Menacing objects: non-human agency in Volpone’s bedchamber

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1 Ben Jonson’s *Volpone* is set in a city positively saturated with objects. Beyond poetic signification or perceived functionality, these items are prominently positioned throughout the play. Without voice, they seem to insist; without volition, they exert power. Because *Volpone* is brimming with these possessions, both common and uncommon, this examination centres on a few otherwise mundane items referenced early in the play: coin, plate, and pillow. These objects have a kind of agency all their own, however obscure. It is not for lack of attention, however, that Volpone completely overlooks this agency. Rather, he pays the wrong kind of attention. By viewing these objects self-reflexively, Volpone occludes his own perceptual abilities. This problem of perception, as a matter of course, also hampers his ability to interpret and engage with other human actors. To be clear, acknowledging the agency of objects does not suggest that they can dance across the stage of their own accord. Despite its strange, carnivalesque elements, *Volpone* does not tread in the realms of the supernatural.

2 Still, these coveted items are seldom used for their original, prescribed purposes in *Volpone*. Indeed, Volpone is seemingly uninterested in the transactional nature of coins, with the eating off of plates, or with bedrest as such. Almost immediately, then, these objects defy attempts to neatly classify them, as this study will demonstrate. Jonson presents the audience with a stifling, claustrophobic universe in *Volpone*. As the objects pile up, they encroach on the lives of all parties involved. This closeness, this physical menace, is meant to be intimately felt by the audience as well as the characters. Moreover, Jonson structures the play around the primacy of the bedchamber only to explode it entirely, and with the assistance of what would at first glance appear to be mere props. Typically, one cannot physically engage with the items onstage as a viewer. Nonetheless, Jonson’s early, sustained focus on possessions puts pressure onto the crowd by way of rhetorical insistence. Volpone’s words both draw in and weigh down the audience. By observing the sly fox as he grapples with the autonomous movement of actors inside and outside his den, however, one sees the problems inherent in
disregarding the agency of things and people. By considering how Volpone is situated within broader networks of early modern life, be they commercial, legal or otherwise, it is possible to articulate further and understand Jonson’s engagement with household objects. Volpone’s aggressive hoarding and reshuffling of various actors, both human and nonhuman, warrants careful consideration.

3 Despite his vulpine name, Volpone is guilty of rabid, selfish anthropocentrism. In mythology, the overwhelming tendency is to project humanity onto unwitting animals and objects. In Jonson’s case, this dynamic is much more complex. A larger problem arises upon recognising how easily readers (or critics) tacitly adopt the same anthropocentric stance as Volpone. This can occur despite knowing full well that, charismatic as he is, the eponymous protagonist is a villain. By expanding one’s critical impulses actively to make room for the power and agency of objects, it is then possible to undercut this latent anthropocentrism. Indeed, a heightened critical sensitivity can yield more nuanced readings of Volpone. In effect, critics can carve out a space for the agency of the secondary actors in the play, be they human or non-human. At this juncture, recent theoretical considerations in the field of so-called “thing theory” offer an interesting avenue of approach.

4 As John Plotz notes, “Thing theory is at its best … when it focuses on this sense of failure, or partial failure, to name or classify”. Volpone’s eventual undoing is predicated upon two perceptual mistakes: on one hand, he misclassifies both the things and characters around him. He brazenly treats all actors in the play, sentient or otherwise, as wholly incapable of transformation or movement outside his sphere of influence within the bedchamber. Humans and pillows may as well be identical to Volpone, in a perverse way. After all, at least in Volpone’s eyes, both seem to exist solely for his use and gain. On the other hand, Volpone greatly overestimates the power and durability of the social structures he abuses in Venice. To put it another way, he mistakenly assumes that the unabashed greed and ambition of human actors will allow his deceitful games to continue unabated. As Bruno Latour reminds us, however, “As soon as you believe social aggregates can hold their own being propped up by ‘social forces’, then objects vanish from view and … society is enough to hold every thing with, literally, no thing”. Though Volpone’s ego leaves little room for these considerations, Latour does lead the discussion in a potentially revelatory direction with actor-network theory (ANT).

5 In the midst of pondering Latour’s potential import in literary criticism, Rita Felski poses an important question: “Can actor-network theory help us think more adequately about interpretation?” It certainly can, but not before critics understand the stakes of evoking ANT. The theory is complex, but Felski wonderfully summarises its essential components. As she notes, for Latour, “Society does not stand behind, and covertly control, human practices, as if it were ontologically distinct from those practices, akin to a shadowy, all-seeing, puppet master”. This is, in part, why ANT readily informs an examination of Volpone. In the simplest sense, these notions of control and puppeteering accurately describe the behaviours of Jonson’s numerous ne’er-do-wells. Additionally, in the case of Volpone, no matter how clever he thinks he is, his myopic exertion of control cannot produce predictable outcomes. After all, as Felski further suggests, “the social just is the act and the fact of association, the coming together of phenomena to create multiple assemblages, affinities, and networks”. Returning to Jonson, then, one faces yet another important question: what does it mean to “do actor-
network theory” with Volpone? In order to find the answer, one must continuously resist the urge to assume intellectual distance.

Latour’s notion of the social-as-network bears out in Jonson’s play, but only if critics do what Volpone cannot. In other words, one must pause meaningfully, and at regular intervals, to account for both non-human and human forms of agency. Latour and Felski both assert that the social “exists only in its instantiations, in the sometimes foreseeable, sometimes unpredictable ways in which ideas, texts, images, people, and objects couple and uncouple, attach and break apart”. For Latour, the process of describing these instantiations can go on forever. Of course, there is a valid reason to restrict this particular study’s primary focus to Volpone’s relationship with non-human actors: these common objects – these things – have no voice as actors on the stage, at least in a literal sense. An ANT-influenced approach, however, can “permit an explanation of how a few obtain the right to express and to represent the many silent actors of the social and natural worlds they have mobilized”. To put it another way, one need not play Volpone’s game. Rather, it is possible to actively enable the agency of the other actors involved.

To be sure, one could convincingly argue that Volpone is an extension of early modern tensions surrounding opulence and class. Conspicuous consumption is fascinating to consider insofar as it casts aside the original purpose and physicality of objects. Indeed, this brand of consumption revolves around displaying symbols of wealth and influence. Volpone’s possessions can demonstrate his power, certainly. Paradoxically, the very capacity of an object to defy its perceived purpose can have an equally disempowering effect on the owner. As the story progresses, objects gradually reveal themselves to be anything but stable or inert in Volpone. Much like the writings of Bill Brown, then, this study is concerned with “occasions of contingency – the chance interruption – that disclose the physicality of things”. Latour’s assertion that the text can be “the functional equivalent of a laboratory [and] a place for trials, experiments, and simulations” is especially alluring. Implicit in treating Jonson’s text as a laboratory of sorts is the fact that these experiments may fail disastrously or fizzle into nothing. Nonetheless, to truly liberate the objects in Volpone, one must also describe said objects in their respective, overlapping networks (both inside and outside the text). In this way, one can do justice to their complexity as they move and constantly transform themselves and each other. Moreover, Volpone’s fate proves that turning a blind eye to the physicality and complex network associations of objects is a dangerous enterprise.

In addition to their physical proximity in Volpone’s bedchamber, his possessions are also part of a network of “comfort objects”. To clarify, these possessions are grouped under this perceptual umbrella with the understanding that they can and will transform, whether subjected to close scrutiny or not. Part of what makes these non-human agents so compelling in Volpone is the fact that they are not static. For the purposes of this study, then, the concept of comfort objects simply provides a point of ingress, however transitory. The designation of “comfort object” is intended to describe, as Latour would put it, “an association between entities which are in no way recognisable as being social in the ordinary manner, except during the brief moment when they are reshuffled together”. This reshuffling takes place before readers, viewers, or critics even have the chance to ponder the potential meaning. Volpone, the crafty character that he is, gleefully begins the reshuffling process before the curtain is even drawn. Ultimately, this aggressive reshuffling of human and non-human actors
leads to the escalating problems he experiences over the course of the play. Jonson also makes it abundantly clear, though, that his imagined Venetians are quite preoccupied with the social stability that these objects can provide. However fleetingly, objects can grant their human possessors some form(s) of comfort. These things, even while sitting motionless atop shelves and dressers, are still capable of acting, though the means by which they act is often obscure.

It is possible to elucidate the complex process of describing objects as actors in Volpone by performing a kind of case study. By considering historical context, the extent to which ordinary household objects transform as they act and move in overlapping networks becomes much clearer. Given the importance of Volpone’s bedchamber as an epicentre of activity in the play, let us observe the pillow in early modern England. To begin, one might consider the pillow as it acts in legal or commercial networks. Take, for example, official acts handed down by a monarch:

Be it enacted by the aucthoritie of this present Parlament, that from, and attre the laste day of lune next commyng, no person, or persons, whatsoeuer, shal make (to thentent to selle, or offre to be solde) any fetherbedde, bolstre, or pillowe, excepte the same be stuffed with drie pulled fethers, or cleane downe onely, without mynglyng of skalded fethers, fennedowne, sand, lyme, grauell, heare, or any other vnlawfull, or corrupte stuffe, vpon paine of forfeicture of al suche fetherbeddes, bolsters, and pillowes, and euery of them so offred to be solde, or the value therof.

This passage is reproduced here in its entirety, and despite its seeming banality, to demonstrate how intuitively the notion of overlapping networks of things applies to the early modern world. The excerpt speaks to a fundamental notion that underpins the present examination of Volpone, in fact. This “corrupte stuffe”, though outwardly invisible, determines how and where the pillow can act, at least in theory; if the aforementioned “corrupte stuffe” is discovered, there is an ever-present threat of forfeiture. Simultaneously, the potential use of materials like sand or hair also plays a part in influencing the assertion of commercial law. If successfully hidden, these impurities can persist and act without hindrance. Agency, in this light, becomes highly diffuse. Neither point in the network constitutes an absolute limit. This passage shows that even though background movement can be obscured and obfuscated, it still has meaningful, tangible outcomes for other actors. These covert movements are especially relevant in the case of the wily fox. As Volpone brags to Mosca, after all, he prides himself on the fact that he “use[s] no trade, no venture” (I.i.33). Though he places himself outside these networks of commerce, he cannot unerringly account for the hidden movements of other actors; no matter how much he blusters about his intelligence and no matter how often he swaggers about his quarters, he is not omniscient. Oddly, his repeated attempts to pull other actors into the bedchamber tacitly suggests that, on some level, Volpone recognises the unpredictable nature of those he seeks to control. Nevertheless, the unseen movements of other actors constantly alter and undermine Volpone’s plot, even in his own chambers. Along with his avowed repudiation of commercial networks, though, Volpone also fiercely rejects Christianity. While his blaspheming is potentially controversial, it also emphasises the degree to which Jonson engages with the religious tumult of the early seventeenth century.

Other scholars like Katharine Eisaman Maus have wonderfully explored the religious complexities of idolatry in Volpone. The notion of Volpone as an idolater is interesting.
in its own right, but the stakes of this study lie elsewhere. Indeed, while one could fruitfully trace when and how he rejects Christianity, there is much to be said for Volpone’s obsession with concentrating “on the object in the foreground in order to avoid noticing what’s in the background”. Much of Maus’s reading focuses on Volpone’s refusal to acknowledge the transitory nature of both his wealth and himself. In short, Volpone attempts to defer indefinitely his own mortality, at least according to Maus. On the subject of religious quarrel/contemplation, then, it is wholly appropriate to glance at Erasmus’ paraphrasing of the New Testament with a keen eye toward the text’s treatment of pillows and other things: “Iesus in the meane season slept vpon a pillowe, signifiyng as it were by a figure, what perill there is in thynges here in the worlde, as often as they slepe beyng delighted with comodities and pleasures of this worlde, whiche haue taken vpon them to be in stede of Christ”. Here, Erasmus explicitly engages with the pillow, but not as a mere background item. Volpone’s aversion to recognising “what’s in the background” is, then, a fundamental failure to deal with the agency of the objects in question. In this light, the central paradox of Volpone is that the eponymous villain is clever enough to see the actor networks as they swim around and through him, but either fear or ego prevents him from acting accordingly. To echo Maus, it is important to recognise the degree to which notions of finitude and mortality underscore much of Jonson’s text.

Regarding death, then, the last network of actions and transformations to consider shows the pillow at its most sinister and personal. Take, for example, the work of John Foxe, who, in relating the history of the Catholic Church, tells a tale of grisly assassination: Marozia, daughter of a famous Roman harlot, or so the story goes, “brought to passe that this pope John the eleuenth was smothered with a pillow laid to his mouth”. Though this is far from the first or most well-known example of smothering in the period, there are echoes of this found in Volpone. Mosca is well aware of the hidden power of pillows: “Faith, I could stifle him, rarely, with a pillow, / As well as any woman that should keep him” (I.v.68–9). That seemingly anyone could wield this mundane household item to enact murder reveals as much about the pillow as it does any of Venice’s denizens. At the same time, the pillow, as a perceptual object in this scene, is bookended by female hands. In this period, textiles, sewing, and lacework are the domains of women, at least from a labor standpoint. Still, the pillow is also not defined simply by the material constraints of its creation. The potential for causing harm with a pillow is not unique to Mosca’s darkly suggestive goading either, as Foxe and others demonstrate. Indeed, it seems that at least in part, the pillow is stuffed not just with feathers, straw, or “corrupte stuffe,” but with associations. These associations circulate before the pillow even appears onstage, and before it is made a focal point. Most importantly, at least for the purposes of this study, Mosca shows that the pillow has a kind of agency. This agency manifests in the ways that other actors must deal with the pillow as a tangible object: just as Mosca has the ability to carry, move, and use the pillow, it follows that his actions are also shaped by the pillow itself, by its contours and weight. This case study began by considering the pillow, in a basic sense, as a commercial item. Returning to matters of commerce, then, this examination must also take a momentary step away from the (il)legal, religious, and/or malignant pillow and toward the domain of chequins or coins.

Volpone’s desire to hoard gold coins – to amass currency as a symbol and tool for deceit – speaks to his unusual relationship with things. One could logically infer that some of his riches are spent on the upkeep of a lavish lifestyle and estate, though Jonson allows
these particular elements of Volpone’s day-to-day life to be primarily implicit. Instead, Jonson guides the audience through his own strange case study of coins and some of their associative networks. In much the same way that the case study above examines the pillow, the play takes viewers point-by-point through religious, commercial, and physical networks in which coins circulate. To begin, Volpone describes gold as “the dumb god that giv’st all men tongues; / That canst do nought, and yet mak’st men do all things” (I.i.22–3). As Maus astutely notes on this passage, “Volpone does not want to acknowledge the agency that seems to come along with godhead”.16 For the most part, Volpone imagines that he and his riches are beyond the world of skilled trade, banks, and money-lending. Returning to the first scene of the play, recall Volpone’s insistence that he “turn[s] no monies, in the public bank; / Nor usure[s] private” (I.i.39). All the same, the tangibility of coins is explicitly acknowledged when Corbaccio says, “See, Mosca, look / Here, I have brought a bag of bright chequins, / Will quite weight down his plate” (I.iv.67–9). Expanding the potential network associations even further in his opening speech, Volpone attests to the fact that coins may even have a celestial lineage:

O thou son of Sol,
But brighter than thy father, let me kiss,
With adoration, thee, and every relic
Of sacred treasure in this blessed room. (I.i.10–13)

14 Here, gold is begat of the sun itself, inheriting its luminescence and power. At the risk of overliteralising the poetic language on display, it is significant that these and all objects have lineages. With the notion of lineage is also implied the notion of transformation and growth over time, which Volpone either egoistically or wilfully disregards. Once again, the play makes it plain that even something as commonplace as money is able to exert a weird agency even if Volpone and Mosca try to curtail it.

In order to better understand this agency, it is instructive to consider Michel Callon’s exploration of “translation”, which he defines as “a general process ... during which the identity of actors, the possibility of interaction and the margins of manoeuvre are negotiated and delimited”.17 While his examination of scallop cultivation in St Brieuc Bay seems far removed from Jonson’s imagined Venice, Callon offers a fruitful approach to understanding Volpone’s downfall. Moreover, his work enables a robust description of the actors in Volpone, both human and non-human alike. The most revelatory component of Callon’s theory revolves around the concept of an obligatory passage point (OPP). Callon would describe an OPP as the manifestation of an actor’s attempts to establish itself as indispensable through problematisation. In the case of Jonson’s play, the titular figure provides the most obvious example. Much like the researchers described in Callon’s piece, Volpone determines “a set of actors and define[s] their identities in such a way to establish [himself] as an obligatory passage point in the network of relationships”.18 To put it another way, despite his disdain for the social and commercial networks of Venice, Volpone tries to make himself (and his bedchamber) an unavoidable gateway through which all other actors must pass. He does this by creating a problem (hence problematisation) for the characters and objects he assumes are too dim-witted to exert agency: all actors must, in one way or another, augment Volpone’s social power in Venice (figure 1).
Callon addresses non-human agency to an extent, though the drama of St Brieuc bay cannot act as a one-to-one comparison point for *Volpone*; Callon's methodologies require minor adjustments. To be sure, much of his work focuses on identifying the goals of given actors. While it is easy enough to explore the desires of Volpone, Voltore, Mosca, and others, the objects under consideration cannot necessarily be treated in the same ways. A plate has agency insofar as it can exert power and prompt other actors to respond in certain ways, but it is not automatically imbued with volition. In this instance, Jane Bennett's work is potentially elucidatory. By her estimation, “One would … understand ‘objects’ to be those swirls of matter, energy, and incipience that can hold themselves together long enough to vie with the strivings of other objects.”¹⁹ In this instance, “striving” is something wholly dissimilar to simply having goals. Instead, the process of striving is what constitutes an actor’s resistance to the movement of other actors. At this juncture, a simple adjustment to Callon’s theory is necessary: the author’s focus on goals is replaced with the perceived function of the actors. With this change in place, one can weigh perceived function against strivings or, as Callon would term them, mutinies. By recalibrating Callon’s theories, in fact, it becomes easier to decode Volpone’s *perception* of these comfort objects. Simultaneously, though, it is important to consider the ways in which these comfort objects simply do not conform to said perception. This same model can be repurposed for many uses outside the scope of this study, but for the moment, it allows clear, visual articulation of the fact that Volpone’s OPP is terribly fragile; it is insufficient in accounting for all the ways these comfort objects can mutiny and strive against their owner’s will. Whenever and however an item defies its understood purpose – at least in the context Volpone’s perception and power dynamics – constitutes a fracture in his plan, even if indirectly (figure 2).
Returning to Bennett, this study echoes the sentiment that “[c]ontemporary materialisms … that affirm a vitality or creative power of bodies and forces at all ranges or scales also cut against the hubris of human exceptionalism”. The overarching hope for this examination, then, is twofold: in an immediate sense, the underlying argument of this piece is intended to shed new light on why Volpone’s grand scheme fails. This new reading, though, does not directly contradict more traditional approaches to Jonson’s play. Rather, Jonson’s work intuitively resonates with current theoretical considerations in thing theory and ANT. In a larger sense, there is a critical lesson hidden in the story of Volpone’s eventual undoing. Without oversimplifying matters, it seems that Bennett points to the exact issue at hand: the hubris of human exceptionalism. If critics purposefully resist Volpone’s constrictive, contractive trap of hubris – and if it is possible to put things on equal footing with characters and humans – the scholarly possibilities before us radically expand. With this inclusiveness and attentiveness, the conversation suddenly becomes more complex and interesting. Still, there are potential problems to this approach. An ANT-focused examination may seem to deemphasise the importance of Voltore, Mosca, Celia, and many others. The levelling gesture of ANT, however, fosters a heightened sensitivity. This sensitivity can be meaningfully harnessed to include any and all actors in a given network, whether human or non-human. Ridding ourselves of human exceptionalism, then, allows for a reoriented viewpoint that brings the margins closer to the centre.
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NOTES

11. Anno quinto et sexto Eduardi Sexti actes made in the session of this present parlament..., London, Richard Grafton, 1552, sig. E6r.
12. All references to Volpone are from Robert N. Watson, ed., Volpone, New Mermaids, 2003.
ABSTRACTS

This paper is a brief exploration of some otherwise mundane objects, or possessions in Ben Jonson’s Volpone. By bringing recent social science considerations in actor-network/thing theory to bear, the strange agency of inanimate objects becomes more apparent. Though agency does not always imply volition, the coins, plates, and pillows strewn about Jonson’s play can (and do) shape the eponymous fox’s fate. By expanding critical considerations to actively include non-human actors in Volpone, complex matters of perception and deception can be productively explored in new ways.

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