Performing power and the power of performance in the bed-space of Jonson’s *Volpone* (1606)

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In Ben Jonson’s *Volpone*, the title character’s bed figuratively – and in some performances, literally – takes centre stage. It is the space from which Volpone conducts much of his deceptive business, cozening would-be heirs and ushering his servants into action in his role as a dying glutton. In Act III scene xii, however, the bed facilitates another form of action: the failed seduction of Celia, Corvino’s obstinately pure wife, through a kind of bed-trick interrupted. The play thus nods to the bedchamber’s dual connotations as a space of death and as a space of sexual generation; there are, however, two major problems with these connotations as staged in the play. Volpone is not sick and dying, and he is not Celia’s consensual lover in either a marital or extramarital sense. What, then, is the bed’s role in the play, if not as a locus of death or love? This paper will argue that Volpone’s bed operates as a domestic performance space, a miniature stage upon which actors like Volpone may perform and encode their own physicality according to and against audience expectations. In particular, I will explain the ways in which Volpone, within the performatic framework of the bed-space, attempts to code his body into polarities of power: the impotence of the sick body versus the potency of the sexually aroused body; the passivity of the needy unwell versus the activity of relentless seducer.

I borrow the word *performatic*, based on the Spanish *performático*, from Diana Taylor, who suggests it as an alternative to the adjective “performative”, given that the latter has been theoretically tied to processes of socialisation to such a degree that it cannot be extricated from that discursive realm. *Performatic*, in contrast, can be used to refer to nondiscursive “embodied praxis” of the kind that happens in performance.¹ A necessary caveat here is that, as Taylor

¹ The discursive realm in question usually locates “performativity” first to the speech-act and social theory made famous in J. L. Austin’s *How To Do Things with Words* (1962) as the notion of a performative utterance, one that has the force of action, before being expanded through Judith Butler’s work (*Gender Trouble*, 1990) to encompass as well the construction of identity within and through presented and repeated social conventions.

acknowledges, the *performative* is always engaged and in friction with the *performative*. A performance, as an embodied expressive system for transmitting social knowledge – with whatever spectacular, comedic, moral, etc. intent – must refer to and be shaped by the discursive social identities and habits made visible through performativity.\(^3\) I hope, in this paper, to demonstrate that this kind of informative friction is legible within the world of *Volpone*; in particular, I argue that the bed’s material and symbolic legacy in spheres of early modern *performativity* allow the bed-space ultimately to exceed its conceptual bounds as a theatrical prop and become, instead, the very impetus and vehicle for Volpone’s own *performative* embodiment.

*Volpone* has long been noted by directors, playgoers, and scholars for a certain glee that it takes in its own theatricality and in the possibilities of performance.\(^4\) Not only does Volpone himself relish in the successes of his embodiment of a dying man as well as a particularly verbose mountebank, but the inclination towards self-conscious performance settles upon nearly all of the play’s characters: Volpone’s witty parasite Mosca acts as both actor and director of all performance proceedings, both openly, as the orchestrator of Volpone’s household entertainments, and covertly, advising Voltore, for example, to “pretend you came and went in haste” and “Put business i’ your face” (I.iii.68, 78).\(^5\) Mosca continually demands superficiality, reminding the characters of what they must seem to be and do, and what must be legible in their appearance; the entirety of the play’s action, in fact, relies on what Nano describes as “pleasing imitation” (III.iii.13, emphasis mine).

Within this thick setting of deceit, Volpone’s bed is a nearly inseparable accompaniment to Volpone’s own performance of illness. Stage directions in playtext and dialogue initiate Volpone’s transformation into and out of his sick-dress, often referring explicitly to the bed: Volpone requests “My pillow now” when Voltore first arrives (I.ii.123), springs “My couch! Away!” at Lady Would-Be’s entrance, (III.iii.21) and is advised by Mosca soon after to “keep you at your couch” (III.v.32) and later again to get “To your couch, sir” (III.viii.19). The stage directions included in Jonson’s edited works suggest the embodied action associated with these demands, with Volpone “leaping from his couch” (I.iv.132 sd) before he later “Retires

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\(^3\) In the case of early modern theatre, for example, W. B. Worthen uses “performativity” in order to describe the relation between a written dramatic text and socio-cultural habits and practices that in combination imbue a performance with “meaningful force as performed action”: *Shakespeare and the Force of Modern Performance*, Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2003, p. 12. See also Andrew Parker and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, eds., *Performativity and Performance*, New York, Routledge, 1995.

\(^4\) Scholars have recently suggested that the play’s internal theatricality rises to the level of meta-theatre; Bill Angus and Lauren Coker, for example, have analysed the play’s metadramatic treatments of the secretive informer and Volpone’s portrayal of disability. See Bill Angus, *Metadrama and the Informer in Shakespeare and Jonson*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2016; and Lauren Coker, “”There Is No Suff’ring Due’: Metatheatricality and Disability Drag in Volpone”, in *Recovering Disability in Early Modern England*, ed. Allison P. Hobgood and David Houston Wood, Columbus, Ohio State University Press, 2013, pp. 123–135. For a summary of the various metatheatrical actors and set-pieces in the play, see also Manfred Draut, “Metadrama in Ben Jonson’s Volpone”, *The Show Within: Dramatic and Other Insets: English Renaissance Drama (1550–1642)* I&II, ed. François Laroque, Montpellier, Université Paul-Valéry, 1992, II, pp. 319–331.

to his couch" (3.iii.27 sd). As such, the bed always seems to be physically present as symbol and site of the ruse, a stage as well as tiring-house for Volpone, whose character transformation within the bed-space often involves him donning a sick-cap. Some performances have even literalised the bed’s association with Volpone’s faux-illness, reimagining it as a kind of hospital gurney, most notably in the Royal Shakespeare Company’s 2015 production directed by Trevor Nunn (figure 1).

Figure 1. Volpone (Henry Goodman) and Mosca (Orion Lee) preparing his bandages and sick makeup on a hospital bed. Volpone, dir. Trevor Nunn, Royal Shakespeare Company, 2015.

The association of the bed with the tiring-house becomes even more evident when the stage property of the bed closes the action of Act III scene v, as Volpone prepares to encounter Celia, announcing that he will “draw – for an encounter” (38), a euphemism that corresponds to the stage action as the curtains are drawn: “bed-curtains close upon Volpone” and he recedes into the bed as a hidden space from which he will emerge in the next scene as a quite different Volpone from the one Lady Politic Would-Be has just encountered.

The bed is clearly, then, a creative and transformative space from which Volpone can generate his various identities, but the logic that makes this transformation possible deserves, I think, further attention. I argue that the bed offers a particular facility of deceit due to its preexisting status as a highly performative space. As social historians have clarified the bed’s

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6 The language of the play labels the object as a couch, but as Leslie Thomson points out, there seems to have been little definitional difference between a bed and a couch. OED defines it as a sleeping surface in its earliest uses (deriving from the French coucher, to sleep), and Henry Cockeram called it a “little bed” in his 1623 English Dictionarie, sig. C8v. Thomson suggests that a couch was simply a more portable stage property, used otherwise for the same kinds of theatrical tableaus for which a bed would be used. Leslie Thomson, “Beds on the Early Modern Stage”, Early Theatre 19:2, (2016), pp. 31–58, 41.
role in the early modern lifecycle as traced through marriage, childbirth, and death, concepts of performativity have illuminated the conventions of embodiment surrounding its material presence. Laura Gowing, for example, argues that beyond the nuptial rituals that saw wedding guests accompanying the newlywed couple to bed and assisting in disrobing in anticipation of consummation, the marital bed remained fundamentally social insofar as neighbors participated in “policing” the state of the marital bed in order to inform adultery proceedings – for a married couple, union in a bed was in part a performatively display of domestic order. The deathbed, as well, has long been understood as a key site for the performatives rituals constituting the *ars moriendi*; the dying man, surrounded by friends and sources of Christian counsel, passed through stoic meditations that involved commemorating loved ones to God and settling final debts and conflicts, the process of which could also act socially as recollections of a dying person’s participation in public life. Witnesses of death often commented on whether or not the dying said anything profound during their final moments and embodied the stoicism that demonstrated their readiness to leave the world. In other words, and in terms that might perhaps sound facetious, to be witnessed *conscious* in a bed in early modern England was, in most cases, to have something quite important expected of you. It is for this reason, I believe, that Leslie Thomson interprets beds’ theatrical import on the early modern stage as displaying vulnerability: “More generally and regardless of the particular context or gender”, she says, “a figure on a bed is usually somehow vulnerable and rarely has control over her or his situation. Hence bed scenes often include an element of titillation and voyeurism as part of their effect. In other cases a curtained bed creates suspense and anticipation of a discovery”. The entire purpose of the theatrical bed, in Thomson’s terms, is to provide space for an interplay of seen and unseen, anticipation and exposure.

In the case of *Volpone*, however, it seems to me that Volpone is at his least vulnerable when he is in bed. I believe that this is because Volpone, as we see quite clearly, does not occupy his bed in a performatively sense: he is, as I have said, neither enacting his death or his nuptial consummation. Rather, he has managed to twist these performatives actions into performatives ones. That is, Volpone, master of theatricality, draws upon an object, the bed, already overwritten with performatives expectations and meta-performs them: rather than merely self-consciously embodying the conventions of the deathbed, sickbed, and marriage bed as one who is dying, ill, or having sex as a newlywed, he dramatises these functions without the intention of actually carrying out any of them. Unlike early modern bed-trick plots, which are predicated on concealment to work, Volpone need not hide his embodiment from his gulls, but

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7 See especially David Cressy’s *Birth, Marriage, and Death: Ritual Religion, and the Life-Cycle in Tudor and Stuart England*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1997. For an application of this social history to early modern drama, see Elizabeth Sharrett, *Beds as Stage Properties in Renaissance Drama: Materializing Birth, Marriage, and Death*, Manchester, Manchester University Press, forthcoming 2020, wherein Sharrett argues that early modern dramatists exploited the multivalent symbolic properties of the bed in terms of the rites of the human life cycle for dramatic purposes.


9 On death rites and customs, see Philippe Ariès, *The Hour of Our Death*, trans. Helen Weaver, Oxford University Press, 1991; for a more localised treatment of these rites, see Dan Beaver, “‘Sown in Dishonour, Raised in Glory’: Death, Ritual and Social Organization in Northern Gloucestershire, 1590–1690”, *Social History* 17:3 (1992), pp. 389–419.

only manipulate it into the appropriate shape. This distinction is in fact crucial for understanding Volpone’s unique and agential use of the bed-space. Performative behavior subsumes the subject beneath the construct in which they are both embedded—pun somewhat intended: a marital rite remains a marital rite regardless of the individual bride or groom; once asserted in the social fabric, it exists as its own ontological event. Performance, however, reasserts the agency of the actor, and it is this agency that allows Volpone to wield performance as a form of power.

He begins, first—and for three full years—with performing impotence. Because the grounds of Volpone’s deceit involve inheritance, *impotence* necessarily takes on two meanings: the first meaning is, of course, decrepitude, and the second meaning is sexual infirmity constituted as either infertility or the “[c]omplete absence of sexual power”. The two forms of weakness, physical and specifically sexual, are often tied together by association with age and especially within men: the male body’s increasing humoral coldness and dryness in old age could weaken the seminal vessels, cause an insufficiency of seed, or prevent the generation of heat associated with venery; Felix Platter’s *Platerus golden practice of physick* (1664) explains of sexual impotence that in general “Men are more deficient than Women, for the man doth more in that act than the Woman”. In combination, the two forms of impotence establish Volpone’s performance as masculine and even patriarchal, being an attempt to control the estate through the illusion of passive relinquishment.

The falsification of physical impotence as illness was an active social concern, primarily in early modern contexts of beggary; the cony-catching literature of Thomas Dekker and Thomas Harman, for example, attempted to outline the processes by which beggars called “palliards” and “clapperdudgeons” would construct an image of ill health by crafting false wounds, feigning epileptic fits, and foregoing use of one or more limbs in order to solicit sympathy from passers-by. Voyeuristic accounts of such beggars revealed in exposing their tricks, but as audience members, we have the privilege of seeing Volpone’s adoption of impotence from the play’s outset. In addition to jumping into bed and donning his cap, Volpone invokes his feigned illnesses as a set of transformative muses: “Now, my feigned cough, my phthisic, and my gout; / My apoplexy, palsy, and catarrhs; / Help, with your forcéd functions, this my posture” (I.i.124–6). Helped by Mosca’s repeated insistence upon specific impairments—as Mosca tells Corvino, “He cannot understand, his hearing’s gone” (I.v.15)—Volpone produces repeated verbal and stage signals of his physical performance of illness: for example, lines interrupted with coughs (“I feel me going; Uh! uh! uh! / I’m sailing to my port, Uh! uh! uh! uh!” in Act I scene iii [28–9]) and the stage direction that has Mosca “shout[ ] in Volpone’s ear” to demonstrate his deafness to Corvino (I.v.51 sd). The actions narrate for the audience the very things that the actors onstage must do in order to play their roles—indeed, Volpone’s performance of deafness is rather like a ventriloquism or a metatheatrical reflection of the actor playing Corbaccio must do. This farcical embodiment of impotence constitutes what we might

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11 *OED*, “impotence, n.”, 2.b.
in contemporary theoretical parlance call “disability drag”, a term that has gained traction as a way to describe what happens when an able-bodied actor plays the part of a disabled character with the audience’s knowledge, such that the actor’s able-bodiedness haunts their performance of disability. As Lauren Coker has argued, “Jonson’s depiction of the body in Volpone satirize[s] the credibility of disability”.

The depiction of this bedridden body, too, allows Volpone to reap what fruits he finds in being understood as impotent in both medical and reproductive senses. When Corvino attempts to persuade Celia to lie with Volpone, Corvino describes him as

An old, decrepit wretch,
That has no sense, no sinew; takes his meat
With others’ fingers; only knows to gape
When you do scald his gums; a voice; a shadow;
And what can this man hurt you? (III.vii.42–6)

Because he is (ostensibly) physically weak, Volpone is imagined here as sexually non-threatening even in the moment that he is about to become such. His body, with its restricted motion, places him in contrast to “some young Frenchman, or hot Tuscan blood / That had read Aretine” (III.vii.59–60).

This mistake arising from the bedchamber performance of illness allows Volpone, figuratively, to flip the script, or at least the schema of his performance. Corrupting the performative implications of the nuptial bed by having Corvino give his wife away as if in marriage – as Corvino has already decided that “The cases are all one of wife and daughter” (II.vi.73) – Volpone shifts with delight from playing at one form of dying to playing for another. This shift is marked by an altered relationship with the bed as a performance space: as soon as Volpone is alone with Celia, we get the stage direction for Volpone “leaping from his couch” (III.7.139), an alteration in both physical and sexual potency, as his leaping now suggests the connotations of animal copulation. Volpone seems to interpret the opposite of his performance of impotence to be showcasing virile male potency, stressing to Celia how “fresh” and “hot” he is (III.vii.157–8) and how bedridden he is not. Here, however, his replacement of the performative marital and sexual action of the bed with an ostentatious performance of illicit sexuality cannot work without conscripting Celia into the action both physically and theatrically: in order to maintain Celia’s ignorance à la a traditional bed-trick, Volpone would need to continue to perform impotence; to convince Celia of his personal virulence, Volpone would need, it seems, to relinquish the secure constructedness of his theatrical performance and with it some degree of his control.

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14 Tobin Siebers explains the choice of the terminology to deliberately highlight artificiality in such performances, calling disability drag a masquerade that is “as bombastic as a drag performance”: Disability Theory, Ann Arbor, University of Michigan Press, 2008, p. 115. On early modern dramatic disability drag, see Lindsey Row-Heyveld, Dissembling Disability in Early Modern English Drama, New York, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018.


16 An especially provocative comparison, given the printed union of Aretino’s sonnets with Marcantonio Raimondi’s explicit illustrations and their depiction of a sexual athleticism to which Volpone, beyond his impotent disguise, might aspire.

17 See OED, “leap, v.”, 9. “Of certain beasts: To spring upon (the female) in copulation”.

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Instead, in one of the most famous passages of the play, Volpone invites Celia to join his household’s sphere of performance, providing her with a list of suggested characters:

Whilst we, in changèd shapes, act Ovid’s tales,
Thou, like Europa now, and I like Jove;
Then I like Mars, and thou like Erycine:
So, of the rest, till we have quite run through,
And wearied all the fables of the gods.
Then will I have thee in more modern forms,
Attirèd like some sprightly dame of France,
Brave Tuscan lady, or proud Spanish beauty;
Sometimes, unto the Persian Sophy’s wife,
Or the Grand Signor’s mistress; and, for change,
To one of our most artful courtesans,
Or some quick Negro, or cold Russian. (III.vii.220–31)

It is a direct invitation to action, both sexually and even more so performatively; rather than abandon his tendency to meta-theatre in favor of wooing Celia in his own form, Volpone exchanges his prior disability drag for a slew of imagined ethnic or racial impersonations and, notably, deities, whose acts in Ovid’s *Metamorphoses* are tales not only of transformation, but often of rape. Ironically, then, Volpone’s invitation to Celia to act a part is one that, by casting her in the part of an abducted character like Europa, suggests a lack of the very kind of agency that he himself assumes through theatrical performance. In fact, in the midst of this heady fantasy of theatrical performance, Volpone seems almost to mistake scripting the performance of sex for the thing itself. As such, we might say that he in fact fails at performing the powerful virulence that he attempts to present to Celia, having become so caught up in the pleasure of performance itself that he has lost sight of its performative referent. Celia perhaps unwittingly corrects him: given his self-description as vying with Proteus, Celia seems to take it at face value in a way that Volpone is a transformed, non-human kind of entity, as she appeals to “any part that yet sounds man about you” (III.vii.241). Indeed, Celia suggests that if Volpone is human, his current performance has missed the mark of the masculine heterosexual power that he professes: for Celia claims that violence (perhaps like that Corvino threatens) is more masculine than sexual luxuriousness: “Yet feed your wrath, sir, rather than your lust / (It is a vice comes nearer manliness)” (III.vii.248–9).

Celia’s imputation that Volpone has behaved in unmanly fashion, in combination with her promises to pray for his health in exchange for mercy, raises the specter of Volpone’s previous performed embodiment of impotence. Volpone seems to understand his failure, and that his self-conscious rhetoric of performance has caused Celia to “Think me cold, / Frozen, and impotent” (259–60); as such, he retroactively revises how the scene should have been played: “I should have done the act, and then have parleyed” (264). His attempt at compensation is to assert his physicality further, with rape as the antithesis of his assumed impotence, although this too is mere performance and presumption: while the presence of the bed allows Volpone to attempt to reassert masculine power and potency through the body, in so doing he in fact traps himself even further within the definitional scope of impotence, which includes in its meanings the inability to practice self-restraint and moderate passionate desires.
If the bed is a source of power for Volpone, then, we might have reason to say as well that the bed and its possibilities has power over Volpone. If the bed operates both as a locus across which Volpone may cross the boundary between the performative and performatic, as well as a material and conceptual object on and through which he can enact multiple forms of physicality, then we must no doubt ask: 1) what happens when Volpone leaves his bedchamber; and 2) more importantly, when does Volpone’s power to wield performance truly collapse? Is it when his performance of potency before Celia is still inscribed with impotence and therefore fails to fully materialise? Is it when Bonario’s unsolicited witnessing of the performance has shattered the illusion of impotence and perhaps of potency as well, leaving Volpone fully “unmask’d”? Or is it when Volpone’s performance is strained by the imposition of a more dominant actor – namely, Lady Would-Be?

One useful approach articulated by scholars such as Howard Marchitello and Alexander W. Lyle argues that Volpone’s performance primarily fails when it is transferred from the private to the public, a statement that would seem to be supported by Volpone’s own complaint after his first trial, that “I ne’er was in dislike with my disguise / Till this fled moment: here ’twas good, in private, / But in your public – cavè whilst I breathe” (V.i.2–4). There are a few difficulties in this interpretation, one of which being that we see Volpone’s performance as Scoto succeed in its intentions, and that this takes place in the open piazza, even if its targeted audience is a woman indoors. In the first portion of his trial, too, Volpone scrapes by, perhaps because he attempts to bring the performance space of the bed with him: In Act IV scene vi, the officers of justice return “bearing Volpone on a couch” (IV.vi.21 sd). Voltore takes advantage of his physical posture to defend him from the charge of rape: “See here, grave fathers, here’s the ravisher / ... / Do you not think / These limbs should affect venery? Or these eyes / Covet a concubine? Pray you mark these hands; / Are they not fit to stroke a lady’s breasts? / Perhaps he doth dissemble!” (IV.vi. 23–29). I would argue then that Volpone’s downfall is not determined only by physical space, but by scripted versus unscripted performances. The impotence and virility of the bed, as performative behaviours, offer a preconceived script on which Volpone can ground his performance, just as the mountebank’s speech has as its foundational influence the similar speeches of real mountebanks. But Volpone, in his habit as a commendatore and at last in the final trial, fails to improvise according to sudden changes in scene. As a result, when the fox is at last sentenced to what he calls “mortification”, his performance is stripped of its power, and he of his power to perform.

It is worth considering, then, what changes in performances such as Trevor Nunn’s production that replace the stage property of the bed with an alternative – the use of a hospital gurney, for example, reflects in a “modernised” production the disappearance of the performative deathbed of early modern England in a twentieth- and twenty-first-century

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19 The mediation through the balcony is likely an important component of this success as well; on the early modern balcony’s role in negotiating relational security for female characters, see Christy Desmet, "Enter Beatrice, above: The Balcony as Safe Space in John Marston’s The Dutch Courtesan", Arrêt sur Scène / Scene Focus, 6 (2017), pp. 107–121.
context that sees a shift, as Philippe Ariès notes, toward the hospital death. The expectation of nuptial performativity, however, is not overwritten onto the same object, and the production compensates for this lack by bringing in a round bed to supplement the gurney, which remains onstage during the failed seduction scene as a remnant of Volpone’s performance of impotence (figure 2).

Figure 2. Volpone (Henry Goodman) and Celia (Rhiannon Handy). Volpone, dir. Trevor Nunn, Royal Shakespeare Company, 2015.

The bed-space is no longer a multivalent provisioner of performative scripts, but it becomes limited in what kind of performance locus it can be and in what power it avails Volpone to deceive his suitors. While directors and scholars have argued that Volpone is infinitely ripe for modernisation due to the eternal relevance of avarice, we must also acknowledge that dramatic performances inscribed with materiality informed by specific performative contexts will necessarily, in contemporary performance, have a level of object-informed meaning obscured. If Volpone loses his script when the bed-space, laden with early modern cultural significance, disappears, then to some extent, in modern performance, so do we.

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