

## **J. Romains' and M. Tourneur's Creative Transposition of *Volpone***

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**Resumen:** Somos conscientes de que la fortuna que aguarda a un texto en otros contextos tras su creación inicial es inseparable de la capacidad de sus traductores para adecuarse a las necesidades y expectativas del público receptor, capacidad que, tanto Jules Romains, autor del guión cinematográfico de la película francesa *Volpone*, estrenada en 1940, como Maurice Tourneur, director de esta, demostraron en su adaptación de la comedia inglesa a un medio nuevo en un momento de auge del cine sonoro. Es precisamente la creatividad de esa transposición de la comedia más emblemática de Ben Jonson lo que constituye el centro de interés del presente artículo.

**Palabras clave:** Romains; Tourneur; *Volpone*; transposición creativa.

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**Abstract:** We are well aware that, no matter how valuable a text may be, its afterlife in other cultural and linguistic contexts is heavily dependent on the translator's ability to meet the needs and expectations of its target audience. This is precisely what French screenwriter Jules Romains and film director Maurice Tourneur did when adapting Jonson's *Volpone* [1940] for the new medium at the advent of sound films. It is the aim of this article to cast light on their creative transposition of Ben Jonson's theatrical masterpiece.

**Keywords:** Romains; Tourneur; *Volpone*; creative transposition.



## 1. Introduction

As Susan Bassnett pointed out in her seminal work “The Translation Turn in Cultural Studies”, “within translation studies, it is apparent that the transfer of texts across cultures by no means depends on the intrinsic value of the text itself<sup>1</sup>”, (1998: 134) but, as Lefevere remarked, “writers become classics, and their work becomes cultural capital not only on their own merits, but also because they are rewritten<sup>2</sup>” (1998: 109).

The present article focuses on a significant case in point where the creative transposition of a literary text into a new medium, that of sound films, required the active collaboration of an inspired screenwriter and an accomplished film director<sup>3</sup>. Jules Romains provided Maurice Tourneur with the screen script he needed to produce the first and most outstanding film version of Ben Jonson's *Volpone*, a task which proved as challenging to Romains as it did to Tourneur, as they had to adapt the linguistic and dramatic conventions of a Jacobean satiric comedy to the new genre, that of talking films<sup>4</sup>. Both authors relied on their previous experience with drama and film, and completed a screen adaptation of *Volpone* that fully met the expectations of their audiences, first in Paris, where it was first released in 1940, and soon afterwards in the United States, where it was successful with audiences from different parts of the country throughout the whole decade<sup>5</sup>. Although Romains'

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<sup>1</sup> That is why, in Stam's words, “we need to be less concerned with inchoate notions of ‘fidelity’ and to give more attention to dialogical responses –to readings, critiques, interpretations, and rewritings of prior material.” (2000: 75)

<sup>2</sup> This statement is in line with the importance awarded by Julie Sanders to adaptations, which she deems the “veritable markers of canonical status” (2006: 9). When dealing with this issue, she recalls that, as early as 1919, T.S. Eliot suggested “an alternative literary value-system in which the reworking and response to the texts of the past could take centre-stage.” (2006: 8)

<sup>3</sup> As Julie Sanders points out, “in any study of adaptation [...] the creative import of the author cannot be as easily dismissed as Roland Barthes's or Michael Foucault's influential theories of the ‘death of the author’ might suggest.” (2006: 2)

<sup>4</sup> It is worth drawing attention to the usefulness of Cattrysse's functional approach to the study of film adaptation, as his view that “a film adaptation can fulfil several functions, such as the innovation of a film genre,” fully applies here. (1997a: 224)

<sup>5</sup> Our analysis of this film adaptation agrees with Cattrysse's target oriented approach, which highlights the role played by target context conditions (1997a: 223; 1997b: 53; 2004: 48). Already in 1992, Cattrysse applied the Polysystem theories of translation

and Tourneur's screen version of *Volpone* was released at the advent of sound films, it still rates first among film adaptations of the play, in spite of which their joint contribution to the afterlife of the most outstanding Jacobean comedy has been systematically ignored. It is the aim of the present article to draw the critics' attention to the high value of their joint and valuable effort.

The article starts by offering a brief overview of *Volpone*'s afterlife through translation into other languages and media, in order to establish the background against which to analyze Romain's and Tourneur's film version of the play<sup>6</sup>. Special attention is paid to Romain's previous theatrical adaptation of the play for the French stage, which proved highly successful with audiences and gave rise to a good number of translations into other languages. Attention is next paid to the specific requirements of film adaptations in terms of plot, character portrayal and language, as appropriately reflected in Romain's screen script. The licenses he took regarding the film's ending are also addressed in order to draw attention to the challenging nature of his version, which he nevertheless subtly dissembled through the apt use of a farcical style. This farcical style required the active collaboration of Maurice Tourneur, a film director whose previous work with silent films evinced a perfect command of the camera. His wide experience in the field of theatre made him equally aware of the need for a good scenario as well as a proficient cast of actors, all of which he counted on while shooting his *Volpone*, one of the most creative updates of Jonson's satire on greed and lust. It is our aim in this article to recover Tourneur's masterpiece from an undeserved oblivion.

## 2. *Volpone*'s previous hypotexts

Ben Jonson would never have dreamed of seeing his cherished *Volpone* reach large audiences across the Atlantic three hundred years after

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to the study of film adaptation when he claimed that "there seems to be no valuable argument to keep reducing the concept of translation to mere cross-linguistic transfer processes," and added: "The scope has to be extended to a contextualistic semiotic perspective." (1992: 68)

<sup>6</sup> Our analysis fully partakes of Venuti's hermeneutic approach which he defines as "interrogative, exposing the cultural and social conditions of prior materials and of the translation or adaptation that has processed them." (Venuti 2007: 41)

its première. The sharpest satiric comedy of the Jacobean period truly deserved it, although, after being unanimously greeted as an accomplished and incisive portrayal of human greed, changes in the tastes of audiences made it lose its sharp teeth in the hands of its barber. George Colman cut all those sentences, scenes or words which the times might have found fault with. The result was a harmless –and insipid– comedy that the most immature stomachs could digest. In spite of Colman's purifying zeal, his version was last staged in 1788<sup>7</sup>, and Jonson's once provoking fox slept until the 1920s, when, all of a sudden, literary scholars and daring playwrights brought him back to life.

The new times seemed to be more receptive of creative adaptations than respectful productions of the play, since, in spite of the undeniable merit of the *Phoenix Society* production of *Volpone* at the Lyric Theatre, Hammersmith, which, for the first time since 1754 did not cut the secondary plot, the mountebank scene, or Volpone's deformed "family", audiences seem to have felt closer to Stefan Zweig's German adaptation of the play, which premièred at the Vienna *Burgtheater* in 1926, and would later be performed throughout Europe and America, both in German and in English translation.

A reason for the great success that Zweig's version enjoyed may lay in his replacement of Jonson's harsh ending with a more amiable one. Even though Zweig's version was far from sunny, especially in the portrayal of its title role, who gave signs of pathological sadism, the play did not confine its main characters to gaol or the galleys, but allowed Volpone to join his family back in Genoa, and Mosca to share his new status as Volpone's heir with those attending the banquet he offered at his newly inherited house.

The French playwright Jules Romain's found himself among the numerous spectators that saw Zweig's free version of *Volpone* performed, and agreed with Zweig to adapt his German version to the tastes and expectations of his French countrymen. As a result, he removed most of the scenes which highlighted Volpone's sadism, and gave the play greater coherence, by suiting the play's general atmosphere to its happy ending. The play was premièred at the Parisian *Atelier* on 23 Novem-

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<sup>7</sup> *Volpone*, in its older version, was last performed in 1754. George Colman's "altered version" was first performed in 1771 and held the stage until 1788.

ber 1928, and became the most successful play the Atelier would ever perform.

The success of Romain's version led acting companies from different countries to buy his rights and have the play performed in their own language. Not least among them was Spain, where Precioso and Sánchez Guerra rendered Romain's *Volpone* in Spanish. Apart from minor cuts, which were due to censorship restrictions, the tone of their version was as suitable for a successful performance as Romain's had proved a couple of years before. The outcome, however, had little in common with it, not because of the script's poor quality, but because of the troupe's scarce rehearsal of their parts<sup>8</sup>.

The Company performing at the *Infanta Beatriz*<sup>9</sup> did not take into account that Romain's version at the Atelier would never have been as successful as it proved, had it not been for the high quality and sustained work of its proficient actors, especially Charles Dullin, who performed the role of Volpone, and Louis Jouvet, who played the part of Mosca.

### 3. Jules Romain's and Maurice Tourneur's film version of *Volpone*

The advent of talking film took place precisely around the time when *Volpone* was staged in Paris, and France, that prided itself in the high artistic quality of its movies, did its best to produce memorable –and long lasting– motion pictures. The increasing popularity of this new form of entertainment made it a suitable medium to give new life to classic works of literature, a practice that, as Corrigan (2007: 35) points out, became particularly popular in the late thirties.

An increasing demand was felt for screen scripts, which led a group of writers that included Romain, Giraudoux, Gide and Maurois, to establish the Society known as *Film Parlant Français*. The French cinema could hardly think of a more suitable group of authors to provide it with the scripts required for high quality motion pictures.

Although, as George Stuart claims in *Le Soir*,

On s'applique, chez nous, depuis quelques mois, à nos persuader que le film parlant est un art nouveau, obéissant à une technique nouvelle,

<sup>8</sup> For further information on the Spanish reception of *Volpone*, see Ribes (2006).

<sup>9</sup> It was premiered at the *Infanta Beatriz* (Madrid) on 19 December 1929.

ouvrant des horizons inédits, et, surtout, n'empruntant rien au théâtre envers lequel il entend conserver sa pleine indépendance,

experienced film directors such as Maurice Tourneur, had a completely different idea of how beneficial the collaboration between film and drama could prove. In his view, "le film parlant n'est pas autre chose qu'une oeuvre théâtrale bénéficiant de toutes les possibilités de la technique cinématographique".

It was Tourneur that George Stuart was obviously describing when he gave a sketch of the ideal film director:

C'est que pour "jouer" ce théâtre-là il faut des comédiens de théâtre. Mais pour diriger ces comédiens, il faudrait, logiquement, un homme de théâtre, aussi familier avec les textes dramatiques qu'avec les fermetures à l'iris et les plans américains.

Maurice Tourneur, who was asked to direct *Volpone* in 1939, was widely experienced in both fields. As Robert Florey (1977: 5) pointed out, "M. Tourneur s'impose comme un remarquable metteur en scène [...] son expérience théâtrale, longue déjà de plus de 15 ans, acquise auprès de maîtres tels qu'Antoine, lui confère une autorité toute particulière"<sup>10</sup>. Jacques Deslandes (1977: 5) similarly concluded that "Maurice Tourneur [...] ce grand amateur de théâtre [...] a contribué à faire tomber les (fausses) barrières qui séparent-dit-on le théâtre du cinéma".

Back in 1914, Tourneur had already directed several film adaptations of stage plays in the United States. As George Geltzer (1961: 195) points out, although Tourneur was then at the beginning of his career as director, he already used "the very latest cinematic developments—action, cuts, cutaways, close-ups, parallel-action, long tracking shots".

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<sup>10</sup> Lakshmi (1932) records Tourneur's enthusiastic account of his collaboration with Antoine: "Je assistai quotidiennement au travail magnifique de cet homme dont l'unique raison de vivre était son théâtre. J'avais cessé de jouer le comédie pour devenir son régisseur. Je l'ai vu monter des centaines des spectacles, tous vivants et pittoresques, français ou étrangers, classiques ou modernes [...] Je reconnais ici que tout ce que je sais [...] c'est à lui que je le dois". Marcel Lobet (1961) mentions other influential theatre practitioners who left their mark on Tourneur's work: "Tourneur restait très attentif à l'évolution de la technique théâtrale, et il se plaisait à citer, outre son maître Antoine, Max Reinhardt, Gordon Craig, Stanilavsky et Jacques Coupeau".

Even at that time of the mute cinema, Tourneur was aware of the importance of successfully playing a part, which entailed carefully choosing and rehearsing the cast that was to perform in the film. On 30 June 1915, Tourneur declared to the *Dramatic Mirror*: “The director is responsible for a picture’s faults, especially acting flaws, for these prove the director has miscast, or failed to instruct his players properly”<sup>11</sup>.

If this was a must for mute films, it soon revealed indispensable for sound movies, as it often turned out that actors whose performance was successful in silent films, proved in need of greater training to perform successfully in the new media. George Stuart regretted the fact that directors often concentrated on technical aspects of films such as lighting, but paid secondary attention to the actors’ delivery of lines: “on tourne trois, quatre fois, une scène pour obtenir un bon son et un bon éclairage, mais on livre sans préparation la prose de Bataille”, a situation he anticipated M. Tourneur would modify: “il paraît que tout va changer. C’est M. Maurice Tourneur qui donne l’exemple. Désormais, on répétera dans les studios comme on répète dans les théâtres”, and he confidently concluded: “Il apporte la révolution”.

Tourneur was aware of the high standards of theatrical performance in France at the time, as he had collaborated with such consummate actors as the members of the *Cartel des Quatre*. Himself an experienced actor and director, he could not forget that good actors need good scripts in order to offer outstanding performances, something which he often missed, as he declared to Doringe, from *l’Image*, in January 1934: “Un bon scenario! [...] Il ne nous manque pas autre chose. Nous avons des artistes excellentes, et d’excellents techniciens, nous avons des studios parfaitement équipés, ce qu’il y a de plus rare c’est *un bon scenario*”.

That is probably why, in 1939, he took over the direction of *Volpone*, which had been partially shot by Jacques Baroncelli. Even though Tourneur was poorly paid for his work, there still was great compensation for him in its direction, as it contained everything he could have dreamed of: a good script and an experienced cast of actors<sup>12</sup>. Thus, in

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<sup>11</sup> Quoted in quoted in Geltzer (1961: 196).

<sup>12</sup> As Jacques Deslandes put it, “*Volpone* de Maurice Tourneur, oeuvre de commande, est peut-être la plus proche de celle qu’il rêva un jour de tourner” (1977: 5).



spite of the film's low budget, he directed it with such enthusiasm that it became the most outstanding achievement of his career<sup>13</sup>.

Films such as Tourneur's *Volpone* fully justify Allardyce Nicholl's claim that motion pictures merit the same status as theatrical texts, as long as they are not simple copies of their literary originals<sup>14</sup>. The fact that this renowned Renaissance scholar made this statement as early as 1936 speaks of the increasing relevance of film adaptations of literary texts in the late thirties. The new medium was no longer considered ancillary to the theatre, but capable of making literary texts fully meaningful to large audiences.

This is precisely what Jules Romains had done when he accepted adapting *Volpone* for the French stage, and this is also what he did when, in 1937, he agreed to write the screenplay for the film version. An experienced screenwriter, he knew exactly what changes a stage play had to undergo in order to suit the new medium: shorter duration, clarity of plot, and character coherence. This is exactly what A. Cuisenier (1948: 279) highlights when commenting on Romains' high contribution to this field of studies:

L'œuvre [...] s'astreint aux conditions les plus sévères de cohésion, de vraisemblance, de précision, afin d'y projeter plus de lumière. Et cette clarté de la pensée commande cette de l'expression, impose les termes les moins rares, les tours les plus simples, les rythmes le mieux définis, ajoute à l'évidence de l'expression directe l'illumination des figures et des images, bref tout ce qui peut amener un groupe au maximum d'être, et en pénétrer le plus vaste public.

Tourneur's film version of *Volpone* benefited from the best possible collaboration between an experienced film director, a skilful screen-

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<sup>13</sup> According to Harry Waldman, "*Volpone* is Tourneur's greatest film" (2011: 160). Marcel Lobet (1961) shares the same viewpoint when he says: "Quelles sont les oeuvres de Maurice Tourneur qui émergent de l'oubli? ... *Volpone*", an opinion that Luc Seyral (1977) also subscribes. At Tourneur's death in 1961, *Volpone* was unanimously greeted as his masterpiece. See Pierrette Sansnom (1961); "Mort du Metteur en Scène Maurice Tourneur" (1961); "Mort de Maurice Tourneur" (1961); "Maurice Tourneur qui lança 'Rouletabille' à l'écran vient de mourir" (1961); "Le Metteur en Scène Maurice Tourneur meurt à 83 ans" (1961); "Maurice Tourneur est Mort" (1961); "Maurice Tourneur est mort" *Lettres Françaises* (1961).

<sup>14</sup> Quoted in Cartmell & Whelehan (2007: 1).

writer and a talented cast of actors. Their close collaboration would never have produced a masterpiece like *Volpone*, had it not been for their great enthusiasm and professionalism, which made them bring the best out of themselves, in spite of obvious economic difficulties. Romaines provided the film director and cast of actors with a clearly structured plot that perfectly suited the new medium, while Tourneur's camera took advantage of the actors' superb modulation of their parts.

The features which Linda Hutcheon (2013: 43) highlights as indispensable for a film adaptation to succeed, can be found in Romaines' careful adaptation of the play, as he not only makes sure that the plot develops according to a cause-effect motivation, but also offers a coherent portrayal of its characters. Jackson's (2000: 30) observations on the special attention that the opening sequence of a film deserves similarly correspond to the film's careful portrayal of its main characters and prevailing atmosphere from the first shots, which, as he goes on to suggest, serves as a springboard for the action. What Romaines does not follow so closely is the common advice of providing a film adaptation with a closed, happy ending, even though it was a common practice at the time when the film was produced (Seger, 1992: 7)<sup>15</sup>.

As in other parts of the film, Romaines' subtle employment of farce allows him to comply with the need of creating an amiable atmosphere while, at the same time, ambiguously subverting accepted class, race and gender ideologies. The Venetian prejudices against foreigners, the tyranny of husbands over their victimized wives, the need of illegitimate children to earn their living by prostituting themselves, though harsh in real life, are rendered in the film in a farcical style that reduces its sharpness while simultaneously denouncing it.

Even though the film seems to end with the triumph of Mosca, a presumably generous character who punishes his greedy master, Volpone, and shares his inheritance with Venetian citizens, closer attention to the film's dénouement unravels more complex layers of meaning. This complexity is closely connected to the different scenes Romaines has added to his film script, especially to the symbolic addition of Carnival celebrations. The fact that the king of Carnival is burning when Mosca opens his newly inherited palace to the rowdy crowds, can be taken to symbolize not only the destruction of that embodiment of evil that is

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<sup>15</sup> Quoted in Zatlin (2005: 288).

Volpone, who has just been defeated by his witty servant, but also the future destruction of the actual king's "heir", whose extravagance may turn him into the next king of Carnival.

Mosca's surprising ending, where he throws his money out of the window into the streets, and allows the gold-feverish crowds to invade his house looking for more, is anticipated by the character's first appearance in the film, which shows him in jail for debts, as well as by his acknowledgement to Volpone that he is a born spendthrift.

Volpone's famous trick of feigning an incurable illness so as to attract the greedy birds of prey to his deathbed does not come as a surprise in the film, but is carefully motivated by the addition of a scene that fully portrays the greed of those despicable characters Volpone later cons. The title role is not Jonson's cold character who takes extreme delight in cheating others, but a generous, good-hearted foreigner who is despised by haughty Venetians.

All these features are developed in the initial scene, where Volpone's ship has presumably sunk, which sends him straight to gaol, after he vainly tries to obtain a loan from Corbaccio that may enable him to return the 3,000 chequins he owes Corvino. When the ship unexpectedly arrives, Corbaccio, Corvino and Voltore rush to bail him out of gaol, as a means to show him their love. Although Volpone is initially deceived by their hypocritical behaviour, he soon discovers the truth<sup>16</sup> and lets them know that he will pay them in kind.

The initial scene also portrays Volpone as a generous character who fulfils his promises. When in gaol, he feels like taking his life out of despair for being bankrupt, but Mosca helps him sober up by making him realize that there is still hope that his ships may appear, since no one has seen them sink. Mosca is the embodiment of stoicism and cheers him up. Volpone, full of gratitude, promises Mosca he will help him if he regains his freedom, a promise he keeps as soon as he is out of gaol. Volpone is therefore portrayed in the film as an even character that keeps his promises, and, as the viewer anticipates, also takes revenge on those who wish to extort money from him.

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<sup>16</sup> Corbaccio had even tried to make Volpone sign a document which compelled him to pay 10,000 chequins in return for the 3,000 he had anticipated to free him from prison. He pretended to have generously risked his money, and even declined to accept Volpone's ring in case his ship never turned up.

Once Volpone and Mosca are out of gaol, the camera shows them in Volpone's recently acquired palace, expecting rich guests for dinner. The table, however, is almost empty, as most guests have not shown up at the Levantine's palace, and have not even apologized for not attending his dinner. Those who have turned up are not any better, as they make clear as soon as the possibility arises for them to show their true nature. When Volpone pretends not to feel well, the camera shows them in close-up, heartily celebrating the merchant's serious illness (and impending death). Volpone leaves the table and, with Mosca by his side, contemplates the scene from the distance and hits upon the idea of taking revenge on those infamous fellows. The trick he conceives of is that of making them believe that he is approaching death, so that his guests' own greed leads them to compete with each other for Volpone's inheritance. From this point onwards, the film follows Jonson's general outline, with the greedy birds of prey offering him valuable presents which, in the case of Corvino, includes his own wife, and, in that of Corbaccio, his only son's inheritance.

Mosca's address to Corbaccio's son so as to draw him to Volpone's house and have him discover that his father has disinherited him in favour of Volpone, is, again, more carefully motivated than either in Ben Jonson's *Volpone* or in Zweig's or Romain's previous adaptations of the play. Romain has Corbaccio's son, Leone, playing at cards in the tavern when Mosca approaches him. He has run out of money and does not reject Mosca's offer of having him gain a substantial sum of money if he accompanies him to find out that his father has left him penniless.

Corvino's despicable nature is highlighted in the film by having Mosca approach him in church, where he helps him hit upon the idea that his own wife is the woman who should go to quench Volpone's lust and, hopefully, help him to the next world, as the result of a fit of passion. Corvino's hypocritical nature is acidly portrayed by Romain who has him give the following justification for offering his own wife for Volpone's enjoyment: "Mon devoir serait de ne pas abandonner Volpone, on l'état où il est, à de basses tentations". It seems as if providing him with a faithful wife were more edifying than offering him a public woman. Corvino's last minute scruples about handling those topics in church: "Croyez-vous que cet-endroit-ci convienne à ce genre de conversation?" are cynically dismissed by Mosca, who, voicing Romain's own views on the matter, makes him realize that God sees him, both in

and out of church: "Ah! Dieu nous voit partout, nous entend partout". When on his own, Mosca addresses the camera and makes the film's message clear to all viewers: "Celu-là vend sa femme ... l'autre vend son fils ... Il vendraient Dieu lui-même, s'il leur tombait dans les pattes ... l'argent, l'argent partout!"

Later on, the film offers a visual image of the power that money has to literally move the world. It is at the end, after Mosca has cheated his master out of his money, that he grabs a handful of coins and throws them out of the window, where the crowds have gathered to celebrate Shrove Tuesday. They immediately kneel down to pick them up and hurry to mount the palace's staircase as soon as its doors open. The camera follows their upward movement until they reach the trunk which they quickly set to empty. As the mob hurriedly goes up the stairs, Volpone slowly descends that same staircase he once had mounted as the palace's owner. The wheel of Fortune has come full circle, and it is Mosca who now finds himself at the top. His slow descent, however, is already starting, as the riotous celebration in his house allows the viewer to foresee. Once his fortune is spent, he will probably return to that dark dungeon Volpone had helped him to abandon. Although he has not paid his master in kind, for he has returned greed for generosity, the wheel follows its course, and Mosca, in spite of his resourcefulness, cannot escape its influence.

Tourneur's effective camera highlights Fortune's capricious changes by means of appropriate low- and high-angles. When Volpone is first sent to prison for lack of funds to pay Corvino his money back, the camera closely follows his descent through a narrow opening that leads to a dark dungeon. It is there that he joins Mosca, whose inability to save any money has confined him there. Volpone's bad luck changes when the *Sagittaire* arrives safe in Venice, and the camera soon afterwards shows Mosca from a high-angle, tightly holding a rope that pulls him out of his hole. Although the film ends by showing Volpone's descent from his palace, the crowd's ascent clearly points to Mosca's impending downfall.

Good luck lasts no longer than Shrove Tuesday, and, once the king of Carnival is burnt, long Lent follows. Lent, of course, is harder for those who lack a means of living than for the well-to-do, in spite of which greed seems to move them all. Tourneur's camera shows the viewer those crowded streets of Venice whose variegated nature fasci-

nates some critics, while it fills others with despite. This is the case with those film reviewers persuaded that genuine Venetians should avoid all contact with contaminating foreigners. Georges Devaise's description of Tourneur's outdoor shooting is a case in point. He says: "Maurice Tourneur [...] rend bien le tumulte et le grouillement de ces rues où l'Arménien côtoie le Grec, où le faquin frôle la grande dame" ([1941] 1977: 65).

The film's materiality is also addressed by a number of critics who point to its lack of lustre. Thus Devaise exclaims: "Quel dommage que la photographie soit si grise!" ([1941] 1977: 65), a remark that bears certain resemblance to Pierre Heuzé's "Son mérite est grand d'avoir évité de nous promener plus qu'il convenait dans cette ville à images ressasses qu'est Venise" ([1941] 1977: 65).

Both Devaise's and Heuzé's comments indirectly point to Tourneur's scarcity of means while shooting *Volpone*, a circumstance that Jacques Deslandes explains when he recounts how Tourneur had to take up where Baroncelli had left almost two years earlier: "Avec des boîtes de pellicule déjà impressionnée –le fragment du *Volpone* de Baroncelli– des décors reconstitués tant bien que mal [...] un décor qui n'existe plus que sur la pellicule à un faux semblant qui est à peine fini" (1977: 6), which leads him to conclude: "Avec *Volpone* [...] on pourrait presque parler de cinéma aléatoire: faire d'une nécessité une prodigieuse liberté" (1977: 6)<sup>17</sup>.

This is precisely the film's greatest merit: to have taken advantage of the outstanding performing abilities of its select cast, whose farcical style of interpretation has rendered any naturalistic setting redundant. It is the symbolic nature of its setting and costumes that counts, not its lavish outdoor takes, which the political and economic circumstances did not make possible. This style, however, perfectly suited Coupeau's disciples, who prided themselves in turning their body movement, voice range and facial expression into their most valuable and effective tools to give life to any script. The script's shrewd writer, moreover, wholly shared their standpoint, as his close and prolonged collaboration with

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<sup>17</sup> The *Tribune de Genève* in "Sept dimanches" (1977) similarly points to the fact that Tourneur's most outstanding film was shot during the war: "Au moment où la guerre éclate, Tourneur termine ce qui est –hélas pour lui– sa composition la plus célèbre. Il s'agit de *Volpone*".

this select group of actors had steadily proved. What the viewer was finally offered was a picture that, in Pierre Heuze's words, "garde sa cohésion, sa précision, son rythme d'oeuvre forte" ([1941]1977: 65). Jonson himself could not have dreamed of a better update of his harsh satiric comedy.

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