'Volpone, meaning “sly fox” in Italian, is a comedy play written by Ben Jonson in 1605-1606. Recognised as one of the best Jacobean era comedies, the play is a ruthless satire on lust and greed.

Volpone is a con artist and has amassed a lot of wealth through dishonest means. A group of three legacy hunters is attracted to him as he is childless and has no natural heir. A lawyer named Voltore, a merchant called Corvino and an old gentleman named Corbaccio are desirous of inheriting Volpone’s fortune after he dies.

Volpone is pretending to be ill so he could receive a lot of lavish gifts from the legacy hunters. The fact that he is in perfect health is only known to himself and his parasite Mosca. Mosca is Volpone’s servant cum slave.

Volpone gets attracted to Corvino’s wife, Celia. Mosca describes her as the most beautiful woman in Italy. He asks Mosca to use his wealth and bring him closer to her. Lady Politic Would-be, the wife of an English knight arrives to meet Volpone but Mosca asks her to come later. Volpone disguises himself as a mountebank and interrupts the conversation between Sir Politic Would-be and Peregrine, an English traveller who has just arrived in Venice. In his disguised avatar, Volpone sells elixir and asks for a handkerchief. Celia offers hers.

Back at home, Volpone tells Mosca that he lusts for Celia. Mosca vows to delight him with her presence. Mosca heads to Corvino’s house. Corvino is berating Celia for offering her handkerchief and questions her loyalty. Mosca interrupts and tells Corvino that Volpone will make him his heir if Celia sleeps with him as that will restore his health. Corvino agrees.

Mosca meets Corbaccio’s son Bonario and tells him that his father is planning to disinherit him. Lady Politic arrives again. As soon as she is admitted, she starts talking non-stop. This annoys Volpone. Mosca dismisses her by saying that he saw Sir Politic with a courtesan (a prostitute).

Lady Politic sees Sir Politic with Peregrine. She believes Peregrine is the female prostitute just dressed in man’s clothing. Mosca arrives and tells her that she is mistaken and points at Celia saying she is the courtesan he was talking about. Lady Politic believes him.

When Celia and Volpone are together, Volpone offers his inheritance but being the good Christian, Celia declines the offer. Volpone starts forcing himself on her but Bonario who is hidden but witnessing the scene rescues Celia.

Celia and Bonario inform the senate about Volpone’s intention to rape Celia, Corbaccio disinheriting his son and Corvino forcing his wife into prostitution. Voltore enters as the lawyer of Volpone and changes the argument in Volpone’s favour. He projects Celia and Bonario as lovers, empathises with Corbaccio for being nearly killed by his son and portrays Corvino as an innocent husband. The senate orders Celia and Bonario to be arrested.

Volpone feels that he is actually falling ill and decides to play a final prank on the legacy hunters. He spreads a rumour that he is dead and that he has made Mosca his sole heir. Everything is going as per Volpone’s plan but Mosca has other plans. In a soliloquy, he says that he will not let Volpone “return to the world of the living” unless he gives him half his fortune.

Voltore feels disgusted by his doings and confesses in front of the Senate. He calls himself and Mosca as criminals. Voltore claims that Volpone is alive but the opportunistic Mosca, who has his will, denies the claim. He says that Volpone is dead so he can inherit his estate immediately.

Volpone thinks it is better to tell the truth than let Mosca inherit all the wealth. Volpone is sent to prison for his misdoings. Corbaccio’s estate is given to his son Bonario. Corvino is made a subject of public humiliation. The play ends with the playwright asking the audience to applaud if they liked the play.
Mind Map

Corvino
- Jealous merchant
- Legacy-hunter
- Rivals

Voltore
- Eloquent lawyer
- Legacy-hunter
- Rivals

Volpone
- Greedy trickster
- Legacy-hunter

Corbaccio
- Elderly nobleman
- Legacy-hunter

Mosca
- Cunning fool
- Manipulator
- Servant

Rivals

Legacy-hunter