

Volpone: or The biter bitten
A short play in three acts,
by
Marcus Miller and Nicholas Beale
May 20

Dramatis Personae

Captain Kafka, President of Arcadia
Antonio, his handsome, trusted adviser
Clarida, able, attractive young NY lawyer
Volpone, wily bond trader
Grief, judge of 2nd circuit court in NY
Learned B. lawyer of great reknown based in NY
Prof S. economist of great reknown based in NY
Gravitas, Supreme Court Judge in DC
Narrator



Act One

Scene One: Arcadia in dire straits

Setting: Captain's quarters in Arcadia (located somewhere in Latin America).
Foul weather, a thunderous storm is breaking.



CAPTAIN (*staggering*)

The gods are angry with Arcadia:
our troubles multiply with every day.
Now, like a ship in a pitiless storm,
our nation veers towards unyielding rocks!
Say, good Antonio, how as captain, I
can save our country from the angry flood.

ANTONIO

You must act now with a determined haste,
And boldness that will match these fearsome times.

CAPTAIN

Brave words, my trusty friend: but what to do?

ANTONIO

We must devalue and default, my lord.

Lightning, roll of thunder

CAPTAIN (*staggering again*)

Alas, I'm little wiser. Please explain.

ANTONIO

Friend, like a pigmy to a tiger bound,
Arcadia is lash'd to the dollar proud.
This too-tight bond she must unravel, so
the peso can find its own best level.

And then she must her heavy debts rewrite,
whose foul weight else will drag her down, unto
the slimy bottom of the dreadful deep.

Thus only will we dire disaster 'scape
and fair Arcadia rise again, my lord.

CAPTAIN

We'll do this; and, Gods, prosper now our plan!
(*shouts, as if to the crew of a ship*)
All hands on deck! Attention every man!
The peso shall float free; and tell to all
our creditors, we'll salvage what we can!

Scene Two The swap; and the holdout

Setting: Captain's quarters: fair weather

CAPTAIN

The storm is passed, my loyal Antonio,
our ship of state secure. But mark you how
our creditors come crowding in. What now?

ANTONIO

It is soon told. The peso is so low
against the mighty dollar, that the claims
of creditors must all be written down,
with dollars swapped to pesos, one to one.

(pause)

And yet, so they may share good times to come,
we'll grant them all Growth Bonds as well.

CAPTAIN

But how

is this to be achieved?

ANTONIO

To make our peace
with all our creditors, here from New York
comes Clarida, a lawyer of renown



CLARIDA *(enters)*

Greetings, O captain

CAPTAIN

You are welcome here -
by looks so young, in reputation wise.
To help regain our sweet Arcadian dreams,
go with Antonio to parley with
our creditors.

ANTONIO

Come, Clarida, with me

Exit Antonio and Clarida, soon to return.

CAPTAIN

What news? What news? Your faces give me hope.

ANTONIO

Our creditors, at first reluctant, have
listen'd to our plan, accepted the swap,
be-sweeten'd with Growth Bonds. So now they all
await our renew'd growth with urgent hope.

CLARIDA

But one says he'll not settle...

Loud banging at the door; enter Volpone

... here he is!

CAPTAIN

What right have you to force your entry here
as if the place were yours?

VOLPONE

I come to claim
my due. Volpone is my name. By law
of contract, all your ships, your goods
your embassies - and even this room - are mine,
security for these your bonds I own.

Waves a clutch of sovereign bonds

CLARIDA

Why, when Arcadia was in dire straits,
those bonds were purchased for a trifle. Now
you want full value. Shame upon you, sir!

ANTONIO (*angry*)

Be satisfied with what the rest have got.
Ask more and you'll get nothing, in God's name.

VOLPONE

Young fool! We'll see who wins this waiting game.

Leaves

CLARIDA

Your flashing anger may, Antonio,
advantage give to a dangerous foe.

Act 2

Scene 1 Antonio's dream; and his curse

Setting: a café in NY

Ten years have passed with no concessions on either side. Arcadia is resolved not to privilege the holdout creditor: Volpone, makes repeated attempts to seize Arcadian assets, without success. Antonio and Clarida meet.

CLARIDA

Arcadia and Volpone fierce do stand
in frozen postures of defiance. Yet
see how these set-piece gestures do mislead:
Arcadia now enjoys far better times!

ANTONIO

So far so good, but all of this may change -
if my foul dream last night comes true.

CLARIDA

What dream,
that makes you pale and shudder, just to tell?

ANTONIO

To toast our better times - and the decade
of out-foxing Volpone – Captain K
invited you to fair Arcadia
to rest, and use his private launch, with me
beside you. So we sailed a sunny sea -

CLARIDA (*interrupting*)
a beach I would prefer!

ANTONIO (*smiling*)

Why, in my dream
those were your very words! so on the beach
all lined with green hibiscus we embarked -



CLARIDA (*interrupting*)
Ah, wondrous.

ANTONIO

But no sooner had our bow
kissed the soft sand than from bushes leapt
a fearful band; Volpone and his men.
Our boat they branded with these doleful words:
'SEQUESTERED BY ORDER OF JUDGE GRIEF'
They marched us both ashore, I turned and - woe -
on your fair breast a dreadful sign I saw:
'PROPERTY OF VOLPONE, BY THE LAW'
From this sad scene I woke, in ghastly sweat;
and then came quickly here to banish it.

CLARIDA

I'm here. My breast bears no such sign: all's well.

ANTONIO

Yet such things may take place within the law.

Stands up and cries out loudly

So here I do declare, for all to hear,
That I will take no notice of Judge Grief,
a silver-haired crook no better than a thief.
Let him and all his edicts rot in hell!
Should this case last until the end of time,
grasping Volpone shan't receive a dime.

CLARIDA,

You have laid on the Judge a heavy curse.
But what if this your anger make things worse?

Scene 2 Judge Grief's thunderbolt

Setting: A court room in NY

CLARIDA (*sotto voce*)

O Let me plead our case, Antonio,
you are too hot and too intemperate,
and will anger the irascible judge.

ANTONIO

Reluctantly, I leave the pleas to you



THE YALE BEN JONSON

VOLPONE

Most learned Judge, spare me my sore distress,
spurned by a debtor who pays not a cent.
Others got their dues: I want that too.
Give me my just claim for *pari passu* !

CLARIDA

O learned judge, the other creditors'
forbearance has let Arcadia grow.
But had Volpone got his cruel way,
this would have failed: so why reward him now?

JUDGE GRIEF

There is a principle as old as time
that those in court must all respect the judge
th' embodiment of justice and the law.
Upstart Arcadia has defied this code –
spurned all my rulings, and my judgements mocked.
she will not pay, no matter what I say.
She must be punished for the rule of law!
Arcadia treats Volpone as a cur,
But yet he is a valid creditor.

CLARIDA

Arcadia's bluster means no real offence
'tis but the brave face of an injured pride.

JUDGE GRIEF

Young woman, speak me not of injured pride.
(*pauses*)
I order that Arcadia pay in full
with costs, without delay. And in default
these monies can be seized from what is due

to other creditors. Let it now be done!

Leaves the court

ANTONIO

Oh Clarida, we pay a heavy the price
For the dire curse I made, 'gainst your advice.

CLARIDA

Your curse, Antonio, has made him mad,
for all will follow in Volpone's tracks.
To the Supreme Court we must appeal:
two learned sages must we now consult,
unknown to Volpone and his team.
They will furnish us with subtle means
to trap this wolf. So come away with me
and we will take their counsel secretly.

Exit

Act 3

Scene 1 The plot thickens

Setting: law offices in NY

The Learned B and Professor S are seated, in low, but animated conversation (inaudible to the audience). There is knocking at the door.



LEARNED B and PROF S (*both in unison*)

(as in Gilbert and Sullivan)

Pray do come in. Pray do come in.

Enter Clarida and Antonio

We bid you both warm welcome here.

CLARIDA

O Learned B, Professor S,
we come to you in great distress.

Judge Grief, in a thunderbolt from the blue,
has granted Volpone *pari passu*!

B&S (*both in unison*)
We've heard the news, the dreadful man -

C&A
He's given Volpone *pari passu*!

B&S (*both in unison*)
We've made a plan, a marv'ulous plan -

C&A
Come tell us now; what should we do?

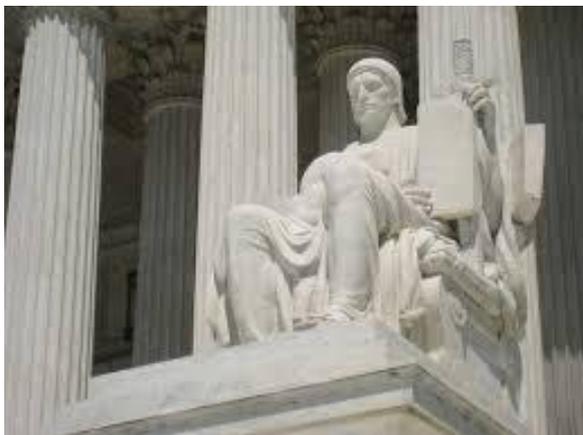
ANTONIO (*interrupting*)
These walls have ears. To keep this plan
unknown to Volpone as long as we can,
write nothing in clear, and make no sound.
Then Volpone's plot will fall to the ground.

B&S (*both in unison*)
We'll speak in silence; write nothing down.
(*conspiratorially*)
Come closer friends, come close. No sound: no sound!

There follows a pantomime as the distinguished Lawyer and Economist 'explain' with exaggerated mime how to entrap Volpone, the lawyer with rolls of documents, the economist with a whiteboard (perhaps showing an equation or two, like $11 - 2 = 9$ or even $e=mc^2$) which gets rubbed off promptly after use. With professional panache, Clarida takes it all in (but not of course the audience as they are not in on the secret, to be revealed in the next scene). Finally, when the pantomime is over, Clarida and Antonio leave, furtively.

Scene 2 Judgement Day

Setting: Supreme Court of the United States, in Washington DC



GRAVITAS

Who brings the case before us?

VOLPONE

It is I

GRAVITAS

Who's for Arcadia?

CLARIDA

I your honour, here

GRAVITAS

Do you Volpone seek to claim your due.
Or will you now accept what others have,
so that Arcadia may live in peace.

VOLPONE

I claim my due, with interest and costs.

CLARIDA

We urge you think again, for mercy's sake

VOLPONE

Talk not of mercy: give me due dessert.
I am in court for justice, not just cash
Here is my contract: here I rest my case

CLARIDA

But be advised before we do proceed,
others would surely suffer for this deed.
In future creditors will no pity show
and say 'I'll be no sweet, forgiving fool
when so much more is gotten by the cruel'.

VOLPONE

Nay, from this suffering will spring much good.
Debt contracts will be now understood
to mean exactly what they say; so states
will borrow only when they can repay!
Give me my due and end the matter here.

CLARIDA

(aside)

Now let's out-wolve this wolf.

(aloud)

Be now advis'd
your claim stands twice contested. Tis resolved
that creditors can act as one to cast
aside the claims of lone rapacious wolves --

their own receipts immune, and shielded from
the fangs of vengeful predators. This by
the Comity of Nations is agreed.

VOLPONE

Is this the law? Your honour, is this so?

GRAVITAS

Ay! So it is the Nations have decreed.

VOLPONE

I will take what others got; and fight again

CLARIDA

Nay ... your belated claim may be denied:
you may get less! For to protect its gold
Persia's creditors got just ten percent!

ANTONIO

Ah! now wily wolf, we have you on the hip!
A hundred? No! Not thirty - maybe ten!
On bended knee you now must mercy beg.

VOLPONE

Justice is all I seek; not your goodwill.

GRAVITAS

Let us hear what the defendant has to say.

CLARIDA (*speaking first*)

We'll let Volpone have recov'ry bonds,
so he will want to see Arcadia grow -
share-holder now, and not her fiercest foe.

GRAVITAS

Come now Volpone, take it while you may.

VOLPONE

Despite the cost of hunt and chase,
This offer will I take, and end the case.

(*muses*)

Against Antonio I would have won;
but Clarida, with enchanted armour on,
embolds my prey to act in unison.

(*turns on his heel*)

Let sovereign debtors other fools pursue:
Volpone leaves to wolve in pastures new.

Exeunt omnes

Epilogue

Setting: Hall of Arcadian Embassy in Washington, DC.
There's wine, elegant dress and the sound of tango music.

ANTONIO

What a marvel you were in the court dear;
And it's great that we have your support, dear.
On our National Day
as we party away,
you're the toast of the town tonight. *Salud!*

(raises his glass to hers)

CLARIDA

It's a pleasure for me to be here, dear.
I'm so glad that our victory was clear, dear.
And I'm happy to say,
as we party away,
that Arcadian tango is what I like!

He invites her to dance

ANTONIO

Come, let's dance on this night of delight, dear!

CLARIDA

Sure, but one thing you better get right, dear.
As I glide round the room
holding close to your arm,
just remember - my first love is the law!

*He bows and takes her in his arms;
slowly they start to dance*

(End)

