Jonson's Tortoise and Avian

P. B. R. Doob and G. B. Shand

Studies of Jonson's use of beast fables in *Volpone* have elucidated the action of much of the play while throwing little light on the interactions of Politic Wouldbe and Peregrine, and especially on Politic's futile attempt to hide himself in the tortoise-shell. Two recent articles have sought to clarify the play's tortoise symbolism, but have not located beast fable analogues for the event in question. The better of these articles, by Ian Donaldson, divides the tortoise symbolism into three categories: the representation of policy, used ironically here by Jonson; the representation of silence, with justice being done to the ridiculously garrulous Sir Pol; and the representation of the virtue of keeping at home, a quality of the chaste woman which can be seen as one of the central themes of the play. Our aim is to supplement Donaldson's article with a strikingly appropriate beast fable analogue to the Peregrine-Politic plot and its tortoise-shell culmination.

The informing structure of this episode finds such an analogue in Avian's fable of the tortoise and the other birds, which we quote from *Caxton's Aesop*:

He that enhaunceth hym selfe more than he oughte to do To hym oughte not to come noo good/ As hit appiereth by this present fable/ Of a tortose/ whiche said ... to the byrdes/ yf ye lyft me vp wel hyghe fro the ground to the ayer I shalle shewe to yow grete plente of precious stones/ And the Egle toke her and bare her so hyghe/ that she myghte not see the erthe/ And the Egle sayd to her shewe me now these precious stones that thow promysest to shewe to me/ And by cause that the tortose myght not see in the erthe/ and that the Egle knewe wel that he was deceyued/ thrested his clowes in to the tortoses bely/ and kylled hit/ For he that wylle haue and gete worship and glorye may not haue hit without grete labore/ Therfore hit is better and more sure/ to kepe hym lowely than to enhaunc hym self on hyghe/ and after to deye shamefullly and myserably/ For men sayn comynly/ who so mounteth hygher/ than he shold/ he falleth lower than he wold.

The general appropriateness of this fable to the discussions of foolish aspiration in the play is clear enough, but even more notable is its relevance to Politic's efforts to enhance himself more than he ought to do. Politic is determined to appear omniscient without any greater effort than that required to copy notes out of play-books, and when he takes it upon himself to instruct Peregrine in the proper manner of travel in Venice, his pearls of wisdom, hardly "grete plente of precious stones," are specious enough to warrant Peregrine's unmasking of the false knower, just as that other predatory bird, the eagle, un-masks the tortoise of the fable. And as the tortoise promised jewels, so Politic has promised great wealth:

Well, if I could but find one man, one man
To mine own heart, whom I durst trust, I would ...
Make him rich, make him a fortune. 4

Like the tortoise high above the earth, however, Politic has nothing to show, and Peregrine, recognizing this nothing, sets him up for the final humiliation, warning him of his immi-
nent danger, and asking him if he has no frail, no sugar chest or currant butt in which to hide himself. Politic, in a choice of properties clearly signalling the connection between this episode and the beast fable, produces his tortoise-shell, clammers into it, and is unmasked as poseur and fool by the avenging Peregrine. The punishment is infinitely more gentle than that meted out in Avian, but then the context here is comedy, and Jonson is sporting more with follies than with crimes.

The existence of this fable analogue in no way negates the symbolic functions of the tortoise discussed by Donaldson. It is reasonable to suggest, however, that the Avian fable, or something very like it, provides the informing structure for the Peregrine-Politic-tortoise episode, while Donaldson's happily appropriate symbolic values are the kind of literary bonus that would have delighted Jonson.

Glendon College, York University

Notes
1 See, for example, Jonas A. Barish, “The Double Plot in Volpone,” Modern Philology, L1 (1953), 83-92.
5 Ibid., V. iv. 44-49. Compare Falstaff’s exit in the buck basket (Merry Wives of Windsor, III. iv), and note Robert E. Knoll’s case for the tortoise-shell as a version of the basket of Tudor farce, in Ben Jonson’s Plays: An Introduction (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), p. 100.
6 Avian’s violence is threatened, however, as the Second Merchant cries, “Heart, I’ll see him creep, or prick his guts” (V. iv. 70).