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# FOUR ENGLISH COMEDIES

JONSON/VOLPONE

CONGREVE/THE WAY OF THE WORLD  
GOLDSMITH/SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER  
SHERIDAN/THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL



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## THREE RESTORATION COMEDIES

*The Man of Mode* – ETHEREGE

*The Country Wife* – WYCHERLEY

*Love for Love* – CONGREVE

Artificial, irreverent, and bawdy, the Restoration theatre came as a violent reaction to the strict ordinance of the Commonwealth. Played before the most cliquish and cynical audience in the history of the theatre, consciously trailing its coat at the puritan citizenry, it has delighted and offended over the centuries in about equal measure. Yet, take it or leave it, it offers a morality of its own, in which elegance and wit are the chief virtues, and folly, meanness, and hypocrisy the butts of its genial satire. At its best, as in the three plays included here, it produced some of the greatest comedy of all time, holding up to its age a mirror whose image, however partial, is 'bright, sharp and pertinent, undimmed with the breath of years'

*Ben Jonson*

## THREE COMEDIES

As Shakespeare's nearest rival on the English stage, Ben Jonson has both gained and suffered. Productions of recent years have, as it were, rediscovered him as a comic dramatist of genius and a master of language. This volume contains his best-known comedies.

*Volpone*, which is perhaps his greatest, and *The Alchemist* are both *tours de force* of brilliant knavery, unflagging in wit and comic invention. *Bartholomew Fair*, an earthier work, portrays Jonson's fellow Londoners in festive mood – bawdy, energetic, and never at a loss for words.



## FOUR ENGLISH COMEDIES

Ben Jonson was born in 1572 at Westminster, the son of a minister, and educated at Westminster School. In about 1597 he worked for Henslowe, the theatre manager, and he led gatherings of writers at the Mermaid Tavern. His first major success was *Every Man in His Humour* (1598), but his finest plays were written after 1606: *Volpone* (1606), *Epicoene, or The Silent Woman* (1609), *The Alchemist* (1610) and *Bartholomew Fair* (1614). From 1616 he held a grant from James I and devised elaborate court masks, often with Inigo Jones. Jonson died in 1637.

William Congreve was born in 1670 in Yorkshire, spent his childhood in Ireland, where his father was on military service, and was a fellow-student to Swift at Kilkenny and Trinity College, Dublin. In 1691 he came to London to study law. He had already published verse and a novel when he achieved fame with his first comedy, *The Old Bachelor*, in 1693. His other plays included *The Double Dealer* (1694), *Love for Love* (1695) and *The Way of the World* (1700). Congreve, a friend of Steele and Pope and intimately attached to the Duchess of Marlborough, held various government sinecures. He died in 1729 and was buried in Westminster Abbey.

Oliver Goldsmith was born in 1730, the son of an Irish clergyman, and educated at Trinity College, Dublin, and in Edinburgh, where he studied medicine. In 1756 he returned destitute from wandering through Europe, and became a hackwriter of reviews and biographies. In 1761 he met Dr Johnson and became a member of 'The Club'. Among his works the best known are *The Vicar of Wakefield* (1766, written in 1762), *The Good-Natur'd Man* (1768), and *She Stoops to Conquer*, an immense success in 1773. Goldsmith died in 1774.

Richard Brinsley Sheridan was born in 1751, the son of an actor-elocutionist, and educated at Harrow. He escorted the singer Elizabeth Linley to France, fought two duels on her behalf, and married her in 1773. In 1775 he made a spectacular debut as a dramatist with three plays: *The Rivals*, *St Patrick's Day* and *The Duenna*, a comic opera. The following year he acquired Garrick's share in the Drury Lane Theatre which he managed until it was burnt down in 1809. *The School for Scandal* was produced in 1777 and *The Critic* in 1779. From 1780 until 1812 Sheridan was an M.P. and held government offices. In 1787-8 he made some celebrated speeches impeaching Warren Hastings. He died in 1816.



FOUR  
ENGLISH COMEDIES

*of the 17th and 18th  
Centuries*

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VOLPONE  
THE WAY OF THE WORLD  
SHE STOOPS TO CONQUER  
THE SCHOOL FOR SCANDAL

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*Edited by J. M. Morrell*

PENGUIN BOOKS

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## PREFACE

*English comedy would appear sufficiently rich for a choice of four representative plays to be a fairly easy task. Something by Shakespeare, naturally, Sheridan, Wilde, Shaw, and, warming to the work, a compiler could add name to name. Here the question of accessibility arises. The Importance of Being Earnest is much easier to find than a copy of, say, Congreve's Way of the World. Therefore the aim of this volume is to provide a selection of plays which are established in their own right, and have the measure of universality which will ensure an audience as delighted now as when the play appeared – perhaps even more so – but which have not as yet been collected in a single volume.*

*This, then, explains the omission alike of Shakespeare and more recent playwrights. Yet even now the choice is varied enough to call, perhaps, for an explanation of this particular selection. Pre-Shakespearian comedy will always be the field of the student of literature rather than the reader of plays. Shakespeare's elder contemporaries, such as Peele or Greene, have enough in common with Shakespeare to incline the general reader to dwell rather on what they lack in comparison with him than on what they possess in their own right. From the glorious summer of the seventeenth-century drama Ben Jonson chooses himself, for originality of subject, strength in treatment, and a distinctive and considered view of what he intended his comedy to achieve. Volpone has been chosen as one of Jonson's finest plays; it reads most easily, and the weight of the satirical comedy gives the play a massive dignity and vigour.*

*Restoration comedy must be represented. It is a remarkably self-contained body of social comedy, springing from the life of an urbane and leisured part of the community. Manners and*

*attitudes provide the comedy, style and elegance adorn the language. Congreve's Way of the World has been chosen chiefly because the dialogue moves with such exquisite grace: 'Beauty the lover's gift? Lord, what is a lover, that it can give? Why, one makes lovers as fast as one pleases, and they live as long as one pleases, and then if one pleases one makes more.'*

*Moving on to the eighteenth century, a selection of writers makes itself, Sheridan and Goldsmith. Here also are plays which offer further varieties of comedy. The School for Scandal and She Stoops to Conquer both show the fun that comes from a good comic plot, which includes mistaken identities, disguises, and, when Tony Lumpkin conducts the revels and leads his mother in a circumbendibus, something very near slapstick. Sheridan's School for Scandal has been chosen rather than The Rivals, as, in addition to a good plot, it offers more variety of character and, for example in the conversation of the scandal-mongers, more brilliant dialogue. She Stoops to Conquer is distinguished by something absent in all the other plays, a hearty good humour, an exuberant sense of fun, and characters all of whom are likeable.*

*Though comedies, all four offer a different view of the comic theme. It is a pity that there is nothing to show English romantic comedy, but for this the reader must go to Shakespeare. The four plays selected are no chamber drama, but plays which have remained in the comic repertory. All have been on the stage within living memory, and, though Congreve or Jonson may be more in tune with our generation than Goldsmith, nevertheless it can safely be assumed that the wheel will come full circle and that each will have his turn.*

*The texts of all four plays have been carefully compared with the earliest printed editions, and are presented in each case without omissions of any kind, and with the stage directions of the original text. But, although the Prologues and Epilogues have*

*been added, it has not seemed necessary to include all those minor hors d'œuvres and savouries with which seventeenth and eighteenth century playwrights and their printers rejoiced to deck their literary dishes. Accordingly, Jonson's lengthy prose dedication of Volpone to 'the Two Famous Universities', Steele's prefatory verses to The Way of the World and Congreve's prose dedication of the play to Montague, Goldsmith's dedication to Jonson of She Stoops to Conquer, and Sheridan's 'Portrait' addressed to Mrs Crewe which appeared with the original edition of The School for Scandal, have been omitted.*

*Spelling and capitalization have in general been adapted to modern practice, but the original punctuation has been followed except where it is likely to cause difficulty to a reader of the present day.*

*Volpone, first acted in 1606, was first printed in the following year. The Way of the World, produced at the Lincoln's Inn Theatre in 1700, was first printed in the same year. The premier production of She Stoops to Conquer took place at Covent Garden in 1773; that of The School for Scandal at Drury Lane in 1777.*



VOLPONE;

*or, The Fox*



*by* BEN JONSON

THE PERSONS OF  
THE PLAY

VOLPONE, *a Magnifico*  
MOSCA, *his Parasite*  
VOLTORE, *an Advocate*  
CORBACCIO, *an old Gentleman*  
CORVINO, *a Merchant*  
BONARIO, *son to Corbaccio*  
SIR POLITICK WOULD-BE, *a Knight*  
PEREGRINE, *a Gentleman Traveller*  
NANO, *a Dwarf*  
CASTRONE, *an Eunuch*  
ANDROGYNO, *an Hermaphrodite*  
GREGE (*or Mob*)  
Commandadori, *Officers of Justice*  
Mercatori, *three Merchants*  
Avocatori, *four Magistrates*  
Notario, *the Register*  
LADY WOULD-BE, *Sir Politick's Wife*  
CELIA, *Corvino's Wife*  
Servitori, *Servants, two Waiting-women, &c.*

SCENE — VENICE

# VOLPONE; OR, THE FOX

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## ARGUMENT

V olpone, childless, rich, feigns sick, despairs,  
O ffers his state to hopes of several heirs,  
L ies languishing; his parasite receives  
P resents of all, assures, deludes; then weaves  
O ther cross-plots, which ope themselves, are told.  
N ew tricks for safety are sought; they thrive; when, bold  
E ach tempts the other again, and all are sold.

## PROLOGUE

Now, luck yet send us, and a little wit  
Will serve to make our play hit;  
(According to the palates of the season.)  
Here is rhyme, not empty of reason.  
This we were bid to credit, from our poet,  
Whose true scope, if you would know it,  
In all his poems still have been this measure,  
To mix profit with your pleasure;  
And not as some, whose throats their envy failing,  
Cry hoarsely, all he writes is railing:  
And when his plays come forth, think they can flout them,  
With saying, he was a year about them.  
To this there needs no lie, but this his creature,  
Which was, two months since, no feature;  
And though he dares give them five lives to mend it,  
'Tis known, five weeks fully penn'd it,  
From his own hand, without a co-adjutor,  
Novince, journey-man, or tutor.



Yet thus much I can give you as a token  
Of his play's worth, no eggs are broken,  
Nor quaking custards with fierce teeth affrighted  
Wherewith your rout are so delighted;  
Nor hailes he in a gull, old ends reciting,  
To stop gaps in his loose writing;  
With such a deal of monstrous and forced action,  
As might make Bethlem a faction:  
Nor made he his play for jests stolen from each table,  
But makes jests to fit his fable;  
And so presents quick comedy, refined,  
As best critics have designed;  
The laws of time, place, persons he observeth,  
From no needful rule he swerveth.  
All gall and copperas from his ink he draineth,  
Only a little salt remaineth,  
Wherewith he'll rub your cheeks, till, red with laughter,  
They shall look fresh a week after.

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## ACT I, SCENE I

VOLPONE, MOSCA

*Volp.* Good morning to the day; and next, my gold:  
Open the shrine, that I may see my saint.  
Hail the world's soul, and mine. More glad than is  
The teeming earth to see the longed-for sun  
Peep through the horns of the celestial Ram,  
Am I, to view thy splendour darkening his;  
That lying here, amongst my other hoards,  
Showest like a flame by night; or like the day  
Struck out of chaos, when all darkness fled  
Unto the centre. O, thou son of Sol,  
But brighter than thy father, let me kiss,  
With adoration, thee, and every relic  
Of sacred treasure in this blessed room.  
Well did wise poets, by thy glorious name,