The Changeling Study Guide

The Changeling by Thomas Middleton

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Author Biography

Thomas Middleton was born in 1580 in London, England; his exact date of birth is unknown, but he was baptized on April 18. His father was a prosperous bricklayer who died when Middleton was five. Middleton attended grammar school and in 1598 he matriculated at Queen's College, Oxford, where he studied from 1598 to 1601. There are no records indicating whether he ever received a degree.

Middleton married Magdalen Marbeck in 1602, and returned to London the following year. By this time, he was writing plays for the prominent theatre manager, Philip Henslowe. His earliest surviving independent play is *Blurt, Master Constable* (1602). From 1602 to 1607, he penned many plays for boy's companies, especially the Boys of St. Paul's. Many of these plays were citizen comedies (also called city comedies), which were set in London, featured mostly lower- and middle-class characters, were moral in tone, and which glorified the city of London. Examples of some popular Middleton citizen comedies are *Michaelmas Term* (c. 1606), *A Trick to Catch the Old One* (c. 1605), and *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1611), which is probably Middleton's most widely read play today. Middleton also wrote tragedies, including *The Revenger's Tragedy* (1607)□although the authorship of this play is sometimes questioned□and *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (1608).

It appears that from 1608 to 1610, Middleton struggled to make a living and may have been in debt. Between 1615 and 1617, he wrote *A Fair Quarrel*, marking his first collaboration with actor and playwright William Rowley. He collaborated on works with other playwrights of the time as well, including Thomas Dekker, Michael Drayton, Anthony Munday, John Webster, and possibly even William Shakespeare.

By this time, Middleton had become well known as a dramatist and he began to prosper. He was hired on many occasions to write and produce City of London pageants, and in 1620, he was appointed city chronicler, a position he retained until his death. With the income he continued to receive from his plays, he became moderately well-to-do. He wrote for the King's Men, the Prince's Men, and for Lady Elizabeth's Men.

The two plays that are generally considered his masterpieces in the genre of tragedy were written late in his career. These were *Women Beware Women* (c. 1625), his last know play, and *The Changeling*, written in collaboration with Rowley and performed in 1622.

In 1624, Middleton's play *Game at Chess* was a theatrical sensation at the Globe Theatre. It dealt with the English dislike of Spanish influence at the English court, and the English suspicion of Catholics. The play was the first to be performed for nine consecutive days, and it would have continued even longer had it not been suppressed by the authorities for its anti-Spanish content.

Middleton died of natural causes, and was buried July 4, 1627, in Newington Butts, London. He is often ranked by contemporary scholars behind only Ben Jonson and William Shakespeare in the ranks of Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists.

Plot Summary

Act 1

When *The Changeling* begins, Alsemero has fallen in love with Beatrice, whom he has just met in a church. He intends to cancel his voyage from Alicant, Spain, to Malta, and marry her. When he tells Beatrice of his love, she regrets that five days ago she was promised in marriage to Alonzo de Piracquo.

De Flores enters the scene; he is the servant of Vermandero, Beatrice's father. Beatrice despises De Flores, but he is in love with her and persists in seeing her at every opportunity. When her father enters, Beatrice asks him to invite Alsemero to his castle. Vermandero agrees when he discovers that Alsemero's deceased father was an old friend of his.

The second scene introduces the subplot. Alibius, an old doctor who is in charge of a lunatic asylum, confides in his servant Lollio that he is worried his young wife Isabella may seek affection elsewhere. He asks Lollio to keep watch on her while he is away and to prevent visitors to the madhouse from seeing her. Pedro and Antonio enter; Antonio is dressed to look like a fool, and Pedro pays Alibius to admit him to the asylum.

Act 2

Beatrice has decided she wants to marry Alsemero. De Flores enters, still using every excuse to see Beatrice, even though she insults him. He tells her that Alonzo has arrived with his brother Tomazo. After De Flores exits, Beatrice, repelled by De Flores, says she will get her father to dismiss him.

Vermandero, Alonzo, and Tomazo enter. While Beatrice and Vermandero talk, Tomazo tells his brother that Beatrice did not seem pleased to see him. Alonzo dismisses the remark. After Vermandero informs Alonzo that Beatrice has requested a three-day postponement of their wedding, Tomazo repeats his misgivings. He tells Alonzo not to marry Beatrice because she is in love with someone else. Alonzo refuses to listen.

In the second scene, Beatrice confesses her love to Alsemero. He wants to challenge Alonzo to a duel, but Beatrice fears this will only make the problem worse. She has already decided on a course of action. When she sees De Flores, she speaks kindly to him and promises him some medicine that will cure his bad skin. He is delighted at her apparent change of heart. She tells him she is being forced to marry a man she hates, and De Flores realizes she wants him to murder Alonzo. She gives him money and he readily agrees to perform the deed. Beatrice says she expects him to leave the country after the murder; she is pleased that she can get rid of De Flores and Alonzo at the same time. De Flores, however, sees this as an opportunity to possess Beatrice sexually.

Act 3

While De Flores is showing Alonzo around the castle, De Flores stabs him to death. Unable to remove a ring from Alonzo's finger, he cuts off the finger instead.

Meanwhile, in the madhouse, Lollio introduces Isabella to Franciscus, who is only pretending to be mad, and to Antonio, who is only pretending to be a fool. Both men wish to gain access to Isabella. After Lollio exits, Antonio reveals his true self and declares his love for Isabella, but she is not impressed. Antonio persists, and Lollio overhears his words of love. After he escorts Antonio out, Lollio makes a pass at Isabella. She tells him that if he does not stop, she will get Antonio to cut his throat. Alibius enters and informs them they must get some madmen and fools to put on a dance to entertain the guests at the wedding of Beatrice and Alonzo.

De Flores reports to Beatrice that he has murdered Alonzo. He shows her the dead man's finger, which horrifies Beatrice. The ring was a gift from her, at her father's request. She tells De Flores to keep the ring, which is worth three hundred ducats. When this does not please him, she gives him three thousand golden florins. De Flores explains that he did not commit murder for financial reward, but Beatrice does not understand what he is trying to tell her. She offers to double the sum, but when he scorns at that, she asks him to get out of the country and to write to her, naming his own price. He replies that if he leaves, she must too, since they are bound together in guilt. He tries to kiss her and reveals how desperately he wants to make love to her. She tries to reject him, but he reminds her of her guilt. She tries to impress on him the difference in their social class, but he claims that her evil act has made them equals. He says that if she does not do what he wants, he will inform on her. She makes one last effort to offer him money, but again he refuses. She begins to see the terrible consequences of her actions.

Act 4

Beatrice has yielded to De Flores's sexual demands, and has also married Alsemero. Alone in the afternoon, she realizes she cannot offer herself to her new husband, because he will know she is not a virgin. In Alsemero's medicine cabinet, she finds a book that prescribes a potion designed to show if a woman is a virgin. She tries it out on Diaphanta, on whom it has the required effect: she gapes, sneezes, and then laughs. Beatrice arranges for her to go to Alsemero's bed that night, in the pitch darkness, and pretend to be Beatrice.

Vermandero issues warrants for the arrest of Antonio and Franciscus, since he believes they are responsible for the murder of Alonzo. Tomazo enters, seeking revenge for his brother's death. He challenges Alsemero to a duel, and Jasperino reports to Alsemaro that he and Diaphanta have overheard suspicious conversations between De Flores and Beatrice. Puzzled, Alsemero gives Beatrice the virginity test, which Beatrice, knowing how to react, passes with flying colors.

Isabella shows Lollio a letter that Franciscus has written to her, confessing his love for her. Lollio teaches Antonio the dance that is to be performed at the wedding. Isabella enters, disguised as a madwoman and ready to flirt with Antonio, but Antonio speaks roughly to her, and she rejects him. Lollio then falsely informs Antonio that Isabella really is in love with him. The two men agree to conspire against Franciscus. But then Lollio tells Franciscus that Isabella is in love with him, and encourages him to beat up Antonio when the evening revels end.

Act 5

Beatrice is angry with Diaphanta because it is two o'clock in the morning and the maid still has not returned. De Flores sets fire to Diaphanta's chamber, hoping she will run home and die in the fire. Beatrice starts to love him because he takes care of her interests. The plan works; Diaphanta is burnt to death.

Tomazo, still seeking revenge but not knowing on whom to take it, encounters De Flores and strikes him in anger. De Flores does not hit back since he feels the pangs of conscience. Vermandero informs Tomazo that he has arrested Antonio and Franciscus for the murder; their behavior in disguising themselves looked so suspicious.

Alsemero accuses Beatrice of adultery. She confesses that she employed De Flores to murder Alonzo, but explains that she did it out of love for Alsemero. Alsemero confronts De Flores with Beatrice's confession. Then Vermandero, who believes he has caught the murderers, enters, and Alsemero brings forth the guilty pair. De Flores has fatally wounded Beatrice and has also stabbed himself. Beatrice confesses she sent Diaphanta in her place to the bedroom, and De Flores admits his guilt. He stabs himself again and dies; Beatrice dies also, leaving Vermandero, Tomazo, and Alsemero to reflect on the fact that justice has been done.

Characters

Alibius

Alibius is a jealous old doctor who is in charge of a private lunatic asylum. He is married to Isabella, a woman much younger than himself, and he is worried that when he is away another man may usurp his position. He therefore instructs his servant Lollio to prevent any of the visitors to the asylum, who may include young nobleman who come to gawk at the inmates, from seeing Isabella.

Alsemero

Alsemero is a nobleman from Valencia who falls in love with Beatrice. He immediately postpones his voyage to Malta to declare his love for her. Alsemero is an honorable man. When he finds out that Beatrice is betrothed to Alonzo but would sooner marry him, Alsemero, he wants to challenge Alonzo to a duel. But Beatrice refuses to allow this. When Jasperino informs him that he and Diaphanta have overheard suspicious conversations between De Flores and Beatrice, Alsemero gives her a potion that is supposed to reveal whether a woman is a virgin. Not a jealous man by nature, he does not want to think ill of his new bride and is relieved when she passes the test. When Beatrice is finally forced into confessing her crime to him, he is horrified and rejects her utterly.

Antonio

Antonio is the changeling, the counterfeit fool. He is a member of Vermandero's staff, but he gets permission to leave for a while, pretending that he is going on a trip to Bramata. In truth, he wants to gain access to Isabella, so he pretends to be a fool and is admitted to the lunatic asylum. After a while he casts his disguise aside and declares his love for Isabella. Unfortunately for Antonio (as well as for Franciscus), he happens to enter the asylum on the same day that Alonzo is murdered. When this fact transpires, Vermandero arrests him for murder. He is only spared the gallows when the truth comes out in the final scene.

Beatrice

Beatrice, also called Joanna, is the young, beautiful daughter of Vermandero. But behind her beauty lies an immature, selfish, cruel and cunning nature. When the plays begins, she is engaged to marry Alonzo, and it appears that she has some affection for him. But as soon as Alsemero declares his love for her, she switches her affections to the new man. Not wanting to be thwarted in her desires, and without a thought for the possible consequences, she employs De Flores, a man whom she loathes and despises, to murder Alonzo. But she completely misjudges De Flores. She thinks she

can pay him for his services and get him to leave the country; instead, he demands sex from her. She is forced to submit to him, since he makes her realize that they are partners in crime and she cannot escape from him. But this creates another problem for her. Although she is now free to marry Alsemero, she cannot allow him to detect on their wedding night that she is not a virgin, so she employs Diaphanta to go to Alsemero's bed in her place. De Flores then efficiently disposes of Diaphanta in a house fire, before the truth can come out, and Beatrice decides that she is now in love with him. Her crimes catch up with her when Jasperino overhears incriminating conversations between her and De Flores and reports them to Alsemero. When challenged by her husband, she confesses her role in the murder, but omits the substitution of Diaphanta in the marriage bed. After being rejected by her husband, she is stabbed by De Flores. Wounded, she is shamed in front of her father, and finally admits the full truth to Alsemero just before she dies.

De Flores

De Flores is a servant of Vermandero, Beatrice's father. He has an ugly appearance, particularly the skin on his face. De Flores is known to most people as an honest man, and Vermandero thinks highly of him. But in fact De Flores has no ethical sense at all, and his besetting sin is his sexual obsession with Beatrice. He invents any little excuse to go and see her, even though she loathes him and insults him. He is ready to endure such humiliations simply to have a glimpse of her. De Flores is more experienced and worldly-wise than Beatrice, and when she hints to him that she would like to see Alonzo murdered, he at once sees how he can use the opportunity to blackmail her into sexual submission. After he has killed Alonzo, he ignores Beatrice's attempts to buy him off, insisting that he will only be satisfied by his sexual enjoyment of her. Having outwitted and outmaneuvered her, he has his desire. Then, when Beatrice is threatened by the fact that Diaphanta has not returned from Alsemero's bed, it is De Flores who thinks up a scheme to save her. De Flores is so efficient in planning and acting upon it that Beatrice convinces herself that he is a man worth loving, because he takes such good care of her. Although De Flores does have some moments when his conscience troubles him, when his crimes are discovered, he remains defiant. He kills himself and Beatrice so they can be together in hell.

Diaphanta

Diaphanta is Beatrice's maid who flirts with Jasperino. At Beatrice's request, she takes Beatrice's place in Alsemero's bed on the wedding night. Beatrice thinks Diaphanta is a little too eager to accept the assignment and wonders whether she really is a virgin. But she is satisfied when she gives Diaphanta the test for virginity prescribed in a medical book, and the maid passes it. But Diaphanta apparently enjoys her love-making with Alsemero since she fails to return at midnight, as she had promised. When the first streaks of dawn appear in the sky, De Flores sets fire to Diaphanta's chamber, to lure her home. When the alarm is sounded about the fire, Diaphanta rushes back to her chambers, where she meets her death in the flames, just as De Flores had intended.

Franciscus

Franciscus is an employee of Vermandero who gets a leave of absence. He uses it to disguise himself as a madman and enter the lunatic asylum, where his purpose is to declare his love for Isabella. For a while he acts like a madman, but then sends Isabella a love letter, which unfortunately for him is intercepted by Lollio. Franciscus is arrested along with Antonio on suspicion of the murder of Alonzo, and would have been hanged had the truth not come out.

Isabella

Isabella is the young wife of Alibius. She is attractive to men and her old husband fears that her affections may stray. Confined to a room where she may only meet the inmates of the lunatic asylum rather than the visitors, she finds herself subject to the unwanted romantic attentions of Antonio and Franciscus. She also has to fend off an attempted seduction by Lollio. Isabella's common sense and good judgment are contrasted with Beatrice's complete lack of those qualities.

Jasperino

Jasperino is Alsemero's friend. He expresses surprise at Alsemero's sudden change of plans after he falls in love with Beatrice, and decides that he will entertain himself by seducing Diaphanta, who seems more than willing to be seduced. Jasperino later reports to Alsemero that he and Diaphanta have overheard incriminating conversation between De Flores and Beatrice.

Lollio

Lollio is Alibius's servant. Alibius charges him with ensuring that none of the visitors to the lunatic asylum are allowed to see Isabella. Lollio, who wants to seduce Isabella himself, readily agrees. He introduces Franciscus and then Antonio to Isabella, not realizing that they are only pretending to be madman and fool, respectively. When Lollio tries to kiss Isabella, she rebuffs him severely, telling him that if he does not stop, she will get Antonio to cut his throat. Lollio then tries to set Antonio and Franciscus against each other by telling each man separately that Isabella is in love with them.

Pedro

Pedro is Antonio's friend who takes him to the lunatic asylum.

Alonzo de Piracquo

Alonzo de Piracquo is a nobleman who when the play begins is engaged to marry Beatrice. Beatrice's father thinks very highly of him and is pleased that he is going to he his son-in-law. But Beatrice quickly loses interest in Alonzo when she meets Alsemero. Alonzo's brother Tomazo warns him not to marry Beatrice but he does not listen. He is murdered by De Flores as De Flores shows him around Vermandero's castle.

Tomazo de Piracquo

Tomazo de Piracquo is Alonzo's brother. He sees that Beatrice does not love Alonzo, and advises him not to marry her. After the murder of Alonzo, Tomazo comes to Vermandero's castle, seeking revenge, but he does not know the identity of the murderer. At first he is courteous to De Flores, thinking him an honest man (Act 4, scene 1), but later (Act 5, scene 2) takes an instinctive dislike to him and strikes him. At the end of the play he is satisfied that justice has been done.

Vermandero

Vermandero is Beatrice's father. He occupies a high position in Alicant society, since he lives in a castle and is attended by servants and has other employees. He is an old friend of Alsemero's late father, so is well-disposed to Alsemero. He is a good-hearted man, hospitable and honorable who is forced in the final scene of the play to watch in dismay as the evil acts are revealed and his own daughter is killed.

Themes

Reason and Passion

This tragedy is propelled by a conflict between reason and passion, in which passion rules. In dealing with sexual desire, the central characters fail to use proper judgment. Lust overwhelms all other considerations. In the case of Beatrice, there is considerable irony in the explanations she offers herself for her changing emotions. She falls in love with Alsemero immediately, but convinces herself that she is making a reasoned choice. She justifies her desertion of Alonzo by telling herself that when she fell for him, she was being led astray by appearances and she lacked judgment. She even warns Alsemero of the need to test an emotion such as love, by the use of reason. But she gives a clue to her state of mind when she admits in act 1 to a "giddy turning" in her affections as she turns from Alonzo to Alsemero. This does not sound like the state of mind that accompanies reasoned judgment. In fact, Beatrice is deceiving herself, justifying her fickleness by claiming it is something else. She even convinces herself that Alsemero is a man of sound judgment, because she approves of his choice of Jasperino as a friend: "It is a sign he makes his choice with judgement," she says. She extrapolates from that she too, in choosing a man of judgment, is exercising a similar virtue: "Methinks I love now with the eyes of judgement, / And see the way to merit." The truth, however, is that Beatrice is living in a state of self-delusion, which she never questions. When it comes to her dealings with De Flores, for example, it never occurs to her that De Flores wants from her something other than money. She fails to assess his character correctly.

Alonzo is another character who blinds himself to reality, owing to romantic or sexual desire. In act 2, scene 1, he fails to notice that Beatrice does not greet him with any warmth and shows no interest in him at all. He rejects Tomazo's warning simply because he cannot bear to hear any ill spoken of Beatrice, even though the evidence of her coolness toward him is obvious to his brother. Tomazo is one of the few characters in the play who retains his good judgment (since he is not affected by love or passion), and he speaks a truth that the play will ultimately reveal: "Why, here is love's tame madness: thus a man / Quickly steals into his vexation." He means that it is madness to fail to perceive an ugly truth due to feelings of love, because it will quickly lead to distress. In Alonzo's case, it leads to more than that□it leads directly to his death.

Diaphanta also suffers the fatal consequences of letting passion override judgment. On Beatrice's wedding night, she enjoys Alsemero's embraces too much and fails to return at the appointed hour. She dies in a fire as a result.

De Flores is yet another character in whom lust annihilates judgment. Unlike Beatrice, he does not fool himself into believing something other than the truth. He knows that Beatrice loathes him, and yet he keeps going back to see her, whenever the opportunity presents itself, and he endures her abuse. He knows that from a rational point of view, his actions make no sense. But he also knows that he lusts after Beatrice with such

passion that nothing else is of any significance. He admits that he "cannot choose but love her," and that "I can as well be hanged as refrain from seeing her." De Flores has gone beyond the point where he can exercise judgment; he is in the grip of lust and it will not let him go.

Once the characters have fallen under the spell of love or passion or lust, the crimes that follow seem inevitable.

Appearance versus Reality

There is a contrast between appearance and reality. Beatrice looks outwardly fine, but her beautiful appearance masks a selfish, ruthless, violent nature. During the play, she goes through a series of inner transformations that make her quite different from how she initially appears. Early on, betrothed to Alonzo, she is in love with Alsemero; later, in the dumb show that begins act 4, scene 1, she appears as a modest, virtuous bride in a solemn wedding procession, while the reality is that she is an accomplice in murder and has already been unfaithful to her husband. By passing the virginity test, she appears to be a virgin when she is not. She is also soon to create adulterers out of her maid and her unknowing husband; then finally, she will change affections once more, from her husband to De Flores. This makes Beatrice one of the "changelings" of the play's title.

The deception of Alsemero, who thinks he is making love to his bride when in fact his lover is Diaphanta, adds another layer to the appearance versus reality theme. This theme is also part of the comic subplot, which comments on the main plot. Antonio (who is described in the *dramatis personae* as the changeling) pretends to be a fool, and Franciscus pretends to be mad. Their appearances are quite contrary to the reality, although in a sense they too, like Beatrice, Alsemero, and De Flores, are mad for love, since they go to such absurd lengths to access to Isabella.

The theme of appearance versus reality also extends to Lollio who (like De Flores) appears to be the loyal servant of his master, but in fact is plotting to have Isabella for himself. Isabella provides a twist to the appearance-reality theme. Alibius suspects that she is virtuous only on the surface and that she will be tempted to gain sexual satisfaction elsewhere; he thinks there may be a dichotomy between the way she appears and who she really is. In that, however, he is mistaken. Although Isabella is not beyond using playful sexual innuendo with Lollio and Antonio, she is what she appears to be: a virtuous wife.

Style

There are many images of eyes and references to sight, many of which are used with unconscious irony by Beatrice, who points out that the eye can deceive when it comes to reaching reliable judgments about love and character. In act 1, scene 1, she says to Alsemero:

Our eyes are sentinels unto our judgements,

And should give certain judgement what they see;

But they are rash sometimes, and tell us wonders

Of common things, which when our judgments find,

They can then check the eyes, and call them blind.

Beatrice says of her quickly forgotten love for Alonzo, "Sure, mine eyes were mistaken," and she contrasts the superficiality of the eyes with what she calls the "eye of judgment" and "intellectual eyesight." The irony is that Beatrice is never more blind than when she thinks she is seeing with the eyes of judgment.

Images of sickness, poison, and blood reinforce the themes of the play. In the first scene, Alsemero, dismissing any idea that he is unwell, says, "Unless there be some hidden malady / Within me that I understand not." He does not know it yet, but the love he has just conceived for Beatrice will act as a sickness, a poison to him. Beatrice regards De Flores as like a "deadly poison," and says that he is to her a "basilisk" (a mythical reptile whose glance was said to be fatal). When the poison introduced by Beatrice and De Flores has done its work, Jasperino refers to the situation as an "ulcer" that is "full of corruption." An image of sickness is also used by De Flores, who refers to his lust for Beatrice as a "mad qualm" (a qualm is an illness).

Images of sickness are balanced by references to healing. Beatrice offers to make a medicine to cure De Flores's skin; Jasperino informs Diaphanta that he can be cured of the madness he jokingly claims to suffer from by sexual intercourse with her. Alibius, who is a doctor, claims to be able to cure both madmen and fools. The irony is that he cannot; the inmates are kept in line with whips, not cured by medicine. There is no medicine that can cure the sickness that afflicts Beatrice and De Flores, which also infects the characters around them.

Images of blood convey both lust and murder. Jasperino says he has the "maddest blood i' th' town," by which he means the most lustful. De Flores uses the word in the same sense when, after realizing he has a workable plan to possess Beatrice's body, he exclaims: "O my blood! / Methinks I feel her in mine arms already." But De Flores's use of the word is also linked to his knowledge that he must shed blood (by murder) in order to satisfy his blood (his lust). After he has killed Alonzo, he seeks to collect from

Beatrice what his lust demands, and he uses the word blood to mean murder: "A woman dipped in blood, and talk of modesty?" The blood image recurs later, when Alsemero tells his daughter that she should have gone "a thousand leagues" in order to avoid "This dangerous bridge of blood!"

Finally, Beatrice herself takes up the image of blood but she links it not to lust or murder but to the medical practice of blood-letting to cure a patient. This connects the image of blood with the references in the play to healing. In act 5, scene 3, Beatrice says to her father:

I am that of your blood was taken from you

For your better health. Look no more upon't,

But cast it to the ground regardlessly;

Let the common sewer take it from distinction.

Historical Context

Jacobean Drama

Jacobean drama in England covers the period from 1603 to 1625, coinciding with the reign of King James I. The Jacobean professional theatre has been described by David Farley-Hills in *Jacobean Drama* as "the most brilliant and dynamic the world has seen." The dominant figure during the first part of the Jacobean period was William Shakespeare (1564—1616). Although many of Shakespeare's plays were written during the reign of Elizabeth I, some of his greatest works appeared in the first decade of the Jacobean age, including the tragedies of *Othello*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth*, and *Antony and Cleopatra*, and the romances *Pericles*, *Cymbeline*, *The Winter's Tale*, and *The Tempest*. During this decade, Shakespeare's preeminence was challenged by other dramatists, including Ben Jonson (1572—1637), George Chapman (c. 1560—1634), John Marston (c. 1575 or 1576—1634), Middleton, John Webster (c. 1580—c. 1625), and John Fletcher (1579—1625).

The Jacobean theatre enjoyed the rich legacy bequeathed by the Elizabethan age: a public used to attending plays and to paying for the privilege; a number of permanent theatres, both large and small; and a system that enabled those involved in writing and putting on plays to gain some financial reward from doing so. The largest theatres were open-air buildings such as the Globe, which could accommodate an audience of several thousand. The Globe was made famous as the theatre where Shakespeare's plays were first performed. Other large theatres in London were the Fortune, the Curtain, and the Hope. There were also smaller, covered theatres, such as Paul's and Blackfriars. Paul's had room for an audience of only about a hundred; the capacity of Blackfriars was about seven hundred.

The Phoenix, the theatre where *The Changeling* premiered, was a small private theatre on Drury Lane. Built in 1609 to stage cockfights, and thus originally called the Cockpit, the building was converted to a theatre in 1616. After being badly damaged in a riot in 1617, it was rebuilt and named the Phoenix.

Enclosed theatres were more expensive than open-air theatres like the Globe, and therefore the enclosed theatres attracted wealthier audiences. The open-air theatres attracted a much wider cross-section of London society, from artisans to gentry. The genius of the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists lay in their abilities to write plays that could please both the serious, educated public as well as patrons who merely wanted a robust, easily digested form of entertainment.

Treatment of Madness

In sixteenth and seventeenth century England, there were no effective treatments for mental illness. In London, the insane were confined to Bedlam Hospital, and for a fee,

visitors were admitted to the hospital to gawk at the antics of the patients. People regarded such a visit much as a modern person might regard a trip to the zoo. Thomas Dekker's play *The Honest Whore* (1604) has a scene in which a duke and his companions visit Bedlam for entertainment. This practice is the source of Alibius's fear in *The Changeling* that aristocratic visitors to his madhouse may catch the eye of his young wife Isabella.

Patients in Bedlam were sometimes kept naked and in chains. Discipline appears to have been harsh, as is shown in *The Changeling*, in which Lollio keeps a whip handy to control the patients. As a Londoner, Middleton may well have observed such practices on a visit to Bedlam. That such treatment of the insane was not unusual can be gleaned from Shakespeare's play *As You Like It* (1599 or 1600), in which the heroine Rosalind remarks lightheartedly, "Love is merely a madness, and I tell you, deserves as well a dark house and a whip as madmen do." In Shakespeare's *Twelfth Night*, when Malvolio is falsely declared to be mad, he is bound and confined to a dark room, where he is tormented by the fool, Feste. For Elizabethan and Jacobean audiences, insanity appears to have been a topic from which much amusement could be derived.

Critical Overview

Middleton was a popular playwright in his own day, but not long after his death, his works were neglected and were largely forgotten. In the nineteenth century, Middleton's work was revived, although his plays were often considered too coarse and vulgar by moralistic Victorian critics. Twentieth century scholars and critics put aside such scruples and established Middleton's best work as superior to any of his contemporaries, barring William Shakespeare and Ben Jonson.

The Changeling is usually considered Middleton's greatest tragedy. In the opinion of T. S. Eliot, in his essay on "Thomas Middleton" in *Selected Essays*, *The Changeling* stands out as the greatest tragedy of its time, with the exception of Shakespeare's tragedies. For Samuel Schoenbaum in *Middleton's Tragedies*, "Nowhere else in Middleton are action and dialogue, character and theme blended together into such powerful harmony." Critics have frequently praised the characterization of Beatrice and De Flores. The scene between these characters in act 3 (scene 4) is often singled out for comment. J. R. Mulrayne in *Thomas Middleton* calls this scene "one of the most powerful encounters between two antagonistic yet similar personalities in the whole range of theatre," a judgment with which others concur.

Critics also note the effectiveness of the playwriting collaboration between Middleton, who wrote the tragic parts of the play, and Rowley, who wrote the comic subplot. George Walton Williams, for example, points out how the two plots are related, "structurally, tonally, thematically, and metaphorically with a subtlety and effectiveness that lets them speak as one on the unifying concept of transformation, or the condition of being a changeling."

Criticism

- Critical Essay #1

Critical Essay #1

Aubrey holds a Ph.D. in English and has published many articles on English drama. In this essay, Aubrey analyzes Middleton's characterizations of Beatrice and De Flores.

The principal interest in *The Changeling* lies in the two central characters, Beatrice and De Flores. De Flores is a study in sexual obsession. He is a ruthless character who is also efficient and knowledgeable about the ways of the world. He was born a gentleman but fell on hard times. Other than his reference to his "hard fate," the details of his past life are never specified, but he surely resents his situation as a servant to Vermandero. The ugliness of his appearance is emphasized, but like another famous villain—Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*—he is perceived by others as "honest." He allows his inner life and motivations to be seen by the outside world, which gives him an advantage, since no one suspects him of wrongdoing. Once he has conceived a sexual desire for Beatrice, a woman who, as the daughter of his employer, he can never in the normal course of events expect to have, he allows his lust to completely dominate his thoughts and actions. De Flores is a slave to his obsessive desire, seeking out any moment he can to be in Beatrice's presence, even though she expresses her loathing for him to his face. Masochistically, De Flores will endure any humiliation as long as it allows him to gaze on the object of his obsession. He continues to act in this way, in spite of an awareness that he is making a fool of himself ("Why, am I not an ass to devise ways / Thus to be railed at?"). It seems that with every rejection, his desire grows stronger. Like a stalker, he observes his prey and bides his time.

De Flores holds a great advantage over Beatrice because he is more experienced in the world than she is. When he realizes that she wants to get rid of Alonzo, his mind works fast. He knows this gives him an opportunity to possess her, and he acts with single-minded daring. He is utterly confident of the success of his plan. Unlike Beatrice, he knows who he is dealing with. Her inexperience and naïveté are no match for his cunning and foresight. It is not an equal contest.

One way that De Flores reveals himself is through his language. His speech is awash with sexual puns (he is not the only character in the play to exhibit this quality). For example, when he picks up the glove Beatrice has dropped, his words have an obscene double meaning:

Now I know

She had rather wear my pelt tanned in a pair

Of dancing pumps than I should thrust my fingers

Into her sockets here.

The last line has the connotation of sexual penetration by the man of the woman.

When Beatrice flatters De Flores because she is about to employ him to commit murder, and says his hard face shows "service, resolution, manhood, / If cause were of employment," De Flores responds with words that are full of sexual innuendo, although these double meanings are not recognized by Beatrice.

'Twould be soon seen,

If e'er your ladyship had cause to use it.

I would but wish the honour of a service

So happy that it mounts to.

"Use," "service," and "mounts" all have sexual connotations in De Flores's mind, as Christopher Ricks has pointed out in his essay, "The Moral and Poetic Structure of *The Changeling*," which appears in *Essays in Criticism*. Ricks also points out that in this scene, Beatrice misses De Flores's meaning every time; she simply does not understand how his mind works. This cross-talking is also apparent in act 4, scene 3, the powerful scene in which De Flores brings the severed finger, the evidence of the murder, to Beatrice. This is his "service" to her, which must in his mind be rewarded with "service," that is, sexual intercourse.

Like anyone in the grip of a deep obsession, De Flores cares for nothing except the achievement of his desire. This is why he can so truthfully say to Beatrice that unless she allows him to possess her, he will confess everything to the authorities. He will risk everything, even his life, in pursuit of his goal. And unlike Beatrice, De Flores shows no repentance at the end of the play when their joint deeds are unmasked. His words to Alsemero, even when he is wounded by his own hand and about to give himself the fatal blow, are not of contrition but of cruel triumph and defiance: "I coupled with your mate / At barley-break. Now we are left in hell."

These few moments of sexual conquest represent for De Flores the fulfillment of his entire life; nothing else gave him comparable enjoyment:

I thank life for nothing

But that pleasure; it was so sweet to me

That I have drunk up all, left none behind

For any man to pledge me.

So much for De Flores□man at his worst, a character any audience can love to hate. But what of Beatrice? Why does this catastrophe overtake her? Young and beautiful, with suitors at her feet, she should have been on the threshold of a happy life. Una Ellis-Fermor, in her book, *Jacobean Drama: An Interpretation*, describes Beatrice as a "spoilt child," and it is easy to see the aptness of the phrase. Beatrice is used to getting what she wants and does not like to be thwarted in her desires. But she is very

inexperienced, does not understand the nature of men, and has no developed moral awareness. Part of her problem is her misplaced self-confidence; she does not know her own ignorance. On first meeting with Alsemero, when he declares that he is in love with her, she is bold enough to give him a little piece of advice about how the eyes can deceive, and judgment should be made with the reasoning mind. This is advice that she is singularly unqualified to give, since she is led astray by first impressions just as much as Alsemero is. Beatrice is a young woman with a great capacity for self-delusion. She makes one bad decision after another, and yet thinks she is being very astute. When she first has the idea of getting De Flores to kill Alonzo, for example, she draws on the philosophical idea that even the ugliest thing in creation is good for some purpose. Ellis-Fermor comments that Beatrice is here like a "clever child who has learnt a rule from a book." When De Flores enters, Ellis-Fermor states, Beatrice is

still a child playing with a complicated machine of whose mechanism or capacities she knows nothing, concerned only to release the catch that will start it working and delighted when, in accordance with the text-book's instructions, it begins to move.

The moment of truth for Beatrice arrives in act 3, scene 4, in which De Flores reports that he has done the deed she required of him□Alonzo is dead. Beatrice's first response is one of joy; she is so happy she weeps. But then De Flores shows her the proof□the dead man's finger with the ring on it, and Beatrice recoils in horror. "Bless me! What hast thou done?" she exclaims. It is as if for the first time she realizes what has actually happened, that a real, flesh-and-blood man has been murdered. The sight of the ring, which was a gift her father made her send Alonzo, adds to her distress because it connects the murder with something directly associated with her.

The remainder of the scene constitutes a very rude awakening for Beatrice. At first she thinks it is just a matter of money that will make De Flores, who has now become an extreme inconvenience to her, disappear. When the truth begins to dawn on her, she thinks it impossible that anyone could be so wicked and cruel as to make Alonzo's death "the murderer of my honour!" But De Flores's hard and irrefutable logic holds a mirror up to her own nature and shows her that actions have real consequences that cannot be escaped. She realizes that "Murder . . . is followed by more sins." However, this does not make her repent. She is determined to brazen it out and pose as Alsemero's virgin bride. Deceit, adultery, and death (that of Diaphanta) soon follow.

Apparently untroubled by conscience, Beatrice only confesses her guilt when she is cornered and defeated. And at first she confesses only to what Alsemero already knows. Even then she tries to minimize her guilt, claiming that the murder was done for Alsemero's sake. She reveals the full truth, including the "bed trick" involving Diaphanta, and begs for forgiveness, only when she knows that her death is upon her. Even at the last, she blames De Flores for her downfall. Several times in the play she likens him to a serpent, and tells Alsemero in the final scene that she "stroked a serpent." This puts in mind the biblical myth of Eve, who was tempted by Satan in the form of a serpent. Beatrice seems to think of herself as the innocent one overcome by a creature with evil intent, whereas in fact she bears at least equal responsibility for what happened.

Beatrice pays a high price for her immaturity and lack of moral awareness, but the dramatist leaves the audience in no doubt that she deserves her fate.

Source: Bryan Aubrey, Critical Essay on *The Changeling*, in *Drama for Students*, Thomson Gale, 2006.

Adaptations

The Changeling was adapted for film in Great Britain in 1998. The film was directed by Marcus Thompson and starred Ian Dury, Billy Connolly, and Colm O'Maonlai.

Topics for Further Study

Some critics have argued that Beatrice is unconsciously attracted to De Flores from the beginning. Is there any evidence from the play to support such a notion? What might she find attractive in De Flores?

Dramas often feature characters who act as foils for other characters; they set one another off, offering the audience a study in contrasts. In what sense is Isabella a foil for Beatrice? Is Alsemero a foil for De Flores?

In their collaboration, Middleton wrote most of the main plot, while Rowley wrote the comic subplot. What evidence can be produced to show the closeness of their collaboration? In other words, how are the two plots related, in terms of themes and language?

Research and describe the main features of the Elizabethan and Jacobean playhouses. What was the physical structure of the theaters, i.e., what did they look like? In what sense was the audience more involved in the action than a modern audience might be? How were plays staged? What social class of people attended the plays?

Compare and Contrast

Jacobean Age: In 1623, the first folio edition of Shakespeare is published. It contains thirty-six plays, eighteen of which are published for the first time. It sells for £1, and over 1,000 copies are printed.

Today: There are 228 surviving copies of Shakespeare's first folio, over one-third of which are owned by the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C. In 2003, Oxford University's Oriel College sells its copy of the first folio for £3.5 million, to philanthropist Sir Paul Getty.

Jacobean Age: Great Britain in the reign of James I is an emerging European power. Largely Protestant, its great rival is Catholic Spain, and there is mutual suspicion between the two countries.

Today: Religion is no longer a divisive factor in relations between European nations. Spain and Britain are democratic nations, and both are members of the European Union.

Jacobean Age: In 1605, a group of Catholics smuggles thirty-six barrels of gunpowder into the vault of parliament. King James is addressing parliament when a man named Guy Fawkes is apprehended as he is about to ignite the fuse. This attempt to wipe out the entire government of Britain becomes known as the Gunpowder Plot. Fawkes is hanged in 1606.

Today: On November 5 every year, England commemorates the foiling of the Gunpowder Plot. The event is called Guy Fawkes Night or Bonfire Night. Huge bonfires are lit, fireworks are set off, and effigies representing Guy Fawkes are tossed on the bonfire.

What Do I Read Next?

Middleton's *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1611) is often considered Middleton's finest comedy. It is a skillfully plotted, cynical drama about the seamier side of life in London, as unscrupulous characters seek money, marriage, and sex. The title is a joke, since Cheapside was a notorious location in London frequented by prostitutes.

William Shakespeare's dark comedy *Measure for Measure* (1604) has some similarities with *The Changeling*. Like De Flores, Shakespeare's character Angelo allows his sexual obsession with a woman to lead him into sinful actions. The play also features the plot device known as the "bed trick," in which a man is tricked into making love to a woman who is not the woman he thinks she is. Shakespeare's play, however, ends in forgiveness rather than death.

Volpone (first performed 1606) is one of Ben Jonson's great comic plays. It satirizes hypocrisy, greed, and self-deception, which are all unmasked in the end. Some of the characters resemble predatory birds such as the crow, vulture, and raven. Volpone is likened to a fox.

The Shakespearean Stage, 1574—1642 (2d ed., 1980), by Andrew Gurr, is a concise guide to the Elizabethan and Jacobean theatre world. There are chapters on the companies, the actors, the playhouses, the audience, and how the plays were staged.

Further Study

Bromham, A. A., and Zara Bruzzi, *"The Changeling" and the Years of Crisis, 1619—1624: A Hieroglyph of Britain*, Pinter Publishers, 1990.

This work examines the relationship between *The Changeling* and the politics of the early seventeenth century. The play's authors see it as a warning to England against marital and political alliance with Spain.

Chakravorty, Swapan, *Society and Politics in the Plays of Thomas Middleton*, Clarendon Press, 1996, pp. 145—65.

This chapter discusses sex, desire, power, and politics in *The Changeling*. De Flores has learned how to turn the rules of chivalry and courtly love against the rulers.

Farr, Dorothy M., *Thomas Middleton and the Drama of Realism: A Study of Some Representative Plays*, Oliver & Boyd, 1973, pp. 50—71.

Farr analyzes the acuteness of Middleton's psychological insight, seeing the characters as victims of their capacity for evasion and self-delusion. She also discusses imagery, irony, and the relationship between the main plot and the subplot.

Holmes, David M., *The Art of Thomas Middleton: A Critical Study*, Clarendon Press, 1970, pp. 172—84.

Holmes discusses the characterizations and relationships in the play. Beatrice and Alsemero are infatuated with each other. Beatrice is tragically ignorant of the nature of real love, and her ignorance makes her vulnerable.

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