

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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THE CHANGELING 1622

Thomas Middleton (1580-1627)

Background

Middleton the Man

Middleton was the son of a bricklayer who had through his own determination raised himself to the social level of a gentleman and came to own significant properties in the London theater district. When Middleton was five his father died, and for the next fifteen years the law courts did all they could to make life difficult for the family; Middleton and his family were preoccupied with acquiring John's and his sister's inheritance from the legal system. For this reason, it seems, Middleton developed a lifelong animosity toward the legal profession, which he often pilloried in his dramas. In a wider sense one might want to trace Middleton's broadly bitter view of mankind the changeling--to the prolonged bitterness of his childhood.

The growth of the self-conscious modern mind is implicit in the biographical squibs with which we interlace these brief entries--Middleton and the rest. We are, of course dealing here with tragedies, and cannot expect upbeat or happy conclusions to all the mind outflowerings we are reading into these stories born in bitterness and loss. There is a mindset that belongs with the creativity of the tragedian: What we may not think, from tragedy, is the self-awareness that belongs with the mindset of the tragedian: pain and loss, after all, are where we cannot sidestep ourselves, or pretend to be other than we are. Middleton's own private pain resonates through the wounded world-sense that pervades the present drama. In the instance before us, however, it will be worth adding a counter point indicative of the way adversity can nestle into prosperity, by a subtle historical turn. Middleton, after all, was the son of an entrepreneurial man of considerable grit, who had worked his way up the social and financial ladders by dint of determination. He had lived his way into the tragic perspective but he had worked his way up through it into a creative height from which to look down on the tragic.

CHARACTERS

Alicante

Vermadero, father of Beatrice, governor of the castle of Alicante. Of normal sight, Vermadero fails to see what is going on under his nose. In particular, he has no sense of the turbulent and depraved inner life of his daughter, Beatrice.

Beatrice, Vermadero's daughter, is the most prominent character involved in the fatal games of love and jealousy in the castle of Alicante.

Diaphanta, her waiting woman, a passive operant in various malign love games.

Tomazo de Piracquo, a nobleman.

Alonso de Piracquo, brother of Tomazo, suitor of Beatrice. Ultimately victim of jealousy and murder.

Alsemero, suitor of Beatrice, a nobleman; the preferred by Beatrice herself

Jasperino, Alsemero's friend.

DeFlores, servant of Vermadero; a gentleman hit man, a perverse lover.

Asylum

Alibius, a jealous doctor; afraid of losing his sexy wife Isabella

Lollo, Alibius' waiting man; a womanizer and a go-between, a kind of parallel to DeFlores in the castle.

Isabella, wife of Alibius; interested in the madhouse for her own sexual reasons.

Franciscus, the counterfeit madman; drawn to Isabella.

Antonio, counterfeit fool.

Pedro, Antonio's friend.

PLOT

There are two parallel plots, one a tragedy, one a comedy, and the two of them intertwined. Each of them involves a saga of love, and violence, jealousy, murder, and confession

The first plot centers around Beatrice, Vermadero's daughter, and her two suitors--Alonso to whom her father has betrothed her--against her will--Beatrice turns to Deflores, ---and Alsemero, with whom she is truly in love. To get rid of Alonso. Beatrice turns to another admirer of her, Deflores, whom she loathes, and who is a servant of her father, Vermadero. Beatrice wants DeFlores to murder Alonso for her, thus to help her develop her love for Alsemero. Murder as the pathway to true love is thus the formula of the first plot. The plot is being hatched in Beatrice's mind.

The second plot, the comedy, takes place in a madhouse presided over by Dr. Alibius, the husband of Isabella. His wife Alibus is jealous of his wife, especially because he can no longer satisfy her sexually. Two lovers are pursuing her--Franciscus and Antonio--they pretend to be a madman and a fool, respectively, in order to remain in her presence.

The drama as a whole opens on a scene introducing us to Alsemero and Beatrice, as they first make a flirtatious encounter with one another. While they are talking, Jasperino's eye falls on Diaphanta, the waiting woman of Beatrice. and he decides that he too should have a girl. The play is vigorously launched on the theme of desire and impulse.

In what follows the author brings together Vermadero with Beatrice, and with DeFlores-- --Beatrice's loathing, who loves her enough to put up with all her abuse.

Beatrice begins to realize that she needs to get Alonso out of the way, and the best solution seems to her to that DeFlores--who adores her and will do anything for her--should be paid to murder Alonso. He readily agrees to commit this murder, believing it will be a pathway to sex with Beatrice. He is of course wrong, for she can't wait to get rid of him. De Flores commits the murder, in the course of which he spots a brilliant jewel on Alonso's finger; he cuts off the finger, and takes it with him.

Back in the madhouse we rejoin Lollo and Isabella, who has just entered the premises. There she finds Antonio, who starts to make out with her, explaining that he has only been pretending to be mad. At this point the jealous husband Alibius enters, unaware of what is going on--which also includes not only the sexual play with his wife, but also an amazing scene in which the mad occupants of the asylum, birdlike in form, descend on the occupants of the madhouse, as chilling as the furies in Aeschylus' *Oresteia*, or as a modern madhouse drama into the work of Antonin Artaud.

Back in the castle, too, an extraordinary scene ensues, in which Beatrice has to realize, into what a fatal trap she has fallen by implicating herself with DeFlores in the murder of Alonso. It is at this point that she recognizes how far she has fallen into a vicious cycle of sin. Of course she had simply misunderstood

DeFlores, thinking that she could buy him off, not realizing how deeply in love with her he was. We are in the process of accumulating evidence for how readily people--Alibius, Vermadero, DeFlores--fail to represent clearly to themselves what kinds of danger they have right before their noses.

Act IV is a fascinating dumb show, a mute forecast of the future. Many of the dramatis personae are there, including even Isabella, the wife of the director of the madhouse. (The two worlds of this double drama intersect here, eerily.) In this future world, forecast before us, Beatrice has married Alsemero, whom she still loves, but is unable to make love to him because she is too shamed, by the falsehood she has lived with and the blood she has shed, in order to gain him as a husband. To these evil recourses she adds the additional deception of drawing Diaphanta into an evil scheme. Since Beatrice is too shamed to sleep with her new husband on his wedding night she arranges for Diaphanta, who is still a virgin, to take her place in the dark of night.

After the dumbshow we return to the madhouse, where Isabella appears, dressed as a madwoman--the outlines of Beatrice begin to show on the person of Isabella. Antonio and Lollo circulate among the madmen. Alibius the director enters, and the madmen revel and dance in readiness for the marriage of Beatrice.

We return to the scene that brings Diaphanta into the bed of Alsemero, and find that morning is approaching, when Almecero will discover he is not in bed with Beatrice. Searching her mind once more for a solution, Beatrice takes up a suggestion of DeFlores, this time that he should set fire to Diaphanta's quarters. Beatrice takes him up on this, even, incredibly, agreeing that DeFlores should then murder Diaphanta. The vicious cycle joining Beatrice to her hit man, DeFlores--would be once more fatefully at work.

Meanwhile we enter the asylum again, where Isabella is enduring her own trial by sexuality, beset by lovers, and particularly by Lollo. Unaware of Isabella, he acts as master of ceremonies for the varied assaults on the availability of Isabella. In a final scene events bring all the characters together in the castle, where in a violent sequence of personal collisions the major characters induce themselves to confess to the different ways in which each of them has changed, become a *changeling*, in the course of the play. Beatrice confesses to her sins, highlighting the deception she has carried out with Diaphanta. DeFlores admits to having killed Alonso, and stabs himself to death to escape retribution from Alonso's brother.

The notion of the changeling permeates the present play. This notion goes into deep anthropology, where it connotes a child of faery and witchcraft, who has been deposited on earth in place of a human child. The changeling is inherently evil. Evil inclinations drive all the major players in the drama, except those, like Vermadero or perhaps like Alibius, who fail to see, smell, or intuit the presence of evil until they confess their ways back to true humanity. The remainder, the congenitally evil, like Beatrice, DeFlores, or Lollo are damned to their evil until they confess.

THEMES

Perception and illusion Much is made, in this play concerned with delusion and illusion, of the deception wrought by our eyes, which are in many ways inferior to intellectual sight, which probes deeply but which itself often misses the material. It is revealing. The inability of lovers to identify their beloveds' true emotions is a driver of much of the action of the play. Beatrice inevitably dominates the play's mélange of dark and limited perceptions. She comes into this dramatic world radiant and popular, but is unable to distinguish between male lust--the case of DeFlores--and male congeniality--Alsemero.

Lust The impulsive feelings of Beatrice, toward the multiple would-be lovers who surround her, lead her to follow her heart into dark corners of lust: into an unnegotiable passion for Almecero, a deep aversion to Alonso, and a total disgust for DeFlores, who is at the end the one to whom she seals herself in a pact of homicide. Her dreadful death, stabbed by DeFlores, who had in the end become her lover, illustrates the folly of ignoring her initial engagement to Alonso. Her prioritizing of her own private choices is reckless and impetuous, and takes its own toll in the end. The same must be said of Isabella, who gives

her own free rein to her passions. She lets herself be overtaken by the self-interested guidance of Lollio, who wants her for his own lustful reasons.

Madness Middleton is a master of interweaving the issues of daily life, ambition, and jealousy with the world of a mental asylum which is for the most part the mirror image of daily life in an upside down version. (Isabella is the chief crossover from the asylum world to the 'real world,' and in fact we are never sure how she makes the transition from one world to another.)

Confession The play ends in a flurry of confessions. It is as though Middleton sought here to dramatize first the theological error of sin, then to drive away the implosion of sin by a mass confession of guilt. The saving grace of evil it is, to be willing to clear one's inner platters. Once opened for expression, the human soul is halfway to telling all.

EVENTS

In the rolling structure of this play, the mad and sane worlds continually intersect, with a little of both traits on each side of the divide. Even those in Vermadero's castle are subject to desire, jealousy, and venality-- as in readiness to murder for hire. The mad, or fake mad who are feigning so that they can get sex, carry on in a shadow world, enforcing the overall sense that madness and evil intentions are closely interwoven. Middleton's emphasis is on the omnipresence and infectious range of evil. Tragedy customarily traffics in pain and suffering, but these misfortunes frequently have bad judgment or bad luck as their driver. For Middleton the driver is often conscious self-interested evil, the destruction of others for one's own pleasure.