"I(t) could not choose but follow": Erotic Logic in *The Changeling*

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“I(t) could not choose but follow”: Erotic Logic in The Changeling

One of the most disturbing allusions in Renaissance drama occurs at the end of act 3 of Thomas Middleton and William Rowley’s The Changeling. In an earlier scene, the soon-to-be-married Beatrice Joanna had persuaded her loathsome servant and admirer, De Flores, to kill her betrothed so that she might wed Alsemoro, her new beloved (2.2.57–155). Now, in an exchange that parallels this earlier “seduction” (inverting its power relations), De Flores makes evident his intention to claim his reward through rape.¹ Beatrice kneels and sues for deliverance, but he refuses, raises her, and, as she shivers in mute fear, declares:

¹Las how the turtle pants! Thou’lt love anon
What thou so fear’st and faint’st to venture on.

(3.4.169–70)

His words are clearly meant to recall the epithalamium from Ben Jonson’s masque Hymenaei. In the first stanza of that poem, Jonson begins to focus on the wedding night, and asks that “no object stay . . . / The turtles from their blisses.” Three lines later he begins the second stanza by counseling the bride, “Shrink not, soft virgin, you will love / Anon what you so fear to prove” (403–5, 408–9).²

The allusion is significant on a number of levels. Hymenaei was written, of course, to celebrate Frances Howard’s 1606 marriage to the Earl of Essex—an occasion that proved to be extremely embarrassing for its author. As several critics have observed, Jonson’s wedding poem focuses on an unusual degree on marital defloweration, despite (or perhaps because of) the fact that the participants were considered too young to consummate their marriage (Howard was 13, Essex only 15), and, much to Jonson’s irritation, most of his poem was discreetly cut in performance.³ The events that followed are notorious. Seven years later, Howard sought an annulment, maintaining that the marriage was never consummated, and while this assertion and Howard’s claim to be a virgin were generally disbelieved (it was rumored that she used a substitute when forced to take a virginity test), the annulment was granted; Howard subsequently married Robert Carr, Earl of Somerset, who was thought to have been her lover, and the couple was eventually accused (probably correctly) of the murder of Thomas Overbury.⁴ Howard was viewed as
the archetypal whorish, evil woman, and she functioned as a model for Beatrice Joanna in Middleton and Rowley’s play. In the popular imagination, then, young Frances Howard did, to an extraordinary degree, learn to love what she feared to venture on, and Middleton’s allusion clearly operates both as a reminder of the local connection and as an irony at Jonson’s expense. Middleton did, in fact, repeatedly lampoon Hymenaei, and since he himself (as well as Jonson) wrote a masque for Howard’s second wedding, he had reason to wish to distance himself from the whole affair. Yet, I would suggest, there is considerably more at stake here than “embarrassing Ben,” and, while The Changeling clearly asks for politicized local readings, the connection with Howard also serves—as the figure of Howard herself did—to localize contemporary fears and fantasies about women, sexuality, and marriage. For by repeating Jonson’s invocation to marital consummation at the end of a rape scene, Middleton does something similar to what the line itself does—instruct, that is, on the coincidence of fear and desire, of virgin and whore, of marriage and rape. And while Middleton makes the connection between these apparent opposites explicit, he seems to be merely spelling out paradoxes and problems that are already present in Jonson’s poem and in the epithalamic tradition in general.

In the following pages, I will explore how The Changeling anatomizes, criticizes, and simultaneously participates in the assumptions implicit in that tradition. Here and in his other plays, Middleton succeeds, through a complex network of allusions, in foregrounding the frightening (if paradoxical) male fantasies at the heart of the tradition; at the same time, the play’s powerful manipulation of dramatic structure enables it, in contrast to lyric and other nondramatic versions of those fantasies, to paper over the contradictions it uncovers, presenting its culture’s nightmares in their most compelling form. As this summary suggests, I will be focusing throughout on the formal—structural and linguistic—aspects of the texts I examine, but I will be arguing that these have a specific gendered force.

In Hymenaei, Jonson himself characterizes the marriage he celebrates as a rape, and he cites classical authority for doing so. The third stanza of his epithalamium begins:

Help, youth and virgins, help to sing
The prize which Hymen here doth bring,
And did so lately rap
From forth the mother’s lap
To place her by that side
Where she must long abide.

(416–21)

And Jonson explains: “The bride was always feigned to be ravished from her mother’s bosom, or if she were wanting, from the nearest relation, because that had succeeded well to Romulous, who by force get wives for him and his from the Sabines.” (Of course, since Howard was only 13, little “feigning” was necessary in this case.)

80 Representations

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If Jonson’s marriage presents itself as a rape, Middleton’s rape is repeatedly conflated with marriage. As Michael Neill and others have noted, De Flores uses marital imagery throughout this scene.9 Moreover, after concluding with the reminiscence of Hymenaei, the scene is in fact followed by a dumb show of Beatrice Joanna’s marriage, after which she declares:

This fellow has undone me endlessly:
Never was bride so fearfully distressed.

(4.1.1–2)

The extraordinarily resonant first line both recalls and revises the numerous references to “perfection” in the play—references that, like the strikingly similar ones that pervade Jonson’s masque, are used in a self-consciously contradictory manner to suggest both marital union and the unbroken circle of “perfect” virginity: to be “undone” is literally to be unperfected, deprived of closure, made forever “endless.”10 At the same time, “endlessly” suggests the eternity of marriage, the “world-without-end bargain.”11 The second line is deeply ambiguous: it seems to imply simultaneously that Beatrice Joanna’s frightening situation contrasts with that of a more conventional bride and that it is merely an intensification of the fears experienced by any bride.

The play as a whole, of course, repeatedly suggests the necessary coincidence of fear and desire, of “loving and loathing,” and it repeatedly associates this paradox with the losing of virginity—the “unexpected passage o’er” that “makes a frightful pleasure” (3.3.261–62).12 Indeed, the paradox is first formulated when Beatrice Joanna’s expressed loathing for De Flores leads to Alsemoro’s exposition of the “frailty in our nature,” the “imperfection” we all share (1.1.115, 117); his chosen example unmistakably evokes sexual desire in general and the loss of virginity in particular.13

Alsemoro: There’s scarce a thing but is both loved and loathed.
Myself, I must confess, have the same frailty.
Beatrice: And what may be your poison, sir? I am bold with you.
Alsemoro: What might be your desire perhaps: a cherry.

(1.1.124–27)

And this association is confirmed in the parallel discussion between the servants Diaphanta and Jasperino, which contains similarly suggestive punning on “poppy” (1.1.145–50)—although Diaphanta’s lack of fear and loathing, here and later in the play, both underscores her lower status and renders her an unsuitable erotic object for the audience.14

These references seem to circle around and find their center in the rape scene, in De Flores’s climactic lines, and especially in the image of the “panting turtle” that Middleton developed from Hymenaei. This image, which in context clearly expresses Beatrice Joanna’s fear, also suggests the desire that De Flores assures her she will experience “anon”—and it does so effectively enough that at least one critic...

“I(t) could not choose but follow”: Erotic Logic in The Changeling

81
has taken it *simply* as an expression of lust. In the New Mermaid edition, Joost Daalder declares: “This is not an emotion produced by bullying, leave alone something like rape, as is so often claimed. I do not mean of course that there is no bullying—only that it cannot by itself explain Beatrice’s positive sexual response.” Without endorsing what seems to me an astounding comment, I would suggest that Daalder is pointing here to something that is missed by critics who view Beatrice Joanna’s desire for De Flores as developing after the fact. While this structure clearly exists and is necessary to the play’s persuasiveness, Beatrice’s loathing is also itself viewed as the guarantor of her desire—as ultimately contemporaneous with and indistinguishable from that desire. It is not so much, as Daalder claims, that the individual character is presented as experiencing unconscious sexual longings, as that the fears of sexuality (both real and pretended) that are necessary to the construction of her as a perfect virgin, the perfectly desirable erotic object (note that De Flores declares that he would not wish to ravish her if her “virginity” were not “perfect” in her; 3.4.117), that these very fears and faintings are themselves taken as the other side of unbridled desire. In her insightful essay on *The Changeling* and the politics of rape, Deborah Burks notes that in a culture in which women are blamed for arousing male desire, “even the purest woman” is viewed as possibly complicit in her own ravishment. I would suggest that Middleton’s cultural analysis goes even further than this: in a society in which virginity is eroticized, in which desire is intertwined with and regularly issues in disgust, the purest woman—the most desirable woman—is especially suspect.

The image that Middleton developed from *Hymenaei* clearly fascinated him; he returns to it repeatedly, and its appearance in his other late plays may serve as a useful gloss on the nexus of ideas it suggested. In *Women Beware Women*, for example, as the Duke is about to rape Bianca, the young and innocent bride of another man, he instructs her:

Prithee, tremble not,
I feel thy breast shake like a turtle panting
Under a loving hand that makes much on’t.
Why art thou so fearfull?17

(2.2.320–23)

Significantly, after this scene, to the consternation of many critics, the seemingly blameless Bianca comes—with little explanation or transition—to relish being the duke’s whore.18 And the blurring of fear and desire here, like that in *The Changeling*, frequently caused earlier readers to argue that what now seems a rape was merely a “seduction.” Middleton’s other use of the image—in *A Game at Chess*—is even more telling. Here, the White Queen’s Pawn, who is determined to remain a virgin, is told she will see her future husband in a glass; as she is about to do so, she exclaims:

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82 Representations
A sudden fear invades me, a faint trembling
Under this omen,
As is oft felt the panting of a turtle
Under a stroking hand.

And her deceiver, the Black Queen’s Pawn, replies:

That bodes good luck still,
Sign you shall change state speedily, for that trembling
Is always the first symptom of a bride.¹⁹

(3.3.4–9)

Of course, the man whom the unfortunate virgin sees, and with whom she predictably falls in love, is the man who has previously tried to rape her—and who in fact attempts to do so again: she is saved only when the lustful Black Queen’s Pawn substitutes herself in a bed-trick.

These passages insistently suggest that the “perfect” virgin is the twin, the double, or—in the language of The Changeling—the “fellow” of the “undone” whore; and, as an inevitable corollary, they suggest that the ideal marriage is a brutal rape. As the Black Queen’s Pawn remarks, fears, tremblings, loathing, and delays were in fact traditional “symptoms of a bride,” her necessary accessory. They appear regularly in epithalamia, functioning both as a kind of virginity test—proof of the bride’s iconic status—and as the displaced expression of societal fears and anxieties; and they are frequently evoked in conjunction with (or seen as identical to) the bride’s (virginal) desire.²⁰ One of the most striking examples appears in the description of folk epithalamia in George Puttenham’s Arte of English Poesie. Puttenham notes that music and distractions were used on the wedding night to cover what he refers to (in terms quite similar to those in The Changeling) as “the noise of the laughing lamenting spouse.”²¹ And he goes on to describe the morning after in language that, once again, resonates with Middleton’s play:

In the morning when it was faire broad day, and that by likeyhood all tournes were sufficiently serued, the last actes of the entertlude being ended, and that the bride must within few hours arise and apparrrell her selze, no more as a virgine, but as a wife, and about dinner time must by order come forth Sicut sponsa de thalamo, very demurely to be sene and acknowledged of her parents and kinsfolkes whether she were the same woman or a changeling, or dead or alie, or maimed by any accident nocturnall.²²

Dale Randall, who has noted this last similarity, remarks that a hitherto unacknowledged meaning of the term changeling seems to be “a woman who has had sexual intercourse.”²³ But although this meaning is clearly present, it is arrived at in a very circuitous fashion: the passage seems, first of all, to suggest the possibility of some sort of bed-trick or substitution (like those that occur in The Changeling and A Game at Chess) and, secondarily, to imply that sexual experience (precisely because it is associated with a movement away from closure and stasis) creates an extreme alteration in the bride, potentially destroying her or “substituting” for her ideal virginal

“I(t) could not choose but follow” : Erotic Logic in The Changeling

83
self a radically discontinuous personality (which, nevertheless, inhabits a body that appears identical). It seems significant, in this context, that after Bianca is raped and changes abruptly in *Women Beware Women*, the aged Mother declares:

> She’s no more like the gentlewoman at first
> Than I am like her that nev’r lay with man yet.

[3.1.66–67]

And in *The Changeling*, Beatrice Joanna is not only replaced by Diaphanta in bed; she is also, in a suggestive but little noted passage, seen herself as a replacement, substituting for her perfect dead “fellow” or twin—in short, as a changeling. Alsemero declares of her, “The fellow of this creature were partner / For a king’s love,” and her father replies:

> I had her fellow once, sir,
> But heaven has married her to joys eternal.
> ’Twere sin to wish her in this vale again.”

[3.4.3–5]

Beatrice’s “fellow” is imaged here as perfect precisely because she is dead, static, “married” only to “joys eternal”; within the world of the play, her “fellow” or “twin” is De Flores (4.1.1; 5.3.142). The rumor that Frances Howard used a substitute when she submitted, veiled, to an examination of her virginity quite clearly played a part in the bed-trick that occurs in *The Changeling*. But equally clearly, this particular allusion does not exhaust the full force of Middleton’s creation. Rather, both the bed-trick and the rumor about Howard itself seem to be referencing a greater storehouse of cultural anxieties. The fears and fantasies that Middleton is evoking here are worked out quite explicitly in John Marston’s *The Wonder of Women*, or *The Tragedy of Sophonisba* (1606). Although Marston’s heroine is presented as ideally virtuous, the problems in the play appear to be precipitated by her desire: she actively chooses one suitor (Massinissa) over another (Syphax), refuses to express the traditional fears of consummation, and, during the marriage ceremony, casts aside “modest silence” to declare, “In open flame then passion break” (1.2.43–49). The war that then disrupts the ceremony plainly functions as a displacement of the consummation it prevents. As the chorus shouts “*Io to Hymen*” and Sophonisba’s husband prepares for bed, a messenger appears to announce the attack, and he is depicted both as about to penetrate and as frighteningly penetrated: “*Enter Carthalon, his sword drawn, his body wounded, his shield struck full of darts; Massinissa being ready for bed*” (1.2.61 stage direction). The two nightmare visions of consummation that are suggested here are played out in succeeding scenes. Syphax first tries to rape Sophonisba (and is foiled only when she substitutes a drugged male slave in a bed-trick); the witch Erinco then effectively rapes Syphax: having promised to bring the virgin to his bed, she appears “*in the shape of Sophonisba, her face veiled*” (4.1.213 stage direction), sleeps with him, and reveals herself to her horrified bed-partner in the
morning. We are presented, on the one hand, with the prospect of the forcible penetration of the frightened virgin-bride, and on the other, with the even more terrifying penetration of the male by a deceptive, sexually voracious hag: Erichtho is a particularly fascinating embodiment of the changeling. While enacting the fears associated with marriage, these mirroring violations simultaneously permit the married pair to remain pure and intact: Sophonisba is finally preserved the only way she can be—by being killed; she dies “with breast unstained, / Faith pure, a virgin wife / . . . most happy in [her] husband’s arms” (5.4.102–3, 106).

The fears that are called up by all these texts are, as Heather Dubrow notes, repeatedly countered in epithalamia by visions of a return to Eden and by the perfection and closure that return implies. 28 This is, in fact, the image with which The Changeling begins—Alsemoro’s vision of a static, circular, lyric “perfection” where all beginnings touch their ends, a state of visual ideality and identity from which, it is hoped, nothing “follows”: 29

’Twas in the temple where I first beheld her,  
And now again the same. What omen yet  
Follows of that? None but imaginary:  
Why should my hopes of fate be timorous?  
The place is holy, so is my intent:  
I love her beauties to the holy purpose,  
And that, methinks, admits comparison  
With man’s first creation, the place blest,  
And is his right home back, if he achieve it.  
The church hath first begun our interview;  
And that’s the place must join us into one;  
So there’s beginning and perfection too. 29

(1.1.1–12)

From one perspective, The Changeling enacts a Fall from this state into linearity, into movement, change, and dramatic sequence that “could not choose but follow” (5.1.84; 5.3.108): the phrase echoes throughout, evoking both erotic compulsion and the logical “inevitability” of Beatrice’s progression from murderess to whore. 30 And as that inevitable progression is played out, the perfect circle of the beginning metamorphoses into a vaginal “hell” that “circumscribes us all” (5.3.163–64). This final image is explicitly connected with inescapable sequence in Beatrice’s description of the effects of the virginity test:

Just in all things, and in order  
As if ’twere circumscribed; one accident  
Gives way unto another. 31

(4.2.109–11)

It also, of course, recalls one of Christopher Marlowe’s most well-known evocations of limitlessness: “Hell hath no limits, nor is circumscribed / In one self place” (Dr

“I(t) could not choose but follow”: Erotic Logic in The Changeling
If Marlowe, as I have suggested elsewhere, explores the possibilities and problems of (sexual and textual) non sequitur, this play self-consciously answers Marlowe’s famous line by chillingly declaring, “sequitur,” and relentlessly working out the implications of “what follows.”

The full force of dramatic sequence in *The Changeling* can be best appreciated by comparing the play to those rare nondramatic poems that actually complete its narrative arc. One of the most strikingly similar lyric performances occurs in Fulke Greville’s sonnet, “*Caelica*, I ouernight was finely vseed”:

*Caelica*, I ouernight was finely vseed,
Lodg’d in the midst of paradise, your Heart:
Kind thoughts had charge I might not be refused,
Of euery fruit and flower I had part.
But curious Knowledge, blowne with busie flame,
The sweetest fruits had downe in shadowes hidden,
And for it found mine eyes had scene the same,
I from my paradise was straight forbidden,
Where that Curre, Rumor, runnes in euery place,
Barking with Care, begotten out of feare;
And glassy Honour, tender of Disgrace,
Stands Ceraphin to see I come not there;
While that fine soyle, which all those ioyes did yeeld,
By broken fence is prou’d a common field.

*(Caelica 37)*

Here again, we have a story of female betrayal cast as the primal narrative, and here again, as the text moves from desire to disgust, the object of desire metamorphoses from a paradisaic enclosure to a “common field” whose defenses have been “broken” (compare Beatrice as the “broken rib of mankind”; 5.3.145). But unlike *The Changeling*, the lyric does not situate its story securely in the external world. While the opening, with its outward-reaching address, positions the poem ambiguously between reality and fantasy, the following lines push it clearly in the direction of a dream. Not only is it in the tradition of lyric dream poems, but after the first two lines the addressee disappears, and we are left only with “I” and a series of unlocated “thoughts.” The poem’s insistent interiority reaches a height in the second quatrains. At first glance, these lines appear to describe a forbidden attempt “to eie those [female] parts, which no eie should behold” (*Hero and Leander*, 403), followed by an expulsion from Edenic unity. But it is difficult to avoid noticing that we are presented with an allegory of the Fall in which all the parts belong to “curious Knowledge”: it is the forbidden as well as the forbidden, the secretor of the fruit as well as the fruit itself, the transgressor and the avenger of transgression (the traditional conflation of the carnal and conceptual senses of “knowledge” is, of course, important here). It is still possible to arrive at an externalized reading of these lines (in which “curious Knowledge” suggests both “rumor” and “fear of
rino”), but it requires some strain to do so, and the self-reflection here seems overpowering. It is itself reflected, in a dizzying fashion, in the line, “And for it found mine eyes had seene the same,” which inescapably calls up an image of eyes mirroring themselves—and if we pause for a moment to remark that the most logical referent of “the same” is “the fruits” (although “Knowledge” is also a distant possibility), we must further note that none of these corrections really matters, since all of these things are so clearly “the same.” We are faced with the self-expelling nature of curious knowledge, with the self-disgust aroused by desire, with what Greville himself, in another dream poem (Caelica 100: “In Night when colours all to blacke are cast”), called “selfe-offence” (line 7). Like the visions described in that poem, those in “Caelica, I ouernight was finely vsed” are

... images of self-confusednesse,
Which hurt imaginations onely see,
And from this nothing seene, tels newes of devils,
Which but expressions be of inward euils. 38

(Caelica 100.11–14)

But if the “devils” there are explicitly self-generated, here they are given a local habitation and a name—and that name is “Caelica.” Lack, “hurt,” the fundamental emptiness of “nothing seene” is assigned to a woman, and the castrating fear aroused by that vision is partially contained by assigning her blame as well. As his own desire expels the speaker from his “paradise,” the poem concludes with an externalizing movement: we are confronted first with allegorized (and thus distanced and depersonalized) emotions, and finally with an attribution of guilt: “While that fine soyle, which all those ioyes did yeeld, / By broken fence is prou’d a common field.” Proved. Q. E. D. Since the only “breaking” here (even if one were to accept all of the poem’s assertions at face value) was occasioned by the speaker, there seems, at first glance, to be something missing. One can, of course, fill in the gaps (and other sonnets in the sequence do, to a certain extent), but the point is that one must do so—and those gaps call attention to themselves. As it stands, the poem seems to describe the progression, “I desire you, therefore you’re a whore” or even (more radically but more accurately) “I desire, therefore you’re a whore.” And while from one perspective this is utterly ludicrous, it is also utterly predictable.

This progression is analyzed and criticized in one of the most well-known dream sequences in early modern literature: the wet dream in book 1, canto 1 of Edmund Spenser’s Faerie Queene. Spenser’s nondramatic allegory fills in some of the elisions in the movement traced by Greville’s sonnet; as a result it forms a useful bridge between the lyric and the dramatic structure of The Changeling. The dream that Redcrosse experiences, which presents itself as an unmanning (“that nigh his manly hart did melt away”; 1.1.47), moves from desire (aroused by the thought of Una’s beauty and chastity) to disgust (aroused by her association with lust), and then back to desire—imaged, significantly, in the form of a series of circles linked

“I(t) could not choose but follow”: Erotic Logic in The Changeling 87
both to virginity and to the marriage ceremony. He awakens in a state of inter-
mixed fear and passion, unsure whether he should “mistrust” an internal or an 
external enemy (“some secret ill, or hidden foe of his”), and he is confronted by 
simulacrum of Una, which Archimago has substituted for his virgin beloved:

In this greate passion of vnwonted lust, 
    Or wonted feare of doing ought amis, 
He started vp, as seeming to mistrust, 
Some secret ill, or hidden foe of his: 
Lo there before his face his Lady is, 
Vnder blake stole hyding her bayted hooke, 
And as halfe blushing offerd him to kis, 
With gentle blandishment and lovely looke, 
Most like that virgin true, which for her knight him took. 
(1.1.49)

Like much of The Faerie Queene, the lines in the second half of this stanza clearly 
function on two levels: they are simultaneously a literal description of the fiction 
and an analysis of the workings of the hero’s mind. From the second perspective 
(made insistent by the immediacy of line 5), they very clearly enact a gradual pro-
cess of externalization and displacement. Redcrosse believes that he sees his Lady 
before him—but he also believes that she conceals a deadly temptation (“Vnder 
blake stole hyding her bayted hooke”). And bit by bit that temptation seems to ma-
terialize—although the following descriptions are in fact carefully poised between 
active and passive (“offred”), reality and appearance. The final line centers, predict-
ably, around the question of virginity, and it is interestingly two-edged: on the level 
of the fiction, Redcrosse sees the false Una; in his imagination, however, he sees 
Una who is false—who has “taken” him in by appearing like the true virgin she is 
not. A kind of allegorical bed-trick has occurred.

It is this vision, termed an “vncounth sight,” that almost moves the knight to 
kill Una, although upon consideration, he resolves “to prowe his sense and tempt 
her faigned truth” (1.1.50). Of course, from the moment that he awakes in that 
confused state of desire and fear of desire, the rest of this sequence proceeds like 
clockwork. Redcrosse sees what he knows he’s going to see (he won’t really see Una 
again until he gets this out of his system) and hears what he knows he’s going to 
hear. Finally, having moved from “I desire her” to “she desires me,” he takes the 
next “logical” step in this progression: “If she’d sleep with me, she’ll sleep with 
anyone.” This is the substance of the next vision he sees: Archimago shows him 
Una in bed with an unnamed squire (1.2.3–5). And at that point (having been 
restrained from murder), he runs away “still flying from his thoughts and gealous 
feare” (1.2.12).

The allegorical narrative in The Faerie Queene appears to follow a more logical 
trajectory than Greville’s lyric. In a much less ambiguous fashion, Spenser presents
us first with a dream—and then with a waking dream. As Paul Alpers has shown, however, the structure of The Faerie Queene is fundamentally “nondramatic”: its basic unit is the stanza; it does not derive its force from—or even ultimately provide us with—coherent plot development.42 And it shares this last characteristic, to a certain extent, with most early modern fictions and romances. The linear, “logical” plot and the consequent feeling of inevitability we have come to identify with narrative are much more evident in (or at least expected of) the drama in this period: contemporary theorists repeatedly demand unity in drama that they are willing to forego in prose and poetic romances.43

Moreover, Spenser’s allegory locates the events it describes in Redcrosse’s mind and makes it clear that a process of externalization is taking place, at the same time that it depends on putatively external agents (Archimago and later Duessa), who serve to deflect some of the blame from Redcrosse. In The Changeling, by contrast, the process of externalization is performed by the dramatic structure itself, which closes the gaps in Greville’s fantasy, although vestiges of the internal nightmare remain.44 As the play progresses from its opening lyric speech (expressing fear and desire at the sight of a woman) to dramatic movement, it enacts the Fall more fully than the nondramatic examples we have been considering; simultaneously, that progression externalizes the contradictory emotions present in the speech, as it calls into being a dramatic heroine who has been variously characterized as a “spoilt child,” a “beautiful witch,” and “a piece of human refuse,” who finally is unveiled as an uncouth sight (Alsemero tells her, “O, thou art all deformed”; 5.3.77), and who is, beyond a shadow of a doubt, “prou’d a common field.”45 It could not choose but follow.

The Changeling is clearly aware of the “imperfection” we all share (1.1.117), but it simultaneously locates that imperfection in Beatrice, imagining her both as the object and the origin of desire, both as castrated (the “deformed,” uncouth sight) and as the source of castration (Beatrice’s first beloved, Alonzo, is killed and his finger is cut off in the citadel, which is associated with her—and, more specifically, with her genitals—throughout the play).46 In her classic essay, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” Laura Mulvey outlines two means of dealing with the castration anxiety aroused by the sight of a woman: the investigation of female guilt and her subsequent punishment, and the fetishistic worship of the female. She notes that the former method seems particularly at home in narrative: “This sadistic side fits in well with narrative. Sadism demands a story, depends on making something happen, forcing a change in another person, a battle of will and strength, victory/defeat, all occurring in a linear time with a beginning and an end.”47 As The Changeling moves from lyric worship to dramatic punishment, linear structure is presented as a problem—but it also becomes the solution: not only does it facilitate externalization and displacement, its very form seems to provide us with a logical coherence that smooths out contradictions and recuperates the closure whose loss

“I(t) could not choose but follow”: Erotic Logic in The Changeling 89
it describes. And that closure is effectively embodied by the circle of men who are left at the end, Beatrice’s father having gained a new “son” in Alsemero to replace his damaged daughter (5.3.216).

In his fascinating analysis of the scandals surrounding Frances Howard, David Lindley has suggested how the conventional version of her life has similarly been constructed to fit accepted narrative patterns. He shows that readings of Howard’s early years have been colored, both in her time and in our own, by her later involvement in the Overbury murder: “The later-known crime is imported back into the reading of the divorce, which then becomes a sign of Frances Howard’s essential moral turpitude.” He explains:

For the modern reader the sense of a necessary connection between divorce and murder is reinforced by historians’ effort to produce a chronological narrative of the events of 1613 . . . It then becomes easy to follow seventeenth-century commentators in assuming a kind of moral domino effect by which the lesser crime of adultery leads to the greater sin of murder in neat and necessary narrative succession. The final temptation is to reinforce the potency of this narrative sequence by deriving from its completed shape a construction of Frances Howard’s character which will endorse that moral scenario. Accordingly she becomes a quasi-tragic figure who demonstrates a deepening slide into moral depravity.

Lindley characterizes The Changeling as “articulat[ing] just such a moral sequence,” and he points to the fact that the traditional view of Beatrice’s character, classically voiced by T. S. Eliot (“the unmoral nature, suddenly trapped in the inexorable toil of morality”) “strikingly parallels the personality historians have constructed for Frances Howard.”

The play clearly articulates and participates in the sequence he describes, while it simultaneously presents that sequence self-consciously and analyzes its creation. Interestingly, The Changeling “straightens out” the order of events in Frances Howard’s life, making it clear that adultery is the inevitable conclusion of her participation in murder—that it is not, in our culture, the “lesser” crime for a woman, but the culminating expression of her inward evil. Indeed, any movement on her part leads inexorably to whoredom. After watching a meeting between Beatrice Joanna and Alsemero, De Flores declares:

If a woman
Fly from one point, from him she makes a husband,
She spreads and mounts then, like arithmetic,
One, ten, a hundred, a thousand, ten thousand—
Proves in time sutler to an army royal.

(2.2.60–64)

“Point” here, of course, suggests penis. But it also implies a static, fixed existence, such as that which Alsemero imagines in his opening lyric speech. In this context, any motion, any will, any life at all leads to the same inevitable conclusion. Signifi-
cantly, later in the play, Beatrice tells Diaphanta (with obvious double meaning), “Y’re too quick, I fear, to be a maid” (4.1.91).

As De Flores’s lines indicate, *The Changeling* further suggests that Beatrice Joanna’s story—and Frances Howard’s—are not simply made to fit a traditional narrative; rather, what Lindley felicitously terms the “potency of the narrative sequence” finds its most perfect thematic expression in a version of this story—with its displacement of imperfection, lack, and guilt onto a woman. From one perspective, *The Changeling* emphasizes its own embeddedness in the processes of causality. The progression from murderess to whore that Asemoro declares “could not choose but follow” is presented not merely as an example of logic, of making sense in our culture, but as the example—just as the erotic compulsion that is connected to it by being signaled by a version of the same line is presented as the example of eroticism. And, as the responses of numerous readers have shown, the play goes a long way to making these claims stick. Discussing the rape scene, for example, Una Ellis-Fermor comments:

From this point [3.4.74] onward every line of De Flores is an immovable logical statement, each statement revealing a merciless fact in that world of reality she [Beatrice] has wandered into, sleep-walking. Every line in her part is now the simple utterance of reality; the plain speech that is all a swiftly traveling mind can spare for recording the landmarks in its new and changing observation. The lines themselves harden and grow metallic as the strokes of logic harden her mind.33

In Ellis-Fermor’s comment, as in the play, logic and eroticism share the same form—and that form is clearly phallic, firmly reasserting the threatened “point.”

But at the same time, as this analysis has shown, *The Changeling* insistently calls our attention to the constructedness of its own logic. In ways that Asemoro never consciously imagines, the beginning of the play does, indeed, touch its end: its concluding images are implicit in its opening, and the sequence it describes is always already complete. Beatrice is already fallen, already a whore, already hideously deformed. Beauty not only loves the Beast here, Beauty is the Beast.54 And, of course, we knew it all along, so it could not choose but follow.

Sigmund Freud’s commentary on compulsive neuroses, although formulated in a quite different context, may shed some final light on the play and on the assumptions it analyzes and enacts. Freud is explaining how his patient, the “Rat Man,” repeatedly removes and replaces a stone from the road that “his lady” travels:

A battle between love and hate was raging in the lover’s breast, and the object of both these feelings was one and the same person. The battle was represented in a plastic form by his compulsive and symbolic act of removing the stone from the road along which she was to drive, and then of undoing this deed of love by replacing the stone where it had lain, so that her carriage might come to grief against it and she herself be hurt. . . . Compulsive acts like this, in two successive stages, of which the second neutralizes the first, are a typical occurrence in obsessional neuroses. The patient’s consciousness naturally misunderstands them—rationalizes them, in short. But their true significance lies in their being a representa-

“I(t) could not choose but follow”: Erotic Logic in *The Changeling*
tion of a conflict between two opposing impulses of approximately equal strength: and hitherto I have invariably found that this opposition has been one between love and hate. . . . What regularly occurs in hysteria is that a compromise is arrived at which enables both the opposing tendencies to find expression simultaneously—which kills two birds with one stone; whereas here each of the two opposing tendencies finds satisfaction singly, first one and then the other, though naturally an attempt is made to establish some sort of logical connection (often in defiance of all logic) between the antagonists.55

The Changeling seems to suggest, among other things, that conventional Renaissance lyrics and tragedies of love are structured like the symptoms Freud attributes here to “hysteria” and “compulsion.”

As we have seen, pairings similar to those that Freud describes pervade the play. And the word fellow (like follow, which is its fellow) echoes throughout.56 All the characters are doubled, and therefore “imperfect,” “undone”; but as Beatrice becomes the locus for a sexuality that is both “loved and loathed,” so too is she seen as the origin of all doubling.57 Doubling is not, however, merely a sign of incompleteness here; it allows, ultimately, for a perfect pairing to take place. The ideal union that Alsemoro had envisioned is both undermined and fulfilled by the orgasmic union of Beatrice Joanna and De Flores in death, which wickedly parodies the end of Romeo and Juliet.58 Words, scenes, actions, and images are similarly matched: one glove is dropped, one sigh is sighed, and we wait for the other (explicitly termed its “fellow”) to follow (2.2.102; compare 1.1.223–28). And the result is the self-conscious creation of that structure of “inevitability” that has been intuited by so many readers, a structure that functions as both the mark of lost perfection and its redemption; that acknowledges universal lack and reassigns it; that manages, among its other achievements, simultaneously to display and to hide its own origin as it works out—and derives considerable erotic power from—a phantasmal but familiar cultural logic that we, like its heroine, “[can] not choose but follow.”

Notes

Earlier versions of this essay were presented at “Rape and Representation,” a seminar directed by Karen Bamford and Karen Robertson at the Shakespeare Association of America; at a panel at the Renaissance Society of America; at the Women and Gender in Early Modern Europe Seminar of the Harvard Humanities Center, directed by Diana Henderson and Marina Leslie; at the Group for Early Modern Cultural Studies; and at the Tufts Medieval-Early Modern Colloquium. I thank the participants in all these groups for their questions and comments. I am particularly grateful to Richard Burt, Kevin Dunn, Stephanie Gaynor, and Cristina Malcolmson for their careful readings and helpful suggestions.

1. All quotation of Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, The Changeling, is from the New Mermaid edition, ed. Joost Daalder (New York, 1990). In the first scene, De Flores had kneeled to Beatrice, and begged to be of “service” (2.2.116, cf. 54, 59, 69, 93, 119,
140; now, she humbles herself before him. Both scenes additionally recall the kneeling in the subplot of the madmen before their masters, who control them with “commanding pizzes,” making them “as tame as the ladies” (4.3.62); see Cristina Malcolmson, “As Tame as the Ladies: Politics and Gender in The Changeling,” English Literary Renaissance 20 (1990): 321–39.


4. For a fascinating account of Howard’s life that carefully examines the mythology surrounding her and effectively problematizes traditional readings of her character and crimes, see David Lindley, The Trials of Frances Howard: Fact and Fiction at the Court of King James (London, 1993).

5. For analyses of this connection from a number of different perspectives, see Margot Heinemann, Puritanism and Theatre: Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama Under the Early Stuarts (Cambridge, 1980), 178–79; J. L. Simmons, “Diabolical Realism in Middleton and Rowley’s The Changeling,” Renaissance Drama, n.s., 11 (1980): 135–70; and A. A. Bromham and Zara Bruzzi, The Changeling and the Years of Crisis, 1619–1624: A Hieroglyph of Britain (London, 1990); as well as Hopkins, “Beguiling”; Lindley, Trials; and Malcolmson, “Politics and Gender.”

6. See, for example, the final scene of Middleton’s Women Beware Women (5.2), in which a parody of the masque becomes the occasion for multiple sexually motivated murders.

7. See Lindley, “Embarrassing Ben.” For reflections upon the strengths and limitations of the practice of reading literary texts for commentary on contemporary events, see Leah Marcus, Puzzling Shakespeare: Local Reading and Its Discontents (Berkeley, 1988).

8. Jonson, Complete Masques, 522. The note continues: “See Festus [under rapi] and that of Catullus [lx 3–4]: ‘You who carry off the tender maiden to a husband.’”


10. For “perfection” in The Changeling, see 1.1.59, 117; 2.2.54, 3.4.117; 4.3.53, 215; 5.3.115. For an illuminating discussion of Jonson’s use of the term in his epitalamia, see Du-

“I(t) could not choose but follow”: Erotic Logic in The Changeling 93
brow, *Happier Eden*, 219–20, 223, 230; and note the following lines from *Hymenaei*: “Telia, for Hymen, perfects all, and ends” (265); “Here stay, and let your sports be crowned / The perfectest figure is the round (361); “Your bride, that, ere the morn, / Shall far more perfect be” (426–27); “That you may both ere day / Rise perfect every way” (486–87, repeated with slight variations, 494–95, 502–3); “Shut fast the door; and as they soon / To their perfection haste, / So may their arders last” (513–15); “Virgins in their sweet and peaceful state / Have all things perfect, spin their own free fate, / Depend on no proud second, are their own / Center and circle, now and always one” (717–20). In his own notes, Jonson associates “Telia [which] signifies Perfecta, or as some translate it Perfectrix [she who makes perfect],” with marriage; Jonson, *Complete Masques*, 520. See also the popular ballad about Frances Howard, “A mayd of more perfection,” which ridicules her assertion of “Virginity” (line 5) at the time of her annullment; “Poems from a Seventeenth Century Manuscript with the Hand of Robert Herrick,” ed. Norman K. Farmer Jr., *Texas Quarterly* 16 (1973), supplement 91.


12. These lines refer literally to the antimasque that is to be performed by the madmen at Beatrice’s wedding, but they have an obvious double meaning. The absence of the anticipated performance from the play has worried a number of critics. Richard Levin, in *The Multiple Plot in English Renaissance Drama* (Chicago, 1971), suggests that “we are missing a major scene” (47); and Sarah P. Sutherland, in *Masques in Jacobean Tragedy* (New York, 1983), goes to great lengths to argue that the play is complete as it stands (101–11). I am suggesting that the whole play (not merely the subplot, as some readers have claimed) functions as a kind of marriage antimasque; cf. Mohammad Kowsar, “Middleton and Rowley’s *The Changeling*: The Besieged Temple,” *Criticism* 28 (1986): 145–63.

13. Cf. Little, “Virginity and Hysteria,” 40 n. 34. Little cites suggestive uses of cherry in Shakespeare’s *The Witch of Edmonton* 3.1.18–19 and *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* 5.1.192; see also *Midsummer Night’s Dream* 3.2.210; *Volpone* 1.1.89.

14. Cf. *Changeling* 4.1, in which Diaphanta’s disavowal of sexual fears makes Beatrice doubt she is a maid.


20. See Dubrow, Happier Eden, esp. on fears and delays in Herrick’s celebrations of marriage, 239–58; on “virginal desire” see also Loughlin, “Love’s Friend,” and Marie H. Loughlin, Hymeneutics: Interpreting Virginity on the Early Modern Stage (Lewisburg, Penn., 1997). One of the poems discussed in Dubrow, Happier Eden, 240, Herrick’s “Julia’s Churching, or Purification,” presents us with an interesting variation on these themes, as a woman’s preserving her fear of sexuality in a faithful marriage is seen as effectively preserving her virginity (and thus keeping her ever desirable):

She who keeps chastely to her husbands side
Is not for one, but every night his Bride.
And stealing still with love, and feare to Bed,
Brings him not one, but many a Maiden-head.

(ll. 13–16)

For a feminist revision of this set of ideas, see Margaret Cavendish’s play The Bridals.


22. Puttenham, Arte of English Poesie, 67; English emphasis mine.

23. Dale Randall, “Some Observations on the Theme of Chastity in The Changeling,” English Literary Renaissance 14 (1984): 350. Randall is concerned to argue against earlier readers who maintained that the term only applies to Antonio, and to assert that “Beatrice Joanna is ultimately the changeling in a play that is full of changelings.”

24. Although it seems likely that Vermandero is speaking of Beatrice’s mother (imaged as her daughter’s twin), his speech simultaneously calls up the image of a (good) twin sister, for whom Beatrice was exchanged. Significantly, after Diaphanta is substituted for Beatrice in the bed-trick, Beatrice associates her with her sister: “Were it my sister, now she gets no more” (5.1.112).


26. My attention was first called to the relevance of this play by DeeAnna Phares-Matthews’s suggestive essay, “Blood’s Appetite: Carnality and Violation of the Female in Marston’s Sophonisba,” presented to the “Rape and Representation” seminar at the 1999 meeting of the Shakespeare Association of America. All quotation of Sophonisba follows the text of John Marston, Selected Plays, ed. Macdonald P. Jackson and Michael Neill (Cambridge, 1986).

27. Cf. the repeatedly interrupted consummation in Othello.


29. See Little, “Virginity and Hysteria,” 25, on the evocation of Petrarch’s Laura and Dante’s Beatrice here. David Duncan, in “Virginity in The Changeling,” English Studies
in Canada 9 (1983): 25–33, comments on Alsemoro’s appeal to Edenic marriage, but he clearly believes that this “bold notion” is unusual (27).

30. On the Fall into linearity, see also Neill, Issues of Death, 181. When Alsemoro discovers Beatrice out of bed on their wedding night, she tells him, “When I missed you, / I could not choose but follow” (5.1.83–84); and when De Flores tells Alsemoro, in a rhymed couplet, that in addition to being a killer, Beatrice is a “whore,” Alsemoro replies: “It could not choose but follow” (5.3.106–8). See also 1.1.101–2 (“Must I be enjoined / To follow still whilst she flies from me”); 1.1.232–33 (“I know she hates me / Yet cannot choose but love her”); 5.1.79–80 (“Hie quickly to your chamber; / Your reward follows you”); 5.3.175–77 ([De Flores, dying:] “Make haste Joanna, by that token to thee [the finger] / Canst not forget, so lately put in mind; / I would not go to leave thee far behind”).

31. Beatrice tries out this “test” (a potion) by giving it to Diaphanta, and later fakes its effects when she herself is tested.


34. My text for Fulke Greville’s poetry is Certaine Learned and Elegant Worke (1633): A Facsimile Reproduction (Delmar, N.Y., 1990). I follow Geoffrey Bullough, Poems and Drama of Fulke Greville, First Lord Brooke, 2 vols. (Edinburgh, 1939), and other modern editors in emending “in downe” to “downe in” in line 6 of Caelica 37. I prefer, however, to avoid their other (minor but somewhat irritating) corrections. To cite one example with some relevance to the following discussion: Thom Gunn’s modernization of Bullough’s edition, while retaining the capitalization in the third quatrain of this poem, removes it from “Knowledge” in line 5, apparently attempting to remove from the word some of the ambiguous agency present in the folio; see Selected Poems of Fulke Greville, ed. Thom Gunn (Chicago, 1968).

35. For lyric dream poems see Sir Philip Sidney, Astrophil and Stella 38 (“This night while sleepe begins with heavy wings”); Sir Thomas Wyatt, “Unstable dreme, according to the place”; and John Donne, “The Dream” (which plays with conventional expectations). I would suggest that Wyatt’s “They fle from me” is also a variant on this tradition.


37. See Turner, One Flesh, chap. 1, for discussion of this conflation in interpretations of Genesis.

38. For a different, but not unrelated, reading of this poem in the tradition of dream sonnets (and in connection with Spenser), see Dorothy Stephens, The Limits of Eroticism in Post-Petrarchan Narrative: Conditional Pleasure from Spenser to Marvell (Cambridge, 1998), 48–51.

39. Faerie Queene 1.1.48:

And she her selfe of beautie soueraigne Queene,
Faire Venus seemde vnto his bed to bring
Her, whom he waking euermore did weene
To be the chastest flowre, that ay did spring
On earthly braunch, the daughter of a king,
Now a loose Leman to vile service bound:
And eke the Graces seemed all to sing,
Hymen to Hymen, dauncing all around
Whilst freshest Flora her with Yuiid girlond crownd.
These images are unpacked in the final canto, where the dream is fulfilled in a positive manner in a regained Eden. Una is first compared to Diana, crowned with a “girland” and celebrated as a “goodly maiden Queene” (1.12.7–8); she is then married to Redcrosse, and the two join together in a passage that recalls the water imagery in the dream (“Yet swimming in that sea of blisfull joy” [1.12.41]). Both images had, of course, appeared in negative contexts earlier in the book, when Redcrosse, attempting to escape his dream, ended up enacting it with Duessa (canto 7). All quotation from The Faerie Queene follows the text of J. C. Smith (Oxford, 1909), reprinted in Edmund Spenser, The Faerie Queene, ed. A. C. Hamilton (London, 1977).

40. For a complex exploration of this technique, see Susanne Lindgren Wofford, The Choice of Achilles: The Ideology of Figure in the Epic (Stanford, 1992), esp. 235–36.

41. The later substitution of Duessa for Una furthers the bed-trick motif. It is only when Duessa is unveiled as the true “vncouth sight” (1.1.50) that Una can appear (however briefly) as “a virgin wife / . . . most happy in [her] husband’s arms”; Marston Sophonisba 5.4.103, 106.


43. Sidney, for example, differentiates between nondramatic works, in which genres may be mingled, and proper comedies and tragedies, which should be constructed with Aristotle’s unities in mind; Sir Philip Sidney, An Apology for Poetry, ed. Forrest G. Robinson (New York, 1985), 77–78. And Jonson repeatedly complains of the unnatural form of dramatic romances, which he dismisses as “Tales, Tempests, and such like drolleries”; in Bartholmew Fair, Induction, line 125. Renaissance plays, of course, regularly broke the rules laid out for them, and The Changeling, with its double plot, is no exception. Still, early modern dramatists were acutely aware of the theoretical expectation of unity and were self-conscious about flouting it when they did. I discuss the differences between early modern dramatic and nondramatic narratives further in my forthcoming book Consummate Play: Desire and Dramatic Form in Early Modern England.

44. Thus, critics frequently refer to the “mythic” resonances in the play; for an extended reading along these lines, see Robert Jordan, “Myth and Psychology in The Changeling,” Renaissance Drama, n.s., 3 (1970): 157–65.

45. Una Ellis-Fermor first called Beatrice a “spoilt child” in The Jacobean Drama: An Interpretation (London, 1936), 147, and the characterization has been repeated by many critics. Simmons, “Diabolical Realism,” declares that “the beautiful witch is now seen as the hag she is” (151), and explicitly compares Beatrice’s unmasking to that of Duessa (150). Sara Eaton also makes this comparison, but from a critical, feminist point of view in her “Beatrice-Joanna and the Rhetoric of Love,” in Staging the Renaissance: Reinterpretations of Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama, ed. David Scott Kastan and Peter Stallybrass (New York, 1991), 278. Stachniewski, “Calvinist Psychology,” comments that “Alsemero and Vermandero quickly perceive that their beloved Beatrice is really a piece of human refuse and take comfort in their spiritual brotherhood” (240). For a discussion of the scapegoat mechanism in the play from a somewhat different perspective, see Sharon Stockton, “The ‘broken rib of mankind’: The Sociopolitical Function of the Scapegoat in The Changeling,” Papers on Language and Literature 26 (1990): 459–77.

    Compare Changeling 5.3.77 to Beatrice’s response when Alsemero calls her a “whore”:

    What a horrid sound it hath!
    It blasts a beauty to deformity;

    “I(t) could not choose but follow”: Erotic Logic in The Changeling
Upon what face soever that breath falls,
It strikes it ugly.

(5.3.31–34)

46. In Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood (New York, 2000), Gary Taylor argues (using Middleton’s A Game at Chess as his primary text) that what we think of as “castration anxiety” did not exist at this time. He insists on the literal meaning of “castration” and asserts that “in Middleton’s world, women do not cut off men’s penises or regard intercourse as invasive” (121). It seems odd that in an argument based largely on Middleton, he could so completely ignore The Changeling, with its central image of penile amputation (he mentions the play only in passing). For a different account of early modern “castration” that accrords more with my own view, see Dymptna Callaghan, “The Castrator’s Song: Female Impersonation on the Early Modern Stage,” in Shakespeare Without Women: Representing Gender and Race on the Renaissance Stage (New York, 2000), 49–74.


49. Lindley, Trials, 78.


52. Coppélia Kahn comments on this passage, “these words . . . epitomize the fantasy of women’s sexual appetite on which the term of whore is founded,” and notes its similarity to “Othello’s despairing fantasy that ‘the general camp, pioners and all’ might have tasted Desdemona’s body”; see “Whores and Wives in Jacobean Drama,” in In Another Country, ed. Dorothea Keehler and Susan Baker (Metuchen, N.J., 1991), 252.

53. Ellis-Fermor, Jacobean Drama, 147. See also Irving Ribner’s Calvinist reading: “The dominant motif of the play is the working out of a kind of inexorable fate which makes impossible any real change”; Jacobean Tragedy: The Quest for Moral Order (New York, 1962), 130.


55. Sigmund Freud, Three Case Histories, ed. Philip Rieff (New York, 1996), 34–35; emphasis in last sentence mine. I thank Stephanie Gaynor for calling my attention to this passage.

56. See Changeling 1.1.89; 1.2.102; 3.4.3, 4; 4.1.1.


58. Neil, Issues of Death, 171, sees the conclusion as “a re-enactment of Othello’s eroticized murder-suicide from Othello” (which, I would suggest, is itself a rethinking of the end of Romeo and Juliet). On the play’s general relation to Romeo and Juliet, see Robert Ornstein, The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy (Madison, 1965), 186; and Nicholas Brooke, Horrid Laughter in Jacobean Tragedy (London, 1979), 72. See also Kowsar’s final evaluation of Beatrice: “Hers is the true love story,” in “Middleton and Rowley’s The Changeling,” 162. As many readers have noted, Bianca’s suicide in Women Beware Women, which “turns death / Into a parting kiss” (5.2.194–95), also parodies Juliet’s.