MORALITY AND THE WOMEN IN THE PLAYS

OF THOMAS MIDDLETON

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by

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1969.
For this reason, then, and for considerations of length, I intend only to work with those plays which, according to the general scholarly consensus, have been written, if not in toto, at least in the main by Middleton.

My aim in this study is twofold. Firstly I wish to bring to light the work of a dramatist who, at least in the past, has been admired for The Changeling (although even then with reservations), but for very little else. The Changeling may be Middleton's ultimate statement about the nature of evil in the human personality, but it is by no means his only one. Part of the interest in a study of this nature must therefore be in the tracing of the development which culminates in this play. Secondly, I believe that while Middleton's women characters show a development representative of a general interest in psychology, abnormal included, which is exhibited by many of the dramatists in the late Elizabethan and early Jacobean periods, this development is also rendered highly individual by his moral point of view.

Some critics, however, have declared Middleton to be a cynic who wallows in corruption for its own sake. But, although it is something very different from the usual vociferous moralizing, we do find in the plays what might be called a "negative morality". In other words, the dramatist's awareness of and despair at sin is to be felt in his silences
and in his implications rather than in any spoken satire or condemnation. Satire is undeniably useful: it helps to point out and underline the common abuses of Middleton's day, but it is much less important than his consuming interest in damnation upon earth, a damnation which finds its expression in a magnificently sustained and faultlessly focussed vision of the consequences of sin in this life. The women, linked as they are by a common source in their creator, develop as his vision develops. We could even go so far as to say that, at least in Women Beware Women and The Changeling, character constitutes Middleton's moral point of view. The women are not merely exempla of his morality. They are that morality. This then, is the idea around which my thesis is centred.

I feel I must apologize for the poor quality of the texts which I have been obliged to use in my discussion of the earlier plays. In many of the older editions, like those of Dyce and Ellis, efficient reference has been made difficult, if not impossible, because line numbers have not been given and the text has sometimes been cut. However, with the reawakening of interest in Middleton's work, I trust that more modern editions of the lesser-known plays will be available, complete with line numbers, in the not too distant future.

Finally, I wish to thank Mr. D.G. Malouf, of the Department of English at the University of Sydney for the comments he made
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CHAPTER ONE
THE EARLY VIEWS OF WOMEN

To understand something of the way in which women in Middleton's time were regarded, it is necessary to look briefly at the traditions which most influenced Elizabethan and Jacobean Drama. For dramatists at the beginning of the seventeenth century, a constantly recurring theme was that of sexual sin and its consequences. Renaissance notions of the glory of the human body and intellect had lost their initial force in England, and the reason for this can only be guessed. Probably most thoughtful men had realized that, for all their attractiveness, these notions had not provided any solution to the basic problems of existence. Disillusionment caused a return to many medieval concepts. Schoenbaum says that "Gothic Europe contemplated with grim fascination the evils of the flesh. The Medieval church was unrelenting in its scorn and condemnation of every aspect of the sensual life. It regarded facial and bodily beauty with distrust, as something false and treacherous, a surface allurement leading men away from spiritual reality".¹

In the years between 1590 and 1630 most thinking people felt much the same way, but medieval concepts of sex, rather

than springing from man's appraisal and judgment of the contemporary morality and the social conditions surrounding him, as was common in later times, had their origins in Biblical exegesis and theological disputation. The book of Genesis, for example, provided unlimited opportunity for argument and theological debate. The figure of Eve, mother of mankind, was interpreted in many different ways and accorded many diverse levels of significance. There was a distinct polarity of opinion with regard to her place in Creation and, more generally, to woman's place in both the kingdom of God and society upon earth.

In his study of the Genesis commentaries from 1527 to 1633, Arnold Williams gives a very clear and detailed history of the treatment and interpretations of the Eve-story, and deals with such questions as whether or not woman was seen by the commentators as an inferior creature of only biological utility, whether or not they considered that woman had been made as society for man, as his fit companion, or simply as an "occasional animal", a remedy for illicit love. Her relative status to that of man was widely discussed. Had her soul come from God or man? Was she subjected to man? The question of whether or not sexual intercourse had taken place before or after the Fall took its toll of Patristic intellectual, or rather theological, energy. But as well as the serious commentary upon Eve, there arose some side

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issues which coexisted with the serious. "A great many of
the Jewish topics belong to the domain of satire, and
medieval and Renaissance satires on women not infrequently
availed themselves of this Jewish material." 3

As far as the Fall was concerned, one of the worst sins
of which Eve was accused was infidelity to Adam, in that she
exalted her own will and understanding over his and God's.
J.M. Evans quotes Saint Augustine as having written: "Under
what circumstances would the woman believe these words [of
the serpent in Eden]. . . unless there were already in her
mind a certain love of her own power and a certain proud
self-presumption?" 4 Evans's own comment on this is worth
noticing: he remarks that this indicates that Eve "was at
least potentially sinful before she ever touched the forbidden
fruit", and that this cast "the gravest doubts on her original
integrity". 5

In the medieval period, therefore, this potential for
evil was emphasized and, as Schoenbaum says, "Women were
regarded with suspicion and disdain. The cause of Adam's
fall from grace, and man's subsequent loss of Paradise, they
were looked upon as temptresses and schemers, lascivious and
adulterous by nature." 6 This condemnation of the sensual
life appeared in medieval drama, and in the popular writings

3 Williams, p. 90.
5 Ibid.
6 Schoenbaum, p.191.
of the period constant emphasis was laid upon feminine vanity and lack of interest in anything not related in some way to the material world.

Saint Bernadino degli Albisceschi (1380-1444) had this to say to women: "... how shameful is it that, when I am saying Mass, you make a clamour like a bag of rattling bones! ... Oh, it is a fine devotion with which you follow the Mass!"7 Fair Rosamund, mistress of Henry II of England (1154-1189) was held up to the public gaze as a "harlot" so that "ill-disposed women" might "take example by her to avoid the sin of adultery and of lechery".8 The author of the "Rhyme of Fair Ladies" (from Reliquiae Antiquae) did not spare the fair sex either. In describing a group of chattering women he noted rather acidly that "none sleeps here as they do at Mass, for all are cheerful companions in these lists of vanity".9

The "Monk's View of Mankind" contained comments showing the same zeal: "A married woman hath many needs; precious robes, gold and gems, great expenses, handmaidens, furniture of all kinds, litters, and a gilded car. ... Thou must honour her nurse and nursemaid, her slave. ... her comely follower and the curled manager of her affairs - names which do but cloke her adulterers."10 These are the comments from

8 See G.G. Coulton's collection of medieval writings, Life in the Middle Ages (Cambridge, 1954), Vol.III, p.5. The citation is from Trevina's Higden.
9 Coulton, III, p.53.
10 Coulton, IV, pp.22-23. The translation is of Saint Jerome (c.340-420).
European writers and thinkers. Their opinions are clear, but what was happening in England?

G.R. Owst has remarked that medieval English preachers were not much given to the emotions of love and sweetness where women were concerned. He comments: "Where healthy human nature seems to demand some positive doctrine of sexual happiness, they speak only, as in the realms of public affairs, of sin and temptation, of forbidden pleasures and lusts, of needful fears and repressions, haunted by the same old shadow of Original Sin, the same primitive ascetical ideals as their ancestors... Woman's chief glory — not merely her little foibles and excesses — is by them accounted a snare and a delusion, her greatest field of activity little better than a wilderness of briars and pitfalls." 11

To many a medieval housewife who played a dignified and active part in the society of her age and who was faithful to God and to her husband, these ill-balanced oracular denunciations from the pulpit were obviously unfair.

Ecclesiastes, however, became the slogan: "Death itself is not so cruel as woman's heart that wheelers and beguiles, as woman's clutches that release their captive never. God's friends escape her; of sinners she makes an easy prey." 12

Beauty was but "an outward form of little duration, a withered flower, carnal felicity, human concupiscence." 13

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12 Ecclesiastes, VII. 27.
13 Owst, p.48.
Master Rypon, a contemporary of Chaucer and a Benedictine monk, extended the following caution to unwary men: "Wheresoever beauty shows upon the face, there lurks much filth beneath the skin." Women of the Bible from Eve to Jezebel were "held up as a warning of the fate to which social ambitions and gadding about would inevitably lead", and woman was seen as "the confusion of Man, an incessant warfare, a daily ruin, a house of tempest, a hindrance to devotion."

A student could continue ad infinitum finding such evidence of the medieval "vision" of woman as a seducer, a temptress, a beast and a devil. Furthermore, the pulpit seems to have regarded matrimony with the utmost pessimism. Because of her frivolity, sensuality and wilfulness, a woman was dangerous when single, and, it seems, doubly dangerous when married because her awareness of her own importance might lead her to disobey her rightful lord and master. Women were selfish, demanding, proud and inconstant, the devil's decoys. They painted their faces and took too great an interest in clothes, jewellery, good food and soft living. It is not a pleasant picture but, as Owst has pointed out, it is in this way that "the medieval pulpit in England can rightly claim to have been a creative centre of literary satire and complaint." Owst emphasizes the importance of the preachers: despite the fact that their sermons about feminine vices were too one-sided,

14 Ibid.  
15 Owst, p.119.  
16 Owst, p.378.  
17 Owst, p.469.
they told their congregations "this story of universal calamity and decay. It was they who taught ordinary men and women to see life as one continuous drama played out in a succession of Acts, all tinged with an ancient Hebrew melancholy - the helplessness and pathos of childhood, the folly of youth's strivings and ambitions, the empty vanity of middle-age, the end of all mortal effort and of the restless excitement of human passions".  

John D. Peter has written of the themes of medieval complaint as they transfer from specifically religious to more secular fields of thought and activity: "To both the poet and the homilist the physical corruptibility of men and women is simply a symbol of the moral corruption within: mortality and sinfulness, the double heritage of the Fall, are almost aspects of the same quality." He too remarks upon the prejudice with which women were contemplated as the daughters of Eve. "Just as the story of the Fall perhaps reflects the growing man's incomplete adjustment to the adult world... so too Eve is herself presumably an embodiment in myth of an enduring prejudice... For the moralist of the times she offered herself primarily as a foil for the Virgin..." Thus, in the Middle Ages, women found themselves perpetually oscillating between the pedestal and the pit.

Complainants who were only too willing to consign woman to the pit were plentiful enough, but a strong opposing factor was

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18 Cowst, pp.533-534.
19 Complaint and Satire in Early English Literature (Oxford, 1956), p.64.
20 Peter. p.86.
to be found in Virgin-worship or the cult of Mary. Fourteenth century poems of praise to the Virgin often drew from the metres and conventions of secular poetry but they were still inspired by what Rosemary Woolf calls "Marian piety," and despite the terms used, which, in many cases could have come only from the courtly love tradition, they showed a devoted love for and dependence upon the Blessed Virgin. Fifteenth century lyrics, however, were the beginning of a gradual change in emphasis in that they praised not only the mercy, gentleness and goodness but also the physical beauty of Mary. As Rosemary Woolf has noted, it was only the direct mention of the Virgin's name or the inclusion of some distinguishing term or image which, in many cases, prevented the poems from appearing completely secular. Without any specific distinctions, many of the lyrics might have been descriptions "of the poet's ideal mistress, with the traditional comparisons to flowers and precious stones".

Thus the fourteenth century cult of Virgin-worship, where the religious element was dominant, gradually led to a "transitional combination of secular and religious" and from there, in the final shifting of emphasis, to a point where the secular element was, in many instances, dominant. The romantic "love-longings" of the courtly traditions began to supersede the

22 Woolf, p. 275.
23 Woolf, p. 276.
declarations of repentance, so that some of the lyrics extant today, particularly if their author is unknown, still cause scholars to wonder if the intended recipient of this praise, so rich in "sacred diction and rhetorical devices", was the Virgin or simply the poet's mistress. Moreover, the rose as the Christian symbol of martyrdom and the Passion of Christ was now superseded by the rose as a romantic or courtly symbol.

The reasons for such a shift in emphasis may only be guessed at. Poets may have wanted to exercise their art as well as to praise the Virgin, so that religious and artistic motives became combined. There may even have been some decline in medieval devotion to the Virgin. Whatever the reasons, it would be true to say that the Reformation dealt the death-blow to the practice of Virgin-worship in many parts of Europe, even though the Council of Trent (1546-1564), which corrected many of the abuses complained about by the pre-reformation conciliar movement in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, restrained rather than condemned it. The graven images may have been cast out and the actual cult practices discontinued, but as Muriel St. Clare Byrne has pointed out, the driving-force behind these practices remained, as "something amazingly powerful, something instinctive, and deeply rooted in the more emotional and imaginative side of the religion of simple people". Thus whatever emotional attachment to the Virgin

24 Woolf, p. 231.
survived in England probably reappeared, now rechannelled into the cult of the Virgin Queen.

Elizabeth I of England (1558-1603), Spenser's Gloriana, used her virginity to gain her subjects' respect and loyalty. Most Protestants would speak out against the Papist practice of Virgin-worship but they would still devoutly revere their queen and stoutly defend her honour. In effect, the passion of the pre-reformation cult remained. All that was now different was the object to which it was directed. The cult of Gloriana had its effects and Wright suggests that the much more balanced debate about feminine virtues and vices in the early years of Elizabeth's reign could be at least partly ascribed to the efforts of a queen who knew how to use her sex. Suspicions of a woman as a monarch may have inspired many of the attacks upon womankind in general, but many of the defenses of women in the period probably sprang from just as strong a desire to defend the sovereign's sex. Moreover, social changes in England also had their effect, says Wright, because women were beginning to take an increasingly important part in many crafts and trades.

Opposite sides were taken by Gosynhill and Vaughan, the former in his "Schole-house of Women" (c1542) making a prolonged and vitriolic attack upon feminine vanity, chatter,

27 Wright ascribes "Dysalogue" to Robert Vaughan. See p.468.
extravagance and general frailty, the latter in "A Dyalogue
defensye for women, agaynst malcyous detractoures" (1542) condemning the double standard whereby men blamed women for unchastity. (Vaughan pointed out that men were just as much to blame because they were guilty of pressuring women to bring about their capitulation.)

In the years that followed, the battle continued to rage and Wright notes "a gradual intensifying of acrimony" which was probably partly due to King James's lack of interest in women and partly to the actual extravagance and vanity of the sex. The bourgeoisie, however, did its best to defend women and "during the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, middle-class writers debated the position and prerogatives of women, debated the theme of woman's goodness or wickedness, and prevailingly defended her, even while condemning the excesses of pride and extravagance which led to disaster in the citizens' economy."  

The Instruction of a Christian Woman, written by Juan Luis Vives for Catherine of Aragon’s young daughter (later Mary I of England), and published in English in or around 1540, contained very detailed instructions on the way a young lady of good birth and prospects was to behave. His instructions ranged from hints on how to rear a baby girl and comments on virginity, clothes, cosmetics, going out,

28 Wright, p.481.
29 Wright, p.506.
dancing, loving, lovers and courtship to marriage, being a wife and then a widow. These instructions may appear a little too stringent to modern readers, but it would be true to say that they contained the same expectations as regards female behaviour as those discussed by Alfred Harbage. However, a more liberal attitude developed in the period between 1540 and 1580, since "the dominant moral philosophy of the time rejected the medieval identification of the sexual impulse with uncleanness and original sin." Harbage goes on to say that the sexual impulse was no longer declared anathema, but simply channelled into the right direction i.e. marriage. "Deviations from the pattern were assumed to be personally improvident, socially dangerous, and sinful in the eyes of God. Fornication was weak and contemptible, adultery a crime akin to murder."

However, there were still large sections of the population which were promiscuous and irresponsible. In "coterie" or select drama, as opposed to popular drama, there was greater lenience towards prostitution and adultery. Some writers found themselves in the peculiar position of presenting what Harbage calls "commercialized vice" for the coterie audiences and dramatized moral denunciations for the popular theatre. The coterie groups evidenced palates which, according to Harbage, were "sufficiently jaded or exploratory (according to the point of view) to require the fillip of the excessive,

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32 Harbage, p.188.
the devious, the perverse. Incest, sexual intrigues, zoophilics and gerontophilics, all engaged the jaundiced eye of the coterie fanatics, while popular theatre, which also had its share of ribaldry though of a much healthier sort, used clowns as figures of lechery and kept its heroes and heroines chaste. Popular drama showed that women did have sexual impulses but that they were not promiscuous. Most popular drama emphasized feminine constancy and "unchaste" women appeared "only in the underworld or in tragedies."

Coterie dramatists only presented marriage to show up the squalor of that relationship: their vision was not completely false, but the lives presented on the popular stage were, on the whole, truer to real life.

The Puritans' new and more liberal definition of marriage was also a definition for the majority of Englishmen, says Harbage, and the increasing assertiveness of the middle class could be held at least partially responsible for the growing "religious and poetic endorsement of wedded love". In their enlightening article "The Puritan Art of Love", William and Malleville Haller write of how the Puritans came to see "matrimony as their holy rule". They believed that few were given that rare gift of continence, so having accepted the idea of marriage they set about clarifying its spiritual

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33 Harbage, p.208.
34 Harbage, p.235.
35 Harbage, p.229.
36 HLO, V (1941-42), p.238.
and moral rather than legal and institutional problems. They wished to declare the office of man and wife according to Scripture and so they wrote many sermons on marriage.

The Puritans considered matrimony as having three aims: the procreation of children, the relief of lust and the consolation of loneliness. Following the Pauline injunction they made it quite clear that "Concupiscence was the normal condition, and to refrain from marriage, its appointed remedy, was to court temptation." 37 Woman's rank and function within marriage were defined precisely, for woman was obviously not man's equal. That she could consider herself equal to her husband was against nature and God's law. But, by the same token, forcible subordination of a wife by a husband was forbidden. Puritan women were "not browbeaten, and put upon by their lords and masters. The contrary was as likely as not often the fact." 38

Apart from this however, man and woman were equal in one respect. Since they were "equal in sin and alike in their appointed inheritance of death", they were "heirs together of the grace of life... Hence the godly wife, no matter how hard her earthly lot, could be certain that the balance would be righted in heaven". 39 As Knappen has pointed out, man might still have been "exalted as the lord and master, and woman treated as the weaker vessel, made of poorer stuff and legally

37 Haller, p.244.
38 Haller, p.249.
39 Haller, pp.250-251.
subject to her husband", but at the same time "ruleship did not mean tyranny". A man, he says, was obliged to honour his wife, to refrain from beating her, treating her like a drudge or ordering her about like a servant. In fact, as the Hallers themselves have remarked, the diary of the Puritan Richard Rogers (1551-1618) shows that "the loves of these married saints" were far from being "tepid", while Knappen observes, in his introduction to the diaries, that Rogers might justifiably be called typical of his day. Rogers does not mention either his first or second wife very frequently in his diary, but entries such as the following (August 26, 1590) show that marital love and concern were sincerely felt and that Rogers wanted to live with his wife "taking all helpe, one by another, both for mutual comfort now and for hereafter, and, because the time of abiding together is short, thus to take that good in it that might be, ... with amiabines, ... ".

In a more general secular sense the hangover from medieval preoccupations remained in the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods in the taking over of the traditions of complaint and satire. Satire found its way into comedy and into "satiric" plays where complaint elements were incorporated into a general "domestic" framework. Satire and complaint were sometimes found together in plays where, as Peter says,

41 Haller, p. 257.
42 Two Elizabethan Puritan Diaries, ... , ed., M.M. Knappen (Chicago, 1933), pp. 101-102.
the seriousness of complaint enjoyed alliance with "knockabout farce and muddled mythology". But in some of the better Elizabethan and Jacobean tragedies "the complainant's conception of Death and Retribution had already fused with a practicable form of Tragedy", says Peter, "where the result had already been adapted to the exigencies of the popular stage, and where the all but anachronistic utterances of Complaint had taken on a new lease of life, as dramatic commentary rather than direct admonition. Whatever congruity there accordingly was in an absolute sense between the type of Tragedy commonly attempted by the Elizabethans and the themes of the complainants there was also an evolutionary link between them, and one on which the dramatists at first quite frankly relied.

Together with the traditions of complaint and satire, the medieval preoccupation with the falseness of beauty and the brevity of life still remained in the Elizabethan Age. The Renaissance spirit may have temporarily swept away the doubts, and sexual preoccupations may have remained dormant for a time during Elizabeth's reign when the themes of heroic exploits, romantic and chivalric ideals and popularized history held sway, but between 1590 and 1630 the "pessimistic inclinations of the age" reappeared with full force. As Schoenbaum has pointed out: "Thoughtful men at the turn of the century, brooding with gloomy persistence on the decay of nature and

43 Peter, p.207.
44 Peter, p.212.
45 Schoenbaum, p.191.
the inevitability of death, soon turned their cynical eyes on the relationship between the sexes, with its infinite suggestiveness of possible evil. An age now prone to masochistic pleasures, fascinated by the spectacle of ingenious tortures and protracted death scenes on the stage, tormented itself with endless reflection on the inconstancy of woman, the clever means devised by wives to deceive their husbands, the probability of cuckoldom, and the possibility of incest."46

The Elizabethan stage had once been glorious in its variety but now that variety was accompanied by a contracting, a narrowing, even a distorting, so that it came to have what Schoenbaum calls "the oppressive atmosphere of the hot-house".47 However, this was not completely negative. This narrowing led to a sharp focussing upon one theme and variations of that theme, and provided "magnificently probing studies of men and women torn by uncontrollable passions" and "minds haunted by unspeakable jealousies".48 This was a far cry from the self-conscious blandness of Bacon: "virtue is like a rich stone, best plain set: and surely virtue is best set in a body that is comely, though not of delicate features; and that hath rather dignity of presence, than beauty of aspect. . . . Beauty is as summer fruits, which are easy to corrupt, and

46 Schoenbaum, p.193.
47 Ibid.
48 Ibid.
cannot last: and for the most part it makes a dissolute youth, and an age a little out of countenance.⁴⁹

As Eudo C. Mason has remarked, the tragic hero of this new narrowed drama found himself in a situation for which he was not prepared: "He had believed in woman, but something has overthrown that belief, and with it his belief in his own judgment, in himself, and in all things has been shattered; he is, in all his satirical generalizations, for his own feeling, concerned no longer with theories of any kind, but only with obscene, unendurable realities; he is obsessed with revolting images of sexual appetite and activities, and so ultimately with sex itself as a necessary condition of our existence; his obsession can give no reasoned account of itself, sees nothing stable or reliable left to appeal to; life has become for him an inanely gesticulating lecherous monster. . . . This sexual obsession is, of course, not the sole, but it is one of the chief and most characteristic manifestations of tragic despair employed by the Elizabethan and Jacobean dramatists".⁵⁰

However, Mason emphasizes that these denunciations of women should not be accepted per se as the poets' final judgments upon women. They should rather be seen as "subjective symptoms" of the soul's disease, this being not

just an "isolated pathological phenomenon" but a symptom of a prevailing sickness, a disease within the whole of life itself. So, one could say that these railings against women are probably denunciations of humankind in general, "against the inescapable conditions of human life, against oneself — even, in a certain sense against God". Mason is careful to distinguish between the moralists, who also express abhorrence for sex, and the poets, for "whereas the moralist is unmistakably trying to persuade himself and others that the grapes are sour, the tragic poet has just as unmistakably drunken copiously enough of the wine of the same grapes to know both how sweet and how treacherous it can be." In the works of dramatists like Cyril Tourneur sex was obsessively portrayed as something disgusting just as life itself was regarded as something totally lacking significance.

Mason does not make any real attempt to find a reason for this change in attitude. He says that we "cannot assume that promiscuity, prostitution, venereal disease, adultery, jealousy and sordid vices were any more rife in the world they lived in after 1595 than they had been before". But he does speak of a general change in language, imagery, structure and rhythm, supposedly symptomatic in some way of this change in outlook which made itself obvious in English literature shortly before

51 Mason, pp. 2-3.
52 Ibid., p. 3.
53 Ibid., p. 5.
1600. Peter's suggestion that in times of security the relationship between men and women was defined in terms of "love" and in times of unrest defined in terms of "sex" is one which cannot be overlooked. Economic instability, social displacement and religious uncertainty caused many people to think more deeply about themselves, their surroundings and the meaning of their existence: unrest had then, as it still has today, a way of making the problems in all areas of existence appallingly and unavoidably obvious.

After the defeat of Spain the "new spirit of competition" which as L.G. Salinger has pointed out, "loosened the whole social hierarchy" had both good and bad results. By 1590 it was clear that the opportunists were becoming rich, many of the wealthy were becoming richer and the poor were being downtrodden in the rush for easy profit. Steeply rising prices, however, affected higher and lower classes alike and contributed to a widespread financial embarrassment which culminated in the sale of titles under the Stuarts. A society now blatantly acquisative showed quite clearly that the "universality and unity" of the old order were quickly giving way to the "multiplicity and conflict" of the new.

It is understandable, then, that man's inner and outer worlds had become " oppressively vast and dark". Religion had both enhanced man's sense of the glory he might attain

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54 Peter, p.170.
with the help of God's grace, and deepened his awareness of his own bestiality. In the words of Shakespeare's Hamlet, "the beauty of the world! the paragon of animals!" had been reduced to nothing but "this quintessence of dust" (II.i.296,297). The "new" Sciences (misnamed, because they had been developed and practised in the Middle Ages) crystallized the question "What do I know?" with a new and overwhelming force so that men could only look up to heaven and, like Flammeo, "confound/knowledge with knowledge".59

The pervading sense of unrest showed itself in many different ways but most dramatists used the more bestial aspects of human relationships as particularized reflections of a far more general decay. The malcontents themselves, short of money and lacking the opportunity for advancement, saw in sex a baseness which they considered had spread throughout and undermined society as a whole. Thus, while it would be wrong to exaggerate the importance of this sexual preoccupation, it would be equally wrong to forget that for Jacobean tragic writers and their characters, lust was "nemesis".60

But if the drama of the time reflected the widespread mood of disillusionment, it also documented the birth and development of a whole new race of feminine dramatis personae. Attacks upon women in the name of morality continued, and

60 Mason, p.10.
in the later years of Elizabeth's reign conservative ire was still aroused by the increasing freedom allowed the fair sex. But defenses of the Queen's femininity and personal splendour, the middle class's defense of woman (on the grounds that she was as often constant, truthful and faithful as not, a help to her husband in family matters and even in the responsibilities of trade and business and, at least potentially, an individual in her own right), the Puritans' liberal attitude to marriage and to the status of woman within that institution, and popular drama's presentation upon the stage of chaste maidens and honorable matrons: all these had a noticeable effect in that women were now being accepted less as mere property and more as people with virtues and ideas of their own. True to its avowed aims, drama reflected this gradual change in outlook in the characters placed upon its stage.

It is with this background in mind, then, that we come at last to view the Middleton canon and to look at the women characters as they develop. In the early plays, which will be discussed in the next chapter, the women are hardly more than stock figures, although this is to some extent excusable in an artist struggling to find himself and to use his dramatic talents in the best and most significant way possible. From there I shall go on to look at the women of the transitional period and, finally, those of the later and tragic plays.
CHAPTER TWO

MORAL STATEMENT AND CHARACTER IN THE EARLY PLAYS

There is a contention, common enough among critics, that Middleton, in his early work at least, did not have any opinions. Una Ellis-Fermor suggests that he had "no rigid moral theory" and "few theories, rigid or otherwise, of art", and that the "journalistic rapidity" of his composition sometimes led to inartistic terseness. Madeleine Doran declares that the plays contain "little feeling of genuine reproof". Jonson's satire may be serious, continues Miss Doran, but Middleton's is often in doubt. His satire is only moral in a wide sense, in that it implies a standard of judgment about what aspects of human behaviour are or are not ridiculous. Their ridiculousness, she concludes, does not disturb him.

According to Muriel C. Bradbrook, Middleton shows in his comedies neither "the moral nor the combative tendencies of Marston and Jonson" and is a true "Chameleon poet".

It is, however, wrong to suppose that, because Middleton does not moralize overtly, he has no moral viewpoint at all. His silences are more significant in many cases than what he says, for as Brian Gibbons has pointed out, in the comedies

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2 Ibid., p.130.
4 Ibid., p.167.
"his wit leaps nimbly over the darker streams of disquiet, pain and evil, directing us to them by implication". The fact that Middleton uses the quick-moving circumstances of his plots to foil the Falsos, reveal the not so innocent tomfoolery of the Follywits and to bring about the downfall of the Prodictors is sufficient moral commentary in itself, and even in the later plays, declarations such as the Cardinal's in Women Beware Women (IV.i. 189f. and iii.1f.) are uncommon. Miss Bradbrook draws our attention to this by her remark that Middleton's "silent judgment" is provided by the "weight of irony, by all that is left unsaid". Thus Middleton's moral viewpoint, almost always implicit, is to be found in his almost completely dispassionate way of reporting what he sees with "almost superhuman vigilance of observation and economy of drawing".

As T.B. Tomlinson has pointed out, it is the characters in the comedies who convey this implicit moral message, for they show "that aspect of the general bargaining and buying which is completely sterile, completely devoid of anything approaching ordinary humanity". Middleton's condemnation, for condemnation there is, lies not in his satire but rather in his presentation of the facts: the facts of character and situation. The power of naturalistic drama is, therefore,

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7 Bradbrook, p.157.
8 Ellis-Perman, p.136.
enhanced when bitter denunciation is approached and yet not stated outright. Samuel Schoenbaum writes: "An age in transition provided Middleton with the stuff of realistic comedy. As the traditional superstructure, with its inherited privileges and obligations, moved rapidly toward dissolution, economic dislocations and shifting class alignments created the semblance, at least, of disorder and accentuated the discrepancy between social appearance and reality." 10

An excellent example of a comedy with a rigid moral theory is A Chaste Maid in Cheapside. In this play, London is a harsh city and in its streets the abandoned country wench meets the corrupt officers who enforce the new laws against the consumption of meat in the Lenten season. They pounce upon the girl who leaves them with her unwanted baby hidden under a pile of meat at the bottom of her basket. Indoors, degradation is rife. Sir Walter Whorehound marries off his unwanted Welsh mistress to Tim Yellowhammer, the goldsmith's son, by posing her as an heiress. Whorehound is finally gulled himself by Allwit, whose wife he enjoys and by whom he has sired seven bastards. The cuckold of Allwit, ironically enough, wears the mask of the godfather in what Boas calls the "coarse Skeletonic realism" 11 of the christening scene.

that scene which Miss Bradbrook has rated as being "among the rankest in all Elizabethan drama".\textsuperscript{12} This, says Gibbons, is "a savagely direct irony",\textsuperscript{13} but just as savage, though indirect, is the unspoken commentary on both Allwit and Whorehound contained in the wittol's speech as the miserable Sir Walter is dragged off to prison:

\begin{quote}
I must tell you, sir,
You have been somewhat bolder in my house
Than I could well like of; I suffer'd you
Till it stuck here at my heart: I tell you truly
I thought you had been familiar with my wife once.(V.i)\textsuperscript{14}
\end{quote}

This contrasts quite clearly with Allwit's earlier self-congratulation at being the cuckold of a wealthy man who "... has maintained my house this ten years; / Not only keeps my wife, but 'a keeps me / And all my family;"\textsuperscript{15} As Tomlinson has stated, "the man's utterly barren, parasitical existence is beautifully effortless",\textsuperscript{16} and the moral cannot be missed.

Moll Yellowhammer, the "Chaste Maid", attempts to elope but is prevented by her infuriated parents whose anger "is a wrath which reveals the emotional bankruptcy that ensues when the only values recognized are those associated with social and material advancement."\textsuperscript{17} Moll is regarded quite openly by her parents as one of the "bargaining counters in the

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{12} Bradbrook, p.162.
\textsuperscript{13} Gibbons, p.168.
\textsuperscript{14} Citations from A Chaste Maid in my text are to The Works of Thomas Middleton, ed. Alexander Dyce (London, 1840), Vol. IV.
\textsuperscript{15} A Chaste Maid, I.ii.
\textsuperscript{16} Tomlinson, p.163.
\textsuperscript{17} Schoenbaum, pp.298–299.
\end{flushright}
business of acquiring money or goods"; and the unfortunate girl's swansong appeals to Maudlin, her mother, simply because of its sweet sound. When Moll is presumed dead, Brother Timothy busies himself with the composition of an erudite Latin epitaph, Yellowhammer Senior feverishly anticipates what the neighbours will say when the failure of his financial scheme becomes apparent, and Maudlin says "Mass, a match; We'll not lose all at once, somewhat we'll catch." She is very easily consoled for Moll's death by the thought of Tim's approaching marriage.

The agent of retribution in the play is Allwit the wittol, and it is characteristic of Middleton's irony that one who is himself a liar and a parasite is the force by which retribution is exacted from the other characters in the play, whether they be utterly vicious or merely foolish. As Schoenbaum has pointed out, A Chaste Maid is not a simple play, although it is undoubtedly a moral one. It is a world of "pervasive squalor" which leaves a powerful impression. The impression gains power from the balance Middleton makes of the tension between the two disparate elements of laughter and brutality. "The essential brutality of the content of the play is counterpoised by the laughter which informs the dramatist's treatment of his chilling material. In effecting and sustaining this recalcitrant balance, Middleton is well served by his irony —

18 Tomlinson, p.159.
19 A Chaste Maid, V. ii.
an instrument peculiarly fitted to the expression of the cruel
and the comic alike."\textsuperscript{20} There is no explicit moral in this
play, and any moral statements made directly by characters
constitute Middleton's oblique commentary upon those characters
themselves. His plot draws to a close in such a way that his
characters get paid in their own coin. Even if Allwit escapes
punishment at the end of \textit{A Chaste Maid}, we are left in no
doubt as to where he stands in moral terms.

The comedies are, in the opinion of David Frost, over-
praised on the whole. They do not have that "vigour of
individual life", nor do they exhibit the "formal delights of
art".\textsuperscript{21} The plots and incidents they contain are often
unrelated, says Frost, while there are only half-hearted
attempts to link the main plots and sub-plots. True, the
plays do not possess that "vigour of individual life", but it
must be remembered that the early comedies are Middleton's
first dramatic attempts, and a dramatist can be forgiven many
faults when he is struggling in his prentice-years to develop
his technique. But despite this, or perhaps because of it,
particular character types which recur from play to play are
often very easily confused one with another. There is a vast
body of comic material from which the plots have been brought
to life, those plots which swarm with usurers and gulls.

\textsuperscript{20} Schoenbaum, pp.306-307.
\textsuperscript{21} David L. Frost, \textit{The School of Shakespeare} (Cambridge, 1968), p.47.
coney-catchers and courtesans, innkeepers and wits, constables and scheming parents, servants and unforgiving uncles, fathers and grandfathers. To a certain extent we must treat Middleton's characters in the same way in which we treat any other dramatist's: we must willingly suspend disbelief and allow that they have some validity of existence in terms of the play in which they are to be found, because they are sufficiently lively when we read the plays or see them enacted on the stage. By the same token, however, the plots are similar in their twists and turns, their sudden climaxes and just as sudden reversals and unmaskings. This complexity has its effects, for while the plots are sound enough, both they and the characters within them tend to become jumbled in our minds. In fact, some characters could change places from one play to another and still make adequate sense in their new context.

The same nice but unprepossessing young ladies fall in love with the young men whom their parents or guardians consider unsuitable choices (and this usually for financial reasons). All that distinguishes Moll Yellowhammer from Joyce, Mary Fitzallard from Jane Fitzallen, Susan Quomodo from Maria, and Katherine from Falso's niece is, indeed, their names. All the young Witgoods, Wengraves, Fitsgraves and Touchwoods are similarly handsome and witty. The guardians, parents and justices swarm across the stages of these comedies with unrelenting avidity: the characters of Hoard, the
Yellowhammers, Old Wengrave, Quomodo, Falso and Sir Bounteous Progress at least accord in name and personality with the medieval morality tradition from which they have been taken, although in most cases they are more fully developed as individuals and less emblematic than their names would lead us to suppose.

Husbands like Allwit in A Chaste Maid are cuckolded (sometimes willingly), husbands like Water-Camlet in Anything for a Quiet Life are patient, husbands like Harebrain in A Mad World My Masters are stupid. Citizen-wives are generally vain, bossy and willing to deceive their husbands, as are Mistresses Gallipot, Tiltyard and Openwork in The Roaring Girl. Gulls like Easy in Michaelmas Term abound, as do the panders, the gallants and the whores in Your Five Gallants. Servants and constables proliferate, the former usually rascals like Shortyard and Falselight in Michaelmas Term, the latter subjected to many comic indignities and misunderstandings, as in A Mad World My Masters. Characters like Proditor, Infesto and Lussurioso in The Phoenix show, as Swinburne says, "that we are still on the debatable border-land between the old Morality and the new comedy", but even with the faint beginnings of psychological realism in their make-up, most of the characters and the plots to which they belong are only too easy to confuse.

Frost says that Middleton only makes half-hearted attempts to link the main plots and sub-plots, but this is not true. A Mad World My Masters is an excellent example of the way in which Middleton successfully uses one character, this time the militant whore Frank Gullman, to link the plot concerning her lover, Sir Bounteous Progress, and Dick Follywit, the man who eventually marries her, with that concerning Sir Penitent Brothel, his adulterous wishful thinking, and his abortive intrigue with the malleable Mistress Harebrain, whose jealous, pamphlet-reading husband exhibits a righteousness which is almost vicious. Both Frank's "managing character" and the circumstances arising from a well-contrived and ingenious plot combine to give us an example of a comedy where main plot and sub-plot are well integrated, to form a convincing unity. This facility of integration is also evident in Women Beware Women and The Changeling, where the sub-plots reflect the action in the main plot and contribute to the artistic and ethical unity of the whole.

The portrait of London, though meant to resemble reality, has, according to Frost, but "some limited basis in historical fact", and is only "a vulgarly over-simplified picture". The picture is simplified, certainly, so Frost is partially right; just as The Phoenix, set in Ferrara, remains "English" in atmosphere, so too the London of the other comedies is undoubtedly an exaggerated one. Even L.C. Knights is doubtful

23 Frost, p.48.
about it because, after complaining that Middleton "tells us nothing at all about these characters as individuals in a particular place and period", 24 he will only commit himself to saying that the background has "sufficient basis in actuality". 25

Lytton Strachey is quoted by Muriel St. Clare Byrne as having written of the Elizabethans: "How is it possible to give a coherent account of their subtlety and their naïveté, their delicacy and their brutality, their piety and their lust? . . . Who can reconstruct those iron nerved beings who passed with rapture from some divine madrigal sung to a lute by a bewitching boy in a tavern to the spectacle of mauled dogs tearing a bear to pieces?" 26 Dr. Tillyard says that Elizabethan England had "standards of hygiene, decency and humanitarianism which would make a modern sick". 27 But if either of these exaggerations is to be believed, then, as Miss St. Clare Byrne points out, it "means that the contrasts and contradictions with which the age presents us are too great to allow us to accept the Elizabethans as credible human beings". 28 The real Elizabethan background, as Miss St. Clare Byrne points out, is rather more "homely and unsensational". 29

In other words, London had its clean and tidy suburbs as well

25 Ibid., p.218.
26 See St. Clare Byrne, p.4.(introduction).
28 St. Clare Byrne, p.5.
29 St. Clare Byrne, p.10.
as its red-light districts.

The London back-drop of the comedies is certainly exaggerated then, but to call it a "vulgarly over-simplified picture" as Frost does, is to misunderstand what Middleton does and why he does it. In seeking to present a thesis or theme, an artist selects from his surroundings those parts of reality which seem best, of themselves, to convey his feelings about life and about people. So that while Elizabethan London was, in the main, "homely and unsensational", it did have its share of rascally usurers and merchants, prostitutes and constables, gay young blades and irascible parents as well. To deny Middleton the right to select from his surroundings the people who suited his view of human nature is to deny him what we are obliged to allow every artist. The question remains, however: did his exaggeration of a particular side of society and his neglect of another more normal side for the sake of his drama, lead him to write plays where the vision of humankind was too one-sided?

The dramatists of the time, according to Brian Gibbons, "articulated a radical critique of their age", and city comedy was "purposefully selective in its choice of themes and responses". The Elizabethan dramatic form grew from the medieval didactic tradition, a tradition which had been designed with emblematic or morality characters to express and illustrate moral argument. By Middleton's time the drama

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30 Gibbons, p. 17.
had come to possess a "structural coherence and strength" which could only be attributed to its medieval background. Thus the plays, presentations of a "selected" side or area of the society of the time, showed social and moral folly and corruption and invited the most respectable members of the audience, who were without sin, to cast the first stones. The thieves and tricksters of the coney-catching pamphlets did not find their way onto the stage for the sheer fun of it: they were there as exempla to be used by the dramatist so that he might show the forces of human emotion unleashed by the desire for or the expectation of money, rather than the workings of money itself. The dramatists, Middleton among them, were out to show their audiences that, in the words of Shakespeare:

One touch of nature makes the whole world kin,  
That all with one consent praise newborn gauds,  
Though they are made and molded of things past,  
And give to dust that is a little gilt  
More laud than gilt o'erdusted.  

Middleton's satire, says Frost, is "too universal and indiscriminate in its objects to be really effective". The author's motives are undoubtedly "impure" and the plays show nothing more than a desire to "wallow in corruption". Miss Ellis-Fermor, however, is nearer the truth when she remarks that Middleton's satire is "a liberal and comprehensive

31 Gibbons, p.20.  
33 Frost, p.48.
exposure" which is "broad and free as the enveloping air".  

Middleton's satire does not narrow his work the way Jonson's does, nor is it too "indiscriminate in its objects". Middleton may cause us to feel sympathy for a character who is not "good" in the conventional sense, but this is because his art, like the world around us, demands a much more complex response than do the "black" and "white" characters of the morality tradition. Middleton is not wallowing in corruption for its own sake and his use of characters from an unsavoury part of city Society evidences a very clear moral aim. These characters do not announce themselves in terms of their moral turpitude: they do not tell us they are bad, in just the same way that his good characters refrain from eulogizing their own goodness, since those who indulge in this sort of behaviour are always implicitly or explicitly cut down to size. For an audience with sufficient sensibility, it is enough to see these good and bad characters one and all. No direct comment is necessary.

In the later comedies we find a tinge of pessimism, the beginnings of disillusionment, and Frost is right when he calls Middleton a "gnostic", who "feels the irreconcilable clash between flesh and spirit and (unlike Shakespeare) finds it impossible to trust the purity of anything which partakes of the flesh".  

The man who has been, at least implicitly, in

34 Ellis-Fermor, p.137.  
favour of a moral order has now had to come to terms with the reality around him, and it is in the late comedies and tragicom edies that we feel the presence of what Miss Ellis-Fermor has called "the shadow of unsanctified death". It is in these plays that "the real grimness of Middleton's tragic commentary begins to be anticipated". 36

It is impossible to say precisely where stock characters, taken over from the medieval emblematic tradition and developed in the Elizabethan-Jacobean context of shifting social values become something more individual, because the women of Middleton's comedies, like all characters in all plays, have both universal and personal elements within them. But the thread of self-assertion which ultimately leads to Bianca and Beatrice-Joanna must begin somewhere. There is a vast dramatic background of characters, similar in type, social standing and activity, who recur throughout the comedies. In situation at least, Frank Gullman in A Mad World My Masters is one of these. Despite this, and despite the fact that this play chronologically precedes A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, previously discussed, we can see in Frank's character the faint glimmer of new beginnings.

We first hear of Frank when Penitent Brothel refers to her as a creature "with tried art", who "corrupts and loosens" the "most constant powers" of Mistress Harebrain. "See," he

36 Ellis-Fermor, p.136.
says, "here she comes," The close courtesan, whose mother is her bawd" (I.i). Frank Gullman is indeed a courtesan who has been sold into sexual slavery at least fifteen times by her own mother, a creature whose cheerful amorality anticipates that of Livia in Women Beware Women. When Frank appears before Brothel he calls her "My little pretty lady Gullman", partially in acknowledgment of her undoubted sexual attractiveness, and partially in contempt born of familiarity. She is the mistress of Sir Bounteous Progress, the unyielding grandfather of the gay young blade Dick Follywit, and her ability to manage other people and their affairs is made clear from the outset when she says "Sigh not, master Penitent; trust the managing of the business with me, 'tis for my credit now to see't well finished;" She has promised her support to Brothel who is laying siege to the virtue of Mistress Harebrain, a frivolous wife with jealous but credulous husband.

Frank, however, is perfectly aware of Brothel's aim to use her; she is willing to permit him to do so as long as his intentions accord with her. For the courtesan is no mindless kept woman, as is clearly obvious from her remarks to her mother about old Progress:

he's my keeper indeed; but there's many a piece of venison stolen that my keeper wots not on. There's no park kept so warily but loses flesh one time or other; and no woman kept so privately but may watch advantage to make the best of her pleasure; and in common reason one keeper cannot be enough for so proud a park as a woman.

37 Citations from A Mad World in my text are to Works, ed. Dyce, Vol.II.
She has a certain pride in her femininity, an eye for the main chance, and is not called "Gull-man" for nothing. Her christian name is also significant, for it points to the lady's wry honesty, an honesty which does not exclude even her own mother. For when the silly Harebrain praises her mother's "modesty" and "excellent carriage", the coarsened but not unattractive realism which is so much a part of Frank's character is shown when she says in a tart aside, "Sh'as always carried it well in those places, sir; witness three bastards apiece." 38

Harebrain calls her "sweet virgin" and tells her to "rip up the life of a courtesan" when counselling his wife "and show her how loathsome 'tis". He is obviously unaware of Frank's calling, but the lady's honesty towards not only her mother but herself allows her to say in tones of ironic awareness, "The gentleman would persuade me in time to disgrace myself, and speak ill of mine own function." The capable "arranging" of the lives and opinions of other is evident in her "counsel" to Mistress Harebrain:

Manage these principles but with art and life,
Welcome all nations, thou'rt an honest wife.

The emphasis placed upon those two words "manage" and "art" are further indications of the courtesan's prowess, and when Harebrain gives her a ruby in payment for "counselling" his wife, she says truthfully and yet not truthfully in

38 A Mad World, I.ii.
accordance with both her names, "It is not so much worth, sir; I am a very ill counsellor, truly."

When she helps Brothel to plan his assault upon Mistress Harebrain's wifely honour (which is jealously guarded by her husband but regarded as nothing of real consequence by the lady herself), she plans to "counterfeit a fit of violent sickness" while Brothel dresses up as a physician. Her "managing" characteristic is again made quite evident: she sweeps all before her, even Sir Penitent:

Put but this cunningly in practice, it shall be both a sufficient recompense for all my pains in your love, and the ready means to make Mistress Harebrain way, by the visiting of me, to your mutual desired company.

It seems as if their roles have been reversed. Brothel, the initial user, is now being used by Frank to show off her own ingenuity. The play is no longer Brothel's; it has become the courtesan's.

The scene where Frank's puppeteering qualities are most comically obvious is that which takes place in her bedchamber, for she is counterfeiting the shallow gasps and the pallor of one who is seriously ill. She listens to Sir Bounteous's conjectures as to whether or not she is pregnant by him and accepts with beautifully-disguised alacrity the money which he offers for her medication. We can imagine Frank, upon his departure, leaping from her bed, capering about the room and counting the money he has left her, before saying mockingly:

39 Ibid., II.vi.
Here's somewhat to set up with. How soon he took occasion to slip into his own flattery, soothing his own defects! He only fears he has done that deed which I ne'er feared to come from him in my life. 40

She has only to slump back upon the bed, eyes closed, breathing painfully, when the arrival of Inesse and Possibility is announced. Mistress Harebrain later arrives to visit and is whisked away by Brothel to the tune of Frank's brisk admonition:

Fish, you're a faint liver; trust yourself with your pleasure, and me with your security; go.

Mistress Harebrain's eavesdropping husband is summoned by the "dying" courtesan, who leads him to believe that she thinks, in her fever, that she is addressing his wife:

Good mistress Harebrain, this was kindly done, - huh, - give me your hand, - huh, - alas, how cold you are! even so is your husband, that worthy, wise gentleman; as comfortable a man to woman in my case as ever trod - huh - shoe-leather. Love him, honour him, stick by him: he lets you want nothing that's fit for a woman; and, to be sure on't, he will see himself that you want it not.

Thus, Harebrain greets his wife upon her return with entreaties that she should often come to visit "this sick virtuous maid". Brothel's comment at the end of this scene is sufficient:

Art of ladies!
When plots are e'en past hope, and hang their head,
Set with a woman's hand, they thrive and spread.

There is included an additional complication, whereby Dick Follywit, who is anxious lest his grandfather's estate and money should be inherited by that "blanch'd harlot", 41

40 Ibid., III.ii.
41 Ibid., IV.iii.
dresses up as the courtesan and robs Progress's jewel casket. The trick has its desired effect and Frank's reputation with Sir Bounteous is blackened, but later when Follywit meets her, unaware that she is his grandfather's mistress, he falls in love with her and is attracted to her by the very strictness with which she repulses his advances:

'S foot, this is strange! I've seldom seen a wench Stand upon stricter points: life, she will not Endure to be courted! does she e'er think to prosper? I'll ne'er believe that tree can bring forth fruit That never bears a blossom; courtship's a blossom, And often brings forth fruit in forty weeks. .

I do protest in earnest, I ne'er knew At which end to begin t' affect a woman Till this bewitching minute; 42

Her mother appears, to explain that Frank has a "peevish honour" which has put off many suitors, and after she has gone Follywit muses, "If e'er I love, or anything move me, 'Twill be a woman's simple modesty." The courtesan of "maidens humours", the "foolish virgin", is then dragged in, seemingly protesting, and under her mother's guidance the marriage between Frank and Follywit is arranged.

Up till this point, Frank's ability to "gull men" has been nothing but comic, but whether or not her conversion to right living is a sincere one is questionable. Her statement at the end of the play, when Progress informs his grandson that he has married his grandfather's quean, does not sound

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42 Ibid., IV. v.
very convincing. It may be that, in Middleton's realistic view, any such rejections of \textit{la dolce vita} are as short-lived as they are inherently unreliable. A woman like Frank, who has been so energetic in the displaying of her own ingenuity and the pursuit of her own satisfaction may not wish to subject herself to Dick Follywit after they are married. On the other hand, her rejection of the old way of life may be sincere and her machinations throughout much of \textit{A Mad World} directed to the attainment of respectability by marriage. Moreover, it may only have been Middleton's haste to tie up the loose ends at the close of the play which have led him to give but two lines to Frank:

\begin{quote}
What I have been is past; be that forgiven,
And have a soul true both to thee and heaven!\footnote{Ibid., V.ii.}
\end{quote}

Whatever the argument, Frank Gullman has some real vitality. Structurally speaking, her situation in the play as a militant whore makes her no more than a stock type. She fulfils the purpose conventionally fulfilled in drama by women such as herself and is, thematically speaking, an important but nonetheless conventional part of the biter-bit tradition, or, in the words of Miss Bradbrook, the theme "Diamond-cut-Diamond".\footnote{Bradbrook, p.159.} Like many of the militant whores she is energetic, somewhat coarsened, and never reluctant to aid the cause of seduction. She is mentally, if not physically emancipated. The only time she appears to be
struggling against parental authority she is, unlike Noll Yellowhammer in *A Chaste Maid*, aware that the scene is a sham, put on merely for Follywit's benefit. Although she is, for the greater part of the play at least, a "bad" character in the commonly-accepted moral sense, we must allow that she has much attraction.

These statements, however, could be equally well applied to most of the whores and courtesans in Middleton's comedies, so what is it which makes Frank Gullman different? Surely it is the fact that Frank is her own mistress and acts to suit no-one but herself. From the time when Sir Penitent Brothel's patronizing intentions to use her ingenuity for his own purposes are gradually and subtly reversed, Frank goes from strength to strength. In most of the comedies the whores and courtesans wordlessly and ornamentally fade from the scene, having been used by gallants, panders, presenters and the impersonal powers of retribution to exact the punishment from others for crimes committed. Frank is never used: she is the user. This is where individuality begins.
CHAPTER THREE

THE PERIOD OF TRANSITION

Gamaliel Bradford has remarked that "Middleton is a dramatist about whom it is difficult to make up one's mind", a dramatist who "has hardly a heroine of importance who wins our affection or sympathy". 1 Presumably Bradford means that the women in the comedies are generally undeveloped and thus unworthy of attention, and the women in the tragedies are not moral in the conventional sense and therefore undeserving of our sympathy. Bradford is wrong, at least on the first count, since no study of the important women in Middleton's plays would be complete without the Britomart figure of Moll Cutpurse in The Roaring Girl. Frank Gullman's refusal to submit to judgment other than her own is magnified and extended in Moll, so that the "roaring girl" becomes "a heroine of importance", not only in terms of the play in which she is to be found, but also in terms of the steady development of Middleton's women characters from the early to the later plays. The faint beginnings discernible in Frank Gullman in A Mad World My Masters are amplified in this great and individual character.

According to Swinburne, the play's style is full of Dekker's mannerisms: "slipshod and straggling metre, incongruous touches or flashes of fanciful or lyrical expression, reckless and awkward inversions, irrational and

irrepressible outbreaks of irregular and fitful rhyme. But no matter what comments are made about the style of the play, one cannot help but be convinced that the conception of Moll's character belongs to Middleton alone. To him, says Ellis, "we probably owe much of the charity shed over the central figure in this delightful play". Moll, according to Ellis, is a "frank and freespoken" creature, but she is modest when gallants take liberties and uses her knowledge of vice to beat it at its own game. As Miss Bradbrook has remarked, Moll seems but a "harmless jester" entertaining her betters, but the "edge" of Middleton's writing is seldom keener than here.

We first hear of Moll when Sir Alexander Wengrave describes this strange creature upon whom his son, Sebastian, supposedly dotes:

A scurvy woman,

A creature, saith he, nature hath brought forth
To mock the sex of woman. It is a thing
One knows not how to name: her birth began
'Ere she was all made: 'tis woman more than man,
Man more than woman; and, which to none can hap,
The sun gives her two shadows to one shape; (I. i)

He later continues his description of this "scurvy woman" who "strays so from her kind,/ Nature repents she made her:" and calls her a "mermaid" who has "toled my son to shipwreck". But Moll soon shows us that she is under no man's thumb. She

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2 Swinburne, p.xvi.
4 Bradbrook, p.164.
5 All citations from The Roaring Girl in my text are to Thomas Middleton, ed. Ellis, Vol.II.
is aware of the empty lives of those around her and, characteristically, does not hesitate to say so:

O, the gallants of these times are shallow lechers! they put not their courtship home enough to a wench: 'tis impossible to know what woman is thoroughly honest, because she's never thoroughly tried; I am of that certain belief, there are more queans in this town of their own making than of any man's provoking: where lies the slackness then? As far as Moll is concerned, the "shallow lechers" are no more to blame than the "queans", for the people she sees around her all exhibit this "slackness" of character. Moll is no hollow feminist; she recognizes that both men and women have impurity in their natures, and that both must share the blame.

Sebastian Wengrave, who is in love with Mary Fitzallard, proposes marriage to Moll simply to scare his father into approving his match with Mary. He meets with the following reply from Moll:

I have no humour to marry; I love to lie a' both sides a' the bed myself: and again, a' the other side, a wife, you know, ought to be obedient, but I fear me I am too headstrong to obey; therefore I'll never go about it. I love you so well, sir, for your good will, I'd be loth you should repent your bargain after; and therefore we'll ne'er come together at first. I have the head now of myself, and am man enough for a woman: marriage is but a chopping and changing, where a maiden loses one head, and has a worse i' the place. We see Moll Cutpurse for what she is: an easygoing, thoroughly honest and practical person. It is not in her nature to simper or flirt, or to act as if she has no mind or common sense, and when Sir Alexander Wengrave calls her a whore, Sebastian's

6 The Roaring Girl, II.i.
7 Ibid., II.ii.
defense of her is Middleton's defense also:

Here's her worst,
Sh'as a bold spirit that mingles with mankind,
But nothing else comes near it: and oftentimes
Though her apparel somewhat shames her birth;
But she is loose in nothing but in mirth;
Would all Molls were no worse!

Sebastian plans to enlist her aid in his fight to win his father's permission to marry Mary Fitzallard because "'Twixt lovers' hearts she's a fit instrument," and, moreover, he recognizes her wisdom:

By her advice, for in that craft she's wise,
My love and I may meet, spite of all spies.

Moll's central statement about herself comes in the scene where she meets the gallant, Laxton, and challenges him, but what she says shows also her awareness of human nature as a whole:

thou'rt one of those
That thinks each woman thy fond flexible whore;
If she but cast a liberal eye upon thee,
Turn back her head, she's thine; or amongst company
By chance drink first to thee, then she's quite gone,
There is no means to help her: nay, for a need,
Wilt swear into thy credulous fellow lechers,
That thou art more in favour with a lady
At first sight than her monkey all her lifetime.
How many of our sex, by such as thou,
Have their good thoughts paid with a blasted name
That never deserved loosely, or did trip
In path of whoredom beyond cup and lip!

In seeking to make Moll his mistress, Laxton has not only brought her verbal wrath upon his head, but has also laid bare what Miss Ellis-Fermor has called her "fierce, active virginity":

8 Ibid., III.1.
9 Ellis-Fermor, p.150.
In thee I defy all men, their worst hates
And their best flatteries, all their golden witchcrafts,
With which they entangle the poor spirits of fools, ...

Why, she asks Laxton, does he think she is "meat" for him, she
"that never yet / Had angling rod cast" toward her? She tells
him that she is "given to sport", that she is "often merry"
and jests with everyone, but her mirth does not make her a
whore. Unlike the pallid creatures of the early comedies,
Moll is willing to resort to physical violence to defend her
honour:

I scorn to prostitute myself to a man,
I that can prostitute a man to me;
And so I greet thee.

... ...

My spirit shall be mistress of this house 10
As long as I have time in't.

When Laxton, who has had an affair with Mistress Gallipot,
is given his marching orders by her in the presence of her
husband, he remarks that women are "apple-eaters all,
deceivers still" (III.ii), and while this is an overt
comparison of the dishonest Mistress Gallipot with the mother
of mankind, it is also Middleton's implied contrast between the
citizen wives who are "deceivers still" and Moll, who is
unashamedly honest. Moll has spent some time among the low
livers:

Perhaps for my mad going some reprove me;
I please myself, and care not else who love me. 11

10 "house" here meaning "body"
11 The Roaring Girl, V.i.
This, however, does not make her one of them. To a large extent it has been protective colouring, for as far as the practical Moll is concerned, one needs to know vice to combat it effectively.

The final scene of the play shows the appearance of Moll in female attire, the reconciliation of Sir Alexander and his son, and the marriage of Sebastian and Mary Fitzallard. But the pale and quiet young bride, having played a conventional second string to Moll throughout the play, has hardly a word to say for herself. Moll is given the final lines. Sir Alexander asks her if she will ever marry and she answers:

> When you shall hear
> Gallants void from sergeants' fear,
> Honesty and truth unslandered,
> Woman manned, but never pandered,
> Cheats booted, but not coached,
> Vessels older ere they're broached;
> If my mind be then not varied,
> Next day following, I'll be married.

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Middleton means us to believe that Moll will never marry, for like his "Roaring Girl" he is sufficient realist to know that such a perfect state of affairs will never be. The conventional characters in the play may have their fairy-tale ending, but Middleton uses the clear-sighted and down-to-earth Moll to show us that things will never be just the way we want them. He has given Moll Cutpurse coherence and consistency as an individual character which almost enable her to break through and stand outside the play's framework. But in her practical view of life lies his ethical implication, for the feeling in

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12 The Roaring Girl, V.ii.
this play that the world and human nature will always be flawed recurs with growing intensity in the tragicomedies which follow.

In the work of some of Middleton's contemporaries, tragi-comedy seemed little more than an evasion of the responsibilities of both tragedy and comedy alike, but Middleton himself seems to have had a much more serious aim. "In his hands", says Schoenbaum, "tragicomedy undergoes a curious transformation", because in the tragicomedies Middleton is "using women as his crucial figures for the first time in his career". It seems to me that Moll Cutpurse of the late comedy is, in her own way, just as crucial a figure in terms of Middleton's artistic and ethical development as is Hippolita in the tragicomedy The Old Law, but Schoenbaum is quite correct, nonetheless, when he says that Middleton "explores the nature of virtue itself and ventures upon a strange realm in which even the revered qualities of pity and maternal love are subjected to his detached and merciless scrutiny. He moves toward a new kind of ironic drama which is neither precisely comic nor precisely tragic. It is a realistic drama that rejects the sensationalism which characterizes the tragedy of the age; that deals seriously with the dilemmas of ordinary, unheroic people; that dwells on weakness rather than evil". Some of his work is, of course, patchy and uneven, and as Schoenbaum

14 Schoenbaum, p.8.
cautions: "the critic must . . . always distinguish between those scenes that Middleton wrote without conviction, in accordance with the prevalent taste for artificial drama, and those to which he seriously applied himself". But many of his characters in the tragicomedies are horrifyingly real "and no last-minute reversal can disguise the fact that he has created a dark and terrifying world – all the more terrifying because of the absence of physical violence".

The gruesome medieval melodrama of the main plot in *The Witch* needs little, if any, comment, but the witches in the play are not just witches. As Schoenbaum has remarked, "their escapades reflect the persistent concern with sexuality that is to lead the dramatist, in his mature tragedies, into psychological explorations unattempted by his contemporaries". However, it is only in the Abberzanes-Francisca sub-plot that Middleton can forget the conventions he has drawn upon, and set about presenting his own view of life. Abberzanes comes from the long tradition of city comedy rakes just as Francisca is derived from the succession of city-oriented country-girls whose faces are their fortunes. But where the city comedy wenches are treated with at least a modicum of sympathy, Francisca is given no such treatment. She is a "libidinous sixteen-year-old" who is irritated beyond measure to find that she is pregnant, and "although she fears the consequences of

15 Ibid.
16 Ibid.
17 Schoenbaum, p.9.
discovery, her anxieties scarcely dampen her spirits". In a soliloquy, she complains of her bad luck:

These bastards come upon poor venturing gentlewomen ten to one faster than your legitimate children: if I had been married, I'll be hanged if I had been with child so soon now. (II.1)

Her aside in the presence of her sister-in-law, Isabella, shows a coarsened and self-indulgent individuality:

pride is a kind of swelling:—
But yet I've small cause to be proud of mine.

She has a certain vivacity, but it is not a pleasant one. In fact Francisca emerges, in the words of Schoenbaum, "as something very close to an adolescent psychopath". She resolves to ruin her brother's wife and poisons Antonio's mind against Isabella; she listens eagerly whilst he enters his wife's room, sword drawn:

A strange and sudden silence after all:
I trust he's spoiled 'em both; too dear a happiness!
O how I tremble between doubts and joys!

In this play Middleton seems to feel compelled to show "what is permanently despicable about the human animal". Thus, the drama of The Witch is played out not so much in terms of comedy or tragedy but in what Schoenbaum calls "the middle mood", where the dominant feeling is that of increasing claustrophobia as the darknesses of the last plays loom on the horizon.

18 Ibid.
19 All citations from The Witch in my text are to Thomas Middleton, ed. Ellis, Vol.II.
20 Schoenbaum, pp.9-10.
21 The Witch, IV.iii.
22 Schoenbaum, p.10
23 Ibid.
"Sweetest Hippolita" (I.i)\(^{24}\) in *The Old Law* is a woman whose pity for mankind, while indicative of the constancy and sympathy of her feminine nature, is also shown by Middleton to be her weakness. In the early part of the play she visits her cousin Eugenia, a sensual and mercenary young woman of nineteen who is married to a man many years her senior. Eugenia has married old Lysander for his money. She has calculated that he cannot live long under the "Law" which, in Ephra, necessitates the execution of old men and women who are no longer of any use to society:

> And when youth fails, wise women will make it;  
> But always take age first, to make thee rich:  
> That was my counsel ever, and then youth  
> Will make thee sport enough all thy life after.  
> 'Tis [the] time's policy, wench; what is't to hide  
> A little hardness for a pair of years, or so?  
> A man whose only strength lies in his breath,  
> Weakness in all parts else, thy bedfellow,  
> A cough of the lungs, or say a wheezing matter;  
> Then shake off chains, and dance all thy life after?\(^{25}\)

But when Hippolita appears, Eugenia play-acts:

> Can you blame me, when the time  
> Of my dear love and husband now draws on?  
> I study funeral tears against the day  
> I must be a sad widow.

It is this heart-rending picture of the consummate hypocrite's tears for her elderly husband as he approaches death which softens Hippolita's heart, and she discloses the means by which Leonides, her father-in-law, has been hidden to save him from execution. Her sympathy makes her attractive,

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24 All citations from *The Old Law* in my text are to *Works*, ed. Dyce, Vol.I.  
25 *The Old Law*, II.i. Eugenia is advising her daughter, Parthenia.
but such sympathy must be tempered with good sense: here Hippolita's generosity is a naïve one which is inadequate in the face of the malevolence which Eugenia is made to represent. Eugenia betrays her kindly cousin's secret and, in one moment of insight, Hippolita understands that her weakness will lead to Leonides's death:

Her tears that never wept, and mine own pity
E'en cozen'd me together, and stole from me
This secret, which fierce death should not have purchas'd. 26

The implications are, as Schoenbaum points out, "not only personal but cosmic. They lie in the workings of an inexorable universe in which frailty and evil - an Hippolita and a Eugenia - bring equal ruin upon themselves." 27 The answer of Hippolita's husband, Cleanthes, to her agonized recognition of her own responsibility is indeed Middleton's comment:

May, then we're at an end; all we are false ones,
And ought to suffer. I was false to wisdom,
In trusting woman; thou wert false to faith,
In uttering of the secret; and thou false
To goodness, in deceiving such a pity:
We are all tainted some way...  

Parrott and Ball have called A Fair Quarrel a "masterpiece of firmly realized portraiture" of a young "sober and self-reliant" soldier. 28 A close study of the play, however, shows that Captain Ager does not figure as prominently as does his mother, another example of a woman whose greatest strength is also her greatest weakness.

26 The Old Law, IV.ii.
27 Schoenbaum, p.12.
Lady Ager sacrifices her honour to prevent her son from being killed in a duel defending that honour:

I was betrayed to a most sinful hour
By a corrupted soul I put in trust once,
A kinswoman. (II.i)29

Captain Ager therefore refuses to fight the duel since he believes that his cause is not a just one. His opponent calls him "a base submissive coward". Ager now has a cause he knows, in conscience, to be without question, and thus the duel is fought and the Captain's opponent wounded. When he returns from the duel his remorseful mother tries to make amends by telling him the truth:

that which few mothers will,
Or fewer can, I did, out of true fear
And loving care, only to keep thee here.30

When her son learns the truth, he immediately prays for his opponent's recovery: either way Lady Ager has failed, and as Schoenbaum has pointed out, Middleton's method has been to have her "move, unknowingly but inexorably toward the bitter realization of her own inadequacy".31 She says:

What an unhappiness have I in goodness!
'Tis ever my desire to intend well,
But have no fortunate way in 't.

But the irony is that her "goodness" is actually an excessive maternal love and protectiveness, and in her efforts to keep her son alive, she is preventing him from living according to

29 All citations from A Fair Quarrel in my text are to Thomas Middleton, ed. Ellis, Vol.II.
30 A Fair Quarrel, IV.iii.
31 Schoenbaum, p.18.
his conscience and the code of honour to which he knows he must adhere. Despite this weakness, or perhaps because of it, Lady Ager emerges as a warm-hearted and responsive human being. She is a character capable of arousing great sympathy since her weakness points to the general frailty from which all mankind suffers.

Technically speaking, the late comedies and most of the tragicomedies represent a tremendous advance in Middleton's presentation, in dramatic form, of human people in truly human predicaments. The characters of these plays do not only show their humanity in weakness, but in the very individuality with which they are imbued. What is, however, more interesting to the purposes of this thesis, is that in these later plays, Middleton never ceases to be fascinated and disturbed by good and bad women alike, or rather, by the utterly amoral and the merely frail. He has turned away from the comedies of social life and manners and has begun to probe the inner lives of complex people. His focus has narrowed from a wide and comprehensive satire to the interpretation of human motive in a more intense and centralized sense. It is in the energy and the essential humanity of the women, whether good or bad, in the late comedies and tragicomedies which anticipate, to some extent, the heathen princess Roxena, and to a much greater extent, Bianca and Beatrice-Joanna in the last, and finest, plays of all.
CHAPTER FOUR

ROXENA IN HENGIST, KING OF KENT

There has been little written either about Roxena or the play in which she appears. Those critics who have felt obliged to mention Hengist have, in most cases, done just that and very quickly passed on. Swinburne describes the story as "ugly and unnatural"¹ and Ellis writes that the play is, on the whole, "obscure, roughly written and uninteresting; the rare flashes of splendid or passionate poetry that redeem it might be gathered up into a very small space".² These comments have some little truth in them no doubt, but all opinion seems to have focussed, and wrongly so, upon the faults, rather than the virtues of a developing dramatist's style and technique.

David Frost says that Middleton underwent a "revolution" in mid-career and that Hengist is one of the first real products of that "revolution". Middleton became chief writer for the group of actors called the "King's Men", a group which had much to do with William Shakespeare and acted his plays. It is quite probable, suggests Frost, that at some point in time the two playwrights met, or that Middleton saw Shakespeare's genius in manuscript form or upon the stage. Middleton, at least in his early plays, was imitative in nature, and since Shakespeare had shown how a dramatist could

simultaneously solve a moral and a technical problem when concluding a tragedy, it was only to be expected that Middleton should attempt the same solution. Until this time, tragic writers had had three choices of method in concluding their plays: the figure of the Revenger who, like Vindice in Tourneur's *Revenger's Tragedy*, killed everyone else before killing himself, the intervention of some celestial and retributive force often by way of signs and portents, as in Tourneur's *Atheist's Tragedy*, or the fatal "overreaching" and resultant ruin of the villain, as in Marlowe's *Jew of Malta*. Shakespeare's solution to the moral and technical difficulties posed by each of these choices was "to demonstrate the psychological effects of evil" because punishment lay in what the character became. Retribution was likely to follow also on a practical level, since the well-springs of action were poisoned and the tyrant's deeds would alienate society and raise opposition". Middle顿 seems to have recognized this, for in *Hengist* the interest in psychological motivation which has already been evident in temporary flashes in the earlier plays, can here be seen gathering to the final climax of narrowed concentration in *Women Beware Women* and *The Changeling*. For the characters in *Hengist*, "sin breeds self-disgust and isolation" and Middleton's attitude is made quite clear in these lines at the end of the

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3 Frost, p.56.
4 Ibid.
Vortiger's progress, says Frost, "is one from wilful blindness and a naïve expectation of pleasure to a discovery of the nature and consequences of evil and its effect on the personality". Despite his masculinity, the usurper could be said to be the psychological forerunner of the women in the following plays. This wilful blindness in Bianca and Beatrice-Joanna leads them into evil, and, like Vortiger, they will in their own way declare that "There is no rest at all, but torments waking." 7

Vortiger may be the central character in the play but the tragic interest both in him and the events which surround and finally overcome him seems to be insufficiently concentrated. But here we must distinguish between the different effects of this lack of concentration: it may make the plot patchy and unco-ordinated and it may make the play seem but a hurly-burly of unassimilated and quite disparate elements, for as Barker has remarked, the story "gets only the most cursory attention". 8 The action is compressed in some places and straggling in others, the events are sometimes quite bewildering in their rapidity, and the constant shifting of the spotlight from character to character makes for chaotic

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5 Citations from Hengist in my text are to Thomas Middleton, ed. Ellis, Vol.II.
6 Frost, p.58.
7 Hengist, V.ii.
rather than co-ordinated drama. But this lack of concentra-
tion does not affect the characters quite so adversely. Some
of them are mere mouthpieces, but, as Barker has pointed out,
"the study of sainthood" in Constantius is "impressive", far
more impressive, in fact, than the epic element of the
Saxon invasion depicted in the play. Constantius "is first
of all a human being, a portrait of a saint by a great
realist". Horsus is also considered by Barker to be a
strong character: "his ruling passion . . . is no doubt lust
for Roxana - it is, after all, for her sake that he gives up
his ambition and attaches himself to Vortiger - and yet his
passion is so completely transformed by his intelligence that
it scarcely seems to be lust at all. This vision is so
wonderfully clear that he has no illusions of any kind, least
of all about his mistress, whom he is always able to see quite
dispassionately as she really is". He says:

\[
\text{'tis her cunning,} \\
\text{The love of her own lust, which makes a woman} \\
\text{Gallop down hill as fearless as a drunkard.} \]

Unfortunately Barker pays no attention to the psycho-
logical portrait of Vortiger, but while this portrait is not
as mature and rounded as those in the plays that follow, the
seeds of that later complexity of character in Women Beware
Women and The Changeling are undoubtedly there. Bald has

9 Barker, p.117.
10 Ibid.
11 Barker, p.119.
12 Henriet, II.iii.
noticed this, and has allowed Vortiger "an inherent kinship with the man in the street", a kinship which will bring about his downfall. In other words, the usurper shares the ordinary man's naive ignorance of and wonder at the blessings (or curses) of position and power, and never really outgrows them. His tragedy then, is in "his emotional refusal to make any specific acknowledgment of a moral order",\(^{13}\) even though that order is quite evident.

In terms of character, Hengist is a strange play with limited success, but success none the less, for it traces, in a more consistent and sustained way than the earlier plays, the development of Middleton's final and mature style. For the purposes of this study I have selected Roxena, who points to an interest, on Middleton's part, in offences of a sexual nature, but also to a more general preoccupation with every kind of sin. She has a certain vitality, at least in terms of the play, and it is in this, in her female sex, and in what Horsus calls her "cunning" that we find the links with the past of Moll Cutpurse, Frank Gullman and Francisca, and to the future of Leantio's wife and the mistress of De Flores.

Roxena represents a further development of the individualized woman who knows her own mind, even though that mind is directed to evil ends. She exists within a play which is historically and chronologically limited in terms of time,

\(^{13}\) R.C. Bald, ed. Hengist, King of Kent or the Mayor of Queenborough (London, 1938), p.xlvii (introduction).
but she is more timeless than a superficial perusal of
Hengist permits us to suppose. Her historical existence,
though wholly created by Middleton and not to be found in
the sources from which he took his plot, is validated in
the play by her part in the Hengist-Horsus-Vortiger intrigue,
but her existence as a character outside of this limited
timespan is verified by the vitality accorded her by her
creator and by the implicit ethical statement he makes her
represent. So she is part, and yet not part, of the play:
rather, perhaps, since she has no basis in historical fact,
a part of the history of Middleton himself, playwright and
dispassionate presenter of the feminine psychology in
dramatic form. In almost every way she is a bad advertise-
ment for her sex: she is impure, unfaithful, ambitious,
lying, cold-hearted, murderous and ever ready to perjure
herself, but the very evil she exhibits makes us watch her
with fascination. There is a certain complexity in her,
when on one hand we see her braving every danger to be with
Hengist, her father, at the beginning of the play, and on the
other, faltering when she thinks she will be asked to swear
publicly that she is a virgin.

Roxena makes her first appearance in the play some
considerable time after Raynulph, the presenter, has
introduced her as the woman
Who, from her father, like a thief,
Hid her best and truest tears,
Which her lustful lover wears
In many a stolen and wary kiss,
Unseen of father. Maids do this,
Yet highly scorn to be called strumpets too:

When she actually arrives, she is heralded by the flattering words of a gentleman, who tells her father of the perils she has faced on her long journey from Germany:

Followed you close, Sir,
With such a zeal as daughter never equalled;
Exposed herself to all the merciless dangers
Set in mankind or fortune; not regarding
Aught but your sight.

Hengist's "Her love is infinite to me" is as traditional a blind father's statement as are those by Shakespeare's Lear and Gloucester, and Horsus is quick to show where her true motives lie. Despite any moral judgments we have made of the heathen princess, however, we must admit that her bravery in undertaking such a journey is admirable, even though her reasons for doing so might be quite the opposite.

Her entrance, with her arm already linked in Vortiger's, is evidence enough that Roxana will always attempt to be on the winning side, and her ability to brash out situations which could easily ruin her is shown when Horsus pretends to have an epileptic fit. The princess says quite coolly:

0, 'tis his epilepsy; I know it well:
I helped him once in Germany; comes it again?
A virgin's right hand stroked upon his heart
Gives him ease straight; but it must be a pure virgin,
Or else it brings no comfort.

14 Hengist, I.i.
15 Hengist, II.iii.
Horsus, however, is no more an epileptic than Roxena is a "pure virgin". He is jealous of the attention which she is paying to the usurper and refuses to rise:

But I'll prevent it now, and break thy neck
With thy own cunning. Thou has undertaken
To give me help, to bring in royal credit
Thy cracked virginity, but I'll spoil all:
I will not stand on purpose, though I could,
But fall still to disgrace thee.

I have no other way to help myself;
For when thou'rt known to be a whore impostorous,
I shall be sure to keep thee.

Objections to this "test" for virginity have been many. Frost says that this scene contains "psychological thrills for their own sake" and Schoenbaum labels it "strangely cynical and preposterous". But to say that Horsus could simply refuse to rise to his feet and blacken Roxena's reputation for good is to overlook the dramatic potential of a device which, while a little crude, is still astonishingly effective. Roxena's powers of persuasion, physical or otherwise, are too great for Horsus to resist, and he must finally rise and declare himself cured. But in terms of the relationship between the two, the "test" has served to highlight important facets of the characters of both the heathen princess and her lover. Horsus is quite aware of his mistress's cruelty and ambition, but her plot for advancement and his passion for her are two good reasons why he should pronounce himself cured.

16 Frost, p. 60.
17 "Rencist, and Sexual Preoccupation", p. 183.
Roxena is, strangely enough, the one who first mentions the test. In this instance we see a woman who is capable of taking great risks. In fact, there seems to be something almost compulsive in the way she "lives off" challenge. If she can act out her lies in public, so much the better, and despite her uncertainty when the oath upon virginity is announced at Vortiger's feast later in the play, the superb and seemingly heart-felt way in which the princess swears that she is pure shows her ability to gamble with her reputation, only to have it remain unimpaired, if not actually enhanced. Middleton must also have some concrete way of showing us that Roxena has her hopes set upon Vortiger and the crown. If she can bring her "cracked virginity" into "royal credit", her chances of winning over Vortiger, whose unconscious respect for purity is axiomatic, are considerably increased, and in this sense the "test" scene is an effective antitypical prelude to the undeserved disgrace into which the faithful Castiza will later fall. Both this "test" and Roxena's later declaration of purity are used by Middleton to give Vortiger an excuse, however flimsy, to discredit Castiza and marry the German princess. Moreover, there is the final and, I think, the most important way in which the "test", like Alsemero's test of Beatrice-Joanna in The Changeling, can be justified: in both instances Middleton is ironically highlighting a woman's shallow and unfounded pretensions to a purity which she does not possess.
The relationship between the heathen princess and her lover is further explored in the subsequent argument between the two, Horsus still writhing with the pangs of jealousy and Roxena asking coolly, "Do you pine at my advancement, Sir?" He retorts with indignation:

O barrenness
Of understanding! what a right love's this!
'Tis you that fall, I that am reprehended:
What height of honours, eminence of fortune,
Should ravish me from you?

Her answer is partly flippancy, partly cold truth:

Who can tell that, Sir?
What's he can judge of a man's appetite
Before he sees him eat?
Who knows the strength of any's constancy
That never yet was tempted? We can call
Nothing our own, if they be deeds to come;
They're only ours when they are passed and done.

'Tis not advancement that I love alone;
'Tis love of shelter, to keep shame unknown.

But the word "shame" has a hollow ring and it seems to be overlaid with Middleton's irony: that "shame" in the sense of true guilt for wrongdoing should be used by a woman as unrepentant as Roxena is surely ironic. Her calculating logic is further shown in the lines:

I pity all the fortunes of poor women
In my own unhappiness. When we have given
All that we have to men, what's our requital?
An ill-faced jealousy, that resembles much
The mistrustfulness of an insatiate thief,
That scarce believes he has all, though he has stripped
The true man naked, and left nothing on him
But the hard cord that binds him; so are we
First robbed, and then left bound by jealousy.

18 Heciet, III.1.
The speech is conventional, down to the neat little exemplum contained within it. It might just as well be spoken by a paragon of virtue reproving her rash lover for restricting her freedom. Here, however, the deadly irony lies in the fact that these "moral" objections are being made by a woman who, morally speaking, has forfeited the right to object in such a way. Her pity for other women who are subjected to the same treatment would sound quite acceptable if voiced by another, but Roxena pities no-one, and what prevents us from accepting her objections at their face value is her parting remark after Horsus has agreed to follow her plans:

Life of love!
If lost virginity can win such a day,
I'll have no daughter but shall learn my way.

Roxena's world is that of a sexual lottery, her currency is her "cracked virginity", and her aim is to use that "virginity" to pay the price of power.

Boas's opinion of Hengist is quite evident in that he classifies it under the heading "Drama of Sex Complications". Middleton, says Boas, has given way "to the obsession which leads him so often to overload his plots with abnormal sexual complications". He argues that Middleton should only have said that Vortiger forsakes Castiza to marry Roxena and states that Vortiger's "repellently torturous plot" against his wife is proof of the dramatist's obsession with sex.

19 Boas, p.231.
20 Ibid.
Like the epilepsy scene, however, the rape scene can be justified, for it is in this hideous interlude where Castiza is ravished by her own husband, that the ethical and artistic contrast between Castiza and Roxena is made appallingly clear. Castiza does not ever develop fully as a character, and what we see of her accords unswervingly with what her name implies, but the despairing words she utters to her abductors carry the feeling of true anguish:

Never did sorrows in afflicted woman
Meet with such cruelties, such hard-hearted ways
Human invention never found before:
To call back life to live, is but ill taken
By some departing souls; then to force mine back
To an eternal act of death in lust, 21
What is it but most execrable?

These lines contribute to the irony when they are compared with the statements of Roxena, and when Castiza makes her agonized plea that her abductors take her eyes rather than her honour, even the immovable Horsus has to "wrestle down all pity":

Fluck them quite out; all outward lights of body
I'll spare most willingly, but take not from me
That which must guide me to another world,
And leave me dark for ever; fast without
That cursed pleasure, which will make two souls
Endure a famine everlastingly.

To see Castiza's rape in the simple terms of logic and probability alone would be to overlook Middleton's intention: in other words, the event itself is not really as important as the implications behind it. The plot against Castiza arouses our sympathy for her, and technically speaking, it

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21 Hengist, III.i.ii.
leads firstly to the public oath on fidelity and virginity, secondly to Castiza's disgrace, and thirdly to Roxena's usurpation of her place as Vortiger's legal wife. Ethically speaking, it allows Middleton to draw yet another moral contrast between Roxena and Castiza, and this contrast is played out in terms of their purity, either within or without the marriage relationship. Whether or not this means that Middleton is obsessed with sex is quite another question, though Boas has not looked for any possible reasons, other than this, for the inclusion of the rape scene. Schoenbaum says that Middleton has "a keen insight into the psychological recesses of tortured human souls and a profound understanding of the terrible consequences of sin", but, he continues, the dramatist's preoccupation with sex is so great that "he constantly intrudes irrelevant allusions to chastity and infidelity, lust and ravishment". 22

Simply to note the frequency with which the sexual motif recurs in Middleton's plays is not, as many critics like Schoenbaum and Boas have wrongly supposed, to find the reason for its appearance. In many instances, the number of times that the motif appears has been mistaken as symptomatic of Middleton's personal obsession, but his utterly dispassionate presentation of the women who commit sexual transgressions in his plays belies the suggestion that his involvement with his material is anything other than that of a brilliantly

22 Schoenbaum, p. 190.
perceptive dramatist. One of the true marks of obsession is that it is egocentric: that the person obsessed clings fiercely to his preoccupations regardless of whether or not they have any basis in the reality of the people and the circumstances round about him. Middleton is not alone in his interest in sexuality, for like him, his contemporaries use it as a particular symbol for a much more general and widespread decay. Shakespeare is not obsessed by sex, yet in Hamlet his poetic statements about the prevailing sickness of man and society are couched in terms as often sexual as anything else. So Middleton uses the sex motif in his plays not just for the sake of using it, but because it points out something about the all-pervading rottenness in man and his world. Such nausea is not only due to a surfeit of sexuality, but to a surfeit of many other things as well: in other words this world, in every sense and in all its aspects, is too much with us. Furthermore, obsession is most often blind both to its own limitations and to the reality outside it, but Middleton is never blind.

Like his contemporaries, Middleton was conditioned by audience response and then, as now, audiences were interested in sex. History plays, satires and comedies of social manners all had their attraction, but the dramatic representations of personal relationships could draw both audience and characters together as people who all experienced the same happiness and disillusionment. Different sections of the audience would obviously react in different ways to the
presentation of sex upon the stage: the jaded palates of some would be titillated, the self-righteous would look with fascinated repulsion at the sins of others which they were sure they would never commit themselves, but the implicit message was there for those with enough sense to see a part of themselves, however small, in the characters of the play and sufficient sensibility to perceive the ironies contained within the dramatist's recreated world. Thus, as Schoenbaum himself admits, Middleton's treatment of sexuality is "too stern, too tragic in its implications" to be mere exploitation for purposes of popularity and financial gain, and although his plays "are occasionally marred by the sensationalism characteristic of his age, he succumbs to this fault in far lesser degree than many of his contemporaries. He shows little interest in exploiting the lurid aspects of a situation in order to titillate his audience." 24

The dramatist's interest in sex is, therefore, inextricably bound up with his interest in every aspect of sin and its consequences, and Henchist has its share of sins which are not sexual in nature: murder, deception, ambition, perjury, usurpation and treachery all have their part in the play, and it would be wrong to say that Middleton's interest in ethics is limited to the ethics of sexual relationships. Once again, the artist's right to be selective is apparent.

and while it would be true to say that Middleton uses sexual imagery, sexual transgressions and sexual relationships with very great frequency, it must also be admitted that these are only a part of a greater, though implied, whole, of a more extensive and "unsparing picture of human degradation". 25

Our conditioning in a post-Freudian Society has caused us, though often wrongly, to see the sexual urge as the basis of all our actions. It would, however, be pointless to try and establish some sort of casual relationship between Roxena's sexual drives and her ambition for advancement. What we do find is that she uses her "cracked virginity" to get what she wants and proves the old dictum that men rule from the throne and women from the bed. Sex is of less interest to Roxena as an end in itself than it is as a bargaining counter. It is what she can buy with sex which matters, so that her sexuality may not be so much the basis of her actions as an attribute which she is prepared to use. The scheming Roxena's attempts to "keep shame unknown", and her use of the word "shame" itself are rendered hollow by Castiza's words after she has been ravished. She feels she is guilty of adultery and cannot bear to look her husband in the face:

He may read my shame
Now in my blush. 26

Nowhere, however, is the contrast between Castiza and Roxena made more evident or given such tragic intensity as

25 Schoenbaum, Middleton's Tragedies, p.95.
26 Hencist, III.iii.
in the scene where Vortiger demands that all the ladies at his feast swear that they are either virgins or faithful wives. There is a chilling comedy in the answers from the unidentified women scattered about the feast, as they frantically twist and turn in their efforts to absolve themselves from impurity. One pleads a faulty memory, and needs two or three "people" in her chamber to "subdue" her when she takes hysterical fits. Another says that she sleeps so heavily that a cannon discharged close to her ear could not awaken her; therefore, she concludes desperately, she cannot say what goes on around her when she is asleep in her bed. These comic, and yet somehow tragic, verbal evasions form a heavily ironic backdrop for the answers which are to come from Castiza and Roxena.

Vortiger is perfectly aware that his wife will not perjure herself and she admits that she has been unfaithful, albeit unwillingly, to her husband's bed:

'Twas far from my consent; I was surprised
By villains, and so raught, 27

She is now in disgrace, her son's legitimacy is in question and Devonshire her father and his friend Stafford are arrested and led away.

Vortiger then asks Roxena to swear. Calculating that to swear by gods in whom she does not believe is no perjury, the heathen princess makes her declaration:

27 Hengist, IV.ii.
My lord, as much
As chastity can put a woman to;
I ask no favour. And to approve the purity
Of what my habit and my time professeth,
As likewise to requite all courteous censure
Here I take oath I am as free from man
As truth from falsehood, or sanctity from stain.

The irony is now complete. The woman who has been raped by her own husband has lost her reputation, and the "precious whore" who has sworn herself to be pure with such "impudent confidence" is now to be Vortiger's queen. The dumb show which follows at the end of the scene shows that Roxena is responsible for the murder of Vortimer, the son of Vortiger by Castiza.

In the play's final scene, after the massacre of the British lords by Hengist and his Saxons, Aurelius and Uther, brothers of the murdered Constantius, return to besiege Vortiger's castle in Wales. Vortiger senses that his time is short and that punishment is imminent, so he turns upon Horsus. As the two face each other like cornered animals, Horsus tells Vortiger that he is a cuckold:

Roxena, whom thou'st raised to thy own ruin,
See was my whore in Germany. 28

The two fight to the death and Roxena appears, calling for help:

O for succour!
Who's near me? Help me, save me! the flame follows me;
'Tis in the figure of young Vortimer, the prince,
Whose life I took by poison.

28 Hengist, V.ii.
Roxena has always been aware of her own wrongdoings, but this is the only time in the play when she publicly acknowledges her guilt. The fact that the flames take the shape of the murdered Vortimer may seem improbable, but they indicate that Middleton's moral order, against which Roxena has offended, has now returned to exact retribution. Just as she used the flames of passion to make other people her servants, now she must perish by the flames of punishment.

It is, however, in keeping with her character that she should make one last attempt to save herself. She calls to the fighting men, and her words "my love, my lord!" are ambiguous: they could equally refer to Vortiger or Horsus and they show that Roxena still wishes to be on the winning side. But her husband and her lover are engrossed in their fight to the death, and her plea, which is among the loveliest and most poetic lines in the play, goes quite unregarded:

Horsus, look up, if not to succour me, 
To see me yet consumed. O what is love, 
When life is not regarded!

The final irony is that she is not "regarded". The woman who once had both Horsus and Vortiger at her feet can only say:

No way to 'scape? is this the end of glory? 
Doubly beset with enemies? wrath, and fire? 
It comes nearer - rivers and fountains, fall! - 
It sucks away my breath; I cannot give 
A curse to sin, and hear't out while I live.

Whether or not life has been glorious, if it has been sinful, it must be punished. The glory of Roxena herself, of life and love, of all human beings must end, since there is
no escape from that justice which makes all sinners equal.
Roxena dies, and her epitaph, spoken by Vortiger, is indeed
a fitting one:

    Burn, burn! Now I can tend thee,
Take time with her in torment, call her life
Afar off to thee, dry up her strumpet-blood,
And hardly parch the skin: let one heat strangle her,
Another fetch her to her sense again,
And the worse pain be only her reviving;
Follow her eternally! O mystical harlot,
Thou hast thy full due! whom lust crowned queen before,
Flames crown her now a most triumphant whore;
And that end crowns them all!

No agent of nemesis has been necessary, since the flames
which have followed Roxena have merely been evidence of the
destruction she has brought upon herself. Like all the other
evil characters, Roxena has carried within her from the
beginning that fatal ability to actively engage in wickedness:
her ambition and her willingness to sell herself to gain power
and glory have brought their own reward. As an anonymous
lord remarks in the play's final scene:

    See, sin needs
   No other destruction than it breeds
   In its own bosom.

This is a statement which applies, not only to Roxena, but
also to all the sinners in the plays of Middleton.
CHAPTER FIVE

WOMEN BEWARE WOMEN

When we come to look at the later plays, we find that they do not deal so much with the expectation of money or worldly power, as with the inherent flaw in people which causes them to succumb to temptation. In other words, Middleton turns away from the flaw's exterior manifestations and back to the flaw itself. Critics disagree about its nature: to some it is merely forgiveable human frailty,1 to others it is a moral blindness,2 and to others again it is the evil which is always inherent in the human personality.3

Opinions about Women Beware Women as a dramatic representation of Middleton's moral point of view may be as differing as they are many, but most critics see the majority of the play's male characters as quite conventional. As Roma Gill writes in her introduction to the play, the Duke is a shadowy character, "the conventional royal lecher of Italianate tragedy".4 Miss Gill contends that the sinful Hippolito, uncle of Isabella, is a more developed character,5 but I can find very few reasons for this view. Middleton unaccountably gives him some striking lines:

1 See Ellis-Fermor, p.142.
5 Gill, p.xix.
Lust and forgetfulness has been amongst us,
And we are brought to nothing. (V.i.i.144-145)6

There is, however, very little in most of what this character
says or does which might lead us to suppose that he is
anything but conventional. The Ward and Sordido are only
obsceneely gesticulating jesters, and despite the fact that
their comedy is that of hideous truth, they have no real
individuality outside the ironic commentary which Middleton
embodies in them.

Leantio, however, is a more complex creature. He is a
mixture of passion, complacency and pathos, a character about
whom his critics have long argued, and I think that it would
be valuable to look at the opinions expressed by some of them
since our response to Bianca must be determined to some extent
by whether or not we feel sympathy for her abandoned husband.
Like Miss Gill many commentators find him a pitiful but
irritating figure: "Leantio, certainly, is not the dashing
hero of romantic fiction. A pious, penny-pinching virtue
marks even his proudest moments, and however gallantly he tries
to appear affectionate, he succeeds only in embarrassing."7
John D. Jump refers to the man's "ardent possessiveness, his
habitual anxiety, his self-congratulation on his marriage as
a step conducive to prudent and orderly living, and his
uneasiness at having stolen his bride. . . . There is a

6 Citations from Women Beware Women in my text are to Miss
Gill's edition.
7 Gill, p.xx. See also Ellis-Fermor, pp.143-144, and
Muriel C. Bradbrook, Themes and Conventions of
bumptious, callow eagerness about his speeches in this scene [I.i.]; a naïve, febrile pride in his acquisition; and a rather priggish self-satisfaction:"

Oh what a mark were there for women then!
But beauty able to content a conqueror,
Whom earth could scarce content, keeps me in compass;
(I.i.25-27)

The clerk is peevish, garrulous and unreasonably jealous, as in the scene where he tells his estranged wife that she will "vex" and "gnaw" since he is "not love-starved" (IV.i.66).

Irving Ribner remarks: "He is not to be regarded, as critics have tended to regard him, as a loving, virtuous husband whose decline will be the theme of the play. . . . Leantio's very devotion to Bianca involves the kind of moral equivocation which is the theme of the play, for while Leantio protests the purity of his love and his superiority to other men in virtue because of it, he admits the theft of Bianca. . . . But theft cannot be noble, and the virtue which such theft engenders is only a seeming virtue which hides an inner corruption." There are, however, some critics who see Leantio as a tragic figure who is as worthy of interest as his wife. Jump writes that, after the banquet, the clerk's lament for the loss of his wife shows "a greater depth and maturity of feeling than he has hitherto

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manifested", whilst Tomlinson hails his disillusionment after the feast as "a very intelligent blend of a new clear-sightedness and the old egotism." It is possible to feel sympathy for (rather than with) Leantio, but commiseration on our part is nearly always tempered with annoyance. Leantio is modern drama's "fall guy" whose mental niggardliness and blatant proprietary instinct prevent us from liking or admiring him. His humanity is never dignified and never gracious. He makes us uncomfortable and, as often as not, we take refuge in contempt.

However, until he becomes Livia's gigolo there is very little in the clerk, however petty or irritating, which could be called a "sin". His "sin" of adultery is more easily understandable than the misdeeds of any of the play's other characters since his principal motive, and an entirely human one at that, is to show Bianca that he can live without her, and live in luxury at that. It is ironic, also, that when he is boasting of theft (I.i.35-44), the stealing of Bianca is itself rendered pallid and somewhat less than sinful when we realize that true theft involves the abduction or removal of a person or an object against all odds and, if necessary by force. The theft of Bianca is really no theft at all since the person "stolen" has come voluntarily and has, in fact, helped Leantio to plan the "crime".

There can be no scandalous "amour passion" for such a

11 Jump, pp.359-360.
12 Tomlinson, p.181.
man, made even more scandalous and exciting by the fact that holy church has not incorporated two in one. Instead, fortified by the knowledge that marriage makes most things possible, Leantio lusts after his lawful wife and tells himself that painted tarts cannot possibly hope to arouse him:

When I behold a glorious dangerous strumpet, Sparkling in beauty and destruction too, Both at a twinkling, I do liken straight Her beautified body to a goodly temple That's built on vaults where carcasses lie rotting: And so by little and little I shrink back again, And quench desire with a cool meditation;¹³

There is nothing rougishly likable in the man, no courtly veneer however thin, but only a lumpish self-righteousness, an unawareness of himself and an innocence or blindness to evil which counts as much against him as the evil man's blindness to good.

Any discussion of the development of Bianca's character must, of necessity, be centred around the moral implications of that so-called development. Many critics can see only a dewy innocence in the young woman who greets her husband's mother with the words: "Kind mother, there is nothing can be wanting/ To her that does enjoy all her desires"(I.i.125-126). It is only later when, confronted with the splendour of the life she has abandoned to marry Leantio that, according to some commentators, the moral decline begins. Miss Gill remarks that, in Women Beware Women and The Changeling Middleton "charts the slow awakening to sin and reality as

¹³ For the whole of this speech see III.i.82-109.
gentle, impetuous girls change into ruthless, scheming women,” and Miss Ellis-Fermor writes: “Middleton seems to have grasped the principle... that the more generously a nature is endowed, especially perhaps a woman's, the more bitter is its corruption if it is thwarted or maimed in the full course of its development.” Thus, as far as both these critics are concerned, Bianca Capello is a good example of how "the promise of a fine flowering" is "destroyed.”

Opposing views which are perhaps more strictly and impersonally philosophical are those put forward by critics who declare Bianca like Livia, Hippolito, Isabella, Guardiano et alii to be evil from the very beginning, and the play to be the charting, not of the progressive deterioration of character from innocence to corruption, but of the progressive revelation of the ever-present evil in human nature. T.S. Eliot writes: “Bianca remains, like Beatrice in The Changeling, a real woman; as real, indeed, as any woman of Elizabethan tragedy. Bianca is a type of the woman who is purely moved by vanity.” Ribner comments: “Bianca too at the beginning of the play prides herself on her virtue, her ability to forgo wealth and luxury in dedication to the love

14 Gill, p.xxi.
of her husband, but it is only the appearance of virtue which she values, and when she is faced with her choice between poverty as a faithful wife and luxury as the Duke's mistress, it is the Duke she chooses. Her seduction, with her feeble attempts at resistance, is an elaborate game, which is emphasized by the parallel game of chess which is played below while it is taking place. The chess game serves to emphasize the essential falseness of Bianca's protestations of chastity, to show that the protests are part of the game, and that it is merely the appearance of virtue which she strives to protect. 17

G.R. Hibbard holds the same opinion, but without labouring the philosophical point to the extent where the question of plausibility and dramatic realism is entirely forgotten. He does remark that "we are left in no doubt that the main figures are either morally corrupt to begin with or eventually become so", 18 but he continues from the point at which most other critics have left off. In other words, Hibbard not only notes that the moral flaw might always exist within human nature so that Bianca could never be in a state of innocence even at the beginning of the play, but also tries to suggest how that flaw shows itself, particularly in Women Beware Women. In Bianca's case the

answer is quite obvious; that "as a direct result of her experiences", she "comes to see how much her own fate has been a necessary and inevitable consequence of the way she was brought up". 19 This, then, is not just a strictly philosophical theory of the moral flaw, since Hibbard suggests what that flaw might be in social terms, and while his suggestion is by no means the only acceptable one, it is valuable more especially perhaps in terms of the contemporary background of the Elizabethan and Jacobean periods.

In order to see the moral implications of Bianca's character, I think it would be useful to look at some of the statements she makes at crucial moments in the play. One difficulty remains, however, to which all the careful criticism in the world can only do imperfect justice: both Middleton and his characters so often understate, that our interpretations of what they do say can only be subjective. Thus, I shall endeavour to interpret the lines in the way which seems to me to form the most consistent point of view.

Heaven send a quiet peace with this man's love,
And I am as rich, as virtue can be poor -
Which were enough, after the rate of mind,
To erect temples of content placed here.
I have forsok friends, fortunes, and my country;
And hourly I rejoice in't. Here's my friends,
And few is the good number. Thy successes,
Howsoever they look, I will still name my fortunes;

(I.i.127-134)

These are Bianca's first words, about which Miss Gill writes:

19 Hibbard, pp.44-45.
"Bianca's meek silence, followed by the statement of content with cottage poverty, must be taken at face value, along with her protestations of virtue to the duke. Only in this way can her subsequent cruelty have its full impact."20 Bianca's character throughout the play would be more consistent, however, if this speech were interpreted conversely and the runaway heiress's destruction seen as contained, even now, within her character. Further to this, there may be sufficient impact in the awful fact that human personality is oppressed and often changed by evil influence, but surely the impact is at once more subtle and ultimately more devastating if we realize that the evil which is being revealed to us is not merely developing in the here and now but has been present in the character from the very beginning. This kind of dramatic "double bluff" has as much, if not more, impact than the gradual deterioration theory which Miss Gill seems to advocate.

The word "desires" (l.126) has strong sensual overtones, but despite the haze of physical fulfillment we realize that Bianca is very much aware of what she has given up to marry Leantio. She asks, moreover, for "quiet peace" (l.127) and says that she has forsaken "friends, fortunes", (l.131) to elope. Contrary to what Dodson says about the emergence of Middleton's heroines from enclosed and protected environments into potentially tragic situations, Bianca's words suggest that the life she has led before running away with the clerk

20 Gill, p.xxi.
has been anything but "sequestered". Her lines betray that certain sense of "playing at being married" which is akin to a small girl's "playing houses". There is an element of unreality here, because the thrill of the elopement has not worn off, but the indications are that Bianca is in love with the romantic ideal which she believes Leantio to be rather than the clerk himself, as a faulty and rather ordinary young man. Her perceptions have been influenced by the novelty of her recent experience and her preoccupations are predominantly sensual, as is shown by her teasing remark to her new husband: "You have not bid me welcome since I came" (l.142).

When Leantio is obliged to leave her to go to work she begs him to remain with her in lines which indicate that she lacks a sense of true responsibility, a fault which could certainly be ascribed, as Hibbard would have it, to an upbringing which was probably more indulgent than it should have been: "Tomorrow, adding but a little care more,/ Will dispatch all as well - believe me, 'twill sir" (I.iii.38-39). She asks him to stay "this one night" and the specific use of "night" rather than "day" suggests that her physical needs are still more important to her than any other consideration. The use of "day" would be a more general indication of Bianca's unhappiness when her husband leaves to earn their living: in other words, she is not going to miss Leantio's wit, chivalry or good humour as much as she is going to miss the sexual satisfaction he can give her. It is in this way

21 Dodson, p.377.
that a sense of the misguided nature of her reactions, begun in her very first speech, is immeasurably strengthened.

After her husband's departure, the new bride joins her mother-in-law to watch the procession of the Duke of Florence, and as the splendid parade passes by, she asks: "Did not the duke look up? me-thought he saw us" (1.106). What Bianca means is "me-thought he saw me", since by her own admission, Leantio's mother is past sixty years of age and no longer attractive to the opposite sex. Even if Bianca has not been aware up until now of her own good looks (and I find this almost impossible to believe), her new husband's ecstatic ramblings about her jewel-like beauty must have had their effect upon her. Her answer to her mother-in-law's sensible retort is non-committal: "Most likely so" (1.112). Therein, however, lies the ambiguity. These three words could be a simple acquiescence to the mother's sound reasoning, but we cannot rule out the possibility that Middleton is ironically implying the presence of that ambition which, after this one flash, will remain hidden until later in the play.

When Bianca next appears, her response to the friendly overtures of the widow Livia and the smooth compliments of Guardiano is neither more nor less than what is socially acceptable. Here we have to supply our own stage directions, but we must admit that it is most unlikely that Bianca should be awed or overwhelmed by the splendour of Livia's house. We

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22 See I.i. 12-26, 46-56 and 161-176.
could rather expect to see an almost instantaneous readjustment to and self-assurance in the atmosphere of a type of life so recently abandoned by her. Guardiano takes her on a tour of the house, and it is while the excursion is in progress that Bianca meets the Duke. Guardiano, one of those "aristocratic ponces" referred to by B.A. Young in his review of a recent English performance of *Women Beware Women*, immediately makes a very swift exit with Bianca's indictment ringing in his wake: "Oh treachery to honour!" (II.ii.321).

It could be argued, of course, that her mention of "treachery" and "honour" is a trifle premature, since the Duke has given no verbal indication of what he has in mind. He merely tells Bianca not to look for Guardiano, for "he's but a vapour/That when the sun appears is seen no more" (II.319-320).

The Duke then makes his declaration of "respect and honour" (1.325), and Bianca's reply to his outpourings is ambiguous. As in the case of those three non-committal words in I.iii.112, this reply of "Oh my lord!" (1.334) is subject to many interpretations, one of the most plausible being that, while she is saying these simple words, Bianca is mentally weighing up the situation. It can, therefore, be argued that Middleton means us not to overlook the seemingly ingenuous way she questions the Duke as he continues the catalogue of her beauties: "My lord, what seek you?" (1.347)

But as she asks, we can see that she knows perfectly well

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23 *The Financial Times*, 4 July 1969, p.3.
what he seeks; she is merely attempting to keep him at bay until she can think of what to do.

The Duke answers that he seeks "Love" and Bianca immediately retorts that she cannot love him because she already has a husband. It could be argued that the Duke's "Love" could be interpreted (although obviously not by him) in the sense of "friendship", but Bianca's reply shows that she takes the word to mean sexual love. She says that she cannot "Take a friend" to Leantio because — and this sounds a little flippant — that would be "a double mischief; / Or else there's no religion" (ll.349-350). Then when the Duke tells her not to "tremble" at fears of her own making, comes the plea which many critics, like Frost, see as "impassioned":

Nor, great lord,
Make me not bold with death and deeds of ruin
Because they fear not you; me they must fright,
Then am I best in health. Should thunder speak
And none regard it, it had lost the name,
And were as good be still. I'm not like those
That take their soundest sleeps in greatest tempests;
Then wake I most, the weather fearfullest,
And call for strength to virtue. (ll.351-359)

Jump comments that "the most significant thing" in Bianca's speeches "is her eventual appeal" to the Duke "not to make her act against the dictates of her conscience. Evidently she fears the forces in herself which infidelity would release; she wishes to continue in the retirement and restraint which Leantio represents." In fact Bianca is,

24 Frost, p.65.
25 Jump, p.359.
and has always been, quite aware of herself and we can see very clearly her own admission of weakness in the lines: "Then wake I most, the weather fearfulllest, / And call for strength to virtue." Thus, although she may not have actually sinned, the fact that Bianca implies that she has known temptation, especially in the sort of life she has led before marrying Leantio, makes her less of the innocent than some critics would have us suppose. Nor does this interpretation necessarily make nonsense of Engelberg's notions about tragic blindness in *Women Beware Women*, since clear-sighted awareness of oneself does not automatically mean that one wishes to be aware of, or cares about, one's obligations to other people and their needs.

Then Bianca asks the Duke why he seeks to take away what he can never give. In his overwhelming answer he offers her that "wealth" and "honour" which Leantio cannot give her. He tells her that he is aware of her newly-chosen life of poverty, a thing he "heard too lately and soon pitied". He asks her how she can be her "beauty's enemy" and "kiss away a month or two in wedlock", only to "weep whole years in wants for ever after?" He appeals to that part of her which yearns so much for material security; she must "play the wise wench, and provide for ever".

It is not surprising, therefore, that "Bianca's virtue" as Miss Bradbrook observes, "simply collapses". This is

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26 See citation 2.
27 Bradbrook, p.228.
not out of character or in any way inconsistent with her own implication that temptation is not a new experience to her. In fact we can only suppose from this wordless acquiescence that her earlier verbal parryings were only meant to cloak her appraisal of the Duke's offer and not to reflect real horror and true moral indignation at his suggestions. Her protests have a hollow ring; but in the empty silence in which she submits to her seducer we find nothing but the impression of an utterly meaningless morality: our vision of the actualization of a latent potentiality for evil is inescapably clear.

Bianca's reappearance after the seduction has caused many critics to comment. Most, like Frost, consider that "the first half-willing sin is followed" by a "despairing commitment to evil." Miss Gill remarks: "Seduction makes Bianca articulate; and her eloquence is feminine", and it can certainly be agreed that the seduction has done away with a certain verbal reticence evident in the early scenes. Engelberg, however, argues that, like Beatrice-Joanna in The Changeling, Bianca is "trapped" by the "superficiality" of her "visual perceptions". This could conceivably be true, especially when we think of the stupid mistake she has made in marrying Leantio in the first place, but by the time the seduction has taken place her awareness is a wrongly-
directed rather than a superficial one. In other words, her perceptions of the world she was born into and to which her liaison with the Duke has returned her and her awareness of herself are certainly very clear, but they still preclude any wish, or feeling of obligation, to see anything else. The vision Bianca has may well be a true one, but it is restricted, or rather constricted, by the vice which it has willingly embraced. Thus her tragedy might be that of a clear and intelligent vision which has been deliberately and consciously misdirected and must be forcibly turned in upon itself at the end of the play.

Bianca's first words upon reappearing are curiously comic in tone: "Now bless me from a blasting!" (l.421) The lines which follow are, however, more serious:

I saw that now
Fearful for any woman's eye to look on,
Infectious mists and mildews hang at's eyes,
The weather of a doomsday dwells upon him. 31

Here, as throughout the play, is the clear sight asserting itself and Bianca is perfectly aware of what will happen to her if she continues in her chosen course. But somehow she shrugs off the abhorrent vision and willingly embraces her new situation: "Come, poison all at once!" There does not appear, moreover, to be any deep-seated feeling of outrage or shame such as that expressed by the ravished Castiza in Hengist, King of Kent or, for that matter, by Shakespeare's Lucrece. What surprises and affects us is not only Bianca's

31 The whole of this speech constitutes ll.421-445.
acceptance, but also the celerity with which it is put into words. She then curses the "baseness" and "smooth-browed treachery" of Guardiano who "wore the fair veil of a friendly welcome", in a return to the warning vision of her earlier lines, although this time the vision, at least on the face of it, is directed at the pander. She says that she feels "bound" to curse him, although whether simply by a feeling of social convention, since his crime in betraying her is one which she would naturally be expected to curse, or by any real moral conviction of her own, we can only guess.

It is, however, consistent with Bianca's character that she might well have preferred to arrange her own adultery and to come to an understanding with the man in question without the services of one such as Guardiano. It is in keeping with her personality that she dislikes being manipulated and so it is her pride, not her honour, which is smarting. Consequently she despises Guardiano as a man who has the mentality of a pimp, who deserves no other status than that of "base villain" and "slave" and is nothing but an aristocratic parasite: "I give thee that to feed on."

This also ties in very well with the "Machiavellian" terms used at the end of the speech: Bianca "likes the treason well, but hates the traitor." The affair itself is quite acceptable, but manipulation by a "damned bawd" and "an old ass" (ll. 466, 467), the Queen and the rook of the chess game, is not.

Then come the lines:
I'm made bold now,  
I thank thy treachery; sin and I'm acquainted,  
No couple greater;  

I can see no more reason for calling these lines "a despairing commitment to evil" than for calling Bianca's obviously voluntary submission to her seducer a "half-willing sin", since her momentous confrontation with evil is referred to by her in terms more fitting to social introductions at a fashionable cocktail party, and in a tone which ironically implies her lack of real outrage at that confrontation. Thus the comic thread, spun out from the beginning of this speech, is picked up by Bianca with a wry and clear-sighted humour reminiscent of Frank Gullman's, when she extols Guardiano's virtues as a guide:

The kindness of some people, how't exceeds!  
'Faith, I have seen that I little thought to see I'th' morning when I rose, (11.456-458)  

Eliot has remarked: "There is hardly anything truer in Elizabethan drama than Bianca's gradual self-will and self-importance in consequence of her courtship by the Duke." We could, however, take issue with Eliot's use of the word "gradual". There is nothing gradual about Bianca's "self-will" since she herself admits, or rather declares, to her mother-in-law: "And report went of me that I could wrangle/ For what I wanted when I was two hours old" (III.i.57-58).  

32 See Frost, citation 30.  
33 Eliot, p.89.
There is nothing gradual about her nagging, which shows in her very first words when she reappears in the next Act.

At the very beginning of the play she has made everlasting demands that Leantio remain with her instead of going out to work, and now her background and upbringing return after her seduction in her peremptory and petulant insistence upon the luxuries to which she has previously been accustomed:

This is the strangest house
For all defects, as ever gentlewoman
Made shift withal, to pass away her love in!
Why is there not a cushion - cloth of drawn work,
Or some fair cut-work pinned up in my bed-chamber,
A silver-and-gilt casting bottle hung by't? (ll. 16-21)

She addresses further peevish complaints to Leantio's mother (ll.45-50), and her words emphasize the vicious circle in which Leantio is caught. To keep his wife he is obliged to work, and it is in working to keep her that he will lose her. Life at subsistence level with nothing but her husband's clumsy attempts at romance to lighten the tedium no longer appeals to Bianca, who makes this utterly clear to him when he appears, smugly telling himself: "She'll be so greedy now, and cling about me,/ I take care how I shall be rid of her" (ll.107-108). The cool reception which Leantio gets, however, only causes him to enquire solicitously about his loved one's health. In answer she demands "some pleasant lodging i'th' high street" and then virtually proclaims her whoredom:

"'Tis a sweet recreation for a gentlewoman/ To stand in a bay-window and see gallants" (ll.130-131).

Leantio keeps his temper for a long time, but it is
difficult to tell whether it is patience or stupidity which makes him so forbearing. He clumsily tells his wife that he desires to see only her, but her sharp retort (ll.141-148), marked at intervals by the contemptuously reiterated word "Sir", is built, ironically enough, around the philosophy that fidelity between lovers is equivalent to blindness. But the arrival of the court messenger is enough to arouse his suspicions and he calls back his "gem no stranger's eye must see" (1.175), and swears that he will lock her away rather than let her go to the Duke's feast. Her protest is indignant and her action decisive. Leantio is ultimately powerless in the face of her mockery and casual departure: "We shall be all executed for treason shortly" (1.264).

As Ornstein has remarked, when Bianca "displays her smutty sophisticated wit in the banquet scene, we sense that she has not been thrust into an alien experience but returned to a familiar reality". There is nothing particularly notable in what she says at the banquet, and perhaps the most apposite comment in this scene comes not from her, but from Livia as she and the desolated Leantio watch Bianca leaving with her lover: "Want's the key of whoreson" (III.i.287). We learn more when we next see Bianca, for her long soliloquy is full of self-congratulation. She is now firmly (and presumably, publicly) established as the Duke's mistress, and so totally is she in sympathy with her "new"

34 Ornstein, p.195.
35 See IV.i.23-30.
surroundings that she can muse smugly about the people she has known in Venice and then speak about the rearing of young girls as if she has spent her whole life in that pursuit (11.32-35).

It is then that the confrontation of estranged husband and wife takes place. The two jab tentatively at one another, although Leantio's tone is less assured than Bianca's, and both seemingly congratulate one another on the achievement of wealth and status:

Leantio: A sumptuous lodging!
Bianca: Y'have an excellent suit there.
Leantio: A chair of velvet!
Bianca: Is your cloak lined through, sir?
Leantio: Y'are very stately here.
Bianca: 'Faith, something proud, sir. (11.52-54)

But finally Bianca, the stronger of the two, says "Sure I think, sir, We both thrive best asunder" (11.60-61), and Leantio, who is constitutionally incapable of keeping up the pace in such a verbal battle, has recourse to name-calling with such epithets as "whore" and "impudent, spiteful strumpet". She firmly establishes her supremacy by suggesting that she has earned his captainship of the fort whilst he comes a poor second in his transparent attempt to arouse her jealousy by telling her of his affair with Livia. Bianca, however, remains quite unmoved, and speaks of the man she has hastily married and just as hastily deserted as
a "poor base start-up with bad breath.

Although it is spoken by a weakling such as Leantio, the real indictment of Bianca comes from him as he stormily takes his leave. To him she is "as dark as death" (1.94), a creature of "blind pride" (1.99) with a perjured soul" (1.103). But Leantio, like many of those who write about Women Beware Women, also sees Bianca's deliberate self-misdirection as blindness. It may well be an avoidance of her moral and social obligations, but her vision of what matters to her, of her chosen part of reality, is still lucidity itself. Blindness implies a total lack of sight and therefore it also implies at least an impaired ability, at most a complete inability to make any choice, but Bianca clearly sees the alternatives and because of, or rather despite, them she deliberately chooses. Nor, as Leantio would have us believe, is she "ignorant", although it could be argued that because of her sins, she will be ignorant of (in the sense of "not experiencing") that security which can only come with a settled conscience. Still, however, understandable his motives, Leantio has described them, the proverbial glass houses stones. Both husband and wife, as has described them, "twins in degradation).

Unlike Vittoria Corombona in The White Devil, who, despite the nature of her crime, uses her undeniable strength
of character and innate nobility in her own defense, 37 Bianca falls back on religion as a means of discomfitting the accusing Cardinal:

yet 'mongst all your virtues
I see not charity written, which some call
The first-born of religion; and I wonder
I cannot see 't in yours. 38

In terms of logic, the speech would be acceptable if spoken by someone else: as it is, the right words are being used wrongly in support of an evil deed, and the sinner's repentance mentioned by Bianca is, in the case of the Duke and herself, a hollow repentance. The marriage whereby "lives that are licentious are made honest" is no marriage when it has been made possible by murder. The logic is certainly there, but it is a logic automatically rendered specious by the character of the woman who uses it.

Before the concluding masque, which has been referred to by J.C. trewin in his review of Women Beware Women as that "last comic clutter of death", 39 Bianca leaves us in no doubt as to her plans:

Cardinal, you die this night; the plot's laid surely:

He has his times of frailty, and his thoughts
Their transports too, through flesh and blood,
For all his zeal, his learning and his light,
As well as we poor souls that sin by night.
(V.ii.21-29)

37 See Webster's White Devil, III.i.ii.
38 See Women Beware Women, IV.iii.47-69.
Like her defense to the Cardinal when he interrupts her wedding procession, her tinselled remarks to her new husband are just as complacent and, of course, just as specious, for "envy and slander" she says "Are things soon raised against faithful lovers; / But comfort is, they are not long unrewarded" (11.45-48). Thus, general dissent aroused by her marriage to the Duke will be fittingly punished and this suggestion is also overlaid with the hint that the Cardinal's "envy and slander" will not remain "unrewarded" for very much longer. It is ironic that Bianca is so sure of herself; hers is an assurance which is gradually broken down as she waits impatiently, and in vain, for the Cardinal to perish from the effects of the poison which she has prepared for him: "Not yet? no change? when falls he to the earth?" (1.173)

When she realizes that she has killed the Duke by mistake, Bianca takes her own life. Frost declares that her suicide "is a violation" of the portrait which has been "built up over four acts. There is nothing in her cold desertion of Leantio, whom she had loved and eloped with to lead us to accept that she would kill herself for love of the man who had raped her." 40 Ornstein, however, sees in her dying utterances an "unrepentant passion" which is mingled with "sincere remorse". 41 But perhaps one of the best comments about Bianca's death is that of Miss Gill:

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40 Frost, p.70.
41 Ornstein, p.196. See also Women Beware Women, V.i.i.194-195, and 202-203.
"With less than total success Middleton then tries at the end to recapitulate the complexity of Bianca's life - her love for the Duke, a sense of sin, her guilt towards Leontio, and a final dying morality. All but the first of these might have been forgotten. Of her dying utterances the best, because the most realistic and psychologically consistent, comes with the frightened glance around the hostile court: \"[42] What make I here? these are all strangers to me,/ Not known but by their malice, now th'art gone\" (11.204–205).

Thus, if there is any "sincere remorse" (because there has certainly been an awareness of guilt) it exists in combination with a number of other factors, one of the most important being that Bianca, naturally enough, is afraid to face disgrace. It is in character for a woman who deserts her husband that she should hurriedly desert life because it seems hopeless without the protection of the Duke. The "malice" of the courtiers is yet another consideration, since they could make her existence as a widow an extremely unhappy one. Bianca does not want their disrespect, but, with a touch of pride and contempt for them, she does not want their sympathy either: "Nor do I seek their pities" (1.206). An attendant lord remarks upon "What shift sh'as made to be her own destruction" (1.215). Bianca's "destruction", however, lies not within a cup of poison, but in the life she has led. As Hippolito says before he dies:

42 Gill, p.xxii.
Lust and forgetfulness has been amongst us, 
And we are brought to nothing. (ll.144-145)

It cannot be emphasized enough that Bianca's tragedy does not lie in blindness. Blindness cannot constitute tragedy because nothing can be seen, no alternatives can be observed and no tragic choice can be made. Total blindness can only mean the impenetrable insensitivity of the egoist on one hand or, on the other, a total incapacity to observe people and to communicate and interact with them. Bianca does not belong to either extreme. Her tragedy lies in her voluntary engagement of her strong personality and clear sight in pursuit of something which is at best elusive, and at worst worth nothing. The tragedy is underlined by the fact that she has relied upon attainment of the goal as a vindication of the methods used in that attainment and that she must ultimately see the goal as worthless and impermanent. Finally, the ultimate and universal tragedy lies in the fact that the potential evil which, in the way of original sin, is always a part of human nature, has been accepted and actualized rather than resisted and overcome as the permanent moral order demands.

Livia and Isabella are both important characters in Women Beware Women not only because they are women (and Middleton's interest certainly lies in feminine psychology) but also because the former who, according to Ribner, stands
apart "in her complete and willing rejection of all moral values" 43 performs the undeniably functional duty of tying together the two plots and because the latter, who engages upon a sinful liaison with her uncle, parallels the career of Bianca in the main plot. I propose to look very briefly at the standing of both women as characters in their own right and in terms of Middleton's thesis before looking at the masque and its place in the play as a whole.

Miss Ellis-Fermor speaks of the widow Livia's "coarse moral obliquity" 44 and Jump writes that "we know her well as a hearty, affectionate, lax creature, with a sardonic view, often wittily expressed, of the injustice to women of the marital relationship", 45 and a casual attitude to sex: "And if we lick a finger then, sometimes, / We are not too blame; your best cooks use it" (l.ii.44-45). It is, however, Dodson who makes the most valuable comments about the widow, not only when he suggests that Middleton presents her as "a realist passing into a state of unreality", 46 but also when he attempts to probe her relationship with her brother, and suggests that she has been "nurturing an abnormal, potentially incestuous attraction" 47 for Hippolito. 48 If this is so,

43 Ribner, p.21.
44 Ellis-Fermor, p.140.
45 Jump, p.358. See also Gill, pp.xiii-xxiv;
Ornstein, pp.192-193, and Hibbard, pp.48-51.
46 Dodson, p.377.
48 See I.ii.146-148, 150-152, and ii.18-23,63-73.
then the procuring of Isabella seems less like unmotivated malice and more an attempt to provide a reasonably acceptable substitute for herself. Thus she can vicariously indulge her own passions through Isabella, and though we cannot supply any ethical reason for her lie about her niece's bastardy, we can see Middleton's realist, who solves problems which confront her in accordance with the resources at hand. From the time that she plays her part in the seductions of both Bianca and Isabella we lost any sympathy for Livia that we might have had before, but when she has met and fallen in love with Leantio, her change from "a middle-aged woman of intensely active intellect in full control of her emotional responses, to the pathetic indulgent of a late summer passion, is a tragedy on a plane too real to be dismissed as fantastic." 49

To explain Livia's motives, however, is not to excuse the sins she commits and like Bianca, the evil which has always been part of her brings her to destruction. She sets the wheel of sexual intrigue in motion and it is she who must stop the wheel, to the ruination of the other characters in the play and herself as well. Despite her sympathy for her niece who is about to be subjected to the miseries of an enforced marriage 50 and a certain loudmouthed charm, 51 her suggestive remarks to her own brother put us on our guard.

49 Dodson, p. 380.
50 See I, ii. 29-35.
51 ll. 47-51.
against her attraction: "thou art all a feast,/ And she
that has thee, a most happy guest" (I.151-152). The
celerity with which she ceases chiding Hippolito for his
incestuous passion and begins to think of ways to "bring
forth/ As pleasant fruits as sensuality wishes" (II.1.30-31)
shows a moral sense at best distinctly unstable, at worst
completely lacking. Her initial objections to the sin of
incest are rendered meaningless by the haste with which she
attempts to console her brother. Here again, as in the
case of Bianca, hers is a clear sight which is willfully
misdirected when circumstances, and impulses, demand.

If, however, there is some plausible psychological
reason for Livia's procuring of Isabella for her brother,
there is no such reason in the case of Bianca. It seems
almost as if the widow regards the whole venture as a
challenge to her ingenuity; if she fails, she will "shut
up shop in cunning" (II.ii.28). Also, when Bianca returns
after her seduction to hiss "damned bawd!" at Liva, the
widow's reply shows an amused, unexcited acceptance which
is the result of a lifetime of casual lapses:

Is't so, 'damned bawd'!
Are you so bitter? 'Tis but want of use;
Her tender modesty is sea-sick a little,
Being not accustomed to the breaking billow
Of woman's wavering faith, blown with temptations.
'Tis but a qualm of honour, 'twill away;
A little bitter for the time, but lasts not.
Sin tastes at the first draught like wormwood water,
But drunk again, 'tis nectar ever after. (II.470-478)

After she has seen Istantio at the banquet, the realist
passes into a state of unreality. She will "begin the week and paint tomorrow" (III.ii.143), and so catch the abandoned clerk's attention. But the conventional Jacobean image of the cosmetic covering age, ugliness and decay is here invested by Middleton with a powerful moral significance, underlined by the words of Isabella's song, which tells of women who spend their time "to make physic work, or blood/Force fresh in an old lady's cheek" (II.151-152). In this instance, the use of camouflage for spiritual ugliness as well as physical age renders the age no more than pathetic but the ugliness morally abhorrent. Livia's destruction is inherent in her very beginnings: her first cheerfully amoral statements and her anguished cry at Leantio's death, her subsequent desire for revenge, her spiteful betrayal of the relationship of Isabella and Hippolito and her hideously ironic death dressed as Juno Pronuba, goddess of marriage, all are part of that "jest" which, in her own words, "hell falls a-laughing at" (IV.ii.63).

While few critics have tried to convince us that Livia is a good woman who becomes corrupted by evil influence, Isabella has been prevailingingly defended as an innocent, unworlhdly girl who is driven into an adulterous (and incestuous) relationship and so corrupted by social pressures and circumstance. Miss Gill writes: "Married to the foolish Ward, Isabella will know only the misery of frustration; but this is of no consequence to her father. Survival is
impossible without equivocation, so she must marry the Ward to satisfy the demands of society and sleep with Hippolito to find the love she needs herself." The most plausible explanation for the so-called change in Isabella, however, is that there is actually no change at all and that the "virtue" of the early scenes must be stripped away like Livia's cosmetics, to show the ever-present spiritual ugliness beneath. As Ribner has remarked, "Hippolito and Isabella pride themselves on the nobility of their love, as opposed to the crude commercialism of marriage for which Fabricio stands. They will not commit incest, but they will commit adultery", and, in fact, "they willingly commit evil to avoid the appearance of evil." Thus, these lovers "do not really decline in moral stature; they are corrupt from the very beginning." 

In view of this, it seems that no young woman of true virtue would be led so easily into such a liaison, and the very paucity of reactions from Isabella as her aunt tells her of her supposed illegitimacy shows that she has already become used to at least hearing of such things. It can be argued that it is not Livia's fault that her niece eagerly seizes upon her aunt's lie as an excuse for adultery, and that Isabella prefers a hole-and-corner affair with

52 Gill, p.xvii. See also Bradbrook, pp.226-227, and Ribbard, p.50.
53 Ribner, p.29.
54 Ibid., p.32.
Hippolito to a more open and honest rebellion against her father's commercial attitude to marriage. Isabella, as Ornstein points out, is "a true child of her time," a woman "brazen enough to have a "friend" but too weak to defy social conventions". Moreover, the calm with which the girl accepts the news of her mother's supposed adultery confirms the impression of world-weary awareness already created with her earlier remarks about marriage:

When women have their choices commonly
They do but buy their thraldoms, and bring great portions
To men to keep 'em in subjection:
As if a fearful prisoner should bribe
The keeper to be good to him, yet lies in still,
And glad of a good usage, a good look
Sometimes. (I.ii.171-177)

However deep her anguish, this speech shows that Isabella is thoroughly conversant with the undignified, and even the sordid, matters of this world. It is, moreover, her ability to accept her illegitimacy and the prospect of adultery with no qualms and little more than a flicker of surprise (II.i.73-177), which leads us to doubt her innocence. Even if she has never actively and deliberately sinned until her affair with her uncle, the predilection for sin has always been present and, when the occasion demands, is all too readily actualized. Even if there has been only weakness at the beginning, this weakness, like Leantio's, quickly becomes the ready acceptance of and involvement in evil, the

55 Ornstein, p.193.
evil becomes the world in which the characters of *Women Beware Women* live and breathe, and Isabella's life can be seen for what it is: the gradual unmasking of a spiritual deformity always present in her character and not so much the cause of her destruction as that very destruction itself.

As with the characters, so with the action of *Women Beware Women*, and the final masque in which all the main characters meet their doom has been criticized and praised in the best tradition. It has been called "indiscriminate butchery",56 artistically inadequate57 and "too conventionally literary".58 There has also been a suggestion that Middleton "has thrown away all illusion of psychological depth for the immediate reward of a cynical peripeteia".59 But the masque also has its defenders, among them F.T. Bowers, who declares that in *Women Beware Women*, Middleton has "reaffirmed the importance of the masque play-within-play as a setting for a dramatic catastrophe",60 and a number of lesser-known critics who have carefully reappraised the masque and its functions and conventions in terms of what it must have meant to the Elizabethans and Jacobins.61 That the traditional elements of masque are used cannot be denied, but this does not make the "dramatic catastrophe" of *Women

56 Bradford, p.17.
57 Ornstein, p.197.
58 Tomlinson, p.184.
60 *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy 1587-1642* (Princeton, 1940), p.165. See also Ellis-Fermor, p.135 note.
Beware Women totally unacceptable although the complete expression of Middleton's tragic vision is understandably impeded by the use of the conventional "blood-bath" and the tradition which dictates that the existence of divine justice and retribution must be shown.

Apart from its adherence to the twin traditions of massacre and retribution and its emphatic shift of the play's conflict from the domestic scene to the courtly arena which is its rightful place, the most important function of the masque is that its "grotesque incongruity" emphasizes, as Ribner points out, "that of the actual marriage of Bianca to the Duke at which it is performed", for it is "a dramatic symbol of the inevitable collapse of a society which by faulty choice of values has devoted itself to its own destruction". The casting is both ironic and moralistic: "Juno Promuba, the marriage goddess"(IV.ii.214) is played by Livia while Isabella is cast as the young nymph who is entangled with two men at once. Hippolito and Guardiano play the shepherds who are in pursuit of the nymph, and it is ironic that, in real life their interest is, in the case of one unchaste and incestuous, and of the other, commercial and mercenary. They appeal to Juno "that rul'st" as Livia has certainly done in real life, "o'er coupled bodies" (V.ii.73), to choose the better man. Ironically, both Bianca and Isabella as the nymph of the masque, stand between two men, husband and lover, but in both cases they

62 Ribner, p.21.
are not torn, as the nymph is, between the two. For them a choice is never necessary and their husbands, Leontio and the Ward, never really stand a chance.

Guardiano finally falls through the trapdoor he has prepared for Hippolito, Livia kills Isabella before being overcome by the poisoned fumes with which her niece has "sacrificed" to her and Hippolito, in despair at Isabella's death, runs on to the sword of a by-standing guard. Bianca can only watch in horror as the Duke dies after mistakenly drinking the poison she has prepared for the Cardinal; she herself hurriedly takes leave of life with nothing but a conventional epilogue by which to make herself remembered: "Pride, greatness, honours, beauty, youth, ambition—/ You must all down together; there's no help for't" (ll.216-217).

There is none of the stylized beauty of movement and the almost exaggerated grace usually associated with the masque in this corporate death-scene. But the frenetic urgency with which the characters conglomerately tumble into death is not a lack of dramatic talent on Middleton's part. None of the characters can die fortified by the spiritual self-sufficiency which so illumines and transfigures the last moments of the heroine of Webster's Duchess of Malfy. In their helter-skelter rush to kill one another and in the ironic denouement in which they themselves are undone, we see only a sad and rather sickening truth revealed by a way of life which has not been the cause of destruction, but destruction itself. In the manner of the moral cartoonist,
Middleton fixes them in absurd poses which are, however, invested with a profound ethical significance. The masque is certainly a concession to the taste of contemporary audiences, but Middleton has made convention work for him. He has achieved his aim in an undeniably stylistic manner, but achieved it none the less.

Now we must return, in conclusion, to the tragic vision of which *Women Beware Women* is so significant a part. Miss Gill and Miss Ellis-Fermor both declare that the play's important statements are social, or rather sociological, in nature. Miss Gill remarks that the play's two plots combine to expose the cruelties of an acquisitive society, to reveal what Miss Ellis-Fermor calls the "fantastic hypocrisy of society's pretensions". Criticism of these pretensions can certainly be found in the play, but it remains nothing more than a by-product of Middleton's preoccupation with the self-damnation of the unhappy individual.

Ornstein notes that Middleton does not sentimentalize vice, but that he does not dignify virtue either, and that he does nothing to suggest that moral ideals have much influence on human behaviour or to convince us that, in addition to a norm of illicit passion and materialism, there is a norm of decency as well. In other words, he creates the impression, says Ornstein, that his characters' conduct

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63 Gill, p.xvii.
64 Ellis-Fermor, p.144.
is, in fact, "a social norm rather than an anti-social aberration". Engelberg writes: "Harsher even than Webster, Middleton opposes no real clarity of sight to blindness, no rational and ordered universe to offset the optical illusions of his blinded characters." I think, however, that these criticisms are seriously at fault because both critics fail to realize that Middleton's moral judgment is implicit in his presentation of people and the terrible things which they can do to themselves. He is not obliged to make any direct moral statements, and just because his characters choose not to follow the rulings of the moral order does not mean that they are unaware of it or that the order itself does not exist.

The dividing line between the earlier plays and the great achievement of The Changeling is, I believe, constituted by Women Beware Women. In this play the elements of tragedy and comedy are both to be found. More important, however, is the close relationship which exists between the dramatist's characters and his morality. The people in Women Beware Women are not merely exempla of Middleton's moral point of view. They are that point of view and, by being themselves, they act out his tragic vision, a vision which needs no texts, preaching or overt didacticism of any kind.

It has been argued that Middleton's vision is Calvinistic

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65 Ornstein, p. 198.
and that his characters are predestined. If this is so, their lives are but the mechanical working out of a destiny chosen for them without their knowledge or consent and the tragic element is virtually reduced to nothing. Those who are predestined have no real choice, and without choice there can be no real tragedy. Ever since the earliest commentaries on Genesis, thinkers in the Christian world have been concerned with the implications of the concept of original sin, and in accordance with the doctrine of the Fall, have declared that all men are born with a potential for evil. It must equally be emphasized, however, that human beings are also granted free will, so that their personal destiny lies within their own hands. There are those who choose to resist the potential for evil and to struggle for their salvation as Christian duty demands, but there are also those who, like the main characters in Women Beware Women deliberately choose the ways of evil from the very beginning and, in so doing, choose their own damnation. We can only postulate the reasons for Middleton's preoccupation with those who embrace evil: whether personal pessimism or the unsettled times in which he lived led him to write as he did will always remain uncertain. All we do know is that his characters make a conscious choice, and in this choice and the working out of the destiny which belongs to it, lies the tragedy of Women Beware Women.

CHAPTER SIX

THE CHANGELING

The very same moral point of view upon which *Women Beware Women* is based is also to be found in *The Changeling* and so it is unnecessary, for the most part, to note once more the criticisms which are equally applicable to both plays. Suffice it to say that there are some commentators who, like Gamini Salgado in his introduction to *The Changeling*, see the play as charting "the gradual degeneration of Beatrice from a dutiful daughter and bride-to-be to a mesmerized accessory in adultery and murder",¹ and others who, like Irving Ribner, declare that it involves "no process of transformation", but rather the stripping away of the false facade of virtue.² Those who stress Beatrice's initial innocence make great use of the "transformation" imagery found throughout the play and, indeed, in the title, but the changes which take place, though seemingly sincere, are always tragically untrue to character and, therefore, short-lived. Middleton subtly uses these "transformations" to highlight the deficiencies of those who


declare themselves to be changed, and especially the deficiencies of Beatrice. In this chapter I propose to show that, from the beginning of the play her predisposition to evil is always inescapably before us. The play is, then, the building up of a complex structure of events which show that, from the first, she carries her destruction within her own bosom. Again I wish to make it clear that I do not subscribe in any way to Ribner’s argument that The Changeling has a Calvinistic bias. As in Women Beware Women, the essential tragedy in this play lies in the deliberate choice of a particular course of action without regard to the consequences, and wilful misdirection of energy in support of that choice.

The Changeling represents a tremendous advance in characterization, particularly with De Flores. Alsemoro is not a very powerful character; he is merely, as Helen Gardner points out, "a standard by which we see what has happened to Beatrice-Joanna", and even though he symbolizes wisdom which is yet deceived and human impotence in the face of circumstance he is, as a living, breathing character, rather undistinguished. This can certainly be ascribed to

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4 See Ribner, pp.131-133, and Ornstein, p.182.
5 Even if what Miss Gardner says is true, I do not think that Middleton means us to see Alsemoro as perfect. To succumb to love at first sight as quickly as he does is nothing short of lunacy in most cases, and is certainly proved to be so in The Changeling.
Middleton's wish to concentrate on the two main figures, De Flores and Beatrice, and De Flores himself is adequate proof that strong characterization of men was not outside the dramatist's range. Franciscus and Antonio perform the structural role of linking main plot and sub-plot together, but they are little more than creatures of circumstance and, while Lollio and Alibius parallel De Flores and Alsemoro in the main plot, they are worth little attention in their own right. Even Vermandero is not a developed character; he shows nothing but a "slightly stupid or blunted calm of mind" which, according to Tomlinson, allows him no more than the "complacent reasoning and rationalization" so obviously shared by his daughter. The brothers de Piracquo are little more than sketches, the one doomed to die by the hand of De Flores in the depths of Vermandero's castle and thereafter to wander aimlessly as a ghost, the other destined to make only sporadic appearances as a restless and ineffectual figure of Revenge. The "under-drawing" of these subsidiary figures, however, should not cause us to doubt Middleton's talents as a creator of character. As in the case of Alsemoro, they are deliberately kept in the background so as to permit the focussing of our vision upon Beatrice and De Flores.

It is, then, with the brooding figure of the serving-man who, in accordance with his name, "deflowers" Beatrice,

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6 Tomlinson, p. 193.
7 Tomlinson, p. 199.
that we can see Middleton's powers of characterization. He shows at times a cynicism closely related to that of Iago in Shakespeare's *Othello*, but whereas Iago is a study in motiveless malignity, even a superficial perusal of *The Changeling* provides us with at least one very plausible reason for De Flores' actions.\(^8\) He is not just an evil character, for he demands a "complexity of response"\(^9\) which will be discussed later in connection with the Confrontation scene. Moreover, *The Changeling* is not only Beatrice's play; it belongs to De Flores as well. Thus I propose to look at both characters together as they progress from a barely-realized (on Beatrice's part) affinity in evil at the beginning to a spiritual and physical liaison which, in the final scene, is openly admitted.

As Ornstein points out, the play's opening scene is "deliberately conventional and deliberately embroidered with literary artifices", so that Alsemro's meeting with Beatrice becomes a "Petrarchan love duel". Beneath the surface sweetness, however, we find "subtle and prophetic dissonances".\(^10\) Thus this arrangement of the drama on three levels at once, naturalistic, mock-Petrarchan and morally prophetic, shows us the actual meeting, its interpretation by the two lovers and the reality which they have seen but

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8 See Salgado, p.37, for a brief discussion of the resemblances between the two characters, and for the opposite viewpoint, Frost, p.71.
9 See Frost, pp.73-74.
10 Ornstein, pp.181-182.
blithely ignored. The "love at first sight" to which they have both succumbed is made to appear magical and yet inherently dubious by the constant mention of omens, and contrary to Miss Gardner's contention that the supernatural element is "only a perfunctory acknowledgment of the popular taste for ghosts of murdered men", its use throughout creates a consistent and sustained pattern designed to counterbalance, often ironically, the events taking place in the more earthly reality. The "temple's vane" has indeed turned against Alsemoro who, we feel, should no longer be in Alicante, and Middleton means us to see his change from traveller to courtly loiterer, from a man sensibly suspicious of women to a moon-struck lover, not as a real "transformation" but as something tragically untrue to his nature. It is a change which is sufficiently out of character to prompt Jasperino, who obviously knows Alsemoro well, to remark: "How now! The laws of the Medes are/changed, sure" (I.i.59-60).

From the first, Beatrice's skill in such encounters is made quite plain. There is no modesty, no trace of shyness, only a quickness of repartee which could not possibly come from one unversed in the ways of the world, and while her feelings for Alsemoro are undoubtedly sincere, she is also aware of her role as the mysterious Petrarchan lady of fire and ice and assumes it with practised ease:

11 Gardner, p.328.
12 Citations from The Changeling in my text are to Salgadão's edition.
Be better advised, sir:

Our eyes are sentinels unto our judgements
And should give certain judgement what they see;

(11.72-74)

This is sophisticated small talk, and the image of sight is only used to elicit from Alsemere a denial that he is simply amusing himself with her and, of course, an outright declaration of affection. The declaration is duly made and is followed by her statement which is part chagrin and, to give Beatrice her due, part wonderment:

Sure, mine eyes were mistaken,
This was the man was meant me; that he should come
So near his time and miss it! (11.85-87)

But her annoyance at the whole situation makes itself felt in her whip-lash remarks to De Flores, who comes to tell her that her father will soon be arriving. Her loathing for the serving-man is made quite plain: "And how welcome for your part you are/ I'm sure you know" (11.101-102). The challenging and confident lady has now become a petulant girl who, absorbed in her irrational hatred of De Flores, must be nudged back to the present situation by Alsemere's polite enquiry about the cause of her displeasure. Realizing that her display of bad temper may have given him the wrong impression, Beatrice asks his pardon and tells him that she dislikes and fears De Flores, only to be soothed, as Ornstein notes, by the "commonplaces of an unimaginative and impercipient mind".13

De Flores declares himself unsure of the reason for her

13 Ornstein, p.182.
hate: "She knows no cause for't, but a peevish will" (1.110). The word "will" is, however, significant. Moreover, the fact that he is ugly cannot be overlooked, for Middleton has made use of the conventional belief in physiognomy, thereby suggesting that De Flores' physical appearance mirrors the state of his soul. Beatrice is repelled and yet fascinated by his ugliness and this fascination points to her instinctive realization that, in some way as yet unrevealed, her spirit is perilously akin to his. Thus while it is only hinted at in the beginning, the link between them is still undoubtedly there because the violence of her antipathy to him is, by its very nature, closely allied to passion. As Tomlinson notes, Beatrice has a fear of De Flores which is "based on a real affinity too frightening to be dealt with and controlled at a conscious level".14

The entry of Vermandero puts an end to the romantic colloquy of the lovers which, in a baser and yet a more practical way, has been "parodied", as Ricks observes, by the "brisk lust" of Diaphanta and Jasperino.15 The father, complacently assured of the complete suitability of his daughter's betrothed, tells her that the wedding must take place within the week, and Beatrice's way of playing for time shows little, if any, true modesty. Her pretended

14 Tomlinson, p.187. See also Ribner, p.126, and Salgado, pp.36-37.
attachment to that "dear companion" of her soul serves only to hide her sophisticated supposition that the rather prurient superstition surrounding a woman's loss of maidenhead in marriage can be played upon if she wants to plead for a postponement. She is perfectly aware that it is passion for a stranger and not virginal timidity which inspires her plea. To call her action that of an "innocent" would be to deny Middleton's view of her and to mistake his underlying irony which will ultimately be complete when she is deflowered "so rude and suddenly" by the hated De Flores. Moreover, to call her "dutiful" as Salgado does is to ignore her obvious lack of regard for the feelings and wishes of others:

Vermandero: He shall be bound to me
As fast as this tie can hold him; I'll want
My will else.
Beatrice [aside]: I shall want mine if you do it.

(11.225-227)

As her father leaves, Beatrice drops her glove and in response to Vermandero's request, De Flores bends to pick it up. When he offers it to her she draws off the mate and throws them both down in an inverted but prophetic parody of the giving of a favour. She could, we may argue, ignore De Flores completely or simply accept the glove, but the fact that she actually gives him the pair suggests that she recognizes, even if only subconsciously at this stage, her kinship with him. It is an action she would probably be incapable of explaining in logical terms, but her peremptory "Take 'em" indicates that she expects him, in
his desire for her, to do just that. The episode is, therefore, significant in that it symbolically prefigures her eventual physical union with him. It also highlights the rashness of the girl who, repelled by the appetite she senses in the man before her, is still giddy enough to give him what she should be giving to Alsemoro. It is indeed, as De Flores wryly observes, a favour "come—with a mischief!" for just as something instinctive has made Beatrice part with the gloves, so the potential tragedy of such an action is at once apparent. Moreover, it is, above all, this episode which should convince critics that, even if Rowley mapped out this scene and sketched in the romantic meeting of the lovers in the temple, the truer genius of Middleton has been responsible for its adherence to the play's thesis. As Ornstein concludes, in Rowley's "contributions to the main plot he is faithfully executing the tragic design which Middleton expands in those scenes that are unmistakably his own". 16

When we next meet Beatrice, her rhapsodic meditation upon "judgement" serves only to heighten our awareness of what Tomlinson calls "the dreadful gap in the woman's logic": 17

Then I appear in nothing more approved,  
Than making choice of him;  
For 'tis a principle, he that can choose  
That bosom well, who of his thought partakes,  
Proves most discreet in every choice he makes. (II.i.8-12)

16 Ornstein, p.290 note 2.  
17 Tomlinson, p.193.
Beatrice is not blind since, as was pointed out in the discussion of *Women Beware Women*, blindness leaves no room for tragic choice. Her tragedy lies not in lack of sight but in her interpretation of what comes within her line of vision. She sees clearly enough, but rationalizes all which does not coincide with her preconceived notions of what should happen. N.W. Bawcutt writes that "Beatrice is not innocent in any fine or worthy sense: it is the innocence of selfishness, of ignorance, of one who has failed to realize that she is as much subject to the laws of morality as anyone else. But it would not be right to say that she is unaware of morality". The moral order is, to her, a force which she can invoke for protection against De Flores but also a force which she herself disregards when it suits her. Like Bianca Capello, she relies on the attainment of the goal she has chosen as vindication of the methods she uses in that attainment, and like Bianca's, her vision must be forced in upon itself before she will admit her own evil. Even as she dies, we find no true repentance because she is disgusted by the consequences of her sins rather than by the nature of the sins themselves.

When Beatrice is approached by De Flores with a long-winded message about the arrival of the brothers de Piracquo her words emphasize once more the uneasiness she experiences in his presence: "This ominous ill-faced fellow more disturbs me/ Than all my other passions" (11.53-54). The relentless

slowness of his lines contrasts strongly with the sharp, cut-off impatience of her questions. Her violent demands that he remove himself from her sight indicate her growing awareness of her spiritual affinity with this "standing toad-pool", this embodiment of her own self-appointed ruin. The seemingly patient courtesy of De Flores' statements ironically counterbalances his earlier admission, while watching Beatrice, of the blazing passion which she arouses in him:

She turns her blessed eye upon me now,
And I'll endure all storms before I part with't. 19

There is also a cruel comedy in the way he deliberately lengthens and elaborates his message so that he might longer stay and look at her. He is not despairing of her, as is shown in his cynical aside that "Women have chid themselves abed to men" (1.38), but he is not merely the conventional cynic either. He has a Shakespearean depth to him, as Frost points out, and despite his obsession with sex, his ugliness, his wickedness and his cynicism, he shows a "perverted grandeur, which evokes grudging sympathy, even though we recognize his depravity". 20 Thus, as in the case of Shakespearean villains, his ugliness and social inferiority and the cruel treatment he has had in the past demand a complex response in which pity and condemnation are inextricably mingled.

By the time her father enters with Alonzo and Tomaso, Beatrice is in no fit state to talk of marriage, but Tomaso's

19 For the whole of this speech see II.i.26-51.
20 Frost, p.73.
sensible observations to his brother about her preoccupied mood go quite unnoticed. Alonzo's faith, says his brother, is "cozened in her, strongly cozened", but the enraptured Alonzo is as completely in the hold of "love's tame madness" as are the clandestine lovers themselves. The "madness" of Alonzo's affection parallels that of Alsemero in the following scene where, once again, Beatrice shows that she is far from innocent as she hints broadly to her lover that Piracquo is a hindrance and would be better out of the way. Alsemero suggests that an honorable duel would settle matters but, as Ornstein points out, at the very moment when "he bodies her unspoken thought, their marriage of true minds disintegrates. She instinctively knows that this Petrarchan service requires a different kind of man; she knows that she needs De Flores even though she loves Alsemero".\(^2\) Her rejection of his offer is vehement:

\begin{verbatim}
The law would claim you from me, or obscurity
Be made the grave to bury you alive.
I'm glad these thoughts come forth; oh keep not one
Of this condition, sir; here was a cause
Found to bring sorrow on her way to death:(II.ii.34-38)
\end{verbatim}

But in turning from Alsemero as an unfit instrument of her will, she thinks of someone with a "fouler visage" and the cold-bloodedness with which she seizes on the serving-man as the ideal murderer of Alonzo underlines, as Ornstein suggests, "the disparity" between "Alsemero's storybook romanticism and her equally naïve but ruthless calculation.

\(^2\) Ornstein, p.183.
She is the stronger, the dominating figure\textsuperscript{22} and her lover's unsuccessful attempts to find out what she is thinking about shows that this "marriage of true minds" is really no marriage at all. Beatrice reproves herself for marring "so good a market" with her "scorn", but, overlooking the indisputable fact that she cannot, as she thinks, manipulate others without some consequence to herself, she determines to "serve" her "turn" upon De Flores. Once again, as Ornstein observes, "the spying De Flores sets the Petrarchan tableau in cynical perspective. To Alsemoro Beatrice's infidelity to Alonzo is proof of her devotion to him. To De Flores it is evidence of an inherent frailty which a calculating man might turn to sensual profit:"\textsuperscript{23} "I'm sure both/ Cannot be served unless she transgresses" (ll.59–60).

He confesses himself surprised, however, at her flattery: "'Tis the same physiomy to a hair and pimple,/ Which she called scurvy scarce an hour ago" (ll.77–78). His awareness of the suddenness of her change in attitude does not, all the same, stop him from becoming inflamed by her touch, and despite the fact that Beatrice has no conception of the depth and intensity of the passion she is arousing and can consciously evade contemplating the nature of the temptation she is offering to De Flores, her honeyed words and touches indicate, once again, that she knows instinctively of his desire for her. But her interpretation of that desire

\textsuperscript{22} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{23} Ibid.
is based upon what she wants to see: she believes that he will murder Alonzo to gain her favour and be content with any reward which she deigns to give him.

What is, however, most telling in this exchange, is Beatrice's complacent insistence upon drawing the "moral" from her rather dubious situation. With the ability to rationalize and moralize inherited from her father, she suppresses in her mind any application which morality might have to her and reduces everything, whether pleasant or unpleasant, to a neat formula:

> When we are used
> To a hard face, 'tis not so unpleasing;
> It mends still in opinion, hourly mends,
> I see it by experience. (ll. 89-92)

Thus any feelings of guilt which might arise from her selfish use of another person can be quickly and painlessly assuaged, and these specious words emphatically underline not blindness, but the wilfulness which allows her to observe the situation and its probable consequences and then completely disregard them. Her words are confident and expressive but we are never permitted to forget that they are really nothing but lies.

According to Ornstein, De Flores "cynically miscalculates her motive" and accepts the "crude masquerade of her courtship". Miss Bradbrook also argues that the pair part from one another "mutually deceived". But, as Frost has

24 Ornstein, p. 184.
observed, this interpretation "makes nonsense" of the "finest lines" of that later scene where De Flores comes to claim his reward:26

Can you weep fate from its determined purpose? So soon may you weep me. (III.i.162-163)

De Flores is no passive dupe. When he parts from Beatrice he is well aware that she intends to reward him with money, but he is determined, all the same, that she will pay the price of Alonso's murder with her body. "He has", as Frost claims, "assured himself of Beatrice; he does not believe that she has assured herself to him".27 The scene has been carefully constructed so that the motives of both are obvious to an audience, but while De Flores' vision of it all is quite unclouded, Beatrice's inability to grasp the meaning of his most blatant sexual references shows that she still interprets everything solely in terms of what she herself desires. She is so complacently preoccupied with her own cleverness in ridding herself of "Piracquo, and his dog-face" at one and the same time that, when she eagerly tells De Flores that he can live abroad in comfort after the murder, she fails to see what lies behind the seemingly gentle acquiescence of his reply: "Ay, ay, we'll talk of that hereafter" (II.ii.147). Finally, after she has happily and unsuspectingly taken her leave, he soliloquizes in unholy anticipation of "the affection which will follow her rape, when 'hunger and pleasure' have commended such a slovenly

26 See Frost, pp.71-73.
27 Frost, p.72.
The Confrontation scene (III.iv), in which Beatrice is gradually forced to an uncompromising recognition of her kinship with De Flores is, in many respects, more of a climax than the play's final scene. In her opening soliloquy she basks in the "refulgent virtue" of her love for Alsemero, happily expecting her father's blessing upon their union, but the imagery of feasting in the lines of De Flores as he enters, emphasizes the emptiness of such airy moralizing. She turns from her meditation to ask him "Is it done then?" (1.23) but her intention to consign the murder and murderer to as quick an anonymity as possible is thwarted by his bald statement: "I've a token for you". Her surprise is faultlessly drawn; here, we feel, is a woman who has never given a single thought to what murder entails. All she can say is that the ring from Alonso's severed finger is an engagement pledge which her father made her send to him. She attempts to conclude the business by telling De Flores that he can keep it and briskly suggests that he would do well to dispose of the finger.

It is important not to underestimate the significance of this "token". It is not merely an Italianate horror included by Middleton for the titillation of a morbid audience. It is a symbol, albeit grisly, of Beatrice's

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28 Frost, P.73.
29 For a brief discussion of the sustained use of the imagery of eating and sexual enjoyment in The Changeling, see Bradbrook, pp.234-236.
complicity in the murder of Alonzo, and even though she does not really see its significance, it helps to prepare the way for De Flores' eventual demand for "payment". Had he made his claim upon her body with no such offering she might well have refused to "pay" and, as Frost says, "damn the consequences". But now De Flores only needs to take one further step to impress upon her that she is inextricably involved in murder and is thus a fit mate for him.

The sight of the finger, however, does little more than awaken vague misgivings and, anxious to see the back of him, Beatrice continues with naïve insistence to increase the sum of money she had previously intended to pay the murderer. The sustained flow of the dialogue traces out that initial uncertainty which is soon to become horrified comprehension while at the same time balancing the feeling in her lines of growing terror and disbelief with the terse and yet passionate declarations of De Flores. Even when she is told that she must take flight she can only ask, half ingenuously, half fearfully: "What's your meaning?" (1.82) Then, in the sombre and reverberating tones of tragedy comes the inescapable reply:

Why, are not you as guilty, in, I'm sure, As deep as I? And we should stick together. Come, your fears counsel you but ill, my absence Would draw suspect upon you instantly; There were no rescue for you. (11.84-88)  

Since the finger has actually failed to elicit much of a response, De Flores has had to become more explicit and with

30 Frost, p.73.
the words "He speaks home", Beatrice acknowledges her complicity although she does not seem to be very perturbed by it. It is only when he tries to kiss her that she realizes, with terror, what "precious" reward he intends to claim and her protests against his rude advances indicate horror, not at her own crime, but at the way it has permitted De Flores to be so forward. Then comes his declaration: he has "eased" her of her "trouble" by killing Alonzo and now that he is "in pain" (i.e. in the throes of desire), he must be "eased" of her. The word "blood" means both life-blood and the sexual urge, so that "Justice" invites Beatrice to pay for the killing of her betrothed with her sexual favours. Her realization that union with De Flores will force her to be unfaithful to the man she loves shows once more her awareness of a moral order. This awareness, however, constitutes its own irony, for while she is ready to call such an order to her aid in defending herself against De Flores, in the past she has been only too ready to disregard the claims that it has rightfully made upon her. This renders her talk of "honour" and "modesty" quite hollow, and despite her continuing protests, comes De Flores' terrible indictment of her:

Push, you forget yourself!
A woman dipped in blood, and talk of modesty?
(11.126-127)

31 For a discussion of the double meaning of the play's key words, see Ricks, "Moral and Poetic Structure".
Her fluent use of moral terminology is apparent in her reference to the "misery of sin" but, as before, it is the thought of an alliance with a man she detests rather than true repentance for her crime which prompts her despairing cry. In an attempt to re-establish her authority in the mistress-servant relationship, Beatrice begs De Flores to think of the "distance" set by "creation" between their bloods, but in his answer is to be found the universal truth that sin is a leveller which makes all men equal. Complicity in murder has removed the social barriers which previously might have been between them: "Push, fly not to your birth, but settle you/ In what the act has made you." Beatrice is now the "deed's creature" and her affinity with him, hidden at the beginning of the play, is revealed in all its horror.

The lines which follow her agonized exclamation of his name add to the complex impression of De Flores which has been built up throughout the play:

    I shall rest from all lovers' plagues then;
    I live in pain now: that shooting eye
    Will burn my heart to cinders. (ll.152-154)

There is a tired triumph in these words which makes him less of an unmitigated villain. "I live in pain now" shows us a man who, while evil, is capable of a passion as intense and as enduring as that of Dante for his Beatrice. The grandeur may be perverted, but it is grandeur none the less. Moreover, it is these lines which help to highlight the

32 For the whole of this speech see ll.133-141 and 143-150.
utter crassness of Beatrice's final attempt at bribery, an attempt which is rendered ineffectual and quickly stilled by the brooding voice of her evil angel:

Can you weep fate from its determined purpose?  
So soon may you weep me.  
(11.162-163)

Finally, after Beatrice's acknowledgment of that "vengeance" which she has, until now, so readily disregarded, come the scene's closing lines from De Flores and, as Miss Bradbrook observes, we can hear his "tenderness" in "one of Middleton's most daring and most perfectly managed modulations of feeling". 33

After the dumb show, at the beginning of Act Four, which informs us in stylized action of the marriage between Beatrice and Alseméro, comes the virginity test which some critics, like Schoenbaum, have hastened to label "ridiculous". 34 The test is, however, defended and, I think, rightly by Ribner on the grounds that if it is ludicrous, then it is intentionally so in order "to illustrate the futility of probing into what only time can reveal". 35 Beatrice appears, caught in the toils of her own plotting and desperately casting about for an effective solution to her problem:

There's no venturing
Into his bed, what course see'er I light upon,  
Without my shame, which may grow up to danger;  
(IV.i.11-13)

33 Bradbrook, p.219.  
34 Schoenbaum, p.147.  See also Hibbard, p.61.  
35 Ribner, p.131.  See also Bradbrook, p.215, for a brief discussion of the test's place among the "ominous" elements of the play.
As she busies herself with a furtive inspection of her husband's private belongings we can see the lack of trust and honesty upon which this marriage has been built. Alsemoro's obvious intention to have test tube proof of his wife's honesty not only causes us to doubt the validity of his clear sight and Beatrice's belief in it but also emphasizes the inadequacy of the relationship for which so much has been hazarded.

The maid-servant, Diaphanta, unwittingly breaks in upon Beatrice's thoughts and gives her the idea of using the girl as a substitute bride in Alsemoro's bed. Firstly, however, she must know if her maid is a virgin and in tones of pretended moral indignation she transfers to Diaphanta the sin of which she knows she is guilty: "I fear thou art not modest, Diaphanta" (1.65). In an act which renders her own loss of chastity even more obvious and appalling, she bribes her maid and proceeds to "try" her virginity so that she might learn the "symptoms" specified by Alsemoro's chemical handbook and counterfeit them if the need arises. Alsemoro, meanwhile, listens to Jasperino's account of a meeting between Beatrice and De Flores and is very quick to doubt his wife, but when he sees her again he changes his mind with equal celerity: "She's abused, questionless" (IV.iII.129).

When she finally passes his test by dint of gaping, sneezing and laughing at the appropriate intervals, his suspicions are lulled and he praises that honour which his chemical mumbo-jumbo has "proved" her to possess: "Chaste as the
breath of heaven, or morning's womb, / That brings the day forth; thus my love encloses thee" (ll. 149-150). Thus the virginity test, while it undoubtedly contains elements of domestic comedy, does bring home to us the unalterable fact of Beatrice's loss of chastity. Moreover, it is a symbolic overture to the kind of problems she will constantly have to face now that she is married in vice to De Flores.

The opening of Act Five shows us a wretched Beatrice cursing her maid who "cannot rule her blood to keep her promise" (V.i.7), and Middleton's portrayal of her jealousy and humiliation as she paces up and down outside her own bridal chamber is masterly. Her disregard of her own dubious situation is ironically reflected in her curses against Diaphanta who "never minds" her mistress's "honour" or her "peace". This is nothing but name-calling, since it comes from a woman who has deliberately sent one unwanted suitor to an unshriven grave, committed adultery, sent a substitute bride to her husband's bed and so forfeited her right to "peace". The striking of the clock has the same effect of inexorability obtained by Marlowe in the last scene of Faustus, and the telescoping of time effectively enhances on the one hand, Diaphanta's oblivious lust, and, on the other, Beatrice's desperate but deserved plight. In anger and terror she turns to De Flores and asks him what to do, but once again the man to whom she is married in body and spirit, though not in name, must make himself brutally
clear before she can turn her thoughts to the physical side of murder: "You talk of danger when your fame's on fire" (1.34). Thus the web of sin in which Beatrice is entangled becomes even more constricting. To cover up the murder of Alonzo she has become De Flores' mistress. To hide her loss of virginity she has used the services of a counterfeit bride. Now that bride, on the suggestion of De Flores, is to be murdered so that she will keep her secret.

It is in this scene that Beatrice openly acknowledges, for the first time, her reliance upon her mate: "I'm forced to love thee now, / 'Cause thou provid'st so carefully for my honour" (11.47-48). But in direct contrast to the tenderness of his lines at the end of the Confrontation scene, De Flores here shows only a cynical attitude to their relationship: the words "safety", "pleasure" and "continuance" reveal nothing of his former protectiveness but rather, they heavily emphasize the sexual side of their alliance. The scene is also important in that it clearly displays Middleton's superb use of implication. The drama has leapt straight from Beatrice's submission to De Flores to her meeting with him here and, as Ornstein remarks, the dramatist "subtly intimates the evolution of their relationship by the nature of their new entente". Moreover, the rather pathetic ghost of Alonzo which wanders aimlessly across the stage before the conflagration in which Diaphanta supposedly "dies" is

36 Ornstein, p.181.
indicative of Middleton's careful use of convention and its appearance can be justified in terms of the reactions it elicits from both Beatrice and De Flores. It heavily under­scores De Flores' total lack of guilt, and even though Beatrice professes herself scared of this "ill thing" she soon forgets it and turns her thoughts back to Diaphanta. The fire over, the maid's body is "discovered" by De Flores and consigned by Beatrice to its resting place with no less cold-bloodedness than that with which the misguided Alonzo was consigned to his.

In the final scene the drama is played out: Alsemero again listens to Jasperino's suspicions and is, this time, convinced. When Beatrice approaches him he asks her to "resolve... one question", the question of her honesty. Her answer, as he is quick to point out, is far from "modest" and realizing the truth about her he tells her that she is a "whore". She reveals once more her inability to cope with circumstances which she has not had time to rationalize and tells her husband that he has "ruined" what he can "ne'er repair again" (V.iii.34-35), but she finally admits the murder, believing in her misguided way that two killings make her less abhorrent to him than would adultery: "Your love has made me/ A cruel murd'ress" (11.64-65). It is here, as Ornstein has ably pointed out, that the Petrarchan roles are quite reversed: "now she demands Alsemero's love as her reward for the Petrarchan service of murder".37 Her husband's

37 Ornstein, p.189.
attitude to her is forcibly conveyed in the words he uses, words which relate to blood, to death and to deformity, but with unbelievable single-mindedness Beatrice tries to hammer home the lie that she is not guilty of adultery. When De Flores enters and coolly admits his relationship with Beatrice he asserts his "marital" right to go to her in the closet into which she has been thrust: it is a claim which Alsemere bitterly acknowledges:

I'll be your pander now; rehearse again
Your scene of lust, that you may be perfect
When you shall come to act it to the black audience
Where howls and gnashings shall be music to you.
Clip your adulteress freely, 'tis the pilot
Will guide you to the Mars Mortuum
Where you shall sink to fathoms bottomless. (ll.114-120)

De Flores finally brings the dying Beatrice out to face her father and her husband and many critics, like Tomlinson, argue that this is "the moment in the play" when she "at last, and with virtually no further prevarication, sees truly". 38 Her vision, has, indeed, been forcibly turned in upon itself, but we are given no indication that she feels true repentance. We are, in fact, convinced that, as Ornstein declares, "her "moral" awareness actually leads to viler degradation because it does not include remorse. . . . She is revolted by the price she must now pay, but not by the criminal act she has already committed". 39 To Beatrice "honour" and "life" are one and the same thing and her

38 Tomlinson, p.206. See also Jump, p.366; Ricks, p.301; Hibbard, p.60, and Eliot, who sees the last great speech as nothing but good poetry, p.93.
39 Ornstein, p.185. See also Bradford, "Women of Middleton and Webster", p.21, and Holzknecht, p.267.
statement that both have fallen with De Flores enables Middleton to draw the distinction between public and private morality. She does not see her death as expiation for sin but as an escape from disgrace; now that her "shame" has been revealed she no longer wants to live.

De Flores' death is also entirely consistent with his character. He is, in many respects, more admirable than Beatrice because he calmly accepts his share of the blame and does not attempt to shift it onto anyone else. The completeness of his knowledge of Beatrice's faults has never changed the feeling he has had for her: "I loved this woman in spite of her heart", and even though he dies complacent in the knowledge that he has had her to himself, the complacency is somehow modified by the protectiveness he shows towards her: "I would not go to leave thee far behind" (l.177). The words are not cynical or bestial, but words of concern: the passion which has inspired them may have been evil, but the calm assurance which they show is magnificently realized.

And so they die, mistress and servant, accomplices in crime who are destined for the Sea of the Dead. Vermandero's reaction to the loss of his daughter betrays his overriding preoccupation rather than any true sorrow. Without a word of compassion, the man immediately thinks in terror of the blow his reputation will sustain: "Oh, my name is entered

40 See ll.167-171.
now in that record/ Where till this fatal hour 'twas never read" (ll.180-181). Middleton might have used the onlookers as a choric commentary upon the horror of Beatrice's fate. Yet, once again, he places the integrity of his tragic vision before dramatic effect: those who remain behind are hypocrites whose mood is complacent rather than compassionate, and this complacency is epitomized by what Tomlinson calls the "slightly too jolly" remark of Alsemoro: "What an opacious body had that moon/ That last changed on us!" (ll.196-197). We do, perhaps, expect a little more grief on his part, especially when we think back to the fervour of his courtship speeches, but when he goes on to speak the generalized and rather inane epilogue we see that the convention is used to reveal, by implication, the frail and impercipient humanity of its speaker.

The sub-plot has elicited many and varied comments. Some critics, like Salgado, consider it "farcical" whilst others, like Tomlinson, argue that it emphasizes and further defines Middleton's point. The most perceptive comments of all, however, come from William Empson in his excellent study of Some Versions of Pastoral. Professor Empson begins by noting that the sub-plot is generally "an easy-going device, often used simply to fill out a play, and

41 Tomlinson, p.205.
42 Salgado, p.34. See also Boas, Stuart Drama, p.241; Swinburne, p.xxxv, and Ellis-Fermor, p.144.
44 A study of the Pastoral form in literature (Harmondsworth 1966).
has an obvious effect in the Elizabethans of making you feel
the play deals with life as a whole... In *The
Changeling*, however, the sub-plot is very thoroughly woven
into the tragic design by a series of events which parallel,
or are anti-typical to, the events of the main plot. Most
modern audiences are unable to take the unembarassed
Elizabethan view of madmen, but in Middleton's time they
were believed to possess "some positive extra-human quality;
they might say things profoundly true".  

Both plots have many similar points in construction;
in each case the "heroine" is involved (whether by marriage
or betrothal) with a man she does not love. Unlike Isabella,
however, who sensibly sees how changeable her lovers are and
so keeps from committing adultery, Beatrice wilfully allows
"love's tame madness" to direct her actions and ultimately
loses that hope of salvation which Isabella has preserved
for herself. In comparison with the tragic characters,
Isabella has a refreshing sanity: living among madmen and
fools has convinced her that it is necessary. Compared with
Beatrice Isabella is, as Empson points out, "a very
impressive creature; and the assumption in the tragic part
that Alsemero will take his maid's virginity without
discovering she is not his wife is more really brutal than
anything in the asylum scenes".  

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45 Empson, p.29.
46 Empson, p.46. See also Robert Rentoul Reed Jr.,
47 Empson, p.47.
There is also a parallel between the "deceived" husbands, Alsemoro and Alibius, but a more important one is drawn between De Flores and Lollio, the custodian of the asylum. Where one demands his "share" of his mistress's affections and is accommodated because of the repercussions which would undoubtedly result from her refusal, the other also claims what he considers to be his due and is sternly rebuked. The two plots are also connected, although somewhat circumstantially, by Antonio and Franciscus, the two courtiers who leave Vermandero's castle to be disguised as madmen and return with the other lunatics "to close up the solemnity" of Beatrice's wedding. The sub-plot, held by most scholars to be the work of Rowley, is, in most instances, distinguished only by its lack of quality. This does not mean, however, that it is without a strong thematic purpose.

We must, in conclusion, ask ourselves what constitutes Beatrice's tragedy and how that tragedy relates to Middleton's overall conception of human nature and its relationship with the moral order. Her tragedy is one, not of blindness, but of interpretation. Her eyes see clearly but since she wilfully refuses to consider the application of the moral order to her own situation, her vision has no lasting significance. Her faulty interpretation of all she sees is, in artistic terms, conveyed by Middleton's consistent use of a balance between the Petrarchan view of life and the baser reality. Her passionate dislike of De Flores indicates her instinctive recognition of her "alter ego", the promptings
of which she has deliberately chosen to follow, while the
serving-man, despite his evil, could be called "the scourge
of God" because he is the instrument of that divine
retribution which Beatrice has refused to recognize.

There is a touch of pessimism which we cannot over­
look, for all Middleton's "good" characters are shown, in
this play, to be far from perfect. With the vision of the
true realist, he sees a world where human nature will always
have a tragic potentiality for evil, but his view is not
cynical. We find in his work no admiration for passion, no
emotional sympathy with those who are caught in its toils.
This, however, does not mean that we has no values but
rather that his values are of a different sort from the ones
which convention has conditioned us to expect. In The
Changeling he does imply a distinction between people who
are passionate and yet complacently moral and those who,
while capable of deep feeling, do not permit it to cloud their
sensible vision of life. It is a distinction between
Beatrice and Isabella, between true goodness, which is sane,
reliable and not attained without some struggle and false
goodness, which is smug, self-conscious and the result of a
wilful misdirection of energy. It is this true goodness
upon which the future of Middleton's world depends.
CONCLUSION

It is very difficult in a summary of a few pages to do justice to those aspects of Middleton's development which have been discussed in this thesis. But an attempt must be made, and I think it would be valuable to look once more, however briefly, at those two aspects which I have attempted to show as being the most important: character and morality.

Firstly then, we must look at the women, for it is in them that the gradual enlargement and extension of the dramatist's powers of characterization can be seen. In *A Mad World My Masters* (1606), we meet the witty courtesan Frank Gullman, who practises deception but remains undeceived herself. She refuses to be "managed" or manipulated and in this way she is highly individual, but she is also a whore, a calling to which none of us could rightfully give moral support. Against the background of a "mad world" of social abuses and hypocrisy, her practicality and good humour are weighed up against her amoral efforts in one-up-manship, so that while she is a person we like and with whom we can laugh, she is not a person we can really admire. We do feel strong admiration, however, for Moll Cutpurse in *The Roaring Girl* (1608), a play in which Middleton's techniques of characterization are further developed. Moll's lack of femininity is so heavily stressed that at first it constitutes our dominant, perhaps even our only impression
of her, but like Frank Gullman she soon makes it clear that she is not one to be used or ordered about. Unlike Frank, however, she is "honest" in two senses: she is not prepared to sell, or in any other way dispose of her chastity and if she deceives, it is with the intention of fighting and conquering deception on its own ground.

Then, in A Chaste Maid in Cheapside (1611), comes a regression, in terms of character, to the rather insipid Moll Yellowhammer, who is almost indistinguishable from the conventional heroines in some of the early plays. I must point out that I have used this play in the beginning of my study to show how character and morality are separately discernible in the more conventional city comedies rather than for the purposes of commenting on a heroine who is obviously ordinary to the point of being almost non-existent. It must be admitted, of course, that Middleton's development in characterization was far from consistent in the first half of his career as a dramatist. The possible reasons for such sporadic development are many, among them financial need, which necessitated the churning out of conventional drama or even a lack of interest in a woman whose action in this play is passive rather than active, whose role, in other words, determines to a great extent the sort of character she must be.

The tragicomedies which form the bridge between the comedies and the later plays show the beginnings of an interest in the nature of the moral flaw, but it is with
the heathen princess Roxena in *Hengist, King of Kent* (1618) that this interest becomes developed into something nearing a consistent point of view. Roxena is similar to Frank Gullman and Moll Cutpurse in that she too has a mind of her own, but the difference lies in the fact that her character is tragically turned towards evil. She, like Frank, will sell her chastity, but the sale can no longer be laughed at or simply ignored. The preoccupation with sexual sins which is to be so much of a leit motif in the two great tragedies makes its first sustained appearance in this play, an appearance which, for the first time, is consistently overlaid with tragic implication.

Bianca Capello in *Women Beware Women* (1621) and Beatrice-Joanna in *The Changeling* (1622) are both representatives of the culmination of Middleton's development in the techniques of portraying feminine character. They are individual enough to seek what they want with life-like spirit and persistence but, at the same time, tragically human enough to make the wrong choice, that of evil. Other than this, however, I can say nothing more to convey my admiration for Middleton's presentation of them than has already been said in Chapters Five and Six.

Concurrent with, and in the later plays indistinguishable from, this development of Middleton's characterization of women is the gradual emergence of a moral point of view which, as it progresses, gains in intensity what it loses
in the narrowing of its focus. Although A Chaste Maid in Cheapside is chronologically preceded by A Mad World My Masters and The Roaring Girl, I have dealt with it at the beginning of my thesis because I consider it an interesting example of the way Middleton suddenly reverts to the conventions of social satire espoused by so many of his contemporaries. In A Chaste Maid there is undoubtedly a rigid moral theory but it seems to be implied in terms of the social, rather than the personal areas of experience. It is because of this, and because I wished to deal with the development of Middleton's personal morality in an unbroken sequence that I have discussed this play outside its rightful chronological context.

At first, with A Mad World My Masters, there seems a great danger of cynicism. Frank Gullman is not a good character: in fact she is actively and intelligently bad and yet she receives no punishment. Retribution in this play seems to have a rather casual modus operandi in that the unlucky are struck down as often as the evil are. In this way, therefore, character and morality are quite separate. The Roaring Girl, however, constitutes a counterbalance, for it is here that morality draws closer to character. Through the practical eye of Moll we see, as she does, that the world can never be perfect, but it would be wrong to call this cynicism. It is a commitment to realism rather than cynical despair which keeps Middleton
from falsifying his vision. Moreover, he does show his approval of Moll's sensible attitude to life, an attitude which is, incidentally, the forerunner of Isabella's practical and sound morality in The Changeling.

In Henriad, King of Kent the feeling that total good and perfection are impossible becomes more explicit. Middleton sees character and morality as merging elements: people contain within themselves from the very beginning, the seeds of their own destruction. This does not mean that they have been predestined by some exterior and uncaring force which will only allow them to mechanically act out a foreordained drama of destruction. There is always a choice between the alternatives of good and evil and it is a choice which Middleton fully acknowledges.

In Women Beware Women and even more strongly in The Changeling, we see the dramatist's increasing concern with those who actualize their latent potentiality for evil and so make the choice which leads to ruin. Bianca and Beatrice choose their own destruction and, in so doing, constitute Middleton's morality. In other words, the merging process is now complete: morality and character are one.
LISTS OF WORKS CONSULTED

All but a few of the works listed here are cited in the footnotes. The remainder are included because they have provided the necessary historical background or in some way influenced by thinking.

<table>
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