

EARLY MODERN LITERARY STUDIES



‘French Amulets’: Expelling Poisons, and Contagion in *The Changeling*

Catherine L. Reedy

Lake Forest College

reedy@mx.lakeforest.edu

When Beatrice-Joanna, the central figure of Middleton’s and Rowley’s *The Changeling* (ca. 1622), decides to use her servant, De Flores, as a poisonous remedy – a ‘poison’ who will ‘expel’ other poisons (2.2.47)¹ – she repeats what was for Middleton a lifelong obsession over the ambivalent properties of dangerous remedies. A play known for its uncanny doubles and deceptive secrets, *The Changeling* stages the controversial yet popular use of medicinal poison, as the ugly, visually-poisonous De Flores transforms into an expelling cure of sorts. In order to rid herself of one ‘poison’ – her now-unwanted fiancé, Alonso de Piracquo – Beatrice-Joanna will use another ‘poison’ – De Flores – to do the murderous deed. Drawing on the doubled nature of medicinal poisons, Middleton and Rowley tap into some of the era’s most heated debates on the substance. Although Beatrice-Joanna turns to poison as a mixed *pharmakon* of poison and cure, where she might ‘make much of poison, / Keep one to expel another’ (2.2.46-7), the play ends instead with a vision of poison as a completely destructive substance, as ‘defil[ing]’ as Beatrice-Joanna’s bleeding body in its deathly conversions of life into death (5.3.150).² Most critics have read these poisonous references as part of the play’s other scientific practices, from the mental asylum to Mizaldus’s manuscript, where masculine systems of

¹ Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, *The Changeling*, ed. by George Walton Williams (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1966); all citations from *The Changeling* taken from this edition. All other Middleton works are cited from *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010).

² See Gibbs’s Introduction and fn 2 and 14 for more on the Greek term *pharmakon*. The ambivalent charge of the term contrasts with other Latinate terms for ‘poisons’ in the era. See *Medical Understandings of Poison circa 1250-1600*, dissertation, University of Wisconsin-Madison (Ann Arbor: ProQuest/UMI, 2009).

control probe women and their unreliable bodies.³ Going along with this, Beatrice-Joanna's direct meddling with poisons and potions offers her an avenue to escape masculine detection and to rival male authorities.⁴ One wonders how to interpret Beatrice-Joanna's use of De Flores as a poison as a self-proclaimed man of art. Is she a sexually-corrupted, temporarily-protected woman with an 'aberrant, female appetite [that] drove her to seek out poison' in Mary Floyd-Wilson's account, or in turning to poison has she entered into to a world 'exclusively reserved for men', as Tanya Pollard argues?⁵

But these pressing questions of gender, medical authority, and ambivalent drugs were further complicated by what would have been the most controversial property of poison in the era, one remarkably overlooked by critics. Outside of its destructiveness as substance, early modern writers debated ever more urgently about one of poison's properties in particular: that is, its casual role in explaining contagion. A hidden, spreading force, poison was believed to be behind the hidden, spreading diseases of the pox and the plague, as it acted on bodies at a distance.

In this essay, I contend that, like their audiences, Middleton and Rowley have contagion in mind, from all the stocks of ambiguous drugs to all the play's changeling transformations. Throughout the play, they explore the dangerous spread of hidden forces, like desire and sin, and use poison as a locus to explore the hidden motives guiding courtship and sex. By turning to the language of poison and disease, Middleton and Rowley recall the 'French amulet' used not only in their shared *A Fair Quarrel* (ca. 1615–

³ The virginity test and Beatrice-Joanna's rape have been widely, and richly, read in this regard, especially following Garber's account of the male inscription and control over the 'intangibility of [female] desire'; see Marjorie Garber, 'The Insincerity of Women', in *Desire in the Renaissance: Psychoanalysis and Literature*, ed. by Valeria Finucci and Regina Schwartz (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 19-38 (p. 25). For more on Middleton's deceptive female pregnancies, see Caroline Bicks, 'Gender and Sexuality', in *Thomas Middleton in Context*, ed. by Suzanne Gossett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 263-70; and for an elegant reading of the play's interior spaces and Beatrice-Joanna's hiddenness, see Michael Neill, 'Introduction' in *The Changeling*, ed. by Michael Neill (New York: Norton, 2006). Luttfiring takes it a step further in analyzing the way these patriarchal tests were both feminized and destabilized by the unreliability of female bodies; see Sara D. Luttfiring, 'Bodily Narratives and the Politics of Virginity in *The Changeling* and the Essex Divorce', *Renaissance Drama* 39 (2011), 97-128 (p. 99).

⁴ Pollard finds Beatrice-Joanna's manipulative use of the virginity potion to link her with the clever, and typically male, schemers of Middleton's city comedies, though the potion ends up turning into a poison by the end; see 'Drugs, Remedies, Poisons, and the Theatre', in *Thomas Middleton in Context*, ed. by Suzanne Gossett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 287-294 (pp. 293-4). Floyd-Wilson also considers the virginity potion scene to get at both the feminized 'closet' of womanly secrets and Beatrice-Joanna's own feminine rivaling of the patriarchal powers that be; see *Occult Knowledge, Science, and Gender on the Shakespearean Stage* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), p. 99.

⁵ See Floyd-Wilson, p. 109 and Pollard, 'Drugs, Remedies', p. 294.

1616),⁶ but also adapted from Middleton's far earlier explorations of this poisonous cure, referenced in one of his first printed works, the collaborative plague satire, *Newes from Gravesend* (1604). In fact, no figure looms as large in Middleton's works as that of the pox-infected prostitute, protected from the poison of the plague by the poison of her syphilitic infection. Poison-based immunization captured the ironies and paradoxes of medical poison which drew Middleton's attention as a consummate satirist. Loaded with innuendo, the term 'French amulet' plays on the believed foreign origins of the pox, the venereal disease now generally identified as syphilis, and the 'occult virtues' of amulets more generally, or the supposedly 'pure' preservatives against corruption. In fact, throughout the Oxford edition of Middleton's *Collected Works*, the plague-protected, pox-infected woman is so characteristic of Middleton's hand that it serves as a virtual calling card, a way of identifying his authorship in the many collaborative works included in the tome.⁷ It appears in comic and satiric contexts – the 'French supersedas' in *The Meeting of Gallants* (1604) and 'Monsieur Dry-bones' of *The Black Book* (1604) – but also in tragic contexts, whether the 'leprous' Bianca of *Woman Beware Woman* or the 'defile[d]' Beatrice-Joanna of *The Changeling*. Yet, while critics have explored at length Middleton's anxious representations of the ever-inaccessible nature of women and their hidden reproductive organs – their 'secrets' – his much revisited 'French amulet' remains a startling blind-spot in scholarship. As such, the complex sexual exchanges, gendered contagions, and hidden communications of *The Changeling* have not been read in light of Middleton's own relatively experimental model of poisonous immunization.

In contrast, this essay finds the 'French amulet' to be central to the contagious exchanges of *The Changeling*, as a gendered dynamic both conjured and subverted within this play of escalating contaminations. Beatrice-Joanna's metaphoric use of poison as a *pharmakon* of poison and cure draws directly from this figure of poison-based immunization and, as I will argue, captures the play's persistent interest in the connections among poison, gender, and contagious diseases. At the same time, the playwrights reimagine and revise the typical immunity relationship of the pox-infected prostitute, subverting the expected dynamic while at the same time undermining seemingly 'pure' substances. Their

⁶ The *Fair Quarrel* features a comic debate over the danger of the 'pox' or the 'plague' – that is, which was less curable – which culminates with the 'plaguey whore' who is infected with both, in Chough's phrase.

⁷ For instance, in the contemporaneous *The Meeting of Gallants* (1604), another plague satire co-authored with Dekker, Middleton's hand is identified in a section on the 'French supersedeas' (372-373), or a writ that delays a defendant's payment, in a legal reworking of this metaphor of immunity. Additionally, nearly all of the relatively few lines identified as Middleton's in the later *Timon of Athens* (ca. 1607) involve Timon's wish for the 'whore[s]' travelling with Alcibiades to continue their trade, so that they might infect the Athenians with the pox, 'Give them diseases' and 'Plague all,' though themselves remain none the worse for the wear (Scene 14, 85; 162).

language of gendered poisons and diseases showcases the transformative power of communication in an even broader sense too, and, in the process, undermines the totalizing frames of visible exposure on offer from the medical technologies of an increasingly modern science.

In turning to the ‘French amulet’ to consider the corrupted and secret exchanges of *The Changeling*, this essay expands upon Alison Chapman’s account of Middleton’s ‘adaptive impulse,’ or his tendency to revisit and rework past texts. This ‘collaborative habit of mind,’ as Chapman puts it,⁸ reflects Middleton’s frequent re-visitations of the previous ideas and figures, and speaks as well to the ‘multiplicity’ rather than ‘coherence’ in the play’s mixed form, following David Nicol’s seminal approach.⁹ By making much of Middleton’s fascination with ‘French amulets’ and his own evolving models of poisonous immunization, my essay likewise responds to the occult antipathies and sympathies uniting Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores in Mary Floyd-Wilson’s account, and re-connects poison and disease at the same time.

In addition to this scholarly work on gender, attraction, and scientific production, I draw as well from the rich body of literature on Beatrice-Joanna’s chastity to think about how this over-valued, fetishized, and performed substance—a ‘precious’ reward for De Flores’ murderous labor (2.2.130; 132; 3.4.68; 115)—relates to the poisonous spread of her ‘whoredom,’ in De Flores’ words (3.4.145).¹⁰ In the process, I locate yet another, even more peculiar overlapping category, as the play stages the contagious danger not only of Beatrice-Joanna’s corrupted, deflowered body, but also, more surprisingly, of her virginity itself. This approach to the poisonousness of even ‘pure’ substances thus builds on Jennifer Panek’s recent work on the play’s paradoxical circuit of shame and pleasure, where flushing fuels erotic desire and reveals that the audience has been ‘complicit with the fetishization of virginity’ and ultimately ‘get[s] off on its own prohibitions’.¹¹ Likewise, this essay will explore the alluringly ‘perfect’ (3.4.118) and simultaneously

⁸ Alison A. Chapman, ‘Writing Outside the Theatre’, in *Thomas Middleton in Context*, ed. by Suzanne Gossett (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), pp. 243-9 (p. 249).

⁹ David Nicol, *Middleton and Rowley: Forms of Collaboration in the Jacobean Playhouse* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), p. 6.

¹⁰ Duncan cites the over-valued, even idolatrous chastity in the play, while Panek gives a good review of the fetishization of Beatrice-Joanna’s virginity and her double-edged shame. See Douglas Duncan, ‘Virginity in *The Changeling*’, *English Studies in Canada* 9.1 (1983), 25-35; and Jennifer Panek, ‘Shame and Pleasure in *The Changeling*’, *Renaissance Drama* 42.2 (2014), 191-215. See Luttfring as well for a good overview of the unreliability of the virginity test, and the era’s deep concerns over the nature of virginity itself (99-104).

¹¹ Panek, 215.

‘defil[ing]’ (5.3.150) charge of not only the play’s dangerous remedies and bodies, but of spectatorship itself. Above all, hidden communications haunt and subvert the plot-making actions of this secret-filled play.

Medical Meanings of Poison

Contagion is often left out of the equation when critics analyze poison on the early modern stage, whether in the *Changeling* or any other play, partly because poison is usually understood to be a discrete substance and not the force of those contagious diseases of poison, like the pox and the plague. Thus, studies on poison usually treat it as a discrete, if imagined, substance or prop, one of the many excesses of the ostensibly more ‘decadent’ Jacobean stage.¹² In J.A. Symond’s early, and representative, account, poison was so prevalent in what he labels the Senecan ‘tragedies of blood’ that it was ‘poured out like rain’,¹³ and all the poison-laced goblets of wine, odors, portraits, skulls, and so forth went along with other supposed Senecan excesses, from rhetorical bombast to stylized violence, of these revenge-infused plays.¹⁴ Even less charged, contemporary accounts still take it for granted that poisons were a stable category of substance, *pharmakon* or not.¹⁵ Either way, critics typically read Beatrice-Joanna’s decision to use

¹² For a good example of criticism that pits the decadence of the Jacobean against the naturalism of the Elizabethan theaterhouses, see Robert Ornstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985).

¹³ J.A. Symonds, *Shakspeare's Predecessors in the English Drama* (New York: Cooper Square Publishers, 1883), p. 486.

¹⁴ Early accounts of the Senecan influence on the stage (Cunliffe), the so-called ‘tragedies of blood’ (Stoll), and the revenge tragedy (Bowers) highlight the influence of Senecan ‘excess’ along with sensationalized, ‘Italianate’ violence onto English drama, what Dewar-Watson more recently calls the ‘excesses of Senecan rhetoric’ (25). See John W. Cunliffe, *The Influence of Seneca on Elizabethan Tragedy: An Essay* (New York: Macmillan, 1893); Elmer Edgar Stoll, *John Webster: the Periods of his Work as Determined by his Relations to the Drama of his Day* (Cambridge: A. Mudge and Son, 1905), p. 98; Fredson Bowers, *Elizabethan Revenge Tragedy, 1587-1642* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1940); and Sarah Dewar-Watson, ‘Jocasta: A Tragedie Written in Greek’, *International Journal of the Classical Tradition* 17.1 (2010), 22-32. More contemporary accounts of the English revenge tragedy find these early modern plays to use the stylizations of gore, poison, and excess to distance the audience from the action and genre (Burnett), or, more complexly, to disguise subversive politics (Woodbridge); see Anne Pippin Burnett, *Revenge in Attic and Later Tragedy* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998) and Linda Woodbridge, *English Revenge Drama: Money, Resistance, Equality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010). Whatever the take, poison and violence are generally taken to signal theatrical excess and an imported, un-English convention.

¹⁵ Harris and Pollard especially consider the ambivalent power of drugs on the stage and in the marketplace, and both separately consider the doubleness of the *pharmakon* as part of their central reading of these

De Flores as a poison within this context and with a heavy dose of irony, as her lines reveal a surprising mix of knowing naiveté, in Neill's terms, and recall countless, unsuccessful stage revengers and their deceptive wares. In Fredson Bowers's foundational estimation, *The Changeling* thus belongs to the 'disapproval of revenge' type of revenge tragedies, where 'life carries its own vengeance for crime' and Beatrice-Joanna's corrupt moral deeds – her use of expelling poison – inevitably pave the way to her defiled blood and death at the end of the play.¹⁶ As Floyd-Wilson more recently puts it, 'her decision to deploy DeFlores as a poison backfires, for he succeeds, instead, in poisoning her'.¹⁷

Part of this reading takes off from the play's near constant association between De Flores and poison. His ugliness, one of the most dramatic departures from the source material, manifests as a corrupting poison. Described first as a 'basilisk' (1.1.111) who poisons through venomous glance, De Flores harms others with his ugliness, both through direct contact, as Beatrice-Joanna has 'kissed poison' (5.2.67) by sleeping with him, and also at a distance, as he emits a miasma of vaporous corruptions from his deformed body. In fact, his own obvious breed of poison – obvious in that it issues directly from his visible ugliness – is described as acting specifically like the plague. In one example, Tomazo, the brother of the murdered Alonso, compares De Flores to a 'pest-house' (5.2.12) of contamination, or a quarantined lodging filled with the plague-infected. In the larger quote, De Flores's poison is outwardly-apparent – he is 'so most deadly venomous, / He would go near to poison any weapon / That should draw blood on him' (17-19) – but also acts below the visible surface. Without knowing why, Tomazo feels 'choke[d]' up and 'infected[ed]' in his 'blood' whenever De Flores 'breathes' on him (24-5, 26). Visibly and invisibly noxious, De Flores threatens to spread illness through his breath just as the very murderous odors of garlic-mouthed Londoners shared illness across the crammed bodies of public gatherings.

Accordingly, Beatrice-Joanna's use of De Flores as a poison would thus elegantly set the terms for the play's final medical figure. The story ends with blood-letting, as Beatrice-

dangerous drugs. See Jonathan Gil Harris, *Foreign Bodies and the Body Politic: Discourses of Social Pathology in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 50-57 for more on poisonous outsiders and the body politic and Tanya Pollard, *Drugs and Theatre in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). Wilson, in contrast, considers poison not only as a physical substance, but also as a 'way ...[to] think[] about how the world works,' while largely considering poison to be a vehicle for disguise and murder; see Miranda Wilson, *Poison's Dark Works in Renaissance England* (Lanham: Bucknell University Press, 2014), p. xxii.

¹⁶ Bowers, p. 204.

¹⁷ Floyd-Wilson, p. 105.

Joanna describes her 'defile[d]' blood now emptied out into the 'common sewer' (5.3.154). Read in this way, the playwrights might be said to use medical poison – 'Why, men of art make much of poison, / Keep one to expel another' (2.2.46-7) – to hint at Beatrice-Joanna's eventual contamination; and those earlier lines on expelling poison ironically call on her imminent demise all the more obviously, when poison is understood as such an inherently destructive substance.

But, looking more closely at Rowley's¹⁸ final, twisted figure, this apparent scheme of a one-to-one punishment of figurative poison to figurative poisoner does not so easily set aside the dangers of contagion, even at this most morally-instructive moment. While she ends by imagining herself to be fully polluted, all of Beatrice-Joanna's poisonousness still conjures up the threat of spreading this contamination to others:

BEATRICE: Oh, come not near me, sire; I shall defile you.
I am that of your blood was taken from you
For your better health; look no more upon't
But cast it to the ground regardlessly.
Let the common sewer take it from distinction. (5.3.150-4)

Rowley's tangled metaphor partly distances Beatrice-Joanna's contaminated blood from the larger familial body, like the blackened lumps congealed in the pool of Shakespeare's Lucrece's otherwise pure, red blood. Beatrice's own body merges with the corrupted stream of blood pouring out of the castle and into the 'common sewer' without 'distinction,' just as her body in the source, torn apart and burnt into ashes, is thrown into the air 'unworthy to haue any resting place on earth'.¹⁹

Yet, unnervingly, Rowley also yokes her defiled blood with the blood still inside her father's and husband's veins: she is 'that of *your* blood was taken *from you*,' or their own infected blood, a disease that once lived inside of their bodies. The figure unsettles the seeming isolation of Beatrice-Joanna from the unwitting familial network of Vermandero's castle, just as the finale following draws attention to the continued threat of adultery, as Isabella threatens to 'break' the 'head' of her jealous husband, Alibius, with cuckold's horns should he not change his ways (5.3.213). Beatrice-Joanna might

¹⁸ I'm following the Oxford edition of *Middleton's Collected Works* in my attribution of lines to Rowley or Middleton, although this remains a vexed issue.

¹⁹ John Reynolds, *The triumphs of Gods revenge against the Crying and execrable sinne of murther*. (London: Felix Kyngston for William Lee, 1621), p. 145. *Early English Books Online* [accessed 29 May 2018].

infect others – ‘come not near me’ – yet, more troublingly, they might have been exposed already to her contagious blood – ‘I am that of your blood’.

The contagiousness of this defilement thus ruptures any sense of precise containment in this scene. Not only within this scene, but throughout the play, Middleton and Rowley pair poison and contagiousness, such that poison, variously-defined, means much more than decadence or ironic justice. It seems another way of reading both the arsenal of poisons and the overwhelming contagion is in order: an account more in line with the era’s deeply-fraught debate on poison and its effects, and the playwrights’ own experimental approaches to the different breeds of poisonous diseases.

On a more general level, the huge overlap of drugs and the language of infection in *The Changeling* calls upon that spreading, boundary-breaking meaning of poison to get at the play’s major, un-subtle, theme: that is, change. In this play of multiply identified ‘changeling’ figures, where characters swap one body, desire, and lover for another in both Alicante and the madhouse, Middleton and Rowley present love as simultaneously poisonous and contagious in startlingly medical terms. Erotic ‘taste’ is presented as a preference of ‘poison’ (1.1.109; 108), love-making a ‘compound[ing]’ of drugs to ‘tame the maddest blood i’town’ (140-1), and the act of falling in love the ‘creep[ing]’ of love, vulgarly, ‘in at a mouse-hole’ (3.3.93). The era indeed found poison to offer the very mechanism for this kind of transference and spread, which was one reason writers began to identify spreading diseases as being poisonous.²⁰ Above all, poison spread at a distance, whether from foul odors, astral influences, or touchable surfaces, and, more than its noxious or destructive effects, it was identified for being transformative, whether understood positively or negatively.²¹ Thus, in the play’s asylum plot, Rowley pushes the melancholic, love-sick trope up a notch, showcasing not only the madness of love, but its possible infectiousness. At least, the disguised gentlemen, Franciscus and Antonio, hope that their erotic desire will eventually spread to their desired mistress, Isabella, as they hide, like poisons, under the counterfeited outer ‘shape[s]’ of madness (3.3.118).

If poison was understood as an external force spurring this kind of internal change – the eye-ball infected Petrarchan lamenter, the pestilence-filled-ear of Othello – as a substance, its outlines remained murky and arguable in the period. In fact, the exact nature of the substance remained a troubling question in practitioner’s minds, as not every healer

²⁰ Gibbs, *Medical Understandings of Poison*, pp. 154-5.

²¹ See Gibbs’ Introduction for more on the overlapping and distinct trajectories of the Greek *pharmakon* versus the Latin *venenum*. ‘Venoms’ came to mean naturally occurring animal poisons, while ‘poison’ (from *potio*) remained tied to chalices and their ambivalent contents.

agreed whether or not poisons were inherently destructive. Poisons were believed to take their properties – their exponential and hidden spread, corruption of the vital spirits, and so forth – according to their ‘occult virtues,’ ‘specific form,’ or ‘total substance,’ and writers disagreed about how, exactly, these processes played out.²² In general, however, the more poison was believed to be a distinct substance that acted according to its ‘specific form’ or ‘total substance’ – that is, based on its properties as a whole – the more inimical to life it was believed to be; likewise, the more its occult virtues were identified, the more it was connected to the Greek *pharmakon*, which blurred the boundaries between medicine and poison.²³

Even though it was understood as being remarkably dangerous, poison remained a prevalent, if controversial, drug used for healing partly because of this deadly power, but especially in the face of the venomous diseases of poison, like the pox and the plague.²⁴ The medical debate grew especially heated in the wake of the devastating 1603 plague visitation, when Francis Herring, a member of the elite Royal College of Physicians, argued in a series of warring pamphlets against the use of amulets and plague-cakes: that is, sacks of arsenic wrapped in red taffeta and worn above the left breast, designed to attract and expel atmospheric poisons away from the heart and its life-giving vital spirits. For Herring, poison is ‘an opposite, professed and perpetuall enemy to our nature’, of such a dangerous, corrosive nature as to be inherently ‘adverse and pernicious to nature’.²⁵

²² To generalize, ‘specific form’ and ‘total substance’ were often used interchangeably to describe the properties of a substance that came from its form as a whole, rather than from a particular mixture of elements. ‘Occult virtues’ are the hidden properties of a substance, as opposed to the elemental properties of the substances’ ‘manifest virtues.’ See Gibbs, *Medical Understandings of Poison* chapters 1-2, for a good history of ‘total substance’, Nutton for ‘total substance’ in Galenism, Wear for the distinction between ‘total substance’ and ‘occult properties, and Richardson for Jean Fernel’s understanding of disease of ‘total substance’ that were either ‘manifest’ and ‘occult’. See Vivian Nutton, ‘Galenic Medicine’ in *Ancient Medicine*, 2nd ed. (New York: Routledge, 2013), pp. 236-53; Andrew Wear, *The Western Medical Tradition: 800 BC to AD 1800* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995), pp. 261-4; and Lina Deer Richardson, ‘The Generation of Disease: Occult Causes and Diseases of the Total Substance’ in *The Medical Renaissance of the Sixteenth Century*, ed. by A. Wear, R.K. Rensch, and I.M. Lonie (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), pp. 175-194.

²³ Gibbs, *Medical Understandings*, p. 58. Incidentally, the first English terms ‘poison’ and ‘venom,’ from Latin *potio*, ‘drink’ and *venenum*, ‘potions/drugs,’ did not initially at least limit the substance to only destructive effects, although, by the early modern period, the terms were used figuratively for a host of deadly, spreading substances, evoking pollution, contamination, sinfulness, and even heresy.

²⁴ Andrew Wear, *Knowledge and Practice in English Medicine, 1550-1680* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), pp. 336-8.

²⁵ Francis Herring, *Certaine rules, directions, or aduertisements for this time of pestilentiall contagion: with a caueat to those that weare about their neckes impoisoned amulets as a preseruatiue from the plague* (London: William Jones, 1603), pp. 9 and 10. *Early English Books Online* [accessed 29 May 2018].

But despite Herring's misgivings, practitioners continued to use poisons along with traditional Galenic measures in their hybrid treatment of the plague. Ultimately, it remained maddeningly unclear if poison was useful, how it produced effects, and whether or not it was even a stable, identifiable substance at all or just another property of compounds.

Middleton's French Amulets

Middleton was well aware of the different approaches to poison in circulation, and even offered his own unique theories on the relationship between the poisons of different epidemic diseases. In response to the 1603 epidemic, the very same that so troubled Herring with its vast number of arsenic-laden, amuleted corpses, Middleton explored both incompatible definitions of poison with fellow playwright Thomas Dekker, in their anonymously published pamphlet *Newes from Gravesend* (1604). In his much briefer contribution,²⁶ Middleton also offers one of the first recorded examples of the pox immunity effect: that is, the 'French amulets' of syphilitic disease. The idea that peculiar breeds of poisonous infections might protect against other infections was far from a given assumption. Indeed, many medical writers worried about precisely the opposite effect: that is, that the pox, along with other odors, filth, and abominations, might amplify atmospheric poisons. In his satire, Middleton has it both ways: poisons, both literal and figurative, worsen the plague yet ironically protect the poisoners in the process. To get at the pernicious multiplication of societal poisons, Middleton satirizes the character types whose individual sins have brought about the communal plague. Usurers, gallants, and prostitutes, called 'speckled vermin' (105) and 'lumps of poison' (14) in his satirical *Black Book* (1604), cause the plague yet are not its victims. Only the 'babes and poor' (*Newes from Gravesend*, 974) die of this 'beggar's plague,' though Middleton proceeds to imagine a better plague: one that might take more appropriate victims. While the others meet their deserved end in this fictitious visitation, like the usurer who is forced to 'behold / His pestilent flesh' (980-1) and the glutton who 'see[s] blue marks' of swollen buboes rather than grapes that 'hang in clusters on each vein' (1009-10), the 'painted harlots' (1038) do not even die in Middleton's imagined plague. They continue to 'Smile at this plague' (1045) just as they gloat over their syphilitic customers, and survive here as they do in reality. In Middleton's words, they know that 'Two gnawing poisons cannot lie / In one corrupted flesh together' (1049-50).

²⁶ As above, I'm following the Oxford edition for authorship attribution with this text as well.

Middleton emphasizes the sadistic pleasure of the ‘painted harlots’ (1038) and their ‘half-faced panders’ (1046), in the larger quote:

Now they dance in ruffian’s hands,
Lazy lieutenants without bands,
With muffled half-faced panders laughing
Whilst he [their customer] lies gasping, they sit quaffing,
Smile at this plague and black mischance
Knowing that their deaths come o’er from France.
Tis not their season now to die:
Two gnawing poisons cannot lie
In one corrupted flesh together,
Nor can this poison then fly thither.
There’s not a strumpet ’mongst them all
That lives and rises by her fall
Dreads this contagion or his [lover’s/pestilence’s] threats,
Being guarded with French amulets. (1044-1055)

The unjust transmissions and amulet protections of the real plague here contrast with the earlier visually-based, divine punishment of the imagined plague. In this more just plague, men all receive their comeuppance by ‘behold[ing],’ ‘see[ing],’ and gazing in ‘dreadful trance’ (1033), while the women and their pimps are as disguised as the invisible putrefactions and diseases surrounding them. The women are ‘painted’ (1038) with cosmetics and the men are ‘muffled and half-faced’ (1046), their deceptive exteriors belying what is inside. While Dekker’s ending ultimately maps London’s plague onto a scheme of providential and political order, where the plague serves as the punishing force to cut out the corrupt bodies of England and make a fitter bride for the new king, here, Middleton stresses the mismatch between victims and villain: a jarring discrepancy nowhere more apparent than in the shadowy world of the pox-protected prostitute.

What remains hidden inside these women seems less a substance of mixed properties, in the traditional sense of the *pharmakon*, and more a force so ‘gnawing’ and grossly corrupting that the infected flesh allows no remaining space for another poison or further infection. But even as Middleton stresses the uniformly bad qualities of the pox’s poison, the fact remains that poison, however accidentally, has benefited its user. Strangely, too, this delay remains unavailable to the male customers, who are elsewhere described by their tell-tale pox infections. Granting women special immunity, the pox apparently carries gender-specific effects and privileges in this satirical text.

Elsewhere, writers understood the pox according to gendered terms. Unlike the levelling plague, the pox was localized, something inside women's bodies, and this hiddenness and femininity often went hand-in-hand. While the pox was first described as emerging like the plague, it was quickly recognized as being sexually transmitted and carried by specific people, or groups of people, especially foreigners.²⁷ But it was also feminine, and English writers in particular characterized the disease in gendered terms, emphasizing the corruptions of the polluted 'Matrix' of women that are the very 'original of this disease' in Peter Lowe's account.²⁸ Men, in contrast, were the victims: the 'secret parts of men... recieue infection'.²⁹ Women's 'secrets,' that is, their anatomy, sexuality, and reproduction, were more generally described as internal, a hidden and inverted form of external male genitalia, and impressionable by virtue of their cold, wet, and wax-like materiality.³⁰ The pox, neatly matching sexual sin with disease, was thus intimately connected to women in all their venomous and stagnating hiddenness. So too, apparently, was the pox's momentary shield from other, more deadly diseases a property belonging to women.

The pox-infected, plague-repelling sex worker features prominently in Middleton's oeuvre, and not only in his plague satires. One finds references to the 'French amulet' often within his city comedies, as in the early *Your Five Gallants* (ca. 1607), where the canny and exacting merchant Frippery, carefully reading the Bills of Mortality each week, nervously takes whores during times of plague so that 'the pox sits at meat and meal with him' (1.1.5). The figure of wily feminine corruption compelled Middleton's satirical eye, his acerbic awareness of the fascinating and debasing paradoxes of the average Londoner earning him the perhaps anachronistic label as a proto-realist, or, in T.S. Eliot's well-known lines a 'great recorder' rather than message-bearer in the era.³¹ But other than these

²⁷ See Johannes Fabricius, *Syphilis in Shakespeare's England* (Bristol: Jessica Kingsley Publishers, 1994).

²⁸ Peter Lowe, *An easie, certaine, and perfect method, to cure and preuent the Spanish sicknes wherby the learned and skilfull chirurgian may heale a great many other diseases* (London: James Roberts, 1596), sig. B2r. *Early English Books Online*, [accessed 29 May 2018].

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ Katharine Park, *Secrets of Women: Gender, Generation, and the Origins of Human Dissection* (New York: Zone Books, 2006), p. 181.

³¹ Jonathan R. Hope, 'Middletonian Stylistics' in *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Middleton*, ed. by Gary Taylor and Trish Thomas Henley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), pp. 247-263 (p. 252) and T.S. Eliot, *Essays on Elizabethan Drama* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, 1956), p. 169. There's a rich critical history on Middleton as a quasi-realist. Charles Lamb first notes the sense of realism in Middleton's tragic *Women Beware Women*, speaking of Beatrice's rape scene as being 'one of those scenes which has the air of being an immediate transcript from life'; quoted in Sara Jayne Steen, *Ambrosia in an Earthen Vessel: Three Centuries of Audience and Reader Response to the Works of Thomas Middleton*. New York: AMS Press, 1993), p. 139. Likewise, in 1875, Aldophus William Ward writes of Middleton's 'comedies' as being 'perhaps the truest dramatic representation of it [the English life of his own age]'

accounts of his urban style, Middleton also became largely known for his tragic heroines, those ‘femme fatales’ so startlingly and viscerally corrupted they became a stand-in for the power of his dramatic work more generally.³² In his series of Petrarchan sonnets for each of the dramatists found in Lamb’s *Specimens*, Algernon Swinburne even remembers Middleton for his violent women: a bloody bride, ‘With brows blood-flecked behind their bridal wreath / And lips that bade the assassin’s sword find sheath / Deep in the heart whereto love’s heart was vowed’, reminiscent of Beatrice-Joanna, but also Bianca and Livia of *Women Beware Women*.³³ These later portraits of raped, sin-embracing women reflect the viciously gleeful, plague-protected harlots in their reliance on certain types of ‘French amulets’ of corruption used as temporary shields from harm.

Outside of his intense interest in corrupted women, Middleton also uses the ‘French amulets’ of immunity to construct a unique time-frame of infection and retribution from dynamically opposing types of poisons, where the private, internal, and feminine pox seems pitted against a public, external, and masculine plague. This seems especially clear in the poetically ‘just’ plague of exposure in the *Newes*, where providentially-mapped plagues kill off the poisoners. But even in that text, the lived experience of the plague breaks through: one wishes, or the text assumes one wishes, that the usurer would behold his ‘pestilent flesh,’ and that the prostitute would doubly suffer for her societal wrongs, but what remains is the scattershot injustice of contingency rather than the path of divine retribution. Like the pox, the plague relies on the same muddled and, importantly, invisible mechanisms of transmission as the pox, and the plague’s opposing characterizations – male, communal, overt – almost go hand-in-hand with the pox’s feminine corruptions.

The language of visibility accompanies Middleton’s desire for such a medicinal force that would right these wrongs, that divinely-directed plague that slaughters poisoners and heals the city’s moral and physical illness. To make a better plague, as imagined in the ‘News,’ one must ‘behold,’ but this clarifying, medicinal power also shows up in his city pageants and masques as ridding the city of a whole host of vices partly by making them

(quoted in *ibid.*). Douglas Bruster wisely warns against reading Middleton’s plays as ‘powerful pieces of sociology, reminding us that Middleton wrote from his imagination rather than from ‘real life’; see ‘Middleton’s Imagination’, in *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Middleton*, ed. by Gary Taylor and Trish Thomas Henley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) pp. 518-34 (p. 525).

³² For a good example of Middleton’s boundary-breaking feminism, see Terri Bourus, “‘It’s a Whole Different Sex!’: Women Performing Middleton on the Modern Stage” in *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Middleton*, ed. by Gary Taylor and Trish Thomas Henley (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012) 551-70 (p. 569).

³³ Algernon Charles Swinburne, ‘IX Thomas Middleton’, in *The Collected Poetical Works of Algernon Charles Swinburne* (London: William Heinemann, 1917), Vol. V, p. 302.

visible. For instance, in *The World Tossed at Tennis* (1622), Middleton's and Rowley's masque roughly contemporaneous with *The Changeling*, the Law defeats the contagious and obscuring fog of Deceit through a purgative 'sovereign pill or potion.' Strikingly, this idealized expelling pill recalls Beatrice-Joanna's murderous use of De Flores as an expelling poison:

And what can cleanse or mundify the world
Better than law, the clearer of all cases,
The sovereign pill or potion that expels
All poisonous, rotten, and infectious wrongs
From the vexed bosom of the commonwealth? (759-63)

Unlike the inadvertent protections of the pox's poison, the purgative potion of the law rids only the filth of the commonwealth in its targeted sovereignty. But if the just law is a pill swallowed by the body of the state to 'belch forth in vomit' (778) part of its infectious members, is it a potion or a poison, and are the two really so separable? As the Lawyer continues, his 'pills are bitter' and contain mineral poisons, like antimony, to enact this 'scour[ing]' (771). Even in this more black-and-white genre, it seems, one needs 'sovereign pills' of poison to clean up the swamp, so to speak. But, if this is indeed the case, what are we to make of Beatrice-Joanna's ill-fated use of De Flores as a poison? One wonders whether she's acting as a defiled 'strumpet' or as a cleansing sovereign: or, more to the point, whether or not it's even possible at all to separate these French amulets of the pox from the expelling pharmacies of the law.

Internal and External Poisons in *The Changeling*

The Changeling, obviously invested in the detection and exposure of disguise, replicates and subtly revises the 'French amulet' dynamic of feminine, venereal poisons, collective plagues, and sovereign pills of truth and justice. Within this context, Beatrice-Joanna recalls the poisonous prostitute, and both she and De Flores stage the different varieties of poisons from this 'French amulet' dynamic. Beatrice-Joanna's corruptions, on the one hand, seemingly follow the feminine pox scheme. She is corrupted on the inside through her mutable, and unpredictable female desire. The switch in her heart from Alonso to Alsemero, 'a giddy turning' (1.1.149) she can feel happening internally, is immensely physical, 'a kind / Of whoredom in thy heart' (3.3.143-4) in De Flores' terms that starts in the pulp of her organs and moves outwards. The playwrights even switch the dramatic center of the play from the source text, so the pivotal mutability of the source's Alsemero

– who ‘leaues *Bellona* to adore *Venus*, and forsakes *Mars*, to follow *Cupid*’³⁴ – is instead transferred to Beatrice-Joanna and her shifting desires. Even more, Alsemero’s own change in the play becomes less about him and more about Beatrice-Joanna. He tells his friend, Jasperino, that he is well, ‘Unless there be some hidden malady / Within me that I understand not’ (1.1.24-5), and that ‘hidden malady,’ while within his own body, seems to have its source in the desirable Beatrice-Joanna.

In addition to this infecting hiddenness of women, the play references the dangerous unknowns of the very matter of women’s wombs, whether the forcible power of their imaginations onto developing fetal bodies or their man-handled ‘secrets’ of the elaborate puns in the asylum plot. For instance, when Alonso’s brother, Tomazo de Piracquo, worries about Beatrice-Joanna’s visible lack of interest for Alonso, Tomazo warns his brother about maternal impressions, where one’s wife ‘lie[s] but with another in thine arms, / He the half-father unto all thy children / In the conception; if he get [beget] ’em not, / She helps to get ’em for him in this passion’ (2.1.134-7). The imagination works concretely and aggressively in the sinews and flesh of developing children: it ‘get[s] ’em’, the children, for the ‘him’ not physically in bed with Beatrice.

Moreover, as has been well-explored, the scientific tools of Alsemero’s ‘physician’s closet’ – the vials and dog-eared manuscripts – seek to expose the hidden secrets of women: ‘whether a woman be with child or no’ or ‘whether a woman be a maid or not’ (4.1.26, 40). But before she notices this unlocked chamber of experimentation, Beatrice-Joanna expresses perhaps too great a belief in Alsemero’s ability to discern the truth of (her) matter after the wedding night. The clarity of Alsemero’s ‘understanding’ contrasts with her ‘hiddenness,’ as she fears exposure: Alsemero is so

ennobled both in body and mind,
So clear in understanding (that’s my plague now),
Before whose judgment will my fault appear
Like a malefactors’ crimes before tribunals,
There is no hiding on’t – the more I dive
Into my own distress (4.1.5-9).

Her ‘plague now’ recalls the providential plague of the *Newes*, as a masculine-directed punishment that arises from clarity of ‘understanding.’ Her own contagious poison thus contrasts with this ‘plague’ of visible punishment, and seems more internal, womb-like, and invisibly infectious.

³⁴ Reynolds, p. 110.

The playwrights likewise present the other plaguey breed of poison of the *Newes* in *The Changeling*. Far from the visible plague of understanding or Beatrice-Joanna's pox-like disguise, De Flores's corruptions follow the more masculine, but unjust plague scheme of the *Newes*, where atmospheric corruptions kill the innocent. As discussed, his plaguey nature is both visibly poisonous, through his notorious ugliness, and invisibly spreading, like the 'pest-house' (5.2.12) of contamination. Along with these characterizations, De Flores kills others by manipulating visual processes. Leading the unfortunate fiancé Alonso through the dark recesses of the castle's narrow corridors and vaults, De Flores brings Alonso into further and further darkness, until, pointing out the 'goodly munition[s]' (3.2.10) outside the window, De Flores commands distraction – 'Keep your eye straight, my lord' (13) – before butchering him. In separating these characters based on their poison type and visibility, Middleton and Rowley thus suggest that Beatrice-Joanna's pox-like, sexual desires are the secret source of the metaphoric disease running through Alicante. De Flores, with more outwardly-directed, scatter-shot bite, commits Beatrice-Joanna's crimes for her through a contagious transfer.

Beatrice-Joanna's use of De Flores as a weapon thus partly replicates the pox-plague immunity relationship, as he kills her suitors more immediately, while her 'death from France' comes later. Locked in a closet in a parody of their copulation, her orgasmic death cry, 'Oh, Oh, Oh', restages 'their scene of lust' (5.3.116) now as her final and fatal penetration from De Flores's 'penknife' (174). But Middleton and Rowley have allowed for a more nuanced characterization from Beatrice-Joanna's perspective, just as Pollard, Floyd-Wilson, and others have separately outlined. She may be protected by her secret sexual relationship with De Flores, but Beatrice-Joanna more explicitly models her use of the plaguey-De Flores after 'men of art', like the countless male authorities in this and other plays who use sovereign potions to do their bidding. Part of the tragic pull of her character, then, arises from the conflicting models of poisonous immunity that are tangled together in the play, as the expelling poisons of omniscient, masculine authority prove to be merely the temporary amulets of female contamination. Beatrice-Joanna may think she out-performs the best of the 'men of art' in her use of expelling substances, but in 'kiss[ing] poison' and 'strok[ing] a serpent' (5.2.67) she's become infected herself, a mere 'whore' with a flimsy French amulet, according to the patriarchal powers of the end.

One might thus assume, then, that the obvious source of Beatrice-Joanna's inner contamination is the adulterous loss of her virginity, or perhaps her heart-based swapping of Alsemero for Alonso. Indeed, one may read De Flores' and Beatrice-Joanna's oppositional poisons – their inner and outer corruptions – as magnetizing their union, as an explosive match of like-to-like, something once conventional in contemporary

productions and readings of the play.³⁵ But the playwrights go another route. While maintaining the opposing corruptions of a feminized pox and a masculinized plague in the *Newes*, the playwrights simultaneously – and shockingly – conjure yet another competing source of poisonousness that undoes the very system of binaries that pits poison against remedy, disease against health, and vice against virtue. In fact, Beatrice-Joanna appears to hold a certain secret and poisonous quality before her turn to expelling poisons. That source, paradoxically, lies in a materially-imagined space of virtue: the very purity of Beatrice-Joanna's virginity.

The Dangerous Power of Virginity

It is, after all, Beatrice-Joanna's virginity rather than her corruption that communicates invisibly with all the men of the play. De Flores, while celebrating her 'turn' to Alsemero, as it indicates her own eventual 'whoredom' with himself, desires her not for her fellow, complementary source of poison, but for very purity of her virginity. Again and again, the play calls attention to the compelling power not of the hidden 'whoredom of thy heart,' but of her chastity: something transcribed as an actual substance, one deemed 'precious' no less than four times in the play, and 'perfect in thee' (3.3.116) according to De Flores. Alsemero, too, uses the same metaphor as De Flores by imagining his eventual consummation with Beatrice-Joanna to be 'perfection' in the sense of completion: 'The church hath first begun our interview / And that's the place must join us into one; / So there's beginning and perfection too' (1.1.10-12). Her virginity – complete, untarnished, and whole – spurs erotic desire from many men and, shockingly, brings about its own undoing through its very purity.

Middleton and Rowley thus subversively suggest that virginity, in its very dazzling power, might be another 'French amulet'. Most critics read this attractive quality of her chastity as another case of tragic irony, where purity, acting on impurity, accidentally undoes itself. There, her virginity is still viewed as something antithetical to the sea of poisons and potions, as in Floyd-Wilson's account, where virginity is converted into its opposite, as although 'the occult qualities of her virginity provide him with relief, his spirit converts her into the very poison she sought to escape'.³⁶ However, more disturbingly, Beatrice-Joanna's virginity itself appears poisonous in its spreading charms

³⁵ See Barker and Nicol for a thorough unpacking of the critical impulse to read Beatrice-Joanna's rape as a fulfilment of her own 'repressed, subtextual desire for De Flores'. See 'Does Beatrice Joanna Have a Subtext?: *The Changeling* on the London Stage', *Early Modern Literary Studies* 10.1 (2004), 1-43.

³⁶ Floyd-Wilson, p. 107.

even before its loss – corrupting rather than corrupted – and becomes yet another of the play’s mixed substances, no less ambivalent than the other stash of transforming and expelling poisons.

Middleton elsewhere explores the odd relationship of purity to corruption. For instance, in his other tragedy of corrupted women, *Women Beware Women*, Bianca, infected by her adulterous union with the Duke of Florence, embraces the contagious ‘leprosy’ of her honor, using all-or-nothing logic: ‘Yet since mine honour’s leprous, why should I / Preserve that fair that caus’d the leprosy? / Come, poison all at once’ (2.2.423-5). Here, once again, her ‘fair caus’d’ the very ‘leprous’ infection, first spurring the Duke’s desire and later provoking his unlawful penetration of her body.

But in an even more extreme example, Middleton shows how chastity itself, while physically cleansing the female body, might be inherently suspect and prone to contamination. In his very early poem on the classical figure of feminine chastity, Middleton’s *The Ghost of Lucrece* (1600) conjures the ‘chaste and pure’ ghost of the raped heroine from the dead, who proceeds to lament for hundreds of lines on her lost chastity. Unlike Shakespeare’s poem and the other sources, which remain at pains to separate Lucrece’s pure mind from her corrupted body, Middleton’s poem imagines Lucrece’s moral status to be inescapably physical. When raped by Tarquin, something Middleton voices as being part-seduction, the very physical property keeping Lucrece’s blood healthy becomes stagnant and foul. In this case, virginity or marital chastity is not simply a trait of a virtuous person, but becomes an active agent that purifies the internal fluids, humours, and organs through motion. Without this cleansing system, all the body rots, and the dead Lucrece mourns

the spring of blood’s virginity
That wont to serve thy veins like conduit heads
And cleanse thy cistern of iniquity
With maiden humours from chaste Flora’s meads (388-91).

This cleansing, moving force even links heaven to earth, as an ‘eternal eye’ and ‘laundress’ to deific souls:

’Twas thou, O chastity, m’eternal eye,
The want of thee made my ghost reel to hell.
’Twas thou, O chastity, that gild’st the sky
With beams of virtue. It is thou doth dwell
In that white milken crystal silver cell,

Thou laundress to the gods and goddesses,
Washing their souls in founts of holiness. (507-513)

At one level, this 'laundress' of the blood washes the dirty, debased human body to make it holier, closer to the heavens above, and this account of virginity as a 'laundress' for the soul seems to highlight a cleansing power completely antithetical to sully work of poison.

'Laundress,' however, meant more than a domestic linen-washer, as glossed above. In fact, in the very same poem, Middleton uses 'laundress' to mean the exact opposite characterization, when Lucrece asks if 'Venus [is] made a laundress,' or prostitute, 'to the court' (50). G.B. Shand, the editor of this poem in the Oxford edition, notes that 'laundress' only refers to a prostitute in its first usage. Yet, if Middleton intended his reader to pick up the double-entendre a page before, surely it would still echo here, however uncomfortably within this paean to uncorrupted female sexuality. Indeed, he uses the term two other times to refer to promiscuity in his works: in Knavesbe's canny admission of adultery to his wife in *Anything for a Quiet Life* and in his early prose satire *The Nightingale and the Ant*.³⁷ Like the famously mixed word 'nunnery,' simultaneously evoking celibacy and prostitution in Hamlet's cruel invectives to Ophelia, 'laundress' exposes something troubling in female sexuality. Even in its most divine and cleansing state, female chastity eerily contains within it the seeds of its own eventual contamination and rot.

Beatrice-Joanna's virginity, elsewhere described by critics as over-valued, idolatrous, fetishized, and constructed, thus becomes yet another ambivalent substance: something she holds dearly and thinks will protect her from De Flores' advances, along with her higher status: 'Think but upon the distance that creation / Set 'twixt thy blood and mine, and keep thee there' (3.4.131-2). But it is her virginity, and what De Flores describes as the resulting 'plague' of desire it incites within him, that leads to the contagious-like birth of sins outlined after her blackmail and rape: 'Vengeance begins; / Murder, I see, is followed by more sins' (3.4.163-4). Off-stage, she's 'undone ... endlessly' (4.1.1), the temporal equivalent to Bianca's spatial metaphor of total leprosy in *Women Beware Women*, and dramatic time as well dilates and shrinks in her isolating fears, the clocks striking different hours as she waits for her maid after the bed-trick. But the disturbing

³⁷ Knavesbe is trying to goad his wife into admitting that she has also committed adultery, when he says: 'I sinned twice with my laundress.' In the 'Nightingale and the Ant,' the ant, recounting his time as a soldier (since he has been reincarnated as many various 'types' of Londoners), speaks of the way 'harlots' disguise their promiscuity. Here, 'the habit of a laundress / shadows the abomination of a strumpet' (885-6).

and all-too familiar sense of blame surrounds Beatrice-Joanna, as a highly desirable commodity with a highly desirable commodity, as the cult of idealized virginity perversely naturalizes the violation of that virtue. Her own desirability poisonously compels others to commit vicious acts, whether by the lust-fueled, glove-jamming De Flores, or by the would-be-dueling Alsemero. Pox-like in its unviolated completeness, women's uncorrupted secrets thus act like a 'French amulet' of the pox, spurring the plagues of male desire and ensuring eventual self-destruction through their very allure.

Disguised Language and Fractured Communication

If Beatrice-Joanna remains unaware of her own fatally poisonous quality, one she trusts will preserve her, she is not alone in misreading the outward signs in Alicante. Throughout the play, Middleton and Rowley actually stage communication itself as fractured, splitting apart the dialogue in a head-dizzying number of stage asides. Editors have had to make sense of these lines throughout the play, as the labeling of these unmarked stage devices can lead to hugely different dramatic effects.³⁸ This occurs especially during the opening scene, where Beatrice-Joanna understands her newfound love for Alsemero to be part of better 'see[ing]' with 'the eyes of judgment' (2.1.13). Yet, the magnitude of asides with the other juxtaposed, raunchy conversations between servants deflate the more serious claims of Beatrice-Joanna's and Alsemero's love. When she finally arranges to meet with Alsemero in a hidden chamber, Beatrice-Joanna even sounds like the masculine medical authorities desperate for exposure of women's secrets: 'I have within mine eye all my desires' (2.2.8), she says, yoking pleasure to full sensory knowledge.

But, moments after this claim of full knowledge and delight—her joys all within her eye, the play's dream of a truly transparent love almost realized—the unspoken consonance between Alsemero and Beatrice-Joanna begins to slip away. By deciding to duel Alonso de Piracquo to win her hand properly, Alsemero accidentally triggers Beatrice-Joanna's decision to act as a man of art and kill Alonso through more underhanded means. Yet, rather than stage this as a soliloquy, Middleton and Rowley use a lengthy aside: one which breaks up dramatic time, enough so that Alsemero interrupts her, twice:

BEATRICE: Here was a course [the suggested duel]
Found to bring sorrow on her way to death;

³⁸ See Nora Williams, "'Cannot I keep That Secret?': Editing and Performing Asides in *The Changeling*", *Shakespeare Bulletin* 34.1 (2016), 29-45.

The tears would ne'er ha' dried, till dust had chok'd 'em.
 Blood-guiltiness becomes a fouler-visage,
 And now I think on one – *I was to blame,*
I ha' marred so good a market with my scorn: [by shunning De Flores in her
 anger]
'T had been done questionless. The ugliest creature
Creation framed for some use, yet to see
I could not mark so much where it should be.
 ALSEMERO: Lady!
 BEATRICE: *Why, men of art make much of poison,*
Keep one to expel another. Where was my art?
 ALSEMERO: Lady, you hear not me. (2.2.37-48, asides italicized)

In explicitly calling attention to Beatrice's aside, Middleton sharply drives a wedge between the two plotting lovers. Her internal world becomes inaccessible to Alsemero, where before it was linguistically mutual: 'We're so like / In our expressions, lady, that unless I borrow / The same words, I shall never find their equals' (2.2.12-14). The two never feel this sense of profound likeness and connection again. Beatrice retreats more and more into her hidden world of secrets and Alsemero becomes increasingly scientific in his desperate attempts to observe the external signs of his impossibly obscure wife.

These splitting asides only appear to leave the stage in the masterful scene of De Flores's blackmail and coercion over Beatrice-Joanna. De Flores's verse mirrors Beatrice's estimation of him: his language is 'bold and vicious,' devoid of imagery and emptied of regular meter. The harsh reality of their shared crime comes across in their nearly rhythmless and transparent language:

BEATRICE: Is it done then?
 DE FLORES: Piracquo is no more.
 BEATRICE: My joys start at mine eyes; our sweet'st delights
 Are evermore born weeping.
 DE FLORES: I've a token for you.
 BEATRICE: For me?
 DE FLORES: But it was sent somewhat unwillingly—[*Shows the finger*]
 I could not get the ring without the finger.
 BEATRICE: Bless me! What hast thou done?
 DE FLORES: Why, is that more
 Than killing the whole man? (3.4.23-31)

The shorn line ‘Piracquo is no more’ sets us up the later, major revelation of the scene: ‘You’re no more now’ (136), De Flores says, rebuking Beatrice-Joanna’s continued ‘modesty’ and propriety, and ‘you must forget your parentage to me; / Y’are the deed’s creature’ (137-8). Reborn by sin and commanded to commit incest with her new poisonous parent, Beatrice-Joanna is forced to face her sense of ‘honor’ and her sovereign pill as being, in fact, far from immunizing and expelling in the way she understood it. Both her hidden ‘French amulet’ and her external poison have increased rather than expelled sin and her troubles. Here, the audience becomes aware of the loss of her innocence, if it may be called that, or her awareness of the stark reality of the situation, by the mismatch of her favorite visual metaphor and De Flores’ gory token. ‘My joys start at mine eyes’, she says, before the visual token of what she’s actually done undoes this fanciful figure: ‘Bless me! What hast thou done?’ (24; 30).

Without the aside splitting the world into hidden and exposed desires, the blackmail scene continues with characters engaging directly with each other for one of the only moments in the play. Knowing the full extent of De Flores’ obsessive lust for Beatrice, the audience experiences an intense dramatic suspension, a climactic build to Beatrice-Joanna’s own discovery. At the same time, since spectators are accustomed to having full access to character’s internal responses and hidden agendas in real-time, the lack of asides add a certain degree of confusion, connecting the audience to Beatrice-Joanna for the moment:

BEATRICE: ’Tis resolved then.
 Look you, sir, here’s three thousand golden florins;
 I have not meanly thought upon thy merit.
 DE FLORES: What, salary? Now you move me!
 BEATRICE: How, De Flores?
 DE FLORES: Do you place me in the rank of verminous fellows
 To destroy things for wages? (3.3.60-5)

By stripping this moment of the usual asides – where Beatrice might continue to speak of her confusion and De Flores of his ardor or the success of his plot – Middleton stages the very transition from hidden, audience-directed language to revelatory, character-directed dialogue, savagely emptied of the fantasies of metaphor in its expressions. The dark triumph of the scene does not only have to do with De Flores’s success in forcing Beatrice to sleep with him. It is the triumph of communication, where character-directed language finally expresses motives and feelings.

Despite the punitive vision of restoration in the finale, and the biting account of Beatrice-Joanna’s and De Flores’s sinfulness throughout, the play suggests, somewhat

subversively, that it is only when these 'two gnawing poisons' meet that truth is communicated, in its ugly, shorn reality. Language itself, elsewhere fractured and insufficient, finally offers up what is hidden in the play's final figure of transformative and dangerous communication. Their secrets, momentarily, share the same corrupted space.