

Tiresias and the Basilisk:  
Vision and Madness in Middleton and Rowley's  
*The Changeling*

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ABSTRACT

This essay examines the prevalent and recurring references to vision and sight that appear in Thomas Middleton and Samuel Rowley's play of 1622, *The Changeling*. The play, set in Alicante, is a revenge tragedy of sexual lust and violent obsession. Middleton and Rowley use the metaphors of sight, culled and adapted from the Petrarchan tradition, as a means of expressing evil, danger, and deceit, particularly when the viewing subject is female. There follows an examination of the reasons for gendering vision and expressing the visual field in this wholly negative way. Following the Protestant reformation of the 1530s, and its violent consolidation under the Somerset protectorate, England experienced a period of iconoclasm and image breaking that had significant repercussions for concepts of vision and visuality up until the Civil War. The language of *The Changeling*, it is argued, is symptomatic of the iconophobia and visual neuroses experienced in many areas of discourse—including poetry, theology and theology—during the English renaissance. Finally, these ideas are brought together in two figures invoked by the authors, the basilisk, the mythical creature that had the ability to kill with its gaze alone, and Tiresias, a blind prophet of profound insight.

In 1587, the residents of Warsaw recorded what seems to be the last ever sighting of a living basilisk.<sup>1</sup> Exactly how a first-hand “sighting” of this monster could be reported after the event is not made entirely clear, as the basilisk was a deadly creature, gifted with the ability to kill with its fatal gaze alone. “Even if it looks at a man, it destroys him”, wrote a twelfth-century bestiary, “At the mere sight of a basilisk, any bird which is flying past cannot get across unhurt, but, although it may be far from the creature's mouth, it gets

frizzled up and is devoured".<sup>2</sup> Yet many people from the fourteenth century onwards would have seen been able to see dead basilisks on public display and in private collections. Of course, these were not real monsters, but rather examples of what are now known as "Jenny Hannivers", fabricated beasts made from the dried carcass of another animal, often an adult ray.<sup>3</sup> The forgery of mythological beasts has been as much a part of travellers tales as one-footed sciapods or reverse-kneed antipodes; Marco Polo himself witnessed the manufacture of mermaids produced by stitching together half a monkey and half a fish.<sup>4</sup> In the sixteenth century, Dutch vessels trading with China and the western islands of the Malay Archipelago brought back similar hybrid cadavers, such as monkfish or bishopfish, replete with piscine episcopal dress. But basilisks were the most popular of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Jenny Hannivers, and were produced in great numbers, especially in Northern Italy. The Jesuits college at Rome could boast one, and the Emperor Maximilian held one in his treasure house. Several are still preserved in the museums of Milan, Venice, and Verona.<sup>5</sup>

The fashion for basilisks (from the Greek for "little king") is not only represented by *faux* remains, but in the textual record as well. In the English drama of the period, there are many references to the basilisk's deadly ability to kill with its gaze, especially in the first half of the seventeenth century. What the basilisk comes to represent at this time is a tangible fear associated with an intangible materiality. As such, the basilisk possesses the classic attributes of implied menace - it produces a deadly effect, but its source cannot be seen. As with all our cultural embodiments of horror, the idea of the basilisk can be unpacked to display robustly non-mythical fears and concerns, especially in relation to English culture, because its means of attack was the visual field. Vision was a censored sense in the second half of the sixteenth century. Iconoclastic destruction of Catholic church imagery, and Protestantisms privileging of internalized religious meditation, meant that visual sensuality became closely associated with deceit and error. In a deeply Protestant nation, anathematized to popish imagery, the basilisk neatly conveyed many post-reformation anxieties about the status and morality of sight within the sensorium.

The terror of the basilisk is evoked in the dangers, traps and lures that constitute the central theme of Thomas Middleton and Samuel Rowley's most successful collaboration, the dual-plotted, revenge tragedy *The Changeling* (1622). While the location of the play conforms to genre, it is difficult to ignore the irony of setting a play so thematically dark and claustrophobic in Alicante, a place I most readily associate with clarity and sunlight. Similarly, the panopticonal castle of San Bernardo is for Middleton and Rowley a location of myopia and emotional weakness, rather than strength and vigilance. But given that the play's development clearly involves overturning commonsensical and non-reflective ideas of the importance of vision, I suppose this should come as no surprise. *The Changeling* revels in an excess of lust inspired by the eyes that challenges reason with deadly consequence. Like Shakespeare's *King Lear* it makes extensive use of the ironies derived from a commingling of the categories of madness and lucidity, outward appearance and inner worth. There is an overt suggestion that seeing enflames sexual desire, and therefore, by extension, is responsible for all crimes committed in the name of cupidity. For this same reason, medieval scribes associated the basilisk with *luxuria* or lust; consequently

syphilis was nicknamed “the venom of the basilisk” due to the rapidity with which it spread across the continent in the late sixteenth-century.

It is the aim of this essay to discuss the use and mobilization of the metaphors of vision in Middleton and Rowley's famous play. I hope to demonstrate that the obsessions revealed in the language of *The Changeling* are symptomatic of the iconophobia and visual neuroses of the English renaissance. As it rather ambitiously takes vision as its topic, the methodology of this essay will necessarily be something of a “Jenny Hanniver” itself. Vision leaves no trace, and in the absence of a visibility of the past, the only way we can discuss the visual field of the English Renaissance is to reconstruct it from the fragments of other creatures.

When discussing the ways in which vision and representation were treated in the early-modern period, we are really discussing the history of the metaphors that are used to construct a concept of visibility.<sup>6</sup> In *The Changeling*, Middleton and Rowley establish the importance of visual metaphor early in the exposition, allowing the metaphor to embark upon a narrative development whose progress and transformation follows the plot with considerable precision. Alsemero's opening lines in the play establish the direction in which the metaphor will move:

'Twas in the temple where I first beheld her,  
And now again the same; what omen yet  
Follows of that? None but imaginary.  
Why should my hopes or fate be timorous?  
The place is holy, so is my intent;  
I love her beauties to the holy purpose  
And that, methinks, admits comparison  
With man's first creation, the place blest,  
And is his home right back, if he achieve it.  
(I.i.4-9)<sup>7</sup>

For Alsemero, the vision of the beautiful Beatrice-Joanna at her devotions realizes his desire for a partner who symbolizes chastity, fidelity, and piety. His description of Beatrice-Joanna invites us to see a virtually prelapsarian tableau, in which a strong myth of ideal woman is invoked. He has witnessed his edenic “home”, seeing Beatrice-Joanna prior to the Fall, as it were, before the original sin of Eve (a scene that will be ironically echoed by her own more literal fall at the hands of the Machiavellian henchman De Flores). At the opening of the play, then, Middleton and Rowley offer the visual possibility of an originary point to which Alsemero may return, a primal, Platonic scene in which he can be immersed.

Alsemero sees in Beatrice-Joanna exactly what he wants to see - a woman framed by the parameters of his desire. Middleton and Rowley were obviously aware of the literary traditions they were evoking in this scene. Indeed, they make an intertextual reference to it through the name of their female protagonist, who shares the moniker with another literary Beatrice who has a great deal of significance for the themes of vision and danger - the beloved woman of Dante's *Vita Nuova* (1292-4).<sup>8</sup> The similarity between Alsemero's

first sighting of Beatrice-Joanna and Dante's of Beatrice, and the subsequent effect it has on both men, is worth noting.<sup>9</sup> Like Alsemero, Dante admires Beatrice from afar, his infatuation engendered when he sees her passing in the street, and, like Alsemero, he also believes it to be an event peppered with profundity:

Nine times already since my birth the heaven of light had circled back to almost the same point when the now glorious lady of my mind first appeared to my eyes. She was called Beatrice by many who could not have possibly called her by any other name... At that point the animal spirit, the one abiding in the high chamber to which all the senses bring their perceptions, was stricken with amazement, and speaking directly to the spirits of sight, said these words: "Now your bliss has appeared".<sup>10</sup>

As with the opening scene of *The Changeling*, the sight of the beloved convinces the poet that he has witnessed his destiny, and subsequently humble vision takes on the status of a communion with supernatural forces. The major difference between the lovers Dante and Alsemero is, of course, the fact that Dante, like all the love-poets that succeeded him, never takes possession of the woman to whom he so loyally devotes his soul. It is as if an eternal postponement of bliss seals the emotions in their pristine form, while the actual consummation, the bringing together of image and body, will only serve to confirm our fallibility, frailty and ability to disappoint. The fact that Alsemero breaches the invisible line that perpetually kept Dante at arm's length, therefore, should alert us to the fact that all will not be well with this particular love-match.

Dante's text was the forerunner of many similar tales of unrequited passion that appeared in Europe, most notably in the work of Petrarch, produced in Italy during the thirteenth century. Petrarch's sonnets in praise of Laura established the sonnet form, investing it with a standardized repertoire of images and sentiments aimed at expressing the pain of the forlorn lover. As it was with Dante, so it is with Petrarch, whose love for Laura is also instigated by the mere sight of her:

It was the day when the sun's rays turned pale with grief for his  
Maker when I was taken, and I did not defend myself against it,  
for your lovely eyes, Lady, bound me.<sup>11</sup>

This passage uses a figure that was to become a standard of Petrarchan love-poetry, the idea of the lover being made a captive of his mistress.<sup>12</sup>

Middleton's use of Petrarchanism, however, owes rather less to the great man himself than the Petrarchan imitators of the 1590's. Petrarchan sonnet sequences enjoyed a great deal of popularity in Elizabethan England, between 1592 and 1597 especially, with Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, Edmund Spenser's *Amoretti*, and Samuel Daniel's *Delia* all appearing at this time. In these five years, more than twenty sonnet sequences were published, while a further number circulated in manuscript form.<sup>13</sup> Alsemero's virtual deification of Beatrice-Joanna is a familiar element of the somewhat formulaic narrative of these poems that go on to document the (unsuccessful) pursuit of a woman long adored from afar. What is common to these sequences is the constant emphasis placed upon

viewing the object of the poet's affections to the extent that they become voyeuristic, scrupulously cataloguing the beauty of the beloved's every aspect, and relentlessly detailing every furtive exchange of glances.<sup>14</sup> Any innovations that the Elizabethans brought to the form can be characterized in the less than tender, and often dehumanizing, emotions that the poets display, as if expressing rage at their persistent failure. In this war of love, the female eye is the most feared weapon, as Spenser's *Amoretti* makes plain,

Fayre eyes, the myrroure of my mazed hart,  
what wondrous vertue is contaynd in you,  
the which both lyfe and death forth from you dart  
into the object of your mighty view?  
For when ye mildly looke with lovely hew,  
then is my soule with life love inspired  
but when ye lowre, or looke on me askew.  
then doe I die, as one with lightning fyred.<sup>15</sup>

Middleton and Rowley are particularly keen on borrowing this viciousness from the embattled, garrulous, guilt-ridden and pleading aspects of the verse.<sup>16</sup> For them, the power of seductive visuality is such that even the murtherous De Flores can be converted into a Petrarchan victim: "I live in pain now", he says, "That shooting eye / Will burn my heart to cinders" (III.iv.152-153).<sup>17</sup>

The anxieties present in the language of vision show us the influence that the Protestant reformation on English visual culture. After the Henrician reforms of the 1530's and their vehement fundamentalist affirmation under Edward VI, the visual field underwent a radical re-definition of unprecedented proportions. Iconoclasm was just one feature of an attempt by government to assert its sovereignty and antipathy towards the political power of the Pope and the military powers of Catholic Europe, especially Spain. Given the central role allocated to images of devotion by Catholicism, it is understandable that the Protestants would seek to disarm this strikingly immediate way of intimating a proximity to God. Iconoclasm censured certain images as idolatrous, and alerted the populace to the evils implicit in ignoring a strict sense of visual chastity.<sup>18</sup> It is interesting to note that the iconoclastic treatises of the time make an important point of interpolating the visual field with a certain amount of sexual peril by aligning popish idolatry with carnal sin. As Nicholas Ridley, Bishop of London from 1549-1553, wrote in his *Treatise on the Worship of Images*,

As good magistrates, who intend to banish all whoredom, do drive away all naughty persons, especially out of such places as be suspected; even so images, being "Meretricies", *id est*, "Whores" - for that the worshipping of them is called in the prophets fornication and adultery - ought to be banished, and especially out of churches, which is the most suspected place, and where the spiritual fornication hath been most committed.<sup>19</sup>

Similarly, the Elizabethan *Homilie against the Peril of Idolatry*, first published in 1563 and reprinted numerous times well into seventeenth century, asked the rhetorical question, "Doeth not the word of GOD call idolatrie spirituall fornication?",

Doeth it not call a gylte or painted Idole or Image, a strumpet with a painted face: Bee not the spirituall wickedness of an Idols inticing, like the flatteries of a wanton harlot: Bee not men and women as prone to spirituall fornication (I mean Idolatrie) as to carnal fornication...<sup>20</sup>

The *Homilie* also states that Catholic church itself is a "foule, filthie, olde withered harlot", while reminding us that when "the nature of man is...bent on worshipping of Images...then it is bent to whoredome and adulterie in the company of harlots".<sup>21</sup> The iconoclasts found fuel for their denunciation of the Catholic worship of images in an Old Testament that continually collates the worship of images with the sexual licentiousness and moral laxity of women. As Linda Gregerson writes, "the conjunction between lust, or uxuriousness, and the carnal misreading of signs, or idolatry, is one to which the Old Testament and Apocrypha gave repeated testimony".<sup>22</sup> In order to counter the divine power that Catholicism imputed to its icons, Protestant theology insisted that vision was an ephemeral and beguiling sense, offering only transient signs and meaningless distractions that lead the unwary into sin: "the eye is the devil's doore" chimed John Donne.<sup>23</sup> Vision was the sense with which women were most frequently aligned; they were rich surfaces, attracted to display, idolatry waiting to happen.<sup>24</sup> That the association of sexually active women with visual excess continued to remain strong beyond the Edwardian years (1547-1553) is evinced by English Petrarchanism and by texts like Spenser's *Faerie Queene*, in which episodes such as the destruction of the erotic spectacle of the Bower of Bliss by Guyon, the knight of Temperance, associate surplus display with moral turpitude.<sup>25</sup> Throughout Spenser's epic, chaste, heroic, and, above all, Protestant, characters are tempted by strength-sapping sirens in sumptuous surroundings. Following Spenser's lead, Middleton himself aligned idolatry unequivocally with the wickedness of women in an early poem, *The Wisdom of Solomon Paraphrased*, in which he tries to suppress its evil with his pen,

O idol-worshipping, thou mother art,  
She-procreatress of a he-offence?  
I know thee now, thou bear'st a woman's part,  
Thou nature hast of her, she of thee sense:  
These are thy daughters, too, too like the mother;  
Black sins, I dim you all with inky smother.<sup>26</sup>

Again and again we can see that the sins of lust and idolatry cannot be divorced from the characteristics of femininity: a louche life led in a gaudy interior.

But the figuration of woman as iconic lure or occularcentric harpy is only one aspect of Middleton's exploration of the politics of sight. Gendered Protestant condemnation of vision began to be challenged, indirectly and within a secular framework, by new

“scientific” visualities. As the initial shock wave of the Reformation faded, the importance of innovations such as the development of the telescope, and detailed studies of optics meant that no longer was sight to be cast off out of hand as a sense that merely fooled the unwary sinner. Philosophers such as Francis Bacon (1561-1626) were emphasizing the importance of empirical evidence when attempting to uncover the truth.<sup>27</sup> Bacon's philosophy, like the visual celebrations of the Jacobean court masque, must have sat uneasily alongside traditional Protestant fears. Certainly, it must have been difficult to discuss vision in any privileged way without the trace of idolatry creeping in to infect the “new” categories of sight that were being established. The metaphors of sight, already overburdened with meaning, were on the move, sending the visual world into a state of further hesitancy and undecidability.

This shift is partly alluded to in the title of *The Changeling*, with its resonance of transformation, vacillation, and flux. The many changes of identity that occur throughout the play, whether drastic or incremental, invite us to ask exactly who “the changeling” is supposed to be. The *dramatis personae* name Antonio, “the counterfeit fool”, but to attribute the title to him alone is disingenuous. Antonio certainly adopts a feigned persona, but can he be said to be any more of a changeling than Beatrice-Joanna? Her gradual transformation is far more radical and chillingly demonic than his, but then, virtually every other character in the play undergoes some kind of transformation as well: Diaphanta is a substitute bride, De Flores changes from despised reptile to cherished lover, Alibius changes from astigmatic fool to contrite husband, madmen to assorted fauna, Tomazo from fay courtier to revenger, and Alonzo “from suitor to corpse”.<sup>28</sup> Contained within the *topoi* of change, undecidability, and an emphasis on the process rather than the product, there is an important questioning of the ability of sight to identify the truth amongst the flurry of mis-identifications that constitute the play. To emphasise his own particularly rapid transformation from stoic merchant to charmed lover, Alsemero aligns himself with the famously capricious changes of the wind:

Alse. Even now I observ'd  
The temple's vane to turn full in my face;  
I know 'tis against me.

Jasp. Against you?  
Then you know not where you are.

Alse. Not well indeed.  
(I.i.19-23)

One of the plays main themes, then, is movement and metamorphosis, mutating from one subject position to another. In the mad and murderous world of Alicante, an individual is able to occupy more than one subject position at a time. Identity becomes a malleable concept, in a state of suspended uncertainty, not fixed and focused like the Alsemero Jasperino knows of old.

Of course, *The Changeling* is not unusual in seeking to reveal the distance between appearance and reality. One might argue that, alongside sex and death, one of the principal themes of English drama 1580-1643 consists of warnings against what we might call

“ocular literalism”. Various narratives from the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century stage that feature “impenetrable” theatrical disguises, for example, rely upon a certain unstated cultural belief that, in its natural state, the eye is the organ of the ignorant. The literal unmasking of a disguised character, such as the Duke in Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, is usually accompanied by the metaphorical unmasking of another, such as Angelo in the same play. In this case, the one who wears the disguise can “see” with the eyes of wisdom, whereas the one who is fooled can only see the surface and not the inner motivation of characters. Such narrative devices have the effect of producing a meritocracy of seeing, in which morally unimpeachable characters will be granted the ability to unveil or unmask the hidden meanings of their corrupt colleagues. In *Measure for Measure*, the serial mis-recognitions and inability to penetrate disguises that characterises Angelo's despotic career (like Alsemero, he is also duped by a changeling in his bed), are a reflection of his moral and intellectual myopia.<sup>29</sup> Similarly, Isabella's discovery of “Tony's disguise is akin to her metaphorically moral stripping of the sexual motivations that lie behind the dutiful exteriors of her aspirant lovers.

That the abyss between the concepts of sensory and intellectual perception seems to be bridgeable only by an astute, morally unimpeachable, few is made all the more acute by the fact that for one brief, yet tantalising, moment at the opening of *The Changeling*, we are given the illusion that seeing and interpretation exist in complete accord: the mirage of Beatrice-Joanna that convinces Alsemero he has found his God-intended “home”. Typically, Middleton and Rowley will not allow this idea to remain static. Far from comprising a return and rest, Alsemero's desire for Beatrice-Joanna instigates a frenzy of activity that offends the passage of matrimonial law by provoking adultery and murder. After his brave, if sudden, proclamation of love, Beatrice-Joanna is quick to query the premise through which Alsemero defines his love. Instead of sharing his version of events, she interrogates his interpretation of the scene, and questions his propriety:

Be better advis'd sir.  
 Our eyes are sentinels unto our judgements  
 And should give certain judgement what they see,  
 But they are rash sometimes and tell us wonders  
 Of common things, which when our judgements find,  
 They can then check the eyes and call them blind.  
 (I.i.68-73)

It seems a very sober and mature assessment that Beatrice offers her admirer, countering the hyperbole of his opening speech with the juxtaposition of “wonders” and “common things”. Beatrice is also mindful of the superiority of the intellect over vision, a “sentinel”, an underling who serves an incumbent and much less excitable master, judgement. Notice how the language at this point keeps the jurisdiction of the eyes and of judgement firmly apart, as if insisting that they exist in some kind of feudal or highly stratified relationship to each other, one dominant, the other subordinate. Amongst other things, the hierarchy suggests that the balanced subject is able to ruminate and reflect upon the information he or she is given by the senses in a calm and measured way, distancing



themselves from the immediacy of the retinal image long enough to produce a clear and objective appraisal of the situation. Inasmuch as she uses this analogy to offer her thoughts to Alsemero, Beatrice-Joanna identifies herself with the autonomous, self-reflexive Cartesian subject, governed by reason. The feudalism of this relationship, and its commensurate suggestion of a well-balanced individual, is echoed by Alsemero at I.i.69-73, but, like the fiction of harmony that he opens the play with, its use already suggests the future possibility of unrest or usurpation. By act II, for example, the established order is already in some disarray, as Beatrice-Joanna begins to realise the extent of her empathy for Alsemero, and her desire to participate in his fantasy,

Methinks I love now with the eyes of judgement  
 And see the way to merit, clearly see it.  
 A true deserver like a diamond sparkles;  
 In darkness you may see him, that's in absence,  
 Which is the greatest darkness falls on love;  
 Yet he is best discern'd then  
 With intellectual eyesight  
 (II.i.13-19)

Sexual compatibility is here equated with compatible visual interpretations, signifying to the audience that their love is based on romantic understanding rather than political convenience. But, just as certain conventional boundaries are transgressed as their love is confirmed, the feudal economy of reason is also upset. Whereas the eyes were initially the servants of reason, now Beatrice-Joanna collapses the distinction as she convinces herself that she sees with “the eyes of judgement”. Given the circumstances in which the pronouncement is made, her trumpeting of “intellectual eyesight” is oxymoronic. As vision is promoted and drawn in to the mind, the ability of conscious reason to reflect upon the validity of the information it receives is called into question. As it begins to creep over the threshold of reason, visual desire infects everything until reason can no longer govern the actions of its subjects.

For Beatrice-Joanna, the reversal of oppositions slowly consolidates its hold on her as the play progresses, its effects being particularly noticeable in her relationship to De Flores. The extent of her confusion can be seen by reference to Robert Burton's *Anatomie of Melancholy* (first published 1621). In a chapter entitled “Other causes of Love Melancholy, Sight, Beauty from the Face, Eyes, other Parts, and how it Pierceth”, Burton defines the way in which beauty engenders love:

the most familiar and usual cause of Love, is that which comes by sight, which conveys those admirable rayes of Beauty and pleasing graces to the heart... [T]he eyes are the harbingers of love, and the first step of love is sight...they as two sluces let in the influences of that divine, powerfull, soule-ravishing, and captivating beauty, which, as one saith, *is sharper than any dart or needle, wounds deeper into the heart, and opens a gap through our eyes to that lovely wound, which pierceth the soule it self... Through it love is kindled like a fire.*<sup>30</sup>

Burton ends his appraisal of love by concluding that, "we contemne and abhorre generally such things as are foule and ugly to behold, accompt them filthy, but love and covet that which is faire".<sup>31</sup> Beatrice-Joanna certainly conforms to Burton's analysis in her initial treatment of De Flores, *before* she has recognized Alsemero as the object of her desire. At her first sight of De Flores, she equates him with "a deadly poison" (I.i.108), saying "Such to mine eyes is that same fellow there, / The same that report speaks of the basilisk" (I.i.110-111). In this insult, Beatrice-Joanna raises the spectre of deadly vision that haunts the entire play, from Alsemero's first sighting of her, to the final consummation of her death. In Beatrice's invocation of the beast, and her subsequent fall due to the commitment with which she pursues her desires, Middleton presumes to make an equation in which the marriage of sexuality to the visual field usurps reason with deadly consequence. While Beatrice's initial disgust emphasises the distance that exists between Alsemero's beauty and De Flores' ugliness, it also serves as a mark against which we can chart the degeneration of categories in this world of deposed reason. It is an impossibility for one definition not to remain uninfected by the other, and, surely enough, the moral decline of Beatrice-Joanna is concentrated in her contravention of Burton's anatomy of love: ugliness and beauty are no longer opposites. As she says of De Flores, "How heartily he serves me! His face loathes one, / But look upon his care, who would not love him? / The east is not more beauteous than his service" (V.i.70-72).

The tragic consequences of this collapse in the order of vision is played out as comedy in the sub-plot set in Alibius' madhouse. Obvious parallels can be drawn between the circumstances of the characters in these scenes and their counterparts at court. Beatrice-Joanna, who accepts a petition of love, has her partner in Isabella who rejects hers, the "husbands" Alonzo and Alibius are a matching pair of dupes, Alsemero and Antonio and Franciscus have transposed fates as suitors, while De Flores and Lollo feature as destructive and ineffectual panders respectively. The important thing about the characters of the sub-plot is the fact that they invert the consequences of the main action, but whereas the court of Alicante experiences tragedy, the population of the madhouse induces only comedy. Alibius' household serves something of a choric function, therefore, anticipating, reiterating, and reacting to the action of the main plot.

If the basilisk is the defining metaphor for vision in the main plot of *The Changeling*, then the figure of Tiresias is its counterpart in the sub-plot. This other mythical oddity of vision is brought to light by the disguised Franciscus in an exchange with Lollo, Alibius' man:

*Franc.* Didst thou ever hear of one Tiresias,

A famous poet?

*Lollo.* Yes, that kept tame wild-geese.

*Franc.* That's he; I am the man.

*Lollo.* No.

*Franc.* Yes, but make no words on't; I was a man

Seven years ago.

*Lollo.* A Stripling, I think you might.

*Franc.* Now I'm a woman, all feminine.

*Lollio.* I would I might see that.

*Franc.* Juno struck me blind.

*Lollio.* I'll ne'er believe that; for a woman they say, has an eye more than a man.

(III.iii.63-75)

Tiresias is yet another anomaly of vision that populates *The Changeling*. A blind, male prophet transformed by Juno into a woman when he adjudicated that women found more pleasure in sex than men. In many ways, this strange compound character is just as much a cipher for the play as the basilisk, coming as he does in the middle of a scene in which Franciscus “changes” his identity several times through identification and allusion to various different mythological figures.<sup>32</sup> While Tiresias figures as part of an entire chain of associations, he is also the unifying force for all Franciscus' multiple identifications as he stands for ambiguous sexual identity, oxymoronic vision, and the punishment of reason by sexual jealousy.

The crossover and re-definition of boundaries that all these changes amount to are probably best summed up in the projected masque of the madmen that was to have been danced to celebrate the nuptials of Alsemero and Beatrice-Joanna. Madness has certainly entered court before madmen themselves enter it, but to have madmen dancing in celebration of a royal wedding would have completed the transition entirely, where vision equates to epistemological uncertainty, while madness, the negation of rationality, is a bastion of blind lucidity: the basilisk and Tiresias.<sup>33</sup> Middleton and Rowley stop just short of staging this spectacle, preferring instead the conventional Jacobean restoration of harmony and punishment of transgression, performed here through a series of vignettes that feature epiphanic realizations, and the recognition of true motives that restore visual order to the correct proportions, such as Alibius' “I see all apparent, wife, and will change now” (V.iii.214). Beatrice-Joanna's fate remains sealed, however, and her appropriation of Alsemero's opening vision undergoes its final inversion. “Rehearse again / Your scene of lust”, says Alsemero to her,

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.

(V.iii.115-118)

In this final statement of the effects of her sight, Beatrice concludes the play in almost exact opposition to the prelapsarian vision that opened it. Again, the vista of history is laid out for the deluded spectator, but now, instead of signifying love, it reveals a vision of hell and damnation. Having positioned herself throughout the play as seer rather than traditional Petrarchan seen, Beatrice is responsible for several deaths. It is she who ultimately mutates into the basilisk.

## Notes

1. See Laurence A Brenier, "The Basilisk", in *Mythical and Fabulous Creatures: A Source Book and Research Guide*, ed. South-Malcolm (New York: Bedrick, 1981), pp.113-122, p.117.
2. T.H. White (ed. and trans.), *The Book of Beasts, being a translation from a Latin bestiary of the twelfth century* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1954), no page numbers.
3. See E. W. Gudger, "Jenny Hannivers, Dragons and Basilisks in the Old Natural History Books and In Modern Times", *The Scientific Monthly*, 38 (1934): 511-523.
4. See Rudolph Wittkower, "Marvels of the East: A Study in the History of Monsters", in *Allegory and the Migration of Symbols* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1987), pp.45-74.
5. Aldrovandi, being a scientist, was not taken in. He saw the fabricated beast for what it was, a con-trick palmed off on an inquisitive public to relieve them of their money. Aldrovandi writes that, "Showmen fashion diverse-shaped figures from dried rays and foist these on the ignorant either for dragons or for basilisks. I am pleased to show here two of these [forgeries]". Quoted in Gudger, "Jenny Hannivers", p.518.
6. For a closely argued philosophical account of this process, see Jacques Derrida, "The White Mythology: Metaphor in the Text of Philosophy", in *Margins of Philosophy*, trans. Alan Bass (New York et. al.: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1982), pp.207-271. For an intellectual history of theorizations of the visual field, see Martin Jay, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994).
7. Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, *The Changeling*, ed. George Walton Williams, *Regents Renaissance Drama Series* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1966). All subsequent citations are from this edition.
8. Middleton and Rowley lifted the names for their characters direct from the story's source, John Reynold's *The Triumphs of God's Revenge* (1621), which included a character named Beatrice. Perhaps this helped in some way to influence the metaphorical movements that my discussion of the play highlights, suggesting obvious parallels to the authors as they constructed their themes and leitmotifs.
9. The second half of her double-barrelled name introduces an irony that is in keeping with the fluidity of identities that is a constant theme throughout this play. By the sixteenth-century, Joanna appears to have been one of the commonest English Christian names for girls, and hence became associated with drabs and drudges. Jonson's *Bartholomew Fair* features a common gingerbread woman named "Joan Trash", while Robert Herrick's "*Upon Jone and Jane*" held that:

JONE is a wench that's painted;  
*Jone* is a girl that's tainted;  
 Yet *Jone* she goes  
 Like one of those  
 Whom purity has sainted.

Or even, "JONE wo'd tel her haire; and well she might, / Having but seven in all; three black, foure white". Robert Herrick, *Hesperides*, in *The Poems of Robert Herrick*, ed. L.C. Martin (London: Oxford University Press, 1965), p. 229 and 195. See also Shakespeare, *Love's Labour's Lost*, V.ii.909-910: "A merry note, / While greasy Joan doth keel the pot."

10. Dante Alighieri, *Vita Nuova*, trans. Mark Musa (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992, p.4.

11. Francesco Petrarca, *Rime Sparse*, no.3, in *Petrarch's Lyric Poems: The Rime Sparse and Other Lyrics*, ed. and trans. Robert M. Durling (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1976), p.38.

12. An example of the standard English usage of this trope of Petrarchanism would be Philip Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, sonnet 29:

Like some weak Lords, neighbord by mighty kings,  
 To keepe themselves and their chiefe cities free,  
 Do easily yeeld that all their coasts may be  
 Ready to store their campes of needfull things;  
 So *Stella's* heart, finding what power *Love* brings,  
 To keepe it selfe in life and liberty  
 Doth willing graunt that in the frontiers he  
 Use all, to helpe his other conquerings:  
 And thus her heart escapes, but thus her eyes  
 Serve him with shot, her lips his heralds arre,  
 Her breasts his tents, legs his triumphal carre,  
 Her flesh his food, her skin his armour brave;  
 And I, but for because my prospect lies  
 Upon that coast, am giv'n up for a slave.

Philip Sidney, *Astrophel and Stella*, in Maurice Evans (ed.), *Elizabethan Sonnets* (London: Everyman, 1994), pp.4-57, p.14. For an analysis of the use of images of punishment and torture in Elizabethan sonnets, see Scott Wilson, "Racked on the Tyrant's Bed: the Politics of Pleasure and Pain and the Elizabethan Sonnet Sequences", *Textual Practice*, 3 (1989): 234-249. Other popular metaphors include imagining the mistress as a fortress or castle that cannot be taken and must be lain under siege. Vanderamo's concerns about the secrets of his castle is one example. Given the assignation that immediately precedes the appeal, it is hard to ignore the sexual subtext of Beatrice-Joanna's request on Alsemero's behalf: "I find him much more desirous / to see you castle. He hath desrv'd it, sir, / If ye please to grant it" (Li.154-156). See, for further examples, Sidney's *Astrophel and Stella*, sonnets 9,12,29,36,61,79, and song 2; Samuel Daniel's *Delia*, sonnets 42 and 51; Thomas Lodge's *Phyllis*, sonnets 23 and 24; Michael Drayton's *Idea*, sonnet 63; Spenser's *Amoretti*, sonnet 14; and the anonymous *Zepheria*, sonnet 25. For a study of the use of this and other Petrarchan metaphors in *The Changeling*, see Thomas L. Berger, "The Petrarchan Fortress of *The Changeling*", *Renaissance Papers* (1969): 37-46, and Robert Ormstein, *The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy* (Madison, Wis., 1960), pp.179-190.

13. See Michael R. G. Spiller, *The Development of the Sonnet: An Introduction* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

14. For a good account of the ways in which sonneteers dealt with the female body, see Nancy J. Vickers, "Diana Described: Scattered Women and Scattered Rhyme", *Critical Inquiry*, 8 (1981): 165-179.

15. Edmund Spenser, *Amoretti and Epithalamion*, sonnet VII, in *Spenser, Poetical Works*, ed. J. C. Smith and E. De Selincourt (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1989), pp.561-584, p.563.

16. In a sonnet of 1592, Henry Constable spells out the *religious* danger of loving a disdainful mistress:

Mine eye with all the deadlie sinnes is fraught,

I. First *proud*, sith it presum'd to looke so hie:  
 a watchman being made, stood gazing by,  
 2. and *idle*, to looke no heede till I was caught:  
 3. And *envious*, beares envie that my thought  
 should in his absence be to her so nie:  
 to kill my hart, mine eie let in her eie,  
 4. and so consent gave to a *murther* wrought:  
 5. And *covetous*, it never would remoove  
 from her faire haire, gold so doth please his sight:  
 6. *Unchast*, a baud betweene my hart and love:  
 7. a *glutton* eie, with teares drunk everie night.  
 These sinnes procured have a Goddesse'ire:  
 Wherefore my hart is damnd in Love's sweete fire.

Henry Constable, sonnet no.11 from *Diana. The praises of his Mistress in certaine sweete Sonnets by H.C.*, in *Elizabethan Sonnets*, pp.154-162.

17. Cf. IV.ii.106-107: "Oh, were she the sole glory of the earth, / Had eyes that could shoot fire into kings' breasts".

18. Recently, historians have questioned the extent to which the iconoclasm of the 16th and early 17th centuries had upon the survival of pre-reformation art works, suggesting that "more images and church furnishings may have survived the iconoclasts of the mid-sixteenth century than did the campaigns against images during the civil wars and republics of the 1640's and 1650's, and both these periods could have been said to have been less destructive than the actions of the Victorian developers of the nineteenth century". See Maurice Howard, *The Tudor Image* (London: Tate Gallery, 1995), p.10.

19. Nicholas Ridley, Bishop of London, *A Treatise on the Worship of Images*, in *Works of Nicholas Ridley*, ed. Henry Christmas (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1841), pp.81-96, p.87.

20. Quoted in Ernest B. Gilman, *Iconoclasm and Poetry: Down Went Dagon* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p.132.

21. Quoted in Gilman, *Iconoclasm and Poetry*, p.133, 131. See also, Patrick Collinson, *From Iconoclasm to Iconophobia: The Cultural Impact of the Second Reformation*, The Stenton Lecture, 1985 (Reading: University of Reading Press, 1986), p.25.

22. Linda Gregerson, "Protestant Erotics: Idolatry and Interpretation in Spenser's *Faerie Queene*", *ELH* 58 (1991): 1-34. On the ways in which the Edwardians and Elizabethans plundered the Old Testament to find images of kingship that paralleled their own policies, see Margaret Aston, *The King's Bedpost: Reformation and Iconography in a Tudor Group Portrait* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

23. John Donne, *The Sermons of John Donne*, ed. George R. Potter and Evelyn M. Simpson, 10 vols. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1953-1962), vol. 8, p.228. While there are innumerable examples of admonitory and didactic verses that seek to warn the reader about the pitfalls of coveting the quotidian, Spenser's *Complaints*, especially his "Visions of the World's Vanitie", probably offer the most accessible examples. See *Poetical Works*, pp.469-526, esp.pp.521-522.

24. Stephen Orgel's important essay on the representation of women by boys and men on the early-modern stage contains some interesting examples of anti-theatrical Puritan condemnation of the dangers of having "women" in public view. In the light of this work on the transvesticism of the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century drama, Middleton's commensurate rendition of the

problems of viewing women takes on a further meta-theatrical dimension of some complexity. See Stephen Orgel, "Nobody's Perfect: Or Why Did the English Stage Take Boys for Women?", *The South Atlantic Quarterly*, 88:1 (1989): 7-28. See also, Laura Levine, "Men in Women's Clothing: Anti-theatricality and Effeminization from 1579-1642", *Criticism*, XXVIII:2 (Spring 1986): 121-143.

25. See Edmund Spenser, *The Faerie Queene*, ed. A.C. Hamilton (London and New York: Longman, 1992), Bk.II, canto xii, stanzas 69-87.

26. Thomas Middleton, *The Wisdom of Solomon Paraphrased*, in *The Works of Thomas Middleton*, ed. A.H. Bullen (London: John C. Nimmon, 1885), 8 vols., vol.8, pp.137-297, p.253.

27. I think it is fair to say that, while Bacon may not be an empiricist in the common sense, he was certainly a forerunner of Locke. As regards idolatry, he was of his time, careful about images, although still very much persuaded of the importance of sight to the methodology of natural science.

28. See Lois E. Bueler, "The Rhetoric of Change in *The Changeling*", *English Literary Renaissance*, 14:1 (1984): 95-113, p.95.

29. Many critics have written on the role of disguise and its staging in the early-modern theatre. In relation to misrecognition and misidentification, see, for example, Barbara Freedman's essay "Reading Errantly: Misrecognition and the Uncanny in *The Comedy of Errors*" in *Staging the Gaze: Postmodernism, Psychoanalysis, and Shakespearean Comedy* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1991), pp.78-113.

30. Robert Burton, *The Anatomie of Melancholy*, ed. Faulkner, Kiessling, and Blair, 3 vols. (Oxford: Clarendon, 1994, vol.3, p.66.

31. Burton, *Anatomie*, p.66.

32. See Beuler, "The Rhetoric of Change in *The Changeling*", p.106. Beuler draws attention to the fact that Franciscus' shifting language here conforms to the rhetorical figure known as "antonomasia" as it is defined by George Puttenham in his *Arte of English Poesie* (1589). This text also defines the Greek figure of disorder, hypallage, a kind of substitution of words that remain grammatical but produce nonsense in their given context, with the word "changeling".

33. Perhaps the avoidance of the marriage masque represents a deliberate attempt by Middleton to evoke a corrupt nuptial ceremony that he wrote for the court of James I, *The Masque of Cupid*, performed on January 4th 1613/14, in celebration of the scandalous marriage of the Earl of Somerset to Frances Howard, a woman accused of adultery and imprisoned for murder. Many critics have seen a direct reference to the contemporary events featuring Frances Howard and the action of *The Changeling*. Howard was accused of using the services of an occultist physician in order to dose her first husband with anaphrodisiacs in order to nullify his sexual appetite. She then had to persuade a court that her first marriage should be declared void because it had not been consummated. In order to do this, she had to be examined by a team of female jurors. As she had been committing adultery on a regular basis with the Earl of Somerset, she feared the conclusions they would draw and apparently sent a cousin to the examination with a veil on her head as, it was said, a concession to modesty. The parallels between this virginity test, and the substitution of Diaphanta are clear to see in this case, and Middleton and Rowley may be exploiting the fact that Howard was released from the Tower sometime between 1621 and 1622, which coincides with the most likely dates for this plays composition. See also Middleton's play *The Witch*, as well as J.L. Simmons, "Diabolical Realism in Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*", *Renaissance Drama*, n.s. 10 (1980): 135-170, esp. pp.153-162; and David Lindley, *The Trials of Frances Howard: Fact and Fiction at the Court of King James* (London: Routledge, 1993).