

# Woman Question and Questioning Personal Autonomy in The Changeling

\*Shah Mohammad Sanaul Karim

Assistant Professor, English Language & Literature, International Islamic University Chittagong Chittagong,  
Bangladesh  
[karim1974@gmail.com](mailto:karim1974@gmail.com)

\*\*Fawzia Fathema

Lecturer, English Language & Literature, International Islamic University Chittagong, Chittagong, Bangladesh  
[fawzia.fathema@yahoo.com](mailto:fawzia.fathema@yahoo.com)

\*\*\*Abdul Hakim

Assistant Professor, English Language & Literature, International Islamic University Chittagong, Chittagong,  
Bangladesh  
[hakim\\_cueng@yahoo.com](mailto:hakim_cueng@yahoo.com)

## Abstract

The Changeling, collaborated on by Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, incorporates two plots in which the central roles are played by women who have their origin in two totally different social structures. This essay makes an attempt to put the status of woman in question as to how a woman's personal autonomy goes through twists and turns in the social construct mirrored in the play, how a woman can lead life according to her own will. How Beatrice's selfhood fluctuates and gets affected – are also under discussion of this essay. The essay shall further argue that Beatrice's quest for private desire / authenticity produces a paradoxical meaning between the intended effect of the action and actual result.

The Changeling incorporates one comic sub plot and a main plot. While the comic subplot includes a fidelity test that reflects the central plot, the main plot that includes a psychological exploration of Beatrice- Joanna's own tragic dilemma. Here, the comic subplot is important like the main plot. Isabella plays the role not only as a mere a comic foil but also as a corollary to Beatrice Joanna. She highlights many qualities of Beatrice-Joanna and is functioning on a paradigm of faithfulness in contrast to Beatrice-Joanna's own capriciousness. The two plots put the discretionary traits of the two dominant female characters side by side. While Beatrice – Joanna's naive and egocentric actions take her towards tragedy, Isabella's astuteness and maturity makes her the virtuous exemplar of the play. In addition to this, the fundamental difference between the two characters is class consciousness. While Beatrice-Joanna lives a life of aristocratic privilege, Isabella has a more pragmatic view of the world.

In both plots, the women are at the focal point of desire from the part of male. While Beatrice-Joanna is courted by Alonso, Alsemero and De Flores, Isabella is courted by Lollo, Antonio and Franciscus. Similarly, while De Flores is in a position "to demand her (Beatrice) virginity", Alibius's disregard to Isabella makes her susceptible to the men of asylum (as presented in the comic sub plot) and upper class agents who "falsely believe to be permissive and promiscuous"<sup>1</sup>. Here, the storylines of the two plots develop parallelly to such an extent that it as if Middleton and Rowley have presented a story into two seemingly different storylines.

Isabella is a lower class woman and is subject to upper class male aggression. Her very pragmatic viewpoint makes her realize that if she is unfaithful, Lollo will demand his "thirds" (IV.iii. 38). On the other hand, Beatrice Joanna seems completely oblivious to the constructs of power and class in her society. As the daughter of Vermandero, she believes herself to be completely sheltered from any negative consequences of her actions. This ignorance of class structures raises questions about woman as a race and stems from Beatrice Joanna's presentation "like a princess in a fairy tale, surrounded by obsequious attendants, only child of an influential and kindly father, with an eager suitor, a secret lover, a useful confidante, a waiting gentleman who professes to live for her whim"<sup>2</sup>.

While Beatrice Joanna enjoys the protection provided by her father's castle, Isabella, as an inmate of asylum, is well aware of class structures and social constructs. While Beatrice-Joanna enjoys personal autonomy to an extent and lives like a princess, Isabella firmly realizes the protection she receives from marriage and conjugal fidelity. Here, it is Isabella, who, ironically, is better prepared to function in society than Beatrice Joanna whose class biasness and individual freedom makes her oblivious to pragmatic aspects of power and social status.

Beatrice-Joanna is guilty of the fact that she never discourages Alsemero's flirtations, but this in no way creates the ground that she is a "whore". Alsemero suggests, "One good service/ Would strike off both your fears," as he proposes to "Remove the cause" (II.ii.22-23, 24). Alsemero suggests challenging Alonzo to a duel though there is no real reason for such a challenge. The seeds of murder are planted. At this stage, Beatrice-Joanna wants to protect Alsemero as she discourages his duel, "Pray, no more, sir. / Say you prevailed; you're danger's and not mine then. /The law would claim you from me" (II.ii.32-34).

The central conflict of the play occurs due to Beatrice-Joanna's over-eagerness to pursue Alsemero's suit as well as to try to protect his honor. Personal autonomy does not make Beatrice-Joanna far sighted, rather makes her myopic and she naively believes that DeFlores will solve her problems and will protect both herself and Alsemero from any consequence of wrong-doing.

Beatrice-Joanna can not be thought of as instinctively evil. Rather, due to her princess-like upbringing she falls short of reason and a perception of class structures. Her belief is that the aristocratic class system is completely fixed and stable and does not permit any mechanisms for social mobility. That is why, she believes that it is DeFlores who is given the order to kill Alonzo: "I shall rid myself / Of two inveterate loathing at one time"(II.ii.144-145), because she fails to gauge DeFlores' mind to employ the murder as a mean to rise socially. DeFlores is well aware of the control such an opportunity provides him, as he comments, "I was blest/ To light upon this minute; I'll make use on't (II.ii.93-94).

The problem of Beatrice-Joanna develops due to her miscommunication, for she never makes her objections known because of her naive and instinctive misunderstanding of social structures. She wants to free herself from betrothal with Alonzo and marry Alsemero. But, she is the daughter of a nobleman who feels obliged to a politically viable marriage, as he claims "I'll want / My will else" (I.i.227-228). The complete disregard of a previously arranged marriage would severely injure Vermandero's own honor. Her fundamental misunderstanding of social structures and lack of social judgment makes her arrangement and affair with DeFlores, a perfect weapon of convenience. She is unable to read his intentions as she believes that he needs what all men need: money. She fails to realize that he intends to sleep with her, an upper class woman, nor does she recognize his intentions of covert social mobility. She completely misunderstands DeFlores' excessive eagerness to provide help. Essentially, the murder becomes the tie that binds the two, transcending social class, as he reminds her that "Peace and innocency has turn'd you out/ And made you one with me"(III.iv.139-140). DeFlores' rape of Beatrice-Joanna sets in motion a tragic turn of events that, ultimately, leads to her complete ruin. By the end of the play, she becomes the locus for a sexuality that is both 'loved and loathed'. It is this dichotomy of being loved and loathed that leads to her own catastrophic realization of guilt, pointed out in her final words "'Tis time to die, when 'tis a shame to live" (V.iii.180).

What is the cause of the destruction and fall down of Beatrice-Joanna? It is her skewed moral compass. Burks truly puts "her behaviour is guided by flawed interpretations of her cultures gender roles"<sup>3</sup>. Her personal autonomy does not give her the courage to challenge social conventions. Her poor understanding of social constructs gives her this false belief that she possesses no social recourse for her impending marriage to Alonzo other than to have him killed.

Beatrice-Joanna's naiveté is used in order to equate Isabella, whose social awareness serves as a counter example to Beatrice-Joanna. Isabella's character is meant to reflect the actions of other characters in being tempted. She rejects enticements, displaying both control and reason. She displays more decorum and discretion than Beatrice-Joanna. She does not have the "princess" complex of Beatrice-Joanna. She knows the consequences of an affair. Her marital bond solidifies her middle class status and provides her with Alibius' protection. Isabella's mastery of both lust and passion reemphasizes and parodies the play's major themes. This emphasis is only repeated in the play's end as Beatrice-Joanna is publicly scandalized as she shamefully accepts her part in the murder and cries, "'Tis time to die, when it is shame to live," to which her father, Vermandero, responds "Oh, my name is entered now in that record"(V.iii.181).

Characters in Thomas Middleton's dramas mostly endow us with unique signifying types, private desires that are pursued within social rules and values, and, at the same time, self presentations that affect their private values at the expense of public identity. Both private and public selves are ingeniously attracting each other within the social value system, as it were, so that for Thomas Middleton, the scenes of self-creation are far more sophisticated than those established by Shakespearean heroes. Middletonian heroes and heroines often see public responsibility as incorporated into attributes.

Middleton makes us observe how the social value system is perceived differently by individuals, as what Paul Yachnin calls “Middletonian irony”<sup>4</sup>. Yachnin further argues: “Middleton’s play engages and disables interpretation by making and undoing tragic forms of selfhood and constructing and deconstructing interpretive frameworks”<sup>5</sup>. This essay looks into the private versions of self presented by the public environment, because these private versions, as it is assumed, make characters’ meaning of action unstable and paradoxical. Indeed, Middleton vividly depicts the clash between differing private values in the ways that characters use their own agencies in a society they inhabit. Perhaps this complicates a character’s processes of self creation and selfhood.

Middletonian characters mostly try to revise their social roles and duties, rather than to yield to ideological pressure by negotiating their subjectivities between the given and the created. They see themselves as private individuals rather than as members of a community. The Changeling provides some important insights that might have otherwise passed unnoticed in terms of private value and morality. The play upholds how Beatrice–Joanna’s attempt at autonomy becomes obstructed by other forces of value.

Though she behaves according to her own will, Beatrice–Joanna is made unfree by contingent circumstances that exceed her power. This is why the result of her actions gives a paradoxical and unstable meaning. The play has an essential morality. Characters’ private values tend to cross public codes and rules of morality. For example, Beatrice–Joanna sees her social role and responsibility as a daughter as temporal and disposable. Her quest for authenticity at different moments in the play itself marks a fault line between sex and morality. More specifically, her process of self creation exposes a paradoxical meaning of action, because public autonomy – for example, capitalistic, patriarchal, and hierarchical structures – raises ethical problems, not a foundational basis to assess some actions.

Characters’ morality in The Changeling remains suspended in the sense that idiosyncratic standards of value forbid us to offer a clear dichotomy of good and bad. So it is argued in this essay that Beatrice–Joanna’s quest for private desire or authenticity in Thomas Middleton’s The Changeling produces a paradoxical meaning between the intended effect of action and the actual result. Beatrice–Joanna’s sexual desire, which advances the action, takes her to face the unpredictable tragedy even if she initially has the freedom to act according to her will. The gap between her action and its effect makes us question the meaningful action she intended. What is more, the fact that she finally yields up her subjectivity to external force attests that she is a creature of circumstances, because the circumstances under girding social interaction become something that exceeds Beatrice’s power. Middleton shows the instability of human purpose and the submission of humanity to fortune through Beatrice’s process of self -creation. The tragic politics of desire and power in the play are deftly established in the three characters, Beatrice’s fiancé, Alonzo de Piracquo, her lover, Alsemero, and a servant, De Flores. Before the play opens, she has been betrothed to Alonzo de Piracquo, whose social position will further the ambitions of her father, Vermandero. However, she has fallen in love with Alsemero whom she already has seen in an Alicante temple. So Vermandero’s will is for Beatrice to marry Piracquo, while Beatrice’s will is set on marrying Alsemero, and De Flores’ will is to possess her. In the complex maze of idiosyncratic selfhood and desire, characters’ agencies are damaged by the torrent of private passions, which continually beget contingent circumstances.

In the opening scene, the dialogue among Vermandero, Alsemero, and Beatrice seems as a prelude to some impulsive event for her.

Vermandero:- I tell you sir, the gentleman’s complete,  
A courtier and gallant , enriched  
With many fair and noble ornaments;  
I would not change him for a son-in –law,  
For any he in Spain, the proudest he -,  
And we have great ones, that you know.  
Alsemero:- He’s much bound to you, sir.  
Vermandero:- He shall be bound to me ,  
As fast as this tie can hold him ; I’ll want  
My will else.

Beatrice:- (Aside) I shall want mine if you do it. (I.i.218-226)

At this moment, Beatrice’s given condition makes it clear that she cannot choose her own husband according to her own will. However, her aside indicates that her will is strong enough to pursue private desire by herself. Her passion and unique personality forbid her from making a rational judgment of the given situation. For example, in the opening scene Beatrice deals with the relation between sight and judgment:

“Our eyes are sentinels unto our judgments / And should give certain judgment what they see;/ But they are rash sometimes , and tell us wonders / Of common things , which when our judgments find , / They can then check the eyes, and call them blind”.(I.i.74-78)

Her speech shows that private passion could override reason or judgment . For her, to follow impulse and passion might mean abandoning her social duty and role, which means that she knows no other world than the world capable of fulfilling her wishes. Richard Levin points out that her childish ability is limited to the visual principle of judgment that whatever she wants is right, owing to her unique personality, which contains “an innate delicacy of taste , a fine appreciation of the surfaces, particularly the visual surfaces , of life, upon which her responses tend to center”<sup>6</sup>.

Admittedly, Beatrice-Joanna talks about social codes and norms as mismatched with her private value. She believes that she is able to create her life by revising what counts as a public field: her self-knowledge. She finds public autonomy as a surmountable condition that enables her to fulfill authentic selfhood. In all probability, she may have thought that other people belong to her power, especially De Flores and Diaphanta , because of their inferior social position. When Beatrice-Joanna tries to woo Alsemero, she develops her own model in line with her private values. From her point of view, her father’s will that asks Beatrice to marry Alonzo functions as an obstacle in the way of her authentic self. For her, to become what she truly is is to reject who she is not. The subsequent situations present something beyond Beatrice’s will and choice.

Beatrice had underestimated De Flores’s power. She might have thought that he is devoid of masculine autonomy, which accords with feudal code. She refers to the natural order which draws line of distinction between her and his blood: “Think but upon the distance that creation / Set ‘twixt thy blood and mine” (III.iv.131-132) Because of her wrong judgment, she puts herself in his power in the sense that her desire exactly causes her destiny to be subject to that of De Flores, which means that she becomes a victim of her own action: “I am in a labyrinth”(III.iv.72) . It also leads to the irreconcilable difference between her intention and its effects.

Beatrice’s youth has caused her mind to move to a whirlwind of passion even if she knows that her action gives rise to a moral problem, because she has committed a crime. Beatrice’s regret exposes a fault line between sex and morality: “ Oh misery of sin! Would I had been bound / Perpetually unto my living hate/ In that Piracquo, than to hear these words” (III.iv.128-130). This may be a crucial point that her idiosyncratic selfhood is bound to create values and patterns of behavior. In addition, she did not realize the desire she is causing – for example, when she touches his face with her own hands, De Flores is enraptured. The sentence “You are the deed’s creature” has paradoxical meaning in which Beatrice, who tried to exert power, fails to bring on her effectiveness. Her intentional action does not turn out to be meaningful for herself in the way she intended, as it were.

Beatrice-Joanna misjudges her waiting woman’s action. She is indignant at her waiting woman, calling her “this whore” (V.i.23). The unintentional aspect of her action functions as a constraint on her will because this action makes Beatrice more dependent upon De Flores, in which her damage leads to Alsemero’s suspicion. She tells DeFlores: “I’m forced to love thee now / ‘Cause thou provid’st so carefully for my honour”(V.i.48-49). Here her honorable social superiority and female virtue are mercilessly shattered. Swapan Chakravorty argues that the virginity test demonstrates “the norm of honour by which De Flores’ social better lives”<sup>7</sup>. Her quest for authentic self results in dirtying herself with dishonour, something she never expected, because the virginity test, put by Alsemero, who is suspicious of Beatrice’s virginity, makes her effort for self-creation unsuccessful .She has never wanted to tarnish herself with the crimes she has committed, but this attempt becomes inevitable because her idiosyncratic personality and the circumstances that drive her desires never prevent her from carrying out her plan. Her condition in the world reflects the instability of her purpose and ambition. The discrepancy between Beatrice’s intention and the actual result call into question her autonomy.

(All quotations are taken from **Three Jacobean Tragedies** published by The Penguin English Library edited by Gamini Salgado.)

### Bibliography

1. Kistner, A.L. and M.K. “ The Five Structures of The Changeling.” Modern Language Studies. II.2(1981): Page-40.
2. Farr, Dorothy M. “ The Changeling”. Modern Language Review.62.4(1967): Page-586.
3. Burks, Deborah. “I’ll Want My Will Else”: The Changeling and Women’s Complicity With Their Rapists”. ELH 62.4(1995): Page- 759.
4. Yachnin, Paul. Stage-Wrights: Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton and the making of Theatrical Value. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1997. Page-121.
5. Ibid. Page- 125.
6. Levin , Richard. The Multiple Plot in English Renaissance Drama. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976. Page-39.
7. Chakravorty , Swapan. Society and Politics in the Plays of Thomas Middleton. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996. Page-158.

The IISTE is a pioneer in the Open-Access hosting service and academic event management. The aim of the firm is Accelerating Global Knowledge Sharing.

More information about the firm can be found on the homepage:

<http://www.iiste.org>

## CALL FOR JOURNAL PAPERS

There are more than 30 peer-reviewed academic journals hosted under the hosting platform.

**Prospective authors of journals can find the submission instruction on the following page:** <http://www.iiste.org/journals/> All the journals articles are available online to the readers all over the world without financial, legal, or technical barriers other than those inseparable from gaining access to the internet itself. Paper version of the journals is also available upon request of readers and authors.

## MORE RESOURCES

Book publication information: <http://www.iiste.org/book/>

Academic conference: <http://www.iiste.org/conference/upcoming-conferences-call-for-paper/>

## IISTE Knowledge Sharing Partners

EBSCO, Index Copernicus, Ulrich's Periodicals Directory, JournalTOCS, PKP Open Archives Harvester, Bielefeld Academic Search Engine, Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek EZB, Open J-Gate, OCLC WorldCat, Universe Digital Library, NewJour, Google Scholar

