

## The Closet Drama in *The Changeling*, V.iii

JOOST DAALDER

*Flinders University of South Australia*

In act 5, scene 3 of Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*, Alsemero, once fully convinced that Beatrice has been involved in murder and adultery, decides to lock her up in his "closet," his small private room, which on the stage was no doubt situated within what is now often called the "discovery space"—formerly known as the "inner stage." Alsemero instructs De Flores to join her shortly afterward. This note will address the vexed question, What happens in that closet, until Beatrice and De Flores (meanwhile hidden from view by, e.g., a curtain) appear on stage again?

That scholars continue to be uncertain about this question is obvious from the latest edition of the play, which is included in Bryan Loughrey and Neil Taylor, eds., *Thomas Middleton: Five Plays* (London, 1988).

In this version, De Flores comes back on stage after line 142, "*bringing in* BEATRICE [*wounded*]." I have no quarrel with the addition of the word "wounded," although it does not occur in the primary source (the 1653 quarto). Beatrice and De Flores confess their sins to those yet unacquainted with them. De Flores shows himself quite unrepentant. He says that he murdered Alonzo, and adds:

her honour's prize  
Was my reward; I thank life for nothing  
But that pleasure; it was so sweet to me  
That I have drunk up all, left none behind            170  
For any man to pledge me.

Vermandero, Beatrice's father, exclaims: "Horrid villain! / Keep life in him for further tortures." To which De Flores retorts:

No!  
I can prevent you; here's my penknife still.  
It is but one thread more, [*Stabs himself.*] and now 'tis cut.

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Make haste, Joanna, by that token to thee: 175  
 Canst not forget, so lately put in mind,  
 I would not go to leave thee far behind.  
*Dies.*

Concerning “that token” the editors comment: “i.e. his self-inflicted wound (although possibly he is referring to the wound he gave her).”

Clearly they raise two possibilities here, expressing preference for the wound which De Flores has just given himself with his penknife, while not rejecting an alternative solution, namely, that the “token” was given to her when he wounded her. This, one infers, happened in the closet and connects with the editorial specification that De Flores has brought in Beatrice “wounded.” I suggest that the word “token” cannot refer to both wounds at the same time, although I concede that both exist. We must somehow try to come to a firm resolution regarding what the “token” is.

The editors’ difficulty arises, I submit, from not considering yet another possibility, which—it must be added in their defense—others have not recognized either. The “token” may refer to something else which De Flores gave Beatrice, namely, the promise implied in a *first* wound which he inflicted upon himself in the closet. If this possibility can be made to hold, the lines “Make . . . behind” (lines 175–77) will need to be repunctuated, although the punctuation, typical of texts succeeding N. W. Bawcutt’s, is based on his edition (London, 1958—now published by Manchester University Press). Bawcutt’s edition has widely been accepted as standard, but this does not mean that he is invariably right.

The editorial punctuation of lines 175–77, and comments provided by Loughrey and Taylor and others, show a degree of confusion as to what happens in the closet which I think we can only rectify by considering just what Rowley (who wrote this scene) had in mind when he first takes us imaginatively “into the closet,” so to speak.

Alsemero initially sends Beatrice into the closet because he needs time to think (in his own words)

What I must do in this; meantime you shall 85  
 Be my prisoner only: enter my closet;  
*Exit* BEATRICE.  
 I’ll be your keeper yet.

Action in the closet is not likely until later. During the ensuing dialogue between Alsemero and De Flores (who turns up shortly afterward) we forget about Beatrice as a presence in the closet. But she presumably overhears De Flores when he calls her a whore, for she then exclaims (line 110): “He lies, the villain does belie me!” De Flores says to Alsemero: “Let me go to her, sir.” Alsemero replies:

Nay, you shall to her.  
 Peace, crying crocodile, your sounds are heard!  
 Take your prey to you, get you in to her, sir.  
*Exit DE FLORES.*  
 I'll be your pander now; rehearse again  
 Your scene of lust, that you may be perfect 115  
 When you shall come to act it to the black audience  
 Where howls and gnashings shall be music to you.  
 Clip your adult'ress freely, 'tis the pilot  
 Will guide you to the Mare Mortuum,  
 Where you shall sink to fadoms bottomless. 120

Scholars generally overlook the sexual implications of these words. All editors print "in to" in line 113. But the quarto has "into."<sup>1</sup> In a play so noted for its sexual puns,<sup>2</sup> the quarto's "get you into her sir" is likely to mean both "move yourself into the closet, toward her" (the common interpretation) and "move yourself into her sexually." We should not miss Alsemero's suggestion to De Flores that he have sexual intercourse with Beatrice when once he is inside the closet. This suggestion—or instruction, rather—is reinforced by "rehearse again / Your scene of lust" (lines 114–15) and "Clip your adult'ress freely" (line 118).

That Alsemero did intend the evil couple to have intercourse in the closet was grasped by Dorothea Kehler over twenty years ago.<sup>3</sup> However, although Kehler rightly pointed to some of the linguistic particulars, she drew a fanciful conclusion from her evidence. She argues in favor of the reading of 'intercourse' for "token" in line 175, but no such connection is suggested, and the interpretation of "token" in this sense seems as arbitrary as that of Tinsley Helton, who had offered the suggestion that "token" refers to the ring which De Flores gave to Beatrice after killing Alonzo.<sup>4</sup> These readings distance us unnecessarily from the evidence, and one conjecture thus becomes as indefensible as another.

However, Kehler was right to insist that critics of *The Changeling* had not accounted for what takes place in Alsemero's room during this interval. And I agree that the lovers do engage in a final act of

1. Readers who have no access to any copy of the 1653 quarto may care to check the facsimile edition of a copy in the British Library (BL 162.k.10) published by the Scholar Press (Menston, England, 1973), with an introductory note by N. W. Bawcutt.

2. Compare particularly Christopher Ricks, "The Moral and Poetic Structure of *The Changeling*," *Essays in Criticism* 10 (1960): 179–99.

3. Dorothea Kehler, "Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*, V, iii, 175–77," *Explicator* 26 (1968), item 41.

4. Tinsley Helton, "Middleton and Rowley's *The Changeling*, V, iii, 175–77," *Explicator* 21 (1963), item 74.

intercourse. But what else happens? While they are in the closet, Vermandero and Alsemero argue over who is to blame for murdering Alonzo. This leads Alonzo's brother Tomazo to say:

How is my cause bandied through your delays!  
 'Tis urgent in blood and calls for haste; 135  
 Give me a brother alive or dead;  
 Alive, a wife with him; if dead, for both  
 A recompense, for murder and adultery.

This is followed by:

BEATRICE (*Within.*): O! O! O!  
 ALSEMERO: Hark, 'tis coming to you.  
 DE FLORES (*Within.*): Nay, I'll along for company.  
 BEATRICE (*Within.*): O! O! 140

We first need to try and deduce what Beatrice's "O! O! O!" signifies. To do this, we have to pay attention to what Alsemero says next: "Hark, 'tis coming to you." For one thing, this may be a reference to the "recompense" which Tomazo is seeking for his brother, who is indeed dead. But, if so, *what* recompense does Alsemero refer to as "coming"? Alsemero's "'tis coming to you" seems to refer not only to "recompense" but also to "murder and adultery." I suggest that the two levels of meaning are in fact fused. A recompense for murder and adultery is coming to Tomazo, but that recompense also *is* further murder and adultery. The original murder was that of Alonzo, and Beatrice committed adultery, as Tomazo sees it, when she was married to Alsemero instead of Alonzo, to whom she had been betrothed. The "recompense" takes the form of another murder, namely that of Beatrice by De Flores (who has just stabbed her), and another instance of adultery, that is, the copulation in the closet, which has just come to a climax. Beatrice's "O! O! O!" thus betokens both "murder" and "adultery" to Alsemero.

So far, two of the three key events in the closet have occurred: De Flores has fornicated with Beatrice, and he has stabbed her. But in order to understand what follows in the play—and particularly the sense of "token" in line 175—we need to pay special attention to what comes next:

DE FLORES (*Within.*): Nay, I'll along for company.  
 BEATRICE (*Within.*): O! O!

When De Flores says "Nay, I'll along for company" he must mean that he intends to accompany Beatrice. Beatrice is incapable of walking anywhere on her own (as is obvious from the fact that he has to carry her), and the journey which De Flores has in mind is therefore Beatrice's

journey to death. He stabs himself in order to be with her on that journey. Beatrice, in shock at this latest development, calls out "O! O!"

That De Flores has in fact wounded himself is not only patent from these lines but yet more unequivocally shown in what he next says when he appears on stage with Beatrice:

Here we are; if you have any more  
To say to us, speak quickly, I shall not  
Give you the hearing else; I am so stout yet, 145  
And so, I think, that broken rib of mankind.

Here "I shall not / Give you the hearing else" means 'If you do not speak quickly I shall be unable to give you a hearing because I am fatally wounded', and the sense of "I am so stout yet, / And so, I think, that broken rib of mankind" is 'I am still sufficiently strong to hear you if you are quick, as is—I believe—Beatrice, that broken rib of mankind'. On stage, De Flores should point at Beatrice when he refers to her. His contempt for Beatrice as Eve, weaker than himself (a "rib of mankind" and "broken" at that), suggests that he thinks she will predecease him. But things do not develop the way De Flores expects. He thinks that the one wound which he gave himself will be sufficient to result in his death. But, ironically, he is still not dead when Vermandero calls for "further tortures" (line 172), and he then decides to hasten the process of dying along by stabbing himself a second time. This action ensures—again, ironically—that he dies before Beatrice.

Now, perhaps, we shall be able to make sense of lines 175–77, which Loughrey and Taylor (following Bawcutt) punctuate as follows:

Make haste, Joanna, by that token to thee:  
Canst not forget, so lately put in mind,  
I would not go to leave thee far behind.

The quarto version has:

Make haste Joanna by that token to thee.  
Canst not forget so lately put in mind,  
I would not goe to leave thee far behind.

Bawcutt, in "translating" the quarto stop after "thee" into a colon, takes that mark too seriously. The stop does not necessarily have the syntactical weight that it assumes in Bawcutt's interpretation but is probably merely a sign for a pause in delivery. Indeed, it may well be a simple error, as the quarto punctuation cannot by any means be considered authoritative. On the other hand, we are quite at liberty to interpret the comma after "mind" as a semicolon, although its function too is probably rhetorical rather than syntactical. I would suggest the following punctuation:

Make haste, Joanna, by that token to thee  
 Canst not forget, so lately put in mind;  
 I would not go to leave thee far behind.<sup>5</sup>

The lines thus punctuated may be paraphrased: 'Make haste in dying, Joanna, in keeping with the promise which I made to you when I first wounded myself, and which you cannot forget, having been reminded of it so recently now that I have wounded myself a second time; I should not be keen to go (and will not go) while I leave you far behind me'.

The "token" is the promise which De Flores gave to Beatrice ("Joanna") when he first wounded himself in the closet. This action (the third major event in the closet drama) was to indicate to her: 'I promise, by wounding myself after wounding you, that I shall accompany you into death'. Now, contrary to his expectations, De Flores has to remind Beatrice of that earlier promise by wounding himself a second time, and he has to urge her to follow him instead of vice versa. Although Beatrice does die almost immediately after these words, De Flores dies first and thus is shown to have less control over events than he had hoped. The drama in the closet in this respect embodies a major theme of the play: that our schemes—no matter how evil we are and no matter how clever we think we are—will in the end inevitably prove the existence of a power we cannot manipulate.

5. I frequently disagree with the punctuation in Bawcutt's edition and others. For further examples, see Thomas Middleton and William Rowley, *The Changeling*, ed. Joost Daalder (London, 1990).