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Madness and Mismanagement in Middleton and Rowley's The Changeling

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Jacobean playwrights seem to have been fascinated by the issue of madness. As Robert Rentoul Reed puts it, there was “an abnormally extensive use of madness upon the Jacobean stage” (p. 4). If both Ophelia and Lear immediately cross our minds, Shakespeare’s contemporary playwrights take the lion’s share as regards the dramatic appropriation of another “stage”, that of the Hospital of Bethlehem, also known as Bedlam asylum. Thomas Dekker’s *The Honest Whore, Part 1* (1604), John Webster’s *The Duchess of Malfi* (1614), John Fletcher’s *The Pilgrim* (1621) and Thomas Middleton and William Rowley’s *The Changeling* (1622) have their respective inmates, whether genuinely insane or counterfeit. In contrast with *Hamlet* and *King Lear*, these plays do not explore individual characters’ disturbed psyches but rather question the way madmen are *socially*, that is, *institutionally* dealt with. The treatment of lunatics in the sixteenth century was known to be as brutal as ineffective. “Society,” as Gamini Salgado notes, “was not prepared to put up with a poor man who was insane and so he was treated in much the same way as witches, whores, vagrants and others whose conduct was likely to be socially nonconformist” (pp. 198-99). William C. Carroll observes: “Once they were inscribed in the discourse of poverty, then, the London mad could be classified as a social rather than a psy-

chological problem, and official management could turn from the untreatable ‘mind diseased’ [Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, V.iii.42] to the more easily managed body” (p. 107). The “official management” was that of Bedlam, whose bad reputation was, by early in the reign of James I, firmly established.

The Changeling is perhaps the best and most famous English “madhouse play”. The first record of its performance at Whitehall dates back to January 1623, but it is likely to have been performed at the Phoenix Theatre as early as 1622. Whatever the precise date, it seems significant that the play was performed *after* the 1620 “Petition of the Poor Distracted People in the House of Bedlem”, that is, after the appointment of Dr Helkiah Croke—one of James I’s private court physicians—as keeper of Bedlam in 1618. The timing suggests that Middleton and Rowley may be making topical connections between Dr Croke and their Dr Alibius.

To begin with, a brief diachronic survey of the hospital of Bethlehem from its creation in 1247 to Rowley and Middleton’s days will be helpful in gaining a better understanding of the sorry state the asylum was in and what might have been the Jacobean audience’s shared knowledge and expectations as spectators. Topically resonant allusions in the play to mismanagement will then be traced and analysed—that is, elements exposing the predominance of financial motives over medical competence and concern. These include suggestions of embezzlement, abuse of power, neglect and negation, exploitation, and so forth. Middleton and Rowley’s satirical target will finally emerge as having a broader scope. Our focus will shift from political to religious criticism, from “clinical” to human folly. But these categories may also prove permeable.

Originally, Bedlam was a priory established in 1247 for the bishop of St Mary of Bethlehem—hence its name. In 1330, it was converted into “The Hospital of St Mary of Bethlehem”, and it became more specifically a “hospital for lunatics” in 1402.¹ Things changed with the Reformation. In 1536, George Boleyn (Anne’s brother), who was the governor of the hospital, was beheaded and succeeded by Bishop Bonner, then by Sir Peter Mewtys, who was one of Henry VIII’s confidential agents. It comes as no surprise, then, that two years after his appointment, “the citizens set themselves to try and save from the greed and callousness of the king some of the London hospitals, of which Bethlehem was one” (O’Donoghue, p. 110). In 1538, the Mayor of London, Sir Thomas Gresham, petitioned the King to

1 *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. “Bedlam”.

regard favourably the religious houses that had been founded “only for the relief and comfort of poor and impotent people unable to help themselves” (cited O’Donoghue, p. 111). As O’Donoghue observes, in his *Story of Bethlehem Hospital*, the Mayor carefully calculated his appeal to Henry VIII, being both diplomatic and persistent:

They were not founded for the maintenance of canons, priests, and monks to live in pleasure, nothing regarding the miserable people lying in every street, offending every clean person passing by their filthy and nasty savours. (cited O’Donoghue, p. 111)

It took no less than eight years for Henry VIII to agree, just before his death in 1546, to grant Bethlehem to the City of London, provided the City would pay for maintenance and restoration work. From 1547 to 1556, the hospital for lunatics was administered by the court of aldermen; in late 1556, it was transferred to the governors of Christ’s Hospital; in 1557, it was placed under the management of Bridewell, the London house of correction whose bad reputation would also be firmly established. Funding priority never seems to have been given to Bethlehem; as O’Donoghue puts it, “Bethlehem has always been the Cinderella among her disdainful sister hospitals” (p. 128).

Notorious mismanagement of Bedlam was brought to light in James I’s reign. An inquiry held at Guildhall in 1618 revealed that Thomas Jenner, the keeper of the hospital, was “unskilful in the practice of medicine” and possibly “guilty of harshness and neglect towards his patients” (O’Donoghue, p. 156). He was consequently dismissed, in spite of protests and appeals. His successor could have been deemed to be different at first glance. Dr Helkiah Crooke had been appointed physician to James I in 1604 and had written a book on anatomy entitled *Mikrokosmographia*, so he appeared worthy of trust when the hospital was placed under his direction in 1619. As Dr Crooke intended to reform the hospital, he immediately wrote a petition to James I. He urged that Bedlam should immediately be freed from the supervision of Bridewell, with the allegation that the union of Bedlam and Bridewell had been a disaster since 1557 (O’Donoghue, p. 158). The governors of Bridewell, who were also responsible for Bedlam, seem indeed to have been unconcerned with asylum matters. According to Patricia Allderidge, Dr Crooke undoubtedly “laid his finger with singular precision on both the cause and the symptom of Bethlem’s trouble over the preceding 100 years” (p. 156).

The king, however, interpreted Crooke's demand as a threat to the jurisdiction that he claimed over Bedlam and rejected it. Ken Jackson points out that "by 1622 the Crown was asserting its control over all charitable practices" (p. 204). As a result, Jackson goes on to say, "the exchange between the Court of Aldermen and James was a very real struggle between social actors to determine the nature and government of a charity" (p. 213). For O'Donoghue, the king's rejection might explain why Dr Crooke lost interest in the hospital and let it go—until he was forced to defend himself against the City's charges of corruption. For in 1620, "the Petition of the Poor Distracted People in the House of Bedlem" pointed to serious abuses; in 1622, Dr Crooke's servants were charged with "showing unnecessary harshness towards a patient;"² in 1625, Dr Crooke's misdemeanours were investigated, and he was finally dismissed in 1634, after Charles I's investigating commissions' reports proved his mismanagement to be quite beyond the pale.

Donald Lupton's depiction of Bedlam in 1632, therefore, in *London and the Countrey Carbonadoed and Quartred into Severall Characters*—a book of characters illustrating the habits and manners of Englishmen from the reign of James I—comes as no surprise:

It seemes strange that any one should recover here, the cryings, screechings, roarings, brawlings, shakings of chaines, swearings, frettings, chaffings, are so many, so hideous, so great, that they are more able to drive a man that hath his witts, rather out of them, then to helpe one that never had them, or hath lost them, to find them again. (p. 75)

Lupton questions nothing less than his contemporaries' ability either to manage or to cure madness. But let us now turn to the charges of mismanagement against Dr Crooke and see how they may have inspired Middleton and Rowley for their dramatic portrait of Dr Alibius.

The 1632 report on the hospital and that of 1633 on the keeper are crystal-clear. In *The Changeling*, we are shown Dr Alibius' cupidity. Alibius is not merely a greedy doctor; he is actually after his patients' inheritances. The patients' relatives are blindly ready to pay him handsomely so that their fools may have "good attendance and sweet lodging" (I.ii.116).³ What matters for Dr Alibius is that his patients come from a rich family and stand to be heirs to its fortune.

2 It is to be regretted that, as O'Donoghue informs us (p. 160), no copy of this pamphlet or broadsheet is now known to exist.

3 All quotations from *The Changeling* are taken from the New Revels edition of Bawcutt.

Hence, his indelicate question, “is there not one incurable fool / That might be begg’d? (IV iii.209-10)—meaning that he is seeking appointment as guardian in order to enjoy his patient’s estate. In the Caroline reports, what is exposed is no less than embezzlement: “It was proved by the commissioners of 1632 and 1633 . . . that legacies, fees from patients’ friends, and other money went without reference to the steward’s bills into the bulging pockets of Dr Crooke” (O’Donoghue, p. 167). The commissioners also found out that Dr Crooke’s steward appropriated the regular supply of food and drink put at the disposal of the hospital by the mayor and sheriffs. As O’Donoghue recapitulates the situation, “the steward and his wife—left with little but the bones by Dr Crooke—proceeded to take the choicest bits for themselves and to sell the remainders, which had cost them nothing, to their helpless prisoners at six times its value” (p. 168). In the play, Lollo is innocent of such practices, but the fools’ and madmen’s disjointed cries nonetheless suggest that they are hungry and undernourished: “the bread’s too little” (I.ii.195), “[g]ive her more onion” (197), “her permasant, her permasant!” (202-3). Their cries may echo the First Madman’s voice of starvation in *The Honest Whore, Part 1*: “I am starved, and have had no meat by this light, ever since the great flood”; “look you, here are my guts: these are my ribs—you may look through my ribs—see how my guts come out! These are my red guts, my very guts, oh, oh!” (Dekker, IV.ii [p. 181]).

It is not clear whether the lunatics are underfed in *The Changeling*, but their abnormal behaviours—which hunger may accentuate, as Piero Camporesi makes us aware⁴—are clearly exploited with a lucrative end in view. With Lollo’s help, Dr Alibius will exhibit “A mixture of our madmen and our fools” (III.iii.256) at the wedding-entertainment given by Vermandero. He is paid to organize “[o]nly an unexpected passage over, / To make a frightful pleasure” (III.iii.259-60), but he has a plan to get even more money out of his inmates. He tells Lollo:

could we so act it,
To teach it in a wild *distracted measure*,
Though out of form and figure, breaking time’s head,
It were not matter, ’twould be *heal’d* again

4 See Camporesi, p. 125:

The most effective and upsetting drug, bitterest and most ferocious, has always been hunger, creator of unfathomable disturbances of mind and imagination. Further lifelike and convincing dreams grew out of this forced hallucination, compensating for the everyday poverty.

In one age or other, if not in this:
This, this, Lollo, there's a good reward begun,
And will beget a bounty, be it known. (III.iii.261-67, my emphasis)

As if to accentuate the doctor's cynicism, the verb "heal" is symptomatic of a strategy of postponement and, even more significantly, misapplied: what might be "healed" in the future is not the distraction of his patients but the "distracted measure" of the "morris" (IV.iii.65) dance. His wife Isabella's ironic reaction articulates a criticism of such practices: "Y'have a fine trade on't, / Madmen and fools are a staple commodity" (III.iii.275-76). But what matters for Dr Alibius is "[b]y madmen and by fools" to "thrive" (279). Madmen are thereby reduced to "sights" such as the "bull with five legs" in *Bartholomew Fair* (Jonson, III.vi.4, 7)—that is, made profitable. As Carroll puts it, "the 'Bedlam poor' are just another form of popular entertainment, culturally equivalent to various urban curiosities, or to such theatricalized spectacles as bear-baiting or 'stage plays'" (p. 100). At Bedlam, Salgado explains,

both the harmless and the violent were available for important visitors to amuse themselves with. The general public had to pay for admission. . . . The entertainment regularly provided included the beating of the inmates with wire whips and the opportunity to harass those who were chained from a safe distance. (p. 202)

In *The Changeling*, Isabella ironically tells Lollo, "Afford me then the pleasure of your Bedlam" (III.iii.21). Alibius' man produces one of the fools, a "gentle nigget" (102), and reassures her: "you may play with him, as safely with him as with his bauble" (102-3). Far from being considered as an object of medical study, deficiency in understanding is reduced to a form of entertainment, even as it provides a useful satirical vehicle (another form of instrumentalization). "I'll undertake to wind him up to the wit of a constable" (I.ii.125-26), says Lollo mockingly about one of his newly acquired patients. All in all, Middleton and Rowley's play probably reflected the fact that "the show of Bethlem . . . had come under criticism for emphasizing its 'theater' rather than its charity" (Jackson, p. 204).

Charity is outshone by entertainment, and so is medical care. Among Dr Crooke's numerous misdemeanours was the fact that he "only appeared at the hospital on quarter days" (O'Donoghue, p. 160). For O'Donoghue, this invites a comparison with another doctor, Timothy Bright, the author of *A Treatise of Melancholy* (1586):

while he [Bright] was writing his book, he was neglecting his patients at St Bartholomew's, from which he was practically dismissed. Is Dr Crooke another example of the physician who sacrifices the responsibilities of his office and salary to more congenial pursuits and society? (p. 164)

In *The Changeling*, Dr Alibius too is notoriously absent from his asylum. His man laments: "Would my master were come home! I am not able to govern both these wards together" (III.iii.166-68). It is clear from the beginning of the play that the doctor neither "governs" his madhouse nor "cures" his fools and madmen, although he says he does: "I do profess the cure of either sort: / My trade, my living 'tis, I thrive by it" (I.ii.49-50). It is significant that the economic lexicon (instead of the medical one) should be predominant in his speech.

Infantilizing and whipping are resorted to by way of curing. Both madmen and fools are "under the whip" (I.ii.45), which is also termed "the wire" (201) and, quite tellingly, "poison" (III.iii.86). As Michel Foucault observes, in *Histoire de la folie à l'âge classique*, "la folie relève, moins que jamais, de la médecine; elle ne peut pas appartenir davantage au domaine de la correction. Animalité déchaînée, on ne peut la maîtriser que par le dressage et l'abêtissement" (p. 200). In the play, the "real" fools and madmen are closely associated with the animal kingdom: "Sometimes they imitate the beasts and birds, / Singing, or howling, braying, barking" (III.iii.196-97). To take up Foucault's terms, "la folie emprunte son visage au masque de la bête" (p. 197). So what may have shocked Middleton and Rowley and their audience was, perhaps, not so much the way madness was contained and not cured as the neglect of basic human care combined with lucrative exhibition, the absence of both decency and charity, the dying of genuine charitable practices.

In *Separate Theaters*, Jackson reminds us: "Early modern Europe relied primarily on religion, and religious discourse to explain, justify, and manage its charitable practices" (p. 206). This being acknowledged, he argues that *The Changeling* is Middleton and Rowley's answer to *The Pilgrim*, to Fletcher's "valorization of Catholic good works" (p. 213). Rowley and Middleton, conversely, expose the mismanagement of the private hospital, that is, "the potential for perversion in the holy motivation for charity" (p. 223), the "corrupt uses that relied on the Catholic notion of *caritas*" (p. 222). In *The Changeling*, Jackson notes, "Antonio and Franciscus have come to the madhouse previously as visitors . . . masking cupiditas for Isabella with *caritas* for the mad" (p. 123).

What is Dr Alibius' main preoccupation, not to say obsession? That his man should watch his wife rather than his inmates, for fear she should cuckold him with "the daily visitants, that come to see / My brainsick patients" (I.ii.52-53). This is why he (ambiguously) tells Lollio: "Here I do say must thy employment be, / To watch her treadings, and in my absence / Supply my place" (37-40). His fantasies turn the asylum into a stage propitious for a vaudeville. The stakes are domestic, not medical; the asylum administration is perverted by the doctor's private obsession. Both the institution and its hypocritical visitors are exposed. It seems that what may be questioned, beyond the religious implications, is the change from individual charity to institutionalized charity, the emergence of a new sensitiveness towards madness that is no longer religious but social. Antonio's and Franciscus' counterfeit attitudes are part of a larger scheme, that of the hypocrisy of the institution, that is, of those in charge of it. Madness is exhibited, but what is exposed is mismanagement and misdemeanour.

In *The Changeling*, we are shown lunatics who "act their fancies in any shapes / Suiting their present thoughts" (III.iii.193-94). Lunacy is no prerequisite for that. The play encompasses the various dictionary meanings of the term "folly".⁵ Quite obviously, "madness, insanity, mania (French folie)", on the one hand, and "deficiency in understanding, want of good sense, weakness or derangement of mind", on the other hand, are epitomized by Alibius' madmen and fools. But "folly", in the sense of "a foolish action, error, idea, practice; a ridiculous thing, an absurdity", is the lot of all the foolish suitors, ranging from Antonio and Franciscus to Alonzo de Piracquo and Alsemero—not to mention De Flores. They love blindly. Alsemero finally realizes that Beatrice is "all deform'd" (V.iii.77). In Tomazo's view, his brother Alonzo is the very embodiment of "love's tame madness" (II.i.154). This acceptance of folly can be related to that of "lewdness, wantonness"; over the whole play, we are presented with what Foucault terms "la danse insensée des vies immorales" (p. 180). Finally, when the focus is on the main plot, folly comes to signify "wickedness, evil, mischief, harm". In this regard, the most evil "fools" in the play are Beatrice and De Flores, those whom Alsemero calls "twins of mischief" (V.iii.142). This exposes the permeability of categories, both within the subplot and in its relation to the main plot.

5 The definitions which follow are from the *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, s.v. "folly": 4: "madness, insanity, mania (French folie)"; 1.a: "deficiency in understanding, want of good sense, weakness or derangement of mind"; 1.c: "a foolish action, error, idea, practice; a ridiculous thing, an absurdity"; 3.a: "lewdness, wantonness"; 2.A: "wickedness, evil, mischief, harm".

In Dr Alibius' madhouse, the patients are divided into "two sorts of people" (I.2.44), the fools and the madmen: "the one has not enough wit to be knaves, and the other not knavery enough to be fools" (I.ii.45-47). If the inmates of Vermandero's castle are taken into account, a third sort can be added: those who have knavery enough to be fools. It is not clear which sort is more harmful to society. For Susan Neal Mayberry,

The playwrights alternate their tales dramatizing a society's gradual disintegration with scenes depicting the antics of the inmates of an asylum. We are drawn into a nightmare where people who exhibit unconventional but relatively harmless behaviours are deemed insane while those who deliberately lie, deceive, commit adultery and murder but maintain a conventional appearance are not. The very structure of the drama asks us to question exactly who belongs to the madhouse. (p. 22)

The watertightness of reassuring and simplifying categories is questioned.

The Changeling is a play inviting reflection on the notions of change and exchange; it is about circulation and contamination, about porosity. In this respect, the very title is programmatic: the play offers various interpretations of who the "changeling" might be, apart from Antonio, who is labelled as such in the list of *dramatis personae*. As N. W. Bawcutt comments, the term "changeling" can designate both "the ugly or mentally deficient child which the fairies were supposed to leave in place of a normal child which they stole" and "the normal, stolen child" (Bawcutt, ed., p. 3, n. on the Title). So the title introduces the notion of reversibility. "Changeling" can also refer, as Bawcutt goes on to point out, to "an inferior substitute, a waverer or unreliable person, and an inconstant woman". The end of the play puts the emphasis on reversibility and mutability: the word "change", whether noun or verb, is uttered no less than nine times within the final twenty-four lines. The surviving characters learn lessons from the folly of human passions and from their own mistakes—whether mismanagement or misinterpretation; the playwrights suggest that we should beware of appearances and of what *lies* behind supposedly watertight categories. The play was adapted in Paris in 2002 with an interesting new title that had a witty twist in its spelling: *Vice(s), Versa*.⁶ This very convincingly connected the notions of vice and reversibility.

6 *Vice(s), Versa / The Changeling*, trans. Frédéric Jessua, dir. Frédéric Ozier, Acte6 Compagny, Sudden Théâtre, Paris, 2002.

Two further remarks may be made. First, although the asylum scenes of the subplot expose Dr Alibius' mismanagement, they are absolutely comic—at least they were in *Vice(s)*, *Versa*—and provide some successful comic relief. Second, at the end of the play, Dr Alibius' future “transformation” (V.iii.210) concerns only the domestic sphere: “I see all apparent, wife, and will change now / Into a better husband, and never keep / Scholars that shall be wiser than myself” (213-15). Exeunt his fools and madmen. Dr Alibius comes to realize that he neglected his wife, yet it never dawns upon him that he might have neglected his patients too. This raises the question of what the playwrights may have had in mind.

Dr Alibius' madhouse is, in fact, a stage for counterfeit lunatics, namely Antonio and Franciscus, and later on Isabella, when she disguises herself as a madwoman to make fun of Antonio and catch him out at his own game. The “genuine” fools and madmen are relegated to the background: they are mainly *heard*, and when they are *seen*, or rather *caught a glimpse of*, they are located “above” (III.iii.190 SD), that is, in the distance, as if “to make a frightful pleasure, that is all” (260). What Middleton and Rowley disclose about lunacy in the asylum scenes may have points in common with what Dr Alibius is asked to show for the wedding entertainment: in both cases, it seems that madness is exhibited just long enough to create a spectacular effect, no more, no less. But whereas Dr Alibius exploits “genuine” fools and madmen for what Lollo miscalls his “masque” (IV.iii.201) — miscalles because it is rather an anti-masque—the playwrights use counterfeit madness and appeal to actors to create dramatic irony and comic misunderstanding, to introduce a metatheatrical dimension to their play and leave room for body language and improvisation. It might be surmised that the power and subtlety of the play lay in the contrasted way “genuine” lunatics and counterfeit ones were impersonated—the latter to elicit laughter from the audience, the former, charity. The inmates' brief appearance in the asylum, “some as birds, others as beasts” (III.iii.190 SD), and their rehearsal of the morris dance there are key moments. If they invited from spectators the same comment as Isabella's, that is, “Alack, alack, 'tis too full of pity / To be laugh'd at” (III.iii.43-44), they would reconcile the notions of theatricality and charity that the Bedlam malpractices and lure of gain had tended to dissociate.

Madness is, no doubt, a remarkable dramatic tool. Yet there may be more to the subplot than comic relief; lunatics may create more than spectacular effects. The playwrights may have been suggesting that madness, in spite of its senseless micro-syntax, is part of society's macro-syntax. For Jackson, the hospi-

tal of Bethlehem was “an authentic, non-representational ‘theater’ that more fully incorporated madness in the world of reason” (p. 245). It might be suggested that the other theatre, the representational one, with plays like *The Changeling*, helped defer, on the level of social consciousness, what Foucault calls “le grand renfermement” (p. 67)—the Great Confinement.

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