

THE WORK OF THOMAS MIDDLETON

by

R. O. James

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PREFACE

References throughout are to the edition of Thomas Middleton's work edited by A.H. Bullen and published in 1885.

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R.O. James.

INTRODUCTION.

It was T.S. Eliot who said of Thomas Middleton's work that "His greatest tragedies and his greatest comedies are as if written by two different men He has no point of view, he is neither sentimental nor cynical; he is neither resigned, nor disillusioned, nor romantic; he has no message. He is merely the name which associates six or seven great plays".¹ Our aim in this thesis is to demonstrate a continuous line of development from the crudest beginnings of his work to his finished tragic masterpieces, to find certain common themes which hold practically all his best work together as a unity.

What T.B. Tomlinson has called the "flat, naturalistic tone"² of Middleton's writing is the first thing which must strike even the most cursory reader. From the crude banter of the earlier comedies to the electric confrontations of De Flores and Beatrice-Joanna in "The Changeling", one feels one is listening to the unvarnished language of real men, with few of the oratorical flourishes characteristic

1. T.S. Eliot: Selected Essays. p.162.

2. T.B. Tomlinson: A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy. p.165.

of some writers of his period. Middleton, in a way which is otherwise truer of the comic than the tragic writers of the time, reflects in all his work the language, as well as the values and preoccupations, of the middle-class Londoners amongst whom he lived. One of the dominant themes in his imagery is that of the bourgeois obsession with property, the furnishings and the solid comforts with which the bourgeoisie surround themselves in their homes, and the wealth which purchases them. In plays like "A Chaste Maid in Cheapside" and "Women Beware Women", indeed, this becomes central to Middleton's meaning, as the greed for possessions is twisted into a hard, possessive jealousy which perverts relationships in love and marriage.

But what is even more striking than this is the essential sameness of Middleton's moral vision through his work. There is a development in his attitude to this as his work matures, but his basic premisses remain unchanged. It is here, more than anywhere else, that the intrinsic unity of his work is to be found. It is significant that in a very early poem, a juvenile effort written before he had even embarked on his career as a dramatist, the incredibly long and tedious "The Wisdom of Solomon Paraphrased", he dwells on an image which is to recur throughout his work, and to occupy a central position in

"The Changeling" and "Women Beware Women", that of the sinner blinded by his passions and stumbling to his ruin:

"The blinded eyes can never see the way,
The blinded heart can never see to see,
The blinded soul doth always go astray".

("The Wisdom of Solomon Paraphrased",

/ Chapter IV, verse 15.)

And similarly the "Insatiable Cron", "Prodigal Zedon" and "Cheating Droone" of his "Micro-Cynicon", also of this period in his work, are in embryo the types he is to satirise in a very different way in his comedies. The likeness is even more striking in the dissolute characters of another of these early works, those of "Father Hubbard's Tales", and in the low haunts described in "The Black Book".

In the earliest comedies, Middleton's consciousness of human evil, folly and wrong-doing is even clearer. Almost all his leading characters are disreputable in one way or another; the exceptions are Phoenix in "The Phoenix" and Fitsgrave in "Your Five Gallants", and both these are present not only as participants in the action but also observers mouthing Middleton's own concern at the abuses they see. We have seen in "The Wisdom of Solomon Paraphrased" that Middleton is already aware of the blinded sinner going to his ruin; Fitsgrave's

remark of the villains he finds himself with, that "Their own invention damns them" ("Your Five Gallants", V i 74), helps too in explaining the moral position he adopts, and which is to remain with him throughout his career.

What he sees is that lust, passion and greed are inevitably fatal to men's happiness. So long as men are governed by reason, do not allow their judgement to be blinded by the demands of passion, all is well; but when they surrender to their wills they set themselves on the path of their destruction. The idea is hardly a new one; but with Middleton it becomes an obsession, the dominant theme of all his work. And an account of the development of his work must largely be an account of his increasing pessimism as he becomes more convinced of the basic hopelessness of men, feels more and more that this surrender of reason is not just the mark of a few wicked men, but the common and inescapable lot of all mankind.

At first, indeed, he seems to watch the vices of his rogues with a kind of sardonic amusement. The scoundrels and tricksters he saw about him were his subject, but he did not necessarily think that the whole world was of this sort, and, because he did not exclude the possibility of virtue somewhere else, even if

not in his plays, he managed to remain fairly detached about what he describes. So his principal characters are not really developed as fully rounded people, degenerating as they become confirmed in their ill ways. Instead, as we shall see with men like Lucre and Hoard in "A Trick to Catch the Old One", they are really just caricatures of their own pet vice, who do not change in essence through the length of the plays in which they appear. (This is in part, of course, simply an indication of Middleton's comparative immaturity as a dramatist at this stage.) And, on the whole, Middleton is content to laugh fairly gently at them. The more savage mockery of the later comedies, the profound gloom of the tragedies, are later growths.

And yet one is aware that the problems he deals with at this stage are consistent with those of his later work. In "Michaelmas Term", Quomodo's comments on his wife suggest all the hard possessiveness which is a crucial factor in the events of "A Chaste Maid in Cheapside" and "Women Beware Women"; she is a piece of property like a jewel, an asset and therefore to be properly looked after:

"A modest wife is such a jewel,

Every goldsmith cannot show it:

Is that's honest and not cruel
Is the likeliest man to own it".

("Michaelmas Term", V 1

71 - 74)

Even the tender virtues become here merely a more effective way to profit - or, at least, to present profit, for, as Follywit sees in "A Mad World, my Masters", greed must be paid for in the end:

"Let the usurer look for't; for craft recoils
in the end, like an overcharged musket, and maims
the very hand that puts fire to't. There needs
no more but a usurer's own blow to strike him
from hence to hell; 'twill set him forward with
a vengeance".

("A Mad World, my Masters",

III iii 10 - 15).

In his later comedies, the need of detachment lingers; one still feels that Middleton is laughing at his victims, not agonising over them. But there are modifications from the earlier period. One feels, first, that the laughter has a tinge of bitterness in it. There is a note of hysteria in the savage mockery of the Puritans in "A Chaste Maid in Cheapside", in a scene which starts urbanely enough and descends to a level of crudity unequalled in Middleton, and which yet communicates

to us a sense of purpose, a sense that it is not simply gratuitous coarseness but the expression of a deeply-felt mood.

What is happening to Middleton is that he becomes more aware that the follies he laughs at do really matter, that the price men pay for their sins is a heavy one. In the very nearly tragic end of Sir Walter's Whorehound there is a hint of the terrors to come, although at this stage the threatened punishment remains a physical one, not the terrible deterioration in the personality itself which is the most appalling part of Middleton's tragic picture.

In the enormous variety of the characters on the stage, in the careful symmetry of the relationships we shall see Middleton established between them, there is a growing sense, too, that he is not just talking of a particular group of rogues, but that he is presenting us with a cross-section of society as he sees it, that this is his view of human society as a whole. It is the beginning of the mood which is to possess him more and more, in which he feels that all men are equally weak and bad, that none can escape the common fate. A curious exception is Moll in "The Roaring Girl", who remains honest and good-hearted to the end, without losing her vitality and interest for us, for all her

peccadilloes a really sterling soul, and perhaps the only virtuous character in all Middleton's work he succeeds in making even remotely attractive or even convincing. It is significant that she is regarded as a freak, a "mad girl" ("The Roaring Girl", V ii 210), an exception to all the norms of human society.

The tragicomedies which he begins to write at this time are, as a group, the weakest of Middleton's plays. He wrote them at a time when he was busying himself with the perhaps more profitable masques and pageants he wrote and produced for the City of London and some of the City Companies, works which have little bearing on the main-stream of his drama. But there is a more fundamental reason than this distraction for the weakness of this period in his drama.

What is beginning to assert itself in Middleton's mind at this time is the idea that, even when men appear to act with the best of intention, unconsciously they submit to the evil and weakness in their own natures. The mother of "A Fair Quarrel" thinks she is unselfishly trying to save her son at the expense of her own honour; but it is really an excess of selfish motherly possessiveness which makes her act as she does. Man, Middleton thinks, (and woman - more than most dramatists, Middleton

has women at the centre of his plots), is always, consciously or unconsciously, willingly or unwillingly, prone to evil and weakness. It is an essentially tragic notion, and the reason for the curious uncertainty of these plays, for their lack of real conviction, is perhaps that Middleton has not yet accepted the full implications of his changing mood. To some extent, of course, the happy endings which he gives the plays are simply the consequence of the tragicomic convention in which he is writing; still, these endings do seem more forced as he goes on, less logical conclusions to the kind of situations and problems he has been considering in the body of the plays. So the unexpected revival of all the old folk apparently killed in "The Old Law", an event which, we shall see, seems to contradict everything Middleton has been trying to say in the body of the play, is matched by what seems the deliberately feeble conclusion of "The Witch", in which the almost inevitable death which should follow the Duchess's cry,

"Bestow me upon death, sir; I am guilty,

And of a cruelty above my cause",

("The Witch", V iii 91 - 92)

is effortlessly by-passed in a few words from the Lord Governor:

"No, my sword

Shall never stain the virgin brightness on't

With blood of an adulteress".

("The Witch", V iii 99 - 101)

It is impossible to believe Middleton really accepted the likelihood of this, or the immediately subsequent rising from his death-bed of the Duke she is assumed to have murdered.

"With "Hengist, King of Kent" - or "The Mayor of Queenborough", as it is called in Bullen's edition of the plays - we move into the fullness of Middleton's tragic period. Structurally confused though this play is, there are elements in it which we have seen nowhere in his earlier work. Middleton is no longer amused by human folly. Because men are basically committed to sin, even when they appear to be motivated by good, there can be no redemption, of the kind he tried to find in the tragicomedies, through love or truth, or learning better wisdom through suffering. Despite their better judgement, men are driven through passion to their own destruction. And it is in the nature of this destruction that we are most aware that Middleton's work is coming to full maturity, for, as we shall find, the inevitable physical death at the end of the play is preceded by an even more horrible and chilling degeneration in the personality itself. So, for the first time in Middleton's work, we see a kind of psychological drama, in which the

lusts and passions in which they indulge make deep inroads into the very beings of his characters, brutalising them and making them insensible to the yet greater sins which become possible to them. So the decline of Vortiger in "Hengist, King of Kent" is matched by that of Beatrice-Joanna in "The Changeling", as she becomes increasingly ready to buy her pleasures at the cost of other's lives, and by the progressive coarsening of Bianca and Leantio in "Women Beware Women". The process is an intricate one, and is treated more fully in the chapters devoted to these plays.

But, even inside his tragic period, we are aware of an increasing pessimism in Middleton's view of human affairs. At first, as in "The Changeling", he sees a moral order which purges itself ruthlessly of the evil in its system, then leaves those who remain to make a fresh start. There is something of the element of hope one finds at the end of Shakespeare's tragedies. "The Changeling" is largely concerned with the private tragedy of Beatrice-Joanna and De Flores, and Middleton does not concern himself over-much with the remaining characters. Although, as we have suggested earlier, it is one aspect of his increasingly gloomy view of life that he comes to believe all men have a basic commitment to sin, that

passion will in the end always defeat judgement and reason, he is not yet ready to declare all men immediately and irretrievably doomed.

By the time he comes to "Women Beware Women" he has lost all hope. As in "A Chaste Maid in Cheapside", the large number of characters, and the intricately balanced relationships between them, leave the impression that they represent for Middleton the whole of mankind. And it is not just a few characters who must be purged; everyone in the play is corrupt, and all are destroyed together. This is Middleton's final, gloomy view of the total depravity and the total hopelessness of man.

PART ONE: COMEDY

CHAPTER I."The Phoenix."

"The Phoenix" is one of Middleton's earliest mature works, and essentially an experimental play. Some of it is crude. The prince Phoenix remains a rather shadowy figure, much of the time making turgid pronouncements on the action rather than participating in it himself, and the heavy-footed nature of much of what he, in particular, has to say, the stilted manner of the language, suggests how unsure of himself Middleton still was.

What makes the play interesting is that it is now that Middleton begins to develop those moral attitudes and preoccupations which are to be a unifying element in his later work. He is not to go about things in quite this way again; but the kinds of vices that he portrays, and more especially the way he sees them as a product, usually, of the triumph of blind passion or will over reason and constraint, are the beginnings of the problems he is to deal with throughout his career as a dramatist, and to which he is to produce widely different, and increasingly gloomy, answers as he grows older.

As the play begins, the Duke of Ferrara, conscious his age is telling on him, admits that the rule of his dukedom is not as strong or effective as it might have

been,

"For there's as much disease, though not to th' eye,
In too much pity as in tyranny".

(I i 9 - 10)

So, in preparing to hand the conduct of affairs over to his son Phoenix, he prepares us also for the theme which is to concern us in the play: like a disease, sins and abuses are corrupting the land.

The one thing lacking in Phoenix, a prince "Elder in virtues than in years" (I i 17), whose "Judgement is a father to his youth" (I i 18), is that he is untravelled; and it is determined that he must remedy this before he assumes power. Phoenix, indeed, is shrewd enough to see the dangers to himself of absenting himself from the dukedom when his father is so near death, and yet, not wishing to dishonour the command, determines,

"I'll stay at home, and travel".

(I i 88)

Instead of going to some foreign land he will

"look into the heart and bowels of this dukedom, and, in disguise, mark all abuses ready for reformation or punishment."

(I i 100 - 102)

Again, as he talks of "looking into the heart and bowels of this dukedom", we are reminded of the Duke's earlier

comment on his diseased land. The image of Phoenix, travelling disguised about the dukedom with his sole companion Fidelio, as a physician, probing a diseased body before he prescribes its cure, is to recur throughout the play.

A.C.Dessen, indeed, suggests that this is something more than a pattern of imagery imposed on Middleton's story. He points out that the exposure of the various vices plaguing the dukedom, which forms the substance of the plot, can "be seen in terms of a larger thematic unity, the health of the kingdom".¹ So, "The Phoenix" is concerned with the condition of the entire kingdom, the specific evils exposed forming a panorama of English vico Middleton is using a panoramic selection of figures from representative areas of society to deal dramatically with public issues".¹

In attempting to relate the play to the tradition of allegorical drama, Dessen goes on to suggest that Middleton "has managed to maintain the realistic or 'literal' surface that we expect in Jacobean comedy while, at the same time, achieving the scope and general

1. and 2. A.C. Dessen: Middleton's "The Phoenix" and the Allegorical Tradition. (Studies in English Literature - Spring 1966.) Pp. 292 and 293.

significance characteristic of the morality tradition".² Certainly, the non-literal elements in the play go far beyond the nominal allegory, familiar enough to the comic writers of the period, by which the characters are given names like Fidelio, Falso or Infesto; and one is always conscious of the characters existing as part of the play's pattern of imagery, as well being the flesh and blood people Middleton succeeds in making them.

The first of the vicious creatures infesting the play whom we encounter is the Captain, recently married to Castiza, the mother of Fidelio, and now bitterly regretting having done any such thing, and determining to be rid of her as soon, and as profitably, as he can. In his words as he asks himself,

"What lustful passion came aboard of me, that I should marry? was I drunk? That a man is in danger every minute to be cast away, without he have an extraordinary pilot that can perform more than a man can do!"

(I ii 43 - 48)

we are introduced to what is to become Middleton's principal obsession as his work matures. The Captain, driven on by passion, has committed himself to a course

of action that his own judgement, if only it had been strong enough to control his actions, would never have allowed. But for the moment Middleton is content to observe the phenomenon without making any moral pronouncement on it. What interests him more now is to convey the impression of the Captain as a full-blooded rogue, a flesh and blood figure who reveals his regrets and his desires as he tells us:

What a fortunate elder brother is he, whose father being a rammish ploughman, himself a perfumed gentleman spending the labouring reek from his father's nostrils in tobacco, the sweat of his father's body in monthly physic for his pretty queasy harlot! Would my father had held a plough so, and fed upon squeezed curds and onions, that I might have bathed in sensuality! but he was too ruttish himself to let me thrive under him; consumed me before he got me; and that makes me so wretched now to be shackled with a wife, and not greatly rich neither".

(I ii 55 - 62 and 66 - 72)

In the mixture of "rammish ploughman" and "perfumed gentleman", "the sweat of his father's body", "the squeezed curds and onions" and "the pretty queasy harlot", the ruttishness and the sensuality, Middleton implies

the various elements which combine to produce the pungent flavour of the Captain.

His wife, Castiza, too, seems to have drifted into this marriage against her better judgement, regrets that

"For love to you, did I neglect my state,

Chide better fortunes from me,

Gave the world talk, laid all my friends at waste!"

(I ii 82 - 84)

and laments,

"What a miserable state

Am I led into!"

(I ii 97 - 98)

The Captain implies, too, that her desires might have as much to do with the marriage's present failure as with its having happened in the first place, admitting ruefully,

"You think as most of your insatiate widows,

That captains can do wonders; when, alas,

The name does often prove the better man!"

(I ii 92 - 94)

But the Captain thinks he sees the means to be rid of her. Indeed, "any way to be rid of her would rid my torment; if all means fails, I'll kill or poison her, and purge my fault at sea" (I ii 147 - 149). But it might not be necessary to take quite these extreme measures.

He eyes the villainous Proditor (one who, in his determination to supplant the Duke, has threatened:

"Not many months Phoenix shall keep his life"),

(I ii 145)

and, seeing Proditor's obvious interest in his wife, mutters:

"I must

Make much of him; he'll one day write me cuckold;

It is good to make much of such a man;

E'en to my face he plies it hard, - I thank him".

(I ii 99 - 102)

Meanwhile, Phoenix is beginning to discover the facts of life in the dukedom. There is an element of naivety in his first conversation as an ostensibly private citizen as, told of the villainies of the lawyer Tangle, just arrived at the inn where he is lodging, he asks the groom,

"A fine fellow; but do you know him to be a knave, and will lodge him?"

(I iv 26 - 27)

The groom merely protests in astonishment,

"Your worship begins to talk idly are there honest men enough, think you, in a term-time to fill all the inns in the town?"

(I iv 28 and 30 - 32)

This fellow Tangle is the next of the play's villains that we meet. We are conscious here that Tangle serves two purposes for Middleton. First, he is developed as a character, and, like the Captain, emerges as a full and individual comic figure as he puffs:

"I have found such sweet pleasure in the vexation of others, that I could wish my years over and over again, to see that fellow a beggar, that bawling knave a gentleman, a matter brought e'en to a judgement today, as far as e'er 'twas to begin again to-morrow; O raptures! here a writ of demur, there a procedendo, here a sursurrara, there a capiendo, tricks, delays, money-laws!"

(I iv 115 - 121)

He explains the details of the various cases he has afoot, and tells how he finds the means to pay for them. By coming up "some five days before a term" (I iv 162) and dodging "amongst inns and places of most receipt" (I iv 65) he contrives to

"dive into countrymen's causes; furnish 'em with knavish counsel, little to their profit; buzzing into their ears this course, that writ, this office, that ultimum refugium; as you know I have words enow for the purpose".

(I iv 168 - 172)

"O raptures!" More than the loathsome creature which he might have been, Tangle emerges as a lively gad-fly, buzzing from client to client, relishing immensely the trouble he stirs up, and, for a time at least, making us relish it too. On one level, Tangle is a highly successful figure of fun, and something more than just a caricature of a particular type of rogue.

But there is a more serious purpose too, and it demonstrates itself in Phoenix's words after listening to Tangle, as he protests, at considerable length, to the effect that

"Thou angel sent amongst us, sober Law,
Made with meek eyes, persuading action,
No loud immodest tongue,
Voic'd like a virgin, and as chaste from sale,
Save only to be heard, but not to rail;
How has abuse deform'd thee to all eyes,
That where thy virtues sat, thy vices rise!
Yet why so rashly for one villain's fault
Do I arraign whole man? Admired Law,
Thy upper parts must needs be sacred, pure,
And incorruptible; they're grave and wise;
'Tis but the dross beneath 'em, and the clouds
That get between thy glory and their praise,
That make the visible and foul eclipse"

This is pretty tedious stuff after the liveliness of the comic scene which precedes it; still, it is the balance between speeches like this and the comic interludes which gives the play its characteristic flavour. The pattern which asserts itself is that a comedy scene, exposing some particular vice, is followed by Phoenix, as a kind of chorus, commenting on it and drawing attention to its serious aspects; although there is a more conventional plot as well, in which the various characters come together and use and abuse each other, what remains in the memory afterwards is a series of characters representative of assorted vices, and the voice of Phoenix solemnly deploring what he sees in them. So, although he is the play's central figure, he emerges perhaps less than anyone else as a personality, remains just a shadowy form making choral pronouncements. And the play remains a rather uneasy balance of realistic comedy and allegory. As a means of commenting on society as he sees it, the method is a clumsy one, a reminder that Middleton is still a tyro in the dramatist's art. He is to acquire more sophisticated techniques later; what we are conscious of here is that the things he talks about are the things which are to interest him throughout

his work.

Meanwhile, Tangle, who has been retained by the Captain to find some means of ridding himself of Castiza, tells Phoenix of the affair, and of the Captain's scheme to sell Castiza to Proditor. Phoenix is appalled, and his comment reminds us of the image running through the play of vice as an ugly disease or deformity:

"What monstrous days are these!

Not only to be vicious most men study,

But in it to be ugly; strive to exceed

Each other in the most deformed deed".

(I iv 267 - 270)

He reminds us, too, of that other theme which is to occupy Middleton increasingly as he matures, of the degrading effect of the passions, which lead men to lose their judgement in bestiality:

"To sell his lady! Indeed, she was a beast

To marry him; and so he makes of her".

(I iv 279 - 280)

Now we are introduced in fairly rapid succession to two more vices. The Jeweller's Wife, daughter of Falso, pays a knight to satisfy her pleasure, her husband being inadequate in this respect. Again a few words suffice to make this something more

individual than a mere representation of one kind of Vice. The Jeweller's Wife, waiting agitatedly for the knight to appear, tells us,

"O, he's a trim knight! would he venture his body into a barber's shop, when he knows 'tis as dangerous as a piece of Ireland? O, yonder, yonder he comes",

(I v 5 - 8)

while the exact nature of the arrangement between them is indicated in their greetings to each other:

"My sweet revenue,"

(I v 11)

calls the Knight, and she responds,

"My pleasure, welcome!"

(I v 12)

The nature both of his knighthood and of her determination to have him is clear enough as she outlines the arrangements she has made for their accommodation, and he murmurs deprecatingly,

"A man so resolute in valour as a woman in desire, were an absolute leader".

(I v 37 - 38)

Even more genial in his assorted wickednesses is the cheerful figure of the justice Falso, whom we find responding to the suggestion of a bribe with the protest,

"I'll not meddle with them; you give 'em to my wife, not to me",

(I vi 33 - 34)

and who explains his methods of administering justice thus:

"Two angels one party, four another: and I think it a great spark of wisdom and policy, if a man come to me for justice, first to know his griefs by his fees, which be light, and which be heavy; he may counterfeit else, and make me do justice for nothing; I like not that; for when I mean to be just, let me be paid well for't; the deed so rare purges the bribe".

(I vi 50 - 56)

Nor does he take his fees only in money. His brother, just deceased, has made Falso his "full and whole executor, bequeathing his daughter, and with her all his wealth, only to your disposition".

(I vi 74 - 76)

Certainly, as he looks more closely at the terms of the will, Falso can see the financial possibilities:

"'If she marry by your consent, choice and liking, make her dowry five thousand crowns': hum, five thousand crowns? therefore by my consent she shall ne'er marry; I will neither choose for her, like of it, nor consent to't".

(I vi 140 - 144)

But the situation offers more than this, as Falso makes clear enough in his effusive greeting:

"Ah, my sweet niece, let me kiss thee, and drop a tear between thy lips! Niece, you're most happily welcome: the charge of you is wholly and solely mine own; and since you are so fortunately come, niece, I'll rest a perpetual widower". (I vi 91 - 92 and 113 - 115)

His niece, unsure of his real intentions, protests mildly:

"I take the meaning chaster than the words:
Yet I hope well of both, since it is thus,
His phrase offends least that's known humourous".

(I vi 116 - 118)

Nor is Falso her only danger; the knight spares time from the Jeweller's Wife to say,

"Now, by the pleasure of my blood, a pretty cousin!
I would not care if I were as near kin to her as I
have been to her kinswoman".

(I vi 145 - 147)

By way of contrast with all this cheerful roguery, we return to Phoenix and Fidelio, the latter telling Phoenix of his plans to save his mother Castiza from the clutches of the Captain. As is characteristic of his work in all its periods, Middleton is not particularly at home when dealing with unalloyed goodness, and it is

difficult to be quite convinced by the sanctimonious
Fidelio as he tells us:

"Chaste duty, my lord, works powerfully in me; and
rather than the poor lady my mother should fall upon
the common side of rumour to beggar her name, I
would not only undergo all habits, offices, disguised
professions, though e'en opposite to the temper my
blood holds; but in the stainless quarrel of her
reputation, alter my shape for ever".

(II 1 6 - 12)

More convincing is the Captain, whom we find chasing
away Castiza, inconveniently arrived just as "we're at
a price for thee, at a price" (II 11 2) - she is evidently
not to be consulted in the matter of her sale to Proditor.
Impassioned, she tells him he brings disgrace on both of
them by his actions, and reminds us of Othello's
"reputation" as she goes on,

"O, why do you
So wilfully cherish your own poison,
And breathe against the best of life, chaste credit?
Well may I call it chaste; for, like a maid,
Once falsely broke, it ever lives decay'd...."

(II 1 17 - 21)

This is all very well as far as it goes, but does seem to imply that she is more concerned with what people think of them than of the morality of her or her husband's behaviour. Indeed, her part in this, as in the original marriage, is a curious one; she is not quite the model of outraged propriety that her son Fidelio would have her be. But she is certainly no great admirer of Proditor, to whom the Captain is hoping to sell her, and, referring to him as "my poison" (II 11 36), exits hastily when her ardent suitor arrives, leaving the Captain to explain she has gone "for modesty's cause....she's not yours yet".

(II 11 41 - 42)

Fidelio and Phoenix appear again, still disguised, Fidelio, ironically, as the scrivener who is to read out the terms of the contract by which Proditor buys Castiza. The Captain's cynicism is splendidly brought out in the counter-point of Fidelio's voice, reading out all the virtues and merits of the wife whom the Captain is quite incapable of appreciating, and that of the Captain himself as he counts the money Proditor has given him to conclude the bargain:

Fidelio:.....Madonna Castiza, my most virtuous, modest,
loving, and obedient wife -

Captain: By my troth, my lord, and so she is. -

Three, four, five, six, seven

Fidelio: Together with all and singular those admirable qualities with which her noble breast is furnished.

Captain: Well said, scrivener; hast put 'em all in? -
You shall hear now, my lord.

Fidelio: In primis, the beauties of her mind, chastity, temperance, and, above all, patience -

Captain: You have bought a jewel, i'faith, my lord. -
Nine and thirty, forty.

(II 11 98 - 110)

These are disgraceful proceedings, and it is high time for Phoenix to deliver another of his monumental moralistic asides. This he now proceeds to do; part of the pattern by which, having demonstrated an especially vile piece of dealing, Middleton has Phoenix pontificate on the demerits of the matter. Again, one is conscious what a dreary device this is that Middleton has adopted, as Phoenix speaks the banal lines:

"Of all deeds yet this strikes the deepest wound
Into my apprehension.

Reverend and honourable Matrimony,
Mother of lawful sweets, unshamed mornings,
Dangerless pleasures! thou that mak'st the bed
Both pleasant and legitimately fruitful!

Without thee,

All the whole world were soiled bastardy.

Thou art the only and the greatest form

That put'st a difference between our desires

And the disorder'd appetites of beasts,

Making their mates those that stand next their lusts.

..... But O! here I am fix'd,

To make sale of a wife, monstrous and foul,

An act abhorr'd in nature, cold in soul:

Who that has man in him could so resign

To make his shame the posy to the coin?"

(II ii 162 - 173 and

192 - 196)

Typically, the Captain pricks up his ears at the mention of coin in the last line, and interposes,

"Right, i'faith, my lord; fully five hundred".

(II ii 197)

Again, there is Middleton's concern at the deforming power of unconstrained lust, which, as in this case, can convert even marriage into that disordered and bestial relationship from which it is intended to provide some protection. Even Proditor, in many ways an even more despicable character than the Captain himself, is slightly appalled, and tells him:

"I love the pearl thou sold'st, hate thee the seller.
Go to sea; the end of thee - is lousy".

(II 11 232 - 233)

Phoenix himself is so sickened that he determines to reveal himself and punish the Captain then and there, proclaiming,

"Who scourgeth sin let him do't dreadfully";

(II 11 264)

he must be slightly taken aback when, in the very act of laying hands on the Captain, they are interrupted by the returning Castiza, who leaps to his protection, crying,

"Who hath laid violence upon my husband,

My dear sweet captain? Help!"

(II 11 298 - 299)

There is a kind of blindness in passion which affects Castiza here, as we have seen it must have influenced her in marrying the Captain in the first place, and which intrigues Middleton; it is, indeed, as we shall see, the source of one of the predominant patterns of imagery in his later tragedies.

For the moment, it is the image of disease and corruption which is clearest. The Captain feels,

"The Egyptian plague creeps over me already;
I begin to be lousy",

(II 11 314 - 315)

and Phoenix warns him,

"thou'rt dangerous in a chamber, virulent venom
Unto a lady's name and her chaste breath.
If past this evening's verge the dukedom hold thee,
Thou art reserv'd for abject punishment".

(II 11 321 - 324)

But even in his disgrace the Captain is incorrigible;
urged to beg his pardon of Castiza, he can only tell her:

"I do beseech your ladyship not so much for pardon, as
to bestow a few of those crowns upon a poor unfeathered
rover that will as truly pray for you, - and wish
you hanged (aside) - as any man breathing".

(II 11 332 - 335)

There is something admirable about a man who can be as
consistent in his roguery as this, and we cannot help
feeling slightly sorry when so lively a fellow leaves the
stage. Middleton is at his best portraying men like this;
such models of virtue as Phoenix or Fidelio are pale and
unconvincing shadows of men beside them.

That other lively rogue, Falso, appears again now,
still hoping for the best from his niece, and deprecating
her modesty:

"A foolish, coy, bashful thing it is; she's afraid to lie with her own uncle: I'd do her no harm, i'faith".

(II iii 32 - 33)

He sounds quite aggrieved as he asks her,

"if your uncle be part of your own flesh and blood, is it not then fit your own flesh and blood should come nearest you?"

(II iii 80 - 82)

and, to her protests that Fidelio is her "vow'd husband" (II iii 63), says,

"And what's a husband? Is not a husband a stranger at first? and will you lie with a stranger before you lie with your own uncle?"

(II iii 64 - 66)

It is absurd, but there is something intriguing about such bland effrontery; once more, we see Middleton at his best in his portrayal of the foibles and trickeries of dishonest men.

The psuedo-allegorical technique of which A.C. Dessen wrote is seen again in the "law-bout" (II iii 154) in which Falso and Tangle now engage. First, they define the terms of the game:

Tangle: A writ of delay, Longsword; scandala magnatum, Backsword.

Falso: Scandals are backwords indeed.

Tangle: Capias cominus, Case of Rapiers.

Falso: O desperate!

Tangle: A latitat, Sword and Dagger; a writ of execution, Rapier and Dagger.

Falso: Thou art come to our present weapon: but what call you Sword and Buckler, then?

Tangle: O, that's out of use now! Sword and Buckler was called a good conscience, but that weapon's left long ago". (II iii 171 - 183)

The bout continues, until at last Falso is overthrown:

Tangle cries:

"Now follows a writ of execution; a capias utlagatum gives you a wound mortal, trips up your heels, and lays you i' th' counter". (II iii 250 - 252)

As Falso remarks, recording, perhaps, Middleton's bitterness at the legal entanglements which confused his own early days (vide R.H. Barker's "Thomas Middleton", Pp. 3 - 5),

"I perceive by this trial, if a man have a sound fall in law, he'll feel it in his bones all his life after".

(II iii 273 - 274) So Middleton has used a comic interlude to make a telling comment on the damaging effects of litigation. It is at least a more successful method than that of Phoenix's long, solemn speech earlier, denouncing the law's abuse. (I iv 197ff.)

There follows another demonstration of the way Falso executes his justice's office as Latronello and Fucato, wearing false beards, tumble on to the stage to tell him that their companion Furtivo has been taken "in the action", (III 1 29) a robbery which Falso's men have conducted under his protection - for, as we shall shortly see, he ensures the effective release of the villain when he is brought before him. Middleton could only have been thinking of Falstaff in Falso's chortling account of the robbers he keeps about him now, and of the actions he took part in in his youth. Indeed, Falso throughout the play appears as a somewhat more degenerate version of Falstaff, whom it is somehow difficult to imagine sharing in Falso's incestuous ambitions:

"Pox on him again! would he be taken? he frets me.

I have been a youth myself: I ha' seen the day I could have told money out of other men's purses, - mass, so can I do now, - nor will I keep that fellow about me that dares not bid a man stand; for as long as drunkenness is a vice, stand is a virtue: but I would not have 'em taken. I remember now betimes in a morning, I would have peeped through the green boughs, and have had the party presently, and then to ride away finely in fear: 'twas e'en venery to me, i'faith, the pleasantest course of life! one would

think every woodcock a constable, and every owl an officer. But those days are past with me; and, a' my troth, I think I am a greater thief now, and in no danger. I can take my ease, sit in my chair, look in your faces now, and rob you; make you bring your money by authority, put off your hat, and thank me for robbing of you. O, there is nothing to a thief under covert barn!" (III 1 58 - 75)

Although imitative, this is perhaps the finest passage in the play, with the green boughs, woodcocks and owls of the woods helping suggest the life of a younger Falso, and adding another dimension to our picture of the stouter and older man now dispensing injustice from the comfort of his chair.

But he is not to be allowed to continue in this way for long. The robbed men were Phoenix and Fidelio, who soon learn from his niece the trickery he has practised in the apparent trial of Furtivo, where, after asking him why

"do you take such a beastly course, to stop horses, hinder gentlewomen from their meetings, and make citizens never ride but a'Sundays, only to avoid morning prayer and you? Is it because your worshipful master feeds

you with lean spits, pays you with Irish money,
 or clothes you in northern dozens?" (III 1 145 - 152),
 he tells him he cannot take the chance he might "have
 a trick to break prison, or a bribe for the officers"
 (III 1 192 - 193), and accordingly sentences him to the
 charge of his own fellows, to "lie in mine own house!"
 (III 1 203) For the moment Phoenix and Fidelio remain
 silent; but they promise the niece they will soon
 "hasten your remove from this foul den
 Of theft and purpos'd incest".

(III 1 257 - 258)

Now Phoenix begins to be personally involved in the
 situations he has, up to now, generally been able to
 observe without participating in them. Proditor chooses
 the disguised Phoenix, of all people (and it is curious
 that, despite his disguise, he is still called "Phoenix"
 by, for instance, Proditor when he addresses him now -
 IV 1 1 - an oversight, presumably, on Middleton's part)
 to take into his confidence about a plot he is contriving
 to make men believe

"the prince, his son,
 To be the plotter of his father's murder",

(IV 1 3 - 9)

thus furthering his own scheme to kill Phoenix the prince, so that

"Then if his son meet death as he returns,
Or by my hired instruments turn up,
The general voice will cry, O happy vengeance!"

(IV 1 12 - 14)

Phoenix determines that he will deal with this crafty villain summarily enough; he has over-reached himself at last, and must pay the price for all his treacheries and vice:

" 'Twas time to look into thee, in whose heart
Treason grows ripe, and therefore fit to fall:
That slave first sinks whose envy threatens all".

(IV 1 26 - 28)

So, although their time has not yet quite come, two villains, Falso and Proditor, are ripe for exposure. First to break, though, is Tangle. It is clear from the moment he appears that he is in a state of excessive, nervous excitement; he seizes Phoenix's hand, burbling,

"O, cry thee mercy! give me thy hand - fare thee well. -
Has no relief again me then; his demurs will not help him;
his sursurraras will but play the knaves with him".

(IV 1 80 - 83)

But it is not to be. First one suitor, then another, cries out in triumph as his judgement is given at last in their favour, against Tangle. It is too much for the old fellow; he goes, simply, mad, pronounces a "terrible, horrible curse" (IV o -22) on all present, and storms off. It is the occasion for another of Phoenix's homilies, this one a little shorter and a little less turgid than the previous ones:

"the man's mad,

And privileg'd by the moon, if he say true:

Less madness 'tis to speak sin than to do.

This wretch, that lov'd before his food his strife,

This punishment falls even with his life.

His pleasure was vexation, all his bliss

The torment of another;

Their hurt his health, their starved hopes his store:

Who so loves law dies either mad or poor".

(IV i 139 - 147)

This is true enough; still, Tangle was an amusing devil, all this seems a little hard considering his present plight, and on the whole our sympathies at this juncture are with the absent litigator rather than with his really very self-satisfied assailant.

Meanwhile, Fiedlio has found a man the direct antithesis of Tangle, one Quieto, who burnt his fingers in litigation years before, and is now so determined to live in amity with all mankind that, even when told his neighbour has brazenly stolen his best carpet, his only response is,

"Let him go; trouble him not: lock the door quietly after him, and have a safer care who comes in next".

(IV 1 188 - 190)

Even Phoenix is astonished at such passivity, and urges him to court, but Quieto assures him that rather than allow himself to be involved with the law,

"I'll give him the table too first! Better endure a fist than a sharp sword: I had rather they should pull off my clothes than flay off my skin, and hang that on mine enemy's hedge".

(IV 1 193 - 196)

The incident is mildly amusing, but it serves little real purpose, apart from making the point that Tangle's ruin has just made much more forcibly. It is difficult to see why Middleton has bothered to introduce Quieto at all, although he does serve a purpose of sorts later in restoring Tangle's sanity, and so fulfils a certain symbolic function not unimportant to the play's theme.

But as a living character, apart from his role as an allegorical representation of what is needed to restore the law's wits, he is as insipid and improbable as Middleton's virtuous characters so often turn out to be.

In the course of this scene, Phoenix has unintentionally jarred "the ring of the Jeweller's door", and this involves him immediately in another incident. A maid, thinking it is the knight, come to visit her mistress, draws him into the house and puts him in the "blind parlour" (IV 11 10), the room where she is wont to make her assignations. (We remember the relationship, in Middleton's later tragedies, between blindness and lust.) The idea is continued as she, unaware in the darkness that she is not talking to the real knight, gives him money stolen from her husband, as payment for his services, upbraids him for deceiving her that he was sufficiently intimate with the prince to provide her with an introduction to the court, then refuses him a diamond he has requested, saying,

"O, take heed! you cannot have that; 'tis always in the
eye of my husband". (IV 11 89 - 90)

Jewels, as we shall see later, are associated too with lust in Middleton's work. Sight is judgement, as blindness

is passion; that rational side of her which recognises the loyalty she owes her husband, (is in his eye) is aware she should not surrender the jewel of her desires to the knight. In the end, of course, he gets the diamond: "take it, this kiss, and my love for ever" (IV 11 98 - 99), she tells him.

Outside, meantime, the knight himself attempts to enter, is rebuffed by the maid, arrested by officers, then rescued by a gentleman who blinds the first officer, who protests,

"Where were your eyes? could you not see I was an officer? -

Stop, stop, stop, stop!" (IV 111 76 - 77)

The officers, representing justice and judgement, have attempted to constrain vice, but have been unable to assert themselves against the forces of darkness or blindness - "Where were your eyes?" they say to their attacker - and have themselves lost their sight in the attempt: another of the victories for lust over reason which engross Middleton in all his work.

But it is time now for the denouement. The scene is the court, where Phoenix, still in disguise and the supposed accomplice of Proditor, hears him respond to the news of prince Phoenix's return with a murmured,

"Soul-quicking news! - pale vengeance to my blood!"

(V 1 57)

Events move rapidly. First Proditor, then two lesser lords, Lussurioso and Infesto, who have given themselves up to gaming, then Falso, are exposed to the court. Phoenix reveals himself, and, virtue triumphant, indulges in such banalities as,

"Treason, we laugh at thy vain-labouring stings,
Above the foot thou hast no power o'er kings!"

(V 1 168 - 169)

The consistency with which the more virtuous of Middleton's characters indulge in such improbable idiocies of language is remarkable.

The arrival of the Jeweller's Wife provides the opportunity for another of his major assaults on vice, and, after producing the purse of money she had given him in mistake for the knight, he tells her,

"Stand forth, thou one of those
For whose close lusts the plague ne'er leaves the city.
Thou worse than common! private, subtle harlot!
That dost deceive three with one feigned lip,
Thy husband, the world's eye, and the law's whip.
Thy zeal is hot, for 'tis to lust and fraud,
And dost not dread to make thy book thy bawd...."

(V 1 227 - 233)

And finally Quieto sluices the vein of the mad Tangle, letting out the "filthy stream of trouble, spite and doubt" (V i 307), his blood which has become the colour of the ink of lawyers' writs, "the disease's nature, the fiend's drink" (V i 314), and giving him in its stead "the balsam of a temperate brain" (V i 317). So allegory and the realism of stage actions come together, and all ends well, Phoenix telling us,

"Thus when all hearts are tun'd to honour's strings,
There is no music to the quire of kings".

(V i 347 - 348)

CHAPTER II"A Trick to Catch the Old One"

The principal theme of "A Trick to Catch the Old One" is avarice. The machinations of the ostensible hero, Witgood, really just provide the occasion for the plotting and cheating of two greedy old men, Lucre and Hoard. It is all simple enough; there is nothing to compare with the complexities of Jonson's study of the many faces of greed in "The Alchemist". Nor is Middleton concerned with a whole range of different vices, as he was in "The Phoenix": even the lechery which is usually a central feature of his drama here plays, as we shall see, a very minor role.

It does, however, provide the basis for Witgood's insolvency, the play's starting-point. He looks ruefully about his lands, and ponders what has happened to the revenues they should produce for him:

"What milk brings thy meadows forth now? where are thy goodly uplands, and thy down lands? all sunk into that little pit, lechery. Why should a gallant pay but two shillings for his ordinary that nourishes him, and twenty times two for his brothel that consumes him?" (I 1 2 - 7)

And so he has fallen a victim to that villainous old usurer, his uncle Lucre; nor can he expect any mercy from the old man, who will quite happily break him if he sees any advantage to himself in doing so: for,

"yet these old fox-brained and ox-browed uncles have still defence for their avarice, and apologies for their practices,

and will thus greet our follies:

He that doth his youth expose

To brothel, drink and danger,

Let him that is his nearest kin

Cheat him before a stranger:

and that's his uncle; 'tis a principle in usury".

(I 1 12 - 17) There is only one way out of his present plight; he must live by his wits.

But, loose-living a fellow as he has been, there is something open and likeable about Witgood; there is a streak of generosity in his nature with which the crabbed meanness of the old misers compares odiously. Even his vices seem more the product of youthful high spirits than anything else. So he upbraids his Courtesan when she appears, telling her:

"My loathing! hast thou been the secret
consumption of my purse, and now comest to undo
my last means, my wits?"

(I i 29 - 31) He knows she has exploited him, but is
too good-natured, or too weak, to put a stop to the
situation. But when she responds,

"I've been true to your pleasure; and all your lands
Thrice rack'd was never worth the jewel which
I prodigally gave you, my virginity:
Lands mortgag'd may return, and more esteem'd,
But honesty once pawn'd, is ne'er redeem'd",

(I i 36 - 40)

he is immediately repentant, and begs her,

"Forgive: I do thee wrong
To make thee sin, and then to chide thee for't".

(I i 41 - 42)

In any event, the scheme which is beginning to
form itself in his mind for the redeeming of his lost
wealth depends on her, and he proceeds now to explain
to her what he will have her do:

"So, so, so: thou shalt presently take the name
and form upon thee of a rich country widow, four
hundred a-year valiant, in woods, in bullocks,
in barns, and in rye-stacks; we'll to London,

and to my covetous uncle

The device well and cunningly carried, the name of a rich widow, and four hundred a-year in good earth, will so conjure up a kind of usurer's love in him to me I know the state of an old man's affection so well: if his nephew be poor indeed, why, he lets God alone with him; but if he be once rich, then he'll be the first man that helps him". (I i 63 - 66, 88 - 90, 94- 97)

Now we meet the two old money-lenders who are the central characters of the play. Having fallen out, it appears, "about a purchase, fetching over a young heir" (I i 120), they have become

"mortal adversaries:

Two old tough spirits, they seldom meet but fight,
Or quarrel when 'tis calmest:
I think their anger may be the very fire
That keeps their age alive".

(I ii 116 - 119)

They are hard at it on this occasion. Hoard protests at Lucre's constant presence near him, complaining,

"Shall my adversary thus daily affront me, ripping up the old wound of our malice, which three summers could not close up? into which wound the very sight of him drops scalding lead instead of balsamum"

(I iii 4 - 7),

and rebuking him for his treatment of his nephew .

Lucre tries to defend himself,

"Upbraidest thou me with nephew? is all imputation laid upon me? what acquaintance have I with his follies? if he riot, 'tis he must want it; if he surfeit, 'tis he must feel it; if he drab it, 'tis he must lie by't: what's this to me?" (I iii 33 - 37)

Hoard continues to scold,

"What's all to thee? nothing, nothing; such is the gulf of thy desire and the wolf of thy conscience: but be assured, Old Pecunius Lucre, if ever fortune so bless me, that I may be at leisure to vex thee, or any means so favour me, that I may have opportunity to vex mad thee, I will pursue it with that flame of hate, that spirit of malice, unrepressed wrath, that I will blast thy comforts". (I iii 44)

This is all lively stuff; but one is a little reminded of E.M. Forster's remark of the characters in H.G. Wells's novels, that they are all "as flat as a photograph. But the photographs are agitated with such vigour that we forget their complexities lie on the surface and would disappear if it was scratched or curled up It is the deft and powerful hands of their maker that shake them and trick the reader into a sense of depth".¹ Wilbur Dunkel, too, has remarked

1. E.M. Forster: Aspects of the Novel (Pelican) pp. 79 - 80

of the characters in Middleton's comedies that "From one aspect the characters seem hardly to represent human beings; that is, they appear as mere pawns in the scheme of their creator, the dramatist On the other hand, the characters seem true to life: they speak naturally and convincingly about the petty things that human beings discuss".²

There seems some truth in both these remarks. Characters like Hoard and Lucre are immensely lively; and yet, as people, once they pause long enough in their activities for us to see how flat the caricatures are, they hardly convince. It is, in part, a reflection of the "humours" popularised by Jonson, the notion of men fitting into a definable pattern of character types. In plays as richly orchestrated as Jonson's comedies, with their vast range of personalities, this does not detract from the fullness of the drama; there is sufficient to keep us fully occupied. Even in "The Phoenix", with its variety of scoundrels, there is no danger of monotony. But "A Trick to Catch the Old One" deals only with one vice, that of avarice; the two old men who represent the type, much though Middleton may

2. W.D. Dunkel: The Dramatic Technique of Thomas Middleton in his Comedies of London Life. p.49.

agitate them into a semblance of life, are quite flat. They have no other noticeable virtues or demerits, nor do they develop even in greed as the play progresses; they are amusing enough personifications of greed, and that is all. And the result is that, as a whole, this play, funny though it is, does at first seem just a little thin in content.

And yet, somehow, it keeps us engrossed. The reason, perhaps, is that at this stage in his career Middleton is not terribly concerned about his characters as people. It is only later, as he becomes more concerned with the effects of passion on men, the way they degenerate as they succumb to sin, that characterisation becomes his primary interest. For the moment, although he remains conscious of the presence of sin, what he is doing is to present a comedy of situation, in which "scoundrels clash, plot and counterplot, cudgel their brains devising stratagems, each more outrageous than the last".³

Where he is consistent with the moral attitudes he demonstrates in his later work, is that certain kinds

3. R.H. Barker: Thomas Middleton. p.61.

of behaviour, greed in this play, lechery in others, are self-destructive; those who indulge in them must in the end pay the price for their misdeeds. For the moment, it does not matter too much; Middleton is detached, rather amused by the whole business. For their sins, the price is no more than some external punishment or inconvenience, not the terrible deterioration in the personality itself which is the essence of Middleton's tragedy. Nevertheless, this is the serious point behind the comic play of the rather trivial, paste-board characters of the earlier comedies, and it is this that explains why a play like "A Trick to Catch the Old One" somehow conveys an impression of significance which it would be difficult to justify in terms of plot and character.

Having said this, one is confronted with the one character in the play who does seem to assume the roundness of a full personality, the "notorious, usuring, blasphemous, atheistical, brothel-vomiting rascal" (I iv 13) Dampit, who proceeds immediately to explain how he comes by his livelihood:

"Harry Dampit, a trampler of time, say, he would be up in a morning, and be here with his serge gown, dashed up to the hams in a cause; have his feet stink about Westminster Hall, and come home again; see the galleons, the galleasses, the great armadas of the law; then there be hoys and petty vessels, oars and sculler of the time; there be picklocks of the time too: then would I be here; I would trample up and down like a mule: now to the judges, 'May it please your reverend honourable fatherhoods'; then to my counsellor, 'May it please your worshipful patience'; then to the examiner's office, 'May it please your master-ship's gentleness'; then to one of the clerks, 'May it please your worshipful lousiness', - for I find him scrubbing in his cod-piece; then to the hall again, then to the chamber again - here I have fees of one; there I have fees of another; my clients come about me, the fooliaminy and coxcombry of the country: I still trashed and trotted for other men's causes; thus was poor Harry Dampit made rich by others laziness, who, though they would not follow their own suits, I made 'em follow me with ther purses". (I iv 43 - 57 and 60 - 66)

All this is splendid stuff, evoking richly not only the rumbustious personality of old Dampit, but also the bustle and confusion of the courts. What is curious is that Dampit, perhaps the most interesting character in the play, has no part in its plot as such; the three scenes devoted to him have almost no relationship to the rest of the play, and, in terms of what happens in them, could scarcely even be described as a sub-plot; it is as if Middleton inserted the scenes as a make-weight after he had completed the rest of the play. And what makes it stranger is that, apart from this, "A Trick to Catch the Old One" is one of Middleton's best-structured comedies, with characters and situation all introduced naturally and easily in the first few scenes, and a straight and (apart from the Dampit scenes) uninterrupted progress of cause and effect leading to the denouement.

But closer inspection suggests that there is more to it than this. In terms of action, very little happens in the three Dampit scenes; yet in them Middleton develops Dampit as a personality in a way he develops no one else in the play; and the nature of this development has a special purpose in relation to

the play's total significance.

The first we see of Dampit is his public face, as he boasts cheerfully of his triumphs about the courts and the gulls he has cheated of their money. Sauntering along with his henchman, Gulf, he is the complete, confident, maliciously successful scoundrel. But the next time we see him he is in the privacy of his own home, alone with the serving-woman Audrey, of whom he is sufficiently contemptuous not to bother to keep any secrets from her. He is drunk, and engages Audrey in genial banter, telling her,

"Why, is't not one of clock i' th' morning? is not that early enough? fetch me a glass of fresh beer". (III iv 14 - 15)

As he goes on, he falls into a vein of self-pity, saying,

"I am very weak truly: I have not eaten so much as the bulk of an egg these three days I am not sick, nor I am not well". (III iv 18 - 20 and 31 - 32)

When Audrey tries to commiserate with him, he rejects her sympathy, and scolds, "you prate too much, and understand too little" (III iv 25). More, he goes on, to the only person who ever shows him any sign whatsoever of real affection,

In Holborn some, in Fleet Street some,
Where'er he come there's some, there's some".

(IV v 1 - 4)

There is horror in these words, and it is sustained by two creatures, Lamprey and Spichcock, who come to mock him in his sickness. Lamprey tells Spichcock,

"Look you; did not I tell you he lay like the devil in chains, when he was bound for a thousand year?"

(IV v 7 - 8)

and Spichcock responds,

"But I think the devil had no steel bedstaffs; he goes beyond him for that" (IV v 9 - 10).

He is, they think, "only bed-rid with drinking" (IV v 14), although he assures them,

"you come and see a weak man here, a very weak man"

(IV v 17).

Mockingly they urge him to his prayers, but he tells them,

"O, I have prayed too much, poor man!" (IV v 21)

The exact nature of his prayers we learnt in his previous scene, when he reminisced,

"When did I say my prayers? In anno 88, when the great armada was coming; and in anno 89, when the great thundering and lightning was, I prayed heartily then, i'faith, to overthrow Poovies' new buildings; I kneeled by my great iron chest, I remember"

(III iv 1 - 5).

Clearly, there is to be no comfort for Dampit at the end in repentance and prayer, and the plight of the dying usurer is graphically stated by Lamprey. Again, we are reminded that Dampit's is a soul in hell; like Middleton's later tragic characters, unlike anyone else in these early comedies, he is paying for the excesses of his life whilst he still lives, simply in what he has degenerated into as a man: as Lamprey points out:

"Note but the misery of this usuring slave: here he lies, like a noisome dunghill, full of the poison of his drunken blasphemies; and they to whom he bequeathes all, grudge him the very meat that feeds him, the very pillow that eases him. Here may a usurer behold his end: what profits it to be a slave in this world, and a devil i' th' next?"

(IV v 58 - 64).

It is clear that Dampit's mind is going; first, when he sees Sir Launcelot, also come to mock, he tells him,

"Sir Launcelot, let me buss thee, Sir Launcelot; thou art the only friend that I honour and respect" (IV v 65 - 66); yet within a moment, told he has come "in love to see you" (IV v 81) he spurns the offered friendship as firmly as he had earlier rejected Audrey's; perhaps he has at least the clarity to see his must be a lone journey to hell:

"A louse for his love! his father was a comb-maker; I have no need of his crawling love: he comes to have longer day, the superlative rascal!"

(IV v 83 - 85)

Certainly, he is accurate enough in his prognosis of Sir Launcelot's sincerity; the latter prepares to "show you more tricks yet; I'll give you another taste of him" (IV v 92 - 93). Even as they see his memory failing rapidly their only concern is that they can play at least one trick more on him before he goes completely; Sir Launcelot urges them hastily,

"Mass, then 'twill be quite gone! Before he drink that, tell him there's a country client come up, and here attends for his learned advice" (IV v 97 - 99). And now, grotesquely, as Dampit in his dying moments calls for

"One cup more, and then let the bell toll: I hope I shall be weak enough by that time" (IV v 101 - 102), they pretend that Sir Launcelot, whom Dampit no longer even recognises, is some impoverished man come to seek his aid, and laugh as the old man indignantly turns him away.

There arrives now, with Hoard, that "dive-dapper of damnation, Gulf the usurer" (IV v 138), who tells his old master in roguery,

"What, hung alive in chains? O spectacle! bed-staffs of steel? O monstrum horrendum, informe, ingens, cui lumen ademptum! O Dampit, Dampit, here's a just judgement shown upon usury, extortion, and trampling villainy! Is this the end of cut-throat usury, brothel, and blasphemy? now mayst thou see what race a usurer runs" (IV v 163 - 167 and 169 - 171).

And again, determined to die alone, Dampit repudiates one who has been close to him, telling Gulf,

"why, thou great Lucifer's little vicar! I am
not so weak but I know a knave at first sight:
thou inconstionable rascal!" (IV v 176 - 178)

And now, seeing his time has really come, the others
depart; with nothing more to be had from him, not even
mockery, they desert him, Gulf's only benediction,

"Hang him, usuring rascal!" (IV v 193)

and Sir Launcelot's,

"Nay, we have enough of him, i'faith; keep him
for the house.

Now make your best:

For thrice his wealth I would not have his breast",

(IV v 198 - 200)

and, as he goes out,

"Mass, then 'twill be a pitiful day when he wakes:

I would be loath to see that day: come" (IV v 203 - 204)

So, finally, he is left with Audrey, devoted to the end;
touchingly, she gathers him to her in his last moments,
murmuring,

"Sleep in my bosom, sleep" (IV v 195).

It is one of the most pitiful deaths in all Middleton's
drama.

And, in relation to the rest of the play, despite
structural faults, these scenes do seem to fulfil some

kind of purpose. What it is has best been expressed, perhaps, by R. Levin, who suggests that Dampit acts as "a sort of emotional lightning rod, someone who can draw off from Lucre and Hoard to himself the audience's normal detestation of the usurer and also its fears By including these Dampit scenes, the author is, as it were, acknowledging the existence of a much more serious world in which this kind of man constitutes a very real evil and meets a very real punishment".⁴ The suggestion is, up to a point, a convincing one, certainly as an explanation of how Middleton came to insert the scenes in the first place. It confirms he does not, at this stage, want to concern himself too much with the moral implications of this character's behaviour. And yet, by the time they end our dominant feeling is not the detestation Levin sees; the fear is there, certainly, but we have seen too little of Dampit in the height of his powers, too much of his decline, to feel anything in the end but a kind of pity which seems far from any emotion we are ever likely to have felt in relation to Lucre and Hoard.

By comparison with this, Lucre seems a harmless

4. R. Levin: The Dampit scenes in "A Trick to Catch the Old One". p.147.

enough old buffer, as he tries to justify himself in his own mind over his treatment of his nephew:

"For my strict hand towards his mortgage, that I deny not: I confess I had an uncle's pen'worth; let me see, half in half, true: I saw neither hope of his reclaiming, nor comfort in his being; and was it not better bestowed upon his uncle than upon one of his aunts? - I need not say bawd, for everyone knows what aunt stands for in the last translation" (II i 7 - 13).

He is interrupted by the Host, a country tavern-keeper to whom Witgood is indebted, and who has accompanied him to London to act as his accomplice in the tricking of Lucre, in the expectation of recouping his losses. The Host, pretending to have knocked indifferently at the first door he came to, affects to be searching out Witgood for his mistress, "a country gentlewoman, and a widow, sir" (II i 32). Lucre immediately pricks up his ears, the more so when he hears she is enamoured of "one master Witgood, if ever you have heard of the gentleman" (II i 51 - 52). What one is very aware of in what follows is Middleton's superb ear for the nuances of ordinary speech.

This is, indeed, one of Middleton's greatest strengths; if his verse does not often rise to the higher poetic reaches; if, as Arthur Symons has remarked, it "rarely steps aside to pick up a jewel, nor do jewels drop naturally out of its mouth"⁵, he does, in verse and prose, have a directness and a simplicity more akin to the everyday language of ordinary men than to the language of much of the drama of his period. There is about his work, as T.B. Tomlinson has said, a "deliberate flatness of tone"⁶; what Symons calls "a pungent, fluent, very natural and speakable prose"⁷. combines with verse which to Middleton is "a native idiom; he speaks in it naturally, bending it as he pleases, to any shade of meaning, filling it with stuff alien to poetry"⁷.

So, as the Host tells Lucre of the fortune the rich widow is likely to bring his nephew, the old man is immediately alert, and demands the details; and in his words as the details unfold there is a superbly real

5. A. Symons: "Middleton and Rowley", Cantab. Hist of Eng. Lit. Vol. vi. p.80.

6. T.B. Tomlinson: A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy. p.158.

7. A. Symons: "Middleton and Rowley". Cantab. Hist. of Eng. Lit. vol. vi. pp. 66 and 67.

balance of wonder at his improvident nephew's luck, cunning as he plans to squeeze more information from the host, and the bumbling of age:

"My nephew, by th' mass, my nephew? I'll fetch out more of this, i'faith: a simple country fellow. I'll work't out of him. (Aside) - And is that gentleman, sayst thou, presently to marry her?"

(II 1 61 - 64)

And again, as the Host prepares to go to further his search for Witgood and Lucre hastens to prevent his departure, there is a fine blend of fright at the prospect of losing him, and a cautious wish not to seem too eager, combined with a few lines in which the usurer appears to argue with himself as much as with the Host. Again, Middleton captures to perfection the very tones of the cunning old man:

"Inquire of him? If i might counsel thee, thou shouldst ne'er trouble thyself further; inquire of him no more but of me; I'll fit thee. I grant he has been youthful; but is he not now reclaimed? mark you that, sir: has not your mistress, think you, been wanton in her youth? if men be wags, are there not women wagtails?"

(II 1 79 - 84)

And the effect is sustained as Lucre prepares the

Host for any unfavourable reports he may hear of Witgood, assuring him,

"The worst report you hear of him, I can tell you, is that he has been a kind gentleman, a liberal, and a worthy: who but lusty Witgood, thrice-noble Witgood!" (II i 89 - 91)

He fusses as he tries to remember the name of Witgood's estates:

"Hum - see, like a beast, if I have not forgot the name - pooh! and out yonder again, goodly grown woods and fair meadows: pax on't, I can ne'er hit of that place neither: he? why, he's Witgood of Witgood Hall; he an unknown thing!

(II i 104 - 108) and, when the Host says he has heard reports Witgood is mortgaged to his uncle, protests,

"Why, do you think, i'faith, he was ever so simple to nortgage his lands to his uncle? or his uncle so unnatural to take the extremity of such a mortgage?" (II i 115 - 117)

The moment the Host has gone, Lucre starts plotting how he may use all this to his own advantage. He sends post-haste for Witgood, musing how far he is prepared to lead the young man on with promises of help:

"I'll make him rich enough in words, if that be good: and if it come to a piece of money, I will not greatly stick for't; there may be hope some of the widow's lands, too, may one day fall upon me, if things be carried wisely"

(II 1 180 - 184).

When Witgood and the Courtesan do arrive, too, he gives something of the impression of a rather maudlin old fellow. One is reminded of the one-sidedness of the characters in the play as we hear him talk of the widow; any trace of the kind of sexual interest one would expect to find in almost anyone in Middleton, as he chortles of how he would cheat and deceive her, is there only as double-entendre, unintended by Lucre:

"I love a' life to prattle with a rich widow;
'tis pretty, methinks, when our tongues go together;
and then to promise much and perform little; I
love that sport a'life, i'faith: yet I am in the
mood now to do my nephew some good, if he take me
handsomely"

(II 1 267 - 272).

And so he burbles on, cunning enough, yet obvious enough in his cunning for no one to be deceived, promising the widow that Witgood will one day be his heir, inheriting his house and his fortune - things which could not be

further from the minds of Mistress Lucre and her son Freedom, who stand by as all this goes on.

And his rival Hoard is a duplicate of him, as, hearing of the affair between Witgood and the supposed widow, and, being a widower himself, he determines to step in, make her his wife, and so gain both a fortune for himself and revenge against Lucre. Like Lucre, he gives not the slightest impression that he has any sexual interest in the widow at all - has decided on the match, indeed, before he has even seen her:

"Happy revenge, I hug thee! I have not only the means laid before me, extremely to cross my adversary, and confound the last hopes of his nephew, but thereby to enrich my own estate, augment my revenues, and build mine own fortunes greater: ha, ha!" (II ii 45 - 49)

It never even crosses his mind that the supposed widow might prefer the young, handsome, but impoverished Witgood to a broken, but rich, old miser. Like Lucre, he is, as a character, quite flat, a mere personification of avarice.

And the theme continues as Witgood finds himself surrounded by his creditors, all eager to profit from the reported match with the widow; he only fends them off for

the moment by reminding them he is "but newly sure yet to the widow" (III 1 25) and pointing out that a disclosure of the true state of his affairs at this time could lead to a breach with her which would jeopardise their prospects of ever receiving any payment at all. But it is enough; they cannot do enough to provide him with the means to pursue the match, each secretly approaching him with offers of help in the expectation that he will be the first to profit from Witgood's new fortune once he is safely wived.

Only Witgood himself remains an exception to the general tone of greed. Told that Hoard is one of the crowds of suitors now flocking to the Courtesan, he urges her to press the match, quite ready to see her properly matched even if it is at the cost of the success of their trick:

"Wench, make up thy own fortunes now; do thyself a good turn once in thy days: he's rich in money, movables, and lands; marry him: he's an old doating fool, and that's worth all; marry him: twould be a great comfort to me to see thee do well, i'faith; marry him: 'twould ease my conscience well to see thee well bestowed; I have a care of thee, i'faith" (III 1 114 - 121).

And this, indeed, she proceeds immediately to do, listening gravely to old Hoard's assurances that Witgood is a prodigal and his uncle an extortioner, swearing on her knees that Witgood "ne'er shall marry me" (III i 202), (Witgood himself, looking in on the scene, murmurs,

"Heaven knows he never meant it!" (III i 203), and promising herself to Hoard, not, though, without the protest:

"Alas, you love not widows but for wealth!

I promise you I ha' nothing, sir" (III i 220 - 221); an assurance to which he replies smugly,

"Well said, widow,

Well said; thy love is all I seek, before
These gentlemen" (III i 222 - 224).

The plot rattles on to a brilliantly farcical tavern scene, in the course of which characters appear and disappear, and by the end of which, after a series of incidents and intrigues, the Courtesan has vanished with Hoard into the sanctuary of Cole-Harbour, Lucre hot on their trail. He finds them there, already, although he does not know it, man and wife, and the Courtesan, good-naturedly doing her best by Witgood, extracts from Lucre a binding promise he will relieve his nephew of his

mortgage, and, more, make him his only heir, on condition that she "will be as clear then as I am now" (IV i 88). Hoard, chuckling gleefully, indicates what his marriage really means to him:

"Ha, ha, ha! if every man that swells in malice
Could be reveng'd as happily as I,
He would choose hate, and forswear amity".

(IV i 99 - 101)

Meanwhile, in his home, Lucre spits his rage at the way Hoard has tried to cheat him, and delivers his mortgage back to Witgood; he knows why Hoard has done it, and is determined to return the compliment:

"Ay, that's it mads me, spites me! I'll spend my
wealth ere he shall carry her so, because I know

'tis only to spite me. Ay, this is it" (IV ii 34 - 36).

So Witgood is relieved of his most troublesome burden, although he must deal still with his other creditors, who, hearing of Hoard's marriage, are decided now on breaking him.

The scene which follows is an interesting one, in which Hoard muses on the pleasures of the married life before him. There is the slightest suggestion of physical attraction to his wife, but Middleton does not pursue the

matter, and it is clear where Hoard's interests really lie. L.C. Knights⁸ has written of the way Middleton's comedies take for granted the social attitudes and movements of his time, without consciously embodying or discussing them; there is a case in point here, where Hoard's picture of himself riding in state to his new wife's country estate and establishing himself there is reminiscent of one of the great social changes of the day, in which ownership of the land began to pass from the older gentry to the middle class of the towns, newly prosperous and anxious to add gentility to their wealth by the possession of great estates. Hoard's speech is a splendid blend of the varying emotions and desires occupying him now; nor is there any doubt that avarice is again the dominant one:

"What a sweet blessing hast thou, master Hoard,
above a multitude! wilt thou never be thankful?
how dost thou think to be blest another time?
or dost thou count this the full measure of thy
happiness? by my troth, I think thou doest: not
only a wife large in possessions, but spacious in
content; she's rich, she's young, she's fair, she's

8. L.C. Knights: Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson:

wise: when I wake, I think of her lands - that revives me; when I go to bed, I dream of her beauty - and that's enough for me: she's worth four hundred a-year in her very smock, if a man knew how to use it. But the journey will be all, in troth, into the country; to ride to her lands in state and order following; my brother, and other worshipful gentlemen, whose companies I ha' sent down for already, to ride along with us in their goodly decorum beards, their broad velvet cassocks, and chains of gold twice or thrice double; against which time I'll entertain some ten men of mine own into liveries" (IV iv 1 - 17).

We see here Middleton's gift for conveying a very precise idea of mood and character through clear, particular images of the physical objects associated with them. The "goodly decorum beards" and "broad velvet cassocks" and "chains of gold" suggest exactly the solid, worthy substance of the class to which Hoard belongs; the class to which he aspires is as fully suggested in his words to "my jolly falconer and my bonny huntsman" (IV iv 53), men whom he has employed to look after his new wants:

"we shall have most need of you at my wife's manor-houses i' th' country; there's goodly parks and champion grounds for you; we shall have all our sports within ourselves; all the gentlemen a' th' country shall be beholding to us and our pastimes" (IV iv 53 - 58).

But difficulties begin to close in on him. The Host appears, and talks of a "pre-contract" between Witgood and the Courtesan, which Lucre is determined to bring to law; Witgood himself, "laid hold on by his creditors" (IV iv 100), protests too, claiming Hoard's stealing his prospective wife has "wrought his undoing by the injurious detaining of his contract" (IV iv 102 - 103). The Courtesan, still quite unscrupulous in doing all she can for Witgood's pocket, persuades Hoard,

"send speedily for the creditors; by this time's he's desperate; he'll set his hand to anything: take order for his debts, or discharge 'em quite: a pax on him, let's be rid of a rascal!" (IV iv 134 - 137)

So they are brought together, Hoard explaining to Witgood that, for the Courtesan, he has "wedded her, and bedded her, and yet she is little the worse" (IV iv 197), and, even in his urgency, unable to resist pleading with Witgood's creditors to take "ten shillings in the pound,

and the sum down roundly" (IV iv 243). Even in the deed renouncing all claims to the "widow's" possessions which he has brought for Witgood to sign, there is an indication of the solid wealth Hoard deludes himself he has acquired with his new wife, the sheer quantity of the things enumerated implying how busily and particularly his imagination has been at work:

"manor(s), manor-houses, parks, groves, meadow-grounds, arable lands, barns, stacks, stables, dove-holes, and coney-burrows; together with all her cattle, money, plate, jewels, borders, chains, bracelets, furnitures, hangings, moveables or immoveables" (IV iv 262 - 265).

And the theme of avarice is underlined again by the greed with which the creditors persuade Witgood to accept the terms with promises of favour once the transaction is complete, then abandon him, as he knew well enough they would, once they have their money safely in their pockets.

And now the time has come for the inevitable exposure of how Hoard has been gulled, and has been "married to a whore, i'faith" (V i 11). For the first time as Hoard's wife, the Courtesan meets his brother Onesiphorus, whom she has known in her previous life. As Lucre arrives to rub salt into the wound, Hoard discovers his wife's real station in life, and in despair cries,

"Out, out! I am cheated; infinitely cozen'd!"

But, predictably, the play ends happily, Hoard agreeing,

"I must embrace shame, to be rid of shame!

Conceal'd disgrace prevents a public name",

(V 11 157 - 158)

the Courtesan abjuring her trade, and Witgood declaring himself

"A reclaim'd man, loathing the general vice".

(V 11 205)

It is Hoard himself who sees how his and Lucre's greed has made asses of them:

"So, so, all friends! the wedding-dinner cools:

Who seem most crafty prove oftentimes most fools".

(V 11 206 - 207)

CHAPTER III

"A Chaste Maid in Cheapside"

In "A Trick to Catch the Old One", Middleton seemed always a little detached from the moral implications of what his characters did. He was not unaware of these implications, and, as we saw in the case of Dampit, certainly, very conscious of the price men pay for their misdeeds; yet he was content to remain a little above it all, cynically amused by the vices of his rogues, content even to use Dampit, as R. Levin suggested, as a kind of "emotional lightning rod" in order not to trouble his audience too much with the real horror of men like Lucre and Hoard. It was sufficient to evolve a plot of intrigue and cheating, in which scoundrels clashed and quarreled; whether they had to suffer in the end for their greed, whether it was a comment on the human condition in general, were problems with which Middleton at that stage in his career was not primarily concerned.

In "A Chaste Maid in Cheapside" the mood of detachment lingers, but one is always conscious in it, too, of a certain underlying concern.

Middleton is beginning to care about human weakness and sin, beginning to see more clearly the consequences of them which are to preoccupy him in his later work.

The play's themes begin to develop in the first scene, in which we see Maudlin, the wife of Yellowhammer the goldsmith, reprimanding her daughter for her dullness, and for neglecting her dancing and her practice on the virginal. One is aware of a pattern of sexuality beginning to assert itself in the mother's interest in Moll's marital prospects, as she tells her,

"methinks you had need have somewhat to quicken your
green sickness - do you weep? - a husband: had not
such a piece of flesh been ordained, what had us wives
been good for? to make salads, or else cried up and down
for samphire"

(I i 4 - 9)

and the mood continues as she remembers her own dancing partner:

"when I was of your bord
He miss'd me not a night; I was kept at it;
I took delight to learn, and he to teach me;

Pretty brown gentleman! He took pleasure in my company:
But you are dull, nothing comes nimbly from you;
You dance like a plumber's daughter, and deserve
Two thousand pound in lead to your marriage,
And not in goldsmith's ware".

(I i 16 - 22)

The double-entendre of Maudlin's description of her dancing-master is typical of the play, in which practically everything anyone says has a sexual connotation; but the matter does not rest there. There is a link between the "piece of flesh", a husband, and the alternative of making salads or selling samphire, which is to recur throughout the play in a series of images in which food and drink represent sexual appetite. In this case, as R.H. Parker points out in a note in his edition of the play¹, the matter is emphasised in the choice of salads and samphire, the former "associated with impropriety because they were highly seasoned", and the latter having similar associations.

¹ R.H. Parker ed: "A Chaste Maid in Cheapside". p.7.

The reference to Moll's dancing "like a plumber's daughter", too, is significant. It is a reminder, first, of Middleton's awareness of the social milieu in which he wrote. He is amusedly conscious of the manoeuvring for social position which afflicted folk such as the Yellowhammers, in the much more flexible society which was beginning to establish itself in England at this time with the rise of the mercantile classes (vide L.C. Knights: "Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson"); so the superiority of a goldsmith's daughter to a plumber's daughter is as important to Maudlin as his descent from "The Yellowhammers in Oxfordshire, near Abingdon" (IV i 197) is to Yellowhammer himself. And, similarly, that they both consider it would be a great catch to be able to marry their daughter to Sir Walter Whorehound, and their son Tim to the Welsh "gentlewoman", is representative of the way in which the more prosperous of the middle-classes in the cities tried to acquire land or to marry their children into the rural aristocracy, in the attempt to elevate themselves from bourgeoisie to landed gentry.

But, in association with similar ideas elsewhere in the play, there are other suggestions in this phrase too. One is aware in "A Chaste Maid", as one was not particularly aware in, for instance,

"A Trick to Catch the Old One", of Middleton's growing preoccupation with lust and lechery as vices from which all others derive, so that in the play the whole world of commercial greed and competition, and the wealth and possessions that go with it, acquire sexual overtones. As R.H. Parker remarks, "The sickness of Jacobean city life is traced to its perversions of natural eroticism, with a consistency which strikingly anticipates the theories of Freud..... The play's most obvious perversion of sexuality is its link with competitive materialism.... In Cheapside sexual relationships are reduced to terms of mercantile advantage".² The importance of all this in Middleton's scheme of things is to make itself increasingly clear as the play goes on, both in terms of what happens in the plot and of the patterns of imagery that establish themselves.

The way in which material things are at the centre of all the Yellowhammers' thinking, colour even their thinking about love and marriage, is indicated in the next section of the play, in which Yellowhammer upbraids his wife for scolding Moll. He cannot tell her she is a scold without thinking of how she might treat some attorney's clerk.

²ed. R.H. Parker: "A Chaste Maid In Cheapside". Intro.pp.xlvii and xlviii.

come into the shop, nor think of the frailty of women's nature without comparing it to linen:

"Has no attorney's clerk been here a'late,
And chang'd his half-crown-piece his mother sent him,
Or rather cozen'd you with a gilded twopence,
To bring the word in fashion for her faults
Or cracks in duty and obedience?
Term 'em even so, sweet wife,
As there's no woman made without a flaw;
Your purest lawns have frays, and cambrics bracks."

(I i 28 - 35)

And it is indicated, too, in Maudlin's attitude to the proposed match between Moll and Sir Walter Whorehound, where the actual nature of the relationship between the pair is so insignificant to her by comparison with the material advantages of a marriage into the gentry that she can remark on hearing that he is on his way to their house,

"We're honoured, then, if this baggage would be humble,
And kiss him with devotion when he enters".

(I i 45 - 46)

There is a real cruelty in the meanness of this; the kind of life their daughter will have with Sir Walter is unimportant in relation to the satisfaction - and profit - the parents would derive from the match. And there is a dry comment on the twisted sense of values which can produce this in the remark which follows it, in which Yellowhammer, asked whether his son Tim has had word of the proposal that he should marry Sir Walter's niece, the supposed Welsh gentlewoman, replies:

"Had word just the day after, when you sent him
The silver spoon to eat his broth in the hall
Amongst the gentlemen-commoners".

(11 53 - 55)

For the Yellowhammers, to provide their children with partners in marriage is a commercial transaction, for which one pays a certain price in expectation of a certain return in cash or kind; it is precisely similar in type to their gift to Tim of a silver spoon, which will enhance his standing with the young gentlemen of the university. And it is significant that the only thing that really matters in the whole transaction, the food he will eat with the spoon, is as poor a dish as broth.

It will matter as little to them if the quality of love in the marriage itself should prove as thin a mixture.

Middleton's increasing mastery of the medium in which he is working is seen in the incident which follows; it is simply the arrival of a porter, who comes with news from their son. He is only on the stage for a few lines, but Middleton does not allow him to remain a faceless messenger; his "translation" of Tim's message establishes him as a memorable comic figure:

"Let me come to't, for I was a scholar forty years ago;
'tis thus, I warrant you: 'matri', it makes no matter;
'ambobus parentibus", for a pair of boots; 'patri',
pay the porter; 'amantissimis carissimis', he's the carrier's
man, and his name is Sims; and there he says truth, forsooth,
my name is Sims indeed; I have not forgot all my learning:
a money-matter, I thought I should hit on't"

(I i 71 - 79)

For all its complexity, "A Chaste Maid" is undoubtedly Middleton's funniest play: the dialogue is bubbling with wit, usually of the crudest sort, whilst in the plot one farcical situation succeeds another with

lightning rapidity. Even "The Roaring Girl", probably Middleton's next best mature comedy, is tedious by comparison.

Now Yellowhammer busies himself with a customer, whilst Sir Walter enters with the Welshwoman and Davy, his attendant. It is clear immediately that he has precisely the same view of marriage as the Yellowhammers; as Yellowhammer goes about his business, Sir Walter explains to the Welshwoman exactly the nature of the relationship he is arranging for her:

"I bring thee up to turn thee into gold, wench,
And make thy fortune shine like your bright trade;
A goldsmith's shop sets out a city maid";

(I i 103 - 105)

and in an aside Davy makes it clear what kind of bargain Tim is to receive in the match - the Welshwoman is, indeed, no "heir to some nineteen mountains" (I i 131), as the Yellowhammers suppose, but merely Sir Walter's mistress, whom he is at least kind enough to provide for in his own way on the occasion of his intended marriage:

"Pure Welsh virgin!
She lost her maidenhead in Brecknockshire".

(I i 108 - 109)

What one is increasingly aware of as the play progresses is the universality, for Middleton, of his characters' vices. It helps, perhaps, to explain the slightly ominous, gloomy undertone which one is always conscious of beneath the surface of this superficially extremely funny play; for what one has here is a complete panorama of the people of Middleton's London, and every one of them is in some way a rogue. It is not like "The Phoenix", in which one sees a gallery of rogues, but in which there is also a hero who seems to represent a norm of decency from which they have departed; nor is it like "A Trick to Catch the Old One", in which one feels one is dealing with a more limited situation, in which everyone is a rogue perhaps, but which does not exclude the possibility of good in some other context. In "A Chaste Maid" we feel that what Middleton has to say about the particular people he has put on his stage he would as readily say about humanity as a whole. It is a kind of pessimism which is to increase as he writes his tragi-comedies, in which he seems often to write about the supposedly virtuous with the special purpose of exposing them, and to reach its fullness in the tragedies, with their despairing view of human weakness. The mood helps, too, to explain the likeness one is aware of between this play and "Women Beware

Women"; there are other similarities, which we shall mention later, but in "A Chaste Maid" we feel Middleton has stopped talking of the wickedness of particular men, and has started talking of human wickedness in general; and in the same way we feel in "Women Beware Women" that Middleton has stopped talking of the punishment some men must suffer for their sins, and has started talking of it as something mankind as a whole must suffer. There is even a hint, in Sir Walter's end, of the kind of fate he is to inflict on his tragic characters.

And the mood of sensuality continues as Maudlin tells Sir Walter of the kind of match he is to make. Again, there is a combination of sexual lowdness and snobbery as she compliments the knight, and tells him of his inevitable effect on Moll:

"Besides, you have a presence, sweet Sir Walter,
Able to daunt a maid brought up i' the city;
A brave court-spirit makes our virgins quiver,
And kiss with trembling thighs";

(I i 117 - 120)

a theme which continues as Yellowhammer tells him not to waste extravagant compliments on her:

"Honour and faithful servant! they are compliments
For the worthies of Whitehall or Greenwich;
E'en plain, sufficient subsidy-words serves us, sir".

(I i 126 - 128)

The obsequiousness with which they treat Sir Walter is one of the most sickening things in the whole play.

Touchwood Junior is the next character we meet. Although he is the young man Moll really loves, and has hastened to her so that he might save her from the clutches of Sir Walter, he makes it clear enough he is no pure, chivalrous young innocent. As he talks of the Welshwoman Sir Walter has brought up to London with him to furnish a bride for Tim, and of how he must waste no time in carrying off Moll before Sir Walter takes her, it is of ram and ewe he thinks. The crudeness of the sexual associations are clear enough, and the use of "mutton" and the mention of "famine" also provide a link with the imagery of food as lust that we have seen is present throughout the play. "Blood", too, is a word that carries heavy overtones of sexuality, as we shall see in "The Changeling":

' My knight, with a brace of footmen,
Is come, and brought up his ewe-mutton to find
A ram at London; I must hasten it,
Or else pick a' famine; her blood is mine,
And that's the surest".

(I i 137 - 141)

It is typical of the play that Middleton should so immediately class as a complete scoundrel the one character, who, in terms of his place in the plot, one would expect almost as a matter of tradition to be the romantic hero of the piece. And the theme continues in his very first words to Moll, and, by implication, suggests her desires are as great as his:

"Turn not to me till thou mayst lawfully; it but whets
my stomach, which is too sharp-set already".

(I i 143 - 144)

The other principal theme, the social consciousness of the Yellowhammers, also recurs here, as Yellowhammer tells Touchwood Junior his son is about to take his degree at the university, and remarks,

"He will be call'd Sir Yellowhammer then
Over all Cambridge, and that's half a knight".

(I i 152 - 153)

Again, Touchwood reminds us that these social aspirations can be seen as part of a pattern of perverted sexuality; and the theme develops as he determines to trick Yellowhammer in the matter of a ring:

"How strangely busy is the devil and riches!
Poor soul! kept in too hard, her mother's eye
Is cruel toward her, being to him.
'Twere a good mirth now to set him a-work
To make her wedding-ring; I must about it;
Rather than the gain should fall to a stranger,
'Twas honesty in me t'enrich my father".

(I i 159 - 165)

It is not just the cruelty of the trick that matters here. As so often in this play, one is conscious of Middleton experimenting with ideas he is to develop more fully later. So the double-entendre of the whole conversation between Touchwood Junior and Yellowhammer in the matter

of the ring is a reminder of the much more explicit phallic imagery of the ring in "The Changeling", in which we are prepared both in the incident of the dropped glove ("The Changeling" I, i) and the conversations of Lollio with Alibius and with Franciscus ("The Changeling" I ii and III iii) for the moment when De Flores presents Beatrice with the ring and finger of the murdered Alonzo ("The Changeling" III iv). And the talk of the ring's weight, and of the diamond which is to decorate it, is also a reminder of the relationship for the characters in "A Chaste Maid" between the world of love and marriage and the world of material possessions:

Touch. Jun. I'd have a wedding-ring made for a gentlewoman

With all speed that may be.

Yel. Of what weight, sir?

Touch. Jun. Of some half ounce, stand fair

And comely, with the spark of a diamond;

Sir, 'twere pity to lose the least grace.....

Yel. Have you the wideness of her finger, sir?

Touch. Jun. Yes, sure, I think I have her measure about me:

Good faith, 'tis down, I cannot show it you;

I must pull too many things out to be certain.

Just such another gentlewoman - that's your daughter, sir?

Yel. And therefore, sir, no gentlewoman.

Touch. jun. I protest

I ne'er saw two maids handed more alike;

I'll ne'er seek farther, if you'll give me leave, sir.

Yel. If you dare venture by her finger, sir.

Touch. jun. Ay, and I'll bide all loss, sir.

Yel. Say you so, sir?

Let us see. - Hither, girl.

Touch. jun. Shall I make bold

With your finger, gentlewoman?

Moll Your pleasure, sir."

The obtuseness of the parents is suggested, too, in the idea that they are blind to what Touchwood Junior is doing to them. Again, Middleton is using an image that is to recur in his tragedies, in which blindness is frequently used to suggest the way in which characters are led by lust into actions which their judgement, if they were in their right minds, could never have allowed to them. In this case, the desire of her parents to marry her for profit and social advancement blind them to Moll's affair with Touchwood. So Touchwood asks that the ring should have on it the posy:

"Love that's wise

Blinds parents' eyes"

(I i 193)

and Yellowhammer himself remarks,

"I wonder things can be so warily carried,

And parents blinded so: but they're serv'd right,

That have two eyes and were so dull a' sight".

(I i 200 - 202)

Through all this first part of the play we are being introduced one by one to the various rascals who fill it, and to their various brands of iniquity. Next to appear is the wittol Allwit, a man who lives his comfortable life in idleness, leaving all his expenses and responsibilities to Sir Walter, by the simple device of leaving to him also the pleasures of his wife. Again, we are conscious in his description of the things with which he has been able to surround himself that in this play material possessions become a kind of substitute for proper human relationships; the exchange Allwit has made, of his wife for the material comforts of a prosperous home, epitomises the twisted sense of values of all the characters in the play. And the barrenness of his life, for all his goods,

suggests the essential barrenness, for Middleton, of the life of the commercial classes, with their eternal preoccupation with profits and the acquirement of possessions:

"He gets me all my children, and pays the nurse
Monthly or weekly; puts me to nothing, rent,
Nor church-duties, not so much as the scavenger;
The happiest state that ever man was born to:
I walk out in a morning; come to breakfast,
Find excellent cheer; a good fire in winter;
Look in my coal-house about midsummer eve,
That's full, five or six chaldron new laid up;
Look in my back-yard, I shall find a steeple
Made up with Kentish faggots, which o'er looks
The water-house and the windmills: I say nothing,
But smile and pin the door. When she lies in,
As now she's even upon the point of grunting,
A lady lies not in like her; there's her embossings,
Embroiderings, spanglings, and I know not what,
As if she lay with all the gaudy-shops
In Gresham's Bourse about her; then her restoratives,

Able to set up a young apothecary,
And richly stock the foreman of a drug-shop;
Her sugar by whole loaves, her wine by rundlets.
I see these things, but, like a happy man,
I pay for none at all; yet fools think's mine;
I have the name, and in his gold I shine".

(I II 18 - 40)

It is not only on the level of symbolism that this kind of writing is effective; as a picture of the solid comforts of a middle-class home in Middleton's London it is remarkable in its intimacy and the clarity of its detail. As we shall see, there are similar passages in "Women Beware Women", a play, we remarked earlier, with which "A Chaste Maid" has many parallels.

It was, indeed, in this connection primarily that T.B. Tomlinson talked of the close relationship between the two plays, and in general of the closeness of Middleton's comic and his tragic worlds. In both plays, as he says, "marriage as a bourgeois contract for the exchange of people for money, goods, or lands predominates..... They both represent a world where daughters are quite openly bargaining-counters in the business of acquiring money and goods".³ although, as he

³ T.B. Tomlinson: A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy, pp. 158 - 161

points out, "there is one important distinction which holds the two sets of contiguous plays slightly apart: in comedy, his concern for the new bourgeois values of living is focused more specifically than in tragedy..... In the tragedy, the evils of London life are less in the foreground".³ And this concern with the values of middle-class

domestic life is reflected not only in his subject-matter and imagery, but also in the rather "flat, naturalistic tone",⁴ almost the tone of ordinary speech, which is one of the most distinctive features of Middleton's writing, and which is another point of similarity between even the crudest of the comedies and the greatest of the tragedies.

Allwit here, for instance, could be any prosperous citizen, anywhere and in any age, describing the comforts and conveniences of his home, rather hesitating at first, speaking in short, disconnected phrases, then becoming more fluent as he warms to his subject, so that he is quite carried away as he talks of the "embossings, / embroiderings, spanglings, and I know not what, / As if she lay with all the gaudy-shops / In Gresham's Burse about her", and ending, quite emotional in his self-satisfaction, with the couplet,

³ T.B. Tomlinson: A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy, pp. 158 - 161.

⁴ Ibid : p. 165.

"I pay for none at all; yet fools think's mine;

I have the name, and in his gold I shine".

There follows the rich farce of Allwit's conversation with Sir Walter, in which he pays due deference to his patron, laughing inwardly at Sir Walter's jealous queries about Mistress Allwit's activities in his absence, and, when Sir Walter accuses him,

"Yet by your leave, I heard you were once offering

To go to bed with her"

(I ii 94 - 95)

vehemently denying he would ever do any such thing. Both men assure us in asides of how masterfully they manipulate the other, Sir Walter telling us, after threatening Allwit that he will leave Mistress Allwit and marry instead,

"That wakes the slave,

And keeps his flesh in awe",

(I ii 97 - 98)

and Allwit telling us,

"I'll stop that gap
Where'er I find it open: I have poison'd
His hopes in marriage already (with)
Some old rich widows, and some landed virgins;
And I'll fall to work still before I'll lose him;
He's yet too sweet to part from".

(I ii 99 - 104)

Now it is Touchwood Senior's turn to appear with his wife and
to introduce himself to us. The Touchwoods' problem is a simple one:

"our desires
Are both too fruitful for our barren fortunes.
How adverse runs the destiny of some creatures!
Some only can get riches and no children;
We only can get children and no riches:
Then 'tis the prudent's(t) part to check our will,
And, till our state rise, make our bloods lie still.
'Life, every year a child, and some years two!
Besides drinkings abroad, that's never reckon'd;
This gear will not hold out".

(II i 8 - 17)

The problem is understandable. Still, the way in which Touchwood sets out to solve it marks him as another of the play's rogues. That he in the end makes good, that his machinations work, has some significance for Middleton; for what Touchwood Senior is doing is to "check our will", to "make our bloods lie still". What is fatal to the characters in Middleton's great tragedies, what leads to the deterioration of a personality, and ultimately to the destruction of a life, is, as we shall see, a surrender to precisely this "will", a blind following of lust and passion. And the idea is present in Middleton's mind here. It is his judgement which enables Touchwood to restrain his "will" and deploy it into more profitable channels; and it is a similar triumph of judgement, cunning perhaps, which makes possible Allwit's long exploitation of the violent, lecherous Sir Walter, the most obviously wilful character in the play and the one who comes closest to a tragic end.

And Touchwood Senior emerges, too, as a convincing enough personality. The apologetic note at the end of his talk, of "the drinkings abroad" which have added to the already considerable costs of his family, adds another dimension to our picture of life in the Touchwood household,

lift it off the page and into the realm of life. It is a great advance on the much cruder characterisation of a play like "A Trick to Catch the Old One", where, as we saw, most of the characters remained flat caricatures of human types rather than flesh and blood people. He continues to develop as he ponders his fortune in marrying the woman he has and thinks how much worse he might have been with anyone else, like any complacent middle-aged family man:

"had I married

A sensual fool now, as 'tis hard to 'scape it

'Mongst gentlewomen of our time, she would ha' hang'd

About my neck, and never left her hold

Till she had kiss'd me into wanton businesses,

Which at the waking of my better judgement

I should have curs'd most bitterly".

(II i 25 - 31)

Again, he thinks of the saving grace of judgement, and the theme continues as he thinks on of his wife:

"but of all creatures,

I hold that wife a most unmatched treasure,

That can unto her fortunes fix her pleasure,

And not unto her blood: this is like wedlock;
The feast of marriage is not lust, but love,
And care of the estate".

(II i 46 - 51)

It is certainly not that Touchwood is a man without lusts; he himself confirms that

"I've such a fatal finger in such business,
I must forth with't; chiefly for country wenches,
For every harvest I shall hinder haymaking;
I had no less than seven lay in last progress,
Within three weeks of one another's time",

(II i 59 - 63)

and his own assessment of his prowess is confirmed by the appearance of a country girl with a child she blames him for; fortunately he can "tender her a husband" (II i 79), for he keeps

"two or three gulls in pickle
To eat such mutton with, and she shall choose one" -

(II i 80 - 81)

a reiteration of the link between food and lust. What is important is that Touchwood has learnt to subject his passions, strong though they are, to his judgement, and so to use them to his own advantage.

There is a clue, perhaps, to what is wrong with Touchwood, to the way in which he does fit into the pattern of the play as another scoundrel, in his talk of "care of the estate" as the most important element in marriage. What one has here is a repetition of Middleton's notion that bourgeois values, and the importance of possessions and wealth, is a kind of perversion of sexuality - a notion which, as we have suggested, pervades the play's imagery. For Touchwood Senior, it is the things a married couple surround themselves with that mark a successful match. The intriguing thing is that this bourgeois twisting of values can work - if normal desires and passions are sublimated, and turned to the much more profitable field of commerce, then one can outwit one's weaker-minded fellows. This is something Middleton was well aware of, as is seen in the successes of both Touchwood and Allwit.

Allwit's case is an especially instructive one, because he takes great pains to tell us he has never allowed himself for one moment to be jealous of Sir Walter's liaison with his wife. He has succeeded in evading the one great danger of these bourgeois values. The danger

is that, if possessions become the all-important thing, and marriage just another commercial transaction, then love itself can become a kind of possessiveness, in which the marriage partners regard each other as just another possession. This is the kind of situation which led to the jealousies of "Women Beware Women". And, in the whole of Middleton, it is lust undiluted, or else the jealousy deriving from a mixture of lust and possessiveness, that destroys, never the essentially rational, even if unscrupulous, manipulations of commercial civilisation; what Herbert Marcuse calls "the rational character of its irrationality"⁵ is the saving grace of the emerging world of capitalism for Middleton too, and much as he dislikes it and satirises it he sees it as in the end victor over the more natural passions. It is to this that we must look if we are to find any coherent pattern in the varying fortunes of the different characters at the end of the play.

The object of Touchwood Senior's trickery is Sir Oliver Kix, whose wife explains their particular problem succinctly enough:

"To be seven years a wife, and not a child:

O, not a child!"

(II i 133 - 144)

⁵ H. Marcuse: One Dimensional Man. (Sphere Books 1960) p.24.

Where the Touchwoods are fecund but impoverished, Kix and his wife are wealthy and childless; Touchwood's course is clear enough, he will sell Sir Oliver some concoction, at enormous price, guaranteed to effect such a change in them they become capable of producing children. Meanwhile, to ensure the success of the mixture, he personally will seduce Lady Kix; his celebrated powers of generation cannot fail to have the required result, and to give every satisfaction both to Sir Oliver and to Lady Kix. The plot is complicated by the fact that Sir Walter stands to inherit Sir Oliver's fortune if the latter dies childless, and therefore can be counted on to use every means at his disposal to ensure there is no successful issue.

The unsatisfactory nature of the relationship between Sir Oliver and his wife is indicated by their constant squabbling, usually over the question of which one of them is responsible for their childless state, alternating with spells in which they coo endearments at each other; as Touchwood remarks they

"Fall out like giants, and fall in like children".

(III iii 47)

It is suggested too in the somehow lascivious jealousy with which they watch Touchwood's country girl. It is not quite clear whether they can see her burden is a child, or whether it looks like a package of meat in its basket: the obscurity is perhaps deliberate, as Middleton suggests the association of meat, flesh and lust. It was a time in which strict rules prohibited the consumption of meat during Lent (something of an anomaly in an increasingly Puritan London) and "promoters", notorious for their corruption and accessibility to bribes, were appointed to patrol the streets enforcing the regulations. Touchwood says,

"What shift she'll make now with this piece of flesh

In this strict time of Lent, I cannot imagine;

Flesh dare not peep abroad now.....

I hold my life she's in deep passion

For the imprisonment of veal and mutton,

Now kept in garrets; weeps for some calf's head now;

Methinks her husband's head might serve, with bacon".

(II i 105 - 107 and 119 - 122)

It is an indication of Middleton's attitude to the Puritans that it is the barren Sir Oliver into whose mouth he puts the speech which accompanies this - the speech itself, perhaps, intended as a sop to the anti-theatre faction in London; somehow, its tone is not satirical;

"I have known

This city now above this seven years,

But, I protest, in better state of government,

I never knew it yet, nor ever heard of;

There has been more religious wholesome laws

In the half-circle of a year erected

For common good than memory e'er knew of,

Setting apart corruption of promoters,

And other poisonous officers, that infect

And with a venomous breath taint every goodness."

(II i 107 - 116)

The contrast between Touchwood and his wife and Sir Oliver and Lady Kix is a reminder of R. Levin's observation that what might otherwise be an impossibly rambling and disjointed play, with a host of unconnected characters, is given a kind of structural unity by the

nature of the four plots which make it up, those of Touchwood Junior, Moll and Sir Walter, of the Allwits and Sir Walter, of Sir Oliver and Lady Kix and Touchwood Senior, and of Tim Yellowhammer, Sir Walter and the Welshwoman. There is, he suggests, "a level of significant comparisons and contrasts which are developed among the four plots and used to relate them to each other..... It is evident that these four plots were placed together with a view to exploiting certain symmetrical patterns of character and action. Each of them, for example, is based on a sexual triangle involving two men and a woman".⁶ The effect of this symmetrical, balanced pattern is, perhaps, to strengthen the impression, mentioned earlier, that in this play Middleton is not just talking about a particular group of people, but that what he says of his characters here represents a view he is coming to hold more strongly of human nature in general. The pattern is too complete, too logical, to be merely a random selection of types; what we have here is Middleton's picture of a whole society.

After some cheerful comedy, in which Allwit admires what is really Sir Walter's baby, brought to him by the wet nurse, we encounter the Promoters of whom Sir Oliver spoke earlier, this time themselves

⁶ R. Levin; The Four Plots of "A Chaste Maid in Cheapside".
(Review of English Studies, vol. xvi, 1965, pp. 14 - 24)

to be the subject of a trick. Allwit's description of them is yet another reminder of Middleton's link between food, especially meat, corruption and lust; the meat the promoters seize will go to fatten their whores:

"Ha, how now? what are these that stand so close
At the street-corner, pricking up their ears
And snuffing up their noses, like rich men's dogs
When the first course goes in? By the mass, promoters;
'Tis so, I hold my life; and planted there
T' arrest the dead corps of poor calves and sheep.....
This Lent will fat the whorsons up with sweetbreads,
And lard their whores with lamb-stones: what their golls
Can clutch goes presently to their Molls and Dolls;
The bawds will be so fat with what they earn,
Their chins will hang like udders by Easter-eve,
And, being stroak'd, will give the milk of witches".

(II ii 54 - 59 and 64 - 69)

The theme continues in Allwit's talk with them, in which they suggest he should be

"fulfill'd with answerable food,

To sharpen blood, delight health, and tickle nature",

(II II 83 - 84)

and in which he eventually confounds them by telling them,

"My wife lies in - a foutra for promoters!"

(II II 95)

pregnant women were exempt from the prohibition. The promoters successfully confiscate a basket of meat from a passer-by, and are then confronted by the country girl with her basket. Inevitably, they are tricked into taking the basket, and after the girl has left discover in it Touchwood's baby, to the delight no doubt of the contemporary audience.

The sheer speed and sureness of the comedy maintains itself as Touchwood Junior arranges for a parson to marry him to Moll. Again, Middleton turns the Parson, who is on the stage only for a few lines, into an individual with just a few deft touches. He tells Touchwood,

"Yes, though I ne'er was married, sir,
I've felt the force of love from good men's daughters,
And some that will be maids yet three years hence",

(III 1 2 - 4)

and manages to reduce even the ceremony to farce, uniting the couple with a banal little rhyme - or at least beginning to do so, for the ceremony is interrupted by an irate Yellowhammer, accompanied by Sir Walter:

Par. "Then I'll not linger,
Place that ring upon her finger:
This the finger plays the part,
Whose master-vein shoots from the heart:
Now join hands -
Yel. Which I will sever,
And so ne'er again meet, never!"

(III 1 15-16)

Surlily, Yellowhammer reminds Touchwood how he gulled him in the matter of the ring, and tells him:

"I thank you, sir, for blinding of us;
We've good hope to recover our sight shortly:
In the meantime I will lock up this baggage
As carefully as my gold; she shall see
As little sun, if a close room or so
Can keep her from the light on't."

(III i 38 - 43)

Like gold, she is an expendable asset, to be kept under lock and key until some suitable purchaser appears; her personal feelings are of no consequence whatsoever. It is again the distortion of normal human relations into a commercial transaction.

For sheer vulgarity, the scene which follows is unsurpassed in Middleton. And yet it remains as comedy immensely effective, and there is an underlying note of seriousness, implicit in all the crudeness of the scene's imagery. A group of "gossips" has come for the christening of Lady Allwit's latest child, all good puritan women, glad to see the child

"well kursen'd, i' the right way,
Without idolatry or superstition,
After the pure manner of Amsterdam".

(III ii 3 - 5)

(Amsterdam was at the time a centre of the Anabaptist sect). There is savage mockery in Middleton's treatment of these women. Their language becomes more and more filled with innuendo, their behaviour more and more crude, as the ceremony goes on, whilst Allwit comments on all they do for the benefit of the audience.

They talk of the gifts brought for the child. In the context of this scene, the sexual symbolism of the gifts seems evident enough, whilst a red beard was associated with lechery (vide R.H. Parker's edition of the play, p. 57):

Third Gos.	Now, by my faith, a fair high standing-cup And two great 'postle-spoons, one of them gilt.
First Pur.	Sure that was Judas then with the red beard.
Sec. Pur.	I would not feed My daughter with that spoon for all the world, For fear of colouring her hair; red hair The brethren like not, it consumes them much; 'Tis not the sisters' colour".

Meanwhile, they are hard at work eating the comfits provided for them, and pocketing those they cannot manage for the moment. The lewdness of the scene again acquires sexual overtones as Allwit describes it. The greed of the gossips is clearly in essence a sexual greed, and the serious point Middleton seems to be communicating through this is that the sublimation of the sexual appetites, for the puritans here in gluttony, for the commercial classes in their monetary greed, is as depraved and ugly as the lusts they would claim to have subdued. It is in this sense, rather than in the private practice of vices they would in public deny, that Middleton sees the essential hypocrisy of these people. So Allwit tells us:

"Now out come all the tassell'd handkerchers,
They're spread abroad between their knees already;
Now in goes the long fingers that are wash'd
Some thrice a-day in urine; my wife uses it.
Now we shall have such pocketing; see how
They lurch at the lower end!"

(III ii 51 - 56)

And, as they go on, their greed becomes more and more outrageous:

"These women have no consciences at sweetmeats,
Where'er they come; see and they've not cull'd out
All the long plums too, they've left nothing here
But short wriggle-tail comfits, not worth mouthing".

(III ii 62 - 65)

Wine, too, is as nothing to them. Allwit marvels at their capacity,

"Now the cups troll about,
To whet the gossips' whistles; it pours down, t'faith;
They never think of payment".

(III ii 78 - 80)

and hears them become more and more slurred and incoherent in their
speech, still demanding,

"Bring hither that same cup, nurse; I would fain
Drive away this - hup - antichristian grief".

(III ii 88 - 89)

The comedy heightens as the Yellowhammers' son Tim arrives
in the midst of the festivities from Cambridge, an excessively bashful
young man who cries out in alarm,

"O, I'm betray'd!.....

'Tis against the laws of the university

For any that has answer'd under bachelor

To thrust 'mongst married wives".

(III ii 110 and 119 - 121)

But the gossips press round undeterred, and the scene achieves
new heights of vulgarity as they kiss the protesting Tim:

Tim: O this is horrible,

She wets as she kisses! - Your handkercher, sweet tutor,
To wipe them off as fast as they come on.

Sec. Gos. Welcome from Cambridge.

Tim: This is intolerable!

This woman has a villainous sweet breath,

Did she not stink of comfits. - Help me, sweet tutor,
Or I shall rub my lips off!

Tutor: I'll go kiss

The lower end the whilst.

Tim: Perhaps that's the sweeter,

And we shall despatch the sooner".

(III ii 153 - 165)

At last the First Puritan, Mistress Underarm, collapses completely under the combined influence of the excitement and the wine, crying,

"'Tis but the common affliction of the faithful;

We must embrace our falls",

(III II 165 - 166)

the double-entendre of which does not escape Tim, who says in relief,

"I'm glad I 'scap'd it;

It was some rotten kiss sure, it dropt down

Before it came at me".

(III II 166 - 168)

It is difficult to believe that Middleton set out cold-bloodedly to write all this; he seems to have been swept away completely, allowing the at first comparatively gentle satire to become more and more coarse. And the mood sustains itself in the imagery as Allwit calls the gossip to see the "bravest show", (III II 173),

"Come along presently

By the Pissing-Conduit, with two brave drums

And a standard bearer",

(III II 174 - 175)

and, after the gossips have left, asks Davy, who has found some wine spilt under the stools, "Is't no worse, think'st thou?"

(III ii 185) It is clear enough that by this stage the serious purpose which seemed evident earlier in the scene has become submerged in buffoonery.

Now the brothers Touchwood hear of the impending marriage of Sir Walter and Moll, and Touchwood Junior urges his brother to hurry with the business of providing Lady Kix with a child, thus depriving Sir Walter of his legacy and ensuring he will no longer be of interest, as a potential husband for Moll, to Yellowhammer:

"Get but his wife with child, perch at tree-top,

And shake the golden fruit into her lap".

(III iii 11 - 12)

In "golden fruit" the two main lines of imagery in the play are brought together; it is lechery for profit Touchwood Senior is urged to.

Meanwhile, the younger brother has planned to abduct Moll that night, and she is to be

"led through gutters,

Strange hidden ways, which none but love could find,

Or ha' the heart to venture"

(III iii 31 - 33)

in order to join him.

The university now comes in for the same kind of satirical treatment as the puritans were given in the christening scene. Tim and his tutor dispute in the most idiotic fashion imaginable, pedantry gone mad, and the scene reduces itself rapidly to the usual level of vulgarity as Tim assures his mother,

"By logic I'll prove anything.....

I'll prove a whore to be an honest woman",

(IV i 39 and 40)

an offer to which she holds him at the end of the play. Meanwhile, he worries about the match that is being arranged for him with the Welshwoman, wondering,

"They say she has mountains to her marriage,

She's full of cattle, some two thousand runts:

Now, what the meaning of these runts should be,

My tutor cannot tell me; I have look'd

In Rider's Dictionary for the letter R,

And there I can hear no tidings of these runts neither;

Unless they should be Romford hogs, I know them not",

(IV i 91 - 97)

and, when she appears in person, conducting a ludicrous conversation with her, in which he talks in Latin and she in Welsh (which he imagines to be Hebrew), to their mutual bewilderment and with the inevitable accompaniment of a series of ribald puns as he tries to interpret what she has said.

Allwit, as determined as Touchwood to prevent the match between Sir Walter and Moll, because it would of course be the end of the highly profitable relationship between Sir Walter and Mistress Allwit, is busy the while talking to Yellowhammer, assuring him he is about to marry his daughter to "an arrant whoremaster" (IV i 219). It is consistent with the attitude to marriage which he have seen Yellowhammer to represent in the play that he is not a whit disturbed by the revelation, but after a little reflection determines,

"The knight is rich, he shall be my son-in-law;
No matter, so the whore he keeps be wholesome,
My daughter takes no hurt then; so let them wed:
I'll have him sweat well ere they go to bed".

(IV i 258 - 261)

Clearly, Yellowhammer is one of the tougher nuts Allwit has had to crack in order to keep his menage in the form he wishes it. In any event, it seems he might have saved himself the attempt; Moll has fled, together with "my father's plate" and "three chains of pearl and a box of coral" (IV ii 2 and 4). That these things should be of sufficient consequence to justify a mention at such a time is a reminder of the relationship for the Yellowhammers between marriage and the world of possessions; it is reminiscent of Shylock's agony at the abduction of his daughter Jessica with jewels and ducats.

Eventually in a street by the Thames they find Moll, and she is led by the hair back home, to the accompaniment of jeers at her ill-treatment from a genial group of watermen. Clearly, the principal concern for the Yellowhammers now is that her market value might have depreciated, Tim bemoaning,

"She hath brought her from the water like a mermaid;
She's but half my sister now, as far as the flesh goes,
The rest may be sold to fishwives",

(IV iii 53 - 55)

but Sir Walter seems comparatively unperturbed at his bride's evident reluctance to marry him, merely promising himself,

"ere tomorrow noon

I shall receive two thousand pound in gold,

And a sweet maidenhead worth forty".

(IV III 76 - 78)

It is not to be, however; he is surprised by Touchwood junior, who engages him in a fight and wounds him.

The wounded Sir Walter now very nearly assumes tragic proportions. Suddenly, he begins, in his fear of the death which seems imminent, to repent his mis-spent life, telling Allwit,

"Thou know'st me to be wicked; for thy baseness

Kept the eyes open still on all my sins;

None knew the dear account my soul stood charg'd with

So well as thou, yet, like hell's flattering angel,

Would'st never tell me on't, lett'st me go on,

And join with death in sleep",

(V I 24 - 29)

and Mistress Allwit,

"Thou loathsome strumpet! Some good, pitying man,

Remove my sins out of my sight a little".

(V 1 35 - 36)

But this is, after all, still comedy, and Sir Walter's lamentations sound more ludicrous as news - apocryphal of course - is brought that Touchwood Junior has died as a result of his part in the fight. Allwit and his lady, taking fright at the thought they might be harbouring a wanted man, show their gratitude for all Sir Walter has done for them by ordering him in his distress immediately to leave their house - or, rather the house he has paid for in their name - Allwit telling him virtuously,

"I'll harbour no such persons as men-slayers;

Lock yourself where you will".

(V 1 115 - 116)

Middleton's characters in "A Chaste Maid" consistently present themselves in the worst possible light, whether it is necessary to the plot or not. Allwit's attitude is confirmed as a servant brings him news that Lady Kix is with child, and that therefore Sir Walter is

a broken man. Sir Walter is led off in agony at the tidings, whilst the unperturbed Allwits plan a cosy Whorehoundless future. In the details of the furnishings they plan for their new home, there is a last reminder of the importance of possessions for these people, and the way in which Middleton sees them as a kind of twisted substitute for proper human relationships:

Mis.All. Let's let out lodgings then,
 And take a house in the Strand.

Allwit In troth, a match, wench!
 We're simply stock'd with cloth-of-tissue cushions
 To furnish out bay-windows; push, what not
 That's quaint and costly, from the top to the bottom;
 Life, for furniture we may lodge a countess:
 There's a close-stool of tawny velvet too,
 Now I think on it, wife".

(V II 157 - 165)

Moll, too, seems now to be dying, despite all the efforts of her devoted parents to save her in their own way. As Yellowhammer tells her,

"The doctor's making a most sovereign drink for thee,
The worst ingredience dissolv'd pearl and amber;
We spare no cost, girl".

(V ii 24 - 26)

Touchwood Senior calls to tell the Yellowhammers that his brother is dead, distributes gold to the servants and hands a letter to Moll. The significance of these actions is to emerge shortly; the immediate consequence is that Moll swoons and is taken to be dead. It is characteristic of the ugly picture Middleton paints of human nature in the play that her parents' first reaction to her death is to ponder the part their cruel treatment has played, and with almost unbelievable selfishness to think only,

"All the whole street will hate us, and the world
Point me out cruel: it's our best course, wife,
After we've given order for the funeral,
To absent ourselves till she be laid in ground".

(V ii 92 - 95)

The final scene is reminiscent, in its sudden revival of the dead and resolving of what had appeared to be impossible situations, of the

tragi-comedies Middleton is shortly to start writing. In the plight of the broken Sir Walter in particular, and in the apparent deaths too of Moll and Touchwood Junior, we had a reminder of Middleton's growing sense of the destructive power of sin; but he is not yet ready to follow the matter to its logical end, and for the moment he must allow all to end happily. So it is, perhaps, to the period just before the conclusion of the play, rather than to the end itself, that we must look if we are to see how the various characters have had to pay for their various misdemeanours. And, as we suggested earlier, it is those who have given way to their lusts and passions who have suffered, whilst those who kept their judgement, and indulged in a more crafty form of villainy, emerge unscathed. So Sir Walter, Touchwood Junior and Moll, all of whom gave way to the sensuous side of their natures, are all either broken or (albeit shortly to be revived) dead. The crafty manipulators of men and money, Allwit, Touchwood Senior, Yellowhammer, in their way perhaps worse rogues than the more natural folk who have sinned in passion, emerge with their prosperity undiminished or even enhanced. So Middleton's view of lust as the element which destroys all those who give way to it is consistent; it is only the nature of the destruction, the degeneration of a personality culminating in death, which is to become more horrible in his tragedies.

For the present, we are given something much more palatable. Recorders play, the principal characters, suitably attired in black and attended by servants, enter, the men from one side, the women from the other, the flower-garlanded coffin of Moll and the sword-holding coffin of Touchwood Junior are carried on and sad music is heard. We settle ourselves for a pleasantly decorous tableau as the conclusion of the play, and listen to Touchwood Senior's moving funeral oration. Predictably, Moll and Touchwood Junior rise from the dead at the crucial moment, and the Parson marries them before Yellowhammer and his wife know it has been done. Tim, meanwhile, has run off secretly and married the Welshwoman, no longer, since Sir Walter has been discredited, regarded by his parents as a suitable match. But no matter; all has ended, more or less, well. As Yellowhammer resignedly observes,

"So fortune seldom deals two marriages
With one hand, and both lucky; the best is,
One feast will serve them both: marry, for room,
I'll have the dinner kept in Goldsmiths' Hall,
To which, kind gallants, I invite you all".

PART TWO: TRAGICOMEDY

CHAPTER IVA Fair Quarrel.

In "A Fair Quarrel", we see Middleton moving on to a different kind of drama from that of his comedies. The situations, the complications of plot and character, are much the same; it is the mood that has changed.

Earlier, we have seen Middleton accepting the trickeries and vices of his rogues with amusement, always a little above the scene, detached and almost unconcerned about the implications of what he sees and describes. Now, there is a greater sense of involvement; he begins to appreciate that these foibles matter, that they have a place, not only in the characters of rogues and tricksters, but in everyone. So he begins to investigate the ostensibly virtuous conduct of apparently good men - and to find it lacking.

But these tragicomedies remain the reflection of an intermediate mood for Middleton. Their happy endings do seem contrived, often, and out of keeping with the mood of other parts of the plays they finish; still, they are possible, as they would not have been possible at the conclusion of the great tragedies which Middleton is to write later in his career. So, in many ways, the

tragicomedies are the weakest of Middleton's work; there is no longer the carefree enjoyment of the comedies, and at the same time Middleton has not yet faced the full implications of his changed mood.

It is Russell, Lady Ager's brother and father of Jane, who speaks first. It is soon clear that the tender care he bestows on his daughter is not all it seems. Certainly

"We cannot be too careful o' her, too tender!"

(I i 7)

but the remedy soon reveals his basic cynicism. He explains,

"All my aim is

To cast upon her riches; that's the thing

We rich men call perfection".

(I i 10 - 12)

The usual Middleton themes are clearly about to assert themselves again.

He tells Lady Ager that her son, Captain Ager, is returned to England, and she is effusively thankful at the news, telling Russell,

"O, if a mother's dear suit may prevail with him,

From England he shall never part again!"

(I i 31 - 32)

Her affection for her son, here and elsewhere in the play, is clear and unaffected; yet it opens one of the issues

with which Middleton concerns himself in the play. When she attempts to protect her son from his duel with the Colonel, her motives are perhaps not as disinterested as she herself imagines them to be, and the mother's behaviour becomes an important theme in the play.

She leaves Russell now with a friend of the Colonel and a friend of her son. These two fall to blows in defence of the virtues of the Captain and the Colonel. Captain Ager and the Colonel appear in person, and subdue the row, but it soon blows up again as the Colonel's friend explains to him what it was about. At the explanation that

"This gentleman

Parallel'd captain Ager's worth with yours",

(I i 67 - 68)

the Colonel is outraged; to be compared in valour to a mere boy, even if it is to his good friend the captain, is an outrageous calumny. The attempts of the others to calm him by saying there could be no harm in such a comparison only enrage him further, and he and the captain are only prevented from falling immediately to blows by the intervention of Russell.

The Colonel's rage at all this seems somewhat exaggerated and improbable, and indeed by any normal standard he seems strangely sensitive. Yet what appears

at first a weakness in the plot can be shown to be serving an important part of Middleton's purpose. F.T. Bowers has pointed out the enormous importance of the concept of honour, in a quite technical sense, to the soldiery of the time - and indeed, in one form or another, to the soldiery of any time. He explains that "the code of the extremists, like the colonel, was so artificial that it distinguished between an 'honest' and an 'honorable' man. Honorable men were all those, good or wicked, who had not lost the good opinion of the world; honor, no matter how evil the man, was not lost until others knew by proof of the man's defects".¹ So to impugn in even the slightest degree his valour, the most important thing in a soldier's armoury of virtues, was to the Colonel the unforgivable insult, because it put in jeopardy his whole standing in the eyes of the world.

This is a theme which is to develop as the play goes on. Middleton is putting in question here the rationality of the whole code of honour as it prevailed in his time. It is a part of his growing cynicism about the commonly accepted standards of human behaviour. What he is doing is to take apparently honourable and virtuous human

1. F.T. Bowers: Middleton's "Fair Quarrel" and the Duelling Code. JEGP vol. xxxvi 1937. Pp.40 - 65.

activities - in this case of the duellist's code of honour, certainly, one which was by no means universally acceptable even in his own time - and to show how absurdly irrational and even immoral they really are; we shall see the whole system of the law come under similarly scathing examination in "The Old Law".

What is happening to Middleton at this stage in his career is that, having up to this point watched with cynical pleasure the doings of rogues and thieves, he now begins to see that even the actions of those who might be supposed to be models of propriety and goodness are really highly questionable. It is a step towards the complete despair of the human condition which is to be the most characteristic feature of his tragic period. And the horrible irony, as it presents itself to him, is that men are often entirely unconscious of what it is they are about. So it would appear to the Colonel despicable and unworthy to have behaved in any but the, in fact absurdly touchy, manner he did. By his own code, his reaction was predictable:

"Shall I lose here what I have safe brought home

Through many dangers?.....

My fame,

Life of the life, my reputation";

(I i 108 - 109 and 110)

Like Othello, he stands to lose "the better part of me".

Complications enter the plot at this point, with the arrival of Russell's daughter Jane, escorted by one Fitzallen, a kinsman of the Colonel. He hopes soon to be her husband, and greets Captain Ager as

"I hope, my kinsman shortly";

(I i 149)

words which cause Russell to reveal to us in an aside that he will do everything in his power to prevent any such match:

"You must come short indeed,

Or the length of my device will be ill-shrunk".

(I i 149 - 150)

Again in this section of his story, Middleton appears to be questioning the accepted norms of his time; the deviousness of Russell's schemes to eliminate the attractive but impecunious Fitzallen, with whom Jane is really in love, and the absurdity of the rival candidate he attempts to substitute, can only be a comment on the standards of a father who would rather marry his daughter prosperously than marry her happily - a theme, of course, not limited only to this play or only to Middleton.

It is in pursuit of his scheme against Fitzallen that Russell now uses another exchange of words between the Colonel and Captain Ager to disarm them of their swords,

protesting

"We'll have no arms here now but lovers' arms".

(I i 183)

His real aim is to ensure that they will not be able to intervene when his next move against Fitzallen - with whom he is outwardly on the best of terms - comes into action:

"These were the fish that I did angle for;
I have caught 'em finely. Now for my trick;
My project's lusty, and will hit the nick".

(I i 188 - 190)

Indeed, he has managed to disguise his hostility to Fitzallen so effectively that Jane is mystified that her "father's hand sticks yet" (I i 198) in the matter of consenting to the marriage, and begs the Colonel to intervene on their behalf.

Disillusion comes swiftly, as a couple of "salt-petre men" are admitted, ostensibly to search for suitable earth for their trade (a topical incident - the salt-petre men, needing earth impregnated with animal matter for their manufacture of gun-powder, were resented for their right to enter homes, and even to dig up floors). It soon appears that they are sergeants in disguise, come to arrest Fitzallen for debt.

Now Russell's mendacity is revealed, and also his

cunning in having obtained the swords of the Colonel and Captain Ager, powerless to carry out the rescue which could save Fitzallen. There is malicious triumph in his

"My fine trick, i' faith!

Let beggars beware to love rich men's daughters".

(I i 296 - 297)

Nor does he long trouble to keep up the pretence that he even regrets what is happening : his "I dare not suffer (any) rescue here" (I i 291) soon becomes

"I am wrong'd

Very much wrong'd in this; I must needs speak it. -

Sir, you have not dealt like an honest lover

With me nor my child: here you boast to me

Of a great revenue, a large substance,

Wherein you would endow and state my daughter.....

But now I find you a loose prodigal,

A large unthrift".

(I i 303 - 307)

By his own standards, certainly, he does seem a wronged man: It is the old matter of marriage as a commercial transaction again; but Fitzallen's protestations that

"Sir I am wrong'd; these are malicious plots

Of some obscure enemies that I have;

These debts are none of mine"

(I i 318 - 320)

arouse the Colonel's suspicions that the "obscure enemies" might be none other than Russell himself, and he chides him bitterly:

"Sir, I do now suspect you have betray'd him
And us, to cause us to be weaponless" -

(I i 339 - 340)

words sufficient to re-arouse the indignation of Russell's nephew Ager. In the ensuing quarrel, the Colonel makes the charge which is to cause Ager so much agonising through the rest of the play:

"Foul-mouth'd I will be - thou'rt the son of a whore!"

(I i 351)

For a man of honour there can be only one response to words like these - or can there be? If the quarrel is to be a fair one, Ager must be quite sure the words are a lie - a problem which provides the rather unlikely occasion for the moral perplexities Middleton introduces into the play.

But the inevitable duel must be delayed - Russell has the men's swords. And so they part, vowing to name seconds and to appoint a time and place for their meeting. Fitzallen is left alone with Jane. He fears that her "cruel-smiling father" (I i 383) wishes "by my remove to plant some other" (I i 385) - a fear which Jane repudiates for her own part, in the process revealing

yet another complication - she fears she is with child:

"Thou hast too firmly stamp't me for thine own,
Ever to be ras'd out: I am not current
In any other's hand; I fear too soon
I shall discover it".

(I i 387 - 390)

Familiar Middleton themes are re-asserting themselves; if Russell is wronging the young couple by their standards, they have certainly wronged him by his; he has no inkling the affair has gone as far as it has. Deception of the old by the young, of the young by the old, self-deception too, if Jane and Fitzallen really believed that because

"heaven had witness to the jugal knot"

(II ii 85)

they had no cause to fear the consequences of their action: this is the wonted ground of Middleton's comedies. And the impression is confirmed by Russell's promise that he has "a lad of thousands coming in" (I i 406) for her,

"One master Chough, a Cornish gentleman;
Has as much land of his own fee-simple
As a crow can fly over in half a day".

(I i 424 - 426)

His cynicism matches that of Isabella's father in "Women Beware Women" as he explains the advantage of the match:

"Suppose he have more wealth than wit to guide it,
 Why, there's thy gains; thou keep'st the keys of all,
 Disposest all".

(I i 407 - 409)

And yet, if the situation is a familiar one after the comedies, the mood is not: we no longer feel that Middleton is laughing. It is this distinction which really marks the difference between the comedies and Middleton's later work; more and more, Middleton comes to care about human cynicism and greed and lust, to realise how inevitably they undermine men, and women, and lead them to destruction. It is a new mood as yet, and not fully on him; but the artificially happy endings of the tragicomedies become more and more difficult for him, until at last he is ready to face the full import of what he has come to believe, and to write his great tragedies.

The scene which follows is one of the most remarkable in the play, and indeed in all of Middleton's work. It begins with Ager discussing the rights and wrongs of his quarrel with the Colonel. Certainly, the Colonel's insult is a mortal one:

"The son of a whore?

There is not such another murdering-piece

In all the stock of calumny; it kills
 At one report two reputations,
 A mother's and a son's".

(II i 1 - 5)

And yet, for himself, Ager cannot rise to it with the
 immediate anger that is its due; he is

"too full of conscience,
 Knowledge, and patience, to give justice to't;
 So careful of my eternity, which consists
 Of upright actions, that unless I knew
 It were a truth I stood for, any coward
 Might make my breast his foot-pace".

(II i 9 - 14)

If only he could be sure of the justice of his cause,

"E'en to hell's threshold would I follow him,
 And see the slanderer in before I left him:
 But as it is, it fears me; and I never
 Appeared too conscionably just till now.
 My good opinion of her life and virtues
 Bids me go on, and fain would I be rul'd by't;
 But when my judgement tells me she's but woman,
 Whose frailty let in death to all mankind
 My valour shrinks at that".

(II i 22 - 30)

At first, we can only admire his conscientious

scruples; but it comes to one that these misgivings and doubts about what would appear a reasonable response are not new; indeed, one is reminded of nothing so much in this speech as of Hamlet, excusing his failure to revenge his father's death, and trying to screw himself to the pitch of action. Inevitably, the question arises as to just why Ager is really unwilling to take arms against the Colonel at this point. Cowardice does not seem a sufficient explanation; although Ager will not fight the Colonel on this issue, he springs precipitately enough into action the moment the Colonel insults him on an issue where he feels sure he is in the right. And yet, another kind of cowardice is perhaps the explanation here; it is that he is "So careful of my eternity" that provides a reason for the delay. In a sense, this seems rather far-fetched; apart from this aspect of his character, Ager is not developed as a particularly pious man, and there does not appear any good reason why he should be so scrupulous in this matter alone.

In the answer to this problem lies the key to Middleton's intention in the whole play. Samuel Schoenbaum has remarked that in Middleton's hands "tragicomedý undergoes a curious transformation he explores the nature of virtue itself and ventures upon a strange realm in which

even the revered qualities of pity and maternal love are subjected to his detached and merciless scrutiny".². So Ager's refusal to fight the Colonel, a refusal which he himself tries to present as a matter of conscience, can be shown to be an altogether less worthy affair. He himself is unaware of the basic cowardice, simply because it is not a physical cowardice, the kind that soldiers understand, which prevents him fighting. Even when men believe themselves to be acting from the best possible motives, Middleton seems to be saying, their behaviour is often unconsciously motivated by something much less commendable.

And the same can be shown to be true of the mother's reaction when Ager - again somewhat implausibly - decides that the only way to determine the matter is to ask her to be frank with him. At first she is simply, and predictably, enraged at the slur on her honour in his even doubting the question, striking him and saying:

"Dost thou call

That quarrel doubtful? where are all my merits?

Not one stand up to tell this man his error?

Thou might'st as well bring the sun's truth in question

2. S. Schoenbaum: Middleton's Tragicomedies. Modern Philology, Vol. LIV, August 1956. Pp. 7 - 20.

As thy birth or my honour!"

(II i 91 - 94)

But as the implications of the matter come home to her, as she realises that he is to fight a duel on her behalf, she suddenly fears,

"'Las, I shall lose him!"

(II i 150)

and, desperately determined to prevent him, confesses, quite untruthfully as it appears,

"I was betray's to a most sinful hour
By a corrupted soul I put in trust once,
A kinswoman".

(II i 185 - 187)

Again, the first reaction is admiration for the mother's sacrificing her honour to save her son's life. But again, the question arises just what her motives in the matter really are. Certainly, it does not occur to her that her motives are fundamentally selfish ones, that in reality she is being over-possessive, denying her son the right to make his own decisions, to live - or die - according to his own code of honour. And yet, in the end, this is what her behaviour amounts to. The idea is substantiated by her reaction at the beginning of the play to the news of her son's return to England

(I i 31 - 32); there, too, she was more concerned with her own pleasure in his being home than with his need to live his life where he could best fulfil it. Again, Middleton is looking at conduct which seems superficially a model of virtue and unselfishness, and seeing the unworthiness of the motives which have produced it.

Cruelly cynical though this scene might be shown to be (and it has not always been so regarded: Charles Lamb said of Ager's conduct that there could be discerned "in the differences, the quarrels, the animosities of man, a beauty and truth of moral feeling, no less than in the iterately inculcated duties of forgiveness and atonement"³.) it has a depth of perception, a sensitivity to the nuances of human speech and behaviour, which make it a great one. The same cannot be said of the next one, in which Jane, after much idiotic coyness, so that in the end she tells the news to the physician's sister because she is too shy to tell him direct, reveals

"A guilty sorrow to you; I'm with child".

(II ii 75)

The crude comedy of the scene seems strangely at variance

3. Charles Lamb, quoted by A.H. Bullen in his edition of the plays, Vol. IV, P.213.

both with its subject matter and with its context in the play as a whole. The inconsistency of Middleton - or Rowley - in introducing this kind of scene at this point in the play unnecessarily detracts from its structural quality; still at this stage, Middleton seems capable of producing great scenes, but not great plays.

The crudity is sustained by the arrival of Russell with the new candidate for Jane's favours, the Cornishman Chough, a great wrestler, who immediately reduces the scene to the broadest farce, saying to Jane,

"I'll wrestle a fall with you now; I'll show you a trick that you never saw in your life..... the hug and the lock between man and woman, with a fair fall, is as sweet an exercise for the body as you'll desire in a summer's evening".

(II ii 161 - 163 and 170 - 173)

Now the time has come for Ager's meeting with the Colonel, and his two seconds are desperately trying to persuade him to the fight. What ever his private morality may tell him, in the eyes of the world he will forfeit all his hard-won honour if he fails to meet a challenge like this, and he might as well

"let that honourable name of soldier

Fall from you like a shiver'd wreath of laurel

By thunder struck from a desertless forehead,
That wears another's right by usurpation".

(III i 24 - 27)

But Ager is adamant, - When the Colonel appears, he is
astounded to hear Ager tell him that

"I never thought on Victory, our mistress,
With greater reverence than I have your worth,
Nor ever loved her better".

(III i 55 - 57)

He can only respond that

"I came not hither, sir, for an encomium",

(III i 64)

but

."provided

For storms and tempests, and the foulest season
That ever rage let forth, or blew in wildness
from the incensed prison of man's blood".

(III i 66 - 69)

Ager's difficulty here, of course, is that he must
back out of the fight, but could never honourably reveal
why he has done so: his mother's reputation must remain
unsullied, even at the cost of his own reputation for
valour. And, as we have suggested, there is an element
of truth, too, in the reasons he offers now for declining

to fight; he is no physical coward, but he fears divine retribution for his anger:

"Why should man

For a poor hasty syllable or two,

And vented only in forgetful fury,

Chain all the hopes and riches of his soul

To the revenge of that, die lost for ever?

For he that makes his last peace with his Maker

In anger, anger is his peace eternally".

(III i 81 - 87)

And now, in his contempt, the Colonel ironically provides Ager with the cue he has been waiting for.

As he turns away, he proclaims he can only consider

Ager "a base submissive coward" (III i 112). It is

enough; Ager has the morally justifiable occasion for

the fight he has longed for. Physical cowardice means

nothing to him. Joyfully he commands the Colonel,

"Come you back, sir" (III i 115). The irony of

the occasion lies in his remark that if this opportunity

had not offered itself

"I'd lost my honour else".

(III i 133)

The absurdity of the code of duelling and honour is

brought home to us in this situation, where, to retain

his honour in his own eyes and in the eyes of heaven, he had to sacrifice it in the eyes of the world. And, of course, the theme could be taken further; in many spheres, men must compromise with their own consciences to retain the respect of the world at large. It is all a part of Middleton's continuing, and increasingly bitter, cynicism about the ways of the world.

They fight, and the Colonel falls. His words as he lies, as he thinks, dying, seem a little melodramatic in the context of this play, but they strike a note which is to become a familiar one in the tragedies:

"O, just heaven has found me,
And turn'd the stings of my too hasty injuries
Into my own blood! I pursu'd my ruin,
And urg'd him past the patience of an angel".

(III i 176 - 179)

In his repentance and his forgiveness of Ager, he sees that it is the violence of his own passion that has brought him to this pass - a notion which is to acquire sexual connotations in his later work, but which is central to Middleton's tragic thought. We are reminded again that the tragicomedies seem to represent a period of transition for Middleton, in which the amused detachment with which he watches men's foibles in the

comedies turns slowly to the bitter and despairing view of life he reaches in his tragic period.

Again, these matters are interrupted for a comic interlude between Jane and a Dutch nurse. The scene becomes more serious as the physician talks to Jane, yet its tone remains lurid by comparison with much of the rest of the play. Yet in the physician's words as he says

"we are not born

For ourselves only; self-love is a sin",

(III ii 33 - 34)

there is a warning which both Ager and his mother might have heeded; it is selfishness, underlying their apparent self-abnegation, which is the root of their ills, the unconscious motive for their actions.

But the physician's words are for his purpose but the prelude to the advances he proceeds to make to Jane, whom he feels has become his legitimate victim and mistress by virtue of her actions. There is something of Beatrice's lack of insight into De Flores's intentions in "The Changeling", as Jane fails completely to understand the physician as he expresses his desires, and the same incredulity and indignation when at last she sees what he is driving at:

"Away, you are a blackamoor! you love me?
 I hate you for your love! Are you the man
 That in your painted outside seem'd so white?
 O you're a foul dissembling hypocrite!

(III ii 101 - 104)

It does not seem to occur to her that, in his eyes at least, his conduct is no more reprehensible than hers has been. At this stage, it is true, Middleton can still paint Jane's affair with Fitzallen in a quite favourable light; but in essence it is not very different from the kind of relationship he is to portray in his later work as a blind and self-destructive surrender to the baser passions. Still, for this once he allows Jane to evade the physician's advances, as Beatrice could never have evaded De Flores's, and her despairing,

"What shall I do? - what do? is it a question?
 Nor shame, nor hate, nor fear, nor lust, nor force,
 Now being too bad, shall ever make me worse"

(III ii 139 - 141)

does not prevent an eminently satisfactory conclusion to her troubles at the end of the play.

And this kind of self-deception on Jane's part is duplicated more subtly by Ager's mother, as she learns he has gone to fight his duel, and moans,

"Have I belied my faith, injur'd my goodness,
Slander'd my honour for his preservation,
Having but only him, and yet no happier?"

(III iii 20 - 22)

Clearly, she feels she has done everything, sacrificed everything, for him; yet, equally clearly, in the hour of his greatest peril it is her own situation which is uppermost in her thoughts.

The grave nonsense of the Roaring School, which occupies much of the next act, is one of Middleton's happier comic inventions. It serves a more serious purpose, too: the confrontation between Chough and Trimtram, on the one hand, with Captain Albo and his whores on the other, serves as a parody of the code of honour prevailing in the encounters of the more serious duellists elsewhere in the play, a reduction ad absurdum of the whole duelling system:

Chough: "Offer the jostle, Trim.

(Trimtram jostles Captain Albo)

Capt. Albo: Ha! what meanest thou by that?

Trim: I mean to confront thee, cyclops.

Chough: I'll tell thee what a' means - is this thy sister?

Capt. Albo: How then, sir?

Chough: Why then, I say she is a broodstrops; and this

is a fucus.

Priss: No, indeed, sir, we are both fucusses.

Capt. Albo: Art thou military? art thou a soldier?

Chough: A soldier? no, I scorn to be so poor; I am
a roarer."

(IV iv 62 - 73)

Nothing could be more absurd than the school of the roarers, with its ridiculous vocabulary and code of behaviour; and yet there is a certain uneasy resemblance to the language and the manners of the duellists.

There is a similar playing with words as the surgeon tries to describe the Colonel's injuries to his worried sister; but a more serious mood develops as the Colonel talks of how his injuries have taught him "penitence and forgiveness" (IV ii 46), and reads his will, in which he has arranged for his sister to inherit his entire estate, on the condition that she "forthwith tender both herself and all these infeoffments to that noble captain, my late enemy, Captain Ager" (IV ii 68 - 69). The Colonel's large, generous, forgiving gesture, like that of so many of Middleton's characters, is to be made largely at someone else's expense. Even so, the Colonel's hurt astonishment when she demurs seems just a little unlikely:

"Am I content,
 Having much kindred, yet to give thee all,
 Because in thee I'd raise my means to goodness,
 And canst thou prove so thankless to my bounty,
 To grudge my soul her peace?"

(IV ii 86 - 90)

His sister is to contract a marriage she does not want,
 in order that the Colonel may die with a clear conscience;
 fortunately, she is complaisant, and promises,

"since you enforce it
 With such a strength of passion, I'll perform
 What by your will you have enjoin'd me to,
 Though the world never show me joy again";

(IV ii 109 - 112)

a gracious offer, which the Colonel surlily accepts,
 doubting that

"this may be fair cunning for the time".

(IV ii 113)

Now Lady Ager greets the returning captain, and,
 thinking he must be desperately wounded, twitters
 anxiously about calling a surgeon to attend him. An
 affecting scene follows, in which she explains how she
 made up the tale of her fall to save him from a duel,
 but confusion continues as he immediately proclaims

the news was more than he could have hoped for, that his previous action was just "a shift to hold time play" (IV iii 74), and that now, if the Colonel recovered from his first lot of wounds, he could really take his vengeance. As his mother sighs,

"What an unhappiness have I in goodness!

'Tis ever my desire to intend well,

But have no fortunate way in't".

(IV ii 83 - 85)

Could it be that her lack of luck is due to the self-deception which makes her see her actions in a rather better light than they really deserve?

The physician now is still trying to induce Jane to surrender to his wiles, tempting her, since she does not wish to marry Chough, to

"Meet it with revenge, marry a cuckold",

(V i 18)

and, his final card, threatening to reveal the story of her bastard child to her prospective husband - news which does not alarm her as much as he would have liked. The threat is executed soon enough; he tells Chough when he appears,

"Your intended bride is a whore; that's freely sir".

(V i 101)

It is at this stage that the play really begins to fall apart. Chough, certainly, is enraged at the news, and swears he will not have her as his wife. But the tone remains one of comic bawdry, and the perceptiveness and human insights which were a feature of the play's better moments are too subtle for the mood of this final act. And the improbably happy ending which now ensues, part of a convention to which Middleton seems to have felt himself bound, but with which he becomes increasingly unhappy in his later work, is an inappropriate conclusion to much of the action which has gone before. It seems to deny all the ideas which Middleton was propagating earlier in the play about the foolishness of men and their lack of understanding of their own motives; he manoeuvres people and plot, with a complete disregard for the probabilities, in order to send all his characters off the stage at the end of the play happily disposed of for the rest of their days.

So the result of all the physician's contrivings against her is that Jane no longer need fear marriage to Chough; and what is more, the man her father produces as a substitute husband is none other than her real lover, Fitzallen, who, as he is in fact its father,

is not unduly disturbed to hear of the existence of the bastard child, and who in addition collects a handsome dowry from Russell by way of bribing him to accept the match he has wanted all along. The colonel appears, miraculously recovered from his wounds, to effect his reconciliation with Captain Ager, and to confirm the match between the captain and his sister, now firmly in love with each other. All is well; and yet one cannot help feeling that all this is alien to the real lesson of the play, that the Colonel's final words are inappropriately cheerful for what would surely have ensued in nature from the situation of the play's earlier scenes:

"Fair be that quarrel makes such happy friends!"

(V i 447)

CHAPTER VThe Old Law.

In "The Old Law" we see the same mixture of intentions as that of "A Fair Quarrel", a reflection of that stage in Middleton's thought when he becomes increasingly bitter about the hopelessness of human affairs, but is not yet ready to accept the full implications of his despair or to produce the kind of inevitable catastrophe which is the mark of his tragic period. Again we see a fundamentally tragic situation, converted by a twist in the plot to a happy ending inconsistent with the kind of thought expressed in the rest of the play.

To some extent, it is true, Middleton is the victim in this phase of his work of the fashions of his time. William A. Armstrong has written of the changing nature of the theatre-going public in Jacobean England. The theatre ceased to be a theatre of the people, and audiences tended to be composed more of "courtiers, gentlemen of the Inns of Court, wits, and women of fashion, together with such hangers-on as gamblers, soldiers, prostitutes, and would-be gallants".¹ These new courtiers were,

1. W.A. Armstrong: The Audience of the Elizabethan Private Theaters. (In "The Seventeenth Century Stage", ed. G.E. Bentley, pp. 215 - 234)

Allardyce Nicoll says, "more enervated than their predecessors"² and, apart from their fondness for the violent horrors of Jacobean tragedy, developed also "an increasing love of pathos and of what may be called sentimentalism", resulting in "a peculiar form of tragic-comedy typical of this age. In this form of tragic-comedy torment and horror hover in the air, but are finally dispelled by an artificial close".² Clearly, this trend has left its mark on Middleton, and the inconsistencies of his work at this stage in his career are indicative of it. But it is an inconsistency that would have been impossible for him in the fullness of his tragic period, and that it occurs here is only evidence of the uncertainty of his own mind in this period of transition.

The story tells that the Duke Evander devises a law in terms of which, by reason of their age and uselessness in practical affairs,

"all men living in our dominions of Epire, in their decayed nature, to the age of fourscore, or women to the age of threescore, shall on the same day be instantly put to death".

(I i 131 - 134)

2. Allardyce Nicoll: *British Drama*. pp.112, 113.

In a lawyer's comment, on the concept of law in general,

"The law! what more firm, sir,

More powerful, forcible, or more permanent",

(I i 2 - 3)

and in his comment on this cruel, absurd law in particular,

"Never did Greece

Our ancient seat of brave philosophers,

'Mongst all her nomothetae and lawgivers,

Not when she flourish'd in her sevenfold sages,

Whose living memory can never die,

Produce a law more grave and necessary",

(I i 45 - 50)

lies Middleton's purpose in the play. As with the duelling code in "A Fair Quarrel", men uncritically accept the most ridiculous, and frequently even immoral, codes of conduct if they can assume the appearance of institutions, so that even a novelty like that condemning old men to their deaths, because it carries the imprint of the law, is swallowed. And in this case, of course, its absurdity is glossed over most especially by all those who stand to gain most by the statute. Yet it is because most men are prepared to accept unthinkingly all the illogicalities of convention

that the social structure is maintained, and to question the phenomenon is to question the whole ordering of human affairs. This is what Middleton does in "The Old Law".

Simonides, a young courtier, "a young man that has an old father" (I i II) is the first to explain the benefits of the legislation:

"Are there not fellows that lie bedrid in their
offices,
That younger men would walk lustily in?
Churchmen, that even the second infancy
Hath silenc'd, yet hath spun out their lives so long,
That many pregnant and ingenious spirits
Have languish's in their hop'd reversions,
And died upon the thought? and, by your leave sir,
Have you not places fill'd up in the law
By some grave senators, that you imagine
Have held them long enough, and such spirits as you,
Were they remov'd, would leap into their dignities?"

(I i 31 - 41)

It is, indeed, a situation ripe for the profiting of
"those that have old parents and rich inheritance!"

(I i 29)

But Cleanthes, who enters at this point, takes a very different view of the situation. When Simonides calls to him cheerily,

"O lad, here's a spring for young plants to flourish!
The old trees must down kept the sun from us;
We shall rise now, boy",

(I i 72 - 74)

his reply indicates how conscious he is of all he has derived from his father:

"Whither, sir, I pray?

To the bleak air of storms, among those trees
Which we had shelter from?"

(I i 74 - 76)

Like other of Middleton's more virtuous characters, Cleanthes, when he makes remarks like this, is just a little difficult to believe in. His rebuke to Simonides comes too smug and pat, one cannot help expecting his priggishness to prove a cover for some dark design of his own, and feels cheated when his rectitude is preserved to the end. Middleton is only really at home in the seamier side of life. Simonides is similarly confused, and implores him,

"Come, come, here's none but friends here, we

may speak

Our insides freely".

(I i 88 - 89)

However, for the moment, it gives Middleton the chance to underline the point he is trying to make about

the law; the lawyer, too, shakes his head over Cleanthes's apparent innocence, telling him,

"O sir,

You understand a conscience, but not law",

(I i 100 - 101)

and, taken aback by Cleanthes's protesting,

"Why, sir, is there so main a difference?"

(I i 102)

assures him,

"You'll never be good lawyer if you understand not that",

(I i 103)

a reminder of the cynicism of a certain type of practitioner of the law. And the theme is continued, as Cleanthes dismisses contemptuously the lawyer's justification of the law as

"A fine lawfull evasion!"

(I i 119)

The lawyer, significantly, is quite prepared to change sides when he sees what is needed to earn his fee from this particular client, and suggests an especially feeble device to add twenty-one years to an old man's life; but even Cleanthes, seeking desperately for some way around the law to save his old father's life, sees what a "poor evasion" (I i 189) the lawyer's suggestion is that

"we say, man is not at age
 Till he be one-and-twenty; before, 'tis infancy,
 And adolescence, nor, by that addition,
 Fourscore he cannot be till a hundred and one".

(I 1 185 - 188)

One can almost hear the derisive laughter of Middleton's audience at this feeble device; but that the lawyer should produce it in all seriousness (and, of course, in response to the prospect of a fee), as the answer to a law which he has just been busy defending, is a reminder of the verbal trickery and dishonest reasoning within the law which it is a part of Middleton's serious purpose to criticise. And the cynicism is further stressed by the lawyer's brazen response to Cleanthe's criticism of his case, that

"I have spoke out my fee, and I have done, sir".

(I 1 201)

But it is Simonides' father Creon (greeted effusively by the hypocritical Simonides with

"O my dear father!")

(I 1 202)

who really spells out the callous injustice of this particular law as he talks of his youth, of all the service he has seen and the dangers he has faced, yet never one till now that he has not been able to defeat:

"In my youth

I was a soldier, no coward in my age;
I never turn'd my back upon my foe;
I have felt nature's winters, sicknesses,
Yet ever kept a lively sap in me
To greet the cheerful spring of health again.
Dangers on horseback, on foot, by water,
I have 'scap'd to this day".

(I i 220 - 227)

Yet now willy-nilly he must die; one can only feel intense
pity for the old man as he protests helplessly that he

"has treacherously at home,
In's secured quiet, by a villain's hand
Been basely lost, in his stars' ignorance; -
And so must I die by a tyrant's sword".

(I i 237 - 240)

But the lawyer can only murmur in simulated horror,

"O say not so, sir; it is by the law".

(I i 241)

This is the usual defence of those who would defend an
institution simply because it is an institution; like the
code of honour in "A Fair Quarrel", the law and everything,
no matter how immoral or unjust, which can claim to be a
part of the law assumes the mantle of respectability.
Creon puts the foolishness of this unquestioning attitude

in its proper perspective with his angry retort,

"And what's that, sir, but the sword of tyranny,
When it is brandish'd against innocent lives?"

(I i 242 - 243)

But we feel the poignancy of the situation more strongly, and we feel too Middleton is dealing with material in which he finds it easier to involve himself, in the gallantry of the old man as he tries to save his wife Antigona, at least, from what seems inevitably to be his own fate, in her determination not to linger in this world after he has gone, and in Simonides' hypocritical effusions as he pretends to mourn their impending loss, and at the same time does his best to hasten it. This is the world of human relationships, and of often confused and twisted human reaction to a moral dilemma, which is increasingly the province Middleton is to make his own as his work matures and he prepares for his greater tragedies.

Cleanthes, watching Simonides as he murmurs,

"I hope

They'll go together; I would they would, i'faith -
Then would her thirds be sav'd too",

(I i 273 - 275)

and then smoothly dismisses his father's protest that he seems in haste to see them gone with

"O my heart! Would you have me gone before
you, sir,

You give me such a deadly wound?"

(I i 277 - 278)

can only wonder

"Does the kind root bleed out his livelihood
In parent distribution to his branches,
Adorning them with all his glorious fruits,
Proud that his pride is seen when he's unseen;
And must not gratitude descend again,
To comfort his old limbs in fruitless winter?"

(I i 314 - 319)

In the image of the old parents as trees, providing their young with shelter and sustenance (an image we have seen him use before, at I i 74 - 76) there is an indication of Cleanthes's faith in the fundamental, natural strength of the relationship between parent and child, and his abhorrence of the plottings of Simonides, simply because they are an unnatural and repulsive departure from the legitimate order of things.

Still, there is something a little cloying about the loving family relationship that reveals itself now between Cleanthes, his wife Hippolita, and his father Leonides. Again, Middleton seems rather uneasy in the depiction of pure virtue. So, with the threat of death

hanging over him, Leonides can think of nothing but his son's fortune in having married Hippolita, saying,

"When I die, sure 'twill be a gentle death,
for I will die with wonder of her virtues".

(I i 360 - 361)

Cleanthes tries to warn him,

"This admiration

Helps nothing to your safety: think of that, sir".

(I i 372 - 373)

but his father's description of all she has done to try and find some way to evade the law wins Cleanthes to even greater heights of love for her:

"The thought,

The very thought, claims all that (love) from me,

And she is now possest of't".

(I i 378 - 380)

In contrast with the self-seeking of the other characters, all this unselfish devotion really seems too much of a good thing, and one is quite relieved when they get down to the business of deciding what they can do to save the old man.

Even here Leonides's uprightness is an obstacle. At first he will hear nothing of the obvious course of flying the country, and act, as he sees it, of gross ingratitude to the land that has nurtured him, even if its present rulers are planning to take his life,

and protests,

"I must not shame my country for the law.
This country here hath bred me, brought me up,
And shall I now refuse a grave in her?"

(I i 399 - 40L)

Indeed, even when Cleanthes finds a way of circumventing this, and reminds him,

"You have a lodge, sir,
So far remote from way of passengers,
That seldom any mortal eye does greet with't;
And yet so sweetly situate with thickets,
Built with such cunning labyrinths within,
As if the provident heavens, foreseeing cruelty,
Had bid you frame it to this purpose only"

(I i 435 - 440)

Leonides contrives to think the course a dishonourable one, and tells Cleanthes,

"Fie, fie! 'tis dangerous - and treason too,
To abuse the law".

(I i 442 - 443)

It is the disgrace of treason, not its danger, that shocks the old man here - even when it is treason against those who plot to take his life.

In the end, Cleanthes persuades him into hiding only by a filial reminder of what they mean to each other,

and a suggestion that in one way at least no treason is possible between them:

"Why, there is but one body in all this counsel,
Which cannot betray itself: we two are one,
One soul, one body, one heart, think all one thought;
And yet we two are not completely one,
But as (I) have deriv'd myself from you. -
Who shall betray us where there is no second?"

(I i 455 - 460)

It is characteristic of Middleton's uncertainty of touch in dealing with this kind of character that the old man's response, when at last he agrees, has no relationship to all the doubts he has had up to this point; abruptly, he is ready to treat the whole thing as a light-hearted joke:

"Ha, ha, ha!
This will be a sportive fine demur,
If the error not be found".

(I i 470 - 472)

It is something of a relief to return to the earthier cynicism of a group of courtiers, who discuss the foibles of their old parents with scant respect; one remarks of the father he is soon to rid himself of,

"I'd that opinion of him,
Which made me the more willing to part from him;

He was not fit to live i' the world, indeed,
 Any time these ten years, my lord,
 But I would not say so much",

(II i 7 - 11)

and the Duke Evander agrees impatiently,

"he that's all spent is ripe for death at all hours,
 and does but trifle time out".

(II i 12 - 13)

They reminisce of how they endured

"In two-penny commons, and in boots twice vamp'd",

(II i 26)

and rejoice in their new fortunes; think, too, of the generation that must follow them, and serve them similarly in their turn. If there were any doubts about their belief in the absolute goodness of the decree, they are dismissed by their agreement never to let their own young know of it - a degree of optimism, though, about which one of their own number sounds a warning, and a reminder of the price they must one day pay for their present greed:

" 'Twill come to 'em by instinct, man.

May your grace

Never be old, you stand so well for youth!"

(II i 32 - 33)

This way in which men rush, for immediate pleasure and profit, into a situation which will, predictably, be

in the end their own destruction is a recurrent Middleton theme, becomes, indeed as he grows increasingly conscious of the clash between passion in men and what their judgement tells them is wise and right, the centre of his tragic thought.

And there is a degree of sycophancy, too, as they assure Evander of the wisdom of his law, and the way in which it has bettered the whole quality of court life:

"but for men, my lord,
That should be the sole bravery of a palace,
To walk with hollow eyes and long white beards,
As if a prince dwelt in a land of goats".

(II i 44 - 47)

They are fit company for Simonides, who reappears at this point with his mother and father Creon and Antigona, protesting that he will not cheat the law by even one minute, and, of his father, that

"your act
Shall not receive a minute's wrong by him,
While I live, sir; and he's so just himself too,
I know he would no(t) offer't" -

(II i 82 - 85)

words which provide an ironic contrast with those of

Cleanthes earlier, desperately trying to save his father, who really did wonder whether it might be dishonourable to defy Evander's law.

Indeed, Creon too seems willing to offer himself to death, and it is only his wife's protests to Evander,

"O, give not confidence

To all he speaks, my lord, in his own injury"

(II i 94 - 95)

which provoke Simonides to give away to the old couple his real impatience to be rid of them in the almost incredible cynicism of his suggestion to his mother,

"I'll help you to a courtier of nineteen, mother",

(II i 108)

if she will hold her tongue - words which justly produce her rebuke that he is "unnatural" (II i 109). Not that he is at all abashed by such a charge, for he only murmurs complacently,

"Then I am no fool I'm sure,

For to be natural at such a time

Were a fool's part indeed".

(II i 109 - 111)

There can be no doubt Middleton achieves a vitality and a sparkle in the dialogue of his villains that he cannot match in that of his more upright characters. There is tremendous conviction in Simonides' voice, and tremendous verve too, as he gabbles on until at

last Evander orders the old man to be seized and carried away:

"The woman speaks she knows not what, my lord.

He make a law, poor man! he bought a table, indeed,
Only to learn to die by't, there's the business, now;
Wherein there are some precepts for a son too,
How he should learn to live, but I ne'er look'd
upon't:

For, when he's dead, I shall live well enough,
And keep a better table than that, I trow".

(II i 118 - 124)

But all this is interrupted by the entrance of a funeral procession, led by Cleanthes, beaming happily as he proclaims that his father, in dying suddenly, has

"beguil'd cruel law the sweetliest

That ever age was blest to" -

(II i 170 - 171)

All this a device to explain his father's disappearance as he is carried off into hiding in the lodge in the wood.

And Simonides, too, derives joy from the sight, gloating,

"I'm rapt now in a contemplation,

Even at the very sight of yonder hearse;

I do but think what a fine thing 'tis now

To live, and follow some seven uncles thus,

As many cousin-germans, and such people,
 That will leave legacies; a pox! I'd see 'em
 hang'd else,
 Ere I'd follow one of them, and they could find
 the way.

Now I've enough to begin to be horrible covetous".

(II i 206 - 213)

One thing to be said for Simonides is that he really does enjoy his villainy; he is the complete cynic, with never the slightest indication of a twinge of conscience. In this sense, of course, he belongs distinctly in the comic period of Middleton's work, with none of the agonising clashes of reason and passion which are a part of the far more subtle delineation of Middleton's later, tragic, characters.

Now he dismisses all his father's old retainers, assuring them he has no further need of their kind of service; he fully intends to dispose of his new fortune in drink and riotous living. The arrangement suits them well enough; they, too, are infected by the spirit of the age, and go happily off to

"seek out widows of nine-and-fifty, and we can, that's within a year of their deaths, and so we shall be sure to be quickly rid of 'em; for a year's enough of conscience to be troubles with a wife, for any man

living".

(II i 266 - 270)

It would be unlike Middleton in his drama to become so absorbed in matters of the law as to neglect the dramatic possibilities of sexual intrigue, and this is the element which enters the play at this point. Eugenia, the young wife of old Lysander, uncle of Cleanthes, makes no secret of the reasons for her marrying him, and of the fact that she is impatient for his execution:

"And we young wenches, that have mother-wits,
And love to marry muck first, and man after,
Do never think old men are old enough,
That we may soon be rid on 'em".

(II ii 22 - 25)

She pouts grumpily as she considers the tedium of her existence, and the gay life she is missing now, when she is young and longs for pleasure. And again we feel that this is Middleton in his element, as he brings vividly alive the kind of domestic world he must have known. There is a sensuousness, too, in her dwelling on all the physical details of the life around her which epitomises precisely the type of woman he is trying to portray:

"his slippers must be warm'd, in August too,
And his gown girt to him in the very dog-days,

When every mastiff lolls out's tongue for heat.
 Would not this vex a beauty of nineteen now?
 Alas! I should be tumbling in cold baths now,
 Under each armpit a fine bean-flower bag,
 To screw out whiteness when I list -
 And some seven of the properest men i' the dukedom
 Making a banquet ready i' the next room for me;
 Where he that gets the first kiss is envied,
 And stands upon his guard a fortnight after".

(II ii 7 - 17)

But now an eager band of courtiers descends upon
 her home, in anticipation of the impending death of
 her husband, and ready to pay court to her. There is
 no doubt of the spirit in which they come, and they
 make no secret of it from her:

"O sweet precious bud of beauty!

Troth, she smells over all the house, methinks",

(II ii 29 - 30)

cries one, and another:

"Do we not know the craft of you young tumblers?

That (when) you wed an old man, you think upon

Another husband as you are marrying of him".

(II ii 43 - 45)

Nor do they leave her husband Lysander to question
 why they are there; he is treated with open contempt

It is an indication of Middleton's attitude to the Puritans that it is the barren Sir Oliver into whose mouth he puts the speech which accompanies this - the speech itself, perhaps, intended as a sop to the anti-theatre faction in London; somehow, its tone is not satirical;

"I have known

This city now above this seven years,
But, I protest, in better state of government,
I never knew it yet, nor ever heard of;
There has been more religious wholesome laws
In the half-circle of a year erected
For common good than memory e'er knew of,
Setting apart corruption of promoters,
And other poisonous officers, that infect
And with a venomous breath taint every goodness."

(II i 107 - 116)

The contrast between Touchwood and his wife and Sir Oliver and Lady Kix is a reminder of R. Levin's observation that what might otherwise be an impossibly rambling and disjointed play, with a host of unconnected characters, is given a kind of structural unity by the

nature of the four plots which make it up, those of Touchwood Junior, Moll and Sir Walter, of the Allwits and Sir Walter, of Sir Oliver and Lady Kix and Touchwood Senior, and of Tim Yellowhammer, Sir Walter and the Welshwoman. There is, he suggests, "a level of significant comparisons and contrasts which are developed among the four plots and used to relate them to each other..... It is evident that these four plots were placed together with a view to exploiting certain symmetrical patterns of character and action. Each of them, for example, is based on a sexual triangle involving two men and a woman".⁶ The effect of this symmetrical, balanced pattern is, perhaps, to strengthen the impression, mentioned earlier, that in this play Middleton is not just talking about a particular group of people, but that what he says of his characters here represents a view he is coming to hold more strongly of human nature in general. The pattern is too complete, too logical, to be merely a random selection of types; what we have here is Middleton's picture of a whole society.

After some cheerful comedy, in which Allwit admires what is really Sir Walter's baby, brought to him by the wet nurse, we encounter the Promoters of whom Sir Oliver spoke earlier, this time themselves

⁶ R. Levin; The Four Plots of "A Chaste Maid in Cheapside".
(Review of English Studies, vol. xvi, 1965, pp. 14 - 24)

to be the subject of a trick. Allwit's description of them is yet another reminder of Middleton's link between food, especially meat, corruption and lust; the meat the promoters seize will go to fatten their whores:

"Ha, how now? what are these that stand so close
At the street-corner, pricking up their ears
And snuffing up their noses, like rich men's dogs
When the first course goes in? By the mass, promoters;
'Tis so, I hold my life; and planted there
T' arrest the dead corps of poor calves and sheep.....
This Lent will fat the whoresons up with sweetbreads,
And lard their whores with lamb-stones: what their golls
Can clutch goes presently to their Molls and Dolls;
The bawds will be so fat with what they earn,
Their chins will hang like udders by Easter-eve,
And, being stroak'd, will give the milk of witches".

(II ii 54 - 59 and 64 - 69)

The theme continues in Allwit's talk with them, in which they suggest he should be

"fulfill'd with answerable food,
To sharpen blood, delight health, and tickle nature",

(II ii 83 - 84)

and in which he eventually confounds them by telling them,

"My wife lies in - a foutra for promoters!"

(II ii 95)

pregnant women were exempt from the prohibition. The promoters successfully confiscate a basket of meat from a passer-by, and are then confronted by the country girl with her basket. Inevitably, they are tricked into taking the basket, and after the girl has left discover in it Touchwood's baby, to the delight no doubt of the contemporary audience.

The sheer speed and sureness of the comedy maintains itself as Touchwood Junior arranges for a parson to marry him to Moll. Again, Middleton turns the Parson, who is on the stage only for a few lines, into an individual with just a few deft touches. He tells Touchwood,

"Yes, though I ne'er was married, sir,
I've felt the force of love from good men's daughters,
And some that will be maids yet three years hence",

(III 1 2 - 4)

and manages to reduce even the ceremony to farce, uniting the couple with a banal little rhyme - or at least beginning to do so, for the ceremony is interrupted by an irate Yellowhammer, accompanied by Sir Walter:

Par. "Then I'll not linger,
Place that ring upon her finger:
This the finger plays the part,
Whose master-vein shoots from the heart:
Now join hands -
Yel. Which I will sever,
And so ne'er again meet, never!"

(III 1 15-16)

Surlily, Yellowhammer reminds Touchwood how he gulled him in the matter of the ring, and tells him:

"I thank you, sir, for blinding of us;
We've good hope to recover our sight shortly:
In the meantime I will lock up this baggage
As carefully as my gold; she shall see
As little sun, if a close room or so
Can keep her from the light on't."

(III i 38 - 43)

Like gold, she is an expendable asset, to be kept under lock and key until some suitable purchaser appears; her personal feelings are of no consequence whatsoever. It is again the distortion of normal human relations into a commercial transaction.

For sheer vulgarity, the scene which follows is unsurpassed in Middleton. And yet it remains as comedy immensely effective, and there is an underlying note of seriousness, implicit in all the crudeness of the scene's imagery. A group of "gossips" has come for the christening of Lady Allwit's latest child, all good puritan women, glad to see the child

"well kursen'd, i' the right way,

Without idolatry or superstition,

After the pure manner of Amsterdam".

(III ii 3 - 5)

(Amsterdam was at the time a centre of the Anabaptist sect). There is savage mockery in Middleton's treatment of these women. Their language becomes more and more filled with innuendo, their behaviour more and more crude, as the ceremony goes on, whilst Allwit comments on all they do for the benefit of the audience.

They talk of the gifts brought for the child. In the context of this scene, the sexual symbolism of the gifts seems evident enough, whilst a red beard was associated with lechery (vide R.H. Parker's edition of the play, p. 57):

Third Gos.	Now, by my faith, a fair high standing-cup And two great 'postle-spoons, one of them gilt.
First Pur.	Sure that was Judas then with the red beard.
Sec. Pur.	I would not feed My daughter with that spoon for all the world, For fear of colouring her hair; red hair The brethren like not, it consumes them much; 'Tis not the sisters' colour".

Meanwhile, they are hard at work eating the comfits provided for them, and pocketing those they cannot manage for the moment. The lewdness of the scene again acquires sexual overtones as Allwit describes it. The greed of the gossips is clearly in essence a sexual greed, and the serious point Middleton seems to be communicating through this is that the sublimation of the sexual appetites, for the puritans here in gluttony, for the commercial classes in their monetary greed, is as depraved and ugly as the lusts they would claim to have subdued. It is in this sense, rather than in the private practice of vices they would in public deny, that Middleton sees the essential hypocrisy of these people. So Allwit tells us:

"Now out come all the tassell'd handkerchers,
They're spread abroad between their knees already;
Now in goes the long fingers that are wash'd
Some thrice a-day in urine; my wife uses it.
Now we shall have such pocketing; see how
They lurch at the lower end!"

(III ii 51 - 56)

And, as they go on, their greed becomes more and more outrageous:

"These women have no consciences at sweetmeats,
Where'er they come; see and they've not cull'd out
All the long plums too, they've left nothing here
But short wriggle-tail comfits, not worth mouthing".

(III ii 62 - 65)

Wine, too, is as nothing to them. Allwit marvels at their capacity,

"Now the cups troll about,
To whet the gossips' whistles; it pours down, I'faith;
They never think of payment".

(III ii 78 - 80)

and hears them become more and more slurred and incoherent in their
speech, still demanding,

"Bring hither that same cup, nurse; I would fain
Drive away this - hup - antichristian grief".

(III ii 88 - 89)

The comedy heightens as the Yellowhammers' son Tim arrives
in the midst of the festivities from Cambridge, an excessively bashful
young man who cries out in alarm,

"O, I'm betray'd!.....

'Tis against the laws of the university

For any that has answer'd under bachelor

To thrust 'mongst married wives".

(III ii 110 and 119 - 121)

But the gossips press round undeterred, and the scene achieves
new heights of vulgarity as they kiss the protesting Tim:

Tim: O this is horrible,

She wets as she kisses! - Your handkercher, sweet tutor,

To wipe them off as fast as they come on.

Sec. Gos. Welcome from Cambridge.

Tim: This is intolerable!

This woman has a villainous sweet breath,

Did she not stink of comfits. - Help me, sweet tutor,

Or I shall rub my lips off!

Tutor: I'll go kiss

The lower end the whilst.

Tim: Perhaps that's the sweeter,

And we shall despatch the sooner".

(III ii 153 - 165)

At last the First Puritan, Mistress Underarm, collapses completely under the combined influence of the excitement and the wine, crying,

"'Tis but the common affliction of the faithful;
We must embrace our falls".

(III ii 165 - 166)

the double-entendre of which does not escape Tim, who says in relief,

"I'm glad I 'scap'd it;
It was some rotten kiss sure, it dropt down
Before it came at me".

(III ii 166 - 168)

It is difficult to believe that Middleton set out cold-bloodedly to write all this; he seems to have been swept away completely, allowing the at first comparatively gentle satire to become more and more coarse. And the mood sustains itself in the imagery as Allwit calls the gossips to see the "bravest show", (III ii 173),

"Come along presently

By the Pissing-Conduit, with two brave drums
And a standard bearer",

(III ii 174 - 175)

and, after the gossips have left, asks Davy, who has found some wine spilt under the stools, "Is't no worse, think'st thou?"

(III II 185) It is clear enough that by this stage the serious purpose which seemed evident earlier in the scene has become submerged in buffoonery.

Now the brothers Touchwood hear of the impending marriage of Sir Walter and Moll, and Touchwood Junior urges his brother to hurry with the business of providing Lady Kix with a child, thus depriving Sir Walter of his legacy and ensuring he will no longer be of interest, as a potential husband for Moll, to Yellowhammer:

"Get but his wife with child, perch at tree-top,

And shake the golden fruit into her lap".

(III III 11 - 12)

In "golden fruit" the two main lines of imagery in the play are brought together; it is lechery for profit Touchwood Senior is urged to.

Meanwhile, the younger brother has planned to abduct Moll that night, and she is to be

"led through gutters,

Strange hidden ways, which none but love could find,

Or ha' the heart to venture"

(III III 31 - 33)

in order to join him.

The university now comes in for the same kind of satirical treatment as the puritans were given in the christening scene. Tim and his tutor dispute in the most idiotic fashion imaginable, pedantry gone mad, and the scene reduces itself rapidly to the usual level of vulgarity as Tim assures his mother,

"By logic I'll prove anything.....

I'll prove a whore to be an honest woman",

(IV i 39 and 40)

an offer to which she holds him at the end of the play. Meanwhile, he worries about the match that is being arranged for him with the Welshwoman, wondering,

"They say she has mountains to her marriage,

She's full of cattle, some two thousand runts:

Now, what the meaning of these runts should be,

My tutor cannot tell me; I have look'd

In Rider's Dictionary for the letter R,

And there I can hear no tidings of those runts neither;

Unless they should be Romford hogs, I know them not",

(IV i 91 - 97)

and, when she appears in person, conducting a ludicrous conversation with her, in which he talks in Latin and she in Welsh (which he imagines to be Hebrew), to their mutual bewilderment and with the inevitable accompaniment of a series of ribald puns as he tries to interpret what she has said.

Allwit, as determined as Touchwood to prevent the match between Sir Walter and Moll, because it would of course be the end of the highly profitable relationship between Sir Walter and Mistress Allwit, is busy the while talking to Yellowhammer, assuring him he is about to marry his daughter to "an arrant whoremaster" (IV i 219). It is consistent with the attitude to marriage which he have seen Yellowhammer to represent in the play that he is not a whit disturbed by the revelation, but after a little reflection determines,

"The knight is rich, he shall be my son-in-law;
No matter, so the whore he keeps be wholesome,
My daughter takes no hurt then; so let them wed:
I'll have him sweat well ere they go to bed".

(IV i 258 - 261)

Clearly, Yellowhammer is one of the tougher nuts Allwit has had to crack in order to keep his menage in the form he wishes it. In any event, it seems he might have saved himself the attempt; Moll has fled, together with "my father's plate" and "three chains of pearl and a box of coral" (IV ii 2 and 4). That these things should be of sufficient consequence to justify a mention at such a time is a reminder of the relationship for the Yellowhammers between marriage and the world of possessions; it is reminiscent of Shylock's agony at the abduction of his daughter Jessica with jewels and ducats.

Eventually in a street by the Thames they find Moll, and she is led by the hair back home, to the accompaniment of jeers at her ill-treatment from a genial group of watermen. Clearly, the principal concern for the Yellowhammers now is that her market value might have depreciated, Tim bemoaning,

"She hath brought her from the water like a mermaid;
She's but half my sister now, as far as the flesh goes.
The rest may be sold to fishwives",

(IV iii 53 - 55)

but Sir Walter seems comparatively unperturbed at his bride's evident reluctance to marry him, merely promising himself,

"ere tomorrow noon

I shall receive two thousand pound in gold,

And a sweet maidenhead worth forty".

(IV iii 76 - 78)

It is not to be, however; he is surprised by Touchwood junior, who engages him in a fight and wounds him.

The wounded Sir Walter now very nearly assumes tragic proportions. Suddenly, he begins, in his fear of the death which seems imminent, to repent his mis-spent life, telling Aliwit,

"Thou know'st me to be wicked; for thy baseness

Kept the eyes open still on all my sins;

None knew the dear account my soul stood charg'd with

So well as thou, yet, like hell's flattering angel,

Would'st never tell me on't, lett'st me go on,

And join with death in sleep",

(V i 24 - 29)

and Mistress Allwit,

"Thou loathsome strumpet! Some good, pitying man,
Remove my sins out of my sight a little".

(V 1 35 - 36)

But this is, after all, still comedy, and Sir Walter's lamentations sound more ludicrous as news - apocryphal of course - is brought that Touchwood Junior has died as a result of his part in the fight. Allwit and his lady, taking fright at the thought they might be harbouring a wanted man, show their gratitude for all Sir Walter has done for them by ordering him in his distress immediately to leave their house - or, rather the house he has paid for in their name - Allwit telling him virtuously,

"I'll harbour no such persons as men-slayers;
Lock yourself where you will".

(V 1 115 - 116)

Middleton's characters in "A Chaste Maid" consistently present themselves in the worst possible light, whether it is necessary to the plot or not. Allwit's attitude is confirmed as a servant brings him news that Lady Kix is with child, and that therefore Sir Walter is

a broken man. Sir Walter is led off in agony at the tidings, whilst the unperturbed Allwits plan a cosy Whorehoundless future. In the details of the furnishings they plan for their new home, there is a last reminder of the importance of possessions for these people, and the way in which Middleton sees them as a kind of twisted substitute for proper human relationships:

Mrs.All. Let's let out lodgings then,
 And take a house in the Strand.

Allwit In troth, a match, wonch!
 We're simply stock'd with cloth-of-tissue cushions
 To furnish out bay-windows; push, what not
 That's quaint and costly, from the top to the bottom;
 Life, for furniture we may lodge a countess:
 There's a close-stool of tawny velvet too,
 Now I think on it, wife".

(V ii 157 - 165)

Moll, too, seems now to be dying, despite all the efforts of her devoted parents to save her in their own way. As Yellowhammer tells her,

"The doctor's making a most sovereign drink for thee,
The worst ingredience dissolv'd pearl and amber;
We spare no cost, girl".

(V II 24 - 26)

Touchwood Senior calls to tell the Yellowhammers that his brother is dead, distributes gold to the servants and hands a letter to Moll. The significance of these actions is to emerge shortly; the immediate consequence is that Moll swoons and is taken to be dead. It is characteristic of the ugly picture Middleton paints of human nature in the play that her parents' first reaction to her death is to ponder the part their cruel treatment has played, and with almost unbelievable selfishness to think only,

"All the whole street will hate us, and the world
Point me out cruel: it's our best course, wife,
After we've given order for the funeral,
To absent ourselves till she be laid in ground".

(V II 92 - 95)

The final scene is reminiscent, in its sudden revival of the dead and resolving of what had appeared to be impossible situations, of the

tragi-comedies Middleton is shortly to start writing. In the plight of the broken Sir Walter in particular, and in the apparent deaths too of Moll and Touchwood Junior, we had a reminder of Middleton's growing sense of the destructive power of sin; but he is not yet ready to follow the matter to its logical end, and for the moment he must allow all to end happily. So it is, perhaps, to the period just before the conclusion of the play, rather than to the end itself, that we must look if we are to see how the various characters have had to pay for their various misdemeanours. And, as we suggested earlier, it is those who have given way to their lusts and passions who have suffered, whilst those who kept their judgement, and indulged in a more crafty form of villainy, emerge unscathed. So Sir Walter, Touchwood Junior and Moll, all of whom gave way to the sensuous side of their natures, are all either broken or (albeit shortly to be revived) dead. The crafty manipulators of men and money, Allwit, Touchwood Senior, Yellowhammer, in their way perhaps worse rogues than the more natural folk who have sinned in passion, emerge with their prosperity undiminished or even enhanced. So Middleton's view of just as the element which destroys all those who give way to it is consistent; it is only the nature of the destruction, the degeneration of a personality culminating in death, which is to become more horrible in his tragedies.

as he tries to rebuke them for bursting in, as a feeble old creature who no longer has even the right to live:

"pray, 'tend your book, sir;

We've nothing to say to you, you may go die,

For here be those in place that can supply".

(II ii 62 - 64)

And in Lysander's denouncement of them we see, as Middleton must have done, the corrupting effect of a foolish or immoral code of law. (To some extent, no doubt, all this must reflect Middleton's bitterness at litigation and the workings of the law which, as R.H. Barker has described it, must have left such an impression on him in his youth.)³ So Lysander bitterly curses them, calling them

"Monsters unnatural: you that have been covetous
Of your own father' deaths, gape ye for mine now?"

(II ii 75 - 76)

Still, Eugenia is not entirely without a sense of honour; she refuses to give a "kind answer yet" (II ii 100) until her husband is really dead, and for the moment Simonides must be content to

3. R.H. Barker: Thomas Middleton. Pp. 3 - 5.

"lay you o' the lips, and leave you".

(II ii 113)

Now Eugenia is visited by Hippolita, foolish woman, who, what ever her other virtues, is quite unable to keep a secret when she is under any kind of stress. Seeing Eugenia's tears - produced for the occasion, as an entirely deceitful tribute to the thought of Lysander's coming death - Hippolita confesses,

"Alas! I have a secret lodg'd within me,

Which now will out in pity".

(II ii 158 - 159)

There is something faintly ludicrous in the way Hippolita regards the secret as something temporarily lodged within her, but over which she has no kind of control at all. And so she tells Eugenia the whole story of how they have hidden Leonides in the woods, and suggests to her - as if anything could be further from her thoughts! - she protect her husband in the same way. The hard-hearted Eugenia can only sneer when Hippolita has gone,

"Easy fool,

Thou has put thyself into my power for ever;

Take heed of angering me. I conceal!

I feign a funeral! I keep my husband!

'Tis! I've been thinking any time these two years,

I have kept him too long already".

(II ii 196 - 201)

A new element enters the play at this point, which is to occupy much of its middle portions. In a series of somewhat crude and tedious comic incidents, the clown Gnotho plots to rid himself of his wife Agatha by falsifying the parish-chronicle to make her appear older than she really is. If any serious purpose is to be attached to all this, and to the similar machinations of Simonides' ex-servants, the Cook, Tailor, Bailiff and Butler, as they try to marry ancient wives and rid themselves of them as fast as they are able, it is presumably to suggest that the whole community, and not just a small group of courtiers, is corrupted when society adopts ignoble or immoral attitudes. What ever the intention, the clowning is not of such a quality as to sustain itself successfully over the distance Middleton attempts to maintain it, and its presence really weakens the structure of the plot, with a large section in which there is no real development of Middleton's proper theme.

Meanwhile, we find Eugenia, surrounded by her followers, saying she will "kill herself with infinite laughter" (III ii 2) as she watches the antics of old Lysander, who is desperately emulating the ways of youth

in an attempt to disguise his age. There is something repulsively heartless in this picture of a young wife, surrounded by admirers, making fun of her foolish old husband. There is something pitiful, too, in the picture of the old man, his pathetic attempts at dancing and fencing, and the defiance he hurls at the young men who have taunted him:

"Come you a wooing,

And I alive and lusty? you shall find

An alteration, jack-boys; I have a spirit yet,

(And I could match my hair to't, there's the fault)

And can do offices of youth yet lightly;

At least I will do, though it pain me a little".

(III ii 58 - 63)

One can almost hear the cracked old voice in Middleton's words, and feel the crack of some rheumatically joint in the last line, as he asks it to perform more than at his age it is capable of. Certainly, Middleton is more at home, and more interesting, portraying the foibles and silliness of the crack-brained old Lysander than he is in trying to convince us of the venerable dignity of Leonides or Creon; he is too much the cynic to accept unreservedly the resigned and honourable acceptance by these latter of their fate, simply because it is the law. Still, the contrast between them serves

an important purpose, in reminding us that in this war of youth and age that he portrays there can be no crossing from one side to the other - not, at least, without a considerable loss of seemliness.

Cleanthes, too, sees how Lysander's behaviour would perturb the other old men, as he upbraids him,

"I had a father, had he liv'd his month out,
But to ha' seen this most prodigious folly,
There needed not the law to have him cut off;
The sight of this had proved his executioner,
And broke his heart; he would have held it equal
Done to a sanctuary".

(III ii 245 - 250)

Again, we feel uneasily that, what ever Middleton's intention, Cleanthes does emerge as a rather unpleasantly sanctimonious young man; the veneration with which he regards old age seems improbable after the far more convincing scorn of the other young men of the court. And, considering the danger in which Lysander stands, there seems a certain want of charity, too, as Cleanthes asks,

"What devil brought this colour to your mind,
Which, since your childhood, I ne'er saw you wear?
(Sure) you were ever of an innocent gloss
Since I was ripe for knowledge, and would you lose
it,

And change the livery of saints and angels
 For this mixt monstrousness; to force a ground
 That has been so long hallow'd like a temple,
 To bring forth fruits of earth now; and turn back
 To the wild cries of lust, and the complexion
 Of sin in act, lost and long since repented!"

(III ii 219 - 228)

But Cleanthes knows clearly enough where the real
 blame lies for what Lysander does, as he tells Eugenia,

"Look on thy work

But with a Christian eye, 'twould turn thy heart
 Into a shower of blood, to be the cause
 Of that old man's destruction",

(III ii 271 - 274)

and warns her,

"thy too hasty lust

Has driven him to this strong apostacy".

(III ii 287 -288)

words which leave her unrepentant, swearing, indeed,
 that she will avenge his harshness by revealing the
 secret, so foolishly told her by Hippolita, of Leonides's
 hiding place.

The cloying sweetness of Cleanthes's nature remains
 somewhat oppressive as he tip-toes into the forest

hiding-place, asking,

"What's that? O, nothing but the whispering wind
Breathes through yon churlish hawthorn, that
grew rude,

As if it chid the gentle breath that kiss'd it",

(IV ii 1 - 3)

and asks Hippolita,

"Precious chief of women,

How dies the good old soul? has he fed well?"

(IV ii 23 - 24)

In the context of Middleton's usual writing, this kind of language is simply too inflated, too absurdly and pretentiously good, to be believed; and the theme continues, as Cleanthes proceeds to count his blessings:

"I find 'em, as angels are found, by legions:

First, in the love and honesty of a wife,

Which is first and chiefest of all temporal
blessings;

Next, in yourself, which is the hope and joy

Of all my actions, my affairs, my wishes;

And lastly, which crowns all, I find my soul

Crown'd with the peace of 'em, th' eternal riches,

Man's only portion for his heavenly marriage!"

(IV ii 42 - 49)

It is almost a relief when the idyll is disturbed by the sound of a horn. Warned by Eugenia, Evander and his hunting party burst upon the scene, and despite all equivocations Leonides is brought from his hiding place and the whole matter exposed. Still the old man and his son vie with each other in self-denying goodness; Cleanthes throws himself to his knees, crying,

"I transgressed

Your law, my lord, let me receive the sting on't;
Be once just, sir, and let the offender die:
He's innocent in all, and I am guilty".

(IV ii 176 - 179)

whilst Leonides in his turn protests,

"his love would draw

An undeserved misery on his youth,
And wrong a peace resolv'd, on both parts sinful.
'Tis I am guilty of my own concealment".

(IV ii 181 - 184)

We are much more convinced by Eugenia's malicious triumph, as she reveals,

"I will not lose so glorious a revenge,
Not to be understood in't; I betray('d) him".

(IV ii 234 - 235)

Now, as Cleanthes, Hippolita and Leonides are led off as captives, and some kind of tragic outcome seems

inevitable, the play enters its least satisfactory portion. The court is ready to sit in judgement on Cleanthes, and Simonides, prominent on the bench, unctuously pronounces,

" 'Twas wickedly attempted; that's my judgement".

(V I 16)

Nor is the court, even before Cleanthes has appeared, in any doubt as to its intentions; Simonides reminds them:

"The prisoner shall be sure to be condemned;
Sleeping or waking, we are resolv'd on that,
Before we sit upon him?"

(V i 8 - 10)

Again we are reminded of the somewhat jaundiced view Middleton takes of the law.

The prisoners are brought in, Cleanthes delivers his inevitable address on the responsibilities of the young to their parents, accuses his judges of

"the heaviest crimes that ever made up (sin),
Unnaturalness and inhumanity",

(V i 225 - 226)

and warns them:

"you are parricides,
And, if you marry, will beget the like,
Who, when you're grown to full maturity,

Will hurry you, their fathers, to their graves".

(V 1 232 - 235)

Simonides in his turn tells Cleanthes,

"I say again, this act of thine expresses
A double disobedience: As our princes
Are fathers, so they are our sovereigns too;
And he that doth rebel 'gainst sovereignty
Doth commit treason in the height of degree:
And now thou art quite gone".

(V 1 202 - 207)

All seems ready for the sentence but suddenly Evander
intervenes, and at once the whole play is reduced to
absurd improbability. Music plays, and all the old men,
supposedly dead, appear. The tables are turned;
Cleanthes, still proclaiming his guilt, that he

"should be so vild,

As once to think you cruel",

(V 1 276 - 277)

finds himself set up as judge to decide whether those
who have just condemned him are fit to receive any
legacies in terms of a law, just proclaimed, that "no
son and heir shall be held capable of his inheritance
at the age of one-and-twenty, unless, he be at that time
as mature in obedience, manners, and goodness".

(V 1 290 - 292)

And this is all, no-one suffers any greater punishment. The old return to life, the young to filial obedience, Gnotho to Agatha, his servants to old Creon's employ: everything is exactly as it was at the beginning of the play. It is indicative of the weakness of Middleton's tragi-comedies, the way in which their final scenes contrive to take all point from what has preceded them, that Evander's final words are a direct contradiction of the whole purpose of the play as it has appeared up to this moment:

"All's joy, I see; let music be the crown:
And set it high, 'The good needs fear no law,
It is his safety, and the bad man's awe'."

(V 1 711 - 713)

PART THREE: TRAGEDY

CHAPTER VI

"The Mayor of Queenborough"
or "Hengist", King of Kent".

With "Hengist", we feel Middleton is moving on to a new kind of drama, as he himself develops a new and gloomier view of humanity - a view we have seen in embryo in "A Fair Quarrel", but which only here expresses itself fully. The play itself is something of an anomaly, as Samuel Schoenbaum says of it "a curious union of psychological tragedy, pseudo-history, and comic buffoonery"¹. There are comic scenes as crude and pointless as anything in Middleton, and a structural pattern reminiscent of the old chronicle plays, complete with chorus, references to the chronicles on which the story is based, and Dumb Shows to move the action on. Even in the tragic elements of the play, it is difficult to decide whether we are concerned with a play about ambition and power, or about lust and sexual passion. Nor can it be claimed that these elements produce a satisfactory amalgam; the play is as

1. S. Schoenbaum: Middleton's Tragedies. p.70.

uneven in quality, and as various in tone, as anything in Middleton. Structurally, it is a disaster, and yet at its best it achieves a power hard to find elsewhere in Middleton outside his great tragedies.

The first part of the play is concerned with the saintly Constantius, and with the attempts of Vortiger to usurp his throne. In the play at this stage, we are reminded as much as we are anywhere in Middleton of the kind of theme Shakespeare dealt with in "Macbeth". Not that the ambitions of Vortiger in any real sense parallel those of Macbeth; there is little of Macbeth's tortured self-doubt here, and Vortiger has no Lady Macbeth to drive him on. And, as we shall discover, the theme of ambition soon subordinates itself to others, more congenial to Middleton's genius. What we do see is Middleton writing a kind of play which is to become characteristic of all his later work, in which he attempts to show some psychological insight into his characters, their motives, and their steady deterioration as they become habituated to sin.

R.C. Bald, in the introduction to his edition of the play, remarks of Middleton that "comparison with Shakespeare seems to throw into relief what is best in his work", and, while admitting that "the similarity is often of kind rather than of quality", sees "a certain kinship

between the minds of the two men"¹; as M.C. Bradbrook remarked, Middleton "relies upon action and characterisation in a way which no one else did (except Shakespeare)", and has a special "interest in the way the mind works" - to the extent that "the stress which should fall upon themes and imagery is much lighter in Middleton's plays than in those of most of his contemporaries".² (This is not to suggest that characterisation is insignificant in most of Middleton's contemporaries; it is the balance between this and the imagery which is different.)

More recently, this idea has been developed by D.L. Frost. What ever the accuracy of his assertions that Middleton came directly under the influence of Shakespeare's work as a writer for the King's Men from about 1615, it is certainly true that from this period Middleton began, as Shakespeare had done, attempting to "demonstrate the psychological effects of evil; punishment lay in what the character became". In "Hengist", the process remains fairly crude; still, Middleton has discovered the dramatic appeal of a "psychological interaction of characters",³ and of the development of individual characters as a consequence

1. R.C. Bald: Intro. to "Hengist, King of Kent". P.xliv. (Scribner's 1938).

2. M.C. Bradbrook: Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy". PP. 213 and 239.

3. D.L. Frost: The School of Shakespeare. P.60.

of their own actions. Frost's remark of Vortiger, that "The progress is one from wilful blindness and a naive expectation of pleasure to a discovery of the nature and consequences of evil and its effect on the personality"⁴, could be a description of Middleton's major preoccupation in all his tragedies.

It is in this sense, indeed that "Hengist" marks the great divide in Middleton's work. In "A Fair Quarrel", we saw the first signs of Middleton's increasing pessimism; in the comedies, Middleton regarded the foolishness and depravity of man, as he delineated it in his characters, with a certain cynical and amused detachment, and it is only now that he becomes fully conscious of the destructive powers of evil. It is this consciousness which explains the increasingly gloomy view of life revealed in his later plays. And it is because this destruction is essentially an inner destruction of the personality, rather than a physical cataclysm, that we feel Middleton's work is taking a rather different direction from that of many of his contemporaries. The bloody slaughter at the end of "Women Beware Women", for instance, has seemed curiously out of

4. D.L. Frost: The School of Shakespeare. P.58.

place to many critics - although, as we shall attempt to show later, the scene is not as incompatible with Middletons' subject matter as might at first appear.

To return to the start of "Hengist", it is in his opening words that Vortiger reveals the two predominant features of his character as seen in the early part of the play, his ambition and his contempt for the common people. He wonders,

"Will that wide-throated beast, the multitude,
Never leave bellowing?"

(I i 1 - 2)

and remarks

"How near was I to a sceptre and a crown!"

(I i 4)

had it not been that

"this forked rabble
With their infectious acclamations,
Poison'd my fortunes for Constantine's sons".

(I i 6 - 8)

Evidently, his contempt for the rabble is equalled only by their hatred for him.

Still, he is determined not to be idle in the matter: he explains,

"though I rise not king, I'll seek the means
To grow as near to one as policy can",

(I i 9 - 10)

a policy he describes more explicitly later, saying of Constantius that he will

"use all means

To vex authority from him, and in all
Study what most may discontent his blood,
Making my mask my zeal to the public good".

(I 1 156 - 159)

For Constantius, he has nothing but puzzled contempt,
saying wonderingly of him after his crowning,

"What several inclinations are in nature!
How much is he disquieted, and wears royalty
Disdainfully upon him, like a curse!
Calls a fair crown the weight of his afflictions!"

(I 1 151 - 154)

For himself, he knows he cannot rest content until he has
what Constantius so much detests:

"Can the great motion of ambition stand,
Like wheels false wrought by an unskilful hand?"

(I 1 143 - 144)

Constantius is made of very different stuff. He
has found in prayer and contemplation a refuge from the
trials of the world, and longs only to be left in peace;
it would be a wicked injustice to deprive him of this.

He calls on Vortiger, who for his own ends presses the crown upon him, to

"Think with how much unwillingness and anguish
A glorified soul parted from the body
Would to that loathsome jail again return:
With such great pain a well-subdu'd affection
Re-enters worldly business",

(I 1 50 - 54)

and tells him,

"if't be worthily held sacrilege
To rob a temple, 'tis no less offence
To ravish meditations from the soul,
The consecrated altar in a man".

(I 1 96 - 99)

It is, significantly, the monk Germanus, one who by his own vocation one would not expect to be unduly censorious of the contemplative life as such, who exposes the fallaciousness, the essential selfishness, of Constantius's plea:

"Who's born a prince, is born for general peace,
Not his own only: heaven will look for him
In others' acts, and will require him there.

What is in you religious, must be shown

In saving many more souls than your own".

(I 1 74 - 78)

Middleton is conscious here, as elsewhere, that conventional piety is no weapon to hold up against the powers of evil. He seems, indeed, to regard the devout with some contempt; Constantius's invocations are as ineffectual and as irrelevant as those of the Cardinal in "Women Beware Women". Goodness, as an end in itself, rather than as a response to, or a resistance to, evil, is to Middleton a feeble, rather meaningless thing. Certainly, unchallenged virtue has little place in the scheme of his tragic drama, preoccupied as it is with the endless battle within individual men between reason and what they know to be good and the darker passions which try always to overpower them. There can be no final victory for reason, and indeed as he goes on Middleton becomes increasingly sure that men cannot resist the passions in themselves, and that they are destroyed by them in the end.

In this connection, T.B. Tomlinson has said of the dramatists of the period that they believed that "the deepest response to evil and good, or to the valuable and the chaotic, sees them as, in some sense, dependent on each other for their form, substance, and very existence".

They see "the good and valuable as - at least in part - actually nourished and supported by chaos and evil.... there is a sense in which, for the Elizabethans generally, to experience the tragic and the chaotic is at the same time to experience the energy and richness of life itself".⁵ Middleton, certainly, seems always deeply conscious of this power and vitality of evil, and is aware of the one-sidedness of a life which contrives to exist without it. Characters like Constantius and the Cardinal are lacking in that essential life-force which gives purpose and energy to men's lives even as it ensures their ultimate destruction.

With this sort of conflict as the basis of his tragic drama, Middleton could not confine himself for long to an essentially acquired, rather than natural, vice, such as Vortiger's ambition. Something more basic is necessary for his purpose, and it is at this point that Middleton introduces the subject that is soon to supplant Vortiger's rise as the primary focus of attention in the play. In a Dumb Show, elucidated by "Raynolph, monk of Chester" (I 1), author of the Polychronicon on which Middleton based the story of the play, we cross to Germany, where we see Hengist and Horsa draw the lots which are

5. T.B. Tomlinson: A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy. Pp. 3 and 4.

to send them with their men from an over-crowded Germany to try their luck in England. As Raynulphe reveals that Roxena, the daughter of Hengist, and Horsus are secret lovers, we feel that we are on more familiar Middleton ground. Samuel Schoenbaum has remarked how historical episodes and the career of Vortiger are gradually pushed into the background, to be disposed of in Dumb Shows and choruses, so that we see "a total shift of emphasis as the play progresses: an historical drama becomes a melodrama of amorous intrigue, a study of ambition becomes a study of lust".⁶ The special nature of Middleton's tragic genius is asserting itself; for all the similarity of their interests in some respects, Middleton cannot work contentedly with a theme and a subject-matter which might have satisfied Shakespeare.

But there is still some interest to be derived from the matter of Constantius. Vortiger, hoping to make his kingship intolerable to him, forces Constantius to wear rich clothes, and exposes him, when he wishes to be about his devotions, to the importunities of crowds of petitioners. When they kneel to him, he, thinking they

6. S. Schoenbaum: Middleton's Tragedies. P.86.

are directing their prayers to heaven, not to him,
throws himself down too, crying,

"With what devotion do they point at heaven.

And seem to check me that I am too remiss!

I bring my zeal among you, holy men"

(I ii 72 - 74)

and calls on them to

"Make your requests to heaven, not to me"

(I ii 89)

- a response the essential foolishness of which is brought
home by their lamenting,

" 'Las! mine's a supplication for brass buttons, sir",

(I ii 91)

and, more strongly,

"We are almost all undone, the country beggar'd".

(I ii 105)

Constantius's saintliness is a selfish indulgence when
the affairs of the realm demand his labours.

The sexual note intrudes again as Vortiger demands
of Constantius that he must forthwith "Settle your mind
to marry" (I ii 119). Constantius is appalled; vowed
celibacy

Hath set a virgin seal upon my blood,
 And alter'd all the course; the heat I have
 Is all enclos'd within a zeal to virtue,
 And that's not fit for earthly propagation".

(I ii 125 - 128)

Curiously, Castiza, the prospective bride, is as
 reluctant as he, has

"never felt
 Th' unhappy hand of misery till this touch";

(I ii 136 - 137)

the end result of their interview is that he strengthens
 her in her resolve to keep her chastity, sealing it
 with a pure kiss which, observed by the worldly Vortiger,
 causes him some unnecessary alarm that his stratagem
 has succeeded too well - alarm that explains itself even
 more readily when we discover that Castiza, whom he has
 used as his bait, is already betrothed to Vortiger.

She declares, proclaiming to him the vow she has made to
 Constantius, that

"I'm bound, my lord, to marry none but you, -
 You'll grant me that, - and you I'll never marry".

(II ii 10 - 11)

In this entanglement, Middleton has found the theme which, as we have seen, is to supplant Vortiger's ambitions as the real subject of his interest. Now he hurries on the historical part of the plot with another quick Dumb Show, in which Vortiger bribes two villains, who, after they have killed Constantius for him, he then in pretended sorrow kills in their turn. He is then crowned and takes Castiza as his reluctant bride, while Constantius's brothers Aurelius and Uther, like Malcolm and Donalbain in "Macbeth", flee to plan their revenge from afar. Thus cursorily Middleton disposes in a few moments of material which, perhaps, one might conjecture, he intended to occupy a major portion of the play until he was carried away by his own more natural inclinations.

There is a certain naiveté about Vortiger, which manifests itself in his simple astonishment that, once he is king, all problems do not immediately evaporate, leaving him to reign in peace and contentment. He laments that

"After I was a king,
I thought I never should have felt pain more;
That there had been a ceasing of all passions
And common stings which subjects use to feel",

and resents those "ulcers of the realm" (II ii 8), the common people whom he so despises, and who now seem to threaten his new-found power. And he begins to discover what an ephemeral thing this power is:

"O this dream of glory!

Sweet power, before I can have time to taste thee
Must I for ever lose thee?"

(II ii 4 - 6)

Ironically, he turns for help to the very men who are in the end to destroy him, the Saxons Hengist and Horsa, newly landed in his kingdom and eager to serve him with their swords. There follows the affair of the hide and the first appearance of the tanner Simon. Hengist - a cunning man - asks for as much land as can be covered by the hide Simon carries, in return for his services to Vortiger. The favour granted, he has Simon stretch it and cut it into ribbons, which, tied together, encircle sufficient land in Kent for him to establish himself and to build his castle, Thong Castle. All this, and indeed the whole sub-plot of Simon, seems strangely light-hearted in the context of the play as a whole, especially in view of the quite considerable portion of the play taken up by Simon's doings - part of the extraordinary medley of styles which is a feature of the play.

Simon himself seems an entirely good-natured buffoon, without any of the latent viciousness which is a feature even of most of Middleton's comic characters. It all seems to bear out the suggestion that the play as we have it has been superimposed by Middleton on some of his much earlier work, so that what we see is the beginning of the full development of his mature tragic style, mixed with some comic scenes which pre-date even his better-known comedies.⁷

Into the latter part of this scene Middleton introduces the arrival of Xoxena, daughter of Hengist and lover of Horsus. She arrives, indeed, with almost unseemly haste, Horsus no sooner having requested she be sent for than she appears in person, having, we are told, followed them hot-foot from home, "With such a zeal, "a gentleman remarks, "as daughter never equall'd" (II iii 162). It is as if a whole new set of possibilities has intruded itself on Middleton's imagination, and he cannot bear to go on one moment longer without employing them. And Horsus knows well enough why she has come so fast, that it is no filial affection which has speeded her. His

7. R.C. Bald: Intro. to "Hengist, King of Kent". Pp.xviii - xix.

comment on her is, at last, in the main-stream of Middleton's tragic thought:

" 'tis her cunning,

The love of her own lust, which makes a woman
Gallop down hill as fearlessly as a drunkard.
There's no true loadstone in the world but that;
It draws them through all storms by sea or shame:
Life's loss is thought too small to pay that game".

(II iii 166 - 171)

It is not without significance that it is in relation to women these remarks are made: Middleton's views of blind, wilful lust, and its destructive power, seems always to apply most strongly to his women, to Roxena in "Hengist", to Bianca, Isabella and Livia in "Women Beware Women", most clearly of all to Beatrice-Joanna in "The Changeling".

And with her, to add to the situation, is Vortiger - Vortiger, who has become infatuated with her physical charms, and who demands now of her father that he be allowed to make Roxena, not his wife, but,

"My mistress, sir, or nothing".

(II iii 203)

Hengist, of course, demurs, but is won over as easily as Leantio in "Women Beware Women", with Vortiger's offer that he will "create thee earl of Kent". (II iii 215)

Hengist's response is, if anything, even more obsequious than Leantio's:

"Your love's unworthy creature",

(II iii 253)

are his first words. Trickery and cunning, even the selling of his daughter's virtue, are all part of the game in Hengist's growing territorial ambitions; indeed, so far as the theme of ambition continues to be an important one in the play, it transfers itself from Vortiger to him.

But our attention is diverted for the moment from Hengist by Horsus, who, unable to intervene without revealing that Roxena is already his mistress, falls in some kind of fit - "his epilepsy," says Roxena, "I know it well."

(II iii 217) There follows one of the extraordinary virginity tests of which Middleton makes something of a speciality in his plays - there is another in this play, and one in "The Changeling". In this case, the test is of Roxena's own making; she claims she has seen Horsus in this state before, and that

"A virgin's right hand strok'd upon his heart
Gives him ease straight".

(II iii 219 - 220)

The whole episode is somewhat obscure, there is nothing

to indicate why Roxena really thinks she can make him rise, or why she should impose a test like this on herself when the consequence is so doubtful. It is only later that Horsus and she conspire to trick Vortiger, so the fainting cannot have been planned. Nor can Horsus have intended it as a ploy to put her at his mercy; it is only after he has fallen that Roxena makes her claim. Whatever her reason, she has played right into Horsus's hands, and he tells her

"Thou hast undertaken

To give me help, to bring in royal credit

Thy crack'd virginity, but I'll spoil all:

I will not stand on purpose, though I could,

But fall still to disgrace thee.....

For when thou'rt known to be a whore imposterous,

I shall be sure to keep thee".

(II 111 228 - 232

and 234 - 235)

Vortiger, at least, is impressed, so perhaps she has achieved her object, and we hear now the first indication of passion boiling within him:

"The truth of this will bring love's rage into me".

(II 111 223)

But for Vortiger's belief in her Roxena has paid the price of making herself - perhaps willingly - entirely the creature of Horsus, who capitalises on the situation by threatening as he rises,

"But if thou ever failst me, I will fall,
And thou shalt never get me up again".

(II iii 242 - 243)

Horsus, indeed, begins to impress us at this stage as a man several degrees cleverer than anyone else in the play. He has manipulated Roxena, as he will manipulate others later, to his own ends, and he loses no time in following up his advantage. It is only the violent passion with which he pursues his affair with Roxena beyond the bounds of discretion that in the end destroys him.

It is Roxena, though, who sees how she and Horsus can continue lovers, and at the same time turn Vortiger's infatuation to their own advantage:

Take reason's advice, and you'll find it impossible
For you to lose me in this king's advancement,
Who's an usurper here; and as the kingdom,
So shall he have my love by usurpation;
The right shall be in thee still. My ascension
To dignity is but to waft thee higher".

(III i 53 - 58)

It is remarkable how Vortiger, the crafty, successful scheme of the first part of the play, is unknowingly converted by his lust to the role of gull and cuckold - a very characteristic Middleton transformation. And certainly all the characters are behaving now with all the wilful, cunning foolishness which is their usual form. Vortiger's remark at this moment,

"Invention, fail me not: 'tis a gallant credit
To marry one's whore bravely",

(III 1 75 - 76)

and Roxena's

"If lost virginity can win such a day,
I'll have no daughter but shall learn my way",

(III 1 71 - 72)

might reasonably have been put in the mouths of a considerable number of Middleton's men and women. And Middleton's preoccupation with such matters is well illustrated by Horsus's musing, quite gratuitously, as it has no bearing on any action of the play,

"May be some son(s) of mine, got by this woman too,
May match with their own sisters".

(III 1 73 - 74)

There follows one of those rather absurd amatory intrigues which are scattered about Middleton's work.

Vortiger, still ill at ease -

"Have I power

Of life and death, and cannot command ease

In my own blood?"

(III 1 77 - 79)

he asks himself - longs to be rid of Castiza (now, it appears, his wife, despite her early protestations she would not marry him - an unexplained turn-about which suggests either a gap in the text or an inconsistency in Middleton's own work) so that he can give all his attentions to Roxena. As Middleton's characters tend to do at such moments, he pours out his story to the one man who is out to dupe him - in this case Horsus.

Horsus suggests that, disguised, they abduct Castiza and outrage her. This done, they will restore her to her home, where she will doubtless say nothing of what has happened. Later, they will devise some means of trapping her into revealing all, and then Vortiger will have the excuse he wants to remove her from the scene. No sooner said than done: they carry her off, and the next we see of her she is hanging her head as she sees Vortiger for the first time after her return, and saying,

"Methinks I should not dare to look on him....

He may read my shame

Now in my blush".

(III 111 263 and 267 - 268)

Meanwhile, Vortiger praises her as one who delights
in "all chaste works" (III 111 283), who is

"so link'd to holiness,

So taken with contemplative desires,

That the world has you, yet enjoys you not".

(III 111 268 - 269)

All this is the kind of writing which reveals Middleton at his worst, manipulating his characters in the most improbable manner for the sake of a lurid incident, agitating them like unlikely puppets. There seems no particular reason why Castiza should remain silent about her abduction, no reason why the abduction should have taken place at all. If Vortiger really wished to be rid of her, there is nothing in his character as we have seen it up to this point to suggest he could not remove her by some more direct and open method, as he has already eliminated Constantius.

In this middle section of the play, there is a distinct feeling that Middleton has lost touch with his characters as the people he has so painstakingly created in the better parts of the play; one's most charitable

response is to remember that this is, after all, only an early attempt at a kind of psychological drama that he is only really to master later in his two greatest tragedies. And one's awareness at this point of the highly erratic quality of this play, its failure really to find any unity of theme or manner, is only heightened by the intrusion into all this devious intriguing of a long scene of the broadest comedy, in which Hengist adjudicates between the rival candidatures of Simon the tanner and Oliver the weaver for the mayoralty of Queenborough. It is an interesting comment on the medley of themes and styles in the play, and the excessive proportion of it given up to the absurdities of Simon, that this incident should have provided one of the two titles by which the play has been commonly known.

Now Vortiger is ready to put Castiza to the test of chastity which, he knows, she can no longer pass. On his way to a feast at Hengist's castle he has reminded us of one of the traits in his character we had observed earlier, his detestation of the common people. Saluted by Simon and his followers, he responds surlily,

"Forbear your tedious and ridiculous duties;
I hate them, as I do the riots of your
Inconstant rabble; I have felt your fits:
Sheathe up your bounties with your iron wits".

At the castle, he whispers to Horsus

"This is the time I've chosen; here's a full meeting,
And here will I disgrace her".

(IV 11 13)

Horsus cynically watches as Vortiger goes up to
Castiza and takes her arm:

"what a false knot

Of amity he ties about her arm,
Which rage must part! In marriage 'tis no wonder,
Knots knit with kisses oft are broke with thunder".

(IV 11 31 - 34)

On some pretext, Vortiger demands that all the
ladies present should

"swear (I've sworn you shall) that you ne'er knew
The will of any man besides your husband's".

(IV 11 86 - 87)

Predictably, the other ladies present decline,
pleading forgetfulness or the infirmity of sleeping so
soundly "The loudest thunder cannot waken me". (IV 11 93)
Predictably, too, Castiza "dare not" take the oath.

(IV 11 125) Now Vortiger has the opportunity he has waited
for, and he proceeds brutally to shame her: to her appeals
that she was

"surpris'd

By villains, and so raught",

(IV 11 153 - 154)

he retorts,

"O cunning texture to enclose adultery!

Mark but what subtle veil her sin puts on;

Religion brings her to confession first,

Then steps in art to sanctify that lust. -

'Tis likely you could be surpris'd!"

(IV 11 155 - 159)

So she is disgraced. The cunning Horsus sees exactly how to use this situation to his advantage. Roxena, being a pagan, need have no fears of swearing a Christian oath she is chaste, and she hastens to do so. Vortiger is overcome with excitement; again we see his judgement, the shrewdness he has displayed in matters of state, quite mastered by his lust:

"O thou treasure that ravishes the possessor!

I know not where to speed so well again;

I'll keep thee while I have thee".

(IV 11 211 - 213)

Horsus knows too well the weaknesses of the
otherwise crafty Vortiger, and triumphs,

"Ha, ha!

He's well provided now: here struck my fortunes.
With what an impudent confidence she swore honest,
Having th' advantage of the oath! precious whore!

(IV 11 219 - 222)

But he is intelligent enough to realise, too, that he
is subject to the same passions, and in relation to the
same woman, as Vortiger is. Only her father, Hengist, is
above this, and Horsus shrewdly perceives that here, if
anywhere, his danger lies:

"The earl of Kent

Is calm and smooth, like a deep dangerous water;
He has some secret way; I know his blood;
The grave's not greedier, nor hell's lord more proud".

(IV 11 226 - 229)

The play begins to pick up in quality, and to regain
its characteristic Middleton flavour, as it develops now
into the drama of three men, all formidably cunning and
greedy for power, two of whom are weakened by wilful
passions, one of whom remains always "calm and smooth".

In Middleton, it is always the irrational power of lust that sets reason and cunning at naught in men. Given one man who is fully in control of his passions, two who are not, the outcome of the play becomes at this stage a predictable one; the main interest remaining is to see how Vortiger and Horsa give themselves away.

Again, though, Middleton intervenes with the clumsy device of a Dumb Show to dispose of a considerable body of history. The nobles, angered at Vortiger's choice of a pagan bride, crown his son Vortimer king. Roxena poisons Vortimer, Vortiger is re-crowned king, Hengist threatens revolt but is temporarily appeased.

To return to the action proper, Hengist, waiting for a parley with Vortiger, arms his men secretly each with

"An instrument of steel, which will unseen
Lurk, like a snake under the innocent shade
Of a spread summer-leaf",

(IV iii 16 - 18)

determined to fasten and secure his place in England. We have seen the streak of naiveté in Vortiger; again it appears as he expresses his astonishment at Hengist's practising on him very much the same kind of trickery he had used against Constantius:

"O, the strange nooks of guile or subtilty,
 When man so cunningly lies hid from man!
 Who could expect such treason from thy breast
 Such thunder from thy voice?"

(IV 111 52 - 55)

But of course he must capitulate to Hengist's demands:
 Hengist becomes king of Kent.

Vortiger cannot be quite unconscious of what has
 been his undoing; if he had not been driven by lust to
 abandon Castiza and marry Roxena, all might have been
 well. His conscience, even, troubles him as he thinks,

"the murder of Constantius
 Speaks to me in the voice of't, and the wrongs
 Of our late queen, slipt both into one organ.
 Ambition, hell, my own undoing lust,
 And all the brood of plagues, conspire against me:
 I have not a friend left me".

(IV 111 105 - 110)

Not a true friend, that is. Horsus protests at Vortiger's
 declaration that he and Roxena must fly to Cambria, with
 no mention of Horsus's being one of the party,

"My lord, and I not nam'd,
That have vow'd lasting service to my life's
Extremest minute!"

(IV 111 118 - 120)

Vortiger, as gullible as ever, is overjoyed:

"O faithful treasure!

All my lost happiness is made up in thee".

(IV 111 122 - 123)

But Horsus wastes no time in revealing to us his
real motives for going:

"I'll follow you through the world, to cuckold you;
That's my way now. Every one has his toy
While he lives here: some men delight in building,
A trick of Babel, which will ne'er be left;
Some in consuming what was rais'd with toiling;
Hengist in getting honour, I in spoiling".

(IV 111 124 - 129)

To follow Vortiger merely to ruin him, rather than to
further his own ambitions, is a considerable decline in
Horsus, a senseless activity which it is difficult to
imagine his embarking on as we knew him earlier in the
play. Jealousy and lust have led him on wilfully, to a
considerable decline in his own powers. His ruin now can
only be a matter of time.

Again, at what is a crucial point in the action of the play, immediately before the denouement, a comic scene with Simon intervenes, and again at considerable length. A company of players arrive, and there follows what is, at first at least, a fairly obvious parody of the arrival of the players in "Hamlet". They are, the second player announces,

"comedians, tragedians, tragi-comedians, comi-tragedians, pastorists, humourists, clownists, satirists: we have them, sir, from the hug to the smile, from the smile to the laugh, from the laugh to the handkerchief" (V i 76 - 80). The action is interrupted, just as Simon leaps up and joins the players in the action of their play, considerably disrupting its plot, by the arrival of Hengist. A messenger tells them they must to Wales, to the rescue of Roxena, Vortiger and Horsus, besieged by Aurelius and Uther, the brothers of Constantius, returned at last to take their revenge for the usurpation of their brother's throne.

The end of the play assumes, as we shall later see, symbolic overtones, as Horsus and Vortiger stab each other, and then they and Roxena perish in the flames of the castle where they have taken refuge. But first, as Aurelius and Uther stand below directing the firing of the castle, Vortiger and Horsus fall to

violent quarreling, Vortiger accusing Horsus, with his schemes for the removal of Castiza, of being responsible for his ruin. Vortiger offers to his opponents that he will kill Horsus as a peace offering, Horsus in return reveals to Vortiger that Roxena was his whore, had been even in Germany before he had come to England. Even before the flames can reach them, they have fallen on each other, stabbing each other desperately, violent actions which expose the almost bestial level to which these men have been reduced by the power of their own uncontrollable passions. A watcher below observes,

"See, sin needs

No other destruction than (what) it breeds

In its own bosom".

(V ii 76 - 78)

Although the imagery of the play never assumes the complexity or sophistication of that in "The Changeling" or "Women Beware Women", two distinct patterns are discernible through the action of the play. In the first of these, the troubles which begrid the characters are represented by storm, thunder and lightning. The images do not, however, serve quite the same purpose they do in "Women Beware Women", where they symbolise the violence of the passions in the characters themselves.

Here they remain external, representations of the external forces with which the characters must contend. So a button-maker comforts himself that the hardships imposed by Constantius's neglect of his kingly duties cannot last long:

"No violent storm lasts ever;

That is the comfort of't".

(I ii 102 - 103)

Constantius himself is relieved when the petitioners go, and says,

"Thank heaven! 'tis o'er now: we should ne'er

know rightly

The sweetness of a calm, but for a storm".

(I ii 113 - 114)

Vortiger, hearing the murmur of the common people against him after he has become king, says,

"Hark! I hear ruin threaten me with a voice

That imitates thunder".

(II ii 14 - 15)

Horsus comes nearer to using the storm as a symbol of inner passions when he talks of women's lust as being the loadstone which

"draws them through all storms by sea or shame".

(II iii 170)

Roxena tells Horsus they must beware the danger of Hengist's discovering their affair, because the greater his advancement in England,

"The greater will the storm of his rage be

"Gainst his blood's wronging".

(III i 23 - 24)

Horsus watches Vortiger take Castiza by the arm, just before her abduction is exposed when she refuses to take an oath she has been faithful to her husband, and talks of the passions which can sunder such a relationship between man and wife:

"Knots knit with kisses oft are broke with thunder".

(IV ii 34)

When Castiza has refused the oath, her father Devonshire cries out,

"Here's a storm

Able to wake all of our name inhumed,

And raise them from their sleeps of peace and fame".

(IV ii 127 - 129)

Hengist warns his men, when he has secretly armed them before the parley with Vortiger, they should have

"Calm looks, but stormy souls possess you all!"

(IV iii 27)

And Vortiger, shocked out of his credulity, protests,

"Who could expect such treason from thy breast
 Such thunder from thy voice? Or tak'st thou pride
 To imitate the fair uncertainty
 Of a bright day, that teens a sudden storm,
 When the world least expects one? but of all
 I'll ne'er trust fair sky in a man again:
 There's the deceitful weather".

(IV iii 54 - 60)

At last, on the walls of the castle, death imminent,
 Vortiger cries out, protesting his innocence, that
 if it were not Horsus that had led him astray,

"May thunder strike me from these walls",

(V ii 55)

and, as Horsus tells him Roxena has been his whore, calls

"Burst me open,

The violence of whirlwinds!"

(V ii 88 - 89)

And it is at this moment that Aurelius, calling on
 lightning to aid him in the destruction of Vortiger,
 provides a link between these images of storm and the
 second strand of imagery:

"O that the zealous fire on my soul's altar,
 To the high birth of virtue consecrated,
 Would fit me with a lightning now to blast him".

(V ii 8 - 10)

Earlier in this chapter, we talked of T.B.Tomlinson's suggestion that the Elizabethans saw good and evil as "dependent on each other for their form, substance, and very existence", with good "actually nourished and supported by chaos and evil" (T.B.Tomlinson, "A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy", Pp. 3 and 4). It seemed possible to extend this concept at least to Middleton of the Jacobean. For him, the kind of negative virtue found in Constantius or the Cardinal of "Women Beware Women" was a feeble, pointless thing. It is only as a reaction to evil, as a positive part of the energy of life, that goodness has any merit. Later in his career, Middleton is to despair of the possibility of good ever triumphing over evil; but at this stage despite the doubts of the tragicomedies he still could feel that good had an energy of its own, derived from its conflict with evil, and that it could in the end assert itself.

This view finds expression in "Hengist" in a series of images, in which the power of good represents itself as the power of light against the darkness of evil; and, as it becomes strong enough to destroy evil, it becomes a stronger blaze, as lightning and as flame.

It is, as it happens, Constantius who introduces

the theme, protesting at Vortiger's attempts to crown him king:

"Dare you receive heaven's light in at your eye-lids,
And offer violence to religion?

Take heed;

The very beam let in to comfort you

May be the fire to burn you".

(I i 43 - 46)

If only Constantius's own saintliness had been of the vital kind implied in the imagery, he need have had no fear of Vortiger.

Constantius, too, begs Casitza she should retain her chastity, not throw it away in marriage:

"Keep still that holy and immaculate fire,
You chaste lamp of eternity! 'tis a treasure
Too precious for death's moment to partake,
This twinkling of short life. Disdain as much
To let mortality know you, as stars
To kiss the pavements; you've a substance as
Excellent as theirs, holding your pureness:
They look upon corruption, as you do,
But are stars still; be you a virgin too".

(I ii 160 - 168)

It is significant that Constantius has disappeared

from the scene before light begins to exercise its more active function as flame. Vortiger, thinking of the danger to his schemings from the common people, sees that their "ignorant zeal" is "so fiery now". (II ii II)

There is an apparent inconsistency in the imagery at this point; three times the flames represent the heat of passion, the lust which is taking hold of Vortiger and Horsus, before this line of thought is abandoned and the former meaning re-asserts itself. Thus Horsus sees the difficulty he and Roxena will have hiding their growing passion from the world:

"our close-hid flame

Will break out of my heart; I cannot keep it....

A kind of grief 'bout these times of the moon still".

(II iii 187 - 188 and 190)

And again he warns Vortiger, who is having difficulty constraining his lust for Roxena,

"you've a flame too open and too violent,

Which, like blood-guiltiness in an offender,

Betrays him when nought else can".

(III i 103 - 105)

Roxena, too, tells her father, in what seems a somewhat curious father and daughter conversation, that Vortiger's feelings for her are, if anything, greater than before:

"Nay, with increase, my lord, the flame grows greater;
 Though he has learn'd a better part of late
 To set a screen before it".

(III iii 235 - 237)

This anomaly in the use of the image may, perhaps, represent an actual uncertainty in Middleton's own mind; he sees that the power of their passions destroys evil men, but has still not quite clarified for himself, as he does later in his career, that there is something here which they are really helpless to resist. There is more here than the baneful effect of lust that we saw in the comedies. So, half-consciously, he gropes towards this position in the images above, while on another level he tries to assert the power of good over evil. The flames represent, in one part of his mind, the forces of good purging evil from the world; in another part of his mind, they come closer to the kind of view he takes in the later tragedies, of evil as an all-destroying force that in the end consumes itself.

It is Castiza who re-asserts the first theme, protesting as she is carried away by her abductors,

"be content to take

Only my sight, as ransom for my honour,

And where you have but mock'd my eyes with darkness

Pluck them out quite; all outward lights of body
 I'll spare most willingly, but take not from me
 That which must guide me to another world,
 And leave me dark for ever".

(III ii 83 - 89)

Vortiger sees Horsus is moved by her protestations, and
 murmurs,

"By this light he'll be taken!"

(III ii 92)

But is in the last scene of the play that the full
 force of Middleton's imagery is shown. As Aurelius
 cries out, speaking of the castle in which Vortiger,
 Horsus and Roxena, the three characters who have given
 way to their lusts, are immured,

"Let wild-fire ruin it",

(V ii 2)

the flames become a dual symbol, for the power of good,
 victorious over evil, and for the violent passions which
 are destroying those trapped on the castle walls.

Roxena cries out in her agony,

"Help me, save me! the flame follows me",

(V ii 100)

and,

"No way to 'scape? is this the end of glory?

knowing he has acquiesced in the affair with Vortiger,
can only wail,

"The consumer has been here; she's gone, she's lost;
In glowing cinders now lie all my joys".

(V ii 133 - 134)

Beatrice's mind, and can scarcely even justify their presence in the play on any other basis.

From the start, Beatrice's passionate, wilful temperament is displayed. Alsemero has seen her twice in the temple; that is the extent of their acquaintance so far. He has fallen in love with her - a pure and honourable love, which he intends to consummate in marriage:

"The place is holy, so is my intent.....

The church hath first begun our interview,

And that's the place must join us into one."

(I 1 5 and 10 - 11)

To be sure, his friend Jasperino sees a change in him. He has never known him before to delay in a journey, and until he sees it for himself cannot even contemplate the possibility of his friend's being in love.

"Lover I'm sure you're none; the stoic was
Found in you long ago."

(I 1 36 - 37)

But Alsemero here, and indeed throughout the play, remains completely in control of himself. If he chooses to dally at Alicant, then the choice has been deliberately and rationally made.

From the moment of her first appearance, we see that

the case with Beatrice is a very different one. Alsemero goes straight up to her, and - to Jasperine's astonishment - they kiss. For Alsemero, with nothing to fear except his friend's surprise, this is an easy enough move. For Beatrice it is more abandoned. Even as she cooes endearments to him, she finds time to lament,

".....sure mine eyes were mistaken;

This was the man was meant me : that he should come
So near his time, and miss it!"

(I 1 86 - 88)

She is newly betrothed to Alonzo, yet she throws herself into the arms of a man she has seen only twice before, and, presumably, never spoken to at all - this indiscreetly in the presence of her follower Diaphante and a flock of servants.

There is a curious irrationality, too, in her conviction that Alsemero is her man. If her "eyes were mistaken" in relation to Alonzo, presumably they could be so again in the case of Alsemero. And she has only just warned him at some length of the dangers of relying too much on the eyes in making such judgements.

"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 1 74 - 78)

This is one of the rare moments in the play in which Beatrice gives any indication she is even aware that one's "judgement" can be distorted by wilfulness or that one should make one's decisions with judgement, rather than acting on the impulse of the moment. Normally we see her acting instinctively, without scruple or hesitation.

This happens, for instance, the moment De Flores makes his first appearance, as he does at this point. He attempts a courteous warning that her father is approaching, and she immediately flies at him in anger,

"....you must stale

A good presence with unnecessary blabbing;

And how welcome for your part you are,

I'm sure you know."

(I i 99-102)

At this stage in the play, the motivations both for De Flores' persistence in following Beatrice and for her aversion from him are but crudely delineated. He feels some compulsion to be with her, but can explain it as being "but to spite her anger" (I i 107). As for her behaviour, he sees in it nothing but the workings of a "peevish will" (I i 109) - a phrase with deeper connotations as the play develops, but at this point trivial enough. Her account of the matter is as unhelpful; it is her "infirmity" to feel so of him, he is to her

" as a deadly poison

Which to a thousand other tastes were wholesome",

(I 1 114-115)

an explanation which Alsemero puts firmly into place by remarking that he has a similar distaste for cherries.

Her rather unattractive mixture of petulance and cunning selfishness is seen, too, in her complaint to Alsemero, who wonders why De Flores persists so if he knows her distaste for him.

"He cannot be ignorant of that, sir,

I have not spar'd to tell him so; and I want

To help myself, since he's a gentleman

In good respect with my father, and follows him."

(I 1 134 - 137)

She cannot understand why he follows his own wishes, not hers; yet her pride does not forbid her using him for her own ends, as later she thinks she can use him in the matter of Alonzo.

Now her father Vermandero appears, and Beatrice suggests he show Alsemero the castle. Vermandero wants first to know a little more about Alsemero, for

".... our citadels

Are place'd conspicuous to outward view,

On promonts' tops, but within are secrets" -

(I 1 167-169)

"How shall I dare to venture in his castle,
 When he discharges murderers at the gate?
 But I must on, for back I cannot go."

(I 1 225 - 227)

For Beatrice there is no such divided counsel. When
 Vermandero remarks that he will "want my will else" if
 there is no immediate marriage, Beatrice murmurs,
 "I shall want mine, if you do it."

(I 1 223)

She knows what her will demands, and is determined to
 satisfy it. Or does she know? She has changed once
 already in this scene; now there is a hint of something
 deeper, the hidden impulse which is to draw her blindly
 on to the abyss. She has already proclaimed her hatred
 for De Flores. Now, as the others go, she sees him still
 standing by and, deliberately as it would appear, or at
 least with unconscious purpose, drops her glove for him
 to retrieve. As he picks it up, there is the customary
 sneer:

"Who bade you stoop? they touch my hand no more:
 There! for the other's sake I part with this;
 Take 'em, and draw thine own skin off with 'em!"

(I 1 231 - 233)

Still, it is a communication of sorts, and one she has
 not been able to resist initiating; she seems as much

driven to it as he.

In the heavy sexuality implicit in his response there is a warning of the deep and violent passions which are being aroused, and which are shortly to have full play:

"Here's a favour come with a mischief now! I know
She had rather wear my pelt tann'd in a pair
Of dancing pumps, than I should thrust my fingers
Into her sockets here: I know she hates me,
Yet cannot choose but love her : no matter:
If but to vex her, I will haunt her still;
Though I get nothing else, I'll have my will."

(I 1 234 - 240)

In the almost playful, mocking crudity of the first lines, there is an undercurrent of violence, suggested in the sudden force of "thrust". And this is confirmed in the abrupt triumph of "I'll have my will". In a moment it comes to him that, whatever the name for her feelings for him, he has the power to possess her; he has only to wait his chance. De Flores has a kind of evil intelligence and insight. He sees the inner Beatrice more shrewdly than she sees herself.

The comic subplot has been the subject of much

critical controversy. Samuel Schoenbaum reflects the commonly held view that it is the play's "worst blemish.... stupid and tedious....offensive to the modern reader".¹ But K.L. Holznecht points out that the plot and subplot, "far from being flimsily held together, are actually parallels of action.....a young woman has every provocation and every opportunity for wavering but does not, and a servant tries to blackmail his lady for a share in her supposed frailty".² Robert Ornstein would concede the parallel, as a form of burlesque, but denies that "plot and subplot form an organic unity or that the subplot makes a significant enough contribution to the meaning of the play to justify its repeated interruption of the main plot".³

Irving Ribner sees the unity of plot and subplot as fulfilling Middleton's "larger thematic design...Middleton is concerned not so much with the complexities of human

¹ S. Schoenbaum: Middleton's Tragedies. p.147.

² K. Holznecht: The Dramatic Structure of "The Changeling" (in "Shakespeare's Contemporaries" ed. Bluestone and Rabkin) pp. 268 and 270.

³ R. Ornstein: The Moral Vision of Jacobean Tragedy. p.180.

nature as with the nature of evil in the world.... (The plays) embrace a more comprehensive view of human life than ever could be encompassed in the psychological study of any individual."⁴ So, "Middleton shows us the reality of damnation in the inescapable fate of Beatrice - Joanna, but he shows us also the grace of God which can preserve Isabella".⁵ For Middleton at this stage, there is still some hope that men may find the good and resist the wilfulness of their own natures; he has not yet reached the utter despair of "Women Beware Women" in which all submit equally to the evil in themselves and all are destroyed together.

W. Empson and M.C. Bradbrook both see the subplot, not only as providing a parallel in action, but also as a symbolic representation of the unreason and evil whose power is the theme of the play. Miss Bradbrook suggests that "the chorus of madmen depict the bestial element in man".⁶

⁴ and ⁵ I. Ribner: *Jacobean Tragedy*. pp. 124 and 129.

⁶ M.C. Bradbrook: *Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy*. p.222.

W. Empson regards the masque for the wedding as "the chief source of the ideas of the play. The antimasque at a great wedding, considered as sub-human, stood for the insanity of disorder to show marriage as necessary.... So the effect of the vulgar lunatic asylum scenes is to surround the characters with a herd of lunatics, howling outside in the night, one step into whose company is irretrievable".⁷

So it is possible to find in the subplot a purpose and a unity with Middleton's main plot which redeems what must otherwise appear inexcusably bad. The crudity of its execution does blur the playwright's purpose in these scenes; still, the parallels with the main plot are too marked to be entirely fortuitous.

In the subplot's first scene, which begins at this point, we see Alibius, a doctor who undertakes the care of fools and madmen, entrusting to his man Lollio the safeguarding of his young wife Isabella in his absence. He fears to be cuckolded by one of the "gallants... Of quick enticing eyes" (I ii 57 - 57) who are daily visitants to his asylum. The terms in which he describes his fears to Lollio, and in which Lollio replies to him,

⁷ W. Empson: *Some Versions of Pastoral*. p.45.

are reminiscent of De Flores' words as he picked up Beatrice's gloves:

Alibius: "I would wear my ring on my own finger;
 Whilst it is borrowed, it is none of mine,
 But his that useth it.

Lollio: You must keep it on still then; if it but lie
 by, one or other will be thrusting into't."

(I ii 27 - 31)

Again there is the violent force of "thrusting"; the same dark forces which provide the motive and the energy for the main plot are at work in the subplot.

The remainder of the scene is taken up with the reception of Antonio, a member of Vermandero's household, who, by falling in love with Isabella and coming to the asylum disguised as an idiot in order to see her, provides the connection between the two parts of the play. The crude by-play between him and Lollio is scarcely even amusing, and it is only in the closing lines of the scene, where the confused gibberings of the lunatics remind us of the consequences of unreason, that there is an echo of the deeper issues of the play.

In the scene which follows, Middleton gives us a rather clearer picture of the relationship between Beatrice and De Flores. Beatrice has given Jasperine a message

for Alsemero, with a time and place for them to meet. She praises Alsemero's choice of friend, and manages to make his judgement in the matter reflect creditably even upon herself:

"It is a sign he makes his choice with judgement;
Then I appear in nothing more approv'd
Than making choice of him; for 'tis a principle,
He that can choose
That bosom well who of his thoughts partakes,
Proves most discreet in every choice he makes."

(II 1 7 - 12)

One is aware of a curiously twisted logic as she continues,

"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 is he best discern'd then
With intellectual eyesight."

(II 1 13 - 19)

She seems to have forgotten her own warning a little earlier, that the eyes are "rash sometimes" (I 1 76) in their choice, and deceive the judgement. "Intellectual eyesight" suggests a curious amalgam of judgement and

sensuous response - certainly there is a failure to distinguish between them in her own mind, although the idea of there being a distinction is one she has harped on before. It is her nature to rush headlong into foolish, wilful decisions, all the time deluding herself that she is supremely rational. As De Flores realises better than she does herself, she is essentially the creature of her passions.

Her inability to comprehend the workings of her own person is indicated in her response to De Flores, who enters at this point to tell her of Alonzo's arrival. Something more than a "peevish will" (I 1 109) is implicit in

This ominous ill-faced fellow more disturbs me
Than all my other passions";

(II 1 52 - 53)

she is aware of some danger to herself in her instinctive response to the man:

"I never see this fellow but I think
Of some harm towards me, danger's in my mind still".

(II 1 89-90)

And yet, so blind to herself is she in her wilfulness, she is soon to try to manipulate this dangerous man to her own ends, and by doing so place herself completely at his mercy. She cannot dismiss her feelings to the man

as mere hatred; fear is more what is suggested in words like "ominous", "harm" and "danger". What it amounts to is not so much fear of De Flores, as fear of something in herself, something which presents itself to her most acutely in her response to him.

On any rational grounds, she should feel for him nothing more than distaste for his ugliness; and yet she cannot resist contact with him, she drops her glove so that he is forced to respond to the gesture, her intense loathing is an instinctive denial of intense desire. On this level, De Flores exists less as a character external to herself than as a symbol of the passionate and irrational part of her nature, against which from the start of the play such already distorted judgement as she has is fighting a losing battle, and to which in the end she submits entirely.

As for De Flores himself, he ruefully admits he "can as well be hanged as refrain seeing her" (II 1 28). He knows what her treatment of him will be; yet he

".....must see her still!

I shall have a mad qualm within this hour again,
I know't."

(II 1 78 - 80)

And yet there is not the same irrationality here as there is in Beatrice's response to him; he knows what he wants, and he knows that there is at least a chance he may get it. What ever else she felt for him, it was not indifference; and then,

"....there's daily precedents of bad faces
Belov'd beyond all reason; these foul chops
May come into favour one day 'mongst their fellows".

(II 1 83 - 85)

Buoyant optimism seems, indeed, the mark of all the lovers in this scene. When his brother Tomaso remarked on Beatrice's notable chilliness, Alonzo is astonished:

"You speak as if she lov'd some other, then."

(II 1 140)

Tomaso can scarcely believe he can "apprehend so slowly" (II 1 141), but Alonzo dismisses his fears as absurd and even offensive. Tomaso shakes his head ruefully. In his "Why, here is love's tame madness" (II 1 153) there is a reminder of the play's relationship between the madness of the lunatics and the madness of irrational love.

And now Beatrice has her great desire; she and Alsemero are alone together at last. Even as they embrace, she regrets aloud her ties to Alonzo. But Alsemero has

an answer,

"The honourablest piece about man, valour:

I'll send a challenge to Piracquo instantly".

(II 11 27 - 28)

This is a far cry from the underhand murder which is her eventual solution; Alsemero remains to the end the soul of honour, and is appalled when he eventually discovers what she has done for him.

For Beatrice, however, there is not even a moment's doubt. To endanger him is unthinkable; there is a better way.

"Blood-guiltiness becomes a fouler visage;

And now I think on one; I was to blame,

I ha' marred so good a market with my scorn."

(II 11 40 - 42)

Contemptuously, she is ready to throw the foul deed to De Flores to perform, knowing he will do it in her service:

"Why, men of art make much of poison,

Keep one to expel another."

(II 11 46 - 47)

This is the turning point for Beatrice. Blindly, without thinking of where this is to lead her, she throws herself at the mercy of De Flores. She has thrown judgement to the winds, succumbed finally and entirely to the passionate wilfulness of her nature, which De Flores

represents, and in doing so ensured her own ultimate destruction. And she does not even know that she has done it.

De Flores has watched this encounter, and it comes to him that if Beatrice will sin for Alsemero she may do so for him as well, for

"....if a woman

Fly from one point, from him she makes a husband,
She spreads and mounts then like arithmetic".

(II 11 60 - 62)

In the double entendre of "Spreads and mounts" we see De Flores' own increasing desire as he watches; so that Beatrice's mere use of his name as she calls him to her is enough almost to make him "run mad with joy"

(II 11 1.70). But more is to follow. She caresses his face, says that his vile complexion is "but the heat of the liver" (II 11 80), for which she will furnish a cleansing water, and murmurs that he was "not wont to look so amorously" (II 11 74).

De Flores is beside himself. On the one hand, he is too shrewd to be entirely fooled; if there is any change, it is not in himself.

" 'Tis the same physnomy, to a hair and pimple,
Which she call'd scurvy scare an hour ago:
How is this?"

(II 11 76 - 78)

Still, he is prepared to take the hint. Whatever her motives, Beatrice's behaviour to him has undergone a radical change; and he has no doubt he can turn it to his own advantage. He is "up to the chin in heaven" (II ii 79). And this is really all the motive Middleton provides for what De Flores does; simply an opportunity to satisfy his own lusts. It is not quite the "motiveless malignity" of an Iago; although there are echoes of Iago's character in De Flores, Iago is the more cold-blooded fish. But to make too deep a study of De Flores would be beside Middleton's purpose. As a figure on the stage, he is a sinister, evil creature; but, as a part of Middleton's theme in the play, he is important chiefly as a representation of something inside Beatrice herself.

Christopher Ricks has pointed out Middleton's use in "The Changeling" of a group of words, "each of which has two meanings, one sexual....they sum up the moral and poetic theme of the play. Beatrice ignores and defies the moral order when it suits her; but then she invokes its protection against De Flores. Beatrice wants simply to have her cake and eat it, but for that you need two cakes; and what are, at first, two meanings are inexorably

one word."⁸

So as Beatrice hints at what she wants from him she tells him that

"Hardness becomes the visage of a man well;
It argues service, resolution, manhood,
If cause were of employment"

(II 11 92 - 94)

and that

"There's horror in my service blood, and danger"

(II 11 120)

De Flores responds in like vein. He wishes only for

"....the honour of a service

So happy as that mounts to",

(II 11 95 - 96)

she can claim "so much man in me" (II 11 116), it is

"a service that I kneel for to you" (II 11 118).

The implications are clear at this stage to De Flores, and only Beatrice is still blind. She sees "his wants are greedy" (II 11 126), but thinks that to satisfy them "Gold tastes like angel's food" (II 11 127). If "his need / Is strong upon him" (II 11 128 - 129) then to give

⁸ C. Ricks: The Moral and Poetic Structure of "The Changeling".
(Essays in Criticism Vol. X, July 1960, pp. 290-306)

him money is sufficient. And this is all she is conscious of as she assures him,

"As thou art forward, and thy service dangerous,
Thy reward shall be precious".

(II 11 130 - 131)

The reward! Assuredly, he has thought of that already, and knows "it will be precious; the thought ravishes!"
(II 11 133) She cannot know

How sweet it were to me to be employ'd
In any act of yours".

(II 11 122 - 123)

So complacently she throws all her fears "upon thy service" (II 11 141). He will kill Alonzo, and then she will provide him with the means for flight and for prosperity in another country. She congratulates herself

"I shall rid myself
Of two inveterate loathings at one time,
Piracque and his dog-face".

(II 11 146 - 148)

Rid herself! Already he has begun to assert himself in his relationship with her, interrupted her curtly in her maudlin, as he would not have interrupted her even at the beginning of this scene, with

Antonio, and now he attempts to blackmail her, making in essence exactly the same demands that De Flores is to make of Beatrice:

"....kiss me, my little Lacedaemonian; let me feel how thy pulses beat; thou hast a thing about thee would do a man pleasure, I'll lay my hand on't."

(III iii 247 - 250)

She rejects him, as Beatrice does not dare, or does not choose, to reject De Flores; and the threat with which she answers him is essentially the same as the demand which Beatrice makes of De Flores:

"Be silent, mute,
Mute as a statue, or his injunction
For me enjoying, shall be to cut thy throat."

(III iii 253 - 255)

Isabella knows, as Beatrice does not until it is too late, what price has to be paid for such a service.

Meanwhile, De Flores has performed the task, killed Alonzo, in the depths of the castle, removed ring and finger from the body to prove his service, and comes now, in what is generally accounted the play's greatest scene, to Beatrice to claim his reward. It is to be different later, but at this stage he feels no compunction, no

remorse; his deed is

" but light and cheap

For the sweet recompense that I set down for't";

(III iv-11. 19 - 20)

he has done the deed, and for it now

"All things are answerable, time, circumstance,

Your wishes, and my service".

(III iv 22 - 23)

Beatrice's delight receives its first set-back when De Flores produces the ring, still on the dead man's finger; and we remember the sexual overtones of De Flores picking up the glove, and Lollio's warning to Alibus.

"Bless me, what hast thou done?"

(III iv 29)

she cries in horror. Now, for the first time, it comes home to her what the deed really entailed. Until this moment, she has been too much preoccupied with her own advantage to realise imaginatively that a man has lost his life to serve her will. As she sees the dead flesh, the enormity of her deed comes fully home to her. But she quickly recovers herself:

"I pray, bury the finger, but the stone

You may make use on shortly; the true value,

Tak't of my truth, is near three hundred ducats".

(III iv 42 - 44)

Even De Flores is a little taken aback at the want of feeling in this:

" 'Twill hardly buy a capcase for one's conscience though"

(III iv 45)

he cries; he will take it, but it is by no means the payment he has in mind. Nor is any larger sum in gold, and he rejects indignantly her offer of "three thousand golden florens".

"Do you place me in the rank of verminous fellows,
To destroy things for wages? offer gold
(For) the life-blood of man? is anything
Valued too precious for my recompense?

(III iv 65 - 68)

Now De Flores has begun to show his hand, and as he goes on his purpose must have been plain to anyone but Beatrice. N.W. Bawcutt suggests that Beatrice is simply "not a particularly intelligent woman ... a poor judge of character"⁹ but there is more to it than that. In her egoistic single-mindedness, it has simply not occurred to her that there can be any other point of view than her own, that De Flores would demand any other payment for the

⁹ N.W. Bawcutt: Intro, to "The Changeling" (Revels Plays) p.liv.

privilege of having served her than she chose to give him. She has decided on a course of action, and pursued it headlong, without even thinking of the price she might have to pay. Now the play achieves a degree of psychological insight it has not reached before, and is not to reach again, as Middleton shows us this spoilt, self-centred, wilful girl, forced to look the deed in the face, to look, in effect, into the darkest parts of herself, and to understand the consequences of her surrender to her own darker nature. It is upon De Flores she looks as all this comes home to her, De Flores who is the symbol of all the evil that is in her.

And so Beatrice cries out in her confusion and distress, "I understand thee not" (III iv 1.69). She is "in a labyrinth" (III iv 73), wishes only to be rid of him - be rid of the part of her own self that she has just discovered! - offers to double the sum she has offered him. We hear of the labyrinth again, when Isabella, disguised as a madwoman, calls out to Antonio to "tread the lower labyrinth" (IV iii 112) with her. And it is the "madness", the bestiality, in her own nature which has plunged Beatrice down now into the confusion of the maze.

There is a new note of desperation in her voice as she says,

"I prithee, make away with all speed possible....
prithce, take thy flight".

(III iv 78 and 82)

Now, coldly, quietly, De Flores plays his trump card:

"You must fly too then."

(III iv 182)

In her dumbfounded bewilderment, she can mouth only the one syllable, "I?" (III iv 82). And as he continues she still cannot grasp his meaning. He speaks fast, with passion:

"Why, are not you as guilty? in, I'm sure,
As deep as I; and we should stick together:
Come, your fears counsel you but ill; my absence
Would draw suspect upon you instantly,
There were no rescue for you."

(III iv 84 - 88)

At last she sees, "He speaks home" (III iv 33), but the full implications have not yet reached her. As he goes on, the conflict raging within her is brought home by the antiphony of his demands and her protests.

Beatrice: How now, sir?

This shows not well.

De Flores: What makes your lip so strange?

This must not be betwixt us.

Thy language is so bold and vicious,
 I cannot see which way I can forgive it
 With any modesty."

(III iv 121 - 126)

In this daring, almost incredible tour de force Middleton shows us Beatrice, in the very moment in which the full weight of the evil she has done comes home to her, talking primly of the offence to her modesty in the strength of De Flores' language--and somehow we believe it, because this is the stuff of which Beatrice is made. Even now, she feels her guilt entirely in terms of the price she must pay for it. So self-centred, so blind, is she that she cannot imaginatively comprehend what the murder of Alonzo has meant, what murder involves. Because it has not happened to her, it is simply not a crime of the same magnitude, even, of the threat to her honour. That De Flores should be a murderer means little to her; but she cannot begin to fathom how he could be so supremely wicked as to "make his death the murderer of my honour". It is the supreme irony of the play that Beatrice, knowing that she is transformed, fallen, never really understands what she has done to bring her to this state. It is the blindness of Middleton's tragic characters, driven on by passion and will to their own destruction, their judgements

blurred and distorted by the violent forces which impel them.

And transformed she is. She may no longer plead her high birth to set a distance between herself and De Flores; she is the "deed's creature" (III iv 138), a changeling indeed, as De Flores says, "one with me" (III iv 141), no longer the young innocent she has appeared to the world, but the creature of De Flores, of her own most wilful passions. It is in this sense that she, more than Antonio, is the real "changeling" of the play. That she had "changed from thy first love" (III iv 144) was just the first part of her transformation. What she now surrenders to had, of course, always been a part of her; now it is the whole of her.

So De Flores is inexorable. What ever she may offer, she cannot go back on what she has done; it is now a part of her, and there can be no return:

"Can you weep Fate from its determined purpose?

So soon may you weep me,"

(III iv 162 - 163)

"lines", T.S. Eliot remarks, "Of which Shakespeare or Sophocles might have been proud".¹⁰

¹⁰ T.S. Eliot: Selected Essays. p.164.

So Beatrice submits to her fate, and as De Flores raises her his tone - again astonishing, but, once one has seen it, the absolute, inevitable truth - is one of exquisitely loving tenderness:

"Thy peace is wrought for ever in this yielding.

'Las! how the turtle pants! thou'lt love anon

What thou so fear'st and faint'st to venture on."

(III iv 11.169 - 171)

There is a distinct feeling at this stage in the play that Middleton has shot his bolt, and that what follows is anti-climax. The action is speeded on by a Dumb Show, from which we gather that, Alonzo having disappeared, Beatrice is married to Alsemero. De Flores follows, "smiling at the accident" (IV: Dumb Show), and is startled by Alonzo's ghost, "showing the hand whose finger he had cut off". A ghost, after what we have just seen! It is a considerable decline.

Beatrice returns at the start of the next scene, and evinces great concern at the prospect of her first night with Alsemero, one

"So clear in understanding, - that's my plague now -

Before whose judgement will my fault appear

Like malefactors' crimes before tribunals".

(IV 1 6 - 8)

But Diaphante has the answer: under cover of darkness, she will substitute herself for Beatrice in Alsemero's bed, another changeling, until midnight, when she may creep quietly out and let Beatrice replace her.

There follows the childish nonsense of the virginity test. Beatrice, who apparently has no more scruples about this sort of thing than she has in greater matters, finds Alsemero's closet open, and investigates it. In a medicine chest is a glass, the contents of which drunk will make a true maid "incontinently gape, then fall into a sudden sneezing, last into a violent laughing"

(IV 1 51). She tries it on Diaphante to make sure of her virtue, and determines that if Alsemero puts her to the test she will fake the symptoms.

Meanwhile, Vermandero is being harried by Tomaso, suspicious of the circumstances of his brother's disappearance. Vermandero's suspicion has already fallen on Antonio and on Franciscus, another member of his household who is also a disguised inmate of Alibius's asylum in love with Isabella, whose unexplained absence from the court suggests some connection with the vanished Alonzo. But he is too proud to tell the importunate Tomaso of this until he has more definite proof.

Tomaso sees De Flores, calls him "Honest De Flores" (IV 11 37) - shades of "honest Iago"! - , and "kind and true one" (IV 11 43), and tells him of his suspicions of Beatrice, whom he has already noted had little affection for her potential husband, and therefore some motive for disposing of him. De Flores assures him to the contrary, and there is a ring of truth in his words; it is childish wilfulness and amorality, rather than a conscious commitment to evil, that has brought Beatrice where she is:

"No, no; a pretty, easy, round-pack'd sinner,
As your most ladies are, else you might think
I flatter'd her; but, sir, at no hand wicked."

(IV 11 52 - 54)

Interestingly in the light of Tomaso's commendatory words, it is De Flores himself who gives the fullest account of his faults, when he describes his own appearance (II 1 37 - 38). Other than this, it is only Beatrice and, later, Tomaso who express any particular dislike for him. As has been suggested earlier, Middleton does not go to great pains in the delineation of De Flores, being concerned mainly with Beatrice. He seems content to leave us with the general impression of an ugly, sinister villain, but

there are moments when he strikes a softer note, and De Flores does not appear necessarily an entirely unsympathetic character. He is at least honest with himself, and one must feel some pity for one so desperately aware of his own short-comings.

And now he displays signs of something Beatrice never shows - a troubled conscience. When Tomaso comes near him he "smells his brother's blood"(IV ii 42), he thinks

"....I'm now again a-killing on him,
He brings it so fresh to me",

(IV ii 45 - 45)

"His company even overlays my conscience".

(IV ii 57)

The mood recurs later, when he sees Alonzo's ghost again, and cries out, " 'Twas but a mist of conscience" (V i 60). De Flores as a symbol represents all that is evil in Beatrice; as a man, he ironically possesses virtues that she lacks, a reminder that he is a character on the stage, as well as an aspect of Beatrice's self.

And now Middleton hurries the action on again. Alsemero and Tomaso quarrel, and Tomaso swears he will avenge his brother's disappearance. Jasperino tells Alsemero of overhearing Beatrice and De Flores talking together, in terms that "challenge interest in a woman" (IV ii 1.103), and Alsemero, unbelieving, swears,

"O, were she the sole glory of the earth,
Had eyes that could shoot fire into kings' breasts,
And touch'd, she sleeps not here!"

(IV ii 106 - 108)

He submits Beatrice to the test of maidenhood, from which she, having learnt the routine in advance, emerges in his eyes "Chaste as the breath of Heaven" (IV ii 1.150). After the heights Middleton has scaled in earlier scenes, all this is sorry stuff indeed.

We return to the asylum, where Isabella is being importuned by letter by Franciscus, in much the same way as she has already been importuned by Antonio. Lollio demands again his reward for silence, and she promises him that,

"The first place is thine, believe it, Lollio,
If I do fall".

(IV iii 41)

But of course, unlike Beatrice, she has no intention of falling.

The inmates are practising their dance for the masque at the wedding of Alsemero and Beatrice, and Isabella, disguised as a madwoman, dances with Antonio, tempting him on and then disappearing. Lollio tempts Franciscus to buffet Antonio, his rival, if he has the

opportunity. The scene ends with the arrival of all the madmen and fools, who go together through their paces, a kind of celebration of their madness and a fitting prelude to the final act of the play, in which Beatrice is to pay the price for her own mad wilfulness.

One strikes, then two, and Beatrice is in a fine frenzy. Diaphante lies still with Alsemero, and Beatrice fears she may be betrayed. We see the old callousness, as she determines that Diaphante must be silenced:

"No trusting of her life with such a secret,
That cannot rule her blood to keep her promise".

(V 1 6 - 7)

De Flores frets impatiently at her weakness, and we remember his conviction that women are all "easy, round-pack'd sinners" (Iv ii 52) if the opportunity is there:

"Sure the devil
Hath sow'd his itch within her; who would trust
A waiting-woman....
....they're mad whelps,
You cannot stave them off from game royal."

(V 1 13 - 14 and 18 - 19)

It is the repetition of remarks like these that help to create the image of De Flores as a lustful, sordid creature.

He sets busily about the task of setting a fire, under cover of which Diaphante may be removed unobserved from Alsemero. Beatrice cannot but be impressed by his efficiency, but her words suggest that there is more than that in her relationship with him now. She is "forc'd to love thee now" (V 1 47);

"his face loathes one;

But look upon his care, who would not love him?

(V 1 69 - 70)

"Here's a man worth loving!"

(V 1 74)

The rest of the household, roused from their beds by the alarm, gather around, and Alsemero eyes Beatrice curiously as she says fulsomely of De Flores that he is "a wondrous necessary man" (V 1 90) and - after she knows he has dispatched Diaphante for her - that " 'Twere well he were rewarded" (V 1 121). She was not wont to talk of De Flores in these terms, and Alsemero cannot but remember Jasperino's tale of hearing the two together.

Now the suspicious Tomaso appears, and watches "the fellow that some call honest De Flores" (V 11 9) - his own words a little earlier, but now he speaks of him in very different terms:

"yet he's so foul

One would scarce touch (him) with a sword he lov'd
And made account of; so most deadly venomous,
He would go near to poison any weapon
That should draw blood upon him."

(V 11 15 - 19)

De Fores' foulness is not merely an external thing, at least to Tomaso at this moment; it is his whole nature. In his rage, Tomaso attempts to fight with De Flores, and draws his sword upon him; but De Flores' conscience is smitten again at the sight of the man whose brother he has killed, and he cannot respond:

"I cannot strike; I see his brother's wounds
Fresh bleeding in his eye."

(V 11 32 - 33)

In any case, even as he declaims that he will be avenged for Alonzo's loss, Vermandero comes to him with news: Antonio and Franciscus have been exposed, and everything points to their guilt.

Now there begin the final movements of the play. Alsemero is at last convinced of Beatrice's unfaithfulness to him, and the terms in which he expresses his reaction to the news suggest the change which has taken place in Beatrice, her transformation to a creature of her own most evil passions.

"The black mask

That so continually was worn upon't

Condemns the face for ugly ere it be seen",

(V iii 3 - 4)

"there was a visor

Over that cunning face",

(V iii 47)

and lastly,

"O, thou art all deform'd!"

(V iii 78)

Even Beatrice is conscious of what has happened to her; it "blasts a beauty to deformity". (V iii 34) Foulness and corruption are contained, indeed, in the whole situation as it is now revealed to Alsemero. Yet there are depths he has not yet plunged; Jasperine tells him,

" 'tis not a shallow probe

Can search this ulcer soundly; I fear you'll find it
Full of corruption".

(V iii 7 - 9)

Beatrice, in her desperate attempt to prove she really loves him, attempts now to excuse herself from the lesser sin by revealing the greater one. So far gone is she in the coarseness of her moral attitudes that she really expects he will love her the more when she tells him his

"love has made me

A cruel murderess"

(V 111 65 - 66)

that she has "kissed poison for it, stroked a serpent".

(V 111 67) In fact, of course, he is appalled, cries that

"The bed itself's a charnel, the sheets shrouds
For murder'd carcasses",

(V 111 84 - 85)

and imprisons her in his closet.

De Flores enters, and Alsemero tells him the whole
act is now revealed, and, bitterly, adds

"My wife's behindhand with you, she tells me,
For a brave bloody blow you gave for her sake
Upon Piracquo" -

(V 111 103 - 105)

one detail which De Flores can, and does, correct:

"and that - she is a whore" (V 111 108). Alsemero's reply
is made for Middleton too:

"I(t) could not choose but follow: O cunning devils!
How should blind men know you from fair-fac'd saints?"

(V 111 109 - 110)

Once Beatrice has surrendered to her impulses, she is
damned for ever; she herself has seen that

"Murder, I see, is follow'd by more sins;

(III iv 164)

and, to one whose judgement is as blind as hers, there can be no fore-knowledge of what submission to the evil in her own nature, to that cunning devil De Flores, must mean.

And so, seeing there can be no salvation, Alsemero throws De Flores to his wife; in his words there is the full bitter realisation of what Beatrice has given herself to, and to what she is tied for all eternity. Blindly, she has chosen the path of self-destruction, and now she must pay the price.

"I'll be your pander now; rehearse again
Your scene of lust, 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:
Clip your adulteress freely, 'tis the pilot
Will guide you to the mare mortuum,
Where you shall sink to fathoms bottomless."

(V 111 115 - 121)

"The Black audience" - as De Flores reiterates this idea, we remember the lunatics and their game (III 111 172):

"Yes, and the while I coupled with your mate
At barley-break; now we are left in hell."

(V 111 165 - 166)

It was the madness of their desires which brought them to this pass. Now he takes the final step, calls on Beatrice to follow him as he stabs himself and dies.

And the private tragedy of Beatrice and her De Flores remains just that. The universal destruction of "Women Beware Women" is not yet part of Middleton's mood. Simply in the departure of those who have sinned is the guarantee of salvation for those who remain:

"justice hath so right

The guilty hit, that innocence is quit

By proclamation, and may joy again."

(V 111 188 - 190)

CHAPTER VIII."Women Beware Women"

In "Women Beware Women", we become aware of a much deeper and more all-pervading pessimism than that of "The Changeling". There, the tragedy of Beatrice-Joanna was a private affair, the consequence of her personal surrender to the power of her own passions. Men had a choice of good or ill, and if they chose with judgement they could save themselves from Beatrice's self-destructive course. In "Women Beware Women", Middleton no longer sees this saving grace. All men - and women - are irretrievably bad, completely at the mercy of their own worse selves.

The idea is communicated to us in a number of ways. There is the indiscriminate slaughter of the final Act, when everybody must pay the price of his own follies. But there is more than this. There is, first, the fact that the issues which in "The Changeling" confronted Beatrice alone here confront almost all the characters in turn, characters who on close analysis seem all to have the elements of their final doom in them, if unrealised, from our first meeting them. And there is

the essential ordinariness of the world in which these characters move, which may ostensibly be the conventionally Italianate one, but which soon shows itself to be the workaday London world of Middleton and his audience - a world therefore from which his audience could not detach themselves, but which involves them in itself. If Middleton's pessimism has become all-pervasive, it cannot exclude himself or those for whom he wrote.

With his first words, Leantio makes it clear that he is no wide-eyed innocent. To his mother's welcome on his return to Florence with Bianco, he responds that it is

"The fortune commonly of knavish children
To have the loving'st mothers".

(I i 10 - 11)

And if he loves Bianca with rather more ardour than the good-humoured tolerance with which he regards the "poor affectionate soul" (I i 8) his mother, it is no pure ethereal love he bears her. From the first, it is at best a physical affection he reveals; but even this is overshadowed by the almost mercenary pride he takes in her as a possession. She is

"the most unvalu'dst purchase

That youth of man had ever knowledge of!"

(I 1 12)

The joy is not just in her for what she is; it is that
he can look upon

"That treasure,

And know it to be mine - there lies the blessing".

(I 1 14 - 15)

And for the sin he has been guilty of in the acquiring
of her, it is one that he can "glory in; 'tis theft"
(I 1 37). There is no shame in this, but a certain
relief, perhaps, that he need no longer occupy his Sundays
with the business of courtship, like the gallants in
church "only to see faces" (I 1 33). His description of
all this, that it is

"As if lust went to market still on Sundays",

(I 1 34)

epitomises the amalgam of love and commercial dealing
which is a central theme of the play.

It is this theme, indeed, which gives the play its
characteristic tone. More than in "The Changeling", more
than in any other of his tragedies, we feel ourselves
in the same middle-class world, with the same bourgeois
attitudes, that we had encountered in the comedies.

The people are the middle-class Londoners whom Middleton knew, and the homes where most of the action takes place seem ordinary, prosperous homes, on an ordinary street where good-neighbourliness is one of the virtues. The domesticity which most of the characters possess amongst their other, less ordinary, traits, the preoccupation with possessions, commodities and commercial transactions, and with the stodgy comforts of bourgeois living, the plentiful food and the comfortable furnishings, which reveals itself in the imagery of their speech, lends a special horror to the final holocaust, when the snug domestic difficulties which have been developing suddenly assume another dimension and Middleton reverts to the more familiar ground of Jacobean tragedy.

What is fundamentally wrong with the human relationships in this play, what leads inevitably to the mutual destruction of the last scene, is this sense of property, and the complete absence of love as spiritual union, as a reciprocal relationship, the "Extasie" of Donne which "interanimates two souls". For Leantio, the most he can say of Bianca is that "she's mine" (I 1 42), and marriage is the contract which has sealed her to him.

It is important for him too, somehow, that her parents are "great in wealth" (I 1 50), even if she has

brought little enough of it with her. And of her less tangible assets, even her face he sees as "her dowry" (I 1 54), whilst her other merits lie

"lock'd up in hidden virtues,

Like jewels kept in cabinets".

(I 1 55 - 56)

It is this notion of her as his property, reserved for his pleasure, locked up out of the way when not in use, which heightens his enjoyment now - and which exacerbates his fury when he loses her.

His mother's reply, too, is bound up with the problems of property. No nonsense about love - what can he offer Bianca to compensate her for the material advantages she has lost? The whole affair has been, by her standards, most disreputable and irresponsible. He has drawn her away from her prosperous home, to a situation in which he can scarcely keep himself as a single man, and where there is little prospect of betterment.

Leantio does his best to hush his mother - he does not want his new possession to become difficult or disorderly. It would never do to

"teach her to rebel,

When she is in a good way to obedience";

(I 1 74 - 75)

this is the way to make wives a profitless burden,

rising up against their husbands for "six gowns a-year"

(I i 77). If mother can but keep quiet, she will be

"contented

With all conditions that my fortunes bring her to",

(I i 88 - 89)

keep close to him and produce additional property in the form of children, to the envy of rich merchants, whose "fruitful bags" of money do not compensate for the "barren wombs" of their wives (I i 100).

Indeed, Bianca, for the moment, is quite content, has no regrets for the comforts she has left behind her. Only in the conclusion of her speech have we a warning of the sensuality which is to surface after her seduction by the Duke, as she playfully induces Leantio to kiss her. This is all harmless enough; yet it is enough to suggest that it is the physical side of her relationship with her new husband that is most important to her. When she gives way to the importunities of the Duke, she is not doing something foreign to her nature as we have seen it up to that point, nor is she to be seen entirely as the hapless victim; the elements of the sensuality which is eventually to destroy her are in her from the start.

And there is an element of weakness, too, in Leantio's regret at having to leave her and go about his business for a few days. It is

" a bitterness

To think upon tomorrow! that I must leave
Her still to the sweet hopes of the week's end",

(I i 154 - 156)

a weakness which is to be confirmed when the time comes actually to depart, and he dallies and is tempted to stay.

And again, as he complains, we realise how far Middleton is from the conventional world of Jacobean Italianate tragedy; in how many tragedies of the period must the action be delayed until the hero can return from his labours for the leisure of the weekend? This is very much the world of the urban middle-class. And the impression is confirmed as he talks of Bianca, again as a possession, as a status-symbol so enviable that he dare not even reveal it to the jealous eyes of his fellow townsmen:

"O fair-ey'd Florence,

Didst thou but know what a most matchless jewel
Thou now art mistress of, a pride would take thee,
Able to shoot destruction through the bloods
Of all thy youthful sons! but 'tis great policy
To keep choice treasures in obscurest places".

(I i 161 - 166)

He could, almost, be a Dickensian miser, gloating over his hoard.

In the next scene, we encounter for the first time the cynicism with which Guariano and Fabricio plan the marriage of Guardiano's Ward to Fabricio's daughter Isabella. Guardiano wonders whether, if Isabella is to love his Ward, as Fabricio insists she shall, there can be any possible "reason for this love" (I 11 15). Fabricio's answer reminds us of one of the central issues of the play, as it was of "The Changeling":

"Why, do you think that women love with reason?"

(I 11 16)

he cries contemptuously. He remembers his wife when he was courting her, and wonders,

"And if her daughter prove not mad for love too,
She takes not after her; nor after me,
If she prefer reason before my pleasure".

(I 11 24 - 26)

One remembers the link between love and madness of "The Changeling", and the conflict between passion and judgement which Miss Bradbrook sees as central to that tragedy. Possessed by the "transforming power of love",

she writes, "the characters are entirely at the mercy of their feelings, which are instinctive and uncontrollable. Judgement is blinded"¹ And the characters in "Women Beware Women" are subject to the same conflicts, with the same inevitable victory for passion over judgement. Yet, as we have seen already in Bianca, the elements which are to destroy them are in them from the start. Love is the trigger that releases the violence suppressed until that point by their more rational selves.

Miss Bradbrook has observed, too, the prevalent imagery of food and gluttony in the play, appropriate, she remarks, to "the coarser quality of the feelings in that play".² Livia, remarking on the injustices of a woman's lot in marriage, and particularly on the injustice, in Isabella's case, of forcing "her love to one she never saw" (I ii 31), says of the husband's portion that

"he tastes of many sundry dishes

That we poor wretches never lay our lips to,

As obedience forsooth, subjection, duty, and

such kick-shaws,

¹ M.C. Bradbrook: Themes and Conventions of Eliz.Tragedy.p.214

² Ibid. p.236.

All of our making, but serv'd in to them;
 And if we lick a finger then sometimes,
 We're not to blame, your best cooks (often) use it".

(I 11 40 - 45)

This pattern of imagery does, indeed, serve a double purpose in the play: it is a comment, certainly, on the grossness of the physical appetites, and the debasement of those who surrender their judgement to them; it is a reminder, too, of the stolid bourgeois comforts that give the tragedy its special tone. The wife surreptitiously licking at the little delicacies she has prepared for her husband belongs certainly to the warmth of a well-stocked middle-class larder rather than to the court.

And this is represented even in the coarse and ugly ramblings of the Ward, whom we meet at this point. A poulterer's wife has complained that he has

"struck

A bump in her child's head as big as an egg".

(I 11 96 - 97)

He will lay up his cat and cat-stick "i' the chimney corner" (I 11 107), contract himself at midnight "to the larder-woman" (I 11 117), and

"forswear eating eggs in moonshine nights;
 There's ne'er a one I eat but turns into a cock
 In four-and-twenty hours: if my hot blood
 Be not took down in time, sure 'twill crow shortly".

(I 11 123 - 126)

In the coarse jest of the last of these, one sees the amalgam between gluttony and the sexual appetites which Middleton suggests in these images.

Knowing the affection between Isabella and her uncle, Hippolito, (although not aware yet of its darker aspects), Hippolito's sister Livia begs him to comfort the distressed girl. Hippolito responds in an aside, in which he hints to us for the first time of the real nature of his feelings for Isabella,

"not a thing ordained, heaven has forbid it;
And 'tis most meet that I should rather perish
Than the decree divine receive least blemish".

(I ii 156 - 158)

This is the rational side of Hippolito's nature speaking; yet, within a very few lines he cannot resist telling Isabella that she might

"Know the worst then;

I love thee dearlier than an uncle can".

(I ii 214)

His judgement has forbidden any such course; but uncontrollable passions have led him to a situation in which, as he full well knows, he must perish. This is the predicament, and the choice, of all Middleton's tragic figures. In "The Changeling" the tragedy was

confined to Beatrice; that it is the position of virtually every character in "Women Beware Women" is a reminder of the increasingly gloomy view of the human condition that Middleton has assumed.

Isabella, talking of "honesty and love" (I ii 180) as things that make a woman's subjection in marriage tolerable, has just said that they can

"make a harmony

In things that are most strange to human reason".

(I ii 184 - 185)

But it is very different

"When blood, that should be love, is mix'd with lust" -

(I ii 231)

a distinction between love and lust that few of Middleton's characters seem able to make, indeed one which she herself is to forget when she soon, inevitably, surrenders on the flimsiest of excuses to the strange desires that she begins now to discover in herself. Like all the others, she knows in reason the dreadful consequences of such a surrender to will, at first renounces it in horror and then in pathetically short order gives way. Hippolito, really, sums up the choice:

"The worst can be but death, and let it come;

He that lives joyless, every day's his doom".

(I ii 233)

at least, the other characters have an equal degree of self-knowledge. We do not find here quite the sinner described by R.H. Barker, who "inevitably gropes in a dark world until he stumbles on the path that leads to inevitable disaster"⁴; the path is chosen knowingly, the darkness and the stumbling come later. Edward Engelberg suggests that the actual moment of surrender is not of major interest to Middleton, that he is "interested neither in the loss of sight nor its restoration, but rather in the stumbling of his blinded characters, in the steady decline of unsteady people. Victims of vertigo, they plunge to depths where no light can reach them".⁵ The eyes, sight and blindness form, as we shall discover, a distinct pattern of imagery in the play.

So we see Leantio, dithering unsteadily as he determines whether to go or stay:

"I've no power to go now, an I should be hang'd;
Farewell all business; I desire no more
Than I see yonder: let the goods at key
Look to themselves

⁴ R.H. Barker: Thomas Middleton. p.151.

⁵ E. Engelberg: Tragic Blindness in "The Changeling" and "Women Beware Women"- Modern Language Quarterly Vol. 23. 1962. (p.20)

O, fie, what a religion have I leap'd into!
 Get out again, for shame! the man loves best
 When his care's most, that shows his zeal to love:
 Fondness is but the idiot to affection,
 That plays at hot-cockles with rich merchants' wives,
 Good to make sport withal when the chest's full,
 And the long warehouse cracks." (I iii 15-18 and 21-27)

Apart from the situation here, of the rather prosy Monday morning effort to return to work, the "goods at key", the "hot-cockles", the "rich merchants' wives", the full chest, the warehouse, all remind us of the middle-class, urban world in which Middleton's characters move in this play.

At this stage the struggle is still largely an external one; Leantio is struggling not so much against his own worse nature as against the wiles of Bianca. Hers seems the more sensuous nature, and for the second time it is she who wants to dally in love. She has "good hope you'll stay now" (I iii 36), she pleads with him,

"pray return;
 Tomorrow, adding but a little care more,
 Will despatch all as well".

(I iii 37 - 39)

But he is adamant, conscious of the dangers of simply

giving way to this kind of temptation, not yet ready for a complete submission to will:

"But love that's wanton must be rul'd awhile
By that that's careful, or all goes to ruin:
As fitting is a government in love
As in a kingdom; where 'tis all mere lust,
'Tis like an insurrection in the people,
That, rais'd in self-will, wars against all reason".

(I iii 41 - 46)

Leantio has not yet forgotten the distinction between love and "mere lust", strong though the physical element is in his affair with Bianca.

And so Bianca is left alone with Leantio's mother, and sets herself by the window to watch the Duke and his "states" in their annual procession to "St. Mark's temple".

(I iii 86 and 87) D. Mehl has pointed out how Middleton uses pantomime and dumb show of this sort, coupled with the dialogue of observers, to heighten certain scenes in "Women Beware Women", and to lend emphasis to certain points in the action.⁶

⁶ D. Mehl: The Elizabethan Dumb Show. pp. 149 - 152

The excited questions of Bianca as she waits for the procession, her pleasure as she sees the Duke notice her in her window, are an ominous reminder of her restless nature; she is not going to be content for long to remain immured in Leantio's house with his mother.

In the next scene, we return to the problems of Hippolito's relationship with his nieces. In the very moment of appealing to his sister Livia for help in the affair of Isabella, Hippolito acknowledges what madness it is to pursue such a course as he desires. He has come by his desire, he says,

"Even as easily

As man comes by destruction, which ofttimes

He wears in his own bosom".

(II 1 2 - 4)

In Bianca's reply, we remember Middleton's use of the eyes, sight and blindness as images. She talks of the madness of the whole affair, and asks why

"must thy eye

Dwell evilly on the fairness of thy kindred,

And seek not where it should?"

(II 1 8 - 10)

Hippolito is not stumbling blindly in this matter; his words and Livia's make it clear enough he is going into

it with his eyes very much open.

As Livia talks of how she will smooth the way for him, she begins to develop for what she is, one of Middleton's most remarkable characters. There is real affection for her brother in all she says and does: she is a warm-hearted creature, and everything she does, both good and evil, comes straight from the heart. And yet she is completely without any kind of morality. She will furnish those she loves with everything they want - quite regardless of any kind of moral consideration, without, even, any real regard for the practical consequences. She knows what a fatal business it is for her brother; she knows what it must mean to her niece, whom she loves as well. Yet she will pander to their immediate gratification, provide Isabella with some flimsy story to excuse her lapse, ensure, in effect, their eventual destruction. She is the perfect pander, catering for everyone's present desires, quite genuinely and disinterestedly glad to see their temporary joy, quite oblivious of the agony for which she must in the end bear some responsibility, and yet with another part of her being knowing quite well what it is she is about. There seems an almost physical satisfaction for her in feeling the warmth and approval of those about her; it

is this, perhaps, which gives her her own warmth, and attracts us to her even as she enacts her dreadful schemes.

So she describes how she can

"bring forth

As pleasant fruits as sensuality wishes

In all her teeming longings",

(II 1 30 - 32)

tells us she can

"give as shrewd a lift to chastity

As any she that wears a tongue in Florence;

Sh'ad need be a good horsewoman, and sit fast,

Whom my strong argument could not fling at last".

(I 11 36 - 39)

It is a strange blend of warm-heartedness and cynicism which can make her say,

"You are not the first, brother, has attempted

Things more forbidden than this seems to be.

I'll minister all cordials now to you,

Because I'll cheer you up, sir";

(I 11 46 - 49)

and her affection for her brother is clear enough as she sends him off so that she can talk to Isabella on her own:

"Beshrew you, would I lov'd you not so well! ...

I am the fondest where I once affect".

(I 11 63 - 65)

And so, with great delicacy and subtlety, without even mentioning Hippolito except to beg Isabella never to mention the matter to him, Livia tells her what she most wants to hear, and is therefore most ready to believe: that her supposed father was not her father at all, that therefore Livia is not her aunt - and, by implication, that Hippolito is not her uncle and there would be nothing unnatural in any kind of relationship with him. And the complete, abrupt change in Livia, after all her loving words to Isabella, is yet entirely credible, as she whispers to Hippolito:

"She's thine own; go".

(II 1 179)

Livia can see well enough that there will be no struggle, even, from Isabella; the possibility has offered itself to her of giving way to her longings for Hippolito, and she falls upon it; here, if nowhere else in the play, we see a character plunge blindly into the vortex. So deluded is Isabella by the sudden release of her own passions that she cries out, in the very moment of deception, that she

"never had the means to know myself
Till this blessed hour?"

(II 1 182 - 183)

and even Hippolito is taken aback by the voraciousness with which she throws herself upon him. The sheer physical, sensuous forces driving her are brought home to us by the gluttony with which she parallels her feelings:

"Prithee, forgive me,
I did but chide in jest; the best loves use it
Sometimes, it sets an edge upon affection:
When we invite our best friends to a feast,
'Tis not all sweetmeats that we set before them;
There's somewhat sharp and salt, both to whet appetite
And make 'em taste their wine well; so, methinks,
After a friendly, sharp, and savoury chiding,
A kiss tastes wondrous well, and full o' the grape".

(II 1 196 - 203)

Isabella has, indeed, changed dramatically with her commitment to will. Hard-headedly she decides she must marry the fool to provide a cover:

"This marriage shall go forward",

(II 1 206)

she says bluntly. And there is a kind of realism as she

describes the changes she must accept if this affair is to work. Again, this is the shrewd, hard-headed world of the middle-class; and again food becomes a metaphor for sex:

"She that comes once to be a housekeeper
Must not look every day to fare well, sir,
Like a young waiting-gentlewoman in service,
For she feeds commonly as her lady does,
No good bit passes her but she gets a taste on't;
But when she comes to keep house for herself,
She's glad of some choice cates then once a-week,
Or twice at most, and glad if she can get 'em;
So must affection learn to fare with thankfulness".

(II i 217 - 225)

Hippolito can only express his astonishment at the change Livia has somehow wrought in his innocent young niece:

"What has she done to her, can any tell?
'Tis beyond sorcery this, drugs, or love-powders".

(II i 231 - 232)

And in his words as he acknowledges the necessity of the marriage as a cover, there is a reminder that for Middleton to sin is blindness, that it is sight that can penetrate sin and show it up for what it is:

"It is the only veil wit can devise
To keep our acts hid from sin-piercing eyes".

(II 1 237 - 238)

Guardiano and Livia plot to entice their "Sunday-dinner woman" and "Thursday-supper woman" (II 11 3 and 4), Leantio's mother, into Livia's presence so that they can find out who the beautiful woman was whom the Duke saw in the window; Livia is to play the part of pander again. She is proud of her art in these matters, and swears that if she

"do't not,

Or at least come as near it

As any wench in Florence of my standing,

I'll quite give o'er, and shut up shop in cunning".

(II 11 25 - 26 and 28 - 29)

The idea of the shop, the woman who comes in to "do" on Thursdays and Sundays - and with whom Livia will soon be chatting on very equal terms - keep us still firmly fixed in Middleton's urban middle-class world.

Guardiano, too, is concerned most with the prospects of "riches or advancement" (II 11 31) which will be the reward for his part in the affair, waits for the "good fortune" (II 11 42) that must come from it, and remembers

that

"I've had a lucky hand these fifteen year

At such court-passage with three dice in a dish",

(II 11 43 - 44)

and insists that Isabella, now that she is willing to meet his Ward again, must like her mother before her

"On with her chain of pearl, her ruby bracelets,
Lay ready all her tricks and jiggenbobs".

(II 11 71 - 72)

This allying of jewels and wealth with the business of love is an integral part of Middleton's method in the play, suggesting the predominance of the physical and external aspects of love in the minds of his characters, and reminding us of the almost commercial bartering and dealing by which most of the matches are made. Christopher Ricks has remarked on the "innumerable references to treasures, precious stones, silver", and pointed out how "the familiar bric-a-brac of romantic love takes on a disconcertingly materialist tone".⁷ We have already seen a similar instance at I i 56.

Even the Ward, who arrives now, keeps up this

⁷ C. Ricks: Word Play in "Women Beware Women" -
Review of English Studies vol. xii 1961 Pp. 238 - 250

relationship between commerce and love, asking, in anticipation of hearing the marriage arrangements,

"What's the next business after shittlecock now?"

(II 11 83)

As in "The Changeling", words like "business", "service" and "employment" usually have a sexual as well as a commercial connotation, implying the link between the two activities with which Middleton is concerned. And Sordido's crude delineation of the physical charms of an ideal wife (II 11 105 - 121) serves a similar purpose, reminding us that lust and material pleasure, rather than any higher kind of love, is what Middleton sees as inducing a fatal blindness of will, and forcing the surrender of judgement. Very often, indeed, the crudities of Sordido and the Ward serve to state rather more bluntly the physical lust which is more subtly suggested in all the imagery of commerce. The two combine in Sordido's comment that

"choosing of a wench in a huge farthingale
Is like the buying of ware under a great pent-house;
What with the deceit of one,
And the false light of th' other, mark my speeches,
He may have a diseas'd wench in's bed,
And rotten stuff in's breeches".

(II 11 134 - 139)

The gulling of the old mother, and the seduction of Bianca, form one of the most remarkable scenes in Middleton's work. Charles Lamb said that it is "one of those scenes which has the air of being an immediate transcript from life"⁸; Samuel Schoenbaum reminds us that "the amiable conversation serves only to cloak the most vicious and sordid of intrigues".⁹ This is really the triumph of Livia. So friendly, charming, homely and natural is she in her conversation with the simple old mother that even we, knowing her as we do, are almost fooled. It is no wonder the old woman is deceived.

So Livia chatters away amiably, like any respectable housewife, to make her feel at home:

"Widow, come, come, I've a great quarrel to you;
Faith, I must chide you, that you must be sent for;
You make yourself so strange, never come at us,
And yet so near a neighbour, and so unkind;
Troth, you're to blame; you cannot be more welcome
To any house in Florence, that I'll tell you".

(II ii 142 - 147)

⁸ Quoted in the Mermaid Series "Thomas Middleton", vol.1, p.297.

⁹ S. Schoenbaum: Middleton's Tragedies. p.118.

"Never come at us"! No wonder the mother is somewhat overwhelmed; up to this time, her relationship with Livia's household had been merely that of the woman who came in to help with Sunday dinner and Thursday supper. Livia will hear nothing of her excuses, or of her attempt to slip away home again. Soon the story is out. The old woman does not want to leave Bianca alone at home, and she is sent for to join them.

She arrives, and is immediately taken off by Guardiano to see the upper portions of the house and "the monument". Livia and the mother settle down to a game of chess, and, as Bianca appears above, there follows the remarkable sequence in which Bianca's seduction by the Duke is accompanied by the comments of the two women on their game, an allegory of the events going on above them, to which the old woman remains completely oblivious. In one sense, the whole thing is stylised, contrived. And yet, through the naturalism of the dialogue, the deceptively commonplace air in which it is all conducted, the whole thing remains real and convincing. Middleton's unobtrusive ability to capture the sounds of ordinary human speech is seen here at its most effective.

So Livia moves her piece on the board, and says,

"Here's a duke

Will strike a sure stroke for the game anon;
Your pawn cannot come back to relieve itself";

(II 11 305 - 307)

and up above Guardiano pulls back a curtain, reveals the Duke, and discreetly disappears. True, the Duke's words are gentle:

"Prithee, tremble not;

I feel thy breast shake like a turtle panting
Under a loving hand that makes much on't";

(II 11 325 - 327)

still, his intention is clear enough, and Bianca at first draws back in horror, crying,

"O my extremity!

My lord, what seek you?"

(II 11 350)

But his blandishments soon smother her feeble protestations. It is significant that what wins her is the material rewards he has to offer; again, love is almost a bartering, and the restlessness, the childish willingness to be impressed, which we saw in her earlier have their natural conclusion. So she is no mere innocent deceived by the more sophisticated Duke. The elements in her which make her surrender to him have been there from

"You may see, madam,

My eyes begin to fail".) (II ii 397 - 398)

Guardiano, as he comments on what he has done, again uses food as a metaphor for love, so emphasising the essential coarseness of Bianca's choice - and, of course, of his own part in the affair:

"Yet, to prepare her stomach by degrees

To Cupid's feast, because I saw 'twas queasy,

I showed her naked pictures by the way,

A bit to stay the appetite".

(II ii 406 - 409)

And that Bianca herself is clear enough about what she has done we see in her first words as we see her again:

"Now bless me from a blasting! I saw that now,

Fearful for any woman's eye to look on.....

Yet since my honour's leprous, why should I

Preserve that fair that caus'd the leprosy?

Come, poison all at once.....

I'm made bold now,

I thank thy treachery; sin and I'm acquainted".

(II ii 425 - 426, 429 - 431, 444 - 445)

She hesitated and protested a little before accepting what was inevitable, inevitable as much for what she was as for the power of the Duke; but, once committed to the

course, there could be no turning back. As Livia remarks knowingly when they have gone,

"Sin tastes at the first draught like wormwood-water,
But drunk again, 'tis nectar ever after".

(II ii 481 - 482)

The mother soon finds that Bianca's is a changed character, "strangely alter'd" (III i 6), and longs for Leantio to return so that he can deal with the situation. This is one of a number of rather abrupt changes in the character of Bianca which have aroused some critical disapproval. J.A. Bastiaenen claims that "As to inconsistency of character it will be hard to find a match for Isabella (sic - from the context it is clear that Bianca is intended) in 'Women Beware Women'. There is an incomprehensible discrepancy between the earlier stages of her career and the latter. We first make her acquaintance when she arrives at the house of her mother-in-law whither she has fled with her young husband, Leantio...."¹⁰. R.H. Barker similarly remarks "Nearly every time she appears we get a fresh impression of her", and attempts to explain the difficulty by suggesting that "Middleton is trying to telescope into five acts a development that in real life covered a period of years and one that struck him as unusually complicated".¹¹

¹⁰ J.A. Bastiaenen: *The Moral Tone of Jacobean and Caroline Drama*. p.86.

¹¹ R.H. Barker: *Thomas Middleton*. p.134.

It would probably be more accurate to think of it not simply as a change, but rather as a deterioration, the moral disintegration of a character set on a self-destructive course. She pouts and sulks at the absence of the usual household comforts in Leantio's poor home, where at first she had been so content - and manages incidentally to evoke splendidly the atmosphere of a solid bourgeois home full of possessions, the kind of home from which she must herself have come:

"Why is there not a cushion-cloth of drawn-work,
Or some fair cut-work pinn'd up in my bed-chamber,
A silver and gilt casting-bottle hung by't?....
Never a green silk quilt is there i' th' house, mother,
To cast upon my bed?"

(III 1 19 - 21 and 27 - 28)

So Leantio is to be bitterly disillusioned when he returns; a disillusion harder after his cheerful words as he approaches his home, and says that

"Honest wedlock
Is like a banqueting-house built in a garden,"

(III 1 89 - 90)

a fine contrast when he thinks that

"base lust,

With all her powders, paintings, and best pride,
Is but a fair house built by a ditch-side".

(III 1 91 - 93)

But there is an element of self-deception in his words:
the fragrant thought of her kiss

"that will hang upon my lip

As sweet as morning-dew upon a rose"

(III 1 104 - 105)

assumes a somewhat coarser quality when he thinks that

"after a five-days' fast

She'll be so greedy now, and cling about me".

There is a heavily sensuous quality in his relationship
with Bianca which makes it something less than lovely.

And of course the kiss he longs for is not to
be. Bianca dismisses him coldly:

"No matter for a kiss, sir; let it pass;

'Tis but a toy, we'll not so much as mind it";

(III 1 150 - 151)

all she wants from him is "some pleasant lodging i' th'
high street, sir" (III 1 128) where she can "stand in
a bay-window and see gallants". (III 1 131) This
restlessness in her is, indeed, her great weakness: for
her "the eye's treasure" is but "change of objects".

(III 1 144 - 145) There is a kind of sensuous pleasure

for her in spreading her favours like this; a selfishness which is completely at odds with his rather different selfishness in wanting to keep her "a gem no stranger's eye must see" (III 1 176), and, when a messenger comes for her from the Duke, to "lock my life's best treasure up". (III 1 247) There is a hard possessiveness, as we have seen, in his attitude to Bianca, whom he would allow no more freedom of mind than any other of his goods. No real love could be as self-centred as this. And again a jewel symbolises the heartless materialism of the thing.

And so he must give her up, and let her go to the Duke. Both of them have tried to use the other for their own convenience, as mere physical appurtenances, a kind of greediness which finds expression in the mother as she bustles to prepare herself for the visit:

"I'll first obey the Duke,

And taste of a good banquet; I'm of thy mind:

I'll step but up and fetch two handkerchiefs

To pocket up some sweetmeats, and o'ertake thee".

(III 1 265 - 268)

The banquet scene which follows is a pivotal one in the play, in which all the characters are brought together. Guardiano and his ward appear first, the

latter told to watch carefully his wife-to-be Isabella. His coarse wit is a reminder of the unreasoning lust which is a central theme of the play.

Bianca, with the Duke, sees Leantio approach, and imagines he must be bent on revenge:

"The storm is now in's heart, and would get nearer,
And fall here, if it durst; it pours down younder",

(III 11 30 - 31)

she says. (The metaphor of a storm, the violence of the elements, is used several times by Middleton to suggest the turbulence of passion in the characters, and provide a distinct pattern of images in the play. When we first meet him, Leantio talks of the shelter he has found from the wrath of Bianca's parents:

"But let storms spend their furies; now we've got
A shelter o'er our quiet innocent loves".

(I 1 51 - 52)

In the scene of Bianca's seduction by the Duke, she at first repulses his attempts to persuade her all is well:

"I'm not like those
That take their soundest sleeps in greatest tempests;
Then wake I most, the weather fearfullest".

(II 11 360 - 362)

But he reassures her:

"Let storms come when they list, they find thee sheltered".

(II ii 388)

The Duke, so far from allowing her to think of him as the storm which will break her, convinces her that he is the sun which dissipates it. When Guardiano goes after his appearance, he says that

"he's but a vapour

That, when the sun appears, is seen no more".

(II ii 323 - 324)

Her tragedy is, of course, that she believes him. When, later in the play, her ladies ask her what her clock says, she claims,

"I set mine by the sun",

(IV i 8)

and Leantio says when he means to see her in her new state,

"I'll see that glistering whore, shines like a serpent
Now the court sun's upon her".

(IV ii 21 - 22)

As Livia has observed, Bianca's scruples at accepting the Duke's advances were short-lived in the extreme:

"Her tender modesty is sea-sick a little,
Being not accusom'd to the breaking billow
Of woman's wavering faith blown with temptations".

(II ii 476 - 478)

Now, in the banquet scene, the storms blow, as Bianca predicts, about Leantio. He remembers how, when he knew she returned his love, he had watched

"Whole nights together, in all weathers, for thee,
Yet stood in heart more merry than the tempest
That sung about mine ears, - like dangerous flatterers,
That can set all their mischief to sweet tunes".

(III ii 254 - 257)

But all that is gone. Livia, beginning her seduction of him, tries to make him forget:

"unless love's music wak'd thee,
No storm of fortune should".

(III ii 305 - 306)

And later Leantio gloats over the doom he foresees for Bianca:

"But come I to your everlasting parting once,
Thunder shall seem soft music to that tempest".

(IV i 89 - 90)

In the end, the violence of the storm is a violence that must destroy them all.)

But now Leantio sees Bianca and the Duke at the banquet, and comments on them:

"A kissing too!

I see 'tis plain lust now, adultery 'bolder'd;

But still there is no feeling for Bianca as a person, or as anything more than a lost possession. In a sense we feel Leantio has deserved it all:

"Here stands the poor thief now that stole the treasure,
And he's not thought on",

(III ii 88)

he mourns.

The deterioration in Bianca, too, is very much in evidence in this scene. Her cynical humour sinks to the level of the Ward's bawdry as she listens to Isabella, then responds to Fabricio's query whether she liked his daughter's "breast", or voice.

"Her breast?

He talks as if his daughter had given suck
Before she were married, as her betters have;
The next he praises sure will be her nipples".

(III ii 157 - 160)

This is a far cry from the gentle-voiced creature of the play's first scene.

R.H. Barker has commented on the "contrapuntal" structure of this scene as it continues. ("Thomas Middleton" p.141) Leantio jealously watches his wife as she jests with the Duke - "O, that music mocks me!" (III ii 135) - while Livia's desire for him stirs in its turn - "I am not yet so old but he may think of me"

(III ii 138). Hippolito dances with Isabella, ostensibly a substitute for the uncouth Ward whom Isabella in reality is only consenting to marry as a cover for her affair with Hippolito; then the Ward clumsily imitates Hippolito's dance with Isabella whilst her uncle watches. At last the others depart, and Livia is left to make her advances to Leantio, brought now to the state where she must pander for herself and not for others, and, in the confusion of the situation, losing all her old skill.

So she tries foolishly to break in on him whilst he bewails his loss of Bianca, her passion over-ruling the judgement which should have told her to wait a more opportune time:

"This makes me madder to enjoy him now",

(III ii 263)

she cries as she listens to him. Impatiently she tries to tell him he must forget the "strumpet" (III ii 275), a word which is forming in his own mind, but which he can never accept from her. But at last her importunities make their impression on him, and he responds with delighted astonishment to her kiss and, more pertinently, her offer of

"your page and footman,
Your race-horses, or any various pleasure
Exercis'd youth delights in".

(III ii 371 - 373)

Ironically, he has accepted her on precisely the terms
on which the Duke had won Bianca:

"Troth, then, I'll love enough, and take enough".

(III i 376)

It is a sordid arrangement, on which Middleton's comment
is suggested in the action of the next scene, where Sordido
and the Ward go into various contortions attempting to
assess Isabella's physical attributes as she is paraded
before them.

The degeneration of both Bianca and Leantio is
graphically illustrated in the next scene, where they
flaunt their ill-gotten riches at each other. Even here
at court, the setting is somehow bourgeois rather than
noble. Leantio finds Bianca at her "lodgings", where she
stands at a window - a favourite occupation of hers -
reminding him of the window from which he first smuggled
her away, a window which by comparison was "a great deal
lower, and less carved". (IV i 46)

They exchange studied insults:

Bianca: "How now! what silkworm's this, i' the name of pride?"

Leantio: "A bow i' th' ham to your greatness;

You must have now three legs I take it, must you not?"

(IV 1 47 - 49)

and comment derisively on the splendour of each other's costumes:

Leantio: "Stay, stay, let's see your cloth-of-silver slippers."

Bianca: "Who's your shoemaker? has made you a neat boot."

Leantio: "Will you have a pair? the Duke will lend you spurs."

(IV 1 56 - 58)

There is a hard-boiled quality about all this which would have been impossible in them, for all their selfish possessiveness and sensuousness, when we first knew them. But it is the logical development of the materialist, bartering attitude to love which marred their relationship from the start.

Leantio is the weaker of the two characters, and he is the first to break down. "You're a whore!" (IV 11 62) he screams suddenly. Whilst she sneeringly interposes a comment from time to time, he rants on, denouncing and threatening. She is blind, plunged into the darkness of her sins, from which she can never save herself. And

again the theme is there that it is her blindness that lets her stumble on, her eyes that might have saved her.

"Why, here's sin made, and ne'er a conscience put to't, -
A monster with all forehead and no eyes!

Why do I talk to thee of sense or virtue,
That art as dark as death? and as much madness
To set light before thee, as to lead blind folks
To see the monuments, which they may smell as soon
As they behold, - marry, oftentimes their heads,
For want of light, may feel the hardness of 'em;
So shall thy blind pride my revenge and anger,
That canst not see it now; and it may fall
At such an hour when thou least seest of all:
So, to an ignorance darker than thy womb
I leave thy perjur'd soul; a plague will come!"

(IV 1 92 - 105)

But the Duke, when he hears of all this, determines in quick order that Leantio must be eliminated. Knowing Hippolito's quick temper, and his fondness for his sister Livia, he sends for him to tell him of Livia's affair with Leantio, sneeringly talking of Leantio's serving her pleasure - a link between employment and the act of love we have seen Middleton use elsewhere - as he describes how

"her ignorant pleasures,
 Only by lust instructed, have receiv's
 Into their services an impudent boaster".

(IV i 149 - 151)

As he knew would happen, Hippolito rushes off to seek revenge.

A new figure appears now, the Cardinal, whose stern denunciations of the adultery of the Duke his brother strike a strange note in the play at this point. Indeed, he remains a strange figure, seemingly apart from the ordinary human failings of everyone else in the play; one constantly expects him to be exposed as an hypocritical self-server, and is somehow a little put out that he preserves his moral rectitude to the end of the last act. He represents, perhaps, a kind of unrealistic virtuousness that can never hope to make any real impression in the busy world of ordinary human affairs; it is significant that the only real consequence of his admonitions is that the Duke is renewed in his determination to have Leantio killed, so that he can no longer be accused of adultery with his wife - a curious moral decision, to say the least, and part of the self-deception and blindness as a consequence of lust which is so important in the play.

But there is an element of truth, too, in what he says, if only they would hear him. A little later, Bianca tells him that among his virtues she can "see not charity written" (IV iii 50), since he expresses disapproval of the marriage that is now possible between the Duke and Bianca, a case, as he sees it, of the Duke allowing himself to "bind himself in chains" to his sin. (IV iii 13) She reminds him that religion is

"better serv'd,

When lives that are licentious are made honest,
Than when they still run through a sinful blood".

(IV iii 65 - 67)

It is the Cardinal who is right here, and she who is deceived. What neither she nor any of the other characters in the play can see is that it is the nature of the relationship which matters, not whether it is enacted within or without the bounds of matrimony. So her marriage to Leantio was bound to fail, because it was a matter of selfish passions on either side, and not of any higher bond. And the same is true of Isabella, when she cries out "shame and horror" (IV ii 134) on learning that Hippolito is her uncle after all. She cannot see that their relationship went wrong because she allowed it to degenerate into a matter of physical satisfaction, not because it was incestuous.

It is a kind of attitude which is exemplified in Hippolito's comments as he sees Leantio, an hypocrisy which would allow any kind of viciousness provided it is done under a cloak of respectability. And again we are reminded that darkness, blindness and sin go together:

"Put case one must be vicious, as I know myself
Monstrously guilty, there's a blind time made for't,
He might use only that, - 'twere conscionable;
Art, silence, closeness, subtlety, and darkness,
Are fit for such a business; but there's no pity
To be bestow'd on an apparent sinner,
An impudent daylight lecher".

(IV ii 4 - 11)

He falls upon Leantio, kills him, and is found by Livia, who proceeds in her vexation at losing Leantio to expose his incestuous relationship with Isabella. Guardiano, the Ward and Livia swear for their various reasons to be avenged on Isabella and Hippolito, they in their turn swear vengeance on Livia. A masque at the nuptials of the Duke and Bianca provides a suitable setting for the deeds; the scene is set for the holocaust of the final act.

The macabre horror of the scene is more striking by contrast with the relative homeliness of the action up to that point. Isabella and Livia kill each other almost simultaneously. Guardiano falls into a trap of his own setting. Hippolito is shot by a Cupid, then runs on a sword to hasten his own death. The Duke drinks a cup of poison prepared for the Cardinal, and Bianca follows him. The total effect of the scene is of an even greater calamity than has in fact taken place.

Critical opinion has been divided on the dramatic validity of this last scene. Certainly, the sheer physical destruction may at first glance seem irrelevant to the essentially psychological deterioration in the characters that we have seen up to this point. David Frost suggests that the moral order of the play demanded "that the characters receive in their own personalities the result of their crimes the conventions clash ... the mass murder ... seems arbitrary".¹² T.B. Tomlinson dismisses it as "irretrievably banal".¹³ Samuel

12. D.L. Frost: *The School of Shakespeare*. p.69.

13. T.B. Tomlinson: *A Study of Elizabethan and Jacobean Tragedy*. p.184.

Schoenbaum says that "no amount of forced ingenuity or brilliant verse could save so preposterous a denouement".¹⁴

R.H. Barker remarks that "Drama yields to something like ballet with distinct overtones of symbolism", but considers in the end that the slaughter is "quite indiscriminate and completely unrealistic".¹⁵

On the other hand, M.C. Bradbrook acknowledges that "the huddle of murders may be improbable", but suggests that "the over-hanging atmosphere of mortality in the last act makes all the method of narrative of subsidiary importance".¹⁶

And Irving Ribner says that "the sordid realism of the characterisation and the mass-murders at the end are not artistic defects; they are conditioned and made necessary by the particular moral statement which the total play affirms".¹⁷ In "Women Beware Women", "we are never shown the possibility of good, only an invidious evil corrupting every level of society".¹⁸

14. S. Schoenbaum: "Middleton's Tragedies." p.131.

15. R.H. Barker: "Thomas Middleton." Pp. 143 and 144.

16. M.C. Bradbrook: Themes and Conventions of Elizabethan Tragedy. p.233.

17. I. Ribner: Jacobean Tragedy. p.138.

18. Ibid. p.129.

The play leaves us only "with a sense of the sordid ruin man has made of the world in which we too must live, and with a feeling that this ruin is the product of an initial human commitment to evil which it is beyond the power of any man to alter".¹⁹

This seems the real justification for these final events. We have seen through all his plays the increasing pessimism with which Middleton regarded the world of men and their affairs. Yet even at the end of "The Changeling" Alsemero could still say

"justice hath so right

The guilty hit, that innocence is quit

By proclamation, and may joy again".

("The Changeling", V iii 188 - 190)

By the time he comes to the end of "Women Beware Women" Middleton no longer feels men have the choice of good or ill. Their passions forbid a rational choice, and in the end they must destroy themselves. It is Hippolito who expresses Middleton's final, gloomy view:

"Lust and forgetfulness has been amongst us,

And we are brought to nothing".

(V 1 187 - 188)

19. I. Ribner: Jacobean Tragedy. p.125.

PART FOUR

Other Works

A Note on Dating and Authorship

Bibliography

CHAPTER IX

Other Works

(i) Blurt, Master Constable:

Modern critics have questioned whether Middleton had any part in the play. R.H. Barker (p.197) quotes E.H.C. Oliphant, Mark Eccles and R.C. Bald as supporting this view, the former two attributing it to Dekker. Principal grounds are the presence of a romantic heroine, Violetta, quite unlike any woman elsewhere in Middleton, whose attitude to women is an altogether more cynical one, the confusion of the latter part of the plot, which led to differences between Bullen (Vol. I, pp.xxi + xxiii) and A.W. Ward, the euphuistic quality of the verse, quite unlike the prosaic quality of most of Middleton's writing, and the use of images more easily paralleled elsewhere in Dekker than elsewhere in Middleton.

(ii) The Family of Love:

Swinburne called this Middleton's "worst authentic example of farce or satire..... so heavy and so empty and so feeble" (Introduction to the Old Mermaid series "Thomas Middleton", p.xxviii), and D.L. Frost

comments on "the wholesale pilfering from 'Romeo and Juliet'", adding that "The marvel of 'The Family of Love' is that it can so assiduously imitate 'Romeo and Juliet' yet be so little like it..... the transition to London has been a coarsening one" (D.L. Frost: *The School of Shakespeare*, pp. 26 and 30). Apart from the presence of a balcony love scene, there are constant echoes of 'Romeo and Juliet' in the dialogue; in two consecutive speeches by quite inappropriate characters in quite inappropriate contexts we are, for instance, reminded of Friar Laurence in 'Romeo and Juliet'. Purge, an apothecary, tells us:

"The gray-eyed morning braves me to my face, and calls
me sluggard: 'tis time for tradesmen to be in their shops...."

(II i 1 - 2)

and Giltster says a few lines later:

"The tedious night is past, and the jocund morn looks
more lively and fresh....."

(II ii 1 - 2)

The bawdry of Lipsalve and Gudgeon, "two gallants that only pursue city lechery", is comic in the crudest way; but there is not

much in the play's treatment of lechery and jealousy to suggest the more serious moral purpose which we find elsewhere in Middleton.

(iii) A Mad World, my Masters:

Follywit, like Witgood in 'A Trick to Catch the Old One', is a dissolute young man who must use his wits to pay for his extravagances; unlike Witgood, who had to deal with the old curmudgeon Lucre, he is blessed with a generous uncle, Sir Bounteous Progress, "like his name, bounteous, open for all comers" (I i 66), whom he nevertheless determines to gull for even more than can be extracted from him openly. The plot is lively in the extreme; the characters appear and disappear in a variety of disguises. We see Follywit as Lord Owemuch, enjoying the hospitality of Sir Bounteous, and later, stopping at nothing to extract what he can from the old man, even disguised as Sir Bounteous' courtesan; the physician who attends on the courtesan is in reality the disguised Penitent Brothel, with whom the courtesan has plotted in order to gain him access to his lover, Mistress Harebrain; Mistress Harebrain herself is the shape taken by a Succubus which presents itself to Penitent Brothel to tempt him when he is on the verge of repentance.

This succubus, and his repentance, suggest a more serious note. And there is an echo of the notion of lust as blindness in the deceptions practised by the succubus, so that men sin without knowing what they are really about. As Penitent tells Mistress Harebrain,

"What knows the lecher, when he clips his whore,
Whether it be the devil his parts adore?
They're both so like, that, in our natural sense,
I could discern no change nor difference".

(IV iv 57 - 60)

And the madness of the title, too, becomes a substitute for the blindness image; the old libertine Sir Bounteous and Follywit are both mad in this sense because

"Man's never at high height of madness full
Until he love, and prove a woman's gull".

(IV v 14 - 15)

(iv) Michaelmas Term:

In "Michaelmas Term" the plot of "A Mad World, my Masters" and "A Trick to Catch the Old One" is reversed, and we see a rich

and gullible young heir, Easy, up in London from his estates in Essex, very nearly cheated by the villainous wool-draper Quomodo, who shares the aspirations of the prosperous urban classes as we have seen them elsewhere in Middleton's plays to rural gentility.

Quomodo has set his heart on winning Easy's estates for himself; he almost succeeds, and his schemings only fall apart when he goes too far, feigning to be dead in order to see how his family mourn his death and how his son deals with his estate. The essential possessiveness of his attitude to his wife (which we mentioned in the Introduction) and to his family receives its due reward, his son celebrating his demise and his wife promptly marrying Easy. His description of the journey he envisages to his estates is reminiscent of Hoards' similar effusions in 'A Trick to Catch the Old One' (IV iv 1 - 17), quoted in our account of that play; again, as in 'A Chaste Maid in Cheapside' and 'Women Beware Women', the bourgeois obsession with property is an important theme in the play, both in plot and, as here, in the detailed comments on the things with which the bourgeoisie surround themselves:

"A fine journey in the Whitsun holydays, I'faith, to ride down with a number of citizens and their wives, some upon pillions, some upon side-saddles, I and little Thomasine i' th' middle, our son and heir, Sim Quomodo, in a peach-colour taffeta jacket....."

(IV i 74 - 78).

(v) Your Five Gallants:

In most of this play, one sees a world of rogues and cheats as ripe as any in Middleton. The "five gallants" themselves are Frippery, the "broker-gallant", Primero, the "bawd-gallant", Goldstone, the "cheating-gallant", Pursenet, the "pocket-gallant" and Tailby, the "whore-gallant" - a fair cross-section of the types of scoundrel we find in Middleton's comic world. For the first part of the play, they engage in all the customary machinations against one another, and Middleton's tone is as cynically amused by the situations, as detached from any sort of moralising, as it ever is. His subjects are the rogues of the London streets, and whether there is a better world apart from the one he portrays in the play is not a matter with which he troubles himself.

As the play nears its end, however, there is a re-assertion of the existence of a more moral society, with the appearance of Fitsgrave, who, rather like Phoenix in 'The Phoenix', proceeds to expose the rascals. Unlike Phoenix, however, Fitsgrave is content to make his point by what he does rather than by what he says, and there is none of the dreary moralising of the former play; Middleton's dramatic technique is beginning to mature.

(vi) The Roaring Girl:

As was suggested in our Introduction, 'The Roaring Girl' is interesting primarily for the character of Moll, the "roaring girl" herself, one of the few essentially good-natured people (in Middleton (although some of the play has been attributed to Dekker) whom he describes with any conviction. T.S. Eliot, who admired the play, remarks of her, "the girl herself is always real. She may rant, she may behave preposterously, but she remains a type of the sort of woman who has renounced all happiness for herself and who lives only for a principle" (T.S. Eliot: Selected Essays. p.167). That she was, it appears, drawn from life (see Bullen, vol. 4, pp. 3 - 6) may help to account for Middleton's uncharacteristic success in making her virtues interesting.

For the rest, the characters provide the usual Middletonian gallery of rogues and schemers, in a somewhat untidy and tedious plot. There is an amusing group of women, the Mistresses Gallipot, Tiltyard and Openwork, whose shops and what they say of them are reminiscent, at a slightly lower social level, of the obsession with property we see elsewhere in Middleton's middle-classes. Her lover Laxton's remark of Mistress Gallipot is a reminder of the blindness or darkness associated with lechery: she is a

"good wench, i'faith, and one that loves darkness well; she puts out a candle with the best tricks of any drugster's wife in England..... The other night she would needs lead me into a room with a candle in her hand to show me a naked picture, where no sooner entered, but the candle was sent of an errand".

(II i 132 - 134 and 136 - 139)

(vii) More Dissemblers Beside Women:

The play's irony lies in the dissemblances practised by its leading characters. To please his uncle the Cardinal, whose heir he hopes to be, Lactantio, who is really in the midst of one affair and about to have another with Aurelia, pretends to believe that

"of all the frensies

That follow flesh and blood, O reverend uncle,

The most ridiculous is to fawn on woman".

(I II 113 - 115)

The Duchess, who took a vow of chastity when her husband died, keeps it for seven years, then falls in love with the general Andrugio when she sees his triumphal return to Milan after a victory. Over-awed by the sanctity of the Cardinal, she breaks down in the attempt to confess the matter to him, and at the last moment substitutes Lactantie's name for Andrugio's. The Cardinal, whose first reaction to the news of her failure was to pray,

"O, all you powers of chastity,

Look to this woman: let her not faint now",

(II I 93 - 94)

rapidly changes his tune when he hears his nephew's name, deciding,

"What right could that be to religion,

To be her end, and dispossess my kinsman";

(II II 27 - 28)

At least Lactantio is less hypocritical to himself about his motives in pretending to return the Duchess's advances, admitting brazenly enough to himself:

"The best dissembler lights on the best woman;

"Twere sin to part us".

(III i 220 - 221)

Eventually, of course, the complexities of his love-life catch up with Lactantio; but, in the characteristic tragicomic manner, the doom which his uncle prepares for him is turned aside by the Duchess, who assures the Cardinal his nephew

"has had punishment

Enough in his false hopes".

(V ii 240 - 241)

(viii) No Wit, no Help Like a Woman's:

The play is, as R.H. Barker describes it, a "potboiler..... an unpretentious collection of farcical and melodramatic scenes" (R.H. Barker: "Thomas Middleton", p.87) and on this level is amusing enough. The moral obloquy which elsewhere in Middleton might have attached itself to Philip Twilght's secret marriage to Grace, who then

turns out to be his sister, never really develops, as Philip was of course quite unconscious of the connection; It is easy enough for Lady Twilight to tell him:

"Repent yet, and all's sav'd; 'twas but hard chance".

(IV ii 252)

To ascribe the whole thing to "hard chance" is of course a long way from Middleton's usual moral position, and there is nothing to suggest we should regard his ignorance as a kind of wilful blindness. In any case, as we would expect in a play from this period of Middleton's work, Grace turns out in the end not to have been Philip's sister after all. The usual Middleton themes are less evident here, perhaps, than in any other of his plays.

(ix) The Witch:

The parallels between the witches in the play and those of 'Macbeth' have earned this work more critical attention than it really deserves. Typically of Middleton, they differ from Shakespeare's witches (or Middleton's witches in 'Macbeth', as some would claim) in their sexuality, especially in the relationship between Hecate and her son Firestone.

The main actions of the play are conducted on the level of powerful melodrama. The Duchess swears vengeance on the Duke her husband, who cruelly forces her to drink a toast from a cup fashioned from the skull of her late father. She tricks Almachildes, blindfold and thinking he is with the woman who is about to become his lover, into a choice between death and killing the Duke for her, and subsequently visits the witches with a view to disposing of him when she has tired of him. There is clearly a parallel between this situation and that of Beatrice-Joanna's use of De Flores for a similar purpose in 'The Changeling', but none of the psychological tensions of that play are reflected here, the Duchess promising Almachildes in advance that his reward for the deed will be "new life, great honour, and my love" (III ii 42). He is under no illusions about his chances of collecting his dues, commenting,

"If I trust her, as she's a woman, let one of her long
hairs wind about my heart, and be the end of me"

(IV i 12 - 14)

and indeed she pretends, as soon as she thinks the deed is done, that it is essential for him to lie low. It is after this very first meeting after the Duke's supposed death that she determines,

"This fellow lives too long after the deed;
I'm weary of his sight he must die quickly",

(IV 1 46 - 47)

words worthy of Beatrice in the latter part of her decay, the difference being that in this case there is no horrifying deterioration in personality, the Duchess having been capable of such melodramatic utterances from the time of our first encounter with her. In any event, of course, in the end the Duke turns out not to have been killed after all, in one of Middleton's least convincing tragicomic endings.

One is, indeed, acutely aware in this play of Middleton's uncertainty of direction. There are on the one hand people like the Duchess, caricatures of evil, of whom Middleton is only to have any real insight in his later work. Why they behave as they do is a question to which at this stage he has no real answers - a part of the unsatisfactory nature of this period of his work, in which he becomes aware of a new dimension in human wickedness, which he neither fully understands nor even is fully prepared even to accept as real. On the other hand there are characters like the girl Francisca, who might almost be a slut from one of the early comedies, with her complaints of her inability to prevent the arrival of unwanted and illegitimate

children, and her talk of the men friends who

"come by water to the back-door at midnight, there stay perhaps an hour in all weathers, with a pair of reeking watermen laden with bottles of wine, chewets, and currant-custards".

(II i 48 - 52)

(x) The Widow:

This is an amusingly ironical, if lightweight, comedy, in which the jealous Brandino, a justice, is gulled into releasing his wife's would-be lover, Francisco, from arrest in time to keep an assignation with his wife Philippa. Less interesting are the scenes involving the widow Valeria and her suitors; the most amusing scenes in the play are those involving a band of singing thieves and the daughter of one of Valeria's suitors, Martia, disguised as a man. There are of course the usual complications, which resolve themselves in time for a happy conclusion with Francisco married to Martia, despite his slightly ominous remark earlier in the play, typical of Middleton's moral attitude, that

" 'tis man's own sin

That puts on armour upon all his evils,

And gives them strength to strike him".

(III ii 88 - 90)

(xi) The World Tost at Tennis:

Intended to be performed at Somerset House, and apparently performed at a theatre largely because it had been rejected by its sponsors at court, this is a particularly poor effort, a medley of tedious dialogue, tiresome comic interludes, song, dance and spectacle.

(xii) Anything for a Quiet Life:

In this comedy, written in very much the same period as "The Changeling", we find Middleton in unusually tranquil mood. There is none of the savage mockery of the earlier comedies, none of the despair of the tragedies, in this collaborative work, the story, principally, of Sir Francis Cressingham and his almost child wife, none of the dwelling on the blindness of the will that such a situation might have aroused in Middleton in other moods; his friends consider Sir Francis a foolish old man, his wife is extravagant and restless, there are the predictable difficulties of such a match, no more. More salty are the scenes of the would-be cuckold Knavesby and his wife, whom he attempts for the sake of preferment to pander to Lord Beaufort, and who ends in the arms of Beaufort's page instead; and the scenes of the barber Sweet-ball are mildly amusing. But it is as

if Middleton feels with Water-Camlet, a character in the play, that it is better turn away from the moral issues that trouble him elsewhere and, in a phrase frequently reiterated in the play, "do anything for a quiet life". (I 1 136).

(xiii) The Spanish Gipsy:

This is another play of very doubtful attribution. H.D. Sykes considered it "Substantially, if not wholly, from the pen of John Ford" and E.H.C. Oliphant says that it "Seems in the main to be from the workshop of Ford and Dekker; but there are also a few uncertain signs of Middleton". On the other hand, Bentley is supported by others when he states that there is "No persuasive evidence to contradict the normal assumption that the play was an ordinary collaboration between Middleton and Rowley". (All quoted by R.H. Barker, in "Thomas Middleton", pp. 208 - 209). In any event, it would perhaps be unwise to attempt to place it too firmly in position as a part of Middleton's work. Certainly Bullen's remark, that it "opened gloomily and ended cheerfully" (Vol. I, p. lxxii), is rather uncharacteristic of Middleton's mood as we have seen it develop in those plays of this period more confidently attributed to him.

The story begins with the abduction by Roderigo of the beautiful Clara; he is assisted by two friends, Louis de Castro and Diego,

the former of whom then discovers that the girl he has helped abduct is the one whom it has been arranged he is to marry, and rushes off to attempt her rescue. The language of the play assumes symbolic overtones in the first scene between Roderigo and Clara, in which the contrast between the dishonour to which she is exposed, and her belief that she will escape unharmed, is suggested in her talk of the blackness of the night in which she has been captured and the certainty that day will come, a reminder of the concepts of sin as blindness and reason as light. The impression is confirmed in her discovery of a star-lit garden, a sanctuary of repose in which outrage seems impossible:

"Though the black veil of night hath overclouded
The world in darkness, yet ere many hours
The sun will rise again, and then this act
Of my dishonour will appear before you
More black than is the canopy that shrouds it.....

Up, I beseech thee,

Thou lady regent of the air, the moon,

And lead me by thy light to some brave vengeance!

..... What's here, a window-curtain?

O heaven, the stars appear too: ha, a chamber,

A goodly one? dwells rape in such a paradise?"

(I III 1 - 5, 36 - 37) and 40 - 44)

And so Roderigo thinks better of it, and releases her; only subsequently does he realise he has fallen so deeply in love that he can no longer live without her. Disguised, he goes into hiding, and, in the scenes which follow, falls in with a band of apparent gipsies, actually the family of Alvarez, forced into banishment after their involvement in a feud with the family of Louis De Castro. Amongst them is the beautiful Pretiosa, really Constanza, the lost daughter of Fernando, corregidor of Madrid, and the admired of all who see her. These scenes have a lyric tone, a certain floweriness of concept and expression, which, delightful though it is in its own way, certainly seems quite unlike the rather earthy naturalism of the rest of Middleton's work. In the end, the various difficulties resolve themselves, the different threads are drawn together, and the play ends on a happy note. Somehow, it is an ending more natural in its context than that of most of Middleton's tragicomedies, the improbability of which we have remarked on elsewhere; the problems which Middleton is concerned with in most of the rest of his work are not present here to contradict the happy ending, another reason for questioning how great a hand Middleton had in its composition.

(xiv) A Game at Chess:

This satirical allegory of the events surrounding the abortive attempt of King James to arrange a Spanish marriage for his son Charles, so uniting the two most powerful countries in Europe, was sufficiently controversial to be closed by James after nine performances, and to drive Middleton and his players into temporary hiding, possibly even imprisonment. It contrives, too, to give expression to a number of the usual Middleton preoccupations.

The play's form is that of a chess game, in which the white pieces represent the English, the black the Spaniards. Occasionally, the action even takes the form of a move on the board, as when the Black Knight seizes the White King's Pawn (III i 253), but even on this occasion it is the removal of White King's Pawn's upper garment, revealing he is black underneath, which is used to indicate the pawn has been a traitor, and generally the action is farther removed from the game than this.

The usual theme of lechery asserts itself in the sub-plot of the White Queen's Pawn, symbol of the members of the Church of England, who has to contend with the prolonged efforts of the Jesuitical Black Bishop's Pawn to seduce or rape her, and who, of course, escapes in the end more or less unscathed. More important are the machinations

of the Black Knight, the villain of the piece, representing the hated Spanish ambassador to England Gondomar, whose protests were to lead to the play's cancellation. He was the prime mover in the affair of the highly unpopular Spanish marriage, and appears in the play as an odious creature, oiling his way into the king's confidence, and gloating over the way he has contrived things so that,

"The court hath held the city by the horns
Whilst I have milked her".

(III i 108 - 109)

Another interesting portrait is that of the Fat Bishop, representing de Dominis, a Spanish Archbishop who turned Protestant and fled to England, then later returned to Catholicism, a hypocritical creature in Middleton's eyes, changing to what ever side seemed to offer him most advantage, cynically explaining,

"It is but penning
Another recantation, and inventing
Two or three bitter books against the White House,
And then I'm in on th' other side again
As firm as e'er I was, as fat and flourishing".

(III i 50 - 54).

(xv) Pageants and Triumphs:

From about 1613, Middleton was frequently engaged in the composition and production of a variety of pageants and triumphs, generally in celebration of some notable city event, and commissioned either by the city itself or by one or another of the city companies. Imbued with the sense of the occasion for which they were written, and embellished with the intended accompaniments of pageant, spectacle and song, they were no doubt impressive enough, but regarded from the purely literary point of view they are somewhat trivial, and there is not much to say of them once one has listed the particular allegorical figures who mouth what ever platitudes were appropriate for the occasion catered for. These lines, on the occasion of the Opening of the New River, are only slightly more fatuous than most:

"First here's the overseer, this tried man
An ancient soldier and an artisan;
The clerk; next him the mathematician;
The master of the timber-work takes place
Next after these; the measurer in like case;
Bricklayer and engineer; and after these
The borer and the pavior; then it shows

The labourers next, keeper of Amwell-head;
The walkers last; so all their names are read;
Yet these but parcels of six hundred more
That at one time have been employ'd before;
Yet these in sight and all the rest will say,
That all the week they had their royal pay.

(The Speech goes on)

Now for the fruits then: flow forth, precious spring,
So long and dearly sought for, and now bring
Comfort to all that love thee; loudly sing,
And with thy crystal murmur struck together,
Bid all thy true well-wishers welcome hither!"

Even at best, as in this tribute from "The Sun in Aries", on the occasion of the installation of a new Lord Mayor, the element of fatuity predominates on the printed page:

"Bright thoughts, joy, and alacrity of heart
Bless thy great undertakings: 'tis the part
And property of Phoebus with his rays
To cheer and illumine good men's ways;

Eagle-ey'd actions, that dare behold
His sparkling globe depart tried all like gold;
'Tis bribery and injustice, deeds of night,
That fly the sunbeam, which makes good works bright..."

Works of this nature included in Bullen's edition are: Part of the Entertainment to King James; The Triumphs of Truth, and the Entertainment at the Opening of the New River; Civitatis Amor; The Triumphs of Honour and Industry; The Triumphs of Love and Antiquity; The Sun in Aries; The Triumphs of Honour and Virtue; An Invention, etc.; The Triumphs of Integrity; and The Triumphs of Health and Prosperity.

Also of this period is the pointless vulgarity of "The Inner Temple Masque" (1619).

(xvi) Poems and Prose Works:

Of the works included in Bullen's edition of Middleton, there remain to be mentioned first two occasional prose pieces. First, "Sir R. Sherley Sent Ambassador, etc." (1609), a series of speeches in praise of Sir Robert Sherley, a much-travelled "English Knight, sent Ambassador from the King of the Persians to the Princes of Europe"

(Bullen, Vol. viii, p.300), suggests the imagined splendour of the Persian Empire, and asks such questions as:

"what is the cause that Sherley hath not all this while
lived in the same country that first lent him breath?
This is the reason: - a spirit so great was not to be
contained within so small a circle as his country" (p.315)

Second, there is "The Peacemaker" (1618), celebrating the state of peace in which England found herself in 1618, praying for its continuance, and warning against such dangers to it as,

"Murder! Oh Cain-created sin! Cursed catastrophe
of all the rest!" (Bullen, Vol. viii, p.333).

The poems are really juvenile efforts. "The Wisdom of Solomon Paraphrased" (1597) quoted in our Introduction, is an almost unbelievably poor piece of work; as Swinburne says of it, it is incredible that "the Thomas Middleton who coiled some reams of paper with what he was pleased to consider or to call a paraphrase of "The Wisdom of Solomon" can have had anything but a poet's name in common with a poet" (Introduction to Old Mermaid "Thomas Middleton", p.xxvii).

"Micro-Cynicon" (1599) is a verse satire of six types of person Middleton felt to be particularly worthy of contempt, "Insatiate Cron", "Prodigal Zodon", "Insolent Superba", "Cheating Droone", "Ingling Pyander" and "Wise Innocent". It sustains itself on the not very impressive level of those lines on "Prodigal Zodon":

"Who knows not Zodon? Zodon! what is he
The true-born child of insatiety.
If true-born, when? if born at all, say where?
Where conscience begg'd in worst time of the year;
His name young Prodigal, son to greedy Gain,
Let blood be folly in a contrary vein".

(Bullen, Vol. viii, p. 120)

"The Black Book" (1604) is an amusing enough account of the low life of Middleton's London, containing such descriptions as that of "the usurer's man, whose nose showed as if it had been made of hollow pasteboard, and his cheeks like two thin pancakes clapt together; a pitiful knave he was, and looked for all the world as if meal had been at twenty shillings a bushel" (Bullen, Vol. viii, p. 17).

"Father Hubbard's Tales", or "The Ant and the Nightingale" (1604)

is a rather similar work, in three parts, written in the form of a fable, the story being told to a nightingale by an ant. In the first part, the ant, previously a ploughman on the estate of a young spendthrift, who has squandered his fortune until he is ruined, describes how the prodigal's tenants went to London and found their master "accoutred in such a strange and prodigal shape, that it amounted to two year's rent in apparel", and mentions a merchant and a mercer, who had fitted "my young master in clothes, whilst they had clothed themselves in his acres, and measured him out velvet by the thumb, whilst they received his revenues by the handfuls" (Bullen, Vol. viii, p. 71). In the second part, the ant has a spell as a soldier, and in the third, in which the ant is a poor scholar at the university, one may imagine Middleton is sounding an autobiographical note, as the ant describes how he was "unfruitfully led to the lickerish study of poetry, that sweet honey-poison, that swells a scholar with unprofitable sweetness and delicious faist conceits, until he burst into extremities and become a poetical almsman" (p. 71).

Only discovered in 1920 was "The Ghost of Lucrece" (1596 - 1600) (Charles Scribner's, 1937), a "complaint" in which the ghost of Lucrece returns to bemoan her rape by Tarquin. The poem bears the marks of

Middleton's earliest and crudest work, the language being inflated and often ludicrous. In a succession of verses, for instance, Tarquin is addressed by a series of pejorative epithets, in the manner of:

" 'Tarquin the Night-owl': in whose flaming eyes
Lust and desire handled their balls of blood,
Chasing my spirit with fiery mysteries
Unto the hazard where Destruction stood
Ready to strike my soul into a cloud,
So, when the sun had seen my vapour rise,
Then with his beams to dash me from the skies".

(148 - 154)

Yet one is aware here, in embryo, of themes which we have seen assert themselves in all Middleton's work, the nature of lust, its association with sight and blindness, and, in the verse below, its degenerative influence:

Being in the eye, Lust is a cockatrice;
Hemlock in taste; a canker in the thought;
And in the life, a moth which in a trice
Consumes that treasure which so dear was bought,

And cost so many drops of blood (for nought),
So many streams of blood and baths of sweat
To bathe our spirits and to quench our heat".

(372 - 379)

A Note on Dating and Authorship

I have by and large refrained from speculation about the authorship of individual scenes in the plays discussed. What ever contribution playwrights like Rowley or Dekker may have made, the plays as a whole have seemed to me, in their different ways, to reflect something which is characteristically Middleton's.

In the case of 'Women Beware Women' discussion of its chronological position in Middleton's work has seemed relevant to what I have said of it. The extract below (from G.E. Bentley: The Jacobean and Caroline Stage, Vol. IV, p.906) sums up the problems, and confirms the position I have given it at the end of Middleton's work:

"The date of the tragedy is highly speculative.....E.H.C. Oliphant, R.C. Bald, and Miss Jacobs would all like to date the play late in Middleton's career, because it seems to display his greatest maturity in serious drama. Bald and Miss Jacobs are both deterred, however, by the fact that no record of the licence of the play by Sir Henry Herbert

has been preserved, and they conclude that it must therefore have been licensed before Herbert's office-book begins in 1622. The reasoning is fallacious. We do not have records of all the entries Sir Henry Herbert made..... Thus any Jacobean or Caroline date before Middleton's death in July 1627 is available, and it is only the character of the work in "Women Beware Women" which makes the last few years of his life, after "A Game at Chess", seem a likely period of composition. "

R.C. Bald (in "The Chronology of Middleton's Plays", Modern Language Review, XXXII, 1937, pp.33 - 46) suggests the following dates for the plays included in Bullen's edition. The date in parenthesis after each play is that suggested by R.H. Barker in "Thomas Middleton", pp.158 - 209, who gives "Women Beware Women" a date after "The Changeling":

1601 - 02	Blurt Master Constable (1601 - 02)
1603 - 04	The Phoenix (1602)
1602	The Family of Love (1602?)
1604	A Mad World, My Masters (1604 - 06)
1604	Michaelmas Term (1604 - 06)

1605	Your Five Gallants (1604 - 06)
c. 1606	A Trick to Catch the Old One (1604 - 06)
1608 - 08	The Roaring Girl (1604 - 08)
1613	A Chaste Maid in Cheapside (1611)
c. 1615	More Dissemblers Beside Women (1623)
c. 1615	No Wit, no help like a Woman's (1610)
1615 - 16	A Fair Quarrel (1615)
1616	The Witch (1610 - 1616)
1616	The Widow (1616)
c. 1616	The Old Law (1618?)
1615 - 20	The Mayor of 'Queensborough' (1616?) (or Hengist, King of Kent)
1619	The World Tost at Tennis (1619 - 20)
1621	Anything for a Quiet Life (1621)
c. 1621	Women Beware Women (1627)
1622	The Changeling (1622)
1623	The Spanish Gipsy (1623)
1624	A Game at Chess (1624)

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