The Changeling, or how Bacon's closet becomes the cabinet of curiosities

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Abstract

First licensed by the Master of the Revels in 1622, *The Changeling* opened to London playgoers who were in some measure familiar with Bacon's praise of inductive reasoning in *Novum Organum* (1620). It is therefore of note to find that the protagonist of Middleton and Rowley's play, Beatrice-Joanna, consistently undermines what Michael Neill describes as "the ... correspondence of outward appearance and inward reality" (xx); induction cannot reveal moral worth. The closet of experimentation that contains this incongruously unchaste virgin thus transforms into a cabinet of curiosities whose contents resist accepted logic and simple assumptions.

Keywords: *The Changeling* (Middleton, Thomas and Rowley, William); *Novum Organum* (Bacon, Francis); metaphysics; empirical (Baconian) method (rejection of); cabinet of curiosities; literary interpretation

In 1622, two years after the first publication of Sir Francis Bacon's *Novum Organum*, the Master of Revels first licensed Middleton and Rowley's play, *The Changeling*, for performance. One year earlier, Bacon (1561-1626), then-Lord Chancellor of James I, had been removed from office for taking bribes, the charges engineered by political adversaries who disapproved of Bacon's opposition to the abuse of monopolies; he thereafter devoted his life exclusively to writing, including *Novum*, the only part of his *Instauratio Magna* to reach near completion (Klein, 2012). Among the Prince's Men leading comedic actors, William Rowley (1585-1625?) had collaborated with Thomas Middleton (1580-1627), pamphleteer and writer of satiric tragedies, city comedies, and pageants, on at least four earlier productions (Neill, 2006: p.ix-x). *The Changeling's* domestic tragedy emerges when Beatrice-Joanna's cupidity for a new suitor is coupled with Deflores's own desire to possess her virginity, the price of his murderous complicity. Although it is unlikely that Middleton, Rowley, or most early modern playgoers would have read the Latin *Novum*, it is probable that most knew "what [was] in it from report" (Bromham, 1990: p.144), including the rudiments of Bacon's method. Rejecting the medieval Aristotelian project "to resolve nature into ... forms" or "figments of the human mind [...] the "changes [...] and simple action" (Varvis, 1983: p.63) of naturally observed phenomena became the object of Baconian analysis.

The limits of this "new instrument" (or *novum organum*) become readily apparent when one attempts to

determine metaphysical and not material truths, as Middleton and Rowley demonstrate in their depiction of Beatrice-Joanna's virtue. In O'Connor's (2007) critical introduction of Middleton's *The Witch* (1609-16?)¹, she identifies the difficulty of determining an early modern woman's moral worth: female social standing was fixed primarily with respect "to her sexual relations with men" (O'Connor, 2007: p.128, 1128). Because sexual activity does not leave easily observed traces upon the body (excepting gynecological examination), one's appraisal of feminine chastity and attendant social status is always suspect (O'Connor, 2007: p.1128). Secretly unchaste, Beatrice-Joanna thus invariably disrupts "the [...] correspondence of outward appearance and inward reality" (Neill, 2006: p.xx). Observation alone cannot reveal underlying cause, destabilizing Bacon's notion of "form" and his "First Vintage"² model of hypothesis formation (Klein, 2012). Beatrice-Joanna resists early modern science's anxious masculine efforts to codify (and regulate) the social world. Confined within Alsemero's closet, the anomalous Beatrice-Joanna transforms a scientific cabinet into one of curiosities, its contents demanding more fluid, flexible methods of interpretation that deny those of Bacon.

Although having adopted the Beatrice-Joanna/Deflores plot from Reynolds's (1704) *The Triumphs of God's Revenge against ... Murther* (1621), it is telling, argues Bromham (1990), that Middleton and Rowley make Reynold's roving knight, "Don Pedro de Alsemero," a scientist. In Act I, Scene I, Beatrice-Joanna instantly

recognizes Alsemero to be “a scholar” and so rhetorically represents his affections as a branch of knowledge, flirtatiously asking, “[w]hich of the sciences is this love you speak of?” (1.1.60-1). Ironically, it is the bewitching Beatrice-Joanna who, in light of Alsemero’s impetuous declaration of love, flirtatiously cautions that eyes sometimes “tell us wonders / Of common things” (1.1.70-1). Good judgment will check lovesick eyes and “call them blind” (1.1.71-2).

Ever devoted to empiricism, however, Alsemero metaphorically assures her that, like the two “houses [of parliament] [...] consenting,” he has found “both [eyes and judgment] agreed” (1.1.74-6); these “consenting houses” parallel what Bacon’s *Novum* calls induction’s figurative “marriage between the empirical and the rational faculty” (Bromham, 1990: p.142). Moreover, it is only on the basis of this metaphorical matrimony that Alsemero’s love-bill or marriage contract can be signed into law and/or proceed (1.1.77-8); his appraisal of Beatrice-Joanna’s suitability depends in part upon sensory experience.

Beatrice-Joanna first undermines the value of Alsemero’s Baconian method when she reveals, in an aside, that her eyes must not have been functioning when she agreed to wed Alonzo for she now concludes or *sees* that Alsemero “was the man [...] meant [for her]” (1.1.80-1). Sight has led her, states Deflores, to “a kind / Of whoredom in [her] heart” (3.3.143-4). Tenuous and ephemeral, new sensory experiences must give rise to new conclusions. Perceptions are also idiosyncratic. Alsemero states that, like Beatrice-Joanna’s irrational loathing of Deflores’s appearance, tastes are “a frequent frailty in our nature” (1.1.111): “one distastes / The scent of roses, which to infinites / Most pleasing is” (1.1.120). Replete with his own irrational appetites, Alsemero himself confesses to possession of this “same frailty” (1.1.120). Inductive certainty proves impossible when fuelled by mercurial sense-data.

O’Callaghan (2009) suggests that Beatrice-Joanna’s use of asides in Act I, Scene I, to reveal her displeasure at marrying Alonzo indicates that there are “dangerous ‘secrets’ lurking within her ‘outward view’ of [...] modesty and obedience” (p.139). Withholding from Vermandero, for instance, that Alonzo’s arrival is “ill news” (1.1.181) suggests not only that she is aware of the incongruity between her physical appearance and emotional reality, but that she will exploit this incongruity to further her own aims (i.e., have Alonzo murdered in order to marry Alsemero). She appoints Deflores, one whose “fouler visage” becomes “blood guiltiness” (2.2.40), executor of her bloodlust’s design. Although providing the means through which Beatrice-Joanna’s sin is concealed, Deflores nonetheless relies upon his sight to assure him of her “perfect” virginity (3.3.117), the price of his complicity. Her unblemished face powerfully masks her wantonness.

Alsemero’s “right physician’s closet” (4.1.20) is thus first connected with Baconian learning when Beatrice-Joanna finds *The Book of Experiment* concealed within (4.1.24-5):

the manuscript, argues Bromham (1990), is “quite literally” a stand-in for Bacon’s *Novum*, “Bacon’s [own] book of experiment” (p.143). The secondary titles of both books are also nearly interchangeable, Bacon’s *Interpretation of Nature* revealing Alsemero’s *Secrets in Nature* (Bromham, 1990: p.143).

This locked closet, a small room for private study, is “set round with vials” containing solutions designed to visually elicit, in she who ingests them, states not readily learnt through sight, including pregnancy and virginity (4.1.21-40). Beatrice-Joanna administers one such tonic to the vestal Diaphanta, for instance, so as to ascertain what strange “accidents” (or behaviors) Beatrice-Joanna herself must imitate to conceal her own impurity (4.2.101-21); “undone [...] endlessly” by Deflores, Beatrice-Joanna must now fake the results of Alsemero’s experiment (4.3.137-8), producing a false negative (i.e., “has *not* had sex,” or “virgin”). Such results significantly undermine Bacon’s principal “procedure of exclusion” whereby what is assumed (that Beatrice-Joanna is unchaste) is shown through experimentation to be untrue (that Beatrice-Joanna is chaste) (Klein, 2012). “[L]ocat[ing] truth in material rather than spiritual signs,” contends O’Callaghan (2009), Alsemero’s inductive verification of female chastity “is easily deceived by false appearances” (p.142).

The transformation of this closet laboratory into cabinet of curiosities ultimately occurs when, in Act V, Scene III, Alsemero locks Beatrice-Joanna (5.3.87) inside. Finally convinced that her physical beauty conceals her true lasciviousness, Alsemero declares that neither “smiles nor tears,” easily put on, “[s]hall move [...] [him]” (5.3.30-1); he will figuratively “tear out [his] suspicion” from inside Beatrice-Joanna’s very heart (5.3.37-9). Sixteenth and seventeenth century cabinets of curiosities were used to display odd specimens that could not be understood using preexisting, “manmade ordering schemes” (Zytaruk, 2011: p.2-3; McNeely & Wolverton, 2008: p.145). Perhaps, by way of chastity’s subversion of Bacon’s empirical method, Middleton and Rowley similarly suggest that viewers must “think for themselves” (McNeely & Wolverton, 2008: p.145) and not make assumptions on the basis of appearance: maidenly reticence can sometimes mask the most insatiable harlot.

Endnotes

1. Given "possible associations ... [and] the suggestiveness of the material" (Bronham & Bruzzi, 1990: p.19), Heinemann (1980) has drawn connections between Beatrice-Joanna, *The Witch's* three main female characters, and Frances Howard, a gentlewoman who obtained an annulment of her first marriage on the basis of *virgo incorrupta*, or non-consummation (O'Connor, 2007: p.1124). It was popularly believed that the results of Howard's virginity test had in fact been falsified (Gossett, 2011: p. 239), much like those of the test Alsemero administers to Beatrice-Joanna (4.3.137-8). Rumors circulated that another woman had replaced Howard during the required physical examination (Bronham & Bruzzi, 1990: p.21), a scenario reminiscent of Diaphanta's bed-trick substitution for Beatrice-Joanna (4.2.119-24).

2. According to Book II of Bacon's *Novum Organum*, "First Vintage" proposes that because "the form of anything is inherent [...] in each individual instance in which the thing itself is inherent," an initial hypothesis can be derived observationally through the simple process of eliminative induction (Giunta, n.d.; Klein, 2012).

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