



The “bed’s scandal” in Thomas Middleton and William Rowley’s *The Changeling*

Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin

► To cite this version:

Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin. The “bed’s scandal” in Thomas Middleton and William Rowley’s *The Changeling*. Arrêt sur scène / Scene Focus, 2019, Scènes de lit / Bedchamber Scenes, 8, pp.87-99. halshs-03671136

HAL Id: halshs-03671136

<https://shs.hal.science/halshs-03671136>

Submitted on 18 May 2022

HAL is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L’archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d’enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.



The “bed’s scandal” in Middleton and Rowley’s *The Changeling*

Nathalie VIENNE-GUERRIN
IRCL, UMR 5186 CNRS and Univ. Paul-Valéry Montpellier

This paper stems from the remembrance of the shock of the performance and the very idea of the bed-trick in *The Changeling* were for me, as a nineteen-year-old French spectator, when I saw Thomas Middleton and William Rowley’s 1622 play, directed and translated by Stuart Seide as *Le Changeon*, performed at the Théâtre de Gennevilliers near Paris in January 1988 (figure 1).¹



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 1. Deflores (Marc Berman) and Beatrice-Joanna (Sylvie Debrun). *Le Changeon*, dir. Stuart Seide, Théâtre de Gennevilliers, France, 1988.

¹ Further images are available at: <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b90024610> (accessed on 26 October 2018).

As is shown notably by Marliss C. Desens, *The Bed-trick in English Renaissance Drama, Explorations in Gender, Sexuality, and Power* (1994), the bed-trick is a recurrent convention of English Renaissance drama. Yet for the young, inexperienced spectator I was at the time, it constituted indeed what Beatrice-Joanna calls a “bed’s scandal” (v.iii.63).² The purpose of this article will be to analyse the role played by the bed-trick performed by Beatrice and Diaphanta (figure 2) and, beyond that, to study the tension between what is seen and what remains unseen of the play’s bedchamber episodes.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 2. Diaphanta (Marianne Merlo) and Beatrice-Joanna (Sylvie Debrun). *Le Changeon*, dir. Stuart Seide, Théâtre de Gennevilliers, France, 1988.

We will see that the play indeed offers several sorts of bedchamber scenes by suggesting and concealing the sexual encounter between Beatrice and Deflores; by dramatising a bed-trick; by setting Diaphanta’s chamber on fire; and finally by representing Alsemoro’s closet as a substitute for the bedchamber where Deflores and Beatrice can “rehearse again” their “scene of lust” (v.iii.115–16). We will see that these four variations of a bedchamber scene lead to the image of the bed as a “charnel” (v.iii.84) and play on the tension between showing and not showing, giving the spectators of this “bed’s scandal” the impression that they see it without seeing it. This article will analyse the four moments of this “bed’s scandal” – four moments in which the absence-presence of the bed is conspicuous.

² All quotations are from Michael Neill, ed. *The Changeling*, London, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2006.

The bedchamber scenes in *The Changeling* should rather be called bedchamber “unscenes”, to use Marjorie Garber’s clever expression in her 1984 article on “ineffability and the ‘unscene’ in Shakespeare’s plays”.³

The rape “unscene”

The “rape”⁴ that takes place between III.iii and IV.i is the first of these “unscenes”. At the end of III.iii, Deflores leaves the stage with Beatrice in a sequence that opens onto the ellipsis of what a bed scene could be and that relegates the secrecy and violence of their sexual encounter off-stage. Middleton and Rowley choose to silence the text at that moment, leaving the rape to the spectator and director’s imagination. After having “silence[d]” (III.i.28) – that is, killed – Alonzo, Deflores silences Beatrice by telling her:

Come, rise, and shroud your blushes in my bosom. [Raises her]
Silence is one of pleasure’s best receipts:
Thy peace is wrought forever in this yielding.
‘Las how the turtle pants! [...] (III.iii.166–9)

The obsessive presence of the finger in this play is both pregnant with sexual connotations and suggestive of the emblems of silence that represent figures with their finger on their mouth. The association of rape and silence relates what happens to Beatrice to the mythological story of Philomela who was raped by Tereus, who cut out her tongue to prevent her from telling of his misdeeds, a story of which one can find an illustration, for example, in the 1615 edition of Andrea Alciato’s *Les Emblemes* (figure 3).⁵



Figure 3. Le Babil (babbling), Andrea Alciato, *Les Emblemes* [Book 2], Geneva/Cologny, Jean II de Tournes, 1615.⁶

³ Marjorie Garber, “The rest is silence’: ineffability and the ‘unscene’ in Shakespeare’s plays”, in Peter S. Hawkins and Ann Howland Schotter, eds., *Ineffability: Naming the Unnamable from Dante to Beckett*, New York, AMS, 1984, pp. 35–50.

⁴ As there is some controversy among critics as to the question of Beatrice’s possible consent, I use inverted commas. On this issue, see Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin, “Loving and loathing: horror in *The Changeling* from text to screen”, in Mark Hutchings, ed., *The Changeling: A Critical Reader*, London, Bloomsbury, forthcoming.

⁵ See Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 6.424ff, especially 555–7.

⁶ See <https://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/alciato/emblem.php?id=FALd274> (accessed on 27 October 2018).

After having cut off Alonzo's finger to take possession of his ring, a highly sexual gesture both of castration and of rape, Deflores symbolically cuts out Beatrice-Joanna-Philomela's tongue by referring to silence and by ironically comparing her to the love bird, the turtle dove.

The deed remains dramatically silent indeed as is noticed by Kim Solga in *Violence against Women in Early Modern Performance: Invisible Acts* (2009). Solga analyses the "invisible act" performed by Deflores and Beatrice-Joanna. She notices that the act of violation that leaves Beatrice-Joanna "endlessly undone" (IV.i.1) takes place during "what has become the conventional interval for the play in modern performance" and that "*The Changeling* stages Beatrice-Joanna's rape by Deflores as a hole at the centre of the text and its performance".⁷ What happens at that moment is what Deflores calls, about Alonzo's murder, a "work of secrecy" (III.i.27). While we know how Deflores murders Alonzo and how he cuts off his finger, we do not know what happens during the interval, which has opened, among critics, onto the question of Beatrice-Joanna's degree of consent and fascination/repulsion and which has left directors with various staging possibilities, some of them choosing to show the rape, and others keeping the original gap and thus maintaining the imaginary space open to the spectators. The 1997 film version of *The Changeling*, directed by Marcus Thompson, is emblematic of the various choices offered by this "unscene": in this version, the bed is a large trunk on which the two characters are seen in a sexual sequence combining shots of violence and pleasure. The trunk-bed/bed-trunk is precisely the place where Deflores has cut off Alonzo's finger: the spectators are shown the stain left by Alonzo's finger's blood, which symbolically mirrors the blood left by Beatrice-Joanna's defloration. During the marriage sequence (figures 4a, 4b, and 4c) and throughout the film, one can see subliminal shots of Beatrice-Joanna's defloration that seem to haunt both the new bride and Deflores.⁸



⁷ Kim Solga, *Violence against Women in Early Modern Performance. Invisible acts*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009, p. 149.

⁸ See Courtney Lehmann, "Taking back the night": hospitality in *The Changeling* on film, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 29.4 (2011), pp. 591–604.



Figures 4a, 4b, and 4c. The marriage sequence haunted by ambivalent images of the “rape” scene. *The Changeling*, dir. Marcus Thompson, 1998.

The editing of this wedding sequence gives meaning to the double name of the hybrid character, Beatrice-Joanna – two names that have the woman oscillate between the figure of the saint and the figure of the whore. Confronted with this hole in the text, spectators and directors can feel free to fill it in different ways. Directors can choose to draw the bed curtain or to leave it open. They can choose to keep the scene silent and secret and let the audience’s imagination work or they can perform it, as was the case in Declan Donnellan’s 2006 Cheek by Jowl production in which “the rape was played straight in all its brutality and made for uncomfortable viewing”.⁹ In that production, the “bed” was the very desk on which Beatrice-Joanna (Olivia Williams) had written “the cheque with which she hoped to pay off Deflores”, played by Will Keen.¹⁰

The bed-trick sequence

If the spectator-reader-director is free to imagine this first bed or, should we say, bed-less scene that is left open to interpretation, Beatrice provides a reading of the bed-trick that guides our imagination, filling in that gap. No sooner does Beatrice come back onstage after her rape and the wedding dumbshow than she expresses her fear of “th’ensuing night” (IV.i.3):

⁹ Michelle O’Callaghan, *Thomas Middleton, Renaissance Dramatist*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2009, p. 152.

¹⁰ O’Callaghan, *Thomas Middleton, Renaissance Dramatist*, p. 152.

There's no venturing
Into his (Alsemero's) bed, what course soe'er I light upon,
Without my shame, which may grow up to danger:
He cannot but in justice strangle me
As I lie by him, as a cheater use me. (IV.i.11–15)

One can see here an embedded image of the bed scene that one finds in *Othello*, a play that critics have often associated with *The Changeling*. The pun on the word “lie” and the image of the “cheater” prepare the theatrical trick, as Beatrice uses Diaphanta to rehearse her part to be able to play it a bit later with Alsemero (figure 5).



Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 5. Preparing the bed-trick: Diaphanta (Marianne Merlo) sneezing during the chastity test. *Le Changeon*, dir. Stuart Seide, Théâtre de Gennevilliers, France, 1988.

With that trick, the bed becomes a stage, a theatrical space. “tis seven hours to bed-time” (IV.i.52), Beatrice notes: contrary to Deflores’s sexual assault that probably takes place during the day, the condition of the bed-trick is that it happens at night, obscurity masking or effacing the transgressing sexual act, as is suggested by Seide’s version in which the woman’s face was kept in the dark (figure 6).



Source: gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 6. Diaphanta (Marianne Merlo) and Alsemoro (Bruno Wolkowitch) during the bed-trick. *Le Changeon*, dir. Stuart Seide, Théâtre de Gennevilliers, France, 1988.

Here is how Beatrice describes the marriage bed-scene in which Diaphanta is playing her mistress’s part:

One struck, and yet she lies by’t! O my fears!
This strumpet serves her own ends, ‘tis apparent now,
Devours the pleasure with a greedy appetite,
And never minds my honour or my peace (v.i.1–7)

Ironically, while Diaphanta “forgets herself” (v.i.24), Beatrice literally becomes the *waiting-woman* in this scene, waiting for her changeling to come back to her usual self and to leave “the bride’s place” (iv.i.125). The food imagery found in the terms “devours”, “greedy” and “appetite” equates bed-time with what is previously identified as “belly-hour” (i.ii.67) by Lollo in the subplot. This is confirmed when Deflores describes Diaphanta as one of those “termagants” who relish “their ladies’ first fruits” and who are “mad whelps” whom “you cannot stave [...] off from game royal” (v.i.17–20). Thus, Beatrice and Deflores fill in the hole of this second bedchamber scene by imagining what’s happening behind the door of the nuptial bedroom. Their voyeuristic reading of the scene is confirmed when Diaphanta reappears, saying: “Pardon frailty, madam: / In troth I was so well, I ev’n forgot myself (v.i.77–8).

Fire in the chamber

No wonder then that Deflores should set fire to Diaphanta’s chamber, thus literalising what the bed-trick has revealed, that is her fiery sexuality suggested by her very name, Diaphanta, which means “the red hot one”.¹¹ Deflores seems to punish her through the very fire she has been embodying in her lustful embraces with Alsemoro. In his *Dictionary of Sexual Language*, Gordon Williams shows that the word “chamber” can be understood as both bedroom and “vagina”, as Middleton and Rowley’s text associates fire and sex.¹² By setting Diaphanta’s chamber on fire, Deflores becomes a Lucifer (light-bearer). In Marcus Thompson’s 1998 film version, the torch that Deflores uses to set the bedchamber on fire looks like a phallus, thus creating an obvious parallel between sex and fire (figure 7).



Figure 7. The phallus-like torch. *Middleton’s Changeling*, dir. Marcus Thompson, 1997.

¹¹ Joost Daalder, ed., *The Changeling*, London, New Mermaids, 1990 [1964], p. 3.

¹² See Gordon Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature*, London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ, Athlone, 3 vols, 1994, vol. 1, pp. 225–6.

This translates Deflores's bawdy innuendoes based on the association of the chimney and the vagina,¹³ when he refers to Diaphanta's "chimney being a-fire" (v.i.38) and when he says "I will be ready with a piece high-charged" (v.i.46): the expression refers to a "heavily loaded handgun"¹⁴ that is supposed to put out a chimney-fire but can also be highly evocative of sexuality. This is all the more so since, after saying his aim is to "cleanse the chimney", he adds that she (Diaphanta) "shall be the mark" (v.i.48). Beatrice also describes Diaphanta's "lodging chamber" (v.i.99) as a dangerous place because of Diaphanta's negligence: "But in her chamber negligent and heavy, / She 'scaped a mine twice" (v.i.102–3). The text creates an image of Diaphanta's intimacy that relates the two meanings of the word "slut" (v.i.104) used by Vermandero to describe her: the word is evocative both of a servant and of a "strumpet", the latter term being used twice by Beatrice to characterise Diaphanta. Fire and desire are thus tightly connected in this post bed-trick scene. This bedchamber scene again takes place off-stage, for obvious reasons, but its evocation has a highly symbolic impact.

What happens in the closet?

Critics such as Bruce Boehrer have noticed how the play cultivates a sense of secrecy, enclosure and interiority.¹⁵ In v.iii, this culture of secrecy is given a dramatic emphasis when Alsemero locks up his bride in a closet in his private place, a place whose privacy Beatrice had previously violated to find her husband's chastity tests. The closet had appeared in iv.i when, after having been deflowered by Deflores, Beatrice had tried to find a way of faking chastity. In this scene (iv.ii), this closet is related to sexuality, as it appears as the place that reveals either a woman's chastity or a woman's pregnancy. This closet in which Beatrice thinks she's found a way out in iv.i, becomes a prison in v.iii, a prison that Alsemero turns into a brothel or slaughter-house or "charnel house", as he says, when he forces Deflores to join Beatrice inside:

get you into her, sir. *Exit Deflores [Alsemero locks him in the closet]*
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 [meaning in hell] (v.iii.114–16)

The closet, a private place *par excellence* becomes a "common" place that the playwrights choose to equate with Beatrice (through the "get you into her"), a filthy place from which one can only perceive what Vermandero calls "horrid sounds" (v.iii.142). The metadramatic dimension of the formulation ("rehearse", "act", "audience") questions the very possibility of acting such a scene before a theatre audience (figure 8).

¹³ Williams, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language...*, vol. 1, pp. 234–6.

¹⁴ Daalder, ed. *The Changeling*, p. 97.

¹⁵ See Bruce Boehrer, "Alsemero's closet: privacy and interiority in *The Changeling*", *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 96.3 (1997), pp. 349–68.



Source gallica.bnf.fr / Bibliothèque nationale de France

Figure 8. Alsemoro (Bruno Wolkowitch), Deflores (Marc Berman) and Beatrice-Joanna (Sylvie Debrun). *Le Changeon*, dir. Stuart Seide, Théâtre de Gennevilliers, 1988.

It is as if such unnatural scenes could only be relegated to a “non-place” (as Solga notes) or a hellish world. The closet is turned into a hellish bedless-chamber from which Beatrice’s ambivalent exclamations “Oh, oh, oh” (V.iii.139) can be heard. “I am a stranger to your bed”, says Beatrice (V.iii.159): what seems to characterise her in the end is that she, like Doll Tearsheet in *2 Henry 4* is a “(k)night-errant” (V.iv.22),¹⁶ a word that means “whore” in Shakespeare’s text; from the very first scene of the play she seems to be deprived of a bed of her own. Having lost the bed of her virginity, she seems to be condemned to err at night, forever being a “stranger” to her nuptial bed.

John Reynolds’s pamphlet against murder, *The Triumphs of Gods revenge against the crying, and execrable sinne of murther* (1621), is considered as the main source of the plot of *The Changeling*. The 1657 edition of the book summarises the story with a picture that looks like a comic strip (figure 9), in which readers see Beatrice-Joanna and Deflores in bed, with Alsemoro coming to murder them for adultery.

¹⁶ William Shakespeare, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, second edition, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1997.

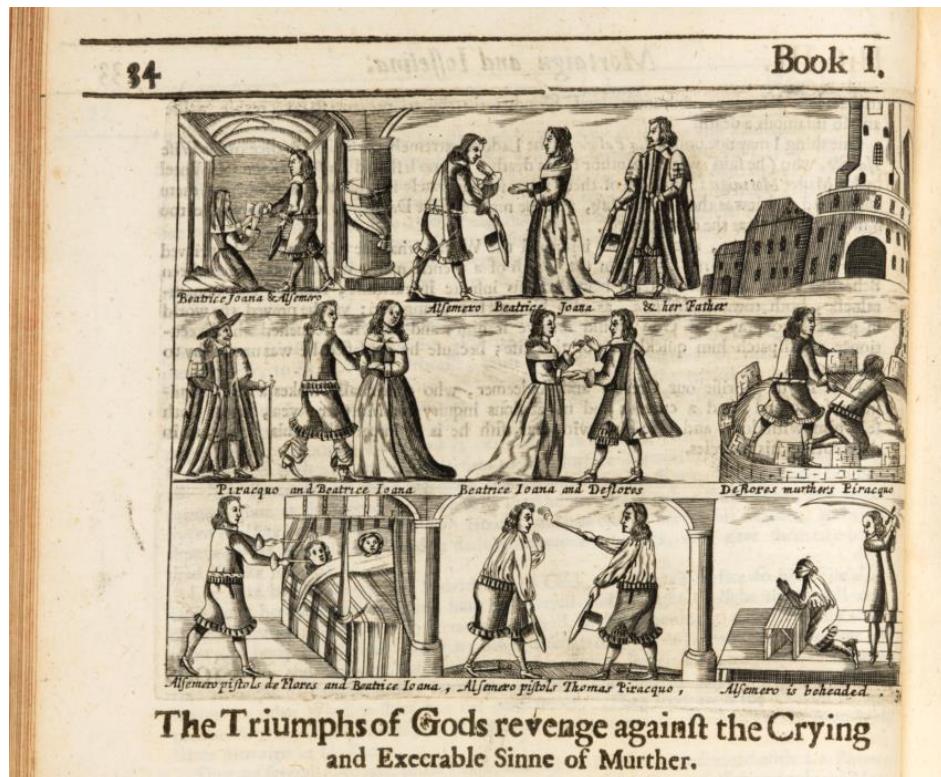


Figure 9. John Reynolds, *God's revenge against murder*, London, Sarah Griffin for William Lee, 1657 [1621], sig. D5v portion. Wing R1309.

There is a bed in this picture (figure 10).



Figure 10. Reynolds, *God's revenge against murder*, sig. D5v portion.

In *The Changeling*, the bed that would signify marriage, the bed that could be emblematic of a stable frame and of an intimate lawful relationship, this bed is forever absent and remains an idea, as is suggested by images preserved by the Théâtre de Gennevilliers version in which the bed was reduced to a sheet spread on the ground (figure 11).



Figure 11. The ever-absent bed, with Beatrice-Joanna (Sylvie Debrun). *Le Changeon*, dir. Stuart Seide, Théâtre de Gennevilliers, 1988.

Ironically, it is to “be true” to this ideal bed that Beatrice proves false by using the bed-trick: “Remember I am true unto your bed” (v.iii.83), she says to Alsemoro at the end of the play, before adding that Alsemoro’s “bed was cozened on the nuptial night” (v.iii.160).

The sound of the bed’s scandal

At the end of the play, the ideal bed becomes the sepulchre that Beatrice had ironically mentioned in II.II.67 as something that “youth and beauty” should be loathing. The bed and the sepulchre look strangely alike, as in this picture of a stormy marriage from Georgette de Montenay’s *Emblematum Christianorum centuria / Emblemes Chrestiens* (1584) (figure 12):



Figure 12. Georgette de Montenay, *Emblematum Christianorum centuria / Emblemes Chrestiens*, Zurich, Christoph Froschauer, 1584.¹⁷

What is seen as the most hateful place first, becomes the most desirable place: “Tis time to die, when ‘tis a shame to live” (v.iii.179), says Beatrice. This formulation shows that what kills her, more than Deflores’s murderous rape, is the “bed’s scandal”, the fact that her story is made public. What kills her is the scandal that she hears in Alsemoro’s words when he

¹⁷ See <http://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/emblem.php?id=FMOb100> (accessed on 27 October 2018).

tells her: "You are a whore" (v.iii.32), a word that had been in the air since I.ii when one of the madmen in the subplot had shouted "Cat-whore, cat-whore" (I.ii.191). Beatrice reacts to the word as follows:

What a horrid sound it hath!
It blasts a beauty to deformity;
Upon what face soever that breath falls,
It strikes it ugly. Oh, you have ruined
What you can ne'er repair again! (v.iii.31–5)

The sound of the word "whore" is as "horrid" as Beatrice's ambiguous sounds of death "Oh, oh, oh", described by her father a few lines later (v.iii.142). "This bed's a charnel, the sheets shrouds for murdered carcasses" (v.iii.84–5): through the word "charnel", which etymologically means the "flesh-house", the bed is both associated with death and sex in a closet "unscene" that is full of sound and fury and that combines Eros and Thanatos. But the thing that kills Beatrice is the scandal, the slander (a word related to the French *esclandre*) of what Alsemero sees as "this sad story": "in what part / Of this sad story shall I first begin?" (v.iii.88–9): in this play the bedchamber scenes are put into words, and become a rumour that circulates from tongue to ear, especially when Jasperino tells Alsemero "I heard your bride's voice in the next room to me; / And, lending more attention, found Deflores / Louder than she" (IV.ii.94–6). The bed "unscenes" are heard, they are turned into a soundscape, a rumour that ruins Beatrice's reputation: "Mine honour fell with him, and now my life", says Beatrice, a formulation that precisely reflects what a scandal is etymologically: something that makes one fall, a cause of moral stumbling. This same honour is described in the subplot as "a caper" that will "rise as fast and high, / Has a knee or two, and falls to th' ground again" (IV.iii.90–1).

"Let me go poor to my bed with honour, / And I am rich in all things." (III.iii.157–8), implores Beatrice to Deflores, in a sentence that echoes the biblical proverb according to which a good name is better than riches. One of Guillaume de la Perrière's emblems (figure 13) relates fire and fame (*fama*):



Figure 13. Guillaume de la Perrière, *La Morosophie*, Lyon, Macé Bonhomme, 1553, emblem 60.¹⁸

¹⁸ See https://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/emblem.php?id=FL_Pho60 (accessed on 27 October 2018).

“As fire, once lit, is easily preserved, but once extinct, is almost impossible to restore: just so, it is easy to preserve one’s bright fame and good name, but, if it goes out, it is never regained”:

Feu alumé facilement s’enflamme,
Esteint, il est de mauvais alumer:
A grand travail recouvre loz [laus: reputation] & fame,
Qui la laissé folement consumer.¹⁹

The fire in Diaphanta’s bedchamber can be read as an image of the bed’s scandal that ruins Beatrice’s name forever.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- BOEHRER, Bruce, “Alsemoro’s closet: privacy and interiority in *The Changeling*”, *The Journal of English and Germanic Philology*, 96.3 (1997), pp. 349–68.
- DESENS, Marliss C., *The Bed-trick in English Renaissance Drama, Explorations in Gender, Sexuality, and Power*, Newark, University of Delaware Press, 1994.
- DAALDER, Joost, ed., *The Changeling*, London, New Mermaids, 1990 [1964].
- GARBER, Marjorie, “‘The rest is silence’: ineffability and the ‘unscene’ in Shakespeare’s plays”, in Peter S. Hawkins and Ann Howland Schotter, eds., *Ineffability, Naming the Unnamable: from Dante to Beckett*, New York, AMS, 1984, pp. 35–50.
- LEHMANN, Courtney, “Taking back the night”: hospitality in *The Changeling* on film”, *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 29:4, Winter 2011, pp. 591–604.
- NEILL, Michael, ed., *The Changeling*, London, Bloomsbury Methuen Drama, 2006.
- O’CALLAGHAN, Michelle, *Thomas Middleton, Renaissance Dramatist*, Edinburgh, Edinburgh University Press, 2009.
- SHAKESPEARE, William, *The Riverside Shakespeare*, ed. G. Blakemore Evans, second edition, Boston, Houghton Mifflin, 1997.
- SOLGA, Kim, *Violence against Women in Early Modern Performance: Invisible Acts*, Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2009.
- WEIS, René, *Henry IV, Part Two*, Oxford, Clarendon Press, 1998.
- WILLIAMS, Gordon, *A Dictionary of Sexual Language and Imagery in Shakespearean and Stuart Literature*, London and Atlantic Highlands, NJ, The Athlone Press, 3 vols, 1994.

¹⁹ Transcription and translation from the Glasgow emblem books website: <https://www.emblems.arts.gla.ac.uk/french/emblem.php?id=FLPho6o> (accessed 27 October 2018).