

Chapter 8
Desiring Subjects:
Staging the Female Servant in
Early Modern Tragedy

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The third act of Shakespeare's *The Winter's Tale* (first performed in 1611) stages a scene of loss and redemption, death and transformation that is intimately connected to matters of genre. The death of Antigonus paired with the finding of the infant Perdita by the Bohemian shepherd occasion a striking shift in the play's tone and formal momentum. As the shepherd tells his son: "thou met'st with things dying, I with things new-born" (3.3.113–14).¹ But this oft-discussed transition in the play's mood and structure is also, perhaps surprisingly, associated with women's service. When the shepherd first comes across Perdita alone on the seacoast, he exclaims: "Though I am not bookish, yet I can read waiting-gentlewoman in the scape. This has been some stair-work, some trunk-work, some behind-door-work. They were warmer that got this than the poor thing is here" (3.3.72–6). The shepherd interprets the abandoned infant as the product of a "scape," or sexual escapade, involving a waiting-gentlewoman and probably conducted furtively (i.e., under the stairs, in a trunk, or behind a door). Historically speaking, the shepherd's analysis of the scene corresponds to what we know about illegitimate births among women in service. Despite the fact women in service in early modern England were generally expected to remain chaste and were not permitted to marry, "the typical unmarried mother who was brought before the secular courts was the maidservant who had been impregnated by her master or fellow servant."² Given these circumstances, Shakespeare's shepherd might be forgiven for jumping so quickly to his conclusions.

What interests me most about this passage, however, is not the "accuracy" of the shepherd's assumptions per se, but the fact that the *narrative* of the sexually deviant female servant proves to be especially useful at this key juncture in the play. This particular story, after all, is not just an analytical assessment of the probability of the child's origins, but rather an embellished, even fanciful account

¹ All citations of Shakespeare's plays refer to *The Riverside Shakespeare*, 2nd ed., (ed.) G. Blakemore Evans (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1997) and will be given parenthetically in the text. For all primary texts, dates in parentheses indicate the year the work was first published, unless otherwise indicated.

² See Sara Mendelson and Patricia Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 97–8.

that conjures up lurid images of a female servant engaged in “behind-door-work.” Deployed at the very moment in which the play switches gears from tragedy to comedy (or at least to tragicomedy), the shepherd’s tale offers a sort of generic bridge, providing a temporary explanation of Perdita’s origins that allows the plot to move forward toward eventual resolution. Moreover, the story itself is a generic mixture: although the furtive sexual rendezvous and the presumably illegitimate child presage tragedy, the tone and diction of the shepherd’s relation imply comedy, even farce. Visible only as an abstract, sexualized figure in the shepherd’s narrative, the waiting-gentlewoman remains shadowy and indeterminate, yet also oddly central to the generically hybrid plot of Shakespeare’s romance. Indeed, I would suggest that her narrative importance is directly related to the deferral and eventual effacement of the potentially tragic consequences of her story.

In what follows, I turn my attention to early modern tragedy—the genre that the shepherd’s narrative seems both to invite and resist—in order to explore in greater detail the ways in which women’s service work gets ideologically deployed in dramatic narratives. Tragedy may initially seem an unlikely genre to examine for traces of women’s work (in comparison, for instance, to domestic comedies that focus on the daily workings of the household), but I am particularly interested in the ways in which tragic form, especially in plays that give sustained attention to female servant characters, both occludes and enables specific narratives of women’s service. These narratives actively re-imagine and discursively delimit the cultural meaning of female service during a transitional period in English economic history. Looking primarily at Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and William Rowley’s *The Witch of Edmonton* (first performed in 1621) and Rowley and Thomas Middleton’s *The Changeling* (first performed in 1622), I argue that these Jacobean tragedies stage the sexual vulnerability of the female servant in part as a cautionary narrative about domestic order and the shifting parameters of the institution of service. At the same time, the formal trajectories that shape the plots of female servants derive much of their force from the cultural fantasies of marriage and domestic harmony that tragedy seems generically designed to resist. As such, these formal features and oddly romanticized narratives of female service substitute fictions of desire for the real sexual coercion and economic imperatives that attended England’s increasingly commercialized labor market.

The early seventeenth century was a particularly uncertain time for the institution of domestic service in England. About sixty percent of those aged fifteen to twenty-four were servants living in the households of families other than their birth families, and young women were more often employed in service than in any other occupation.³ Women from nearly all ranks of society worked as servants

³ See Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 92–4 and Keith Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities: Economic Lives in Early Modern Britain* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 32–3. For the increase in female household servants during the early modern period, see Anne Laurence, *Women in England 1500–1760: A Social History* (London: Phoenix Giant, 1994), 134–5 and Ilana Krausman Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth in Early Modern England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1994), 151.

in domestic settings, ranging from scullery maids to ladies-in-waiting (including, we may presume, the shepherd’s “waiting-gentlewoman”). Yet, despite their ubiquity, female servants were not always easily absorbed into social hierarchies, largely because the nature of those hierarchies was changing as England moved toward a more widespread wage-based system of labor. By the beginning of the seventeenth century, due in part to the sharp reduction in the size of aristocratic households, increasing numbers of servants were negotiating yearly contracts with their masters rather than assuming long-term positions.⁴ Because female domestic servants had been removed from their birth homes and their parents’ supervision, their social status was especially ambiguous. Often, these women were viewed as sexually vulnerable and potentially disorderly singlewomen; indeed, the 1563 Statute of Artificers, which stated that local officials could order unmarried women aged twelve to forty into service, was based on the principle that unmarried and masterless women were inherently disorderly.⁵ While in service, women were often subject to the sexual advances of their masters or fellow servants, and the public penalties for these liaisons would usually fall most heavily on the female domestic. In his analysis of seventeenth-century female servants’ accounts of sexual relations with their masters, Tim Meldrum notes three recurring themes: “the tensions that were created within households, the breaking of bonds that resulted, and the almost inevitable loss of place for the servant who conceived.”⁶ These

⁴ See A.L. Beier, *Masterless Men: The Vagrancy Problem in England 1560–1640* (London, Methuen, 1985). For the gradual replacement of the feudal ideology of service with a wage-labor system in the period, see Michael Neill, *Putting History to the Question: Power, Politics, and Society in English Renaissance Drama* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000), 28–39; Wendy Wall, *Staging Domesticity: Household Work and English Identity in Early Modern Drama* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 201–3; Mark Thornton Burnett, *Masters and Servants in English Renaissance Drama and Culture: Authority and Obedience* (New York: St Martin’s, 1997), 4–5 and 8–9; and Mary Ellen Lamb, “Tracing a Heterosexual Erotics of Service in *Twelfth Night* and the Autobiographical Writings of Thomas Whythorne and Anne Clifford,” *Criticism* 40.1 (1998): 1–7. For contemporary concerns about the increasingly mercenary nature of service, see Walter Darell, *A Short Discourse of the Life of Servingmen* (London, 1578) and I.M., *A Health to the Gentlemanly Profession of Servingmen* (London, 1598).

⁵ See Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 96. For the potential challenge to social order posed by singlewomen, see also Paul Griffiths, *Youth and Authority: Formative Experiences in England 1560–1640* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), 358–9 and Amy M. Froide, *Never Married: Singlewomen in Early Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). For the connection between service and vagrancy in the period, see also Patricia Fumerton, *Unsettled: The Culture of Mobility and the Working Poor in Early Modern England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 12–32.

⁶ Meldrum, “London Domestic Servants from Depositional Evidence, 1660–1750: Servant-Employer Sexuality in the Patriarchal Household,” in *Chronicling Poverty: The Voices and Strategies of the English Poor, 1640–1840*, (eds.) Tim Hitchcock, Peter King, and Pamela Sharpe (New York: St Martin’s Press, 1997), 48.

tensions, together with the often disastrous emotional and economic consequences of rape or pregnancy, meant that women in service, despite their familiar presence in early modern homes, were often regarded as transient, potentially disruptive and sexually available.

Dekker, Ford and Rowley's domestic tragedy *The Witch of Edmonton* dramatizes many of these social uncertainties. As befits its genre, the play begins where more comedic narratives involving female service usually leave off—with a marriage.⁷ In the play's main plot, Winifred, a maidservant of Sir Arthur Clarington, has married Frank Thorney, a gentleman's son who is also in Sir Arthur's service. The marriage legitimizes Frank and Winifred's unborn child; Winifred admits that Frank has had "conquest of my maiden-love" and Frank reassures her that, "Thy child shall know / Who to call Dad now" (1.1.33, 4–5).⁸ Young working women in city comedies are frequently subject to the sexual advances of their male suitors, but Winifred is vulnerable to both a fellow servant and, we learn a few scenes later, her master. Learning of Winifred's marriage to Frank, Sir Arthur interprets the event as a clever ploy of hers to allow them to continue their sexual liaison without suspicion; as he tells her, "now we share / Free scope enough, without control or fear, / To interchange our pleasures" (1.1.170–72). Sir Arthur's diction emphasizes mutuality at the expense of coercion, representing their liaison as a collaborative act of interchange and sharing rather than as manipulation. When she acts confused about his meaning, he reminds her of their "secret game" (1.1.176), another euphemism that associates her with furtive, but mutual, sexual exploits (much like the "behind-door-work" in the shepherd's narrative) instead of with sexual and social powerlessness. Although the rhetoric of this exchange posits Winifred's sexual relations with Sir Arthur as mutual rather than enforced, the scene challenges that conclusion through Winifred's reference to Frank's "conquest," an appropriate metaphor for Winifred's defenselessness.

Winifred's situation makes legible the fact that for early modern women, service was frequently a form of sexual as well as social subordination. Although female servants had been associated with disruptive sexuality in popular literature dating back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, these earlier tales tended to focus on lecherous maidservants who used their occupations as covers for sexual escapades rather than on servants' sexuality vulnerability.⁹ By the seventeenth

⁷ For a fuller discussion of the teleological marriage plot as it relates to early modern comedy, see my essay, "Labors of Love: Women, Marriage, and Service in *Twelfth Night* and *The Compleat Servant-Maid*," *Shakespearean International Yearbook* 5 (2005): 103–26 and its expanded version in *Women's Work in Early Modern English Literature and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

⁸ Thomas Dekker, John Ford, and William Rowley, *The Witch of Edmonton*, (ed.) Arthur F. Kinney (London: A & C Black, 1998). All citations will refer to this edition of the play and will be given parenthetically in the text.

⁹ See Michael Goodich, "Ancilla Dei: The Servant as Saint in the Late Middle Ages," in *Women of the Medieval World: Essays in Honor of John H. Mundy*, (eds.) Julius Kirshner and Suzanne F. Wemple (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1985), 121–5.

century, as Susan Amussen has demonstrated, servants faced a contradiction in the household in which they worked because they were simultaneously protected and threatened by their masters. A master was in theory "supposed to ensure the moral behavior of his servants, but he could also force them to have sex with him."¹⁰ Female servants were understood as sexually available within the households in which they were employed and were often not protected by "normal community controls on extramarital sex."¹¹ Characters such as Winifred expose these domestic contradictions as they become caught up in their potentially tragic consequences. Although muted by Sir Arthur's euphemistic rhetoric and Frank's bland reassurances, Winifred's sexual vulnerability is nevertheless a necessary precondition of the play's tragicomic plot. As an emblem of the crisis of domestic authority and social order, the pregnant, single maidservant sets the stage for the violence and disorder that will presumably follow.

As in *The Winter's Tale*, however, the potential tragedy of Winifred's situation is staged only to be systematically deferred over the course of the plot. Violence and disorder *do* certainly follow in the course of the play, but Winifred is oddly immune from much of it, and her own story is discursively reworked so as to separate her from the tragedy that befalls many of the play's other characters. Sir Arthur's rhetoric of sexual partnership begins to distance Winifred from the taint of sexual scandal in the very first scene of the play, as we have seen. Furthermore, by opening the play with Frank's assurances of marriage, Dekker, Ford, and Rowley simultaneously elicit and disarm "[t]he threatening figure of the single, pregnant, potentially masterless woman."¹² Indeed, despite Sir Arthur's prodding, Winifred is firmly resolved not only to marry Frank but also to end her affair with her master, proclaiming: "I will change my life, / From a loose whore to a repentant wife" (1.1.192–3). Because she refuses to comply with his desires, Winifred is forced to leave Sir Arthur's service, another event that would mark her as masterless and socially displaced if she hadn't so fortuitously married Frank. As if to highlight the neat coincidence of her termination as a servant and her fortunate entrée into married life, Winifred marks the occasion by announcing her own parallel moral transformation. In plotting the course from

¹⁰ Amussen, "Punishment, Discipline, and Power: The Social Meanings of Violence in Early Modern England," *Journal of British Studies* 34.1 (1995): 14.

¹¹ Amussen, "Punishment, Discipline, and Power," 15–16. For the sexual vulnerability of female servants, see also Garthine Walker, "Rereading Rape and Sexual Violence in Early Modern England," *Gender and History* 10.1 (1998): 1–25; Marjorie Keniston McIntosh, "Servants and the Household Unit in an Elizabethan English Community," *Journal of Family History* 9.1 (1984): 20–21; Griffiths, *Youth and Authority*, 273–6; Laura Gowing, *Common Bodies: Women, Touch and Power in Seventeenth-Century England* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2003), 59–65; Meldrum, "London Domestic Servants," 52–7; and Martin Ingram, *Church Courts, Sex and Marriage in England, 1570–1640* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), 259–81.

¹² See Helen Vella Bonavita, "Maids, Wives and Widows: Multiple Meaning and Marriage in *The Witch of Edmonton*," *Parergon* 23.2 (2006): 88.

“loose whore” to “repentant wife,” Winifred transforms Sir Arthur’s rhetoric of jocular sexuality into a new story, a tidy conversion plot that promises a coherent narrative trajectory just at the moment when her occupational and social position seem most precarious. The tragic consequences of Winifred’s tenure in service are thus staged only to be hastily displaced by more comforting plotlines involving repentance and marriage.

The reassuring idea that women would get married immediately after leaving positions in service was a popular one in early modern England, one bolstered by the increasingly transitory nature of service by the early seventeenth century and by the expectation that women could work as servants in order to gain the practical skills they would need as wives and to delay their marriages until they became more economically feasible. Yet this social ideal frequently jarred with reality. Many former servants were never able to marry for financial reasons, and poverty caused a great many others to delay their marriages long after they left their positions as domestics.¹³ The fact that contemporary comedies romanticize women’s movement from service to marriage is unsurprising; that a tragedy like *The Witch of Edmonton* should do so warrants further scrutiny. Winifred’s hasty marriage does not transform her story into the stuff of romantic comedy, but it does, at least initially, substitute the formal *structure* of comic resolution for the fallen-from-grace narrative of tragic loss that her initial situation seems to presage.

Yet if the play offers a marriage plot to assuage concerns about Winifred’s social displacement, that move is only partially successful at best. Although Winifred is spared the most disastrous outcomes of being a single, pregnant, out-of-work maidservant—such as poverty, abandonment, criminal prosecution, or death—her marriage to Frank is hardly the end of her troubles. When Frank marries Susan Carter later in the play, the union that was supposed to legitimize Winifred and her child quickly becomes a bigamous one. The neat trajectory that propelled Winifred out of service and into a life of marriage and moral certainty is quickly thrown into disarray by Frank’s second marriage, which not only taints the legitimacy of the first but also forces Winifred to return to service in the guise of a male page in order to mask her husband’s illicit relationships. In staging this return to service, the play, as Mark Thornton Burnett has argued, “explores the options available to the abandoned woman servant forced to find a legitimate social niche.”¹⁴ Although married and thus ostensibly assigned a clear social place, Winifred remains at least symbolically abandoned by both husband and master. Unlike the function of cross-

¹³ For service as a transitional position, see Ann Kussmaul, *Servants in Husbandry in Early Modern England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 4; Wrightson, *Earthly Necessities*, 32; Mendelson and Crawford, *Women in Early Modern England*, 92–6; and Judith Weil, *Service and Dependency in Shakespeare’s Plays* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 18–23. On service as preparation for marriage, see Judith M. Bennett and Amy M. Froide, “A Singular Past,” in *Singlewomen in the European Past, 1250–1800*, (eds.) Bennett and Froide (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1999), 9–10 and Ben-Amos, *Adolescence and Youth*, 227–32.

¹⁴ See Burnett, *Masters and Servants*, 135.

dressing in a comedy such as *Twelfth Night*, in which Viola dons male disguise as a means of self-preservation and, as Jean Howard has argued, as a “holding place” until she returns to the heterosexual marriage economy,¹⁵ Winifred’s act of cross-dressing effectively disallows her any closure that she might otherwise have gained by marrying Frank. Susan, Frank’s second wife, has been told that Winifred (as a male page) was “commended” to her husband by Sir Arthur. Telling the disguised Winifred that Frank was also one of Sir Arthur’s servants, Susan remarks: “That title methinks should make you almost fellows, / Or at the least much more than a servant; / And I am sure he will respect you so” (3.2.59–61). Susan’s syntactically hesitant lines locate Winifred in the murky space that exists between being “almost fellows” and being “much more than a servant,” denying her the social stability promised by marriage in lieu of service. Both her disguise and Frank’s bigamy effectively preclude her from publicly claiming her status as a wife, a series of events that destabilizes the institution of marriage itself as a force of social order in the play.¹⁶ Marriage in *The Witch of Edmonton* is hardly a celebratory end to service or even to sexual improprieties, but an expedient arrangement that initiates a new scenario of sexual and social disorder.

Even so, the conclusion of Winifred’s story is far more positive than this series of potentially tragic events might suggest. Despite her mistreatment throughout the play—including the fact that she is saddled with a bigamous husband-turned-murderer-turned-executed-criminal—Winifred ultimately escapes the fate of many female servants who appear in historical narratives as vagrants or destitute single mothers. Indeed, even though it appears that she will be left, in Frank’s words, “unprovided” and “unfriended” after his death, the Justice rules that Sir Arthur must pay her “a thousand marks” for “his abuse” of her, a sum to which Sir Arthur willingly agrees (5.3.65, 66, 158, 156). Winifred thus receives a generous monetary payment that saves her from poverty, while also acquiring the spiritual authority that accompanies the role of grieving widow. As he is being taken to execution, Frank specifically plots out this role for his “much wronged” bride (5.3.63). He tells her:

there is payment
Belongs to goodness from the great exchequer
Above; it will not fail thee, Winifred;
Be that thy comfort. (5.3.69–72)

Winifred assents to this designation as a pseudo-martyr figure, telling the gathered company that she will survive as the “monument” of Frank’s “loved memory,” a memory that she will preserve “[w]ith a religious care” (5.3.100–102). Her

¹⁵ See Howard, *The Stage and Social Struggle in Early Modern England* (London: Routledge, 1994), 93–128.

¹⁶ On the destabilization of marriage in the play, see Bonavita, “Maids, Wives and Widows,” and Lisa Hopkins, “Ladies’ Trials: Women and the Law in Three Plays of John Ford,” *Cahiers Elisabéthains* 56 (1999): 53.

transition from “loose whore” to “repentant wife” is superseded by her final status as a widow with “modest hopes” (Epil. 5), who is literally granted the final word in the play when she addresses the audience in the epilogue. Winifred’s story is thus both a cautionary one—a potent reminder of the sexual and social disruptions that can stem from women’s work as domestic servants—and a fanciful one, in which real concerns about poverty, vagrancy, and sexual scandal are displaced by more reassuring narratives that emphasize women’s seemingly effortless transitions from servant to wife to widow. It would be a mistake, however, to conclude unequivocally that this surprisingly happy ending constructs the subjectivity of female servants in positive terms. All of the more “favorable” subject-positions that Winifred inhabits in the play—such as the role of grieving widow or her designation as Sir Arthur’s sexual “partner” rather than his abused servant—are carefully delimited and scripted by others. Sir Arthur deflects any suggestion of overt sexual coercion in the first scene, and the Justice, Frank, and Sir Arthur provide a frame for understanding her story of service and its end, an end that coincides with widowhood rather than with marriage. In staging Winifred’s oddly romanticized narrative, *The Witch of Edmonton* announces and then averts tragic catastrophe. Yet it suggests that tragedy is prevented not through the agency of the servant herself, but rather by virtue of her fortuitous circumstances and the intervention of her male superiors.

In deflecting her potential tragedy, Dekker, Ford, and Rowley allow others to plot and define Winifred’s experiences both during and following her tenure in service. This is a discursive strategy common to many tragedies of the period, even those with relatively minor female servant characters. In *Arden of Faversham* (1592), for instance, a domestic tragedy intensely interested in the relationships between masters and servants, Susan, the servingmaid of Alice Arden and sister to Alice’s lover, Mosby, serves primarily as a pawn in Alice and Mosby’s plot against Arden.¹⁷ Susan has only a handful of lines in the entire play, yet she figures prominently as the subject of Alice and Mosby’s marriage negotiations on her behalf. In order to enlist their assistance in murdering Arden, Alice and Mosby promise Susan in marriage to both Michael, Arden’s servant, and Clarke, the painter who devises the (unsuccessful) poisoned painting. Susan is thus entered into two competing marriage plots of which she is entirely unaware. Even a letter that Michael prepares for Susan, in which these competing narratives are solidified and explained, is intercepted by Arden, who rails against Michael for wanting to

¹⁷ Noteworthy studies of this play and its master-servant dynamics include: Frances E. Dolan, *Dangerous Familiars: Representations of Domestic Crime in England 1550–1700* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), 20–58; Lena Cowen Orlin, *Private Matters and Public Culture in Post-Reformation England* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1994), 15–78; and Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr., *The Drama of Landscape: Land, Property, and Social Relations on the Early Modern Stage* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1998), 31–56.

marry “so base a trull” (3.28).¹⁸ Although neither of Susan’s marriage prospects is ever realized in the play, her hypothetical marriage is nonetheless a necessary fiction that fuels Mosby’s and Alice’s murderous plans. Ultimately, Susan is herself sentenced to death, even though she has minimal complicity in the murder of Arden (she tells Mosby innocently that she “knew not of it till the deed was done” [18.20]). As a subordinate member of a household in which subordinates have rebelled against their master, Susan is positioned in the play as guilty by association. Her own narrative of service and the marriage trajectories in which she is unwittingly inserted are so rigorously controlled that they take shape in the drama almost exclusively through the words of others. However, the silencing of Susan in this tragedy also hints at what is imagined to be the dangerously unpredictable nature of female servants—those “base trulls” who must be carefully managed, scripted, and scrutinized lest they (in Arden’s words) become part of a “crew of harlots, all in love” (3.25).

Rowley and Middleton’s tragedy *The Changeling* is similarly interested in the potential sexual disorder caused by female servants, but it shares with *The Witch of Edmonton* a pattern of deferral and redeployment whereby the story of the female domestic is manipulated and redefined for strategic purposes. However, in the overtly tragic ending of Rowley and Middleton’s play (compared with the tragicomic redemption of Winifred) chaos and violence command the stage more viscerally and at greater length.¹⁹ Diaphanta, Beatrice’s waiting-woman in *The Changeling*, figures as both a pawn in a larger plot and as a character who, like Susan in *Arden of Faversham*, must be scripted by others in the face of her own silence. Diaphanta’s primary role in the play is to substitute for Beatrice on her wedding night with Alsemero; Beatrice pays the virgin Diaphanta one thousand ducats to take over her “first night’s pleasure” in order to hide the fact that she herself is no longer a virgin (4.1.88).²⁰ Eager to accept Beatrice’s offer, Diaphanta giddily exclaims: “The bride’s place, / And with a thousand ducats! I’m for a justice now: / I bring a portion with me; I scorn small fools” (4.1.128–30). The

¹⁸ *Arden of Faversham*, (ed.) Martin White (London: A & C Black, 1982). All citations will refer to this edition of the play and will be given parenthetically in the text.

¹⁹ For the link between disloyal servants and sexual ambition in the play, see Michael Neill, “‘A woman’s service’: Gender, Subordination, and the Erotics of Rank in the Drama of Shakespeare and his Contemporaries,” *The Shakespearean International Yearbook 5* (2005): 127–44. Neill’s discussion, however, focuses on De Flores rather than Diaphanta. Burnett argues that the play is “preoccupied with larger crises in service” and that it “uncovers pervasive concerns about dependency . . . and the fixity of hierarchical schemes.” See “*The Changeling* and Masters and Servants,” in *Early Modern English Drama: A Critical Companion*, (eds.) Garrett A. Sullivan, Jr., Patrick Cheney, and Andrew Hadfield (New York: Oxford University Press, 2006), 307.

²⁰ William Rowley and Thomas Middleton, *The Changeling*, (ed.) Douglas Bruster, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, (eds.) Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007). All citations will refer to this edition of the play and will be given parenthetically in the text.

bed trick to which she so willingly accedes positions Diaphanta's lusty sexuality quite strikingly within a marriage plot in which she both literally and figuratively takes over the "bride's place"—dowry and all. Like Winifred's bigamous marriage to Frank, however, Diaphanta's tryst is tainted by illicit sexuality. Not only is her wedding night an adulterous one, but Diaphanta almost ruins Beatrice's scheme when she overindulges in her sexual rendezvous, "devour[ing] the pleasure with a greedy appetite" (5.1.3). As formal stage device run amok, the bed trick in this play contorts and parodies the culturally assumed passage of women from service to marriage and characterizes Diaphanta as unreliable and sexually voracious. It also casts doubt on her subservience within the domestic hierarchy, compelling De Flores, Beatrice's lover and partner in crime, to exclaim in exasperation: "Who'd trust a waiting-woman?" (5.1.15). As the clock strikes one and then two with no sign of Diaphanta, Beatrice joins De Flores in berating her servant, saying that "this whore forgets herself" (5.1.23). While the play successfully paints Diaphanta as a lusty and disobedient servant, a cautionary emblem of the disorder that women's service can engender in domestic settings, it also offers a fantasy version of that disorder by displacing all blame onto the servant herself and by rerouting her actions to align with marriage—however contrived and unsatisfactory. In Diaphanta's narrative, as in Sir Arthur's euphemistic description of his relationship with Winifred, the sexual relationship between a female servant and her master is defined in terms of lascivious and disorderly female desire rather than coercive male prerogative. Furthermore, the play discursively manages even this potentially disruptive sexuality by siphoning it off into a contorted marriage trajectory through the dramatic device of the bed trick.

As a substitute and, ultimately, a scapegoat for her mistress, Diaphanta bears a resemblance to Margaret in Shakespeare's *Much Ado About Nothing* (1600). At the crucial turning point in that play, Borachio's wooing of Margaret, Hero's attending gentlewoman, "by the name of Hero" (3.3.146), leads Claudio and Don Pedro to denounce Hero publicly as a "rotten orange" who is "but the sign and semblance of her honor" (4.1.32, 34). Of course, *Much Ado* is a comedy and this error is rectified in the end, but the substitution of waiting-woman for mistress nevertheless initiates generic tensions, precipitating the play's temporary transition into tragedy, epitomized by Hero's presumed death. Though it is not recognized as such until the play's conclusion, the presumed sexual laxity of a female servant once again heralds domestic chaos and tragedy. Like Diaphanta, Margaret's indecorous behavior at "her mistress's chamber-window" (3.3.146–7) threatens to taint her mistress's honor. Yet the resolution of this misunderstanding at the conclusion of Shakespeare's comedy works doubly to sanitize Hero's own reputation, both by clearing her name outright and by rhetorically shifting suspicion onto the schemers Don John and Borachio, as well as onto Margaret herself. As Leonato tells the gathered company, although Claudio and Don Pedro are innocent, "Margaret was in some fault for this, / Although against her will, as it appears / In the true course of all the question" (5.4.4–6). Tragedy is averted, but only by displacing Hero's blame onto Margaret, who is both granted agency as a kind of conspirator (she was "in some fault") and simultaneously denied it (the act

was "against her will"). Like Winifred and the shepherd's waiting-gentlewoman, Margaret is granted a central role in *Much Ado*'s narrative arc that is directly related to her assumed lasciviousness, but the potentially tragic consequences of her indiscretions are subsumed by the play's romantic resolution. This resolution, however, still requires a specific version of Margaret's story in order to be successful. Conveniently at fault "against her will," Margaret escapes the more extreme penalties imposed on characters such as Don John, yet remains vaguely guilty of sexual improprieties—enough so, at least, to reassure the audience of Hero's innocence by comparison.

As is the case with Margaret in *Much Ado*, Diaphanta's sexual escapades have a significant afterlife of their own. Ultimately Diaphanta must be killed because of her complicity in Beatrice and De Flores's scheming; De Flores sets fire to Diaphanta's chambers to lure her out of Alsemero's bed, then meets her in her chambers and shoots her. Yet Diaphanta's death is not the end of her narrative, as it is for Susan in *Arden*. When questioned by her father, Vermandero, about Diaphanta's "accident," Beatrice concocts an entirely new narrative about her service:

Vermandero: How should the fire come there [to Diaphanta's chamber]?

Beatrice: As good a soul as ever lady countenanced,
But in her chamber negligent and heavy;
She 'scaped a ruin twice.

Vermandero: Twice?

Beatrice: Strangely, twice, sir.

Vermandero: Those sleepy sluts are dangerous in a house,
And they be ne'er so good. (5.1.102–7)

Beatrice and Vermandero rewrite Diaphanta's death as deserving, or at least as inevitable, by inserting her into the position of the bad, "negligent" servant. By calling her a "sleepy slut"—a phrase that, for contemporary audiences, conjured a range of problematic meanings, including a dirty, slovenly or untidy woman, a troublesome or awkward creature, a drudge, a foul slattern, or a woman of low or loose character—Vermandero implies that not only her sexual behavior but also her lack of diligence in her household tasks is to blame for her death.²¹ Vermandero's insult thus simultaneously emphasizes Diaphanta's lower class status, her failure in her household duties, and her sexual improprieties. Beatrice goes even further than insulting Diaphanta after her death; by inventing two prior incidents in which Diaphanta narrowly "scaped a ruin," Beatrice establishes a narrative pattern of slothful service after the fact.

²¹ *OED*, "slut, *n.*," 1 and 2. Judith Haber argues that Diaphanta's lack of sexual fears "underscores her lower status" in "'I(t) could not choose but follow': Erotic Logic in *The Changeling*," *Representations* 81 (2003): 81.

The narrative that Beatrice and Vermandero conveniently provide for Diaphanta defines her in terms of laziness, sexual indecorum, and domestic disorder, creating a picture of service that, not surprisingly, runs directly counter to advice given to female servants by seventeenth-century conduct book writers. Hannah Woolley, for example, who wrote several books on domesticity later in the century, includes a great deal of specific advice for female servants in her manual, *The Compleat Servant-Maid* (1677). Woolley warns her readers to “encline not to sloth or laze in bed” and to “be neat, cleanly, and huswifely in your clothes,” and later in the treatise she forbids “wantoning in the society of men,” advice that Diaphanta, the “sleepy slut,” clearly ignores—at least, according to Beatrice.²² In terms of dramatic effect, Woolley’s practical advice pales in comparison to Beatrice’s racy story and that, of course, is precisely the point. Displacing both the mundane economic details common to treatises like Woolley’s and the historical risk of sexual coercion and abuse, Rowley and Middleton offer up the female servant as both delicious entertainment and crucial mechanism of the tragic plot. Both in the bed trick and after her death, Diaphanta’s narrative is provided to the audience through the mediated language of those characters who *need* her to function as the “sleepy slut” or negligent servant in order for their own dramatic plots to succeed. *The Changeling* represents Diaphanta’s story of service as a malleable commodity that can be manipulated to provide closure and an appropriately cautionary message about sexual disorder. The artificial nature of Diaphanta’s posthumous narrative, however, signals the degree to which this sense of closure is contrived, tentative, and ultimately illusory. The fanciful and nearly excessive scripting of Diaphanta’s service—similar to what we saw with Winifred in *The Witch of Edmonton* and Susan in *Arden of Faversham*—attempts to provide a feeling of certainty and finality, but cannot completely erase the threat to household order posed by Diaphanta, the “sleepy” and “dangerous” slut.

The dangers implicit in the work of domestic service are writ large in tragedies such as *The Changeling* and *The Witch of Edmonton*, as these plays, befitting their genre, place sustained attention on the potentially disastrous consequences of female service in the patriarchal household. At a time when the institution of service was gradually being redefined in terms of temporary, wage-based contracts rather than sustained social relationships, these narratives serve a cautionary function, warning audiences about the uncertainties and instabilities that these female workers potentially bring into English homes. What is more surprising and ultimately more interesting about these plays, however, is the way in which romanticized plot structures manage at times to permeate the tragic mode. Winifred as sexual partner and later grieving widow and Diaphanta as “sleepy slut” are dramatic fantasies that depend on the deflection of the far more common historical narratives of economic hardship and, most notably, sexual subordination and abuse. There is, therefore a cultural use-value to these fictions that goes beyond their

²² Woolley, *The Compleat Servant-Maid; Or, The Young Maidens Tutor* (London, 1677), B1v and D7v.

cautionary function. The tragic genre creates a space in which concerns about the sexual vulnerability of women in service can be vividly, even tantalizingly, aired. Yet in these plays that tragic drive is superseded and narratologically transformed into far more palatable stories. Crucially, those stories are told by others. The subjectivity of the female servant thus emerges only at a distant remove, and is defined largely in terms of social powerlessness, criminality, or excessive sexual desire. The fanciful narratives that structure these plays—particularly those that rewrite sexual coercion as female lasciviousness—in no way benefit the servant herself, though they do ameliorate the potentially more devastating aspects of her story, presumably for the benefit of the audience, which can enjoy the salacious entertainment on offer without considering too deeply the more troubling stories of women’s service and its aftermath.

These plays thus perform a culturally useful balancing act, creating a space—albeit a largely negative one—in which female servants emerge as dramatic subjects, while also displacing those subjects when dramatically necessary. Like the shepherd’s waiting-gentlewoman or Margaret in *Much Ado*, the stories of female servants are poised between tragedy and comedy. As narratives, they are generic hybrids, and the complications they invoke are likewise resolved through generic means. Plays as divergent as *The Winter’s Tale* and *The Witch of Edmonton* turn to romanticized plotlines to leave the problems of “behind-door-work” and “secret game[s]” behind. In doing so, however, these plays turn sexual vulnerability itself into a fictional narrative, replacing the real danger of coercion that obtained in master-servant relationships with a discursive fantasy of female desire. In this scenario, fictional narrative does the work of distancing messy social realities by rendering them salacious entertainment and therefore of limited social threat. As a result, it becomes far too easy to align ourselves with the shepherd in *The Winter’s Tale* and “read waiting-gentlewoman in the scape.”