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Unnatural Naturals?

Changelings and Issues of Intellectual Disability in Early Modern English Drama

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Stories of “changelings” were among the most popular pieces of fairy lore in early modern England, in particular after the middle of the sixteenth century (Latham, pp. 148-50). The term was used in reference to the nightly substitution of babies in their cradle by supernatural beings such as fairies and demons. These, according to Christian beliefs, were more likely to act on individuals dwelling in a theological limbo, such as unchristened infants and unchurched nursing mothers (Buccola, pp. 49-50; Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition*, pp. 136, 141).¹ A changeling could be either the beautiful child that was taken away to fairyland or the child that was left behind by the fairies in the place of the rightful baby (Buccola, p. 49). In the second case, there was usually something wrong with the substitute baby, also called an “elf”, “killcrop” or “oaf” (Haffter, p. 56)—often its appearance, as it could be ugly, deformed or monstrous, or maybe its behaviour, as it might be unruly, peevish or motionless, or even its lack of normal growth. The subnormality of these children, however, was sometimes related also to the insufficiency of their intellectual performance, and this is where the notions of changeling and fool converged.

The relation between the two in Renaissance thinking has recently been considered by psychological historians such as C. F. Goodey and Tim Stainton (pp. 223-40), but its relevance to drama has only been cursorily remarked on by literary historians of the early modern period. M. W. Latham briefly mentioned how “elf” and “changeling” could be used generally to des-

1 Latham has found “no records in England until the middle of the 16th century of the exchange of fairy children for mortal offspring which resulted in the disappearance of the human infant and the appearance of a strange and supernatural baby in its stead” (p. 150).

ignite a silly or foolish person.² Susan Schoon Eberly, in focusing on fairy offspring and issues of disability, neglects early modern drama and draws most primary material from later folk tales (pp. 58-77). More pertinent is Regina Buccola's section on changelings, as she mentions a few foolish dramatic characters associated directly or indirectly with fairy lore. Among those who deal with fairies but are not termed changelings themselves she lists Bottom in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, stressing his virtual role as an inferior substitute for Titania's Indian boy. She also applies the notion to the stupid prince Cloten in *Cymbeline*, who acts as a replacement for the king's lost sons for twenty years before the twins are almost magically restored to their father. As concerns dull characters passed off as children of the fairies, Buccola lingers only on Dapper in Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* but focuses more on his (fraudulent) connections with the fairy world than on his idiocy (pp. 52, 120-22, 160). My main aim in this essay is to study more in depth and to clarify the connection between the two stock figures of the fool and the changeling. Starting from theological, folkloric and proto-psychological definitions of the changeling, I will discuss some early modern dramatic examples of the changeling in relation to ideas of idiocy. I will show how, although the characters' fairy contacts or supposed origins seem to connect them with the supernatural, their idiocy is more extensively shaped by tangible ideas of intellectual deficiency, which draw on the social, legal, medical and physiognomical knowledge available in the early modern period.

Scholars of psychology and developmental disability have often linked the making up and transmission of changeling stories with what is now defined as the parental bereavement model: then, as now, the grief that parents felt when they found out that their child was not what they expected—that it was malformed or had difficulty learning—gave way to a mourning for the child that they had not had. In an age when science had not yet given explanations for congenital bodily or mental deviations from the norm, people found in the supernatural and the demonic a justification for what they could not understand and found hard to accept. In this way they allayed feelings of anxiety, anger, rejection or guilt (Goodey and Stainton, p. 224; Eberly, pp. 61-62; Haffter, p. 55).

The association between supernatural origins and physical and/or mental defect was apparently so marked that at some point in the seventeenth century the word "changeling" became interchangeable with "idiot".³ In the earlier period, roughly from

2 Latham cited examples from the following mainly dramatic works (pp. 20, 157): *Misogonus* (anon.), *Diana* (a sonnet sequence by Henry Constable), *The Bugbears* (anon.), *Common Conditions* (anon.), *The Muses of Elizium* (a poem by Michael Drayton), *Gallathea* (John Lyly), *Promos and Cassandra* (George Whetstone), *The Changeling* (Thomas Middleton and William Rowley), *Anything for a Quiet Life* (Thomas Middleton and John Webster) and *The Sad Shepherd* (Ben Jonson).

3 See *OED*, s.v. "changeling", def. 3.

the mid-fifteenth century, when the word “changeling” is first attested, it could indicate either a substitute child or someone whose will and opinions were very changeable (Goodey, p. 267), but not necessarily a natural fool: the assimilation to a condition comparable to intellectual disability occurred only later and gradually.

The earliest extant historical documentation of the child substitution story itself in Europe dates to the thirteenth century, when the theologian William of Auvergne noted how *cambiones* (the Latin word for changelings) were believed to be

children of demon incubi, substituted by female demons so that they are fed by them as if they are their own and are . . . swapped and substituted to female parents for their own children. They say these are thin, always wailing, drinking so much milk that it takes four wet-nurses to feed one. They are seen to stay with their wet-nurses for many years, after which they fly away, or rather vanish.⁴

Similarly, the Paris theologian Jacques De Vitry wrote that “children whom the French call *chamium* . . . suck dry many wet-nurses but nevertheless do not benefit or grow, but have a hard, distended belly”.⁵ Other texts in the fifteenth century revived stories of *cambiones*, but the most authoritative for later writers were the *Malleus Malleficarum* (1486), by Heinrich Kramer and Jacob Sprenger, which, however, added little to the earlier French descriptions, and above all Luther’s *Tischreden* (*Table Talk*), a compilation (by Johannes Mathesius and others) published in German in 1566. Luther, to whom the idea that changelings should be killed because they are the Devil’s offspring is attributed, told the story of a “changed child” of twelve years of age who

did nothing but feed, and would eat as much as two clowns or threshers were able to eat. When one touched it, then it cried out. When any evil happened in the house, then it laughed and was joyful; but when all went well, then it cried and was very sad. (Goodey and Stainton, p. 229 [citing Luther, p. 397])

He also spoke of a “Killcrop” who “sucked the Mother and five other Women dry; and besides, devoured very much” (Goodey and Stainton, p. 229 [citing Luther, p. 397]). Goodey and Stainton have shown how the focus in these records is on the tangibility of the devil and the physical or behavioural subnormality of the children: very little is said about their intellectual performance. Using these and other examples, Goodey and Stainton have sought to demonstrate how the fairy-demoniac substitution story initially had no relation to the notion of intellectual disability, that the link between the two

4 William of Auvergne, *De Universo*, as cited and translated by Goodey and Stainton, p. 227.

5 Jacques de Vitry, *Sermones Vulgares*, as cited and translated by Goodey and Stainton, p. 228.

meanings of “changeling” as elf and “idiot” was merely “incidental” (p. 223), and that the union between the two concepts is the result of the superimposition of later (late seventeenth- to twentieth-century) medical definitions of mental retardation upon medieval and Renaissance accounts: instances of this type started appearing with the work of scientific writers Thomas Willis (*Cerebri Anatomie*, 1664) and John Locke (*Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, 1690).

In my view, Goodey and Stainton appear unnecessarily dismissive. I am not, in particular, convinced of the irrelevance of some examples which they term “exceptional” or “isolated”. Already in the late fifteenth century, the Dominican friar Johannes Nider referred to the changeling children later described in the *Malleus* as having no speech (Nider, *praeceptum* I, *capitulum* II, *quaestio* 12), so presumably suffering from mutism, aphasia or some other type of impairment that impeded their ability to use language effectively. These are disorders that even nowadays can be related to intellectual disability.⁶ The apparent rarity of explicit references to the intellectual characteristics of changelings in accounts of substitution may in fact be a consequence of the general inability to distinguish between mental and physical impairment in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance. A flawed body almost certainly bespoke mental defects, so that a fool and a cripple were inherently linked figures.

In this light, an early seventeenth-century account is definitely too intriguing to be overlooked. In the fairy epic *Nymphidia*, Michael Drayton exposed the early modern belief that:

When a child haps to be got,
Which after proves an idiot,
When folk perceive it thriveth not,
The fault therein [d]o smother:
Some silly doting brainless calf,
That understands things by the half,
Say, that the Fairy left this elf,
And took away the other. (ll. 83-90)⁷

Though Drayton does not share his contemporaries’ belief, he interestingly marks the connection between a child’s inability to “thrive”—probably in a physical sense, as

⁶ See, e.g., Kliegman, pp. 210-11, and Schwartz, pp. 52-81.

⁷ *Nymphidia* was first published in 1627, but it might not be so late. Some critics have argued that it was written before Shakespeare’s *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*. Others have supposed that, because of internal evidence pointing to *Don Quixote*, the poem cannot be earlier than 1605 (see Malone, ed., p. 460n.). Drayton, however, might have been expressing a view that was common already in the late sixteenth century.

that would be the first thing “folk” would notice—and his being taken for an “idiot”: lack of growth thus entails intellectual disability. This also illuminates earlier accounts of *cambiones*, where failure to grow or to perform any meaningful activity was a common characteristic,⁸ and where, therefore, the idea of idiocy might be deemed implicit. The twelve-year-old Dessau changeling Luther had mentioned

devoured as much as four farmers did, and he did nothing else than eat and excrete. Luther suggested that he be suffocated. Someone asked, “for what reason?” He replied, “Because I think he’s simply a mass of flesh without a soul. Couldn’t the devil have done this, inasmuch as he gives such shape to the body and mind even of those who have reason that in their obsession they hear, see, and feel nothing? The devil is himself in their soul. The power of the devil is great when in this way he holds the minds of men captive. (Goodey and Stainton, p. 230 [citing Luther, p. 396])

While being soulless hints at sin, there can also be a psycho-physiological meaning to soul. “Soul” or “animal” spirits, or the “soul substance”, in medieval and early modern science and philosophy was the matter filling the brain and fuelling the faculties of the mind (Harvey, p. 2; Metzler, pp. 60, 63, 85). A brain devoid of soul spirits was therefore the brain of a fool. Let us now turn to the dramatic discourse of idiocy in connection with the changeling myth.

Middleton and Rowley’s *The Changeling*, performed in 1622, is the obvious example that comes to mind when we think of changelings in early modern drama. Yet the word “changeling” is never present within the play text, nor is there any fairy offspring as such in the plot. The character list ties the epithet incontrovertibly to Antonio, and as such it points, in the second decade of the seventeenth century, to the notion of a changeling as “an idiot, an imbecile” (*OED*, def. 3), but also more generally as a “substitute”, in that, pretending to be an inmate of the hospital, Antonio stands as the surrogate of a fool.⁹ Though Antonio is not a real fool—and occasionally his intellectual acuity shines through his pretended foolishness—his performance as one is good enough to link him to early modern views of idiocy as a clinical and legal state. In this way, he is ironically at odds with the supernatural resonances his epithet might have evoked. Even before Antonio appears for the first time in the play, his condition is described as partly distinct

⁸ See also Cameron, pp. 36, 114.

⁹ Neill, ed., adds other possible interpretations: the “substitute” points to Diaphanta as a stand-in for Beatrice in the bed trick; because “changeling” hints at the idea of “changing”, it represents Beatrice-Joanna’s transformation and her inconsistency or fickleness, as well as Alsemero’s “conversion from fearless traveller to abject lover” (p. 398, note to the title.). Here I will concentrate on the meaning of “changeling” as idiot.

from that of the violent ranting inmates of the madhouse. The keeper Lollius states how there are “but two sorts of people in the house . . . that’s fools and madmen; the one has not wit enough to be knaves, and the other not knavery enough to be fools” (I.ii.45-48).¹⁰ As a fool, Antonio is *not* a madman: Lollio here makes explicit the legal separation that English authorities had been advocating since the thirteenth century between “idiocy” as mental impairment from birth and “lunacy” as mental illness arising during the course of one’s life, a condition that allowed for lucid intervals (Neugebauer, p. 25). Idiocy, as an ailment of the soul rather than of the body, was regarded as incurable by earthly medicine (Jackson, p. 287). This is the reason why it was rare for idiots to be admitted into Bedlam (Stainton, “Medieval Charitable Institutions”, p. 23). Therefore, on the one hand, it is somewhat unrealistic that Alibius should be dealing in fools as well as madmen, though this might be due to the keeper’s greedy desire to lay his hands on the inheritance of as many inmates’ as possible.¹¹ On the other, Pedro makes clear that he does not expect Antonio to recover fully, but merely that the doctor should give “some little strength to his sick and weak part of nature in him” (I.ii.88-89).

Antonio’s interactions with Lollio encapsulate what was at stake in early modern legal discussions and examinations of idiocy. Lollio’s asking for Antonio’s name not only serves as a dramatic device to introduce a new character to the audience, but also evokes the practices of authorities at early modern incompetency examinations—held by the Court of Wards and Liveries—where idiots were asked easy questions about themselves to prove their capacity.¹² Personal names vehiculate the individual’s social identity (Cohen, pp. 71-79; Hough and Izdebska, p. 387), so by asking for Antonio’s name, Lollio implicitly carries out an inspection to validate his belonging to society. Antonio does have a name, but when he is asked for it, he does not give an answer. This inability is already enough to declare him an idiot in a double way—legally, because for Lollius this is a practical clue to determine whether Antonio is actually disabled or not, and socially, because it hints at the idiot as an individual lacking a clear civic identity. In this light, Lollio’s interrogation stands for a parodic reversal of the baptismal ritual: rather than incorporating the individual into the community, it ratifies his exclusion.¹³

Concerning Antonio’s name, Pedro specifies that “we use but half for him, only Tony” (I.ii.100-1), which, Lollio comments, is “enough, and a very good name for a fool” (102-3).¹⁴ The shortening of the fool’s given name hints at the early modern social

¹⁰ Middleton and Rowley, ed. Thomson (my text of reference).

¹¹ On Alibius’s greed, see Drouet, pp. 144-45.

¹² See Neugebauer, esp. pp. 28-33.

¹³ For the function of baptism and name-giving in the early modern period see Muir, pp. 24-25.

¹⁴ This might be a reference to Thony, the royal fool at the French court between 1547 and 1559, for whom Brantôme and Ronsard wrote epitaphs. (Thanks to Richard Hillman for this suggestion.)

practice of using common address for disabled people (Postles, pp. 105-6). “Tony” points to the intellectually disabled individual’s social assimilation to a child; it registers a diminishing of a social status which, moreover, Antonio supposedly does not know the value of. Not only is he unable to state his own name, but he also cannot locate himself clearly within a family, which, as Michael MacDonald notes, was the “basic garment of social identity” (p. 126). Antonio cannot tell the difference between Pedro and Lollo—to him they are both “cousin”—and on first seeing Isabella he calls out, “is it not my *aunt*?” (III.iii.105; italics mine), with a double entendre on the word’s slang sense of “prostitute” (as with Dol Common in *The Alchemist*, to be mentioned below). Just as authorities tested idiots’ numeracy skills to make sure they could not manage property, Lollo also frequently asks for mathematical calculations (“Tony, how many is five times six?” [III.iii.162-63]) and rejoices at Antonio’s improvements.

Though Antonio’s intellectual defect is permanent, Pedro’s eagerness to raise his cousin to “any degree of wit” (I.ii.110) is tied to insistence that the “idiot” “is a gentleman” (I.ii.117). Pedro voices the early modern anxiety that an abnormal individual might be born to the noble classes, which considered themselves also the intellectual elite. For example, Giovanni Battista Nenna’s influential tract on nobility, translated into English in 1595 as *Nennio*, maintained that children “who in their swadling cloutes descended of a noble stocke . . . yet are neither capable of vertue nor reason” lacked the nobility of mind to be regarded as truly noble, and were therefore to be seen as people “of the vulgar sort”, as degenerate as descendants of noble families who became “robbers in the high way, murtherers, theeues, slaundersers” (Nenna, p. 76). When Antonio steps momentarily out of his performance of folly, he shows connivance with the outlook that gentlemantliness and foolishness are incompatible concepts, and he refuses to be connected with the latter:

Take no acquaintance
Of these outward follies; there is within
A gentleman that loves you. (III.iii.145-47)

And he does so also invoking early modern humoral theories of folly:

Isabella. . . . You become not your tongue
When you speak from your clothes.
Antonio. How can he freeze,
Lives near so sweet a warmth? (178-80)

While warmth represents the beauty, gentleness and supposed sensuality of Isabella, it also points to the opposite humoral tag of the fool, who was normally cold and moist (Metzler, p. 84). Antonio acknowledges this with his image of one who could “freeze”, but, in his subtle attempt to seduce Isabella, he pretends he sees the love of a woman as a

spiritual cure for his soul, the part of man that idiocy taints. To Antonio, however, idiocy is also displayed in more visible terms of bodily disability:

Look you but cheerfully, and in your eyes
I shall behold mine own deformity,
And dress myself up fairer; I know this shape
Becomes me not. (III.iii.193-96)

He thereby confirms his connection not only to iconographic fools (deformed, cripples) but also to monstrous changeling births.

The changeling and the fool identities in Antonio are additionally linked via childish attributes. Just as changeling stories were usually about babies and young children, natural fools also represented a permanent lingering in the early phase of human development, both intellectually and socially (McDonagh, p. 85). Lollo suggests that Antonio will be able to “go play” (I.ii.184) soon, and presents the madmen as “school-fellows” (227) of the idiot. Also, Antonio’s occasional sounds, such as “he, he” or “oh, oh”, voice the inarticulate ways a child requests attention or expresses frustration, as does his admission—which elicits Lollo’s reassurance—that he is scared of madmen: “I would see the madmen, cousin, if they would not bite me” (230-31). When Lollo warns him, “you must not cry, child” (151), Antonio reminds us of the always “ailing” substituted children of the records and folklore narratives, such as the “wee kiddie” Johnnie in the Cradle, who “was always crying and never satisfied” (Briggs, *British Folk Tales*, p. 188).

This vision of the changeling fool as someone unable to express him or herself in a meaningful, assertive way is dramatised also in Peter Hausted’s *The Rival Friends*, performed nine years after *The Changeling*, which features two simple-minded young women: Mistress Ursely and Merda. The author describes them in “The Praeface to the Reader” as “two Changelings”, who “spoke no strong lines but plaid at Chackstones” (p. 4).¹⁵ The first is the “supposed Daughter” of the “Simoniacall Patrone” Sacriedge Hooke (*Dramatis Personae*, p. 1). We know from the list of characters that she is “deformed and foolish” (p. 1), and her unspecified disability, which involves at the very least “a crooked back” (I.viii [p. 34]), makes people think she

without all question
Was Kitlin to Nib o’th Queene of Faries Kitchin,
Sent to [her father] for a Newyeeres gift
Vpon exchange by the Elf. (I.viii [p. 34])

¹⁵ I cite the transcription of the 1632 London edition available in the *Early Print* digital anthology derived from the *Shakespeare His Contemporaries* project; page numbers refer to the PDF document.

Ursely is apparently such an abominable creature that she does not even deserve to be a descendant of the queen of fairies: she is instead the daughter of her kitchen maid, Nib (possibly a contraction of “Isabella”). The allusion to Ursely as a kitten is also possibly tied to the traditional role of cats as evil fairies in animal form.¹⁶ In both senses, Ursely is seen as a magical creature. At the end of the play, we find out that Ursely is indeed special, as she was given away by her real mother when the latter saw that the baby was “deformed and distort” (V.viii [p. 130]), and was adopted by a lady, for whom, therefore, Ursely was indeed a substitute child. Merda, on the contrary, is the eighteen-year-old real daughter of her parents yet is called by her mother “fayrie brat”, “changeling”, “[d]aughter to Madam Pusse the kitchin mayd” (II.vi [p. 52]). Though only Ursely is also physically disabled, the two girls display intellectual disability in analogous ways. Both of them are termed children of kitchen maids, and both are linked to the myth of fairy cats. Childishness, however, is the quality that specifically marks them as foolish.

Irina Metzler has discussed the connection among children, animals and the intellectually disabled; since antiquity, these categories had been used for beings whose emotions, instincts and physical movements could not be channelled through judgment or rationality (Metzler, pp. 122-30). Merda’s unwillingness to wake up in the morning in Act Two, Scene One, attests to such immaturity, and also substantiates the early modern conception of natural folly as somehow related to lethargy (Metzler, p. 84) and excessive somnolence, as opposed to the association of madness with frenzy. Ursely walks up to Merda singing, and she also sings later on in the play. Her repetitive empty tune, “Fa la la la” (II.i. [p. 39]), which she utters at unexpected or inappropriate moments, is reminiscent of the way Antonio in *The Changeling* entertains himself, and is paralleled by Merda’s inability to express herself and her anxiety in an intelligible way. Merda often repeats what others say to her, and her “Mother Mother Mother what shall I doe?” becomes inarticulate sound in “Vm vm vm” (II.vi. [p. 52]).

It is, however, the two women’s attitude to play, already signalled by the author’s prefatory comment, that gets stigmatised as subnormal. Bartholomeus Anglicus had in fact remarked that because children “think only on things that be, and reck not of things that shall be, they love plays, game, and vanity” (p. 51). In Act Two, Scene One, Ursely wakes Merda up because she has “found six Checkstones in [her] / Father’s yard” (p. 39) and she wants to play, while the latter, in Act Two, Scene Five, ironically counterpoints her father’s serious business by playing “with babes clouts” (p. 48, SD), that is, dolls, something which her father resents and which he wishes to punish by the customary method of punishing fools: “Making of Puppets one of your age and breeding? / You haue an Husband

¹⁶ See Briggs, *The Fairies in Tradition*, pp. 85-88.

Minion you a rodde” (p. 49); “I le breake you of this trade of making children / Before your time if I can find a willow / Within a mile of an Oake” (p. 51). The dialogue between Merda and Ursely reaches the apex of insignificance insofar as it focuses merely on play, making large use of the typical bickering language of children. Here is a case in point:

Ursely. well well the next time

That you eat any Cheesecakes at our house

You shall haue better luck shall you.

Merda. Your Cheesecakes we haue as good of our owne. (II.ii [p. 41])

Ursely’s more serious subnormality, however, becomes manifest as Merda gets the upper hand in the amical relationship. The latter asks her friend to give her anything interesting she has on her—bracelets, gloves. Ursely’s unquestioning compliance with Merda’s request not only marks her naïveté but links her with an economical definition of idiocy as lack of property and financial status. Taking away property from individuals “begged for fools” by their relatives corresponded, in the early modern English legal system, to the official declaration of the idiocy of the person. Hausted echoes this by getting Ursely to give up some of her most personal belongings. The girl’s easy pliability, however, confirms her inability to attribute a special value to those items.

The two girls’ immaturity is represented, finally, in the way they project their sexuality. McDonagh has noted how intellectually disabled women were usually seen as “threatening” creatures, whose excessive sexual and physical appetites were frequently represented in literature, as in John Fletcher’s *The Pilgrim* (1621) (McDonagh, pp. 105-6). Both Merda’s and Ursely’s desire is directed at someone they cannot have: Merda falls in love at once with a female disguised as a man, and is nicknamed “Maukin” by her mother, who thus gestures towards her licentiousness.¹⁷ Ursely intends to marry nobody but Anteros, a love-hater who despises not only her but any living woman.

In Richard Brome’s play *The English Moor, or The Mock-Marriage* (performed in 1637), we again find the theme of the intellectually disabled son, but, as in *The Changeling*, intellectual disability is craftily simulated. John Buzzard, a dismissed servant of the old usurer Quicksand, is involved by some of his master’s debtors in a plot to cancel all the payments owing. Quicksand has a secret “idiot” child in Norfolk, whom he abandoned in infancy, and Buzzard impersonates the idiot to bribe his former master into an unprofitable deal. In mentioning the secret for the first time, Buzzard declares himself sure of the fairy origins of Quicksand’s child:

¹⁷ The *OED* lists the word as a variant of “malkin”, whose first meaning is “a lower-class, untidy, or sluttish woman, *esp.* a servant or country girl” (def. 1.a).

Buzzard. ... But it is the arsy-versiest oaf that ever crept into the world. Sure, some goblin got it for him; or changed it in the nest, that's certain.

Nathaniel. I vow thou utterest brave things. Is't a boy?

Buzzard. It has gone for a boy in short coats and long coats this seven and twenty years.

Edmund. An idiot, is it?

Buzzard. Yes, a very natural; and goes a thissen; and looks as old as I do too. And I think if my beard were off, I could be like him: I have taken great pains to practise his speech and action to make myself merry with him in the country. (III.ii.523-27)¹⁸

Traditionally seen as mischievous variants of fairies, goblins were creatures straddling folklore, magic and demonology (Gibson and Esra, p. 106; Briggs, *Encyclopedia*, p. 194). Ostling and Forest's extensive corpus-based research has, however, revealed the ambiguity in the taxonomy of praeternatural beings and shown how, in early modern literary, theological and demonological texts and pamphlets, "a *goblin* is presented as being the same thing as a *fairy* or a *devil*", as well as a spirit: the equivalence of such figures is often reflected explicitly in collocations (Ostling and Forest, pp. 559-60). As Buzzard's conjecture clearly demonstrates, goblins, like fairies, were often associated with the taking away of children (Ostling and Forest, p. 557), but here the common ground between goblins and demons—*incubi*, in particular—comes into full view, encompassing the belief in devils' procreating power and their defective offspring set out by earlier theologians.

Buzzard's second line stresses the congruence of idiocy and infancy, defining the natural fool as an adult who will never grow, as the children's rhymes he sings in Act Five testify. Long coats or petticoats, in particular, were the tunics usually worn by children and both natural and artificial fools, on stage and off.¹⁹ The audience later finds out that the fool's name is "Timsy", a diminutive of Timothy, the stage clown playing the part,²⁰ and, again, as in *The Changeling*, it is a childlike nickname encapsulating the social subordination the fool is relegated to. Buzzard's third line then exposes some of the physiological manifestations of idiocy. Buzzard imitates what seems like Timsy's strange way of walking. As in Drayton's *Nymphidia*, physical disability is here taken as the chief sign of mental disability, thereby underlining the substantial congruence between the two. Facial deformity is also part of this physical disability, as is suggested by Buzzard's hint that the natural fool is a boy with an adult's face, as well as disrupted speech and actions.

The most interesting piece of information—also because it gives Buzzard's listeners the idea of dressing him up as a fool—is that removing one's beard is enough to make him

¹⁸ References are to the edition by Steggle for the *Richard Brome Online* collection, which numbers acts, scenes and speeches.

¹⁹ For a lengthy discussion of the issue see Hotson, pp. 53-70.

²⁰ The comic actor Timothy Read; see Brome, ed. Steggle, "Introduction".

look like a fool. We have many indications that fools in the early modern period were associated with beardlessness and, more generally, hairlessness.²¹ This has psychological and physiognomical explanations. Lethargy, whose symptoms were occasionally mapped out on intellectually disabled individuals, was connected with coldness and moistness of temperament, which, in turn, were associated with beardlessness and hairlessness. Since Galen, this characteristic had been connected with diminished perspiration of the brain and an inferior overall state of that organ. Early modern doctors, such as Juan Huarte, were more explicit in drawing a connection between hairlessness and lack of wit (Siegel, pp. 178-83).²² It is in this light, I believe, that we should interpret Buzzard's remarks that "My beard's my honour" and that "Hair is an ornament of honour upon man—or woman" (III.ii.532). Buzzard's equation implies the existence of a third term, standing in opposition to the other two: foolishness. Honour, symbolised by hair, was indeed opposed to foolishness, because a fool, having no social position or authority, could not possess it.²³ So it is not by chance that the first thing the gang does to turn Buzzard into a fool is to cut off his beard. Even before that, though, his transformation into the foolish changeling starts with booze, which makes him sleepy. When he declares, "Hey ho! I am very sleepy" (534), Buzzard combines lack of reason with sleep, thus embracing lethargy.

When the time comes for Buzzard to start his performance and enter "*like a changeling*" (IV.v.814 SD), we realise how this relies on an extreme disruption of language, such as we have seen in the other changelings so far. Aside from the first two lines, where he seemingly praises the music, the rest of his utterances merely repeat the nonsense "Ha, ha, ha" and "Hey toodle loodle loodle loo". These might imitate the sound of pipes, or be "an instruction to make noise rather than a set of words to be spoken", as Steggle suggests (Brome, ed. Steggle, n. to IV.v.819), and as such they recall Antonio's and Ursely's empty statements, pronounced at unexpected or inopportune moments. Or they might form a continuous background to the dialogue between the other characters,

21 In psalters, the fool was usually bald; see Gifford, p. 338. Rosenberg reports Douce's comment that fools in Shakespeare's time had their heads shaved so that the cockscomb could stand out (p. 103n.). Wiles explains that some fools had their heads shaved to prevent lice: one example is Jane the Fool, Mary I's jester (p. 190).

22 Huarte wrote that "another sort of baldnesse groweth from hauing the haire hard & earthily, and of a grosse composition, but that betokeneth a man void of vnderstanding, imagination and memory" (p. 213). Besides stating that having a beard "is the first token of a temperat man" (p. 261), Huarte connects the beardlessness of women with their natural cold and moist temperament, which, when extreme, works "an impairment in the reasonable part" (pp. 272-74).

23 Goodey discusses the link between folly and lack of honour. Nobility was usually associated with the possession of honour: a nobly born fool, being unable to understand, was fundamentally disqualified from his social rank. On the other hand, anyone who was not born into a noble family was inherently a fool, though not really impaired (pp. 125-26).

as is suggested by the stage direction “*Etcetera*” at the end of Buzzard’s lines (Brome, ed. Steggle, n. to IV.v.840).

At several points, the play offers consideration of the issue of foolish births in early modern England, the keeping of a natural, and idiocy in relation to parenthood. The gang broods over the birth of the natural fool, or “changeling bastard” (III.iii.561), and considers it the consequence of the sins of “this rascal Quicksands”: evidently “lechery”, as well as “greedy avarice and cozenage” (557). “That his base offspring proves a natural idiot” is regarded as one of the “punishments / That haunt the miscreant for his black misdeeds” (558). This explanation reflects what Haffer has seen as a crucial change in the attitude to the substitution story after the Christian appropriation of an essentially heathen myth in the post-Reformation era: the blame was not projected solely on the spirits, but internalised by parents, who saw it as punishment for their sins. The seventeenth-century German author Praetorius, for instance, reinforced the *Malleus Malleficarum*’s theory that changelings were the punishment for cursing fathers by affirming that God especially punishes unchaste fathers who, like Quicksands, beget children outside marriage (Haffer, pp. 58-59).²⁴ When Arnold, a member of the gang, shows Buzzard-changeling to Quicksands, he claims he came to “[put] off a child natural to the natural father” (IV.v.836), arguing that the latter is “not the first grave and wise citizen that has got an idiot” (838). Intelligence and idiocy are here put in dangerous proximity, as Arnold utters a piece of folk wisdom concerning the incapacity of wise men to give birth to children like themselves in wit. In fact, Renaissance psychology also endorsed this view. Huarte is most explicit in this respect:

men verie wise, euen in the copulation go imagining vpon matters nothing pertinent to that they haue in hand, and therethrough, weaken the seed, and make their children defectiue, as well in the powers reasonall, as in the naturall. (p. 286)

Contrarily to what his unnatural birth and his abominable linguistic performance suggest, the fool has achieved quite something in his life: “he has learned to thrip among the mawthers” (IV.v.857), that is, he has learnt some spinning and, more interestingly, he has got sixteen women with child. Such an imputation owes much to the early modern European medico-legal debate on fools’ sexual capacity. On the one hand, fools’ sexual prowess was suggested by theories, such as Huarte’s, that unlike wise men, “sottish persons apply themselues affectionatly to the carnall act” (p. 286). On the other hand, one of the characters’ bewildered question, “Is’t possible?” (IV.v.861), registers the Renaissance bias against fools’ fertility—which is apparent in the words of an early sixteenth-century

²⁴ For the passage in *Malleus*, see Kramer and Sprenger, ed. and trans. Summers, p. 105.

legal dictionary that stated that if a man could “begette a childe then he was noe Ideot naturallye” (Rastell, sig. 117^v)—or even, as Paromita Chakravarti argues, “eugenic anxieties about generational transmission of physical and mental disabilities” (p. 224). For example, in 1621 the papal physician Paul Zacchias wrote about the congenital deaf that they had “a rude and gross understanding” and were akin to animals; thus they should not be allowed to marry, not only because their mental capacity prevented the full comprehension of the sacrament, but also because “there is evidence that they beget children like themselves” (cited by Cranefield and Federn, p. 17).

The intellectually disabled person’s alleged physical immaturity is what informs the representation of another dramatic “changeling”, whom, though chronologically belonging to the earliest play in the group, I have left for last because he is not really a fool, although he is in various ways turned into one by other characters. This is Dapper, the clerk of Jonson’s *The Alchemist* (1610), who wants Subtle to provide him with a familiar spirit in order to win at gambling. The conmen convince him that “a rare star / Reigned at [his] birth” (I.ii.123-24), that therefore he is “allied to the Queen of Fairy” (126) and that he was “born with a caul o’ [his] head” (128). This was an especially good omen in the period, as, when a baby was born with part of the amnion around its head, it was supposed to be endowed with visionary powers and a special affinity with the spirits. The caul itself was seen as an external soul or a guardian spirit (Muir, pp. 27-28). Though changeling stories do not often involve details about the caul, and no actual “substitution” is mentioned in relation to Dapper, the magical token of the caul suggests the identity of Dapper as an elf himself and supports the motherly role of the Fairy Queen. Dapper’s foolishness shines in being easily gulled by Subtle and Face into engaging in special rituals for his “aunt”, the Fairy Queen, who “kissed him, in the cradle” (I.ii.150) and apparently loves him very much. As Buccola notes (p. 122), Dapper is called “quodling” (I.i.189), which hints at his unripeness and sexual immaturity in interacting with his “fairy” aunt while being cozened by an actual “aunt”, the prostitute Dol disguised as the Fairy Queen. Other exhibits of intellectual disability are thrust upon Dapper, as he accepts the instructions of Subtle and Face. Linguistic inarticulacy is part of the ritual he must perform in honour of the Fairy Queen:

Subtle. Is he [Dapper] fasting?
Face. Yes.
Subtle. And hath cried *hum*?
Face. Thrice, you must answer.
Dapper. Thrice.
Subtle. And as oft *buz*?
Face. If you have, say.
Dapper. I have. (III.v.2-4)

Not only is Dapper forced to pronounce nonsense words repeatedly, but his need of an intermediary to be able to respond to Subtle's commands is another signal of his linguistic incapacity, which is reinforced by the insinuation that Dapper is able to answer only by exact imitation of Face's cues, and not by independent reasoning.

The next steps of the cozeners' plan are first to have him don a "robe" that perilously recalls real fools' cassocks, and then to rob Dapper of all his valuables, intimidatingly suggesting that the Fairy Queen wants him to "throw away all wordly pelf" (III.v.17), namely purse, handkerchiefs, rings, money, anything "that is transitory" (30). Dapper's "idiotification" is complete, as he witnesses his own dispossession of property, in a dramatic enactment of early modern English legal appropriation of idiots' wealth once they were examined and found disabled. Face underscores such an implication by exhorting Dapper to be totally honest and by playing on the double meaning of "innocent" as blameless and fool: "Deal plainly, sir, and shame the fairies. Show / You are an innocent" (39-40). The false elves, who detect further riches on Dapper's body and force him to give them up, set up a sort of a mock trial of the poor fool and thereby enact an ironical representation of authorities stripping fools of their belongings. The "idiot" thus becomes a destitute person, carrying to an extreme the implications of the Greek word *idiotes*, someone lacking public office or a peasant. This also occurs later, when Dol as Fairy Queen encounters her beloved nephew and implies the impossibility of a fool's keeping money for himself: "Much, nephew, shalt thou win; much shalt thou spend; / Much shalt thou give away; much shalt thou lend" (V.iv.30-31). Jonson contrives the show of the supernatural on stage so as to dramatise a very "natural" reality in protocapitalist London, when idiocy grants were very rewarding strategies used not only by the monarchy to swell its coffers but also by guardians to garner attractive revenues from the idiot's property.²⁵ The greed of Jonson's comen, vehiculated through a praeternatural disguise, is not so far from the greedy mischief of many relatives of early modern idiots, who, instead of looking after the welfare of their wards, were "carelesse" and "committed wastes and spoyles upon their Lands".²⁶

25 In the Middle Ages and until the mid-sixteenth century, when someone was declared an idiot, their property would be permanently acquired by the king: guardians could receive surplus revenue from the idiot's property if they paid an annual rent to the king. This policy was, of course, very profitable for the monarchy and the fool's relatives, but unfair to the finances of the individual. This is the reason why the policy gradually changed in Elizabeth's and James's reigns to provide for a fairer treatment of the fool's finance and welfare. This did not imply, however, that fines and rents were not reintroduced in periods of financial necessity. See Neugebauer, esp. pp. 33-37.

26 This criticism was directed by James I to Court-of-Wards-appointed guardians of all kinds of wards, not just fools (cited by Hunter and Macalpine, p. 92).

This discussion has attempted to reconsider the folkloric belief in the changeling, focusing on its privileged position at the crossroads between the magical/demonic/praternatural and the real. An investigation into cultural instances of idiocy and fairy origin has also shown that a combination of the two concepts is perceivable in early modern English drama, especially after the turn of the seventeenth century. This chronological specificity should perhaps be viewed in relation to the fact that the balance between the magical and the real in the portrait of the changelings in the plays is—in general—distinctly shifted towards the latter. Ultimately, none of the changeling-fools are actually children of the fairies; they are only believed or pretended to be such, just as no actual fairies or goblins appear in these plays. Correspondingly, allusions to the supernatural identity of the changelings are definitely exceeded by suggestions that their idiocy is a tangible human condition, measurable in early modern social, medical and legal terms—terms which, in many cases, the modern reader can even accept. Besides an increasing interest in issues of natural—rather than just moral or allegorical—folly in the period,²⁷ such a shift might be to some extent related to the progressive disenchantment of the era and the diminishing belief in the occult: this thesis was famously argued by Keith Thomas in his *Religion and the Decline of Magic* and has been revived in literary studies by, among others, Barbara Traister, who shows how, especially after the 1590s, English drama registered a “decline in belief in spiritual and demonic magic” and how the *topos* of demonic intervention was treated less and less seriously by playwrights, with the magician figure becoming “a stock character on the order of the clown” and stage demons appearing definitely “weaker and less effective” than before (Traister, pp. 19, 21, 22).

It is perhaps not by chance that all of the changelings in the plays discussed here are inherently comic characters. Whether their folly is real or merely simulated, the staging of changeling goblin-fools in ways that largely rationalised their disabilities enabled playwrights to downplay and satirise the implications of popular belief in magic, while at the same time providing material for the clowns in those plays. Thus the changeling fool, on the one hand adapting to early seventeenth-century disenchantment and, on the other—as a demonic child—ironically recalling the comedy of devils and vices of the old religious drama, proves a truly chameleon-like figure.

27 See Stainton, “Reason’s Other”, pp. 230–31.

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