

INTRODUCTION

*“It is impossible to criticize this play by any laws of literature as they exist now; as it is also absurd to judge it by the taste of the present age.”—Anthony Trollope, commenting on *The Widow*, by Thomas Middleton*

“How is’t possible to suffice so many ears, so many eyes? . . . How is’t possible to please opinion tossed on such wild seas?”—Thomas Middleton,

No Wit/Help Like a Woman’s

For many viewers and voters during the 2012 United States Presidential election, the political disagreements about unemployment, tax reform, universal health care, and abortion came down to issues of how the government deals with inequity between groups of people. Marginalized groups like the poor, racial minorities, gays, and women struggle for access to the same governmental benefits afforded straight, white, middle-class men, and this struggle was made manifest in electoral rhetoric. Entire groups of people were used as props to further political careers. We saw these issues being debated in such a way that political discourse yielded to political theater. As ridiculous as the spectacle became, it was nothing new; the plays of Thomas Middleton staged similar issues of social inequity for public consumption almost four centuries ago.

Today, after a hiatus of three hundred years, Middleton’s plays again enjoy a stage presence—and a growing stage history. While Marilyn Roberts demonstrates that Middleton’s plays were staged by amateur and university theater companies as early as the 1920’s, beginning in the late 1950’s, professional productions of Middleton’s most famous tragedies—*Women Beware Women*, *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, and *The*

Changeling—took the stage to great acclaim. Now, more than fifty years later, a dozen of his plays have been staged by professional companies, totaling over 125 productions in the US and the UK. In April 2014, the Royal Shakespeare Company, one of the most prestigious English language theaters in the world, will open its second production of *The Roaring Girl*—just under a year after staging another Middleton comedy, *A Mad World, My Masters*. It's safe to say that, outside of his own lifetime, Middleton has never gotten more attention.

The big question is, why Middleton? And why now?

Middleton's Modern Relevance

To the browser on Amazon, Middleton may seem strictly Jacobean, in the worst sense. His plays contain all the hallmarks of that age: unrealistic characters, stilted language, unfamiliar locales, and frankly ridiculous plot devices. Give one of his plays a quick scan and you might dismiss him, as Anthony Trollope and many other critics have, as a second-tier Jacobean playwright. But observing his plays in performance, particularly in recent productions, offers other perspectives on Middleton's current cultural value and relevance. He seems to straddle the line between early modern and modern. In 1928, T.S. Eliot remarked upon Middleton's cultural relevance, saying that, when we read *The Changeling*, we “discover that we are looking on at a dispassionate exposure of fundamental passions of any time and any place” (141). The same remains true today. In 1998, a reviewer for the *Daily Telegraph* called *The Honest Whore* a “marvelously dark, surprisingly modern work about sexual betrayal and emotional violence.”

Because of the ease with which today's audiences can understand Middleton, added to the strikingly modern attitude his plays take toward sex, gender, urbanity, and the middle class, the plays make for exciting contemporary productions. In a move that seems familiar, given our current concern for political correctness, Middleton often takes the point of view of the disenfranchised. He writes about the poor and the rising early modern middle-class as often as he writes about the dukes, counts, dauphins, and kings that appear so often in other early modern plays. Middleton's comedies, too, overflow with incisive satire of the rich and royal; they abound with trickster figures and carnivalesque characters that turn established social mores on their heads. Middleton also exhibits a more egalitarian, less misogynistic attitude toward women than many of his contemporaries. Readers familiar with early modern playwrights such as Shakespeare, Jonson, Webster, or Marlowe are often surprised by the wit and guts of the female characters—many not from the upper class, but prostitutes, shop-keepers' daughters, and roaring girls—in Middleton's plays¹.

Middleton's language, too, feels current to today's audiences. In performance, his dialogue takes on a freshness and casualness very different from the formal poetry we have come to associate with the English Renaissance. Part of this is his use of contractions and shorter lines, which sound more realistic to our ears². Attend a performance of *The Revenger's Tragedy* and hear audiences laugh in surprise and delight

¹ “**roaring girl** *n.* the female counterpart of a roaring boy; a noisy, bawdy, or riotous woman or girl, esp. one who takes on a masculine role” (from the *Oxford English Dictionary*).

² For more about Middleton's stylistics, specifically the word choices he routinely uses that set him apart from other writers, see Macdonald P. Jackson's essay “Early Modern Authorship: Canons and Chronologies” in *Thomas Middleton: the Companion*, esp. 87-92; and Jonathan R. Hope's essay “Middletonian Stylistics” in *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Middleton*.

at lines like, “Old dad dead?” and “Whose head’s that, then?” delivered as offhandedly as any line from a Neil Simon play. But it’s not only Middleton’s dialogue that makes his plays seem modern. He writes with the moral ambiguity that we have come to expect from art. In 1961, reviewing Tony Richardson’s production of *The Changeling*, W.A. Darlington noted a correspondence “between the disillusioned people of the Restoration and our disillusioned selves.” Middleton’s characters, far from being pure of heart, do not always deserve their happy endings; they are not strictly bad or good, but an ambiguous mixture of the two. Like the modern filmmaker Quentin Tarantino, to whom he has often been compared, Middleton writes quirky, larger-than-life characters and big, campy violence to unsettle us. Instead of providing easy answers, his plays provoke difficult questions, not least about our own complicity as we enjoy his scenes of bloodshed and debauchery.

These characteristics of Middleton’s plays, attractive to modern audiences, are exactly what made them so repellent to audiences and readers during Trollope’s day. Trollope’s quote, which I use as my epigraph, has become obsolete; today’s tastes and literary laws are exactly the kinds of values by which to judge Middleton’s works (qtd in Steen 124). Because of these factors, Middleton resonates better with our culture today than he did a century ago. Current directors such as Melly Still and Brigid Larmour highlight Middleton’s interest in strong female characters. Others, like Di Trevis and Robert Woodruff are drawn to the amoral attitude toward sex and violence in his tragedies. Still others, like Barry Kyle and playwright Howard Barker, appreciate the undercurrent of class conflict running through his plays. These directors, producers, and

playwrights draw explicit connections, both onstage and in the theatrical paratext of marketing materials, between Middleton's themes and current events.

This renewed theatrical interest has fed, and is fed by, a simultaneously growing critical interest. Today, Middleton studies represent a vibrant and growing section in the field of early modern drama. This rise has only increased with *The Collected Works of Thomas Middleton* and *Thomas Middleton and Early Modern Textual Culture: A Companion to the Collected Works*, which were announced in 1994 and published by Oxford in 2007. This seminal pairing, the first of its kind produced on Middleton, drew on the combined knowledge of over sixty scholars from a variety of disciplines. It has made it easier than ever to study, teach, and produce his plays, creating a sort of Middletonian second-wave. As part of this second-wave, literary critics, stage historians, and performance scholars are paying greater attention to modern-day productions of Middleton³.

Methodology

Although Middleton's stock is booming both on the page and on the stage, there has been, until now, no book solely dedicated to examining Middleton on the modern stage. Lucy Munro notes that, for most of Shakespeare's contemporaries, "there is little or no performance tradition." She describes most modern-day revivals of works by these playwrights as "start[ing] from zero, often eliding or simply ignoring any previous

³ For some scholarly discussions of Middleton on the modern stage, see Michelle O'Callaghan, *Thomas Middleton, Renaissance Dramatist*; Annaliese Connolly, "In the Repertoire: *Women Beware Women* on Stage,"; Innes, Paul, "Out of the Repertoire: *Women Beware Women* and Stage History"; Diana E. Henderson, "Afterlives: Stages and Beyond,"; *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Middleton*, eds. Gary Taylor and Trish Thomas Henley; and *Performing Early Modern Drama Today*, eds. Pascale Aebischer and Kathryn Prince.

productions” (35). My aim is to provide such a production history for Middleton’s works in the twentieth and twenty-first century. I examined records (reviews, playbills, photos, director’s notes, actor/director interviews, and video records) of professional productions of Middleton’s plays from 1960-2013. In this manuscript, I excluded productions for which I could not access at least two different sources. Using this data, I present a more complete vision of how Middleton’s plays are being produced, adapted, and received by modern theaters and audiences.

At the same time, I read these productions not only as interpretations of Middleton’s texts, but also as texts in their own right, with their own historical context. While examining the data I cover, I noticed patterns of emphasis that roughly corresponded with important cultural or theatrical trends. I have attempted to categorize the productions by these trends, recognizing that sometimes the dates I cover in different chapters may overlap. By historicizing these productions, I provide a picture of Middleton’s place in twentieth- and twenty-first-century society, underscoring his continued artistic and cultural significance.

Detailed descriptions of the ways in which directors and actors have tackled certain aspects of these plays will serve as a helpful handbook for theater professionals with questions about how to produce Middleton’s works. For instance, how have directors staged the various masques in these plays? How have actors represented De Flores’ otherness/deformity on stage? How have various productions updated the plays’ use of music and dance? However, the relevance of this project is not limited to the theater community. Literature scholars should welcome a study that examines these texts in their original *métier*—the stage. Using this study, teachers of Middleton’s texts in

either literature or drama classrooms will be able to include discussions of the way these scripts actually translate on stage. Furthermore, as I demonstrate in Chapter Two, common theatrical interpretations become, over time, accepted literary interpretations. A deeper familiarity with the ways in which his plays have been understood by directors and actors (and received by audiences) may open literature scholars' eyes to oft-repeated misunderstandings while at the same time inspiring new interpretations.

There are gaps in my production history—both intentional and unintentional. For instance, I do not attempt to cover the handful of plays where the *Oxford Middleton* claims Middleton has collaborated with Shakespeare. As “Shakespeare” plays, productions of these works have received plenty of attention already. And, except for in rare cases, theater companies do not acknowledge collaboration with Middleton in their marketing materials for works that are primarily known as written by Shakespeare⁴. My conclusion from this is that these theater companies do not reference Middleton studies much in the dramaturgy or staging, either. Even at Shakespeare's Globe, the premier British theater that prides itself on rigorous research to historicize the plays, Middleton's influence on Shakespeare's works is not a subject of interest⁵.

I also do not attempt to document the large body of productions that have occurred at the university level, although Middleton began to be played on university stages long before he made it to the professional stages. University theaters often serve as

⁴ One exception is the recent Hoosier Bard production of *Measure for Measure*, which performed the original 1604 Shakespeare version back-to-back with the later 1621 adaptation of the play by Middleton.

⁵ During the run of the Globe's 2010 *Macbeth*, Brent Griffin was on staff as a dramaturgy intern. He argued for Middleton's influence on the play but ultimately his ideas were passed over for other thematic concerns that interested the director and actors more. Middleton's efforts are not mentioned in the program for that production.

testing grounds for plays that have not yet made it to professional venues, because they have less to lose than well-established theaters invested in canon and authority. However, successful university productions of underperformed plays may provide the impetus for a later, professional, revival, as with Brigid Larmour's production of *The Roaring Girl* in 1980 (see Chapter Three). After a few decades of familiarity with these plays on university campuses, we begin to see Middleton played more often in other, extremely authoritative spaces⁶.

Finally, the scope of my project was limited by availability. Many seminal productions of Middleton plays were produced by relatively small (or, in some cases, defunct) theater companies. Tracking down records for these productions was generally not very rewarding. For instance, I spent hours online trying to contact someone who could put me in touch with Diane West, who directed the only modern day production of *No Wit/Help Like a Woman's* of which I am aware. When I finally tracked her down (by creating an account on the social media network, LinkedIn) and interviewed her, I was disappointed at how few records existed of this production. However, even records at major theater companies can be erased or corrupted. When I visited the American Shakespeare Center archives in Staunton, VA, I was heartbroken to learn that the only DVD recording of their production of *The Witch* was unwatchable. Interviews with actors were little help in this regard, as five years had passed and they did not remember very much about the show. In these cases and others, what information I could glean about the

⁶ For a discussion of the university theater role in reviving early modern dramatists, see Jeremy Lopez's essay "The seeds of time: student theatre and the drama of Shakespeare's contemporaries," included in *Performing Early Modern Drama Today*, eds. Pascale Aebischer and Kathryn Prince.

production will be found in Appendix B, where I provide short descriptions of productions that I find noteworthy. Instances like these demonstrate how daunting it can be to document theater history. At the same time, there is some poetic justice in the idea that the most detailed records of a theater production, itself mutable and transient, are themselves only partially complete. The truth of theater is in the experience.

Chapter Summaries

Chapter Two, “Sex Tragedies and the Summer of Love,” begins the exploration of contemporary productions with the 1960’s when Middleton experienced a comeback in London, starting with the Royal Court Theatre’s 1961 production of *The Changeling*. During this time, the plays most frequently produced were his darker, highly sexualized tragedies, such as *Women Beware Women*, *The Changeling*, and *The Revenger’s Tragedy* (usually attributed to Cyril Tourneur in this period). In this chapter I examine the portrayals, in these three plays, of sexually active women. Each plot shows women using their sexuality in order to rise above their limited social roles. To the normative Jacobean audience-goer, these actions would have been seen as reprehensible, another example of how Eve’s sin perpetuated itself in the lives of morally loose women. However, during the sexual revolution, theaters used Middleton’s frank, gritty attitude towards sex to respond to the changing gender and sexual politics of the time. In some cases, directors and actors even “sexed-up” the female characters, resulting in new, highly controversial interpretations.

Chapter Three, “‘Question Authority’: Middleton in the 80’s and 90’s,” traces a gradual shift in the next two decades of Middleton’s modern stage history. While maintaining an interest in women and sexuality, productions during these years began to

challenge other systems of power, notably those based on class and race. For instance, Howard Barker's 1986 adaptation of *Women Beware Women* gained attention from critics for using the play as a springboard to showcase Barker's "deliberately provocative" socialist values, "in opposition to the new morality of Reagen (sic) and Thatcher" (Howard). In 1988, Richard Eyre took a different approach by claiming that *The Changeling* is about a failed challenge to strict social order. To highlight this theme, he transposed the action to a 19th century Spanish slave colony, and layered racial conflict onto the sexually charged relationship between the leads by casting black actors as De Flores and Diaphanta. Other productions in this period used a punk aesthetic to suggest a subversive attitude towards corrupt institutions. These productions, so invested in questioning authority, also challenged the author/ity of Middleton himself by drastically modernizing the messages of the plays.

In the fourth chapter, "'Taste the welcome of the city': Middleton's Comedies and Original Practices," I discuss original practices (OP), a trend in contemporary classical theater that was popularized by both Shakespeare's Globe in London and the Blackfriars Playhouse in Staunton, VA. OP productions attempt to recreate early modern stage practices in performance, specifically by using universal lighting, cast doubling, cross-gender casting, spare sets, and live music. At times, too, they attempt to rehabilitate plays by Shakespeare's contemporaries by producing them (some for the first time in centuries) and bringing them to the attention of the public⁷. This chapter focuses narrowly on five OP productions of Middleton's city comedies at both the Globe and the Blackfriars.

⁷ This was the explicit goal of the *Read, not Dead* series at Shakespeare's Globe. Under Mark Rylance, the first artistic director of the Globe, that particular theatre saw three Middleton productions in two years.

These productions reach backwards towards an older, more authentic way of seeing these plays while at the same time mirroring the chaotic, heteroglossic modern city back to itself.

Chapter Five, “Middleton! The Musical: Postmodern Adaptations,” examines adaptive strategies that theater companies have used when engaging with Middleton’s texts. Beginning in the mid ‘90s and continuing to the present, these productions seem to explode with creativity as directors, producers, and even songwriters take Middleton in unexpected directions. Some directors, such as Jesse Berger of Red Bull Theater, create subtle adaptations by introducing other early modern voices, such as Bacon, Donne, or Webster, into Middleton’s texts. Others use modern technology such as a revolving stage or intercut video segments to affect the narrative flow. One emerging adaptation strategy is the musical; I cover three different Middleton-based musicals in the last section of this chapter.

Finally, the concluding chapter, “‘Till my next return’: Some Conclusions about Middleton,” examines the influence Middleton’s recent productions have had on his fraught place in the canon. In it, I link the long history of literary criticism of Middleton to the recent performance criticism of his works on stage. Critical opinion of Middleton’s plays has always seemed a bit schizophrenic⁸. Thomas Heywood considered him among the writers of quality of his age, and Ben Jonson called him a “base fellow” (Steen 56; 35). In the eighteenth century, Charles Lamb compared his characters to those of Chaucer for their “air of being an immediate transcript from life” (82); but Henry Hallam said that

⁸ This phenomenon has been amply documented by Steen, as well as in Gary Taylor’s introductory essay to the 2007 Oxford *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works* and the collaborative introductory essay to 2012 *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Middleton*, eds. Gary Taylor and Trish Thomas Henley.

Middleton's characters "are all too vicious to be interesting" (99). Today's critics are not much different; Middleton's reputation still hangs in the balance between genius and hack. Gary Taylor, one of the editors of the *Oxford Middleton*, famously considers Middleton "our other Shakespeare." But F.L. Lucas, another Middleton editor (albeit accidental) remarked scathingly of *Anything for a Quiet Life*, "It would have given me great pleasure to suppress this play: it has certainly given me none to edit it."⁹ While many theater critics such as Michael Coveney and W.A. Darlington praise theater companies for keeping Middleton alive, others like Jeremy Kingston doom his plays "back to obscurity," or, like Sam Marlowe, state that "when a text is lost in the mists of time . . . , there's almost always a good reason for it" (rev. of *Honest Whore*; rev. of *Mad World*).

The Conclusion of this dissertation also looks at recurring language in theater reviews and marketing materials for Middleton productions. The most common theme is a direct comparison between Middleton and Shakespeare. This and other repeated comparisons tend to rhetorically diminish Middleton's importance as an author. Despite this, theater professionals evince sustained excitement for and engagement with his texts, citing their unique voice and egalitarian perspectives as sources of modern appeal. Finally, I examine what the continuing Middletonian second-wave means for the canon. Theatrical productions and academic discussions of his works continue to attract audiences in greater and greater numbers. This phenomenon challenges all of us—theater professionals, historians, literary critics, and cultural theorists—to continue reformulating

⁹ This commentary appears in Lucas's *John Webster: The Complete Works*, vol. 4., where he was editing the play as part of Webster's canon.

the literary and theatrical canon and, indeed, to ask what forces shape the canon to begin with.