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Introduction

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Against the model of Shakespeare as universal genius may be set the model of Middleton as a dramatist of unremitting focus on his own times

(John Jowett, “Thomas Middleton”)

Thomas Middleton – playwright, poet, religious and political polemicist, City Chronologer of London, and celebrator of royal entries – is a man best understood as product and producer of his own environment, and yet, as demonstrated by the success of his works on the contemporary stage and screen, is one who speaks directly to the modern world. The essays in this volume are intended to assist readers, whether students coming to Middleton for the first time or experienced scholars more familiar with Shakespeare, in placing Middleton’s writings in and against the world with which they are so deeply intertwined. Here Middleton is examined in his multiple contexts – that is, in his private life; in the city of early modern London in which he was born, lived, and died; in the world of national and international events that resonated in that city; in the environment of the Jacobean theatres; in the conditions of authorship that led, for example, to frequent collaboration of various kinds; and finally in the context of current intellectual, psychological, and social frameworks.

For the reader and the scholar today the most immediately important context for reading Middleton was the appearance, in 2007, of Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (gen. eds.), *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*. This was the first attempt at a complete edition since A. H. Bullen’s in 1885, which was itself a reprint of Alexander Dyce’s 1840 edition (see Sonia Massai’s essay in this volume, p. 317). I own a copy of Bullen; I bought it many years ago in the basement of a bookstore in Cambridge, Massachusetts, and only when I took the volumes home and found a signature in one did I realize that they had belonged to the great Harvard scholar George Lyman Kittredge (1860–1941). Kittredge, one can tell from his carefully penciled

notes, was well aware of the defects of the Bullen edition and was contemplating his own. But although he edited a *Complete Works of Shakespeare* (Grolier Club, 1936) and published extensively on Chaucer as well as on Jonson and the “poetasters,” he never produced a Middleton. One might well ask why: was it that Middleton – sexy, violent, religious – did not speak to Kittredge’s world, as he does to ours; or was it just that Kittredge, although he published extensively on philology, was defeated by the need to determine the outlines of Middleton’s career before he could discuss his beliefs, his style, and his development? In Kittredge’s day, for instance, it was believed that Middleton was born in 1570 instead of 1580; that *The Revenger’s Tragedy* was by Tourneur; and that *The Family of Love* was by Middleton.

The situation of the current reader is different. During the nearly two-decade gestation of the Oxford *Middleton*, many scholars of the early modern period – over and above the more than sixty who actually participated as editors – became intrigued by Middleton and began new research on and interpretation of his works. In addition, Taylor and his collaborators, especially the attribution scholar MacDonald P. Jackson, worked diligently to clarify the outlines of the Middleton canon. With the now largely uncontested addition to the canon of major tragedies such as *Revenger* and *The Lady’s Tragedy* (formerly known as *The Second Maiden’s Tragedy*), the shape of Middleton’s career appears more clearly that of a significant, multi-talented dramatist: it looks less heavily weighted towards the comedies written early for the boys, less like the limited course of a “city dramatist.” The composition of tragedies stretches from *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (1605) to *The Changeling* (1622), and these are interspersed with tragicomedies, pamphlets, entertainments, and comedies for the adult players. Middleton’s role as a collaborator has also become clearer with the addition of *Wit at Several Weapons* (like *The Nice Valour*, first published in the Beaumont and Fletcher folio) to his other work with William Rowley, and with *Timon of Athens*, *Macbeth*, and *Measure for Measure* recognized as different forms of co-writing with the chief dramatist of the King’s Men.

The Oxford *Middleton*, by its very girth, makes clear the multiplicity of the man and his work; we need to read Middleton in context because his own contexts are multiple. Unlike Shakespeare, who did not write religious poetry, satires, Lord Mayor’s shows, historical allegory, or non-dramatic prose, and whose surviving works come almost exclusively from one theatrical company of adult players, rather than from many companies of boys and men, Middleton’s varied works need to be understood as responding to a series of specific situations, from the gradual growth of religious Arminianism to the rise and fall of the second group of boys’ companies.

One result of looking at the range of his contexts, as the essays in this volume do, is an increase in both breadth and depth of understanding. Certain recognized masterpieces – *Changeling*, *Women Beware Women*, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* – gain complexity as their varied local connections are unraveled. For example, in the essays below *Chaste Maid* is analyzed in the context of London trades, of a powerful Welsh family, of Middleton’s use of the supernatural, of his views on women, and of his language varieties and puns. On the other hand, because the essays explicate different parts of Middleton’s world, a wide range of his works, some quite unfamiliar, figure. In the early twenty-first-century context there are works that gain a prominence they probably would not have had for Kittredge: *Revenger*, of course, which he presumably knew as by Tourneur, but also *The Roaring Girl*, with the appeal of its fighting heroine in drag; *The Witch*, for its historical immediacy and its connection to *Macbeth*; the *Triumphs (of Truth, of Honour and Industry, of Love and Antiquity, of Integrity, of Health and Prosperity)*, which so clearly distinguish the eventual City Chronologer Middleton from Ben Jonson, the writer of court masques.

As the essays by Diana Henderson and Pascale Aebischer in this volume describe, after a long though not absolute silence, in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries Middleton has also had an active performance context. These essays demonstrate the ways in which Middleton has been newly reappreciated, rewritten, or distorted to suit us today. For example, on May 11, 2010 BBC Radio 4 ran a program on Middleton called “The Tudor Tarantino,” advertised as about the “rise and fall of Thomas Middleton, the bad boy of Renaissance drama.” This amusing oversimplification of the seriously Calvinist Middleton – who, when still a “boy” of 17, published *The Wisdom of Solomon Paraphrased* in seventeen chapters of rhyming sestets – demonstrates the necessity to understand Middleton in context. In the course of the program Gary Taylor called *Revenger* “an angry young man’s play,” which is reasonable enough considering that Middleton wrote it when he was 25 or 26 and had been forced down from Oxford by the financial malfeasance of his new stepfather. But certainly later on it was not a “bad boy” who wrote Lord Mayor’s shows or who, probably with powerful political support, made satirical allusions to the notorious Howard/Somerset marriage or to the contrivances of the Spanish that frightened the English population while Prince Charles was in Madrid.

It is, apparently, both the “badness” and the familiarity of Middleton that appeals now. The BBC program featured Harriet Walter, playing Livia in *Women Beware* at the National Theatre in spring 2010, and the production’s director Marianne Elliott. They noted that Middleton’s language is

colloquial, dark, and full of “street talk,” the characters motivated by greed, sex, and criminal impulse. Elliott’s production seemed designed to suggest parallels with the 2009–10 banking crisis: the crumbling portal of the Mother’s house resembled a decrepit bank, and Leontio was a bank clerk rather than a factor. The Ward was a “teddy boy,” and clever use of the Olivier stage revolve allowed the audience to see Bianca’s rape at the same time as the two older women sat comfortably chatting in Livia’s salon. On the BBC Elliott summarized Middleton’s plays as about “ordinary people living ordinary lives under ordinary pressures that they find extraordinary.”

The essays in this volume explicate both the ordinary and the extraordinary contexts in which Middleton, and other English men and women, lived ordinary and, in Middleton’s case, extraordinarily talented lives in the late Elizabethan and Jacobean periods. These essays provide general as well as specific contexts in which to read Middleton; that is, they focus broadly on such matters as political developments in Europe and more narrowly on his personal interests and environment – for example, the food, textiles, furnishings, and tricksters that surrounded the middling sort of Londoner. They reveal the pressures on a freelance craftsman of the theatre and the complications of finding a religious position in the shifting sands of Jacobean Protestantism.

The volume begins with an essay on Middleton’s own life as a “quintessential Jacobean.” Mark Hutchings points out that Middleton came of age during the period of the Armada and died as the Thirty Years War was under way, and argues that “in his engagement with both foreign crises and domestic controversy,” Middleton is the “principal chronicler” of the turbulent years of James’s English rule. Hutchings pays particular attention to Middleton’s early poems and satires: with *Microcynicon: Six Snarling Satires*, he notes, Middleton entered simultaneously “the literary community” and political controversy. It is the many communities in which Middleton lived – poetic, theatrical, legal, religious, civic, commercial, English and European – that the subsequent essays explicate.

Everything that Middleton achieved was tied to the extraordinary growth and complexity of London, so the first group of essays examines the civic context. Looking at both comedies and non-theatrical writings, Darryll Grantley shows how Middleton’s London was “on the one hand a place of wit and sophistication, and on the other one that endemically permitted deception, criminality, and corruption.” Catering for a London audience, Middleton exploited their familiarity with the city to create “a cultural and moral frame of reference.” Andrew Gordon, using the little studied play *The Puritan Widow* as his focus, then exemplifies how Middleton drew upon

“the knowledge, shared with his London audiences, of the modes of living with which specific spaces of the city were inscribed.” Thus the satirical force of naming two servants “Simon St Mary Overies” and “Nicholas St Antlings” and the expression of status through architectural detail. Gordon concludes that Middleton “consistently represents the space of the city as porous,” showing privacy disrupted by “the persistent affirmation of spatialized neighborhood relations.”

Ian Munro delves further into Middleton’s view of the crowded city with its rapidly growing population. The playwright’s *Lord Mayor’s* shows consistently present London with a “bifurcated understanding”: alternatively as an idealized bounteous mother and as Error’s “disorderly, shapeless and secret city,” full of vice and crime. Middleton’s complaints about London’s vice were not merely generic; rather, “specificity of location combines with thematic preoccupations” to articulate his particular anxieties about “what London was becoming.” Munro concludes by noting the “dangerous fluidity of the metonymic connections between stage and city”: in *Your Five Gallants*, as a pawnbroker reads out an actual plague bill, “Middleton’s theatre is not merely a representation of Error’s thronged city, but one of its principal intersections.”

The next group of essays provides more detailed description of the day-to-day life that lies behind Middleton’s representations. Starting from a 1622 inventory of a citizen’s goods, Catherine Richardson enters the household, the city’s principal social and political unit. Through Middleton’s representations in *Chaste Maid* and *Women Beware*, Richardson illuminates the material variety of London life, demonstrating how small objects could “signal social position” and serve as assets in time of need. But more than merely painting a naturalistic picture of material objects, she argues, Middleton “uses the household . . . to explore the gendered nature of notions of private property within the acquisitive city.”

As Elizabeth Lane Furdell writes, “Enjoying a long and vigorous life in Middleton’s London required both a robust constitution and good luck.” Recurrent plague, “new” diseases, “seasonal fevers” all threatened, killing even the heir apparent. Furdell traces the disputes over theories of healing between religion and medicine, between followers of Galen and of Paracelsus, and between the College of Physicians and the unlicensed healers who challenged it. Middleton, she shows, had opinions about all of these conflicts, as is visible for instance in the satire on the surgeon in *A Fair Quarrel*. It is no surprise that his final surviving work, the *Lord Mayor’s Show* for 1626 (which followed one cancelled because of the plague), is entitled optimistically *The Triumphs of Health and Prosperity*.

Several of the next essays sharpen the outlines of Middleton's own positions. Noting that the circulation of money drives plot, character, and setting in Middleton's works "to an extraordinary degree," Aaron W. Kitch nevertheless differentiates this dramatist's "consuming interest in wealth and its distribution" from the attitudes of others such as Dekker and Jonson. In an equally pertinent distinction, Kitch argues that in Middleton, as in our own society, "quotidian life becomes subject to impersonal market forces," but in a play like *Roaring Girl*, although relations between people can be read through the lens of Marx's logic of commodity, the setting nevertheless remains precapitalist. "Invested in the economic realities of early modern London," the plays demonstrate the financial models jostling each other at the time. For example, in *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, Lucre's "fetishism of landed property" is outmoded, while his nephew operates successfully within the new "economy of credit." Similarly, where wealth in the comedies tends to "dissolve communal bonds," in the civic pageants that Middleton wrote for London's powerful merchants commerce "figures as a necessary catalyst for community and nation."

The world of tradesmen and guildsmen was "rapidly changing and riven with tensions" during Middleton's lifetime. Natasha Korda shows Middleton registering these tensions in plays like *The Patient Man and the Honest Whore* that juxtapose "the formal and informal economies of the city," satirizing them in pamphlets like *The Owl's Almanac*, and obfuscating them in depictions of economic transformation in his Lord Mayor's pageants. Korda points out that the playing companies adopted some of the structures of the "innovative capital ventures" of the guilds, and suggests that Middleton "modeled his professional life on the newly flexible forms of trade that surrounded him."

Ceri Sullivan offers a radical rereading of *Chaste Maid* (1613) by connecting it to Middleton's two entertainments of the same year for the Myddleton brothers – Hugh, who brought a new water supply to London, and Thomas, who became Lord Mayor. Their clan of North Welshmen had something of a stranglehold on the capital's markets, water supply, and civic affairs. If the play is read with the entertainments in mind, rather than revealing a negative view of sexual and economic incontinence, "its interests in money, sex, and water have a more local, literal, and positive value," implicitly arguing that "abundance comes from harnessing immigrant talents and natural resources on a communal basis."

The development of Middleton's civic entertainments is traced more broadly by Karen Newman, who shows how these entertainments could be "an assertion of civic power and competition with monarchical authority

and its attendant ceremonies.” Her analysis of the Venetian ambassador’s reaction to *Industry* (1617) clarifies how specifically English these events, which produced “a distinctive urban and discursive space in which persons of different status and degree mixed,” seemed to foreign visitors.

The London world could be violent and dangerous, but, as Jennifer Low demonstrates, it is a mistake to accept only the cony-catching pamphlets’ description of its criminal underworld. Low, instead, points out that a frequent source of violence was the aristocracy, with their duels enabled by technical developments in steel forging. Middleton nevertheless links aristocratic violence to the confidence tricksters by repeatedly satirizing their parallel use of formulaic language. Thus, for instance, *Quarrel* connects “ritualized verbal challenges and nonsense-words.” Still, Low describes how, despite James’s objections and the pamphlet he commissioned Middleton to write against dueling, the custom of the duel actually reduced bloodshed and brawling in Jacobean London.

One response to civic violence was law, which Subha Mukherji identifies as “one of the most visible faces of the viciously predatory city.” In the context of a “robustly litigious London,” law is ubiquitous in Middleton’s works, satire of law appearing in the early prose narratives as well as throughout the plays. Mukherji connects Middleton’s special concern with the absurdity of legal language – in *The Phoenix* Tangle’s madness is cured by a bloodletting of legal jargon – to the sixteenth-century shift from manuscript and oral assimilation to print, with the consequent proliferation of law commentaries and handbooks. Ultimately, though, for Middleton legal maneuvers were connected with “deeper concerns of ethics, usury, and justice.”

The essays in the second part place Middleton’s life and works in a national and international context, starting from the royal court, “the spectacular center of much of the kingdom’s political life,” in Alastair Bellany’s words. In theory the court was an exemplar of virtue, but in Middleton’s lifetime it became “indelibly associated” with immorality. Bellany shows how scandalous images of the Stuart court circulated especially through the little discussed but ubiquitous verse libel. He recounts the Overbury scandal, the greatest of the period, against the broader context of the contested power and authority of favorites. Bellany acknowledges that plays need not mimic events precisely – although some of *Witch* does – but he argues that court scandal is the context in which to read the great tragedies, including *Changeling* and *Women Beware*. Even the transformation of Buckingham “from popish Ganymede to patriot hero” in *A Game at Chess* can be best understood in the context of the revised verse libels of 1624.

The essays of Thomas Cogswell and Ian W. Archer together explain political and religious developments during Middleton's working life. The sequence of these developments clarifies the changing contexts in which, for example, Middleton first attacks and then defends Buckingham, or satirizes Puritans while remaining a Calvinist. Cogswell, stressing the voracious fiscal demands of the long Anglo-Spanish conflict and its impact on traditional modes of taxation, not only describes the political situation against which *Game* – Middleton's most daringly overt satire – must be read, but shows how the combined forces of nationalism, religion, and fiscal exigency led to conflict in a way deeply familiar today.

Archer's essay illuminates the long-raging debate over Middleton's religious position, between those who see the playwright as Puritan and those who don't. The problem arises from "the real fluidity of religious positions in Jacobean London." Archer argues that Puritanism was as much a system of practices as of belief: this helps clarify how Middleton could be a left-wing Calvinist and, notoriously, satirize Puritans. Archer draws further distinctions between religious life in London and in rural England, and between attitudes towards religious imagery in 1622, when Middleton wrote verses celebrating the consecration of St. James, and iconoclasm earlier and later. Similarly, he demonstrates how the meaning of Middleton's "Calvinist religious tract," *The Two Gates of Salvation*, altered between its first publication in 1609 and its republication in 1620 and 1627.

Trudy L. Darby's final essay in this part serves as a transition between Middleton's political and cultural worlds. For example, it places *Game* in the context of his other plays with Spanish themes as well as within the political debate over the Spanish match. Darby's broad overview describes the obsession with all things Spanish, whether cultural, literary, or linguistic. Although Spain was "the enemy," in London there was a "fruitful" business teaching Spanish; Spanish–English dictionaries multiplied; and Middleton was only one of several dramatists who could read Spanish and went directly to Spanish originals for plots.

Essays in the third part of the volume turn to the theatre. Andrew Gurr begins by establishing the "social cartography" of Middleton's theatrical life, particularly important because Middleton wrote for a "uniquely wide range of amphitheatres and indoor theatres" and for a "hugely varied" audience with an "extreme" social range. David Kathman continues by focusing more closely on the history of the boys' companies, for which Middleton wrote an entire series of early comedies. Kathman throws a new light on *Chaste Maid* by proposing that it, too, could be considered a boys' company play, one of

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the last of the genre. Finally he connects shifts in comic style in the Jacobean period to the disappearance of the boys' companies.

Roslyn L. Knutson, too, considers the relationship between company and style. Examining the "commercial dynamic" of the adult companies, she challenges the traditional view of a binary division in the social and economic relationship between "citizen" and "elite" audiences. Instead, she argues, by mixing "retro" features with his "sassy boy-company style of city comedy," Middleton's plays challenge "arbitrary distinctions in audience taste." In their blend of the old-fashioned and the trendy, Middleton's plays were suited to the multiple venues of adult companies like the King's Men and designed to appeal across class lines.

Middleton's writings began to be censored – his early satires were burned – before any of his plays reached the stage. Janet Clare traces different patterns in the operation of censorship by examining the three Middleton plays that attracted the censor's attention. Clare argues that the different outcomes were tied to the immediate political contexts – for example, the issue of regicide in *Lady* was "politically provocative" just after the assassination of the French King Henry IV. Occasionally Middleton himself may not have known just how far he could safely critique the court. But for his greatest success, *Game*, Clare contends, in an argument that helps explain the play's apparently inexplicable licensing, the "satirical thrust" was "consistently coded" on the page and only "activated in performance." Nevertheless, Clare shows from subsequent events that when it suited the authorities, censorship could be merely "token recrimination" to "mollify" objections.

In the final essay in this section Linda Phyllis Austern alerts readers to the "acoustic context" of Middleton's plays. Invisible and often forgotten in reading, sound was "integral to the flow of the action and its meaning." Austern looks carefully at dramatic music in context: its varying significance was "based on cultural practice, intellectual beliefs about the art, and theatrical tradition." Music featured at traditionally determined moments – for instance, the passage between life and death – and those participating in performing it also performed gender, profession, social status, and sometimes nationality.

Essays in the fourth part examine aspects of authorship less tightly tied to performance. Sylvia Adamson begins by identifying Middleton's language as the "harbinger of the naturalistic plain style that was to become dominant in the later seventeenth century." As this is especially true of the comedies, she and three of her students take examples from *Chaste Maid* to exemplify three aspects of Middleton's language: its use of sociolinguistic

varieties – that is, divisions of language by class, location, and religion – to distinguish characters; puns, especially those that emphasize contradictory meanings; and variations in pronoun forms of address expressing status and power relations. Adamson concludes that even while Middleton’s language pushes towards social realism, it remains limited by stereotyping and satire.

The next three essays explore a particularly important element of Middleton’s authorial life, collaboration. As James P. Bednarz writes, a “limitless number of influences can be factored into the process of theatrical production” – and hence anything from the participation of the original actors to the mental activity of the modern reader can be considered, broadly, a form of collaboration – yet “one of its most revealing forms remains the most literal, the writing of a play by a pair or group of authors.” Bednarz concentrates on two exceptional cases of Middleton and another author writing “a single text at the same time”: his work with Webster on *Anything for a Quiet Life* and with Shakespeare on *Timon*. Heather Hirschfeld then discusses Middleton’s two sustained collaborations, those with Thomas Dekker and William Rowley. For Hirschfeld there is a direct relationship between Middleton’s willingness to collaborate and the variety of companies for which he wrote. She concludes that the collaborative ideal can be seen in its “allegorized perversion” in Middleton and Rowley’s most famous play, *Changeling*, while the ideal itself informs even *Game*, a play Middleton wrote alone but in which he “carved out” a part for Rowley, an actor as well as Middleton’s most consistent collaborator.

Eric Rasmussen completes the discussion of collaboration by raising the methodological difficulty presented once we accept a norm of collaboration: how does one determine authorship? Putting pressure on the standard view of the early seventeenth-century literary and theatrical context, which takes for granted Shakespeare’s dominance even after Middleton had begun to write consistently, Rasmussen points out the “shuffling” of attributions on a variety of printed plays, from ones (mis)attributed to Shakespeare, like *Yorkshire*, to ones in which Middleton’s name never appears, like *Timon* and *Macbeth*, and notes that at certain moments Middleton had more plays printed than Shakespeare. Rasmussen’s essay takes us into the current scholarly context, in which arguments about attribution – and methods of attribution – still rage, and in which scholars sometimes contest their own opinions as well as those of others.

Subsequent essays in this part look at particular aspects of Middleton’s choices as an author: his resistance to established genre, his non-theatrical writings, and his continuing ties to medieval forms and attitudes. Using