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Puritanism and Theatre
Past and Present Publications

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Puritanism and Theatre

Thomas Middleton and Opposition Drama under the Early Stuarts

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Introductory note

This book sets out to look at Thomas Middleton’s work in relation to the society and social movements of his time, and, in particular, to trace what connections it may have had with radical, Parliamentarian or Puritan movements and groupings. The more we come to know of these complex opposition movements through the recent work of seventeenth-century historians, the less satisfactory it seems to treat Parliamentary Puritanism simply as anti-theatre, anti-dramatist. I hope this study may both suggest fresh meanings and implications in Middleton’s own writings, and perhaps contribute something towards rethinking the place of drama in that confused and changing society.

The range and time-span of Middleton’s work indeed make it central for such a study. He wrote his earliest poems as a boy of seventeen or eighteen in the last years of Queen Elizabeth, at the time when Henry IV and Henry V were first being acted in the popular playhouses. He was already a rising dramatist when James I came to the throne in 1603, and wrote consistently for the stage throughout the reign. By the time of his death in 1627 not only had fashions in plays changed many times – like fashions in clothes, as he said himself – but the whole social context of the theatre and its audience had been transformed. To understand Middleton’s development we need to be conscious of the movement not only of theatrical taste and technique but of history.

He was a productive dramatist even by Jacobean standards – author or part-author of some twenty plays, as well as the masques and City pageants which occupied much of his time from 1613 onwards. His work took many forms: first, city comedy and farce for the boys’ companies and popular theatres; then tragi-comedy and moral comedy after he went to work for the King’s Men; finally the boldest dramatic satire of the time, A Game at Chess, and two remarkable tragedies, The Changeling and Women Beware Women. It is part of Middleton’s fascination for us that he was able to write what are generally considered his most compelling and confident plays when the conditions for serious drama were becoming more difficult, when what Coleridge called ‘the wonderful philosophic impartiality in Shakespeare’s politics’ was no longer
possible, and when so much dramatic talent was being diverted into the unreal or trivial. He could do so, I believe, partly because in terms of sympathy and ways of seeing, as well as patronage, he was closer than most dramatists to the growing trends of Parliamentary Puritan criticism and opposition inside and outside the court.

To see clearly the nature and importance of ‘opposition’ trends in early Stuart drama one needs to look beyond Middleton’s lifetime; this is what I have tried to do in the last two chapters of the book. Chapter 12 shows how, despite tightening censorship on the one hand and anti-theatre bias on the other, subversive ideas and feelings still worked their way into plays in the twenty years before the Civil War. The final chapter traces the thread of continuity which I believe exists between early Stuart theatre and the upsurge of popular pamphleteering and radical journalism in the 1640s.

In considering the relation between what I have tentatively called ‘opposition drama’ and its social context, it has been necessary to examine at some length the religious and cultural attitudes and social position of Middleton’s patrons and the circles in which they moved. It is with some regret that I have decided to present the results of this work as an appendix (Appendix A), but I could find no way of incorporating so much factual and historical detail in the main text without either cutting essential evidence or holding up the argument. I hope therefore that readers interested in cultural history will be tolerant about this arrangement.

Anyone who works on the frontiers between literature and history, as I have tried to do, must be very heavily indebted to the learning and kindness of other scholars. An investigation such as this could never have been attempted without the monumental labours of G. E. Bentley and his collaborators on The Jacobean and Caroline Stage, and the many scholarly editions of Middleton’s plays that have appeared in recent years. I have tried to acknowledge in the references how much I owe to these and other printed sources.

The interest of Past and Present in the book has been of the greatest value, both in sponsoring its publication and in providing telling criticism of earlier drafts, which has helped me to correct many errors and misinterpretations. In particular I have to thank Trevor Aston for his ready assistance in this respect.

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Margot Heinemann

Note to paperback edition

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M.C.H.