

Gary Taylor *et al.* 2007
Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works
and
Thomas Middleton and Early Modern Textual Culture
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In truth this long-awaited publication is more than a collected works. Unlike orthodox scholarly collections, for example the recent Cambridge edition of the plays of John Webster, but like the 1997 Norton Shakespeare (based on another, rather more orthodox collection, the Oxford Shakespeare of 1986), it includes critical essays on a range of topics relevant to students of early modern literature, theatre, and culture. It is then rather a hybrid: a scholarly edition which properly seeks to identify and present the Middleton canon, and a resource which aims to provide the latest scholarship on the kinds of areas with which specialists and non-specialists alike might reasonably be expected to be familiar. This servant of two masters, divided into two volumes (which raises a number of issues related to form, content, and target audience[s]) is packed with material totalling more than 3,000 pages. Perhaps appropriately for a writer who worked in so many genres (and not for the playhouse alone), the Oxford Middleton is a sprawling assortment of texts, contexts, and scholarship designed, as its general editor and driving force Gary Taylor declares, to do for Middleton what wasn't done for him by a Heminges and Condell.

Like Marlowe, Webster, and the majority of early modern English dramatists, Middleton was a quarto playwright: if his plays were published at all it was in octavo or quarto, some within months or a couple of years of composition and performance, others much later. Unlike those of Shakespeare, Jonson, Beaumont, and Fletcher,

the plays linked to Middleton, either during his lifetime or subsequently, did not appear in a collected edition until two centuries after his death, though several were included in the Beaumont and Fletcher compendium of 1647, for example. A number were first printed some time after his death. *The Changeling*, his celebrated collaboration with William Rowley, was licensed in 1622 but not printed until 1653; *The Witch* appeared only in 1778, and derives from a manuscript in the hand of Ralph Crane which the Oxford editors date to c.1625, some ten years after the play was written. This piecemeal publication (which in many cases, as was common, did not identify Middleton as the author) meant that in the absence of a collected edition he did not enjoy the kind of *literary* reputation that would favour Jonson, Beaumont and Fletcher, and Shakespeare in the later seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, though as Sara Jayne Steen (1993) has shown, a small number of his plays continued to enjoy some success on stage in the Restoration and beyond. T.S. Eliot's observation in his 1927 essay that Middleton's is "merely the name which associates six or seven great plays" (Eliot 1927:84) could have been made at any point between the mid-seventeenth century and the end of the twentieth.

The absence of a collected edition in the seventeenth century meant not only that Middleton's reputation took a long time to become established but that the plays were not *collected* and a canon identified – or, at any rate, a *name* promoted, let alone recognised. As a consequence, the history of Middleton scholarship has been one of protracted debate over the canon, needless to say a necessary prerequisite for a project such as this. A good deal of ink has been spilt since the late nineteenth century arguing for and against the ascription of a number of plays that may or may not have been partly or wholly written by him, and more recently (and indeed contentiously) the nature and extent of his collaborative relationships with other writers and the plays (and textual complications therein) this labour produced. The Oxford Middleton draws on the work of two scholars who have been central to the identification of the canon: David Lake (1975) and MacDonald P. Jackson (1979) – the latter one of its general editors. Few scholars contest the view that *The Revenger's Tragedy* was written by Middleton (and not Cyril Tourneur, as a later seventeenth-century document asserts), while other, less celebrated plays once associated with Middleton, such as *Blurt, Master Constable* and *The Family of*

Love, are no longer, and consequently are omitted; conversely, plays included in the 1647 Beaumont and Fletcher folio, such as *Wit at Several Weapons* and *The Nice Valour*, are brought back into the fold. But such decisions are barely noticeable compared to what is clearly the most provocative feature of this edition, namely the claim that in fact Middleton *was* published in folio in his own lifetime – in the most famous and culturally-significant collection of all time, published in 1623.

In fact scholars have long considered *Timon of Athens* to be a Shakespeare-Middleton collaboration, but the inclusion of this play in a *Middleton* collection, and particularly the re-designation of *Macbeth* and *Measure for Measure*, has raised eyebrows (Vickers 2010). Material common to *The Witch* and *Macbeth* suggests some kind of textual collaboration, possibly (the orthodox view) because Middleton revised *Macbeth* after Shakespeare's death, incorporating parts of *The Witch* (which may have been politically problematic or otherwise troubled, as its dedicatory epistle appears to suggest) for a revival by the King's Men. Gary Taylor and John Jowett have argued strongly that Middleton revised *Measure for Measure* in 1621 (Taylor and Jowett 1993). All three plays were first published in the 1623 folio: no quartos exist, so it is not possible to compare "Shakespeare" and "Middleton" versions – or to separate them. That these three plays were included by Heminges and Condell means a number of things; but most importantly it guaranteed their survival. Their representation as Middleton texts – or rather collaborations in which he had a hand – is provocative but defensible: after all, if scholars are correct, they are all Shakespeare-Middleton collaborations (in the case of *Measure for Measure*, and probably *Macbeth*, "posthumous", textual revivals, which the Oxford Middleton terms "adaptations", Middleton reworking property of the King's Men, which is what the plays were). Heminges and Condell included these plays in the 1623 folio as "Shakespeare" plays, but the application of modern technology has enabled scholars to add yet another chapter to the tortuous textual history of the compilation of the first folio. More importantly for Middleton scholars, it sheds further light on the career of this remarkable dramatist.

The irony of course is that any notion of a "Middleton" canon has to accommodate the fact that a significant number of "his" texts were collaborations. With *The Roaring Girl* and *The Changeling*

Middleton's name overshadows those of Thomas Dekker and Rowley respectively, playwrights who contributed significantly to these plays, and with whom he worked on more than one occasion; with the first folio texts the boot is on the other foot. This raises important issues. MacDonald P. Jackson's essay in the companion volume, "Early Modern Authorship: Canons and Chronologies", provides a thorough and even-handed account of recent studies in attribution, the application of computer technology to authorship studies, and the recent shift in scholarship (stimulated by Jeffrey Masten's work) towards a recognition that collaboration was central to early modern theatre practice, rather than (as earlier generations of scholars supposed) a subset (and poor relation) of "authorship". Writing for the playhouse was not at any stage an "individual" enterprise, for it was a process over which dramatists had very little control; acknowledging – as textual scholars must – that surviving printed texts are rarely "authorial" in provenance presents ticklish questions for editors, especially where multiple authorship is involved. In the case of the Shakespeare-Middleton texts the editors are caught between two stools. On the one hand, the *collaborative* nature of drama supports the inclusion of these texts; on the other hand, their presence requires explicit justification. Departing from their practice with the other collaborative texts (including *Timon of Athens*), the general editors have elected with *Macbeth* and *Measure for Measure* to incorporate their findings into the presentation of the text. In *Macbeth*:

Passages apparently added or rewritten by Middleton are printed in bold type; passages apparently deleted or intended for deletion are printed in grey; transposed passages are printed in grey where Shakespeare probably placed them, and in bold where Middleton apparently moved them. (*Collected Works*, 1170n)

These "apparently" and "probably" will give readers food for thought, and the format may trouble some; but since students can readily find these first folio plays elsewhere the less than ideal reading experience in the presentation of "*Macbeth*" is more than offset by the integration of textual matters into an otherwise accessible publication. Here the "hybrid" nature of the project is most apparent: its principal strength is its fusion of "academic" and "student-friendly" textual and contextual material; but this comes at a price.

A case can be made – as it is here, both explicitly and implicitly – for Thomas Middleton to be recognised as one of the most accomplished writers of the age; certainly, as the career mapped out in these pages shows, he was one of the most flexible – both an artistic and financially-advantageous quality. In addition to the plays and the accompanying introductory essays we encounter material for the specialist: the early poetry, and later examples, such as the moving tribute to the King’s Men’s famous actor Richard Burbage (1619); pamphlets (such as those written when plague closed the playhouses); occasional prose pieces; and the rather better known civic pageants Middleton wrote to celebrate the inauguration of the Lord Mayor. These theatrical-political forms have received considerable attention in recent years, and it is right that they share equal billing with the familiar tragedies (and less familiar plays of his early and middle period). By no means untypically, not all of the Middleton *oeuvre* survives, and it may well be of course that there are unrecorded texts, now lost, that we do not know about. Together with accounts of Middleton’s *known* career, the edition provides brief essays on these lost works, such as, for example, the pageant he wrote for the coronation of Charles I in 1625, which was first delayed due to the plague (just as James’s 1604 entry to London had been, to which Middleton also contributed) and then cancelled for financial reasons. Given Middleton’s dexterity in using public occasions such as his first (and greatest) pageant written for the Lord Mayor’s show in 1613, *The Triumphs of Truth*, to articulate a subtle critique of the city authorities, reminding them of their responsibilities (Bromham 1995), it is a nice question as to how he might have approached his royal commission for the new king.

Middleton was most famous in his own time for his satire on the Spanish Match, James’s plan to marry Charles to the Infanta, and although *A Game at Chess* is unlikely to compete with *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, *Women Beware Women*, or *The Changeling* on the modern stage it is for this remarkable play that his artistic and political sensibilities are most highly regarded by scholars. Fittingly, this episode is the high point of this collection. For all that some of its claims will be disputed by readers – and if Middleton is to receive the attention that the army of scholars behind this project evidently hope, then such debates ought to be welcomed – few will cavil at Gary Taylor’s magisterial work on *A Game at Chess*, which will stand as a monument to his scholarship on Middleton; his 150-page

account of the relationship between the textual witnesses of this play is unlikely to be surpassed. This play survives in a remarkable number of versions, both in manuscript and in print. Following the privy council's ban in August Middleton went about producing manuscript versions with the King's Men's principal scribe Ralph Crane and others, as Harold Love's authoritative essay "Thomas Middleton: Oral Culture and the Manuscript Economy" sets out. It was printed in quarto (three times) the following year. The Oxford Middleton presents two texts, *An Early Version* and *A Later Form*, the latter reflecting the revisions made prior to its staging. Here as elsewhere the Oxford editors adopt a range of both orthodox and innovative – some would say eccentric – presentational devices to highlight both the complexities of early modern textual production in the printing house and the challenges facing modern editors, issues that are discussed in several of the essays included in the companion volume, such as those by Adrian Weiss, John H. Astington, and Cyndia Susan Clegg, who write authoritatively on printing practices, visual culture, and the early modern book trade respectively.

Inevitably an enterprise on this scale involving some sixty (named) contributors makes for a degree of unevenness. The value of the edition is, of course, that Middleton's texts (of all hues) are gathered under one roof, and the cross-referencing between individual contributions is excellent. Yet in some cases the (necessarily brief) introductions to each text are overshadowed by the meatier essays in the companion volume, and it is fair to say that (where comparisons are possible) the Oxford introductions are generally inferior to those available in stand-alone editions published in the long-established Revels or New Mermaids series (though Jackson's introduction to *The Revenger's Tragedy* is superb). (But this is in keeping with the growth of "student-friendly" Cambridge and Blackwell companions, which favour topic-focused essays many in number, short on words; see the new Gossett collection, for example.) To some extent this may be a reflection of the format chosen by Oxford University Press. Like the 1986 Oxford Shakespeare (for which Gary Taylor also served as a general editor), this edition opts for a single-volume edition of the texts, accompanied by a second volume focusing on textual matters. The demands on space in the first volume clearly preclude the fuller introductions many readers would prefer or expect; indeed, the

textual apparatus required for scholarly editions is contained in the second volume, so readers are required to consult both: the second volume is not an “optional extra” but an integral part of this publication, and indeed it is here too that the bulk of the specialist essays (under the subheading “The Culture”) may be found. Although both volumes are handsomely produced they are not easy in the hand – or hands – and one is reminded, once again, of how in format and content this publication aims to satisfy both scholarly expectations (and it does) and appeal to a market ranging from the student to the specialist. This is not necessarily a criticism, rather that it is perhaps a measure of how scholarly editing (and publication) has changed. Whether students will be able to afford the set is another matter; as indeed are the impracticalities of this edition as a teaching text for the classroom. A paradox, then: the “six or seven great plays” identified by Eliot will continue to be published in single-text format, and for all that the Oxford Middleton is intended to promote its subject it remains to be seen whether the less-prominent (and culturally less-valued) texts will receive the wider attention hoped for here. As a work of scholarship it is a considerable achievement, but it will probably have greatest impact in the scholarly community.

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