

David Nicol. 2012.
Middleton and Rowley:
Forms of Collaboration in the Jacobean Playhouse
Toronto-Buffalo-London: University of Toronto Press.

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Although he collaborated with Thomas Middleton on what is acknowledged to be one of the finest Jacobean tragedies, *The Changeling* (1622), and despite the widely-accepted view that he contributed over half the total number of scenes in the play, William Rowley is one of the least known dramatists of the Jacobean era. In his own time he was well-known as a leading actor with Prince Charles's Men, who specialised in Fat Clown parts. When the theatres were reopened at the Restoration, it was the comic subplot of *The Changeling*, for which Rowley was largely responsible, which was more popular than the tragic main plot, written mostly by Thomas Middleton. In more recent times that situation was reversed and Rowley virtually disappeared: indeed, some modern productions cut the subplot entirely. In his 1927 essay on Thomas Middleton, T.S. Eliot failed to mention Rowley at all in connection with *The Changeling*, and about other plays he commented "And Middleton in the end – after criticism has subtracted all that Rowley, all that Dekker, all that others contributed – is a great example of great English drama" (Eliot 1963:169). For Eliot, applying literary critical criteria to dramatic texts, Middleton's work was disfigured by the inferior "ribaldry and clowning" of his collaborators. The growth of university departments of drama and theatre studies later in the twentieth century contributed to a recognition that the dramatic text, as a text for performance, required the application of different criteria and approaches, involving consideration of a range

of forms of collaboration, not simply between writers but between, for instance, actors, companies, theatres, patrons, the censor. David Nicol shows in this book that it is illuminating and legitimate to look at these different forms of collaboration; for example, at how the involvement of a particular actor, such as Rowley, might have contributed not simply by writing scripts, but because he specialised in playing the Fat Clown parts, and in particular a specific type of Clown, which would have affected the tone of the scenes in which he appeared, or indeed of the whole play.

It might have been expected that Rowley's association as collaborator with the successful Middleton would have helped to raise his stock, but paradoxically it may have contributed to a further ignoring of him. In recent years Middleton's reputation has risen more and more and the publication of the Oxford Middleton marked the culmination of that process. So strong has been the spotlight on Middleton that Rowley might seem even more confined to the shadows surrounding him than before, but David Nicol's book puts the record straight, bringing Rowley into sharper focus, and, through detailed and precise examination of varied material, revealing him as a skilled and successful theatre practitioner. Nicol does this with a balanced appraisal that is the more convincing by virtue of its shunning of the extremes of critical evangelism.

Nicol's second chapter, on *The Changeling*, demonstrates most clearly the quality of his work in bringing Rowley into sharper focus and distinguishing between him and Middleton particularly in the matter of theological views. Adopting an approach that accommodates and builds upon attribution studies, Nicol argues that the extent to which changes of writer can affect the way events and characters are represented is an important focus for study of collaboration. Nevertheless he is not solely interested in collaborations between writers – who wrote what – but also aligns himself with scholars who propose alternatives to grouping early modern plays by authors, regarding, for instance, companies, actors, and publishers as having an influence on both the creation and reception of plays. Nicol draws attention to previously unnoticed voices within texts. He also notes that many critics look for consistency and unity in the text, and challenges the implied assumption that Rowley's stance was identical to Middleton's. He looks particularly at disunities in the collaborative text and how

differences between the sections of the text ascribed to the individual writers contribute to the effects of the main plot. Concentrating on decision points for characters in the action, and using Rowley's *All's Lost by Lust* (1618-20) as a comparative text, Nicol distinguishes the theological perspective of Rowley as being that of an adherent to the traditional belief in the efficacy of reason and of good works in the process of salvation, while identifying Middleton's perspective as that of a Calvinist, insisting that human beings are fundamentally evil and that the grace of God alone, not their own actions, can bring salvation.

Nicol considers that the difference between the writers' points of view in *The Changeling* is inadvertent and concludes that "the play is a patchwork, not a perfectly interwoven text" (64), but that the dis coherence nevertheless contributes towards powerful effects in the play. He acknowledges that the discrepancies might be part of the collaborative design but quickly and briefly dismisses this possibility by referring to the close correspondence of the different methods of characterisation with the scenes believed to be by each author. Nicol's desire to get away from an approach that looks for unity in a play and which presents Middleton and Rowley as if they were a single author, sharing the same views, leads him to give less than substantial support to his dismissal of dis coherence as part of a collaborative design. After all there has been considerable agreement among scholars that the structure of consecutive alternation of paired sets of scenes, stressing the interrelationship of the plots through parallel and contrast, suggests a high level of close and conscious collaboration. This is also true of other Middleton, and also Middleton and Rowley plays. However, Nicol is here specifically identifying not the conscious dramatic construction, but the discrepancy at a deeper level between the mindsets of the two dramatists, which he assumes to be inadvertent.

Nicol extends and broadens his examination of forms of collaboration from the treatment of leading themes by collaborative writers to the effect of the playing companies on plays, in particular with regard to dramatic genres. He notes Middleton's tendency towards satire and Rowley's contrasting interest in romance, and suggests that these characteristics were partly due to the preferences of the playing companies for which they were writing. He draws the conclusion that Middleton and Rowley began collaborating when

their respective companies were experimenting with changes to their repertory. The drawing of theatres and companies into the examination of the collaborative process also leads to a consideration of audiences and social issues, clashes between values associated with the gentry and those of citizens, that is particularly insightful as it moves the subject into a new context, that of changes in theatrical conditions and taste.

The chapters in the book lead the reader through a network of collaborative contexts, the most fascinating and speculative of which is left until last: the political use of the stage, with a particular focus on Prince Charles's relationship with his father, James I, and his use of his position as patron of Prince Charles's Men. Nicol speculates that the players were used by the prince as part of a campaign to anger his father or to vent his frustration at James's failure to take military action in support of the Elector and Princess Elizabeth. This may be especially the case with *The Old Law*, which focuses on the frustration of sons toward their fathers. Despite the speculative nature of this section, Nicol make a convincing and subtle consideration of how audiences might have recognised in *The Old Law* the personality and identity of Prince Charles, making him an authorial figure with whom Middleton and Rowley had to collaborate. One of the valuable reassessments that David Nicol's book makes, in addition to providing a fuller and more sharply-focused picture of Rowley, is its detailed and insightful treatment of *The Old Law*, a play that is often neglected, partly because of the poor state of the text, but which has been justly described by George E. Rowe, Jr., (Rowe 1979:175) as "one of the most extraordinary dramas in the Middleton canon" (Rowley is not acknowledged as is so often the case). It is an exceptionally engaging work, and it is to be hoped that Nicol's book will encourage fuller recognition of its quality and significance.

It should perhaps be noted that in two places in the book the date of Middleton's death is recorded as 1625 rather than 1627 (5; 151). It may also be noted that no fundamental argument or exposition of factual context is undermined by this error in dating, important though it is. *Middleton and Rowley: Forms of Collaboration in the Jacobean Playhouse* makes a notable and substantial contribution to our understanding of the theatre of the period. It focuses on a current topic of central interest in the field, collaboration, ranging

widely across a number of contexts: actors, theatre companies, religious belief, social issues and politics. It extends our knowledge and understanding through detailed examination of the varied material and does so in a lucid and admirably readable style.

References

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How to cite this review:

Bromham, Tony. Review of David Nicol. 2012. *Middleton and Rowley: Forms of Collaboration in the Jacobean Playhouse* (Toronto-Buffalo-London: University of Toronto Press). *SEDERI* 24 (2014): 191-195.

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