

Mark Hutchings, ed. 2019.
The Changeling. A Critical Reader.
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The *Changeling. A Critical Reader*, edited by Mark Hutchings, is a remarkable collection of essays aimed at confirming that Thomas Middleton's and William Rowley's *The Changeling* is still one of the most compelling tragedies in the history of English drama. This guide, which addresses key textual, critical, and staging features of the Jacobean masterpiece, intensifies the debate on the play by putting forward to modern readers interrogations which, as Hutchings suggests, are worth dwelling on. The contributors to this volume engage in these interrogations, from different yet certainly complementary perspectives, thus creating a series of palpable synergies that indubitably contribute to present the book as an effective multifocal and far-reaching continuum, instead of as a mere assembling of unconnected essays.

Since the mid-twentieth century, and especially after its 1961 professional revival at the Royal Court in London, *The Changeling* has progressively drawn the attention of scholars. Still, it has been during the last two decades that the play and Middleton's playwriting skills have been praised to the level of Shakespeare's, with more focus on Middleton than on Rowley, about whom scholars still have much to say. Proof of this are the publication of modern critical editions (Thomas Middleton: *The Collected Works*, 2007) and the diverse studies devoted to the ideological and cultural context of Middleton's oeuvre. Among others, seminal studies in this field include journal articles and monographs such as *Thomas Middleton in Context* (2011), *Thomas Middleton and Early Modern Textual Culture* (2007), *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Middleton* (2012), and *Thomas Middleton, Renaissance Dramatist* (2009). Although these works offer a comprehensive reading of Middleton and his texts, as well as of his collaboration with other playwrights (see also, for example, *Middleton and Rowley: Forms of Collaboration in the Jacobean Playhouse* [2012] and *Middleton and His Collaborators* [2008]), a thoughtful and erudite examination of The

Changeling like the one in this volume brings fresh insight into what is perhaps considered Middleton's and Rowley's best play. In this regard, *The Changeling. A Critical Reader* constitutes a significant contribution to the study of this seminal play in the vein of other recent analyses such as those of Jay O'Berski (2012) or Michael Neill (2019) in his reissued edition of the play.

The book opens with a very informative introduction in which the editor reviews the most significant aspects of *The Changeling*, setting the scene for the essays that follow. Focusing on the conditions of the collaboration between the two dramatists, Hutchings explores the peculiarities of the tragedy, its historical and political circumstances, and its textual and dramatic features, to end up suggesting that the text still has much to say to modern scholars, as the ensuing eight chapters seek to prove.

In chapter one, "The critical backstory," Sarah D. Luttfiring outlines the different critical perspectives from which scholars have approached *The Changeling* up to the end of the twentieth century. With a special emphasis on the interpretations of the Beatrice and De Flores story, and the connections between the main plot and the subplot, Luttfiring calls attention to the evident convergences and continuities that underlie the manifold critical readings and that contribute to turn the play into a permanent object of critical analysis. Chapter two, "A performance history," complements this overview of the critical narrative of *The Changeling*, as Jennifer Panek demonstrates here that dramatic performances can indeed raise questions about the interpretation of a text just as academic scholarship does. Panek offers a detailed summary of the staging history of Middleton's and Rowley's masterwork and explains that, although the play remained unstaged until the 1960's, it took less than three decades for it to be recognized as a classic which is now regularly performed—in the traditional or more experimental vein—as part of what is considered the Shakespearean canon. The scope of the latest critical approaches to *The Changeling* during the last two decades is what Patricia A. Cahill condenses in the following chapter, "State of the art." In her essay Cahill examines the six main areas of research that have determined current scholarship on *The Changeling*, corroborating, as the previous two chapters equally do, that Middleton's and Rowley's tragedy proves an unremitting source of critical analysis. Thus, even though *The Changeling. A Critical Reader* offers a table of contents with no other

subdivision than that of its eight chapters, the first three, as can be inferred from these succinct notes, perfectly function as a unit that helps readers appreciate the play in its academic and performance history.

The following two chapters, “New directions: Embodied theatre in *The Changeling*” by Peter Womack and “New directions: Doubles and falsehoods: *The Changeling*’s Spanish undertexts” by Berta Cano-Echevarría, look beyond this exhaustive account of the critical and performance history of *The Changeling* in an attempt to enlarge the scholarly responses elicited by the Jacobean tragedy. Without losing sight of *The Changeling*’s performance conditions, Peter Womack explores the offstage and onstage action of the play to argue very convincingly that the effects achieved by the combination of these two theatrical modes somehow appear to encapsulate the intricacies of the unconscious. Womack, however, does not justify this assumption from what would appear an anachronistic twentieth-century perspective; rather, he does so within the context of the seventeenth-century Protestant practice of self-analysis. Alternatively, Berta Cano-Echevarría’s inspiring essay delves into the textual sources of *The Changeling*. She maintains that, even if John Reynolds’ *The Triumphs of Gods Revenge* (1621) is considered the main source for Middleton’s and Rowley’s story, Gonzalo de Céspedes y Meneses’ *Gerardo the Unfortunate Spaniard* (published in Spanish in 1615 and translated into English in 1622) similarly appears to have influenced the plot of *The Changeling*. Cano-Echevarría’s analysis reveals that not only did the story of *Gerardo the Unfortunate Spaniard* encourage both dramatists to develop key elements of the play absent in Reynolds’s tales, but it also provided the English tragedy with authentic Spanish Golden Age literary material that transcended its mere fictional setting.

The following two chapters again attest that *The Changeling*, like any other early modern play liable to be revived for twenty-first century audiences, still poses intricate staging questions for modern directors. In “New directions: Performing *The Changeling*: 2006–2015,” Sarah Dustagheer focuses on four of the most recent and remarkable productions of Middleton’s and Rowley’s tragedy in order to explain how the disparities between the conditions of Restoration playhouses and modern-day theatres affect contemporary productions. Especially challenging for modern productions are, as her study shows, the combination of the main plot and the subplot, the

representation of the physical and psychological enclosure of the characters, and the performance of sex, violence and the—quite unfamiliar for present-day audiences—use of asides. Another kind of performance analysis, more in connection with the screen than with the stage, is what Nathalie Vienne-Guerrin undertakes in chapter seven, “New direction: Loving and loathing: Horror in *The Changeling* from text to screen.” Inasmuch as *The Changeling* largely hinges upon a clear blend of fascination and repulsion, as illustrated in the prominence given to the body, desire, and abjection, Vienne-Guerrin argues that by no means would modern spectators reject a film adaptation of the play highly influenced by the conventions of the horror genre. Vienne-Guerrin thus addresses the anatomy of horror depicted in *The Changeling* with the purpose of examining modern film versions (especially Marcus Thompson’s *Middleton’s Changeling* [1998]) and their enactment, against the background of the horror genre, of the play’s compelling combination of “loathing and loving.”

The book closes with an essay meant to capture the essence of the volume. In this concluding chapter entitled “Resources,” Nora J. Williams reviews the manifold readings of *The Changeling* and proposes a series of resources particularly addressed to teachers—and students—who might consider *Middleton’s* and *Rowley’s* drama an excellent option for classroom study and might therefore take an interest in the critical and performance approaches to the tragedy. However, Williams does not simply outline these debates, she also asks genuinely challenging questions about specific aspects of the play (i.e. human rights issues or the politics of performing disability) that would certainly prove exciting for postmodern reactions to the text. Wisely sealed with a useful list of online resources and an annotated catalogue of modern editions, Williams’s essay thus puts an end to this inspiring collection of essays.

To conclude, in *The Changeling. A Critical Reader* Mark Hutchings is therefore in charge of a series of essays that not only bring together a stimulating guide to the play’s critical and stage history, but also provide new work on thought-provoking questions never before discussed. Hutchings’s previous research on *Middleton*, and *The Changeling* in particular (2008, 2011, 2012), ensures the rigor and coherence of the volume he edits, which proves a very valuable, practical, and instructive manual for those interested in exploring the

textual and performance complexities of this ground-breaking piece of Jacobean drama.

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