

Shakespeare's Contemporary dramatists

By Emma Smith

The Elizabethan and Jacobean theatres specialized in new plays which had relatively few performances over a period of a few weeks. There was thus a huge appetite for fresh writing, and hundreds of plays, many now lost, were produced, often collaboratively. In this section of Great Writers some of these non-Shakespearean plays and authors are introduced through a combination of podcasts, ebooks and supporting materials. Some plays - such as John Webster's empathic presentation of a woman who follows her own desires in *The Duchess of Malfi* [1] (1614) - have had an ongoing life in the modern theatre. Others - such as Thomas Dekker's contemporary fairytale *The Shoemakers Holiday* [2] (1599) are interesting precisely because they so closely map onto the immediate context of their writing and performance, giving us a window into the late Elizabethan world. [read more]

To us, this group of plays and dramatists is overshadowed by Shakespeare [3]'s towering reputation. But it's good to be reminded that this was not always the case. When in 1598 Francis Meres writes that Shakespeare is 'among our best' for both comedy and tragedy, his lists of similar dramatists are extensive. This is the one for tragedy, for instance: 'the Lorde Buckhurst, Doctor Leg of Cambridge, Doctor Edes of Oxforde, maister Edward Ferris, the Author of the Mirroure for Magistrates, Marlow, Peele, Watson, Kid, Shakespeare, Drayton, Chapman, Decker, and Benjamen Johnson.' Even fifteen years later, John Webster [4] lists Shakespeare fifth among seven named contemporaries as a model for dramatic writing. Nor did Shakespeare write in a vacuum. He drew extensively on the work of his fellow dramatists, reworking an earlier *Hamlet* and an earlier *King Lear* [5], as well as collaborating on joint plays (with George Peele on *Titus Andronicus* [6], with Thomas Nashe on 1 Henry VI, with George Wilkins on *Pericles*, with Thomas Middleton [7] on *Timon of Athens* and with John Fletcher on *Henry VIII*, *Two Noble Kinsmen* and *the lost Cardenio*. Other writers read or saw his work - Middleton's *The Revenger's Tragedy* [8] reworks *Hamlet*, for example, which in turn was inspired by Thomas Kyd [9]'s *The Spanish Tragedy*. This rich creative environment gives a different context for the familiar, 'timeless' Shakespeare.

They also give us access to kinds of work that Shakespeare didn't really dabble in. Middleton's play *The Roaring Girl* presents a fictionalized version of a contemporary London figure, the cross-dressing Mary Frith, as part of a city comedy, a genre resonant with the recognizable topography, speech patterns and concerns of the early Jacobean city. *Arden of Faversham* is an example of domestic tragedy - a downscaling of Aristotelian grandeur to the middling sort of Elizabethan England and telling the true story of a woman's attempt to murder her husband. It's an interesting companion piece to *Othello* [10], and some scholars believe that Shakespeare may have written part of it.

Together, the resources in this section help to extend our appreciation of the early modern period's most dynamic art form - the theatre, and to gain a sense of the breadth of material being produced for these anarchic dream palaces on the south bank of the Thames and beyond the city limits.

contemporary-dramatists

Links

- [1] <http://writersinspire.org/content/duchess-malfi>
- [2] <http://writersinspire.org/content/shoemakers-holiday>
- [3] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/william-shakespeare>
- [4] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/john-webster>
- [5] <http://writersinspire.org/content/tragedie-king-lear>
- [6] <http://writersinspire.org/content/lamentable-tragedy-titus-andronicus>
- [7] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/thomas-middleton>
- [8] <http://writersinspire.org/content/revenger%E2%80%99s-tragedy>
- [9] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/thomas-kyd>
- [10] <http://writersinspire.org/content/tragedie-othello-moore-venice>