

Thomas Middleton: No Wit, No Help like a Playwright's

During his career Thomas Middleton (1580-1627) produced a pretty spectacular canon of plays: spectacular in quantity, quality, and scope. It's no surprise that Middleton excelled at plays of social intrigue, given that it was part of his life from a young age. He was baptised in 1580, the son of Anne and William Middleton; his father was part of the guild of tilers and bricklayers, and had a certified coat of arms, making young Thomas Middleton a gentleman. In 1586 Middleton's father died, and his mother married the grocer Thomas Harvey. Two weeks into the marriage Harvey tried to claim the Middleton children's inheritance for his own, and fifteen years of legal battles between husband and wife ensued. Middleton appeared in court to testify multiple times between 1597 and 1606. It's no wonder, then, that his characters meddle in equivocation and social wrangling.

Middleton entered The Queen's College, University of Oxford in 1598, but left university to become an actor and a playwright.



[1]

Etching for Vizetelly & Co. After 17th century woodcut (Thomas Middleton, Vizetelly & co., 1887) [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons

Master of Many Genres

By 1601 Middleton was writing plays for the Admiral's Men. While he supplemented his income with pamphlets and poetry (particularly when the theatres were closed due to the plague), Middleton wrote a staggering number of plays [2], and quickly established himself as deft writer in all genres.

Like Thomas Dekker [3] - with whom Middleton collaborated on *The Honest Whore*, 1604, and *The Roaring Girl* (Play [4]|Podcast [5]), 1611- Middleton excelled at the city comedy. Other examples include *A Trick to Catch the Old One* [2] (1605), *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* [2] (1613), and *Anything for a Quiet Life* [2] (1621), which he co-wrote with *John Webster* [6].

In her podcast on the *The Revenger's Tragedy* [7] Dr. Smith points out that Middleton's specific strength was the intrigue comedy, a situational comedy in which the plotting of individual characters orchestrate the plot of the play. Examples include *Michaelmas Term* [2] (1604) and *A Mad World, my Masters* [2] (1605), a particularly hilarious cuckolding comedy.

However, Middleton also excelled in writing tragedies. He took advantage of the vogue for the revenge tragedy with *The Revenger's Tragedy* [8] in 1606. He also wrote the deeply unsettling tragedies *Women Beware Women* [2] (1621) and *The Changeling* [2] (1622, co-written with William Rowley), which prove surprisingly sympathetic toward the terrible fates that await women who are lured into sexually licentious behaviour.

Middleton also straddled the line between tragedy and comedy with his tragicomedies: *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's* [2] (1611), *The Witch* (1616), *A Fair Quarrel* (1616, with Rowley), and *The Old Law* [2] (1618, with Rowley), to name but a few. Most famously, he adapted Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* in 1621. For more information on Middleton's hand in *Measure for Measure*, check out *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works* edited by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino; their edition of *Measure for Measure* attributes specific lines to Middleton or Shakespeare.

In fact, Middleton was a frequent collaborator: his hand can be seen in two other Shakespeare plays, *Timon of Athens* [9] and *Macbeth* [10], and worked frequently with Thomas Dekker and William Rowley.

In 1624 Middleton even tried his hand at political satire with *A Game at Chess* [2], a play mocking the Spanish Match, the proposed betrothal of Prince Charles to the Catholic Maria Anna of Spain.

By the time Middleton died in 1627, like Shakespeare, he was a master playwright accomplished in nearly every genre and style of writing.

Want to hear more about Middleton's plays? Check out Dr. Emma Smith's podcasts about *The Revenger's Tragedy* [7], *The Roaring Girl* [5], *Measure for Measure* [11], and *Macbeth* [12].

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Links

- [1] https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File%3AThomas_Middleton_1887_etching.jpg
- [2] <http://writersinspire.org/content/works-thomas-middleton-vols-1-8>
- [3] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/thomas-dekker>
- [4] <http://writersinspire.org/content/roaring-girl-or-moll-cutpurse>
- [5] <http://writersinspire.org/content/roaring-girl-thomas-middleton-thomas-dekker>
- [6] <http://writersinspire.org/writers/john-webster>
- [7] <http://writersinspire.org/content/revengers-tragedy-thomas-middleton>
- [8] <http://writersinspire.org/content/revenger%E2%80%99s-tragedy>
- [9] <http://writersinspire.org/content/life-tymon-athens>
- [10] <http://writersinspire.org/content/tragedie-macbeth>
- [11] <http://writersinspire.org/content/measure-measure>
- [12] <http://writersinspire.org/content/macbeth>