

The governors and
the governed in
middleton's
renaissance plays:
michelmas term, ...



**ASSIGN
BUSTER**

In the early sixteen hundreds, England shifted from the Elizabethan Era to the Jacobean Era. This important power transfer largely influenced European politics and society, consequently affecting Renaissance art and literature. Widely popular Renaissance playwright, Thomas Middleton, reflects this transfer of power in his works and comments on class structures as well as courtly corruption throughout his plays. Middleton crafts his characters, dialogue, and plot to illustrate the growing scandal found in the government and to challenge class hierarchies. Thomas Middleton was published approximately between the years 1602 and 1625, positioning his works predominantly within the Jacobean Era. Middleton's works reflect the current political climate of the time and he is unique in that his writing displays a wide variety of socially diverse characters.

Kate Lechler's text, " Thomas Middleton in Performance 1960-2013: A History of Reception," explains that, " Middleton often takes the point of view of the disenfranchised. He writes about the poor and the rising early modern middle-class as often as he writes about the dukes, counts, dauphins, and kings" (Lechler 3). This display of different social classes allows Middleton to adopt an array of opinions and personas and enables him to realistically portray the variety in his society. Derek B. Alwes comments in his article, " The Secular Morality of Middleton's City Comedies" that, " Middleton's blend of morality and immorality" creates an, " ambiguity" that reflects his culture without asserting strict opinions about wrong and right (Alwes 108). This interesting strategy used by Middleton, creates a demonstration within his plays of moral and political complexity, and reflects the climate of his time without forcing people and situations into rigid constructs. Many of

Middleton's pieces deal with corruption and identify causes and effects of injustice. His play, *Michaelmas Term*, written in 1606 uses characterization to illustrate the corruptible nature of humans as well as exemplify the moral decay of the upper class. Two characters, Andrew Lethe and the Country Wench, portray an inverse relationship between wealth and goodness and exemplify how the influences of growing cities lead to corruption. Andrew Lethe, originally Andrew Gruel, forsakes his past in the pursuit of wealth. His change in name reflects the greater change that has occurred in his personality and character. Each of these names holds significance, both in their literal meaning and in their symbolic connotation within the structure of the story. The last name Gruel is associated with the food, gruel, that is an oatmeal like mush frequently eaten by the lower class. After discarding this past name associated with poverty, Andrew, "takes the name of a river in Hades (Lethe)" (Rowe 100). The Lethe river in Hades is known for its ability to make people forget their past and represents Andrew's choice to forget his origin and instead venture to the city in pursuit of a higher social standing. Lethe is constantly afraid that people will find out his true class identity and commits himself to a fraudulent life among the upper class.

At the beginning of the play, Lethe is inconvenienced by the presence of his mother who is looking for him. When Lethe and his mother, Mother Gothel, meet, the mother does not recognize her son, but Lethe exclaims, "My mother! Curse of poverty! Does she come to shame me, to to betray my birth" (Middleton, *Michaelmas*, 45). This statement portrays Lethe's motivation and illuminates his goal of forgetting the past and moving on to a more affluent future. Lethe not only rejects the status of his past and family,

but subsequently rejects the moral legacy left by his father. Mother Gothel express that, “ his father was an honest, upright tooth drawer” (Middleton, Michaelmas, 46). With Lethe’s rejection of the last name he inherited from his father, he additionally rejects the morality of character that has preceded him. This correlation between affluence and corruption suggests Middleton’s beliefs about wealth and the upper class and pairs poverty with goodness and wealth with corruption. A similar phenomena is seen in the character of the Country Wench in Middleton’s Michaelmas Term. She goes from living a poor rural life to moving to the city and becoming a courtesan. As explained by Ruby Chatterji in his article “ Unity and Disparity Michaelmas Term,” “ The Country Wench decked out in her gentlewomanly fine clothes, which merely hide her inner corruption, parallels Lethe in her transformation: she scarce knows herself, and her own father, not recognizing her, is drafted into her service...She has been caught up in a life of vanity, and her fall is completely moral” (Chatterji 356). Both Lethe and the Country Wench abandon their pasts in search of material affluence, and in doing so find themselves consumed by the immoral characteristics of upper class and city living. After the Country Wench runs away to the city, her father soon follows after her. Upon entering the city, the father of the Country Wench announces, “ Woe worth th’ infected cause that makes me visit this man-devouring city!” (Middleton, Michaelmas, 56-57). This quotation directly associates the city with corruption which continuously proves to be true in the development of Middleton’s characters.

Many of Middleton’s other writings make this same connection, linking the city with moral decay. In Michelle O’Callaghan’s chapter “ Life” taken from

her larger work, Thomas Middleton, Renaissance Dramatist, O'Callaghan states that, "Middleton's own pamphlets (The Meeting of Gallants at an Ordinary, The Black Book and Father Hubbard's Tales)...depict the city as a type of hell, a place populated by creatures that prey on the unwary - lawyers and punks" (O'Callaghan 13-14). This sentiment mirrors the Country Wench's father's statement and further portrays Middleton's belief in the corruption of the city and its ability to infuse its tenants with injustice. Similarly to Mother Gothel, the Country Wench's father is unable to recognize his child once they meet in the city. The father chastises the Country Wench because she is a courtesan and, therefore, is considered a sinner. The Country Wench replies questioning, "Why, you fool, are not gentle women sinners?" (Middleton, Michaelmas, 99). This remark suggests that to be a gentle woman is to be a sinner, again tying the ideas of corruption to the upper class and suggesting that someone cannot be highly positioned without being corrupt. Middleton introduces a tie between the wealthy and the corrupt again in a play frequently credited to him titled, The Revenger's Tragedy.

The Revenger's Tragedy was written in 1606 and states outright, through the character's dialogue that one cannot be both pure and wealthy. The moral center of the play, Castiza is appalled by the actions of the surrounding characters and elaborates that, "Maids and their honour are like poor beginners. Were not sin rich, there would be fewer sinners Why had not virtue a revenue? Well, I know the case, 'twould have impoverished hell." (Middleton, Revenger's, 29). Castiza explains that it seems that only the poor are able to maintain goodness and that perhaps if virtue paid money there

would be more honorable people. Castiza relates sin with riches furthering Middleton's suggestion that the upper class is unable to be virtuous because of their status and wealth. Middleton's play connects poverty with morality and explains that one cannot achieve status and wealth without acting sinfully. The Revenger's Tragedy does not focus on the upper class alone but additionally comment on the transfer of power introduced with the Jacobean Era. Scholars such as Steven Mullaney believe that Gloriana, who is only seen as a skull, represents the death of purity within the royalty and the transfer of power to corruption and scandal that is represented by the Duke. Mullaney explains in his article, "Mourning and Misogyny: Hamlet, The Revenger's Tragedy, and the Final Progress of Elizabeth I, 1600-1607" that Vindice's lover, "proves to be none other than Gloriana, the namesake of Elizabeth's idealized royal persona." (160 Mullaney) This direct reference to Queen Elizabeth confirms Gloriana's representation of the Elizabethan Era. Gloriana is known for her goodness and purity. She was killed by the actions of the Duke which can be assumed to symbolize the Jacobean Era and the societal transfer from a queen known for her purity, to King James I known for his sexual debauchery.

Middleton's narrative reflects this relevant transition of power and implies that England's reign of morality and goodness has been replaced with corruption and distraction. Middleton's play written in 1622, The Changeling, moves Middleton's arguments further and not only suggest the corruption of the upper class, but introduces sin as a leveler between the classes.

Middleton argues against the hierarchy of class and suggests that original sin creates equality among people, implying that the ideas of wealth and title

cannot compensate for sin. After carrying out the murder of Alonzo, DeFlores demands sex from Beatrice-Joanna as payment for his actions. Beatrice-Joanna argues against this act saying that they could not be together because of their difference in social status. DeFlores counters this argument petitioning Beatrice-Joanna to, “ Look but into your conscience, read me there; ‘ Tis a true book, you’ll find me there your equal: Push! Fly not to your birth but set the you In what the act has made you; you’re no more now.” (Middleton, *Changeling*, 338). In this excerpt, DeFlores argues that Beatrice-Johanna’s sin have made her higher social rank irrelevant. DeFlores and Beatrice-Joanna do ultimately have sex and in doing so violate the constructs of class hierarchy. By having sex with DeFlores, Beatrice-Johanna validates DeFlores’s argument and confirms that their sins have equalized them.

A similar destruction of class occurs with the union of Diaphanta and Alsemero. In *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Middleton*, edited by Gary Taylor and Trish Thomas Henley, it is explained that, “ Class and sex are similarly at stake in the famous bed trick scene, in which the desperate Beatrice persuades her servant Diaphanta, to take her place next to Alsemero in the nuptial bed” (Henley and Taylor 412). Both these relations between master and servant portray Middleton’s resistant to class structure and suggest his view of equality between individuals. *Women Beware Woman*, written by Thomas Middleton in 1621 portrays themes of class conflict and additionally comments on the government through Middleton’s use of pointed dialogue and plot. Lisa Hopkins comments in her, “ Art and Nature in *Women Beware Women*” that, “ By the end it has been transformed beyond recognition: the two most obviously middle-class of the

characters, Leantio and his mother, have both disappeared from the story, one of them dead and the other simply forgotten about, and the domestic setting has given place to a country one.” (Hopkins 1). These plot details portray a disenfranchisement of the middle class and display the disqualification of middle class opinion. The play finishes after most everyone has been killed, and the Cardinal ends the show remarking, “ Sin what thou art, these ruins show too piteously: Two kings on one throne cannot sit together, But one must needs down, for his title’s wrong; So where lust reign, that prince cannot reign long.” (Middleton, *Women*, 372). This comment directly relates to the current government and King James I’s, involvement in continuous, sexually immoral biddings. King James I and his court were continuously shrouded in scandal and Middleton suggest that this sexual draw prohibits the King from effectively governing.

Many of Thomas Middleton’s tales about corruption relate directly to political scandals deriving from royalty and the upper class. One such play, *The Witch* written in 1615 is thought to be an exposé of the corruption of King James I and his court, and is seen as direct reference to a well-known scandal of the time. In Lechler’s article she states that, “ *The Witch*, was influenced by one such scandal, the divorce of Frances Howard and Robert Devereux, the Earl of Essex, and her later marriage to Thomas Carr, the Earl of Somerset” (Lechler 15). Middleton uses current events to comment politically on his society and to appeal to his audience by implementing well known scandals that Middleton’s audiences would be aware of and interested in seeing represented in theatre. In Michelle O’Callaghan’s text, *Thomas Middleton, Renaissance Dramatis*, she explains that, “ Just as Sebastian procures a spell

from the witch to render his rival Antonio impotent in relation to his new wife, Isabella, so too at her trial Frances Howard, and her associate, Anne Turner, were accused of practicing witchcraft, and it was implied they had used sorcery to render Essex impotent" (O'Callaghan 156). Middleton crafts his work to symbolize political figures and comment on the corruption and scandal that frequently surrounded King James I and his council.

This political reflection became increasingly common in Middleton's work and is most famously seen in Thomas Middleton's final recognized work, *A Game At Chess*. Although this play was enormously popular, it was quickly closed because of its political commentary. Middleton's play implemented a chess allegory to represent the English and Spanish governments and satirize various members of royalty and courtly leaders. In T. H. Howard-Hill's text, "Political Interpretations of Middleton's 'A Game at Chess'" Howard-Hill explains that, "The relationships amongst the pieces in chess made identification of the White King, Knight, and Duke as James, Charles, and Buckingham respectively a simple matter, and the Black King was evidently Philip IV of Spain" (Howard-Hill 276). Because of the play's controversial sentiments and its infringement upon current laws about portraying monarchs in plays, the show was debuted while King James I was occupied. After reports were shared with the King about the play and its contents King James I was, "Angry that he had been made to appear as if he had lost control of his kingdom, and wanting to maintain face in the diplomatic wrangling" and in reaction, "James acted decisively and banned the play" (O'Callaghan 162). *A Game of Chess* pushed the constructs of theatre and

clearly depicted Thomas Middleton's drive to comment on his political and social surroundings through drama.

An important aspect of literature is the preservation of a society and the ability of art to reflect and comment on its surroundings. Thomas Middleton displays this commentary through each of his works and relentlessly illustrates his views on class, moral, and political constructs that continue to be highly debated to this day. Middleton explores the perspectives of a variety of people groups, classes, and genders, interpreting the current climate of his society and suggesting truths and realities. Thomas Middleton explores the boundaries of theatre while presenting relevant commentaries and immortalizes an era through the documentation of his timeless plays.

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