

**Mark Kaethler.** *Thomas Middleton and the Plural Politics of Jacobean Drama*. Berlin: De Gruyter, 2021. Pp 223. Hardback £79.00. ISBN: 9781501518195. <https://doi.org/10.1515/9781501513763>.

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Thomas Middleton (1580–1627) is one of the more prominent figures in the study of Jacobean drama. Aside from the sheer number of surviving comedies, tragedies, pageants, and masques that can be attributed to his authorship, Middleton also came to be appointed chronologer of the city of London in 1620, was likely responsible for adapting several works originally written by Shakespeare after that dramatist's death in 1616, and was responsible for writing the biggest box office success of the entire early modern period: *A Game at Chess*, which ran for an unprecedented nine days in August 1624 before being sensationally closed down through official intervention. Despite his historical importance, however, monograph studies focusing on Middleton and his works have thus far been few and far between, with the last major book-length study devoted solely to Middleton's political artistry, Swapan Chakravorty's *Society and Politics in the Plays of Thomas Middleton*, having been published over two and half decades ago in 1996. Mark Kaethler's recent book is therefore a highly welcome corrective to the relative absence of such sustained studies in recent years. Over the course of four illuminating chapters, Kaethler provides readers with an exciting and provocative interpretation of Middleton as a highly radical Jacobean writer, one who frequently used his dramatic output to criticize and critique the governance of England's monarch, King James I, through the application of highly provocative rhetorical techniques inspired by the classical tradition, such as *ironia* and *parrhēsia*. The latter technique in particular is a major focus of Kaethler's book, being cogently described by the author as a method by which Middleton 'both signals devotion and questions the limitations of the ruler's authority' (5). Indeed, as Kaethler's work persuasively argues, Middleton's ability to simultaneously praise and criticize the monarch was one he repeatedly demonstrated throughout his career.

The four chapters of Kaethler's monograph cover a substantial period, beginning in 1604 with Middleton's earliest surviving play and concluding with the *A Game at Chess* controversy two decades later. After a lengthy introduction exploring Middleton's poesis and his use of *parrhēsia* as a key element of his political theology (with Kaethler introducing such complex theoretical issues in a pleasingly accessible and straightforward manner), the first chapter examines the 1604

play *The Phoenix*. Kaethler reads the work as Middleton's reflection upon the recent accession of King James to the English throne, through which he 'unsettles the early image of masculine superiority James promoted in his reprinted tracts, *Basilicon Doron* (1603) and *The True Law of Free Monarchies* (1603)' (44). The second chapter moves ahead to 1616, reading *The Witch* in the context of the events following the notorious murder of Sir Thomas Overbury in 1613, for which Frances Howard and Robert Carr were arraigned, found guilty, but ultimately pardoned by James. In something of a coda, this chapter also explores how Middleton continued to comment on the Howard/Carr scandal even six years after their reprieve, through his and William Rowley's 1622 tragedy *The Changeling*, a play which, Kaethler writes, 'establishes a clear parallel between the virginity tests Howard underwent and those that Beatrice-Joanna must undergo according to the absurd patriarchal quasi-science in the play' (104). In the third chapter, Kaethler continues this examination of Middleton and Rowley's writing partnership, presenting their 1620 courtly masque *The World Tossed at Tennis* as a highly ironic response to James's governance during the early years of the Thirty Years War (1618–48). The final chapter then turns to the political moment of *A Game at Chess* in 1624, exploring how the play's depiction of a 'haphazard' chess game directly responds to widespread public anxieties of the time (particularly regarding Anglo-Spanish relations), daringly using this allegory to starkly reveal to spectators 'the fragility of their kingdom' (155).

Kaethler reads their chosen texts chronologically, thereby taking the reader on something of a journey through Middleton's career as a commercial dramatist. In practice, this does give the reader the impression that the study leaps forward in time quite suddenly after chapter 1. After analyzing *The Phoenix*, chapter 2 looks at Middleton's work twelve years later. By comparison, the foci of the remaining three chapters seem better grouped together, with each primary analysis taking place at four-year intervals (1616, 1620, 1624). Upon closer inspection, however, these plays have evidently been carefully selected, with each enabling Kaethler to explore Middleton's responses to several major moments in King James's English reign, each of which caused great concern among Middleton's popular audiences. *The Phoenix* responds to James's accession. *The Witch* to his scandalous pardoning of Howard and Carr, an ill-judged act which 'prompted unrest and blemished the image James had constructed of himself as an ideal ruler' (73). *The World Tossed at Tennis* to England's inaction concerning the developing conflict in Europe, in response to which 'Middleton appears to have oscillated between supporting James's peacemaking mission and challenging it with keen militant Protestantism ... in keeping with Prince Charles's sentiments on the Thirty Years War'

(111). And *A Game at Chess* to James's efforts to secure a 'Spanish Match' between Charles and the Spanish Infanta Maria Anna. What makes Kaethler's focus on these key moments even more fascinating is that rather than simply expounding upon Middleton's probable intentions as a playwright, the audience is also given a prominent position in the meaning-making of theatrical performance.

Kaethler's chapter on *The Phoenix* is particularly powerful in this regard. Here, Kaethler observes how the play's demonstration of 'the limitations of the monarch and the legal system would also have been of interest to the later audience at St Paul's, which would have comprised a significant number of law students from the Inns of Court' (69). Attending to how the play would have spoken to its various audiences, Kaethler also points out that the use of the royal 'we' in the play 'also implies a collective that extends beyond the play world to the audience' (70). *The Phoenix* is often read as one of many 'disguised ruler plays' produced around James's accession, alongside Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1603–4) and John Marston's *The Malcontent* (1603), but Kaethler's analysis allows the play to stand on its own merits, its themes and language essentially promoting 'mutual or collaborative governance' (72), a manner of speaking to authority that Middleton repeatedly returned to throughout his career.

Kaethler's Middleton is a highly intellectual, provocative, and ruminative playwright, one who masterfully employs various classical rhetorical techniques to both praise and undermine the actions of those in authority, often at the same time. Kaethler also presents a picture of Middleton as a markedly daring figure, who despite running into trouble for his writing more than once continued to employ such ironic and *parrhēsiastic* styles of writing throughout his career; an approach to drama that it seems would have naturally culminated in his great cause célèbre, *A Game at Chess*, in 1624. That I felt that there were a significant number of plays left undiscussed by the book's conclusion that would also have benefited from Kaethler's insight is not at all a criticism of their work; rather, Kaethler's detailed and thought-provoking analyses of *The Phoenix*, *The Witch* (with *The Changeling*), *The World Tossed at Tennis*, and *A Game at Chess* make it clear that Middleton was a writer dedicated to using drama as a vehicle for the *parrhēsiastic* interrogation of authority. A book cannot cover everything, but the persuasiveness of Kaethler's thesis is such that their many fascinating lines of inquiry seem destined to have a significant influence on future Middleton scholarship.

Kaethler's monograph concludes by further expounding the political power of Middleton's writing. Turning to Middleton's 1624 poem 'To the King', which seems to have been written as a direct response to the danger he then faced

following the *A Game at Chess* controversy, Kaethler notes that even here 'Middleton plays the pawn' when 'he is in fact the player who moves the king, given that his poem was ostensibly effective or at least comments upon the success Middleton had in avoiding serious penalty' (193). Even to the last, Kaethler's Middleton is a writer who speaks directly to authority while presenting himself as obedient subject, even at a time of immense peril. In reading Middleton in such a radical manner, Kaethler's monograph is a genuine triumph in reinterpreting the political aims of an otherwise very familiar playwright, repositioning its author-subject as not just another early modern dramatist but as a great Jacobean satirist in his own right. Future critical engagements with Middleton's dramatic art can only benefit from Kaethler's unique and invigorating interpretation. This study seems destined to be referred to time and again in future scholarship, and I am not being hyperbolic to suggest that it deserves to be treated as one of the defining pieces of Middleton criticism.