

Mark Hutchings and A.A. Bromham. *Middleton and his Collaborators*. Horndon: Northcote House, 2008. Pp xv, 123.

Middleton and his Collaborators is a new volume in the long-running 'Writers and their Work' series, which publishes short critical studies of literary figures. The series already includes a volume on Thomas Middleton, written by J.R. Mulryne in 1979, but this new book by Mark Hutchings and A.A. Bromham focuses on his collaborations. It begins with introductory chapters on Middleton's career and on early modern dramatic collaboration, proceeds with three chapters on Middleton's work with different collaborators (Dekker, Shakespeare and Rowley), and concludes with a chapter on intertextuality. 'It is a sign of changing perspectives', the authors write, 'that a study of Middleton is now, necessarily, also a study of collaboration' (4). Certainly, their book appears in the wake of several recent (and very different) studies of early modern dramatic collaboration, including Jeffrey Masten's *Textual Intercourse* (Cambridge University Press, 1997), Brian Vickers' *Shakespeare, Co-Author* (Clarendon Press, 2002), and Heather Anne Hirschfield's *Joint Enterprises* (University of Massachusetts Press, 2004). Given his prolific and highly collaborative career, Middleton is an ideal subject for this approach and *Middleton and his Collaborators* is a valuable and thought-provoking contribution to the field. Its individual readings are, however, stronger than its overall argument, as its organization around playwriting teams seems at odds with its aim of broadening the scope of collaboration studies beyond the consideration of writers and their careers.

The 'Writers and their Work' volumes seem intended as introductory guides for students; in this respect *Middleton and his Collaborators* is well-executed. The survey of Middleton's career in chapter one is efficient but wide-ranging, managing to include material on pageants as well as plays. Students will find very helpful the introduction to collaboration in chapter two; its lucid description of the various agents through which playtexts were mediated clearly explains why the concept of the individual author can be problematic in early modern drama (26–36). The book's attention to lesser-known plays is also admirable. For example, the authors devote space to Middleton and Rowley's tragicomedy *The Old Law*, arguing that its theme, 'the conflict between individual conscience and the law', is 'a subject of enduring relevance' (81–2). I have certainly found in the classroom that students are exceptionally responsive to this overlooked play.

The book's most stimulating quality is its broad definition of collaboration, which embraces such activities as imitation, the adaptation of sources, contemporary performance, revival, and the revision of texts. For example, Bromham and Hutchings discuss the theory that the real-life subject of *The Roaring Girl*, Moll Frith, may have performed that play's epilogue, thereby becoming a kind of collaborator herself. Her appearance on stage could have problematized the play's already complex relationship with 'the gap between signifier and signified', producing a 'clash in the playhouse' between the sentimentalized Moll of the play and the scandalous real Moll (52); it remains uncertain whether her status as a 'collaborative feature' made her 'friend or foe' to the play (53). The authors suggest that collaboration 'produces a creative, unmanageable friction', so that perhaps 'it is precisely [Moll's] presence that gives the play its edge' (53).

The book not only broadens the scope of collaboration but also draws connections between different forms of collaborative activity. Noting the intertextual links between *Timon of Athens*, *King Lear*, *Macbeth* and *The Witch*, Bromham and Hutchings describe Middleton collaborating with himself in a constant 'visiting and revisiting of texts, offering new interpretations of old material' (61). They then expand the focus to describe the King's Men and its actors as additional collaborators, noting that most of Middleton's many allusions to *Hamlet* occur in plays produced at the Globe by the King's Men, some of which even starred Richard Burbage. (This fascinating claim is incorrect in one respect: one play that they discuss, *A Fair Quarrel*, was not performed by that company.) Such collaborations between playwright and company, they suggest, could produce 'subtle, complex and plural moments of theatre that call up a memory of an older play and fuse it into the present' (70).

The book is less successful at discussing collaborative relationships between playwrights, in part because Bromham and Hutchings play down the potential frictions that they describe so well elsewhere. The careers of Dekker and Rowley are summarized inadequately (the authors fail to mention, for example, that Dekker collaborated with playwrights other than Middleton or that Rowley wrote solo plays); almost nothing is said to distinguish them from each other or from Middleton, minimizing any sense of the distinctiveness of Dekker's or Rowley's voice. Bromham and Hutchings appear uncomfortable with discussing playwrights as autonomous agents; they follow Jeffrey Masten's lead in seeing 'single authorship [as] a misleading category', arguing that 'even "sole" composition is characterized by writing practices that are in essence collaborative' (31). They are thus sceptical of authorship attribution.

While they accept that its techniques can help determine the presence of a specific playwright in a text as a whole, they resist the disintegrating of texts into 'authorial shares'; for them, this kind of analysis signals 'a return to the [singular] authorship paradigm with which [they] take issue' because it suggests that collaborative writing can be broken into 'components of *solo* composition' (34). They counter that playwrights may have 'accommodated' the 'verbal tics or linguistic preferences' of their collaborators and 'may, indeed, have adopted a different, *non-authorial* style' (35), a possibility that they see as an 'important corrective' to attribution scholars (35).

This corrective is indeed important, but Bromham and Hutchings do not adequately represent the academic debate around it. For example, while they list Vickers' book in their bibliography, they nowhere engage with his lengthy critique of Masten or his defence of the practice of studying distinctive authorial voices within collaborative works. Vickers' stance may not suit the tastes of post-structuralist critics, but a student-oriented book should at least acknowledge both sides of the existing argument. Similarly, the authors' discussion of the methods by which collaborators might have written their plays (33–4) is brief, impressionistic, and unsourced, ignoring Hirschfield's study of different approaches to collaboration and Vickers' detailed breakdown of the historical evidence.

Bromham and Hutchings' rejection of attribution scholarship means that their understanding of the collaborative process is too vague for them to draw any conclusions about it. Hence, their analyses of *Timon of Athens*, *The Honest Whore*, and *The Roaring Girl* are concerned with intertextuality and performance, not with the writers. The resulting readings are interesting, but make the organization of the book around playwriting teams seem purposeless, since Bromham and Hutchings' methodology renders them unable to discuss the internal dynamics of those teams. The only exception is their section on *Macbeth* and *Measure for Measure*, in which they examine various theories about Middleton's insertion of his voice into Shakespeare's plays; asking whether 'the subversive Middleton undermines the conservative Shakespeare' (71), they offer several inconclusive but provocative answers. They apparently find it acceptable to disintegrate revisions, but not collaborations.

This inability to discuss the interactions of playwrights is at its most frustrating in the chapter on Middleton and Rowley, in which Bromham and Hutchings attempt directly to address the problem. Instead of examining 'the division of labour', they explain, they will study instead 'how collaborative texts work as performance texts', in the process seeking to discover 'the

qualities that are distinctive of Middleton and Rowley's collaboration' (75). Unfortunately, their conclusion is simply that collaboration functions like solo authorship. The distinctive qualities they identify are an '[a]lternation between comic and tragic modes' (75), 'narrative clarity', and '[t]he ways the different plots are used in relation to each other to develop and illuminate themes' (77). None of these characteristics seems unique to Middleton and Rowley; none, indeed, distinguishes their collaborations from the plays Middleton and Rowley wrote on their own. Similarly, when Bromham and Hutchings suggest that the dualities, parallels, and contradictions among the characters of *The Changeling* may reflect 'the complex processes of negotiation, revision, reworking, deletion, reassessment and debate between the writers ... [in which] each stage could produce unforeseen effects and unexpected resonances' (86), they admit that this scenario could equally well describe solo composition. They insist that the solitary author must 'make autonomous decisions' whereas collaboration is 'a coming-together' of individuals involving 'debate, persuasion and interaction' (86–7). But if all writing can produce these same effects, what does it matter whether one or many writers are present, especially if we cannot know who wrote what? The bulk of the chapter is simply a rehearsal of well-worn critical readings of Middleton and Rowley's plays; its ostensibly radical approach produces no new insights.

The authors half-acknowledge this problem when they note approvingly John Jowett's exploration of the 'tensions between [the] contributors' in *Timon of Athens* (87), which relies on a 'scholarly consensus' about the division of scenes (99). In their afterword, they propose a 'halfway house' between the author-centred approach and the denial of singular authorship: a praxis that would see texts as *dialogues* between 'textual presences' rather than playwrights as such (99). The numerous stimulating ideas in the book's close readings suggest that this sense of the collaborative text as 'diachronic' and as a 'multiply-constituted palimpsest' (99) is a useful one. But Bromham and Hutchings' discomfort with treating individual playwrights as distinguishable presences prevents them from exploring this important dimension of the text's multivocality. The book can be praised as an engaging introduction to Middleton and collaboration that students will find appealing, but its attempt to reinvent the field feels incomplete.

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