CHAPTER 27

MIDDLETON AND MIMETIC DESIRE

LARS ENGLE

Thomas Middleton’s reputation is at an interesting stage. Thanks to the work of the Oxford Editors, and especially Gary Taylor, Middleton occupies a volatile position: no longer confined to conversations among academic specialists on early modern drama, but not yet in any settled place in a larger canon of authors whom literate people are meant to know about. This chapter seeks to contribute to the emergence of a mythic Middleton whom we know to turn to for some particular kind of excellence, the way we turn to Marlowe for energetic outrage at moral conventionality, or to Jonson for beautifully organized satiric representations of the necessity of containing such outrage. This mythic Middleton is a theatre-poet especially good at catching the generation and power of what René Girard has taught us to call mimetic desire: a great poet, that is, of the social energies of rivalry, comic and tragic (Engle 2008: 417–36). Mimetic sensibility can serve as an umbrella under which to set Middleton’s interest in games and contests, his analyses of market behaviour, his alertness to how people pick up (or are deliberately misled by) a variety of particular social cues to the value or attractiveness of others. More generally, Middleton is a great theatre-poet preoccupied with the mutability of both individual and social moral economies and with the fungibility of their terms, and his interest in rivalrous desire is an important part of this preoccupation. So in this chapter I propose three characteristics of an emergent mythic Middleton—a Middleton who offers us something special to go to him for.

1. Middleton shows how people catch new desires and new aims from each other. Very often, these new desires arise through mimetic sensitivity to the desires and aims of others in a particular social surround that highlights some human ends and obscures others.

2. Middleton shows us how to refer the general or transcendent to the local and social. In Middleton’s work, attempts to reach outside social environments come up against the same localization and particularization Middleton highlights in the
minds of characters. Moral generalizations or otherworldly attitudes are not a way out of a social surround, but a move in it, to be referred to the local situation of the character who is moralizing.

3. Moralizing in Middleton often reflects (1) and (2). There is more disagreement about Middleton as a moralist than about any other aspect of his drama. Indeed, his plays offer a kind of litmus test for critics. If critics hope (or sincerely fear) that there is a realm of absolute judgement waiting at the far end of human misbehaviour, or if they believe that early seventeenth-century Londoners invariably felt this way, they stress Middleton's moralizing as the core of his drama. If they think of morality as just one more discourse of control, they see Middleton as a first-class demystifier for whom moral declamation is often the last refuge of a scoundrel. But if Middleton is preoccupied throughout his career with the way characters (and people) catch new motives and thus new moral or immoral attitudes from their social environments, and consistently has characters justify or rationalize these new impulses in bursts of moral rhetoric, his moralizing and his demystifying may fit together. Both are aspects of Middleton's excellence as a quick-change artist.

Thus the mythic Middleton I propose is mimetic, sceptical, and pragmatic: a playwright who highlights the experiential primacy of the immediate and local over anything that presents itself as settled and fundamental. I have elsewhere discussed mimetic desire in A Trick to Catch the Old One in some detail, and described it more briefly in The Changeling, Women Beware Women, The Revenger's Tragedy, and A Chaste Maid in Cheapside (Engle 2008). In this chapter I begin with some of Middleton's earliest works, offering a detailed discussion of his first play, The Phoenix, alongside selective commentary on A Yorkshire Tragedy, then close with an account of local and immediate motive-acquisition in A Game at Chess, Middleton's last play.

Rarely discussed, and more rarely praised, The Phoenix has several claims on our attention. Middleton's fertile borrowing from and adaptation of Shakespearian examples are noted much more often than his anticipation of them. Here, however, he seems to be anticipating aspects of both of the plays Shakespeare was working on when The Phoenix first appeared. The Phoenix seems to have been written, like both Measure for Measure and Othello, during the 1603–4 period when theatres were closed by plague. According to Leeds Barroll's calculations of when theatres were opened, 'Othello and Measure for Measure might very well have seen their debuts at the Globe in the autumn [of 1604], sometime before November 1, when Othello itself came to court' (Barroll 1991: 123). Both the Oxford Middleton editors and Andrew Gurr follow E. K. Chambers in suggesting that The Phoenix, written for the Boys of Paul's, had a court performance on 20 February 1604 and would thus almost certainly have been performed in London before that date. The King's Men had performed at court on the 19th. Paul Yachnin sug-

---

1 See Gurr (1996: 346); Danson and Kamps (Companion 2007: 346); Chambers (1923: iii. 439).
gests that two allusions in The Phoenix might be associated with the end of Elizabeth's reign rather than the beginning of James's, and thus sees it as 'an Elizabethan, or, preferably, an “interregnum” play', intended for Paul's with 'a date of composition prior to the outbreak of plague and the closing of the theatres' (1986: 375–7). This means that, even though Middleton was a 23-year-old at the beginning of a career as a theatre-poet, and Shakespeare was already very well established, The Phoenix is more likely to have influenced Measure for Measure or Othello than to have been influenced by them. Certainly if Timon is, as most now think, a simultaneous collaboration between Shakespeare and Middleton that dates to 1605 or so, Middleton's early work must have caught Shakespeare's attention. Middleton's presentation of how in male homosocial relations, mimetic desire can quickly invert itself into mimetic suspicion may have influenced Othello directly.

In The Phoenix, the old Duke of Ferrara, who has ‘[f]orty-five years...gently ruled this dukedom', and who fears that 'there's as much disease, though not to the eye, | In too much pity as in tyranny' (1.7–10), sends his son and heir Phoenix off to gain experience by travel. Phoenix, aware that there are dangerous plots in the ducal court, decides to remain in Ferrara in disguise, 'to look into the heart and bowels of this dukedom, and...mark all abuses ready for reformation or punishment' (1.102–4). Like Duke Vincentio in Measure's Vienna, Phoenix will find that detecting abuses is easy but reforming or punishing them is quite difficult. The generic set-up of The Phoenix allows Middleton to illustrate complexities of urban behaviour and motive to his audience for the educational benefit of a future ruler. Phoenix himself will, presumably, sort out in Act 6 (or in this case Scene 16, since The Phoenix does not have act-divisions) what has not yet been reformed by the play's end.

For our purposes, I want to focus on one of the two particularly outrageous sets of relationships in the play (revealed serially to Phoenix as he moves around Ferrara in disguise): the Captain's marriage to and sale of the Lady Castiza, mother of Phoenix's servant/companion Fidelio. The other set includes the various relations of adultery, robbery, bribery, and incest that centre on the household of Justice Falso and enmesh Fidelio's betrothed, Falso's Niece. Each set is characteristically multiple and impure, with a variety of impulses and actions or attempted actions emerging from mixed causes. Each, however, is juxtaposed in the play with an evocation of pure idealized relationship from Phoenix, who clearly in this case represents the attitude of an uncorrupted authority figure trying to bring moral ideals into some sort of relation to their spectacularly kinky instantiations (for Phoenix's idealization of the law in reaction to Falso, see 4.200–30).

The Captain's marriage to Fidelio's widowed mother is first mentioned in haste in a parting conversation between Fidelio and the Niece: 'Write me the truth, how my new father-in-law, | The Captain, bears himself toward my mother' (1.158–9). The Niece inclines to condemn the remarriage on status grounds: 'Methinks she's much disgraced herself' (1.162). Fidelio demurs: 'Nothing so, | If he be good and will abide the touch. | A captain may marry a lady, if he can sail | Into her good will' (1.162–4). While 'abiding the touch' in a new marriage sounds like a reference to the sexual compatibility the bridegroom and bride discover or fail to find, the touchstone that tests the Captain's truth turns out to be the difficulty of sustaining a marriage amid male company.
The marriage is undermined by his piratical crew, on the one hand, and by his virtuous wife's would-be seducer, Count Proditor, on the other. His crew (in this case, his marines, apparently, with 'soldier' rather than 'sailor' as speech-prefixes) knows of ships to be taken:

SECOND SOLDIER Three ships, not a poop less.
THIRD SOLDIER And every one so wealthingly burdened, upon my manhood.
CAPTAIN Pox on't, and now am I tied e'en as the devil would hâ't.
FIRST SOLDIER Captain, of all men living, I would ha' sworn thou wouldst ne'er have married. (2.7–11)

The conversation develops along these lines, expressing a male military community's incredulity that one of its members should throw away freedom and sexual variety:

FIRST SOLDIER But when there are more women, more common, pretty sweethearts, than ever any age could boast of—
CAPTAIN And I to play the artificer and marry: to have my wife dance at home, and my ship at sea, and both take in salt water together. O, lieutenant, thou'rt happy, thou keepest a wench.
FIRST SOLDIER I hope I am happier than so, captain, for o' my troth, she keeps me. (2.25–33)

This revelation of the possibility of being paid for sex by a willing woman to whom one is not indissolubly bound (the first of many such actual or putative relations in Middleton's drama, and one here not tied to the status exchange between gallants and city wives like that of the Knight and the Jeweller's Wife elsewhere in The Phoenix) immediately persuades the Captain that he has incurred a disadvantage with respect to others, and needs to break with marriage and recommit himself to male companions:

CAPTAIN Is there any such fortunate man breathing? And I so miserable to live honest? I envy thee lieutenant, I envy thee, that thou art such a happy knave. Here's my hand among you; share it equally; I'll to sea with you. (2.34–8)

Envy here leads directly to a return to homosocial bonding with a male society, signified by equal sharing of touch.

One wonders how the Captain came to marry in the first place, and in the ensuing soliloquy so does he. At first it seems that the erotic attraction suggested by Fidelio's comment that the Captain may 'sail into [his mother's] good will' has been a factor on the Captain's side as well:

What lustful passion came aboard of me that I should marry—was I drunk? Yet that cannot altogether hold, for it was four o'clock 'th' morning. Had it been five, I would ha' sworn it. (2.42–5)

This suggests a sudden impulse, perhaps operating on both parties.

When, however, the Captain goes on to envy the 'fortunate elder brother' whose inheritance from a base industrious father allows him to live as 'a perfumed gentlemen' with a 'pretty queasy harlot' (2.57–61) the Captain presents his marriage as an economic necessity: the Captain's own father 'consumed me before he got me' by being 'ruttish' (presumably engendering an elder brother), 'and that makes me so wretched now to be shackled with a wife, and not greatly rich, neither' (2.69–72). Moreover, in the middle of
this soliloquy, the Captain adds fear of cuckoldry to his raft of marital complaints—‘what a horrible thing ’twould be to have horns brought me at sea, to look as if the devil were i’th’ ship; and all the great tempests would be thought of my raising’ (2.50–3). Having set his marriage in the context of male companions in conversation with his shipmates, he continues to devalue it in various ways by reference to other men who are better placed than he or who will regard him critically because of it. All of this anti-marital male self-undermining occurs very rapidly, almost abstractly, far from the actuality of any particular relation to a woman, until his new wife enters with a greeting that both respects his military profession and shows her affection:

**LADY** Captain, my husband.

**CAPTAIN** ’Slife, call me husband again and I’ll play the captain and beat you.

**LADY** What has disturbed you, sir, that you now look
   So like an enemy upon me? (2.73–7)

Suddenly, in her surprise and hurt, Middleton dramatizes virtuous female subjectivity discovering with pain the dangers of a husband’s homosocial antifeminism, constituting all other men as objects of envy or jealousy, and blaming the wife for his distress of mind:

**CAPTAIN** Go, make a widower, hang thyself.

**LADY** How comes it that you are so opposite
   To love and kindness? (2.78–80)

Anticipating other Middleton heroines, the Lady defends herself robustly against male misunderstanding—what others say of such Shakespearian characters as Desdemona, she can say of herself:

   I deserve more respect,
   But that you please to be forgetful of it.
   For love to you I did neglect my state,
   Chide better fortunes from me,
   Gave the world talk, laid all my friends at waste. (2.80–4)

The Captain, like Othello under Iago’s influence, construes this history of affection as a further reason to be miserable and resentful, to condemn his wife for desiring him, and to think ill of himself socially and sexually in comparison to other men:

   The more fool you. Could you like none but me?
   Could none but I supply you?
   I am sure you were sued to by far worthier men,
   Deeper in wealth and gentry.
   What could’st thou see in me to make thee dote
   So on me, if I know I am a villain?
   What a torment this? Why didst thou marry me?
   You think, as most of your insatiate widows,
   That captains can do wonders, when, ’las,
   The name does often prove the better man. (2.85–94)
Exploring the incompatibility of her view of him, her choice of him, his view of himself, his male community's way of understanding women's desires, his male community's sense of his loss of being through marriage, and his fears of inadequacy in his new role as husband, he finds, like Othello, 'a torment' he can only escape by violent repudiation of his wife. She sensibly replies: 'That which you urge should rather give me cause / To repent than yourself' (2.95-6). All of this happens quickly in the play as the apparent result of a particular stimulus, the incredulous pity of the Captain's crew. But in one scene Middleton establishes a template for the marital distress of a military man that is both plausible and complex, and that strikingly resembles subtle features of Othello. Of course in The Phoenix the Captain does not murder his lady, though he keeps that option open: 'If all means fail, I'll kill or poison her, and purge my fault at sea' (2.149-50). Instead, knowing her to be too virtuous to provide grounds for divorce by herself, he seeks advice from the litigious client Tangle, who provides a scrivener to write a contract in which the illiterate Captain chooses to cuckold himself by selling her to Count Proditior (a genuine would-be cuckoldor) for 500 crowns, thereby raising capital for his own sea-voyage and producing documentary evidence of her unchastity that he plans to use later in a divorce proceeding. That is, being cuckolded is converted from a general atmospheric male anxiety that helps constitute male homosociality into a specific local strategy.

It is typical of Middleton that we encounter conventional morality in what sound like a priori formulations and experience complex immorality in elaborate gradually revealed sets of transactions. In disguise, Phoenix serves as a witness to the sale, and offers a rueful reflection on the differences between marriage as a noble inherited form of life and the marriage between the Captain and Lady Castiza. Phoenix's reflection, an extended aside, occurs while the Captain counts Proditior's 500 crowns:

Reverend and honourable matrimony,
Mother of lawful sweets, unshamed mornings,
Dangerless pleasures, thou that mak'st the bed
Both pleasant and legitimately fruitful: without thee,
All the whole world were soiled bastardy. (8.166-70)

While this is idealizing in comparison with the marriages in the play, it is also a this-worldly mode of appreciation of marriage as an inherited social form: Phoenix sees marriage in utilitarian rather than Pauline terms and stresses sexual pleasure and safety as key attributes of its pure enactment. Marriage, he suggests, makes us human:

Thou art the only and the greatest form,
That put'st a difference between our desires
And the disordered appetites of beasts,
Making their mates those that stand next their lusts. (8.171-4)

This speech and the pattern of idealization it exemplifies have been the topic of considerable critical complaint: David Holmes sees it as one of several moralizing 'harangues' in which Middleton is 'forgetting or...ignoring the requirement that a play should be diverting,' Anthony Covatta sees it as evidence of Phoenix's rigid morality, and Margot
Heinemann asserts that *The Phoenix* mixes moral didacticism with realism and that ‘all the vigour is in the criticism of everyday life’ (Holmes 1970: 27; Covatta: 1973: 70–2; Heinemann 1980: 68). Swapan Chakravorty comments that Phoenix ‘addresses an ode to holy matrimony, but finds it reduced everywhere to a mockery’ and notes that the device of unifying separate plots by bringing them before the upright Phoenix ‘risks stifling the fun with heavy moralizing’ (1996: 34–5). No one seems to recognize the rather original synthesis of reverence and Epicureanism in Phoenix’s description of marriage (a synthesis that responds powerfully to the torment the Captain has found in it by asserting that marriage should provide a haven from this kind of torment rather than causing it). One important early reader, though, seems to have recognized something worth imitating. As Alexander Dyce notes in his 1840 edition of Middleton, Milton’s apostrophe to marriage in Book 4 of *Paradise Lost* seems modelled on Phoenix’s (Dyce 1840: i. 350):²

Hail wedded love, mysterious law, true source  
Of human offspring, sole propriety  
In Paradise of all things common else.  
By thee adulterous lust was driven from men  
Among the bestial herds to range, by thee  
Founded in reason, loyal, just and pure,  
Relations dear…  
Perpetual fountain of domestic sweets,  
Whose bed is undefiled and chaste pronounced… (Milton 1998: 4,750–61)

Milton praises the first marriage as the source of a tradition of sanctioned pleasure, legitimacy in parenthood, and humanity as distinct from bestiality; these are precisely the strands of marital tradition in Phoenix’s speech. Milton also quotes Middleton’s distinctive use of ‘sweets’ as a synecdoche for ever-renewed moral and sensual pleasure as a way of describing marriage: ‘mother of lawful sweets,’ ‘perpetual fountain of domestic sweets.’ Though Dyce notes the parallel in his edition of *Paradise Lost* as well as his edition of *The Phoenix*, and R. B. Parker, one of the most influential detractors of Phoenix’s rigidity, rediscovered it in an essay published in 1960, the influence seems to have dropped out of sight (1965: 181). It is not mentioned in either of Alastair Fowler’s editions of *Paradise Lost* nor in Merritt Hughes’s, nor is it noted by modern editors of Middleton. It seems however likely that the Oxford Middleton editors would be pleased at the connection, since they bring out other Miltonic echoes: John Jowett points out that a song from Middleton that made its way into commonplace books with an answer by another poet influenced ‘L’Allegro’ and ‘Il Penseroso’, a case in which Milton probably imitated Middleton without knowing he was doing so, and Gary Taylor quotes lines from *A Game at Chess* including ‘the op’ning eyelids of the morn’ that, he says, ‘Milton stole from… when writing *Lycidas*’ (Jowett, *Companion* 2007: 296–7; Taylor, *Collected Works* 2007: 1825).³

² Dyce’s note is quoted telegraphically in a note in Bullen (1885: i. 145).
³ See also Carey (1997: 245).
Phoenix moves directly from this anticipation of *Paradise Lost* to a discussion of the ills attending marriage that anticipates Iago—first, the uncertainty of female chastity, how it is ‘rare to have a bride commence a maid’ (8.176), and then the consequences for male mental stability of such doubts:

> But if chaste and honest,
> There is another devil haunts marriage—
> None fondly loves but knows it—jealousy,
> That wedlock’s yellow sickness,
> That whispering separation every minute,
> And thus the curse takes his effect or progress.
> The most of men in their first sudden furies
> Rail at the narrow bounds of marriage,
> And call’t a prison; then it is most just,
> That the disease o’ th’ prison, jealousy,
> Should still affect ’em. (8.182–92)

The connection between ‘fondly loves’ and marriage devil-haunted by jealousy appears of course in Iago’s amazing lines ‘But O, what damned minutes tells he o’er | Who dothes yet doubts, suspects yet fondly loves!’ (3.3.173–4). The Captain’s ‘Who but that man whom the forefinger cannot daunt, that makes his shame his living—who but that man, I say, could endure to be thoroughly married’ (2.1.46–7) resembles, but does not echo, Othello’s ‘alas, to make me | The fixed finger for the time of scorn | To point his slow and moving finger at’ (4.2.55–7). An odd exchange in *The Phoenix* as the Captain counts money and Fidelio reads out the bill of sale also reminds one of famous lines in *Othello*:

**FIDELIO** ‘which said Madonna Castiza lying, and yet being in the occupation of the said captain—’

**CAPTAIN** Nineteen—occupation! Pox or’t, out with occupation, a captain is of no occupation, man.

Though Middleton may well be thinking of Doll Tearsheet’s complaint in Q1 2 *Henry IV* that Pistol’s styling himself ‘captain’ will make the word as odious as the word “occupy” (2.4.148–50 in Riverside, omitted in Oxford), the use of ‘occupation’ in *The Phoenix* resembles that in *Othello’s occupation’s gone* (3.3.362) again without in any clear way echoing it. Used only once before *Othello* and *Measure for Measure* by Shakespeare, the word ‘occupation’ appears thrice in *Measure* and once each in *Othello*, *Lear*, *Coriolanus*, *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *The Tempest*.

This suggestion would have seemed quite implausible very recently. One of the effects of recent studies of Shakespearean collaboration, and of the Oxford Middleton, which consolidates evidence of co-authorship involving Middleton, is to make us aware that Middleton’s career involved collaboration with Shakespeare near its beginning as well as near its end. The Oxford Middleton editors date Shakespeare and Middleton’s collaboration on *Timon of Athens*—very probably a King’s Men play, since it is published in the 1623 folio—as early as 1605 (Jowett, *Collected Works* 2007: 356). This suggests mutual

---

4 See also Vickers (2002: 244–90, 473–80), for a history of the *Timon* authorship controversy.
awareness and perhaps cultivation of the young Middleton by Shakespeare, a process that could conceivably involve draft-sharing and surely might well involve attentive observation of performances of Middleton’s play in 1603–4.

In any case, Middleton’s Captain, though a satiric sketch rather than a centrally realized character, shows us the local dynamics of marital disturbance: the sense of a field of male observers to whom marriage is seen as a loss of freedom, the constitution of a particular male rival (in the case of Count Proditor, the Captain’s social superior and someone he may constitute as his superior in attractiveness as well), the intolerable torment that the baffled virtuous wife’s reasoning cannot allay, and the outrageous solution. Castiza, reproving her husband for his plan to sell her (as, essentially, a concubine) to Proditor, shows her awareness of the relations between chastity in marriage and credit-worthy financial behaviour, seeing trust as the foundation of both marriages and markets: ‘Have you no sense, neither of my good name | Or your own credit?’ (8.5–6). The Captain turns her word against her: ’Credit? Pox of credit, | That makes me owe so much’ (8.6–7). His ability to borrow has cost him, and he’s seeking to rid himself of all such encumbrances in one great shame-embracing departure that will eliminate not only his bonds to his wife but his participation in the markets: ’O, he that has no credit owes no debts. | ’Tis time I were rid on’t’ (8.16–17). Castiza’s response, while mainly focused on the retention of one’s moral standing, also reflects on one’s reputation for financial soundness:

LADY O, why do you
So wilfully cherish your own poison,
And breathe against the best of life, chaste credit?
Well may I call it chaste, for like a maid,
Once falsely broke, it ever lives decayed.
O, captain, husband, you name that dishonest
By whose good power all that are honest live;
What madness is it to speak ill of that,
Which makes all men speak well. (8.17–25)

Castiza’s commentary on credit differs markedly from the moralizing speeches of Phoenix himself. He moralizes from above the scene that prompts his commentary, but she moralizes from within an evolving situation. Even though, as I have argued, Phoenix’s way of moralizing about marriage (and about law) is more flexible and more social than other commentators have recognized, it is moralizing: it assumes the voice of the one who knows how things ought to be, what institutions are meant to mean, which is always a voice that will be tempted to say, ‘this is how things really are, when uncorrupted by human addiction to false appearances.’ Castiza, however, is trying to get her perversely alienated husband to understand the vocabulary of the moral economy she and he inhabit together. She fails in this—her husband has ears at this point only for the partly imaginary scorn of other males—but what she is doing marks a key tendency of moral discourse in Middleton: toward particular references to the way key words are used in relation to the expenditure or preservation of value.
In sum, then, this aspect of *The Phoenix* shows both Middleton's brilliant enactment of mimetic motive generation in characters and his interest in the way moral discourse engages or fails to engage a particular social situation.

There is yet another example of male desperation and motive-catching in another early work, *A Yorkshire Tragedy* (1605), particularly interesting because we can examine what appears to be the sole source that Middleton used to write this short powerful play.

The great question the play raises is: what could prompt a gentleman, having squandered his inheritance, to murder his own children and wound his wife? Stanley Wells, in his intelligent introduction, emphasizes the play's interest in the devil's agency in this crime:

Thematicallly the dramatist's main development of his source material lies in the notion that the Husband's actions result from demoniac possession. This theme was probably suggested by the talons on the hands and feet of the dark figure of an old man depicted beside the murderer on the title page of the pamphlet. (453)

Though Middleton certainly depicts the Husband's murderous and suicidal despair partly in demonic terms, he does so largely after the Husband has attacked his child. In dramatizing the moment of filicide, Middleton instead emphasizes the ways (outlined in the pamphlet) that two forms of male intervention provide the immediate trigger of family violence. First, a gentleman defends the Wife's honour by wounding the Husband in a duel, and the Husband vows to make the Wife bleed for his pain and debasement. More importantly, because here Middleton actually goes well beyond the pamphlet, as the Husband is threatening the Wife with a dagger, he is interrupted: the Master of an Oxford college comes to visit to complain that the virtuous younger brother of the Husband is now in debtors' prison, having signed a bond for the Husband's debt. The Master in the pamphlet moralizes at some length with emphasis on divine judgement, 'laying open to him what scandal the world would throw upon him, what judgement by God should fall upon him, for suffering his brother to spend the glory of his youth, which is the time young men of hope should seek for preferment, in prison by his means, and did so harrow up his soule with his invincible arguments' (Anon. 1605: 11–12). Middleton's Master presents the judgements that will fall on the Husband in a mixture of otherworldly and this-worldly terms:

O, you have killed the twardest hope of all our university, wherefore, without repentance and amends, expect ponderous and sudden judgements to fall grievously upon you. Your brother, a man who profited in his divine employments, might have made ten thousand souls fit for heaven, now by your careless courses cast in prison, which you must answer for, and assure your spirit it will come home at length. (4.15–22)

The 'judgements' threatened here involve a somewhat utilitarian reckoning of the redemptive good to be expected of the brother measured against the degradation of the Husband. This calculation is not in the pamphlet, only in the play. And it reaches the Husband—he exclaims 'O God, O! The Master continues to emphasize how the Husband has disgraced himself in a male community:
Wise men think ill of you, others speak ill of you, no man loves you, nay, even those whom honesty condemns, condemn you; and—take this from the virtuous affection I bear your brother—never look for prosperous hour, good thought, quiet sleeps, contented walks, nor anything that makes man perfect till you redeem him. What is your answer? (4. 23–30)

Why, we might ask, does Middleton make this appeal by the Master bring forth both apparent moral reflection in the Husband and then, immediately, violent crime? Both the pamphlet author and Middleton are trying to explain what seems like an unnatural act: a father attempting to destroy his children. Given that there is much emphasis on the long-established gentility of the Calverleys, the action is dynastically perverse as well (a point noted by Peter Holbrook) (Holbrook 1994: 100–1). In Calverley’s insanity—partly represented as a devil in possession of him—he asserts frequently but not consistently that his wife is a whore and his children bastards, which would render his murders dynastically intelligible, even perhaps perversely rational. What Middleton supplies that the pamphlet does not is a subtle rendition of a tipping point to family violence, in the form of the damage the Husband’s course of life has done to his closest undeniable male blood relative, his brother:

MASTER I pledge you, sir: to the kind man in prison.
HUSBAND Let it be so.

_Drink both_

Now sir, if you so please
To spend but a few minutes in a walk
About my grounds below, my man here shall attend you. I doubt not but by that time to be furnished of a sufficient answer, and therein my brother fully satisfied.

(4. 46–51)

As the Husband reflects on the causes of his prodigality, he sees it as a crime against his posterity. Throwing ‘three dice’ on a ‘round little table’ makes ‘the gentleman’s palsy in the hand shake out his posterity, thieves or beggars’, he comments with Middleton’s characteristic particularity and vividness. He continues, though, in ways that suggest some residual property may at least potentially remain:

How well was I left, very well, very well. My lands showed like a full moon about me, but now the moon’s i’th’last quarter, waning, waning, and I am mad to think that moon was mine, mine and father’s and my forefather’s generations, generations. Down goes the house of us, down, down, it sinks…. In my seed five are made miserable besides myself. My riot is now by brother’s jailor, my wife’s sighing, my three boys’ penury, and mine own confusion. (4.65–81)

The one of these five whom he has nowhere denied legitimacy is the brother, and it is on guilt toward him that the rest of the soliloquy focuses:

_O, my brother’s_

_In execution among devils that_

Stretch him and make him give, and I in want,

_Not able to live nor to redeem him._

Divines and dying men may talk of hell,
But in my heart her several torments dwell,
Slavery and misery. Who in this case
Would not take up money upon his soul,
Pawn his salvation, live at interest? (4. 84–91)

At this moment 'Enters his little son with a top and a scourge' and the series of child murders begins. The motive suggested in the soliloquy—that the Husband, by pawning his soul to the devil in family violence and suicide, eliminating four of the five people impoverished by the Husband’s prodigality, might somehow ‘take up money’ to appease the devils that have his brother in torment, carries through the violence of the rest of the play. The husband kills two of his children, attempts to kill his wife, and before he rides off to kill the third child, says to the Master, ‘I want one small part to make up the sum, | And then my brother shall rest satisfied’ (5.47–8). When after being thrown by his horse, he is brought before the Master again, it is clear that he has intended his own death along with those of his wife and children:

**MASTER**  Was this the answer I long waited on,
The satisfaction for thy prisoned brother?

**HUSBAND**  Why, he can have no more on’s than our skins,
And some of ’em want but flaying. (6.21–4)

There is no indication in the pamphlet that the brother’s incarceration is the tipping point for Calverley’s murderous madness, much less that in killing his children and assaulting his wife Calverley plans somehow to release his brother from hellish debt. What Middleton has supplied, along with a moving conclusion in which the Husband describes how harrowing it is to look at the bodies of his children now that demonic insanity has left him, is a plausible though perverse economic logic that provides the particular stimulus towards filicide. Once again, we see how sensitively Middleton enacts environmental motive-catching and shows how it can catalyse a general problem, arising from patriarchal stereotypes, into a particular course of action.

The two works I have so far discussed fall at the beginning of Middleton’s career. I close by discussing his last, most economically successful, most politically provocative, and most personally dangerous work, *A Game at Chess*. As Richard Dutton notes, the way this play sits at the intersection of theatre history and politics to some degree distracts critics from its claims as a play: ‘we should not overlook that fact that his is one of the finest plays by one of the most skilled dramatists of the period (this is often sadly overshadowed by the scandal attaching to it)’ (2004: 426). As Gary Taylor’s book-length discussion in *Thomas Middleton and Early Modern Textual Culture* of the textual complexities underlying the two versions of *A Game at Chess* in the Oxford Middleton shows, the play is as fascinating to textualists as it is to historicists, and the two fascinations turn out to be inseparable (*Companion* 2007: 712–873). But if the claims of this chapter are helpful, they characterize a habit of mind in Middleton that shapes his treatment of human interaction at a deep level, and the local, sudden, mimetic acquisition of motives will emerge as central even in a play that is preoccupied with topical allegory. Indeed, as Paul Yachnin comments, *A Game at Chess* is structurally similar to *The
Phoenix—Middleton's last play, like his first, explores the way an old king and a young prince deal with a moral crisis that heralds a transfer of authority from old to young—and thus the somewhat suspect symmetry of pairing Middleton's first surviving independent staged play with his last may point to something a bit deeper (1987: 114).

A Game at Chess offers a fascinating challenge to my claim of what might constitute a mythic Middleton. It does not feature many local mimetic rivalries where X sees Y looking at Z and constitutes Z as object, Y as rival. And its reliance on the chess game seems Foucauldian or Althusserian or, more generally, constructivist, in its emphasis on how a discursive system (a game) determines the set of possibilities and roles for individuals, which they occupy with various degrees of fulfilment and success. At the same time, the way that an abstract game has a contemporary political event superimposed on it leaves room for agency. As A Game at Chess was received at the time, the chess game serves as a disguise permitting the representation of the political event, a representation full of topical importance and reference to particular personalities. The motives and habits of real persons peep through the actions of characters, just as the motives and habits of characters peep through their disguising roles as chess pieces. In terms of authorial agency, the play is a triumph of individual over system, in that it accomplished what was not allowed: the depiction of important living persons on the stage. Thus the play is hardly a model of constructivist depersonalization. The way the play comes to life between its game structure and its topical referentiality amounts to a third dimension (to borrow an idea from recent work by Rob Carson). Seen it three dimensions, a character's significant action is simultaneously local to the character's immediate situation, deep (in that it engages the character's whole personal history), and structurally determined (in that it often involves fulfilling the functions of a set role) (Carson 2008). For example, the Black Knight's Pawn Gelder might seem entirely determined by a structured role, but he emerges as an agent when, toward the end of the play, he tries poignantly to purchase a penance that no one can price for him. Chess is a game constituted around a binary contest, but A Game at Chess, where black and white are simultaneously sides in a purely conventional system, imperial Catholicism vs. insular Protestantism, Spain vs. England, and also a set of idiosyncratic individuals with complex relationships, is persistently enlivened by the way structures of rivalry involving parallelisms of role give or incite meaningful particular relations. To cite a fairly complex instance of this, the play is able to charge the inert onstage relation between the White King (James) and the White Duke (Buckingham) with erotic content by broadly implicating the Black King (Felipe) and the Black Duke (Olivares) in passionate sodomy as both black pieces are swept into the bag at the play's end. This is a kind of mimetic contagion where a structural relation implies emotional commitment and the audience's gaze, alerted by Black King—Black Duke relation, suddenly recognizes triangulated desire among the White King, White Duke, and White Knight Charles.

Moreover, the lower-level plot is mimetic: the pawns are involved in a love triangle that turns on violent rivalry—the past constitution of the White Gelded Bishop's Pawn as a sexual rival to be violently outdone by the Black Knight's Pawn Gelder in competition for the Virgin White Queen's Pawn; the manipulation of the Virgin White Queen's Pawn to see the (disguised, apparently ennobled) Jesuit Black Bishop's Pawn as a love object by the
magic mirror set up by the allegedly admiring Jesuitess Black Queen's Pawn, the substitution in bed of the Jesuitess Black Queen's Pawn for the Virgin White Queen's Pawn as part of a complex humiliating triangular revenge on the Black Bishop's Pawn arising from personal history. It is clear that there is plenty of mimetic rivalry here, and much presentation of situationally created desire. As Gary Taylor points out, the interest of the Virgin White Queen's Pawn in marriage is itself based on her mimetic desire for the maternal status enjoyed by other women: 'instead of penis envy, she suffers from pregnancy envy.' Even pregnancy envy, Taylor continues, 'is not intrinsic, but mimetic—not the inevitable consequence of a natural or biological female desire for motherhood, but a social desire to be what she sees, to acquire what other women already display' (2000a: 124).

It is also clear (though the details are hard to work out) that the seduction/betrayal of the Virgin White Queen's Pawn and the gelding of the White Bishop's Pawn allegorize in some way the intended seduction/betrayal and emasculation of the White Knight (Charles) and the White Duke (Buckingham) in their visit to the Black House.

But local rivalry also constitutes a large part of enjoyable revelation of self by the Black Knight (Gondomar) and the Black then White then Black Fat Bishop of Spalato, two of the most memorable characters in the play. The secular Black Knight feels himself in rivalry with the Jesuits as a mover of policy, and he prides himself specifically on how his personal charm makes him effective:

I brag less,
But have done more than all the conclave of 'em,
...
And what I've done I've done facetiously
With pleasant subtlety and bewitching courtship
Abused all my believers with delight (1.1.254–60)

Moreover, the Black Knight's seduction of the Fat Bishop from the White to the Black side (or back to it) is motivated not only by a general black vs. white rivalry, but also by a humiliating personal incident in which the Fat Bishop defeated him by manipulating the Black Knight's desire for a cure for his shameful ailments, the anal fistula that necessitates his special chair:

... a most uncatholic jest
He put upon me once, when my pain tortured me:
He told me he had found a present cure for me,
Which I grew proud of and observed him seriously.
What think you 'twas? Being execution day,
He showed the hangman to me out at window,
The common hangman. (2.2.61–7)

People become rivals for objects who appear to have what they lack. The Fat Bishop, later in the play, complains about the limitations of scope for ascent within the English ecclesiastical hierarchy:

There's but two lazy beggarly preferments
In the White Kingdom, and I've got 'em both.
My merit does begin to be crop-sick
For want of other titles. (3.1.16–19)

The Black Knight (Gondomar) then immediately proffers a false letter from a former
patron/rival, 'Cardinal Paulus, your most princely kinsman' (3.1.26), dangling before the
Fat Bishop the unbounded possibilities for ascent and rivalrous triumph (as well as
wealth and luxury) offered by the Roman Church. Regretting Spalato's defection, Paulus
notes what might have been: "My present removal by general election to the papal dign-
ity had now auspiciously settled you in my sede vacante"—ha, had it so?—'which at my
next remove by death might have proved your step to supremacy... Think on't seriously,
it is not yet too late then... ' (3.1.37–45).

The kind of professional mimetic rivalry for objects, persons, and offices that drives
usurers in London comedies and prodigals in Middleton's early satire, and that perverts
marriage in The Phoenix, drives statesmen and divines in A Game at Chess. Moreover,
the play promotes a complex political and moral recognition of the dangers of naive
blindness to the pervasiveness of deception, game-playing, and local personal motive.

Middleton's interest in the susceptibility of the self to the immediate moral surround is,
I suggest, central to his claims on a broad non-specialist readership. As a mythic theatre-
poet of rivalrous local interaction, he also achieves a special status as a moralist, because
the moral attitudes that survive awareness of this social animality in human beings are
going to be broadly speaking tolerant and therapeutic ones. The idea that moral attitudes
can survive, and can indeed flexibly encompass, recognition of one's mutability and
understanding of how one's selfhood is located in, and often distorted by, a variable field
of transient rivals, objects, and discursive opportunities, is a powerful aid to the recover-
ies and self-acceptances that pervade Middleton's writing alongside his portrayal of dis-
astrous local self-alterations. Moreover, this habit of mind in Middleton shapes not only
his use of the work of his contemporaries in theatre and civic poetry, but their uses of his.

**Suggested Further Reading**

(Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

and Peter Thomson (eds.), The Cambridge History of British Theatre, vol. i (Cambridge:
Cambridge University Press).


Girard, René (1965), Deceit, Desire, and the Novel: Self and Other in Literary Structure, trans.
Yvonne Freccero (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press).


Taylor, Gary (2000a), Castration: An Abbreviated History of Western Manhood (New York:
Routledge).

Yachnin, Paul (1997), Stage-Wrights: Shakespeare, Jonson, Middleton, and the Making of