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Book Review: Thomas Middleton. *Michaelmas Term*. Ed. Gail Kern Paster. The Revel Plays. Manchester University Press, 2000.

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Thomas Middleton. *Michaelmas Term*. Ed. Gail Kern Paster. Revels Plays. Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 2000. Pp xvi, 205.

The publication of Gail Kern Paster's scholarly and very smart edition of Thomas Middleton's city comedy, *Michaelmas Term*, is surely an indication of the playwright's impending entry into the pantheon of early modern English dramatists, a stellar group that presently includes Jonson, Marlowe, and Shakespeare. Paster's edition is prominent among many other indicators of his rising fortunes, including a host of recent studies (some by the present author) and especially the forthcoming Oxford edition of *The Complete Works* under the general editorship of Gary Taylor. Middleton is well worth all this scholarly work, and he deserves a place of consequence in the English literary canon.

The reasons for his late entry are several. He lacks an agreed upon corpus; he did not cultivate a literary personality and tradition has not cultivated one on his behalf; his plays have not had much of a life in the theatre since his own time; he has suffered from the overshadowing proximity of Shakespeare; and his plays have not attracted the very best critical work, largely as a result of his marginal status. Not all of these deficits are addressed in this edition, but several of them are, especially the need for first-rate criticism, and the overall contribution that it makes both in its own right and as part of a canonizing project is impressive.

That Middleton has lacked an agreed upon corpus is due to his tendency toward collaborative writing, to the general early modern disregard for dramatic authorship (so there are many quartos without attribution), and to the absence of an early folio edition of his works. The lack of a corpus has meant that critics have had to work without an overall sense of the shape of his work, without a 'life and works' narrative and therefore without an adequate sense of who he was or what he believed, and without having recourse to a Middletonian universe of language, imagery, character, incident, and theme. Such a semantic and interpretive universe would have *The Revenger's Tragedy*, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, *The Changeling* (with Rowley), and especially *Women Beware Women* at its centre; these plays would lend a somewhat lesser play such as *Michaelmas Term* a greater degree of gravity and would help to illuminate its socio-linguistic and characterological complexity. Paster cannot develop her edition within a Middletonian universe because, of course, it doesn't yet exist and cannot be wished into being; however, her work makes a contribution to the creation of a larger, more coherent semantic field specific

to the playwright by referencing other works by Middleton in the commentary and by focusing her introduction on Middleton's works and world, even to the point of excluding Shakespeare. The range of reference could have been expanded even more widely, especially in the direction of Middleton's city pageants, since they provide a positive portrayal of the city, one that is tellingly inverted in the playworld but that nevertheless persists at its edges. Quomodo's disdain for large-scale poor relief (he refers to the 'great moneyed men [whose] stocks lie in the poor's throats' [2.3.246–7]) and the Liveryman's disdain for him (4.4.17–18) point to a virtuous, charitable London quite different from the dominant version in the play.

The edition makes a strong case for how the presence of boy actors, who performed *Michaelmas Term* at Paul's, might have augmented the play's critical presentation of the early modern ideal of male friendship (more about this below); but the edition would have been improved by greater and broader attention, in the introduction, illustrations, and commentary, to the theatrical dimension of the play. That would, of course, have required an imaginative reconstruction of the original performance, but we do know something about the conditions of staging at the 'private theatres', and such attention paid to the staging would help readers see the play in their mind's eye and thereby appreciate more fully Middleton's dexterity as a writer for the theatre. More might have been said about the use of the playing space in 2.3, where Thomasine's witnessing of the fleecing of Easy is at once authoritative and romantic – her authority conferred by the vantage-point she holds over the action unfolding below her and her romantic engagement triggered by the optical distance that is a regular feature of burgeoning desire in plays such as *Volpone* or *Women Beware Women*. More discussion of Middleton's stagecraft would also have helped readers understand his playful, critical representation of London society as something that is nested in his playful, critical representation of the theatre. The play performs a construction of the playing space and the audience in addition to representing the society outside the playhouse; and the two spheres of representation are intertwined. When Quomodo enjoins the spectators to 'Admire me, all you students at Inns of Cozenage' (2.3.473–4), he is mocking the Law students in the audience, reminding or perhaps persuading the audience of its elite make-up, and also characterizing London itself as a school of vice.

One of the edition's principal strengths is its commentary, which is fuller, more eye-opening, and more revealing about the ubiquity of Middletonian sexual play than those of previous editions. As already noted, the commentary draws predominately on Middleton's own works; but it is splendidly wide-

ranging. On one typical page (76) there are illuminating references to Middleton's *Father Hubbard's Tales*, Thomas Willis's 1651 rhyming dictionary, *Vestibulum linguae latinae*, and the Geneva Bible. The edition's main strength, however, lies in the introduction's extended treatment of the social meaning of clothing and the ideal of male friendship. These powerful critical discussions, especially on the second topic, sharpen our socio-historical understanding of the play and deepen our emotional response.

Ann Jones and Peter Stallybrass's recent study, *Renaissance Clothing and the Materials of Memory*, provides Paster with the theoretical basis for a reconsideration of the social dimension of dress in the play. The characters do not usually exaggerate the transformative power of new clothing, she explains, but when they do, it is because clothing 'still retained the symbolic capacity to embody social memory even as it was rapidly becoming commodified into its modern form of fashion' (40). The doubleness of clothing, as an embodiment of the transformative energy of the city and as a repository of social memory, is important also since it points to the relative conservatism of Middleton's view, especially as embodied in his depiction of characters (the citizens, the gentlemen) whose costume arouses no comment at all because it merely represents and reinforces who they in fact are.

Finally, the introduction reveals the homosocial ethos dominant in Easy's London as well as the homoerotic desire that underlies his vulnerability to Master Blastfield's ruinous offer of intimacy: 'Middleton signals from the start his play's main interest in the social, sexual, and class relations of men' (27). The effect of this emphasis is to clarify, for instance, the particular resonance of Cockstone's speech of welcome to Easy: 'Here's gallants of all sizes, of all lasts. / Here you may fit your foot, make choice of those / Whom your affection may rejoice in' (1.1.46–8). Perhaps more important, this approach both suggests the play's ability to engage emotionally with the young men who were there in some numbers at the play's original performances and also enhances the play's ability to engage emotionally with us. In sum, Paster's edition succeeds in showing that *Michaelmas Term* is a brilliant dramatization of the cony-catching pamphlets and also a play whose protagonist is robbed not only of his land but also of his youthful love by the so-called Master Blastfield and the other under-dwellers of London commerce.

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