

Early Modern Literary Studies

Gary Taylor and Trish Thomas Henley, eds, *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Middleton* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2012). 670pp. ISBN 978 0 1995 5988 6.

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The editors of *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Middleton*, Gary Taylor and Trish Thomas Henley, open their collection by surveying the relatively barren landscape of Middleton studies prior to the publication of *The Collected Works* in 2007: ‘Looking backward from this vibrant moment, what will strike anyone about the history of Middleton criticism is its paucity, its discontinuity, its lost and riven heart’ (p. 1). It would be difficult to argue with their claim that ‘In a real sense, Middleton criticism started, or started over, in 2007’ (p. 13); accordingly, the thirty-six essays in *The Oxford Handbook* reveal that the heart of Middleton criticism has not only been stabilized and resuscitated, it now pulses with an energy that will no doubt invigorate the study of early modern literature for some time to come.

In many ways, *The Oxford Handbook* is a natural extension of Oxford’s *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works* and its companion volume, *Thomas Middleton and Early Modern Textual Culture*, in that the extensive groundbreaking scholarship of the earlier volumes frees contributors from the obligation of providing broad introductory contexts for particular works or of tackling thorny questions related to attribution. Numerous contributors to *The Oxford Handbook* were also involved in the preparation of these earlier volumes, but they now enjoy a perspective on the Middleton canon that was previously unavailable to them. In the words of Taylor and Henley, ‘all the critical introductions and essays in the 2007 Oxford Middleton were written *before* the 2007 Oxford Middleton was published. The individual contributors could not stand back and get a perspective on the massive collective structure that each was helping to build. Every reader of the Oxford Middleton can see Middleton better than *any* reader before November 2007’ (p. 14). If the process of building the Middleton canon is complete (for the time being), then *The Oxford*

Handbook represents a series of detailed journeys through hitherto unexplored passageways and stairwells that link Middleton's works to one another and link Middleton to the work of his contemporaries and to his historical moment. Indeed, significant portions of a number of the essays in *The Oxford Handbook* are devoted to vigorously surveying or mapping a certain issue or theme across Middleton's corpus; there are so many connections to be discovered - so many forgotten or ignored texts to consider - that one can sense the excitement that accompanies the blazing of new interpretive pathways. In 'Staging Muteness in Middleton,' for instance, Heidi Brayman Hackel identifies Middleton's fascination with 'the theatrical elements that most resist the faculties of a hearing audience: muteness, gesture, and dumb show' (p. 330) in tragedies, comedies, and civic entertainments across his entire career before she gestures at the broader implications of her findings: 'Early modern dumb shows were, finally, not solutions to dramatic problems but rather complex assertions of silence and meaning available in the body' (p. 344). Similarly, 'Middleton's Stylistics' by Jonathan Hope ranges across multiple works and genres to establish Middleton's linguistic preferences, stylistic markers, and his awareness 'of print as a technology, . . . of books as 'things,' . . . of the materiality of manuscript culture, and the handwritten word' (p. 250). Essays devoted to individual works are in the minority, but these too have a freshness about them, as Middleton's best-known works are approached from new angles (such as Regina Buccola's comparative examination of two 2008 productions of *The Revenger's Tragedy* in 'Giving *Revenger's* Its Due'), and some of Middleton's lesser-known works are treated to an attentiveness that has rarely, if ever, been shown them: Stephen Guy-Bray does much to salvage the reputation of Middleton's seemingly universally-disparaged *The Wisdom of Solomon* in 'Middleton's Language Machine,' and Julian Yates helps to navigate the genre-defying swerves of *The Owl's Almanac* in 'Middleton's Shelf Life.'

The exploratory, free-ranging spirit of the collection is very much by design. Unlike most other handbooks or essay anthologies, *The Oxford Handbook* is not organized by way of categories, headings or chapters - instead, the editors reveal that 'We have arranged the essays by the entirely arbitrary principle of authorial alphabetical order - or rather, in deference to Middleton's own habit of turning expectation upside down, in *reverse* alphabetical order' (p. 15). One might point to this ostensibly disorganized approach as limiting the collection's accessibility or utility, but this is not the case. If there is an inconsistency to the claim that the *Collected Works* 'established a Middleton system,' albeit a system 'whose principles have not yet been articulated' (p. 13), it must be said that there is something critically productive about this collection's lack of imposed direction. The

subtitle of the Introduction (which technically is not an introduction at all, but rather an ‘Unintroduction’) is ‘A Middletonian Dissensus,’ and the lack of explicit structure or direction means that readers, like the contributors themselves, are invited to test the interpretive conduits that have been opened by the publication of *The Collected Works*. As one proceeds through the book, certain categories nevertheless come to the fore: Middleton in performance is especially well covered, with Carol Chillington Rutter, Courtney Lehmann, Terri Bourus, and Buccola attending to the challenges and opportunities that Middleton presents to practitioners and audiences of the modern stage and screen; Gabriel Gbadamosi, Paul Budra, and Paul Yachnin, without examining specific performances, offer engaging theorizations of a distinctively Middletonian affect in the theatre.

The recent boom in Middleton studies has at times carried with it a tendency for statements that appear, at first glance, to be hyperbolic and attention-seeking, pronouncements designed to carve out space on critical and canonical landscapes for an important writer whose achievements have too long gone unrecognized. While Taylor and Henley assert in their Unintroduction that ‘What begins in the work of Middleton is . . . modern drama’ (6) - and it remains to be seen if this claim is hyperbolic or not - the collection as a whole should be appreciated for its measured approach to its subject matter. Cumulatively, the essays demarcate rich fields of critical inquiry, clarifying why it is that Middleton matters, and why he must continue to matter from this time forward.

Works Cited

- Taylor, Gary and John Lavagnino, eds, *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).
- —, *Thomas Middleton and Early Modern Textual Culture: A Companion to the Collected Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007).