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**Kaethler, Mark.**

***Thomas Middleton and the Plural Politics of Jacobean Drama.***

Late Tudor and Stuart Drama. Kalamazoo, MI: Medieval Institute Publications / Walter de Gruyter, 2021. Pp. xiii, 223 + 4 ill. ISBN 978-1-5015-1819-5 (hardcover) US\$99.99.

Mark Kaethler's *Thomas Middleton and the Plural Politics of Jacobean Drama* is a re-examination of the Middleton canon that reveals a fluid vision of sovereignty that both acknowledges and subverts James's vision of himself as "sole decider" (196). Noting Middleton's persistent fascination with the limitations of monarchy, Kaethler's book focuses upon those of Middleton's plays that "engage in scandalous or provocative ways with topical subject matter concerning the sovereign and at times challenge his decisions or actions" (7).

Kaethler's monograph is a timely exploration of the relationship between art and political power. Exploring the ways Thomas Middleton, as a Jacobean dramatist, creates space on the stage to critique and correct the would-be infallible English monarch, Kaethler theorizes Middleton is modelling a contractual relationship between the monarch and his subjects.

Suggesting that Middleton's approach can best be described as a political poesis or "*parrhēsiastic* reminders of obligation and consent" (8), Kaethler argues that the playwright acknowledges sacred kingship while also challenging it. Responding to the ongoing scholarly conversation around the nature of Stuart Kingship, he argues that, since James I still acted within the limits of English law, he does not qualify as a true dictator, and that therefore scholars who argue for his absolutism are applying the term anachronistically. Thus, the commentaries on the current political situation in Middleton's plays are not without expectation of some reciprocity on the part of James.

The first chapter focuses upon *The Phoenix* as a didactic "disguised duke narrative" play, figuring young Phoenix as an allegorical James—young in English experience—in need of a thorough understanding of his new kingdom and his contractual obligation to listen to his subjects. In this early instance, suggests Kaethler, "the polite *parrhēsiastic contract*" (90) modelled in *The Phoenix* is effective: the play is performed for James without causing offence and, he argues, evidence suggests the king was at least receptive to the play's suggestions.

Chapter 2 explores Middleton's evolving response to the Francis Howard scandal and its political fallout in both *The Witch* and (in collaboration with William Rowley) *The Changeling*. Kaethler's oblique reference to the Trump-Clinton "lock her up" chants (108) is a nice touch that reminds the reader that this study has modern relevance too. He notes that with time, Middleton's characterization of Howard devolves from satirical detachment in *The Witch* to a misogynistic revenge fantasy in *The Changeling*. But it is *The Witch* that gets him into the most political trouble, with its thinly veiled critique of James I's bungling of the case. In this instance, Kaethler argues, Middleton's pointed *parrhēsiastic* challenge to patriarchal governance is poorly received; the play is not performed for James, and it is ultimately only performed once in Middleton's lifetime. Kaethler, in company with scholars such as Anne Lancashire, reads that lack as caused by political rather than dramaturgical unpopularity. He also notes that while politically progressive in some areas—Middleton works to destabilize the Jacobean vision of absolute power and patriarchy—he frequently raises these challenges at women's expense, particularly, as in this case, when dealing with a real (rather than allegorical) woman.

The second half of the book engages with Middleton's response to the controversies of the Thirty Years' War and the Spanish match. Kaethler highlights the increasingly xenophobic and white supremacist tone of these dramatic texts, where whiteness, goodness, and purity are equated with Englishness, and aligned against blackness, corruption/miscegenation, and evil, which are equated with Spanishness. Kaethler suggests that while the Howard affair revealed the fault lines of James I's rule, it was these international controversies that really shattered his credibility as a successful ruler and peacemaker, which in turn led to increasingly sharp *parrhēsiastic* challenges in Middleton's work.

Chapter 3 considers Middleton and Rowley's use of *ironia* to counsel current and future rulers in their masque-turned-play, *The World Tossed at Tennis*. Although the masque was never staged at court, the play was performed in the public theatre. Kaethler argues the play offers a collaborative model of governance between the Scholar (James) and the Soldier (Prince Charles). This model both undermines James's self-image as an infallible and self-sufficient ruler and invites a citizen audience to participate in a royal game where they can witness the *parrhēsiastic* instruction of their current and future monarchs.

Chapter 4 turns to Middleton's final play, *A Game at Chess*, and its capitalization upon the growing news culture in London. Kaethler notes that

this play overtly confronts Jacobean shortcomings by openly satirizing the English and Spanish courts as the White and Black Houses. Unlike previous scholarly examinations of this play, Kaethler focuses his attention on the pawn plotline of *A Game at Chess*, arguing it highlights “Jacobean governors’ inability to manage foreign affairs with English Protestantism in mind” and “inspires political awareness,” placing the *opera basilica* into the hands of the citizenry (155). While the play was a huge commercial success, it resulted in Middleton’s imprisonment (or the threat thereof), a clear example of the complete breakdown of any kind of *parrhēsiastic* contract between ruler and ruled.

In the conclusion, Kaethler ultimately suggests that by using his political art to present the king with a combination of counsel, critique, and obeisance, Middleton manages consistently to remind James of the limitations of his office.

One of the difficulties with a sharply focused project is what it is forced to leave out. While *The Changeling* understandably receives less airtime than *The Witch*, given its less overtly political thrust, Kaethler’s brief discussion opens intriguing lines of inquiry that could be fruitfully expanded upon. On the other hand, since Middleton and Rowley share authorship for both *The Changeling* and *The World Tossed at Tennis*, it seems relevant to ask how Rowley’s involvement in those two plays impacts the book’s larger argument about Middleton’s *parrhēsiastic* vision, which isn’t really addressed. However, these are minor quibbles, and no book can be all things to all people. This book is an important contribution to Middleton studies and pursues a thorough and balanced exploration of its subject. It will figure as an essential part of any study of seventeenth-century drama.

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