

HUMANITIES INSTITUTE
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A Chaste Maid in Cheapside (1613)

Thomas Middleton (1580-1627)

OVERVIEW

Middleton: the man and his writing world

Middleton was the son of a London bricklayer, yet by dint of hard work, and numerous successful plays, as well as prose works and poems, masques and pageants he managed, in the course of his life, to raise himself to the status of a gentleman, and to own valuable property in London. One reason for his financial success was his position as a free lance dramatist, working as he could for any theatrical company he liked—and that liked his work. And he was versatile. Among Elizabethan dramatists he was almost unique in being equally successful in tragedy and comedy, which opened his work to a large and diverse audience. He remained a popular theatrical presence, and in 1620 was appointed official Chronologist of the City of London, a position of influence in which he was followed by Ben Jonson.

It is worth restating that the label 'city comedy' regularly attaches to the kind of popular work Middleton creates here. The new life of the pre modern city is all over the plot that Middleton traces. Marriage, bearing with it the rewards of inherited monies, is at the same time a vehicle for jealousies and conflicts in Middleton's plays. Desire, which triggers the move toward marriage, sets individual (and sometimes group) interests against one another, while fertility, sprung loose by desire, generates new patterns of work inside the increasingly complex networks of supply, demand, and distribution, which provide the energy routes of the early modern city. Congreve and Etherege, as well as Middleton, sit squarely in the middle of this new dramatic sensibility, drawing the texture of their upper middle lives directly onto the page.

CHARACTERS

Mr. Yellowhammer, a prosperous London goldsmith.

Maudlin, his wife.

Tim, their son. Naïve and out of it.

Moll, their daughter, and the principal, the 'chaste maid,' who comes out of the play mock deified at the end.

Tutor, to Tim, from Cambridge

Sir Walter Whorehound, a suitor to Moll, who likes the looks of her dowry. Also a gallant, who likes the look of the ladies in general, and procreates voluminously with the wife of Allwit.

Sir Oliver Kix, and his wife, Lady Kix. Relatives of Sir Walter. An elderly couple having great trouble making a child.

Allwit and his wife, Mistress Allwit, whom Sir Walter keeps as his mistress, while Allwit, indifferent morally, reaps the benefits.

A Welsh gentlewoman, Sir Walter's whore.

Wat and Nick, bastard sons, by Mistress Allwit.

Touchwood Senior and wife, elderly and failing pair.

Touchwood Junior, another suitor to Moll, and her own favorite from among her suitors. Eventually marries Moll.

A porter

A gentleman

A wench

Two Puritans

Five gossips

Moll's maid

SYNOPSIS

The plot of Middleton's most popular comedy, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, is loose, episodic, part almost of an epic fertility of action, interaction, intrusion, invention.

The play opens with a marital deal cooking. Dad, a prosperous goldsmith, wants a suitable marriage for his daughter, Moll, and turns to a Sir Walter Whorehound, who has just arrived in town, accompanied by his 'landed niece' from Wales, who is intended as a bride for Tim—but is in fact a prostitute.

The most fascinating and erotic—of this powerfully erotic play—involves the marriage of Allwit and his Wife. They live on the Estate of Sir Walter Whorehound, who provides them mansion style living, all the luxuries of maintenance, in return for which Allwit makes his wife available, on the property, whenever Sir Whorehound is around. This situation is perfectly agreeable to Allwit, for he has excellent living and no responsibility, a voluntary cuckold as he is; the situation also satisfies Sir Walter, who can screw without restriction, and always has a place to stay when he's in town.

There follows, and we see already the episodic of this drama, the tale of the senior Touchwood. (Moll, you remember, has the hots for the younger Touchwood, but not for the lecherous Sir Walter her parents design her for.) The senior Touchwoods have the problem that Sir Walter has with Mistress Allwit, that whenever they get together a baby is quickly made. The senior Touchwoods can no longer put up with, or pay for, this fertility. Of necessity they separate, ploughing their story back into the epic of fertility and high fuck which this amazing play makes of itself. It is at this point that the bond between sex and money asserts itself forcefully.

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We have arrived at the Kixes—'middle class nobility' as are all of these factored in characters, in this con summate city drama—an elderly couple who have been unable to procreate. If they die without offspring Sir Walter, a family relative, will inherit Lady Kixes will, which would be anathema for the Touchwoods. It is thus of importance to the Touchwoods that Lady Kix should procreate. Touchstone senior, the exemplar of fertility, takes on this problem, finds his way into Lady Kix's bed, and solves the problem, excluding Sir Walter from the inheritance."A wave of the magic wand' takes care of the matter.

The bulk of Middleton's play is invested in the co-ordinate scenes unrolled above, but there remains, in the tale and the watcher's mind, the initial love, between Moll Yellowhammer and the junior Touchwood with whom she is truly in love. The resolution of this love match will pull at no heart strings, lest we be tempted to anticipate an entrance of Romeo and Juliet. (No play which highlights the tale of the voluntary cuckold, Mr. Allwit, is about to turn romantic on us.) But even without heart strings, we can still be amazed.

On the day before her anticipated wedding to Sir Walter Whorehound, Moll manages to escape from her parents' house, where she has been confined. As she is approaching a small boat, to cross the water to a meeting with Touchwood junior, she is captured, and dragged on stage by Mistress Yellowhammer, furious at the escape; the girl falls into a fit of cold and illness; Touchwood senior appears to remove her to another room in the Yellowhammer house, providing an occasion for a new plan: the maid will pretend that Moll has expired, and arrange for her to be brought on stage in her coffin, in the last scene of the play.

En route to the conclusion, however, Sir Walter and Touchwood Junior come to swords points and each is wounded, Whorehound to the point that he feels he is dying, and expresses himself penitently in powerful language—a reminder of another register available to Middleton. Whorehound is hereupon kicked out of the mansion he 'shares' with the Allwits; his world begins to crumble. The world of the youngsters, Moll and Touchwood junior, is just beginning to soar. The coffins filled with the supposed corpses of the two young lovers are brought on stage, and, at the command of Touchwood senior the 'deceased are ordered to rise from their tombs.' They do so, and the drama is triumphantly wrapped up.

SCENES

In a sense the plot is the events of the present play. And yet the plot, for it is out there as the plain narrative of events, wants being expressed neutrally, without regard to developments which are in fact salient, at least for the observer who is informing himself for the first time; the plot is different from the relation of 'events,' which is more like an account of salient developments, than like a record of what happened. That was truly an event, one might say of a startling or game changing twist in the line of the plot.

The mutual love between Moll and Touchwood junior, though not romantically colored, tinges the remainder of the play. It is in view of such positive and persistent love that we experience the gross of Sir Whorehound's love, which is essentially lust, at least until his repentance.

Deception in love triggers another formative event, when Touchwood senior intervenes to save the Kixes from the curse of childlessness. Sir and Lady Kix have been unable to create a child, with the looming consequence that if the couple were to have a child their fortune would not go to Whorehound, a relative of theirs, but to the newborn child. Touchstone senior would come in for a tidy sum. Touchstone's necessity, therefore, is to deceive the Kixes, so that he can infiltrate into Lady Kix's bed, and impregnate her, depriving Whorehound of a juicy source of inheritance.

Many of the formative events of the present play revolve around marriage and the benefits it can confer, usually monetary. In the episode above, concerning the impregnation of Lady Kix by the magic wand of Touchstone senior, we observe that this one simple success of a creative act, impregnation, can ricochet out onto the plans and hopes of other characters. This is an instance of unpredictable fall out, when Whorehound learns that he will not reap rewards from the dowry of Lady Kix. This is a major blow to Sir Walter, who has been counting on the Lady's dowry to help feather his own nest.

THEMES

Sexuality From the first scene on, when Mr. Yellowhammer asks his daughter whether she has been studying her virginals, this play is packed with sexual innuendo and graphic insinuation. Openings, cracks, entrances, tunnels, monuments, hollows, exits, and entrances; you name it, Middleton rubs your attention in it. Same with the characters. Only Moll and junior Touchstone seem to have any touch with their romantic feelings; the rest—the Kixes, Sir Walter, Touchstone senior, Allwit, Mistress Allwit—are constantly concerned or involved with the sexual. On occasion, as in Allwit's obsession with the pleasures of voluntary cuckoldry, the sexual takes a perverse turn, if only to make the keenness of the sexual other exceptionally intense.

Guilt Sir Walter reaches a low point when he is evicted from Allwit's domestic scene, and forced to leave the cozy arrangement he has long enjoyed with Mistress Allwit. In the beginning of the fifth act, this loss descends like a ton of bricks on the uninhibited lecher, and he feels as though he has lost everything. At the onset of the last act he lets himself go into a powerful—and unique, for this play—expression of remorse for his bad behavior in the past; he grows penitent:

Still my adulterous guilt hovers aloft,
And with her black wings beats down all my prayers,
Ere they be half way up...

Deep remorse, readiness for penance swamps Sir
Walter, in the play's unique tussle with this universal sense of irremediable guilt...

THOUGHTS

Just as early modern culture was itself not one of passion and heart, but rather of a waking to the total complexity of the social world, to the blinding interest of historical being. The present small masterpiece of comedy does little to draw us into the humanity of its characters and sub themes, but

much to involve us in a network of gradually assembling social pieces. For one thing, the drama before us is made up of five different small dramas, involving first the family of Yellowhammer and his search for a suitable mate for Moll, then the tale of Allwit, his wife, and Sir Walter, then the tale of the Touchwoods, and their separation in order to prevent further pregnancies, and then ultimately the tale of the marriage of Moll and Touchwood junior, and their triumphant comic opera city ascent from the coffin. Is the final motif a celebration of true love? Or is it a mockery of the love and marriage industry as it found itself in the city world of Middleton?

The joint burial and ascension scene, with which the play ends, cannot fail to have aroused complex feelings in the audience. It was their world they were watching played with, their hopes for the possibility of chastity and joy in the midst of corruption, filthy language, devotion to fucking, and mandatory withdrawals from sex. Amusing all this can surely have been, but in the end a little chillingly familiar, and to the keenest of observers a foresight into the malaise of industrialized social relations.