THE TREATMENT OF THE MIDDLE CLASS IN THE CITY COMEDIES OF THOMAS MIDDLETON

by

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In Memoriam

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Statement of Purpose

The rise of the middle class to a position of economic importance and new social prestige in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries stimulated an unprecedented amount of literary activity, particularly in drama. The middle class, a curious social phenomenon which affected every facet of Elizabethan life, provided playwrights with innumerable dramatic possibilities. The great number of plays written in this period for or about the middle class testifies to the importance of these citizens in the theatrical world. Thomas Middleton, gentleman and Cambridge scholar, chose the middle class as a major source of character and plot in many of his city comedies, and it is to his plays that we turn most often for a display of the robust life of the period.

The middle class in Middleton's city comedies has been the subject of much critical discussion, raising some major critical problems. These problems concern the accuracy of Middleton's presentation of the middle class and the nature of his attitude toward them. I intend to examine these problems, and, using both historical studies and the comedies themselves, mediate between the varying critical theories. As a basis for comparison and discussion, I shall examine the rise of the middle class, the characteristics commonly attributed to them, and the treatment of the middle class by dramatists contemporary with Middleton. With these presentations of the middle class in mind, I shall examine Middleton's city comedies, discussing in particular his treatment of the economic and family life of the middle class. It seems obvious, after such an examination, that Middleton was not presenting an accurate picture of a social class, but was satirizing

and exaggerating them, molding them to fit the demands of his ingenious plots.

After determining at least partially the extent to which Middleton departed from reality in his presentation of the middle class, I shall attempt to interpret the nature of his attitude toward them. Though Middleton's attitude toward his work, the extent to which he follows convention, and the quality of his satire reveal something about his attitude, his approach to the middle class varies so greatly that it is difficult to define. Though this problem remains a subject for speculation, an enigma unexplained, Middleton's treatment of the middle class is still one of the most energetic and fascinating aspects of the city comedies.

Chapter One: Critical Problems in the City Comedies

During a period rich in every form of literature, Thomas Middleton succeeded in developing a type of comedy unique in drama, the city comedy. The city comedies describe London and the bustling life there in the early years of the seventeenth century, a London teeming with people of all classes: merchants, thieves, gallants, knights, courtesans, cut-purses and cony-catchers, wits and fools. To read the city comedies, however lightly, is to be impressed with the vigorous action of the city and with the utter rascality of the citizens. Middleton excelled in sketches of city life, particularly the seamy side, and his most successful and long-lived comedies treat London low-life and the middle-class milieu as it appeared to a man apparently at home in his surroundings. Middleton's view is broad if not deep; his characters are lively if not living; and his themes, though not universal, combine convention and ingenuity.

Critical opinion varies widely on every aspect of Middleton's art, and on no subject more widely than that of the literary or artistic value of the plays. The great range of opinion on the plays in itself implies a certain enigmatic quality in them; at least they have not been lost in the obscurity which descends on the works of some minor writers. These plays are still very much alive and very much debated. Eliot calls Middleton's plays "great;"[1] Knights goes to the other extreme, calling them "well contrived marionette shows."[2] The comedies are, nevertheless, successful as stage plays and have been lavishly praised for "vivid

variety of incident and intrigue...the clear straight-forward energy and vivacity of the action."[3] In the best of the city comedies, plot, counterplot, and stratagem, each more outrageous than the last, provide excitement, surprise, and bustling activity.[4] However, the very qualities which have won praise have also found severe criticism from those who find that "incident, intrigue, and action do not make literature."[5]

Whether or not the action of Middleton's comedies is appealing may be simply a matter of personal taste; the fact remains that action is the keynote of the comedies, its vigor to a great extent determining the quality of the play. The comedies should not, perhaps, be called "great;" they have neither the varied and excellent poetry nor the universal themes of Shakespeare's drama. They lack also the vivid and brilliant characterization of Jonson's plays, and they have not the charm of Beaumont and Fletcher nor the robust, hearty joy of Dekker. It is the life and the rough vitality of the plays which recommends them. They are definitely stage plays, staking all on the action, the turn of a plot; but they rank as literature because of the brilliance of Middleton's technique. Middleton's master comedies may not be immortal, but they are lively enough to die hard.

The subjects of the satire, the initiators of the intrigue, the prime movers of the action in these comedies are middle-class citizens and those who enter their realm, and it is often Middleton's comedies to which one turns for a display of middle-class life in London in the early seventeenth century. His use of the middle class as a major sub-

ject for drama presents two problems of criticism: What was Middleton's attitude toward the middle class? Was his view of the middle class realistic and photographic or distorted and satiric?

Middleton's plays are often treated as accurate social documents, as realistic treatments of the thought and opinion of the times and of the social customs and attitudes of the people.

> As the greatest realist in Elizabethan drama, Middleton is a hearty observer of life at first hand...The peculiar quality of Middleton's realism appears to be largely due to his keen perception, resulting from direct observation of certain social aspects of character.[6]

Knights, on the other hand, argues that "Middleton tells us nothing at all about these characters as individuals in a particular place and period...and the obvious reason...is that he was not interested in doing so."[7] Therefore the plays are of limited value as social documents; their value in this connection lies in his use of situations to which audiences would readily respond because of familiarity.

> The background that he implicitly asks his audience to accept is a world of thriving citizens, needy gallants and landed gentlemen, and fortune-hunters of all kinds--a world that had sufficient basis in actuality to provide some theatrical verisimilitude for his thoroughly improbable plots.[8]

Through a comparison of Middleton's presentation of the middle class with that of other dramatists of the period and with that of historians, we can partially determine how realistic the city comedies are.

Since Middleton was preoccupied with the middle class, particularly with their dishonest practices, the peculiar way in which he presented them has led to difficulties in determining his attitude. Did Middleton

have a distinct moral attitude? A writer normally approves or disapproves, at least implicitly, of the characters and situations he creates; he has in mind an accepted standard of behavior with which he is satisfied or dissatisfied and he condones or condemns deviations from it accordingly. It is usually possible to determine his attitude through an examination of his techniques, especially his use of satire, which implicitly expresses satisfaction or disapproval, the degree varying with the quality and tone of the satire. Though Middleton usually displays a distinct attitude, it varies as greatly as the quality of his satire and is as difficult to describe. He has been called an amoral writer because his satire falls equally on everything in his world; "he stands apart from his characters, he refuses to take part in the dramatic conflict he portrays."[9] Middleton, according to this theory, simply excludes morals from his drama as well as all traces of his own personality. "He has no point of view, is neither sentimental nor cynical; he is neither resigned nor disillusioned nor romantic; he has no message."[10] His is an "impersonal passionless observation of human nature."[11]

He has been called an irresponsible writer because he failed to be consistent in his condemnation of evil:

> It (the early comedy) is irresponsible rather than immoral, and does not exactly recommend, or approve of, the trickeries and debaucheries which it represents in a lifelike way, under improbable conditions. Yet the writer is no more careful of his ethical than of his other probabilities, and takes little trouble to keep up any consistency in the minds or morals of his agile puppets.[12]

Yet Middleton has also been said to have a moral attitude which led him to level the shafts of his satire at the common abuses in his

time. His is supposed, according to this theory, to display hatred of the citizens and of dishonesty in general and to draw moral lessons from the evil practices he presents.

If it is possible to define Middleton's attitude, it must be done through an examination of his treatment of reality and a comparison of this method with that of other dramatists. Whether Middleton actually did or did not have a distinct moral attitude is a matter for speculation. Middleton's world is a mad one, so varied and populous that it is difficult to make any definite statement about it other than that.

Notes to Chapter One

[1] T.S. Eliot, "Thomas Middleton," Elizabethan Essays (London, 1934), p.89.

[2] L.C. Knights, Drama and Society in the Age of Jonson (New York, n.d.), p.260.

[3] Charles Algernon Swinburne, Introduction to The Works of Thomas Middleton (London, n.d.), Mermaid Series, I,xiii.

[4] Richard Hindry Barker, Thomas Middleton (New York, 1958), p.61.

[5] Knights, op. cit., pp.260-261.

[6] Kathleen M. Lynch, The Social Mode of Restoration Drama (New York, 1926), p.25.

[7] Knights, op. cit., p.258.

[8] Ibid., p.261.

[9] Barker, op. cit., p.53.

[10] Eliot, op. cit., p.89,

[11] Ibid., p.96.

[12] Arthur Symons, "Middleton and Rowley," The Cambridge History of English Literature, edited by A.W. Ward and A.R. Waller (New York, 1939), VI,71.

Chapter Two: The Rise of the Middle Class

In the late sixteenth century and early years of the seventeenth century, the middle class was just coming to be considered an important and influential element in London social, economic, and cultural life. The increasing use of the middle class in drama testifies to its importance in the theatrical world and to the curiosity which it aroused. The middle class, which had been on the rise since the day of the ancient guilds, had suddenly erupted as a full-fledged social class occupying the solid middle level of Elizabethan society. In the highest class were the titled nobility, the landed gentry, and members of the learned professions. The lowest class included the peasantry, laborers, and small artisans.

> Between these extremes was a great class of merchants, trades folk, and skilled craftsmen, a social group whose thoughts and interests centered in business profits. They made up the middle class, the bourgeoise, the average men.[1]

Though the three classes remained independent of each other, at least enough to be distinguishable, within the semi-rigid class structure there was constant flux--wealth was changing hands; the structure of society was being modified somewhat by the shift of yeomen and tradesmen into the gentry while the gentry engaged in trade.[2] From both extremes, the highest and the lowest classes, the middle class absorbed new recruits. The sons of the gentry could enter business; country youths found apprenticeship in the trades a path to advancement. While merchants aspired to enter the gentry, daughters of the gentry often wed

merchants to increase the family fortunes or to enjoy the luxury and gaiety of London life.[3]

"The middle class developed a way of life, a code of ethics, and a set of ideals which gave distinctness to its qualities."[4] Thrift was one of the cardinal virtues; businessmen acquired wealth and a spirit of independence by working for their own material advancement without the aid of patrons. Honesty and industry were considered the most certain ways to success.[5] Realizing that they could become wealthy by their own endeavors, tradesmen became ambitious for further improvement.[6]

Trade was not, to the middle class, a shameful thing,but a reason for pride and wholesome ambition. Utilitarianism, humanitarianism, and materialism were born of these men who measured success by the sure proof--money. The ethics of the middle class were evolved from and most influenced by business expediency.[7] Because social advancement was a major preoccupation of the citizen class, rising in the world was not considered wrong in itself, and acquiring an estate or buying a title were legitimate means of advancement. "Worth deserved a material reward and wealth that had been honestly earned was wholly respectable."[8]

> The emergence of a prosperous citizenry with virile ideas and a propelling ambition had tremendous influence, not only upon England but upon all Europe...England felt the greatest transforming influence from the emergence of the middle class. The evolution had been gradual...its foundations had been laid in the slow commercial development of England since the thirteenth century...[9]

The growth and rise of the middle class were favored by political, economic, and industrial changes which reached a climax in the sixteenth and seven-

teenth centuries. Having some ancestors among the merchant class, the Tudors brought a pronounced bourgeois flavor to the throne. Their shrewd intuition into the feelings of the common people and their lack of scruples against giving knighthoods to merchants, seamen, or wealthy commoners gave their reign a distinct middle-class tone.[10] The Stuarts, who failed to recognize the increasing power of the middle class, were poor successors to the Tudors and were soon rewarded by civil war.[11]

The development of industry and commerce, favored by economic changes, claimed the services of great numbers of the population and built up several industrial centers at the expense of the old feudal towns. A large floating population, leaving the towns, came to London, and after 1563, "all persons except gentlemen, scholars, and possessors of property must choose a trade from the crafts, the sea, or agriculture."[12] Expansion of the wool and cloth trades created new industries, and

> projectors, ancestors of the modern high-pressure salesmen, swarmed in London with innumerable schemes for new businesses and industries, and inventors boasted of new processes for smelting iron with pit, coal...or even turning lead into gold.[13]

In the infancy of modern industry and commerce the "individual craftsman was closer to the completion and distribution of the product of his labor"[14] than he would be in the factory system to come. A strong bourgeois spirit was encouraged by this system, for advancement was easy, permitting anyone to rise to the top. Ambitions ran high, and the qualities which would make a substantial and successful business were cultivated by every apprentice.[15]

"Of all the urban developments of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the growth of London was the most phenomenal and did the most to color the whole of Elizabethan civilization."[16] After London became a banking center, the seat of merchant princes, and a distributing point for foreign and domestic goods, an army of peasants, tradesmen, and craftsmen swarmed to the city, seeking the success and advancement which in turn contributed to London's prosperity.[17] Through the new prosperity, new luxuries were placed in reach of small tradesmen. The urban tradesmen of this period learned to cultivate life's amenities, to enjoy the world and make it more pleasant for himself.[18] And in the meanwhile, in the background the preachers struck an ominous minor chord with warnings of destruction by plague and pestilence because of extravagance and corruption.[19]

The Elizabethan tradesman, later the middle-class merchant and the backbone of society, had pride in his position, a sense of his own importance, and "an ambition for better things, material, spiritual, and intellectual."[20] His philosophy of success emphasized thrift, honesty, industry,and godliness. Education, cultivation of wit, growth in intelligence and mental stature led to advancement and the attainment of ambitions. The Elizabethan citizen

> possessed a strength of mind and character which gave vitality to his thinking and enabled him to propagate his ideas so luxuriantly that they have survived in all their vigor to become the cliches of modern civilization.[21]

A spectacle of the old order changing and giving place to the new must have delighted Middleton, for it was a gold mine of dramatic possi-

bility. Though Middleton displayed the social spectacle frommany angles, he capitalized on the foibles of the new middle class, making them the butt of much of his satire. He best described the "exceptionally prosperous and correspondingly ambitious London citizens who aspire to the privileges of people of fashion"[22] and their traffic for titles and estates.

> (Middleton) shared a love which was common to Dekker and to others at that time, for mean adventures of loose people in cities, knaves who gulled and fools who were gulled, sharpers, and outside cities, highwaymen and gipsies. His eyes were open to every folly of fashion or freak of religion; he knew his law and his lawyers... he had all the terms of astrological and other cant at his fingers' ends, and realized the savour of the oddities of popular speech. It was easy for him to set these people talking as they would really talk...he could set scene after scene...without taking more trouble than his public demanded as to making his plots consistent or probable, not caring, most of the time, to create individual characters, but relying upon the effect of vividly realized moods, or people very much alive for a given moment.[23]

Notes to Chapter Two

1 Louis B. Wright, Middle-Class Culture in Elizabethan England (Chapel Hill, 1935), p.2.

2 C.V. Wedgwood, "Comedy in the Reign of Charles I," Studies in Social History: A Tribute to G.M. Trevelyan. Edited by J.H. Plumb (London, 1955), p.115.

3 Wright, op. cit., p.2.

4 Ibid., p.3.

5 Ibid.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid.

8 Wedgwood, op. cit., pp.118-119.

9 Wright, op. cit., pp.4,5.

10 Ibid., p.5

11 Ibid., p.6.

12 Ibid.

13 Ibid., p.7.

14 Ibid., p.8.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., p.10.

17 Ibid., pp.10,11.

18 Ibid., pp.13-14.

19 Ibid., p.13.

20 Ibid., p.1.

21 Ibid., p.2.

22 Lynch, op. cit., p.26.

23 Symons, op. cit., p.73.

Chapter Three: The Dramatic Presentation of the Middle Class in Some of Middleton's Contemporaries

"Among all the forms of entertainment that amused the public of Elizabethan England, none flourished with greater vigor than the drama, and none appealed more generally to all classes."[1] Courtier and citizens alike supported the theater and developed the habit of playgoing. The tradesmen groups had long been patrons of drama; the early mystery dramas were produced by the guilds and the early actors were guild members. Middle-class audiences continued to flock to the theaters, many theatrical companies depending entirely on their support.

In addition to the native and classical traditions in English drama, and the history, biography, and romances which had long been favorites with English audiences, playwrights of the early seventeenth century borrowed from the myriad elements of contemporary life in their search for dramatic material. The stage was the newsreel, the Life magazine of the day; nothing new happened that was not sensationalized, sentimentalized, or satirized on stage for the enlightenment of the audience and the enrichment of the company. Alchemy, women's fashions, religious disputes, characters of all classes and trades: no subject was too great or too trivial for the boards. Domestic situations were particularly appealing to the average spectator, and any such situation which combined sensationalism with a good sermon on morals was doubly appealing.[2]

The hold of the theater on its audience was due largely to the robust vigor and variety of the plays. The life of the times was a favorite subject. The comedy of the time reflected, by exaggeration of some elements and emphasis on others, the prejudices and anxieties of the audiences. Social problems, changes in society, pretensions of the new rich, and troubles of the new poor were freely discussed.[3] Romantic and distant settings in the South Seas or India provided escape from the daily routine. History plays emphasized England's glorious past and the heritage of the citizens; bourgeois tragedy glorified common folk and their virtues. Dramatic journalism "brought to the stage the latest murder or domestic triangle, properly moralized."[4] Comedy, with its many clowns, fools, and bumpkins, entertained with humor on every level. Didacticism was also a convention, and drama was full of moral lessons taught by faithless wives and traitors of all kinds in their repentance speeches and their advice to those erring or contemplating error. "Elizabethan playgoers comforted their consciences with the good lessons that the drama extracted for them from the doleful ends of...sinners."[5]

> Even though many plays were wicked in the eyes of the puritanically minded, the qualities of popular appeal were too many for the citizenry to forfeit their interest in the drama. Although the commercial classes found fault with the morality of plays which mocked their ideals, not until the fanaticism of 1642 would public sentiment permit a prohibition of stage plays, and then only half-heartedly.[6]

Some playwrights, forgetful that their support came largely from the middle class, persisted in producing plays which antagonised and

alienated the middle class audiences. Such plays emphasized the weaknesses of the middle class, injured their vanity, and mocked their ideals. London tradesmen saw themselves pictured as greedy usurers, easily tricked by witty gallants. Their social ambitions were satirized, the sanctity of their houses was insulted on stage, and their wives were pictured as unfaithful and immoral women.[7] The swift and inexplicable appearance and disappearance of money and the possibility of making money without labor seemed dishonest to the people unused to capitalism and used to the tradition of thrift and diligence. "Usurers, goldsmiths, lawyers, scriveners, and all such as dealt in loans and mortgages were natural villains on the stage."[8] Naturally, men who followed these professions were antagonized by such presentations of their livelihood.

> Moreover, plays frequently implied a loose morality displeasing to bourgeois audiences. Spendthrifts and masters became heroes; witty rogues tricked their masters; sons and daughters; extravagance became a virtue, and thrift a weakness to be mocked; and adultery, instead of being damned in awful sentences, was a subject of merriment.[9]

Whether the middle class was presented favorably or unfavorably, for their own enjoyment or for the amusement of the upper class, middle-class subjects were a mine of possible dramatic situations widely exploited for the stage.

> Like Shakespeare, other dramatists, especially during the vigorous period, between 1590 and 1610, in which the drama reached its highest development, wrote plays pleasing to every class. Nevertheless, by the end of the sixteenth century professional drama was beginning to show a cleavage along class lines, and this cleavage grows distinct as a few dramatists, like Thomas Heywood, became the protag-

> onists of middle-class ideals, and others; like Beaumont and Fletcher, concentrate their effort upon courtly plays designed to please aristocratic tastes.[10]

Popular with the middle-class audiences because of their sympathetic presentation of middle-class life were such playwrights as Thomas Dekker and Thomas Heywood. Probably the most charming and noble pictures of idealized middle-class life are found in Dekker's plays.[11] The Shoemaker's Holiday overflows with robust life, wholesome people, and an overwhelming love of life in general and life in London in particular. The success story of jolly Simon Eyre, the shoemaker who became Lord Mayor, appealed to audiences who believed in the virtues of thrift and hard work. "Shoemakers, indeed, were useful persons to writers who wished to draw a sympathetic picture of the world of craftsmen, for by tradition they were merry souls full of whimsies but possessing...hearts of gold."[12] Simon Eyre is a vital, good-humored man whose eccentricities endear him to his apprentices and to us. He accepts his advancements in the business and political worlds with charming unconcern and remembers his worthy start in life by creating a holiday for all apprentices on each Shrove Tuesday and by giving them a feast at which a hundred tables are five times covered. His wife is a more sober, serious woman, a gentle satire on citizens' wives who disclaim to enjoy advancement, but really seek it.

> Fie upon it, how costly this world's calling is; perdy, but that it is one of the wonderful works of God, I would not deal with it
> (Shoemaker's Holiday, III,iv,pp.64-66)

Mrs. Eyre comments soberly as she orders a new outfit. Throughout the play the dignity of work is stressed, and a King who hobnobs freely with

the 'prentices voices Dekker's democratic ideas.

Dekker's The Honest Whore presents craftsmen in their natural habitat; the virtuous and patient Candido embodies the ideals of all middle-class merchants. The clever subplot (which Middleton borrowed for The Phoenix, incidentally) includes both the merchant as a hero and the gallant as his enemy--an unvictorious enemy. Bellafront, the honest whore of the title, turns out to be a repentant and virtuous woman after all. Again in The Roaring Girl, on which Dekker collaborated with Middleton, the middle-class merchants are seen at home and in the shop, pitting their wits against the city gallants. Moll, the roaring girl, is a vital, robust, and harmless person in spite of her reputation, and Dekker's attitude toward her is typical of his warm, sympathetic, and joyous love of middle-class life.

While Dekker wrote frankly flattering and entertaining stories for the middle class, Thomas Heywood seriously commended and preached their virtues.

> Of all the dramatists who drew material from the life around them, Thomas Heywood was the most significant of the stage spokesmen of burgher ethics and ideas, for he best expressed those prudential qualities which were the basis of middle class solidarity and strength of character. Consciously and unconsciously, he set forth a doctrine of thrift, industry, and fair play.[13]

Thus, Heywood was the "spokesman, and at times the propagandist"[14] of middle-class virtues. He stressed emphatically the rewards of good conduct to the middle class, especially the financial rewards. Vices are bad because they are wasteful and ruinous, but moral goodness brings mercantile rewards.[15]

> The growing class consciousness and the prejudice and ideals that colored all middle-class thinking find expression in Heywood's plays. Certain notes of democracy

> are evident; frequent scorn is heaped on court flatterers and sycophants; independence is praised; the importance of the laboring and trading groups as the backbone of the nation is emphasized; the dignity of work is upheld.[16]

Heywood is also concerned with domestic problems--problems of conduct and relationships. In A Woman Killed with Kindness, he stresses both forgiveness and repentance of sin and has a moral to be heeded by both husbands and wives. Frankford, the husband who forgives his wife on her deathbed, voices many of the middle-class virtues: thrift, honesty, honor, friendship. In the subplot, Sir Charles and his sister suffer from the greed and persecution of their creditors, but will give up neither home nor honor. Heywood took the middle class quite seriously, preaching its virtues and condemning its vices in a pragmatic manner. Frankford, typical of the virtuous middle-class husband as seen by Heywood, is almost too good to be tolerated; he is a living sermon on middle-class morality.

While middle-class audiences enjoy seeing themselves praised, flattered, and sympathetically treated, they resented efforts on the part of dramatists to make them look ridiculous, as in The Knight of the Burning Pestle. The knight, Ralph, who is a grocer's apprentice, parodies scenes from many popular dramas, giving them a middle-class slant. While he goes through his paces, the grocer and his wife sit on the stage commenting on his performance, cheering the hero, clamoring against the villains, drinking beer, and displaying an amazing lack of taste and sophistication. In this play, satire on the middle-class theater-goer, his taste, his occupation, and his way of life, was so

rampant that the play was unpopular with middle-class audiences.

The citizens were, however, "able to laugh at a satirical lashing of their follies,"[17] as shown by the popular reception of some of Jonson's plays. Volpone, The Alchemist, and Bartholomew Fair were popularly accepted:

> It is significant that these plays satirize shortcomings which the average individual would condemn, and the last two, presenting a great gallery of rogues from the London that everyone knew, were certain to produce laughter from all men familiar with the trickeries of the alchemists, projectors, cheats, and fakers with which the metropolis swarmed, in fair time and out.[18]

Jonson's London, like Middleton's, teemed with rascals. But Jonson's rascals usually came to justice, through either shrewd actions by someone in the play or their own overreaching. Jonson's satire in these plays aims to correct, not only to ridicule.

Jonson presents a gallery of middle-class types not unlike those found in Middleton, but drawn with a finer hand, for they are more realistic and more dramatic creations than Middleton's. Tribulation Wholesome, Ananias, and Zeal-of-the-Land Busy are master satires on Puritans; Matthew, the town gull, and Stephen, the country gull, are unforgettable fools. Jeremy, alias Captain Face, is a scheming servant; Ursula, a vendor of roast pig, is the epitome of the robust life of the Fair. Bartholomew Fair, as well as the rest of London as portrayed by Jonson, swarms with rogues, cutpurses, lawyers, clerks, politicians, gamesters, country gulls and city wits--a London as lively and irrepressible as Middleton's. Jonson's satire was harsh, but the moral law in his plays operated firmly and justly. Perhaps the middle

class accepted the satire because of its moral tone and the public correction of vices and stupidity; at least they accepted it when it did not strike too close to home.

Philip Massinger in A New Way to Pay Old Debts combines a sympathetic and a contemptuous treatment of the middle class. Sir Giles Overreach, a merchant and a greedy, unscrupulous villain, has won his fortune from widows, orphans, and ruined men, and he delights in having amassed his fortune by "dark and crooked ways." Even more important than wealth to him is social advancement; but his excessive ambition finally causes him to overreach himself. So badly does he want his daughter to marry into the aristocracy and be "right honorable" that he is willing to have her dishonor herself to gain his ends. Massinger's harsh satire is directed against extremely excessive ambition and unscrupulous means of achieving it, for Sir Giles, who suffers from both ills, is plainly an exaggerated and disgusting character.

Massinger, however, balances his unpleasant picture of a middle-class merchant by presenting in the same play his wholesome and virtuous daughter who chooses not to marry out of her class. The play also contains a gallery of faithful and good-natured servants, the son of a nobleman serving as an apprentice, and an aristocratic lady and gentleman and lady willing to help the young people out. In true middle-class tradition, Wellborn repents of his folly and goes into the service of Lord Lovell after he recovers his fortunes. On the whole, the middle-class characters are presented sympathetically, while Sir Giles, who deserves the worst of punishments, is taken away mad at the end, pursued by furies in the shape of widows and orphans.

In comparison to these playwrights, Middleton seems to display only scorn and contempt for the citizens, who become objects of his ridicule and ribald mockery. His villains reap rich rewards from their villainy; the good lose while the rascals gain. While Heywood praises honor, moral goodness, and the material rewards of goodness, Middleton mocks every virtue the middle class is supposed to possess. He replaces the wholesome joy and the robust humor of Dekker's plays with low farce, obscene jests, and rowdy merriment. Lacking the moral wrath and indignation of Jonson, he fails to use satire as a corrective measure in all cases. Though he presents many characters as despicable as Massinger's Sir Giles, he neglects to punish them as Massinger did. Middleton's approach to the middle class varies as greatly as his attitude toward them. Whether he treats them with whimsical and sly humor, contemptuous amusement, or acid and cryptic satire, his approach is lively, entertaining, and vivid.

Notes to Chapter Three

1 Wright, op. cit., p.603.

2 Ibid., p.631.

3 Wedgwood, op. cit., pp.115,117.

4 Wright, op. cit., p.607.

5 Ibid., p.608.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid., p.605.

8 Wedgwood, op. cit., p.119.

9 Wright, op. cit., p.605.

10 Ibid., p.614.

11 Ibid., p.626.

12 Ibid., p.627.

13 Ibid., p.637.

14 Ibid.

15 Ibid.

16 Ibid., p.638.

17 Ibid., p.628.

18 Ibid., p.629.

Chapter Four: Middleton's View of the Middle Class--- The Business and Professional World

Because of its tremendous impact on the social, cultural, and economic worlds, the middle class was the object of much s tudy, discussion, and curiosity in Middleton's day. The typical middle class character was scrutinized and analyzed in literature and on stage in an attempt to explain this phenomenon. In any catalogue of middle-class characteristics, the most significant was "the self-respecting pride of the citizenry in their own accomplishments and in the dignity of the position in the commonwealth."[1]

> Proud of their self-made success, proud of their material accomplishments, proud of their greatest city, London, the Elizabethan middle class developed a self-respect and a self-esteem that at times reached the proportions of smug self-satisfaction. Suffering from no complex of inferiority because of his business, the tradesman believed himself deserving of social recognition and frequently plumed himself with the titles of a gentleman...[2]

Though merchants and tradesmen were eager for titles and lands and the accompanying benefits, they did not scorn their connection with trade. A background of honest labor, mercantile success, and prosperity increased the dignity of a title, for merchants considered labor itself essentially dignified.

The pride of the middle class was increased by the knowledge that they were the foundation of a stable government and prosperity. Their endeavors in civic economic activities increased the prestige and power of their nation; the middle class citizen was commonly said to be "neat in appareal,modest in demeanure, dainty in dyet, and civill...

in carriage...Pillar of a City, the enricher of a Country, the furnisher of a Court, and the worthy servant of a King."[3]

The pride which the citizens took in themselves was reflected in their pride in their apprentices, young men on the way up; like Simon Eyre, most citizens remembered their own apprenticeship fondly. Though the law required that apprentices serve seven years in study with the tradesmen whose occupation they wished to follow, in actual practice they were almost members of the family and did in many cases marry into the family. Members of the gentry were not loath to apprentice their offspring into the gentle crafts, and marriage between these apprentices and the children of the citizens was of advantage to both. The nobility of the apprentice was stressed in popular literature and stage plays of the times, and the "noble apprentice" was praised and encouraged in middle-class virtues.

Yet the virtues of the middle class did not make them universally admired. The acquisitive talents of the middle class, their pride and self-assertion, and at times their arrogance did arouse hostility in many quarters, notably among the aristocracy.[4] As the middle class gained economic dominance in the city, the hostility and jealousy spread.

That Middleton was a gentleman himself may have influenced his interpretation of the merchants; at any rate he was not kind to them. He said nothing untrue about them, but he satirized the qualities which they actually had and exaggerated them out of all proportion.

The key to Middleton's presentation of middle-class life and to his art in general may lie in one of the early city comedies, A Mad World, My Masters. Follywit, the principal character, is a young man who has learned to live by his wits, and since his grandfather, Sir Bounteous Progress, has money, he is to be gulled also. Sir Bounteous is extremely hospitable; he entertains everyone for the sake of displaying his mansion and treasures and for his own socialadvancement.

Follywit, disguised as Lord Owemuch, visits Sir Bounteous, and he and his "servants," his rowdy companions, are handsomely entertained. During the night Follywit robs the old man, then ties him up and in his own room ties himself up. Sir Bounteous, stricken at this insult to his noble guest, insists on making good the great sum which the supposed lord has lost. This trick is both profitable and entertaining, and Follywit decides to try again. He disguises himself as his grandfather's courtesan, whom he has never met, and visits the house. Meeting Sir Bounteous at the bottom of the stairs, he kisses him and goes up to an upper chamber where he pockets the jewelry in a casket there. Sir Bounteous is left puzzling over the kiss long afterwards: "Methought her breath had much ado to be sweet, like a thing compounded, methought, of wine, beer, and tobacco; I smelt much pudding in't." But when he discovers the robbery, he accuses the courtesan without hesitation.

Even as Follywit plans his third attack on Sir Bounteous, he is about to meet his downfall. He sees the courtesan and falls in love with her instantly, overcome by her modesty and reluctance. In spite of her feigned hesitation she immediately accepts him as a husband, and

he assures her that his aged grandfather, virtually on his death-bed, will soon leave him a vast estate. The courtesan wisely says nothing.

Follywit's third trick is a masterpiece. He appears at a feast at Sir Bounteous' home as the chief actor in a company of strolling players and borrows from Sir Bounteous a watch, a jewel, and a chain to be used as properties in his play. The play is called The Slip, and as Follywit speaks a prologue, his companions slip away--only to be caught and brought back by the constable. Follywit pretends that the constable is a character in the play, binds and gags him, and exits. After some time the guests perceive that they have indeed been given the slip, and release the constable. Follywit reappears in his own dress, assuming that he has outwitted everyone, when the alarm on the watch in his pocket rings and all is revealed. He appeals to the sentiment of his grandfather by telling him that he has married a gentlewoman and a virgin, and Sir Bounteous is so pleased at this outwitting of the wit that he forgives him.

In the subplot the courtesan appears as the "pure virgin" who is the only companion of Mistress Harebrain. Harebrain is so jealous of his wife that he allows her no other friends, but approves this one because of her wise counsels and good morals. Mistress Harebrain promptly takes a lover, Penitent Brothel, with the courtesan as go-between. She meets him at the courtesan's house under the pretext of visiting her sick friend, and the courtesan conducts a one-sided conversation which satisfies the waiting--and eavesdropping--husband. But Penitent repents

of the affair when a devil visits him in the guise of Mistress Harebrain. He persuades her to repent, lectures her on the evils of adultery, and persuades her to vow fidelity. As both kneel, the husband enters, and congratulates himself on the possession of two such rare gems.

As Barker states, "the play creates a world of preposterous tricks, uproarious surprises, sudden and ironic changes of fortune,"[5] and that expresses exactly what Middleton did throughout all his plays. Using the facts about the world with which he was most familiar, he created a world "in which the strangest things happen--in which sharpers disguised as lords are entertained by their grandfathers, and succubi disguised as mistresses discourage adulterous lovers."[6] Middleton's mad world is in London, but what a London! In Middleton's world, there is none good, yet all are treated at best with the urbane humor of the satirist, and at worst with a scathing irony. Deeds which would put yellow journalists at a loss are treated as normal, and occasional acts of kindness or sanity are treated as abnormalities. One would believe that all merchants are usurers, all lawyers cozeners, all gallants knaves, and all knaves wits, if Middleton's world were the real one. There is a moral law present in this mad world, but its operation is faulty and harum-scarum, as freakish and enigmatic as its creator's purpose. Folly is condemned and wit triumphs, even when the foolish are the good and the witty the vicious. Middleton's mad world is an exaggeration, a farcical departure from the one with which he was so familiar; the inhabitants of his world are caricatures of the citizens

in the other. Middleton was able to create this world out of the material of the ordinary one so cleverly that side by side in the plays, we see the setting of the real London and his own; but the values, the people, the attitudes have been slightly and curiously warped so that the whole effect is hilariously funny and somewhat horrible like an image in a distorted mirror.

One is struck immediately in Middleton's world by the many references to money. It was a time when money ran "like quicksilver from one hand to another," money having its value enhanced at a time when the greater number of other values were ambiguous or nonexistent, or when other values were designed to bring in money. If we are going to enter his world, then, we might as well enter by way of a shop and look at the business world.

In the shop of a merchant, or small business man, we would find the merchant himself, his wife, and his apprentices. The shop is dark, to disguise the inferiority of the goods--for here the goods are always inferior--and the apprentices cry "what d'ye lack?" to passersby.

> Whatis't you lack, you lack, you lack?
> Stuffs for the belly or the back? (Anything for a Quiet Life, II,ii,p.268)

The merchants in Middleton's comedies lacked, indeed, the qualities of thrift, intelligence, and humanity; these qualities become greed, miserliness, cruel shrewdness, and inhumanity. The ambitions of the citizens become the object of sharp satire, and on the whole, merchants appear stereotyped and caricatured as grasping, ambitions, malevolent, but crafty men. This type of man is aptly described in Anything for a

Quiet Life as Sir Francis speaks to the mercer, Water-Camlet:

> There are no such ridiculous things i'the world as those love money better than themselves; for though they have understanding to know riches, and a mind to seek them, and a wit to find them, and policy to keep them, and long life to posses them; yet, commonly, they have withal such a false sight, such bleared eyes, all their wealth, when it lies before them, does seem poverty; and such a one are you. (I,i,p.246)

But though merchants and their businesses are consistently condemned in the comedies, the merchants still have pride in themselves and in their occupations. Middleton's merchants also pride themselves on their shrewdness and on any means they have of making money.

> The gray-eyed morning braves me to my face, and calls me sluggard: 'tis time for tradesmen to be in their shops; for he that tends well his shop, and hath an alluring wife with a graceful what d'ye lack? shall be sure to have good doings, and good doings is what that crowns so many citizens with the horns of abundance...I smile to myself to hear our knights and gallants say how they gull us citizens, when, indeed, we gull them, or rather they gull themselves. Here they come in term-time, hire chambers, and perhaps kiss our wives: well, what lose I by that?...they that will thrive must utter their wares as they can, and wink at small faults. (Family of Love, II,ii,pp.30-31)

Middleton's merchants were indeed willing to wink at small faults as long as it was profitable; in Middleton's comedies merchants displayed their wives along with their goods to lure the city gallants. Though Middleton's merchants evidently prospered enough through regular channels of trade, they usually employed several dishonest methods of self-enrichment. Often they were usurers, lending out money or commodities by which they stood to profit more than the customer. While Middleton examines the loan of commodities and the exploitation of wives most thoroughly, he hints at other more dishonest and vicious practices undertaken simply through greed.

The unscrupulous greed of Middleton's merchants is best seen in A Trick to Catch the Old One in the rivalry of Hoard and Lucre, two citizens whose bitter hatred of each other arose in a cheating match:

Ones. Hoard His uncle (Lucre) and my brother (Hoard)
Have been these three years mortal adversaries:
Two old tough spirits, they seldom meet but fight,
Or quarrel when 'tis clamest:
I think their anger the very fire
That keeps their age alive.

Limber What was the quarrel, sir?

Ones. Hoard Faith, about a purchase, fetching over a young heir. Master Hoard, by brother, having wasted much time in beating the bargin, what did me old Lucre, but as his conscience moved him, knowing the poor gentleman, stept in between 'em and cozened him himself. (I,ii,p.356)

The two gentlemen in question never display any of the tricks of trade which made them wealthy, but in seeking to enrich themselves and get the best of each other, they are themselves soundly cheated. Lucre, thinking that he is helping his grandson, Witgood, get the best of Hoard by marrying the rich widow, restores Witgood's property and money which he had taken from him. Hoard, while trying to thwart Witgood's intended marriage and to advance himself, marries the widow and finds too late that she is Witgood's cast-off mistress. The burden of the joke is borne equally by Lucre and Hoard, and they end on fairly civil terms. They are anything but admirable, however; they are conventional enderly misers of stage tradition and not dramatic creations.

Quomodo, however, is Middleton's most outstanding dramatic character, as well as the personification of the merchant's greed,

pride, cunning, and ambition. Quomodo keeps a dark shop--(" 'tis always misty weather in our shops here; we are a nation the sun ne're shines upon.") (Michaelmas Term, II,iii, p.205)--shoddy goods, and two cunning rogues, Falselight and Shortyard, to do his cozening while he maintains the reputation of honesty.

> Go, make my coarse commodities look sleek;
> With subtle art beguile the honest eye:
> Be near to my trap-window, cunning Falselight.
> (I,i,p.222)

Quomodo's knaveries are designed to cheat the gentry, the natural enemies of the citizens, and his chief ambition is the acquisition of land.

> There are means and ways enow to hook in gentry,
> Besides our deadly emnity, which thus stands,
> They're busy 'bout our wives, we 'bout their lands.
> (I,i, p.222)

Quomodo respects wealth and cunning, little else. "Give me the man/ Who out of recreation culls advantage/ Dives into seasons, never walks but thinks,/ Ne rides but plots." (I,i,p.223)

The sight of the Essex estates of Easy, a new heir, had stirred Quomodo's ever-present ambition and greed. Knowing the tastes of young gallants, Quomodo sets Shortyard to strip him of money and lead him into the snare. Shortyard is to disguise himself as a gallant, Master Blastfield, and outgame, outdare, and outspend Easy. This task, because of Easy's youth, inexperience, and naivetée, is soon accomplished, and Easy is duped into signing a bond with Shortyard for a commodity from Quomodo. For an investment of only sixty pounds Quomodo is soon possessor of Easy's estate. On the day the payment is due, Blastfield disappears and Quomodo claims the bond from Easy, who has exhausted

his revenue and must forfeit his land rather than go to prison. Now that Quomodo isalanded citizen, he grows almost lyrical in his fancies:

> Now my desires are full,--for this time.
> A little thing, three hundred pounds a-year,
> Suffices nature, keeps life and soul together!...
> A fine journey in the Whitsun holydays, i'faith,
> to ride down with a number of citizens and their
> wives, some upon pillions, some upon side-saddles, I
> and little Tomasine i'th'middle, our son and heir,
> Sim Quomodo, in a peach-colour taffeta jacket, some
> horselength, or a long yard before us...to see how
> the very thought of green fields puts a man into
> sweet inventions! (IV,i,p.299)
> .....
> O that sweet, neat, comely, proper, delicate parcel of
> land! like a fine gentlewoman i'th'waist, not so great
> as pretty, pretty; the trees in summer whistling, the
> silver waters by the banks harmoniously gliding. I
> should have been a scholar; an excellent place for a
> student...Thus we that seldom get lands honestly, must
> leave our heirs to inherit our knavery...
> (II,iii,pp.249-250)

Quomodo is Middleton's most successful character until he has proved successful in his tricks. It is unfortunate that at that point he suddenly becomes foolish; he decides to pretend to be dead and see what will become of his land, as well as to enjoy the grief of his wife and friends. Like Volpone, Quomodo is destined to suffer by his overreaching. The moment he is not masterminding his own little kingdom, it goes berserk. Easy has suddenly become wise; Sim lets the land fall into the hands of Shortyard; Tomasine is almost instantly married to Easy. Quomodo hears himself condemned by everyone, including his own son. He is surprised to hear that everyone knew of his knavery and despised him for it.

Quomodo even cheats himself of his own goods in an ironic manner. Pretending to be a sexton, he goes to the shop to collect the burial fee

and to find out how much was spent on his funeral. Then, intending to reveal himself triumphantly and be received joyfully back into his own, he signs his full name to a receipt--a receipt which states that he has no claim on anything or anyone under that roof. His return from the dead is met with dismay by Tomasine, and the grief he expected to be lavished on his corpse is certainly given to his live body. Though he carries the affair to court, the receipt stands, and he is left penniless to be his own affliction.

Yellowhammer, the goldsmith in A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, represents the ambition of the citizens, and though he has not the cunning nor the knavery of Quomodo, his aspirations are no more laudable. He intends to marry his children into position; his daughter must marry Sir Walter Whorehound, and Tim, a scholar at Cambridge, must marry Sir Walter's niece, who is really his Welsh courtesan. Yellowhammer expects his son's education to give him a higher social position, also.

> A poor, plain boy, a university man;
> Proceeds next Lent to a bachelor of art;
> He will be called Sir Yellowhammer then
> Over all Cambridge, and that's half a knight.
> (I,i,p.13)

The Yellowhammers are so persistent in their covetousness that they become absurd; when they think their daughter has died and ruined the proposed marriage to quality, they flee to the country to avoid a smear on their reputation for failing to keep the match. They are scheming and shrewd, but stupid, and are successfully duped by everyone in the play. Sir Walter tricks Tim into marrying his mistress, and

almost succeeds in wedding Maud for her dowry; Touchstone Junior dupes them out of a ring and their daughter, and weds her with the ring. "Craft recoils in the end," and they are well served for their greed.

Flippery, the pawnbroker in Your Five Gallants, is the most mercenary of all merchants. The only good quality in him is carefulness--he will not accept pawns from parishes in which deaths from plagues exceed the limit of safety. He is omnipresent, taking up clothes and goods from needy gentry, selling them to aspiring citizens and generally cheating everyone. He outfits the entire personnel of Primero's brothel and cheats them in turn; he stands by the gaming table, lending Tailby money on his clothes as he removes them in the tavern while the game continues. And when he goes to court the wealthy orphan, he is resplendent in finery from his own shop--somewhat motley, we assume.

In the shops of the citizens and tradesmen we find a collection of servants, apprentices , and journeymen, usually reflecting the characteristics of their masters. These servants are of two types. Most of them are English cousins of the clever slaves of Roman comedy who exhibit enough wit, versatility, and ambition to make them often superior to their masters. Others are the rustic or country bumpkin type from English tradition; these are dull-witted, easily distracted, and of no use to anyone except the rogues who live on such gulls.

The apprentices, during their seven years' sojourn with their masters, must have learned them well enough to ply them as well as

their trade, as they do in Middleton's comedies. Ralph, in Anything for a Quiet Life, rules the household of Master Water-Camlet and even calms the shrewish tongue of his master's wife. The apprentice to the apothecary Purge in Family of Love exhibits great patience in spite of of his enforced attendance on Mistress Purge in her erring and frivolous life.

Middleton's preoccupation with crime and with the dishonest practices of his merchants led him to use underworld characters and practices. The underworld was the subject of a great deal of popular literature, but the "topics may have become too exciting both to (the writers) and to their public for them to be able to restrain their imaginative impulses,"[7] and the pamphlets of the times cannot be depended on for a true picture. The pamphlets were often turned into reforming tracts or novels, but criminals and vagrants in actual practice

> were treated as enemies of the community. They were of a class; they were feared, detested, pounced upon, scourged and pilloried; they were often ruthlessly destroyed...they came...adapting themselves to city life to swell the ranks of the criminal classes of London, Exeter, Bristol and Norwich, everywhere unsettling the common folk, and disturbing the conventions of an orderly regime.[8]

Middleton's underworld is full of followers of two of the oldest and most universal professions, theft and prostitution. The extraordinary number of thieves in this world is astounding, but not improbable. In this world where money is the supreme measure of success, its acquisition by any means becomes of prime importance, and many there be who have no trade other than vice to win it. Falso, the justice of the peace in The Phoenix, is the front for an arrant company

of knaves who ride in false beards; he might be, in Middleton's world, the patron saint of thieves. He speaks their creed himself reminiscently and lyrically:

> I remember now betimes in a morning, I would have peeped through the green boughs, and have had the party presently, and then to ride away finely in fear: t'was e'en venery to me, i'faith, the pleasantest course of life! (III,i,p.167)

In A Mad World, My Masters Follywit and his pack of thieves make both a business and a recreation of stealing everything in sight. Pursenet and Goldstone, two of the Five Gallants, are professional thieves, though they maintain a respectable front as court gallants. Thorough mastery of his skill is shown by Goldstone as he frees his boy, caught red-handed picking a pocket. The city swarms with thieves of all degrees, from professionals to merchants, with those who live by their wits, and with those who traffic in other people's folly.

The institution of prostitution, with both amateur and professional practitioners, provides a livelihood for many characters in Middleton. Brothels and taverns were still the proper setting for comedy in the early seventeenth century, and in these places the knaves and rascals revealed themselves as they would not in the drawing room. Some of Middleton's best scenes occur in such settings.

Associated with the profession are numerous hangers-on who live by the labors of others. Primero, the bawd-gallant, maintains his brothel in the guise of a music school and caters to the wives of citizens in addition to keeping his regular employees. Tailby, on the other hand, is the darling of all women and is maintained by them

in return for his favors. Hellgill specializes in turning country wenches into attractice courtesans in Michaelmas Term. In this business, second only to the acquisition of wealth, mothers are employed as bawds and fathers as panders. The courtesans themselves, who are usually intelligent and witty, are worthy relatives of their sisters in Roman comedy. The courtesan in A Trick to Catch the Old One who poses as the Widow Jane Medlar, the "Dutch widow," is perhaps the best example. She is truthful and honest, frankly eager to marry and to enter into any trick to accomplish that goal, and seriously willing to be a good and faithful wife--better than Hoard deserves. Of no less stature is the country girl who gets rid of her unwanted child in A Chaste Maid in Cheapside. After upbraiding Touchwood for destroying her chastity, she admits that this is the fifth time she has been in similar straits. She tricks the despicable promoters, on guard for forbidden meat in Lent, into swearing to keep the child, and then disappears.

The practice of medicine gets its share of satire, too. The good doctor Glister and the Barber-surgeon Sweetball are both stereotypes and comic conventions. They speak a medical jargon of corrupted Latin and meaningless English and use their medical knowledge and prescriptions to get revenge on their enemies, and for low comedy of a very obvious kind.

The practice of law and the whole English judicial system figure largely in the comedies, forming a network of machinery for the punishment of vice. The machine is faulty, for some offenders are punished

while others escape; some judges are just while others are corrupt. Falso, for example, is the central figure in a complex of intrigue and vice. He dispenses justice according to whim and bribe and maintains a group of thieves as his servants. Falso has no scruples against confessing his deeds to anyone, for he has pride in his profession. Tangle, his lawyer friend, delights in entangling suits at law and profits by the confusion of the parties involved. He and Falso indulge in a verbal fencing match which is an elaborate conceit of law jargon and technical terms, and the metaphor is extended throughout the play until Tangle runs mad and is cured by Quietus. Middleton feints at the law in each play, but in Michaelmas Term he gives it a full blow. In the Induction, Michaelmas Term appears, trades his country clothes for civil blacks, and greets the other Terms.

> From Wronger and from wronged have I fee;
> And what by sweat from the rough earth they draw
> Is to enrich this silver harvest, law.
> (Induction, p.218)

Middleton himself explains the title as a joke--in this play you will not find wrongs righted any more than you would in a court term.

In his satire of law and lawyers Middleton was following the tradition which dates back to the Greek theater and has been used widely in both French and English drama. Moliere satirized lawyers; Shakespeare and Jonson also found the English judicial system fit subjects for some of their best satire. Law students themselves had a traditional revel at which they satirized in masques the Inns of Court, methods of teaching law and anomalies in the practice of law.[9]

Lawyers had long been satirized for greed, pedantry, tediousness, and general ineffectiveness, as a survey of drama will show.

Lawyers were considered men who live on the strife of others, delighting in confusing the law and the parties involved. They were unscrupulous villains, respected by no one. They lived only for money and were supposed to be able to die only because the vacation between terms was too long.

> Salewood: Is Master Difficult, the lawyer, dead?
> Rearage: Easily dead, sir.
> Salewood: Pray, when died he?
> Rearage: What a question's that! When should a lawyer die but in the vacation? He has no leisure to die in the term-time; besides, the noise there would fetch him again. (Michaelmas Term, II,iii,p.264)

Despite the harsh satire on law, middle-class citizens were often anxious to have their sons add to the prestige of the family by becoming lawyers, and Middleton capitalized on this ambition. A career in law fitted the middle-class ability to make money; "indeed, 'tis the fittest for a citizen's son, for our word is, What do ye lack, and their word is, What do you give?" (Michaelmas Term, II,iii,p.264) Middleton's lawyers follow the traditional stage convention and are used as a further indication of middle-class ambition and avarice.

Lawyer or doctor, merchant or thief, Middleton's middle-class citizens are treated satirically and unsympathetically. Though Middleton is fully aware of the virtues of the middle class, he manipulates them, using them for his own purposes. The natural pride and ambition of the middle class he twists into vices leading to an amazing variety

of schemes and stratagems. The ordinary citizen becomes a creature possessed by one driving force--jealousy, ambition, pride, avarice--and made by it foolish, absurd, evil, or disgusting. The business and professional world they inhabit is indeed a busy one, and it is there that we find Middleton's most outstanding and memorable characters as well as the most memorable stratagems and schemes in all his ingenious plots.

Notes to Chapter Four

[1] Wright, op. cit., p.19.

[2] Ibid., pp.19-20.

[3] Ibid., pp.30-31.

[4] Ibid., p.20.

[5] Barker, op. cit., p.57.

[6] Ibid.

[7] A.V. Judges, The Elizabethan Underworld (New York, 1930), p.xiii.

[8] Ibid., pp.xiii,xv.

[9] A. Wigfall Green, The Inns of Court and Early Elizabethan Drama (New Haven, 1931), p.1.

Chapter Five: Middleton's View of the Middle Class--Family and Culture

Women, in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, were as universal and as popular a topic as they have ever been, and the wealth of literature which poured from the presses on the subject of woman and her ways found a ready audience. While the aristocratic poets wrote lyrics of goddesses and courtly ladies, middle-class writers were debating and analyzing the role of middle-class women in their own world.[1] From references to women in the pamphlets, books, and letters of the times we can glean a composite picture of woman and her position.

Women were supposed to be fickle, foolish, unfaithful, immature, and more capricious and temperamental than men. Though women were thought more conventional and given to custom than men, they were also accused of less conventionality than they should have. The chief fault of women seemed to be extravagance and excess of pride, which led to economic difficulties for men--quite natural to a city so concerned with economics.[2] On the other hand, women were praised for obedience, affection, patience, silence, thrift, and good housekeeping.[3] Middle-class writers praised the dignity, intelligence, and nobility of soul of women, and slowly began to recognize woman as man's equal.[4]

Middle-class women had long been handicapped by their lack of education, their duties in bearing and rearing children, and their own recognition that they were considered inferior beings. Because marriages were often arranged by parents, women had little or no opportunity for romance and many of them had to endure unhappy marriages. Though parents were expected to provide a suitable marriage and income for

their offspring, they often used their privileges to barter for titles or financial settlements.[5]

In spite of their many handicaps, the women of the business world were "the most emancipated women in that time."[6] The wives who lived above shops and learned the business with their husbands were active citizens. Because they were good at details and regularly on the job, they figured prominently in the mercantile life of their husbands. Women also claimed the attention of the public through activity in community life. "They complained of abuses in the town; they asked for a better schoolmaster; they proved themselves zealous Puritans and an embarrassment to the vicar."[7]

Women and their "populous imperfections" abound in the comedies of Middleton, taking as active a part in the plays as they did in reality. Girls, widows, citizens' wives, courtesans, and servant women, though sometimes as cleverly pictured as the witty young men, are usually stereotypes. The innocent young girls of Middleton's comedies are especially conventional types, found in the play only to motivate some of the action and provide the conventional happy ending or run-away marriage. Though Middleton's opinion of women is usually unflattering, he does present some strong-minded females. Widows in the comedies commonly show more independence and strength of character than other women characters, because their position gives them the choice of a husband and at least a temporary dominance over men. The widows in the plays are usually sought-after as matrimonial prospects, providing Middleton with a chance to display the greed of merchants and gentry in their desire to make wealthy marriages.

Citizens' wives, by far the most outstanding of Middleton's women, are found everywhere: in the shops, in the streets, in brothels, at social functions, and in intrigues of all kinds. They are usually treated as the equal of their husband and in some cases have mastery over the poor man, as does Mistress Water-Camlet. In Middleton's world these women have a will of their own and do what they please. They may be unfaithful, unlearned, shrewish beasts, but they are seldom gulled or deceived. Middleton seems to have a grudging respect for their native intellect, as much as he deplores their behavior. His citizens' wives are as skilled in the art of intrigue as their husbands; moreover, they are frank and unashamed of their vices.

If middle-class men wanted land, titles, and gentility, their wives wanted friends at court, social prestige, and fine clothes. Gallants and decayed gentlemen were not loath to take citizens' wives as lovers and take advantage of their gifts of money. In The Phoenix the Knight and the Jeweller's Wife have a mutually rewarding relationship: she calls him her "Pleasure" and he calls her his "Revenue." If merchants exploited their wives by using them to entice customers, the wives took advantage of the situation as anopportunity to find lovers.

The intrigue between middle-class women and courtiers may have caused some of the strife between the middle class and the aristocracy, though most of it arose from economic jealousy. In the feud between the two classes, land and women were the prizes. In this struggle Middleton satirized the aristocracy also, taking neither side in the conflict. The mutual contempt of the two gave him an opportunity for creating amusing plots. The citizens disliked both the superior social

position of the gallants and their open flaunting of all the middle-class virtues. The life of the gentleman in Middleton's world was a loose one, occupied with gaming, drinking, and spending.

> 'Slid! now I'm quite altered! blown into light colours; let out oaths by th' minute; sit up late till it be early; drink drunk till I am sober; sink down dead in a tavern, and rise in a tobacco shop! (A Mad World, My Masters, I,ii,p.254)

The gentry as well as the middle class is plagued by ambition, for cash on hand and land are the measures of nobility in these days. Sir Bounteous Progress is known widely for his gilt organ, his canopied bed, and his open house, and he entertains lavishly for his own social advancement. Sir Walter Whorehound is another decayed knight seeking to improve his fortunes, in this case by marriage to the daughter of a citizen who promises a dowry of three thousand pounds. Sir Francis Cressingham seeks to mend his fortunes by projects and alchemy. In fact, few of Middleton's gentlemen are admirable; they are usually swaggerers, gamblers, deceivers--the just prey of the citizens. It is no wonder that the citizens mocked them behind their backs, and considered open game the gallants and country gentlemen who flocked to the city to be relieved of their goods.

> Alas, poor birds that cannot keep the sweet country, where they fly at pleasure, but must needs come to London to have their wings clipt, and are fain to go hopping home again! (Michaelmas Term, III,ii,p.279)

Middleton's omission of religion in his comedies is particularly significant in view of the fact that Puritanism, one of the major movements of the seventeenth century, was largely a middle-class movement. Puritanism, an economic and political force as well as a religious one, "was the schoolmaster of the English middle classes. It heightened their virtues and sanctified, without eradicating, their convenient

vices."[8] Though religion was, according to much contemporary evidence, of vital concern to the middle class, Middleton ignores it except to satirize the Puritans in The Family of Love and in one scene of A Chaste Maid in Cheapside. The Family of Love is a Puritan sect which meets, apparently, at all hours in a dark house. It is a place to make assignations, to meet lovers, and to deceive one's husband, as Mistress Purge does.

> The Sect at which Middleton directed the shafts of his ridicule was founded by David George, an Anabaptist of Delft. This fanatic is said to have labored under the delusion that he was chosen by God to restore the Kingdom of Israel and build the tabernacle of Jacob in the latter days....He is said to have claimed for himself a superiority over Moses and Jesus, inasmuch as he was the prophet of Love, while his predecessors had been respectively the prophets of Hope and Faith....
> (Note to The Family of Love, v.III,p.3)

The Familists are pictured as ridiculous gulls, not as zealous fanatics, and they scarcely deserve the name of Puritans.

The Puritan gossips in A Chaste Maid in Cheapside are pictured with something bordering on disgust. They come to the christening of the latest child in the Allwit house, and after a slight confusion at the door as to who is lowly enough to enter last, they settle down to enjoy the drinks and comfits. The third Puritan gets drunk, develops hiccoughs, and eventually falls from her stool. The running commentary on these women by Tim and Allwit makes them appear disgusting and hypocritical rather than amusing. This scene comes close to the tone of Jonson's satiric attacks on Puritans.

Middleton also has little to say about education, except for a few pictures of middle-class students, each a stereotype. The students Beveril and Bowser are simple, straightforward men, humble and meek--easy prey to any sharper. Tim Yellowhammer and Sim Quomodo are merely

fools despite their education. Tim courts his wife in Latin and is married to a whore for his pains; he had said he could prove any woman honest by logic, but is hard pressed to prove his own wife so. Sim Quomodo is quickly cheated of his inheritance when his father is supposed dead and strikes a man for mentioning his father's honesty, for he will not have an untruth spoken about the dead. Scholars in this world are fools and get by on dullness; they are the antitype of the witty, uneducated young men who live by their brains.

> O, my lord, I remember you and I were students together at Cambridge; but, believe me, you went far beyond me....Now, my wit, though it were more dull, yet I went slowly on; and as divers others, when I could not prove an excellent scholar, by a plodding patience I attained to be a petty lawyer; and I thank my dulness for't: you may stamp in lead any figure, but in oil or quicksilver nothing can be imprinted, for they keep no certain station. (Anything For a Quiet Life, I,i,p.255)

The citizens actually were much concerned with improving their state, not only materially, but also culturally. They studied to increase their store of useful and cultural knowledge for their own personal benefit. Though they did not have time for school and lacked leisure time to pursue serious studies, they availed themselves of the handbook and printed guide or manual useful to a busy man, "the counterpart to the modern fifteen-easy-lessons which lead to bourgeois perfection."[9] Middleton must have assumed that the citizens were too busy scheming to study, for he does not mention any attempts on their part to improve their minds. This oversight or omission is in keeping with his biased presentation of the middle class.

Notes to Chapter Five

1 Wright, op. cit., p.465.

2 Wallace Notestein, "The English Woman, 1580-1650," Studies in Social History: A Tribute to G. M. Trevelyan. Edited by J.H. Plumb (London, 1955), pp.73-75, 76.

3 Ibid., pp.77-78.

4 Wright, op. cit., p.506.

5 Notestein, op. cit., p.87.

6 Ibid., p.97.

7 Ibid., p.94

8 R.H. Tawney, Religinn and the Rise of Capitalism (New York, 1926), p.176.

9 Wright, op. cit., p.121.

Chapter Six: Middleton's Attitude--An Unsolved Problem

Any statement about Middleton's attitude toward the persons and events in his comedies must be interpreted in the light of his attitude toward his work. Middleton was a professional writer, supporting himself by his pen, and a member of Henslowe's company of playwrights, the Admiral's and the Earl of Worcester's Men.[1]

> These companies were scarcely the most reputable in London... they specialized in crude and dreary popular entertainment, synthetically prepared. Authors, working singly or in groups, turned out at high speeds anything that would bring them in a few pounds and hold an audience for a few days.[2]

Middleton left Henslowe's group after his stage apprenticeship and wrote for the children's companies, which "sponsored a group of highly intellectual young playwrights."[3] In this group, Middleton was an accepted writer, for he was a gentleman and a Cambridge scholar. As a professional writer he was successful, turning out profitable plays for about twenty years[4] and writing not only plays but pamphlets and masques for the city of London. As Middleton himself stated in the preface to The Roaring Girl, he never regarded his work as art, but merely as public entertainment or as a livelihood. There is no indication in his comedies, at least, that he was concerned with either the quality or ultimate purpose of his work. He seems to have been "just a writer trying to get along,"[5] one who "apparently thought of himself as a purely practical playwright...one who was certainly willing to sell his product wherever he could."[6]

Though Middleton, like the other playwrights of his group, did not write for the general public but for the higher classes who patronized the children's theaters, he could not ignore stage custom. Long-standing tradition demanded, even for the more exclusive theatergoer, vigorous action, comments on politics and current events, sensationalism, characters easily understood--and easily forgotten--and sometimes a moral with tales of intrigue and vice. Middleton seems to have had no trouble producing anything necessary for the audience's pleasure. He belonged, on the other hand, to a group of writers who had lost some of the reforming zeal of their predecessors; while they neither ignored nor repudiated the commonly accepted values of their day, they displayed no faith in them.[7] Discovering that man fails to live up to his values at all times, they made man's failures the objects of ridicule and satire and found satire profitable. Middleton was writing in a time when literary taste, at least that of his fellows and his audience, sometimes demanded a moral and sometimes found it unnecessary. At first he gave them only a mere semblance of a moral to satisfy the old convention. Gradually, the explicitly stated moral disappeared from his plays, leaving satire to take its place--satire at times mild and at times contemptuous, but implicitly showing Middleton's attitude.

Exactly what his attitude is, is a problem still unsolved, primarily because Middleton is inconsistent in his application of a moral law. Ordinarily a moral law in drama is a system in which right or virtue is rewarded and wrong or folly is punished according to a fairly predictable and universal pattern. Though the idealized stage law may be more clearly discernible and simple than the moral law of life, it follows the pattern which we like to attribute to life. Middleton, however,

varies so sharply from any type of predictable pattern of law that he appears to have no basic law and to make no attempt to apply one.

Middleton is also inconsistent in his exposure of vice and in the purpose of his satire. In his plays there is a mixture of repentance and complaisance, of folly punished and vice rewarded; the occasional confession or punishment is an exception, not the rule. Though Middleton did sometimes state a moral explicitly or show a moral attitude through satire or irony, no carefully worked out system of rewards and punishments can be found in his plays.

> He wants to portray, realistically and even cynically, a world peopled only by successful scoundrels...and he also wants to portray a well-ordered world like that of The Phoenix, in which scoundrels, no matter how clever they may be, are in the end invariably brought to justice.[8]

Middleton's plays are full of action and intrigue, and are peopled by an amazing number of rogues and other delightfully wicked characters, who are often Middleton's best. Since he excelled in sketching this type of character and in creating plots dazzling with intrigue and counter-intrigue, he may have felt, justly, that the necessity of presenting a moral in each play would destroy the effect. In Michaelmas Term we regret the sudden fall and final punishment of Quomodo in Act Five and are happy that Middleton did not use a similar method with Follywit or Witgood. The plays in which Middleton allows knavery to operate freely and lets his clever knaves off lightly, such as A Chaste Maid and A Trick to Catch the Old One, are undoubtedly his best.

Although Middleton's best plays have little or no pattern of strict moral justice, he does nevertheless use several devices to express, on

rare occasions, a moral law which is quite conventional and normal. The character who serves as a judge, the comments of characters on themselves and on others, and the occasional confession or repentance are the most common methods used. Though these devices occur at random throughout all the comedies, following no discernible pattern of progression, they are most frequently used in the early city comedies.

Among the early comedies in particular, the structure is arranged as a showcase for evil, set off, documented, and punished by virtue. Jonson used the device of having the rascals override one another and overreach themselves, ending a play with a scene of judgment in which rewards and punishments were distributed, and Middleton occasionally found this method suitable for his purpose. "Often in the last act of a play...Middleton has one of the characters assume a judicial position, unravel the tangle of intrigue, and assign rewards and punishments."[9] A few of Middleton's early comedies employ a framework plot involving the virtuous man in disguise who observes evil and exposes it at the last.

The Phoenix is certainly the most obviously handled of these comedies. Prince Phoenix is sent by the old Duke to travel as part of his education for ruling. He chooses only one servant, Fidelo, to accompany him, and they decide privately to remain in their own country, partly because of the Duke's advanced age and partly because reports have reached Phoenix of evils abroad in the land.

> ...Indeed, a prince need not travel farther than his own kingdom, if he apply himself faithfully...and it would appear far nobler industry in him to reform those fashions that are already in his country, than to bring new ones in....(I,i,p.107)

> So much have the complaints and suits of men...prevailed with my pity, that I cannot otherwise think but there are infectious dealings in most offices, and foul mysteries throughout all professions. (I,i,p. 108)

Soon Phoenix and Fidelo are entangled in knavery of all kinds, possibly because of Fidelo's family and romantic ties. By masking as a thief, a lawyer, a hired murderer--whatever the villains of the play need—Phoenix quickly enough gets into the most outrageous situations. The second, third, and fourth acts of the play are taken up with the exposure of the iniquities which Phoenix discovers; Phoenix serves as a chorus, commenting on and lamenting the evil which he has found. The last act completes the framework by having all the rogues assemble at court, where Fidelo claims to read a letter from Phoenix. The letter accuses each of the evildoers in turn as he appears, and Phoenix, in the appropriate disguise for each occasion, "confesses" his part in the crimes. Finally, rising from his own ashes, so to speak, he claims the throne and sentences the criminals.

The Family of Love contains a character who disguises himself to investigate evil and the play ends with a scene of judgment. Gerardine, the lover who is found unworthy by his sweetheart's guardian, pretends to go on a journey and bequeaths to Maria all his goods in a trunk. When the trunk arrives, of course it contains Gerardine, and for the duration of the play he is in the trunk or in disguise in each of the other sub-plots. He lacks the pure attitude of Phoenix, however, for he practices as much knavery as anyone. During the course of the play, Gerardine appears as a porter, an apparitor, and a judge in the last act, and while issuing warrants for everyone, he manages to assemble the entire cast.

Then he accuses each of his crimes, gives mock sentences, and successfully dupes Dr. Glister of a thousand pounds and marries Maria. The crimes are exposed and the punishments are meted out; wit, not virtue, is rewarded, but at least there is still the moral principle at work.

In Your Five Gallants Middleton again uses the disguised hero in a plot which features the assembling of the rogues and the punishment of evil in the last act. In this case the five gallants, who fortunately have small Latin, request the scholar Bowser to write a masque for presentation to the wealthy orphan, Katherine. Bowser, actually another suitor to Katherine, takes pains to write the mottos in Latin and has the thief's boy recite a Latin speech which leaves no question about the character or intentions of the gallants. Two of them are sent off to be whipped, and they are all forced to marry the courtesans they have betrayed--though now even the courtesans find them too vile. Michaelmas Terms also ends with a scene of judgment, in which Quomodo tries unsuccessfully to regain the possessions for which he cheated Easy. Though the judge is not a character who has personally seen the intrigue as in the other three plays, he is well aware of the justice of Easy's claims and sentences the wrongdoers.

The device of having one character in disguise comment on moral laxity or downright evil is an adequate means of setting off aberrations from a norm--or moral code--by exposing good and evil in close contact. The final judgment and punishment scenes get all the actors back on stage, and a conventional moral code is satisfied by having the offenders

brought to justice. This type of structure is, in a sense, indicative of a type of moral law in which knavery may run rampant for awhile, but virtue triumphs in Act Five.

Middleton also expressed moral judgment through comments of the characters themselves on the times, the evil nature of man, and the common offenses of the day. The tirades of Phoenix are the only lengthy dissertations on the corruption of good instruction in Middleton's comedies, but other comments in the later comedies are quite as penetrating. Penitent Brothel summarizes the world he lives in quite sharply.

> No marvel, then, times should so stretch and turn;
> None for religion, all for pleasure burn.
> Hot zeal into hot lust is now transformed;
> Grace into painting, charity into clothes;
> Faith into false hair, and put off as often.
> (A Mad World, My Masters, IV,iv,p.329)

On occasion a character is moved to moralize on the fate of a sinner. For example, Sir Launcelot comments on Dampit as he lies on his deathbed:

> Note but the misery of this mourning slave: here he lies, like a noisome dunghill, full of the poison of his drunken blasphemies; and they to whom he bequeaths all, grudge him the very meat that feeds him, the very pillow that eases him. Here may a usurer behold his end: what profits it to be a slave in this world, and a devil i'th'next?
> (A Trick to Catch the Old One, IV,v,pp.336-337)

Such occasions are rare, however; usually comments on the immorality of the times are provoked by personal loss on the part of some knave, and have a bitter or cynical tone.

> Well, what a horrible age do we live in, that a man cannot have a quean to himself!...Does my boy pick and I steal to enrich myself, to keep her, to maintain him? Why, this is the right sequence of the world. A lord maintains her, she maintains a knight, he maintains a whore, she maintains a captain. So in like manner the pocket keeps my boy, he

keeps me, I keep her, she keeps him; it runs like quicksilver from one to another. (Your Five Gallants, III,ii,pp.184-185)

Sudden remorse strikes some characters in Middleton's comedies. There are cases of repentance or confession in many of the comedies, notably the ones in which there is no general judgment. One character may repent of folly or past sins, declare the intention to live a wiser or more decent life thereafter, and win the respect of the others. The courtesan in A Trick to Catch the Old One and Lady Goldenfleece in No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's do this. Francisco's repentance in The Widow helps him toward a more fortunate love, but Sir Walter Whorehound's repentance loses him his mistress, children, income, and even a place of refuge to save him from debtor's prison. Penitent Brothel repents after a succubus in the form of Mistress Harebrain visits him, and he wins his mistress over, too. Such late-blooming virtue is rewarded by the friendship and trust of the jealous husband. In Anything for a Quiet Life there is wholesale repentance: Sir Francis Cressingham repents of his marriage and foolish obedience to his wife; Lady Cressingham repents that she has been shrewish and demanding. Water-Camlet becomes sorry for his dishonesty in business, but not sorry enough to stop it; his wife is cured of her shrewishness by the clever apprentice who threatens to leave and ruin the business. Knavesby is forced to repent his attempts to let his wife out for hire when he loses the profit, the client, and the wife, but at his true repentance he is forgiven. There is a general confession and forgiveness of sins at the end of the play, and all the characters agree with Knavesby, "I will do anything for a quiet life." (V,ii,p.347) Such episodes tend to relieve the almost total depravity shown in the city comedies and satisfy the need

for some sense of an active moral force even in this mad world of London. Most of these repentance scenes are not structurally necessary, and except for Francisco's change of heart, make no difference in the outcome of the play.

Such obvious examples of an unwavering moral judgment are the exception, however, for in the later city comedies Middleton seems to take no pains to punish or condemn vice. The characters usually lack a sense of responsibility for their deeds; the prevailing attitude is one of acceptance, bland awareness of evil with no emotional reaction to it. Vice is not depicted as an ugly thing, but as a normal and acceptable part of life. The point of view seems to be amoral, for the characters simply have no sense of morals, and Middleton himself imposes no attitude on them. One of the most notable features of the comedies is the absence of horror in crime and the presence of an air of normality even in the most depraved situations.

In most of the city comedies there is only a rudimentary "moral lesson," if it may be called one, summed up neatly by one of the knaves in a couplet. Replacing the scenes of judgment and punishment are gatherings of the cast at wedding feasts or banquets where the tricks are revealed, the rascals either forgiven or themselves duped, and a hearty laugh is enjoyed by all. Sir Bounteous in A Mad World feels himself repaid for all his losses by the enormous joke of seeing his grandson married to his whore. "Tricks are repaid, I see," is Follywit's only comment, and Sir Bounteous laughs, stating that "this makes amends for all." In most cases when vice is exposed, Middleton's characters fail to condemn it or to feel sorry for having done it. They do not need to, for vice is commonly accepted in their world. Even the jealous husband Harebrain finds only one sin worth worrying about.

Courtesan: Fondly and wilfully she retains that thought, that every sin is damn'd.
Harebrain: O, fie, fie, wife!...There's a diabolical opinion, indeed! Then you may think that usury were damned; you're a fine merchant, i'faith! or bribery; you know the law well! or sloth; would some of the clergy heard you, i'faith! or pride; you come at court! or gluttony; you're not worthy to dine at an alderman's table! Your only deadly sin's adultery...
(A Mad World, My Masters, I,ii,p.267)

The complacency of both knave and gull, of fool and wit, is remarkable throughout the plays, and reaches its maximum in the steadfast calm of Allwit's cynical philosophy:

...I'm like a man
Finding a table furnish'd to his hand,
As mine is still to me, prays for the founder,--
Bless the right worshipful the good founder's life!
I thank him, has maintained my house this ten years;
Not only keeps my wife, but 'a keeps me
And all my family; I'm at his table:...
The happiest state that ever man was born to!
(A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, I,ii,p.17)

Allwit and all the other characters in A Chaste Maid, Middleton's most outrageously scandalous play, accept the wickedness and immorality of their world as quite normal--and indeed, it seems so to the reader, for their attitude is very persuasive.

With Allwit, all the knaves might say, "I am tied/ To nothing in this business; what I do/ Is merely recreation, not constraint." (II,ii, p.33) Though knavery is a means of livelihood, a serious and deadly struggle for survival, it appears as a game undertaken for amusement, a recreation to be spoken of and treated with wit, frankness, and honesty.

There is nowhere in Middleton a stronger feeling of camaraderie and good human feeling than in Your Five Gallants. The five have cheated, cozened, and cudgeled one another throughout the play; finally the chain of pearl which had passed from hand to hand causes a confusion which results in the revelation of the true nature of the gallants.

They realize that they are "all natural brothers...a cheater, a thief, a lecher, a bawd, and a broker!" Overjoyed at the discovery, Goldstone suggests that they unite: "Here be five on's; let's but glue together, why now the world shall not come between us...if we be true among ourselves." (IV,viii,p.225)

In this scene as well as in many others, Middleton seems to enjoy the knavery, to laugh with the rascals, and to condone their actions at least temporarily. Though they may come to justice later, Middleton, for the most part, is on their side. Yet in most cases Middleton laughs at the knaves, mocking them and their deeds, and implicitly condemning their folly. The audience knows the details of the plots and counterplots and sees that, usually, even the cleverest knaves are being tricked and that their punishment is growing out of their own knavery. For example, in A Mad World, My Masters, Follywit has been successful in all his trickery up to the final scene; yet even while he is at the height of his success he is tricked inot marrying his grandfather's whore. By a clever pretense of shyness and innocence the courtesan wins his heart and in spite of her apparent reluctance hastily affirms the engagement which her mother makes for her. Follywit confides to the mother that his grandfather keeps a mistress, but thinks it best not to tell his innocent fiancee this shocking fact. Her mother agrees, replying, "that were needless, i'faith." In The Old Law Gothno has taken advantage of the law which states that women must die when they reach the age of fifty to falsify the record and plan to get rid of old Agatha a few years before her time. As the rest of the characters and the audience know that the law has been repealed, Gothno's behavior becomes amusing and

ironic rather than grotesque and horrible. He leads a procession which he means to serve as his old wife's funeral cortege and his new wife's wedding party, for he is going to remarry the instant Agatha is hanged. His wedding clothes, his concern over the wedding cakes, his extravagant praise of his bride and his abuse of Agatha serve to make him more ridiculous and to sharpen the effect of his complete discomfiture when the new law is revealed to him.

The tone of Middleton's satire is gentle and good-natured at times, but more often contemptuous and abusive. In his best known plays the satire is bitter and cruel, becoming invective on occasions. The objects of the satire are ridiculous, contemptuous, or disgusting, and their actions are either implicitly condoned or implicitly condemned. In The Family of Love and A Chaste Maid the satire is quite harsh. The characters themselves, all totally despicable, comment on each other satirically, and an atmosphere of disgust and something close to hatred pervades both plays. Yet in A Trick to Catch the Old One and A Mad World, My Masters the atmosphere of sharp rivalry and playful jesting has no overtones of disgust or contempt. Middleton seems to enjoy the tricks and jests as much as the characters do. And in Your Five Gallants, The Widow, Anything for a Quiet Life, and No Wit, No Help Like A Woman's the tone is pleasant and the satire is mild.

Most often the point of the satire seems to be that craft recoils in the end, "that sin is blind and sinners...set in motion the forces that bring about their own ruin."[10] In a few epigrams Middleton reveals one type of moral law which operates in his world.

Who lives by cunning, mark it, his fate's cast;
When he has gull'd all, then is himself the last.
(A Mad World, My Masters, V,ii,p.358)

I perceive there's nothing conjures up wit sooner
than poverty, and nothing lays it down sooner
than wealth and lechery.
(A Trick to Catch the Old One, III,i,p.290)

...for craft once known
Does teach fools wit, leaves the deceiver none.
My deeds have cleft me, cleft me!
(Michaelmas Term, V,iii,p.321)

Instead of making any one class or type of person the object of satire, Middleton seems to satirize folly in any form. The stupidity which leads to avarice, overweening pride, foolish ambition, dishonesty--or to foolish and hypocritical virtue--is exposed and punished in many ways. In Middleton's world cleverness is good and folly is bad. Those who are witty and clever thrive even though they are knaves, while those who lack wit or suffer from stupidity are punished. The clever man can safely practice dishonesty, but the foolish man sets in motion the forces which lead to his own downfall, and "craft recoils in the end."

While Middleton sometimes treats his knaves with warmth and humor, he usually treats all subjects with varying degrees of satire. Middleton may find his subjects disgusting, absurd, or amusing, but he never fails to find them fascinating. The inconsistency in his treatment of his subjects, in his attitude toward them, and in his application of a moral system, create a puzzling problem but one which is itself one of the most fascinating aspects of Middleton's city comedies.

Notes to Chapter Six

1 Barker, op. cit., p.9.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid., p.10.

4 Ibid., p.24.

5 Alfred Harbage, Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions (New York, 1952), p.306.

6 Barker, op. cit., p.11.

7 Harbage, op. cit., p.305.

8 Barker, op. cit., p.46.

9 Lynch, op. cit., p.25.

10 Barker, op. cit., p.53.

Conclusion

The middle class of London in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries was one of the most influential groups in history. Initiating or fulfilling several major movements--economic, religious, political, and literary--they possessed a great deal of power and shaped the trend of English life for the entire future. Middle-class citizens, typically small businessmen or tradesmen, worked hard and had serious ambitions. They believed in the solid virtues of labor, thrift, diligence, and patriotism. Most important of all was their tremendous pride in themselves, their apprentices, and their place in London's economic system. Though they would have liked a title to increase the prestige of their name and trade, they were proud of their place in society.

Dramatists of the period found in the middle class a major source of dramatic material as well as a large portion of the paying audience. The literary taste of the middle class and their own interest in themselves shaped drama of the period to a large extent, though dramatists felt free to picture citizens and their customs either sympathetically or unfavorably.

Middleton, like many other playwrights, chose the middle class as a favorite subject; his city comedies display the customs, manners, trades, and inhabitants of London. In this city, its tone set by Middleton's rough, virile style and ribald humor, one is always aware of the constant ferment of a dynamic city with its bustling citizens and its slippery rogues, its wits and fools. Middleton's city is inhabited by merchants, doctors, lawyers, apprentices, wives, courtesans, gallants, and thieves. Though his presentation of them is close enough to reality to be recognizable, his characters are exaggerated

and are not meant to be taken as typical of all middle-class citizens. Middleton's view is not realistic; he usually follows stage convention; he sacrifices realism to intrigue and action; he is preoccupied with unscrupulous or vicious practices, with any rascality which will make a good story. Though he satirizes the middle class to a great extent, he does not display hatred of them, for his satire falls as sharply on the gentry or the thieves as on the average citizen.

Through his varied satire Middleton reveals, usually, an attitude of amusement or aloof contempt. Yet his attitude differs as his satire varies in tone. While in some plays he presents a moral, explicitly or implicitly, he usually neglects to state a moral or display a distinct moral attitude. His pattern of moral law--of punishment of wrong and reward of right--is so inconsistent as to be indescribable. Middleton laughs--kindly, slyly, bitterly, or robustly--at anything and everything, but especially at folly of any kind and at those who are not clever enough to succeed in their schemes. Using the middle class as his major characters, the intrigues of the wise and the foolish as his plots, and satire as his method, Middleton created his city comedies which are still as spontaneous, ribald, and enigmatic as ever.

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