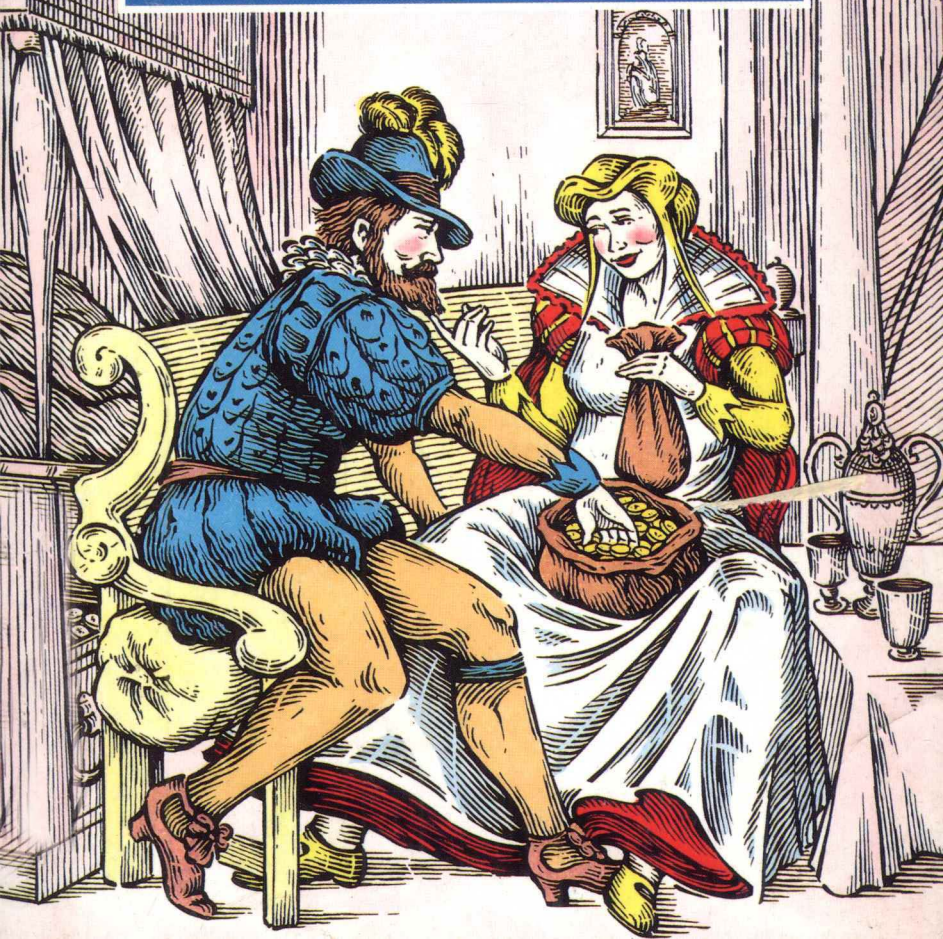


THOMAS MIDDLETON

A MAD WORLD, MY
MASTERS

AND OTHER PLAYS



THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

THOMAS MIDDLETON

A Mad World, My Masters
Michaelmas Term
A Trick to Catch the Old One
No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's

Edited with an Introduction by

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THE WORLD'S CLASSICS

A MAD WORLD, MY MASTERS,
AND OTHER PLAYS

THOMAS MIDDLETON was born in 1580 and died in 1627. His career as a London dramatist therefore spans the most productive, innovative, and exciting period of theatrical activity in the history of English drama. Middleton wrote nearly fifty plays during these years, either alone or in collaboration with other Jacobean dramatists. His greatest play, written in collaboration with William Rowley, is *The Changeling* (1622), a superb and tragic rendering of the pathology of sexual obsession. In his City Comedies, Middleton replays this and other pathologies in robustly comic vein. By the time of his death, Middleton was reasonably well-to-do, having been appointed the City Chronologer for London in 1620, a post which obliged him to keep records of important civic events and organize public entertainments and pageants.

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INTRODUCTION

MIDDLETON'S 'city comedies' are a response to the bitter romance of London bourgeois life in the early seventeenth century. They celebrate and castigate the magnetism of this 'man-devouring city' (*Michaelmas Term*, 2.2.21), and are dominated by two of the great themes of literature dealing with the city, sex and money. Of the two, money—and the real estate that advertises its possession—is ultimately the more important, especially at a time of rampant inflation. One of Middleton's more perceptive critics, Charles Barber, focuses upon a revealing moment in this competition between sex and money for the souls of Middleton's characters in his observation about Witgood at the end of *A Trick to Catch the Old One*: 'his rapture on the recovery of his estate is much more heartfelt than anything he ever says about the woman he marries'.¹ A similar response from another of Middleton's cynical protagonists, Richard Easy, at the conclusion of *Michaelmas Term*, leaves some readers uncertain as to the fate of Thomasine, Quomodo's 'widow', whom Easy has recently married. They have so much difficulty in believing Easy's easy-come, easy-go acceptance of the Judge's decision to return Thomasine to Quomodo that they wonder if something that happened so casually and so swiftly ever really happened at all. But such lack of enthusiasm for the claims of romantic love on the part of the principals involved (except Thomasine, of course) is a good example of the way in which most of the characters in Middleton's early comedies value the energy involved in money-making more highly than that involved in love-making. Quomodo himself believes that the two are incompatible: 'to get riches and children too, 'tis more than one man can do' (*Term*, 4.1.33-4). Often in these comedies the act of making money is a substitute for the act of making love; it may even, more perversely, actually become the act of making love, as in, for instance, Witgood's desire to 'hug four hundred a year' (*A Trick*, 1.2.44).

Making love to money does not seem so bizarre in the world of these comedies, a world that has so remorselessly substituted its own unnatural laws for natural ones. Or, rather, its unnatural laws seem inevitable and natural to the city's inhabitants: 'the pox [*the city*

¹ Charles Barber (ed.), *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, Fountainwell Drama Texts (Berkeley, 1968), 4.

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disease] is as natural now as an ague in the springtime' (*Mad World*, 4.2.24-5), observes Sir Bounteous Progress wryly. And Onesiphorus Hoard's explanation—'Tis as natural for old folks to fall out as for young to fall in' (*A Trick*, 1.1.122-3)—for the conflict between those 'mortal adversaries' (1.1.107), Walkadine Hoard and Pecunius Lucre, perceives their quarrel merely as age's natural and inevitable ague. In fact, the city, a (teeming) world unto itself, is seen throughout these comedies as the creator and dispenser of 'natural agues', a merciless tutor, a subculture with absurd and rigid 'observances' (*Term*, 2.1.93) where 'a man must not so much as spit but within line and fashion' (*Term*, 2.1.93-4). So palpable is London's presence in these comedies that the city can be thought of as Middleton's Marlovian protagonist: 'The city's power is a product of the greediness of the city's embrace, because the city is a version of the Renaissance overreacher, unwilling to let anyone or anything go.'² The city's most pernicious observance turns nature on its head by making it a 'principle in usury' (*A Trick*, 1.1.17) to victimize family members, especially the weaker ones:

He that doth his youth expose
To brothel, drink, and danger,
Let him that is his nearest kin
Cheat him before a stranger.

(*A Trick*, 1.1.13-16)

The plays are full of conflict between members of the same family: in *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's*, for instance, Sir Oliver Twilight talks of the 'sophistic faith of natural sons' (4.1.15), while the Dutch Merchant earlier had broadened the indictment to take in not only a man's natural sons but all his dependants: 'what worse knave to a man | Than he that eats his meat?' (1.3.78-9).

On the principle that 'All sins are venial but venereal' (*Mad World*, 1.2.137), a worse knave to a man than his son, his brother, or his servant, is his wife or his mistress. As many of Middleton's critics have pointed out, Middleton treats marriage in an irreverent and cynical fashion. Richard Horwich notes that in Middleton marriage is 'not an alternative to or an escape from the predatory marketplace, but a marketplace itself';³ he contrasts Middleton's plays with those

² G. K. Paster, *The Idea of the City in the Age of Shakespeare* (Athens, Ga., 1985), 177.

³ Richard Horwich, 'Wives, Courtesans, and the Economics of Love in Jacobean City Comedy', *Comparative Drama*, 7 (1973-4), 291-309, 306.

of Dekker, Heywood, and Marston where marriage functions in a gentler, more Shakespearian mode: 'Middleton's courtesans are indeed courtesans, not innocent girls mistaken for fallen women, and they marry to be reclaimed, but these cheerful and mettlesome women are never reformed by marriage, only enriched, and remain throughout superior in every respect to the fools who marry them.'⁴

Fear of women in general is rife in Middleton's comedies. 'Tis an Amazonian time; you shall have women shortly tread their husbands' (*Mad World*, 3.3.105-6), Follywit bawdily prophesies, little imagining that he will be trodden down by one very shortly, fulfilling thereby the promise of his name. The plays are full of male characters nervously looking over their shoulders for looming female predators: roaring girls, witty squalls, weak and sinful creatures, slaves to vanity, 'deluding shadows begot between tirewomen and tailors' (*Term*, 3.1.4-5), as Hellgill memorably dismisses them, who will do anything for a satin gown. What they mostly do in these plays for satin gowns or country estates or simply to satisfy their own physical appetites involves the sexual enslavement of men. Even Lethe's old mother in *Michaelmas Term* imagines that London will provide her with young courtiers who 'will be hungry upon an old woman' (1.1.307). Small wonder then that Sir Gilbert Lambston in *No Wit* peoples his rogues' gallery with 'clap-fallen daughters, | Night-walking wives . . . libidinous widows' (4.3.52-3). Women-beware-women with a vengeance.

As is the case with many of Middleton's positions, it is not entirely clear just how far this misogyny is the target of his satire and how far the instrument. (It is not until *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's* (c.1611-12) that Middleton's women begin to bear any resemblance to the providential agents we find in Shakespeare's Romances.) Certainly, Follywit's diatribe in *Mad World* against the unnaturalness of women—'And is not most they do against kind, I prithee?' (3.3.91)—resonates with the measured contempt endemic to the plays on this subject, while managing to avoid the fanaticism of Penitent Brothel's hysterical response after he has fulfilled the prediction in *his* name: 'To dote on weakness, slime, corruption, woman!' (4.1.18). The subject of woman produces many a weighty apophthegm of the Follywit variety: 'Man's never at high height of madness full | Until he love and prove a woman's gull'

⁴ Ibid. 302.

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(*Mad World*, 4.5.12-13). Indeed, in this sporting life, the sophisticated gallant ruefully anticipates a final reckoning from one of these immensely resourceful creatures, whose 'wit is ever at full moon' (*Mad World*, 3.2.160), as perhaps Middleton himself did on more than one occasion—he a fatherless boy, brought up by an emotionally unstable mother and married at the age of 22 or 23. In any case, the unnaturalness of women, like all the other unnaturalnesses in the city comedies, is fundamentally the product of the wicked city: as Hellgill remarks, 'Virginity is no city trade' (*Term*, 1.2.41). And men, as Hellgill, Lethe, Follywit, and Witgood exemplify, are quick to seize the chance to become pimps, procurers, perverters of innocence. 'What strange impudence | Governs in man when lust is lord of him' (*No Wit*, 1.2.74-5), Mistress Low-water observes.

All city trades demand resourcefulness, wit, ruthlessness, and energy. The tricksters in Middleton's city comedies have to operate in a world growing ever more deceitful and devious (or so they claim); in their commentaries on the *Zeitgeist* they repeatedly use words like 'subtlety' and 'cunning'. (The fact that their tricks are sometimes transparent and would not deceive a simpleton is a stage convention.) Whores and tricksters in the plays practise a 'politic conveyance' (*Mad World*, 1.1.156), a 'sincere carriage', a 'religious eyebrow' (1.1.157). Even the 'shallow ploughman', the Courtesan's mother claims in *Mad World*, can now distinguish 'Twixt simple truth and a dissembling brow' (1.1.140). Hence the need felt on the part of virtually all the plays' characters to practise the art of dissimulation, from the straightforward counterfeiting of unfelt emotion (as when Thomasine acts like a 'hanging moon, a little waterish awhile' (*Term*, 4.3.42) at Quomodo's 'death') to the elaborate shifts of the quick-change artist, as illustrated in the careers of Follywit, Shortyard, Quomodo, and Mistress Low-water. Country wenches transform themselves into aristocratic whores with the aid of 'wires and tires, bents and bums, felts and falls' (*Term*, 1.2.13-14); fathers and mothers are not able to recognize their own children because of their fancy attire and city ways; all these self-fashioners are in the grip of the city compulsion to make money or to cut a figure, and they are the fictional representatives of their real counterparts in Jacobean society, a status society, obsessed with role-playing, as we can see from the huge number of self-making manuals churned out by the printing presses every year. 'What base birth does not raiment make glorious?' (*Term*, 3.1.1-2), muses Hellgill.

Such self-making is essentially a city pursuit, of course, as only the city offers the possibility of making oneself over in desirable terms, as a gallant or gentlewoman (or trickster and whore). The 'city powd'ring' (*Term*, 1.1.56), as Cockstone calls it. *Michaelmas Term*, in particular, dramatizes the extraordinary appeal of the city for the inhabitants of rural society; London's numbers rose from some 120,000 in 1550 to 375,000 by 1650. *Michaelmas Term*'s formal, symbolic induction lays stress on the conflict between the city and country, while demonstrating at the same time their perverse symbiosis, as do the events of the play—Quomodo, the city merchant, talks of the country gentry being 'busy 'bout our wives, we 'bout their lands' (*Term*, 1.1.109). Hence the use of a metaphor whereby, for instance, the exploitation of the country litigants is seen in terms of a harvest for London lawyers, giving rise to one of those memorable Middleton couplets: 'And so through wealthy variance and fat brawl | The barn is made but steward to the hall' (*Induction*, 13–14). The 'clients' are seen as 'fools', 'asses', 'lambs', 'dried straws', and the 'writs' are like 'wild-fowl'. In an extended metaphor, the Boy vividly portrays the plight of the country innocents: 'Alas, poor birds that cannot keep the sweet country where they fly at pleasure, but must needs come to London to have their wings clipped and are fain to go hopping home again' (3.2.19–21).

At times, and anticipating the later tragedies, subtlety, role-playing, and cunning seem fiendish to their practitioners and victims. 'Tis an age for cloven creatures' (*Term*, 1.2.9), observes Dick Hellgill (a prototype for De Flores), and even in the Fletcherian *No Wit*, Mistress Low-water asks herself, 'Is the world's lease from hell, the devil head-landlord?' (1.2.4). When Witgood seems to be cornered by his sadistic creditors, his response acknowledges the city's spiritual hegemony: 'I am in hell here and the devils will not let me come to thee' (*A Trick*, 4.3.58–9). There is a whiff of sulphur in the air of most of Middleton's city comedies: the Succubus and Penitent Brothel in *Mad World*; Hellgill and the disturbing Dampit and Gulf in *Term*; Lethe in *Trick*—even *No Wit* has its benign, whimsical version of the devilish arts in the presentation of Weatherwise, lost in the fatuities of his almanac. Middleton is clearly fascinated by the possibility of damnation, and a character such as Dampit, once thought to be incoherent and extraneous to the world of his play, now threatens to monopolize critical attention. This 'famous, infamous trampler of time' (*A Trick*, 1.4.10)—and of language—is troublingly fantastic, unnervingly himself, his collapse looking forward to the 'particularly

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disturbing sense of emptiness that lies at the heart of Middleton's tragedies'.⁵ As Richard Levin suggests,⁶ Dampit's career offers a paradigmatic rogue's progress for the economic activities of the Hoards and Lucres of all the city comedies, an observation we should put into a larger cultural context: 'From about the end of the sixteenth century devils appear not, as in *Doctor Faustus* (1588-92), as tempters of a great man's soul, but as metaphors for the uncontrollable forces of the city economy.'⁷

To be in hell here reminds us of Mephistopheles' reply in Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* to Faustus's naïve belief that hell has geographical (or cosmological) boundaries: 'Why, this is hell, nor am I out of it.'⁸ Middleton's characters are not out of hell because hell is here in the city—is the city. At other times, even more pessimistically, characters in these city comedies tend to think of hell as the natural human condition in or out of cities. Such an extreme position is masked by an urbane (and urban) appeal to the cynicism of 'common reason', as the Courtesan calls it: 'And in common reason one keeper cannot be enough for so proud a park as a woman' (*Mad World*, 1.1.131-3). Although such a belief may be preferable to, say, Hare-brain's pathological jealousy in which his wife's 'very dreams are answerable' (*Mad World*, 1.2.53), the Courtesan herself acknowledges how short the step is from a belief in the primacy of common reason to a fatalistic recognition of the inevitable corruption of human nature—'This natural drunkard that undoes us all' (*Mad World*, 4.1.9) as Penitent Brothel puts it—especially female human nature: 'for since we were made for a weak, imperfect creature, we can fit that best that we are made for' (*Mad World*, 2.5.33-4). Given this emphasis on natural corruption in the plays, it is no mere coincidence that the 'device' that Beveril manufactures for the celebration of Lady Goldenfleece's 'marriage' to Mistress Low-water in *No Wit* should involve the 'natural opposition | And untruced war' (3.1.229-30) between the four elements themselves.

⁵ P. K. Ayers, 'Plot, Subplot, and the Uses of Dramatic Discord in *A Mad World*, *My Masters* and *A Trick to Catch the Old One*', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 47 (1986), 3-18, 15.

⁶ Richard Levin, 'The Dampit Scenes in *A Trick to Catch the Old One*', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 25 (1964), 140-52.

⁷ Michael Hattaway, 'Drama and Society', in R. A. Braunmuller and Michael Hattaway (eds.), *The Cambridge Companion to English Renaissance Drama* (Cambridge, 1990), 91-126, 105.

⁸ Christopher Marlowe, *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus*, ed. J. D. Jump, *The Revels Plays* (London, 1962), III. 78.

A fascination with damnation (however melodramatically conceived), the body's natural drunkenness, and the way things fall apart, hardly suggest a writer indifferent to the corruption he satirizes. And yet the traditional assessment of Middleton talks of his detachment, his ability to render his world in vivid colours without giving anything of himself away, least of all his moral position. Recent criticism has taken issue with this line of reasoning (heavily influenced as it was by the *obiter dicta* of T. S. Eliot) and has tended to go to the other extreme, presenting Middleton in earnest, not to say, donnish terms, or, even more startlingly, as a seventeenth-century Ibsen, Brecht, or Zola. Farley-Hills thinks *Mad World* an 'outstanding example of Calvinistically inspired satirical comedy',⁹ and R. B. Parker believes Middleton's comic world has 'a more than Calvinistically determined scheme of retribution'.¹⁰ George Rowe acknowledges the presence of a moral concern but thinks the plays full of irreconcilable clashes due to a contradictory mixture of traditional and contemporary material.¹¹ The moralism, in other words, does not sit easily with what Parker calls an 'amoral vitalism'.¹² None the less, the plays are full of quasi-apophthegms like Easy's in *Michaelmas Term*: 'Man is ne'er healthful till his follies bleed' (5.1.15), and all of them (more or less) subscribe to Lucre's conception of the retributive cycle: 'Does not he return wisest that comes home whipped with his own follies?' (*A Trick*, 2.1.77-8). Paster sees the city itself as the whipper: 'The city exacts a brutal justice in the self-perpetuating order of the predatory cycle.'¹³ And Susan Wells concludes that city comedy as a genre is traditionally moral: 'city comedy is an orthodox instance of corrective moral comedy, liberally salted, perhaps, especially in Middleton's practice, with moral ambiguity.'¹⁴

Sometimes the whipping is self-inflicted. As in Jonson, we are dealing here with the notion, essentially a moralistic one, of the comic overreacher, whose infinite capacity for invention finally brings the complicated edifice he has laboriously constructed crashing down

⁹ David Farley-Hills, *The Comic in Renaissance Comedy* (London, 1981), 102.

¹⁰ R. B. Parker, 'Middleton's Experiments with Comedy and Judgment', *Jacobean Theatre*, Stratford-upon-Avon Studies, 1 (New York, 1960), 179-200, 199.

¹¹ George E. Rowe, Jr., *Thomas Middleton and the New Comedy Tradition* (Lincoln, Nebr., 1979).

¹² Parker, 'Middleton's Experiments', 199.

¹³ Paster, *The Idea*, 159.

¹⁴ Susan Wells, 'Jacobean City Comedy and the Ideology of the City', *English Literary History*, 48 (1981), 37-60, 37.

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around him. The duper outduper himself. According to Leinwand,¹⁵ these overreachers are 'caricatures of anti-comic types' and provide a kind of self-regulating mechanism for the enormities they practise: 'wit destroys wit' (*Term*, 5.1.44), as Shortyard ruefully concludes. The most notorious example of a trickster out-Volponing Volpone is Quomodo, who indulges the 'sweet inventions' (*Term*, 4.1.78-9) of his reckless egotism with a self-destructive abandon that is in vivid contrast to his performance as the patient, wily cony catcher pursuing the intricacies of his plot against Easy. In talking about his grandfather's punishment, Richard Follywit in *Mad World* sums up Quomodo's plight (and his own, did he but know it): 'craft recoils in the end, like an overcharged musket, and maims the very hand that puts fire to't' (3.3.10-11). Passing a somewhat more far-reaching ontological judgement on Quomodo, the Judge tells him at the end of the play: 'Thou art thine own affliction' (5.3.163).

A less convincing, more troublesome, version of the self-destructive retributive cycle involves a sudden Pauline conversion in mid-sinful career. The extreme case is Penitent Brothel in *Mad World*, whose 'sin-shaking sinews' (4.1.72) summon up the dance of the Succubus and force him to forgo the pleasures of his affair with Mistress Harebrain, converting her in the process to the higher pleasures of the chaste life. 'Sin's hate is the best gift that sin bestows' (4.1.28) is his contribution to the list of sonorous dicta in these maxim-haunted plays. Even less convincing, perhaps, is the occasional choric moralist, like the Country Wench's Father in *Michaelmas Term*, who, once a Penitent Brothel himself, now spends his time looking for his corrupted daughter and commenting on the city's depravity in familiar scene-closing sententiae: 'We're bad by nature, but by custom [i.e. habit] worse' (4.2.27). Much more convincing than any variety of self-inflicted punishment is the one governed by the traditional biter-bit formula—equally Jonsonian—where the tricksters are out-tricked by superior strategists (often women, as we have seen), as is Follywit in *Mad World*, outmanœuvred by the Courtesan in her role as a demure virgin. It is left to Sir Bounteous Progress to enjoy the play's last moral word at Follywit's expense: 'Who lives by cunning, mark it, his fate's cast; | When he has gulled all then is himself the last' (*Mad World*, 5.2.282-3).

Although the sources of these city comedies are primarily the ephemera of city life—cony-catching pamphlets, jest books, the

¹⁵ T. B. Leinwand, *The City Staged: Jacobean Comedy, 1603-1613* (Madison, Wis., 1986), 60.

routine business of the law courts, the 'rough texture of daily life on the city streets'¹⁶—the moral criteria they appeal to are traditional and conventional. These plays tend to be nostalgic, dreaming of 'life as it ought to be lived by the standards of a traditional, largely pre-urban frame of reference'.¹⁷ In *Michaelmas Term*, the Father clings to a notion of a sexually pristine time past where the truly human (the truly natural), what he calls the 'human stroke' (3.1.264), ensured the production of moral progeny; in *Mad World* Sir Bounteous Progress looks back to a mythical time when aristocrats, governed by the hospitality embodied in his name, dispensed largesse with open-handed liberality. In *No Wit*, Master Pepperton looks back with the Father's eyes when he says: 'Saucy courting has brought all modest wooing clean out of fashion' (2.1.39-40), and even the malicious and parodic performance by the four rejected and bitter suitors takes the form of the four elements having been corrupted from a pristine past to scandalously evil ways in the present. Sir Bounteous would have especially applauded Fire's presentation: 'I was once a name of comfort, warmed great houses | When charity was landlord' (*No Wit*, 4.3.59-60). Lady Goldenfleece records the decline (disingenuously, no doubt) in linguistic terms: 'How many honest words have suffered corruption since Chaucer's days?' (*No Wit*, 2.1.77-8).

These Edenic fantasies of a lost golden culture animate fugitive yearnings in the present. The obsession, for instance, with 'city powd'ring' sometimes manifests itself in ways that subscribe to a kind of furtive idealism. Quomodo, for example, in *Michaelmas Term*, rejects Rearage as a possible son-in-law despite the fact that he is more obviously desirable in economic—and all other—terms than the candidate whom Thomasine (and Susan) favours, the absurd Lethe. (Although Rearage may be in arrears, at least he still owns the land to be in arrears over.) Quomodo seems to be simply and uncharacteristically dazzled by Lethe's putative Court connections. His scorn for Rearage is all the more remarkable given the fact that the play's main plot follows the labyrinthine intricacies of Quomodo's gulling of Easy out of his country estate, the rural equivalent for the city merchant of a city powdering. The longest speech in the play records Quomodo's raptures at the 'very thought of green fields' (4.1.78) as he subscribes to the popular view in London at the time of Essex as a

¹⁶ G. K. Paster, 'The City in Plautus and Middleton', *Renaissance Drama*, 6 (1973), 29-44, 31.

¹⁷ Ayers, 'Plot, Subplot', 6.

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distant Arcadia distinct from the likes of Cheapside, Clerkenwell, and Brentford. The same motivation inspires a similar speech from Hoard in *A Trick to Catch the Old One* as he imagines himself and his retinue riding down to the country to enjoy Witgood's estate. The sweet inventions that contemplation of these rural paradises inspires in Quomodo and Hoard have something in common with the occasional moments in these plays when a desire for the respectability of marriage (the goal of many a whore) takes on a certain ineffable, effulgent quality. Follywit's hunger for the perfect virgin, a chaste maid in Cheapside, 'a woman's simple modesty' (*Mad World*, 4.5.63), reads like a purified version of the 'venereal dreams' he wishes for Sir Bounteous.

These yearnings when fulfilled are the hallmark of romance. *A Mad World*, *Michaelmas Term*, and *A Trick to Catch the Old One*, all written between 1604 and 1606, appeared at a time when satirical drama, beginning with Jonson's *Every Man Out of His Humour* in 1599, was the dominant form. Between 1599 and 1613 all but twelve of the fifty-five extant plays are satiric comedies. However, with Fletcher's *The Faithful Shepherdess* (1608) we enter a period of the theatre dominated by the plays of Beaumont and Fletcher and the genre of romance. Consequently, *No Wit, No Help Like a Woman's* (c.1611-12) is—superficially anyway—a different kind of play from the earlier three. It belongs to a group of plays broadly in the tragicomic mould, *More Dissemblers Besides Women* (c.1614-15), *A Fair Quarrel* (c.1615-17), *The Witch* (c.1615) and *The Widow* (c.1616), and it might best be seen as a transitional piece between satire and romance, rendering the fugitive expressions of romantic feeling in the earlier city comedies in a much more expansive and celebratory manner. It also appears just before Middleton took up the writing of city pageants in a serious way in 1613, the year of *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. At the same time, *No Wit*, like *A Chaste Maid*, has many of the characteristics of satiric city comedy; George Rowe argues, in fact, that *No Wit*, despite its New Comedy plot, has more cynicism in it than any of Middleton's other city comedies, with the exception of *A Chaste Maid*.¹⁸

Cynicism notwithstanding, *No Wit* is clearly in the grip of the workings of a preposterous history whose strange coincidences obey the iron laws of romance's beneficent destiny, 'The secret powers [that] work wondrously and dully' (1.2.146), as Mistress Low-water

¹⁸ Rowe, *Thomas Middleton*, 173.

reverentially informs us. Middleton feels obliged to match sentiments with language in this play and so he largely abandons his normal racy prose for a verse that is the vehicle for oracular statement: 'I feel a hand of mercy lift me up | Out of a world of waters' (2.3.252-3). Weatherwise provides a parodic instance of this reliance on a beneficent destiny in the absurd way he subjects himself (and anyone else who will listen to him) to the inscrutable sayings of his almanac, and he warns his sceptical interlocutors that, without the guiding posies his almanac provides, they 'may wander like masterless men' (3.1.129).

On the other hand, despite Sir Oliver Twilight's respectful surrender to the secret workings of this implacable force in their lives—'We must not be our own choosers in our fortunes' (1.3.114)—*No Wit* resembles the other three city comedies (and much romance also, for that matter) in its equal emphasis on the contribution made by individual resolve. 'Wake, wake, and let not patience keep thee poor' (1.2.148), Mistress Low-water urges her stricken husband. Indeed, the play's title celebrates the help (as well as the wit) of women in particular to bring about the desired conclusion: that there is no help like a woman's presumably includes the helping hand of providence. In Mistress Low-water's resourcefulness and Lady Twilight's extraordinary magnanimity we find the potent combination that characterizes the wonder-working heroines of Shakespeare's Romances. And the play makes much of the concept of the mother-healer (shades of *Pericles* and *The Winter's Tale*). When all seems lost, Savourwit recommends to Philip Twilight that he 'fly to your mother's pity' (2.2.88); the romantic idealism that suffuses this play is especially articulate (*pace* the city comedy scepticism about the 'sophistic' relationship between the generations) on the subject of the reciprocal obligations of mothers and sons: 'Love is a mother's duty to a son, | As a son's duty is both love and fear' (4.1.169-70) in Lady Twilight's words (not that Philip ever inspires much confidence as a model son).

One of the abiding delights of Middleton's city comedies lies in another potent combination in which satire and festivity are in creative tension. His art 'accommodates both satiric critique and festive celebration, severely scrutinizing commercial urban society while retaining a comic tone'.¹⁹ The plays celebrate those who 'sojourn upon their brain and make their wits their mercers' (*A Trick*,

¹⁹ Mary Beth Rose, *The Expense of Spirit: Love and Sexuality in English Renaissance Drama* (Ithaca, NY, 1988), 46.