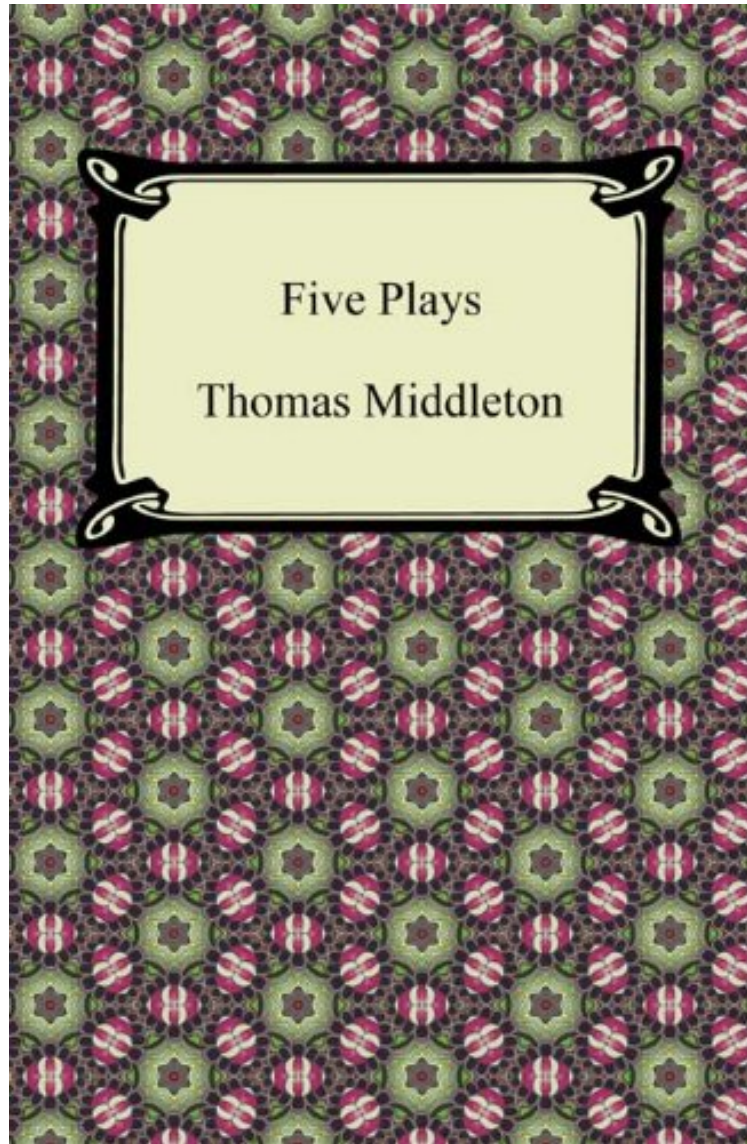


(Mobile book) Five Plays (The Revenger's Tragedy and Other Plays)

## Five Plays (The Revenger's Tragedy and Other Plays)

*Thomas Middleton*

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**Thomas Middleton : Five Plays (The Revenger's Tragedy and Other Plays)** before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Five Plays (The Revenger's Tragedy and Other Plays):

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Puritan Morality on the StageBy J C E HitchcockThomas Middleton (1580-1627) was one of the most prolific Jacobean dramatists and is believed to have written some forty plays, either alone or in collaboration with others, although some have been lost. Like his older contemporary Shakespeare he became known for both comedy and tragedy, although in both genres his style was quite different from Shakespearsquo;s.I will not say much here about ldquo;Women Beware Womenrdquo; or ldquo;The

Changeling" as I have reviewed both those plays elsewhere. The former is, like "The Revengers Tragedy", a tale of sexual desire, violence and revenge set in Italy, but is based (albeit loosely) upon actual historical events which had occurred in Florence several decades earlier. The latter was written by Middleton in collaboration with William Rowley. (Middleton often used collaborators, but the other four plays in this volume were all solo efforts). It combines a tragic main plot (mostly by Middleton), again involving lust and murder, with a comic sub-plot set in a madhouse. The two plots do not mesh together very well, but in the figure of Beatrice-Joanna the two authors have created one of the great villainesses of English drama, comparable to Lady Macbeth. As the editors Bryan Loughrey and Neil Taylor point out in their introduction, most of Shakespeare's comedies (e.g. "Twelfth Night", "Much Ado About Nothing", "As You Like It") are chiefly romantic comedies set in some foreign country and with a plot concentrating upon the love of a young man and a young woman. Middleton's comedies, by contrast, mostly belong to the subgenre known as "city comedy" or "citizens' comedy". They are set in London rather than some exotic location such as Sicily or Illyria and, although they generally involve a love story, this is used as a peg on which to hang some satire at the expense of the citizenry, especially the wealthier elements among it. In "A Trick to Catch the Old One", for example, the hero, Theodorus Witgood, has a sweetheart, Joyce, and the progress of their romance is an important plot device, but Joyce is a relatively minor character who only appears in a couple of scenes. The play is more concerned with financial affairs than with affairs of the heart. As it opens Witgood, a young gentleman from Leicestershire, finds himself in deep financial trouble. He is deeply in debt and his lands have all been mortgaged to his grasping uncle, Pecunius Lucre, a wealthy London merchant. (Middleton often gives his characters symbolic names). Marriage to Joyce, an heiress, would restore his fortunes, but her uncle and guardian Walkadine Hoard, another London merchant, does not welcome the prospect of his niece marrying a husband who is not only penniless but also a relative of Lucre, Hoard's deadly enemy. Witgood comes up with an ingenious solution to his difficulties, which involves his former mistress pretending to be a rich widow in order to trick both Lucre and Hoard. The play also has links with the so-called "new comedy" of Plautus and Terence. (Well, it probably was "new" around 200 BC). Such comedies tend to exploit the "generation gap", with a sympathetic pair of young lovers (Witgood and Joyce) and an unsympathetic older generation (Lucre and Hoard) trying to frustrate their love out of selfish, normally mercenary, motives. It is notable that Middleton was only in his mid-twenties when he wrote it, and the title itself hints at this theme of a clash of the generations. "The Old One" could be a euphemism for the devil, but it could also be a reference to an older man (which could mean either Lucre or Hoard) taken in by the tricks of a younger one. The moral issues raised by the play, however, are a bit more complex. Witgood is far from being without faults of his own. He freely admits that he got into debt because of his wild lifestyle of drinking, gambling and womanising. His treatment of his cast-off mistress also seems questionable. Although she is referred to in the stage directions as "Courtesan" and is even called a "whore" in the text itself, it is clear that she is not a prostitute in the modern sense; she was a virgin until she met Witgood, remained faithful to him throughout their relationship and still evidently retains enough affection for him to play along with his schemes. There is a suggestion that it was only the fact that she lacked an independent fortune of her own which prevented Witgood from marrying her. "A Chaste Maid in Cheapside" has a more complicated story than "A Trick". It involves several subplots, but at the centre are the "chaste maid" herself, Moll Yellowhammer, and her two suitors, Touchwood and Sir Walter Whorehound. Moll, the daughter of a Cheapside goldsmith, is in love with Touchwood but her mercenary family want her to marry the wealthy Sir Walter. Indeed, Moll's father is so mercenary that he continues to regard Whorehound as an ideal son-in-law even after discovering that the man is precisely what his name implies. Middleton's comedies are less poetic than Shakespeare's; "A Trick" is mainly in prose and although there are long passages of blank verse in "A Chaste Maid" they are rarely remarkable for poetic beauty. What Middleton does in both plays, especially "A Chaste Maid", is to provide us with a gallery of vividly drawn satirical portraits of early 17th century Londoners, such as the money-obsessed Hoard and Lucre, the dissolute philanderer Whorehound, Moll's Cambridge student brother Tim, proud of his academic book-learning but a naïve booby when it comes to more mundane matters, and the knowing cuckold Allwit who is happy to prostitute his own wife to Whorehound in exchange for a handsome allowance. The plays are also notable for their use of bawdy wordplay, something of which Middleton made considerably greater use than did Shakespeare and shows us that doubles entendres were an established feature of English comedy long before Max Miller or the Carry On team. When I was at school in the 1970s I remember being taught that "The Revengers Tragedy" (originally published anonymously) was by Cyril Tourneur, but today the consensus of scholarly opinion is that it was written by Middleton. It falls within the general pattern of Senecan revenge tragedies, a genre established in English by Kyd's "The Spanish Tragedy" and of which Shakespeare's "Hamlet" is the most famous example. Plays of this nature generally centre upon a man seeking revenge for the death of a loved one; he succeeds, but only at the cost of unleashing forces which lead to other deaths, including his own. The story is set in an unnamed Italian court. The "Revenger" is Vindice, a young man whose beloved, Gloriana, was murdered by the local Duke after she refused to yield to his sexual advances. The names of the characters are often symbolic of

their personalities or the role they play in the action; "Vindicer", for example, is Italian for "avenger". These names, however, can also be taken as applying to the court as a whole. Vindice is not the only vindictive character, Ambitioso (the Duke's stepson) not the only ambitious one and Lussurioso (meaning "lustful", the Duke's only legitimate son) is far from being the only lecherous one. The Duke is a sordid old lecher, Lussurioso a sordid young one, and the Duke's illegitimate son Spurio is carrying on an incestuous affair with his stepmother the Duchess. When the characters are not plotting to seduce one another they are plotting to kill one another, and the play inevitably ends in a bloodbath. Despite the play's title and its emphasis on bloodshed, it has been described as a black comedy, largely because the violence is at times so far over the top that it is difficult to take it seriously. (Vindice's method of disposing of the Duke is particularly baroque). It makes use of plot devices more commonly associated with comedy such as disguise and mistaken identity; at one point Vindice is employed to kill one "Piatord"; who is in fact an alter ego of Vindice himself. One could easily imagine an entire comedy revolving around this concept. Unlike some earlier revenge plays there is a strong element of cynical satire aimed at the vices of English high society, despite the ostensible Italian setting. (To have set the play in England would doubtless have been too politically dangerous). There is, however, a grim sort of moralism at work here, and indeed in Middleton's other tragedies. Middleton may take a bleak view of human nature, but there is a more optimistic view of divine providence. Vice (and there is plenty of it) is generally punished. Virtue may be in short supply, but the few virtuous characters like the nobleman Antonio and Vindice's sister Castiza ("chastity") are spared. At a time when many Puritans were attacking the theatre for its supposed immorality, Middleton brought a sort of Puritan morality onto the stage.

19 of 19 people found the following review helpful. True dramatic masterpieces from the English Renaissance By Q This is probably the best available collection of Middleton's wonderful plays. It includes the interesting "city comedies": "A Trick to Catch the Old One" and "A Chaste Maid in Cheapside," which reveal so much about 17th century London culture. The highlight of this collection, however, is undoubtedly the 3 great tragedies "The Revenger's Tragedy," "Women Beware Women" and "The Changeling." Modern movies have nothing on Jacobean drama when it comes to sex and violence. Incest, adultery, murder, and poison are all the order of the day here. The female leads are fascinating psychological studies. These are disturbing plays! Unlike the Oxford editions of Middleton, the editing here never gets in the way of your enjoyment of the text. Footnotes are used to aid with the occasionally unfamiliar language, but they are never obtrusive. The introduction is insightful and interesting. If you like Shakespeare, you will probably enjoy Middleton also. While his poetry is not as consistently sublime as Shakespeare's, Middleton is fully comparable with the other great English Renaissance playwrights Christopher Marlowe, Ben Jonson, and John Webster. The only really significant play by Middleton which is missing here is "A Game at Chess," an anti-Catholic satire which is historically fascinating.

16 of 16 people found the following review helpful. Not too keen on the introduction, but. By Sarang Gopalakrishnan First, there's an irritating mistake in the blurb, which says: "'In this play,' T.S. Eliot wrote of Women Beware Women, 'Middleton is surpassed by one Elizabethan alone and that is Shakespeare.'" First of all, Eliot was writing about The Changeling; and second, he qualified his statement with "in the moral essence of tragedy" and remarked that Middleton's plays were inferior to Webster's great tragedies in poetry and dramatic technique. Another inaccuracy is the Introduction's claim that Middleton received "little approving attention" in the first half of the 20th cent. -- though T.S. Eliot praised him highly both as a comic and a tragic writer (not to mention his repeated praise of The Revenger's Tragedy, which he thought was by Tourneur), and William Empson treated the subplot of the Changeling in Some Versions of Pastoral. The trouble with the introduction otherwise is that it ignores the verse, the characterisation, the handling of individual scenes -- in short, everything that makes these plays worth reading -- and talks entirely about Themes instead. The development of Middleton's verse style is something that should be mentioned at least in passing in a selection of his plays; and maybe some attention should have been paid to the details of the Middleton-Rowley collaboration in The Changeling. The plays are well worth reading, though, especially the three tragedies. The comedies have their moments, certainly, but I find them less immediately enjoyable than Jonson's, Shakespeare's or Massinger's.

Thomas Middleton (1580-1627), a bricklayer's son, rose to become one of the most eminent playwrights of the Jacobean period. Along with Ben Jonson he helped shape the dynamic course of drama in Renaissance England. His range is broad, as his work successfully covers comedy, tragedy, and history. Praised during his life as well as today, Middleton remains relevant and influential. This edition collects five of his most treasured dramas, demonstrating the breadth of his abilities. "A Trick to Catch the Old One" (1608) and "A Chaste Maid in Cheapside" (1630) are both delightful comedies of greed and lust. "Women Beware Women" (1637) and "The Revenger's Tragedy" (1607) are both deft tales of the pitfalls of vice, wealth, and sex. Lastly, "The Changeling" (1653) is Middleton's most refined and respected tragedy. It has experienced consistent success both upon its initial release and in modern times, with frequent staging over the past hundred years. "The Changeling" is a dark tale of deception and desire exploring the ways in which these impulses transform human beings, often to tragic ends. All five plays demonstrate Middleton's

numerous gifts as a playwright of his time, gifts that helped shape the course of English literature.