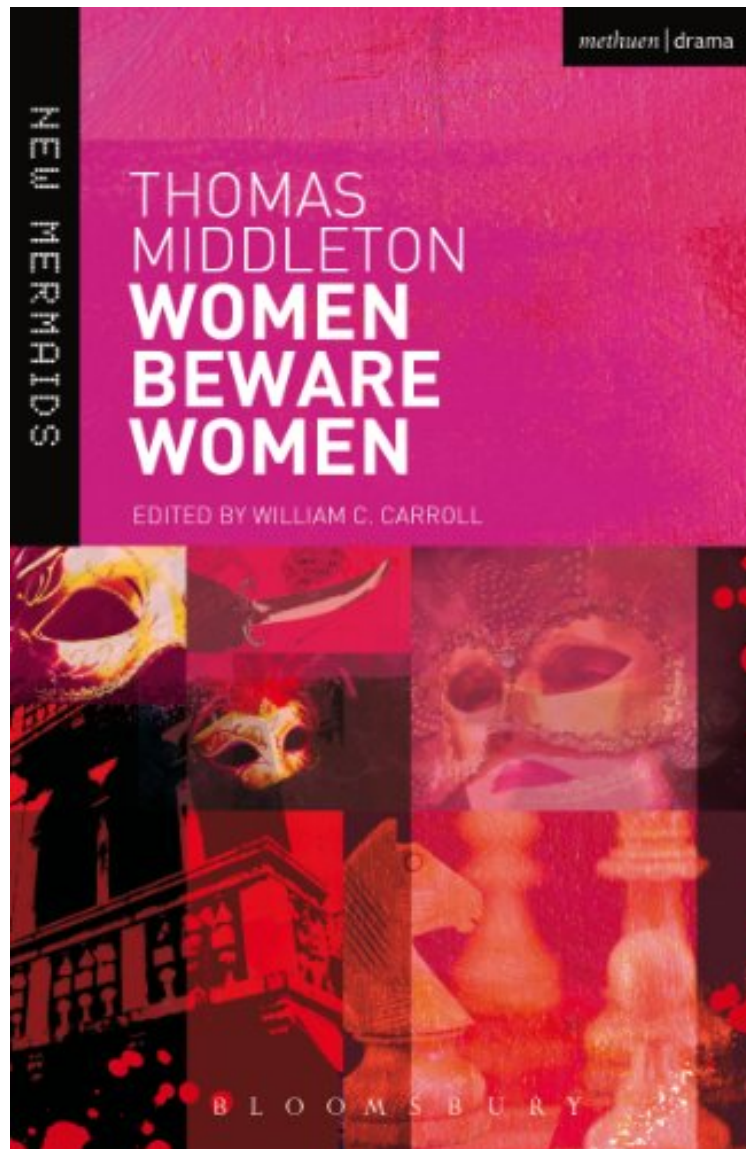


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Thomas Middleton

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Thomas Middleton : Women Beware Women (New Mermaids) before purchasing it in order to gage whether or not it would be worth my time, and all praised Women Beware Women (New Mermaids):

1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. this edition is not very good. The size of the volume is a small ...By G. Mosley Women Beware Women is a five star play. Middleton's revenger play is about all that anyone could want in Jacobean staging and violence. However, this edition is not very good. The size of the volume is a small octavo, and the paper is bright, with a clear type, BUT it is a setting of the text of the New Mermaid editions only. There is absolutely no critical apparatus. The scholarly introduction is hurried, and at the end of the play there is. . . a

"glossary!" All of the nuances, all of the puns, all of the questionable wording, it is supposed to be answered by a glossary at the end of the play that misses countless terms. I had sought a New Mermaid edition of the play, and I got only a text. I cannot fault the intent of the English publishers, who wanted an inexpensive classroom edition, but in this case it is neither less expensive than a scholarly edition nor as good. 's search function was, again, misleading.³ of 3 people found the following review helpful. The Path of Lust Leads But to the Grave By J C E Hitchcock Like his earlier *Revenge's Tragedy*, Thomas Middleton's *Women Beware Women* is a tale of love, lust, violence and revenge at the court of an Italian Duke, although unlike that play it is based, albeit loosely, on historical events. (*The Revenge's Tragedy* is now generally believed to have been written by Middleton, even though it was long attributed to Cyril Tourneur). The events in question are those surrounding Francesco de Medici and Bianca Cappello, his second wife. Their marriage was a controversial one, as Bianca had been his mistress during his first marriage to Joanna of Austria and as her own first husband, Pietro, had died in mysterious circumstances. When Francesco and Bianca both died within a day of one another in October 1587 foul play was suspected, but never proved. According to one popular but unproven theory, Bianca accidentally poisoned her husband while trying to kill his brother, the Cardinal Ferdinando de Medici, whom she hated, and then committed suicide, overcome by grief and remorse at his death. In reality, Bianca was Francesco's mistress for around fifteen years and his wife for nine, but Middleton telescopes these events into a much shorter time-frame. He makes some additional changes; the real Francesco was only a few years older than Bianca, but Middleton makes him fifty-five and her sixteen. His official title was Grand Duke of Tuscany, but here he is referred to as the Duke of Florence. Pietro is renamed Leantio. Joanna never appears in the play, and is never referred to by name, although there is a brief mention of the Duke being a widower. The events of final act, culminating in a series of violent deaths which make the closing scenes of *Hamlet* look like a vicarage tea-party, are wholly of Middleton's own invention. He also adds a fictitious sub-plot involving an incestuous uncle-niece relationship. The title *Women Beware Women* may seem misleading, as the play is not just about crimes perpetrated by women against their own sex. There are also numerous crimes perpetrated both by and against men. In suggesting that women should beware against women, however, Middleton was not thinking so much of crimes against the person, or even crimes against property, as of what might be called crimes against honour and morality. A key figure in the play is the widow Livia, who provides the main link between the main plot and the sub-plot. It is Livia who acts as the Duke's go-between in his dealings with Bianca, and it is she who engineers the incestuous relationship between her niece Isabella and her brother Hippolito by telling Isabella (falsely) that she is illegitimate and therefore no blood-relation to Hippolito. (Livia has a further role in the plot in that she becomes the lover of Leantio after Bianca has abandoned him for the Duke). Livia is instrumental in assisting two women to surrender their honour and chastity, and thereby helps to set in motion the ensuing bloodbath. *Women Beware Women* is generally regarded as a tragedy because it ends in a number of deaths, but Middleton's conception of tragedy was very different to Shakespeare's. Shakespeare's tragic characters- Romeo and Juliet, Hamlet, Lear- are often figures we can pity or sympathise with. Even in the case of a wife-murderer like Othello or a blood-stained tyrant like Macbeth, Shakespeare draws an acute psychological portrait from which we can appreciate that these men were capable of greatness and, under other circumstances, might have achieved it. There is no tragic hero of this nature in *Women Beware Women*, or for that matter in *The Revenge's Tragedy*; instead we are presented with a crowd of bad people who come to a well-deserved bad end. The holocausts which end both plays do not, unlike the endings of most Shakespearean tragedies, inspire (in Aristotle's phrase) fear and pity. This, however, was not Middleton's intention. He has been described both as a large-P Puritan, in the sense of an adherent of a particular faction in 17th century church politics and as a small-p puritan, in the sense of one who takes a rigorously moralistic line, especially in sexual matters. (He was clearly not, however, one of those Puritans who objected to the theatre in principle). Some modern small-p puritans, such as the late Mary Whitehouse, have taken the view that authors (whether for the theatre, the cinema or television) should exclude sex and violence from their writing as far as possible, but Middleton felt that he needed to deal with these matters fully in order to illustrate his conviction that lust begets violence and that the path of sexual licence leads but to the grave. This is emphasised by the sternly moralistic figure of the Cardinal who issues dire warnings- generally unheeded- of where his brother's conduct is likely to lead. It is also emphasised by frequent puns and bawdy wordplay, something which in Shakespearean drama is more commonly found in comedy. (In his tragedies it tends to be confined to the *comic relief* scenes). Where Middleton comes closer to Shakespeare is in his attitude towards political power. Both men were well aware of the dangers of arbitrary rule, especially where power is wielded by those without moral scruples, whether Richard III in Shakespeare's play or the Duke here. Lust, in Middleton's view, is never an attractive quality, but in men of lesser degree (like Whorehound in the comedy *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*) it can be safely ridiculed. In a man as powerful as the Duke who has nobody to hold him to account- in his opinion not even God- it becomes a source of danger and a catalyst for violence. The bloody concluding scene takes place against the background of a Court masque like the ones popular at the English Court during the Jacobean period. (Middleton himself had written some). Ironically, the subject of the masque, organised to celebrate the Duke's marriage to

Bianca, is the triumph of chastity and of married love. The dissolution of the Duke and his Court comes as they act out those virtues they have never attempted to practise in reality; Middleton damns them as much for their cynical hypocrisy as for their lust and cruelty. 1 of 1 people found the following review helpful. Women Beware Women By Leslie A. Grenier This is on the reading list for my English Renaissance class I am taking this semester.

One of the great Renaissance playwrights, Middleton wrote tragedies essentially different from either Marlowe's or Shakespeare's, being wittier than the former and more grittily ironic than the latter. The genre of 'citizen tragedy' came into its own in the eighteenth century, but Middleton can claim to have created it: Bianca, wife of a middling commercial agent, arouses the lust of the Duke of Florence and becomes his mistress, first secretly, then openly and finally, after her husband has been seduced by the scheming Lady Livia and stabbed by Livia's brother, the Duke's wife. Livia plots her revenge, and the play ends with a banquet and a masque that are a triumph of black farce. Middleton's powerful, psychologically complex female characters and his clear-sighted analysis of misogyny are bound to impress today's audiences, but it is the pervasive irony - cynicism, even - with which he dissects the motivations of both oppressor and victim that makes him so eerily modern.

Thomas Middleton's Jacobean drama spreads like a web around the the black- widow figure of Livia... it is clear that Livia's deviousness is a profoundly cynical response to the hypocrisy of a society in which women are powerless and men do as they please.' Sarah Hemming, Financial Times, 29.04.10 'Thomas Middleton's 17th- century study of self-survival and the destruction of innocence' Clare Allfree, Metro (London), 29.04.10 'A sardonic masterwork that admits one to the world of fuliginous cruelty.' Michael Billington, Guardian, 29.04.10 'Dark, decadent and immensely stylish, Women Beware Women makes you laugh even as you shiver.' Charles Spencer, Daily Telegraph, 29.04.10 'A fiercely felt, finely wrought, seldom-seen play by one of Shakespeare's contemporaries.' Susannah Clapp, Observer, 02.05.10 About the Author J.R. Mulryne is Emeritus Professor of English at the University of Warwick