

## Thomas Middleton's



# A Tragi-Comedie called The Witch

## A Playgoer's Guide

"There's one comes down to fetch his dues,  
A kiss, a coll, a sip of blood,  
And why thou stay'st so long  
I muse, I muse,  
Since the air's so sweet and good."

## About Thomas Middleton



Thomas Middleton was an English dramatist during the reign of King James I. He was born in London on April 18th, 1580, and started his writing career at the age of 17 when he published a poem entitled "The Wisdom of Solomon Paraphrased" (1597). Middleton graduated from Queen's College, Oxford, went into law, and in 1620 he was named City Chronologer, a position which he would hold until his death. Most of his early plays were written in collaboration with other playwrights. Between 1613 and 1618 he mostly wrote "tragi-comedies." And after

1621 he wrote tragedies -- including one of his most famous works, *The Changeling*. Middleton died, only 47, in 1627.

Middleton generally wrote realistic tragi-comedies on London life. He is well known for his staunch cynicism and writing plays populated with villains who botch up each other's lives in a comic and/or tragic fashion. The material for condemnation came from his life in London, and the corruption he witnessed around him during the Jacobean era. His unflinchingly negative view of human life probably came out of his Calvinism, which was a Christian view that believed most people were sinners, and only an elite few are actually blessed and good.

## Elizabethan Theatre

Elizabethan theater is a name formally applied to all plays written and performed in England during the reign of Queen Elizabeth I, from 1558 to 1603, but the term is often used to include theater over the reigns of James I and Charles I, until 1642. The theatre was supported mostly by the growing wealth and population of London, which opened a new market for recreation in the city. The theater stems from the traditions of Europe in the middle ages. These playhouses were essentially stages surrounded on three sides by the audience. Usually the stages would be built outside of London, as to avoid the city authority. They were usually in the same district as brothels, taverns, and other "sinful" recreational facilities. Theater itself was often seen as something sinful, as a man

dressing up as a woman was considered a sinful act (and working in the theater was considered too rough and crude for a woman). In 1642, when the Puritans became the government after the Revolution, they actually closed the theatres. Ironically, some of the greatest English writers came out of this context -- for instance, William Shakespeare, Ben Jonson, and Christopher Marlowe.

### Summary

*The Witch* is based in part on an episode in Machiavelli's *Florentine History*. Middleton, however, explains Norman Brittin in his biography of the playwright, has changed it and added to it. "Sebastian, a young noble, has returned from three years at the wars just in time to attend the marriage feast of Isabella, to whom he had been betrothed; but she has suddenly been married to one Antonio by order of her uncle, the Lord Governor of Ravenna. Thus, the victory celebration of the original story is changed to a marriage feast during which the Duke spitefully requires the Duchess to drink from her father's skull. She vows vengeance through her husband's death. Since the historical episode takes up less than a paragraph in Machiavelli, Middleton needed to expand his plot material greatly." G. K. Hunter explains it thus: "But everything thereafter goes awry. The duchess seduces Almachildes, so that she can require him to kill the duke. Faced by the alternative of execution for attempted rape, he does the deed (as it seems) and now he must be killed in his turn. But it was not the duchess he was in bed with, and neither duke nor assassin dies. In a second plot a jealous husband kills his wife and her supposed lover, and then himself falls into a vault and dies. . . The local witches offer all the characters the possibility of short cuts that will lead intention directly into effect. But the offer exceeds the result; even the witches are hobbled by discontinuity. . . . Their charms quickly lose their efficacy or are overtaken by natural causes."



### The Shakespeare / Middleton Connection

There is a long and complicated connection between *The Witch* and Shakespeare's *Macbeth*. *Macbeth* includes what is almost certainly the best-known reference to witches in English literature: that is, the "Double, double, toil and trouble; Fire burn and cauldron bubble" verse. Shakespeare's work was augmented with what many have considered to be a superior image of the witch; the witch scenes from Thomas Middleton's play, involving Hecate and the Weird Sisters. In many performances throughout Elizabethan England, the scenes from his tragi-comedy were seamlessly integrated into *Macbeth*, often with markings indicating such in the scripts used. Chris Cleary, on his Middleton Web site, notes that "Charles Lamb may have been the first to observe that in comparison to Middleton's witches, the witches of *Macbeth* are much more mysterious, much more an elemental force of the supernatural. Indeed, Middleton's witches are more 'realistic,' in the sense that they could have easily come from the everyday society of which those accused of witchcraft were a part."

"Come, my sweet sisters, let the air strike our tune  
Whilst we show reverence to yond peeping moon."

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