https://doi.org/10.22409/gragoata.v29i63.59034.en

Dossier

Thomas Middleton's dramatic social spaces

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Financial disclosure
The author would like to acknowledge the generous support of Fundação de Amparo à Pesquisa do Estado de São Paulo (FAPESP), grant numbers [2016/06723-2] (Universidade de São Paulo, Brazil) and [2016/23470–0] (Shakespeare Institute, UK), in the preparation of this research for publication.

ABSTRACT

This article argues that Middleton's city plays offer a different insight into the logics of the land-related relationships. Land and the social space it generates is a catalyst that drives the action and sets a city's "stereotypical forces" in motion, an impulse prior to the promises of courtship and exchange of wealth. Therefore, land works simultaneously as a passive commodity as well as an active centre for competing and conflicting interests. Focusing on The Phoenix and (1603-4) No Wit/Help Like a Woman's (1611) and relying on Henri Lefebvre's (1991) spatial concepts, I explore the relationship between women and the economics of the social space.

Keywords: *Thomas Middleton; City comedies; Jacobean Drama; Spatial Studies.*

Recebido em: 30/06/2023
Aceito em: 29/02/2024

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How to cite:
CLOSEL, R. A. B. Thomas Middleton's dramatic social spaces. *Gragoatá*, Niterói, v. 29, n. 63, e59034, jan.-abr. 2024. Available from: https://doi.org/10.22409/gragoata.v29i63.59034.en

When I wake, I think of her lands – that revives me.
Michaelmas Term (4.4, 5–6)[1]

[1] References to Middleton's plays are from *Oxford Middleton* (Middleton, 2007).

Introduction

The connection between land and women is crucial to Western literature, going back to the expulsion of humankind from the Christian paradise and the beginning of the postlapsarian period, passing through influential women of classic literature such as Helen of Troy to Shakespeare's Catherine of Valois.[2] In one of his greatest history plays, Shakespeare associates conquered land with the to-be-conquered French princess Catherine in the last act of *Henry V* (1599). The diplomatic marriage cements the victory of the last battle, pointing to a peaceful future.[3] As the last barrier, Catherine is also the last French city that succumbs to the will of those who control her will and her body. In her womb ultimately rests the promise of a male heir and the supposed political stability that comes from rightful kingly succession. The future peace contrasts with the previous war, and the living and healthly body replaces the dying and dead combatants that populated the previous act. Moreover, it invokes the basic contrast between death and life, and war and love. Altogether, this imagery sets a heroic and conventionally dignified closure.

[2] A landmark on Feminism criticism on this topic is 'The traffic in women Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex' by Gayle Rubin. See Karen Hansen (1975).

[3] Marriages like this would have been a diplomatic action in time of peace for the maintenance of ongoing good relationships or their mutual agreement in cases of an eventual conflict between one of these two estate-nations and others.

However, a woman does not need to be blamed for the banishment from Eden, or the breakdown of an epic ten-year war between two nations, or to be the ultimate diplomatic symbol of peace, to experience the pressures connecting her body to some grand discourse, such as an aetiological mythical place, enemy territories, and newly conquered plots of land. Women from lower spheres lived through similar experiences, bearing the expectations and anxieties of a homosocial transfer of ownership within the limits of a particular locality. The spaces in which they were involved were obviously smaller, and the social effect limited to the restricted boundaries. However, it does not mean that the overall individual experience was completely different insofar as the space was its "defining condition" (West, 2002, p. 4).

Scamming suitors and their desired women crowd the city comedies by Thomas Middleton, where location and desirability are complexly entwined. Often based in London, these congested relationships are depicted in different ways in his early Jacobean plays. The dramatist explores the diversity of roles and the range of functions that these "stereotypical" characters can perform during the action as they usually provide familiar and conventional representations of dramatic characters and their counterparts. On one side there are "young brides", "wives", and "widows". Along with these, we usually find a large number of prodigals and suitors (sometimes combined into a young gallant). When taken together, these two types of male character – which are usually portrayed either as having lost their goods and inheritance during their

youth or as eager to acquire more – often lack a persistent trait of the desired member of the opposite sex: wealth and/or land. Women, being moneyed and/or propertied, are seen by such prodigals as a key element to solving their financial problems.[4] In embodying what the men lack, these heroines are the source of male social fears and threats as well as an ingredient in their sexual fancies, as Jennifer Panek (2007) insightfully suggests. Thus, Middleton highlights the many ways that women inhabit his fictional worlds, as well as their infinite variety of real counterparts.[5]

Women are fundamental to the plays' resolution, even if that ending is the generic comedy marriage ending. As they are the mediators between male characters and their objectives, their courtships are usually depicted as a battle over a "highly desirable commodity" (Panek, 2007, p. 8) to be won among different suitors and blocking figures, such as brothers or fathers, and sometimes even the current husband (presumed dead).[6] However, these women are not as passive as the patriarchal powers and their structural alignment in city comedies may suggest.[7] Indeed, they are often portrayed in extreme positions of either pitiable vulnerability or as independent individuals who mock their suitors. Moreover, when read independently, these comedies struggle against any kind of conventions or uniformity, as they are constantly shaping their identities and signalling the development of the action, instead of conforming to expectation. Middleton's comedies portray cultural institutions such as marriage-making dynamics at the centre of the dramatic experience — marriages are expected both in comedies and as way to refresh society. Often, Middleton portrays more than one possible combination of couples. By depicting the agents and the variants of these practices in different plots within the same play, the dramatist challenges as well as he normalizes predatory behaviours that are endorsed by both real and fictional worlds. Thus, his characters do not engage conventionally in a romantic quest. Neither a focus on the formal convention of the city comedy nor on their resolution does justice to the individual experiences that compose the puzzle of problems set by the gendered struggle for autonomy over the space, which subsumes the domestic arena or the body. Born in London and being a first-hand witness to the litigious madness of Jacobean London, Middleton's artistic rebellion against the apparent formality of (dramatic) conventions takes shape in his dramatic form and its (social) content, mainly through the women he depicts.

This article argues that Middleton offers an exceptional insight into the logics of the land-related interactions, in which land is the specific outcome of a negotiation involving a female character. Middleton differs from his contemporaries by playing out the same basic plot in various circumstances multiple times in parallel and connected narrative lines and by depicting voracious economical behaviour as a standard feature of his fictional societies. While, for example, marriage-making is the topic of *Taming of the Shrew* (1590-1), the Shakespearean play focuses on the

[4] On the sexual fantasy regarding the lustful widow, see Jennifer Marie Panek (2007, p. 77-123).

[5] For an excellent account on the cultural constructs that surround widows and suitors within early modern comedies, see Panek (2007).

[6] These elements, which involve the battle of young lovers against an older generation, are usually associated with the New Comedy tradition, derived from Plautus and Terence. However, Middleton breaks with that tradition while employing its structural elements. For more on this topic, see Rowe (1979).

[7] Regarding the criticism of this specific genre in relation to the city, see the classics by Brian Gibbons (1968); Alexander Legatt (1974); and Theodore B. Leinwand (1986). These are full monographs dedicated to the topic.

"taming process" rather than the social practices that endorse the hunt for a wealthy bride. Middleton is also different from his Roman comedic predecessors in that he portrays the transformations that are going on in his own time, especially the consequences of land having become a more obtainable commodity than it had been in previous centuries. Middleton's city plays investigate how *naturalised* the harmful and cyclical social practices had become, meaning that the closure's promise of regeneration fails to espouse new, healthier values. His appropriation of this specific genre of comedy, therefore, defies the commonplace approach, in which content complies with dramatic form, for it is the individual reaction that defines action. Under the banner of these rules and practices, characters play the "normal" game of space, conforming to and subverting the rules and practices of city comedy as they negotiate their place in society. This essay casts light on usually critically unnoticed plays, such as *The Phoenix* (1603-1604) and *No Wit No Help* (1611), because they provide good examples of such situations, as well as strong gender oppositions between characters. In what follows, I will use Henri Lefebvre's ideas found in *The Production of Space* (1991) to explore the relationship between women and the economics of the *social space*.[8] The fictional world in which the plays are set portrays the struggles that women go through as a part of men's business.[9] These two plays contrast patriarchal control and matriarchal hegemony over the territory and those around the land.

[8] A concept drawn from Henri Lefebvre's *The Production of Space*, which I have explored in some texts, see note 12 on the next page.

[9] Michelle O'Callaghan, in her introduction to the works of Middleton, points to a similar point, that "[Middleton's] women object exchange between men" (2009, p. 34).

Drama and [woman's] social space

Land and the social behaviour it generates is a catalyst that drives the action and sets "stereotypical forces" in motion, an impulse prior to the promises of courtship and exchange of wealth. These powers are already inscribed in the community as a custom that *tends* to repetition — a practice endorsed by custom or a *spatial practice*. Thus, land works simultaneously as a passive commodity as well as an active centre for competing and conflicting relationships.[10] Central to this spatial reading is the (early) modern expectation or even the assurance that "quotidian life becomes subject to impersonal market forces" (Kitch, 2011, p. 69 and 74), whereas wealth dissolves all of the communal bonds. Marriage making is an essential aspect of community as it reinforces ties of neighbourliness and set a future in the heirs. As market forces invade that dynamic, the communal values that surround and sustain it are threatened. According to Russell West, in the early modern period, especially in the Jacobean period,

> […] many of the controversial social and political questions in debate were issues of space: questions of enclosure, of rural unemployment and vagrancy, of social mobility, of relationships between court, country and city. These spatial tensions can be seen as being constituted variously by the polarized desires for mobility and flexibility, and, conversely, for fixity and static social structures. Distinct groups of social actors had varying and conflicting degrees of interest in forms of social, geographical or

[10] The conventional label "city comedies" works better as a group classification than as a structural principle that defines roles and actions around the shifting space of the emerging city. According to Lopez, when it comes to non-canonical drama, tradition "conceives plays in terms of conventional form of art (city comedy) […], and accuses dramatists of making characters slavishly dependent on action" (Lopez, 2014, p. 25). Middleton breaks with the Roman New Comedy patterns that modelled the struggle, thus avoiding the foretelling of the action in generic terms, leaving his readers "unsettled" (Rowe, 1979, p. 2–9).

> political mobility or fixity. These interests were constantly alluded to in the theatre of the day, making it an important semiotic mode of intervention in the spatial debates of the period. (West, 2002, p. 3)

Such spatial debates regularly materialise in the female body, as they are the ones who are supposedly responsible for the *fixity* of these social structures through the process of having a healthy heir on whom the society's current order is projected and reproduced. The sixteenth century provides an extreme example involving a Queen of England, the first wife of Henry VIII, Catherine of Aragon, who had not given her king a male successor. Moreover, women were paradoxically also responsible for *mobility*—and this is a fertile ground for the comedies, a genre that conventionally ends in one or more marriages—because these civil unions could also act as means of moving upwards on the social ladder (or downwards in some extreme cases). As ecofeminist scholarship contends, women were often associated with the natural world, and the study of the equation land/property, and women should be historically scrutinized (Laroche; Munroe, 2017, p. 4-5 e 9). However, the association with the non-human partly clarifies, but does not fully explain, the mercantile phenomena portrayed in these plays. In this matter, Middleton, although still overlooked in ecofeminism, is usually closer to us when it comes to dehumanising subjects, because his disordered societies resemble and originate our own societies that worship objects.

Land retained its power as an important index of power and wealth, even when it was starting to absorb the trait of a commercial and saleable commodity during the early modern period (Sullivan Jr., 1998, p. 6-10). Obviously, land and its cultivation remained central to the development of early agrarian capitalism, for basic subsistence and for the linguistic tropes associated with "improvement".[11] Indeed, when it comes to economic, social, and linguistic factors, according to Charlotte Scott, "nowhere was the tension between individualism and community registered more powerfully than in the language of the landscape" (Scott, 2014, p. 97). That language was a legal instrument of power over the land (and its richness), as well as over the women who were formally associated with it. Male figures such as fathers, brothers, and uncles, were often the speakers, decoders, and beneficiaries of these transactions, whereas women were the temporary holders over which the exchange would happen through marriage, remarriage, wardship, or inheritance.[12]

Henri Lefebvre's account of "social space" is a valuable methodological approach to the relationship between society and space, and it has been favoured by some spatial studies, including Shakespearean criticism.[13] According to him, "(social) space is a (social) product" (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 26). Such social spaces are the result of three overlapping categories: human concepts ("spatial practices" in Lefebvre's terminology), perceptions ("representation of space"), and

[11] For an excellent account of the development and impact of this social discourse see Charlotte Scott (2014).

[12] The enclosure of common fields and the Dissolution of the Monasteries are two major spatial developments for early modern English on which I have written articles. On the topic of enclosures, see Regis Augustus Bars Closel, "*Utopia* and the Enclosing of Dramatic Landscapes" (CLOSEL, 2018b); for the Dissolution of the Monasteries, see Regis Augustus Bars Closel, "Shakespeare and the Dissolution of the Monasteries: Land, Economics, and rupture" (CLOSEL, 2018a).

[13] See, for example, Janette Dillon (2000) and Kelly J. Stage (2018).

their experiences ("representational space"). These vary from one person to another as they change from one character to another. Contrast occurs across different groups of people as well. These three approaches are grouped together, creating a triad that is valid both individually and collectively (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 33).[14]

When it comes to the way they experience the world, the same community can provide conflicting values around the same place. For example, while one character looks at land as means of production, another one can see the same place as a surplus extraction mechanism. Different *perceptions* work along distinct experiences under a dominant (official) social *conception* or set of *spatial practices*, which means that, in the above example, a group may regard either of these perspectives as valid or invalid. Different perceptions and experiences usually exist simultaneously at the individual or group level, and drama may spark from that friction of opposing values.

Comedy arises from situations in which characters face peculiar spatial circumstances, and problems are solved as the community rediscovers its communal values, pointing to the reproduction of that same group of values (spatial practices), which also includes the promise of a new generation that may come as the result of marriage. Drama that take place in the space of the city deal with the unstable and ever-changing relationship between conceptions, perceptions, and experiences. According to Lefebvre, that triad defines the *social space* as a social product (Lefebvre, 1991, p. 38-39). Middleton's comedies explore the extent to which these societal values are desirable in the way they are usually fashioned, providing some extravagant solutions, some morally questionable circumstances, and some extravagant characters as a way to incorporate a great range of experiences found in the social space.

Middleton's early comedies include a group that contains *The Phoenix* (1603-4), *Michaelmas Term* (1604), *A Mad World, My Masters* (1605), *No Wit/Help Like Woman's*[15] (1611), and *A Chaste Maid of Cheapside* (1613).[16] All follow a similar pattern: A woman with (real or fancied) wealth is courted by one or more male characters, who employ tricks and curious devices to get over a blocking male figure — a (step)father, uncle, or brother — and finally have access to her. Middleton, however, combines several different individuals and creative plots, often simultaneously, to create the feeling that a similar story is being told differently in every play. The conditions change because the character trying to access her wealth has different relationships with other characters. The one they are trying to court can be a widow, a spouse, or a virgin; sometimes a disguised prostitute fills the role of the rich bride. The process employed is usually marriage, but it also involves remarriage, adultery, and wardship. Consequently, the atmosphere can involve patriarchal control, courtship, cuckoldry, and social reabsorption; even potential incest can hover in the air. As is natural to Middleton, the multiple plots prompt different combinations of gallants and women playing the game simultaneously

[14] See Elden (2004) for an accessible summary of Lefebvre's work.

[15] There are several ways to style this title, as the words "Wit" and "Help" were printed one above the other. I am following the *Oxford Middleton*.

[16] Tragedies such as *Women Beware Women*, also share this trait. As Callaghan (2009, p. 75) points out, "the two youths, the Ward, and Isabella are similarly commodified in the marriage negotiations between his guardian and her father".

in a defined social space. These plays render official *spatial practices* into several *perceptions* and *experiences* split over dozens of characters who respond individually to the pressures caused by different expectations. Out of these five early plays, I focus on the two less studied — *Phoenix* and *No Wit* — as they provide effective examples in which the equation of woman and land is put to the test through distinct women and doubtful ethical and moral circumstances. While the first play gives voice and authority to male surveillance schemes through marriage marketing, adultery and wardship, the second shows the physical limits of female struggle for dominance, revenge, and control through assuming temporarily the dominant voice.

The Phoenix

Written during the transition from the reign of Elizabeth to James, Middleton's earliest play[17] *The Phoenix*[18] has been often compared to Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure* (1604), a play that Middleton himself would revise around 1620-1.[19] Owing to its dynastic-change auspices, it has been associated with didactic dramaturgy, in which political lessons are demonstrated to the monarch through the plot, specifically through the trope of the disguised ruler.[20] That reading, however, focuses on the traditional relationship between a father and his son: the Duke of Ferrara and Phoenix. It also highlights how much deception exists in the court and how much can be learned when identities are hidden. A second model focuses on "estates-morality", on which justice and its application is an important force (Chakravorty, 1996, p. 32). However, the comedy offers more content to be dealt with. Middleton's first city play explores the social space that frames the action, the same region in which Phoenix and his loyal companion Fidelio wander to learn about the "fallen world of mists and darkness" (Rowe, 1979, p. 27) of Ferrara.

Central to the social space of the play is Judge Falso's house and its surroundings.[21] What happens there and in its surroundings is filled with fluidity, inconstancy, and estrangement. Thus, its corrupt foundations are essentially a representation of the social space of Ferrara. According to Catherine Richardson, "Middleton uses the household as a controllable space to explore the gendered nature of notions of private property" (Richardson, 2011, p. 57). Indeed, Falso's house will be the scenario for the depiction of two of the three situations concerning women in this play. These women are depicted under abusive conditions, treated either as mediators of wealth or as a commodities themselves, and are often named in relation to something, to someone, or to their marital status.

Being related to some of the main lines of action, Falso's surroundings have a special ability to determine the impression of the city of Ferrara and its microcosm, "highlighting the interconnectedness of interior and exterior terrain" (Gordon, 2011, p. 44). In a way similar to the exaggerated and extravagant Sir Whorehound in *The Chaste Maid of Cheapside*, Falso energetically stimulates the action, as he is direct and

[17] Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino set *The Phoenix* as the very first text of the *Oxford Middleton* (2007).

[18] Performed at Court on 20 February 1604 (Chakravorty, 1996, p. 32).

[19] On this topic, see Gary Taylor, "Shakespeare's Mediterranean *Measure for Measure*" (2004).

[20] The most comprehensive study on the disguised ruler remains Kevin A. Quarmby, *The Disguised Ruler in Shakespeare and his Contemporaries* (2012). Another coetaneous play that follows on that path is Marston's *Malcontent* (1604).

[21] Out of the seventeen scenes, five take place either in or around the house, and two are presumably in the Jeweller's house. A similar situation happens in the Knight's house in Middleton's *Mad World, My Masters*.

indirectly related to several of the female characters.[22] Like Falso, Fidelio is also related to two of the three women, but in a more positive way. He is engaged to the Niece, and he is the son of Lady Castiza. Although Falso tries to obtain advantages of the women around him, Fidelio, along with the disguised Phoenix, tries to solve their problems—because they are Fidelio's family—getting them out of the abusive situations devised by Falso and others. The three women are Lady Castiza, Falso's Niece and the Jeweller's wife.

[22] Sir Whorehound is a more complex character, but some traits, such as the position of an apparently indirect control over the women in the play, has already been employed in this earlier play.

Lady Castiza illustrates well the point that women are treated as mediators of wealth. Middleton refers to an unusual and improbable situation involving a widow. She starts the play having recently remarried a ship's Captain. However, he soon regrets the decision to marry, because his life at sea will, according to him, inevitably lead to cuckoldry. The financial circumstances are worth examining: he has married a well-provided but not too rich widow. According to early modern English land law of coverture, all of the properties would fall into the new husband's hands unless the widow has taken the necessary legal steps to avoid that situation, a precaution that Lady Castiza has taken. Concerned with being cuckolded and not having access to Lady Castiza's lands, the Captain chooses to sell his wife to the highest bidder, assisted by a lawyer.[23] She is actually sold and a deed of possession with her description is prepared by a disguised Fidelio and Phoenix, under the guidance of a lawyer known as Tangle. However, Fidelio and Phoenix prevent the "new owner"—who is not interested in the lands—from taking possession of her:

[23] Middletonian criticism has not failed to see the connection between the dramatist's personal life and the fictional couple. His mother was involved in a legal battle that lasted for several years after remarrying a captain (Taylor, 2007, p. 25–58).

> Here's a weatherbeaten captain, who not long since new married to a lady widow, would now fain have sued a divorce between her and him, but that her honesty is his only hinderance: to be rid of which, he does determine to turn her into white money; and there's a lord, his chapman, has bid five hundred crowns for her already.
> Fidelio: How?
> Tangle: Or for his part, or whole, in her.
> Phoenix: Why, does he mean to sell his wife?
> Tangle: His wife? Ay, by th' mass, he would sell his soul if he knew what merchant would lay out money upon 't—and some of 'em have need of one, they swear so fast.
>
> (*Phoenix*, Scene iv, 244-250)

The process of wife-selling is extreme and farcical, as it does not represent common or acceptable social behaviour. Middleton portrays a way to subvert the law and expose the indecent market-mindedness of the Captain at the same time he is demonstrating the impossibility of the law offering a definitive and reliable shield against the dominant patriarchy as part of what the characters label as Ferrara's "monstrous days" (4.270).

Although the sequence depicts Castiza's legal discernment when she avoids the economic and social threats of the coverture law, she is still depicted as a vulnerable woman at the hands of her new husband, his lawyer, and the buyer. This sets up a contrast between Castiza's experience of being a landowner as someone who has a stable position protected by the law, and the exposure to a set of official regulations, such as the coverture law, that threaten her autonomous position. In Lefebvre's terminology, there is a divergence between the *representational space* (the individual lived experience) and the *representation of space* (conceptions or official regulations) in that specific social space that simultaneously protects her status and compromises her body. This is the first instance in which Middleton depicts the complex set of arrangements in Ferrara, where gender plays an important role in the experience of those involved, whoever officially owns the properties. It is worth remembering that two male characters—her son and the disguised Phoenix—are the ones who successfully oppose those who try to abuse her legally, financially, and domestically. In rescuing her, they claim no affective nor family relationships towards her, they simply need to enter the game their enemies are playing as a way to overcome them on official grounds.

The second woman, the Niece, also mediates wealth in the play. She is first introduced at the uncle's house because she has recently lost her father, and the uncle is the executor of the inheritance. According to the English land law, this situation was known as wardship, where the deceased father is replaced by a male relative who assumes responsibility for the girl's upbringing, education, and *marriage*. As it is usual, the story is told by the one who holds power over her:

> Falso: Now, I beshrew my heart, I am glad he's in heaven, has left all his cares and troubles with me, and that great vexation of telling of money. Yet I hope he had so much grace before he died to turn his white money into gold, a great ease to his executor. […] (6.84-7).

Although the Niece has a boyfriend called Fidelio, Falso does not plan to agree to a conventional marriage or any regular matrimonial union at all: "Hum, five thousand crowns? Therefore by my consent she shall ne'er marry. I will neither choose for her, like of it, nor consent to't." (6.141–3). He plans to keep his brother's money and inheritance for himself and, shockingly, marry his niece himself.

> Falso: Why, now you come to me, niece. If your uncle be part of your own flesh and blood, is it not then fit your own flesh and blood should come nearest to you? Answer me to that, niece.
>
> Niece:
> You do allude all to incestuous will,
> Nothing to modest purpose. Turn me forth,
> Be like an uncle of these latter days,

> Perjured enough, enough unnatural;
> Play your executorship in tyranny,
> Restrain my fortunes, keep me poor, I care not.
> In this alone most women I'll excel,
> I'll rather yield to beggary than to hell. (9.81–92)

Being legally underage (Clerkson; Warren, 1942, p. 27), she must be under sixteen or possibly even younger than fourteen. As the heir to a considerable fortune, the Niece is also protected by the law, or more accurately, her wealth is protected by law, but as a vulnerable, fatherless character, she is under the threat by those who ought to look after her in a house that ought to shelter her. She does keep her dignity, however, preferring to live as destitute rather than fulfilling her "executor's" will.

As with Lady Castiza, there is a subtle fissure between the woman and her wealth, an opportunity that male characters are ready to exploit, using any official "legal means" they find necessary. The contrast between experience (representational) and the regulations (representation) here are nearly the same as those in Lady Castiza's case. The crucial difference is that a stranger inherits power over her existence rather than purchasing it. The niece's association with the non-human world is evident as soon as Falso seeks to "hoard" her at home as a treasure not available to anyone except himself, turning her into property. Hoarding, thus, would be a consequence of obtaining the *spatial practice* of warding her properties.

In this mood of economic affection, Falso, woos her niece and finds a room for his adulterer daughter and her affair. The third woman, Falso's daughter, does not fail to represent the father's lust. She is not depicted in a situation of potential risk, because she is already metamorphosed into a commodity. She is no longer simply a mediator of property. Indeed, the fact that she is indivisible from wealth is evident from the way her lover treats and calls her "revenue". She is known only as the Jeweller's Wife, a name that also points to her social existence as associated with being either owned or defined by someone else. However, there is evidently an aspect of her that is not "owned" —a potential for negotiation—, as Falso assists the daughter in developing an adulterous relationship, bringing her brother-in-law, the Knight, to his place, while he simply ignores what is about to happen in his own house. Just as Middleton accentuates the exchange-value of the Jeweller's Wife, shown through the careless way her father sanctions the change of hands between brothers. The relationship between the adulterous couple is based on him providing sex, while she provides money, or, as in their own words, the pair represent "Revenue" and "Pleasure" (4.12-3), a pair of values that is absorbed, but never made publicly clear or admissible in the social space.

The house of Falso then becomes a social space of its own, where the potential for incest looms along with prostitution and adulterous relationships. The territory is socially constructed by the sexual and financial energy involving the relationships between the city dwellers

found either inside or outside the house. As it is the place where much of the action occurs, it works as a microcosm for the city of Ferrara in a similar way to the Duke's court. Indeed, the problems that Phoenix discovers and helps to reform are nearly all related to Falso or Fidelio, who are ultimately related through the latter's involvement with (Falso's) Niece.

Fidelio behaves as silent judge and attorney who is not free from his own interests, as the handling of adultery scheme unveils as he "saves the day". The Jeweller's Wife, in contrast to the other two who find some recompense, is tricked by Phoenix, who will expose her at the end of the play, when the other crimes and behaviours are exposed. However, the future ruler of Ferrara is not a completely ideal monarch, because his good actions are done mostly to benefit his personal friend or favourite: he works to save Fidelio's mother (Lady Castiza) and Fidelio's beloved (the Niece).[24] In light of this, it becomes difficult to judge the play's didactic purpose, as it depicts abetting behaviour that were already common to the courtly world. Phoenix changes the experience of his friend's mother and bride, but nothing is made to avoid the repetition of these situations in the future. While he saves two women, he also humiliates another one. Therefore, he represents the attempts of patriarchal surveillance and control over the space as far as his interests are concerned.

[24] In the list of deeds done under disguise, Fidelio also avoids the assassination of the Duke, his father.

Although these symptoms of city corruption are a common feature of Middleton's theatrical thinking, it is worth remembering that this is his first surviving play,[25] so, these features and the portrayal of the "world of extremes" (Rowe, 1979, p. 91) cannot be read as having the latest dramaturgical canon in mind, making it an earlier example of his city comedies. *Phoenix* is more akin to Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, in its portrayal of a moralism that is inextricable from who can give the final sentence, than to his other early comedies written for St Paul Children's. In the next play, Middleton reorganises the same ingredients for a comedy in which the fervour for non-human values associated with female characters takes precedence over any kind of morality or justice that the characters might develop.

[25] Middleton's first play is the lost collaborative play, *Caesar's Fall* (1602), written for the Admiral's Man, (O'Callaghan, 2009, p. 11).

No Wit

In the later play, *No Wit/Help like a Woman's*, Middleton reverses the gender/power game. Instead of manipulative men and women facing extreme situations, he presents ridiculous men, two strong women, and among the latter, a cross-dressed heroine. The main topic explored here is widowhood and the events that follow her management of several suitors and, finally, her new marriage. The widow figure usually challenges the dominant order as she is often well provided and enjoys a significant level of autonomy, even if she consequently receives many suitors. In addition to that, according to Jennifer Panek, Middleton tends rather "to satirise the mercenary suitor than the desirous widow" (2011, p. 276-277),

as she often outwits him, by employing similar tricks and embracing an autonomy that is a man's territory in these plays.

The journey of courtship, which usually depicts older male characters in their often-unreliable schemes and the prodigality of the younger ones, is intense throughout this play. Running parallel is a conflict relevant to the topic being explored here, which involves the two leading female characters regarding the very land on which they stand: Lady Gondenfleece (the widow) and Mistress Low-Water. As the widow takes possession of what her deceased husband has left two things happen: the origin of her recently inherited fortune is brought into light; and a turmoil for her absorption into a second marriage begins.

Early in the play, it becomes clear that Mistress Kate Low-Water's family has been ruined by the Goldenfleeces and that she holds the key to solving a mystery involving an heir.[26] Low-water complains about her poor situation in a monologue bursting with jargon drawn from land law and its related topics.

> Is the world's lease from hell? The devil's head landlord?
> O, how was conscience, the right heir, put by?
> Law would not do such an unrighteous deed,
> Though with the fall of angels't had been fee'd.
> Where are our hopes in banks? Was honesty,
> A younger sister without portion, left
> No dowry in the Chamber beside wantonness?
> O miserable orphan!
> 'Twixt two extremes runs there no blessèd mean,
> No comfortable strain, that I may kiss it?
> Must I to whoredom or to beggary lean,
> My mind being sound? Is there no way to miss it?
> Is't not injustice that a widow laughs,
> And lays her mourning part upon a wife;
> That she should have the garment, I the heart?
> My wealth her husband left her, and me her grief.
> Yet, stood all miseries in their loathèd'st forms
> On this hand of me, thick like a foul mist,
> And here the bright enticements of the world
> In clearest colours, flattery, and advancement,
> And all the bastard glories this frame jets in,
> Horror nor splendour, shadows fair nor foul,
> Should force me shame my husband, wound my soul
> And now I'm put i' th' mind on't, I believe
> It was some prize of land or money given
> By some departing friend upon their deathbed (2.3–29)

Evidently, the widow's wealth and lands were ill-gotten, taken from the Low-Waters. However, unlike the women in *Phoenix*, Kate takes the matter into her own hands and will not be subject to any character to solve her problem.

[26] That mystery will be on hold for most of the play; it involves the Twilight's family, not the Low-Waters, but, as is common in Middleton's plays, different plots connect thematically and structurally.

Kate's experience in her social space is quickly exposed: her family fortunes have changed as a result of the lands lost to the Goldenfleeces; while the widow is taken as available for the money-minded market of bachelors and suitors, even the married Kate Low-Water is taken as a lateral sexual opportunity in that same market.[27] Again, the economic and sexual tensions emerge as a catalyst for the drama that ultimately rests on land problems and its *spatial practices*. However, neither woman will be led by a man or subjugate their wills to one. Instead, Kate assumes the role of a scheming patriarch and manipulates her brother, Beveril, who has fallen in love with the woman who has wronged her sister.

[27] As their rivalry is well-known, Kate Low-Water even receives an indecent proposal from one of the Goldenfleece's suitors, who wants to have sex with her in return for the widow's money.

In a society of weak men, Mistress Low-Water devises a "Shakespearean plan" of crossdressing to join the army of suitors, an enterprise in which she unexpectedly succeeds, to the frustration of the other suitors. Middleton, however, complicates things when the disguise is not exposed at the marriage, and some kind of poetic justice is achieved. He dramatizes the post-wedding events, entering into the couple's room where Mistress Low-Water tricks the widow into remarrying by revealing her identity so that the widow remarries instantly with Beveril.

Kate's experience in the play is transformed when she joins the crew of suitors. She and Beveril reverse the generic comedy pattern, as she is the one who controls her brother's marriage. In doing so, she exercises a power that is usually conferred on patriarchal men in these plays. Moreover, her brother, even if he is truly in love with Lady Goldenfleece, is the means to getting her land back, as the widow's wealth will come back to the Low-Water family through marriage. Thus Mistress Low-Water adapts to the spatial conventions, and thereby to its powers, to change her experience in the city. At the same time, Lady Goldenfleece marries Beveril when she is in a vulnerable position, as she must reorder her life in an unpredictable after-marriage situation. The space of economic competition takes over the intimate space of the newlywed's bedroom. In this way, the widow's personal life has become nearly dependent on the city's life, impositions, and tricks. Middleton's exploration of the fault lines of spatial practice is incredibly invasive, making the possibly mutually affectionate marriage between Beveril and the widow look like the result of a coup of one who mastered the spatial conventions and broke down the walls that surround even the marriage's nuptials.

The play complicates both situations, as the victory of one female character is the defeat of another, although it seems that both Beveril and Lady Goldenfleece are sincerely interested in the match, even if the widow has favoured the disguised sister before marrying the brother. However, whichever side we take, the power of a gendered social space is clear as Kate can only control it by temporarily becoming a man. Kate thus shows awareness of the composition of the social space. She knows the official rules and *practices*; she becomes a suitor as it is a *conception* that is accepted by that society; finally, her *experience* of having her lands taken

from her in the past plays a great role in her actions – and consequently in her brother's choices. The usual game of widow-hunting in *No Wit* is transformed to reveal the absurdity of official conceptions and practices.

Middleton constantly portrays situations in which a woman is treated as a commodity, but his plays are not restricted to that. Both *Phoenix* and *No Wit* depict the forces that operate within the social space. There is no political head conducting and reinforcing the powers through the plays as the cultural imperatives of that space. Mercantile and sexual values are constantly being replicated by several agents – including the *new* disguised character. Likewise, both portray how gender plays a definitive role in paradoxically promoting mobility and reinforcing stability: the first designed to enrich male members of society, where the second keeps them in control. The possession of land is more than an index of power and social standing. It is, according to these different examples, an invasive way of controlling the status quo, ranging from the power over others to the definitive authority within the walls of the domestic space.

Conclusion

After the demand for city comedies had been satiated, during the second decade of the Jacobean period, dramatists directed their attention to another kind of play that draws a relevant parallel: plays about witches and witchcraft become popular, with their exoticism of familiars and devils, as well as uncanny behaviour and action. Despite these fantastic elements, these plays are about a similar kind of female character: an outrageous woman who does not depend on any man. In contrast to the wealthy characters of the city plays, the so-called witches are usually extremely poor and live on the margins of the social space. The isolation from community and their physical off-limits are often the reason for bringing up the association with witchcraft in the first place. Middleton himself wrote a play about it, *The Witch* (1616), and revised Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, emphasising the supernatural elements. Exclusion and displacement are the central element of the emotional and social landscapes of the city comedies. Like the witches, these women usually portray an unsettling interest in independence that challenges masculine jurisdiction, with varying degrees of "success". Central to these plays are the economics that use women as a symbol of social and economic value, which often involves the dynamics of obtaining or losing land, mixed with a potentially obscured desire.

Middleton's dramatic cauldron mixes similar ingredients to create new recipes, sometimes using a familiar recipe, but crafting new flavours and smells. *Phoenix* starts as a political exercise, but moves towards an exploration of the ethics of favouritism, while denouncing the violence of the streets and taverns, and domestic abuse. It depicts the commodification of women through land transfer, hoarding of wealth, and exchange of revenue exemplified by Castiza, the Niece and the

Jeweller's wife, respectively. *No Wit*, despite the absence of a Duke/King character, starts as an individual plan of social revenge, but becomes a nearly authoritarian manipulation of vulnerable targets as an oppressed Kate reinvents herself as a man to manipulate other woman for economic reasons.

As both plays make clear, there is a relationship between hidden identity and awareness of the unspoken rules of one's social space. Phoenix and Kate solve the problems of those around them and the situations caused by lies told about themselves. Even when they doff their disguises, their individual morality is put into question, although it may be taken for granted for dramatic purposes and the expectations of closure. Indeed, the fact that a convention overrules ethical considerations shows that this silence about individual morality is part of the rules of the space, wherein absurd contradictions are often accepted as part of the system.

City comedy is a "system" of dramatic conventions. When one takes stereotypical behaviour as a rule, contradictions are easy to swallow and explain as the natural way of things. The same goes for the real-world conduct such dramas imitate. Middleton successfully reinvents his formulas and, as a result, unsettles his readers. Instead of biblical tales, legends and historical situations, he cautiously opts for recognizable situations and problems that those attending the stage might uneasily recognize as being part of the every life of the city outside the playhouse.

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RESUMO

Os espaços sociais na obra dramática de Thomas Middleton

Este artigo procura demonstrar que as peças sobre a cidade de Thomas Middleton oferecem uma distinta percepção sobre as dinâmicas que envolvem a terra. Terra e o espaço social que ela gera é um catalisador que impulsiona tanto a ação como as "forças estereotipadas" da cidade, revelando-se como um impulso que precede o cortejo e trocas de fortunas. Portanto, a terra funciona simultaneamente como um item passivo e como um centro ativo para interesses competitivos e conflituosos. A partir dos textos de The Phoenix (1603-4) e No Wit/Help Like a Woman's (1611) e com o apoio teórico do conceito de espaço de Henri Lefebvre (1991), exploro o relacionamento entre personagens femininos e a economia do espaço social.

Palavras-chave: *Thomas Middleton; Comédias sobre a cidade; Drama Jacobino; Estudos Espaciais.*