



Swansea University
Prifysgol Abertawe



Cronfa - Swansea University Open Access Repository

This is an author produced version of a paper published in:
Shakespeare Bulletin

Cronfa URL for this paper:
<http://cronfa.swan.ac.uk/Record/cronfa39335>

Paper:

Price, E. (2018). Modernizing Metatheatre in the RSC's *A Mad World My Masters*. *Shakespeare Bulletin*, 36(1), 131-139.
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1353/shb.2018.0008>

This item is brought to you by Swansea University. Any person downloading material is agreeing to abide by the terms of the repository licence. Copies of full text items may be used or reproduced in any format or medium, without prior permission for personal research or study, educational or non-commercial purposes only. The copyright for any work remains with the original author unless otherwise specified. The full-text must not be sold in any format or medium without the formal permission of the copyright holder.

Permission for multiple reproductions should be obtained from the original author.

Authors are personally responsible for adhering to copyright and publisher restrictions when uploading content to the repository.

<http://www.swansea.ac.uk/library/researchsupport/ris-support/>

Modernizing Metatheatres in the RSC's *A Mad World My Masters*

EOIN PRICE

Swansea University

A Mad World My Masters

Presented by the **Royal Shakespeare Company** at the **Swan Theatre**, Stratford-upon-Avon, England, June 6 – October 25, 2013. Directed by Sean Foley. Designed by Alice Power. Lighting by James Farncombe. Music and Sound by Ben and Max Ringham. Choreography by Kate Prince. Fights by Alison de Burgh. With Ellie Beaven (Mrs Littlepick), Ishia Bennison (Mrs Kidman), Ben Deery (Sponger), Richard Durden (Spunky), Richard Goulding (Dick Follywit), John Hopkins (Penitent Brothel), Linda John-Pierre (Singer), Harry McEntire (Oboe), Ciarán Owens (Master Whopping-Prospect), Nicholas Prasad (Master Muchly-Minted), Ian Redford (Sir Bounteous Peersucker), Steffan Rhodri (Mr Littlepick), Sarah Ridgeway (Truly Kidman), Dwane Walcott (Constable) et al..

Presented by the **Royal Shakespeare Company** at the **Wolverhampton Grand Theatre**, Wolverhampton, England, February 26 – February 28, 2015, **Grand Theatre Blackpool**, Blackpool, England, March 5 – March 7, 2015, **Theatre Royal Brighton**, Brighton, 10 March – 14 March, 2015, **Malvern Theatres**, Malvern, March 24 – March 28, 2015, **Hall for Cornwall**, Truro, March 31 – April 4, 2015, **Theatre Royal Bath**, Bath, April 7 – April 11, 2015, **Darlington Civic Theatre**, Darlington, April 14 – April 18, 2015, **Cambridge Arts Theatre**, Cambridge, April 21 – April 25, 2015, **Barbican**, London, April 29 – May 9, 2015. Directed by Sean Foley. Designed by Alice Power. Lighting by James Farncombe. Music and Sound by Ben and Max Ringham. Choreography by Kate Prince. Fights by Alison de Burgh. With Ellie Beaven (Mrs Littlepick), Ishia Bennison (Mrs Kidman), Michael Moreland (Sponger), David Rubin (Spunky), Joe Bannister (Dick Follywit), Dennis Herdman (Penitent Brothel), Lee Mengo (Oboe), Charlie Archer (Master Whopping-Prospect), Nicholas Prasad (Master Muchly-Minted), Ian Redford (Sir Bounteous Peersucker), Ben Deery (Mr Littlepick), Sarah Ridgeway (Truly Kidman), Christopher Chilton (Constable) et al..

Midway through Sean Foley's 2013 RSC production of Thomas Middleton's *A Mad World*

My Masters, Penitent Brothel (John Hopkins) utters what is admittedly, a pretty awful pun.

Masquerading as a doctor, Penitent tends to Truly Kidman (Sarah Ridgeway), a courtesan who feigns illness to dupe the wealthy old knight, Sir Bounteous Peersucker (Ian Redford).

Penitent prescribes a preposterously elaborate and expensive cure, worrying Peersucker, who implores Penitent to show 'patience'. Penitent replies, 'I cannot be patient and physician too'

(46). Turning to the audience, he quips, 'Thomas Middleton, 1605'. Of this moment, Emma

Smith observed ‘That Middleton should be explicitly credited with one of the lamer jokes in an hilarious production is symptomatic of a surprising lack of confidence in the play’s original language’ (2013). José A. Pérez Díez acknowledged that the audience found this moment ‘hysterically funny’ but his response was also sceptical: ‘it seems unlikely that the RSC would have done this with some of Shakespeare’s occasionally unfunny or obsolete jokes’ (2013, 148). Peter Kirwan likewise attested to the ‘huge applause’ this aside received, but his reaction was more favourable. For Kirwan, ‘The explicit pointing out of the play’s multiple authorship, the apology for a bad joke that also acted as a celebration of the author, and the production’s own entertaining self-consciousness all came into play in one aside’ (2013). All three reviewers were broadly positive about the production, but this particular moment was marked out as contentious. Was this self-conscious interpolation a playfully affectionate testimony to the continued vitality of Middleton’s play, or was it an example of anxiety, attesting to the production’s distrust of Middleton’s language?

In their preface to their edition of the playtext, Foley and his co-editor, Phil Porter, say that part of the appeal of the play is that ‘it knows that it’s being funny, and invites us to have fun knowing that it knows’ (11). Although they do not use the word, the quality they ascribe to Middleton’s play accords with many critical conceptions of metatheatre. Writing more broadly about laughter in Shakespearean drama, Indira Ghose states that:

metatheatrical signals [...] *increase* the pleasure of the spectator by drawing attention to the artfulness of the staged fiction. They gratify both the audience’s pleasure of absorption into the fictive world and the pleasure of detached awareness of the mechanics of performance (121).

This review will examine two ‘metatheatrical signals’ in detail: Penitent’s interpolated aside and the play-within-the-play which takes place in the final act. I have chosen two striking incidents of reflexivity but it would be wrong to think of these examples as isolated moments of metatheatre. Indeed, Porter and Foley call attention to Middleton’s sustained engagement

with metatheatre. In their terms, ‘the whole play is a sort of vibrant, amoral celebration of entertainment’ (11). Foley and Porter describe the play’s delight in its own humour as a quality that pervades the play. In turn, reviewers of the production used a variety of phrases to emphasize its metatheatricality. In *The Daily Mail*, Patrick Marmion noted that the production ‘drew its comedy from its self-consciousness’; in *The Independent*, Paul Taylor commented on its ‘knowing theatricality’; and in *The Spectator*, Patrick Carnegie similarly remarked that the play ‘delights in its own theatricality’. The term ‘metatheatre’ was absent from both newspaper and academic reviews, but the sense that the production created humour and pleasure by acknowledging its own form, was frequently observed. In what follows, I first discuss the rationale for its many updates and reflect on its modernization as a kind of metatheatre. Then, I offer two case studies. I return to the ‘Middleton, 1605’ aside with which I began this review before considering the production’s staging of the play-within-the-play.

Modernizing *A Mad World*

Foley and Porter discuss their motivation for modernizing *A Mad World* in their editorial preface. Although they note that the play is ‘one of the most hilariously wicked plays ever written’ (11), they also express doubts about the accessibility of its language and hope that ‘contemporary idiom’ (12) might provide access to meanings obscured by some of the more historically contingent aspects of Middleton’s writing. Theatre reviewers were divided on the issue of whether these changes were successful. Emma Smith observed that their modernizing ‘tends to flatten out verbal texture into something more insistently explicit’. The translation of the name ‘Shortrod’ to ‘Littledick’ serves as an example: Smith writes that this name becomes ‘less, rather than more, funny through repetition’; Pérez Díez, Michael Billington, and Michael Cordner, offer similar critiques.¹ But while Billington pined for the Middletonian ‘original’ and hoped to see a director ‘recreating the Jacobean past, rather than

striving to find a modern equivalent' (2013), most critics acknowledged the utility of some form of modernizing, even if they were ambivalent or critical of Foley and Porter's efforts. Smith found the decision to change the names Inesse and Possibility helpful; Pérez Díez praised the name Spunky, which he considered more accessible than Gunwater (146), while Cordner noted that he occasionally 'emended the dialogue to render it more comprehensible to twenty-first century spectators' when he directed the play at the University of York in 2011 (Introduction). Kirwan took issue, not with the modernizing *per se*, but with the RSC's decision to advertise the text as edited. This was, 'a frustrating statement to read, partly as it implies that the RSC's other productions aren't edited or don't need editing, an implication disingenuous at best'.

I have dwelt on the issue of modernization partly because it seems to be one of the main frameworks through which audiences viewed the production, but also because it serves to augment, or maybe even constitute, the production's metatheatricality. The 'contemporary idiom' selected by Foley and Porter, combined with the advertising of the production as an 'edited' text, drew attention to the process of theatre-making; the self-conscious nature of the production's updates chimed with the play's wider interest in the pleasure of reflexivity. The production's modernizations also encouraged audiences to make topical connections which, in turn, draw attention to the play as a construct, pulling the audience out of the play world, or perhaps allowing them to inhabit the play world and the world beyond the theatre simultaneously. Several commentators enjoyed the RSC production's topical, political references. Peter J Smith thought that the production's greatest achievement was to invoke the sex scandals and financial corruption which continues to characterize the political classes. Smith notes the reference to 'Eton boys' at a time when the then Prime Minister, David Cameron, was 'under fire for having a cabinet made up almost overwhelmingly of public-school boys' (57), and described Follywit as a combination of Cameron and the then Mayor

of London, Boris Johnson. Pérez Díez likewise praised this ‘sharp and topical reference to contemporary British politics’ (148).² These topical references arguably replicated the effect of Middleton’s Jacobean in-jokes. By making twenty-first century allusions, Foley and Porter hoped to communicate something of the spirit and power of Middleton’s play as first experienced by audiences at the Paul’s playhouse, in 1605. There is, however, an additional temporal complication. While the production jokily alluded to the events of 2013 it was set in 1950s Soho, a fact which arguably further enhanced its self-conscious theatricality.

Thomas Middleton, 1605

The production’s mix of modernization and metatheatre was arguably best encapsulated by the interpolated aside: ‘Middleton, 1605’. Although, as Pérez Díez notes, the aside was apparently the product of the rehearsal room – the published playscript contains no reference to the joke – the addition seems clearly in line with Foley and Porter’s vision for the play.³ At this point, perhaps I should self-reflexively confess: when I started to think about writing this review, I thought principally about this moment. My feeling then, and at the time I first saw the production (not at the Swan, in 2013, but at the Barbican, in 2015), was that it was a cheap joke which served to reinforce tired canonical assumptions. I relished the opportunity to see a Middleton play performed (and being well-received by its audience), I enjoyed the pace and intensity of the performances, and I admired the decision to stage the play in something like the present, rather than the clearly-defined and distant past, but I worried that this moment undid some of the production’s good work. What was very possibly an affectionate joke about Middleton by an actor engrossed in (and enjoying?) the experience of appearing in a Middleton play registered to me as a patronising statement about Middleton’s ultimate worth. Here, in the middle of a production which should have celebrated Middleton, was a moment which I thought undermined him, and the audience laughter seemed to me the

conservative cackle of the canon. And isn't it rich, I thought, that the production should joke about Middleton's bad jokes while also making some of his puns (Littledick) limper?

But it is worth questioning my initial assumptions about the conservatism of the production. Discussing the metatheatrical ad libs of an actor playing Autolycus in *The Winter's Tale*, Stephen Purcell notes that the audience apparently enjoyed 'the *frisson* of theatrical rule-breaking' (2009, 29). There is, I think, a difference between the irreverent treatment of Shakespeare and the irreverent treatment of Middleton, and this fed into my initial response to the aside: Middleton does not have the cultural cachet of Shakespeare. However, the idea of 'theatrical rule-breaking' still applies here; this was a striking departure from theatrical expectation. It was also a bold move in that it risked the ire of mainstream theatre reviewers. Purcell has written how theatre reviewers police theatrical innovation by criticising productions which interpolate modern idioms into Shakespeare plays (2010); it may be possible to see *A Mad World* in that context. Billington, for example, regularly praises productions which situate early modern plays in early modern contexts; of the RSC's 2016 production of *The Alchemist*, he wrote 'Polly Findlay has taken a bold and, by today's standards, radical decision in her staging of Ben Jonson's 1610 comic masterpiece: she sets it in period'. He has also criticised productions, including *A Mad World*, which set plays in later periods. In 2014, he complained about Findlay's modern dress *Arden of Faversham* which, he said, failed to treat the play as 'a fascinating historical document'. The unscripted aside in *A Mad World* contests the idea of the 'original' demanded by critics like Billington. A modern reader of the published playtext of the RSC's *A Mad World* would not know, from reading the text alone, that this aside had ever taken place. Similarly a reader (modern or early modern) encountering the 1608 quarto of the play cannot know just by reading the book, what action was left unrecorded. As Richard Preiss explains, a 'playbook is not a performance: it is the retrospective fantasy of one [...] retroactively framing playgoing as a

continuous, monological, readerly experience' (6). Who is to say that the boy actor playing Penitent Brothel in 1605 did not make a similar acknowledgement of the poorness of the pun?

So, on the one hand, the aside risks seeming like a regressive statement which distrusts Middleton's language (see Emma Smith) and marks him out as inferior to Shakespeare (see Pérez Díez). On the other hand, though, it can be seen as a bold celebration of Middleton (see Kirwan) and more broadly, as a celebration of metatheatre. What I think this suggests is that a conservative/radical dichotomy is not especially useful. The aside is at once conservative and radical, which is part of why it is so interesting. Trying to figure out what and why it has happened is enjoyably tricky. What are the audience laughing at? The insouciance of the delivery? The irreverence of the joke? The writing of Thomas Middleton? And who is speaking? The actor, John Hopkins (Dennis Herdman when the production toured in 2015), breaking out of the play for a moment, to comment on it? The character, Penitent Brothel, still in the play but somehow able to aim a jibe against his own creator? Is it a good joke about a bad joke, or, even more metatheatrically, a bad joke about a bad joke? These are not the only possibilities, but they illustrate the pleasurable complexity of this tiny interpolation and the enjoyable interpretative processes it asks of its audiences.

Jacobean Play

The production's most elaborate display of metatheatricity occurred in its final act, as Follywit and his band of accomplices imitate actors and perform at Sir Bounteous's provincial home. The whole episode is a ruse: the performers use expensive items from the household as props but intend to run away once the performance is completed. The name of the play they perform ('The Slip') hints at their true purpose, but they are only discovered when one of the stolen items – in Foley and Porter's script 'a new Swiss' watch (77) – chimes

loudly in Follywit's pocket. Before their plan unravels, the 'actors' have to deal with a Constable who is on to their scheme and has come to arrest them; they manage to do this by co-opting him into the performance. The oblivious onstage audience assumes he is simply part of the show. This bravura display of metatheatricality seems like an appropriate way to end a play in which, as Peter Saccio notes, 'The complexities of performance ramify' (414).

Some of Foley's modernizations enabled further layers of metatheatricality, allowing the complexities of performance to ramify in amusing and complex ways. For example, the play-within-the-play was performed during the middle of a Jacobean-themed fancy dress party. As Foley and Porter's stage directions demonstrate, the final act begins with Sir Bounteous getting ready for the party: '*SIR BOUNTEOUS is finishing getting dressed in Jacobean garb*'; the guests then enter, similarly attired: '*Enter the LITTLEDICKS with BROTHEL. Like all the guests that follow, they are dressed in Jacobean garb for the fancy dress party*' (72). For Billington, the production 'only makes total sense' at this point, 'when all the characters sport Jacobean fancy dress and there is sudden congruity between word and action'. I find it hard to understand this comment: Billington writes as if Jacobean costume has a magic property which suddenly unlocks meaning. Arguably, the opposite is true. Rather than providing clarity, the Jacobean clothing complicates, making an already metatheatrical moment, more metatheatrical. This costume choice is not a return to the 'original' Jacobean, as Billington seems to suggest, but rather a repurposing of that form. Emma Smith attests to the glorious complexity of the scene: 'These are costumes we've seen before, here deployed as costumes, as a Jacobean play disguised as a modern play pretends again to be Jacobean'.

However, modernization does not guarantee metatheatricality. Not all updates to the play enhanced its reflexivity. Sometimes, the production diluted Middleton's metatheatre. In the play as preserved by the 1608 quarto, the Constable who tries and fails to arrest the performers, attempts to demonstrate to the on-stage audience that he is not part of the play.

Asked by Sir Bounteous whether he is ‘the Constable i’t’h Comedy?’, he replies ‘I’t’h comedy? why I am the constable i’t’h commonwealth sir’ (H4^f). In Foley and Porter’s edition, this interaction is rendered differently. When asked the same question by Sir Bounteous, the Constable replies: ‘I’t’h’ comedy? No, I am the constable in a very tragedy, sir’ (82). To my ear, this is a much less satisfying phrasing, as it loses the alliteration and repetition and disrupts the rhythm. More crucially, though, it also changes the metatheatrical terms. In the early printed texts, the Constable attempts to emphasize to the onstage audience that he is not in fact in a play; in the RSC production, the Constable is prepared to imagine himself in a play, albeit in a different genre. In this situation, the theatrical term ‘tragedy’ makes the joke less, rather than more, metatheatrical. Middleton’s joke gains its metatheatrical force by trying to disavow theatre. The Constable fails to establish a distinction between the play world and the real world. His failed effort to disentangle himself from the mechanism of the play only proves its theatricality. The Constable is and is not part of the comedy; he is not a willing participant in the play-within-the-play but he is, of course, an actor in the wider comedy of *A Mad World My Masters*. These further comic ramifications are lost or obscured by Foley and Porter’s emendation. The stakes are higher in Middleton’s text. It is Middleton who makes the more audacious theatrical move: bigger, bolder, and funnier than the modern rewrite.

Reflections

Distinguishing *A Mad World* from city comedies, Laurie Maguire and Emma Smith hit upon one of its principal characteristics: ‘the plot concerns not the (im)morality of gulling (as one might expect from a city comedy) but its theatricality’ (187-188).⁴ Foley’s production certainly tried to embrace the self-aware theatricality of Middleton’s play. At its best, it managed to draw out the metatheatrical potential locked in Middleton’s text. In this review, I

have argued that the production's updates sometimes enabled or enhanced metatheatricality and sometimes worked against it. In this production, metatheatre creates an enjoyable cacophony. Rather than harmonizing or explaining, as Billington suggests, it complicates. Trying to draw potential interpretations out of this complexity is difficult. I have only been able to hint at some possibilities. But I have had fun doing so. And that seems to me at least part of the point: metatheatricality is *fun*.

¹ Billington comments specifically on this name change, during a filmed conversation with Cordner. In the same video, Cordner critiques the editors' decision to change the name Sir Bounteous Progress to Sir Bounteous Peersucker: <https://vimeo.com/69756391> [accessed 15 August 2017].

² Previous productions of the play also make use of topical references: Barrie Keefe's 1977 adaptation relocated the action to the year of the Queen's Silver Jubilee (Bennett 95-100). Barrie adapted the play again in 2002, the year of the Golden Jubilee. While less insistently contemporary, Edward's Boys' 2009 production at King Edward VI School, Stratford-upon-Avon, also scored hits with topical jokes, raising 'snorts of laughter from spectators whose daily newspapers had not long since been full of "cash for honours" scandals' (Chillington Rutter 107).

³ Indeed, in their preface to the edition, Foley and Porter twice claim that Middleton situated his play in London in 1608, ostensibly confusing the play's date of composition (generally agreed to be 1605) with the date it was first published.

⁴ For further discussion of how *A Mad World* differs from city comedy, see Cordner (From Script to Performance).

Works Cited

Bennett, Susan. *Performing Nostalgia: Shifting Shakespeare and the Contemporary Past*. London. Routledge. 1996. Print.

Billington, Michael. “*The Alchemist* review – Polly Findlay finds gold in moral anarchy”.

Guardian. 5 June. 2016. Web. 19 Aug. 2017.

--- “*Arden of Faversham* review – Elizabethan tragedy goes modern”. 7 May. 2014. Web. 19 Aug. 2017.

--- “*A Mad World My Masters* – review”. 14 June. 2013. Web. 19 Aug. 2017.

Billington, Michael, and Michael Cordner. “Jacobean Theatre Now”. Web. 19 Aug. 2017.

<<https://vimeo.com/69756391>>

Cordner, Michael. “*A Mad World My Masters* – Introduction”. *The Dutch Courtesan*. 2013.

Web. 19 Aug. 2017. <<http://www.dutchcourtesan.co.uk/mwmm/>>

--- “Thomas Middleton’s *A Mad World, My Masters*: From Script to Performance”.

Shakespeare Bulletin 31.1 (2013): 3-28.

Carnegy, Patrick. “*A Mad World, My Masters*: the funniest play in Stratford in a long while”.

Spectator. 29 June. 2013. Web. 19 Aug. 2017.

Chillington Rutter, Carol. “Playing with Boys on Middleton’s Stage – and Ours”. *The Oxford*

Handbook of Thomas Middleton. ed. by Gary Taylor and Trish Thomas Henley. Oxford.

Oxford University Press. 2012. 98-115. Print.

Ghose, Indira. *Shakespeare and Laughter*. Manchester. Manchester University Press. 2008.

Print.

Kirwan, Peter. “*A Mad World, My Masters* (RSC) @ The Swan Theatre”. *The Bardathon*. 8.

August 2013. Web. 19 Aug. 2017. <[http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2013/08/08/a-](http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2013/08/08/a-mad-world-my-masters-rsc-the-swan-theatre)

[mad-world-my-masters-rsc-the-swan-theatre](http://blogs.nottingham.ac.uk/bardathon/2013/08/08/a-mad-world-my-masters-rsc-the-swan-theatre)>

Maguire, Laurie, and Emma Smith. ““Time’s comic sparks’: The Dramaturgy of *A Mad*

World, My Masters and *Timon of Athens*”. *The Oxford Handbook of Thomas Middleton*. ed.

by Gary Taylor and Trish Thomas Henley. Oxford. Oxford University Press. 2012. 181-195.

Print.

Marmion, Patrick. "Jacobean romp rides again as a sexy Soho satire". *Daily Mail*. 13 June. 2013. Web. 19 Aug. 2017.

Middleton, Thomas. *A Mad World, My Masters*. London. 1608. Early English Books Online. Web. 19 Aug. 2017. <<http://eebo.chadwyck.com>>

--- *A Mad World My Masters*, ed. Sean Foley and Phil Porter. London. Oberon Books. 2013. Print.

Pérez Díez, José A. "A *Mad World My Masters* dir. by Sean Foley (review)". *Shakespeare Bulletin* 32.1 (2014): 146-149. Print.

Preiss, Richard. *Clowning and Authorship in Early Modern Theatre*. Cambridge. Cambridge University Press. 2014. Print.

Purcell, Stephen. *Popular Shakespeare: Simulation and Subversion on the Modern Stage*. Basingstoke. Palgrave Macmillan. 2009. Print.

--- "That's not 'Shakespeare': Policing the Boundaries of 'Shakespeare' in Reviews". *Shakespeare* 6.3 (2010): 364-370.

Saccio, Peter. "Introduction". *A Mad World, My Masters*. In *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*. eds. Gary Taylor and John Lavanino, et al. Oxford: Clarendon Press. 2007: 414-417. Print.

Smith, Emma. "Ruff Trade in Ham Alley". *Times Literary Supplement*. 8. July 2013. Web. 19 Aug. 2017.

Smith, Peter J. "A *Mad World, My Masters*, directed by Sean Foley for the RSC". *Cahiers Élisabéthains* 84.1 (2013): 57-58. Print.

Taylor, Paul. "Theatre review: *A Mad World, My Masters*, Swan Theatre, Stratford-upon-Avon". *Independent*. 14 June. 2013. Web. 19 Aug. 2017.