“How Many Arts from Such a Labour Flow”: Thomas Middleton and London’s New River

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In 1613, Thomas Middleton devised an entertainment to fete the opening of London’s New River. Recorded in *The Survey of London* (1618), the civic show was the first of Middleton’s many commissions from London’s governors. But Middleton’s engagement with the New River extended into his city comedies, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* (1613) and *Wit at Several Weapons* (1613–20, co-written with William Rowley). Though cited by scholars to suggest the dates of the plays’ compositions, the allusions to the New River have not been studied for their cultural significance or dramatic effect. This essay explores the New River project as a disruption to London’s customary spatial order. Examining Middleton’s varied representations of the New River in his city comedies and civic shows, I discuss how these reveal his responses to the commodification of public space.

Creating the New River: Material structure

Early modern England experienced a vital shift from the landscapes of custom and stewardship to that of property. Whereas land had once been seen as a shared arena for fulfilling social responsibilities by engaging in time-honored activities, “the ‘law of property’ champion[ed] the rights of individuals to develop and expand their own resources, free of the social duties and restraints that dominate[d] the traditional order.”¹ In rural England, feudal lords increasingly perceived agrarian lands as property to be rented out or sold for their personal profit. In London, the commodification of space was rooted in a medieval system of burgage tenure, but a booming population placed unprecedented demands on the property market, and houses were increasingly subdivided and sublet to lodgers.² As Vanessa Harding notes, “When there is . . . a continued demand for private property, there is continued competition for public space.”³ Amid parochial disputes over con-
duits and cesspits, the New River was a conspicuous instance of public space
exploited for personal gain.

Public water sources sustained life in the city, and access to them
was a significant part of London’s spatial order. Free passage to the Thames
was protected by laws governing the lanes and wharves leading to the river.
Conduits were strategically located in busy thoroughfares and also governed
by laws ensuring public access to basic amenities. Spanning a thirty-eight-
mile canal, a waterhouse and a network of pipes running under London’s
main streets, the New River was an ambitious project to boost London’s sup-
ply of water from the Chadwell and Amwell springs in Hertfordshire. It was
designed by Edmund Colthurst, who received a royal charter specifying that
two-thirds of the water would be used to flush the streets for free.

Construction of the New River began in 1604, but stalled between
1605 and 1609. In that period of seeming inactivity, city officials were act-
ing to take over the charter for the conveyance of water to London. But in
1609, they transferred the charter to Hugh Myddelton, a goldsmith, who
offered to finance construction in return for any eventual profits from the
enterprise. Myddelton planned to supply private houses with piped water in
return for “rent” made payable to him every quarter.

In May 1610, a group of landowners petitioned the House of Com-
mons to stop the New River’s construction. Though partly an aqueduct ele-
vated above the ground, the proposed canal for conveying the water would
primarily be a trench dug through the estates of up to three hundred land-
owners. The petition reflects perceived disruptions to the spatial order of the
country, as the landowners argued that construction “barred [them] from
their old waies” of accessing lands, claiming tithes, and growing crops. But
it also accused city officials of abusing the charter and giving the “whole
interest in fee simple to Mr Middleton and his heires . . . for his private bene-
fit.” Contrary to London’s spatial order, they had allowed “that which was
intended for a publick good [to] be converted to a private gayne.”

In undated Parliamentary papers, city officials pass silently over the
charge that “the Mayor etc. have not done anything in this business for
themselves for the bringing thereof to London,” but assert that Myddelton
was entitled to benefit from the project and “deserveth the greater com-
mandation” for financing the work. In fact, Hugh Myddelton was only one
of several private citizens who would gain from the project. Various repre-
sentatives appointed by Parliament and by London’s Court of Aldermen to
enquire into the transferral of the charter would eventually become sharers
in the enterprise.
Construction, which had resumed under Myddelton’s supervision, ground to a halt for almost two years. The deadlock ended in 1611 when King James I intervened in Myddelton’s favor. Agreeing to bear half the cost of the project in return for half its profits, James I essentially advanced the commodification of public space. This violation of London’s spatial order did not pass unnoticed. The formal indenture dated May 2, 1612, largely replicated an agreement drafted the previous November, but with a noteworthy amendment: Jacobean subjects were prohibited from impeding the canal’s construction “upon paine of his majesties highe displeasure and paines and penalties as by anie laws or statues of this realm are or may be inflicted.” As Bernard Rudden observes, the warning suggests resistance toward the project’s continuation. A clause asserting that “the interest shall and maie still be settled and kept in the subjecte and not in His Majesttie” also indicates that the monarch felt the need to defend his part in the profit-oriented project.

Contemporary plays provide evidence of popular opposition to the enterprise. In Jonson’s *The Alchemist* (1610), Sir Epicure Mammon “would ha’built / The city new; and made a ditch about it / of silver.” Instead of ridding the kingdom of plague, the aptly named knight opts to “serve th’whole city with preservative, / Weekly, each house his dose, and at the rate — / As he that built the waterwork does with water.” Fletcher, too, connected the project to the decline of a spatial order that had privileged the common good; in *Wit without Money* (ca. 1614), gallants neglecting their duties and their country estates loiter in the city discussing “water-works, and rumours of New Rivers.”

The project proceeded nonetheless, and the New River was officially opened in 1613. In 1619, the incorporation of the New River Company further licensed the commodification of public space. Although the company was governed by stipulation resembling that of the existing trading companies, it was strikingly unlike them. Trading companies raised funds to purchase items for overseas expeditions, and each investor received his share of cash or kind after a successful venture. By contrast, the financial contributions of Hugh Myddelton and his associates were spent on creating and maintaining the canal, waterhouse, and pipes. None could identify and retrieve a portion of the structure as his own, and each only received financial returns if the enterprise reaped profits. Warded like freehold leases, share issuances implicitly defined “the waterworks, river, and new cut” as physical space that could be transferred or invested in for personal profit. Rudden’s magisterial study explains this watershed in the development of
English company law: “these assets were immovable, sunk in the soil. . . . the New River represented fixed enterprise capital.”

Despite considerable analysis of the New River’s importance to the city’s water supply, its impact on perceptions of space has been overlooked. Yet its sprawling material substratum altered London’s terrain and disclosed visceral changes to the spatial order. Its architectural structure also became a contested site, as London’s governors tried to hide their violation of public space by presenting the waterhouse as a civic monument.

Celebrating the New River: Civic site

On September 29, 1613, London’s governors rode out to Islington immediately after the election of Hugh Myddelton’s brother, Sir Thomas Myddelton, as the new Lord Mayor. There, they were greeted by a newly built reservoir and a waterhouse that contained living quarters and a cistern. Encircled by a brick wall, the site came to be known as the “New River Head.” Sir Thomas was presented with an entertainment devised by Thomas Middleton. This ostensibly celebrated “the day of his honourable election,” but effectively it inaugurated “that most famous and admired work of the running stream from Amwell Head, into the cistern near Islington.” Drummers and at least sixty laborers marched repeatedly around the cistern. The governors heard a speech that acknowledged the various contributors to the New River’s construction, but first paid tribute to Hugh Myddelton’s “industry” and “How many arts from such a labour flow” (64). Then the floodgates were opened, and music played as the reservoir was filled.

The London city magistrates’ procession to Islington is reminiscent of the yearly inspection of the Tyburn springs, which also featured the governors processing beyond the city walls to inspect a main water source. This also customarily took place in autumn and concluded with an entertainment. In 1236, the Lord of Tyburn had allowed London’s governors to pipe water from springs in Paddington to the great conduit in Cheapside. This was the first endeavor to hydrate the city with water from external sources and was financed by the city fathers; the annual ceremony thus symbolized their care for the community.

As William Hardin argues, by patterning the New River inauguration on established civic ceremonies, London’s governors attempted to present the project as being consistent with the city’s customary spatial order. But the comparison could also reveal the incongruity of employing “a discourse of custom and civic duty to celebrate a private, capitalist venture.”
Consequently, the occasion foregrounded the power of civic ceremonies to mold public perceptions of London’s places and authorities.\textsuperscript{19} Clearly, the entertainment needed to be carefully devised if the event were to achieve its purpose in any measure.

Commissioned to prepare the entertainment, Thomas Middleton chose to harness the cultural valence of the city’s military training in Artillery Garden. Commanded and carried out solely by citizens, these field drills brought Londoners together and emphasized their working hand-in-hand to protect their resources. In 1620, for instance, Middleton wrote an entertainment arguing for their continuation on the grounds that the “noble city’s armed defence” secured “the common fort” which protected each one’s property.\textsuperscript{20} Appealing to a sense of civic chivalry, the training fostered Londoners’ personal and collective pride and created a sense of solidarity in spite of its antiegalitarian emphasis on rank and order.\textsuperscript{21} These sentiments were at their height in 1613, as the exercises had only been revived in 1610 and the Artillery Company had received its charter in 1612. The New River entertainment struck a martial tone with its procession of a “troop of laborers,” and with the use of drums, trumpets, and a “peal of chambers” to simulate the sounds of warfare (\textit{Manner of His Lordship’s Entertainment}, 29, 88). Overseen by “[a]n ancient soldier and an artisan” (67), and carried out by the workers who now marched with their spades and shovels, the New River’s construction is characterized as a military effort. These allusions to the general training served to transform the river project into an emblem of civic achievement in which Londoners could take pride. The entertainment’s speech also paid tribute to a long list of personnel and portrayed the river’s construction as a communal undertaking for which “these in sight and all the rest . . . had their royal pay” (77–78). Countering accusations of Hugh Myddelton’s selfish motives, the speech declared that he was interested only in the public good and had staged the festive opening of the river to give “Courage to some that may hereafter live / To practise deeds of goodness and of fame” (60–61).

Also contributing to the effectiveness of the event was Middleton’s able manipulation of the performance space for aesthetic effect. The final lines of the speech invited the water to flow forth and greet its well-wishers, thereby creating a seamless transition between the speech and the filling of the reservoir. However, in blending the dramatic and mechanical inventions, the climactic conclusion shows Middleton shaping the physical place into a cultural space: “that most famous and admired work . . . for the general good of the city” (\textit{Manner of His Lordship’s Entertainment}, 7, 11). In other
words, Middleton’s deployment of the river’s material features in the entertainment underscored his collaboration with the project’s sponsors and their profiting from the commercializing of public space.

A month after the entertainment at Islington, Londoners were treated to another lavish civic entertainment devised by Middleton. *The Triumphs of Truth*, which celebrated Thomas Myddelton’s appointment as Lord Mayor, was the most elaborate and expensive inaugural mayoral pageant of the early modern period. Middleton once again harnessed London’s public spaces for dramatic effect; transforming the capital into an allegorical landscape in which converted Moors bowed toward “the temple of St. Paul” (461) and Error’s mists were dispelled at the Cross in Cheapside. Mock battles staged in between the ceremonial sites made full use of the streets and created a continuous narrative.

This pageant clearly complemented the entertainment held a month earlier at Islington by repeating the theme of zeal defeating envy, but it hinted darkly at Sir Thomas’s mismanagement of the New River project’s charter. Whereas Hugh Myddelton had earlier been praised for overcoming “malice, envy, [and] false suggestions” (*Manner of His Lordship’s Entertainment*, 41), *The Triumphs of Truth* depicted the Lord Mayor as being repeatedly attacked by Envy and Error, who tempted him with “power and profit” (292). Made to participate in the pageantry, the Lord mayor was unable to defeat these characters on his own, despite receiving lengthy warnings against the abuse of civic authority.22

The texts of *The Manner of His Lordship’s Entertainment* and *The Triumphs of Truth* were eventually published in a single volume, thereby allowing the intertextual readings which obliquely denounced Hugh and Thomas Myddelton’s deeds. But readers of this volume could not have failed to notice that Middleton had contributed twice toward civic celebrations for the brothers.23 Commissions for civic shows were valuable sources of income in a competitive industry, and Middleton received forty pounds from the Grocer’s Company for the mayoral show. Since remuneration depended on a job well done, an additional ten shillings from Thomas Myddelton’s son suggests that his employers were well pleased with his devices.24

The tension between Middleton’s criticism of profiteering on public resources and his simultaneous embrace of a capitalist spatial order erupts in his prefatory material. The text for the entertainment at Islington conflates the New River and the dramatist’s creation, as Middleton acknowledges his reliance on the “great work’s perfection” in order for his work to achieve “[p]erfection, which is the crown of all inventions” (*Manner of His Lordship’s...
Entertainment, 36, 12). The statement could be taken to describe the entertainment, in which the filling of the cistern enabled Middleton’s dramatic vision to be realized. However, the dedication to The Triumphs of Truth reveals the inextricable connection between the project sponsors’ and dramatist’s careers, as “the perfection of [Sir Thomas’s] days” is crowned by the “year’s honour” (33–34), of which Middleton’s pageant played a crucial role. As David Bergeron notes, this dedication “affords the space to hear the playwright’s voice working out tensions and conflicts about being a writer . . . in the patronage system.”

Linking his biography with Thomas Myddelton’s, Middleton flatters his employer in a bid for future commissions, but his remark that they face similar “oppositions of malice, ignorance, and envy” (Triumphs of Truth, 37) raises the possibility that he was critiqued for his own part in the New River project. Scholars have attributed the defensive tone of Middleton’s dedication to contemporary disdain for civic shows and their supposed lack of aesthetic value. However, Middleton’s claim to have “redeemed [the pageant] into form, from the ignorance of some former times, and their common writer” (13–15) is followed by an emphasis on the management of common resources. According to the prefatory material, the task of devising a mayoral pageant is a “charge . . . committed by the whole society” and should elicit “the streams of art to equal those of bounty” (57–58, 60–61). The “common writer” (63) is one who fails to fulfill his responsibility. The attention to accountability and the epistle’s decidedly moral tone suggest that Middleton was trying to distance himself from his employers’ exploitative ways. However, the financial aspect of undertaking such an entertainment cannot be overlooked. To prove that the mayoral show was carefully executed, Middleton refers his reader to the atypical performance of a song and speech before the Lord Mayor elect’s journey to Westminster; but, compelled to acknowledge members of the Grocers’ Company as his collaborators, he praises their “greatness of expense, so the cost might purchase perfection” (74–75). Critical of the elite’s commercialization of public space, but financially benefitting from their enterprise, Middleton reexamines the New River project and his part in it in his plays for the commercial stage.

Celebrating the civic writer: A Chaste Maid in Cheapside

Written in April 1613, when the canal had arrived at Islington and preparations for The Triumphs of Truth were well underway, A Chaste Maid in Cheapside was clearly produced with the New River in mind. As Ceri Sulli-
van has shown, “What with . . . London goldsmiths, Puritans and pageants, private streams and children everywhere, the play calls out to be looked at in terms of the Myddeltons’ activities.” However, Middleton’s wry look at his employment by the Myddeltons has not been examined.

Equating the notions of fluidity and wealth, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* revolves around attempts to control the maid Moll who leaks tears from her first appearance. Whereas Moll’s father, Yellowhammer the goldsmith, longs to rise at court by marrying her to the Knight Walter Whorehound, Sir Walter desires the chaste/chased maid for her dowry of two thousand pounds in gold. The play also alludes to the New River project from the outset. “Sir Walter’s come” (1.1.39) as far as Islington, and his arrival in Cheapside is eagerly awaited by the goldsmith. The punning allusion to water in Sir Wa(l)ter’s name sustains throughout the play Middleton’s critique of the waterworks and mercenary interests of citizens who attend to London’s water sources.

However, *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside* struggles to reconcile Middleton’s attack on London’s elite with his own employment by them. Sir Walter also visits the home of Jack Allwit, the willing cuckold who encourages his wife’s affair with the knight in the hopes that Sir Walter will remain a “founder” to the Allwit household through provisions supplied to his wife (1.2.12–18). As the city’s ceremonial center and main market street, Cheapside reflected the overlapping of wealth with civic occasions. The location’s ceremonial function also highlighted public water sources as symbols of the city’s traditions. Four civic monuments gave Cheapside its distinctive character and served as pageant stations in processions: the Little Conduit, the Cross, the Standard, and the Great Conduit. Of these, only the Cross was not a conduit; but it had once been converted into a public fountain to demonstrate its profitableness to Londoners.

Middleton recreates Cheapside in great topographical detail, sets the play entirely there, and places Allwit’s house at the end of the street. Anticipating the arrival of “the right worshipful the good founder” to his house just off Cheapside, Allwit muses contentedly on Sir Walter’s provision of “Kentish faggots, which o’erlooks / The water-house” (1.2.15, 28–29). The comparison of the stack of firewood as being higher than the waterhouse alludes to the waterhouse at Islington, immediately signaling Middleton’s use of Allwit to explore his own place as a dramatist financially supported by the New River sponsors.

Middleton reprises his device for the official opening of the New River when Allwit wishes to vacate his house of a gaggle of gossips visiting

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Mrs. Allwit and her new child fathered by Sir Walter. He directs them straight
toward a public spectacle, “the bravest show” by the “Pissing-Conduit,” the
little Conduit by the Stocks market off Cheapside (3.2.181–82). The “two
brave drums and a standard bearer” in this procession (3.2.183) parody the
“warlike music” and “trop of labourers” of Middleton’s earlier entertain-
ment and serve here to satirize the self-aggrandizing exhibitionism of Lon-
don’s elite. The drums and standard bearer are phallic symbols resembling
the gilt “standing-cup / And two great ‘postle-spoons,” the goblet and spoons
which Sir Walter presents as a christening gift to the new baby a bit earlier
in this scene (3.2.43–44). Much as the christening gifts mask Sir Walter’s
paternity of the child but prompt the gossips to admire his generosity, the
“show” too celebrates the magnanimity of the New River’s founding father
and glosses over his selfish motives.

But if Sir Walter is belittled, so is his parasite Allwit. Although All-
wit boasts that he can “sit still and play” (1.2.53) without having to work for
his maintenance, his boasting is misplaced, for the cuckold actually labors
to keep the knight who keeps him. When Mrs. Allwit gives birth to Sir
Walter’s daughter, Allwit dutifully summons a crowd of gossips to attend
the christening. He thinks he exerts no more effort than to “bid gossips
presently myself / That’s all the work I’ll do” (2.2.1-2), but the indignity of
his situation becomes increasingly clear. The gossips who arrive duly fawn
and coo over the leaky product of the knight’s labor (the child promptly wets
herself), but they also smother Allwit with lascivious kisses and throw his
house into disarray. Increasingly agitated, Allwit finally resorts to directing
their attention to the show outside. Here, Middleton’s parody of his own
device for the New River guides the audience to recognize the true object of
his satire.

The Promoters, who are introduced into the play when Allwit sets
about summoning the gossips, are a foil to the willing cuckold. Tasked
with enforcing sumptuary laws in the city, these officers supplement their
earnings by accepting bribes to overlook the offences of certain Londoners.
They are defeated when they confiscate the basket of a passerby, believing it
contains meat which they can have for their supper, but discover an infant
hidden inside. Their lament over how much it will cost them to look after
the child contrasts with Allwit’s smugness over Sir Walter’s provision for
his household. However, the scene also casts doubt on Allwit’s idealization
of his situation, because it shows that even they who have “wit / To know
our benefactors” can be undone (2.2.130-31). Allwit later expends even more
energy to keep his knight by trying to break off Sir Walter’s impending mar-
riage to Moll. He visits Yellowhammer, reveals Sir Walter’s affair with Mrs.
Allwit, and ridicules himself for being a cuckold. By disparaging Allwit,
Middleton expands his critique of ambitious citizens to include the civic
writer who must “fit the times, there’ll be no music else” (2.3.26).

Complementing Allwit in Cheapside’s patronage system, Touch-
wood Senior reveals the inability of London’s elite to commodify public
spaces without the aid of the pageant writer. Unlike the emasculated Allwit,
however, Touchwood Senior, a gentleman fallen on hard times, is prodi-
giously fertile, “as much fertility symbol as character.”34 The infertile Sir
Oliver Kix, who would “give a thousand pound to purchase fruitfulness”
and satisfy his wife (2.1.144), cannot sire a child and thus inherit wealth
without Touchwood Senior’s aid. It behoves Sir Oliver, therefore, to reduce
his spending on charities ("bating so many good works / In the erecting of
bridewells and spittlehouses" [2.1.145–46]) to pay for a fertility treatment, a
“water” that ostensibly has produced nine children for Touchwood Senior
(2.1.178–82). This he obtains from Touchwood, and once the magical waters
of the potion are duly administered to him (nothing but almond milk), Sir
Oliver immediately rides out to Ware, the site of the reservoir (3.3.108–10).

It falls to Touchwood Senior also to secure Moll for his brother
through a device staged at the joint funeral of Touchwood Junior and Moll.
Torchwood Senior’s mock encomium praising Moll (5.4.1-20) parodies the
entertainment at Islington. “Monuments” are referenced only twice in the
play, both times in relation to Moll. Earlier, Tim, the son of the Yellowham-
mers, desires to guard Moll from Touchwood Junior with weapons from
“him that keeps the monuments” (4.4.49–50), and the rivals for Moll, Sir
Walter and Touchwood Junior, cross swords immediately thereafter. The
sword on Touchwood Junior’s coffin links the fight to the funeral of the two
lovers, at which Touchwood Senior hails the “true chaste monument of her
[Moll’s] living name” (5.4.10) and paves the way for the “miraculous” resur-
rection of Moll and Touchwood Junior and their wedding. Verbal echoes of
Middleton’s work for the Myddeltons ring across the encomium’s inflated
rhetoric, and are glaringly out of place in the city comedy.35 Also reminiscent
of the entertainment at Islington, Touchwood Senior calls for the crowd’s
approval and prompts an outpouring of water from “a hundred weeping
eyes” (5.4.22).

Moll’s lack of agency underscores Touchwood Senior’s power to
determine her place in society. She says little throughout the play, having
only four speeches that exceed a single line. Her three attempts to elope
with Touchwood Junior are not of her planning and she never moves any-

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where unaccompanied. This final attempt to bring Moll and his brother together using the staged resurrection is Touchwood Senior’s “plot” (5.4.33), and it succeeds because Moll has agreed to “learn” from him (5.2.73), then rises from her coffin as prompted. The congregation, too, responds on cue to his virtuoso performance with answering cadences. As Matthew Martin observes, the encomium evokes a sense of wonder in the onstage and off-stage audiences, which lingers even after the discovery that the lovers are alive. Consequently, the play demonstrates the power of drama to shape communal perceptions. As Henry Peacham noted in The Compleat Gentleman, though the mechanical arts deserved admiration for affecting “artificial motion . . . waterworks and the like,” “much more deserveth [Poetrie] to be esteemed that holdeth so severeign a power over the mind, can turne brutishness into civility . . . cowardice into valour . . . command over all affections.”

Having enabled Sir Oliver and Touchwood Junior to defeat Sir Walter, Touchwood Senior settles into a better arrangement with his employer than that previously enjoyed by Allwit in relation to Sir Walter. The cuckold has already cast off Sir Walter and sets up in London’s fashionable new suburb with the furnishings his patron supplied. The triumph of the tricksters celebrates the dramatist’s survival at the expense of the elite, while Sir Walter is imprisoned for his debts and bears the brunt of the play’s anticapitalist attack.

**Criticizing the elite: Wit at Several Weapons**

Compared to A Chaste Maid in Cheapside, Wit at Several Weapons presents the profit-oriented social relations of London in darker and more disturbing tones. The tropes of clothing and comestibles in Wit at Several Weapons convey the idea of a materialist city in farcical but sinister terms, as characters imagine ingesting each other and become indistinguishable from the possessions that they value. Allusions to the New River complement these dominant tropes by providing a topical reference to represent London’s new social order.

The play features two parallel plots, in which Sir Perfidious Oldcraft’s son, Wittypate, and his Niece, who is under his guardianship, wrest their inheritance and dowry from the rapacious old knight. Challenged to prove his ability to “live by his wits” just as his father has done (1.1.3), Wittypate turns on his father and robs him in three “cheats” with the help of several rogues (5.2.312). The Niece outwits Sir Gregory Fop, a wealthy
patron to whom she has been pledged by her uncle for a mere third of her dowry, and connives to marry the penniless gentleman Cunningame and to receive her full portion. Newly arrived in the city, Sir Gregory’s clown, Pompey, endures his disenfranchisement on account of his fatuous adherence to an obsolete chivalric code. Putting his faith in “ladies’ honours” (3.1.301), Pompey has “kept out o’town these two days, o’ purpose to be sent for” by the Niece (4.1.347). By contrast, Cunningame and the Niece, who ruthlessly manipulate the affections of other characters, send Pompey away repeatedly as part of their machinations to secure both match and money. Through the characters’ interaction about the New River, the play juxtaposes Pompey’s code of honor with the Londoners’ pursuit of private gain.

Pompey spends his time angling in the New River, determined to “try what I can catch for luck sake” and “fish fair for’t” (5.1.259–60). However, the play’s urban society operates on principles of wit and deceit, and Pompey emerges from the river’s edge “almost starved with love, and cold” and “hav[ing] no taste in anything” (5.1.38, 52). His hunger becomes a foil to the trope of cannibalism that conveys the rapaciousness of the ascendant citizens. Running throughout the play’s diction, the trope climaxes in the banquet scene wherein Cunningame fulfils his promise to provide Mirabell, whose love he cannot himself requite, with “Some rich electuary, made of a son and heir, / . . . some wealthy Gregory, boiled to a jelly” (4.1.195–97). Sir Gregory has also adopted the citizens’ register of speech and speaks of the banquet’s sweetmeats as mere “sauce” to the “dainty” he will marry (5.1.85–86).

Sent for by Cunningame to witness his wittily orchestrated match between Sir Gregory and Mirabell at the banquet, Pompey becomes singularly preoccupied with sweetmeats, showing up the savagery of London’s social relations. His seemingly innocuous remark that the watercourse offered him only “gudgeons” and “millers’ thumbs” (5.1.46, 48) associates the New River with trickery. As Iain Sharp points out, these fish were proverbial pictures for deceit. Spoken just before Cunningame presides over the banquet and sends him off again, Pompey’s comment is filled with dramatic irony. Similarly, his solemn pronouncement that the New River will “ne’er be a true water” (5.1.46) foreshadows his exclusion from the circulation of wealth and match-making. Pompey’s prediction of the river’s future state also projects a permanent shift in London’s social relations, as does his “looking upon the pipes and whistling” (4.1.362). As Mark Jenner has shown, the laying of pipes in early modern London reflected the formation of new social networks and the dissolution of older ties, including those.
established through citizens employing water-bearers as a means of assisting their poorer neighbors.⁴⁰

Waiting for his summons, Pompey dreams of possessing a catalogue of status symbols: the scarf and diamond he hears of during his “solemn walks / ’Twixt Paddington and Pancridge” (4.1.321-22), the “coach with a buzzard i’th’ poop on’t” and a footman with “orange-tawny ribbons” (4.1.358–60).⁴¹ As he waits by the New River for these items, his grandiose dreams present a comic counterpoint to the darker tones of the play’s main action; it exposes the folly of a new order which prioritizes personal gain in its relations. Circulating between the other characters, the scarf and diamond symbolize the reduction of love to lucre, and Pompey’s exclusion from the city’s resources.⁴²

Despite the laughter that Pompey’s misfortunes elicits, the play stages an acerbic attack on the management of resources by the urban elite. As patriarch and patron, Sir Perfidious Oldcraft controls the fortunes of the younger Oldcrafts and, by extension, all the other characters. But his opening speech in the play, a “seriously and odiously revolting passage,” imposes a moral framework on the play from its outset.⁴³ His wealth and position are the products of corruption; as he has risen in an ungentlemanly manner (“risse ungently”) by abusing “executorships” and disinheriting “orphans, little senseless creatures” (1.1.66–71). His unsavory definition of “wits” prejudices the audience against the other characters as they exercise their own “wits” in search of wealth. The Niece, in particular, takes pride in that “the Oldcrafts / Were born to more wit” (3.1.196–97). This associates her abuse of Pompey’s misguided suit for her with Sir Perfidious’s abusing his civic authority.

The play’s references to the New River may have given additional topical appeal to the play’s satire of London’s elite. Although Sir Perfidious in many ways resembles the other corrupt civic governors in Middleton’s plays, an anomalous detail regarding his provision for Priscian, a Cambridge scholar from Wales (4.1.30–35), suggests an allusion to Hugh Myddelton. Robert Turner observes that the borough of Cardigan had no dean; hence “the Welsh benefice in reversion and the deanship in Cardigan are evidently parts of a joke or a pun.”⁴⁴ Cardiganshire had lead-ore mines, over which Hugh Myddelton gained a lucrative monopoly by 1617.⁴⁵ His Welsh family also supported the Puritan cause and conscientiously provided employment for countrymen.

Certainly, Pompey’s interaction with and about the New River associates it with a new social code premised on the pursuit of private gain.
Discussing the implicit moral judgment conveyed through Pompey, David Nicol notes the pathos evoked by Pompey’s wandering alone in the suburbs; together with the play’s association of the river with trickery, this presents a pessimistic outlook of social relations in London. Writing with Middleton and performing the part of Pompey, William Rowley was the main contributor toward the character’s obsessive remarks about the New River. But, if at all Pompey’s disparagement of the river began as Rowley’s “quiet in-joke” about Middleton’s part in the project, their collaboration turned it into an exploration of London’s new social order.

Middleton is credited with the lines revealing Pompey’s real name: “Pumpey,” a pun on the footman’s pumps and pumping machinery (3.1.291–94). Attempting to rise above his station, he adopts “the name of a Worthy” (5.1.31), dons new attire, and wanders by the newest water source. Middleton also appears to have written Pompey’s most persuasive statement of his right to share in the city’s wealth: “I have an arm for a scarf, as others have, / An ear to hang a jewel, too” (4.1.329–30). The egalitarian sentiment of this statement is reinforced through a malcontent female trickster, the characterization of which is “sheer Middleton.” One of the rogues assisting Wittypate, Lady Ruinous Gentry is almost denied her portion of the collective earnings when Wittypate disputes her “illegitimate share” (1.2.2). Distinct in temperament, social position, and capacity to cheat, but similarly maligned by a young member of the Oldcraft family, the dispirited Lady Ruinous Gentry and affable Pompey establish the play’s critique of London’s elite.

Unlike Middleton’s entertainment at the New River Head, Wit at Several Weapons associates the New River with deceit and the pursuit of personal profit. As Sir Perfidious proudly declares his intention to build an almshouse for decayed wits after he is dead (5.2.332–33), the audience is left with the sense that public space in London will increasingly be under threat.

Notes


6 Colthurst’s charter had also provided for the remaining third of the water supply to be piped to private houses. Nonetheless, Myddelton’s contemporaries clearly used this against him in the outcry that followed. See Ward, *London’s New River*, 19.

7 Oxford, Bodleian Library, Tanner MS 98, fols. 47r–49r, 113r.

8 Duke of Northumberland MSS, vol. 8, fol. 171r (BL Microfilm 282); quoted in Jenner, “From Conduit Community to Commercial Network?,” 258.


10 Quoted in ibid., 29.

11 Quoted in Rudden, *New River*, 16.


that Valentine’s description of how “waterworks, and rumours of New River . . . run
you into questions who built Thames” may reflect how the creation of a man-made
“river” unsettled notions of organic space. Robert Ward notes that the term was first
used for the watercourse by Edmund Coulthurst in 1602 (London’s New River, 19).

Rudden, New River, 44, 46; emphasis in the original.

Ward, London’s New River, 42.

this edition cited by line numbers.

See R. C. Bald, ed., Honourable Entertainments by Thomas Middleton (London: Malone Society Reprints, 1953), vii. The masters of Paris Garden were paid for pro-
viding bear- and bull-baiting for the ceremony in September 1612, October 1613, and
October 1620.

This ceremony was abandoned after official opening of the New River’s reservoir in
1613. Upon its revival in 1620, Middleton’s entertainment for the occasion chides the
assembly of London officials for neglecting “ancient custom” because of the “pipe-
pilgrimage” of Amwell and Chadwell. See Thomas Middleton, “The Third Ent-
tertainment,” Honourable Entertainments, 8, 16, 32.

William Hardin, “‘Pipe-Pilgrimages’ and ‘Fruitfull Rivers’: Thomas Middleton’s
Civic Entertainments and the Water Supply of Early Stuart London,” Renaissance

See Middleton, “The Fourth Entertainment,” Honourable Entertainments, 30–42,
quotations at 31 and 41.

William Hunt, “Civic Chivalry and the English Civil War,” in The Transmission of

See also A. A. Bromham, “Thomas Middleton’s The Triumphs of Truth: City Politics

widely circulated, see Hill, Pageantry and Power, 224.

In 1618, for instance, the Ironmongers’ Company paid Anthony Munday an addi-
tional three pounds for the “good performance his business undertaken.” By con-
trast, the Drapers’ Company initially refused to pay Middleton for devising The Tri-
umphs of Health and Prosperity (1626), on the grounds of its “ill performance.” See
David Bergeron, English Civic Pageantry, 1558–1642 (London: Edward Arnold, 1971),
197–98; Tracey Hill, Pageantry and Power: A Cultural History of the Early Modern
Lord Mayor’s Show, 1585–1639 (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2010),
60–61. For the additional remuneration paid to Middleton for The Triumphs of Truth,

David Bergeron, Textual Patronage in English Drama, 1570–1640 (Aldershot, Hamp-
shire: Ashgate, 2006), 66.
Although Bergeron provides the most sustained discussion of this dedicatory epistle, he too falls back into seeing it as a defense for a “frivolous and ephemeral” genre, similar to the prefatory material of other mayoral pageants. See Bergeron, *Textual Patronage in English Drama*, 66.


Two medieval Lord Mayors of London were Yellowhammers. See Linda Woodbridge, ed., *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2007), 944 n. 204. Thus, Yellowhammer’s pride in his name (4.1.200–205) may have been a gibe at Thomas Myddelton’s mayoralty.


38 Scholarship on the play has focused almost exclusively on attribution and authorship. For the rare discussions of these images and the play’s dark tones, see Michael Dobson, ed., *Wit at Several Weapons*, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Taylor and Lavagnino, 982; Iain Sharp, “*Wit at Several Weapons: A Critical Edition*” (Ph.D. diss., University of Auckland, 1982), 46–52.


40 Jenner, “From Conduit Community to Commercial Network?,” 264.

41 As noted earlier, the first effort, in the thirteenth century, to pipe water into London was from the Paddington springs. Pancridge was one of many areas affected by the New River’s construction. The play may be setting up a deliberate contrast between the old and new water sources to reflect Pompey’s moving toward the newer social order.


43 Algernon Charles Swinburne, *Contemporaries of Shakespeare* (London: Heinemann, 1919), 162.


45 Gough shows that the lease for the mines was granted in recognition of Myddelton’s work on the New River, unlike the common assumption that Myddelton had made a fortune from the mines which was spent on constructing the watercourse. See Gough, *Sir Hugh Myddelton*, 101–10. The allusion may suggest a later date for the play’s composition than 1613. Internal and external evidences mark off a window of 1613 to 1620 for composition; 1613 is usually fixed upon based on the mistaken assumption that the pipes would not have been visible, or on topical references too long after the official opening of the New River. See David Lake, *The Canon of Thomas Middleton: Internal Evidence for the Major Problems of Authorship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 192; Sharp, “*Wit at Several Weapons: A Critical Edition*,” 35.


47 Dobson, *Wit at Several Weapons*, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Taylor and Lavagnino, 981. Studies in attribution have confidently identified the respective contributions of Middleton and Rowley, as well as the close collaborative process that took place.

48 Ibid., 1006; Sharp, “*Wit at Several Weapons: A Critical Edition*,” 258.

49 Dobson, *Wit at Several Weapons*, in *Thomas Middleton: The Collected Works*, ed. Taylor and Lavagnino, 980. Note also Middleton’s habit of injecting an authorial voice into his plays through mouths of tricksters who are part of the action but sufficiently removed from the depravity around them. Lady Ruinous Gentry is an obvious extension of this technique, being one of the boys yet greatly discomfited by her part in their schemes.