

## Maintaining Royal Absolutism in Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chess*

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Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chess* was performed without interruption at the Globe theatre between the 5th and 14th of August 1624, by the King's Men.<sup>1</sup> The playwright depicted the reality of Spain's quest for world domination, and presented the victory of England or English Protestantism over Spain within a chess metaphor. In this metaphor, the White and Black Houses represent England and Spain. Middleton focused on the most important political figures in the Spanish and English courts, assigning to each an apposite identity as a chess piece. The Duke of Buckingham is rendered as the White Duke, the White Knight as Prince Charles, the Black Knight as Count Gondomar, who was the former Spanish Ambassador, and the Fat Bishop as Antonio de Dominis, who was the Archbishop of Spalato. Critics tend to see in this play that Middleton reenacted Charles's and Buckingham's celebrated journey to Madrid in 1623 to conclude the elusive Spanish match, satirizing King James I who was unable to perceive the threat of Spain.<sup>2</sup>

The play attracted large audiences before the Privy Council closed the theatre by the King's command. Responding to protests from Spanish ambassadors, James also punished the players and Middleton, though apparently not severely. The main reason critics have considered that the play caused a scandal among the Spanish ambassadors is seen in the letter of Secretary of State Conway. He reported that the play had "scandalous[ly] personified his Majesty, the King of Spain, Count Gondomar, and the Archbp. of Spalato," together with Chamberlain's words—"They counterfeited [Gondomar's] person to the life, with all his graces and faces."<sup>3</sup> Their reactions to the play reveal how precisely the real-life identities of the chess pieces were portrayed. One of primary sources for *A Game at Chess* has been regarded to be the *Vox Populi* pamphlets of the Puritan pamphleteer, Thomas Scot. The pamphlets suggested the fear of Spanish intentions and, implicitly, the suspicion of James's policy in meeting the threat. The close relationship between the *Vox Populi* pamphlets and Middleton's play shows that the play offered the opposition to the official policy in his day.<sup>4</sup>

At the time when Middleton was composing *A Game at Chess*, James's reliance upon Gondomar made clear that the King had envisioned arranging a Catholic marriage for his heir and securing the restitution of the Palatine through the Spanish advice.<sup>5</sup> But James's inability to recognize that his policy had become a real threat to the commonwealth prompted his Parliament to make war against Spain.<sup>6</sup> Despite contemporaries' perception of it as a political satire reflecting the course of the last years of James's reign, why did the Master of the Revels, Sir Henry Herbert, license *A Game at Chess* and the actors to perform it? G. E. Bentley thinks that the support of such a risky performance came from "a matter of collusion" between some Lords of the Privy Council and the Master of Revels.<sup>7</sup> Margot Heinemann suggests that the anti-Spanish circle, the Pembroke connection or the Queen of Bohemia's circle at the Hague, encouraged the play to be acted.<sup>8</sup> So long as the play depicted Spain as England's old enemy and celebrated both the providential scheme

and "rightness" of the Church of England, I can agree to their arguments. The fact that the punishments for the players and Middleton were not severe also lends credence to their arguments.

Nevertheless, the critics' explanations are based upon the political circumstances of the early 1620s, not upon the textual evidence of *A Game at Chess*. The play seems to have had such merit that the King could allow it to be reenacted on the thirteenth day after his prohibition. The play is ultimately more than a political satire, because it goes far toward the support of James's absolutism, which was eroded by Spain. When he was writing his play, Middleton contrived to show to James the best way to defend his kingdom from the Spanish threat, by the devices of exposing the crisis resulting from James's *volte-face* upon Catholic policy while maintaining his absolutism. In doing so, it is the White Knight and Duke that wipe out the Black's influence on their King, despite the critics' suggestion that they conclude the Spanish match. The playwright's idealization of monarchical authority would serve James's interests in emphasizing his kingship when he was confronted with dissenting voices against his Spanish policy.

In this study I would like to illustrate how an ideal royal absolutism shaped *A Game at Chess* by examining the anti-Spanish elements of the play in relation to contemporary events of the day. Such a study explains, at least partially, the circumstances under which a politically dangerous text can be officially sanctioned after the scandal.

## I

Despite the White King's delayed appearance on stage, Middleton depicts his political system as vulnerable to a political-religious crisis resulting from the Black's evil workings. The induction figures of Error and Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Society of Jesus, whose historical mission was to convert the non-Catholic world, issue the master plan to dominate the entire world. Although Loyola fails to convert the White House before, Error satisfies Loyola that in a chess game presented as Error's "dream, /A vision" (induction 49-50)<sup>9</sup> Jesuits will serve his plan. In accordance with his plan, the Jesuit presented as the Black Bishop's Pawn tempts the White Queen's Pawn, who represents the virtue of pure religious faith. The Black Queen's pawn, a secular Jesuitess, helps him to seduce the White Queen's Pawn to subvert her religion:

That (White Queen's Pawn's faith) is the enemy  
That steals your strength away, and fights against you,  
Disarms your soul e'en in the heat of battle.  
Your firmness that way makes you more infirm  
For the right Christian conflict:

(I. i. 22-26)

Referring to her previous romance with the White Bishop's Pawn, who represents Protestantism, the Black Bishop's Pawn then uses the White Queen's Pawn's inclination to marriage, her wholesome expression of faith, to allure her. The White Bishop's Pawn, however, has been "gelded" by the Black Knight's Pawn. The Black Knight's Pawn's involvement with the White Bishop's Pawn lends itself to a political interpretation of the play, so far as the Black Knight's Pawn

personifies Emperor Ferdinand of Germany. In February 1623, the emperor had deposed James's son-in law, Frederic, and conferred his electorate on Maximillian, Duke of Bavaria, despite the objections of King Philip IV of Spain and most of the princes of Germany.<sup>10</sup> The emperor's policy had reduced the possibility of restoring the Protestant cause in Europe. Consequently, James entertained the notion of allying England with Spain, hoping for the restitution of the Palatine. James's policy caused his subjects to suspect that there was Catholic influence in England.<sup>11</sup>

The same suspicion in the play as that of James's day is clear in the Black Knight's plan to attain a "universal monarchy". The plan suggests the aspect of Spanish policy that deeply troubled Englishmen: the Spanish desire for territorial aggrandizement.<sup>12</sup> In an effort to attain their master plan, Jesuits, the Black Knight's agents, are now spying on Christian kingdoms:

The business of the universal monarchy  
Goes forward well now, the great college pot  
That should be always boiling, with the fuel  
Of all intelligences possible  
Through the Christian kingdoms.

(I. i. 243-37)

Even the White House cannot escape from their master plan. In furthering their project, the Black Knight's Pawn is, however, conscience-stricken for the injury he caused to the White House. His scruples mean in the context of the restitution of the Palatine that Ferdinand could not deny Maximillian the electorate, confronted by his overwhelming military strength. But that the Black Knight's Pawn decides to seek spiritual relief by killing the White Bishop's Pawn (V. ii. 113) will endorse suspicion against the Black House.

## II

The danger of subversion by Catholics in the play is also obvious in the playwright's impeachment of Lionel Cranfield, earl of Middlesex, represented as the White King's Pawn. The Pawn opposes war against the Black House, and betrays the White House. Like the White King's Pawn, Lionel had been alone among the Lords of the Privy Council in opposing the recommendations of Charles and Buckingham for war with Spain, considering the financial consequences for England.<sup>13</sup> At a time when the hostile feelings toward Spain were rising, his argument against war was regarded as a pro-Spanish attitude. Thus the playwright's inclusion of the treacherous White King's Pawn in his play is tantamount to an indictment of James. The King, in fact, constructed such a society in his court to which the Jesuits could swarm. Influential noblemen in the English court favored close alliance with Spain, and James (and afterward Charles) followed foreign policies that were pro-Spanish.<sup>14</sup> This foreign policy of James contradicted the suppression of Catholics.

The most sensational depiction of topical events is reflected in the plot of the Black, who desires to rape the White Queen's Pawn, rendered as a sexual assault upon the religion of England. So far as she represents the truth of the faith, the rape and prostitution of her body facilitates the Black's domination of the White. So the Black's lust for the rape of devotion is a metaphoric

expression of his cravings for domination.<sup>15</sup> The Black King orders:

These are therefore to require you  
by the burning affection I bear to the rape of devotion,  
that speedily upon the surprisal of her, by all watchful  
advantage you make some attempt upon the White  
Queen's person, whose fall or prostitution our lust most  
violently rages for.

(II. i. 20-24)

Following the Black King's order, the Black Bishop's Pawn demands her conversion. In doing so, he uses the Jesuit's agreement that a nun should have a sexual relationship with a bishop, as a token of her devotion to the religion. But the White Queen's Pawn frustrates his plan by revealing that the obedience and chastity of the nun are his deceptive allurements to make her one of the Black House:

Is this the top  
Of all strict order? And the holiest  
Of all societies, the three-vowed people  
For poverty, obedience, chastity,  
The last the most forgot?

(II. i. 84-88)

The exposure of the Jesuit's deception enables the White House to make a counterattack against the Black House, and frustrate the Black's master plan to dominate the world (II. i. 124-28). Apprehensive about it, the Black Bishop's Pawn attempts to attain his ends by force. But the White Queen's Pawn escapes from the Black Bishop's Pawn's assault, with the strange help of the Black Queen's Pawn. In fear of the discovery of their plan, the Black Knight and Bishop change the date of an epistle about the event, secretly sheltering the Black Bishop's Pawn underground. This event shows qualities beyond the political touches of the chess metaphor. As a whole, qualities of game are interwoven into the fabric of the play.<sup>16</sup> The theatrical qualities would have somewhat contributed to the official reaction to the play.

### III

Nonetheless, the White Queen's Pawn's plight resulting from the Black's evil attempt shows that the Church of England has been corrupted and undermined by Spanish Jesuits, due to James's long-standing tolerance of Spain. The story of the White Queen's Pawn therefore reveals a flaw of the White King's political system, despite his absence from the stage. The flaw of the White King's political system is a system of tolerating the agents of the Black House. His policy has become a real threat to the stability of the White House. Then, why does the King tolerate them? The King's tolerance of the Black becomes a central problem in *A Game at Chess*. To answer this problem, I would like to briefly examine the Fat Bishop. The bishop is an apparent Catholic turncoat

pretending to be an Anglican bishop for his own profit, by having published a book that criticized the Black's religion.

That the White King does not recognize the Bishop's treachery is evident in his astonishment when the Bishop defects to the Black side again. Of course, the reason for the White King's dependence upon the Bishop is not referred to in the play. To know the reason, I need to mention the historical Bishop. De Dominis was a propagandist for royal absolutism.<sup>17</sup> The White King's absolutism is also revealed after the White Knight discovers the Black's sexual attempt on the White Queen's Pawn. The White King's reliance upon the Black agents is proved when he denies the White Queen's Pawn's cries of rape and appoints the Black Knight to settle the case:

Where settles the offence,  
Let the fault's punishment be derived from thence:  
We leave her to your censure.

(II. ii. 230-32)

Legally his authority is absolute, but in practice his control is somewhat tenuous. His absolutism will be eroded, so far as the White King does not renounce the Black's influence. The White King is taken at a disadvantage. The play demonstrates the helplessness of its central figure before the Black's threat. He must recognize the Black's erosion of the White House as an obstacle to maintain his absolutism. The White Knight and Duke lead him to recognize the flaw of his political system, despite the critics' suggestion of their entry into the Black House to conclude James's protracted negotiations for the Spanish match. Middleton then gives to the Whites a heroic ability to maintain the White King's absolutism:

The White Knight's policy  
Has outstripped yours, it seems,  
Joined with th'assistant counsel of his Duke.  
The White Bishop's Pawn undertook the journey  
Who as they say discharged it like a flight,  
And made him for the business fit and light.

(III. i. 146-51)

The White King recognizes his Duke as "partner of that honour" (III. i. 165), when the Duke delivers the White Queen from the Black's entrapment. The White Knight and Duke vindicate the White Queen's Pawn before both the Houses. The White Duke is not a morally complete man, though. He is accused of sins he was widely believed to have committed—gluttony and lechery—by the Black Knight. This may represent a peculiar condition in England in which morally adequate leaders who truly contribute to the commonweal cannot be found.

The White King's absolutism is, however, indicated when the Black Knight tries to check the White King and Queen. At the moment of the check, the White Knight calls them "the sacred persons" (III. i. 253). His address reminds us that they are divinely-ordained. The White Bishop's words, "[the White King] Spoke like heaven's substitute" (III. i. 275), also suggest that the White

King is God's representative on earth, a point on which James insisted. James hoped his absolutism would be maintained by de Dominis; although the bishop was thoroughly discredited in the eyes of Englishmen.<sup>18</sup> In this respect, we can understand the reason the White King tolerates the powerful Black's offensive in his House.

#### IV

Now it becomes clear that the Black Queen's Pawn is not acting against the White Queen's Pawn entirely as the Black Bishop's confederate or agent: she wishes to be revenged upon him for his having abandoned her. As she says that "I'll enjoy the sport and cozen you both; / My blood's game is the wages I have worked for"(IV. i. 147-48), she frustrates his desire for the White Queen's Pawn by lying with him instead of getting the White piece into his bed. Triumphant as the religion and chastity of the White is, the problem of the royal absolutism in *A Game at Chess* remains unresolved. The Black Knight says that many Jesuits are out of the jail in the White House and collect the information about the enemy. Exploiting the White King's credulity, the Black Knight tries to entrap the White Knight and win the game with help of the Fat Bishop:

I'm now about a masterpiece of play  
 To entrap the White Knight and with false allurements  
 Entice him to the Black House—more will follow—  
 Whilst our Fat Bishop sets upon the Queen;  
 Then will our game lie sweetly.

(IV. ii. 77-81)

The Black Knight's plan is based upon that of Gondomar, who had expected to achieve the conversion of England through the Spanish marriage of Prince Charles in Madrid.<sup>19</sup> The Black's plan has religious significance in Middleton's day, for Charles was the future head of the Church of England, and if he had converted, the consequences for both church and the kingdom would have been serious, as the White Queen fears.<sup>20</sup> Soon the play clarifies that the Black Knight's primary objective has been the entrapment of the White Knight in order to convert him(IV. ii. 137-39).

During the scene in which the White Knight and Duke visit the Black House, the White Bishop frustrates the Fat Bishop's attack on the White Queen. In a sense, it is the White Bishop that saves the White Queen from rape and prostitution by the Black. Here the White King recognizes the Black's flattery as dissimulation. The King's recommendation to the White Bishop shows his recognition that the recovery of Protestantism is essential to the stability of the White House. On the other hand, feigning their conversion, the White Knight and Duke manage to enter into the Black House. In his temptation of the White Knight, the Black Knight refers to the "universal monarchy," the Black's territorial ambition:

And in the large feast of our vast ambition  
 We count but the White Kingdom whence you came from  
 The garden for our cook to pick his salads;

The food's lean France larded with Germany,  
 Before which comes the grave-chaste signiory  
 Of Venice, served in capon-like in white broth;  
 From our chief oven, Italy, the bake-meats,  
 Savoy, the salt, Geneva, the chipped manchet;  
 Below the salt the Netherlands are placed,  
 A common dish at lower end o'th'table  
 For meaner pride to fall to;

(V. iii. 83-93)

By their "discovery" of the Black House's intentions, the White Knight and Duke win the game of chess; the game ends in "checkmate by discovery" (V. iii. 174). Spain's pieces are thrown into a great dark bag symbolizing the hell mouth. The victory for the White's side over the Black means that the Black's erosion of the White is wiped out. And the White King's absolutism is maintained in the face of the Black's threat. Finally, that the White Queen's Pawn rejoins with the Queen shows the virtue of pure religious faith firmly maintained against the evil of corrupt Jesuits.

Therefore, Middleton may have endorsed the royal absolutism in a way which maintained the stability of his kingdom. After Parliament had voted unanimously to breach the treaties with Spain on 1st of March 1624, anti-Spanish sentiment ran high.<sup>21</sup> So he invented the play to show to James the best way to reestablish the stability of England, by exposing his political flaw but idealizing his monarchical authority. The playwright's strategy also served James's interests in consolidating his kingship at the time when he was not coping with the Spanish threat to the commonweal. *A Game at Chess* had the merit of enhancing James's absolutism, though the performance of the play retains an element of mystery that is unlikely to be resolved.

#### Notes:

\*An earlier version of this paper was presented at the 41st Annual Meeting of the Shakespeare Society of Japan held at Tokyo Women's University in October, 2002.

1. Andrew Gurr, *The Shakespearean Stage, 1574-1642*, second edition (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1985), p. 225.
2. On this subject, see Paul Yachnin, "A *Game at Chess* and Chess Allegory," *Studies in English Literature*, 22 (1982), 317-30.
3. Albert H. Tricomi, *Anticourt Drama in England 1603-1642* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1989), p. 145.
4. Tricomi, p. 143.
5. Godfrey Davies, *The Early Stuarts 1603-1660*, second edition (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987), pp. 56-57.
6. Davies, p. 57.
7. G. E. Bentley, *The Profession of Dramatist in Shakespeare's Time, 1590-1642* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 170.
8. Margot Heinemann, "Middleton's *A Game at Chess*: Parliamentary-Puritans and Opposition Drama," *English Literary Renaissance*, 5 (1975), 232-50.

9. Quotations from Middleton are taken from T. H. Howard-Hill ed., *A Game at Chess* (Manchester and New York: Manchester University Press, 1996).
10. John Loftis, *Renaissance Drama in England & Spain: Topical Allusion and History Plays* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 152.
11. Davies, p. 72.
12. Loftis, p. 174.
13. Loftis, p. 175. Middleton made important changes after the impeachment in April 1624 of Middlesex. An early manuscript of the play does not include the lines that associate the treacherous White King's Pawn with him. Cf. T. H. Howard-Hill, pp. 2-10.
14. Loftis, p. 109.
15. Roussel Sargent, "Theme and Structure in Middleton's *A Game at Chess*," *Modern Language Review*, 66 (1971), 729.
16. Black pieces, in particular, characterize their activities as a game. The qualities of a game can be seen in the plots where the Black Knight seeks to obtain an advantage over his adversaries, the White King's Pawn, Black Knight's Pawn and the Fat Bishop, by deception. And venereal expressions throughout the play may serve to enhance the theatrical qualities.
17. Margot Heinemann, "Political drama" in *English Renaissance Drama*, eds., by A. R. Braunmuller and Michael Hattaway (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), p. 202.
18. T. H. Howard-Hill, p. 23.
19. Loftis, p. 123.
20. T. H. Howard-Hill, p. 37.
21. For a detailed account of the parliamentary sessions of 1624, see Thomas Cogswell, *The Blessed Revolution: English Politics and the Coming of War, 1621-1624* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1989), pp. 135-261.



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