

'Pawn! Sufficiently holy but unmeasurably politic': Middleton's *A Game at Chess* and the Political Significance of Shakespeare's *First Folio*

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Abstract

Thomas Middleton's allegorical play *A Game at Chess* was perhaps the most sensational cultural event of the English Renaissance. It was so incendiary that a spectator declared it may have constituted a hanging offence, and so popular that the concept of the theatrical run had to be invented to accommodate demand. King James' response was to shut down the theatres, launch a manhunt for its author and imprison him. Middleton, considered by T.S. Eliot second only to Shakespeare, never wrote again. Despite the allegory's significance and its infamously transparent message, modern scholars have long struggled to understand it. The article seeks to demonstrate the following. Firstly, that such incomprehension constitutes a major problem for the field. Secondly, that Middleton's theme is 'life imitates art', and that this is systematically accomplished through comparing real-life events to parodic renderings of famous theatrical scenes. Thirdly, that Middleton portrays the main character of White Queen's Pawn as literally a sacrificial pawn used to collapse the proposed marriage between the future Charles I and the Spanish Infanta, and that this may well be the conceptual genesis of the chess theme. Fourthly, that those responsible for collapsing this Spanish Match were chiefly the Herbert family. Fifthly that White Queen's Pawn is a personification of a book registered and rushed into print at the very height of the crisis, and dedicated to the heads of the Herbert family, namely Shakespeare's *First Folio*. Sixthly, that the *First Folio*'s portrayal as a sacrificial pawn demonstrates that it was an intensely political publication.

Keywords: *A Game at Chess*, *Measure for Measure*, *Shakespeare's First Folio*, *Spanish Match*, *William Herbert*

1. *The Sceptical Challenge*

Thomas Middleton's *A Game at Chess* (1625) was perhaps the most sensationally popular, most controversial and most documented play of the



English Renaissance.¹ It played to beyond capacity crowds for nine consecutive days before being suppressed, the first and only theatrical run of the English Renaissance. Ticket sales raised the unimaginable sum of £1500 from an audience estimated to have constituted a seventh of London's population (Wittek 2015, 440). In the description of the then Spanish ambassador Don Carlos Coloma, 'There were more than 3000 persons there on the day that the audience was smallest. There was such merriment, hubbub and applause that even if I had been many leagues away it would not have been possible for me not to have taken notice of it' (Wittek 2015, 439). The play is a political allegory whose meaning Middleton attempts to make as outrageously blatant as possible: the character Black Knight wears the cast-off clothes of the former Spanish Ambassador Gondomar; the personification of Error insists at length that rooks are not to be called rooks but should be called 'Dukes' instead, thus radically limiting who these characters could represent ('Induction', 53-59).²

The play thus had a phenomenal response among a phenomenal cross-section of the population, and the meaning of the allegory was intended to be obvious – and yet the most successful play of the age is also perhaps its most opaque play to modern readers. Successive attempts over centuries to decode the play's allegory of the political events of the early 1620s have foundered: in 2007 Professor Gary Taylor despaired '*there is too much meaning*. Readers can begin to feel overwhelmed by possibilities, frustrated by the sense that we cannot hold suspended all the meanings in play. This frustration is intensified by the impression that the play is ... a "transparent" political allegory, which ought to be easy enough to understand' (Taylor's italics in Taylor and Lavagnino 2007, 1826).

So extraordinary is this long-standing collective failure to understand *even in outline* an allegory considered at the time to be astoundingly, hilariously blatant that it is no longer only a matter of literary interpretation but a sociological matter too. How comes it that exquisitely-skilled scholars with not only the text in front of them but six different manuscripts to peruse (and with historical archives to access) are incapable of matching the comprehension of a questionably literate groundling as he watched the play unfold before him in real-time? Are there some shared but unwarranted assumptions that prevent modern critics from understanding crucial evidence?

¹ This article is dedicated to Jane Wu, Jonathan Haile and Helen Haile. Without their great kindness and support this paper could not have been written. The sceptical challenge with which I begin this article would not have been my starting point without my having read Kripke's study on Wittengestein (1982).

² Quotations of *A Game at Chess* are taken from the text published by Gary Taylor and John Lavagnino (Taylor and Lavagnino 2007, 1830-1885).

It should be stressed that concerns around this collective failure cannot be confined to this play but spill over into general aspects of the field's understanding of English Renaissance theatre. Middleton's play was so precisely engineered that eyewitness John Holles declared 'every particular will bear a large paraphrase' (Taylor and Lavagnino 2007, 1776). There thus existed some kind of allegorical language that we have not understood, which was available to playwrights and which they could rely on their audiences to understand. We don't know how big this language's 'vocabulary' was; whether Middleton was deploying all or just a fraction of it; we don't know how or when it first developed; we don't know how often it was used. However, we do know that the crowds attending the play were a diverse cross-section of London society and that, since the immense crowds held up throughout the run, the word-of-mouth can't have been that it was hard to understand. Rather, the infamously massive commotion caused by the play demonstrates the reverse. Since knowledge tends to move from small groups to large, this symbolic language must have been very well-established by 1624. Moreover, it must have been established considerably before 1624, for John Holles declared that he had not been to the theatre for ten years prior to attending *Game*.

There therefore existed a long-standing, widespread language of allegorical symbols that Londoners had a great deal of experience decoding. Such was their prowess at allegorical comprehension that Middleton could risk his life and liberty on them understanding it, for on hearing of the play King James immediately launched a manhunt for its author. The conclusion is surely that many plays preceding *Game* must have used this allegorical language. Playwrights were broadcasting on a frequency we have hitherto not been able to tune into.

This is surely of enormous worry for the field. For we can very well imagine some sceptical arguments being presented in order to undermine the field's claims to knowledge in a more general sense. For example, a sceptic might declare that if we cannot understand its usage in this play that was acknowledged to be extremely transparent, then we have no grounds to claim we can detect whether or not it is being used in other plays that are presumably more complex. In short, if we cannot understand this famously easy play, we have no grounds on which to claim that we can understand any other given play of the English Renaissance. Is the playwright in a given play broadcasting on this same frequency? Have we misunderstood? How would we know?

The danger is such that it's necessary to stress again how easy London audiences found understanding *Game* – and how clearly the artistic intent was to be as transparent as humanly possible. And yet attempts over centuries to understand this mere child's play have failed. If we collectively cannot understand the symbols +, -, x and ÷ and yet we use these to perform complex arithmetic, what justified confidence can we have that our conclusions are

correct? We may reach a consensus position, but this would surely have no epistemic significance, for in the absence of an understanding of what these symbols mean then any consensus position may be arbitrary, with no way to distinguish between the correct and the false.

Similar sceptical arguments can be produced for other facets of the play. If we cannot understand the most sensationally popular play of the entire Renaissance, then, the sceptic may claim, we have very weak claims to understand the audiences for whom playwrights were writing.

If we cannot understand a play that led to the shutdown of the theatres and a manhunt for its author – and this on the direct orders of the King – then, the sceptic may claim, we have but very weak claims to understand the limits of free speech, and thus of language itself.

An eyewitness, John Woolley, declared that ‘assuredly had so much been done the last year, they had everyman been hanged for it’ (Howard-Hill 1991, 275). If we cannot understand a play that Middleton and his occasional co-writer William Rowley (who played Fat Bishop) risked their lives to produce, then, the sceptic may claim, we can have very weak grounds to claim that we understand what drove ‘our other Shakespeare’ to write. Towards the end of their careers Middleton and Rowley were clearly trying to communicate things to posterity that they could not say plainly, for in *The Changeling* of 1622 they write about a play-within-a-play:

Only an unexpected passage over,
 To make a frightful pleasure, that is all —
 But not the all I aim at. Could we so act it
 To teach it in a wild distracted measure,
 Though out of form and figure, breaking Time’s head —
 (It were no matter, ‘twould be healed again
 In one age or other, if not in this). (3.3.280-286; Taylor and Lavagnino, 1657)

Without knowing what they were trying to communicate we can scarcely understand their motivation for communicating it.

If we cannot understand a play that The King’s Men risked their lives to produce then, the sceptic may claim, we have but very weak grounds to claim that we understand what these people – as tradition has it, key shapers themselves of the plays of Shakespeare – saw as the purpose of theatre. Given the King’s Men’s centrality to London and court theatre, we can have but very weak grounds to claim to understand what was the purpose of drama as a wider culture.

In sum, if we fail to understand this notoriously simple play, then the field is wide open to claims that we have but few grounds to claim that we comprehend English Renaissance plays, audiences, writers or performers. We may well be able to claim differing degrees of mastery of the contemporary discourse surrounding English Renaissance plays, but without understanding

Game we cannot credibly claim to understand English Renaissance theatre itself. Banish *A Game at Chess*, and banish all the world.

Therefore Professor Taylor's astounding confession that *even he* lacked the skills to comprehend a text known to be incredibly simple can surely be seen as a declaration that the field of English Renaissance theatre is now in profound, systemic crisis. If the easy things are impossible, what chance the understanding of the complex things is correct? The understanding of the period seems to have become unmoored; Montaigne's question 'que sais-je?' looms large; and perhaps none can credibly claim expertise – unless they can understand *Game*.

The decoding of *Game* is, therefore, a central problem of the field. (Of course, understanding this play is merely a necessary condition for understanding Renaissance English theatre, not a sufficient one: just as a groundling may have understood *Game* but not all the classical references Jonson packed into his plays, for example, an ability to understand *Game* only by itself entitles one to claim that we can approximate a dubiously literate groundling's comprehension.) The purpose of this article is to examine the central plot of *Game*, revolving around White Queen's Pawn, Black Bishop's Pawn and Black Queen's Pawn; to identify the first of these characters; to explain Middleton's artistic aims; and how he went about achieving the same.

2. *The Pawns' Plot: Life Imitates Art*

This 'Pawns' Plot' has been even less well understood than the rest of the play, as the characters are harder to identify than the likes of White King (James), White Knight (Charles), White Duke (Buckingham) or Black Knight (Gondomar). The explanation for the play's suppression given at the time concerned a supposed 'commandment and restraint given against the representation of any modern Christian kings' (Howard-Hill 1991, 278). However, Howard-Hill notes that such a law is 'unknown to Chambers's and Bentley's theatrical histories' (cited in Starza Smith 2014, n. 24). It is also hard to reconcile the court's supposed horror at seeing kings portrayed on stage with Woolley's report 'that the Players are gone to the Court to Act the game at chess before the King'; Woolley further declares that the Prince and the Duke reportedly 'laughed heartily' at this royal command performance (Howard-Hill 1991, 275). Moreover, we should treat any official reason for curtailment of speech with suspicion, for any truthful explanation would disseminate what it seeks to suppress. The frontispiece of the printed version of *Game* (printed just the following year) bolsters the suspicion of this explanation. It is perfectly willing to depict the full complement of Kings, Queens, Dukes, Bishops and Knights, but glaringly fails to depict any of the pawns whose relationships the play revolves around.

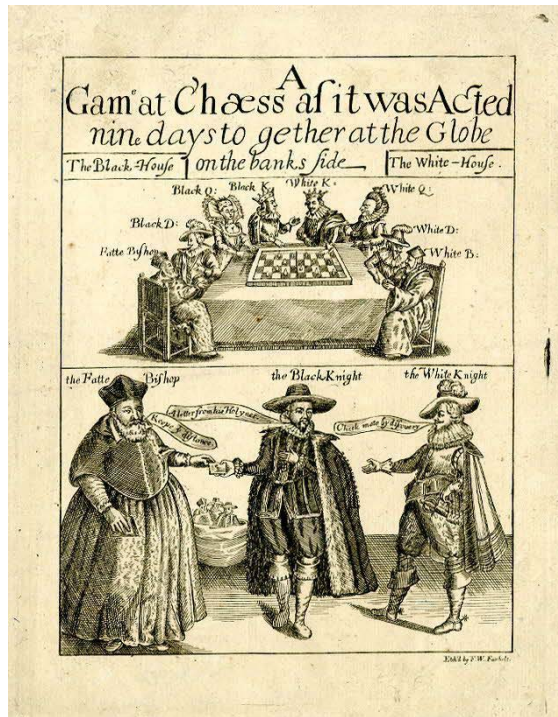


Figure 1 – Thomas Middleton, *A Game at Chess*, Public Domain

It is not only the frontispiece of the play that conspicuously omits the main characters. Howard-Hill asserts that the ‘Pawns’ Plot’ must be a simple moral allegory without any political content because the extensive documentation of reaction to the play failed to mention it:

It has even less political significance than the comparable allegory of *The Faerie Queene*, Book 1 because *no contemporary reporter even noticed the main plot of the play*. It was Middleton’s own invention, apparently owing nothing to printed sources, and comprises the fundamental structural as well as ethical basis of the play. (1991, 284; my italics as regards Howard Hill’s evaluation)

Howard-Hill is right that (with one exception) no contemporary reporter wrote about the Pawns’ Plot. The exception, the poem Thomas Salisbury wrote to Sir Thomas Dawes, is telling however: White Queen’s Pawn is mentioned before the ‘royal pair’ of Prince Charles and the Duke of Buckingham (Bullough 1954, 156-160). Even if we disregard this, however, he surely draws entirely the wrong conclusions about the implications of the silence over the Pawns’ Plot. It is utterly implausible that people queuing up for hours to see the most sensationally popular play in English history up to that date would not have ‘noticed the main plot of the play’ (Howard-Hill 1991, 284).

Every spectator would have known that the play had been suppressed by a very angry King. Since they were willing to freely discuss many aspects of the subplots but studiously avoided all mention of the plot that forms the 'basis of the play' and whose characters dominate most scenes, we can infer that this Pawns' Plot most likely contains information that James wanted to suppress. Far from having little political significance, the Pawns' Plot is, as Black Knight announces, 'unmeasurably politic' (2.1.15). Middleton's imprisonment had just demonstrated to all the spectators precisely how dangerous it was to communicate the meaning of the allegory. Unsurprisingly, they did not generally discuss the Pawns' Plot.

In order to follow and appreciate the Pawns' Plot, the story being allegorically referred to must have been widely understood. In places Middleton relies on the background knowledge of the audience for key plot points: for example, characters discuss how terrible was the revenge that Black Knight's Pawn exerted against White Queen's Pawn (WQP), but what the seemingly squeaky-clean WQP had done to motivate this revenge is never explained nor expanded upon. That Middleton could rely on this wide dissemination of the story when the Pawns' Plot 'owes nothing to printed sources' (Howard-Hill 1991, 284) demonstrates not that the story was of Middleton's invention but that there was some widespread knowledge not in known and comprehended written sources (possibly due to censorship rules).

In order to understand Middleton's allegory, considerable background knowledge was thus required. This is confirmed by William Hemminge's 1630-1632 publication *Elegy on Randolph's Finger*, which describes the play as Middleton's '*learned* Exercise 'gainst Gundomore' (Hemminge 1923, 17, l. 186; my italics). It is curious, then, that one of the earliest readers of the printed play was both extremely learned and also unable to understand the play. In a letter dated 25th May 1625 the Cambridge intellectual Joseph Mead declared that 'The play called the game at chess is in print, but because I have no skill in the game I understand it not' (Taylor and Lavagnino 2007, 1826). Professor Taylor is baffled by Mead's lack of understanding, because he considers Mead to be exceptionally well-versed in the politics and foreign affairs of the time. '[Mead's] difficulty... cannot have been due to ignorance of the play's political background' (*ibid.*).

This, then, is our paradox: this play beyond the ken of Mead was contemporaneously described as 'learned' and involves a set of references so complex that the eye-witness John Holles declared that 'every particular will bear a large paraphrase' (Taylor and Lavagnino 1776). Yet Middleton had such confidence in the ability of the ill-educated London crowds to understand his allegory that he was willing to risk his life and liberty. What learning was widespread among average Londoners but beyond a Cambridge intellectual like Mead?

John Chamberlain remarked that *Game* was attended by a striking diversity of people: it was ‘frequented by all sorts of people: old and young, rich and poor, masters and servants, papists and puritans’ (Taylor and Lavagnino 2007, 1776). Given that this diverse crowd understood the play well, had our learned Cambridge scholar been a Londoner then he, too, would surely have understood the play. Whatever ‘learning’ the play involves must therefore be a type of culture that was widespread in London but which was to some significant degree spatially limited to the capital. Since the play was understood by such diverse audiences, this learning must have been accessible to all rather than being locked up in libraries, art galleries, the minds of private tutors etc.; and since the play attracted spectators from across the sectarian divide this learning cannot have been primarily religious. We note *en passant* that a spatially limited cultural form that every single audience member would have been familiar with is theatre itself.

Taylor comments about Mead’s peculiar incomprehension that ‘the difference between early readers [i.e. Mead] and early spectators results, instead, from the difference in what was visible to each’ (Taylor and Lavagnino 2007, 1826). An oddity about the play is the frequency with which the characters are named in the play. According to Howard-Hill (1995, 134), ‘Middleton uses phrases of address and apposition, both to prepare for the entrance of a character and to identify him after his entry, with a frequency which seems peculiar to this play (or to plays of this kind)’. Middleton was clearly anxious that the audience would not lose track of which character had just appeared, implying that the appearance of the actors must have changed during the course of the play.

This is confirmed by Ben Jonson’s praise of the technical accomplishment of the King’s Men in this specific play:

Tho. ...

There is a *Legacy* left to the *Kings Players*,
Both for their various shifting of their *Scene*,
And dext’rous change o’their persons to all shapes,
And all disguises; by the right reuerend
Archbishop of Spalato. (*The Staple of Nevves*, 3.2)

In performance, then, *Game* featured many changes of scene and costume. We know that these costumes were used to ram home the allegory’s meaning: famously, the actor playing Gondomar roamed the stage wearing the actual clothing once worn by Gondomar, making an entrance in his old carriage. Chamberlain remarked that they had ‘counterfeited his person to the life’ (Howard-Hill 1995, 113). The King’s Men went to such extraordinary pains to ensure Black Knight’s clothing would be recognised, and this strongly implies that they went to considerable pains that all the many, apparently frequently-

changing costumes worn by other characters would also be recognised. This would appear to make considerable demands on the audience, especially when combined with constantly-shifting scenery; yet the average Londoner found the play's meaning transparent. The costumes must therefore have been well known, and their relevance to the changing scenes understood immediately.

Perhaps the costumes were sourced from the wardrobes of the famous people portrayed in the play, just as Gondomar's was? Yet the astonishment that greeted the feat of obtaining Gondomar's clothing and the lack of mention of any other such feat for the other celebrities featured in the allegory implies that it was only Black Knight's clothing that was sourced from the actual figure portrayed. Had they additionally sourced clothing famously worn by the King then it would surely have been mentioned. The clothes must have been famous for a different reason, then.

Where then did the King's Men get all these famous bits of clothing from, and why would they be confident that they would be recognised? Jonson's praise of the 'various shifting... *Scenes*' (*The Staple of Nevves*, 3.2) gives us a clue: the actors were relying on multiple scenes being recognized by the audience. The only way the audiences could have accomplished this is if they were already familiar with the scenes in another context. In other words, they were familiar because they had previously been used in other plays. Middleton's play must have consciously featured theatrical clichés because he has Black Knight call attention to one: 'Oboes again!³ (5.1.9). This use of clichés may have been rather systematic.

Here we have a proposed solution to our paradox: the 'learning' that the London crowds had but the Cambridge intellectual Mead did not was familiarity with the London theatre world. It is proposed that *Game* tells its story through a systematic use of parodies of famous scenes of plays. The theme of the play in general is that 'life imitates art'. Real-life characters can be represented by stylised chesspieces: the play starts with one chess manoeuvre, Queens Gambit Declined, and it ends with another, Checkmate-by-Discovery. Yet between these events the action's resemblance to a chess game falls away. Taking up the thematic slack is the concept that certain real-life events are similar to scenes from well-known plays.

The best test for this hypothesis is if we discover in *Game* a parody of a poem rather than a play. A poem, of course, would not offer Middleton the costumes, the props or the sceneries that could be used to ram home the presence of a parody. In a play that strained to be as blatant as Black Knight wearing Gondomar's clothes we would expect a parody of a poem to cause Middleton to compensate in some way for this lack of visual cues. This is precisely what we find.

When White Queen's Pawn accuses Black Bishop's Pawn of attempted rape, the latter's innocence is substantiated by fake ante-dated letters that 'prove' his absence at the time (2.2). As punishment for her so-called false accusation, the

³ Oboes were used for the entrance of both supernatural characters and royal ones.

aspiring nun is sentenced to be imprisoned ‘in a room filled with all Aretine’s pictures’ (3.1.248). According to McKeown, ‘Aretine’s Postures might possibly be described without exaggeration as the most “obscene” piece of erotica in history’ (2008, 12). Ben Jonson knew them well: ‘for a desperate wit there’s Aretine; / Onely, his pictures are a little obscene’ (*Volpone*, 3.4). Pietro Aretino provided the poetic captions for engraved copies of a series of sixteen drawings showing classical figures engaged in various sexual positions. These pictures, which hang in Mantua, were drawn by one Giulio Romano, the Raphael-trained ‘father of pornography’ who was notoriously the only Renaissance artist to be mentioned by Shakespeare: ‘that rare Italian master Julio Romano’ (Shakespeare, *The Winter’s Tale*, 5.2.76).⁴

In Shakespeare’s *The Rape of Lucrece* the titular victim pauses to lengthily contemplate images that tradition identifies as descriptions of frescos in the Sala di Troia, which are also in Mantua, and are by the very same Giulio Romano (Sarrazin 1900, 105-108).

Thus in Shakespeare’s poem the paragon of chastity contemplates Romano’s heroic depictions of noble antiquity, whilst in Middleton’s parody the paragon of chastity contemplates the same artist’s depictions of gymnastic sex.⁵

Middleton confirms that he is parodying *Lucrece* by specifically, gratuitously, mentioning it:

And in a room filled all with Aretine’s pictures,
More than the twice twelve labours of luxury,
Thou shalt not see so much as the chaste pommel
Of Lucrece’ dagger peeping. (3.1.248-251)

What is actually ‘peeping’ is the underlying structure of the allegory. Middleton has no visual cues to rely on, so he compensates by using a verbal one instead.

3. *Some Parallels with Famous Plays*

Having tested the hypothesis in the most unpromising of circumstances, we now establish Middleton’s use of theatrical parodies in *Game*. In 1624 one of the most high-profile theatrical productions was Ben Jonson’s *Neptunes Triumph for the returne of Albion*, which had a legendarily abortive performance on Twelfth Night that year. The masque was an allegory of Charles’ return from Spain without his proposed princess bride, and thus relates to the collapse of the Spanish Match. The text had been personally censored and approved by

⁴ Shakespeare quotations are from *The New Oxford Shakespeare. The Complete Works. Modern Critical Edition* (Shakespeare, 2017).

⁵ For the less literary inclined audience members this episode also functions as a horny nun joke.

King James, yet proved so controversial that the Spanish ambassadors tussled with the French ambassadors over it, resulting in its forced cancellation.

This play that could drive the hated Spanish diplomats to apoplexy clearly became an object of fascination in London, for not only does Middleton (as we shall see) parody a major part of it but Thomas Salisbury's epistolary poem⁶ about *Game* climaxes with about twenty lines derived from Middleton's parody of *Neptune's Triumph*. Salisbury clearly expected the recipient of his poem, Sir Thomas Dawes, to recognise and appreciate this parody. We can infer that a version of the masque was produced for general London audiences, so that they could see the play the hated Spanish ambassadors found too hot to handle.

Middleton's parody of *Neptunes Triumph* is immediately foreshadowed by a mention of 'a riot which th' inhabitants of Delos were first inventors of' (5.3. 69-70). 'Inventor' was a technical term for the creator of a masque, and Neptune's Triumph is set in Delos.

For many years Jonson had been yoked together with Inigo Jones for the purposes of creating court masques. The two men despised each other and what they stood for but had to work together because their mutual patron, William Herbert, wanted them to. Jonson wrote the script, Inigo created the scenery and costumes. As expressed in the preface of his *Hymenaei* of 1606, Jonson thought there were two aspects of the art of the masque: the soul and the senses. The 'soul' was provided by the poet, aided the understanding and was lasting (perhaps immortal); the 'senses' were provided by the costume and set designer, pleased the senses and were transient (A3r-A3v).

In *Neptunes Triumph* Jonson personifies these two aspects of the masque as 'the Poet', i.e. Jonson, and 'the Cook', i.e. Inigo Jones. Jonson's script satirises Inigo's pretensions to be the equal of a Poet. The 'Cook' declares that 'a good poet differs nothing at all from a master-cook' but he demonstrates that instead of trying to improve the understanding and virtue of the audience he merely tries to flatter their particular tastes. These tastes differ widely, so the way to please everyone, the Cook believes, is to throw a bit of what everyone likes into a pot.

Jonson's Cook advises to 'study the several tastes, what every nation, the Spaniard, the Dutch, the French, the Walloun, the Neapolitan, the Britain, the Sicilian, can expect from you.' However, instead of throwing cooking ingredients into the broth, the Cook throws in people that represent the various ingredients, e.g. 'Newes-master of Poules, / Supplies your Capon' (*Neptunes Trivmph*).

The Poet responds to this confused jumble of ingredients with 'I conceive / The way of your Gally-mawfrey' – 'gallimaufry' deriving from the French word 'galimafrée', meaning 'unappetising dish'. The Cook responds 'you will like it'. At the end of his demonstration the Cook concedes the supremacy of the Poet but proudly asks to be respected for his ludicrous work: 'Brother *Poet*,

⁶ Thomas Salisbury in Sir Thomas Dawes' commonplace book, 1 December 1624. Printed in Taylor and Lavagnino 2007, 872.

though the serious part / be yours, yet, envy not the Cooke his art.' 'Not I!' sniggers the Poet.

Middleton's parody has Black Knight announce his devious ability at politics as 'the master cook of Christendom' (5.3.76) before turning Jonson's idea on its head; whilst Jonson's Cook tries to flatter the tastes of all nations, Middleton's Black Knight treats all the nations of Europe as ingredients to be manipulated within his unappealing broth of megalomaniac universal monarchy:

And in the large feast of our large 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 white signory
 Of Venice, served (*capon-like*) in whitebroth;⁷ (5.3.83-88; my italics)

In Jonson's masque the various 'ingredients' are sequentially put in the cooking pot and then tumble out to begin the masque proper. In Middleton's play the Black House pieces are sequentially put into a massive bag after being 'taken' and then try to escape.

Earlier in the year the Spanish ambassadors were maddened to the point of breaking up a theatrical performance of *Neptvnes Triumph*. How could Middleton resist putting a cheeky homage to that play into the mouth of Spanish ambassador Gondomar?

This is not the only parody of famous theatrical scenes in the play. Multiple scholars have remarked that Middleton models part of Act 5 on a scene of a play he part-wrote: the *Macbeth* scene in which Malcolm suggests he will enact all manner of horrors once he's king (suggestions apparently made as a means of testing MacDuff's motivations). Bald wrote 'it is also of considerable interest to observe that the "dissimulation" of the White Knight in the last scene is certainly modelled on the test imposed by Malcolm on MacDuff in IV.iii of *Macbeth*' (1929, 16). Margot Heinemann agreed: 'The Prince is also made to test Gondomar by accusing himself (much like Malcolm in *Macbeth* IV, iii) of ambition and avarice, neither point being developed with much force. Since Middleton is known to have revised *Macbeth* for the King's Men, he was probably directly modelling his scene on that one' (1980, 164). Aside from the general similarity of plot, the scene includes this striking verbal parallel: White Knight declares 'Ambitious, covetous, luxurious falsehood!' (5.3.163); Malcolm declares 'Luxurious, avaricious, false, deceitful' (Shakespeare, *Macbeth* 4.3.59).

Middleton is satirising the ludicrous official explanation for why Charles and Buckingham had taken the astonishingly reckless step of crossing the continent under false names and without bodyguards in order to make themselves *de facto*

⁷ A superfluous 'in' is deleted from the last line.

hostages of the Spanish Court. 'Buckingham's widely-distributed relation to Parliament in February 1624 [declared] that there was never any danger of Charles succumbing to Spanish pressure, and that the entire trip was a cunning trap to force Spain to reveal its treachery' (Taylor and Lavagnino 2007, 815).

Middleton creates another uncanny parallel to *Macbeth* in that the Induction to *Game* involves the demonic figure of St. Ignatius Loyola declaring 'O with what longings will this breast be tossed, until I see this great game won and lost!' (Induction, 77-78). The start of *Macbeth* involves the demonic figure of a Witch declaring 'When the hurly-burly's done, / When the battle's lost and won' (Shakespeare, *Macbeth*, 1.1.3-4).

Middleton not only wrote parts of *Macbeth* but also parts of *Timon of Athens* and *Measure for Measure*. This is of extreme interest for understanding the Pawns' Plot, for the characters and relationship between White Queen's Pawn, Black Queen's Pawn and Black Bishop's Pawn is extraordinarily similar to those of Isabella, Mariana and Angelo from *Measure for Measure*, which Middleton edited prior to its publication in the First Folio (the differences between the Quarto version of *Othello*, published in 1622, and the First Folio version published just one year later indicate that editing did take place immediately before publication). To write a play that allegorises the events of the preceding few years requires extensive reflections on them; Middleton seemingly spent the allegorised time editing Shakespeare plays. Extensive parallels could not be accidental. A series of parallels will now be set down.

1. Like Isabella, White Queen's Pawn (WQP) is a young virgin seeking to join a religious order. Both long for a strict set of rules to which they can owe obedience.

From *Measure for Measure*:

Yes, truly, I speak not as desiring more,
But rather wishing a more strict restraint
Upon the sisterhood, the votarists of Saint Clare. (1.4.1-3)

From *Game*:

Black Bishop's Pawn (BBP). Please you peruse this small tract of obedience;
'Twill help you forward well.

WQP. Sir, that's a virtue
I've ever thought on with especial reverence. (1.1.191-193)

After reading the book, WQP begs BBP with these words:

Lay your commands as thick and fast upon me
As you can speak 'em. How I thirst to hear 'em!

Set me to work upon this spacious virtue
Which the poor span of life's too narrow for,
Boundless obedience. (2.1.35-39)

2. Both plays compare Isabella and WQP being the victim of falsehood to their complexion being marred, and both use the same metaphor of 'printing':

Women? Help, Heaven! Men their creation mar
In profiting by them. Nay, call us ten times frail,
For we are as soft as our complexions are,
And credulous to false prints.
(Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, 2.4.127-130)

With a cheek
Fresh as her falsehood yet, where castigation.
Has left no pale print of her visiting anguish.
(Middleton, *A Game at Chess*, 3.1.180-182)

3. Both Isabella and WQP are so pure they're loath to even mention the name of sins or sources of disgrace.

Isabella. There is a vice that most I do abhor,
And most desire should meet the blow of justice,
For which I would not plead, but that I must;
For which I must not plead, but that I am
At war 'twixt will and will not.
(Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, 2.2.30-34)

Isabella. This night's the time
That I should do what I abhor to name.
(Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, 3.1.98-99)

WQP. I was discharged
By an inhuman accident, which modesty
Forbids me to put any language to.
(Middleton, *A Game at Chess*, 1.1.145-147)

4. When given a forced choice, both Isabella and WQP are adamant they prefer the wellbeing of their soul to that of the body.

Isabella. Sir, believe this,
I had rather give my body than my soul.
(Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, 2.4.56-57)

WQP. Then take my life, sir,
And leave my honour for my guide to heaven.
(Middleton, *A Game at Chess*, 2.1.135-136)

WQP. Gladly I offered life to preserve honour,
Which would not be accepted without both,
The chief of his ill aim being at my honour.
(Middleton, *A Game at Chess*, 2.2.117-120)

5. Both Isabella and *WQP* are desired by men who are attracted to her because she is so virtuous:

Angelo. What does thou, or what art thou, Angelo?
Dost thou desire her foully for those things
That make her good?
(Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, 2.2.178-180)

BBP. ... That eye
Does promise single life and meek obedience,
Upon whose lips (the sweet fresh buds of youth)
The holy dew of prayer lies like pearl
Dropped from the op'ning eyelids of the morn
Upon the bashful rose.
(Middleton, *A Game at Chess*, 1.1.76-81)

6. Because of this attraction both *Angelo* and *BBP*, though claiming to be morally religious people, become hypocrites and are publicly decried as such by their victims:

Isabella. That Angelo is an adulterous thief,
A hypocrite, a virgin-violator,
Is it not strange, and strange?
(Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, 5.1.40-42)

WQP (to BBP). I will discover thee, arch-hypocrite,
To all the kindreds of the earth.
(Middleton, *A Game at Chess*, 2.1.148-149)

7. Whilst arranging a bed-trick, Black Queen's Pawn (*BQP*) announces 'you're man and wife — all but church ceremonies' (4.1.146). This is similar to the Duke's advice to Mariana:

Duke. Nor, gentle daughter, fear you not at all.
He is your husband on a pre-contract.
To bring you thus together, 'tis no sin.
(Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, 4.1.67-69)

8. In both plays an ex-lover of the lecherous villain substitutes for the virginal religious novice in a bed trick: Mariana in *Measure*, *BQP* in *Game*. When the time comes for the substitute to reveal herself to her ex, we discover that in both cases five years have elapsed since the former lovers' previous meeting.

Angelo. My lord, I must confess I know this woman;
 And five years since there was some speech of marriage
 Betwixt myself and her, which was broke off
 ...
 Since which time of five years
 I never spake with her, saw her, nor heard from her,
 Upon my faith and honour.
 (Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, 5.1.212-220)

BQP. Do you plant your scorn against me?
 Why, when I was probationer in Brussels,
 That engine was not seen; then adoration
 Filled up the place, and wonder was in fashion.
 Is't turned to th' wild seed of contempt so soon?
 Can five years stamp a bawd?
 (Middleton, *A Game at Chess*, 5.2.90-94)

9. Since BBP does not immediately recognise his former lover when she enters, presumably she is wearing a veil. If so then both women, conscious that they are not as young as they once were, unveil and emotionally ask their former lover to gaze upon them.

Mariana. My husband bids me; now I will unmask.
[She shows her face]
 This is that face, thou cruel Angelo,
 Which once thou swor'st was worth the looking on.
 (Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, 5.1.201-203)

BQP. 'Pray, look upon me, sir;
 I've youth enough to take it.
 (Middleton, *A Game at Chess*, 5.2.94-96)

10. Both Isabella and WQP complain bitterly about the wilful caprice of the law:

Isabella. O perilous mouths,
 That bear in them one and the selfsame tongue
 Either of condemnation or approof,
 Bidding the law make courtesy to their will,
 Hooking both right and wrong to th'appetite,
 To follow as it draws!
 (Shakespeare, *Measure for Measure*, 2.4.172-177)

WQP. What certainty is in our bloods, our states?
 What we still write is blotted out by fates,
 Our wills are like a cause that is law-tossed:
 What one court orders, is by another crossed.
 (Middleton, *A Game at Chess*, 3.1.401-404)

This complaint is justified in both cases: both accuse the villain of attempted rape and in both cases the authority figure switches between believing the victim's accusations and declaring them falsehoods.

4. *The Identity of White Queen*

The characters and plot line of the Pawns' Plot are thus taken from *Measure for Measure*. The editor once charged with fidelity to Shakespeare's text has become the dramatist creatively rewriting it. The dominant concern now is Middleton's reasons for doing this. What function do the pawns have? What's most remarkable is that White Queen's Pawn is – literally – depicted as a sacrificial pawn in the game: the play opens with a chessboard showing the Queen's Gambit chess opening in which WQP is deliberately offered as a sacrifice to BBP in exchange for a better position.

Middleton's Variation on Queen's Gambit Declined

NB Only the central four horizontal rows (ranks) are visible to the audience, and in the bottom three chessboards Middleton removes several pieces, presumably in order to clarify allegorical relationships between the still-visible pieces. Chesspiece design by Colin M.L. Burnett under a GNU Free Documentation Licence.



Black, here moving first, advances Black Queen's Pawn and is immediately countered by White moving White Queen's Pawn to meet it (I: i: 1-5).

Black then moves a Black Bishop's Pawn to threaten White Queen's Pawn. (I: i: 30) This creates the Queen's Gambit opening.



White declines to fall into Black's trap by taking the Black Bishop's Pawn with White Queen's Pawn, instead moving White Bishop's Pawn to protect White Queen's Pawn. (I: i: 195)

Black responds by moving Black Knight's Pawn to protect Black Bishop's Pawn (I: i: 205); Black then moves Black Knight for the same purpose. (I: i: 243)

Figure 2 – Graphic created by the author based on images in Taylor and Lavagnino 2007, 1833, 1839

Given the centrality of WQP, it is highly plausible that this notion of a sacrificial pawn was the conceptual genesis of this chess-based play and therefore crucial to understanding it. The conclusion of the Prologue also presents WQP as a necessary sacrifice if they were to win the game:

... in the close
 You shall see checkmate given to virtue's foes.
 But the fair'st jewel that our hopes can deck
 Is so to play our game t'avoid your check. (Prologue, 7-10)

Thus Middleton declares that the sacrifice of WQP was a gambit that was necessary for White House to beat Black House, i.e. WQP's sacrifice was a gambit designed to persuade James and his heir to pull out of the proposed marriage to the Spanish Infanta.

Middleton is insistent that the Pawns' Plot is of great political significance, for BBP reads a letter addressed to him that begins:

'Pawn! Sufficiently holy, but unmeasurably politic. We had late intelligence from our most industrious servant famous in all parts of Europe (our Knight of the Black House) that you have at this instant in chase the White Queen's Pawn, and very likely in the carriage of your game to entrap and take her.' (1.1.15-20)

BBP also stresses the political significance of WQP, for he tries to overcome WQP's resistance by using the following argument:

Art thou so cruel for an honour's bubble
 T'undo a whole fraternity, and disperse
 The secrets of most nations locked in us? (2.1.139-141)

In order to ascertain the identity of White Queen's Pawn we must first work out who White Queen is. Middleton would have had to be very careful about who he called Queen of the English side – nothing kills a jovial mood like open treason – and this means that there are only a very few possible candidates.

White Queen clearly represents someone living, rather than Elizabeth I or James' wife Anne (who died in 1619) as the epilogue refers to her orders and her hopes in the present tense. Middleton's *Collected Works* identifies her as James' daughter Queen Elizabeth of Bohemia (1596-1662). This identification is assumption-based: it declares that the play 'could not have been as comprehensive [a depiction of the Spanish Match crisis] without representing the Queen of Bohemia.' Yet the *Collected Works* immediately casts doubt on this identification: 'even to identify Elizabeth as "Queen" was dangerous, because King James consistently refused to recognise Frederick and Elizabeth's claim to Bohemia' (Taylor in Taylor and Lavagnino 2007, 1796 n. 276). Another danger was that, had the Gunpowder Plotters succeeded, they planned to install then-Princess Elizabeth as a puppet ruler. In chess, of course, the Queen is rather more powerful than the King, Middleton's play reminds his audience about the Gunpowder Plot several times.⁸

⁸ For instance: 'methinks I stand over a powder-vault and the match now a-kindling' (2.1.159-160).

What is extremely divisive is unlikely to delight every type of Londoner, yet this is what the play apparently achieved. Moreover, Middleton would be taking enormous risks for the sake of a marginal character. Extraordinary justification is therefore required, yet every attempt to explain the story of White Queen and her Pawn in terms of Elizabeth and her country has failed. Even the scholar that in 1907 invented the thesis, E.C. Morris, acknowledged its total reliance on the London public being entirely ignorant of events whose allegorical representation they adored: 'It is curious that heretofore no-one has suggested these incidents of the German wars as the basis of the scenes concerning the attacks on the White Queen's Pawn. Possibly the reason is, the actual events as recorded by modern scholarship are too far removed from the plot of the play to be easily recognised' (Morris 1907, 47).

Had the play really disseminated ignorant lies about the conduct of the Royal Family then that would have been good public justification for its suppression. John Chamberlain's letter to Carleton, dated 21st August 1624, declares of the play's controversy that 'the worst is, playeng [Gondomar], they played sombody els, for which they are forbidden to play that or any other play till the Kings pleasure be further knowne' (Chamberlain, 1939, 2, 578). Chamberlain doesn't seem to think the play is telling untruths. Yet perhaps the clearest evidence that Middleton is telling the truth is Ben Jonson's response. His *The Staple of Nevves* extensively discusses *Game*. The lines previously quoted about the King's Men's 'various shifting of their Scene, / And dext'rous change o' their persons to all shapes' (3.2), which come in the guise of a letter written by the main model for Fat Bishop, the Archbishop of Spalato, are followed by two lines in which he pointedly refuses to give any eulogy to William Rowley, the recently-deceased playwright who performed the role. Instead he implies he was a non-entity without a legacy:

... *Lic.* He is dead That plai'd him!
Tho. Then, h'has lost his share o' the *Legacy*.
 (Jonson, *The Staple of Nevves* 3.2)

Jonson, then, clearly felt great animosity towards Rowley's portrayal of Fat Bishop (later we may see why). He also goes so far as to declare that it would be 'justice' for Middleton's 'poor' 'so-called' (3.2) play to be used as toilet paper.

Lic. What news of Gundomar?

Tho. A second *Fistula*,
 Or an *excoriation* (at the least)
 For putting the poore *English-play*, was writ of him,
 To such a sordid vse, as (is said) he did,
 Of cleansing his *posterior's*.

Gundomar's use of
 the game at Chesse,
 or Play so called.

Lic. Iustice! Iustice! (Jonson, *The Staple of Nevves*, 3.2)

Since Jonson was so contemptuous of the play, and was particularly annoyed by Rowley's portrayal of a dissembling writer, had Middleton himself been lying in

the play then Jonson would have had the most open of goals. Yet Jonson does not accuse Middleton of hypocrisy: therefore he cannot have believed Middleton lied.

If, as Morris declared, the facts of the collapse of the Spanish Match as recorded by modern scholarship are far away from the representation of the same onstage, then the most likely resolution is that modern scholarship has missed something crucial about how events transpired. After all, Middleton was Chronologer of London, i.e. its official historian, and therefore in a superb position to know the truth. Very few historians have since tackled the collapse of the Spanish Match, and none have consulted French archives. The field's dominant account is still Gardiner's nineteenth-century opus, which assumes that the negotiations to marry Charles to the Infanta and the negotiations to marry him to his eventual bride Henrietta Maria of France were entirely discrete events, one following the collapse of the other. As we'll see, this is the crucial mistake that makes historical scholarship and *Game* so hard to square – and which in large part makes the play so opaque for modern readers. For if we get the identity of White Queen wrong then the identity of White Queen's Pawn is inexplicable, and therefore also the play itself.

Just as the King of Spain is represented by Black King and James is represented by White King, White Queen represents the Spanish Infanta's rival for Charles' affections: England's Queen-to-be. Although in 1624 Henrietta Maria was not yet married to Charles, those who supported aborting the Spanish Match in favour of a French Match with Henrietta Maria would doubtless be pleased to see her sympathetically presented as already a legitimate part of the English royal family. Such a portrayal would also, at least in part, explain Woolley's conviction that had it been performed the previous year then everyone would have been hanged for it. To present Henrietta Maria as the English Queen when Charles was committed to marrying the Infanta would have been treasonous; to present her as the English Queen when the heir to the English throne was engaged in marriage negotiations with her would have been merely incredibly presumptuous. That such a significant chesspiece as White Queen has such a minor role in the play is also appropriate if White Queen is Henrietta Maria: at the height of the crisis she wasn't yet fourteen.

The key piece of evidence comes when White Knight Prince Charles disappears into the Spanish Court with his marriage to the Spanish Infanta looking assured. White Queen watches him depart in a state of despair:

My love, my hope, my dearest — O he's gone,
Ensnared, entrapped, surprised amongst the Black ones.
I never felt extremity like this...

... I never was

More sick of love than now I am of horror.
I shall be taken. The game's lost, I'm set upon. (4.4.48-57)

White Queen is clearly in a state of romantic heartbreak, and she equates her personal loss with the loss of the entire game, i.e. the attempt to prevent Charles' marriage to the Spanish Infanta. She must represent Charles' future bride.

In this same passage Middleton aims to counter her worst defect as perceived by the English public: her Catholicism. The duplicitous, newly Catholic Fat Bishop flees to the Continent, seeks to 'take' White Queen and tries to have her marry Black King thus entrenching her Catholicism. The reason why it's Fat Bishop who threatens White Queen is that the main model for Fat Bishop, the Archbishop of Spalato, left England and travelled to Paris, where his *Sui Reditus ex Anglia Consilium* was published in 1623. Fat Bishop's approach and plan fills our Paris-based White Queen with horror, and she is rescued by the Protestant White Bishop. The play therefore expresses the (as it happened, vain) hope that Henrietta Maria is not a dyed-in-the-wool Catholic but will be converted to the Anglican faith once she's in England.

If this is not clear enough then the Infanta's replacement by Henrietta Maria in Charles' affections is symbolised in the most blatant way possible: White Queen takes Black Queen, thereby removing her from consideration and standing in her place (5.3).

5. *A 'Perplexed and Secret Business'*

The obvious objection concerns how Henrietta Maria could have been involved with the events of 1623, since she would not marry Charles for another two years and had not yet even spoken to her future husband. (She had, however, seen him across a room.) Dynastic marriages are not necessarily love matches, however, and for years James' ambassador to the French court had promoted Henrietta Maria as a best-of-both-worlds alternative bride for Charles: James could secure a marriage alliance with a great Catholic nation and yet avoid the politically impossible demands the Spanish court had been making. Whilst the fiery Infanta demanded that her children must be raised as Catholics were she to marry Charles – tantamount to demanding the conversion of the British Isles to the Catholic faith – James' ambassador declared that 'where there hath been question of diversity of religions, [Henrietta Maria] hath said, that a wife ought to have no will, but that of her husband's.' (Herbert 1830, 160)

Eventually the ambassador's campaign for Charles to marry Henrietta Maria succeeded. The course of events surrounding the collapse of the Spanish Match is complex. Suffice it to say here that the ambassador's crucial letter was sent to James on 21st October 1623⁹ and, after pointed criticisms of the impracticability of Charles' proposed marriage to the Infanta, it unleashed this bombshell:

Let me take the boldness to assure your Sacred Majesty that those of this King's council here [i.e., France] will *use all means they can*, both to the King of Spain, and to the Pope (in whom they pretend to have

⁹ 31st October (New Style dating). In 1624 France used the (modern) Gregorian calendar, whilst England still used the older Julian calendar. At the time New Style was ten days ahead of Old Style. The letter was marked '31st October Stil. No.' The dating system used for this paper is Old Style.

very particular interest) *not only to interrupt but if it be possible, to break off your Sacred Majesty's alliance with Spain*. For which purpose the Count de Tillieres¹⁰ hath strict command to give either all punctual advice, that accordingly they may proceed. (Lee 1886, 356; my italics)

On 1st November Charles held an impromptu conference with his Privy Council. All members were sworn to silence about the contents of the meeting, which demonstrates that something remarkable was happening behind the scenes: clearly Charles feared that the meeting would be so incendiary as to threaten even the Privy Council's discretion. Charles had had nearly a month to debrief his Councillors following his return from Madrid had that been the cause of the meeting; nothing had materially changed as to the marriage treaty since then. Yet apparently there was new ultra-secret information Charles had to impart. An apparent blank-cheque offer from one of Europe's foremost military powers would surely have been discussed.

Such an extraordinary letter would not have emerged from out of the blue: there must have been feelers going out to the French court to see if there was some way Charles could evade the disastrous obligations he had signed up for in order to marry the Infanta. As early as 1619 the same ambassador had suggested that a marriage deal between Charles and Henrietta Maria could involve some sort of arrangement regarding the Palatinate (Herbert 1830, 158). In the context of 1623, a French commitment to 'use all means they can' to break off the Spanish Match meant offering to commit French troops to restore the Winter Queen and her husband to their rule over the Palatinate. It was during October, as the feelers would have been going out to the French court, that James suddenly decided to demand that the marriage treaty that had already been signed with the Spanish be 'revised upwards' so as to include military intervention in favour of James' daughter. The historian Gardiner (who was unaware of the apparent French offer) was astounded at James' affrontery: 'He actually believed that the King of Spain would be able and willing to effect what was now equivalent to a revolution in Germany as a personal favour to himself' (Gardiner 1869, 428).

Despite Spanish horror at this sudden suggested revision, James grew supremely confident that his son-in-law would be returned to the Palatinate as ruler. On 15th November James sheepishly told the Spanish ambassadors that he had promised his daughter and son-in-law that 'by fair means or by foul he would recover all that they had lost' (Gardiner's account. Gardiner 1869, 440) – so James believed he had discovered a 'foul' means. Remarkably, two days before this meeting with the Spanish ambassadors James started sending out messengers to Madrid with orders to prevent the proxy marriage ceremony. Despite this wrecking manouevre, on 20th of November James wrote to his son-in-law to announce 'we make you offer of a present and full restitution of all the

¹⁰ The French king's ambassador to James' court.

Palatinate unto the person of your son, and that you shall be his administrator during your life, and that after the death of the Duke of Bavaria your son shall be re-established in the electoral dignity...' (Gardiner 1869, vol. II, 448-449). James' behaviour is only explicable if he believed that he had a rock-solid offer of military commitment from France and that either the Spanish would match it or he'd go with the French offer. Either way, a commitment of troops to restore the Palatinate to the rule of James' daughter and son-in-law seemed guaranteed.

When James' messengers arrived in Madrid the wedding was cancelled and the marriage arrangements terminated, but when marriage negotiations with France began, James discovered that his expectation of French military support was entirely misplaced. The ambassador was abruptly recalled, amidst such anger that his life was shattered forever. An editor of the ambassador's autobiography (which – equally abruptly – stops at this dismissal) stated that his 'public life in the years covered by his autobiography was a triumphal progress; it was almost without shadow. His public life in after years is a dreary series of disasters' (Lee 1886, xxix-xxx). James refused to redeem the large debts run up in the course of his French service, refused to make him a member of the Privy Council – the only French ambassador during his reign not to be so appointed, as our ambassador himself bitterly complained – and in general both James and Charles treated him with remarkable disrespect for the rest of their lives. There seems to be no other explanation but that our ambassador had lied.

The ambassador's autobiography declares several things: that he thought the Spanish side were acting in goodwill; that there was some kind of covert operation going on; and that he would be embarrassed to include fuller details in his autobiography (thus indicating that he did have some role in the collapse):

By the intelligence I received in Paris, which I am confident was very good, I am assured that the Spaniard meant really at that time, though how the match was broken, I list not here to relate, it being a more perplexed and secret business than I am willing to insert into the narration of my life. (Lee 1886, 243)

The identity of this ambassador is interesting in itself: he was Sir Edward Herbert, the older brother of Sir Henry Herbert, the Master of the Revels who so curiously approved this politically incendiary play. During November 1623, Sir Henry Herbert was acting as a trusted intermediary for his brother – a letter from Robert Carr to Sir Edward Herbert regarding Spanish matters dated 10th November 1623¹¹ begins: 'My Lord, I have received from your brother Sir Henry two of your letters together' (Carr 1623). It may be inferred that Sir Henry was supportive of his brother's actions at this time. Given his brother's brutal treatment at the hands of his king, Sir Henry had motive to allow subversion.

¹¹ 20th November New Style dating.

Moreover, the Herbert family's last-ditch efforts had apparently saved England from disaster. 'How would it haue joyd brave Talbot (the terror of the French)', Nashe famously wrote, 'to thinke that after he had lye two hundred year in his Tomb, he should triumph againe on the Stage' (Nashe 1592, 26). How much more would it have joyed Sir Henry Herbert to witness his family's greatest triumph being celebrated on stage and immortalized in art by the country's best playwright. Joyed enough to bend the rules, I suspect.

Game was a key source of political iconography for decades after its performances in 1624. In the midst of the Civil War, for example, a pamphlet entitled *The Game at Chesse. A metaphoricall discourse shewing the present estate of this Kingdome* was published. Given this, it is interesting that William Herbert, one of the leading political figures of his day, had multiple portraits made that associated him with the game of chess.



Figure 3 – *An interior with Charles I, Henrietta Maria, The Earls of Pembroke and Jeffery Hudson* c.1635, RCIN 405296, Royal Collection Trust / © Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2018

Above is a British School painting formerly attributed to Hendrick van Steenwijck the younger, entitled 'An Interior with King Charles I, Queen Henrietta Maria, Jeffery Hudson, William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke and His Brother Philip Herbert (later 4th Earl of Pembroke).' William Herbert was one of the Jacobean age's greatest patrons of painters, just as he was one of the greatest patrons of poets and Protestant thinkers, and he had a particular fondness for allegorical art (O'Farrell 2011, 100).

The composition of this painting is extraordinarily eccentric. Charles, King of England, is portrayed as an utterly peripheral hangdog figure lurking in the

gloomy doorway at the very edge of the painting. Henrietta Maria stands in front of him as the couple are presented to an amused and confident Philip Herbert and the commanding figure of William Herbert. Both Herberts carry their white staves of their respective offices, whereas the King bears no such insignia. This is a radical reversal from the orthodoxy of the monarch being portrayed as the central figure receiving obeisance from his courtiers. The artist must have had a reason to do so. If this strangeness weren't enough, the colourful parrot curiously stationed behind William Herbert signals an allegorical meaning.

The painting apparently celebrates the Herberts as being the court's 'queen-makers' - i.e. the people that effectively decided whom Charles should marry. This artistic goal explains why Henrietta Maria is given prominence over her tag-along husband, why the Herberts are portrayed as dominant, and why no other courtiers appear in the scene.

This does not exhaust the strangeness of the composition, however, for even the Herberts are rather peripheral in the painting. The main area and the best lit area is flooring on which Henrietta Maria's court dwarf, Jeffery Hudson, and his dogs are playing. The pattern of the flooring is the same as a chessboard: the chesspiece-sized dwarf is playing a game on a chessboard. The game of chess may be being used as a metaphor for politics: the Herberts may be able to dominate kings but even they are subject to the caprice of geopolitics. The painting both glorifies the Herberts and reminds them of their powerlessness: it serves as a political *memento mori*.



Figure 4 – *William Herbert* William Herbert, 3rd Earl of Pembroke, after Daniel Mytens, oil on canvas, circa 1625, NPG 5560 © National Portrait Gallery, London

Turning to another major portrait of William Herbert, by Daniel Mytens, we see that the composition here is also slightly odd. The space to Herbert's left is notably empty. Again this seems to be because it is the flooring itself that carries significance. We once more see a chessboard pattern. Disregarding the squares obscured by Herbert's legs, there are eight squares to his left and eight squares from front to back of the room. Eight ranks and eight files, just like a chessboard.

That empty space to Herbert's left is visually dominated by an exceedingly colourful pillar in the background that looks out of place in this soberly-decorated house. The strangeness of this pillar is emphasised by its lighting and the intense contrast achieved by placing the pillar in front of a bright window. It looks rather like the pillars in the reconstructed Globe Theatre, where *Game* was performed. This, combined with the curtain beside Herbert – which doesn't seem to be designed to cover a window – suggests that the portrait of the legendary literary patron refers to theatrical matters.

William Herbert, then, is being associated both with the process of choosing Henrietta Maria and *Game*. Returning to Edward Herbert's letter, despite its sensational offer it took nearly two weeks for James to send out riders to Madrid ordering that the marriage should not take place. It seems the King still needed some extra persuasion.

6. *The Identity of White Queen's Pawn*

We therefore now turn to identifying our sacrificial pawn, via a conversation between White King's Pawn (WKP) and Black Knight (BK). Having revealed himself as a turncoat secretly working for the Black side, WKP demands a reward for his work:

WKP. I rest upon you, Knight, for my advancement. (3.1.306)

BK replies:

BK. Pawns that are lost are ever out of play.

WKP. How's this?

BK. No replications. You know me.

No doubt ere long you'll have more company.

The bag is big enough; 'twill hold us all. (3.1.310-313)

Immediately afterwards, BK 'takes' his interlocutor. The language used here is revealing. BK is threatening pawns as a plural. The taking of White King's Pawn thus serves to threaten one or more other White Pawns. There are only two other named pawns on the opposing side: White Bishop's Pawn and White Queen's Pawn. For his threat to carry any weight he cannot be threatening White Bishop's Pawn, for according to BK, himself this Pawn is so common as to be trivially dispensable:

It's but a bawdy pawn out of the way a little.
Enough of them in all parts. (3.1.153-154)

The only remaining possibility, then, is the character that speaks immediately after BK issues this threat: White Queen's Pawn. Moreover, the specific word BK uses is of great interest. Pawns can advance, but his retort 'no replications' is absurd: pawns cannot be replicated. Likewise it would be beyond absurd to threaten to prevent the post-death replication of a person. Since White Queen's Pawn is the one being threatened and she cannot be a person, she must therefore be a personification of an object.

This is further confirmed when BBP, in conversation with Black Queen's Pawn (BQP), expresses his longing for WQP in the following terms:

What art have you to put me on an object
And cannot get me off? (4.1.92-93)

In principle this object is replicable, as long as those with political power permit it. Despite this replicability, however, WQP clearly represents something very special indeed, revered by both White and Black sides. As we've seen, the Prologue calls her the 'the fair'st jewel that our hopes can deck', whilst BQP goes so far as to throw herself prostrate in front of her:

Let me fall with reverence
Before this blessed altar. (3.1.216-217)

BQP introduces WQP as 'so clear a masterpiece of heaven's art, wrought out of dust and ashes' (1.1.2-3). WQP is apparently some form of artwork, and a very great one: the word 'masterpiece' is used systematically, recurring another six times in *Game*. This artwork seems to have been composed during Elizabeth's reign, and at least partially for her. Black Bishop's Pawn (BBP) calls her:

A masterpiece of man (composed by heaven
For a great princess' favour, kingdom's love). (1.1.178-179)

When WQP laments her fate, she reinforces the idea that she existed during the previous reign and was a political pawn to Elizabeth too.

What certainty is in our bloods, our states?
What we still write is blotted out by fates,
Our wills are like a cause that is law-tossed:
What one court orders, is by another crossed. (3.1.401-404)

We note the imagery drawn from the writing process. Since we have seen that WQP's real-life counterpart is an extremely special artwork that is

paradoxically in principle replicable, and that political power is able to prevent replication, then WQP can only represent a book.

Despite the widespread reverence this book represented by WQP evidently attracts, however, at the time of the play's action, it is curiously unavailable. This is symbolised by her virginity, which she talks about in terms of 'print':

BBP. Then you have passed through love?
WQP. But left no stain
 In all my passage, sir, no print of wrong
 For the most chaste maid that may trace my footsteps. (1.1.142-144)

When WQP's name is cleared after the Black side accuse her of falsely accusing BBP, White King talks of her virginity in terms of a book:

This fair delivering act virtue will register
 In that white book of the defence of virgins,
 Where the clear fame of all preserving knights
 Are to eternal memory consecrated. (3.1.163-166)

Black Knight then remarks on WQP's lack of a 'print':

With a cheek
 Fresh as her falsehood yet, where castigation
 Has left no pale print of her visiting anguish. (3.1.180-182)

When WQP is presented with the prospect of marrying BBP she recoils, with her visceral horror expressed in imagery drawn straight from the cast type of the printing process:

So hotburning
 The syllables of sin fly from his lips
 As if the letter came new-cast from hell. (5.2.42-44)

WQP is thus a representation of some book, and the 'virginity' that is central to her character is an expression of her determination to remain unprinted. This, of course, invites the question of how the artwork came to attract such wide veneration if it was unavailable in printed form: it must have had public exposure in some other way to that on a page. This could only have been orally, and (since manuscripts were so rare) by a small number of people to a large audience: from the pulpit or the stage. Since the audiences spanned the sectarian divide, the pulpit seems an unlikely source, meaning that this artwork was probably disseminated at the theatre.

The word 'play' and its variants are used 24 times in *Game*. We even get a 'masterpiece of play' (5.2.77). WQP even expresses her opinions using theatrical metaphors, including an unmistakable Shakespeare allusion:

‘true-filed lines’, the character of Fat Bishop is defined by his willingness to lie in books: ‘there’s my recantation in the last leaf.’ (2.2.90)

The line about ‘the fool and the knave’ is also a barbed attack on Jonson, as it uses two of his favourite insults, as shown by this epigram of his:
To Fool, or Knave

Thy praise or dispraise to me alike:
One doth not stroke me, nor the other strike.

Furthermore, Cunningham’s *Life of Inigo Jones* describes ‘Jones having accused [Jonson] for naming him, behind his back, a fool, he denied it; but, says he, I said, “He was an arrant knave”, and I avouch it’ (Cunningham 1848, 20). We may also be reminded of Jonson’s *Volpone*:

I am *Volpone*, and this, is my Knaue;
This, his owne Knaue; This, auarices Foole;
This, a *Chimera* of Wittal, Foole, and Knaue. (5.11)

Middleton in this passage therefore seems to be inverting Jonson’s praise of Shakespeare and turning his favoured insults against him. It is little wonder that Jonson was so enraged by the character of Fat Bishop, and that *The Staple of Nevves* includes a letter Jonson writes in the name of Spalato.

Black Knight reacts to the presentation of the book with:

Plague of those pestilent pamphlets! Those are they
That wound our cause to th’ heart. (2.2.93-94)

He is interrupted by the sudden – and perhaps highly appropriate – arrival of White Queen’s Pawn, but he later resumes this tirade against these ‘wounding’ publications. When he summarises the damage that the publications presented by Fat Bishop have done to the Black side cause, he does so using just two root images, one of ‘spears’ and one of ‘shaking’:

Your sharp invectives have been points of *spears*
In her sweet tender sides. The unkind wounds
Which a son gives, a son of reverence ‘specially,
They rankle ten times more than th’ adversary’s.
I tell you, sir, your reverend revolt
Did give the fearful’st blow to adoration
Our cause e’er felt. It *shook* the very statues,
The urns and ashes of the sainted sleepers. (3.1.64-71, my italics)

The deployment of these two images in a play in which ‘every particular will bear a large paraphrase’ (quoted in Taylor and Lavagnino 2007, 1776)

couldn't be accidental. There is also a specific reference to Heminges and Condell's epistle dedicatory to the Herberts in the First Folio, in which they have a comical self-dialogue concerning whether or not Shakespeare's plays may be called 'trifles':

we cannot but know their dignity greater, then to descend to the reading of these trifles: and, while we name them trifles, we haue depriu'd our selues of the defence of our Dedication. But since your L.L. haue beene pleas'd to thinke these trifles some-thing ... (Shakespeare 1623, A2r)

BK and BBP also have a debate about whether to call WQP a 'trifle':

BK. So, is your trifle vanished?

BBP. 'Trifle' call you her? It's a good pawn, sir. (1.1.284-285)

White Queen's Pawn therefore represents a book of outstanding plays written long before but unpublished until the period Middleton allegorises, which is chiefly 1623. The book is personified as a Shakespeare character acting out her relevant plot, whilst other characters make numerous extremely specific references to the First Folio. She must be a personification of Shakespeare's First Folio, finally published at the very height of the Spanish Match crisis.¹² Middleton personifies the First Folio as Isabella and makes her so naïve in order to pull off a spectacular piece of dramatic irony: the audience is well aware that they are witnessing a series of hoary old theatrical clichés ripped straight out of Shakespeare's playbook, but Shakespeare's playbook *herself* is completely oblivious and falls for everything.

Since WQP is a representation of the First Folio then that book in some way must have been offered as a sacrificial gambit to help persuade Charles to switch brides to Henrietta Maria. William Herbert – Privy Councillor, First Folio dedicatee and head of Edward Herbert's family – was the dominant Calvinist in Parliament. The legal obligation under the Anglo-Spanish marriage treaty for Charles' children to be being raised as Catholics meant that for William Herbert this marriage was a consummation devoutly not to be wished. He had the motive to collapse the Spanish Match; he had the opportunity in the shape of Edward Herbert's intelligences from Paris; Middleton is emphatic that the means involved the First Folio.

¹² Since WQP's virginity is a metaphor for the unprinted status of the First Folio, the attempted rape episode previously mentioned in connection with the *Lucrece* parody should be read as referring to the False Folio scandal of 1619. The False Folio was an illegitimate attempt to print the first collected works of Shakespeare that was given a spurious legitimacy by the use of replica frontispieces with false dates; likewise BBP makes an illegitimate attempt to have sex with WQP, and uses false dated letters as an alibi.

Since the First Folio was being used as a sacrificial gambit, we would expect some change in its status between William Herbert's attendance at the Privy Council on 1st November and the sending out of the order for the marriage not to proceed on 13th November. The First Folio was registered with the Stationer on 8th November. This was extraordinarily late: normally publications were registered before printing began in order to protect copyright; printing the First Folio would have been a highly risky financial proposition; and the publication process must have started long before. According to all normal practice the First Folio should have been registered long, long before 8th November; instead it was registered mere days before the First Folio appeared on the shelves.

Moreover, when it did appear it was horrendously full of typographical errors, with plentiful signs that the texts were still being edited during final production, such that every copy of the First Folio is slightly different. This latter point demonstrates that the book was printed before even the printers thought it was ready. *Troilus and Cressida* was apparently such a late addition that it suffered the indignity of omission from the Table of Contents, it being stuffed in on unnumbered pages instead. Although the First Folio was prepared during the long crescendo of the Spanish Match crisis – which is very possibly no coincidence, although a consideration of this lies outside the scope of the present article – it was apparently pushed out of the printshop doors with extreme haste. It seems reasonable to suppose that there was a crucial deadline, but no apparent reason for it: Shakespeare had stopped writing plays many years before; the prefatory matter asserts that the purpose of the First Folio is to eliminate the kinds of errors that plagued previous editions; the dedicatees were at that very moment engaged in a struggle to change the course of English history; the printer was coping with the death of his father that month and the assumption of his duties. The question long unanswered is why they would wait so many years, and then in the final stages act in such blind haste.

We may conclude that the extreme rush to finally publish the First Folio relates to its status as some sort of sacrificial pawn that was used by the Herberts to help collapse the Spanish Match. Shakespeare's First Folio is certainly 'sufficiently holy', then, but according to many of those most intimately involved in its creation it was also an 'unmeasurably politic' document. It should be read as such.

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