

## Historicism, presentism and time: Middleton's *The Spanish Gypsy* and *A Game at Chess*

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### ABSTRACT

Middleton's last two surviving plays, *The Spanish Gypsy* (1623) and *A Game at Chess* (1624), seem to belong to different universes, aesthetically and politically, discouraging any notion of Middleton's "late style" or "late period." One was written before, one after, the failure of negotiations for a dynastic marriage that would have united Habsburg and Stuart interests. Analysis and comparison of the two plays challenges the theoretical assumptions about "the temporal constant" in the work both of New Historicist and of Presentist critics.

KEYWORDS: Middleton, time, dynastic, ideological, Cervantes

Thomas Middleton's last two surviving plays are both representations of Spain. *The Spanish Gypsy* and *A Game at Chess* both include Spanish characters, both contain scenes set in Madrid, both make use of Spanish sources. Both were, as contemporary witnesses testify, great theatrical successes in London; both attracted the attention of the Stuart court. The two plays are thus linked to one another temporally and spatially (the time of their composition, and the fictive space represented). Nevertheless, in the almost four centuries since they were written few critics have acknowledged any similarity or relationship between the two plays; scholars who have admired and studied one have almost always ignored or discounted the other. *A Game at Chess* is described as historical, political, particularist, and satiric; *The Spanish Gypsy*, by contrast, has been praised as timeless, personal, pastoral, romantic. Recent gender criticism of *Gypsy* focuses on rape and marriage (Gossett 1984); recent gender criticism of *Game* focuses on castration, sodomy, and the rejection of marriage (Taylor 2000). Middleton and *A Game at Chess* dominate three influential books about political theatre in the 1620s: Heinemann's *Puritanism and Theatre*, Limon's *Dangerous*

*Matter*, Bromham and Bruzzi's *The Changeling and the Years of Crisis*.<sup>1</sup> None of them discusses the songs, dances, and heteronormative personal relationships of *The Spanish Gypsy*. An eyewitness of one of the first performances of *Game* called it "a foule iniury to Spayn" (Taylor and Lavagnino 2007b: 868); a recent critic of *Gypsy* describes it as "pro-Spanish" (Padhi).

Two explanations for this schizophrenic critical history are possible. Possibility number one: the world itself is schizophrenic, and therefore schizophrenia is an appropriate response to the world. According to this diagnosis, the two plays have nothing significant in common; one contradicts the other, and it would be neurotic or naive for critics to assume the existence of a unified or unifying object, or subject, or author. This position is, within the postmodern academy, now usually associated with certain kinds of deconstructive literary theory, but many exemplary applications of deconstruction and literary theory do not invoke it, and in any case it belongs to a much larger philosophical tradition, often traced back to the Pre-Socratics. Let's call this the schizophrenic hypothesis. Possibility number two: the world itself is not schizophrenic, and therefore schizophrenia is not an appropriate response to the world. According to this diagnosis, the two plays do have something significant in common, and critics have hitherto failed to realize what that something is. This position is, within the modern academy, associated with New Criticism and with formalism more generally, but it too belongs to a much larger philosophical tradition, often traced back to Plato. Let's call this the unified field hypothesis.

Two plays, two theories: one binary produces another binary. Surprise, surprise. Two paths diverged in a critics' wood. Naturally, in the finest traditions of American romantic individualism, I intend to take the road less traveled: that is, I intend not to take the right-hand fork and not to take the left-hand fork either, but instead, unlike Robert Frost, I intend to move at a right angle to the fork by climbing a tree or digging a hole. What do we see if we rise above the fork, or undermine the binary? The two paths that diverge in the wood are already paths; both have already been traveled, and both lead to predetermined destinations. If we limit ourselves to those two routes, the conclusions we reach will be predictable, trivial, and arbitrary. Robert Frost's choice of one of the two diverging paths was

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<sup>1</sup> Heinemann (1980) and Limon (1986) both use the engraved title page of *Game* as an illustration on the front of the book jacket.

predetermined by at least two preliminary unarticulated assumptions: first, that he should continue moving forward, and second, that he should remain at ground level. Likewise, both critical theories – the schizophrenic hypothesis, and the unified field hypothesis – already entail at least two shared postulates.

First, both theories share a larger assumption or claim about referentiality. The question of reference has explicitly dominated the critical history of *A Game at Chess*, but we need go no farther than the title of *The Spanish Gypsy* to encounter similar problems. To what do these titles refer? To what world do the words of these plays refer? Do both plays refer to the same world? And how can words refer to a world? What is the nature of the world and what is the relationship between the nature of the world and the nature of the language we use to refer to it? These linguistic questions are also aesthetic questions; they are the foundation not only of the various forms of historicist and political criticism that dominated Anglo-American literary scholarship in the last two decades of the twentieth century, but also of the various forms of formalist criticism that preceded the historicist wave (and seem set to follow it). The schizophrenic hypothesis and the unified field hypothesis disagree about the nature of the world (chaotic, holistic), but they both presuppose that the two plays are referring in the same way to the same world. This may be the case, but it is not self-evident, and it has not been proven.

Second, both theories share a larger assumption or claim about time. After all, both theories are attempts to account for the temporal proximity of the two plays. *The Spanish Gypsy* was licensed for performance by Sir Henry Herbert on July 9, 1623; *A Game at Chess* was licensed by Herbert eleven months later on June 12, 1624. Does that fact matter? Is time a difference-engine? Is the relative difference or similarity between texts a function of their temporal proximity? These philosophical questions are also aesthetic questions. Both theories assume that time is a rational constant; they differ only on the mathematical value of that constant. In the schizophrenic hypothesis, the value of the temporal constant is  $x$ -times-zero. According to this zero-constant, the two plays contradict each other, *sub specie aeternitatis*, because the world always contradicts itself, the word always contradicts itself, the individual subject within the world and the word is always contradicted and contradicting. In the unified field hypothesis, on the other hand, the value of the temporal constant is  $x$ -plus-one; plus one plus one plus one *ad infinitum*. Time changes the world, but it does so at a constant rate, like a

metronome. Since these two plays were written within a twelve-month period, the temporal distance between them is small, and the difference between the two plays must be correspondingly small; they belong to a single beat of the metronome, a single unified point in space-time, a single "local" culture, a single "episteme".<sup>2</sup> According to this metronomic constant, the temporal distance between Middleton and ourselves is hundreds of times greater than the temporal distance between these two plays. Looking back at the plays from such a vast distance, modern critics have simply failed to see the similarities that would have been evident to any Londoner between July 1623 and June 1624. The schizophrenic hypothesis and the unified field hypothesis disagree about the value of time (reductive zero, or additive one), but since both theories treat time as a constant they both presuppose that the two plays share the same temporal distance from the present. That distance may be nil, or it may be great, but it is the same for both plays. This may be the case, and the temporality constant may seem self-evident, but it has never been proven, it is denied by modern physics, and it is overwhelmingly contradicted by our own aesthetic experience. After all, both these plays were written thirty years after Shakespeare's *Richard III*, but *Richard III* is immeasurably closer to the cultural present than *Spanish Gypsy* or *A Game at Chess*. Cultural distance does not depend on metronomic time, but on what Joseph Roach calls "time-ports" and also on what I call "proximity-engines" (Taylor forthcoming).

By now, you may feel lost in the dark wood of philosophy, linguistic theory, mathematics and physics. Good. In order to create a new path, you have to wander away from the old paths, and get completely lost, and then find a new way out. For the moment, try to suspend your belief in either the schizophrenic hypothesis or the unified-field hypothesis, and try also to suspend your belief in the referentiality constant and the temporality constant. Try to believe, instead, for a few minutes, in Middleton. In your moment of panic, suspended over the *mise-en-abyme*, cling to the belief that the way out leads through Middleton, leads in particular through *The Spanish Gypsy* and *A Game at Chess*. Is there a path, a non-trivial path, which connects both plays?

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<sup>2</sup> For a critique of the assumptions about space/time in the work of Michael Foucault, Clifford Geertz and New Historism, see Taylor (1993).

One unexpected path that connects them leads through Joseph Mead, who held the Mildmay Greek lectureship and a fellowship at Christ's College, Cambridge from 1618 to his death in 1638. For those of you tired or suspicious of literary theory, I will offer two new archival discoveries, both from the letters of Mead to his friend Sir Martin Stuteville of Dalham. The second discovery concerns *A Game at Chess*. The first occurs in a letter dated 16 May 1623, in the context of other news from Madrid: "And Archie the King's foole, fell there also from an horse & is killed" (Mead, f. 328<sup>v</sup>). The royal jester in the court of King James I was Archie Armstrong who, in the spring of 1623, was in Madrid as part of the entourage of Prince Charles. The rumor of his death was exaggerated; he survived and returned to England later that year. But this story of his accident with a horse in Madrid accounts for a hitherto unexplained passage in *The Spanish Gypsy*. Act three, scene two is explicitly located in the home of Don Fernando, Corregidor of Madrid; the speech in question is spoken by Diego to the Corregidor (3.2. 246-261).<sup>3</sup>

The jester that so late arrived at court  
 (And there was welcome for his country's sake),  
 By importunity of some friends, it seems,  
 Had borrowed from the gentleman of your horse  
 The backing of your mettled Barbary –  
 On which being mounted, whilst a number gazed  
 To hear what jests he could perform on horseback,  
 The headstrong beast (unused to such a rider)  
 Bears the press of people on before him;  
 With which through the lady Clara meeting  
 Fainted, and there fell down [...]  
 A servant coming forth, and knowing who  
 The lady was, conveyed her to a chamber.  
 A surgeon, too, is sent for.

Most of the details of this narrative – a horseman, a crowd in the street, a bystander who falls down and is conveyed into a chamber in the house of the father of an aristocratic rapist, even the surgeon – all this comes from a story by Cervantes, "La Fuerza di Sangué" ("The Power of Blood"), included in his popular and influential collection

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<sup>3</sup> Quotations from *The Spanish Gypsy* and *A Game at Chess: A Later Form* cite the texts and line-numbering in Taylor and Lavagnino (2007a).

of *Exemplary Novellas* published in 1613.<sup>4</sup> That story was the main source for the rape plot of *The Spanish Gypsy*. In Cervantes, as in the play, this accident is the story's turning point, leading to the discovery of the identity of the rapist. But in Cervantes the horse is ridden by an anonymous competitor in a horse race. In the play, by contrast, the rider is, very specifically, a recently-arrived foreign jester, associated with the court, and welcome because of the court's friendly attitude toward the country from which he comes. None of this is necessary for the plot. Why would any author change the details of the story in Cervantes, in order to provide so much superfluous information about the identity of the rider of the horse? *The Spanish Gypsy* was licensed less than two months after Joseph Mead passed on the story about an accident in Madrid involving a horse ridden by a foreign jester recently arrived at the Spanish court. The only plausible explanation for the play's re-writing of Cervantes at this crucial point is that the author of this passage had heard the story about Archie Armstrong, and that he expected at least some members of his audience to have heard that story too – or, at the very least, to be aware of the fact that the English jester Archie Armstrong had visited the Spanish court in Madrid in the spring of 1623.

Which is to say: one of the sources of *The Spanish Gypsy* – a source hitherto unrecognized by modern scholarship – is the historic visit of Prince Charles to Madrid in 1623. This is also a major source for Acts Four and Five of *A Game at Chess*. Since that visit happened ten years after Shakespeare's last play, it is less familiar to most Renaissance scholars than the Essex rebellion of 1601 or the Midlands riots of 1607, but it was more important – for England, Spain, and Europe – than either. For a decade diplomats shuttled between London and Madrid, discussing what came to be called the Spanish Match, a proposed marriage between Prince Charles, the heir to the British kingdoms, and the Infanta Donna Maria, the younger sister of King Felipe IV. This alliance between the Protestant Stuart dynasty and the Catholic Habsburg dynasty became particularly pressing, and complicated, with the onset in 1618 of the Thirty Years War, a war precipitated by the actions of James I's son-in-law Friedrich V, the Elector Palatine. In early 1623 Prince Charles tried to break the

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<sup>4</sup> For evidence that Middleton used Cervantes (1613) (or one of the early Spanish reprints) rather than the French translation (Cervantes 1620), see Taylor and Lavagnino (2007b: 437).

diplomatic deadlock by going to Madrid in person. He and the Duke of Buckingham – the White Knight and White Duke of *A Game at Chess* – disguised themselves, secretly left England, and traveled incognito, with only a couple of servants, across the Channel and then overland through France to Madrid, where they remained for six months. Modern historians continue to debate the wisdom and agenda of that visit, and why it failed.<sup>5</sup> But no one disputes the extraordinary anxiety produced in the British public by the long absence of the unprotected heir to the throne. The obsession with Madrid during those months was particularly strong in London, which was the center of England's written and oral news networks, and also arguably contained its most fervently Protestant population. The French ambassador in London reported that Charles's departure "hath left a great amazement among the people who are much perplext" and the Earl of Kellie wrote to a friend in Scotland that 'you can not believe such a dead dumpe it did streake [strike] in my most mens myndes heir" (Cogswell 1989: 36).

That is the context invoked by the play's reference to Archie Armstrong. That historical source significantly differs from the literary sources of the play. The text of *The Spanish Gypsy* does not acknowledge its debt to Cervantes, and since the *Exemplary Novellas* had not been translated into English, it is unlikely that many spectators were aware of the relationship between the English play and the Spanish book. Certainly, an audience's reaction to the play does not depend on any knowledge of its literary antecedents. By contrast, the passage about the jester goes out of its way to connect the play's fictional characters to real and recent events in Madrid. The play text does not refer to Cervantes, but it does refer to Archie Armstrong's visit to Madrid. The text here refers to the world outside the fiction, and in doing so it connects the fiction to that historical and political world. It asserts that the events of the play were happening in the same time and place as the negotiations for the Spanish Match. It encourages the audience to think simultaneously about two sets of stories – the stories in the play and the stories about what was happening in Madrid.

That kind of parallel thinking was encouraged by the very title of the play, which would have been posted on flyers all over London (Stern). The first of Cervantes's *Exemplary Novellas*, the source of

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<sup>5</sup> See for instance the radically different accounts by Redworth (2003) and Pursell (2002, 2003).

much of the play's Gypsy plot, is entitled "La Gitanilla." This is the feminine and diminutive form of masculine singular *gitano* ("gypsy"): hence *gitana* ("female gypsy"); hence *gitanilla* ("young or little female gypsy"). Middleton could read and write Spanish, but if he had consulted the 1620 French translation of Cervantes he would have found there the title "La Belle Egyptienne" (meaning "the beautiful female gypsy"), a deliberate oxymoron, like *A Chaste Maid in Cheapside*. Neither the Spanish nor the French title of the story by Cervantes contains anything like the English word "Spanish". The play could have been called "The Fair Gypsy" or "The Little Gypsy Girl," but instead it advertises its Spanishness. It does so in the very months when the English people were obsessed with what was happening or might happen in Madrid. The change in the title, and its effect, can hardly be accidental. Moreover, the altered title loses the specificity of the original: there is only one "little female gypsy" or "beautiful female gypsy" in the novella, and consequently there is no ambiguity about the protagonist of the story. But which gypsy is "The Spanish Gypsy"? Preciosa? Alvarez? Don Juan? All the play's Gypsies are Spanish. And is "The Spanish Gypsy" meant as an oxymoron, or a tautology? Are we meant to realize that "Spanish" and "Gypsy" are alternative ethnic identities, or does the title deliberately and satirically mix the two? Is "Spanish Gypsy" equivalent to what the dialogue calls "Egyptian Spaniards" (3.1. 51)? At play's end we discover that all the Gypsies are really Spanish aristocrats – and that nobody has been able to tell the two categories apart. During this period, the Spanish were obsessed with the issue of blood-purity; Spain's northern European enemies routinely resorted to racist insults about the Iberian mix of European, African, and Jewish ancestry. Certainly, the Spanish ambassador in London regarded *A Game at Chess* as a racial insult; as he indignantly reported, in the 1624 play King Felipe IV was represented on stage as "el rey de los negros" and King James as the "rey de los blancos" ("the king of the blacks" and "king of the whites," respectively).<sup>6</sup>

But the nuances of the play's title matter less than the fact that the change of title, like the foreign jester on horseback, invited spectators to think about the political drama then unfolding in Madrid.

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<sup>6</sup> Taylor and Lavagnino (2007b: 866) [Howard-Hill (1993: 194, 195)]. Appendix G in Taylor and Lavagnino (2007b: 865-873) gives a transcription, in the original languages, of all known early reports; Howard-Hill gives English translations of selected reports known to him.



Moreover, *The Spanish Gypsy* is set – as the first scene immediately establishes – in Madrid. This is another departure from the story by Cervantes, in which, as we would expect, the Gypsies do not remain stationary, but wander around Spain. “La Gitanilla” begins in Madrid but it ends 400 kilometers away, in Murcia; Juana Cardochia propositions Don Juan in Murcia, he is imprisoned in Murcia, he marries Preciosa in Murcia. The play, instead, keeps all the action in Madrid. *The Spanish Gypsy* is, in fact, the first English play set in Madrid. The word “Madrid” occurs ten times in the dialogue; in no other English play performed before 1642 does it appear more than three times, and in all other English plays of the period the word is spoken altogether only ten times. That is, this single play, written while Charles was in Madrid, contains half of the dramatic references to Madrid in the entire period from 1580 to 1642.<sup>7</sup>

All these changes – to the equestrian accident, to the title, to the setting – encouraged or compelled the play’s first spectators to think about the political drama then unfolding in Madrid. They did so in very concentrated bursts of allusion: an eleven-line speech about an accident involving a foreign jester on horseback, a three-word title, the one word “Madrid” repeated ten times. A similar concentrated burst occurs in a short episode involving “a suitor to his Catholic Majesty” (the King of Spain). Act Three scene two – the same scene that, two hundred lines later, will refer to Archie Armstrong – begins with a public profession of reconciliation between ancient enemies. “The volume of those quarrels is too large And too wide printed in our memory. – Would it had ne’er come forth! – So wish we all!” (3.2. 15-17). A “son who is as matchless as the father” generously “casts a hill of sand on all revenge, and stifles it.” A Spanish nobleman then promises “to solicit The King for the repeal of [...] a banished man” (3.2. 23-25). A key English demand in the negotiations for the Spanish marriage was that the King of Spain intervene to insure the restoration of the Protestant Frederick V to his lands in the Palatinate, from which he had been driven by Spanish armies (the repeal of a banished man). The aristocratic young man who is “petitioning the royalty of Spain” for this repeal asks “what hope” there is that his request will be successful, and is

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<sup>7</sup> These statistics derive from a search of the “Literature Online” database in May 2005, when an earlier version of this essay was given at a conference in Murcia. See also Sugden (1925).

told he can depend on "The word royal" [that is, a royal promise], at which point everyone on stage declares "And that's enough" (3.2. 28-32). Defenders and opponents of the Spanish Match were divided on precisely this issue: whether the mere promises of the King of Spain were "enough". The aristocratic young man making this petition then immediately asks for a reaffirmation of "the promise you so oft have made me" that he will receive their daughter as his "wife"; her parents repeat their verbal assurances, but he complains of being teased and tormented. "The tree bows down his head Gently to have me touch it, but – when I offer To pluck the fruit – the top branch grows so high, To mock my reaching hand, up it does fly. I have the mother's smile, the daughter's frown." Prince Charles was repeatedly frustrated in just this way. In response to this complaint Luis is told "O, you must woo hard! – Woo her well; she's thine own" (3.2. 39-50). Prince Charles tried to break the diplomatic deadlock by personally wooing his proposed bride, but he had no more success than this character in the play.<sup>8</sup> None of this material comes from Cervantes, or has any other known literary source; all these links between the situation of the fictional Don Luis and the historical Prince Charles in Madrid are concentrated in a mere 35 lines of dialogue.<sup>9</sup> Unlike the Archie Armstrong speech, nothing in this episode forced spectators to think about Prince Charles, but the cumulative density of the interpolated similarities surely created a strong sense of *déjà vu*.

A more sustained sense of *déjà vu* is created by a character that the play calls Don John. Cervantes calls him "Don Juan." The name "John" may seem innocent enough, especially to Shakespearians, familiar with the Don John in *Much Ado about Nothing*. But when Prince Charles traveled incognito across Europe, he took the name "John Smith," and the alias John or Jack shows up repeatedly in contemporary responses to his trip. The enormously popular and influential polemicist Thomas Scott, for instance, refers to Charles

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<sup>8</sup> The claim that he need only "woo her hard" in order to make her his own is immediately contradicted by an aside: another character objects: "[t]hat law" – i.e., the law that hard wooing will lead to possession – "That law holds not 'mongst Gypsies. I shoot hard, And am wide off from the mark" (3.2. 51-52). In fact, Luis never gets his promised bride; by the end of the play she has been married to someone else, without his even being informed until after the wedding.

<sup>9</sup> Padhi (1984) identified Guzman de Alfarache as the source of the names Luis and Roderigo, and of the marital disappointment of Luis, but none of the details at the beginning of 3.2 come from Aleman.

and Buckingham as "Jonathan and his Armour Bearer" (Cogswell 1989: 293).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, when he becomes a Gypsy John takes the new name "Andrew", a Scots name (rather than the "Andre" the character adopts in Cervantes).<sup>11</sup> These two names, "John" and "Andrew", are the only recognizably British names in the entire play. Both are applied to a young nobleman who, in a grand romantic gesture, disguises himself and runs away from home in order to woo and marry a woman from a very different culture. King James at the time described Charles and Buckingham as "venturous knights, worthy to be put into a new romance." Endymion Porter, describing the Infanta, wrote that "there was never seen a fairer creature." Charles was "wonderfully taken" with her (Redworth 2003: 74, 84, 88). This is the language, and the genre, of the Don John plot of *The Spanish Gypsy*.<sup>12</sup> Don John appears among the gypsies as unexpectedly as Prince Charles appeared in Madrid. Consider, from the historical perspective of the Spanish Match, the following lines of their first exchange. Don John: "I have wooed thee; thou art coy." (2.1. 241-242). Don John: "I must, by this white hand, marry this cherry-lipped, sweet-mouthed villain." She replies: "There's a thing called *quando*". He replies: "Instantly" (2.1. 247-250). She asks: "Marry me? Can gold and lead mix together?" (2.1. 255). She tells him that the only way he can convince her to marry him is to "turn Gypsy for two years. Be one of us" (2.1. 264-265).<sup>13</sup> The Spanish believed that Charles had come to Madrid to convert to Catholicism, and they repeatedly tried to convert him.

Later, a Gypsy reads the palm of Don John's father, and tells him that his "son would ride, the youth would run, The youth would sail, the youth would fly! He's tying a knot will ne'er be done. He shoots, and yet has ne'er an eye" (3.2. 191-194). This speech actually fits the historical Charles better than the fictional Don John: unlike

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<sup>10</sup> See also James I's poem on the departure "Of Jacke and Thom," which refers to "Jacke his sonne and Tom his man" (Cogswell 1989: 43-44).

<sup>11</sup> *The Spanish Gypsy* emphasizes the pseudonym as Cervantes does not: "Andrew" (4.1. 153, 158). "Your name is Andrew?" (4.1. 157); also later in 4.3 and 5.1.

<sup>12</sup> Padhi (1984) suggested that Preciosa was meant to suggest the Infanta, claiming that her age was changed from fifteen (in Cervantes) to thirteen (in the play) because that was the age of the Infanta. Actually, the Infanta was 17 in 1623. But the play does not actually say that Preciosa is thirteen; instead, she says only "I am in my teens" (2.1. 85). Such a claim was much less likely to attract intervention by the censor than "seventeen" would have, but it allows audiences to make the connection themselves.

<sup>13</sup> He repeats this, incredulously, at the end of the scene: "Turn! for two years!" (2.1. 268).

Charles, Don John does no sailing, in the play or the novella, because, unlike Charles, he does not need to do any sailing in order to get to his beloved.

Don John next appears in a scene that stages his betrothal to his alien bride, and his corresponding adoption of her identity. He repeatedly tries to kiss his beloved, and is – as Prince Charles was – prevented from doing so. “No kissing till you’re sworn” (4.1. 12). He declares that “To be as you are, I lose father, friends, Birth, fortunes, all the world” (18-19). Singing “Kings can have but coronations,” the Gypsies “Close” – that is, enclose – “this new brother of our order” (42-45, 54-55). He solemnly swears, “I vow Your laws to keep, your laws allow” (56-57). The chief Spanish demand in the negotiations, and the chief English Protestant anxiety, was that after the marriage England would legalize the practice of Catholicism. “Kings’ diadems shall not buy thee,” Don John declares – the scene’s third reference to kings, which are irrelevant to the fictional context, and not present in Cervantes. Two scenes later, Don John is imprisoned, and his companions are ordered to “stir not one foot out of Madrid” (4.3. 171-172). In Cervantes they are all in Murcia. But on May 11, 1623, Charles had asked to return to England. Permission was refused. He and his companions had effectively become – as the English public had always feared they would – prisoners in Madrid (Redworth 2003: 111). Nevertheless, at play’s end Don John is released, and gets the bride he has wanted, in a generically happy romance ending.

Does this mean that *The Spanish Gypsy* supported, endorsed, and celebrated the Spanish Match? Not necessarily. The fervent English Protestant minister Dr. Thomas Gataker, in a sermon given and printed in 1623, thought that his parishioners had “need of cheering vp” (2) “in such a time especially, when so much cause of *sorrow*” (1), it was hard to avoid being downcast, but Gataker urged them to maintain their composure, because any sign of public dejection “heartneth Gods enemies” (the Catholics); it “giueth them occasion of triumph, when they see Gods children hang the head” (28). As historian Thomas Cogswell concludes, “the only question early in 1623 was not when [or whether] the match would be concluded but rather at what cost” (37). The jokes, songs, dances, and romantic happy ending of *The Spanish Gypsy* may have been, like Gataker’s sermon, an effort to boost the morale of dejected Protestants, in part by imagining the best possible version of an outcome that seemed inevitable. At the end of the play the wandering bridegroom Don John is welcomed home by his father, and restored to an identity that

had been only briefly disguised. By contrast, as a direct result of her love for Don John his alien bride is, in the final scene, utterly transformed, abandoning her lifelong Gypsy identity entirely. Indeed, in another striking departure from Cervantes, at the end of *The Spanish Gypsy* no Gypsies remain: in the last act they are all metamorphosed.

So far, all the connections I have described between *The Spanish Gypsy* and the Spanish Match – the title, the setting, the horseman, various details of the Don John plot – all these changes from Cervantes are politically neutral. They do not, in themselves, assume or enforce a particular attitude toward the Spanish Match. But other changes to the play's literary sources do suggest a particular ideological stance.<sup>14</sup> In Cervantes only one man, Don Juan, runs away from home and debases his identity for the sake of a woman. In the play, two men do so: Don John travels on his own, but Sancho is always accompanied by his companion Soto.<sup>15</sup> The play treats Don John fairly sympathetically, as Cervantes does. But by creating the inseparable Sancho-Soto duo, the play provides an alternative fictional parallel to the Spanish Match, a parallel in some ways more obvious, because the visit to Madrid inextricably paired Prince Charles and his "man" Buckingham. Moreover, we actually see the duo arrive among the Gypsies before Don John does, and before we learn their names we hear them pounding on the door, and are told "Here's gentlemen swear all the oaths in Spain They have seen you, must see you, and will see you" (2.1. 115-116). The two unnamed

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<sup>14</sup> The play begins with darkness, lust, rage, violent abduction, rape, a crucifix metonymically identified with an aristocratic Spanish rapist. That much comes from Cervantes. Of course the Black Legend of Spanish cruelty and lust often drew upon Spanish sources, preferring to condemn Spain out of the mouths of its own writers; but the English text *might* just be innocently echoing its Spanish source. However, the first few minutes of performance add to Cervantes an entirely gratuitous reference to "the Inquisition chapel" and the claim that "Many of our Spanish gallants act these merry parts [i.e. rapes and abductions] every night" (1.1. 27-28). The rapist later excuses himself by claiming that "many thousand in Madrid drink off The cup of lust (and laughing) in one month" (3.1. 20-21). Likewise, Act Two adds an account of a Spanish vendetta, and a Machiavellian plot to bring a man back from exile so that he can be assassinated. None of this suggests a particularly objective, or charitable, attitude toward Spain. On the other hand, by play's end the rapist and the vendetta-driven Machiavellian have both repented, demonstrating that the Spanish are redeemable.

<sup>15</sup> There is a Sancho in the Cervantes novella, but he takes no companion with him, is a fugitive implicated in two murders, encounters the Gypsies accidentally, and does not stay with them long.

strangers are as aggressive and unexpected as Charles and Buckingham, arriving in Madrid and knocking on the ambassador's door, without any advance warning; before we know who they are, Soto describes his master as "more than a gentleman," and himself as a "diminutive don." The first words addressed to Sancho are "Come aloft, Jack-little-ape" (2.1. 124); his reply – "Would my jack might come aloft!" (125) – picks up the word "Jack", the nickname given to Charles after he adopted the pseudonym "John Smith." Like Prince Charles, who was a shy and awkward public speaker, Sancho lets his companion speak for him, while he walks aside and says "Hum". Like Charles, Sancho tries unsuccessfully to get his young woman "loose from [her] company." Like Charles, Sancho "transform[s] [him]self out of a gentleman into a Gypsy" for the sake of a young woman, but the play mocks their sartorial transformation: "If the devil were a tailor, he would scarce know us in these" clothes (3.1. 35-36). They are described as "an idle gentleman And a thing of his, a fool," as "[a] very fine ass and a very fine foal," and as "a couple of cocks" who, after they have "stole" away and gone "abroad", then "Doodle-doo they will cry on your dunghills again" (3.2. 130-144). But Sancho's most remarkable characteristic is his absurdly excessive and entirely futile generosity: in his first encounter with his beloved he gives her gold, and then his cloak, scarf, feather, hat, ruff, and rapier. Afterwards, his guardian asks "Does any gentleman give away his things thus?" (2.2. 132) and "Where's the money to do all this?" (2.2. 161). The Prince's visit to Madrid was appallingly expensive, especially for a British government already strapped for cash. King James, warning Charles that 5000 pounds sterling had already been sent, then proceeded to dispatch precious stones "rumoured to be worth between 80,000 and 200,000" pounds (Redworth 2003: 95-96). Many of these were, like Sancho's clothes, simply given away. Like Don John, Sancho and his companion get thrown into prison; John retains his dignity and integrity, but Sancho and Soto shit themselves with fear; at play's end they go home, without a bride or anything else, having wasted a great deal of money to no purpose whatsoever. None of this is in Cervantes; all of it provides a satiric commentary on what Pretiosa calls "The faults of great men" (and indeed – she continues – "great men Have oftentimes great faults)" (5.1. 120-121).

I could continue analyzing *The Spanish Gypsy* in this way; virtually every character and scene could have been interpreted as a precise and significant commentary on the Spanish Match. It would

have been obvious to the original audiences that the play Middleton co-wrote in 1623, like the play he wrote alone in 1624, was in part a representation of contemporary Anglo-Spanish politics. I may therefore seem to be supporting the unified-field hypothesis – and to be producing the kind of explicitly political reading of an apparently apolitical text that has dominated criticism of early modern literature for a quarter century. Such reading strategies effectively treat every play of the period as though it were *A Game at Chess*, and they therefore have the effect of ignoring or eclipsing or denying the scandalous uniqueness of *A Game at Chess*, which was obvious to all contemporaries. Such readings do not prove the unified field hypothesis; rather, they postulate the unified field hypothesis, they assume that all the texts of the period, dramatic and non-dramatic, literary and documentary, belong to the same synchronic epistemic system. Such readings are not only, by now, very tired; they also falsify the complexity and variety of our own aesthetic experience. How then can we avoid such tired reductionist readings, without simply flipping the binary switch and falling into an equally reductionist return to formalism?

We can do so by challenging what I called, at the beginning of this paper, the representation constant and the temporality constant. Are these two plays equally distant from the present? Do these two plays refer to the same world in the same way? It should already be obvious that *The Spanish Gypsy's* mode of representation, its way of referring to the world, drastically differs from the mode of reference in *A Game at Chess*. Take the issue of time. It is often said that *A Game at Chess* was such a theatrical sensation because it represented contemporary events, as though it were the theatrical equivalent of a newspaper. But the Spanish Match was in fact history by the time *A Game at Chess* was written. The play performed in August 1624 refers to events of 1620 to 1623; as one contemporary remarked, if the playwright and the actors had done the same thing a year before, they would all have been hanged for it. *A Game at Chess* refers to the past of its audience; it is, in fact, an English history play. By contrast, it is *The Spanish Gypsy* that refers to what was the unfinished and unfolding present of its first audiences. The present is, by definition, always present, and so the relationship between the fictional world of *The Spanish Gypsy* and the royal negotiations taking place in Madrid could be invoked, could be summoned into consciousness, at any moment. The play's reference to the foreign court jester on horseback is altogether typical of this mode of representation: Archie

Armstrong suddenly appears as a vivid element of the play, and just as suddenly disappears. Every one of the four young aristocrats in the play – Don John, Sancho, Luis, and Roderigo – at various moments vividly resembles Prince Charles in Madrid. This does not produce inconsistency, because the play is not trying to produce a systematic allegory in which one fictional character stands for one historical character. For us, these moments operate as flashbacks; they take us out of the aesthetic present tense of the play, and project us into the past tense of political history. But for the original audiences they were not flashbacks; they were hot flashes, moments of intensified awareness of the present, in which the performance flashed forward out of its fictional locus/setting into the performative present of the platea/platform.<sup>16</sup>

This difference in the mode of representation is demonstrated by the second archival discovery that I promised you. In a letter dated 25 May 1625, Joseph Mead wrote to Sir Martin Stuteville that “The play called the game at chesse is [also] in print but because I have no skill in the game I vnderstand it not” (1620-26: 446). From a bibliographer’s point of view, this document is important because it establishes, with unusual precision, the date of publication of the first, undated quarto of *A Game at Chess*. But Mead’s comment on the play is, for our purposes, much more important. We are inclined to assume that the difficulty of the play for modern readers results from the fact that we are unfamiliar with the detailed political history of the 1620s, and therefore do not “get” all those topical allusions to persons and events several centuries old. But Mead’s confusion cannot be attributed to temporal distance: he inhabits the same metronomic beat as the play. Mead’s correspondence demonstrates that he assiduously followed domestic and foreign politics and gossip throughout the period represented by the play; indeed, I have often cited his letters in my historical commentary on the play. The play’s enormous, unprecedented, and scandalous theatrical success, in August 1624, demonstrates that tens of thousands of ordinary Londoners – including many people less intelligent and less informed than Mead – understood the play perfectly well. Thirty-five other contemporary responses to those performances confirm the theatrical intelligibility of the play’s references to the politicians and politics of the 1620s. How are we to

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<sup>16</sup> I allude here to Weimann’s (1978) classic distinction between locus and platea in early modern performance.



explain the contrast between Mead's response and everyone else's response? The difference is not temporal but generic. All those other witnesses saw the play, or talked to someone who had seen the play. Mead, by contrast, was the first known reader of the printed play-text. We know in fact of only one other person who, in the 1620s, read the play without having seen it: that person was the censor, Sir Henry Herbert, who read it in manuscript and licensed it for performance. Scholars have often debated why Herbert licensed so scandalous a play: some interpret the license as evidence that the play was supported and promoted by a particular political faction, others cite the license as proof that the play was not politically subversive at all. But there is a much simpler explanation, which avoids this scholarly binary: Herbert, like Mead, was reading the play, not seeing it, and it is entirely possible that Herbert, like Mead, "understood it not." After all, it was in Middleton's interest to write the text in such a way that the censor would not understand it.

Mead attributed his incomprehension to the fact that he had "no skill in the game," that is, he did not know how to play chess. This explanation cannot be sufficient: it is impossible to believe that all those thousands of spectators in August 1624 were chess masters, and none of the many extant comments on the play shows any particular interest in, or knowledge of, chess. The difference in emphasis results from reading rather than seeing. A reader of the text encounters a series of actions and speeches attributed to characters identified as WQP, WBP, BQP, WKP, BBP, etc. This system of abbreviated signs creates an almost insuperable problem of reference; in order to understand the action, a series of cryptic shifting initials first has to be translated into the sign system of chess (White Queen's Pawn, White Queen's Bishop's Pawn, etc). None of these references is individuated in a recognizable way, like "Don John" or "Sancho"; each of them consists of a combination of place-markers, and all those place markers are used in different combinations. Once a reader has mastered this complicated system of reference, and can consistently identify and recognize each of the individual characters, those references within the fiction must then be translated into references to historical persons outside the fiction. By contrast, a spectator at the play simply saw Gondomar, and saw the Archbishop of Spalato, and saw King James, Prince Henry, the Duke of Buckingham, King Felipe, saw an English Jesuit priest and an English lay Jesuitess. Twelve different contemporary witnesses identify Gondomar as the main character; indeed, the play was

sometimes called "Gondomar", as though that were its title. The Archbishop of Spalato, King Felipe, King James, Prince Charles, the Conde-Duke Olivares, and the Duke of Buckingham are all named as characters in contemporary responses to the performances. Those early witnesses also describe the plot of the play: one calls it "a representation of all our spannishe traffike"; another says it "describes Gondomar and all the Spanish proceedings very boldly and broadly"; a third says that in it "the whole Spanish business is ripped vp to the quicke".<sup>17</sup> In performance there was no difficulty in understanding what or who the play represented.

All modern criticism of *A Game at Chess* is based upon reading, and is therefore subject to the same error committed by Mead; that is, all modern criticism of *A Game at Chess* inverts the relationship of tenor and vehicle, foreground and background. In performances of *A Game at Chess*, the literal sense was political; the chess game was a secondary trope. By contrast, in *The Spanish Gypsy* the literal sense is fictional; the Spanish Match is a secondary trope.

The relationship between these two plays thus contradicts the referentiality constant. *A Game at Chess* does not refer to the world in the same way that *The Spanish Gypsy* did. Moreover, the two plays do not refer to the same political world. In 1965 British Prime Minister Harold Wilson said "A week is a long time in politics." That may not be true in all times and all places – if it were true, that would just be another temporal constant – but what I think he meant is that a week *can*, sometimes, be a long time in politics. Think of how radically the global political landscape was transformed between September 8 and September 12, 2001. The theory of time needed to account for events like 9/11 is not the relentless gradualism of classic Darwinian theory (+1+1 repeated several million times) but what Stephen Jay Gould calls punctuated equilibrium, in which long periods of stability or of very slow change are punctuated by relatively sudden catastrophic shifts (+1+1+911+1+1 etc). Certainly, the temporality constant cannot explain or describe what happened to English politics between July

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<sup>17</sup> Taylor and Lavagnino (2007b: 865-873). The Venetian ambassador described it as "several representations under feigned names of many of the circumstances about the marriage with the Infanta." This comment interestingly distinguishes between "representations" and "names"; there is no doubt about who or what the play actually represents, but the characters have been given "*nomi finti*" (870). What spectators saw was more important than the names in the text; by contrast, for a reader only the names are present.

1623 and June 1624. The collapse of the negotiations for the Spanish Match, and in particular the massively jubilant popular response to the return of Prince Charles without a Spanish bride, punctuated the equilibrium of British governance: what a contemporary called a “blessed revolution” precipitated the complete collapse, indeed 180-degree reversal, of a foreign policy that had been sustained for twenty years, a radical reorganization of court factions, a drastic realignment of relations between court and Parliament, and between England and other European powers. That political earthquake also explains the difference between *A Game at Chess* and all the English history plays that preceded it. The contention between “the two noble houses of Lancaster and York” is entirely dynastic; hence the prominence in Shakespeare’s history plays of those long genealogical speeches that modern audiences find so boring.<sup>18</sup> There are no policy differences between the House of Lancaster and the House of York (or, for that matter, between the Capulets and the Montagues). *A Game at Chess*, by contrast, represents politics in terms of an ideological binary, pitting Protestants against Catholics in a way that recognizably anticipates modern political parties, which emerged during the course of the seventeenth century. *A Game at Chess* anticipates the divisions that led to the English civil wars and the Glorious Revolution. *A Game at Chess* is a different kind of history play, because it represents a different model of political history, in which the clash of ideas dominates (or at least overlays) the competition between power-seeking individuals. *A Game at Chess* imagines the new forms of collective identity that Benedict Anderson calls “imagined communities”: the racial identities of black and white, the nationalist identities of English and Spanish, the ideological identities of Protestant and Catholic, Whig and Tory, conservative and liberal.<sup>19</sup> *A Game at Chess* imagines our present. That is why it provoked such an extraordinary contemporary reaction – and that is also why modern scholars have consistently misunderstood it. It does not seem revolutionary to us because we take its terms for granted.

Those modern assumptions about the organization of political conflict also lead us to misunderstand *A Game at Chess* at a more

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<sup>18</sup> The same genealogical arguments organize the disputes between what we now unthinkingly call England and France in *Henry the Sixth Part One*, *Edward III*, *King John* and *Henry V*.

<sup>19</sup> On the racial binary in *A Game at Chess* see Taylor (2005: 132-139).

local level. The historical identity of all the main characters is established by contemporary witnesses, but those witnesses do not comment on some of the minor parts. One of those unidentified minor characters is the White Queen. Some scholars have taken her to represent the English Church, but in contemporary reports the chess characters are persons, not abstractions or institutions, and if Middleton had wanted a character to represent the English church the White Bishop could have fulfilled that allegorical function. Most scholars therefore identify the White Queen with James I's consort, Anne of Denmark. But Queen Anne had died in 1619, four years before Charles and Buckingham went to Madrid; she was a Catholic or crypto-Catholic, and had been the first person to propose a marriage alliance between the Habsburgs and one of her children. It makes no historical sense for her to be alive during any of the action of the play. Even more significantly, the identification with Queen Anne makes nonsense of the White Queen's one big moment, Act Four scene four. It would be particularly absurd to have a long-dead woman be present when Prince Charles (the White Knight) and Buckingham (the White Duke) exit to visit Spain (the Black House), and even more absurd to have a Catholic who supported the Spanish Match be horrified by their departure and worried about its consequences. These two unsatisfactory identifications of the White Queen are based on modern nationalistic assumptions: one reads her as the Church of England, the other as the Queen of England.

But there was another White Queen alive in 1623, one who was linked to King James and Prince Charles in a way that makes sense of the White Queen's relationship to Middleton's White King and White Knight. Elizabeth Stuart was called the Queen of Bohemia, the Queen of Hearts, and the Winter Queen; she lost her crown at the battle of White Mountain. It was the fate of the Winter Queen, and that of her husband the Prince Palatine, that hung in the balance in 1623 when Charles and Buckingham went to Madrid; Elizabeth was indeed horrified by the visit, and worried that Charles would be seduced by the black house; one of the primary obstacles to the Spanish Match, the obstacle emphasized by Charles and Buckingham in their explanation for the collapse of negotiations, was the Spanish refusal to guarantee the restoration of the Palatinate to

the Winter Queen and her husband.<sup>20</sup> The White Queen is threatened and almost taken by a bishop of the Black House because both Bohemia and the Palatinate had been occupied by Spanish troops and Jesuits, who imposed on both populations a policy of systematic enforced conversions to Catholicism; the White Queen is rescued by the White Bishop because her staunchest ally in the English Privy Council was the Archbishop of Canterbury, George Abbot; the White Queen is afterwards reassured by the White King, and rebuked for ever doubting him, because Elizabeth Stuart and the English public did in fact doubt James I's commitment to her cause; the White King's speeches in that scene defend King James from the widespread accusation that he had unnaturally abandoned his own daughter.<sup>21</sup> Middleton's representation of the White Queen, and the popularity of the Winter Queen in England, is not nationalistic; instead, it embodies an allegiance and an identity that is simultaneously Stuart and Protestant, dynastic and ideological. Middleton's white and black houses are not only Protestant and Catholic; the "White House" is also the House of Stuart, the "Black House" is what we call the Habsburg dynasty, what contemporaries called the House of Austria. The combination embodied in Elizabeth Stuart and *A Game at Chess* was natural, powerful, and probably inevitable in the transition between dynastic and ideological systems of governance, but it is also an unstable and potentially confusing combination. The confusion is not only ours. Charles and Buckingham confused the popular rejoicing at their return as an endorsement of their primarily personal and dynastic view of British and European politics; the Protestant public and Parliament interpreted the rejection of the Spanish Match in primarily ideological and nationalistic terms. That brief moment of exultant unity, embodied in *A Game at Chess*, was based on opposed interpretations of an ambiguous compound; the suppression of *A Game at Chess* anticipated the resolution of that ambiguity into the divisions that dominated the reign of Charles I, led to his execution, and inaugurated the modern political world.

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<sup>20</sup> Brennan (2002). Though Redworth denies that Charles and Buckingham were committed to the Palatinate, it was certainly the explanation given to the English public, and therefore the one familiar to Middleton and his audience.

<sup>21</sup> For detailed evidence of the relationship between the play and these historical events see the commentary notes to *A Game at Chess: An Early Form* in Taylor and Lavagnino (2007a: 1814-1815).

The words of *A Game at Chess* referred to a different world than the words of *The Spanish Gypsy*, but the new world order of 1624 was not just political. It was also aesthetic. Between July 1623 and June 1624 Prince Charles returned from Spain, and the Shakespeare first folio was published. John Jowett cogently describes how profoundly that book transformed Shakespeare's cultural identity.<sup>22</sup> It had an even more profound and disruptive effect on the temporality constant. Ewan Fernie, in his recent critical manifesto for "presentism", rightly points out that Shakespeare is more pervasively present in the modern world than he ever was in his own time. That pervasive global presence is due almost entirely to the first folio. Books are what I call proximity engines; they move into our presence the language of the temporally or geographically distant. Printed books do this more effectively than manuscripts, because the printing press can produce many more proximity engines, so that those material links to the past or the distant can be much more widely distributed. The Shakespeare first folio brought 36 Shakespearian or partly-Shakespearian texts into immediate physical proximity with each other, within the material confines of a single book. Our concept of the English history play, and our failure to recognize that *A Game at Chess* belongs in that category, is based entirely upon the ten plays placed in physical proximity to one another in the Shakespeare folio. Jonathan Hope and Michael Witmore can describe the linguistic profile of the history plays because of the Shakespeare first folio. Gordon Macmullan can worry the category of Shakespeare's late plays, there is a history of criticism of Shakespeare's late plays, because of the Shakespeare first folio; without the folio, we would not have texts of *The Winter's Tale*, *Cymbeline*, or *The Tempest*. There is no tradition of criticism that talks about Middleton's history plays, or Middleton's late plays. Why not? Because Middleton's plays were not collected until the 1840s, because there was not even a rudimentary Middleton chronology until the 1930s, because the Middleton first folio – that is, the first edition of all his surviving works, collected into one big volume – was not published until 2007 (Taylor and Lavagnino).

Whether or not *The Collected Works of Thomas Middleton* succeeds in demonstrating that Middleton is "our other Shakespeare," the example of Middleton, the example in particular of his last two

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<sup>22</sup> There are many accounts of the historic importance of the 1623 folio: see among recent examples Taylor (2006) and Bates and Rasmussen (2007).

plays, demonstrates that there is no referentiality constant, there is no temporality constant. There is only punctuated equilibrium, and people like Middleton, who puncture it.

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