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# A FEMALE PEON AND THE STATE OF WAR IN THOMAS MIDDLETON'S *A GAME AT CHESS*

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## 1. Introduction

*A game at chess* (1624) has fallen into oblivion because it was conceived as a political allegory. As soon as the historical reference lost its urgency, the overt textual surface sprang into a handful of hieroglyphs which did not seem worth deciphering. So much so that in the nineteenth century Anthony Trollope pronounced the play "so dull as to be unreadable" (Epperly 1988: 110). With the late twentieth-century swing to historicism, critics such as Margot Heinemann (1980: 151-171) and Albert Tricomi (1989: 142-152) became again interested in the political agenda of the forgotten play, and recovered its original authorial intention.

*A game at chess* differs from some of Middleton's other plays, such as *The black book, The masque of heroes* or *The revenger's tragedy*, in its consistent use of an extra-literary system of signifiers: the chess pieces. The dynamic world of politics is reified in this play into a system of predictable roles in a chess game. As a combination of playfulness and global thinking, the play resembles Middleton's *Mad world, My masters* or *World tossed at tennis*. In their pursuit of historical references, the twentieth-century critics of *A game at chess* tend to focus on the political identities of the chess pieces and ignore the playful multiplicity of global conflicts propelling this play. Thus they usually interpret the opposition of the Black and White pieces as a political allegory of the conflict between the Spanish and the English in the beginning of the seventeenth century, even though the play offers more than the authorial intention promises.

The purpose of this paper is not so much to argue with the historical reading of the play, as to think it away for a moment to make other readings possible.

Far from being a mere timepiece, the play is entirely comprehensible without its contemporaneous trappings and it lends itself to a variety of interpretations.

Reading *A game at chess* as a political allegory or a psychomachia amounts to ascribing to it a political or a moral purpose. Whatever Middleton's intentions may have been, today's audience need not know the details of the seventeenth-century politics. They need not accept the binary view of the political or eternal panorama either. What remains then as the essence of the play, is the sheer joy of playing, and the ambition to win the game, that is to win the audience's applause. In its motivations, chess-playing may be comparable to acting. From the point of view of the reader of the play, as opposed to its audience, the typography of every page of the play script reproduces the Black-White opposition. Although frequently taken for granted, the contrast between the white paper and the black print bears a special significance in the play in which books and letters are the most common (and suspect) props. Finally, the meaning of the Black-White opposition may be completely altered if the play is interpreted in terms of a gender war.

The term "gender", primarily used by linguists to denote "the formal classification by which nouns and pronouns (and often accompanying modifiers) are grouped and inflected, or changed in form, so as to control certain syntactic relationships", became interesting to feminist scholars because "in most Indo-European languages and in others, gender is not necessarily correlated with sex" (Guralnik 1968). Thus "sex" could be reserved for the biological aspect of the difference, whereas "gender" could be viewed as a social, cultural and historical construct. According to Myra Jehlen, "from the perspective of gender, identity is a role, character traits are not autonomous qualities but functions and ways of relating" (Jehlen 1990: 265). Jehlen points out further that "the certainty of gender provides for literature ... an anchor for the kinetic self" (Jehlen 1990: 271-272). Since gender is part of cultural consciousness, and hence it is connected with racial and class identity, the "lifting of the anchor" of gender "accentuates all the instabilities of [the character's] other identifications" (Jehlen 1990: 272).

The major challenge of the cultural approach to *A game at chess* lies in the artificial, decontextualized setting of the play. Only the living people (readers, actors, audience) can infuse the "game at chess" with meanings. The seventeenth-century audience understood the play as a political allegory. The twentieth-century reader can see a different picture. By alternately empowering and disempowering the White Queen's Pawn, Thomas Middleton both speaks and transcends the cultural wisdom of his times. The female peon, who is the focus of attention in Middleton's play and in this paper, would not have had much to say outside the ramifications of the chess game and the theater performance of the seventeenth century. However, even if her presence was originally a mere



convenience from the point of view of the playwright, she is an interesting character now that the feminist lesson has been delivered and heard. My reading is not settled in the seventeenth century. It is retrospective, interested in the coincidence of gender, class and ethic as well as in the dynamic of the "lifting of the anchor" of either of these aspects of identity.

Apart from being a political allegory, a psychomachia, a self-searching artefact, the play enacts a gender war in which ideologies of the private feminine sphere and the public masculine sphere clash. However, just as gender is a social, cultural and historical construct, so also gender war is subject to social, cultural and historical change. The first part of the paper discusses the interdependence of different levels of the Black-White opposition scene by scene as the play unfolds. The second part focuses on the gender underpinnings of the confrontations from the perspective of over three hundred years of cultural, social and political change.

The Black-White opposition seems to capture a global eternal conflict, but, in practical terms, it is presented as a multiplicity of contrasts and antagonisms in the numerous subplots of the play. It is my objective to examine these contrasts and antagonisms, and to show that the accumulation of a variety of conflicts has a centrifugal effect, and that the foregrounding the White Queen's Pawn in the male-dominated world subverts the rigid distinction between the Black and the White pieces. The hierarchy inscribed in the game via the chess framework is also questioned in the course of the play; what seems to be a global conflict, proves to hinge on the trial and tribulation of one of the smallest pieces, the White Queen's Pawn.

From my point of view, the Prologue, the Induction and the Epilogue are as worthy of critical attention as the five acts of the play. A critic who ignores them as extraneous to the chess-theme will fail to see the play as a multilayered structure.

## 2. Unity and multiplicity of action

The Prologue establishes the situation of a political conflict by formally presenting the opponents: "First you shall see the men in order set,/ States and their Pawns, when both the sides are met". Surprisingly, there is no room for women in the Prologue, even though some of them will be quite conspicuous in the play. The moral valuation inherent in the promise "You shall see check-mate given to virtue's foes", will appear ironic later on when it becomes evident that the White House consists of naive, pasteboard, emasculated figures. These complications surface only in a retrospective reading of the Prologue.

It is obvious on the first reading, however, that the Prologue extends the metaphor of a chess game to the relationship between the players and the audience: "But the fairest jewel that our hopes can deck/ Is so to play our game to avoid

your check". The pronoun *your* in this sentence may refer to the audience as a whole who judge the moral, aesthetic and political value of the play, or else to those members of the audience who watch the performance on behalf of a state or states treating it as a possible manifestation of public discontent. In the first case, the opposition is founded primarily on artistic, in the second – on political grounds.

The Induction creates yet another distinction involving the audience; namely, it pits the audience against Ignatius Loyola, who is presented as the father of the Black House, and whose first words on the stage express surprise at the location: "Hah! Where? What angle of the world is this?" Ignatius does not feel at home with the audience, which means that he is their enemy. The exposition of his vices, combined with setting him against the audience, is a flattery to the latter, and thus a move designed to obtain their favor.

The confrontation between Ignatius and the audience is modified by the startling contrast between Ignatius and Error. The former is the only explicitly historical character in the play, but also a metonymy of all Jesuits. The latter is a personification of a moral category. Surprisingly enough, it is Ignatius, and not Error, who blunders and misconstrues the world and himself. It is Ignatius, and not Error, who precipitates disintegration within the Black House. Although Ignatius leaves the stage, his ambition lives on in several Black pieces. His insistence on absolute power foreshadows the egocentrism and the resulting disruption of the Black House.

In Act One Scene One, the Black pieces outnumber by far the White characters. Only three White figures are present at this point; the naive White Queen's Pawn, the emasculated (gelded) White Bishop's Pawn, and the White King's Pawn, who is, in fact, a black piece in disguise. In this act and throughout the play, the Black pieces are more vigorous and intelligent than their White counterparts. This bitter truth is sugar-coated for the audience only in the final victory of "our" side, which is always the audience's side.

A further weakness of the White House lies in the fragility and complexity of the relationships between its members. The White Queen's Pawn and the White Bishop's Pawn do not love each other any more because the White Queen's Pawn as a woman "... must acknowledge custom to enjoy/ What other women challenge and possess" (1.1.170-171 – all quotations are from Harper's edition of Middleton's *A game at chess* cited by act, scene, and line). The Black Queen's Pawn's half-sincere and half-feigned pity for her White counterpart suggests that the gender distinction is far more crucial than the political colors.

There is more pity than hate between the two sides in the beginning of the play. Both the White Queen's Pawn and the White King's Pawn are pitied. Hate, when it appears, has personal rather than political background. The White Queen's Pawn detests the Black Knight's Pawn for purely personal reasons; he has mutilated her lover. Yet, the gelder and the gelded pretend to strive for reconciliation.



A far more bitter and insidious war is in progress within the Black ranks than between the two sides. The Black Queen's Pawn has an ax to grind against the Black Bishop's Pawn. Thus when she appears to eulogize his tenderness in front of the credulous White Queen's Pawn, she in fact mocks his lust (1.1.36-40). The Black Knight's Pawn's and the Black Knight's private criticism of the Black Bishop's Pawn (1.1.209-220, 1.1.268-271) explicitly discredits the Jesuit.

In Act Two Scene One, the gender boundary coincides with the color distinction. The Black Bishop's Pawn's attempted seduction of the White Queen's Pawn parallels the Black King's desire to rape the White Queen. Characteristically, the two White female characters are objects of sexual passion, rather than political or religious ideology on the part of the Black male figures, who may thus fuse and confuse three different spheres of life.

The Black Queen's Pawn's role in this scene remains ambiguous. She is on the Black side in conscientiously performing her Black duties, but her intervention in the seduction scene helps the White Queen's Pawn escape her oppressor.

By the end of the scene the political opposition of the Black House and the audience is restored. For one thing, the higher-rank figures, the Black Bishop and the Black Knight, come to consolidate their efforts in propagating their political cause. For another, the English audience is titillated by the enemies' references to England (2.1.197-214).

The appearance of the Fat Bishop in Act Two Scene Two complicates the binary political division by introducing moral issues. The Fat Bishop is anything but an admirable character. And yet, he is on the White side, along with the audience. This disconcerting, disorienting moment lasts until the dialogue between the Black Bishop and the Black Knight makes it clear that the Fat Bishop will be again recruited by the Black House. Interestingly enough, the Black Knight's eagerness to bring the Fat Bishop back to the Black House springs from his desire for vengeance rather than belief in a common cause (2.2.72-84).

The confrontation between the two Houses, which interrupts the scene of enlistment of the Fat Bishop, reinforces the binary division. The White Queen's Pawn, a woman and a pawn, is the object of the controversy. She is the victim of a mystification on the Black side, and credulity on the White side. At this point, the Black House appears unanimous in its efforts, while the White House splits up. The White King and Queen leave the White Queen's Pawn at the opponents' mercy. Only the White Knight and the White Duke stand by the White Queen's Pawn, and resolve to rescue her.

The next scene, Act Three Scene One, begins by blurring the Black-White boundary. The dialogue between the Black Knight and the Fat Bishop hinges on the contrast between genuine greed and false friendliness. The Fat Bishop has

not formally joined the Black House yet, and his motives are anything but political. Particularly in this scene the Black Knight is portrayed as a master dissembler. His affected friendliness toward the Fat Bishop is followed by a display of buoyant delight in the multitude of schemes he has set in motion (3.1.126-127).

Interestingly enough, the Black Knight's behavior, here and elsewhere in the play, resembles the actor's profession; both have to simulate feelings, mask their anger, take part in a variety of plots, and assume limits of knowledge suitable to their roles.

The rift within the White House persists also in this scene. The White Knight is again the only White figure who speaks up for the White Queen's Pawn (3.1.156-158). Disagreements within the Black House are less clear and more playful. The confrontation between the sides is interrupted by the Black Queen's Pawn who, again, plays an ambiguous part. Outwardly, she declares her willingness to change her color, but the immediate effect of her intervention is that everybody's attention is diverted from the White Queen's Pawn, who is forgotten, instead of being acknowledged as a heroine. The two Black characters who comment on the Black Queen's Pawn's behavior, the Black Queen and the Black Knight, engage in an interpretative duel; the Black Queen defines her pawn's action as madness (3.1.216), while the Black Knight persistently suspects a scheme (3.1.214-244). Both contestants are formally on the same side, along with the object of their controversy.

The sides are polarized once more when the White King's Pawn and the Fat Bishop become members of the Black House. The defectors do not thrive, however; their desertion dooms them. By the end of the scene, the color boundary is again obscured, and the audience faces the female games, as the Black Queen's Pawn and the White Queen's Pawn chat about a handsome gentleman and marriage.

Act Three Scene Three is a continuation of this final dialogue in Scene One. The two scenes are interrupted by the surprising Scene Two, which introduces three new characters; two Black pawns and one White pawn. None of these characters is fully developed as an individual. It is possible that this scene functions as a respite allowing the audience to forget for a moment about their investment in the White side, and enjoy the sheer dynamism of the game.

In Act Four Scene One, the color opposition interferes with the gender roles on the lowest level of the chess hierarchy. The Black Knight's Pawn recognizes the Black Bishop's Pawn because both of them are Black males. The White Queen's Pawn does not recognize the Black Bishop's Pawn because, firstly, she is a White female, and secondly, she is a puppet in the game the Black Queen's Pawn plays. As usual, the Black Queen's Pawn plays on both sides. It is her intention to catch the White Pawn, but she exults even more in embarrassing the



Black Bishop's Pawn. As usual, personal motives are far more important to these characters than the political cause.

The next scene, Act Four Scene Two, reveals new contrasts within the Black House. The dialogue between the Black Knight and his Pawn juxtaposes a high official who affirms his right to trespass moral boundaries (4.2.22-82), and a peon who worries about an offense he once committed (4.2.87-88). It becomes apparent that moral values are neither uniform nor rationally calibrated within the Black House, and that social status is inversely related to the observance of moral precepts. At the moment when disintegration of the Black House appears imminent, however, the Black King enters the scene to rebuke and exhort the Black House: "Stand you now idle in the heat of game?" (4.2.136), and further "Never was game more hopeful of our side" (4.2.144).

The dumb show in Act Four Scene Three is a continuation and a modification of Scene One. It focuses not so much on the color and gender oppositions as on the mechanics of acting or pantomime, and thus resembles Scene Two in Act Three, where the political distinctions are also viewed primarily as a pretext for playing. The vacillation between political involvement and aesthetic detachment adds to the dramatic effect of the game whose outcome is predictable from the outset (it is predicted in the Prologue).

In the next scene, Act Four Scene Four, the joy of playing or witnessing a game coincides with the joy of watching the good side win. For the first time in the play the White House, even though divided, emerges strong and victorious. The White King sounds like a hypocrite, however, when he blames the Queen for doubting her safety: "Fear? You were never guilty of an injury/ To goodness but in that" (4.4.103-104). After all, it was the White Bishop, and not the King, who saved the Queen. Nevertheless, the appearances of the king's power are kept up.

The chess-war relents in the feigned politeness of Act Five Scene One, which apparently takes place elsewhere, only to be resumed with unyielding ferocity in Scene Two when several Black pieces are captured. The latter scene brings the conclusion to the Black Queen's Pawn's game. She manages to compromise the Black Bishop's Pawn, but she is, all the same, condemned because her conversion to whiteness is impossible, and because her motivation in exposing the Black Bishop's Pawn is personal and not political.

The last scene, Scene Three, of the last act returns to the situation in Act Five Scene One, with one important change. Women do not speak in this scene, even though they are physically present on the stage. From gourmet metaphors, the conversation moves on to moral issues; vice and virtue. Both sides are equally pleasant and courteous at first. The only difference between the two Houses is that the Black pieces, and especially the Black Knight, are far more voluble than the representatives of the White House. When the White Duke and the White

Knight take the Black House by surprise, the disintegration of the Black side is completed. It is now the White King's turn to say the last word, even though his role in the whole game was marginal.

This last speech, delivered by a male and a king, is contrasted with the White Queen's Pawn's speech in the Epilogue. Although the White Queen's Pawn is never acclaimed as the winner or heroine, the fact that her speech winds up the whole play is significant. She appears in the Epilogue in a public role; as a White piece who speaks to the "White" audience on behalf of the White House. She remains, however, a woman and a pawn, and thus in her final speech exemplifies also the power of the disempowered.

## 3. The Gender War

Evidently, the eponymous "game" has a sexual as well as a political connotation, despite the authorial tendency to suppress gender meanings in the Epilogue for the sake of political clarity. Female characters in the play are not so numerous as male characters, but some of them attain considerable prominence. Interestingly enough, the strongest female voices belong to the representatives of the lowest rank – the pawns. The Queens are relatively reticent.

The Black Queen's Pawn is a complicated, ambivalent character. She resembles Livia in Middleton's *Women beware women* when she professes friendship and cheats in order to achieve her own goals, but her behavior is psychologically explicable all along. She is potentially an admirable villainess caught up in a system of opposition which does not coincide with her own hierarchy of priorities. She is a scheming peon who dreams of exerting power.

The White Queen's Pawn remains the true focus of attention throughout the play. She is as virtuous as Moll Cutpurse in *The roaring girl*, but unlike Moll, she needs protection. Although far more gullible than Moll, the White Queen's Pawn resembles Moll in her ability to speak for herself. However, the White Queen's Pawn does not give free rein to her elocutionary power. In her final speech she stops short of representing the standpoint of a female peon. Instead, she lets her individuality be subsumed by the common cause. In the Epilogue she speaks on behalf of her Queen to all the supporters of the White House.

The fact that the image of the White House is dominated by an unacclaimed, self-effacing heroine of the lowest rank has some important implications. If the White House is predominantly feminine/effeminate with both positive and negative consequences of this state of affairs, then all conflicts presented in the play have gender underpinnings.

A female peon cannot wage war, but she can polarize attitudes in an archetypal political and religious conflict which hinges on the opposition of good and evil. The close vicinity, or even overlapping, of politics and religion in the play has a gender aspect. Both of these public spheres are dominated by male characters, especially on the Black side which represents an originally strong centralized state inextricably bound with institutionalized religion. The foregrounding of a female peon in this context is a daring step. She cannot oppose either the centralized state or the institutionalized religion, but the idea of such an unequal confrontation is nevertheless latent in the play.



The presence of a female peon in the context of political and religious opposition leads Middleton to politicizing religion (by exposing it as a male-dominated political institution) and spiritualizing politics (by repressing its physical aspect). *A game at chess* does not portray a struggle in the physical sense. Even the defeat of the Black House is a highly civilized ritual. The Black pieces are "put" and not kicked or shoved into the bag (see stage directions in the last scene). There is no bloodshed on the stage. Words, both spoken and written, are the only weapons employed by the characters.

Based on political tracts whose function was comparable with the role of newspapers today, *A game at chess* refers to the clash of the English defensive nationalism, which the play associates with femininity, and the Spanish imperialism, driven by male religious ideology. Reading *A game at chess* as a psychomachia involves looking at the opposition of the Black and White pieces in terms of a universal conflict between good and evil. The overarching truth about the eternal dichotomy of good and evil, which masks the immediate political issues, holds even when the roles are reshuffled, the tables turned and England becomes an empire threatening less powerful nations. The opponents are different then and England is Black.

Middleton may or may not have foreseen such a situation. Still, the distinction between the Black and the White House in his play is not free from ambiguity. Throughout the play, the majority of the White figures are presented as virtuous, but there is a moment when the White Knight and the White Duke confess their vices in front of the Black House. The White Knight speaks of his ambition (5.3.77-78) and calls himself a dissembler (5.3.145), whereas the White Duke admits his intemperance (5.3.121-122). Both of these characters are higher-rank male figures whose sins resemble the vices of the worst representatives of the Black House. Although Middleton does not emphasize these White sins, the color-crossing gender-oriented analogy between Black and White men may account for England's metamorphosis from feminine defensive nationalism to male-dominated imperialism.

The fact that the White King appears on the stage only after the Black House has acknowledged its defeat, constitutes a significant critique of the role of the figurehead absentee king. The White King may be defined in the play as "heaven's substitute", but his role is marginal in comparison with the parts played by the White Duke and the White Knight – the aristocrats by merit, flawed as they are. The ending of *A game at chess* betrays, however, the com-

plex truths suggested in the course of the play in that it fuses the utopia of an efficient monarchy with the apocalypse of an institutionalized degenerate religion.

Despite his sympathy for the White Queen's Pawn, Middleton does not disrupt the social hierarchy to create a system based on merit and moral values. Revolutionary understatements do not evolve into a coherent new ideology of a female peon. What ensues is the moral as well as social and political stasis of this play. Unlike other plays in which good characters turn into evil ones (Vindice in *The revenger's tragedy* or Bianca in *Women beware women*) or plays in which evil characters turn out to be good (Moll in *The roaring girl*), *A game at chess* portrays good characters who remain (moderately) good and evil characters who remain (moderately) evil from the beginning to the end, irrespective of their political color. Since social mobility is impossible, color-crossing, which is not even skin-deep, seems to be the only source of dynamism. The White King's entourage appears vapid in comparison with the full-blooded representatives of the Black House and the "White" defectors. Although the good defeat the evil, the more spectacular villains live longer in the audience's memory.

## 4. Conclusion

The multiplicity of color-crossing conflicts, discussed in the first part of this paper, undermines the Black-White opposition and reduces it to a mere mask. Since the victory of the White figures is a foregone conclusion, the focus of attention is shifted to the next obvious opposition, analyzed in the second part of the paper – the gender conflict within and across the artificial color identity.

The effeminacy of the White male characters, especially the White King, and the inclination to evil in the White male aristocrats bring out, by contrast, the steadfastness of the female peon. The White Queen's Pawn is the only character who undergoes a metamorphosis in the course of the play. From an insignificant figure revolving in the private sphere of unfulfilled love and only incidentally involved in larger conflicts, she develops into a public speaker in the Epilogue. She is not an equal partner of either the White male aristocrats or the Black House but as a woman and a pawn, she points to the grassroots movements as the foundation and repository of true Englishness. Thus the female peon rises to represent and guard the public sphere, while the male characters, both Black and White, disperse their energy in private duels.

Middleton both empowers and disempowers the White Queen's Pawn. He lets her speak and rise to prominence, but as soon as she does, she ceases to speak for herself, her class or her gender. She becomes enveloped by the common cause at the expense of her class and gender identity. Thus Middleton, who both voices and contains the public discontent with King James I and his foreign policy, engages the audience/readers in a subtle game, and by doing so asserts his own political power.



The White Queen's Pawn may have been a mere theatrical expedient in Middleton's play, but she need not be treated in the same way over three hundred years later. A twentieth-century feminist and cultural critic reads into this character the later experience of female and lower-class struggle for full citizenship and access to the public sphere. It is the understated possibility of female lower-class discontent with male-dominated politics and religion that makes *A game at chess* dynamic from the twentieth-century point of view.

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