

Chaos and Harmony in Middleton's *A Game at Chess*

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The political drama at the beginning of the seventeenth century dealt essentially with the conflicts, tensions and divisions of a troubled society. It was a time when religion and politics played a very important role in the development of an early modern society. Political power was constantly present in drama, which had a great influence on audience, as plays helped to form critical attitudes, what transformed the interpretation of politics.

Middleton's play, *A Game at Chess*, one of the best examples of political drama staged in the early seventeenth century, reflects the popular and widespread anti-Spanish attitude in England at the time. We shall show with this paper how Middleton presents a political vision of his time through the chess metaphor, creating an elaborate design from diverse elements. The allegorical use of the chess game simplifies the issues in the play, visually and linguistically, to black and white, but it is language which defines the ideological connotations of a colour pattern in black and white. We tend to illustrate how we obtain a vision of order and disorder in the play by means of language, what constitutes a public response to the political matters represented in *A Game at Chess*.

The new trends of criticism, New Historicism and Cultural Materialism, have attempted the reinterpretation of traditional studies, and have raised interesting issues on the subject. There are many different aspects interrelated in the literary writing of this period such as censorship, printing, and the social, economic and intellectual factors which worked together for the production of poetry and drama (Marcus 1990: 49). Literary texts seem to be imprisoned in a network of cultural forces combining different elements as we shall see in *A Game at Chess*.

A Game at Chess brings out important aspects for consideration. We should bear in mind the social and historical framework of the play as it reflects political events demonstrating popular anti-Spanish feeling. The play was first performed by the King's Men at the Globe in August 1624, and it caused great excitement among people from different social origins and status before it was censored and withdrawn after nine days of uninterrupted performance. The success of the play lies in the representation of current political events in a society with an intense interest in state matters. Spain had been seen, for more than a hundred years, as the power which aspired to rule England, and Catholicism was portrayed as a perfidious threat, a strange religion, the instrument Spain would use to dominate England. The news that the Prince Charles and The Duke of Buckingham intended to travel to Spain to meet the Spanish King to negotiate a future marriage with the Infanta Maria did not find favourable reception among the population. English people felt suspicious about possible Catholic influence on state matters. They blamed a Spanish politician, Gondomar, Ambassador of Spain for having a strongly negative influence on

the English King himself. According to Margot Heinemann (1982: 154), the attempt to carry out this royal marriage was a failure and when The Duke of Buckingham returned from his trip to Spain without the Spanish bride, he was welcomed with bonfires and a great popular outburst of joy and relief.

It is very important for the study of the play to understand these historical events in order to estimate the importance of Middleton's play. Heinemann (1982: 14-17) illustrates the popularity of drama in the Elizabethan period, an evening in the cheapest part of the theatre at a penny was cheaper than an evening in the pub, where a quart of ale cost four pence. It would be impossible to find such audiences before the advent of film and television. Drama served as a way of experiencing and discussing social events and it reflected faithfully the reality and socio-economical development of the time. Drama was clearly felt to be inseparable from life, life from politics and politics from a sense of the past (Lever, 1987: 1). We can find here a possible explanation for the great success of the play. Prince Charles and The Duke of Buckingham had returned from their journey to Spain only a few months before Middleton wrote the play, so that the audience was able to identify the characterization of public personalities in the play, and drama gave them the necessary instruments to debate and discuss political affairs.

However, *A Game at Chess* is something more than a political drama. It is unquestionably the political intention of the play to represent historical events, familiar to the English audience at the beginning of the century. What makes this play so special is precisely the devices Middleton exploits to give us this message. The game of chess provides the perfect instrument to allegorize the power and ambition of the political game. The characters in the play are not real characters, but chess pieces that move and act according to the rules of the chess game. This outline of the chess game demonstrates the idea of two opposing teams that stand for two contrasting societies which give shape to the dramatic structure of the play.

A Game at Chess is designed in accordance with the symbolism of two opposite colours: 'black' and 'white'. Black pieces stand for the Spanish Court while white pieces represent the English one. There is a desire to identify characters with political personalities, who are portrayed in the play through the use of satire and humour. Although they are treated in a humorous way, almost grotesque, it seems that the audience did not find any difficulty in identifying most of them. For instance, Black Knight who represents Gondomar, the Spanish Ambassador, was easily recognized by the audience because he suffered from a fistula and it was well-known that he had to use a special chair to sit down, 'a chair of ease' according to the references in the play.

The literary sources of the play were a selection of pamphlets with a clear anti-Catholic and anti-Spanish feeling, which circulated during James' reign. This collection of pamphlets was written by Thomas Scott in Holland, appearing secretly in England in 1620 under the name of *Vox Populi*. They served almost as newspapers and portrayed a picture of a Roman Catholic plan for world domination for which Spanish diplomacy and the Jesuit order were responsible. This anti-Spanish attitude is perfectly translated into the play by means of satire and comic devices in order to ridicule the Black House characterization, namely Spain. Middleton lifted allusions from *Vox Populi* and brought them to life in his characters' speeches.

We would like to begin the study of the play with an analysis of two important aspects which can be found in the Induction and their later implication in the play. The play opens with Ignatius Loyola's speech stressing, from the beginning, the idea of the political organization of the Jesuit order. There are two interesting aspects in his speech. On the one hand, we find a peculiar metaphor used to describe how

his disciples are spread out all over the world in an attempt to disseminate his doctrine. They are compared to the 'grasshoppers' of Egypt. The negative connotations of this are clearly portrayed. Firstly, it mentions one of the seven plagues which devastated Egypt in ancient times. Secondly, the grasshopper is a devouring insect which feeds on and destroys the natural vegetation. It implies corruption.

On the other hand, we find in Ignatius' dialogue his intention not to follow any rule of the game; as it is clearly marked by Error, The character Ignatius is speaking to:

'Why, would you have 'em against themselves?
That's quite against the rule of game, Ignatius.' (Induction, 69-70)

It is interesting to bear in mind these two aspects as they reflect the general purpose of the play. The mention of the 'grasshopper' leads us to a language full of negative connotations and the fact of not observing any rule of the game shows the most typical features of the characters' action in the Black House. These lines from the Induction which accompany our first sight of the pieces' movement across the chess board are a perfect description of what follows.

Characters use language intentionally to emphasize the idea of chaos and harmony, and language itself is structured in two opposite forms. The language of the white characters is defined in the use of terms which imply positive connotations such as 'obedience', 'virtue', 'purity', 'innocence', 'holiness', 'virginity', 'grace' and so on, as we see in the lines below:

To that good work I bow, and will become
Obedience hamblest daughter, since I find
Th'assistance of a sacred strength to aid me,
The labour is as easy to serve virtue...' (Ac I, sc I, 91-95)

Whereas we observe another type of language which contrasts greatly with the one above. Black Knight uses powerful language full of negative terms which shows his sinister and dark intentions, for example, 'crime', 'treachery', 'violence', 'villainy' as we can see in the following lines:

And what I have done...
Abused all my believers with delight
To many a soul I have let in mortal poison...' (Act I, sc I, 258-263)

As we have observed in the examples above, the dramatic discourse in the play is composed out of language, which comes deeply influenced by ideology. Characters themselves are aware of these linguistic implications, so, White Bishop's Pawn is referred to as the one who 'comes of the whiteness of the cause, the side, the quality / are sacrifices to her worth and virtue'. (Act I, sc I, 201-202). On the contrary, Black Knight is referred to as the one who 'talks of violence, that shames creation, deeds would make night blush'. (Act I, sc I, 225)

Sin, ambition, the destroying of the soul are expressed through metaphors such as the ulcer that must be healed or the infected leprosy. These are strong images that bring out a sense of destruction and corruption. We also observe how the animal symbolism associated with characters is perfectly portrayed in two opposite poles throughout the play. White Queen's Pawn talks about animals such as doves considered to be 'chaste, loving winged creatures', whereas Black Night's language is scattered throughout

with references to animals such as 'serpents', 'blackbirds', 'spiders' or 'falcons'.

It is interesting to underline the symbolism of the word 'blindness' within the play. Blindness is a concept that brings out the idea of absolute darkness and absence of light. This lack of vision or light can literally be taken to mean the colour black and the absence or total absorption of light, or can figuratively be taken to mean an absence of knowledge and truth. *The Oxford English Dictionary* gives us the following definitions for the concepts of 'blackness' and 'whiteness'. Black, among other meanings is the colour of having dark or deadly purposes. It means malignant, deadly, baneful, disastrous and sinister. On the contrary, the colour white is usually associated with the fact of being 'morally or spiritually pure or stainless, spotless and innocent'. We should not ignore the ideological connotations involved in the use of the black and white colours, and, if we applied them to the study of the symbols in the play, they would show the characters' intentions. The Black House purpose is sinister and dark, involving treachery and falsehood, while the white characters rise in defence of all moral values.

There are several sub-plots throughout the play where White Queen's Pawn is the object of the treacheries of the black House. The attempt on the individual white piece is shown to be a minor manifestation of the ambition and violence in the Black House but it also underlines their intention to rule the whole world. Black characters conspire against themselves to bring down the power of the White House, as it is their intention to blame the White Queen's Pawn for losing her virginity. This attack constitutes one of the great strategies to be noted in the chess game as the real purpose is to knock the Queen herself down in order to win the game. We see a lack of cooperation and sincerity among the characters. Each piece plays its own game without following any rules. It is also noticeable that some white pieces turn out to be black, which creates a dim atmosphere of ambiguity and a permanent state of confusion, as characters point out in the play, which is the aim of the political attempt to attain power, although we should not forget that this exposure of people claiming to be white as really black was good stage material.

Black characters create chaos in the game. They are violent and full of rage. Their language is obscure, they often speak in Latin, and they show dark purposes. Chaos brings out a sense of confusion and to a large extent the idea of disintegration and dissolution as we see in the way the chess pieces are removed from the chessboard. Once they have played their part they are reduced to nothing. However, what we obtain from white characters is only clearness. They play in perfect cooperation and interdependence. Their language speaks for justice and virtue. When they are deceived and abused in the game, they react calmly.

Black pieces, we can conclude, offer us a double game. We know their intentions through their different movements across the chessboard and the comments of white characters who tell us about their ambition, cruelty and wickedness. Nevertheless, the audience can see how they disguise their Machiavellian intentions through the use of language. They disguise their own language and, for a moment, they turn out to be the keepers of order, truth and purity. Characters are mere chess pieces which follow the strategies of the game. The play ends with a checkmate and white pieces win the game. All the confusion created upto that point is resolved.

Middleton's chess lesson is valuable as it proporcionates the elements necessary to debate political affairs in a society ruled by authoritative power. Drama became more politicised during this period. As moral values deteriorated a new feeling of insecurity in religion and politics gave this sense of critical writing. Middleton's chess lesson could provide us with a philosophy for the ideal society which likes to

think of itself as harmonious and coherent. Only white pieces of the chess game would realise their ambitions as they would be the only ones able to create order and harmony. However, what Middleton portrays in *A Game at Chess* is a society experiencing important changes in political issues which cannot pass unnoticed to us. The chess metaphor serves as a pattern of thought which operates the strategies of drama.

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