

# Black House against White House

**A Game at Chess**  
by **Thomas Middleton**

Middleton Thomas (1580-1627) english dramatist. He completed his studies at Oxford. He started writing lines **The Ghost of Lucrece** but his fame is due to his comedies and tragedies.

**A Game at Chess** was written in 1624.

This comedy is structured like a game at chess between two opposed formations called **Black House** (Spanish Royal House) and **White House** (English Royal House).

The pieces into play are the following:

<b>BLACK HOUSE</b>	<b>WHITE HOUSE</b>
<b>Black King</b>	<b>White King</b>
<b>Black Queen</b>	<b>White Queen</b>
<b>Black Knight</b>	<b>White Knight</b>
<b>Black Bishop</b>	<b>White Bishop</b>
<b>Black King' s Pawn</b>	<b>White King' s Pawn</b>
<b>Black Queen's Pawn</b>	<b>White Queen's Pawn</b>
<b>Black Knight's Pawn</b>	<b>White Knight's Pawn</b>
<b>Black Bishop's Pawn</b>	<b>White Bishop's Pawn</b>

There are two characters, unidentifiable with chess pieces, but assigned directly to the two formations; **Black Duke** and **White Duke**.

Today the most accredited identification of the most important historical characters is the following:

**White King:** King James I (1566-1625) of Stuart dynasty. He is Anglican. Historically he is considered as absolutist and puritans persecutor.

**White Queen:** The Church of England.

**White Knight:** Prince Charles, King James' son.

**White Duke:** the Duke of Buchingham, G.Villiers (1592-1628). King James ' minister.

**White King's Pawn:** the Duke of Middlesex. King James' treasurer.

**White Bishop:** The Arcibishop of Canterbury.

**Black King:** The Spanish King Philip IV (1605-1665).

**Black Queen:** The Church of Rome.

**Black Knight:** The Duke of Gondomar, spanish ambassador at London.

**Black Duke:** The Earl of Olivares, first spanish minister.

**Black Bishop:** The General Father of Jesuits (hierarchically he represents the highest grade of the Company of Jesus).

It is possible to recognize in the first act's scenes a sequence of moves suggested by the entry on stage of the characters

(BQP, WQP, BBP, WBP), similar to the **Queen's Gambit declined** (by Black's initial move, not at all irregular , in games of 1600).

There is just one piece, out of two formations, that is wandering between two churches: the **Fat Bishop** (inexistent name as for the classification of chess pieces, but we have to remember that Bishop means Vescovo in english), he is the most important figure of the comedy.

This character has been identified with **Marco Antonio De Dominis** (1560-1624), Jesuit and arcibishop of Spalato. Enemy of the Church of Rome and of Pope Paolo V found hospitality by King James' court. In England He published three volumes "*De Repubblica Ecclesiastica*". He was extremely ambitious and greedy and claimed the office of arcibishop of Canterbury to King James I, without any attainment (this office had never been given to any foreigner, anyway).

After Paolo V's death in 1621, Alessandro Ludovisi, Gregorio XV was elected to the papal throne and De Dominis was bound by old friendship to him. As he was thinking to receive the honours being due to him by right, left the England half-clandestinely trying to bring his accumulated fortunes. His decision made him loathed by King James and his court.

On coming back to Italy, he didn't receive all the expected honours. His friend Pope died in the course of the same year (1623) and De Dominis fell into disgrace. After his death he was declared heretic and his corpse was exhumed and burnt with his books.

The comedy, divided into five acts, has two overlapping plots: the first one is developed into the **White House** and is a medium for Middleton to attack the Jesuits directly and satirically (not by chance, the comedy starts with a Prologue through which **Ignazio di Loyola**- founder of the Order-debates on some religious matters with Error, the mistake); the second plot is developed into the **Black House** and tells the story about the failed attempt of negotiation between Spain and England for the marriage between Prince Charles and the Infanta Anna. Middleton considered this marriage (this is an opinion shared by

the most aristocrats and above all by the common people, whose "emotions" and "reactions" Middleton was particularly careful not only from the dramatic point of view), an act of obedience to the spanish plan, partly an express plan in order to establish an Universal Monarchy.

The comedy had a clamorous success even though some of its aspects (the comedy's approval by the *master of the Revels*, the trial against the author and actors, the closing of the theatre where the play was represented - the famous Globe - the direct intervention of James I) have just been investigated till today and are considered a little historical case.

"A game at Chess" work was certainly commissioned to Middleton and was prepared in a very short time considering that Prince Charles and the Duke of Buckingham came back from their spanish mission only on the fifth of october 1623 and the comedy was approved in order to be represented on twelveth of June 1624.

Probably Middleton had already the idea of a satire against the Jesuits and in his mind the **Fat Bishop's** idea. The insertion of a topical event (the marriage of Prince Charles that didn't take place, had only a minimum space into the comedy) was neither difficult nor disagreeable for the author to be represented. This comedy was commissioned by a man whose identity is still considered a mistery today (there are some plausible and faint traces that in the next reviews will be followed and studied in depth by us especially because they are connected to the Game at Chess too). the idea of Middleton to develop the plot like a Game at Chess seemed to be happy and surprisingly theatrical, even if a genial device: chessboard is seen as stage, the pieces are thought as characters, the events are both real and imaginary, the ideas are expressed through the pieces moves.

In Italy, the comedy was staged by Luca Ronconi director in the seventies.

Who won the game?

Naturally the **White House** and by checkmate.

**White Knight** : There you lie then  
And the game's ours - we give thee checkmate by  
Discovery, King, the noblest mate of all.

Middleton created as device a chess structure for his comedies, many times. Another example that will be dealt with in a next article is **Woman beware Woman** set in the Medicean Florence of 1579 (in the course of the same year the marriage between Francesco Maria I and the venetian Bianca Capello was celebrated).

(San Gregorio, 09/28/2000)

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