THE MYTH OF THE BLACK KNIGHT: SUBVERTING THE IMAGE
OF COUNT GONDOMAR IN EARLY MODERN ENGLAND
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Abstract: This article centres its attention on the propaganda produced after the failure of the
Spanish Match: the marriage negotiations between Spain and England from 1614 to 1623. More
specifically, it wishes to analyse Thomas Scott’s Second Vox Populi through its images and assess
their influence on Middleton’s A Game at Chess. One of the purposes of this article will be to
address Middleton’s use of Scott’s iconography and, to a certain extent its prose, to more clearly
identify this playwright’s rhetorical strategies in the creation of the myth of the Black Knight: a
subversive reading of the Spanish diplomat, Count Gondomar.

During the Early Modern Period, Catholic Spain and Protestant England shared an ambivalent
relation that had a constant influence in the social and cultural debates of both nations. Sure
enough, after King Henry VIII’s repudiation of his first wife, the Spanish Catherine of Aragón,
in 1533 and his subsequent religious reform, the diplomatic relations between both kingdoms
started a long process of decay. Later on, the implication of Queen Elizabeth in the revolt of the
Spanish Netherlands triggered the 1588 Invincible Armada Campaign, which finished in disaster
for Spain. For the greatest part of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, both countries were
filled with propaganda that effectively antagonised each other. However, at the beginning of the
Seventeenth century diplomatic ties gained new momentum with the accession of James Stuart
to the throne and the signing of the peace treaty between both countries in 1604. In 1612, Diego
Sarmiento de Acuña, later to be known as Count Gondomar, was appointed Spanish ambassador
to the English Court. For the following ten years, this diplomat managed many English policies
to agree with the interests of Spain and also became one of King James’s closest friends.
Gondomar was essential in the protection of English Catholics and the prevention of
buccaneering in the Americas. He also succeeded in keeping England initially neutral during the
Thirty Years War (1618-1648) through the promise of an Anglo-Spanish royal match between
Prince Charles and the Infanta, María.

From 1614 to 1623 the marriage negotiations helped both countries maintain a cordial
relationship, regardless of their religious differences and life-long enmities. Nonetheless, with the
passing of the years many considered that Gondomar’s political influence over King James I was
becoming too strong. Surely, in 1618 the Spanish ambassador was successful in procuring a
warrant for the execution of Walter Raleigh after he disregarded royal orders and attacked the
Spanish colonies in the Americas during his maritime voyages. King James was forced to consent
to Gondomar’s plea in the name of peace. Raleigh was very popular in England and his
execution at the hand of Gondomar proved a turning point in the rekindling of tensions between
both countries. Indeed, the many lengthy bureaucratic setbacks and religious discussions arising
from the marriage negotiations between England and Spain did not help in alleviating discontent
either.¹

In 1623, anti-Spanish sentiment reached again a high point in London following Prince
Charles’s return from Madrid. After eight tedious years of negotiations, the Anglo-Spanish royal

¹ For more information regarding the political tensions between Spain and England at the end of the 1610s, see
Louis B. Wright, ‘Propaganda against James I's "Appeasement" of Spain’, Huntington Library Quarterly, Vol. 6, no. 2
(1943): 149-172.
match finally reached a dead-end and both nations were again coming closer to a war. Consequently, English streets were filled with libels that effectively antagonised everything Spanish. Some notable propaganda during this period are Thomas Scott's pamphlet, *The Second Vox Populi*, and Thomas Middleton's play, *A Game at Chess*. Both openly attacked Spain, and more particularly Gondomar, who was called by Scott the 'Spanish Matchiavell' in allusion to this Diplomat's allegedly imitation of the infamous Florentine's political tactics and his role as one of the main activists in favour of a Spanish Match.

It is within this historical context that this article wishes to analyse Scott's *Second Vox Populi* through its images and assess their influence on Middleton's *A Game at Chess*. Both play and pamphlet render their propagandistic messages through a variety of formats. One of the purposes of this article will be to address Middleton's use of Scott's iconography and, to a certain extent its prose, to more clearly identify this playwright's rhetorical strategies in the creation of the myth of the Black Knight: a subversive reading of the figure of Gondomar that was pervasive in English historiography. In addition, this article would like to further assess the correlation between Middleton's devilish Black Knight and the real historical ambassador.

In 1624, the English preacher Thomas Scott (1580-1626) published a pamphlet entitled *The Second Part of Vox populi*. This libel continued with the spirit of its 1620 predecessor: the first *Vox Populi or Nevves from Spaine* [fig. 1], where Scott showcased his Anti-Catholic and Anti-Spanish feelings. Both documents are presented as true accounts extracted and translated from high-profile councils held in the Spanish court between Spanish nobles and representatives from the Catholic Church. Both libels also address the question of the Spanish Match and the Crisis of the Palatinate. However, there are some differences in the use of images and the content of the news. The first *Vox Populi* barely uses engravings and showcases a more domestic political approach to matters. Gondomar narrates his recent successes in corrupting the English government and his role in the relaxation of the recusancy laws and the destruction of Raleigh, among other feats. The 1624 *Second Vox Populi*, on the other hand, brings a Spanish council again into session to relate Spain's worrying political and military situation in all its holdings around Europe. Whereas the first *Vox Populi* is written in an admonitory tone that constantly warns against the Spanish threat to England, the second pamphlet is written after Prince Charles's return to London, marking a definite failure for the Spanish Match. The tone of this second libel

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2 For this article, I will be using J.W. Harper's 1966 edition of Middleton's *A Game at Chess*, which heavily relies on the Trinity College and Bridgewater-Huntington Manuscripts. Spelling and capitalizations have been modernised. For Scott's pamphlet, I will be using the copy held at the University of Illinois (Urbana-Champaign Campus), which is digitally available through the Early English Books Online tool (EEBO): http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home

3 My main concern will be therefore to analyse the influence of the images from Scott's *Second Vox Populi* in Middleton's *A Game at Chess*. In order to do so, I will rely on the accounts from the 1624 performances and the play’s text. The influence of the text from Scott's pamphlet and the images from Middleton's early quarto editions will be also mentioned, but they will be rather used to support the image-play comparison.

4 The complete title is: *The second part of Vox populi, or Gondomar appearing in the likenes of Matchiavell in a Spanish parliament wherein are discovered his treacherous & subtile practises to the ruin as well of England, as the Netherlandes faithfully transtated [sic] out of the Spanish coppye by a well-willer to England and Holland.*

5 In this sense, it is ironic that Scott uses a well-known rhetorical strategy from Cervantes in order to criticise Spain. Very early in the novel, the author of *Don Quixote* claims to be able to relate the adventures of the Knight and the Squire thanks to a Moorish manuscript he found and translated into Spanish.

6 In order to learn more about the intricacies of the Spanish Match and the importance of the Palatinate crisis, see Glyn Redworth, *The Prince and the Infanta: The Cultural Politics of the Spanish Match* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004).

7 In her article about Middleton's Black Knight, Trudy Darby places the play in the context of the festival book. The optimistic tone of Scott's *Second Vox Populi* could be also understood within this perspective. See Trudy Darby, ‘The
is therefore more triumphant and Scott presents the prospect of a politically faltering Spain as an opportunity for the English cause.

It is within this more optimistic and facetious rhetorical strategy that the iconography of the 1624 pamphlet can be best understood. In contrast to the sober presentation of the first version, the title page from the Second Vox Populi provides a full-body portrait of Gondomar [fig. 2]. A laudatory reading of this diplomat could be inferred from that depiction, were it not for the presence of a chair with a hole. Gondomar was known to suffer from rectal fistula, making it necessary for him to have access to special seating. In addition, the image also portrays the Count in a sedan chair carried by donkeys, a very well known and detested hallmark of his in the London of the times. Two Latin inscriptions accompany the illustration, both serving as a description of Gondomar that can either be taken at face value or be understood as sardonic remarks: Gentis Hispanae decus (‘Distinguished ornament of the peoples of Spain’) and Simul Complectar omnia (‘I will encompass [successfully accomplish or conquer] everything and everyone’).

A second image from subsequent pages in the pamphlet portrays a gathering of Church official and Spanish eminent nobles or grãndes, among which Gondomar is included, according to Scott’s textual account of the attendants. They all reunite in Seville in order to hold a ‘Spanishe Parliament’ [fig. 3]. A small, smiling devil takes centre stage in the seat where the King should have been expected to preside, as implied by the hanging coat of arms. Another Latin inscription reads Ingentibus exidit ausis (‘Fallen in the execution of bold deeds’). This caption was probably inspired by one of Ovid’s verses from the Metamorphoses (‘Magnis tamen excidit ausis’, Book 2, 328). The classical quote comes from a passage where the poet narrates the myth of Phaeton9. By using one of the lines of Phaeton’s funeral epitaph in the classical tale by Ovid, the image associates a classical myth of reckless pride with the Spanish policies of the times and seems to pass judgement on their outcome.

The third image presents another assembly [fig. 4]. This time, however, the characters portrayed are Catholic priests and Jesuits. As the engraving explains, ‘they use to sitt at Counsell in England to further ye Catholicke Cause’. The use of actual names in the image, and in Scott’s text, reveals a wish for these people to be clearly identified. Scott relates in the pamphlet how this group of clerics are in correspondence with Gondomar. The pamphlet’s denunciation of Catholic activity in England only becomes stronger when one realises that this image is almost a copy of a previous anti-Catholic engraving that directly associates this kind of meetings with events such as the Gunpowder plot of 1605 [fig. 5].

The Second Vox Populi came to be widely known in London’s underground world. The connection between this pamphlet and A Game at Chess has been widely mentioned but very little analysed from an iconographic point of view. This play from Thomas Middleton (1580-1627) was first performed in the summer of 1624 for an unprecedented nine days in a row until it was brought to an abrupt end by King James’s command. This drama satirizes the unhappy outcome of the Spanish Match by telling the story of the White Knight (Prince Charles) and his voyage to the Black Kingdom, where he cleverly uncovers the plots of the Black Knight (Gondomar).

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8 For the sentence to have a complete meaning in Latin, the word ‘exidit’ should actually be ‘excidit’. Typographical errors were not uncommon.

9 In Ovid’s tale, Phaethon asks his father, the sun god Helios, for some proof that would demonstrate his relationship with him. Helios promises to grant him whatever he wants; and Phaethon requests to drive the Sun’s chariot for a day. Nonetheless, when placed in charge of the chariot, he loses control of the fiery horses. Seeing the earth in danger of being consumed by fire, Zeus killed him with one of his thunderbolts.
Middleton could have drawn its very first inspiration for _A Game at Chess_ from a quote in the _Second Vox Populi_. Certainly, at the beginning of the pamphlet's story, Scott describes prince Charles as a ‘pretious a pawne’ that managed to escape from Spanish hands. In addition, passages from the play are almost a literal copy from Scott's _Second Vox Populi_, such as when the Black Knight's boasts about his knowledge of England:

> Pray what use put I my summer recreation to?
> But more to inform my knowledge in the state
> And strength of the White Kingdom! No fortification,
> Haven, Creek, landing-place 'bout the White coast
> But I got draught and platform, learned the depth
> Of all their channels, knowledge of all sands,

(4.2.58-64)

Scott's Gondomar gives an almost identical account:

> For during the time of my abode in _England_, and whilst I lay in _London_, I got partly by the meanes of well affected freinds, and partly by mine owne experience (for in sometime, vnder the colour of taking the ayre, I would take vew of the countrie) I had perfect knowledge of the estate of the whole Land: for the was no Fortification, Hauen, Creeke, of Landing place about the Coast of _England_, but I got a platforme and draught thereof, I learned the depth of all their Channels, I was acquainted with all Sands, Shelves, Rocks, Rivers that might impeach or make for invasion (C2, p. 15)

A contemporary account by the then recently appointed Spanish Ambassador, Carlos Coloma, leaves no doubt about the true identity of Middleton's Black Knight from the very first time it was put into stage:

> The subject of the play is a game of chess, with white houses and black houses, their kings and other pieces, acted by the players, and the king of the blacks has easily been taken for our lord the King, because of his youth, dress and other details. [...] Count of Gondomar, who, [is] brought on to the stage in his little litter almost to the life, and [is] seated on his chair with a hole in it (they said), confessed all the treacherous actions with which he had deceived and soothed the king of the whites\(^{10}\)

The King's men went to great depths to get a hold of some of the former ambassador's belongings for the performance. Unsurprisingly, Spanish authorities strongly protested against the play to King James and he eventually ordered for its removal and for the start on inquiry. However, a more relevant aspect for the purpose of this article is to emphasise the rhetorical construction of Middleton's Black Knight in performance through the use of an old diplomat's clothes and chair. The importance of this decision should not be underestimated. Indeed, as Stallybrass states, Renaissance England was a clothes society: ‘in the Renaissance, clothes could be imagined as retaining the identity and form of the wearer [...]. The garment bears quite literally

the trace and the memory of the owner". In addition, for the identification between Gondomar and the Black Knight to be obvious, the performance of *A Game at Chess* followed almost step by step a previous characterisation already provided by the images from Scott's *Second Vox Populi*. Sure enough, the association of the Black Knight with Gondomar was carefully executed through dramatic props and imagery, along with a strong collaboration with the text. On his first appearance on the stage, the Black Knight is deemed by the Fat Bishop, another relevant character from the play, as the 'fistula of Europe' (2.2.19). As Dutton explains, 'Gondomar's malady comes to stand synecdochically not only for Gondomar himself, but for his policies and aims in their broadest possible extent'. Accordingly, a clear association is made between the Black Knight's physical and moral state, following the same assumption made by the English public (and Scott's image in the pamphlet) about Gondomar's ailment. Middleton doesn't forget the Latin inscriptions present in Scott's title page either, as he is clear to give the Black Knight a preeminent role among the many other characters from the Black Kingdom and he addresses Gondomar's portentous ability to be at the backstage of every happening in the London of the period. Indeed, when the Black Knight is informed by a pawn about the discovery of his plot, he playfully retorts: "Which of the twenty thousand and nine hundred/ Four score and five, canst tell?" (3.1.126-127). In addition, when he is defeated at the end of the play, the White Knight readily recognizes his worth in calling him ‘the mightiest Machiavel-politician’ (5.3.204).

As in the case of Gondomar and the gathering of Spanish *grandes* portrayed in Scott's illustration and widely treated in the pamphlet, the Black Knight raises among the other black pieces, but in the end is defeated through his own conceit, just as in the myth of Phaeton. In this way, *A Game at Chess* does not only ends triumphantly for the White Kingdom's cause but also serves as an admonitory play about the perils of being too friendly with the Spanish and Catholicism. Just as Álvarez Recio explains, during the Jacobean period, Anti-Catholic and Anti-Spanish discourses combined in order to firmly oppose the idea of a Spanish Match for the Prince of Wales. Both Scott's writings and *A Game at Chess* echo the idea of a major threat for England: the attempt of a Universal Monarchy by the Spanish and a Universal Church by the Pope. Under this light, the Spanish Match did certainly appear as a step towards this goal. In this particular aspect, the image of the "plotting" priests and Jesuits from Scott's Pamphlet gains special relevance and is again deeply tied to Gondomar, who was infamous all around London for securing the release of many Catholic priests and Jesuits from prison during his time in the English Court. Scott's pamphlets usually denounces the Jesuits as a source of social unrest, and Middleton follows in this idea by adding in his play a scheming Jesuit in the Black Bishop's pawn and a deceitful Jesuitess in the Black Queen's pawn, not to mention the devious intervention of St. Ignatius and Error in the play's Induction. And still, in *A Game at Chess*, even though the Black Knight is aware of the Jesuits schemes and sometimes helps them in their exploits, Middleton gives the Black Knight Gondomar a higher role in the achievement of a Universal Catholic Monarchy when this character comments on the subject during the play: 'I've bragged less [than the Jesuits], But have done more than all the conclave on 'em' (1.1. 254-255).

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Scott continued to use the figure of Gondomar in subsequent publications in order to further his political causes. Many English contemporaries followed on Scott and Middleton's lead. For decades, the Black Knight Gondomar became an almost mythical figure that inflamed English imagination. Nonetheless, this literary and historical obsession is far from being devoid of interpretative complexity. Just as Elena Levy-Navarro has noted, the figure of the Black Knight proves too central to the play to deem it as a mere satirical target: 'As actors have long known, however, villains can sometimes steal the show, and satirical caricatures too can sometimes unintentionally offer a figure worthy of admiration.'

In her analysis of the Black Knight Levy-Navarro explains that none of the White pieces are morally superior to the Black Knight. Certainly, the White Knight can only defeat him by employing the same deceptive techniques by confessing himself to be an "arch-dissembler" (5.3.145), a plotter of devious schemes. Indeed, the White Knight has to become more Machiavellian than the Black Knight in order to uncover the latter's corruption: 'Perhaps, despite the efforts of the players to make the Black Knight the buffoon, the Black Knight finally is seen to be a far more worthy politician than even Middleton may have wanted him to be.' The White pieces may thus succeed in the end, but they lose their moral ground in the process. A similar thing happens to Scott in the Second Vox Populi, where he finishes deeming Gondomar as a grande of Spain. In the end, Middleton's villain ends up becoming larger than life and a complete disapproval of his deeds comes to be impossible.

Regardless of Scott's and Middleton's opinion on the matter, when comparing the figure of the Black Knight with his flesh and bone alter ego, one is bound to find substantial differences between fiction and reality. Indeed, Gondomar was not considered a grande by his Spanish peers. He was certainly admired, but never became a key figure in Spanish policy-making. In his biography of Count Gondomar, Bartolomé Benito explains that he was originally given the post in England by King Philip III's valido, the Duke of Lerma, to remove him from the political picture; and during that period the Count certainly considered that post a setback for his political career. Additionally, with the passing of the years and the accession of Philip IV and his valido, the count-duke Olivares, Gondomar was eventually considered suspicious in many Spanish political circles due to his many English friends and his admiration of English culture. His open

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14 An example of an ulterior publication centered on Gondomar would be Scott's *Sir VValter Rarvleighs ghost, or Englands forewarner: Discovering a secret consultation, newly holden in the Court of Spaine. Together, with his tormenting of Count de Gondemar; and his strange affrightment, confession and publique recantation: laying open many treacheries intended for the subversion of England*.  
16 For more information regarding other contemporary publications and images about Count Gondomar, see Javier Sánchez Cantón et al., *Don Diego Sarmiento de Acuña, Conde de Gondomar* (Madrid: Real Academia de la Historia, 1935), pp. 67-72.  
19 For more information, see Bartolomé Benito Fernández, *Don Diego Sarmiento de Acuña, conde de Gondomar: el Maquiavelo español* (Gijón: Editorial Trea, 2005).
criticism to the Spanish political decisions of the 1620s did not help him obtain a considerable political promotion either.\textsuperscript{20}

Count Gondomar has been the target of multiple historical interpretations that are very difficult to reconcile. What remains for certain is that each reading of Gondomar is deeply intertwined with the other, and that in every possible interpretation he was considered an avid politician by both the Spanish and English traditions. Although eminently negative, English obsession towards this Renaissance diplomat serves as a proof of the importance Gondomar played in the political stage of Jacobite England. From a contemporary point of view, nothing of the same proportion can be said regarding Spanish acknowledgement of its fellow countryman. Certainly, Scott's diatribes against Gondomar effectively antagonised this diplomat, but also firmly set his presence in the imagination of Early Modern England. This article has shown that Middleton did not only find inspiration for \textit{A Game of Chess} in the pamphlet's text, but that the images from a \textit{Second Vox Populi} also proved to be critical in the actual construction of the plot and the early performances of the play. With the appearance of the early quarto editions of the play a year and a half later after its first performance, one can appreciate the pervasive influence of the iconographic tradition set by a subversive pamphlet such as Thomas Scott's publication (fig. 6 and fig. 7).

From a 21st century point of view, it would be hard to say if Scott predicted so much success for his Gondomar diatribes when he wrote them. As many other libels from the period, its cultural endurance was deeply tied to a very specific political context that was prone to change quickly, making this kind of productions highly ephemeral. Nonetheless, Middleton's use of Scott's textual and iconographical rhetorical strategies for his play in many ways helped perpetuate the message from the \textit{Vox Populi} series and deeply set their message in English historiography, regardless of possible historical inaccuracies.

\textsuperscript{20} For more information regarding Gondomar's discontent with Spanish policies, see John Huxtable Elliott and José F. de la Peña, \textit{Memoriales y Cartas del Conde-Duque de Olivares} vol. 1 (Alfaguara: Madrid, 1978), pp. 103-115. Also, see Gondomar's letter to Philip III of Spain (March 28th, 1619) published in Duque de Alba et al, ‘Correspondencia oficial de Don Diego Sarmiento de Acuña, Conde de Gondomar’, \textit{Documentos inéditos para la Historia de España} vol. 2, pp. 131-147.
Figure 1. Title-plate from Thomas Scott’s first Vox Populi
STC 22100.3 copy 1 [1620]
By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library
Figure 2. Title-plate from Scott’s Second Vox Populi
STC 22103.2 copy 3 [1624]
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Figure 3. ‘The Spanishe Parliament’ in the Second Vox Populi
STC 22103.2 copy 1, sig. A2r [1624]
By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library
Figure 4. Gathering of priests and Jesuits in the Second Vox Populi

STC 22103.2 copy 1. p. 54 [1624]

By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library
Figure 5. Anonymous. *A plot without powder*
Reg. No. 1868,0808.3216; PRN. PPA71473 [1620]
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Figure 6. Title-plate to Thomas Middleton’s *A Game at Chess*
Quarto edition [1625]
By permission of the Folger Shakespeare Library
Figure 7. Title-plate to Thomas Middleton’s *A Game at Chess*
Quarto edition [1625]
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CLASSICAL WORKS AND EARLY MODERN PAMPHLETS


*The second part of Vox populi, or Gondomar appearing in the likenes of Matchianell in a Spanish parliament wherein are discouered his treacherous & subtile practises to the ruine as well of England, as the Netherlandes* faithfully translatable [sic] out of the Spanish coppie by a well-willer to England and Holland. , Printed at Goricom [Gorinchem, i.e. London] : By Ashuerus Ianss [i.e. William Jones], 1624. Stilo novo. Consulted a copy from the University of Illinois Library (Urbana-Champaign Campus). Digitalised version is available at http://eebo.chadwyck.com/home [accessed 19 Feb 2014].


BOOKS AND CHAPTERS


Duque de Alba et al. ‘Correspondencia oficial de Don Diego Sarmiento de Acuña, Conde de Gondomar’, *Documentos inéditos para la Historia de España* vol. 2.


ACADEMIC ARTICLES


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