Experimental Architecture: Cervantes’s Curioso impertinente on the English Stage

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What modes of cognition and formal figuration does exemplarity enable in Cervantes’s intriguing novella El curioso impertinente? Or, conversely, what modes of exemplarity do cognition and formal figuration enable? I would like to focus on the exemplary possibilities of space—from architectural space to the spatial transformations involved in the move from page to stage—by considering Cervantes’s Curioso impertinente and one of its many English theatrical rethinkings, Thomas Middleton’s Lady’s Tragedy (also known as The Second Maiden’s Tragedy). Adaptation—mistakenly viewed by some as lightly veiled repetition, as interference, or as an inferior product or form of cognition—is, in fact, anything but that: it is a phenomenon that reveals its own aura, as Walter Benjamin explains, “its own presence in time and space, its unique existence at the place where it happens to be.”¹

When adaptation involves moving from one genre to another, even more is at stake. Storytelling (the prose of our Cervantine model text, for example) demands a different type of cognition than a play does. If we think for a moment about other genres, such as videogames, we see this even more clearly. Although videogames can be thoroughly engrossing, they cannot easily adapt what novels and novellas can portray so well: the res cogitans, the space of the mind.² Plays need to compensate for this difference by making psychic reality a material reality.

² Ibid., 14.
The Curioso narrative and Middleton’s play offer an exemplary pairing of this difference. The interior space of the mind and the exterior space of empirical reality—especially architecture—are manipulated by these two texts to great effect. In “The Translation of Architecture, the Production of Babel,” Mark Wigley writes: “The philosopher is an architect, endlessly attempting to produce a grounded structure.” Although Wigley is concerned primarily with the biblical Tower and Derridean concepts of translation, he also speaks more broadly about architecture as that which mediates “between idea and building/formal and material/soul and body/theoretical and practical.” It is no accident that architectural structures figure prominently in the texts of both Cervantes and Middleton.

Architecture always makes a powerful cultural statement. Witness a construction like the monumental Parthenon, modified from a pagan temple to a Christian church to an Islamic mosque and figuring successive imperial conquests or their opposite, namely, the imperial demise expressed by ruins. Thus, Walter Benjamin was especially captivated by the power of the ruin to talk less about visual art (in fragmented form) than about philosophy and history.

Negative architecture—the space of the ruin—is chosen by Benjamin as a figure of allegory: “Allegory is in the realm of thought what ruins are in the realm of things.” Traditionally, allegory has been regarded variously and identified according to an array of building blocks—as “a genre, a mode, a technique, or a rhetorical device or trope, related to metaphor and sometimes defined as ‘extended (or continued) metaphor’.” For Benjamin, though, allegory is not a constructive system of meaning production but rather an ontological dead end. As such, it is a kind of experience, a “mode of contemplation.”

To illustrate his take on allegory, Benjamin draws on the figure of the ruin so often featured in Baroque theater and painting, along with the skull symbolizing vanitas—the ruin of the corporeal human individual. Time is of the essence according to this perspective and is at the root of Benjamin’s idiosyncratic distinction between symbol and allegory: “While the symbol manifests the fleeting representation of eternity, allegory’s emphasis on specificity and fragmentation in the objective world is extended to the temporal, where time is shattered into eternally passing instants of historical insight through ‘shock.’”

When Benjamin observes that “allegories are to thoughts as ruins are to things,” he is construing allegory—as opposed to symbol—as a postlapsarian phenomenon in which referentiality is irreparably lost, leaving in its place subjective, arbitrarily used words in a decaying environment. As he sees it, subjectivity and historicity both result from the Fall from the Garden of Eden, and semantic ambiguity is their enduring legacy—that is, verbal ruins, a legacy that both Cervantes and Middleton claim.

Literary works are thought experiments. As Paul Ricoeur observes, texts are “ideological productions of the social imaginary.” When we look at Baroque authors, we see their obsessive desire to dwell on the transitory nature of life as a figure of history, where the world is not

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4 Ibid., 12.
embarked on a journey toward salvation but rather headed for decay and death. This perception endows Benjamin’s allegory with an ontological quality even more powerful than its aesthetic effect. And it is not surprising (given its tremendous potential) that the figure of allegory in both its traditional usage and Benjamin’s becomes most prominent at times of social disorder—either because the powers-that-be are trying to deny the disorder or because those who are disenchanted with the disorder seek to expose it.

With *El curioso impertinente* Cervantes offers us a prime example of what I call “experimental architecture.” We see a literal building—a house—as well as the metaphorical allegorical representation of Anselmo’s wife’s body as a house and fortress communicating verbal ruin—a philosophical regret that cultural values have been objectified and destroyed.

Cervantes’s *novela* (spanning chaps. 33–35 of part 1 of *Don Quijote*) has given rise not only to a wealth of conflicting interpretations and numerous Spanish plays but, in the seventeenth century alone, to at least six English works for the stage. A French translation of the *Curioso* appeared in 1607, and in 1612 Shelton published his translation of *Don Quijote*, part 1. Between 1610 and 1611 three of the six English plays inspired by the *Curioso* appeared: *The Lady’s Tragedy* by Middleton, *The Coxcomb* by Francis Beaumont and John Fletcher, and *Amends for Ladies* by Nathan Fields. The second group of plays includes Aphra Behn’s *The Amorous Prince; or, The Curious Husband* (1671), Thomas Southern’s *The Disappointment, or the Mother of Fashion* (1684), and John Crowne’s *The Married Beau of the Curious Impertinent* (1694).9 In what follows, I will examine one of the theatrical appropriations of Cervantes’s text, Middleton’s *Lady’s Tragedy*, accounting for some of the effects of the generic shift from the prose *novela* read aloud by one narrator to the multimedia nature of theater and considering also to what degree the theatrical adaptations point to a consistently English set of cultural values and controversies.

A “costly experiment” (*tan costosa experiencia*) is the phrase used both by Anselmo at the beginning of his narrative and by the priest at its conclusion.10 Though the cleric objects to the improbable plot, in which a husband tries to get his best friend to seduce his wife, he approves of the way the narrative is told (*el modo de contarla*). So, if the plot is objectionable, what makes its presentation appealing?11 It is significant that Cervantes singles out this tale for censure on two occasions in part 2 of *Don Quijote*: in 2.3 because it does not take place in Spain and has nothing to do with the novel’s protagonist, and in 2.44 because—like “The Captive’s Tale” (in part 1)—it was included by Cide Hamete to avoid the annoying restriction of having to write exclusively about Don Quijote. Yet, reader beware: when Cervantes singles out a text, issue, or character in repeatedly reductionist ways, he is, in fact, challenging us to think carefully about its importance.

The *Curioso* is a prime example of the allegorical ruin. It has been read as a study of friendship, marriage, passion, madness, homoeroticism, and epistemology.12 It is all of the above, but at

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10 Miguel de Cervantes, *Don Quijote de la Mancha*, ed. Martín de Riquer (Barcelona: Juventud, 1968), 331, 371. All Spanish citations from the text refer to this edition. The English citations here and throughout are taken from the translation of James H. Montgomery, *Don Quixote* (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett, 2009), here 246, 279.

11 Américo Castro polled a dozen *Quijote* enthusiasts to ascertain where readers stood on the issues of plausibility and the degree to which the *Curioso* added or detracted from the book as a whole. See his *El pensamiento de Cervantes* (Madrid: Hernando, 1925), 121–28.

12 Among the most insightful interpretations are Bruce W. Wardropper, “The Pertinence of *El curioso impertinente*,” *PMLA* 72, no. 4 (1957): 587–600; Nicolás Wey-Gómez, “The Jealous and the Curious: Freud, Paranoia and Homosexuality in Cervantine Poetics,” in *Cervantes and His Postmodern Constituencies*, ed. Anne
the root of all these interpretations we find Cervantes’s powerful interrogation of myth designed to explore language itself, the production of meaning that subtends social reality and the social imaginary—its values, its expectations, and its dysfunction.

Regardless of the text in question or the time frame, myth and language are always positivistically linked. Myth purports to offer explanations for laws of nature, ethics, and human behavior. “Myths aspire to be tautologous.”¹³ What you see is what you get. The words that represent the people and ideas of myth are transparently clear, offering a kind of prelapsarian referentiality. Unlike myth, Benjamin construes allegory as a postlapsarian phenomenon in which referentiality has been irreparably lost. Ambiguous and deceptive communication results from the subjective severing of meaning, and this severing is unforgettably dramatized by Cervantes with the myth of the two paradigmatic friends, los dos amigos (Anselmo and Lotario), who were so well synchronized in their thoughts, values, and actions that “no había reloj que así lo anduviese” (327; there was no clock in existence that was better concerted [243]).¹⁴

In this narrative we see the referentiality of myth turned into Benjaminian allegory in the context of the two most venerable social values of friendship and marriage. At the story’s inception, as the newlywed Anselmo’s dear friend Lotario announces that he will be visiting his friend’s house less often for the sake of propriety (i.e., to ensure the newlyweds’ upstanding reputation in the community), Anselmo stuns his friend by saying that, had he known Lotario would react with such circumspection, he would never have wed. This is a shocking admission from any point of view: Camila is a paragon of virtue, looks, and wifely devotion, so Anselmo’s revelation here seems aberrant indeed. Moreover, his attitude cannot be attributed to the valuing of his friendship over marriage, since as Lotario points out, the request that he attempt to seduce Camila constitutes a grave dishonor not only to her, to Anselmo, and to the institution of holy matrimony but also to Lotario’s honor and sense of friendship as well. Instead, a same-sex longing seems to be the reason for Anselmo’s attitude. He may be fantasizing by putting himself in Camila’s position: the two have become one flesh according to the marriage contract, so if Lotario seduces her, he is also enjoying Anselmo.¹⁵

The words “friendship,” “marriage,” and “honor” (signifying qualities in both the private and the public, social sphere) are, in Anselmo’s usage, in ruins—having been emptied of their semantic content. Seeing that Lotario is aghast at this proposition that he seduce Camila, Anselmo confesses that he is suffering from the disease of geophagy (the eating of dirt): “yo padezco ahora de la enfermedad que suelen tener algunas mujeres, que se les antoja comer tierra, yeso, carbón, y otras cosas peores” (338; I’m suffering from the disease that sometimes affects women and makes them want to eat earth, plaster, coal, and even worse things [306]).


¹⁵ See Wey-Gómez, “The Jealous and the Curious.”
We may well ask why Cervantes has his male protagonist suffer from a condition that was believed at the time to afflict only females. It is also odd that this gender discrepancy is not explicitly addressed by Camila, Lotario, or the anonymous first-person narrator of the tale (though it is presented as a sudden and very strange change in behavior). It reminds us that Cervantes is always foregrounding the unpredictability of human response, in this case involving gender stereotyping. But Anselmo’s strange self-identification with this female pathology is even more striking because this is the only time that he even remotely puts himself in someone else’s shoes, stepping outside his solipsistic megalomania.

On another level, Anselmo’s anomalous affliction—which he shares with women—foreshadows Camila’s anomalous behavior of a very different sort. That is, she will use her powers of reasoning (a quality traditionally ascribed to men) once Anselmo has lost his, with dazzling results. When she stages a play, pretending to kill herself because her husband’s reputation has been questioned (keenly aware that Anselmo is voyeuristically spying on the scene), she feigns suicide by means of a dagger. Lotario is so amazed at her inventiveness here that, we are told, as soon as he finds himself alone, in a place where no one can see him, he makes “countless signs of the cross,” marveling all the while at Camila’s ingenuity (271). These “countless signs” are meant to ward off Camila’s extraordinary power to deceive—the engaño a los ojos that is based on total verbal and visual distortion, on allegorical ruins. Cervantes goes to great lengths to dramatize how his characters’ subjective manipulations of language render it semantically meaningless, not only in the case of the shameless maid, Leonela, but throughout the story.

In the Curioso—the longest of the intercalated tales in the book—Anselmo’s disease attacks his brain, in turn, attacking referentiality. He will pervert the meaning of “friendship” by equating it with the repeated seduction attempts of his best friend. Dismayed at Anselmo’s request that he try to seduce Camila, Lotario finally capitulates both sexually and discursively. After repeated attempts to reason with his mad friend, Lotario expresses his belief that Anselmo’s perverted trust in him and reckless defiance of human nature are worse than his own betrayal of his friend, as the narrator now differentiates the two friends as the “unreasonable” one and “the treacherous one” (260; el impertinente y el traidor amigo [348]).

Camila’s thespian performance is even more devastating, severing the relationship between words and deeds definitively. This engaño a los ojos is exquisite. The mythic analogies made by Camila between herself and the paradigmatically immortalized wives Lucretia, Penelope, and Portia seal the deal, as it were, in the demolition of referentiality that Benjamin’s allegorist signals. Finally aware of his dreadfully flawed construction, Anselmo—we are told—dies of grief because of his “costly experiment,” Lotario dies in battle, and Camila dies of grief at the news of Lotario’s demise.

So much deceit, so much playacting, makes the labyrinth a particularly appropriate architectural symbol for this tale—the figure is twice evoked to describe the story’s convoluted psyches and twisted words and deeds (251, 266). The figure of the house, used to reference Camila as “such a worthy edifice” (273) and the couple’s abode, lies “empty and deserted” at the tale’s end, defiled as a result of Anselmo’s mad design. He admits in his final moments to have been the “fabricador de su deshonra” (37; the architect of his own dishonor [275]), and though the house does not literally fall down Usher-style, the house as dwelling place, as emblem of conjugal union of flesh and

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spirit, and as locus of social identity has, because of his distressed subjectivity and its linguistic distortion, irreparably crumbled to ruin.

The first of the many English appropriations of the *Curioso* for the stage is *The Lady's Tragedy*—a fascinating remake of the Cervantine *novela* that preserves the significance of the house, of madness, and of the love triangle, as well as the names of Anselmo (as Anselmus) and the maid, Leonela (as Leonel). It also offers images and verbal resonances from the Cervantine original. Yet it treats the destructive and subjective potential of language in an even more surprisingly complex manner. Whether because Jacobean plays favored multiple plots or because this playwright felt the need to add a second plot to make the story more visually and cognitively engaging for an audience (whereas readers of the original novella had to focus on their metaphorical mind’s eye), we find here two plots involving two women (the generically identified Lady and Wife), one betrothed, the other already married (the Lady to Govianus, the Wife to Anselmus), but each caught in a love triangle. Each woman is pursued by another male, the Lady by the unnamed Tyrant, the Wife by Votarius. In both cases, the legitimate male kills the seducer, and the woman commits suicide.

Yet this play is much more than just a doubling of the issues of adultery, madness, and the deadly twisting of discourse originally found in the Cervantine story. It thematizes the viability of relics and inner, as opposed to outer, displays of faith, recalling Benjamin’s obsession with subjectivity and language in the context of religious discourse (here, the contemporary English debates over Catholic versus Protestant beliefs). The play (which has survived in only one seventeenth-century copy) opens as the Tyrant dethrones Govianus, the rightful ruler of the unnamed kingdom, announcing also that Govianus’s fiancée (the unnamed “Lady”) will become his own queen. So obsessed is the Tyrant with bringing about this union that he hyperbolically describes the Lady as his “kingdom” (v. 153), from which he will be “banished” (v. 156) if she does not look favorably on him. He utters these extreme metaphors after having literally banished the rightful monarch (Govianus) from the kingdom that is his by law. From the play’s inception, it features the kind of subjective misappropriation of language that infects each of the characters in Cervantes’s *Curioso* narrative.

The Anselmus of this play’s second plot is identified as the brother of Govianus. His wife-testing scheme involving his best friend (known here as Votarius instead of Lotario, with the Camila figure referred to simply as “the Wife”) will be as reckless and deadly as in Cervantes’s prototype. Yet this triangle—like the one involving the Tyrant, the Lady, and Govianus—will complicate the Benjaminian ruin with meaningful counterexamples.

To date, these two plots have not been carefully analyzed in tandem. And to the extent that the play has been discussed, it has been viewed as a superficial transposition of the *Curioso* narrative to the stage, involving the elimination of the long speeches by Lotario and Anselmo, and the narrator, which are replaced by vastly streamlined versions that are complemented by the interventions of other characters as well. Yet the contrast of the Anselmus plot with that of the Tyrant is key to understanding the play’s message.

The Tyrant instructs the Lady’s father, Helvetius, to give him his daughter in marriage, and Helvetius is only too willing to comply, even advocating force to acquire her. This father is prompted by his own lust for power and status, with no regard for the welfare of his child. Unmoved by the Tyrant’s claim that marrying him would constitute a major social “advancement” for her, the Lady also ignores her father’s stern threat that if she doesn’t comply, “[her] very seed will curse [her]” (v. 677), because she will forfeit the opportunity to have royal children. In order to convince his reluctant offspring, Helvetius goes so far as to say, “if you won’t be his wife, be his mistress . . . make thy best market” (v. 737).

Marriage and parenting are reduced here to commodities—empty terms substituting for external displays of material wealth and power. The Tyrant will remain stuck in his material pursuits, with the Lady as his ideal of a trophy wife. Love—either conjugal or filial—seems unattainable here. As the Tyrant says he is banished if she will not consent to marry him, the Lady explains that Govianus is the only man she will marry, adding that “fortunes are but the outsides of true worth / it is the mynde that sets his master forth” (v. 190). The contrast of inner and outer worth here is critical not only to the Lady’s system of values but to the entire play.

The Tyrant persists, not comprehending her commitment to inherent, inner worth and the referentiality that her words—and those of her beloved—contain.

We then go from the palace to the prison where Govianus has been taken, in a move calculated to eliminate him as an obstacle. When the Lady appears, she is dressed in funereal (black) clothing to dramatize her definitive rejection of the Tyrant’s offer and her decision to join her beloved under house arrest. For his part, the Tyrant, though distraught at having been rejected by her, revels in the idea of Govianus’s torment, and Helvetius also approves of this bondage, saying, with a touch of sadism, “I like the crueltie passing well my lord” (v. 245).

From such remarks, we do not anticipate the unexpected turn of events that occurs in this fallen world of the usurping Tyrant and his entourage. We witness the surprising conversion of Helvetius, who is accurately reviled by Govianus as the panderer of his own daughter. This reprehensible father figure is ultimately shamed by Govianus’s long speech, in which he is told quite bluntly: “thou hadst more need kneele at an Altar / then to a chair of state” (vv. 785–86).

Calling Govianus a “pitiless surgeon,” the elder finally “repents,” having understood the truth of Govianus’s words, whereby moving from the status of loathsome “Enemy” to rightful “Father,” though when he tells the Tyrant that he now serves the “Truth,” Helvetius too is cast into prison. On several occasions, a coincidence of words occurs, words that for the Tyrant are meaningless ciphers stemming from his selfish obsession to possess the Lady but for Govianus and his Lady are charged with meaning. For example, the Tyrant says to his guard: “Take this Iewell beare it as a token / to our heart’s Sainct, twil doe thy wordes no harm / speech may do much, but wealths a greater charme” (v. 1152). Though the Tyrant is convinced that “money talks” more powerfully than words, the image of the “jewel” is used by Govianus antithetically—to signal the Lady’s chastity and her “honest and religious desyres” (v. 1438). (Anselmus’s Wife will give the jewel a third valence, that of a bribe or hush money for the maid.)

Anselmus, meanwhile, envies his brother—Govianus—no doubt because the latter’s Lady has passed the test of devotion (and discursive referentiality) with flying colors. Rather than ruins, we behold an organic and stable construction based on true love. For her part, Anselmus’s

19 The name “Helvetius” offers a strong suggestion of Helvetia, that is, Switzerland, a Protestant country, which reminds the audience of the grave tensions in England between Catholic and Protestant.
Wife—initially motivated by genuine concern—indicates that he is acting “strangely” because he is upset by his brother’s deposition and imprisonment. Yet, like his Spanish avatar, Anselmus is instead obsessed because his own Wife has not been tested, and he insists that his best friend, Votarius, perform the “costly experiment.” The maid, Leonel, like her Cervantine predecessor, tells Anselmus about his Wife’s involvement with his best friend and will be the cause for the ultimate demise of the Wife and Votarius—despite the bribe of the jewel.

Before this happens, however, the Lady kills herself, unwilling to succumb to the Tyrant. Now given to (physical) fits of madness as well, the Tyrant laments her death and decides to engage in the next-best thing—some necrophilia. Invoking the legend of Herod, who preserved the body of a beloved in honey so that he could have sex with her for a period of seven years,²⁰ the Tyrant informs the Lady’s corpse that she is now his:

Since thy life has left me

Ile claspe the bodie for the spirit that dwelt in’t
And loue the howse still for the mistris sake,
Thou art mine now spight of distruction
And Govianus; and I will possess thee.

(vv. 1851–55)

His expressed desire here is significant not only for its ghouliness but because of its historical frame of reference in England at the time at which the play was written. The play was produced in 1611, eight years after the unification of England and Scotland by James I, and seven years after the 1604 accord signed with Spain—the “Treaty of London”—that concluded the nineteen-year Anglo-Spanish War. Though raised as a Protestant, James was the son of the Catholic Mary Queen of Scots. He sought to legitimize both Christian sects, much to the dismay of many Englishmen. He advocated the employment of Catholics in influential positions and was even predisposed to having his son convert to Catholicism so that he could marry a Spanish infanta.²¹ As a result of these religious tensions, debates over the role of the body were played out in many cultural venues, including the theater. Crucial to my purposes here is the Catholic view of the body’s potential as relic (i.e., a material object that possesses an enduring spiritual life) versus the Protestant view that the body is exclusively material, not transcendentally spiritual after death. Protestants focus on inner value as opposed to outward displays of faith such as the veneration of relics and belief in the healing capacity of a corpse. For a Catholic, relics are a perpetuation of a saint in the world of the living, a continuity of the past in the present. From the Protestant perspective, however, relics are but “the bones and garments of rotten bodies.” The “inward testimony of God’s spirit” is where divine truth is located.²²

This ideological dispute between inner and outer displays of spirituality was a particularly hot topic in the time of James I. Critics of the Catholic belief in relics and outward displays

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²⁰ Herod’s deranged and protracted preservation of Mariamne’s body in honey is referred to as the “deed of Herod” in a Talmudic legend (Sanh. 66b).
interpreted this belief as little more than necrophilia. In *The Lady’s Tragedy*, we find a clear focus on the body versus the spirit. The Tyrant, for example, expresses his frustration at the Lady’s unresponsiveness, certain that he will finally get his way now that she is dead:

In vaine my Spirit wrastles with my blood  
Affection wilbe mistris here on earthe,  
The howse is hers, the Sowle is but a tenant

(vv. 2211–13)

The Lady is the “house” and the soul is “but a tenant” in the Tyrant’s estimation. He is interested in the body, the outer, material value, as he has been all along. The inner quality of the soul has never been his focus.

When Govianus visits the crypt, he finds the Lady’s tomb occupied, not by her body, but instead by her ghost—dressed in white and bearing a crucifix. When she informs Govianus of the Tyrant’s plans for postmortem lust with her corpse, he decides to pose as a painter contracted to paint his beloved’s face so that she will seem to be alive. Unbeknownst to the Tyrant, however, Govianus paints her lips with poison. The Tyrant dies after he kisses her lifeless body, reviled by the Lady’s true love, Govianus, as “a sacreligeous villain” and grave robber. Yet there is more to come.

The Lady’s ghost is dressed like the Lady herself and is briefly reunited with her body when she is placed on her regal throne and declared to be the rightful queen by Govianus, after which she is returned to the tomb at the cathedral. Her “virgin victory” is celebrated, and she and Govianus serve as the symbols of integrity in word and deed, in bold contrast to the allegorical ruin embodied by the usurping Tyrant. In this way, the play provides a corrective alternative of verbal integrity to the Tyrant’s ruinous verbal allegory, of depraved and meaningless words and deeds.

The work has been characterized by Sandra Clark as having a

strongly Protestant, even Calvinist, perspective which shapes the retributive outcome of *The Lady's Tragedy* [and which is] quite foreign to the moral scheme by which tragedy is achieved in Cervantes’ tale: more broadly, the notion of honour which is central to the story in all its forms is differently conceived in the still partly feudal society of early modern Spain and in England with its centralized monarchy where the transition to a pre-capitalist state was further advanced. “Honour culture” still persisted in England, but under the Stuarts developed as “an informal personal code” rather than a religious and ethical imperative. ²³

However, *The Lady’s Tragedy* does not paint a precapitalist environment—we are in an undisclosed kingdom with no temporal or economic frame of reference, where a usurper has taken over the court. And although it may be argued that in some English sectors honor had become more of “an informal personal code,” King Govianus and his Lady (who wears a crucifix) clearly project honor as “a religious and ethical imperative.” Middleton is not foregrounding capitalism over the religious and ethical concerns that Clark sees as the domain of early-modern Spain.

The other plot, involving Anselmus, his Wife, and Votarius, likewise ends in complication. Votarius invites Anselmus to spy on the charade that he and the Wife perform: the Wife loudly complains that Votarius has tried to seduce her, and when he bursts into the room and

attempts to kiss her, she stabs him—thinking that he is wearing protective armor so that he will not be harmed. Yet the maid’s paramour (Bellarius), wanting to kill his enemy (Votarius), makes sure that no protection is available. The sword that kills Votarius has also been poisoned, so it will lead to even more mayhem. Convinced that Leonel had falsely accused his clearly virtuous wife, Anselmus uses the sword to kill her for the false accusation. Shocked to see her murdered, Bellarius challenges Anselmus—when the Wife suddenly runs between the two men and is killed by both of them, as she, guilt-ridden over the fact that Votarius has died because of her, claims that she wants to emulate the Lady. To these three corpses are added those of Bellarius and Anselmus, who wound each other mortally. Anselmus dies realizing that his Wife has, indeed, been unfaithful, at which point Govianus orders the servants to bury the five bodies.

This smacks more of a bloody Senecan tragedy like Thomas Kyd’s Spanish Tragedy or Cyril Tourneur’s (or Middleton’s) 1607 Revenger’s Tragedy rather than referencing a precapitalist England or an informal personal code of honor. The resolution of this plot, with its echoes of the first plot (the use of poison and especially the suicide by the female protagonist), complicates the allegorical ruin that the story of the Tyrant versus the Lady boldly represents. The Wife’s conversion—signaled by her emulation of the Lady’s suicide—suggests the encouraging possibility for change from ruin to construction: “ile ymitat my noble sisters fate / late mistres to the worthy Govianus / and cast awaie my life as she did hers” (vv. 2079–81). Despite her mistreatment by Anselmus, the Wife has been inspired by her sister-in-law, who was treated in a most worthy manner by Govianus. She is sacrificing herself to avoid further mistreatment at the hands of the “vitious gamster” when he learns of her infidelity. The Lady’s words and deeds inspire the Wife—by their semantic referentiality—just as Govianus’s words led to the conversion of Helvetius. From this we see that the Baroque production of subjective allegorical ruins described by Benjamin is not necessarily bound to a totalizing environment. Yet it is not a tidy dichotomy either—because, of course, the Lady’s suicide is the worst deed that one who wears the crucifix can commit. Damned by her action, she is not the Christian exemplar after all: her martyrdom is a secular one.

This messy situation gets even more interesting when one puts it in the historical context of James I. Middleton was a pointed political critic. His A Game at Chess, for example, dramatizes the relationship of Philip IV of Spain and James I of England—especially the negotiations over the proposed marriage of Prince Charles and the infanta María. A Game constitutes Middleton’s clearest engagement with the Spanish Empire, so much so that, according to one account, it ended his dramatic career: “he went into hiding, writing nothing more for the stage, and died in 1627.” But The Lady’s Tragedy is his first engagement with Spanish literature. While this play’s debt to El curioso impertinente has long been recognized, its meaningful link to the plot of the

Tyrant and Lady has not been discussed, though Middleton’s play makes a decidedly political statement about the English king—his comportment in both affairs of state and of the flesh. Like Anselmus, the Tyrant is a megalomaniac fixated on a woman. They both want supreme control of the object of their desire (described by each man as a “jewel”)—Camila in the case of Anselmo, and the Lady for the Tyrant. Yet, of course, they differ in their affective relationships—Anselmus, a crazed husband, and the Tyrant, a failed “Lothario.”

In 1609—two years before Middleton wrote his play—James delivered a speech at Whitehall to the Lords and Commons (entitled “King James’ Judgment of a King and a Tyrant”), in which he outlined the duty of the king to uphold the laws of the land and to protect his people:

> A king governing in a settled kingdom, leaves to be a king, and degenerates into a tyrant as soon as he leaves off to rule according to his laws. In which case the king’s conscience may speak unto him, as the poor widow said to Philip of Macedon; either govern according to your law, Aut ne Rex sis. And though no Christian man ought to allow rebellion of people against their prince, yet doth God never leave kings unpunished when they transgress these limits; for in the same Psalm where God saith to kings, Vos dii estis, he immediately thereafter concludes, But ye shall doe like men.

It is no accident, I maintain, that we find in The Lady's Tragedy a rightful and solicitous king (Govianus) who is deposed and replaced by a tyrant. By this pairing, Middleton is alluding to James’s notoriously self-centered behavior. Not only did he play favorites, but he was a hypocrite who strenuously condemned sodomy in his book-length theory of monarchy entitled Basilikon Doron (Royal Gift) while being known to indulge in it. Though sodomy was more accepted in seventeenth-century England than it was in certain other times and places, it was James’s hypocrisy in denouncing it so strongly that offended Middleton and many others. His marriage to Anne of Denmark was very contentious for several reasons, and he had an affair with Anne Murray (1593–95). So, we have the Tyrant and the Lady, and one can even see history in the Tyrant’s elaborate reference to the Lady in the play as his “jewel.” “Jewel” was the name of James’s favorite hunting dog (whom his wife shot to death to get even with him). As such, this Tyrant epitomizes the “hollow façade” that Benjamin equates with allegory. While people have speculated as to whether the Tyrant of this play was perhaps meant to recall Hamlet, I would argue that Middleton points to the well-known royal malfeasance not of medieval Denmark but of his contemporary England instead.

In this context, Benjamin’s ruins are again pertinent. He writes: “In the ruins of great buildings the idea of the plan speaks more impressively than in lesser buildings, however well preserved they are.” The Tyrant’s palace, prison, and crypt are all sites of allegorical ruin in the same way that Anselmus’s house is. This is the reason for the pairing of the two plots. The experimental architecture of the Tyrant—fabricating himself as the king when he is, in fact, a power-hungry madman—magnifies Anselmus’s analogous private experiment, transposing it to the public domain.

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27 The appellation “Lothario” in the sense of a “rake” or “player” first entered the English language in 1703 with Nicholas Rowe’s Fair Penitent.

28 James I’s speech before Parliament, March 21, 1609.

29 Benjamin, Origin of German Tragic Drama, 235.
By his theatrical adaptation, Middleton complicates the Cervantine obsession with ruins—the allegorical ruin of referentiality figured by means of the house and the tomb. In the *Curioso*, the house becomes a metaphorical and literal tomb as a consequence of Anselmo’s mad and depraved behavior. The same architectural association of house and tomb concludes the depravity of Middleton’s mad Tyrant.

*The Lady’s Tragedy* serves as a prime example of the rich possibilities afforded by adaptation in its rethinking of the *Curioso*. It showcases not only different ways of representing the allegorical ruin but also the inherent differences in formal figuration posed by the historical context of James I’s England and by the generic move from page to stage.