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“Reason not the need”: The Accidental Journey of the Conde de Villamediana around the South of England in 1603

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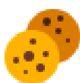
Résumés

Français English
Après vingt ans sans représentation diplomatique en raison des hostilités prolongées de la guerre anglo-espagnole non déclarée (1585-1604), l'Espagne a fait le premier pas vers la paix en envoyant un ambassadeur, Don Juan de Tassis, Conde de Villamediana, pour féliciter le roi James pour son accession au trône d'Angleterre. Son arrivée à Douvres avec un entourage de cent cinquante hommes comme “sa maison” fit sensation selon *Relacion muy verdadera del recebimiento y fiestas*. L'audience de Villamediana avec le roi n'a cessé d'être reportée en raison d'un certain nombre de circonstances imprévues liées à la peste. L'ambassadeur et son train ont donc dû errer dans le sud de l'Angleterre jusqu'à ce qu'il soit finalement reçu à Winchester en octobre 1603. Le voyage de l'ambassadeur d'Espagne est considéré dans cet essai comme une source de débat sur la nécessité et la commodité de suites importantes dans le cadre des ambassades. Il est d'ailleurs suggéré qu'un tel débat ait pu contribuer à définir la suite du roi Lear dans la tragédie de Shakespeare.

After twenty years without diplomatic representation due to the prolonged hostilities of the undeclared Anglo-Spanish War (1585-1604) Spain made the first move towards peace by sending an ambassador, Don Juan de Tassis, Conde de Villamediana, to congratulate King James on his accession to the throne of England. His arrival in Dover with an entourage of one hundred and fifty men as “his house” was a sensation according to *Relacion muy verdadera del recebimiento y fiestas*. Villamediana’s audience with the king kept being postponed due to a number of unanticipated circumstances related to the plague so the ambassador and his train had to wander around the south of England until he was finally received in Winchester in October 1603. The journey of the Spanish ambassador is considered in this essay as a source of debate about the need and convenience of sizable retinues as part of embassies. It is moreover suggested that such a debate may have contributed to define King Lear’s retinue in Shakespeare’s tragedy.



Entrées d’index

Mots-clés : Conde de Villamediana, suites diplomatiques, paix anglo-espagnole, James I, Le Roi Lear
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Texte intégral

1 King Lear’s only condition upon leaving his kingdom to his two elder daughters is that he will keep one hundred knights to preserve “the name and all the additions to a king” (1.1.135). The tensions that this entourage creates between the King and his daughters who continuously strive to cut it by half until it is stripped down to zero run parallel to the king’s humiliation and final madness: “O, reason not the need: our basest beggars /Are in the poorest thing superfluous:/ Allow not nature more than nature needs” (2.4.263-65). These are Lear’s words of acceptance when he realizes his downfall from absolute ruler to dispossessed wanderer. But before reaching this state he has had to haggle with Goneril and Regan over the need for each and every man in his retinue. Critics’ approximate date for the composition of *King Lear* is between 1603 and 1606.[1] The dating coincides with the arrival in England of two Spanish embassies (1603 and 1604) and a corresponding English embassy to Spain in 1605. In each of these embassies, the number of men accompanying the appointed ambassador grew exponentially until six hundred followers accompanied Nottingham’s embassy to Spain in 1605. The first, led by Don Juan de Tassis, Count of Villamediana, comprising one hundred and fifty men, was key in initiating this trend of measuring the honour of the embassy by its sheer size. After twenty years without diplomatic representation due to the prolonged hostilities of the undeclared Anglo-Spanish War (1585-1604), Spain made the first move by sending an ambassador to congratulate King James on his accession. The arrival of the Spanish ambassador was a sensation according to the pamphlets that recount it as well as letters and eyewitnesses’ accounts. This article explores his reception in England and the means by which Villamediana overcame a number of unanticipated circumstances and travelled with his sizeable retinue in all its splendour around the South of England until he could secure an audience with James. Whether this spectacular embassy and those that followed in 1604 and 1605 inspired Shakespeare’s portrayal of Lear’s retinue is a matter of speculation that has only been tangentially suggested so far by scholars, as we shall see. I therefore intend to explore the ways in which Villamediana’s embassy was understood in its time and suggest a possibility in this direction. My purpose is not to offer another alternative reading of *King Lear* but to show the impact of this embassy to understand how the symbolism of power was being reassessed by contemporary audiences and how the size of retinues was a matter for debate at the time.

2 On April 14th 1603, while James was still progressing towards London after the death of Elizabeth I, Philip III of Spain sent letters to the most important harbours in the Iberian Peninsula ordering them to treat every vessel from the realms of James as friendly and stop embargoing them. This, he added, had been agreed upon with his “brother” (in law) Archduke Albert (TNA SP 94/9 /21, 182). This was the first move towards the signing of a peace treaty which would not be finalized until 1604 when the terms agreed in London were ratified first in Brussels and then in Valladolid, thus

putting an end to twenty years of a war that had never been declared in the first place. Upon James's accession, Spain procrastinated for a while, unresolved which policy to follow since the king of Scotland was by no means their chosen successor. However, it was soon evident that James had been accepted without much opposition and that the best course of action was to join the congratulatory messages from other countries and explore the new monarch's position concerning peace with Spain. This could be tricky, but the opportunity for starting a new age of friendship could not be ignored. So, by the time Philip appointed Juan de Tassis y Acuña,[2] the King's special courier, as ambassador extraordinary and was sent with congratulatory letters to England, all the other ambassadors had preceded him, most importantly the Count of Aremberg, ambassador to the Archdukes, who was among the first to arrive from Brussels and Monsieur de Rosny, Great Treasurer of France and special envoy for the occasion.

3 The most complete account of the journey and first audience of the Count of Villamediana at the English court is an anonymous pamphlet which was published in two instalments. *Relacion muy verdadera del recebimiento y fiestas* covers the journey until the moment the first audience with the king is about to take place, whereas *La Segunda Parte de la Embaxada de Don Ivan de Tassis, Conde de Villamediana* recounts the travels and troubles – travails, in the more accurate early modern rendering – of the embassy before they were finally received by James at Winchester on October 5th 1603, almost two months after they departed from Brussels. The impatience in Spain to learn what was happening in the embassy may well be the reason why the chronicler decided to divide into two pamphlets his account of a journey that was taking much longer than initially planned, as the 1603 *Relacion muy verdadera* ended with the optimistic promise that the audience was about to happen, and only in *La Segunda Parte,* not published until 1604, do we learn that the journey had had to be prolonged and the audience postponed.

4 Both pamphlets follow the conventions of the genre: short, impersonal, anonymous and factual, they are designed to inform their readers with apparent dryness of the perambulations of the embassy, giving details of the dates and locations of their itinerary. Mark Hutchings describes how these texts worked in their time:

> Their function being to provide reliable, factual (that is, quasi-objective) information within a circumscribed environment, rather than capture the subjective views or opinions of their authors […]. [R]ecords of diplomatic missions were in part intended as prose 're-performances' of the events they represented; while they functioned as a form of propaganda (rather than travelogue, say, or mere generalized news report), their conventions were specific to both diplomacy and its dissemination. (209-10)

5 Thus, diplomatic missions could be re-enacted for the reader while carrying an understated propagandistic message. In the case of Villamediana's journey, the primary intention was to make the Spanish readers come to terms with the idea of peace with England while at the same time displaying the grandeur of the Spanish embassy and the impact it had on English people. Even though the prospect of peace was rather unpopular at the time, it was more so for the English, who could interpret it as a dangerous concession towards the lifelong enemy, than for the Spaniards, who had a much less clear image of the English as their enemy due to lack of information and a vague idea that they were mostly victims of their Protestant monarchs.[3] The pamphlet was intended to create in its readers the impression that the Spanish embassy had been received according to the superior rank that Spanish diplomacy deserved in all European courts. Every opportunity to describe the pomp and splendour of the cortege was taken, and possible moments of friction omitted. Only by reading between the lines or contrasting the Spanish pamphlet with other recorded testimonies does one realize that the encounter was not as smooth as readers were led to believe.

6 The *Relacion muy verdadera* opens with a detailed description of the retinue that was gathered to travel with Juan de Tassis, newly appointed Count of Villamediana. Apart from the noblemen of his house and a number of family members, he was

accompanied by two captains, one of cavalry and one of infantry, three secretaries, four cooks with their assistants, three chaplains, two trumpeters, a doctor, an apothecary, and a number of private servants, lackeys and footmen all with their liveries and the necessary apparel. This made a total of around one hundred and fifty men, twenty-five horses and three ceremonial carriages plus all the carts loaded with luggage (np).[4] The embassy had to be divided to be able to cross the channel; part of the retinue together with the luggage, horses and some servants embarked at Dunkirk, while Villamediana and the more important men in his company had to travel south to Gravelines where they boarded three large galleys that took them to Dover. Upon seeing the coast, they sent a volley with one hundred and twenty canons and received an equal response from the castle while trumpets and other instruments were playing, and as they disembarked "all the people came out to see the Count and to see Spaniards and in the rush of so many people it was impossible to walk in any way."[5] This phrase, describing how the people thronged "to see Spaniards," not "to see *the* Spaniards," is repeated on different occasions throughout the account, as if they were a rare sight; and they must have been, not only because no Spaniard had visited the country in an official capacity for twenty odd years but because the procession they organised as soon as the luggage arrived was as spectacular as could be:

> Having his clothes arrived and preparing all the necessary apparels for the carriages and horses he departed from Dover with four halberdiers at the front followed by all the luggage that was taken in twenty four carriages and after this other four halberdiers followed by the cavalry with trumpets and pageboys and equerries and then other officials, after which came another trumpet and all the servants of the Count with the rest of the gentlemen that were followed by the carriage of the Ambassador that came all the way full of Englishmen.[6]

7 The news reached London where the Secretary of State Robert Cecil, in charge of deciding how to greet Villamediana, had sent the Master of Ceremonies Sir Lewis Lewkenor to Dover and appointed Lord Danvers and the Earl of Devonshire as the noblemen chosen to greet the Spanish ambassador at different stages as he approached London. Villamediana's arrival had been carefully orchestrated and both guests and hosts had a clear plan to follow in order to allow little room for misinterpretation or confusion. The reception had to be carefully thought out because the Spanish ambassador would not accept any treatment different from that awarded to the French ambassador Rosny who had arrived at the court a few weeks before.[7] Cecil joked with Sir James Elphinstone while communicating the recent news that "The Spanish ambassador cometh with a very great train and carryeth himself in all things conform *a la gravedado Espanola*" (Calendar 244) showing his unwillingness to be impressed, but he could conceal his curiosity about the undeclared purpose of the embassy, whether it would turn out to be just "congratulatory" or concealing a secret negotiating agenda.[8]

8 After James's accession, the reception of foreign ambassadors started following a careful protocol that had not been observed in the times of Elizabeth. Few details were left to improvisation, each reception conveniently adapted to the hierarchy of the delegation. Roberta Anderson explains how diplomacy was organized in the new court:

> In consultation with the master of ceremonies a newly arrived ambassador would have arranged the time and particulars of his entry into the city. Sir Lewis Lewkenor, James's Master of Ceremonies, then chose the courtiers that would accompany the ambassador at his reception. If of sufficient importance he was received personally by the master of Ceremonies, who would escort him and his retinue to Gravesend. From there he made his formal entry into London in the King's barge. (167)

9 Ambassadors' reliance on precedence, ceremony and protocol brought a sense of repeated structure that reassured those involved. As in a play with a given script, ambassadors carried instructions they could not depart from and were expected to read their commission "a la letra" on their audiences with the monarch. However, there was

a special talent relatively unaccounted for by scholars but frequently key to the success in ambassadorial missions, which was their ability to improvise in a Greenblattian sense of the term. Stephen Greenblatt defines improvisation as the ability to capitalize on the unforeseen and to transform given materials into one's own scenario, seeing it as a mode of behaviour crucial to Renaissance forms of power. For Greenblatt, the Europeans' ability to insinuate themselves into the pre-existing political, religious, even psychic structures of other cultures and to turn those structures to their advantage is more important than the "spur of the moment" quality, so that a degree of calculation enters the equation as much as pure impromptu action. These structures have to be "sufficiently close to be recognisable, sufficiently distant to be manipulable" (246). Even though Greenblatt applies these ideas to a context of colonization where the divide between different cultures was much greater than that between different European countries, these notions can still apply to our case study. When the English were cautiously greeting the newly arrived Spaniards and the Spaniards eager to impress their hosts, both sides were calculating their moves in order to have the upper hand in the peace negotiations, while always taking care not to misrepresent the meaning of each other's gestures. Much of what was at stake had to be expressed through non-verbal language and the Spaniards used the number and size of their retinue to this effect, while the English resisted this power, appearing to remain unimpressed.

10 The same year that James ascended the throne and received the formal visit of several European ambassadors, Jean Hotman had his influential treatise *The Ambassador* published in English.[9] Hotman had been secretary to the Earl of Leicester, and as the agent of Henri of Navarre had also been granted secret interviews with James before he became King of England (Goy-Blanquet 63). He was thus in a very good position to observe the cultural clashes between courts and describe their different approaches to diplomacy, together with anecdotes – many of which he had witnessed himself. He observes how in northern countries they appreciate splendidness in the "table and kitchin" but "In Spaine and Italie the table is more frugale: But there it must appeare in horses, coaches, apparel, and traine of followers" (C4). And in another section of the treatise, he includes the following anecdote concerning an unnamed Spanish ambassador, who must have been Bernardino de Mendoza:[10]

> I wish neverthelesse that he would moderate his gravitie so, as it be not hautie, as that of the Spaniards oftentimes is, in their speech, countenance, traine and gate: One that hath beene Ambassador in England and since in France, for the last king of Spaine was want to say: *Dios es poderoso en el ciel, y, el Rey de Espagna en la tierra*. He hath his horses and coach garnished with little bels, and having but three steps from his lodging to the Church, nevertheless, both he and his traine would mount on horseback in their litter or coach. The letters of occurrents reporte, that an other, departing from *Rome* to follow the Pope went forth with seven litters, six coaches, drawne every one with six horses, two hundred servants, sixty wagons loaden with baggage, and the first day hee passed not the first gate. This fashion is held for good amongest them. (E4)

11 *The Ambassador* is relevant to our understanding of the expectations put on ambassadors at the time, since Hotman's intention is to offer a handbook for the conduct of the perfect ambassador, indicating how the representative of a head of state could and should conduct himself. Even though Hotman does not recommend following the example of the Spanish embassies because of their ostentatious excess, nevertheless he insists on the importance of first impressions and of carrying oneself with "ceremony and magnificence" (B4).

12 Villamediana's pomp had, therefore, its precedents and was a sign of identity of Spanish diplomacy, designed to impress not only Spain's courtly hosts, but equally important, the population of the towns they were to pass through. Visibility was a conscious act of propaganda and it was not necessarily circumscribed to making a good impression among peers. Had it been the initially planned itinerary, the display of trumpets, horses and carriages would only have been performed on the route from Dover to Greenwich, a four-day journey with stops in Canterbury, Sittingbourne and

Rochester. These towns were accustomed to the arrival of foreign embassies as this was the common route into London from the continent. However, contemporary commentators give testimony that such a train was one of the most outstanding displays to travel across Kent in that period. In a letter from Charles Chester to the steward of Lord Cobham, imprisoned for plotting to put Lady Arabella Stewart instead of James on the throne of England,[11] Chester expresses himself in Shakespearean terms: “It grieves my soul these troubles should happen while the brave Spanish ambassador came through Kent with incredible pomp, and I like a dull dog in an ambush lurking for the liberty of my Lord” (*Calendar* 247-48).[12] The spectacle must have been impressive: on the way to Canterbury, the Count and his retinue were met by an even more numerous cohort of Englishmen which according to the *Relacion muy verdadera* consisted of two hundred knights in livery mounting their horses, many of them with falcons, and led by the Governor of Kent. The Spaniards were also very pleased to be greeted by women, who according to the narrator were “Extremely beautiful, for generally they are more so in that province than in the rest of England”[13] and Villamediana was so taken by them that he kept descending from his carriage to greet them personally.

13 The cohort would have ended the journey in London had it not been for the plague that was currently decimating the population of the capital. The King, his family and most courtiers had deserted the city to take refuge in the countryside, and thus, on arriving at Greenwich the Spanish embassy boarded barges that avoided London “*tan de priessa que no se pudo ver nada*.” The relator writes that only in the previous week four thousand and nine hundred people had died from the plague. This was certainly one of the worst weeks of the 1603 outbreak and the population was in panic, with many magistrates, doctors and bailiffs having abandoned the city as well. Lack of scientific understanding of the plague led to a number of theories regarding its remedies and origins. The plague was not only attributed to external conditions, such as the corruption of the air or a derangement of the body humours that could be remedied by medical treatments and cleaning the air, but was also understood as a consequence of the supernatural circumstances determined by evil planetary alignments and, more importantly, God’s will (Wilson 156). The recent accession of James, conjoined with the new strategy of welcoming the envoy of the Spanish monarchy, could well be interpreted as reasons for divine punishment. Not everyone received the Spaniards with open arms, as the surviving accounts in Spanish lead us to believe.

14 The opportunity to leave London behind and continue the progress along less trodden paths gave Villamediana and his retinue the chance of getting to be known by parts of the population that may never have known of such an event or witnessed a band of foreigners, comparable to a small invading army advancing inland. This second part of the journey took five days, travelling from Greenwich to Oxford and making stops at Kingston, Staines, Maidenhead and Henley. The whole company had taken barges to avoid London, but in Staines they left the luggage and clothes in the barges and continued their route by land. In Henley, they were received with great ceremony by Charles Blount, the Earl of Devonshire. Devonshire, Baron Mountjoy until he was awarded the earldom by James, had been the leader of the latest campaigns against the rebels in Ireland and had notoriously defeated the Spaniards in the battle of Kinsale, only a year and a half before. Being welcomed by Devonshire could have been understood by Villamediana as a sort of humiliation or an act of defiance. Cecil could have appointed any other less conspicuous lord to greet him but no record is left of the reasons for choosing Devonshire for this mission (other than he was equal in rank to Lord Dorset who had greeted Rosny), but we may speculate that Cecil was curious about how the Spaniard would react to this. As it happened, Villamediana opted for a different and easier option than to show uneasiness, remarking, as reported by the Master of Ceremonies, that Devonshire was a man “of whose name and actions he has heard very honourable report and was the only nobleman that above all the rest he desired to see” (*Calendar,* 6 Sept. 1603). Thus Villamediana turns an unfavourable situation into a favourable one, deciding to interpret his reception by the latest

adversary of Spain as a sign of reconciliation and true good will. The *Relacion muy verdadera* omits for its readers the war triumphs of their host but instead lists his titles: “from the Order of the Garter, Viceroy and Captain General of Ireland, and Councillor of State”[14] and explains that he presented Villamediana with a deer “the biggest honour that can be bequeathed in this land.”[15] Devonshire was in charge of accompanying Villamediana to Oxford where he would finally meet James who was at that time hunting in Woodstock. Thus the *Relacion muy verdadera* finishes with the promise that all the details of the audience with the king would be given in the second part, to be published hereafter, which suspends the action at a crucial point.

15 *La Segunda Parte* starts by announcing that on September 19th one of the chamberlains of Villamediana died of a sudden illness and that the planned audience was cancelled because of rumours he had fallen victim to the plague. Instead, they were advised to travel to Southampton where they were to wait for further orders as the King intended to meet with the ambassador in Winchester. Why they are not asked to wait for the King at Winchester on their way south is left unexplained, but it is possible that the King’s councillors regarded Southampton harbour as a safer option in case stronger measures had to be taken. Thus, the ambassador and his cohort start another progress south, stopping for the night in Abingdon, Newbury and Winchester before arriving in Southampton on September 25th. This journey, albeit hastier than the first one, was completed with all the paraphernalia that the embassy was carrying since they departed from Dover, which had so impressed onlookers: “And the English were astonished of the size of the house he brought with him. And this is true, for one of the glories in this journey has been that the Count carried with him everything that was needed, without needing to buy a nail to hang in our way.”[16]

16 While Villamediana proceeded without knowing when or how he would be able to have an audience, James himself did not stand still, moving as many as ten times in a period of three weeks.[17] If we compare both itineraries, we can see that while Villamediana was staying in the most important towns on his way, the king chose to reside in smaller manors owned by noblemen where he imposed his presence, avoiding the larger towns for fear of the plague. Having decided to spend this first summer as king of England hunting in the woods, wherever he established his reduced court he brought the plague with him, as we learn from this letter from Sir Thomas Edmonds to the Earl of Shrewsbury:

> The Court hath been so continuously haunted wth the sicknes, by reason of the disorderlie companie that doe followe us, as we are forced to remove from place to place, and doe infect all places where we come. We are now going within a few daies from hence to Winchester, to seeke a purer ayre there; and by reason that the Spanishe Ambr hath had one of his companie latelie dead of the Plague at Oxford, his audience wch was appointed to have been geiven him here, is deferred till the Kinge’s coming to Winchester, wch doth nothing please his greatnes. We have here also Monsr de Vitry, that is sent by the French King to congratulatt for the Kinge’s Matie’s happie escape from the late consperacies; and otheres are also come from the Duke of Florence and Guise. We are psentlie in hand to renewe the orders and pclamations for the banishing of sutors from the Corte, and to restreyne the accesse of anie others hither than onlie of ordynarie attendantes. (Nichols 258-59)

17 So while the king was hiding from popular eyes and reducing his court, Villamediana had proceeded in a stately fashion with his one hundred and fifty men to Southampton where once again he established himself with all the pomp that his magnificent luggage provided. Once in his lodgings, Villamediana got impatient that the audience kept being postponed and sent a messenger asking if the audience was going to happen “*presto* […] or what should they do.”[18] This is the only occasion when the anonymous narrator shows the annoyance of the Spanish visitors, as they seem ready to depart if they are not given a set date now that the fear of having been infected has disappeared. We learn from English correspondence that the annoyance of Villamediana was far greater than the Spanish pamphlet suggests. Actually, Villamediana was anxious that all the time

that he had not been admitted into the King’s presence, the French Ambassador had been allowed to remain in court despite the reduction in the number of James’s followers. He thus complained to Lewis Lewkenor “that his patience endured much at this delay of his Audience, the same first redounding as it did, so highly to the dishonour, and Indignity of the king his M*aiestie*, secondly, so much to the blemish of his owne reputation [...] while in the meane time the Frenche (as hee saide) possessed daily the eares of the king and Counsaile, triumphing in the Court, and doing their business as they pleased” (Lewkenor to Cecil, TNA: SP 14/3/76).

18 After this complaint the audience was announced for October 5th, more than a month after the embassy had arrived in England. Much of the *Segunda parte* is dedicated to the description not of the audience *per se* but of the preceding reception of William Herbert, the Earl of Pembroke, who was this time commissioned to accompany Villamediana from Southampton to Winchester. This should not be surprising as the splendour of the embassy was designed so as to act as hosts in a foreign land, not merely guests. The purpose of carrying so much luggage with them was to impress when they were settled in a place as well as when they paraded across the countryside. Lewis Lewkenor had reported from Oxford with sarcasm that “In 2 of his rooms he has hanged up clothes of estate, equal every way, both in breadth and length, to those of the King which are usual in our Court” (*Calendar* 6 Sept. 1603). In Southampton he did the same, decorating the house provided for him with the furniture brought from Spain. The day Pembroke came to Villamediana’s lodgings to escort him to Winchester he was invited to a meal he could not refuse, despite the fact that this meant postponing the journey to Winchester at the risk of arriving late (which they did) for the audience with the king. At this point the narrator offers a very detailed description of how the place was decorated with all the accoutrement they had brought from Spain, including tapestries, silverware, dinnerware, linens and even paintings and substantial furniture:

> Even though the house was small it was very well trimmed, the first room, where a meal would be served, had a tapestry of Scipio and Hannibal all made in silk, which had never been hanged before, a canopy made of golden silk in yellow and blue velvet, with many velvet chairs, a long table for forty people covered with a very good white cloth and very well embroidered serviettes full of lace, which are not used here because they are not very refined. There were three sideboards, one with golden silver full of platters, bowls and cups, and more than thirty other pieces, another [sideboard] with white [silver] with platters, jars and flasks of different shapes, braziers and other pieces, and another of base silver and glass pieces to drink. While the food was laid they entered a room further in to wash their hands, there was a hanging of blue brocade embroidered full of golden tassels, a bed covered with the same, four buffets with table covers of the same cloth, and very good bureaus from Germany made of ivory and ebony, images and paintings.[19]

Thus, Villamediana was able to perform a splendid display of hospitality for Pembroke and his men becoming hosts when they should have been guests, and exhibiting all the luggage brought along from Spain. Special notice is to be given to the tapestry of Hannibal and Scipio (presumably meeting before the battle of Zama), a very befitting image for the occasion.

19 Some testimonies from contemporary observers show to what extent the English refused to be impressed. Sir Lewis Lewkenor – el señor Lucanor, for the Spanish – commented how, despite the numerical grandeur and the train of the visitors being “very honourable and sumptuous,” the Spanish ambassador was not as generous as his predecessors had been (*Calendar* 45-46). And in a more comical vein, Dudley Carleton gossiped in a letter to John Chamberlain how “the Spanish ambassador gave Sir Robert Mansfield a leather jerkin and the count of Aremberg, a Parmesan cheese” (*Calendar* 43). The derision of these remarks shows that the English hosts were uncomfortable with the display of extravagance and could not avoid playing it down. Other courtiers such as Lady Arabella Stuart were much better pleased. She reports about the gifts that Villamediana had been bestowing upon ladies and lords on his way, “Spanish gloves,

hawke's hoods, leather for jerkins and moreover, a perfumer [...] wt a hope to grow gratious wt the other, as he already is" (Nichols 265). But we have to ask ourselves whether all the unforeseen circumstances that Villamediana had to overcome were not, after all, to his advantage. At any rate he was able to display his pomp for a longer period and in a wider geographical area than could have been anticipated adopting visibility as a crucial strategy for the embassy. There was little subtlety in this performance, based on sheer number and size, but ultimately this was a measure of how much the Spaniards were willing to spend on establishing relations with the new English monarchy and how they perceived that power should be displayed.

20 The appeal of such procedure (even for the English) is made apparent by the fact that in the following two years, as the negotiations with Spain proceeded, the size of ambassadorial retinues continued to grow exponentially. When the Constable of Castilla arrived in England in the summer of 1604 to sign the peace treaty that had been under negotiation for the past year he was accompanied by more than two hundred and fifty men (*Relacion de la Iornada*). This is not surprising as Castilla was the hierarchical superior of Villamediana and the distinction had to be made evident. What is more fascinating is that the English adopted the same language of diplomacy that they had despised when they had to put together the embassy to Spain for the ratification of the Treaty of London. On this occasion more than six hundred men accompanied the Earl of Nottingham on his journey to Valladolid, following a logic of multiplication. The expected criticism and mockery ensued, including a comedy by George Chapman, *Monsieur D'Olive*, in which the preparations for a huge embassy are ridiculed on stage, precisely in 1605 (Tricomi).

21 How could this ongoing diplomatic spectacle have had an impact on Shakespeare's composition of *King Lear*? After all, travelling companies could be compared with travelling embassies as they carried with them all the accoutrements they needed to display once they were settled in a given town, and actors must have been very aware of such a theatrical performance as we have described. During this summer of plague, Shakespeare's company (newly anointed as *The Kings Men*) also abandoned London and were itinerant themselves, performing in different towns and country houses such as Pembroke (near Salisbury), Oxford, Coventry and in Shropshire (Gurr 59). One may speculate whether they could have met. For our purpose, however, the emphasis has to be put on the number of members of the embassy not so much on the luggage they carried. Thomas G. Olsen in his article "How Many Knights Had King Lear?" explores the literary sources for King Lear's or Leir's train. He shows how in the medieval texts where this mythical king first appears – Geoffrey of Monmouth's *Historia Regum Brittaniae*, Wace's *Roman de Brut* and Layamon's *Brut* – the diminishing number of knights is an important element of the story; however, it seems improbable that Shakespeare could have borrowed from these : "that Shakespeare had any access to either Wace or Layamon is highly unlikely, and to the best of my knowledge such a theory has never been seriously suggested" (Olsen 202).[20] Instead, the available versions in print, Raphael Holinshed's *Chronicles* (1587), Edmund Spenser's *The Faerie Queene* (1590) and more importantly the anonymous contemporary play *The True Chronicle History of King Leir* (1605) "forego details of Leir's train, typically skipping over the quantity and sometimes even the presence of his men" (Olsen 204). Only in John Higgins's account of Queen Cordila in the 1574 edition of *The Mirour for Magistrates* is the king provided with "threscore knightes & squires," later reduced to thirty, ten, five and finally one. Olsen looks beyond the preceding literature to suggest that King Lear's hundred knights were not only inspired by Higgins's retelling of the old story, but were a comment on the realities of early modern England – the number of the king's knights can be understood as a critique of King James's habit of creating knights with unrestrained ease (209-15). Guy Butler broadens the discussion on the topicality of Lear's one hundred knights and refers again to James's unpopular policy of recklessly creating new knights, but also points towards the impact of the Earl of Nottingham's embassy to Spain with sixty titled knights, which "had been criticised as extravagant and vainglorious by courtiers and commoners alike" (3). Butler

furthermore describes the problems that such retinues caused wherever they went, being both “costly and unruly,” and how “Lear’s proposal to move his court every month (with 100 attendant knights and their hangers on) from Goneril to Regan and back would have meant more to Jacobean audiences than it does to us” (4).

22 Both Olsen and Butler assume that Shakespeare’s knights were, among other things, a comment on contemporary experiences with the escorts of important men, and suggest that these retinues were socially problematic and even ridiculous. In my discussion of the Count of Villamediana’s journey around the south of England, I have attempted to show how this peregrination reveals the complexity of diplomatic language in a moment of fascination with ideas related to honour and the exhibition of power. Even though there are testimonies showing that the English hosts perceived Villamediana’s train as excessive, others tell us that they were also impressed by the show. Villamediana had to take action all the while he was not received by the king he had come to visit with such “incredible pomp.” He could have seen himself humiliated and mortified but his impressive train and luggage enabled him to “improvise” and adopt a position of strength that converted him from guest to host on the occasion of the Earl of Pembroke’s reception, turning the tide in his favour. This was an instance of diplomatic improvisation at a time when improvisation should have had no place. While James was hunting in the woods away from the plague on the first summer of his accession, the most visible cohort of nobles parading around the south of England was formed by Spanish lords. The fact that this was the first of three Anglo-Spanish embassies between 1603 and 1605 and that on each occasion the number of men were multiplied until it reached the astonishing number of six hundred to accompany the Earl of Nottingham into Spain, can be seen as proof that size and number were accepted as meaningful by all parties involved. I am not suggesting that on December 26th 1606, when *King Lear* was performed at court, the then Spanish ambassador, Pedro de Zuñiga, would have identified any allusion to Spanish diplomatic practices. My argument is that in the summers of 1603 and 1604 and in the spring of 1606, Spanish and English embassies engaged in a competition to increase their numbers initiated by Villamediana’s peripatetic mission. That the logic of multiplication of retinues of this notorious diplomatic exchange could be addressed in opposite terms by the logic of division in Shakespeare’s *King Lear* seems not too far fetched a conclusion.

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Notes

1 In March 1603, Samuel Harsnett’s *Declaration of Egregious Popishe Impostures*, used by Shakespeare in his depiction of Poor Tom, was entered in the Stationers’ Register; in December 1606 the play was performed before the king at Whitehall. There have been arguments defending an earlier or a later date of composition between these two dates and, so far, the debate has not been settled. Gary Taylor argued convincingly for the play’s indebtedness to *Eastward Ho*, pushing the date to late 1605 or early 1606, while more recently Stritmatter and Kositsky have turned Taylor’s argument around and defend an earlier dating, contending that *Eastward Ho* is parodying different works by Shakespeare, among them *King Lear*. The argument in this article does not move the dating forwards or backwards as we shall see, since Villamediana’s embassy on its own could have inspired Shakespeare, but the two subsequent larger embassies confirmed a process of multiplication, and so at any of these points 1603, 1604 and 1605 the significance of numbers in the retinues could have been an issue for debate.

2 Juan de Tassis y Acuña was not granted the title of Count of Villamediana until he was in Brussels about to depart for England. He should not be confused with his son Juan de Tassis y

Peralta, second Count of Villamediana, who was more notorious than his father for his poetical writings and his scandalous murder.

3 For a discussion of the imbalance between how Spanish and English construed each other at the time, see Berta Cano Echevarría “The Construction and Deconstruction of English Catholicism in Spain: Fake News or White Legend?” Spanish authorities and the English Catholic exile community in Spain promoted biased information concerning English affairs in order to project an image of England as a primarily Catholic country subjected to a temporary Protestant rule that would happily embrace a return to Catholicism.

4 The National Archives hold three different lists with the names and offices of all the members of Villamediana’s retinue, the total number varying from one hundred and forty-three to one hundred and forty-seven. These records show the importance given to knowing the exact number of the retinue members. (TNA: SP 94/9/70-73)

5 *salio todo el lugar a ver al Conde y a ver Españoles y cargava tanta gente que no se podia andar de ninguna manera*. All the translations from the pamphlet are mine.

6 *Aviendo llegado su ropa y previniendo de todo lo necessario de carros y cavallos partio de Dover llevando delante quatro alabarderos, y luego todo el bagage que era por todo el carruaje veynte y quatro, y luego otros quatro alabarderos y estos seguía la caballería con trompetas y pajes, y cavallerizos, luego los demás oficiales della, yva otra trompeta y todos los lacayos del Conde y demás cavalleros a quien seguían el coche del Embaxador, que siempre vino lleno de Ingleses.*

7 Cecil writes: “He is very inquisitive after the manner of Rhoney’s entertainment lest his should digest any usage inferior to his, in which respect we have been curious to observe such ceremonies, in as great equality as can be, for as much as is past.” [Lord Cecil] to [Sir James Elphinstone], Secretary of State for Scotland. 1603, Sept. 2

8 In the same letter, he writes “What his negotiation will be more than congratulatory, is yet unknown, but I conceive he will proceed as Aremberg did at first, who pretended no necessity of treaty where there hath been no breach of amity, for else he would think it were a diminution of his master's greatness to be the first sender where there were no friendship” (Calendar 244).

9 *The Ambassador* was first written in French and circulated in manuscript, but was not printed in that language until 1616. In the “Epistle dedicatorie” in the English version (1603), signed by the publisher James Shawe and dedicated to the Earl of Pembroke, we learn that: “the learned Author Hotman first framed, and a Gentleman of qualitie, translated, for the use of their privat friendes” (A3). The French original appeared in print in a compilation of texts written by members of the Hotman family entitled *Opuscules françoises des Hotmans* (Paris 1616).

10 Bernardino de Mendoza was Philip II’s ambassador at the court of Elizabeth I from 1578 to 1584, but he was expelled after he had been accused of participating in the Throckmorton plot to assassinate the Queen. He then acted as Spanish ambassador to France for the next six years.

11 Cobham was the leader of the Main Plot together with Sir Walter Raleigh. Both were imprisoned while the Count of Aremberg, ambassador to the Archdukes, accused of being the instigator, remained at court. Villamediana had no connection with the plots but, since many of the plotters were English Catholics, Spain was suspected to be the main power supporting the plan.

12 Note the image of the dog, the iambic pentameter and alliteration in the phrase, all insinuating the poetical aspirations of the writer.

13 *muy hermosas en estremo, porque casi todas lo son, generalmente en aquella provincia mas que en toda Inglaterra.*

14 *de la orden de la Jarretera Virrey, y capitan general de Irlanda y del consejo de estado*.

15 *la mayor fiesta que se hace en esta tierra*.

16 *Y estavan los Ingleses, espantados de tanta casa como traya, y dezian no avian visto señor que tan grande casa traya, y dizen verdad, que una de las grandezas que avido en esta jornada, es traer el Conde todo lo que a menester, sin aver menester comprar un clavo para colgar en el camino.*

17 From August 31st to September 20th, when James finally established court at Winchester, he visited Everley in Wiltshire, Tottenham Park in Savernake Forest, Littlecot in Chilton, Wadley in Faringdon, Burford Priory, Woodstock, Sir Christopher Brown’s residence, Hampstead Marshall and Shaw Place, all of them country residences in the South West (Nichols 254-60).

18 *o que mandava que hiziessen*

19 “ *aunque la casa era chica, estaba bien adereçada, la primera cuadra, donde se había de comer estaba colgada de una tapiceria de Cipion y Anibal toda de seda, que nunca se avia colgado, un Dosel de seda de oro amarilla y terciopelo açul, con muchas sillas de terciopelo, una mesa muy larga para cuarenta personas, con muy buena ropa blanca, y las servilletas muy bien cogidas, y llena de principios, que esto aca no se usa, porque no son muy airos: avia tres aparadores, el uno de plata dorada con muchas fuentes, aguamaniles y copones, y otras pieças que pasaban de treinta: otro de blanca, con fuentes, jarros, y frascos de muchas hechuras,*

braserillos y otras pieçcas: otro de plata de servicio, y vidrios para beber: Mientras se ponía la comida se entraron en un aposento mas adentro a labarse las manos, estaba una colgadura de terciopelo y damasco açul bordada con muchos flecos de oro: una cama de lo mismo, quatro bufetes con sobremesas de los mismo, con muy buenos escritorios de Alemania, Marfil y Evano, muy lindas imágenes y pinturas.”

20 Danièle Berton-Charrière argues on the contrary for the cultural pervasiveness of the stories of the foundation of Britain (including the various forms of the story of King Lear). They came in the form of romances, popular ballads, as well as the more canonical prose and verse versions that circulated in England, Wales and Scotland, and formed an intertextual network which allows for possible influences.

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