A painting by Jan Lievens in Berlin, that was once in the collection of the Stadholder Frederick Henry in The Hague, has provided art historians with a compelling iconographic puzzle. The scene of an old gypsy woman reading the palm of a lavishly-dressed younger woman, with a young blond girl and a Moor in the background, is identified in the Berlin catalogue as The Gypsy Fortune-Teller, which is also the title given to the painting when it appeared in a recent exhibition (fig. 1). These publications adhere to the title first given to the painting, already in 1642, in an inventory of the Palace at Noordeinde, which included: ‘A painting of a soothsayer or gypsy fortune-telling by palm reading, by Jan Lievensz of Leiden.’ As such, this painting would be connected to genre depictions, mostly prints, showing wealthy young men and women in the countryside, having their palms read by gypsies. The possibility that this image represents more was first explored by Maarten Wurfbain in an article of 1997. Prompted by the inscription on the piece of paper on the old gypsy’s forehead, Wurfbain cautiously proposed the admittedly fanciful interpretation of Lievens’s painting as showing a scene from the Biblical book of Proverbs, of Lemuel Listening to the Prophecy of his Mother (Proverbs 31). In this highly unlikely reading, the figures in the foreground right would have to be the young boy Lemuel and his mother, whereas they are clearly a rich, adult woman and an old, poor, gypsy woman. Christopher Brown was closer to the mark when he suggested that Lievens here depicted a subject from literature, rather than from the Bible. As will be shown, the artist chose a theme that remains unique in Dutch Baroque painting.

The key to the interpretation of this picture is not the inscription, which is illegible, but rather the figure in the middle ground. She is a radiant, young blond woman, wearing a flowing white robe. If this painting were to be simply a genre scene of fortune-telling, this figure would be an entirely incongruous element. Her presence cannot be overlooked, as her figure is very conspicuous, positioned in the centre, at the peak of a triangle formed by the figures of the two women in the foreground, and as a light form standing out against dark surroundings. Leaning forward, placing her hand on the back of the woman’s chair, she takes an important place in this composition. Her features connect her with the character of Preciosa in La Gitanilla di Madrid, one of the exemplary stories by Miguel de Cervantes, which he published in 1613 in Madrid. Cervantes’s story revolves around the figure of the girl Preciosa, who was born to a Spanish noble family, but who was stolen as an infant and brought up in a gypsy band, not knowing of her own background. Throughout the story she is repeatedly referred to as being extremely beautiful, but in one particular passage Doña Clara exclaims that her hair ‘...can really and truly be called golden hair?’ Lievens’s painting takes up an event that occurs in the middle of a complex story.
filled with adventures, appropriate to the picaresque tradition. It starts when the young nobleman Don Juan spots Preciosa, singing and fortune-telling in the city, and he falls in love with her. His love is so strong that he agrees to join the gypsy band for a period of two years, to become a gypsy and thus earn Preciosa’s hand. After a number of adventures, Don Juan is propositioned by a wealthy young woman, whom he refuses in favour of Preciosa. In revenge, she has him framed for theft. One of the men who comes to arrest him insults him, and is killed by him. As a gypsy, Don Juan is condemned to death by the local magistrate, Don Fernando. The drama ends happily, however, when Preciosa’s gypsy guardian demonstrates that the girl is actually the magistrate’s daughter. Don Juan is in turn recognized as a nobleman, who was in the right to protect his honour. In the end, the story confirms the power of blood, that sparked a love between these two children of nobility, in the face of an apparent gulf between their social class and religion.

Lievens’s painting corresponds to a minor episode towards the beginning of the story. When Preciosa and her company call at the house of Doña Clara, the wife of the local magistrate, she welcomes them in, and asks Preciosa to tell her fortune. The old gypsy woman, who is only referred to in the story as Preciosa’s ‘grandmother’, urges her to accept the payment and proceed. This moment is represented in Lievens’s picture: to the left, Preciosa’s ‘grandmother’, carrying a baby on her back, crouches and points out a coin to the viewer. Across from her, the lavishly-dressed Doña Clara is seated on a luxurious chair, whose back is covered with a