

Chess in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age

Fundamentals of Medieval and Early Modern Culture

Edited by
Albrecht Classen and Marilyn Sandidge

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Chess in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age

A Fundamental Thought Paradigm
of the Premodern World

Edited by
Daniel E. O'Sullivan

De Gruyter

To Marion and Colm

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: “Le beau jeu nottable”.....1

Part I: Chess, Morality, and Politics

Chapter 1

Chess in Medieval German Literature: A Mirror of Social-Historical
and Cultural, Religious, Ethical, and Moral Conditions

Albrecht Classen.....17

Chapter 2

Making Chess Politically and Socially Relevant in Times of Trouble
in the *Schacktavelslek*

Olle Ferm.....45

Chapter 3

Ludus Scaccarii: Games and Governance in Twelfth-Century England

Paul Milliman.....63

Chapter 4

Defeating the Devil at Chess: A Struggle between Virtue and Vice
in *Le Jeu des esches de la dame moralisé*

Kristin Juel.....87

Part II: Women On and Off the Chessboard

Chapter 5

Medieval Chess, Perceval’s Education, and a Dialectic of Misogyny

Jenny Adams.....111

Chapter 6

Images of Medieval Spanish Chess and Captive Damsels in Distress

Sonja Musser Golladay.....135

Chapter 7

How did the Queen Go Mad?

Mark N. Taylor.....169

Part III: Playing Games with Chess and Allegory

Chapter 8

Playing with Memory: The Chessboard as a Mnemonic Tool in
Medieval Didactic Literature*Amandine Mussou*.....187

Chapter 9

Changing the Rules in and of Medieval Chess Allegories

Daniel E. O'Sullivan.....199

Chapter 10

The Limits of Allegory in Jacobus de Cessolis' *De ludo scaccorum**Dario Del Puppo*.....221

Selected Bibliography.....241

Notes on the Contributors.....253

Acknowledgments.....257

Introduction: “Le beau jeu notable”

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In the prologue of one of the longest medieval allegories, *Les Eschéz d’Amours*, the narrator dedicates his work to those who love “the beautiful, notable game,” that is, chess:

A tous les amoureux gentilz,
Especialment aux soubtilz
Qui aiment le beau jeu notable,
Le jeu plaisant et delitable,
Le jeu tres soubtil et tres gent
Des eschéz, sur tout aultre gent,
Vueil envoyer et leur presente
Ceste escripture cy presente,
Car il y trouveront comment
Je fuy au jeu, n’a pas granment,
D’une fierge en l’angle matéz
Par les trais–tant fuy pres hastéz–
De celle qui, au voir retraire,
Si gracieusement scet traire
Au jeu que je dy des eschés,
C’onques tant n’en sot Ulixés. (vv. 1–16)

[To all noble lovers, especially to the clever ones who love *the beautiful, notable game*, the pleasant and delightful game, the very subtle and very noble game of chess, above all other people, I wish to send and to present to them this here text, for they will find how I was, not long ago, mated in the corner by the moves—I was quickly dispatched!—of a lady who, to tell the truth, knows how to play the game that I’ve mentioned, chess, so graciously that even Ulysses didn’t know so much about it.]¹

¹ I take this citation from the edition that I am currently preparing with Gregory Heyworth, and the translation is my own. Until now, the work has been known as the *Eschés amoureux*, but we feel that title to be problematic. See Gregory Heyworth, “Textual Identity and the Problem of Convention. Recovering the Title of Dresden Oc. 66,” *Textual Cultures: Text, Context, Interpretation* 1.2 (2006): 143–51.

This work was composed in the fourteenth century, though the trope of chess for love goes back at least as far as the troubadours of the twelfth, suggesting just how quickly the ideas of lovemaking and chess were linked. Yet, in the light of how much has been written on chess in the Middle Ages, including the essays contained in this volume, the expression invites renewed consideration.² The game of chess is notable not only because it is noteworthy, i.e., important, in medieval culture, but also because it is a system capable of generating infinite permutations that may be noted down and examined. Its rules and potential for metaphorical or allegorical representation invite poets and preachers to note the similarities between the world on and the world off the chessboard. As such, the game as an abstract whole or a discreet sequence of moves may de-note and con-note different things: order, symmetry, aggression, sacrifice, surrender, good vs. evil, or myriad other meanings. Chess's mutability takes on a whole new dimension in medieval culture when we consider notions of time and space: the game we play today did not exist as such throughout most of the Middle Ages; rather, it changed over history and across nations and even local regions. Finally, add other social or historical considerations in regard to the players themselves—age, gender, and class—and the hermeneutic implications become even more fecund. Consider the meaningful differences among games played between a man and the woman he loves, between a treasurer against a sheriff, or between a lady the devil himself: these are all situations that arise in the chess games of the present volume, thus underscoring the game's importance to understanding medieval culture.

It may be impossible to overestimate the importance of chess in medieval culture. Collections of medieval chess problems (and the modern chess problem survives today in many newspapers next to the crossword puzzle and word jumble), an inheritance from the Muslims, occupy dozens of manuscripts must have engaged minds for countless hours. Chess can set the scene in courtly literature, for example, between lover and beloved, adversaries in their own right. In didactic texts, chess became a figure of thought and speech in treatises on the proper functioning society and social mores. The game's geometric patterns and alternating colors made it a favorite target for manuscript illuminators and other artists who incorporated chess imagery into their work. During the Middle Ages, artisans crafted fine chess sets made of stone, precious metals, and jewels. Chess was so ubiquitous that accounting for its significance in any satisfactory way would arguably require several volumes

² Merritt R. Blakeslee, "Lo dous jocx sotils: La partie d'échecs amoureuse dans la poésie des troubadours" *Cahiers de civilisation médiévale* 18 (1985): 213–22; here 216.

filled with the research of dozens of scholars from an array of academic fields: history, literature, archeology, and historical anthropology, among others.

How can we begin to understand the appeal of the game to a medieval audience? The game's martial origins were of obvious import to people who lived daily among warring factions, be they armies of foreign kings or the knights of neighboring barons enmeshed in some local, territorial skirmish. The game quickly became a requisite part of a knight's education, for in it, a knight could learn how to execute cunning feats of military strategy. Finally, the game taught proper chain of command in military matters: kings stood in the back center in the game's initial positioning where he could survey the whole battlefield, whereas pawns or foot soldiers stood at the front lines, ready to protect their lordly masters and be sacrificed in the march to victory.

Of course, kings did not only conduct wars (though some did admittedly show a penchant for warfare); they also ruled over their subjects, for better or for worse, by executing laws and delegating authority to an entire cast of officials—sheriffs, bailiffs, seneschals—and relying on the lower classes to provide him with duty as well as goods to everyone in the land. It was therefore a short leap to imagine the king of the chessboard and those surrounding him as a representation of medieval society. These political allegories could be more or less detailed depending upon a writer's heuristic goals.

One wonders, though, if beyond the notions of war and civic hierarchy, what else might help account for the game's wild popularity between 1100 and 1500? Could the rise of scholastic thought have contributed to the game's rise? The Schoolmen searched for knowledge using dialectic, the two-sided debate in order to reconcile Church teaching and products of pagan teachings. While a chess game does not end in a resolution of the two sides *per se*, the notion of two oppositional forces locked into a battle with well-established rules that call for implementing logical strategies might very well have struck the imagination of more than one Scholastic thinker. Moreover, scholastic emphasis on essence and existence, a bedrock distinction in Aristotelian thought, might very well have provided some impetus behind the proliferation of chess allegories throughout the Middle Ages. More than one author in the present volume suggests that the two might very well have coincided in the medieval mind.

We may also appeal to medieval aesthetics to understand how chess might also have garnered wide appeal in the Middle Ages. In today's (post)modern world, we search for what's new, original, and exciting. In medieval art and literature, the spectator or reader sought the recognizable and the familiar. This is not to say that he sought for rote repetition; rather, the medieval reader delighted in the ebb and flow of play and variation. For example, the songs the troubadours, whose playfulness immediately makes its comparison to other ludic pursuits quite natural, was based on system of conventions to which

composers adhered while making a number of slight variations in form and content to produce a new song: songs were (generally) strophic in metrical and melodic form, deployed complex rhyme schemes and other acoustic effects, and called upon *loci commune* to express feelings of love, sadness, frustration, etc. There were vogues, of course, and trends, and it is relatively easy to look back on troubadour poetry and see where they began and ended. However, any given troubadour song was subject to an infinite number of combinations and possibilities...just like chess. Every game started out with an equal number of pieces prearranged into their starting positions, the rules were known (or agreed upon) ahead of time, and play proceeded according to those rules or the game was considered invalid. As in the troubadour poetic system, no two games of chess were executed in exactly the same way. Moreover, where poetry reveals trends and evolving tastes as time passes, the game of chess also evolved over time and across space to create the local rule variations—or *assizes*—according to the predilections of particular players at a particular time in a particular place.³

Two texts, one medieval and one modern, pervade any serious discussion of medieval chess and culture. The medieval text is Jacobus de Cessolis's *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium super ludo scacchorum*, a medieval blockbuster of a text, that compared chess pieces, their arrangement, and moves to the ideal medieval *polis*. In whole or in part, the work survives in scores of manuscripts. Relatively soon after its appearance around 1300, the work was translated into several languages—German, French (on two separate occasions), Italian, Spanish, Catalan, Dutch, Swedish, and Czech—and represented perhaps the apex of chess's hold on the medieval imagination. William Caxton's English version, *The Booke and Playe of Chess* (1474) was in fact one of the first books to be printed in English. Comparisons between society and chess had been made before Jacobus, but the lion's share of the work's popularity was most likely due to the detail into which Jacobus extended his political metaphor. It was easy to see correspondences between the king and queen on the board and those who resided in the huge castle on the hill. However, Jacobus, not content with facile comparisons, delved into less obvious similarities, especially in regard to the pawns. As Richard Eales explains it:

³ David Hooper and Kenneth Whyld define "assize" as follows: "a medieval term for a particular set of rules of chess, which differed from country to country and often within the same country. Even the array was not standardized. There was the long assize, with men arranged as they are today, and various kinds of short assize, with pawns on the third rank and an unorthodox arrangement of the pieces. The short assize was so named because it curtailed the otherwise lengthy opening phase, the forces making contact sooner," *The Oxford Companion to Chess* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 17. Murray discusses the evidence of various short assizes in *A History of Chess* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 476–82.

De Cessolis drove home his point by giving a much more elaborate account of the third estate than earlier writers. Though he recognized that pawns in chess all have the same move, and have much in common, he characterized each of them separately to represent a different trade or profession, from labourers, smiths and masons to notaries, advocates and inn-keepers. Though the descriptive scheme was confined to secular society, 'bishops' being portrayed as judges and 'rooks' as royal messengers, it was still an extremely thorough one.⁴

The inclusion of all estates likely widened the allegory's—and the game's—appeal outside of the aristocratic and Latinate circles. In any case, as the essays in this volume attest, the *Liber*, even when it is not the primary object of study, enters most discussions of medieval chess culture.

In addition to Cessolis's medieval text, the modern text that resurfaces time and time again is H. J. R. Murray's *A History of Chess*.⁵ Chess histories and commentaries are myriad, but no single volume has stood the test of time better than Murray's *magnum opus*. As Marilyn Yalom writes in the very first endnote of *Birth of the Chess Queen: A History*,

Murray's 900-page book constitutes the Bible of chess historians. With his knowledge of numerous languages including Latin and Arabic, and his devotion to chess worldwide, H. J. R. Murray was one of those late Victorian giants whose intimidating figure seems to have inhibited further research for the next two generations.⁶

Murray traces the development of the game from its early Persian ancestor, *chaturanga*, right up to the very time of when he was writing at the turn of the twentieth century. The work is replete with literary excerpts in classical, medieval, and modern languages, diagrams, and copious commentary on the game through twelve centuries. So compendious is the work that it may never be supplanted as the standard history of the game, even if many would like to see it superseded, for doing so would require at least a lifetime of scholarly effort, if not a team of scholars to work one or two decades in close collaboration. This is all the more astounding when one realizes that Murray also contributed articles on specific issues of chess history as well as a later digest of chess history, *A Shorter History of Chess* (published posthumously).⁷

In the twentieth century, chess histories have appeared and updated Murray's work, but none have come close to Murray's comprehensiveness. Most important has been Richard Eales, *Chess: The History of a Game*. His 240-page account attempts to cover the same wide chronological parameters as Murray,

⁴ Richard Eales, *Chess: The History of a Game* (New York and Oxford, UK: Facts on File Publications, 1985), 66–67.

⁵ Murray, *A History of Chess* (see note 3).

⁶ Marilyn Yalom, *Birth of the Chess Queen: A History* (New York: HarperCollins, 2004), 243 n 1.

⁷ Most of Murray's bibliography can be found in E. Meissenburg, "H. J. R. Murray (1868–1955): bibliography of a chess historian," *British Chess Magazine* 100 (1980): 249–52.

but the real value of his volume is its bibliographical update of Murray. In other words, while Eales has noted the works of other scholars on particular medieval texts and issues, he does not correct Murray as much as add to him. He notes the proliferation of work on particularly important medieval works such as the "Einsiedeln Verses," Jacobus de Cessolis's *Liber de moribus*, Alfonso el Sabio's *Libro del acedrex*, among others. In addition to Eales, one notes other worthy volumes to have appeared in the last decades: Henry A. Davidson, *A Short History of Chess*; Sally Wilkins, *Sports and Games of Medieval Cultures*; David H. Li, *The Genealogy of Chess*; Adolivie Capece, *Le grand livre de l'histoire des échecs*; Wolfram Runkel, *Schach: Geschichte und Geschichten*; and David Hooper and Kenneth Whyld, *The Oxford Companion to Chess*.⁸ Nevertheless, someone has yet to offer us a single work that adequately combines the fundamental ground covered by Murray with the last century's advances and discoveries in the history of chess.

Exhaustivity in treating chess in medieval culture would require more space than allotted in the present volume, and focussing on one text or one national tradition, while creating depth of knowledge, would obviously restrict the work's audience. The resulting editorial strategy aims to chart the waters between depth and breadth. The essays are gathered here with the intent to represent some of the wide chronological, geographical, cultural, and institutional parameters within which chess operated upon the medieval imagination. The essays cover several linguistic and cultural categories and the commentators here deal with texts composed in Catalan, English, French, German, Latin, Swedish, Pahlavi (a Persian language), and Spanish. These texts date from the seventh through the sixteenth centuries and account for, to the extent possible, changes in social mores and how these movements might have been reflected on the chessboard. The intellectual disciplines implicated in these studies include art, literature, economics, politics, philosophy, education, and related fields.

As an aid to comprehension, the essays are grouped into three categories: Chess, Morality and Politics; Women On and Off the Chessboard; and Playing Games with Chess and Allegory. The essays, much like a game of chess in progress, might have been arranged in other sequences and juxtaposed differently. However, within each category, the essays address literary, artistic, and historical texts from different places at various times over the thousand or so years we call the Middle Ages and early modern period. Moreover, the essays ask different questions of these texts and achieve, the editor hopes, an effect akin to shining light through a diamond where the gazer gains a glimpse

⁸ See "Selected Bibliography" at the end of this volume for bibliographical data on these works as well as for other works dedicated to chess history that have been published over the last century or so.

of something beautiful in its myriad facets, the result of time, effort, and precision craftsmanship.

Chess, Morality, and Politics

As noted above, chess was, first and foremost, a war game, but warring in the Middle Ages, as it is today, came down ultimately to politics. No wonder chess became so quickly a metaphor for social and political conditions after it was introduced to Western Europe around 1100. The game proved to be a valuable means of assessing the social landscape all over Europe, and where that landscape differed, the game could adapt or, at least, those who thought about chess could adapt the beautiful game to their own ends. In order to illustrate this point adequately, the first section of essays consider questions of chess, morality, and politics in four medieval cultures: Germanic, English, Swedish, and French. Furthermore, they interrogate texts pertaining to courtly literature, theological questions of temptation and sin, administrative policy, and principles of good government.

Chess abounds as a metaphor in Middle High German culture, in works as famous as Gottfried von Strassburg's *Tristan* and Wolfram von Eschenbach's *Parzival* to important but lesser known works such as the compendious *Liet von Troye* (ca. 1200) by Herbot von Fritzlar, the *Murtner Siegeslied*, and Rüdiger von Hünchouer's *Wittich vom Jordan* (1290–1293). In his contribution, "Chess in Medieval German Literature: A Mirror of Social-Historical and Cultural, Religious, Ethical, and Moral Conditions," Albrecht Classen carefully analyzes a selection of relevant passages in Middle High German texts from epic and courtly narrative to didactic literature that past scholarship has failed to appreciate sufficiently. In these numerous contexts, we encounter protagonists who either observe or participate in a game of chess or, more curiously, utilize a chessboard or the pieces for other purposes. As Classen himself observes,

The variety of allegorical applications of chess for the representation of courtly society at large, but then also of courtly love, cultural transgression, military strategies, meditation and wisdom, and so forth, was almost infinite, which signals that the chessboard and its pieces powerfully served these poets and writers as some of the most fascinating and far-reaching literary images to reflect upon fundamental ideals, values, principles, and concepts determining courtly society and its relationship both to the lower classes and also to God. (44)

Such observations couched within the meaningful web of references that Classen weaves make his essay an excellent starting point for the volume.

Olle Ferm transports the reader just north of Germany to Scandinavia, to Sweden, in his essay, "Making Chess Politically and Socially Relevant in Times

of Trouble in the *Schacktavelslek*." The *Schacktavelslek*, a loose translation of Jacobus's *Liber* written probably in the 1460s, makes a series of significant adaptations to its source text so as to address events in contemporary Sweden more directly. The work should be read, argues Ferm, in its historical context because, far from proposing an ideal state in only abstract terms, the *Schacktavelslek* was composed at a time when the Swedish kingdom faced formidable threats from both within and outside of its realm, particularly the desire for political dominion among the Danish regents of the Nordic Union. Social disorder, if not outright dissolution, loomed on the horizon, so suggests the author of this chess allegory. In setting forth his explanation of rules of chess as they applied to politics, he provides tangible historical examples of moral decay to warn of the consequences of following the path the nation was on. Calling upon the philosophical idea of the common good born in Greek philosophy and subsequently shaped by Thomas Aquinas and Giles de Rome, whose *De regimine principum* was paraphrased in Swedish in the early fourteenth century, Ferm reads the Swedish chess allegory as one that emphasizes moral virtue and education all while making the case for national kingship and a constitutional monarchy.

With Paul Milliman's essay, "*Ludus Scaccarii: Games and Governance in Twelfth-Century England*," we wade into the deep waters of finance. Milliman considers Richard Fitz Neal's *Dialogus de Scaccario* or "Dialogue of the Exchequer," a unique historical document that outlines how the financial administration of England operated. Henry II's treasurer, Richard begins his work by comparing this important and serious aspect of royal administration to a game of chess. After 1884 when Hubert Hall elaborated upon this comparison of what he called "the game of the exchequer,"⁹ historians have taken this comparison merely as a literary conceit and followed the analytical construct established by R. L. Poole, who described the Exchequer as a machine.¹⁰ Milliman contends, *pace* Poole and those of his ilk, that perhaps Richard wished indeed that his readers think about the Exchequer not as a machine, but as a game. A reexamination of the Exchequer as a game provides additional insights into the process of royal administration by illustrating how people conceptualized (or at least were supposed to conceptualize) the Exchequer. Milliman believes the playfulness and even mystery of the game of chess was part and parcel of Richard's view of the Exchequer:

⁹ Hubert Hall, *Introduction to the Pipe Rolls* (London: Wyman, 1884).

¹⁰ Poole explains: "I have considered the Exchequer a machine at work and have tried to explain how it worked." Reginald L. Poole, *The Exchequer in the Twelfth Century* (1912; London: Frank Cass, 1973), vi.

Richard's text is a rulebook to teach his readers how to play the game, not how to win it. To give away all the mysteries of the Exchequer would undermine Richard's position, both in relation to the sheriffs and in relation to the king. (87)

In the present-day world where financial markets show so much volatility so as to defy systematic explanation, how can we not see in Milliman's thesis a provocative interpretation of finance as subject to the whims and competence (or failings!) of the players involved?

In the final essay of the first section, Kristin Juel turns towards questions of conscience in "Defeating the Devil at Chess: A Struggle between Virtue and Vice in *Le Jeu des Esches de la dame moralisé*." The text, an overtly religious allegory that survives in a single manuscript of the late 15th century, tells of a lady who plays chess against the devil. The prince of darkness tempts her with lofty notions of love in an effort to force her to make a mistake in playing. Juel undertakes her reading only after contextualizing it in the traditions of what she calls "static chess moralities"—chief among them the *Quaedam moralitas de scaccario* attributed to John of Wales and, of course, Jacobus's allegory—and "active chess moralities." She considers the influence of *Floire et Blancheflor*, the *Miracles de Notre Dame* by Gautier de Coinci, and the *Echés amoureux* (*Eschéz d'Amours*). The last work seems to have exercised a particularly strong influence on the composer of the *Jeu*, but there is more than one's reputation or pride on the line in the *Jeu*. As the game is played against the devil himself, it is lady's very soul at stake in each and every move of the game. Juel observes:

In the *Jeu*, it is not only the ultimate outcome of the game that symbolizes a surrender to sin in general; every move made by the devil represents a particular temptation or sin while the lady's response to every move symbolizes her resistance to it. Just as in the *Echecs*, the moves made by the devil pose a particular threat to the lady. The chess moves, no longer in the abstract, take on symbolic value. The specific moral meaning—in this case, the particular threat of the devil or an act of resistance on the part of the lady—is derived from the specific threat of one chess piece to another. (107–08)

Far from comprising a sermon of only fire and brimstone, however, the *Jeu*, argues Juel, offers an ultimately optimistic vision: here good chess play equals virtuous behavior and when the lady defeats the devil at chess, hope is given to all readers.

Women On and Off the Chessboard

Chess has long been considered a man's game. After all, the game started as a representation of war, the pieces represented soldiers, and the game became an important component of a knight's, and not necessarily a lady's, education.

Moreover, only one piece is a woman, the queen, and even she was absent in early chess when in the square next to the king was the *farzin* or royal adviser. Even after the queen replaced the adviser, it took a long time for this piece to evolve the powers that she enjoys in the modern game. Nevertheless, women abound in chess literature. Other times, women are active players of chess or a woman's love becomes the stake involved in a game of chess. Thus, while chess might seem at first blush to be a purely masculine pursuit, one does not have to go far to see women assume a significant role in the world of chess.

In "Medieval Chess, Perceval's Education, and a Dialectic of Misogyny," Jenny Adams adopts a perspective on the role of chess in medieval education by first making her readers aware of the current pedagogical role of chess. While more women and girls may play chess today than in the Middle Ages, few of them figure among the top players in scholastic, national, or international arenas. Adams links this disparity directly to the character traits that medieval chess writers promoted, traits that became coded as specifically masculine. By way of illustration, she considers one of the great medieval stories of youth and education, Chrétien de Troyes's *Conte du graal* or *Perceval*, and the later version of the tale that goes by the title of the *Didot Perceval*. Adams perceives a fundamental shift in the educational paradigms at work in each text. Chrétien's twelfth-century narrative would seem to favor a Bernardian model where stress is placed on individual teachers and authority figures that teach with an eye to *humanitas* and *amicitia*. However, by the early thirteenth century when the *Didot Perceval* was composed, the Scholastic model and its emphasis on learning through experience, not a teacher's tutelage, had become the predominant pedagogical theory. Chess, which figured very little in Chrétien's tale, occupies a central place in Didot and, in light of Scholastic learning practices, Adams does not think that to be a coincidence:

Rather than learn through teachers, the hero learns through his adventures, and one of the most important of these occurs over a chessboard. Perceval's experience at the chessboard castle thus merits deeper consideration, as it both mirrors his earlier experience at Arthur's court and proves to be the fulcrum for the knight's ascension to the throne at the end of the story. (129)

That experience involves Perceval losing three chess games in succession at the chessboard castle and a return to that castle later on to mark, as Adam reads the text, a repudiation of the feminine.

Sonja Musser Golladay moves the discussion further to the west in her essay, "Images of Medieval Spanish Chess and Captive Damsels in Distress." She also displaces the object of study from linguistic to artistic representations of women and chess. She considers chess paintings in Alfonso X el Sabio's *Libros de acedrex dados e tablas* or *Libro de juegos* [*Books of Chess Dice and Tables* or *Book of Games*], completed in Seville in 1283 and then a later painting inside the domes

of the lateral cupolas of the *Sala de los reyes* (or *Sala de justicia*) of the Alhambra Palace in Granada. Musser Golladay reveals hidden allegorical significations behind Alhambra's Gothic art when she considers a chess-rescue painting against the aesthetic background provided by images of chivalric capture on the betrothal caskets as well as the historical background of Spain's Reconquest. The key to understanding, according to Musser Golladay, comes as a result of piecing together this evidence rather than focussing on one master text or event:

Simply because the scenes derive from longer, known or unknown stories does not require that any one recognizable episode of a tale represent the moral of that tale as a whole. José Gudiol Ricart is correct when he laments, "no text could possibly explain such an iconography." We must instead consider why the same non-narrative groupings of selected scenes appear together in the Alhambra and in other places in order to decipher their collective message. (168)

Through her meticulous gathering of evidence, detective work, and careful reasoning, Musser Golladay makes a persuasive argument in deciphering images that still confound many art historians.

Mark Taylor focusses our attention on the chess queen herself, and entitles his essay provocatively: "How Did the Queen Go Mad?" His question is technical, but very important, for understanding the modern game: how did the *fers* (adviser and antecedent to the chess queen) with its limited medieval movement evolve to take on her modern queen's movement? For this revolutionized the way chess is played, sharply distinguishing modern from medieval chess. Not even Murray undertakes the question. Taylor provides two kinds of evidence: first, he lays before the reader a small group of medieval texts prior to about 1475 that suggest or imagine a *fers* more powerful than her limited oblique movement warrants, and that also perhaps imagine a more powerful *alfin* (chess bishop). Second, by comparing the old and modern movements, he deduces the most likely sequence of change, assuming development from simpler to more complex, from small to greater steps. Enough preliminary evidence exists, contends Taylor, that the change may have occurred in stages, which casts doubt upon our prevailing understanding about the queen. With this insight, he calls for a concerted effort to update Murray and, in so doing, return to the medieval texts in order to read them afresh.

Playing Games with Chess and Allegory

Just as the game of chess evolved over time, chess allegories have changed to suit both the tastes of a particular audience and the heuristic aims of a given

author. Moreover, while both the game and allegory follow proscribed rules in order to be understood, those rules are more malleable than they might appear at first glance. For example, moving a rook diagonally would be considered an infringement of the rules, unless, of course, the rule was broken to make a point in an allegorical universe. Readers may think chess to be capable already of enough combinations to articulate any given message, but some authors like to explore its limits and how it can be made even more meaningful outside of its ludic context.

Amandine Mussou considers the practical implications of a game that is simultaneously compact in size and scope but infinite in its potential permutations. In her essay, "Playing with Memory: The Chessboard as a Mnemonic Tool in Medieval Didactic Literature," she reads three chess allegories against the backdrop provided by recent scholarship on medieval memory systems. The individual texts she chooses tie her contribution back to those of Juel and Adams while anticipating those by O'Sullivan and del Puppo: the *Liber de moribus hominum* by Cessolis; *Les Eschés amoureux* (*Les Eschéz d'Amours*) as well as *Le Livre des eschez amoureux moralisés* (both of which she contends were written by Evrart de Conty), and, finally, Philippe de Mézières's *Le Songe du vieil pelerin*, the third book of which is almost entirely based on a *moral eschequier*. Whereas many have commented on how chess forms a part of a knight's education, Mussou believes that chess functioned specifically as an educational tool and mnemonic device.

In "Changing the Rules in and of Medieval Chess Allegories," Daniel O'Sullivan explores how the rules of chess allegory changed as the game evolved. Many scholars, including several in this volume, have noticed that there is a general movement from static to active (to use Juel's terms) chess allegories. O'Sullivan attributes this to the rising popularity of the game and the wider recognition of how the game was played among audiences. When a poet could count on his audience understanding how the game was played, he could employ far more detailed rhetorical strategies to accomplish his heuristic aim. This was accomplished gradually, of course, over several centuries. Beginning with one of the earliest chess texts, the "Vijārīshn I Chatrang" or "The explanation of Chatrang" written in late seventh-century Persia and comparing it to Jacobus's *Liber*, O'Sullivan suggests that early chess allegories had to remain static and make all allegorical correspondences explicitly because the poets could not count on their readers understanding the significance of the various moves. Some chess allegorists such as the poet of *Les Eschéz d'Amours* (*Eschés amoureux*) did include a game in the text, but it could not be accomplished with any textual economy: the poet still had to explain the moves and rely on outside symbolism to convey his message. Only with the advent of the new rules could true chess allegory come into being as the fifteenth-century Catalan text, the *Scachs d'amor*, demonstrates. In this text,

game and allegory are seamlessly fused together for perhaps the first time in chess literature.

With the volume's final contribution, we come circle in many ways, for Dario del Puppo refocusses attention on that great medieval chess allegory in his article, "The Limits of Allegory in Jacobus de Cessolis's *De ludo scaccorum*." Del Puppo contextualizes the *Liber* in its historical context of early fourteenth-century Italy, its rhetorical context as a book of *sententiae* and *exempla*, and its theological context:

As a Dominican friar, he [Jacobus] would have been well versed in discussions about free will. And he is aware of the important political and historical changes taking place in Genoa in his lifetime. But his is still essentially a teleological universe, like for Dante and other late medieval writers and thinkers. For all of "the countless number of ways to play, because of the various meanings and metaphors" that makes chess intriguing, the chessboard is nonetheless a circumscribed space with prescribed roles. The apparently infinite number of moves on the chessboard is all contained within a universe at whose head sits a divine being. (233)

Del Puppo incurs a two-fold debt on the part of his readers in his essay: first, he reminds us that while chess offers seemingly infinite possibilities of play and meaning, the game is nonetheless inscribed within its own rules. Even chess and allegory have their limits. Second, he grounds his discussion of textual transmission and interpretation of allegory in solid philological work on an early witness of the *Liber*, Ms Ricketts 194 in the collection of the Lilly Library at Indiana University, Bloomington, Indiana.

Conclusion

Sixty-four squares. Thirty-two pieces. Two armies, each led by one king. Chess comes down to those simple parameters, and yet in medieval culture it was—and remains today—capable of expressing so much of the human mind. In any game, a chess piece may move no further than seven squares away from the square it occupies, and that goes only for a minority of the pieces; however, as a metaphor for war and politics, as well as allegories of love, education, reason, finance, philosophy, and theology, chess allows the human mind to soar far beyond.

Part I: Chess, Morality, and Politics

Chapter 1

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Chess in Medieval German Literature: A Mirror of Social-Historical and Cultural, Religious, Ethical, and Moral Conditions¹

Chess has intrigued people all over the world, and the game can actually look back to a very long history, wherever its origin actually might have been, whether in India, Persia, or Arabia.² In fact, chess is much more than just a game played by two people using a board to move pieces around fighting against each other until one side is defeated (checkmate). H. J. R. Murray formulated in his by now classic study *A History of Chess*:

We must accordingly conclude that our European chess is a direct descendant of an Indian game played in the 7th century with substantially the same arrangement and method as in Europe five centuries later, the game having been adopted first by the Persians, then handed on by the Persians to the Muslim world, and finally borrowed from Islam by Christian Europe.³

¹ I would like to thank Christoph J. Steppich, Texas A&M University, for his critical reading and helpful suggestions. Sonja Musser Golladay was so kind to point out some remaining errors in my text. Not to forget, I am particularly grateful to Daniel E. O'Sullivan for his excellent achievements as editor.

² Hans and Siegfried Wichmann, *Schach: Ursprung und Wandlung der Spielfigur in 12 Jahrhunderten* (Munich: Callway, 1960).

³ H. J. R. Murray, *A History of Chess* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1913), 27. He adds later: "The game of chess was invented when some Hindu devised a game of war, and, finding the ashtāpada board convenient for his purpose, adopted it as his field of battle." (42) See also Jenny Adams, *Power Play: The Literature and Politics of Chess in the Late Middle Ages*. The Middle

Chess has always enjoyed a much higher cultural status than most other (board) games, serving in many ways as a reflection of culture, education, intelligence, political skills, virtues, vices, and so forth. David Shenk cites thirteenth-century ibn Khallikan as a witness of the infinite intellectual power, seductiveness, and significance of chess: "When Sissa had invented chess and produced it to King Shiram, the latter was filled with amazement and joy. He ordered that it should be preserved in the temples, and held it the best thing that he knew as a training in the art of war, a glory to religion and the world, and the foundation of all justice."⁴

Hardly any culture and any people exposed to this game has ever been able to resist the fascination, if not obsession with, exerted by chess, as the world of the European Middle Ages amply indicated from early on, and as the evidence from subsequent centuries confirms as well.⁵ But in order to illustrate the extensive metaphorical, symbolic, political, and philosophical implications of the chess game throughout the ages, let me begin with a short discussion of a most powerful twentieth-century novella in which chess assumes central importance as an icon, a metaphor, and as a most complex symbol of how man can get caught in social, political, and ideological constraints and then faces the danger of breaking down in that system.

Shortly before committing suicide on February 22, 1942, the Austrian Jewish writer Stefan Zweig completed his *Schachnovelle* (Chess Novella), reflecting upon the impact the Nazis had on the lives of individual people, and drawing from the game of chess the inspiration to illustrate how a person could be destroyed by the machinations and abuses of a dictatorial system.⁶ In the novella, a conservative young man who, in his role as a lawyer, administers the estates of members of the old Austrian monarchy and aristocracy, is appre-

Ages Series (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006), focusing, however, primarily on late-medieval English literature.

⁴ David Shenk, *The Immortal Game: A History of Chess or How 32 Carved Pieces on a Board Illuminated Our Understanding of War, Art, Science, and the Human Brain* (New York, London, et al.: Doubleday, 2006), 13. See also Marilyn Yalom, *Birth of the Chess Queen: A History* (New York: Harper Collins Publishers, 2004)

⁵ See the comprehensive article on "Schachspiel" (game of chess) in Johann Heinrich Zedler's famous *Grosses vollstaendiges Universal-Lexicon Aller Wissenschaften und Kuenste*. Vol. 34 (1742; Graz: Akademische Druck- und Verlagsanstalt, 1961–1964), 684–86. See also Jacob und Wilhelm Grimm, *Deutsches Wörterbuch*. Vol. 8 (Leipzig: Hirzel, 1898), 1956–68, for the terms "schach" to "schachzabel."

⁶ Stefan Zweig, *Schachnovelle*, ed. Brian Murdoch. Methuen's Twentieth Century Texts (London: Methuen, 1986), 3: "On one level, *Schachnovelle* is a tense and exciting narrative, but at the same time it challenges the reader to think about the nature of man's subjection to the tyranny of chance and time." See also the edition of the text in Stefan Zweig, *Meisternovellen* (Frankfurt a. M.: S. Fischer Verlag, 1970), 349–402.

hended by the Nazis and tortured by being kept all by himself for months without end in an almost sceptic hotel room with nothing to stimulate his mind. After more than half a year he happens to gain secretly possession of a chess book, and begins to learn all the moves and possible game strategies. Ultimately, however, he enters a stage of mental confusion, getting lost in more and more virtual chess games that he is schizophrenically playing against himself. The crisis really breaks out only later, once having been released from his cell and after having been treated by a medical doctor for his mentally disturbed mind. Getting involved in a real chess game against a world champion while fleeing the old world, he suddenly loses the connection to reality and gets very upset because his opponent is still playing the same game, whereas he has already moved into a very different one.

Whether we want to read Zweig's text as an expression of how traditional humanitarian values can get lost in a world of increased technical automation, as a protest against Nazi dictatorship, or fascism at large, or as an indication of man's infinite options, or lack thereof, to carve his life according to his own ideals and values, the author has basically presented the chess game as a symbol that requires ever new interpretations because of its infinite possibilities that the individual can pursue, though still limited by the chessboard and the rules according to which the pieces can move around.⁷

Indeed, chess is not necessarily harmless and simply a playful and enjoyable game, as many German and other writers have observed.⁸ Instead, playing

⁷ Murdoch, "Introduction," 30–34; he emphasizes that "Chess as play helps human beings overcome the twin tyrannies of fate and time, and if it will outlast books, they too can also serve to pass time" (33). See also his study "Game, Image and Ambiguity in Zweig's *Schachnovelle*," *New German Studies* 11, 3 (1983): 171–89; Donald G. Daviau, "Stefan Zweig's *Schachnovelle*," *Monatshefte* 65 (1973): 370–84. Most recently, Kai Berkes, "Nihilistische Freude am 'Unmöglichen': Sebastian Haffners 'Geschichte eines Deutschen' und Stefan Zweigs 'Schachnovelle' wollen den 'Wahnsinn' begreifen," *Text und Wahrheit: Ergebnisse der Interdisziplinären Tagung Fakten und Fiktionen der Philosophischen Fakultät der Universität Mannheim*, 28.–30. November 2002, ed. Katja Bär (Frankfurt a. M.: Peter Lang, 2004), 153–66. For an application of the chess, or more generally the game symbolism, to medieval literature, see Albrecht Classen, "Erotik als Spiel, Spiel als Leben, Leben als Erotik: Komparatistische Überlegungen zur Literatur des europäischen Mittelalters," *Mediaevistik* 2 (1989): 7–42; id., "Minnesang als Spiel. Sinnkonstitution auf dem Schachbrett der Liebe," *Studi Medievali*, Serie Terza, XXXVI, 1 (1995): 211–39. See also the intriguing, ultimately however rather speculative, study by Ursula Katzenmeier, *Das Schachspiel des Mittelalters als Strukturierungsprinzip der Erec-Romane*. Beiträge zur älteren Literaturgeschichte (Heidelberg: Carl Winter Universitätsverlag, 1989).

⁸ *Porträt des Schachmeisters in Texten und Partien*, ed. Michael Ehn (Koblenz: H.-W. Fink, 1996); Jiri Veselý, "Das Schachspiel in der deutschsprachigen Literatur," *Deutsch-böhmische Literaturbeziehungen. Germano-Bohemica* (2004): 367–78; *Schachpartie durch Zeiten und Welten*, catalogue to the exhibit, ed. Hans and Barbara Holländer (Heidelberg: Edition Braus, 2005); for chess as a motif in paintings, see Marion Faber, *Das Schachspiel in der europäischen Malerei und*

chess can have considerable implications for the player's life, both as a mirror and as a practicing field, and it also indicates the player's particular level of education, wisdom, and ability to cope in life according to his/her moves on the board.⁹

In European literature poets began to incorporate the chess game as a significant symbol of courtly society at least since the eleventh century—perhaps even the Romans might have played chess, though it seems more likely that the game entered Europe only by the sixth or seventh century via the Arabs on the Iberian Peninsula,¹⁰ whereas the Roman *ludus latronum* employed rather different rules and had no pieces as in chess.¹¹ Particularly didactic and moral writers enjoyed referring to the chess game because it functioned particularly well for their purposes, such as in the case of the English *Moralitas de scaccario* (before the middle of the thirteenth century), whereas the clergy was generally forbidden to play chess.¹² With the help of the chess allegory one could address especially moral and ethical themes, such as we can observe in the satirical *Li jus des esqués* by Engreban d'Arras (ca. 1295). John of Wales' *Breviloquium de virtutibus antiquorum principum* (ca. 1260–1270) pushed the interest in chess as an allegory even further, which then deeply influenced many other clerical writers throughout the late Middle Ages.¹³ One of the most

Graphik (1550–1750) (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1998); Gerhard Josten, *Schach auf Ölgemälden* (Norderstedt: Books on Demand, 2006).

⁹ Modern authors, such as Ronan Benett (*Zugzwang: A Novel* [New York: Bloomsbury, 2007] and Mario Leoncini and Fabio Lotti (*Chi ha ucciso il campione del mondo?: scacchi e crimine* [Rome: Prisma, 2004]), have followed this tradition and continue to utilize the chess game as an excellent metaphor for life at large and society in specifics.

¹⁰ Wolfram Runkel, *Schach: Geschichte und Geschichten* (Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1995), 49–52.

¹¹ Murray, *A History of Chess*, 394–96 (see note 3); Ferdinand Vetter, *Das Schachzabelbuch Kunrats von Ammenhausen, Mönchs und Leutpriesters zu Stein am Rhein. Nebst den Schachbüchern des Jakob von Cessole und des Jakob Mennel*, ed. Ferdinand Vetter. Bibliothek älterer Schriftwerke der deutschen Schweiz (Frauenfeld: J. Huber, 1892), XXIV.

¹² Vetter, ed., *Das Schachzabelbuch*, XXXIII (see note 11).

¹³ Anežka Vidmanová, "Die mittelalterliche Gesellschaft im Lichte des Schachspiels," *Soziale Ordnungen im Selbstverständnis des Mittelalters*, ed. Albert Zimmermann. Miscellanea Mediaevalia, 12, 1 (Berlin and New York: de Gruyter, 1979), 323–55. H. Petschar, "Das Schachspiel in der Literatur; Schachbücher, Schachallegorien," *Lexikon des Mittelalters*. Vol. VII (Munich: LexMa Verlag, 1995), 1428–30; Richard G. Eales, *The History of a Game* (London: Batsford, 1985); Raymond D. Keene, *Chess: An Illustrated History* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990). There is a plethora of similar studies that don't need to be cited here all. For specific approaches to chess with a focus on its symbolic meaning for late-medieval society, see Heike Bierschwale, Oliver Plessow, "Schachbrett, Körper, Räderwerk: Verräumlichte Gesellschaftsmetaphorik im Spätmittelalter," *Raum und Konflikt: Zur symbolischen Konstituierung gesellschaftlicher Ordnung in Mittelalter und Früher Neuzeit*, ed. Christoph Dartmann, Marian Füssel, and Stefanie Rüther. Symbolische Kommunikation und gesellschaftliche Wertesysteme: Schriftenreihe des Sonderforschungsbereichs 496, 5 (Münster: Rhema, 2004), 59–81.

famous books on chess was created in Spain by King Alfonso el Sabio (1221–1284), his *Libros de acedrex, dados e tablas*.¹⁴ The history of chess literature, however, has continued ever since, whether we think of Marco Girolamo Vida's treatise *Scacchia Ludus* (1527), Eberhard Welper's *Das Zeit kurtzende Lust- und Spiel-Hauss* (1694), or F. D. Philidor's *Analyse du jeu des échecs* (1749, and many times thereafter, e.g., 1777).¹⁵ Not surprisingly, many miniaturists also included scenes of chess games into the manuscripts, such as in the *Les vœux du Paon* by Jacques de Longuyon, Tournai, ca. 1350,¹⁶ since they offered great opportunities to illustrate common aspects of life at court, which must have directly appealed to their patrons.

The author of the probably most influential and widely disseminated treatise on this game, the *Liber de moribus hominum et de officiis nobilium super ludo scaccorum* (ca. 1275), Jacobus de Cessolis, originated from the province of Asti in northern Italy. Documents confirm that he belonged to the Dominican monastery of Genua between 1317 and 1322. His fellow brothers encouraged him to compose his chess book as an allegory of human society, in contrast to the traditional astronomical, moral, and religious orientation in the previous works on the game of chess. It was supposed to serve as a valuable resource for preachers and teachers insofar as the individual pieces are assigned particularly representative functions, irrespective of their specific roles in the chess game, such as peasants, craftsmen, merchants, medical doctors, apothecaries, etc., all in the class of ordinary people below the nobility. Altogether Jacobus relates 150 examples, 78 of which pertain to the aristocracy. Primarily he drew his material from classical sources, thereby adding secular material to the repository of religious narratives and miracle accounts usually employed by preachers for their sermons. Remarkably, Jacobus refrains from offering satires of monks, and he hardly criticizes women, as was rather common in the

¹⁴ For a useful introduction and survey, see the online encyclopedia article at: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfonso_X_of_Castile and http://es.wikipedia.org/wiki/Alfonso_X_el_Sabio; (last accessed on March 15, 2011); for a text edition, see Alfonso el Sabio, *Libros de acedrex, dados e tablas: Das Schachzabelbuch König Alfons des Weisen*, ed. Arndt Steiger (Geneva and Zürich-Erlenbach: Droz and Rentsch, 1941). See also Sonja Musser Golladay's Ph.D. dissertation, "Los libros de acedrex dados e tablas: Historical, Artistic and Metaphysical Dimensions of Alfonso X's *Book of Games*" (University of Arizona, 2007).

¹⁵ See also the pleasant study by Ulrich Schädler, *Globusspiel und Himmelsschach: Brett und Würfelspiele im Mittelalter* (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1998), 8–15.

¹⁶ Today in the Pierpont Morgan Library, Ms. G. 24, fol. 25v, see *Medieval Mastery: Book Illumination from Charlemagne to Charles the Bold: 800–1475*, ed. Lee Preedy and William Noel (Leuven: Davidsfonds, 2002), 174.