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## BIRTH OF THE CHESS QUEEN

*Arie van der Stoep*

Independent board game researcher

**Marilyn Yalom, *Birth of the chess queen*. Harper-Collins, New York, hardcover ed. 2004, paperback 2005.**

Chess, born in the East, is a war game. This can be demonstrated by the pieces. The piece alongside the king for example was a vizier, a counsellor: a vizier gave the king advice in important matters as the strategy on the battlefield. After chess was carried to Europe (10th c.) the counsellor was replaced by a queen.

A possible relation between living queen and chess queen, this is Yalom's subject. Since many Western female sovereigns willingly left combat and war to their husbands, the presence of a queen in Western chess is a proof that chess took on a social dimension [2005:XIX]. The author did not confine herself to this observation, but asked the intriguing question if there were living models, so female sovereigns, for the chess queen.

The method Yalom chose to find an answer guarantees the reader some fascinating hours. She describes a work on chess from a certain period and thereupon the life of the female sovereign of the territory in the time the chess manuscript was written. Then she checks whether this sovereign could have served as a model for the chess queen. I give an example that is illustrative for her method of reasoning.

On p. 15-18 Yalom describes the *Einsiedeln* poem from the late 990s, a Latin poem written by a German speaking monk. On p. 19-24 she describes the lives of Adelaide of Burgundy and her daughter-in-law Theophano, a Byzantine princess. "Which queen served as a model?", she asks on p. 19. She cannot make a choice, for "both Theophano and Adelaide provide plausible sources for the birth of the chess queen. Both were famous during their lifetime as consorts sharing power with their husbands and as queens regent successfully protecting their dynasty. Both were highly cultivated

in the realm of art and literature, and had a working knowledge of Latin. Both have been credited with inspiring the Ottonian Renaissance at the imperial court. Both died in the 990s (Theophano in 991, Adelaide in 999), the decade during which the *Einsiedeln Poem* was composed. What more fitting tribute to a recently deceased empress, or one about to die, than a poem attesting to the existence of the chess queen?" [2005:25]. There could be something wrong with my sense of logic, but I am not able to understand why there should be a connection between a chess queen and a female sovereign because the latter has a working knowledge of Latin.

## Identification

A second objection concerns Yalom's identification of chess as a board game and the position of the game in literature and the plastic arts. A striking example is to be found on p. 147: "By the late fifteenth century, when the chess queen's supreme powers were officially codified, the game itself was at the height of its popularity, with a special meaning for couples. They could look to chess as a privileged space for the interchange of intellect, feelings, and sexual desire." Yalom's observations do not relate to chess itself but to the literature, of course. Chess is not more than a pastime: to kill the time two persons in turn move a little wooden figure on a rectangular surface.

I just wrote "Yalom's identification". This is an undeserved reproach, however, for the American only reproduces an argument used by chess historians to prove the popularity of chess as a game. The German Joachim Petzold, for example, argued that chess responded as a seismograph to social changes [4, p. 151]. Not chess responded to social changes: an artist applied chess as a motif, and the way he developed the theme is subject to the place and the time where and when he lived. See the great differences between poems on chess and manuscripts on the game written by chess players, a difference which even becomes visible in the vocabulary: literary men mentioned the chess queen *regina* or invented another female name, chess players (almost) always preferred the Muslim name *fierge/fers* [Murray 1913 quoted many works].

On the background a question asks our attention that Petzold did not touch. This one. Different from our time, a medieval writer did not strive after originality. On the contrary, he eagerly borrowed metaphors and themes from earlier generations. In the French romances of chivalry knights invariably enjoyed playing chess and tables. But was this reality, would it not be better to suppose we have to do with a stereotype? A much read genre in

the trivial literature of the West is the doctor novel, where at the last page a male physician and a female nurse press each other in their arms after a lot of setback. In the 15th c. a loving couple had a date with the chess board as an excuse, in the 21st c. lovers meet with an operating table in between. The doctor always is sporty, slim, tanned, charming and attractive, his female patients yearn for his coming, but the real hospital gives me quite another impression. The real world in medieval France, reflected in the French vocabulary, tells us that the most popular board games was draughts [7, pp. 149-154].

## Spanish queen and chess history

Yalom's quest starts about 1000. After a number of gripping descriptions of chess manuscripts and absorbing depictions of strong female queens and empresses, Yalom arrives at 15th Spain, a place and time where and when chess players broke the old Muslim game. The *Einsiedeln* poem was devoted to a game with a chess queen which could move only to a diagonal adjacent square; in the late 15th c. the piece was allowed to advance diagonal and straight lines as far as it liked. Yalom pays attention to the poem "Scachs d'amor" (Love chess) from the 1470's, the first manuscript referring to the new chess queen [2005:193-194]. The governing queen was Isabella of Castile; we make acquaintance with her on p. 199-211. "Can we establish a connection between the new mighty chess queen and Isabella?", asks Yalom [2005:191]. Her answer is affirmative, based on the argument that Isabella was a militant queen, and that the new chess queen with her unlimited power is militant too [2005:211].

This argument is not new, Yalom borrowed it from Spanish chess historians. She adopts it to sustain her claim, but is it valid? I am afraid not; for the second time I lodge an objection against the method used by chess historians. Clarification.

A "female" word for the Muslim *fierge/fers* like *regina* was not invented by a chess player but by a literary man, who did not see chess as a board game but as a representation of (some part of) the society. In this case a sociological explanation for the birth of *regina* is demanded.

The Spanish name *dama* = 'chess queen', however, rose in the vocabulary of chess players, was coined by people who experimented with the rules of their game, the kind which loses himself so deeply that he forgets the world around him. This escape out of reality is an essential characteristic of play [Huizinga 1950 5:41]. For this reason a social explanation is methodologically

wrong, an etymological investigation is requisite. This investigation was carried out. The Spanish word *dama* = 'chess queen' is a new sense of an existing word 'dama'. This older word *dama* means 'row where the chess pawn is promoted'. Chess players borrowed it from draughts players [7, pp. 38-43].

On p. 194 Yalom refers to Westerveld 1997, who claimed that the Spanish name for draughts, *juego de damas*, originally meant 'game with chess queens' and was linked to the prestige of the Spanish queen Isabella. This is an easy assumption, not based on investigation. A linguistic approach revealed that the game name *juego de damas* was borrowed from French and dates back to the 14th c. [5, 6] [7, pp. 25-37].

## The mythologisation of chess

Petzold's "Kulturgeschichte" is a serious historical study on chess, and Westerveld and other Spanish investigators do serious research too. They cause me a problem, however. In my latest book (2007) I tried to compare the position of chess with the position of draughts and other board games. Leaving literature and plastic arts aside as in principle unreliable, I found a game which has not been very popular for many ages. Only in the 19th c. chess began to outstrip its sister game draughts, for instance; in the 15th and again in the 18th c. chess was drastically influenced by draughts [7, pp. 38-48, 98-101].

Following the description of the position of chess by chess historians, I see –again– a methodological inadequacy. Chess is a trifling pastime, like tables, draughts, goose or halma. In the chess literature the game is proclaimed, but without any comparative investigation, as an exceptional board game, a game of mythical proportions. By linking chess to historical female sovereigns, Yalom contributes her mite to the mythologisation.

In this context I cast a doubt on Yalom's story [2005:103] about king Louis IX of France. One day Louis saw his brother playing chess while at sea during the Crusade, and he dumped the board and all its pieces into the Mediterranean. Yalom's source is an edition of Jean de Joinville, *Vie de Saint Louis* published in 1995. But in the edition of this work by Natalis de Wailly, Paris 1888:22 it is said that Louis' *brother jouoit aus tables a monsignour Gautier d'Anemous*. Louis was ill, but left his bed, went to the players *et prist les dez et les tables et les geta en la mer*, and scolded his brother because the latter played for money. The game in question is tables, and Louis threw the dice and the table pieces into the water.

## Draughts-chess

A last matter. On p. 179, Yalom without comment takes a remarkable line from Linder's book on chess in Russia: "And we played draughts-chess together". *Draughts-chess* is the literal translation of the Russian combination *shashski-shakhmaty*, a riddle that Linder cannot settle, no more than the conjunction *peshi-shakhmaty* [2, p.118]. Can we solve the puzzle looking to the pieces Russian draughts players used? The Ancients played their board games with flat circular pieces. Gaming pieces which have been preserved from old times and which are not flat, all originate from Egypt and the Near East, see for this [7, pp.169-172]. In former days, the Russians probably played draughts with pawn shaped figures, with "chess pawns". This could explain the Russian game name *shashki*, the plural of the word *shashka*, literally "small chess piece", so a pawn [5, p.216]. Reading both *shashski* and *peshi* as 'pawn', we interpret the conjunctions as "game with pawn shaped figures in which checkmate plays a part". Chess.

## Conclusion

To the reader who is interested in the past, particularly in the contribution of female sovereigns in the European history, or who wants to read palatable stories about chess in literature and arts, I can warmly recommend Yalom's book. It does not contribute to our knowledge of chess; on the contrary: it increases the ingrained prejudices about the position of chess among other board games. But it would be unjust to lay this at Yalom's door, she might trust on the literature. The chess history, however, contains some major methodological flaws, which clearly surface in Yalom's book. Hence my conclusion: the book may be fascinating and captivating, it is far from a contribution to our knowledge of board games.

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Board Games Studies was first published in 1998, an initiative inspired by the colloquia on board games held at Leiden University, the Netherlands, in 1995 and 1997. Five institutions affiliated themselves with the journal: the Institut für Spielforschung und Spielpädagogik in Salzburg, the International Institute for Asian Studies in Leiden, the Russian Chess Museum in Moscow, the British Museum in London, and the Department of Computer Science at the University of Maastricht. The journal, which was published by CNWS Publications in Leiden on a yearly basis, was partially funded through the assistance of patrons and boasted a modern layout, trilingual summaries and color plates. The broad ambition of this journal required a continuous commitment from the editors, who reviewed contributions in German, French and English, provided translations of summaries for each article and, in several cases, collaborated extensively with authors to develop manuscripts that were to the academic standards of the publication. The journal had a trial run of three years, after which the format, content and review process was evaluated. The authors of the articles integrated wide-ranging literature necessary for a comprehensive understanding of particular games. Contributions from different disciplines — including psychology, computer science, philology, classical archaeology and history — allowed for a better historical and systematic understanding of board games to emerge. Starting in 2000, a section with a translation of primary sources was added. Book reviews and research notes further complemented the multi-faceted contents. Its first ambition, to serve as a platform for the publication of board games research, was met quickly, while gradually the journal gained prominence among researchers by publishing seminal historical overviews. The colloquia continued from 1995 onwards, moving from a biennial to a yearly schedule. The host institution was expanded beyond Leiden to universities and museums throughout Europe as well as Jerusalem, Philadelphia and, in 2013, the Azores. The colloquia continue to gather an enthusiastic group of scholars, players and collectors. Despite the institutional affiliations and a group of patrons, the production of the journal became financially and logistically problematic with CNWS no longer able to serve as a publisher. Reluctantly, the paper version of the journal was discontinued after volume 7 was published in 2004. The possibility of an online version of the journal had been explored with the online publication of the first issues, a decision that greatly assisted the dissemination of knowledge accumulated in those early volumes. The next step, an online journal that operates again as a platform for recent board games research, was not far away but required the skills and enthusiasm of previous and new editors to materialize. In these last fifteen years, the study of board games has gained momentum and this journal will not only showcase new results but, most of all, will encourage and publicize the work of the dedicated researchers in this field.

Alex de Voogt



## To the authors

Board Game Studies is an academic journal for historical and systematic research on board games. Its object is to provide a forum for board games research from all academic disciplines in order to further our understanding of the development and distribution of board games within an interdisciplinary academic context. Articles are accepted in English, French, and German and will be refereed by at least two editors under the final responsibility of the Editorial Board. Please send your contributions in any editable format (Word, L<sup>A</sup>T<sub>E</sub>X, rtf, ...) with a matching PDF file. Please send all the illustrations in separate files.

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