Renaissance Self-Destruction: The Virtue and Danger of Chess in European Literature

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Renaissance Self-Destruction:
The Virtue and Danger of Chess in European Literature

Senior Project Submitted to
The Division of Languages and Literature
of Bard College

by
Kaleth Marcus Torrens-Martin

Annandale-on-Hudson, New York
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Dedication

For my parents, Roberta and Trey- thank you for supporting me throughout all four years at Bard, for encouraging the study of what I love, for happily listening to and engaging with the wonderful texts and knowledge I brought home with me every break. I love you both.

For Bob Torrens - this thesis really began seventeen years ago, when you taught me the beauty of chess. I still cherish the photo of my first non-odds victory at the house in Montpelier. I look forward to having another match soon.

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For Elliot Harris - every time we play I rediscover that I know little of all there is to know. Thank you for the lesson in humility. I’m still riding the ecstasy of the one double rook sacrifice mate.

For Liam Casey - your chess has totally transformed. I’m grateful that every time I return to Vermont I can be sure of finding a wily opponent.

For Al, Fin, and Teagan - I’m sorry that the last four years have meant we don’t get nearly enough time to play games and have adventures. Things will always be busy, and before I know it you will all be in college. But for now, I’m confident the next year will mean a ton of hearts at the very least.

And for Kennedy - thank you for being endlessly patient and interested through the endless rants about chess morality, Lucretian philosophy, and other such delusions. Our games have helped get me through this year. They remind me of everything I have to look forward to. I cannot wait to see you compete in London, and after we can find a cheerful coffee shop for some quiet chess or a crossword. I will never forget the fortunate omen of no-stress-chess.
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Introduction

Chess grew as music grew, as poetry grew. I believe that it sprang from rude beginnings and gradually added one beauty to another until it ripened into chaturanga (Willard Fiske)

There is a world constructed of sixty-four squares. A paradoxical realm, where the ancient is always new, and stagnant is ever changing, the frozen always dynamic. It is a battlefield with no bloodshed, a court, a city, and world all at once. Its squares contain life and death, love and madness, morality and deception. Its permutations are as infinite as its guises, its dimensions as malleable as its implications. It is populated by thirty-two figures: two opposed ranks with eight humble pawns; a back rank beginning and ending with the implacable rooks, next the daring knights, austere bishops, mighty queens and finally a pair of regal kings, locked in eternal struggle for the mastery of the chessboard world.

Chess is a game ancient and enduring, born from myth in western India around the years 531-78 CE under the name chaturanga (Murray, 27). The mythological origin of chess comes in a variety of interesting forms. In one story, it is an effigy of the battlefield constructed to show a grieving queen mother the circumstances of the king's death. Another posits chess as a method of instruction for young nobles in the tactics of war, and also as a tonic for idleness during a siege. Another story suggests chess as a representation of civil war, used by one brother to indicate his right of succession after the destruction of his kin, lawfully carried out according to the rules of battle (Davidson, 83-84). These are but a few mythic origins of chess, some beautiful and compelling, others amusingly distant from the known historical fact. The full truth of chess’
founding is thus far lost in the far depths of history, but a rough sketch has been established by historians of the game.

The Sanskrit name *chaturanga*, which means literally “four arms,” was a game conceived of as a battlefield, lending credit to many of the myths. The “four arms” refer to the deployment of the army in ancient Indian warfare. Of course, the chess pieces were not represented in *chaturanga* the way they are today. Instead, there were four military units: *padati* (infantry i.e. pawns), *asva* (cavalry i.e knights), *gaja* (elephants i.e. bishops) and *ratha* (chariots i.e. rooks). The royal couple of the European court were instead *rajah* (king) and *mantri* (councilor). There is a long and complex etymological transition for each piece, only the briefest sketch of which will be recreated here. Additionally, the movement of each underwent development and change as first the Persians, Arabs and then Europeans adopted chess. The moves of *chaturanga* are as follows: the counselor *mantri* could only move one square diagonally (much weaker than the later queen). The elephant *gaja* can move one square diagonally, and one square forward, to represent the spaces controlled by four legs and trunk of an elephant. The horse *asva* has had the same L-shaped leap for thirteen centuries and it has never changed. Though the rook *ratha* has a controversial etymology, which will be touched upon in chapter one, its moves were the same: up too but not exceeding the open squares vertically or horizontally (with one extra when an enemy piece can be captured and the rook replaces it). The pawns *padati* (from *pada* meaning foot) were able to move only one square forward, and capture diagonally. Also, should they arrive at the opposite back rank, they were able to be promoted to *mantri* the weakest of the officers in the army (Davidson, 7-8).
For the modern game, the most important result of the linguistic change when Persia adopted chess was that *rajah* in Sanskrit is changed to *shah*, deriving the name for the game in almost every European language. For instance, *shah* is easily recognizable in the German and Italian *schach* and *scacci*, among others. Though less apparent, the French *échec* is also derived from the Persian, and it is from the *échec* that the English “chess” and “check” are born (Davidson, 9-10). Besides the changes of name *rajah* to *shah*, *mantri* to *farzin*, *asva* to *asp*, *gaja* to *pil*, *padati* to *piyadah*, and *ratha* to *rukh* there were few significant changes to the play of chess (called in Persian *chatrang*). The only difference of note was that the *pil* can no longer move forward one square, but remains fixed on the diagonal and could now move two squares. This was important historically because it confines the later bishop to a single color, one light squared and one dark (Davidson, 11).

Despite the few changes to chess play, the Persians studied the game more than had been done in India. It is from this time period that the concept of “check” and “checkmate” originate. In the Sanskrit game, one did not have to declare that the king was under attack, and if this was overlooked, he could be captured, ending the game on the spot. The Persians required that *shah* (king) be called out when he was under attack, which meant accidental captures were impossible. The game was played, therefore, until the king was helpless. Once he could no longer move out of check the king was *manad* which means in Persian “ambushed” and is the origin of checkmate (Davidson 12).

The most influential development of ancient chess occurred in the Arabic period, played in Muslim lands in the eight-tenth century CE. under the name *shatranj*. After the Arab conquest of what is modern day Iran, the resulting cultural overlap meant that within a century chess was
adopted under the new name. Because the languages are quite different (Persian is an “Aryan tongue” like Sanskrit and Arabic is Semetic like Hebrew) the conquerors had to make some changes for ease of pronunciation. Pil (elephant) becomes fil and piyadah (pawn) becomes baidaq. The king remained shah despite the fact this has never been a designation for an Arab ruler, and the rook is carried over exactly, but the counselor changes from farzin to firz. The horse is translated directly as faras. Again, it is the bishop who underwent change, the rule becoming that instead of the option of one or two squares, the fil had to move two at once, greatly reducing its power, since it covered half the squares as before (Davidson, 12-13). Thus, not much changed aside from a translation of names, and the movement of a single piece. However, an important innovation for the game which makes the Arabic period so significant was the enormous literature of chess tactics they developed. The development of chess literature of this kind was the foundation of modern chess.

In this form, the game of chess crossed into Europe on three fronts. First, into Spain by way of North Africa. Second, into Italy by Mediterranean trade routes. Finally, from Asiatic Turkey, through European Turkey and up through the Balkans (Davidson, 13). On the western front, the game converged in France, and then made its way north to Britain and eastward to Germany. Fully adopted into Europe by around the eleventh century, the game maintained the same rules as the Arabic game. However, by the fifteenth century, the rules had shifted such that they are nearly identical to the rules used today. Medieval chess, therefore, has a reign of about four-hundred years in which the game continued to be developed for the increase in speed of

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1 Tactical literature is the study of the game through the memorization of motifs, a practice still important for players today. It works through the study of chess problems, which show a position on the board in an image, and the players attempt to solve it. When a familiar position arises in play, they will recognize how best to gain an advantage in the following series of moves.
play by promoting long range strategy. The changes of the period were as follows: checkmate becomes essential for winning the game, rather than removing all of the opponents pieces; a stalemate is possible, resulting in a draw; the pawn can move two squares on the first move and with this comes en passant: castling is introduced and standardized; the power of the bishop is altered to be able to move any number of open diagonal squares; finally, the queen's power is increased by allowing her to move like a bishop and rook combined. The final two changes, fully standardized by the sixteenth century, are what really optimized long range chess play, and ushered in the modern era (Davidson 14). Indeed, these changes completely changed the game of chess forever, not only because of the increase of speed of play and danger of long range attack, but also because the pawns now are of much greater significance. The ability of a pawn to promote to powerful queen means pawn play and skilled chess play were now synonymous.

Previously, the rook was the most powerful piece on the chess board, hindered only by the difficulty of development. The knight, with the same move pattern as today, was next most powerful. Because of the limited range and slow movement of pawns and clunky move pattern of fil and ferz the game proceeded very differently. The changes made by the sixteenth century mean that the old studies of chess would now be useless. The strategy of the game, also, was completely changed by the necessity of checkmate. This meant that attacks upon the enemy king were essential, as they are today. As such, the artful sacrifice of pieces in the pursuit of checkmate became possible.

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2 One of the more difficult rules to explain, and highly situational, en passant refers to a unique capture pattern for the pawn where it captures by moving one square diagonally behind a pawn which has just moved forward two squares. Since it can only occur after the initial two square move, this means that the capturing pawn has to be on either the fifth rank as white, or the third as black i.e. the capturing pawn will start its turn horizontally adjacent to the pawn which has just moved.
Etymologically, the shift in name of pieces entered into its last stages around this period. In medieval England, the piece, known now as the queen was called ferz or fers, taken from the Arabic. The bishop was called alfil becoming a compound of al fil ie. the elephant. The king, knight and pawn all gained their modern names. The rook has a more complex history and was thought of variously as a chariot or bird but from the influence of the Italian rocca (fortress) and the concept of castling (withdrawing to the castle) the piece acquired its modern iconography as a tower. Having sketched a loose rendering of a complex history involving many moving parts, there is now a foundation to roughly understand chess in Europe during the periods this project covers.

The influx of chess into Europe did not just result in the play of the game there, but also created a whole genre of works dedicated not to chess strategy, but rather literature in the broadest sense of the term. In medieval Europe, the most prevalent form of chess literature was the didactic allegory. One of the earliest instances of chess allegory is Quaedam moralitas de scaccario, or “The Morality of Chess.” H. J. R. Murray refers to it as “The Innocent Morality” (Murray, 530), ascribing the short Latin work to Pope Innocent III (1198–1213). Also speculated to be the work of the Franciscan monk John of Wales (late thirteenth century), though the author is not conclusively known. Quaedam is the first articulation of chess as the world, using the allegory to describe mortality and the leveling power of death, since both kings and pawns return to the same bag at death.³ The text is preserved in the Harley Manuscript (1314-1349), but written much earlier by an unknown author. Though not strictly a literary text, the Libro de los

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Juegos of Alfonso X el Sabio of Castile is a critical step in the migration of chess culture to Europe. It contains one of the richest expressions of intersecting Christian and Muslim thought, since much of the Libro is translated to Spanish from Arabic. It is the best existing chronicle of board games in the Middle Ages, and one which places chess in a particularly exalted position in relation to both dice and backgammon, arguing for the primacy of games of intellect over chance.

The epic poem Les Échecs Amoureux (The Chess of Love) another vastly important allegory which depicts a lover playing chess (and losing) to his beloved lady. Les Échecs popularized the game of chess as a simulacrum for longing and desire, where the progress of play indicates the process of seduction. Owed to this tradition of desire, chess enters into medieval romance. In The Vulgate Cycle, Lancelot plays chess against a chess set which magically plays itself, and which no one else can defeat. After his victory, he bestows the set upon Guinevere. Roman van Walewein, a thirteenth century Middle Dutch romance, begins with a gathering at the court of King Arthur. After the feast ends, a magic chess board flies in the window, daring any knight of the court to sit down for a game. When none do so, it departs the way it came, and Arthur, enthralled by the beautiful set, demands its retrieval. When his knights prove too timid, he declares he will do so himself. Ashamed, Walewein (Gawain) sets out in his lord's stead. The romance centers itself on chess, making the game the catalyst for adventure. This beginning is typical of romance, such as in Sir Gawain and the Green Knight, where the Christmas feast of the court is interrupted by the Green Knights entrance and the challenge to the beheading game.4

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The use of chess persists into the early modern period, finding its way into works of literary giants. In *Utopia* (1551), Thomas More uses chess allegorically to describe the battle of virtue and vice, reminiscent of the medieval didactic allegory (*More, Of Their Trades, and Manner of Life*). François Rabelais uses chess in *Gargantua and Pantagruel* (c. 1532-64) to describe a ballroom dance in terms of the game. The music accompanies the dancers who move through the steps as chess pieces, one side in silver, the other in gold. The colors and setting are both suggestive for the opulence and aesthetic beauty of the pieces, but also the metatheatrical space of the court, where the allegorical representation of court in game expands to cover the entire ballroom of “The Queen of Whims.” This scene in Rabelais is the basis of Thomas Middleton's drama *A Game at Chess* (1624), which uses allegory for the end of satirizing the court space. Instead of names, the characters are represented by the pieces, for instance, *The White Knight, The Black King*. Depicting Anglo-Spanish diplomatic tension, chess, as in Rabelais, expands to represent the court and its members.

Several centuries later, Lewis Carrol builds upon the early modern tradition of courtly allegory, in *Through the Looking Glass* (1871), where characters such as *The White Knight* reappear. The world through the looking glass is a chess board, where its squares are fields and its lines are streams. In this world, everything from reality has been reversed, for instance running keeps one still, and moving away brings one closer. This is the logic of reflection, and chess is made quite literally a mirror world since she enters a looking glass after all. Alice begins as a pawn and slowly works her way towards promotion into a queen, making use of a chess

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motif to describe the coming of age story. Through the genre of fantasy, Carroll makes a sophisticated contribution to chess literature, building upon early modern and medieval thought. He takes the concept of chess as a mirror and expands it into a world unto itself, clearly meditating upon the nature of reality, since the text closes "Life, what is it but a dream?"

Carroll’s vision of the world resonates strongly with The Luzhin Defense (1930) by Vladimir Nabokov, whose protagonist suffers loss of touch from reality, described in terms of dreams. The play of chess overtakes the life of the young Russian savant Luzhin, such that chess comes to be more palpably real than his actual existence. When confronted with an opponent he cannot defeat, Luzhin comes to see that the defense he has constructed is in truth nothing more than an illusion, and that all his existence is predicated on nothingness. This brings the grim realization that he must abdicate the game. Since his life and chess are irrevocably intertwined, the abdication of his chess life means also his suicide.

Given the abundance of chess literature, it is little surprise that the genre has cultivated a particularly rich field of scholarship. When working with medieval sources, scholars primarily examine the way in which chess was used to describe civic structure, court life, and courtly love, not unrelated categories. Jenny Adams, in Power Play: The Literature and Politics of Chess in the Late Middle Ages, examines medieval works in Latin, French, and English. Of these, the most significant is the Latin Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium super ludo scacchorum ('Book of the customs of men and the duties of nobles or the Book of Chess') written by the dominican friar Jacobus de Cessolis in the thirteenth century Genoa. Adams posits that the Liber articulates a system of government founded upon the significant role of the individual for

the general well being of society as a whole. *Power Play* also discusses the epic poem *Les Échecs amoureux* (The Chess of Love), and argues that it is a direct successor of Cessolis’ allegory, where instead of civic virtues the pieces and squares have been assigned emotions, reflecting corresponding feelings of the lovers at play. The undercurrent of the text, Adams contends, is an anxiety about desire and exchange, since the game is a simulacrum of seduction. The text takes the opportunity to praise virtuous conduct and avoids the culmination of desire. The final work Adams considers is *The Merchants Tale of Beryn* by Geoffrey Chaucer, a text which sustains a discussion of chess as related to trade, and mercantile profit, continuing the narrative of chess and anxieties of exchange.

Remaining in the Middle Ages, but traveling to Spain, in *Chess and Courtly Culture in Medieval Castile: The Libro de ajedrez of Alfonso X, el Sabio*, Olivia Constable investigates courtly life. A luxurious manuscript produced for King Alfonso X el Sabio of Castile, Constable uses it as a window into the leisurely pastimes of men and women of the royal court but also the unique commentary it offers on gender, religion and social relation in the thirteenth century.

Circling back to the metaphorical relation of chess and love whose origins are in the French *Les Échecs*, in *Chess, Love, and the Rhetoric of Distraction in Medieval French Narrative* Kristan Juel indicates a larger genre of French literature that uses chess and love together to make moral chastisement for foolish behavior. Stories of men and women playing together arise particularly in the genre of *romance*, for instance the Prose *Lancelot* and *Tristan en Prose*. In these romances, chess is tied to unreasonable behavior- when one player, often the man, is distracted from the game by the other's beauty- known in the genre generally as a “love
trance.” Such texts, Juel argues, leverage said distraction to chastise the foolish lover, and praise those who can resist sinfulness and retain focus.

Though the Middle Ages was a productive time for chess literature, when departing for the early modern period, the presence of the game is hardly diminished. Indeed, the use of chess allegory was retained strongly in the literary imagination. Paul Yachnin, in *A Game at Chess and Chess Allegory* argues as much by investigating two prominent and interconnected sources: Thomas Middleton’s *A Game at Chess*, and the text which inspires the dramatist, *Gargantua and Pantagruel* by François Rabelais. Middleton, though argued by Yachnin not to be as knowledgeable a player as he appears by his use of chess in drama (Yachnin, 317), certainly recognized the games potential. He does not have only one text, but also uses chess for dramatic effect in *Women Beware Women*. Yachnin argues in particular that Middleton’s use of chess allegory is steeped in the games literary past, but also in the contemporary political scene of early modern Europe. His Black Knight, as is true of all villains of the Jacobean stage, takes on a Machiavellian caste, able to dissemble, plot and scheme (Yachnin, 319). This is but one of the many examples of scholarship delving into early modern chess literature. Suffice it to say, given the clear relationship between chess, stratagem and the arguments of Machievelli in *The Prince*, chess retains an important literary place, though potentially fraught with machination.

Chess, of course, did not perish after the Renaissance, but finds its way into both Victorian and twentieth-century novels. On the former, Glen Downey writes *The Truth about Pawn Promotion: The Development of the Chess Motif in Victorian Fiction*, a dissertation at University of Victoria. The aim of his project is to show how the chess metaphor is a linkage between Anne Bronte’s *The Tenant of Wildfell Hall*, Thomas Hardy’s *A Pair of Blue Eyes*, and
Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking-Glass*, predicated on the lack of autonomy for women of the period. Pawn promotion, the process of moving a pawn to the end of the board to promote to a queen, Downey argues, is used in the Victorian texts to reveal the unfulfilling process of “becoming” in a society which designates the female protagonist as second class.

In the twentieth century, the use of chess as a metaphor for the world developed a different but nonetheless sinister guise through the linkage of chess and madness. Two texts essential for this trend are *Schachnovelle* or in English “The Royal Game,” by the Austrian novelist Stefan Zweig, and *The Luzhin Defense*, by Vladimir Nabokov. Though there is scholarship upon this area, it is much less abundant than the early modern and medieval scholarship. Indeed, in Stefan Zweig’s “*Schachnovelle*” authors Donal G. Daviau and Harvey I. Dunkle noted as much saying “Stefan Zweig's *Schachnovelle*, one of his most enduring and best known works, has been acclaimed as a masterpiece and as his finest Novelle. It is somewhat surprising, therefore, that little criticism exists and that no detailed analysis has ever been made to document the claim of literary quality” (Daviau and Dunkle, 371). The purpose of their essay is to examine the text itself, and it does not primarily focus on chess and madness. Indeed, the only scholarship which scratches the surface of *Schachnovelle* is the brief essay *The Application of Learning Theory to the Character Evaluation of Dr. B. in "Schachnovelle"* by Olin Newton and Sandy Pollock. They argue that the text is a rich subject for psychoanalytic theory, which is certainly true, and further that the mind of Dr B is not one characterized by weakness, but is indicative of the survival instinct. This is helpful, as far as it goes, but does not offer a comprehensive study of chess and the mind.
Upon Nabokov’s use of chess a great deal more has been written. Yet, primarily this scholarship investigates what business Nabokov had weaving chess, chess problems and narrative together. For instance in Solus Rex, Nabokov and the Chess Novel, Strother Purdy writes “since Nabokov is a writer of a good deal of power, I offer the following notes on chess in several of his novels both to add to the critical appreciation of them and to consider what relevance chess can have to the business of the novel in general” (Purdy, 379). In general, scholarship upon Nabokov and chess follows the same course. The question of what chess is doing in literature is an interesting one, and yet the approach is more biographical than literary, and scholars have not primarily taken a look at Luzhin for his disturbing dissociation from reality.

By now it should be abundantly clear that there is a dearth of scholarship on chess literature of various different ages and literary traditions. The thematic use of chess as allegory for state, desire as well as courtly life and psychology of chess players have been well documented in scholarship. Indeed, the concept of a world governed by chess has been much studied. What has not been attempted before, however, is to reflect the world of chess in literature as a place unto itself, articulated across nearly a thousand years of cultural production.

This thesis will argue that in the western European tradition, chess in literature represents both a pedagogical tool which instructs one in the art of living well, through allegory and Platonic dialogue, but also a Narcissan mirror uncannily similar to reality. As a tool and intellectual pastime, chess is virtuous, but latent with depths dangerously enthralling as an end in itself. Thus, chess carries inside its squares a lesson for living virtuously in the world but the

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8 Purdy, Strother B. “SOLUS REX: NABOKOV AND THE CHESS NOVEL.” Modern Fiction Studies
danger arises when the chess mirror becomes a world unto itself. It is a game of self-fashioning and self-destruction. Instead of remaining confined to a particular age or genre, this argument will center upon three eras of chess literature, beginning with the Middle Ages, moving next to humanist Italy, and concluding with the modernist novel.

In these three literary moments, life is represented as a game. There are rules for the game, and it can be played skillfully, but such a mirror can also be confining, and perilous for the ability to enthrall. To come to see the checked lines beneath one's feet, brings with it the realization of a promotion square, of a chance for increase, for purpose. What that signifies is not inherent, but necessitates self awareness. For the horizon to come to view, one must first lift their eyes and come to terms with the uncanny fear that what surrounds them, this strange, liminal thing called reality is really a game.

The journey begins with realization. Thus, chapter one investigates the *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium super ludo scacchorum* by Jacobus de Cessolis. His allegory carries the revelation that sparks the mind and sets the feet moving. To learn to play the game at all, let alone skillfully, one must know the rules. Thus, the whole expanse of the chess board will be examined, the duty of each piece, and corresponding associations in society pondered. This reading is natural, since the narrative frame of the text is pedagogical, offering chess as a tool of moral reform. In the friar's allegory exists an orderly world, where all makes sense before the eyes of God. Even that which is out of place is really in place. It is all by design. Once the society interconnected on ties of service and respect is understood, only then does it become sound to advance another square.
Remaining in the Middle Ages, but shifting into the atemporal domain of *romance*, chapter two examines the consequence of excessive skill in both Gottfried’s *Tristan* and *Tristan en Prose*: envy. Chess is a game predicated purely on skillful play, with no room for fortune. Therefore, it is suggestive that the courtier-knight Tristan is a player, and that chess serves as simulacrum in the fateful love potion scene, where his adulterous love with Isolde begins. With envy in mind, stride forward in time, and arrive in humanist Italy, where there are new rules for the play of life. The old method of preaching has been abandoned, but the chessboard world still pervades the courts of the sixteenth century. Chess finds a waiting home amid other leisurely pastimes in Baldassarre Castiglione’s *Il Libro del Cortegiano* “The Book of the Courtier.”

Success as a courtier, depends upon personal *grazia* (grace), and in its absence, *sprezzatura* (nonchalance). These traits provide the dexterity to balance the paradoxical position of courtly life, where one must always perform, but never be performative, must be superior, and never overbearing for the avoidance of envy. The courtier must do everything well, but not too well, retaining the prince's favor and also mediocrity, especially at chess. Pedagogically, chess meshes with the larger philosophical trend away from didacticism to humanist education, where instruction is paired with delight. Yet, the game sits uneasily in the minds of Renaissance thinkers, since its complexity and aesthetic allure make it too captivating to be mere play. Indeed, what before appeared to be an orderly world well contained inside of a game, now shows its first cracks. The chess mirror, where one studies themself, cannot be pondered too long, for fear of forgetting more pressing duties, or in unwarily loving that which is only a reflection. Though a tool for sharpening the wit, chess must be kept at an arm's length, or thus the humanist thinkers argue.
The last stage of the journey rejects this advice, and chapter three will crane forward over the abyss, drinking deep of the bottomless well that is chess. *Schachnovelle “The Royal Game,”* by Stefan Zweig, constructs a chess-world in the interior of the mind. One finds in Zweig the most convincing articulation of the chessboard world outside of the *Liber.* While for the friar de Cessolis the presence of chess meant structure, rules, and order, Zweig offers a new more sinister rendition. His chess players, the brilliant Dr B and the ponderous but indomitable Mirko Czentovic, are studies in chess obsession. Each, for different reasons, find themself solely preoccupied with chess. This makes them an instance of the humanist fear: the play of chess at the expense of all else. Chess becomes both tonic and poison: tonic, for its endless permutations to grant meaning in emptiness; poison when the aesthetic, pleasurable experience of chess becomes an addiction, and the mind, escorted by the game towards infinity, threatens to collapse into madness. Gone is the orderly chess world, with rules, and sensible interpretation. In its place: dissociation, at first from a ghastly imprisonment than from reality altogether. Thus, the journey circles back to the starting square: a world of chess. In the end, it is not allegory, used to understand the tangible through abstraction, but a flight from reality into the recesses of the mind.

Before there was danger, chess found itself employed as a lesson in virtue and a mirror for the world. Turn, then, to Genoa, to *realization,* and the sermon which set the pieces in motion.
I

The City, The Kingdom, and the World Inside the Chessboard

“This whole world is a kind of chessboard, of which one square is white but another black on account of the twofold state of life and death, of grace and sin” (c. 11th century)

In the field of medieval chess scholarship, it is widely understood that a serious discussion of medieval chess literature must include the Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium ac popularium super ludo scachorum (The Book of the Morals of Men and the Duties of Nobles and Commoners, on the Game of Chess), by Jacobus de Cessolis (henceforth the Liber). In its own time, the Liber enjoyed immense popularity across all of Europe, establishing itself within a generation of its completion when it appeared in German and Dutch, then in French, Italian and Spanish, and shortly almost all other languages in Europe. The result of the Liber's prolific spread was that the vernacular and Latin literature of the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries were visibly influenced (Fuller, 34). Though not the first work written on chess in medieval Europe, it is critical for study because it laid the first significant literary foundation.

As speculum regis (commonly translated Mirror for Princes) the Liber purports to provide a moral reflection suitable for educating a monarch. Within the frame of the text itself a

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wicked king is reformed, and by bearing witness to this reform one is enabled to do likewise. However, as is often the case with texts of this genre, the Liber offers lessons for a wider audience than ruling nobles. A close examination reveals that the chess allegory morphs to extend its lessons beyond the education of a single person.

Because the Liber enjoyed vernacular popularity, its manuscripts were not limited to Latin, thus there are three significant versions of the text to consider. First, Liber by Jacobus de Cessolis. Despite the extraordinary popularity of his treatise, Jacobus remains elusive biographically, to the extent that an exact date for his most famous work cannot be given any more precisely than 1276-1325 (26, Fuller). Beyond these dates, and the fact he is thought to have been writing in Genoa, not much else of substance is known.10 Chronologically, the Liber is followed by the French translation, Les Jeu Des Échecs Moralisé (1335-1350)11 by Jehan de Vignay, which is one of the most culturally significant translations of the Liber; and key for understanding the whole story of this text. French was the most commonly known vernacular of the late Middle Ages, and therefore the most widely accessible, making the French Jeu so popular that it is thought to be the basis for William Caxton’s English translation, though he also had access to the original Latin (Fuller, 5). Further, Jehan dedicates the Jeu to the future king, the then prince Jehan le Bon (Fuller 46), which makes the text a speculum regis in the strictest

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10 The reason is partly due to misinformation, which clouds a history of the author. In compiling the 80 manuscripts, Antonius Van der Linde found almost 30 variations of the name Cessolis (Fuller 24). The lack of knowledge led critics to claim de Cessolis was of French origin, but the publication of 14th century documents of the Inquisition in Genoa determined his true origin in Cessola in the province of Asti in Italy and that he remained in a convent there from 1317-1322 (Fuller 25). The range of dates is derived from the mention of one Obertus Guteris who appears in a document from Asti in 1276 and it is suggested that 1325 is the latest date for the writing because de Cessolis speaks favorably of tournaments, which are prohibited in that year Pope John XXII (Fuller 25-26).

11 As with the Liber, an exact date for the translation does not exist, but is given in a possible range (Fuller 67).
sense. F\textsuperscript{12} Finally, the English translation, \textit{The Game and the Playe of the Chesse}, by William Caxton, which will be the iteration examined henceforth. First printed in 1474, the \textit{Game and Playe} is a Middle English translation of the \textit{Liber}.\textsuperscript{13} Notably, \textit{The Game and Playe} is one of the first books ever printed in English (O’Sullivan, 4),\textsuperscript{14} of which about twelve copies survive. As printing takes off in Europe and changes the face of literature forever, it is a chess treatise which is selected as one of the first texts to replicate widely, reinforcing its popularity.

Caxton himself was a figure of some significance, first as an important merchant of luxury goods and then later as a printer (Adams, 5).\textsuperscript{15} He dedicates the book to George, Duke of Clarence, claiming his patronage for the translation. However, scholars today question whether such a relationship existed, or if the dedication was intended to legitimize the text as a \textit{speculum regis} and thereby to sell more copies (Adams, 4). Though not a king, the patronage of the duke, real or fabricated, demonstrates that in practice the \textit{Liber}, and its descendants, were conceived of as \textit{speculum regis}, an inherently educational genre for both its intended audience, or anyone else who gained access to a printed copy.

\textsuperscript{12} Jehan de Vignay not only translates the \textit{Jeu} for at the time future king Jehan I le Bon, but he also presents three other translations to Philippe VI de Valois and four for the queen, Jeanne de Bourgogne (Fuller 46). On the basis of the significant number of translations for the royal family, he is generally considered to have been their official translator. However, as is also true in Caxton’s dedication of \textit{The Game and Playe}, Vignay’s efforts are actually thought to be an independent effort, and by their dedication he seeks to interest the royal family in becoming patron to his work (Fuller 47).

\textsuperscript{13} Though not identical, Adams argues that Caxton does remain faithful to the original (4). Despite being faithful to the Latin of de Cessolis, the prologue which Caxton adds, frames the text in a way that identifies the entire community as the audience of the works moral instruction (Adams, 4). Yet, there is a concrete basis for Caxton’s view of the community at large within the \textit{Liber} itself, and Caxton merely highlights this in his prologue.


This chapter will argue the following: in the frame of the narrative, chess acts as a pedagogical tool for moral reform. Additionally, *The Game and Playe* posits a surprisingly progressive civic structure. Most startling, however, is the text's view of chess as a capacious metaphor for the world, which makes it essential for understanding chess in medieval literature.

First, what is more obvious, yet nonetheless essential: how the frame of the text makes it a *speculum regis*, and therefore a pedagogical tool to shape and cultivate morality. Concerning the king and other major pieces, *The Game and Playe* is a typical *speculum regis*. Yet, in *Book Three: The Offices of the Comyn Pele*, there is a striking deviation, which has led some scholars to question the genre altogether. Finally, how *The Game and Playe* sets up the essential question of this project: chess as a representation of the world. Out of linguistic necessity, this argument cites Caxton's Middle English translation. However, despite a few additions, the Middle English version is an accurate representation of the content of the *Liber*. Where Caxton inserts additional framing prologues he only heightens what is already present.

**The Royal Couple**

The reason scholars consider *The Game and Playe* to be a typical *speculum regis* is largely due to its framing narrative. Before the text turns to the pieces themselves, and their corresponding virtues, it describes the origin of the game.\(^\text{16}\) Chess, the text argues, came into existence in Babylon created by a philosopher named “in Greke ‘Philometor’” (v. 23) to reform

\(^{16}\) This particular origin is one of several mythical creation stories associated with Chess, which the text itself acknowledges. Another fascinating origin story is of chess used to depict the death of a prince to his grieving mother, which comes from the Sanskrit game *Chateranga*, which is more a game of war than European chess, which fits with its warlike origin. In the text, the origin that is described is a third option, equally mythological, of the spread of chess coming from the ancient Greek philosophers, and later Alexander the great. It rejects a fourth myth which places chess as founded at the siege of Troy to pass the time (B1 v.v. 15-21).
an evil king, appropriately named Evylmerodach, who kills his father to ascend the throne and chops him into three hundred pieces (v. 7). Philometor speaks out against his king, determining it is his duty, because it is “leuer dye than to lyve long and be a fals flaterer” (v. 27). Knowing full well that a king of such a violent and evil disposition “destroyeth hym that displesith hym” (v. 32) he opts to endanger himself for the good of the realm. Philometor, whose name means “he that lovyth justyce and mesure” (vv. 23-24), knows that such a king is not fit to rule, and his evil will cause great harm if means are not found to correct him. For Philometor, personal danger is less worrisome than what will happen if the king remains uncorrected.

The method of correction he devises is the game of chess, through which he illustrates the virtues befitting a king. However, his reason for introducing chess to the court is not limited to Evylmerodach’s moral reform, but that is the chief purpose of three. Wary of the kings vicious nature, Philometor does not chastise the king directly, but rather gains his ear discreetly: “For whan this kyng Evylmerodach sawe this playe, and the barons, knyghtes and gentleman of his court playe wyth the phylosoher, he merveylled gretly of the beaute and noveltee of the playe and desired to plate agaynst the philosopher” (v.v. 48-52). Grabbing the wicked king's attention by means of the novel game, Philometor begins his reform. As a pedagogical tool, chess works not only as an allegory, but also as a hook by which to retain the attention of Evylmerodach. This is partly to do with the aesthetic of the game which the king finds to be beautiful, but also that he desires to satisfy his curiosity about the rules. The choice of chess in particular posits an aesthetic mystery native to the game, since he does not use another common medieval game such as dice or backgammon. Indeed, the complex depths of chess will continue to be pondered for
centuries, and into the present day where supercomputers are used to attempt to optimize the infinitely variable game.

Once the wayward king is hooked by curiosity, he becomes attentive to the lessons of Philometor as any student who understands that their attention begets a valuable reward. The structure of the text reflects Philometor’s method: though it is called *The Game and the Playe of the Chesse* in English, it does not elucidate chess strategy, but in morality. The sequence of the text after the introduction is as follows: the estate of the king and his nobles, the estate of the common man, then finally the making of the chess board and the position of pieces and their moves. As such, the king must listen to what amounts to a hundred pages of sermon before he actually learns how the pieces move. Through the game, Philometor simultaneously shows him “the manners and the condycions of a king, of the nobles, and of the comyn people, an of theyr offyces, and how they shold be touchyd and drawn, and how he shold amende himself and become vertuous” (v. 56-58). Clearly, Evylmerodach would not be content to sit down and let Philometor lecture him for hours on what it means to be a good king. Cleverly, the philosopher uses the game to take hold of the king's interest, so that in listening to the story of the pieces, he seems to be attaining his own goal to learn the beautiful game, rather than Philometor’s goal of reforming his evil nature.17

Though this is the essential frame of the text, there are two further reasons for the game's creation, which broaden the purpose of the philosopher from the education of a king, to the wellbeing of society. The game of chess can not only be used successfully to reform a person if

17 One might feel that Philometor pays his king in false coin, since the text only offers a brief account of the play of chess at the end. However, Evylmerodach seems content to learn the barest glimpse of the movement of the pieces, and it can be inferred that like the medieval reader, he becomes entranced by the *exempla* which make up the body of the moral text.
they are already evil, but it can also keep a person from evil in the first place, “And therefore secondly the philosopher fond this playe for to kepe the peple for ydlenes. For there is moche peple, whan so is that they be fortunat in worldly goodes, that they drawe them to ease and ydlenes, whereof comyth ofte tymes many evyllis and grete synnes” (vv. 90-94). Idleness as a prelude to mischief applies more to kings than it does to common people, because a king has more worldly goods, and more leisure time, since they do not necessarily labor physically from dawn to dusk and then sleep exhaustedly. However, a layperson who gains worldly goods is in danger of sinfulness and evil, such as dice, drinking, and whoring or perhaps even worse. Instead of idleness and boredom leading to vice, Philometor presents chess as an alternative which not only keeps one busy intellectually, but also implicitly offers moral instruction.

When making this argument, The Game and Playe does not posit an original claim about leisure and idleness, but rather reiterates an argument owed to the great writer and thinker John of Salisbury, Bishop of Chartres. In Book I of Policraticus, one of the most important medieval works of political theory, John of Salisbury critiques “frivolity” which extends to gaming, hawking, hunting, and various other pastimes. Written around 1160, his work will heavily inform The Game and Playe in both its understanding of the structure of society, and of leisure. Though he critiques wasteful frivolity the bishop admits that “to be acquainted with mathematical games is an interesting and valuable accomplishment- so also the ability to recognize what opponents are vulnerable to surprise and in what way others are safer in their camp [and] we read that Ptolomy, Alexander, Caesar, and Pythagoras himself found relief from their more burdensome duties in contests of this kind. Even their amusements were calculated to prepare them to meet
the problems of philosophy” (27). Chess, though not addressed by name, fits precisely into the category he describes, since it is largely a geometric game. It is not strange to imagine Alexander or Pythagoras being fascinated by chess in their leisure time, especially considering John of Salisbury’s argument that useful leisure provides “relief” from heavy duties. Great men, such as the exemplars listed, all spend their free time preparing to meet the problems of their vocation. Chess has the benefit of being a leisure and a tool of moral instruction simultaneously. Thus it teaches one how to live well, and also is a rigorous pastime that keeps one from evil idleness. Additionally, as a game of strategy, it is especially useful for cultivating “the ability to recognize what opponents are vulnerable to surprise and in what way others are safer in their camp.”

Though a harsh critic of gambling, John of Salisbury admits that even games of chance have their place. He writes, “there are, however, times when, viewed from a certain aspect, games of chance are permissible. For example, if without evil consequences they alleviate the strain of heavy responsibilities and if without harming character they introduce an agreeable period of relaxation” (28). Purely from the angle of utility, games of chance are permissible at appropriate times to alleviate strain. Clearly chess, a far more intellectual game, is useful during leisure time, since it relaxes, and also teaches.

The Song of Roland, supports John of Salisbury’s assessment of the game. Prior to battle “The knights are seated on white silken cloths, the wiser and older ones are playing chess to amuse themselves, and the active younger ones are fencing” (8). Prior to battle, the wiser, more seasoned men, play chess to relax themselves, while it is the younger ones who continue to

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Not only is it appropriate to play chess, it is even wise to do so, since it is useful leisure and gathers one's faculty for their true labors. Clearly, *The Game and Playe* carries on a tradition in medieval literature which recognizes the usefulness of games as both leisurely and instructive.

Philometor’s final reason for the creation of chess addresses the natural disposition of humans: the desire for knowledge of subtle things. Thus, “The thyrd cause is that every man naturally desireth to knowe and here noveletees and tydynge. For this cause they of Athenes studied, as we rede, and for as the corporal or bodelye sight enpessheth and letteth otherwhyle the knowledge of subtyl thynges” (Caxton, 1.95-98). Because humans desire knowledge for its own sake, Philometor can be sure that Evylmerodach will be interested in learning chess. Implicitly, this third cause explains why chess was so popular in the Middle Ages, and why the game has continued to be played across the world for nearly two thousand years.

Games of subtlety are compelling for their hidden “novelties,” whereas dice is merely a game of chance. Though dice is popular, it requires a stake in order to be interesting as a game of chance, otherwise the rolls are arbitrary and meaningless. In chess, on the other hand, “each particular situation appeals to the player, not only as an occasion for attack or defense, but also as a situation to be met by taking thought, a difficulty to be seen through and overcome, a problem to be solved” (Cleveland, 371). Psychologically, the simulation of the battlefield, and also the intellectual problem attract, in addition to the aesthetic display of the board. Philometor leverages this for the end of moral education.

Based on the educational frame, *The Game and Playe* clearly can be understood as a *speculum regis*, since its expressed purpose is to reform a king. If another king were to read *The

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20 They also play tables, or backgammon, which doesn’t fit with the argument precisely, except that it indicates that one can be wise not in spite of their leisure time, but because of it. The younger men tire themselves out training endlessly, while the old campaigners focus themselves through a period of relaxation.
Game and Playe, he will be offered the same moral lessons given to Evylmerodach, and which succeed in showing him his error as a tyrant and patricide. This is particularly poignant in the case of the Jeu by Jehan de Vignay, where he dedicates his work to Jehan le Bon. As a king to be, such a work which examines the proper place of a king in society is the most direct and literal function of a speculum regis. This genre, commonly translated as a mirror for a prince or mirror for princes (here more so mirror for kings), was typically written with the pretext of offering counsel to a sovereign or high member of the nobility. In truth, many specula served another function as both a political forum and also a way to acquire patronage. In the former, authors could extend their philosophical thought into more ambitious or unique areas, without breaking the terms of the genre (Adams, 2).

The genre of the Liber reveals the audience towards which the work was directed, and to an extent, the way in which it was read. Illustrating readership is essential, because one would think very differently about a work such as the Liber if it were only accessible to the elite, or clerical scholars of Latin. When read by clerics, for whom moral reform is not useless but less pertinent than for secular readers, the contents of the text would not be especially profound as lessons. Learned men of God like Jacobus de Cessolis would not only know Latin and read it themselves, but as in the case of William of Tyre, would tutor noble children, as William does for Baldwin IV of Jerusalem (William of Tyre, Historia). Even if they did not tutor their lord as a child, clerics could still translate the Latin texts aloud for them, and communicate their lessons in

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21 In the Middle Ages, prince, contrary to popular belief, does not originally mean “son of a king” but derives from the latin princeps meaning literally primus (first) caput (head) ie. first, foremost, the chief, noble ruler etc. Princes of the Blood refer directly to the male children of a monarch, especially in the 17th century with the rise of absolute monarchy.

that fashion. When examining the *Liber*, a similar pedagogical framework is present: a learned man educating his wayward king. The *Liber* shows what problems can arise when a lord is not provided with a proper moral education, and the obligation for the learned man to provide it.

Around its completion, as late as 1325, the *Liber* was immediately popular. Yet, until it is translated into the vernacular, lords would have needed the intermediary cleric to assist them in exploring the lessons of the chess treatise, revealing the fascinating mirroring effect between the instruction of the text within the text, and the education of nobility in medieval Europe.

 Appropriately for its genre, the first piece on the chessboard that is addressed is the king. He is the foremost of the pieces, and *The Game and Playe* operates as a typical *speculum regis* which places the king as literally the head of state. To demonstrate the proper way in which a king appears and acts virtuously, the king on the chessboard is described:

> For he must sytte in a chayer clothyd in purpure, crowned on his heed, in his right hond a ceptre, and in the lift honde an apple of golde, for he is the most grettest and hyest in dygnyte above al other and most worthy. And that is signyfied by the by the corone, for the glories of the peple is the dygnyte of the kyng. And above all other the kyng ought to be replenyshed with virtues and of grace. And this signyfieth the purpure, for in the like wyse as the robes of purpure maketh fayr and enbelisssheth the body, the same wyse virtues makyth the sowle. He ought alwey thynk on the government of the royame and who hath admyynstracion of justyce, and this shold be by himself pryncipally. This signefyeth the appel of golde that he holdeth in his lift honde. And for as moche as it apereteyneth unto hym to punyssh the revellesm hath he the seotre in his right hond. And for as moche as mystericoere and trouth conserve and kepe the kyng or prync desireth of wyl to belovyd of his peple, lete hym be governed by bebonayrte. (v.v. 1-14)

The image of the king on the board visually reflects the virtues which he ought to embody. The purple robes “maketh fayr and enbelisssheth the body, the same wyse virtues makyth the sowle,” arguing that external appearances ought to reflect the internal realities. Thus, it would be wrong for a king to don purple robes if he is not going to embody the virtues of his soul appropriate for
a king. A problem arises when the internal and external are incongruous, as in the case of Evylmerodach, who kills his father and becomes king, but does not act as befits a king.

The “office of the king” is quite long and detailed, and it seems impossible that a chess piece would have been crafted to reflect everything Cessolis imagines. In the woodcarvings (which are a product of Caxton’s later translation) the pieces are shown to be figural, but small and not so impossibly detailed as is described above (Caxton, 98). However, surviving chess pieces from the twelfth century indicate otherwise.

![Chess King (Ivory). Late 12th century Germany (Cologne). The Thompson Collection, Art Gallery Ontario. Taken by the author December 20th 2022.](image)

The ivory king is figured on his throne, crowned, and in the robes of state. He is set back into an arched alcove of delicately carved pillars, emblematic of a throne room. Clearly, when Philometor grounds his moral instruction in the game of chess, he does not far exceed the contemporary image of the pieces. Though the ivory does not show color, the king on the board

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23 Chess King (Ivory). Late 12th century Germany (Cologne). The Thompson Collection, Art Gallery Ontario. Taken by the author December 20th 2022.
above almost exactly recreates the purple robes, the scepter and the crown, which in their turn represent virtues of the soul.

The actual form of the pieces is layered, since historically and textually they are very detailed, but in Caxton’s woodcuts they appear simplified, like they do on our chess boards today. However, when the game is described further, *The Game and Playe* indicates that the pieces were valuable and expertly produced: “And dyd do make the forme of chequers of gold and silver in human figure after the factions and formes as we have dyvysid and shewid to you tofore” (Caxton, 4.415-16). The pieces made of precious metals indicate the opulence of the game. Indeed, this maps onto the ivory king above, which is a masterfully crafted game piece. Clearly, chess as a means of moral education is directed towards the highest tiers of society, which is in keeping with the pretext of *speculum regis*.\(^\text{24}\) However, the book itself in translation could be read by anyone. As a result, it is the chess literature which becomes a mirror broadly accessible as a place to examine personal faults or virtues. The many vernacular renderings suggest a wider readership, making it certain that at least wealthy aristocrats and merchants would also have had access to the text. This is key for those with no clerical intermediary, as Baldwin IV has in William of Tyre, and the Valois court has in Jehan de Vignay. Thus, it was not just medieval kings who could see themselves on the chessboard, but also those high placed aristocrats whose role in the hierarchical society is reflected back to them by the major pieces.

However, before moving to the aristocracy, the place of the queen must be considered. Not only is it the only female rendering within the allegory, but for the modern chess player, the role of the chess queen is particularly intriguing since it seems in tension with the perceived

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\(^{24}\) Indeed, one of the first mentions of chess in Europe is in a nobleman's will, as a piece of valuable property to pass on (Murray, 441). Also, during the Crusades, the great Saladin offers a chessboard as a gift during a parley, and such gifts were always lavish to reinforce the splendor and generosity of the giver.
position of the queen in medieval society. Further, as a text which is quite progressive in its
treatment of the pawns, one expects that de Cessolís would have some emancipatory, or at least
interesting considerations for the chess queen. Further, because chess was a popular game for
both men and women (Constable, 301), one expects a treatise which purports to offer a vision
of the self in the world would not neglect half the population. In truth this is one of the barest
sections of the text, and offers little surprising insight into the place of the queen, or women in
medieval society. It does not serve well as a speculum regina, but emphasizes chastity and other
queenly virtues, unremarkable aside from the severity of the exempla: the story of Lucretia and
Tarquin and Duchesse Remonde who is brutally killed by her lover, an invading king, after
failing to adhere to the queenly virtue of chastity. Conversely, her daughters are rewarded for
resisting desire since they escape the besieged city with their lives (Caxton, 2.28-30).

Clearly, this is a missed opportunity to explore the place of the queen within the society.
Likely, de Cessolís appears terse concerning the queen because historically the tension between
the queen of medieval history and the powerhouse queen of the chessboard did not exist as such.
The power of the queen emerges in the early modern era, and is a transition point for the game.
In the Middle Ages, and until about the sixteenth century, the queen had very limited movement,
and therefore power (Davidson, 28). Without being reductive of any specific queens within the
Middle Ages, whose power is interesting in its own right, but speaking generally, the queen was

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26 Think of queens such as Eleanor of Aquitaine, who possessed more land than her second husband, Henry II of England, and Blanche of Castile, queen mother to Louis IX of France. Both successfully governed in the place of their sons, Richard I and Louis IX while each respectively was on crusade.
not the king's champion, leading his forces in the field, as might be expected from her role in the modern game of chess.

The change to the queen's movement severely altered the game of chess. Not only does the queen come to be essential\textsuperscript{27} but the pawns have added emphasis for their potential to promote and rise from a lowly pawn into the most dangerous piece in the game. \textit{The Game and Playe} does not explore the queen deeply, but does indirectly have bearing upon the pawns, insofar as they are given exceptional attention considering they cannot promote powerfully, making pawnplay less essential for skilled chess play. The \textit{Liber} might easily have overlooked the pawns, as novice players do, imagining them merely as arrow fodder. This interpretation would not be unreasonable, since they are slow to develop, lacking the two square initial move, making them hindrance in the development of the powerful rooks, since they block them into the corner. In the play of medieval chess, pawns have little late game value, since they cannot become power queens, and therefore the sacrifice of pawns to open lanes for the rooks is an important strategic maneuver. Yet, de Cessolís thought less of chess play than of chess structure, and orderly society wherein the pawns are key. However, for the king's just edicts to reach the pawns, intermediaries were required. In the game, these are the members of the royal court, the bishop, knight and rook.

\textsuperscript{27} A player often resigns if he loses his queen early in the game, because her loss means his chance of victory is so slim that it is disrespectful to the other player to continue to play, since that assumes he cannot win an overwhelming position. This is featured beautifully in the 2020 historical drama \textit{The Queen's Gambit}, when Mr. Shiabel says to Beth Harmon “you resign now” when she loses her queen in her first game against him, to her dismay. It is not a fixed rule of the game, but a code of chess conduct.
The King's Court: Bishop, Knight and Rook

The pieces of the court will be addressed, moving outwards from the king and queen. First then, the bishop, or *alphyn* as it appears in Caxton's text. Etymologically, the *alphyn* is one of the most difficult pieces to discuss, because within Europe the name varied drastically. Caxton uses the French *alphyn*, who “ought to be maad and formed in manere of juges sittyng in a chayer wyth a book open tofore theyr eyen” (v. 304). A bishop as a judge makes sense considering the significant worldly power of bishops in the Middle Ages, and their power to preside before secular and ecclesiastical disputes. However, the bishop’s history is complicated, because, of course, the origin of the piece in the Indian game does not at all correspond to the structure of medieval European society.

Recall that in *chaturanga* the bishop was an elephant. *Al fil* (the elephant) corresponds homonymically to the Old English *aufin* and subsequently to the Middle English *alphyn* which is what Caxton uses. In England, *alphyn* came to mean “bishop” as the game evolved across time. But *alphyn* is the term broadly used in Europe in the 13th and 14th century (Davidson 34). Further, it is not at all evident that either de Cessolis or later Caxton actually mean the ecclesiastical figure “bishop” at all. Indeed, it is highly unlikely for de Cessolis, a Genoese friar, because it is only in English, Icelandic and Portuguese that the ecclesiastical title is used in modern chess (Davidson, 36-37). Caxton, as a translator, does not change the text to argue for the *alphyn* as bishop, even though in England that is how the piece comes to be understood. For simplicity's sake, consider the bishop an *alphyn* ie. judge from here on out as it appears in the text.
In the process of adopting the game of chess, the Europeans reimagined the structure of the game to resemble the structure of their royal court rather than a battlefield (Davidson, 35). The result was a large linguistic, and iconographic change between the Indian game and the European one, which Cessolis uses for his civic metaphor in the fourteenth century. In the case of the alphyn, its role completely changes. Except in strange literary situations, as in The Song of Roland, bishops do not have a place in an army, and of course, did not exist as such in fifth-century India. The court structure positions the alphyn as a judge whose “offiye is for to counceylye the kyng and to make by his commanundementis good lawes, and to enforce alle the royame in good and virtuous maners” (Caxton, 2.308-311). The alphyn is not only a judge who ensures there is justice in the kingdom, but also a councilor of the king, who transforms his royal edicts into just laws. These laws are what ties the king to the body of his subjects, the pawns. The top down structure, where the monarch’s edicts affect the society as a whole, de Cessolis emphasizes the need for strong laws.

In describing the alphyn, both the black and white piece is dealt with simultaneously: “And that is by cause that somme causes ben crymynel and somme ben cyvyle… and therefore ought to be two juges in the royame, one in black for the first cause and that other in whyt (Caxton, 2.305-307). The judge in black deals with criminal courts, and the judge in white with civil charges. The fact de Cessolis differentiated them, and yet encapsulates both in a single chapter further emphasizes the enormous attention he pays to the pawns.

In truth, the alphyn itself is more interesting etymologically than as seen in The Game and Playe. The piece has a clear role, and gains its importances from the relationship to other pieces, especially the pawns. The “just” alphyn ought to govern the laws of land equally against
all people, but “the lawes nowadays ben not executed but upon the poure people. The grete and riche brake hit and go through with al [and] take by force and strengthe lordshippes and seignories upon small and poure peple” (Caxton. 2.401-403). When laying out the office of the judge, a high ranking and powerful member of the king's court, a strong critique was leveled at rich and powerful men. The law, under flimsy judges, only binds the poor to social order, because they are too weak to protest. The strong man can break the law and take lordships by force, committing crimes along the way for which there is no justice.

It is a misconception that feudalism in the Middle Ages was purely a time of chaos and injustice, where no one reflected on the evil done by powerful men at the expense of the poor. Clerics in particular were in a position to be critical of worldly politics. However, the confused binary of king and peasant arises because in the earlier Middle Ages, and in Late Antiquity, a lack of preserved primary sources written by the common man restricts documentation to the concerns of great and powerful men, such as Charlemagne, Constantine, and Clovis. The first Catholic Frankish king, Clovis left behind letters of correspondence between himself and Remigius, bishop of Reims, and around 560, the Histories of Gregory of Tours recount the beginning of the Merovingian dynasty. In literature, there was already a long tradition of epic poems; heroes such as Aeneas, Sigurd, or Roland are, of course, foregrounded. These cultural documents are preserved and have been centralized in history, in a way the stories of slaves and tenant farmers have not been, partly because of scanty literary documentation, partly as a product of what is considered historically significant.²⁸

²⁸ This is of course a generalization, about a complicated historiographical problem, too large to tackle here, which scholars today must try and negotiate. Yet, it is poignant that there is a shift in the high and late Middle Ages in what is considered important as the subject literature.
Yet, by the time of Cessolis, and in the centuries following, until the rise of the absolute monarchy in the seventeenth century, the story has changed. Around half a century after *The Game and Playe*, Geoffrey Chaucer wrote *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400), a collection of stories largely from the mouths of working people, some of whom, for instance the merchant, the cook, and the miller, are very similar to the cast of pawns in the *Liber.* Before Chaucer, William Langland's poem, *Piers Plowman* (c. 1370-86), uses allegory and satire to produce literature focused on the working man, corresponding to the first pawn in *The Game and Playe*, who is a “workman” depicted in the woodcut in a plowed field (Caxton, 53).

Instead of a binary system, the vision of society presented by Cessolis, a cleric and therefore outside of the framework of lord and tenant, is one governed by order. The law, decreed by the king, is upheld by the *alphyn*. A virtuous *alphyn* does not leverage his position of power derived from his proximity to the king (on the board as well as literally as an advisor) and become corrupt, but treats all fairly under the law. The aristocratic servants of the king, therefore, were not only tied to the monarch himself, but also to the pawns. Their role was to treat all in just fashion, noble or common. The civic order of the chess metaphor is one which relies on each tier of society to uphold their own duties as virtuous people. The pattern continues with the knight, whose role is related both to his service to his liege, and his duty to the common man.

Unlike the *alphyn*, the knight does not have a complicated history. Along with an unsurprising list of virtuous befitting a knight, we see also that he is “kepar of the peple and the lawe” (Caxton, v.v.449). As far as the law, the knight serves the king, but de Cessolis also notes

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29 Indeed, the highest ranking storytellers are the knight and the prior, and they are not given special preference at the expense of the pilgrims of lower status, except that the knight tells his tale first. Indeed, the subsequent stories critique and satirize the form of the knight’s story, showing clearly that his higher status does not elevate his position as a storyteller.
that the other duty of the knight is to be a keeper of people weaker than himself. Given the modern understanding of knighthood and chivalry, derived more from *romance* than history, the claim that a knight serves both to uphold the king's law and protect the weak is hardly surprising. However, it does continue to show how each facet of society is necessary for the upkeep of the others.

More interestingly, Cessolis discusses the role of the knight as a military man. Caxton translates this as a “capitayn of a batayle” (Caxton, 2.456).\(^{30}\) In wartime, the responsibility of the knight is not as an enforcer of the law and of justice, but as a commander. In this role,

>[it] behoveth [the knight] to be wyse and wel advysed, for sometime art, craft and engine is more worthe than strengthe or hardynes of a man that is not proved in armes. For otherwhile it happeth that whan the prynce of the batayl affyeth and truseth in his hardynes and strengthe, and wol not use wisdom and engine for to renne upon his enemies, he is vaynquysshed and his people slayn. (v.v. 455-461)

Unlike the popular image of the knight as a man of pure courage and no brain, derived no doubt from fiction or an ungenerous, but understandable, reading of romances, the knight in Cessolis’ mind is as a wise and well informed commander who prioritizes the lives of his men by relying on “craft and engine” over hardiness and strength.\(^{31}\) It is necessary for him to be strong and courageous, but that does not mean he must be unwise, because such commanders cost many lives besides their own. As a leader of a battalion, once again the role of the knight overlaps with the common man. As a “captain” he directs the conscripted footsoldiers, who are that same class that the judge protects.

\(^{30}\) Here *batayle* means battalion, describing the knight as a commander of a division of soldiers.

\(^{31}\) Engine: c. 1300 “Ingenuity, artfulness; cunning, trickery” (OED).
Craft: 1387 (therefore prior to Caxton’s English) as “Skillfulness, ability; prowess or ingenuity in doing something; skill, knowledge, or mastery in a particular field” (OED).
Fascinatingly, the word “engine” means “ingenuity” in this case, but is also the derivation of engineering, which is not typically associated with knights, considered men of action not men of thought. Figures like Merlin are typically described as having “engine,” (OED c. 1450), thus Caxton’s translation, though sensible in itself, is a little surprising. The idea of craftiness and ingenuity being knightly virtues alters the simple cultural image of knighthood. The medieval reading of the Iliad, for instance, does not think well of wily Odysseus, who is the master of craftiness and ingenuity. Indeed, book two of the Aeneid, the brutal sack of Troy by stratagem casts an ugly light upon the deception of the Greeks, Virgil’s tone being far less ambivalent than that of Homer. Yet, de Cessolis argues implicitly, craft in war is a necessary part of the game, in real life, and of course, in chess. When he assigns virtues to the chess pieces, one expects de Cessolis to use the game as a springboard for didactic allegory. However, he does not simply take chess as a frame and depart, abandoning the efficacy of the game. In the case of the knight, his language fits with how the game is played, both today, and in the Middle Ages.

In the medieval game, where the alphyn is a mere shadow of the power of our bishop, and the queen (fiers or ferz) is practically impotent, the pieces that would have shone were the most mobile ones. Recall that the knight has had the same unique move pattern for thirteen centuries and it has never been changed (Davidson, 51). Notably, the ability of the knight to fork the enemy pieces after making an unpredictable jump is one which makes the knight quite powerful even in today’s chess, where it is the weakest of the pieces of the court. Clearly, the

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32 A chess term which means to attack two or more pieces at once, forcing the opponent to choose which to protect, often resulting in the loss of the other. It can be a devastating tactical maneuver.

33 It is a maxim that in an endgame, one should not resign if they have a knight, even if they are down on material, because a fork of the enemy king and one of their pieces (besides another knight) will result in winning material, and perhaps turning the tide of the game.
movement of the knight, difficult for the mind to visualize, makes it an embodiment of tactical craft, as de Cessolis claims. Furthermore, the knight not only operates tactically as Cessolis claims, but also strategically.\textsuperscript{34} Just as the knight is the “captain” of the battlefield, he also often leads the pawns in the game of chess. Either the knight supports the pawns to hold the valued center squares of the board, or they support him ensuring he is defended and cannot be captured for free.

The interplay between knight and pawns is critical for constructing an attack in chess. The object of chess is, of course, to capture the enemy king. New players often do not actually attempt this, but rather focus on gaining an overwhelming advantage of material\textsuperscript{35} before crushing their opponent by the weight of their larger force. While may eventually result in checkmate, more artful players create attacking chances by giving up material for a positional advantage where they force the enemy king into an unsafe position.\textsuperscript{36} In organizing these assaults, one must bolster the attack of the more mobile pieces, such as the knight or bishop, with an attack led by pawns. Like medieval siege warfare, the men-at-arms storm the king's holdfast in the corner, and the battle ends with his capture. In the modern game, one must have well supported attacking pieces, typically greater in number than the defending player, once again like siege warfare. Clearly, the relationship between the pieces on the board (that the pawns are

\textsuperscript{34} In chess tactical moves are often brief situational exchanges, which win material, whereas strategy describes a more holistic and long term view of the game.

\textsuperscript{35} I.e. pieces

\textsuperscript{36} The best players are those who generate precise attacks which their opponent has no hope of fending off without losing massive amounts of material.
necessary for the attack in the game) reflects the argument de Cessolis makes: each tier of society is necessary and important for a functioning whole.

In the medieval game, where the bishops and queen are much less powerful, the knights and rooks have added significance. Since the rooks are the most difficult to develop,\(^\text{37}\) in the early stages of conflict, the knights lead the charge, bolstering their battalion of pawns, just as de Cessolis describes. Though one might argue he appropriates chess as a tool to discuss society, when examined in terms of play it is clear that de Cessolis’ claim is actually quite strong. The representation of an interconnected society is reflected not only iconographically on the board, but also in the sequence of play.

The final member of the chess court, the rook, has a complex etymological history which clashes with the “rooke” of the *Liber*. Today, the rook is depicted as a castle tower, hence the term castling.\(^\text{38}\) However, de Cessolis describes the rook not as a fortification, or siege tower, but as “vycayrs and legates of the kynge” (v. 705), and even describes them as riding on a horse, similarly to the knight. The purpose of the legate is to speak with the kings voice since “a kyng may not be in al places of his royame, therefore the auctorite of hym is gyven to the rookes, whiche represente the kyng. And for as moche as a royame is grete and large, and that rebellyon or noveltees myght sound and aryse in one party or other, therefore ther ben two rookes” (v.v. 705-710). Again, two rooks are discussed in the same chapter, in passing. Despite the serious duties appointed to the rooks, they are not treated on their own. The legate is the final operative in the chess kingdom who functions with the authority of the king, the essential intermediaries

\(^{37}\) Development in chess is the mobilization of one's forces into an effective array, where each piece maximizes its potential. The rooks, stuck in the corner, are usually the last to be developed.

\(^{38}\) A special move each player can make once per game, which is easiest to understand as hiding the king inside a castle or fortress.
between his will, and the common man. They operate not as tyrants but as officials who ensure the continuation of social order.

Since the rook publicly represents the king, it is necessary for him to be virtuous. As with the *alphyn*, who enforces the kings laws, “an untrewe juge or offficer maketh his lord to be named unjust and evyl” (v. 715). The deeds of the rook not only impact the people with whom they interact, but they also create a public image of the king. A corrupt legate is harmful both for their king, and for their people. In medieval society, it was unlikely that the common man should interact directly with the king, the only connection between themselves and the highest power of the state being through the king's representatives. Even though they serve the king, de Cessolis argues that “the vicair of the kyng ought to be so just that he shold employe al his entente to save the comyn wele, and yf hit were nede to put his lyf and lose hit therefore” (v.v. 733-35). Just as the true duty of a king is to his people, so also the rook must serve the common good. In retrospect, it often seems as if the Middle Ages merely exemplifies the idea that those with power will exploit it. On the contrary, just representatives bind together the high and the low, creating an orderly society in which everyone fulfills their duty, not only because they must, but because they take pride in fulfilling it. Thus, theoretically, monarchy operates successfully on the terms of the chess allegory, where there are certain rules for playing the game of life well, where each individual is respected and recognized as serving a collective end.39

How, then, does the rook come to be figured as a castle, since really his place in *The Game and Playe* is as a legate? Additionally, the movement of the rook, operating on open ranks

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39 Of course, de Cessolis would not have written such a text if he felt that all was well in the world, and history shows that the idealized monarchy is rarely realized, and usually lasts only a generation.
and files seems more representative of a rider who gallops out from the court, taking a direct path to his destination. The medieval castle is obviously not a mobile structure, but the castle icon could suggest a siege tower, since it is derived from a game of war. In the Middle Ages, a siege tower, also called a belfry, was a wooden tower, usually movable, which was used for shelter when besieging a castle (OED, belfry). Indeed, Davidson gives this idea some traction, arguing that understanding the rook as a siege tower “gives us an explanation for the maneuver of castling” (Davidson, 46), which places the king not literally inside the tower, since that is not possible, but simulates this idea in the corner of the board. A compelling argument, since a king could retire to the giant siege machines for a safer position on the battlefield, and because the rolling fortress makes more sense than a stationary castle of stone. If a king were actively leading an assault, he could be sure of greater safety from arrows and other projectiles hurled from the walls.

Recall that chess did not begin with castles on the board. Originally, the rook was a chariot called ratha in Sanskrit (Davidson 41), and made up the fourth and most mobile unit of the armies array. Yet, several more steps are required etymologically before we arrive at a castle.

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40 The terms used in chess to describe the rows both horizontally and vertically.

41 International master, and chess teacher Levy Rozman, elucidates the idea of castling, which is strange to new players, as “hiding the king in the castle” which is in keeping with Davidsons viewpoint. A skilled player, but not a top competitor, Rozman has come to fame recently as an online instructor, because of his ability to entertain while dismantling the abstractions of chess which make it inaccessible.

42 Richard the Lionheart, one of the greatest warring English kings, was killed by a crossbowman firing a shot from the battlements, a thing which would never have occurred had he adhered to the principle of chess “king safety” by positioning himself inside one such tower. When computers evaluate chess positions, the weakness of the enemy king is one of the chief factors in their algorithm, along with the activity of the pieces, and balance of material. The safety of castling, or as Davidson imagines it, entering the siege tower, ensures much greater security for the king.

43 There is a complex debate on this issue, not worth delving fully into here, since Davidson makes a convincing case for why it was a chariot and not a ship, which is the other thesis. Ultimately a chariot tracks nicely with a siege tower, since both are rolling vehicles, and also makes most sense in the Indian game, whereas the ship does not historically.
When the Persians adopted the game, they translated the name of the pieces where necessary, and *ratha* became *rukh* which historian H.J.R. Murray argues to mean chariot, but in fact simply means hero (Davidson 43-45). However, when later adopted into Arabic, the name *rukh* persists, though that still does not definitively define the word to mean chariot, though some dictionaries do translate it that way (Davidson 46).

This debate, though interesting to philologists, need not be fully recounted here, because a clear explanation exists for the presence of a tower, or castle, in the modern game of chess. Just as in the case of the *alphyn*, when Europe adopts the game from the Arab world they make changes to reflect their own society. Though chariots are used in early Western warfare, they do not appear in the later Middle Ages, where the field has come to be dominated by armored knights on horseback. What do appear both on the battlefield and in proximity to the court, are castles. Davidson argues that “The only reasonable explanation for this metamorphosis [from chariot to castle]” has already been given— that the Italian word rocca, meaning “fortress,” absorbed the function of the piece both because of its similarity to the Italianized version of *rukh* (which was rocco) and because of the greater appropriateness of a castle or fortress in a battle game” (Davidson 46). Given its complicated history, it is not surprising that in English the piece has two names, both rook, and castle, given the myriad of other possibilities.45

Considering the complex etymology and history of the piece, it isn’t surprising that de Cessolins determines the rook is a legate, though historically that was not one of the contending

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44 Alternatively, it is possible that the rook was a ship, hero, or even a giant mythical bird, the roc

45 It is interesting to note that chess players often correct novices concerning the real names of the pieces, for instance telling them that the “tower” is actually properly named a rook, or the horse icon really represents a knight. In truth, it is not something worth squabbling over, since the history of the pieces is actually too complex to impress upon a novice player, when what they should be learning is how the pieces move.
possibilities. Within de Cessolis’ allegory, and historically, the size of the kingdom meant it was impossible for the king to reach all of his people personally. Thus, these intermediaries are required, and, as de Cessolis describes, it is important that these figures be just and honest, both for the sake of the highest and the lowest alike, and indeed for themselves. When each facet operates according to its given role, order is created. Of course, this is impossible without the goodwill of the pawns. To operate by force is a possibility, but de Cessolis advocates for a society founded on mutual respect and virtue. For this reason, he decides not to overlook the pawns, by putting them as a mere footnote, but treats them seriously, and at length.

*Speculum Corpora Politica:*

The Treatment of Each Pawn Individually

Thus far, what has been examined in *The Game and Playe* has been the essential frame which makes the text *speculum regis*, and the typical depiction of what virtues constitute a good king, queen, and aristocrat, according to the philosopher Philometor. Yet what is most striking about the text is the amount of attention it pays to the common man, that is, the pawns.

To investigate the role of the commoner in *The Game and Playe*, it is important to clarify the extent of that category. The pawns do not merely signify peasants, but represent working class guildsmen, such as smiths, who are skilled laborers. A peasant is “a person who lives in the country and works on the land, esp. as a smallholder or a laborer; a member of an agricultural class dependent on subsistence farming” (OED, c. 1450), which clearly does not cover all of the pawns. In this argument, the word commoner is used to designate all medieval people who are
not part of the aristocracy, clergy, or noble families. Those other categories are covered by the major pieces on the board. The pawns represent a wide variety of medieval people, be they field laborers (Caxton, 53), cloth makers (Caxton, 62), or smiths (Caxton, 58).

The Game and Playe is interested in a discussion of all people outside the walks of court life, be they the lowest tenant farmer, to the wealthy merchant. Caxton himself was a merchant, and by the 1450’s he was one of England’s main importers of luxury goods, which granted him access to powerful circles. When he makes entrepreneurial use of the title of Duke George of Clarence in his dedication, Caxton further suggests that the audience of his printed book is of the highest class, just as when he was a merchant. However, despite the enterprising implication that his books were for the elite, he also recognized the various locations of power in society, being himself of mercantile background. Indeed, England, in the late Middle Ages and early modern period was increasingly influenced by the common man. For instance, consider the heightened role of yeomen in the Hundred Years War, and of course, the first House of Commons in 1341. Thus, it is easy to understand how Caxton simultaneously intended to address both a duke, and also the common person (Adams 8).

The bulk of The Game and Playe comes in book two and book three, the former being chapters on the king, queen and rest of the court (what chess players would call major pieces) and the latter being a discussion of the pawns. The Game and Playe discusses the pawns individually, ascribing a certain profession to each. The result is that the “offices of the comyn

46 The question of the estate of “those who pray” is not necessarily represented by Cessolis, as I’ve argued above. However, every estate is covered in the modern game in England, where the alpyn comes to be a bishop in truth.

47 Documents from 1458 indicate that he had risen to a role as diplomat, and he was also granted a charter that gave him sole access to purchase certain goods in Calais. Further, he was appointed governor at Bruge in 1462 by Edward IV and served as the king’s representative in trade negotiations with nobility in the region (Adams 5).
people” (Caxton, 3.53) is actually the longest of all four books, covering fifty-four pages (53-97), while the discussion of the nobles is only pages twenty-seven (25-52). The reason this section is longest is due to the repetition of major pieces on the back rank: there is a king-side and queen-side knight, bishop and rook. These repeated pieces are covered in one chapter, and as a result there only need to be five chapters. For the pawns there must be eight. Considering their identical appearance, it would have been quite logical for Jacobus de Cessolis to have written one chapter which covers all eight pawns. The implication is that the pawns are more interesting for the allegory than any of the courtly pieces.

The significance of this decision cannot be overstated, since it is essential to the Liber’s reformulation of the body-as-state metaphor.48 Instead of the body, and therefore a natural order governing society, de Cessolis imagines one which is governed by the rules of chess. In doing so, he greatly increases the significance of the pawns, since they do not represent an identical mob of peasants conscripts driven at the enemy line, but craftsmen whose position on the board serves a societal purpose. The clearest example is the second pawn, which represents a smith (Caxton, 59). The pawn is second because he corresponds to the king's knight, placed by him so he can be of ready service. Jacobus argues that the placement of the smith by the knight is essential, since “what may the knyght do yf he ne had tofore hym the smyth for to forge his armours, sadellys, axys, and spheres, and suche thynges as aperteyneth to hym? And what is a knyght worth without hors and armes? Certeynly nothyng more than one of peple” (Caxton, 4.46-48). All of the essential needs of a knight, the tools of his trade which differentiate him from a common man, are made possible by the smith. If his horse is not shod and goes lame, or if he does not

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48 A commonly used metaphor in the Middle Ages where the king is the head and the feet are the common men. The rest of the body is assigned to the other walks of life through the natural metaphor.
have arms, he is reduced from his status as a knight to be “one of the peple” and indeed, it can be argued that he is even lower than a smith, since he has no other trade besides warfare. Because of this interwoven relationship, the knight owes his gratitude to the smith for enabling him to perform his duty. When Jacobus argues that “Knights ought to keep the people” (41), it is not just because that is the duty appointed to knights, to defend the weak and innocent, but also because contractually it is in their best interest to protect the working men who arm, feed and dress them.

As a result of this two fold relationship, *The Game and Playe* argues for a respectful dynamic between nobleman and working man, built on a contractual basis. It is not merely that a knight should serve his own interests and protect the smith and others, though that is an aspect of the argument, but that “that no noble man ought to have despyte of the comyn peple” (Caxton, 4.372). Though they are of elevated status, the nobles ought not, according to de Cessolis, to look down upon their people. This is not to say that in the Middle Ages, or on the chessboard, there is not a clear hierarchy. A knight is more important than a smith in both cases. However, within the chess metaphor, Jacobus lays out how one ought to live as a virtuous lord or ruler, and to illustrate this spends a great deal of time and thought on the relationship between lord and working man, justifying the high view of the low born by their small but essential role as pieces in the greater game.

Post Maxist society is suspicious of a narrative which reinforces class divides. It is convenient for the king if the pawns are happy to remain pawns. Yet, the relationship between the two is more complex than propagandized class oppression, and there is a way in which the social contract described by de Cessolis creates a positive social good. The smith who serves the knight well, and has his respect, can be proud of his vocation as a smith. In turn, his son,
inheriting the trade, can also be proud of his reputation as a skilled workman with an essential role. Five-hundred years before Marx, in a warring society, this civic argument is fairly profound.

Indeed, its political discourse contributed to the Liber’s popularity at a time when similar allegories were flourishing. Since it covers all of the estates in medieval society, the book, once translated into the vernacular, could not only be held as a mirror by a ruler, but also by one who labors, that is, the common man (O’Sullivan 4). Though the text is oriented towards the reform of a king, a whole eight chapters are devoted specifically to the laboring class, making it possible for a real smith to see the significance of his role in society reflected back to him.

While touching upon the relatively autonomous placement of pawns in the allegory, pawn promotion must be considered. The idea that a pawn can move to the end of the chessboard and become a major piece was a provocative idea in the Middle Ages, and remains so today. Even in the twenty-first century, it is not clear that the lowest can expect to rise to gain the status of the highest tiers of society. Such drastic social mobility is an American ideal, and while the American Dream, where one works hard in their field and rises through their own efforts is seen to occur, it is not the fate of most working people, and therefore is the object of critique. Given this, is it not incredible that in the chess-as-state metaphor, a pawn can become a fers (queen)?

However, the idea is not totally without precedent in Christian society. Indeed there are Biblical antecedents which support the idea, such as the rise of David from a shepherd to a king. Jesus himself was a carpenter, and as Christ also the “King of Kings.” Thus, the idea of the humble pawn rising due to virtuous action makes some sense, especially since it was articulated

49 The particular use of exempla became very popular in the 13th century as a tool used by Dominican friars to compel their audience who were not interested in scholastic arguments (Fuller 28).
by a cleric. Further, the situation was not as radical as it may seem, because in 1325 the queen was not the powerhouse it has become in the modern game.

Instead of describing the promotion in terms of power, de Cessolis understands the forward movement as corresponding to virtue. Upon reaching the backrank, “than he is a ‘fiers’.

And than he may goo on al sides cornerwyse fro poyte to poynt onely as the quene” (Caxton, 4.364-65). When the pawn promotes it inhabits the “dygnyte of the quene” (Caxton, 4.369), and does advance in power greatly, now able to move backwards diagonally. However, this is not the same as a pawn becoming the essential attacking piece in chess, which came about in the sixteenth century. Instead, the pawn, by earnestly fulfilling his trade and role in society, signified by his forward moves which adhere to the rules, makes worldly gains. He gains mobility, which is equal to power, and also dignity like that of a queen. A large part of the strength of the Liber’s claim is that hierarchical society is a blessing because it is orderly and just, but also because every tier of society can be dignified.\textsuperscript{50} Though lords would have had access to the Liber through learned scholars of Latin, there was such a popular demand for the text that it was translated into the vernacular. Thus, the implications of Jacobus de Cessolis’ discussion of the pawns on the chessboard was that the common man could actually see himself in the work which he was reading.

A typical speculum regis adheres to a vision of social order informed by John of Salisbury’s Policraticus, which uses the body to describe the structure of society (Adams, 3). In

\footnote{50 However, the effort of moving a pawn to the end of the board to turn it into an already weak piece means medieval players probably did not utilize this strategy all that much, since it would not be game changing. Though Jacobus gives great credit to the pawns, he probably spends a great deal more time and thought on them than a medieval chess player would have. Pawn play, as it’s called in chess, does not become essential to skilled chess play until the pawn can become a queen (Davidson). For this reason the medieval player would probably have neglected the pawns in favor of the powerful knights and rooks, the most mobile and dangerous pieces at their disposal.}
this metaphor, the king is represented by the head, and the rest of the body serves the king, as the peasants do, who are represented by the feet (Adams, 3). An example of this metaphor at work is *De regimine principum* (On the Government of Princes) written by Giles of Rome in the thirteenth century, and one of the more widely known examples of *speculum regis* (Adams, 2). In this work “the primacy of the royal body over all others in the realm” is emphasized, in keeping with the body-as-state metaphor. Metonymically, the use of a natural metaphor, which positions peasants as lowly as possible, implies that, should the head decide that the path forward leads through the swamp, the common man, as feet, will be the ones who get covered in mud. Hardly a dignified duty.

The *Liber* of Jacobus de Cessolis re-envisions society, creating a world where people are *contractually*, rather than *naturally*, connected (Adams, 3). However, the *Liber* does not completely upend social order since pawns do not have the same power as a king on the chessboard, but certainly greater independence is given to the other tiers of society. Further, rules are more apt to be changed in a game, than that the natural order of the body should suddenly change, for instance, it would be absurd for the feet to determine the actions of the head. Conversely, the rules of chess changed greatly during the late Middle Ages, especially towards the start of the early modern era. In the earlier view, the feet cannot have any wants of their own, and are totally without autonomy. Not true of the chess allegory.

This striking reformulation, and its subsequent popularity, begs the question: did the friar write in response to real political changes, or does his popular work bring about such changes, granting the common man greater autonomy and political significance? Given the scanty biographical information, it steps too far to claim the *Liber* upends society in truth, and it is not
clear that he writes in response to a specific change he observes in the world.\textsuperscript{51} However, what can be said is that in thirteenth century Genoa, the city its thought de Cessolis lived and wrote, the government was made up of a wider variety of people than had been the case in previous centuries (Adams, 4).\textsuperscript{52}

The caution in assigning the \textit{Liber} a cause and effect relationship with political order is that so little is known about its author. Rather, the widespread popularity and effectiveness of his work is suggestive given a real world, contemporary example operating under similar doctrine. Regardless, when Jacobus advocates strongly for the importance of the common people as essential facets of an interconnected society in 1325, his argument not only bolsters the popularity of the work, making it one of the most widely read medieval texts, but it also appears to prophesize both the changes to chess, and also to the societal structure in the world.

\section*{The World of the Chessboard}

For this argument, the most important contribution of the \textit{Liber} is not necessarily the popularization of chess in relation to society, which had been done before, though not as popularly (O’Sullivan 4), but rather the idea of chess as a game whose checkered surface reflects back a vision of the world. As a figurative device, the game is incredibly flexible, and its boundaries can be stretched infinitely to encompass any space, be it a court, a kingdom, or world. Thus, it is not \textit{necessarily} most interesting as an allegory for society, because that is just one

\footnote{It must not be thought that this argument envisions him as an early Marxist, rather that the claims are quite progressive and treat the working man generously.}

\footnote{For instance, in 1257 the trade pact with Sicily was signed by a council made up of elders and of the heads of the Genoese guilds. Further, in 1261 the Treaty of Nymphaeum, which was a trade agreement made with the Byzantines, the agreement was signed on behalf of the Genoese by tradesmen, including an innkeeper, a smith among others (Adams 4). These instances clearly show a difference in Genoese society.}
guise which the game can adopt. The *Liber* suggests something much larger than chess as medieval societal structure; he envisions a malleable pedagogical tool which can be compressed or expanded at need:

And hit is so, as we have sayd tofore, that the exchequer which the philosypher ordeyned represented and figured the said cite of Babylone. And in like wyse may hit figure a royame and signifeye alle the world. And yf men regarde and take heed unto the poyntes unto te myddes of every quadrantne, and so to double every quadrant to other, the myles of this cite alwey doublyng unto the nimbre of sity-four, the nombre of the same should surmounte all the world. And not onely the world, but many wordes by the doublyng of myles, which doublyng so as afore sayd should surmounte all thynges. (B4, v.v 96-103)

Conceiving of the squares of the game as exponentially expandable, Jacobus shows how chess can expand to “sumounte all thynges.” In this way, it is easy to envision the chessboard as the ground upon which “Babylone” is built, as the boundaries of a kingdom, and even containing the world. Artistically, chess becomes a bottomless reflective pool from which the artist can draw water. In studying medieval chess, one comes to see how it is, sometimes literally, the ground upon which art is constructed.

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The woodcut, added in the 1483 reprint to Caxton’s *The Game and Playe*, represents Philometor teaching chess to Evylmerodach at court. Strikingly, the floor of the hall corresponds to the squares of the board, signifying the relationship between the game and the structure of the court. Additionally, it visually represents how the squares can be expanded from the dimensions of a table top game to cover the space of the court. This represents not only how the checkered squares of the chessboard lie beneath Philometor’s feet, but that the lines on the board can be the square streets of Babylon, or further expanded exponentially, the whole world.

The image from *The Game and Playe* which is added to Caxton’s edition, is not the only time one sees the floor of the king’s court represented this way.

The image on stained glass produced in England not long after the reprinting of *The Game and Playe*, shows another instance of chess representing the space of the court. Clearly, this image

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54 St. Andrew: Dance of Death. 1506-1510, Norwich England
incorporates chess as metaphorically associated with death, a mutation of the notion of chess as a tool to represent society.  

The versatility and elegance of chess make it extremely useful, since its presence in the art can serve such a wide variety of ends. As a game, it bears a certain aesthetic and intellectual prominence not attributed to other forms of play (Golladay, 3). Dice or backgammon, for example, cannot work as a metaphor for a kingdom in the elegant way chess can. As a result, it is chess which becomes a symbol used in images of courtly love, or as the ground for scenes of death, as shown in the English stained glass above. Thus, the influential Liber of Jacobus de Cessolis is not merely a treatise on how chess can be a metaphor for the state, but it represents how one is supposed to play at life by adhering to the moral virtues associated with one's station (Fuller 6-7).

The medieval didactic allegory, a useful mirror for the representation of civic structure, and a vision of the world, falls out of favor in Italy as the Renaissance rejuvenates classical aesthetics. However, the pedagogical use of chess is retained, if under a slightly different set of aesthetic and philosophical values.

55 Indeed, this particular image calls up another Latin text, Quaedom moralitas de scaccario, where chess demonstrates the equalizing power of death. However, since it was produced around twenty years after the reprint of The Game and Playe, the more popular of the two works, the iconography was likely derived from Caxton.

56 Golladay, Sonja M. Translation of Alfonso X’s Book of Games. 2007, University of Arizona
II

Chess, Envy and the Ethics of Pedagogical Deception:
Chess and Courtliness in Gottfried’s Tristan and Castiglione’s The Book of the Courtier

“Civilization arises and unfolds in and as play” (Johan Huizinga)57

The starting point of this project began with a question about ubiquity: why does chess pervade medieval literature to an extent that it makes its presence felt even to someone who is not looking for it? Chapter one begins to explain that phenomenon, by examining the most famous medieval work, which was largely responsible for making the game so pervasive. Gottfried von Strassburg’s Tristan, penned a hundred years prior to the Liber of Jacobus de Cessolis (around 1210) which cannot include chess on a basis of inspiration or critique, fleshes out the medieval literary ubiquity. When dealing with romance, the logic of temporality is not the most useful approach, and a direct relationship between Jacobus de Cessolis and Gottfried von Strassburg is not necessary for the ubiquity paradigm. Rather, what will be expanded upon here is a resonance between chess in Gottfried’s Tristan and courtliness. It is clear from the previous

chapter how chess can represent the space of a court. However, as a game itself, it also was much played in medieval courts by both men and women.

The initial focus will be on Tristan because he embodies the flower of chivalry, which is necessarily the fusion of the “statesman and the warrior” (Jaeger, 13)\(^5\) into the knight. By statesman, what Jaeger really means is *clericus*, which refers generally to clergy outside of monastic life: teachers, court clergy, bishops, Archbishops among others (Jaeger 15). The statesman is defined by a creed of moderation, self control, reason but also wit and love (Jaeger, 12). The fusion occurs when, “observing the civilizing process of the tenth to twelfth centuries, we see the establishing of an ideal inner hierarchy, which places the statesman mentality above that of the warrior” (Jaeger 13). From this hierarchy a set of ethics, crafted by the statesman, is gradually passed along to the warrior via instruction. This being done, the “civilized man” emerges, and does so most readily when the warrior, defined by heroism, honor and energetic hotheadedness rather than calculation, “ willingly subjects himself to the ethos of the statesman” (Jaeger, 13). In *romance*, the perfect balance between these two societal groups is Gottfried’s Tristan (Jaeger, 13).

An additional emerging societal category is that of the artist, who has a pronounced role that burgeons alongside the medieval court and increasingly into the Renaissance. This occurred because court society tended to aestheticize manners such that the exercise of them becomes a performance, and by turn, a work of art (Jaeger, 13). In the West during the Middle Ages and Renaissance, the tendency is embodied by the courtier (Jaeger, 13). Courtiership and chess will be the subject of the second part of the chapter, in Baldassarre Castiglione’s influential *The Book*

of the Courtier. For now, suffice it to say that the position of courtier of Renaissance Italy can be understood as a direct descendant of the knight typified by Tristan, such that this chapter will discuss each in genealogical turn, as the respective societal groups evolve to fit the political structure around them. Interestingly, across this evolution, each is expected to know and play chess.

The argument of this chapter will be threefold. First, that the game of chess pervades both romance and Renaissance literature, and in doing so situates itself firmly as a courtly talent for the civilized knight epitomized by Tristan, and Castiglione’s Courtier. Games of leisure in general directly related to the courtiers ability to please the prince they serve. Or, in Tristan’s case, what enables him to be a hero of romance and how this comes into tension with being a good vassal to his uncle king Mark. Next, how chess sets itself alongside other courtly skills, which, if practiced correctly, balances the self. If done to the extreme, excites envy. Hence the need for grace to avoid that problem. Finally, where the play of chess fits into a larger philosophical debate about the ethics of deception. Chess, it will be argued, finds a virtuous place in the imagination of both medieval and early modern people because it is morally neutral and only highlights mental acuity. However, chess finds uneasy footing on the pages of Renaissance literature. Because it is so difficult, chess can become an end for study in itself, which the early modern authors argue it should not. By investigating the place of chess in Gottfried’s Tristan, and in Baldassarre Castiglione’s The Book of the Courtier, this chapter will explore the larger philosophical implications of virtuous balance, literary aesthetics, and deception which all derive from classical theory, particularly Aristotle, Plato, Lucretius and Horace. Further, these principals build upon the concern of chapter one: chess as a pedagogical technique for moral correction.
Despite its precarious footing, chess maintains its position as one of many tools for the instruction of a prince, if it is not treated as an end in itself.

Despite the absence of inspiration from de Cessolis, chess still sneaks its way into one of the most famous scenes of medieval romance: the mischance of Tristan and Isolde's love. Tristan, sent on a bridal quest by the advice of his uncle Mark’s councilors, is charged with safeguarding Isolde on her journey to Cornwall (von Strassburg, 12.8540). Originally, he has no designs of love as they make the voyage home. Indeed, previously, their relationship was antagonistic and she is described as “Isolde, the wise queen, his archenemy” (von Strassburg, 12.8340). She is his enemy at this time, because Tristan kills her uncle Morhold (von Strassburg, 9.6990).

In von Strassburg’s text, Tristan does not actually play chess with Isolde during the famous love potion scene (von Strassburg, 16.11570), but the text does depict Tristan as a player in his childhood. When at a market in Parmenie, “Tristan saw a chessboard hanging in the ship. The squares and the edges were very beautifully decorated and a fine example of craftsmanship. Next to it hung chess pieces of ivory and carved by a master's hand. Tristan, talented in all things, could not take his eyes off of it” (von Strassburg, 4.2210-30). Tristan's fascination with the game is in keeping with the entrapment of the wicked king of chapter one, Evylmerodach.

The aesthetic appeal of the masterfully crafted pieces have a strikingly similar first impression across these texts. Further, that a brilliant child should be drawn in particular to chess tracks with its later representation as an “ingenious” game which appeals to curiosity. Tristan, naturally


\[\text{60} \text{ Alternatively called The Morhold}\]
skilled at languages, singing and courteous speech, is in his own right fascinating to the Norwegian merchants whose chess board it is. They offer to play him, and he quickly accepts. When the extent of his talent becomes apparent, they suddenly decide to abduct him (von Strassburg, 4.2330). Tristan is too absorbed in the chess game, which he wins to notice that the ship is sailing away (von Strassburg, 4.2320). Evidently, there are two dangers for the excessively talented: first, that they will be seized and used for their ability. Or, as soon follows, they excite envy in others. Additionally, this scene in the port indicates a concern about chess that will be heightened by the Renaissance humanists: it is a distraction from more serious matters. Tristan is so wrapped up in the game, he doesn’t realize he is being kidnapped. So far as chess is concerned, this is the end of the relevance in Gottfried’s Tristan.

Despite its brevity, the presence of chess is useful insofar as the place it's found in the text also highlights Tristan’s peculiar talents as a child. It follows then, that his aptitude in courtly skills includes chess. It is only in The Prose Tristan (c. 1240) and later in the manuscript page from 1470 that chess becomes more central to the romance. However, since the comparison of this chapter is between the knights of romance and the later Italian courtier, the similarity of talents, including chess, is striking.

Though a later version, the ship scene in The Prose Tristan, has similar context: Isolde and Tristan have no previous intimate history, but really are enemies since he killed her uncle. The notable exception is that they are depicted playing chess. Though the text makes it clear he cherishes her company, Tristan is the true emblem of knighthood, and there is no inkling in his character that he would willingly betray his liege lord by loving his bride to be. As they sailed, “Those on the ship were joyful and merry; they played and chatted. Isolde amused herself with
Tristan, and they talked together of many things. Tristan had no wrongful thoughts; if he loved and cherished Isolde, it was on account of his uncle, whom he would not have harmed under any circumstances while he was in his present frame of mind” (Curtis, 86). While it is clear they enjoy each other's company, and engage in properly courtly pastimes, play and conversation, there is no indication that he would ever have loved her wrongly.

Their doom of love appears to arrive through misfortune alone. Though it is logical for them to love each other, since they are both young, beautiful, and nobly born, the text makes clear that it is through an unhappy accident: “On the third day round about noon Tristan was playing chess with Isolde. It was extremely hot; Tristand was only wearing a light silken tunic, and Isolde was dressed in a green silk garment. Tristan, who was feeling the heat, asked Gorvena and Brangane for a drink, and it so happened that they chanced upon the love potion, without however noticing what it was;” (Curtis, 86). Hidden among other vessels on board the ship, the potion brings forth all of the great joy of love, but also their destruction. The philtre of love brings forth all the unworthy, though seemingly logical thoughts. The potions origin are in Gottfried: the Queen, also called Isolde, crafted it, and secretly gave it to Brangane, her daughter's attendant and companion (von Strassburg, 16.11430). The purpose of the potion is to assist the love of Mark and her daughter on their wedding night (von Strassburg, 16.11460). The irony is, of course, that the potion meant to bolster the love in the marriage is what, by mischance, causes the clandestine love affair with Tristan.

After accidentally drinking the potion, all thoughts of king Mark depart from both their heads. What remains is the feeling that nothing could be better than for them to love each other.

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The realization of love arises not operating like magic which blinds and disregards all difference, but as an inflammation of desire, since they are indeed well suited: “He was very handsome and she was very beautiful; he was high-born and she was of noble lineage; it was only right that they should come together. Let King Mark never be mentioned again. She loved Tristan more than she would have done the richest king in the world. King Mark could find himself another wife, for she wanted Tristan” (Curtis, 87). Though both betray their oaths by such a love, and dishonor themselves, their love is a sympathetic outcry against the arbitrary nature of medieval political marriage among nobility. Isolde has no interest in king Mark, whom she has never seen before, let alone enjoyed conversation with. Instead, she has had the pleasure of conversation and play with the most fitting suitor in the world, who is also of noble blood, and therefore is not a dishonorable match in that way. Every necessary prerequisite is present, and indeed Mark could have easily found another bride to secure him an alliance. Or so the language of desire would have a reader think. It is hard not to find it compelling, since this is no tawdry affair of lust, but rather of the love of two people suited for each other.

What then, does the presence of chess indicate in this scene? It does not seem particularly important, certainly less important than mischance since that is the catalyst for their doomed love. Yet, they could have been doing anything else during the scene. For instance, they could have simply conversed, which is a courtly skill. They obviously could not hunt or ride since they are confined to a ship, and yet could have played dice, or backgammon, or cards. Tristan could have recited poetry, or played the harp; there are a whole manner of talents that he could have displayed to entertain her. Instead, they play chess.
Beyond the choice of chess, the fact that both Tristan and Isolde know the game suggests that in 1240 highborn men and women were familiar with chess to the extent that this scene would be a recognizable one. Like riding and hunting, or appreciating music and literature, chess was indeed a pastime central in medieval Europe and the Islamic world and it was expected they would be skilled at all these endeavours (Constable, 301). Like all other aspects of this scene - the chivalrous and handsome youth, the noble and highborn lady promised to a king in a political marriage, and the clandestine love that arises - chess was familiar to the expected audience. If it had not been, such a detail would not have been incorporated into a later iteration of the text. It is necessary that all aspects of it are familiar, because what is so compelling about the story, to the medieval noble, is that they see themselves in the text. It is an outcry that all who are compelled to wed for political alliance would appreciate.

The detail of chess, which at first appears minor, can be read in two ways, the first more fanciful, and second more practical. First, the presence of chess in this scene suggests that even before the consumption of the potion, love had begun to flourish between Tristan and Isolde. On chess and love, Michael Camille argues: “Chess was the perfect allegorical device because it articulated the playful tension and the often violent conflict inherent in the strategies of seduction that formed the medieval art of love” (Camille, 111). With this consideration in mind, it is possible to see how one might read in between the lines of the text, and ponder whether such an excellent match was not in the lovers minds before the so-called accident of a love potion, which externalizes the fault of their love.

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Regardless if one finds that interpretation of the presence of chess compelling, it is an indicator of love and seduction prior to the entrance of a seemingly magical thrust of doom. The second way of reading the presence of chess is as indicative of the propriety of the friendship between Tristan and Isolde. It is not wrong for the lady and courtier-figure to play and converse, rather these things are appropriate for their respective stations. Tristan, based on the language of the text, had not thought about Isolde amorously at any point previously. In fact, this is stated quite explicitly. The text gives no insight into Isolde’s thoughts, however, only that Tristan amused her, as is his duty as companion.

If Tristan has any fault, it is that he is too good at his job. Indeed, king Mark was reluctant to send him to escort Isolde to him (von Strassburg, 12.8540). In the first place, Tristan is sent back to the court of Queen Isolde because in Cornwall, “vile envy, that cursed disruptor which never really rests, raised its head among them and began to darken the thoughts and actions of the nobles at court. They envied the renown and prominence that the court and the entire realm had bestowed on him” (von Strassburg, 12.8320-30). Envy is, like Lancelot's predicament in The Death of King Arthur, the catalyst for Tristan’s departure to Ireland. The throughline of envy will re-emerge later when looking at the courtier of sixteenth-century Italy.

In Gottfried’s text, one finds a compelling instance of the danger of excessive fame and talent. No issue would have arisen had he not been quite so handsome, highborn, and amusing, unless one reads that the potion of the potion is blind, which does not seem to be the case.64 Rather, it seems to reveal to them what is obvious: that they are a better match than Isolde and

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64 Given that the medieval understanding of optics meant that they thought love entered through the eye, the idea that the love is blind makes no sense. Indeed, in this period it was argued that blind people could not know love, since it cannot enter through vision.
King Mark. In that sense, it is like any liquor which lowers the inhibitions, and allows one to think of what they really want, when the expectation of society, for a moment, has been set aside.

Even if the presence of chess does not fully compel as indicative of seduction prior to the potion, at the very least it will be depicted, in later renditions, as central to this scene, and come to be associated with their love, even if the language of the text is ambiguous.

This illumination from a 15th century manuscript depicts the scene aboard the ship, highlighting several things from the text. First, that the lovers are at play. Second, the love potion is seen in Tristan’s hand. Finally, the chess board has taken center stage. The board occupies as much of the space as any other icon. Indeed, the narrative movement of the illumination shows Tristan drinking the potion over the chess board, his hand resting on the board by his pieces. Isolde is in the process of lifting a piece, indicating that as the potion is consumed, the game is actually underway. Clearly, chess in this later rendition is depicted centrally, and is, therefore, much more

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65 d’Espinques, Évrard. Tristan and Isolde, miniature of the XV century. Folio pg 239. Bibliothèque nationale de France
significant. The fact that the game is in full swing during the precise moment that desire overcomes Tristan is telling.

As far as is visible, the position on the board appears possible, but also scattered. Most of the pieces have been traded away, so the game is nearing its conclusion. Read in tandem with the potion, the process of falling in love is well underway. Additionally, the position of the chess game shows a balanced board state. Material is about equal, though it is hard to tell what is a queen, or a bishop. Each side has a handful of pawns and one or two major pieces remaining. Further, notice that each side has around equal space.\(^\text{66}\) The state of the board indicates that neither player is close to checkmating, which in the allegory would mean the both violent capture, and seduction of their opponent. Rather, it shows two lovers on equal footing, and of equal skill. Just as their outward appearance makes Tristan and Isolde a perfect match, so too does the content of their minds, as revealed through the chess game.

Three hundred years later, and over a thousand kilometers to the south, chess found its way into literature of a wildly different kind, under the penmanship of Renaissance humanists in Italy. Given the physical and temporal separation, it is striking the degree of dialogue between the romance world of Tristan and their own work. Chess, of course, is the throughline. Given this separation, it is hardly surprising that it is thought of and discussed slightly differently. However, what will link the two is the concern of the game as fascinating to the excitable mind. Further, the way in which chess is omnipresent as a talent of a particular genealogy of social position: the warrior civilized by the ethos of the clericus (the chivalric knight), followed by a final stage of refinement of the knight into the courtier, a direct descendant. In making this transition, there is a

\(^{66}\) A chess concept which refers to the activity of the pieces. An active piece controls many squares, and therefore takes up more space. What it suggests above is that the game is close, because material is similar, the kings are safe, and space is equal.
traceable difference in the expectations for the chess playing courtier from that of the knight. This in itself is representative of a much larger shift away from preeminence which excites envy, to graceful mediocrità.

Castiglione’s Courtier and the Chess of Virtuous Subterfuge

One of the most important pieces of literature penned during the Italian Renaissance was The Book of the Courtier by Baldassarre Castiglione. It not only flourished in Italy immediately, but over one-hundred-and-fifty editions were produced in the centuries following its publication in 1528, not just in Italian but Spanish, French German, Dutch and Latin. Its wide dissemination is indicative of The Courtier’s deep hold on the literary and intellectual world in Europe (283, Quondam). The text contains what one expects from its titular declaration: a handbook for the aspiring courtier in sixteenth-century Italy. Yet, the genre is not apparent from the title. It is not a Latin history, or treatise, but written in Italian. The author himself declares he was not present when the historical persons involved commenced their discussion, thus it does not purport to be an eyewitness account, but operates from second hand information (Castiglione, 40). The object of The Courtier is to “describe what, in my view, is the form of courtiership most appropriate for a gentleman living at the Courts of princes, by which he will have the knowledge and ability to serve them in every reasonable thing, winning their favour and the praise of others” (Castiglione, 39). The Courtier emulates the method of writers of the ancient world: it is based on a “discussion” of “men who were singularly qualified in these matters” (Castiglione, 40).

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Structurally, it resembles a Platonic dialogue, where first one person proposes a thesis, and then there is a complication or counter argument (antithesis), and then a synthesis from the first speaker. Not only is it structured dialectically, but the text also thinks of itself philosophically (Castiglione, 51). The chief concern of The Courtier is to create a system of values to which the courtier ascribes, and yet it is not direct and didactic. This is not a manual, in the medieval mode, but is a dialogue from classical antecedents interested in describing “a man who deserves the name of a perfect courtier and has no shortcomings whatsoever” (Castiglione, 39).

Interestingly, the genesis of the perfect courtier is through a game, rather than an academic setting. The context for the game (which supposedly derives the text) occurs on a typical evening at the palace of Duchess Elisabetta Gonzaga (1471-1512), where alongside music and dancing “sometimes ingenious games [were] played” (Castiglione, 44). In The Choice of a Game, Thomas Greene explores the peculiarity of The Courtier’s beginning, questioning why the text begins in such a leisurely and arbitrary manner. He argues that only does the meandering beginning create narrative space for Castiglione to introduce the characters and establish the tone (mingled banter and formality) but it also provides space for the proposal of four other potential games which are rejected by Emelia Pia, who is arbitress of the proposals (Greene, 2). These four games are not random at all, Green argues, but all “stem from a recognizable genealogy” which is medieval, and “of the four original games proposed, the latter two are quite simply questioni in the medieval tradition and the first two merely variants” (Green, 3-4). The Courtier does not draw on medieval tradition for its structure, however, but rather upon ancient dialogue whose models are Plato, Xenophon and Cicero (Green, 4), and

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primarily the “Ciceronian conversation of a hypothetical ideal” (Green, 4). The classical tradition operates by beginning with a praxis69 and then operating inductively, as opposed to the medieval method which is deductive (Green, 5). Thus, the game has practical, rather than theoretical implications, indicating that the methodology of the text reflects an attempt to create concrete change.

Castiglione constructs his courtier in a Neoplatonic, allegedly based upon the conversation of his friends and contemporaries. It will be argued the Courtier is made an exemplar for a particular class of person (people like Castiglione and his companions) at a historical turning point which marks the transformation of the late feudal warrior-aristocrat into the polite gentleman (Javitch, viii). In Italy at this time, politeness not only indicated “superior breeding” but was also the limited freedom of the aristocracy who relied on princes for status and privilege (Javitch, viii). As will be further argued, the chivalric ideals of the high Middle Ages derived from Arthurian romance were no longer appropriate. In the place of a knight, with Lancelot as his exemplar, stands the Courtier with perfect balance.

The Italian Renaissance was not just a boom of cultural creation in Italy, but a rebirth of classical aesthetics. Thus Castiglione utilizes the form of dialogues, and gestures to Cicero’s De oratore explicitly by imitatio in the very first lines.70 Given the model, to succeed the text must itself remain in balance, and cannot be overly academic. It would be entirely against the grain of The Courtier to be written like a medieval manual. Rather, it is concerned with aesthetics, and

69 Praxis: Action or practice; spec. the practice or exercise of a technical subject or art, as distinct from the theory of it (OED).

70 Imitatio is the method of teaching in the humanist school which instructs by imitation of classical text. One learns to write by utilizing classical authors. Thus it is hardly surprising that Castiglione begins his text by using the language of De oratore.
the creation of the aesthetic man (for indeed the courtier is a man), and thus it must itself be aesthetically pleasing. Since the object is to create a courtier, the successor of the medieval knight (who were all men besides a few interesting exceptions), it is uncontested in Book I that the “perfect courtier” is a man. Indeed, the title of the text, *Il Cortegiano*, is gendered male in Italian, even though in English “courtier” is a neutral term. However, in Book III, the role of women and courtiership is hotly contested and the efficacy of the game threatens to break down into uncivilized argument and physical dispute. More than any other moment in a text which, under the surface of the game is about questioning the fundamental structure of society, the discussion of the role of women threatens to exceed the ability of play to assuage the weightiness of the social considerations. The arguments in favor of women's equal ability as thinkers (Castiglione, 225) and for their absolute necessity at court (Castiglione, 210) are really quite radical when considering this *dialogue* was published in 1528. Further, a quarter of the text is devoted to their position in courtly society. Yet, the text remains *Il Cortegiano* and the particular genealogy discussed in this chapter is centered primarily on the first and second books.

Returning to the aesthetic philosophy of the text, Castiglione and all of his peers are of a similar class as their courtier, and themselves must abide by the principles which the game of language and the text itself dictates. They operate philosophically but through a game (*giuoco*), a medium which encourages teaching but avoids the ponderous academic mode. The method is, as Horace says in *Ars Poetica*,\(^7^1\) “to instruct and delight” with beauty at once, both on the level of the structure and the content of the lessons. Clearly, there is a ludic throughline between the pedagogical tactic of Jacobus de Cessolis’s philosopher Philometor of the previous chapter and

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the rationale of humanist thinkers. Both texts operate through the aesthetic education of games. However, these games have a practical purpose, and are not purely theoretical. A pragmatic angle into *The Courtier* is that “virtually every beautiful attribute the Courtier was asked to cultivate could be successfully used to win the good will of a sovereign” (Javitch, ix). Thus, the purpose of *The Courtier* is both aesthetic and practical: to teach and delight for the end of service to a prince. To succeed in this service, the courtier must have “no shortcomings whatsoever” and thus must be a man of very many talents.

Castiglione himself was the epitome of *uomo universale* or many-sided man, for which Renaissance Italy became famous. He is at once a courtier and diplomat, poet, scholar and soldier and it is agreed that he typifies the precise individual which the text constructs (Castiglione, 9). He was born 1478 and died at Toledo in 1529 while serving as papal nuncio (Castiglione, 9). He studied at Milan University learning Latin and Greek, and though he was not a philosopher he was familiar with Aristotelian moral philosophy and Florentine Platonism. Instead of pursuing the most rigorous theoretical learning of his contemporary university, Castiglione’s education was literary and humanistic, studying under the masters Giorgio Merula, Filippo Beroaldo the Elder and Demetrius Chalcodyles (Castiglione, Singleton trans, 377).

While in the service of the ruler of Mantua, Francesco Gonzaga, he became acquainted with and then entered the service of Duke Guidobaldo Montefeltro of Urbino (Castiglione, 10). After the duke was restored to power at the court of Urbino, Castiglione was given command of fifty men-at-arms, so it is clear he had military experience, which is the central necessity of the

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72 Mazzeo defines *uomo universale* as “the result of the harmonious relation of normally opposed impulse” (135) and of course this view of balance is derived in large part from Cicero and Aristotle.

73 An ecclesiastical diplomat, serving as an envoy or a permanent diplomatic representative of the Holy See.
courtier (Castiglione, 10). Evidently, it is possible to aspire to be the courtier which Castiglione describes, since he certainly bases his work on lived experience, not only upon the Aristotelian theory of virtue in balance. Indeed, it is the time spent in service to duke Guidobaldo that inspires *The Courtier* (Castiglione, 12).

Castiglione finished a draft between the years of 1508-16 and a fuller version by 1518 but did not move to publish it until 1526 and it was not released until 1528 (Castiglione, 12), after nearly two decades of effort and polish. Its most important, and indeed controversial creation is the term *sprezzatura* (nonchalance). Interestingly, the creation of a text which extolled nonchalance was, paradoxically, a long and intensive effort. *The Courtier* was Castiglione’s magnum opus. Yet, it does not read as such, and might be thought to be written off the cuff as Castiglione listened to his friends and peers recount their interesting discussion which took place while he was in England (Castiglione, 40). The style of *The Courtier* is to practice what it preaches: *nonchalance*.

To understand why *sprezzatura* is an important and interesting literary-artistic contribution, find the beginning: the palace of Duchess Elizabeth Gonzaga, wife of Duke Guidobaldo. Fittingly for a group of Italian Aristocrats and humanist thinkers, *The Courtier* begins with a game. The driving motive of this game, seeks the creation of a “perfect courtier” for which there was a pressing need in Italy (Javitch, viii). The endeavor was not frivolous, but still tonally lighthearted. Any time the debate between members of the game becomes too heavy and difficult, there is a lightening of the mood, almost always through laughter (*riso*), and the debate is allowed to subside. *The Courtier’s* primary game begins when Federico Fregoso, a courtier and diplomat as well as a friend of Castiglione himself, says “I would like our game this
evening to be this: that one of us should be chosen and given the task of depicting in words a perfect courtier, explaining the character and the particular qualities needed by anyone who deserves such a title. And, just as in philosophical disputations, if anything is said which does not seem appropriate, each of us may be allowed to contradict” (Castiglione, 51). These then, are the rules, which follow the structure of a *dialogue*, which Federico understands clearly.

From the expressed purpose of *The Courtier*, it might be expected that certain virtues be extolled, and whatever particular system of morality is present at the time (chivalry was on the way out) will be applauded. To this, both yes, and no. From the beginning, the text is aware of the precarious task of assigning attributes to a person and thus making a value judgment. Count Ludovico Canossa, another diplomat and friend of the author, says “to recognize true perfection in anything is so difficult as to be scarcely possible; and this is because of the way opinions vary” (Castiglione, 53). Different people, even within the same circle, do not always readily agree about what *perfection* entails. That is why this text cannot operate didactically, telling a reader precisely what is required to make the best courtier. There are no ten steps to follow but rather a fluid interplay between characters as they seek to synthesize opposing values.

As the game commences, there is first, a distinction of class: the courtier must be an aristocrat of noble birth. Count Ludovico says, “for myself, I would have our courtier of noble birth and good family, since it matters far less to a common man if he fails to perform virtuously and well than to a nobleman” (Castiglione, 54). This assumption sits uneasily, and is not convincingly argued for. Indeed, Gaspare Pallavicino initiates the contradictions which structure the dialogue to say “I do not believe that nobility of birth is necessary for the courtier. And if I thought I was saying something new to us, I would cite many people who, though of the most
noble blood, have been wicked in the extreme, and on the other hand, many of humble birth who, through their virtues, have won glory for their descendants” (Castiglione, 55). The critique is particularly striking because many humanists were not born to the aristocracy but rose based on talent. For instance, Sir Thomas More was born to a London lawyer and rose to be Lord Chancellor of England, and the great William Shakespeare was the son of a prosperous glover, and rose to possess a coat of arms and own the second largest house in Stratford (Greenblatt, 7). Both cases, and others in Greenblatt's study, show that “talented middle-class men moved out of a narrowly circumscribed social sphere and into a realm that brought them in close contact with the powerful and great” (Greenblatt, 7). Clearly, there is an uneasy discourse between the talented middle-class man and the aristocracy at play in the sixteenth century, and thus Count Ludovico treads carefully and does not press the point. Changing tact, the count says “and it is that (since we are to create a courtier without any defects, and endowed with every kind of merit) he must be a nobleman if only because of the immediate impression this makes on all concerned” (Castiglione, 56). The unusual shift merits notice, since the strong antithesis is not really overcome in the synthesis but rather acknowledged. Pivoting defensively, Ludovico must grant the point to argue that since upward mobility is possible the importance of noble birth increases, regardless if that is right or wrong (Berger 304). Thus, to be the best courtier, not just a courtier, one must have that extra foot up: a name which gets one in the door.

Noble birth is not the only ingredient for the perfect courtier, but it also requires grace (grazia). Count Lodovico says, “I would have the courtier favored in this respect, too, and

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receive from Nature not only talent and beauty of countenance and person but also that certain air and grace that makes him immediately pleasing and attractive to all who meet him” (Castiglione, 55). This is a barrier to the aspiring courtier, since anything from Nature is difficult to counterfeit. Indeed, the Courtier requires many talents and innate qualities which set him apart. Yet, his favor is not an impossibility, but a particular fusion of qualities unlikely to be found in a single person. However, in the world of the game, such plausibility is not an issue since this game seeks the creation of perfection.

Enter sprezzatura. The Courtier above, of noble birth and possessing “a certain grace” from nature stands upon a pedestal with such self-possession that others may only aspire to his standards but never attain them. He thus is exemplary, and in aspiring, any courtier may attempt to reach grace through nonchalance. As Berger argues: “grazia is a grace beyond the reach of art just before the account of sprezzatura is to make deficiency in grazia the enabling condition of ideal courtiership” (Berger 304). Though one cannot hope to possess grace if they do not have it, the aspirant can employ nonchalance for the end of counterfeiting grace. The ideal courtier, then, is endowed with grace, and thus adhering to the paradoxical necessity of his position is easily managed. For the aspirant, the quality of grace must be counterfeited to strive to balance what will be shown to be paradoxical or even antagonistic qualities within the courtier's job description.

In his state of perfection, the Courtier must have the ability to uphold his two offices, both as soldier and companion to the prince. As Javitch notes, part of this is a civilizing transition from a warrior past to the politeness of the courtier (Javitch, viii). Indeed, the
Renaissance courtier is directly descended from the medieval knight (Scaglione 230), and in the new position, reliant upon a prince for favor, the courtier must navigate carefully if he is to succeed. Thus the need for certain skills which enhance him as a soldier, and others which are pleasing to the prince. Foremost among these, Ludovico says, it is necessary that “our courtier to be an accomplished and versatile horseman and, as well as having a knowledge of horses and all the matters to do with riding, he should put every effort and diligence into surpassing the rest just a little in everything, so that he may always be recognized as superior” (Castiglione, 62). As the successor of the medieval knight, the courtier must be a skilled rider, and have a great knowledge of the animal as well. Additionally, he must be a slightly better rider than all of his other peers.

The model Ludovico describes is completely different from older value systems, even classical antecedents which are rejuvenated during the Renaissance. For instance, Achilles aspires to be the best of Achaeans, Odysseus is the best liar. In medieval romance, Lancelot is the best knight. While these characters have foils, they are the best by such a sizable margin their prowess is unquestionable. The Courtier is completely different because it would be unbecoming to greatly surpass one's peers. Just as Lancelot must go disguised to fight in tournaments, the Courtier would have to ride incognito at races. Hence, the defining value is sprezzatura, not prowess. The Courtier must appear casually skilled at many things, but where he excels it cannot seem as if he has made lengthy study. His demeanor is such that he sits gracefully astride his

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77 The epithet “wily” as descriptor of Odysseus is how the text represents his nature as one defined by gaining advantage through the skill of deception. The word's use comes from his description in line one of the Odyssey, the almost untranslatable polytropos meaning literally in Greek many turns. What these “turns” refer to is ambiguous and particularly controversial in Emily Wilson’s most recent translation which interprets it to mean: complicated. Many in the field feel this does not do justice to the word, or to Odysseus, because “many turns” can of course refer to his physical journey as well as the sinuous paths of his mind.
horse, and when he competes he does not defeat his opponents by a mile, but by a delightfully narrow margin.

Not only does this foster competition, but it also avoids envy. At all costs the courtier ought not to stand from the crowd such that he excites that feeling. There is a necessary difference between the Courtier and a knight like Lancelot. Count Ludovico articulates this, saying, “to be praiseworthy and highly thought of by everyone, and to secure the goodwill of rulers whom he serves, the courtier should know how to order his whole life and to exploit his good qualities general, no matter with whom he associates, without exciting envy” (Castiglione, 114). Evidently, being too good is a real concern in courtiership. The problem of excessive skill is not new, but a thing which figures centrally in both Greek epic and medieval romance. The fateful choice for Achilles is whether to live a long mortal life in obscurity or to seize eternal fame. There is no space here to fully discuss the complexities of that position, but fate's threads, in the Iliad, are wound most tightly around those who step to the forefront. It is they who cannot escape from fate's netting, while those of little renown are left to their own devices, not exciting the envy or resentment of gods or men. Just so in The Death of King Arthur, where Lancelots’ prowess excites the envy of Agravain, who begins to whisper of his adultery with Guinivere to Arthur. That whisper is the first soft touch of fate which brings the kingdom of Logres to its tragic end. In Gottfried’s Tristan, whose titular character is arguably the best embodiment of the courtier antecedent (Jaeger, 13), it is envy which instigates the trouble between Tristan and King Mark. Even in Tristan’s childhood, his talents lead to his abduction by the merchants (von Strassburg, 4.2230).
The Courtier’s *modus operandi* explicitly seeks to avoid these issues by maintaining *sprezzatura*. This is not to say that he is not skilled, but the way in which the Courtier fashions himself is directed towards the appearance of retaining a place narrowly ahead of others. Thus, the Courtier is forced into the paradoxical position of balancing opposites: rehearsed spontaneity and reticent exhibitionism. He must not be presumptuous and must also impress (Javitch xi). Additionally, the exemplarity of the Courtier, and the need for *mediocrity* creates a further snag for the Courtier, for how can a person both be an exemplar for an entire class of society, while also adhering to mediocrity, which necessarily prevents him from being the best? Interestingly, it is the Courtier's skill at different kinds of games which demonstrates he must act to maintain his role.

In addition to the knightly skill of horsemanship, and use of weapons, the Courtier must be a huntsman, and be able to run, throw spears, darts, swim and play tennis, notable for aiding the agility of the soldier (Castiglione, 63). At these games, just as he must be slightly better than his contemporary Italians upon the horse, the Courtier must hold his ground on the tourney field against the French, and at the throwing of spears be equal to the Spanish. The juxtaposition of the Italian courtier with his neighbors directs the reader's attention to the wider socio-political context surrounding 1528 when *The Courtier* was disseminated. This period was a peak literary and artistic achievement in Italy, and also of dire national shame enclosed on one side by the years when the calamities of Italy began with invasion by the French, and on the other by the years when Rome was sacked and Italy finally fell under the domination of Spain (Castiglione, 10).
Given the frame of Renaissance Italy, pressed on one side by the invasion of the French, and on the other by succumbing to Spain’s power, it is hardly surprising that it is the men of these two nations which are the foil for the Courtier. The tension between courtier and warrior, when compared to the warlike but unlettered Frenchman, becomes apparent. The Courtier must be as great a warrior as the Frankish knight, whose prowess is highly pronounced throughout the Middle Ages. As the successor of a particular kind of the chivalric knight, it is imperative that the Italian exemplar live up to that standard of honor while also fully subscribing to the new order. Thus Ludovico says, “I maintain myself that it is more fitting for a warrior to be educated than for anyone else” (Castiglione, 93). With the Italian Wars in full swing, and the dominant Spanish occupying Southern Italy, the moment of the Courtier’s creation is inherently informed by national conflict. Thus, the Courtier cannot fail to compete with the Spaniard, or else the flower of Italy would bring further embarrassment.

The whole project of an Italian exemplar ie. The Courtier is made more pertinent when examined in a historical lens. The perfect Courtier is not the creation of conversation for its own sake, but an exemplar during a time of great cultural creation and also national shame. In general, it is rare for a country to have a peak of cultural output and be conquered from without. Usually, economic and artistic prosperity move in tandem with military might. The atypical situation in Renaissance Italy is what makes it so shameful, and why the courtier must be able to compete with the Spaniard most of all. The greater context resurfaces again in a passage which is central to this chapter's argument, that is, alongside The Courtier’s discussion of chess, which is imperative for understanding the relationship of courtliness and games in Renaissance Italy.
Chess, with its incredibly high skill ceiling, occupies a slightly different position in the life of a courtier than some other of his necessary attributes. Federico says:

‘[Chess] is certainly a refined and ingenious recreation, but it seems to me to possess one defect; namely, that it is possible for it to demand too much knowledge, so that anyone who wishes to become an outstanding player must, I think, give to it as much time and study as he would to learning some noble science or performing well something or other of importance; and yet for all his pains when all is said and done all he knows is a game. Therefore as far as chess is concerned we reach what is a very rare conclusion: that mediocrity is more to be praised than excellence.’ (Castiglione, 140)

In courtly life, the position of chess is uncertain: it is a game, but yet not quite a frivolity, since it requires such serious study and commitment as one might give to a “noble science.”78 As a courtier it is necessary to know chess, but like with cards and dice, it cannot be one's primary focus. Because the Courtier must be good at everything, he cannot devote the necessary time to chess to master it. Thus mediocrity is to be praised. Media ie. middle, suggests a classical balance, rather than lack of skill at chess. The word mediocrità was used during the sixteenth century to mean: “the quality or condition of being intermediate between two extremes; an intermediate state or condition. Formerly also: a quality, position, etc., equally removed from two opposite extremes; a mean” (OED).79 Chess in particular changes the rules for the courtier slightly and has a “rare conclusion” where mediocrity is praised. Typically, the courtier must stand out by a narrow gap to impress while avoiding presumption. Evidently, in the case of chess the task is even more difficult, especially because the game is inherently competitive, like any head-to-head sport.

Today, mediocrity is considered detestable: it implies the desire to be good at something but a failure of mastery because of low intelligence and weak discipline. In a flattened,

78 Ie. The Seven Liberal Arts: Grammar, Logic and Rhetoric; Geometry, Arithmetic, Astronomy and Music.
79 OED: media c. 1530
democratic society, it is those that climb high who are observed and praised, since they have made themselves visible above the mash of the crowd. To be in the middle is to be among the sea of other faces, hidden from all distinction. However, for aristocrats who have the leisure to spend on games of conversation, preeminence is not necessary in the same way. Their concern being the best, but being well equipped to serve their prince (Javitch, xi). Thus, they have the leisure to spend time conversing, hunting or playing chess and time only becomes a consideration in relation to the learning of other important skills: conversation, music, dance, riding or arms. Pragmatically, they require balance and variety, rather than hyper professionalism.

As such, it is inappropriate to devote to a game, however noble, the time it would take to master a science such as rhetoric which is also an essential tool in the courtiers arsenal. Thus, to be middling at chess, as a courtier, is to put the game in its proper place. Signor Gaspare Pallavincio, the youngest of the company, in antithesis, questions whether chess is as difficult as Ludovico lets on. He says, “‘But there are to be found many Spaniards who excel at chess and a number of other games, and yet do not study them too exhaustively or neglect other things’” (Castiglione, 140). The model of the Spaniard returns, and Gaspare observes that they excel at the game and yet are otherwise successful, unburdened by the knowledge of chess. However, following the pattern of the dialogue, Federico says in synthesis: “‘You may take it for granted that they put in a great deal of study, but they conceal it.’” (Castiglione, 140). The Spaniard excels at the game, which appears well if it has not been studied too exhaustively. This implies they are quick witted. Yet, Ludovico explains, they actually are not as clever as they seem, since they study behind closed doors and conceal it. However, it is possible that, should one not realize they study this way, as Gaspare does not, chess appears complementary since it is refined and
ingenious. This is the art of *sprezzatura*. At its most pure the courtier is balanced, doing well at everything, but not so well as to embarrass others, or to be overbearing. As in the discussion of previous measurements of men, such as classical and medieval heroes, the courtier must avoid *envy* by being just a little bit better and appearing nonchalant *in omnibus*.

The re-emergence of a Spanish foil for the Italian courtier gestures to the socio-political context of *The Courtier*. The riposte of Federico signifies that the Spaniards also cultivated *sprezzatura*. Additionally, it is indicative of a particularly rich history of chess play in Spain, which is likely derived from the *Libro del Los Juegos* (the Book of Games) which is the earliest chess manual translated in Europe from Arabic. The translation was commissioned by Alfonso X el Sabio of Castile (1221-1284) and completed in 1283. In the *Libro*, chess as a game of pure intellect, is considered superior to both games of chance, and games which fuse the two, such as Backgammon (Golladay, 3). The prioritization of a game of intellect by the Spanish king is indicative of the cultural value of chess several centuries before. Within the contrast between Spaniard and Italian Courtier, chess becomes a thing of national importance.

Since it is inappropriate to devote too much effort to the “ingenious pastime,” the courtier must maintain a balance, as with skill at arms, which allows him to be the peer of the skilled Spanish chess player, without dedicating to the game the effort of mind required for a noble science. As a courtly skill which is perhaps the most challenging to master quickly and maintain nonchalance, it should come as no surprise that Castiglione does not merely include this one instance, but that chess and courtliness resurfaces a short time later. The additional chess scene is a comic one, where a monkey plays chess against a gentleman in the presence of Emanuel I, the king of Portugal. Amusingly, the monkey displays a certain aptitude as a courtier himself:
and he claimed that he had set eyes on a monkey, of a very different kind from those we are used to seeing, which could play chess extremely well. And on one occasion, when the gentleman who had brought it was in the presence of the King of Portugal and was playing it at chess, the monkey made some moves that were so clever as to press him hard, and eventually checkmated him. As a result the gentleman flew into a rage (as people who lose at chess invariably do), took up the King (which, being of Portuguese make, was very big) and gave the monkey a great blow on the head. At once the monkey skipped aside and began to complain loudly, seeming to be demanding justice from the King himself for the wrong done to it. The gentleman thereupon invited it to play another game, and the monkey, after a few signs of refusal, began to do so and, just as before, once again it got him into trouble. At length the monkey saw that it was in a position to give checkmate again, and so it applied itself with fresh cunning to avoid being struck once more. Unobtrusively, without revealing what it intended, it put its right paw under the gentlemans left elbow, which he was resting rather fastidiously on a taffeta cushion, and using its left hand to checkmate with a pawn, having suddenly snatched the cushion away, at one and the same time it placed the cushion on its head to as shield against blows. Then it jumped for joy in front of the King, as it celebrated its triumph. So you see how wise, wary and discreet that monkey proved to be. (Castiglione, 165).

Not only is this absurd chess scene delightful, but it also implicitly reveals information about the proper, courtly play of chess. Both players exhibit flaws and are not perfect courtiers, since it's both wrong to be enraged at defeat, and to glory in victory. The gentleman, who not only embarrasses himself losing twice in a row, also exhibits the rage, which clearly deviates from proper conduct. Not only does he accost the monkey, but then he is again outwitted in their rematch. When attacked, the monkey seems to demand justice from the king, as a vassal might if done wrong. In other words, the monkey understands the proper behavior before the king, while the gentleman exacts vengeance physically, displaying an unbecoming rage and outdated violent tendency.

Both in Antiquity, and the Middle Ages, exotic animals were prized and imported to Europe. This scene follows in that tradition, and particularly bespeaks the Renaissance to have an unknown species of animal brought to court, and one which displays aptitude at a difficult game. With the rise of both scientific and interest in depicting and understanding foreign creatures, such
as the elephant and rhinoceros, it is fitting that Castiglione should include a clever monkey which beats man at its most ingenious game.\footnote{80}

The scene operates comically through the reversal of the roles: the beast is a courtier, the gentleman acts as a wild beast. He is of less wit, goes into a rage, and tries \textit{fastidiously} to win, all unbecoming of a courtier. While he embarasses himself, the monkey acts quite well, aside from its indecorous celebration. In the second, game Castiglione pays particular attention to the monkey’s \textit{cunning} which allows him not only to win, but to do two things at once: checkmate with a pawn\footnote{81} and prepare himself for the inevitable rage of the gentleman. The monkey learned from its previous mistake: victory carries the danger of engraging his opponent, for which there is no recourse from the king.

Despite the obvious fact that the monkey is not a true courtier but only apes at being one (placing it outside of the system of conduct except as a farcical representation), its actions might still be considered suspect. Indeed, operating through cunning and deception is a matter of some debate in \textit{The Courtier} and in the period as a whole. The much cited example in scholarship for the justification of princely ends through immoral means is \textit{De Principatibus} by Niccolò Machiavelli first released in 1513 and more widely published in 1534.\footnote{82} Castiglione, writing

\footnote{80} Susan Dackerman: Prints and the Pursuit of Knowledge in Early Modern Europe

\footnote{81} The fact that the game is won with the pawn, the least of all the pieces is another cheeky maneuver by this monkey. Even today, checkmates of this kind are more exalted than checkmates with rook or queen. These major pieces typically deliver checkmate, and it appears rather clunky compared to the elegance of the pawn checkmate. Further, there is something wonderfully disrespectful about trapping a king with a pawn, in front of the king of Portugal no less. Medieval theory of chess would indicate that there is nothing more shameful than for a king to be attacked by the lowest tier of society, the pawn. That a monkey should trap a king with a pawn is the ultimate reversal of station, and to do so before a king is certainly a jab. However, it is subtly done and thus the monkey can get away with it, just as the witty courtier can, like Cicero says in defense of Caelius, get away with urbanity. The implication that urbane subtlety is more forgivable and appropriate than explicit vulgarity, and indeed rage as displayed by the gentleman.

\footnote{82} This text is a large reason scholars think Castiglione is overshadowed as a political discourse since it offers a more unique view on government (Lovett 590).
around a similar time, also considers the tension between virtue and deception, particularly in this strange and fascinating scene of a monkey playing chess. Bernardo Accolti, the poet who tells this story, suggests that subterfuge in chess is to be praised. He says “So you see how wise, wary and discreet that monkey proved to be” (Castiglione, 165). He is, of course, being glib and his story is framed by laughter (*riso*) as is much of the text, indicating the lightness of his story, despite the provoking undercurrent of the *wisdom* of subterfuge. However, it should not be taken for granted that Bernardo avoided antithesis when he determined the monkey wise for his actions. Behind this lie deep cultural assumptions not only about the virtue of chess, but also the potential for ethical goodness in subterfuge (Crosbie, 2).83

The relationship between stratagem and virtue is particularly tense. Yet, the game of chess, predicated on stratagem, survived the many critiques thrown its way during the Middle Ages and the Italian Renaissance, continuing to prevail in the larger consciousness as a virtuous pastime. Indeed, early modern chess manuals were popular enough that critiques of the fundamental nature of chess couldn’t dislodge the game from popular play (Crosbie 3). In general, most successful criticisms are predicated on the use to which chess is put, rather than the game itself. As above in Castiglione, if chess were to take up the space of a noble science it becomes suspect, but as long as it is learned in moderation, and does not unbalance the self, it remains an “ingenious pastime” which enables the development of “personal quality” (Crosbie 5).

Yet, despite being firmly cemented into Early Modern culture, Christopher Crosbie in his essay *Early Modern Chess Manuals and the Ethics of Virtuous Subterfuge* notes that chess

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authors took deliberate care to illustrate its “ethical goodness” (Crosbie 5). The defense of the game is that the chessboard is a field “offering a kind of equally distributed moral luck, since players share a common, and socially reinforced, set of conditions and boundaries within which they may test their own faculties” (Crosbie 7). Thus, the game of chess is the epitome of fairplay, where “moral luck” is held in the balance. Unlike games of chance, such as dice, where deceptions and slights of hand are necessary to ensure victory, at the chessboard they are impossible. The only thing at play are the two individual minds across the board. It is from this absolutely neutral setting that virtue arises. Crosbie argues, “the nature of the game itself as one that depends upon intellectual acuity—the mental and characterological attributes so prized in early modern educational discourses—while also presenting to each player a set of identical materials and rules, all open to equal scrutiny, by which to try the contest” (Crosbie, 8). As a result of the openness of the game, it is literally all above board. This places the game of chess outside of suspicion of any Machievellian machination, and when one is defeated, the fault alone lies within the self. At the contested historical crossroads of Aristotelian and Machievellian ethics, chess sits calmly as a self contained universe of pure rationality, and thereby finds itself absolved of moral critique (Crosbie, 11). Any subtlety which enters into chess is to do with a sharpness of wit, to see something which the opponent does not see plainly before their eyes. Because chess requires such “wit, memory, and forecast,” the playing of the game is argued by early modern writers to be a useful tool for sharpening these prized characteristics (Crosbie, 9). Additionally, the process by which the mind is trained by chess is not didactic, since there's no prescription for chess play, instead, chess requires general principles and one's own acuity.

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84 Moral luck describes circumstances whereby a moral agent is assigned moral blame or praise for an action or its consequences, even if it is clear that said agent did not have full control over either the action or its consequences.
Thus, when the monkey defends itself manfully from a violent attack, while checkmating his opponent on the chessboard, the players of the dialogue are happy to consider his cheek a sign of wisdom and proceed with a laugh. Further, the ability to operate on multiple levels simultaneously is emblematic of the *uomo universale* (Castiglione, 17). This many-sidedness is fused with the comic: a monkey-courtier who is both skilled at arms and at the foremost pastime of the mind, the game of chess. Additionally, this monkey-courtier also manages to cheekily gesture to a king's vulnerability before the eyes of a king, while maintaining an air of comedic lightheartedness.

The story of the monkey is not singular in its exploration of virtuous subterfuge in *The Courtier*. While Bernardo’s story could easily be mistaken as frivolous, in *Book IV* Ottaviano Fregoso, Doge of Genoa, has further concerns with pedagogical deception, indicating a broader and more serious consideration underpinning *The Courtier*. Ottaviano argues that the nature of virtue and the role of the Courtier is not only as entertainer but as advisor to a prince. He says “the Courtier will be able to lead his prince by the austere path of virtue, adorning it with shady fronds and strewing it with pretty flowers the lessen the tedium of the toilsome journey [and] with all those means whereof these gentleman have spoken, to keep his mind continually occupied with worthy pleasures” (Castiglione, 213). The use of music, verse and indeed chess, in Ottaviano’s view, are as devices for rendering the austere path to virtue less arduous. These attributes are not the primary end, but are useful for helping to advise the prince in such a way that he rules well. The need for this advisor arises from the fact that, according to Ottaviano “princes today are so corrupted by evil customs and by ignorance and false esteem of

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themselves” (Castiglione, Singleton, 213) that they become bad students. Since princes prove unreceptive to truthful advice, many turn to “lies and flatteries” which avoid his annoyance but do not improve the prince's virtue, ultimately affecting the state dangerously. To circumvent this problem, Ottaviano recognizes the necessity of deception, because the bitterness of truth is not readily accepted by those who have false esteem of themselves. Thus he argues that the prince may be corrected from evil ways by “beguiling him with salutary deception; like shrewd doctors who often spread the edge of the cup with some sweet cordial when they wish to give a bitter-tasting medicine to sick and over-delicate children” (Castiglione, Singleton trans, 213). Deceptions such as are shrewdly beneficial are argued to be useful and indeed necessary for helping children who don’t want to accept help. The comparison is particularly apt, because what are evil princes but children in a position to cause a great deal of harm, whereas the “good” prince is the most beneficial thing for the state (Castiglione, Singleton trans, 214). The work of the courtier is thus highly elevated by Ottaviano, such that he must be the advisor to make virtue of necessity and aid his prince in avoiding the snares of flattery and his own unlearned nature. This particular example touches upon the very scenario of this project's first chapter, and which uses chess as a pedagogical tool for the reform of a wayward king. The same concern, evidently, persists in humanist Italy, where they also find that the best method for reform is the Lucretian honey to ease the bitter taste of medicine (Lucretius, 2.16-20).86

Chess in The Book of the Courtier is no accident, since both scenes epitomize sprezzatura and because it fits perfectly into the pedagogical mode which the text both uses and argues for. Castiglione demonstrates the proper play at court, that is to be skilled but not let on, while also

maintaining mediocrity. It also uses the comic example to reveal a danger within the game: as a thing which is directly correlated to mental aptitude, it is prone to excite anger. In dice, one may be enraged at fortune, or a cheating opponent. In chess, the rage directed outwards is really what is now understood as the psychological reaction to inferiority. Interestingly, the gentleman does in fact react with external violence at the realization of his own deficiency. However, this is an atypical case since the historical increase of chess as opposed to other pastimes led to less violence overall (Crosbie, 11). Indeed, when the gentleman reacts this way, he infringes directly upon the standards of politeness which constrain his class of person. He acts not as a gentleman at all, but as a warrior might when perceiving a slight, that is, in a violent and unrefined manner which is not appropriate for the court of Emanuel I.

These two scenes illuminate the dynamic between the Italian courtier and the Spaniard of Gaspare’s example. Since the ethical goodness of chess has been established, and as a game which displays wit, the Spaniard appears quite intelligent for their ability at chess. Thus, Federico must assure the group that if they are skilled, it is because they put a great deal of energy into chess, and conceal it. The implication is twofold: first, that they are maintaining nonchalance, but secondly that Federico suggests that they put too much effort into a game, rather than a science. Yet, even with that critique, the Courtier must also be good enough at chess not to embarrass himself and all of Italy if he should be challenged to a game of chess by a Spaniard. What can be gleaned from the scene with the monkey especially is that at court before the king, the courtier cannot be fastidious or take the game too seriously, and should he lose, he cannot become enraged. Instead he must remain graceful regardless of the outcome, and

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87 This attitude towards chess, especially gentlemanly conduct remains very important even to this day. When facing an opponent one begins by shaking their hand before sitting to the board, and regardless of the outcome one rises and shakes their hand at the end of the game. If you watch the very best players in the world they make a gigantic
maintain the air that neither winning nor losing are important, since really it is just a game. At its heart, this is what it means to cultivate *nonchalance*.

The Problem with *Sprezzatura*

Yet, *sprezzatura* it is not without danger and is itself open to critique. The darker side of courtiers is that constant nonchalance becomes feigning and shallow. Because of the need for balance, a courtier sacrifices depth of knowledge, gaining a surface level understanding to get by in conversation. For instance, such a courtier is the person who has read Virgil and Homer to be able to make polite cocktail conversation, and knows the term *aristeia* purely to display their own education and refinement, rather than pursuing knowledge of Greek *epic* because it is of interest to them. Further, where they do have deep knowledge, earned through hard work and study, they conceal it so as to appear magnificent without effort. Such people, the contemporary critics of courtly life argue, create a court of wickedness (Ugolini, 5).**88** Because of the inherent peril, *The Courtier* cannot safely be read, like the Tudors did, as a guide for gentlemanly conduct (Javitch, vii). They were not the only people who read *The Courtier* as a guidebook, since, when James Joyce read *The Courtier* his brother observed that he had become more polite but less sincere (75, Ellman).**89** Its use, then, is not to be taken as a didactic guide, but rather a *dialogue* which makes space for the exploration of societal assumptions.

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**88** Ugolini, Paola. *The Court and Its Critics: Anti-Court Sentiments in Early Modern Italy*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2020

An additional problem is the paradox of nonchalance and the need for recognition. Selfish personal applause, the revelation of everything concealed under one's bushel, is not the method of courtier politeness. Yet, their position in service to a prince necessitates that they be well respected for their talents, and thus the courtier must praise themself and receive public praise from others. To undertake both praising oneself, and accepting the praise of others can easily go wrong. As Gaspare says, “Those who praise themselves even though they lack merit are certainly intolerable; but we then assume that our courtier will not be one of them” (Castiglione, 59). Ludovico quickly clarifies the point, indicating that extravagant self praise is to be censured (Castiglione, 59), but that the Courtier must undertake self praise in the right way to avoid envy and annoyance. The question that Gaspare wants answered, then, is what the suggested “right way” is, since it is so invaluable a skill for both the Courtier, and for any who wish to be discreet while also getting what their merit deserves. Ludovico says, “in my opinion it all depends on saying things in such a way that they do not seem to be spoken with that end in view, but are so very much to the purpose that one cannot refrain from saying them; and also on giving the impression of avoiding self-praise, while indulging in it” (Castiglione, 59). The art of this method is quite sound, and yet prone to danger in ungraceful hands. Yet, to not subscribe to this method, one may find they resort to the extravagant self praise Ludovico censures, or remain paralyzed in obscurity, afraid of being thought intolerable.

Fundamentally, the Courtier must gain princely favor, and Ludovico argues there is a way to do so which maintains grace and does not sacrifice politeness for mobility. The courtier as the fusion of the aristocrat and the advisor or entertainer, must be close to the prince's ear, to be effective. He operates from a position where his influence is directly correlated with reputation.
Count Ludovico says, “a man must strive to give a good impression at the beginning if he is ambitious to win the rank and name of a good courtier” (Castiglione, 57). Hence the concern with flattery, since in an effort to please the prince, exaggeration makes a good impression for a courtier. As the poet Calmeta says, “all other means are far more uncertain and take longer than these you are censuring [foul means and evil practices]. For princes today love those only who resort to such practices” (Castiglione, 84). Given the heightened advisory position Ottaviano argues for in Book IV, it is especially clear why the text is so concerned with flattery as opposed to sound advice when serving a wicked or misguided prince.

Castiglione’s work occupies the precarious position where it has the potential to create “false flatterers.” Given its reception by the Tudors, there is a historical precedent for this danger. Yet, the characters themselves are written with such art that they appear aware of the tenuous position they occupy, and how their perfect courtier could subside into wickedness, and become something less than he ought to be. Thus, when describing the difficult matter of self-praise, Count Ludovico says:

He should always be diffident and reserved rather than forward, and he should be on his guard against assuming that he knows what he does not know. For we are instinctively all too greedy for praise, and there is no sound or song that comes sweeter to our ears; praise, like Sirens’ voices, is the kind of music that causes shipwreck to the man who does not stop his ears to its deceptive harmony. Recognizing this danger, some of the philosophers of the ancient world wrote books giving advice on how a man can tell the difference between a true friend and a flatterer. Even so, we may well ask what use is this, seeing that there are so many who realize perfectly well that they are listening to flattery, and yet love the flatterer and detest the one who tells them the truth. (Castiglione, 91)
The issue of flattery as opposed to sincerity is one which not only troubles the courtly life, but which has its origin in the deep classical past, and indeed which persists today. It should hardly be surprising that Castiglione describes flattery vis-a-vis a classical myth given the aptness of the simile and the time and humanist mode in which he writes. Using Socratic philosophy, Ludovico argues, the Courtier can avoid presumption by only accepting that which he knows to be the case. Clearly, The Courtier understands how its philosophy could create sirens, who praise their lord and by doing so shipwreck them. The nautical simile is also particularly apt because in many ways it is the lord who is the helmsman of the ship, directing its course on a stormy political sea. If the helmsman succumbs to the siren song of praise, rather than looking out for snags below the surface, the vessel (ie. the state) will flounder. When this happens, it is not only he who drowns, but the whole crew.

The problem of flattery was well known before the Renaissance. However, Castiglione’s contribution to the work of the ancient philosophers was to question whether advice is a safe recourse against the deviousness of flattery. It is possible to know that one is being flattered shamelessly and still to enjoy the attention, while despising the one who bursts this bubble. Just as Kent in King Lear is banished (1.1 v. 180), it is the messenger who is shot when they try to bring the flattered person down to earth. The Courtier, Ludovico argues, will not be deceived nor

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90 Think of advertisements which attempt to sell their product by appealing to a peripheral need to appear as beautiful as people in the ads. This form of advertising is far more successful psychologically than direct appeal to rationality. Such strategies are just like the siren song, which leads one astray from what values one really holds. Our capitalist society is so cutthroat that the question of true and deep friendship, as opposed to flatterers looking for a raise, is particularly striking.

91 The Elizabethans were also clearly concerned with this issue, if King Lear is any proof. That tragedy of course begins with a court, and ends with a king misled and a nation crumbling as a result of ambitious flatterers.

be a sycophant but “Our courtier should possess such good judgment that he will not be told that black is white or presume anything of himself unless he is certain that it is true” (Castiglione, 91). As such, he will not jump at the first chance to announce his absolute allegiance, and if his lord should suddenly declare that “black is white” he will carefully refrain from agreement.

Yet, the issue is not merely to avoid all praise strenuously, because as someone whose role places them at court, and are required by the argument of the text to be slightly superior to other people, it would be impossible to do so. There is a way, Ludovico argues, to accept praise correctly:

‘Make no mistake at all, the courtier should, on the contrary, when he knows the prizes he receives are well deserved, not assent to them too openly nor let them pass without some protest. Rather he should tend to disclaim them modestly, always giving the impression that arms are, as indeed they should be, his chief profession, and that all his other fine accomplishments serve merely as adornments.’ (91-92)

The method Ludovico argues for is that of polite protest, to modestly argue that one's profession is merely that of a simple soldier. Yet, Ludovico arguably affirms the critique of the courtier methodology: that the result of this philosophy is falseness. Such advice does seem to create an air of false modesty. All can picture a person who, when given true praise, protests and says “it is nothing” while smirking slightly and it is clear to everyone they know the praise to be true.

However, consider Ludovico's argument carefully: the count argues for modesty in accepting praise, which is a virtue if not disingenuous. When the courtier lets on that his chief profession is as a soldier, he is not lying since his chief concern really is that of arms. What then is being proposed? That the courtier must at once be nonchalant and modest about praise, and let it slide off him as insignificant since his skill as a dancer is really just to do with dexterity chiefly
as a warrior? The synthesis of this issue, it would seem, is paradoxical: the courtier in his truest form must be *earnestly nonchalant*. A false iteration of the courtier is he who does not earnestly follow his duty as a soldier, but is really what is called today a shameless “social climber” dressed up in false modesty. The true Courtier is not permitted by Castiglione to be a “sycophant” (Javitch, xii). Even given the paradox of *earnest nonchalance*, the perfect courtier can remain sincere while also being polite by having a range of responses given particularities of a situation (Castiglione, 84).

In opposition, the argument will surely be raised that few indeed can maintain such a paradoxical mode of life. While probably true, it is not the fault of Castiglione, but of themselves for letting fame or praise go to their head, like the siren song, and shipwreck them. Further, *The Courtier* accounts for the problem from the very beginning in the section *Opinions Vary*. Given that disclaimer, all critique of the philosophy finds it harder to stick; since opinions do vary, it is impossible to give sound didactic advice for every situation. Since this is not a didactic scholastic text in Latin but an Italian *dialogue* the critique is further misplaced. A skilled reader will account for the issue of variance when deriving a lesson and if they are graceful like the courtier they will learn the minds of those with whom they converse, and present themselves tactfully as such. Perhaps that makes courtiership closer to Odysseus than to Achilles, and open to a critique of two-faced wickedness. Yet, the ability to use rhetoric (what is called code-switching today) based on the mind of his audience is what makes Odysseus great. The most sound advice Ludovico can give, therefore, is that the Courtier must be modest and to articulate clearly and earnestly that he is really first and foremost a soldier. However, given the way in which opinions can vary, he will not operate consistently but fluidly.
A Dangerous Game

Even with a generous reading of Castiglione, the paradox of *earnestness* and *nonchalance* remains unresolved. Clearly, there are situations where *sprezzatura* does come off as disingenuous. Think of the following scene: the chess master and the courtier sit for a game, and the courtier, who has really made a great study of chess to beat the Spaniard wins. Irritated, the master inquires how they, a courtier, became so skilled at such a hard game. They respond modestly, saying that they really are just a soldier, and have made no great study of it. The implication is insulting. The suggestion is that they are better than the loser implicitly, and have a natural aptitude which far exceeds the hard working master, who has no grace, no natural talent, only grit and decades of study. Further, the modesty is false. It is not a game which one wins at without effort. True earnestness would be to say that one is really a soldier but has also made a diligent study of chess. Yet, *sprezzatura* necessitates that such a thing be a secret. This seems to be the furthest boundary to which the paradox can be pushed. For the ungraceful, such advice is clearly liable to incite rage.

According to Castiglione, there are two considerations with chess and courtliness. First, that at chess it is better to be mediocre than masterful, since so much study is required for the game that it might be better to study rhetoric (or some other noble science). Further, that it is natural for the game to create anger, as with the monkey and the gentleman. These two things together are indicative of the problem with chess: as a game of intellect and study, losing is quite frustrating and indeed embarrassing. Losing to an inferior player is especially aggravating.
because one wonders where all their hard work and suffering has gone. Thus, the game of chess has an implicit danger: it compels serious study, but is so deep a well that in searching the bottom, one becomes entrapped, as by their own reflection, losing track of the sky above them.

Michel de Montaigne reflects upon this precise danger. The philosopher of the French Renaissance, and credited popularizer of the essay form, is not supportive of the play of chess. In the essay Of Democritus and Heraclitus, published in 1588, roughly half a century after The Courtier, he argues:

Or, if he [Alexander] played at chess? what string of his soul was not touched by this idle and childish game? I hate and avoid it, because it is not play enough, that it is too grave and serious a diversion, and I am ashamed to lay out as much thought and study upon it as would serve to much better uses. He did not more pump his brains about his glorious expedition into the Indies, nor than another in unravelling a passage upon which depends the safety of mankind. To what a degree does this ridiculous diversion molest the soul, when all her faculties are summoned together upon this trivial account! and how fair an opportunity she herein gives every one to know and to make a right judgment of himself? I do not more thoroughly sift myself in any other posture than this: what passion are we exempted from in it? Anger, spite, malice, impatience, and a vehement desire of getting the better in a concern wherein it were more excusable to be ambitious of being overcome; for to be eminent, to excel above the common rate in frivolous things, nowise befits a man of honour. What I say in this example may be said in all others. Every particle, every employment of man manifests him equally with any other. (Montaigne, 1.50)\(^9\)

Using the frequently cited Alexander, Montaigne describes a similar argument as Ludovico: chess is “too grave and serious a diversion” to really be considered play. Montaigne “hates and avoids it” because he feeels time is better spent elsewhere. Further, that the game gives rise to “anger, spite, malice [and] vehement desire of getting the better in a concern wherein it were more excusable to be ambitious of being overcome” (Montaigne 1.50). This last point especially concerns this project, since it looks forward to the position of chess in modernity. The game of chess is “not play enough” because it is difficult and excites a burning desire for preeminence which can distract even the great Alexander from more pressing concerns. The final stage of this

project follows upon the heels of Renaissance thought exploring the literary depictions of “vehement desire” for improvement at a game which Montaigne, at least, considers to be a frivolity. What will be of special concern is the danger of chess leading one down into the oblivion of madness by its grasp upon the “string of the soul” (Montaigne, 1.50). The idea that a game can have a palpable result, and profoundly touch the psyche is as fascinating as it is dangerous. The next stage, then, is to peer into this bottomless chess well, and examine how modern literature represents a game with such potential for reflecting the world that it beguiles even, or perhaps especially, the most brilliant minds.
III

An Architecture without Materials:
Transcendence, Madness and the Immaterial World

“[Chess] appeals to the fundamental instinct of combat, in a way that is direct and at the same time exempt from the anti-social features that are inherent in actual physical combat. Here lies a large share of its attractiveness and capacity for stirring emotion” (Cleveland, 1907)\(^9\)

The Royal Game (1941), by Stefan Zweig, follows the confrontation between two world class chess players on board a steam ship. The first, Mirko Czentovic, is the author's fictional world champion. Second, his opponent Dr B, has no real chess experience at the highest level, but his unique circumstances make him competitive with the world champion. The character of the latter will be central for understanding the play of chess, first, as indicative of the expansive capacity of the mind, an instrument with unimaginable potential under extreme conditions. The vast inwardness of the mind is Dr B’s salvation as a prisoner of the Gestapo. His imprisonment is indeed the catalyst for his learning the game of chess, since it is the only thing he has access to inside the barren cell where he is kept in solitary confinement. The Gestapo’s method of torture is not physical, but psychological. Initially, chess, a game with infinite variation, serves as a tonic

against nothingness, but after long months, comes to be a sickness of its own. Secondly, therefore, this chapter will discuss the potential of chess to be psychologically damaging, and even to lead to madness.

By force of necessity, the game fills a void for Dr. B; he has no escape from evil idleness. Denied all comforts, he has no chess board with him inside the cell, and must play in his mind by visualizing both the play of the white and black pieces. The exertion of visualization comes slowly to blur reality with the geometric space of the chess game, which from the necessity of resisting torture, had become his whole world. The splitting of the doctor's mind, the conflation of the chess world with the real, will be read alongside Sigmund Freud’s understanding of the uncanny: the thing which appears familiar, as home, but is not. The doctor’s predicament is accentuated by the fact that he can only play against himself, in his own mind. The psychology of the uncanny is related not only to dissociation, but also to the “doubling” effect of the split mind.

**Salvation and Transcendence: The Inward World of Chess**

Dr B makes his first appearance in *The Royal Game* when he joins a half finished chess game. The narrator and several others, having realized that they are on board ship with the world chess champion, challenge him to a game, which Czentovic will only accept for a fee. The world champion, the son of a poor boatman, is in every way opposite to the doctor. Orphaned at a young age, he is taken in by a priest in the small Slavic village where he was born. He is uneducated, and indeed incapable of writing a sentence in any language despite multiple attempts
to teach him (Zweig, 8). Mirko Cventovic is called a “juvenile savant” (Zweig, 13) but can also be classified as an idiot savant. As a result of his intellectual and social deficiencies, Czentovic is both scorned and ridiculed by his competition. In particular the “pantheon of chess masters” (Zweig, 16) takes offense at Czentovic’s greedy use of chess to extract as much money from his games as possible.

While he is rather crude, there is also something decidedly classist about the disdain for an orphan of poor birth utilizing his single talent to make money. Because of his narrow conception of the world, Czentovic operates with only two variables: chess, and money. He is a businessman, rather than an artist. Additionally, the antagonism from his competition creates in the world champion a cold, unconcealed pride. That he, an outsider of class and intellect, should take the throne of champion fuels his arrogance. Mirko Czentovic is the opposite of Castiglione’s Courtier in every respect: he is of poor, unknown background, arrogant, unilaterally talented, and plays chess with dull, indomitable slowness. Set against him is Dr B, a quiet, unassuming Austrian financier, both an eloquent storyteller, and brilliant player. His style is quite the reverse of Czentovic: it is fast and fiery, where the world champion is cold and trudging. Their confrontation at the chess board is of two great and entirely different minds: aesthetic, artistic chess, against the robotic and monotonous.

Before the doctor's arrival, the amateurs lose rapidly to their irritatingly powerful opponent, and irked at Czentovic’s disinterest, begin another game after the first. Drawn like a moth to a flame, the doctor quietly joins into the crowd where he begins to suggest moves.

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96 A person who has an exceptional aptitude in one particular field, such as music or mathematics, despite having significant impairment in other areas of intellectual or social functioning.
Immediately, it is clear that he is by far the strongest player on the amateur side, and after a time takes Cventovic to a draw. When Czentovic asks him for a rematch, the doctor becomes flustered and says, “I haven’t, it’s been twenty, no, twenty-five years since I sat at a chess board” (Zweig, 42). The impossibility of this, given the excellent play of the gentleman, incites the narrator's investigation. Czentovic offers a rematch on the following day, and the narrator pursues the modest doctor to convince him to play. It is from this pursuit that the doctor is prompted to tell his story, explaining the impossible declaration that he hadn’t sat to a chess board in twenty-five years but before everyone's eyes played the world champion to a draw.

The doctor begins his story by recounting how he came to be a prisoner of the Gestapo. From a family of monarchists, in charge of managing royal funds through the church, he and his office are particularly targeted. After Hitler took charge in Germany and began his raids on the property of the Church and the monasteries, the doctors firm began to manage the smuggling of funds out of the country (Zweig, 48). When the National Socialists realize the importance of this small unassuming firm, they seize the doctor and keep him in solitary confinement. The method of their interrogation is not physical pain, but pure emptiness: a cell with no form of distraction or break to monotony.

After long weeks under the crushing weight of solitary confinement and interrogation by the Gestapo, Dr B takes a risk and steals a book from the pocket of a guardsman's coat, desperately seeking escape from the void of his cell. Hoping for Homer, he is disappointed to find a chess manual. The games are in algebraic notation, and at first he has trouble understanding the book at all. However, as Dr B quickly realizes, there could be no greater gift

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97 Algebraic notation is the method of indicating games in Germany at the time (now used across the board) which uses letters to indicate the pieces. For instance e4 means pawn to the square indicated by the e-file (fifth of eight) and forward two squares to the fourth rank. These indicators are the latitude and longitude of the chess world.
to a prisoner of solitary confinement than a chess almanac. He sets about learning to understand the notation by playing out the games on his checkered blanket with crumbs of food as pieces.

After he has mastered the notation, begins to memorize the old matches. He tells the narrator,

> After fourteen more days I was able to effortlessly play any match in the book from memory — or, to use the technical term: blind. Only then did I begin to understand what an immeasurable blessing my bold theft had secured me. For all at once I had an activity— senseless, pointless, you may say, but nonetheless one that nullified the nothing around me; in those 150 tournament matches I possessed a wonderful weapon against the crushing monotony of my place and time. (Zweig 71)

Not only are the matches of the almanac a weapon against monotony, but learning the notation allows him to step into a world within his mind where the games reside. Dissociation is a skill both invaluable and perilous for him. At this stage, the doctor still tells the story of his “great involvement” with chess practically: he has nothing else to do, so he memorizes chess games. However, his story does not end with chess as a pastime only, and as the story continues it grows to be something more.

Chess as weapon against the Gestapo’s method of psychological torture builds upon the early modern pedagogical theory of chess of the previous chapter. Dr B recounts, "It was precisely the routine of practicing that gave my thinking back its shattered certainty: I felt my brain reinvigorated and even, as it were, freshly whetted by the constant mental discipline”

(Zweig 73). Initially, it is this mental discipline, more than anything, that the game offers the doctor. Learning the old games was not just a pastime, but a plank of driftwood on which to hang in the immeasurable ocean of nothingness around him. Before learning to visualize chess, the doctor floundered in empty space, unable to consider anything besides the next round of interrogation: how much the Gestapo knew already, what they had learned, was his story consistent. Thus was the method of the torture. Deprived of all stimuli, isolated, prisoners were slowly worn down until they cracked.

The entrance of chess provides an escape, a window into another world where the doctor finds companionship among the games of the great players of the twentieth century. He says, “What had begun merely as a means of passing the time now became enjoyment, and the figures of the great chess strategists — Alekhine, Lasker, Bogolyubov, Tartakower — stepped as beloved comrades into my loneliness” (Zweig, 72). The chess board appears uniform and sterile, a series of pieces deprived of life and character, bound by rigid rules. For the doctor, what it provides is a connection to other humans. By engaging with the game, he engages with the thoughts of the great chess strategists. Trapped in a room with no other stimulation, this connection is invaluable.

As the doctor comes to master chess, to be able to visualize it, he begins to understand the signature of each of the great players as he spectates the games inside his mind. He says, “little by little, after I had just been playing mechanically through the games, there awoke in me an artistic, a pleasurable appreciation of the game. I learnt to understand its finesse, its tricks and stings in attack and defense, I grasped the technique of forethought, of calculation, of riposte” (Zweig, 72). Once he comprehends the artistry of the moves, the doctor finds that the world of
chess is just as valuable as any literary text he could have stolen from the Nazi guard. His story emphasizes the ability of the human mind, under extreme duress, to transcend one's conception of their own ability. When unlocked by torment, the possibility of the mind is boundless, and the stratagem of the Gestapo, the cruel psychological torture of solitary confinement, is defeated.

Zweig, in the voice of his unnamed narrator, makes a daring claim that chess is actually more enduring than any literature, and deeper. Chess, which for the humanist writers of the Italian Renaissance was merely an ingenious game, is set by Zweig upon a much higher peak. He writes:

But aren’t we guilty of being insultingly disparaging if we refer to chess as a game? Is it not also a science, an art, poised between one and the other like Muhammad’s coffin between heaven and earth, a unique synthesis of all opposites; ancient and yet always new, mechanical in its structure yet animated only by the imagination, limited to a geometrically petrified space yet unlimited in its permutations, always developing yet ever sterile, a logic with no result, a mathematics without calculations, an art without works, an architecture without materials, which nevertheless has proved more lasting in its forms and history than any works or books, the only game that belongs in every era and among every people, of which no one knows what god brought it to earth to kill boredom, sharpen the wits and taunt the spirit? (Zweig, 21-22)

As a theory of chess, this is Zweig’s tour de force. The narrator, musing to himself about the game, for which he is passionate but not skilled, constructs for chess an existence that far exceeds a mere pastime. In doing so he rejects the assessment of authors like Castiglione and Montaigne who shun the deep study of chess because it becomes a distraction from more serious study. While Zweig’s Dr B is careful, at first, to qualify that what he is learning seems pointless, the text as a whole describes something much more complex than a frivolity used as a filler for empty space. Beyond a practical weapon, the text argues that chess is the synthesis of art and
science, limit and limitlessness. It is a world constructed from a petrified geometry and of an immaterial architecture. Built from a rigid, petrified structure of wood, stone, or metal, chess is both frozen, and simultaneously animated by imagination and unlimited permutations. The artistry is in variation and dynamism, in sequences and movement. There is a beginning, middle and end, but no final product, since the game circles back to the start once the result is determined. Thus, chess has no “works” and no “results,” only a new beginning, with new potential energy. Though ancient, its variable nature keeps it new. As time progresses around chess, the efforts of many new minds make its play evolve. In addition to sharpening the wit of the players, it is a puzzle which remains unsolved even after the game has ended. The pieces return to their squares, and the process of solving begins again, taking on new shape. The game poises between heaven and earth, like the suspend coffin, marking the balance of earthly and divine, elevating chess above the mundane to verge upon the miraculous.

Zweig’s chess world, built on immaterial architecture, is precisely the container which the Dominican friar Jacobus de Cessolis describes in his Liber. Zweig takes that theory of chess and limitlessness and refines it as the synthesis of opposed opposites. Its sheer age, and ability to remain enticingly enigmatic despite the effort of millions of minds is the enthralling mystique of chess. The game of chess, with castles, knights and queens, is an elegant medievalism, a concrete and yet imaginary world unto itself, and like all medievalisms, grounded in a rich

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98 In the age of computers, one might expect that the enigma of chess is undone, and to an extent it does appear at first as more of a game, a pastime with a solution than before their advent. Opening theory and analysis show that there are “correct” or optimal ways to play. Yet, this assumption forgets that the highest level chess engines are ever evolving as more advanced computers run endless simulations of the game and allow the artificial intelligence to learn. Further, even in computer play, the programming of an engine to optimize a game, there is an artistry. In unbalanced positions, the engines find combinations for an advantage so devious they are a beauty to behold.
aesthetic history. Though its people are long dead, the medieval world continues to live inside of
the game as concretely as any other cultural document, and is among the most omnipresent.

*The Royal Game* argues radically in favor of the beauty of chess that the narrator directly
compares it to works of art and literature, and finds the game more enduring. The desire of the
doctor for Homer, the disappointment with the chess almanac, and the realization that chess
actually has greater expanse for the trapped prisoner heightens the comparison of chess to
literature. Indeed, the narrator argues that chess, a game of art and science, exceeds by its lasting
pleasure, even the greatest texts of the ancient world. As with much that rewards the intellect,
chess sits upon a high pinnacle. The arduous climb towards chess mastery makes the vista from
the summit all the more magnificent. For Dr B that process of discovery begins with
memorization, but he reaches a barrier when the exploration of the almanac proves finite.

**The Bottomless Well: Chess, Obsession and the Uncanny**

Once the doctor has accomplished the feat of memorizing every single game in the
almanac, he seeks another means to keep himself entertained. With only chess and his mind, he
can only compete against himself, playing as both black and white (Zweig, 74). However, this
weapon against nothingness is like a sword without a hilt: unsafe to grasp. It is well established
that strong chess players can play blind by visualizing the game. The more talented the player,
the more their true strength will match their ability blind. This is because the skills “forethought
and calculation” required for the highest level of chess mean that at the board the players have
both calculated many moves ahead into the game. The tangible board is a marker of the current
position, but what the great player sees on the stagnant board is the dynamism of thrust and
parry, attack and counter. The confrontation of the players across the board is like fencing with
the mind, an active combat of endurance, calculation and forethought. Therefore, the decision to
play against himself is problematic psychologically, rather than practically.

What the doctor attempts to do, once he has memorized all the games in the almanac, is
much stranger than mere visualization, which Dr B understands quite well. He says:

> even a moment's consideration must make clear that in chess, a game of pure thought, unaffected by
> chance, wanting to play against yourself is a logical absurdity. What chess’s attraction fundamentally rests
> on is, after all, that is strategies are developed in two separate brains, that, in this war of intellect, black
does not know white’s stratagems and seeks constantly to guess and disrupt them for white. (Zweig, 74)

What is lost, then, in playing the self, is the tension between the opposed intellects. The
“attraction” is to do battle with the person across the table, and in playing oneself that stake is
lost. Yet, it is this logical absurdity that endangers the doctor: to attempt to truly play himself
requires significant strain. He cannot only recall one side of the board, one series of moves, one
plan, but he must do so for both sides at once. Further, to simulate the “attraction” of the game,
he needs to induce the combat of two minds by splitting his own.

To truly split the mind requires an altered perception of the self. The doctor recalls,
> “From that moment on, when I began to try to play against myself, it was myself I began
unknowingly to challenge. Each of my selves, my black self and my white self, had to compete
against the other, and each for its part was seized by an ambition, an impatience, to win and to
conquer” (Zweig, 78). The doubling, the competition of the selves, the need for conquest, is what
Dr. B recalls to be the first onset of his mental derangement. The splitting is the byproduct of the desire for competition, which begins mundanely, but quickly becomes more sinister. As he continues to play himself, the game changes from entertainment and the aesthetic pleasure of observing art, becoming violent. He says:

‘as I played I worked myself up into manic over-animation. Initially I had still thought calmly, deliberately, I had taken breaks between one match and the next, to recuperate from the exertion; but my inflamed nerves soon stopped allowing me that pause. Hardly had my white self made a move, but my black self pushed feverishly forward; hardly was one match finished when I was already challenging myself to the next.’ (Zweig, 79)

The condition is such that the selves, which really are both the doctor, have taken on a life of their own, and slipped from his control. The doubling is so pronounced that the real person in the cell has lost agency, while the split mind has gained a feverish addiction which takes precedence over reality. He recounts that chess “was an obsession against which I had no defense; from early until late I thought of nothing but bishop and pawn and rook and king and A and B and C and check and castle, all I was and all I felt drove me to the chequered square” (Zweig 79). What is particularly haunting about this obsession is the uncanny lapse between the real and imagined. When all “I was and all I felt” becomes the game, the immaterial and architecture-less space of the mind becomes a dangerous abyss. Yet, the scenario of imprisonment necessitates that something must be made from nothing. The doctor would have lost his mind, as the Gestapo intended, had he not discovered the almanac. Yet, the infinite replayable variation, the endless

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99 It should be noted that on top of the strain of his mind against itself all day long he has been a prisoner under duress for some time. Further, that the physical strain of chess on the body is actually significant. Just sitting still, chess masters can burn 6000 calories in a single day of competition. The mental strain has a physical consequence, and are not wholly separated. Day in and out, such strain against oneself would cause any constitutional damage.
competition of self against self also threatens a similar loss of sanity. At both polarities, madness abounds, and the caution of Federico that with chess, “mediocrity” is especially to be praised echoes with greater force.

In twentieth century literature, Dr B is not the only figure troubled by doubling, and what Freud defines as the uncanny. For Freud, the uncanny [Unheimlich] means “not from the home” (Freud, 3). Think, for instance, of the sinister gothic environment of William Wilson by Edgar Allen Poe, and the dopplegänger which haunts Wilson. That hauntingly familiar, and seemingly external other, is precisely Freud’s uncanny. Looking no further than chess literature, one finds another unsettling example of the conflation of game and reality. Vladimir Nabokov, in his book *The Luzhin Defense*, engages with the savant figure, that man for whom one thing is as natural as breath, but otherwise is hopelessly inept. Luzhin and Mirko are similar in many respects, both incapable socially, hopeless intellectually, and have desolate childhoods remedied only by their talent at chess.

After a meteoric rise in the elite chess world of Eastern Europe, Luzhin encounters a setback against a particularly difficult opponent. After playing tournaments ceaselessly, he begins to show signs of mental confusion. It quickly becomes clear that chess is having a detrimental effect on his psyche, and that being confronted by an opponent he cannot defeat, the young Russian savant is cast adrift. After wandering aimlessly through his life for some time, Luzhin says to his wife, “‘We’re living in a dream. Now I understand everything.’” He looked about him and saw the table and the faces of people sitting there, their reflections in the samovar – in a special samovarian perspective – and added with tremendous relief: “So this too is a dream? These people are a dream? Well, well…” (Nabokov, 133). For Luzhin, the dinner party
which his very patient wife has arranged appears as a strange, unsettling dream between his bouts at the chess tournament. The physical people at the table around him are no longer as real as what he calls his “real chess life” (133). Dr B is not alone in his troubled condition, but fits into a cast of minds whom chess has overmastered, both Nabokov’s tragic Luzhin, and historical players of the game. For those whose lives are desolate outside of the play of chess, defeat is particularly cutting.

The brilliance and subsequent sickness of the mind is famously recorded in the figure of Paul Morphy, arguably one of the greatest players of all time, and the inventor of the modern style of play.100 He was born in 1837 to a family of well established Irish immigrants who made their way to New Orleans by way of Spain in about 1770 (Lawson 6). He came from a background conducive to success at the board, since “the game of chess was one of the Morphy family’s chief recreations, a diversion often enjoyed on a quiet evening” (Lawson 10). As early as the age of ten, Morphy knew a good deal more about the game of chess than just the moves, seeing a mate in four his opponent missed (Lawson 12). His biographer, David Lawson, appropriately titles the book Paul Morphy, The Pride and Sorrow of Chess. Pride because of his young brilliance, sorrow because of his troubled mind, his abandonment of professional chess

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100 The prioritization of rapid development, where players seek at all costs to marshal their forces and launch a swift attack is made famous by Morphy (Lawson xxvii). He is remembered for his brilliant sacrifices leading to a swift and deadly attack his opponents never seem to have had a chance of preventing. The argument against Morphy being at the highly selective top of historical chess players has to do with the relative infancy of modern play during his lifetime. Today’s players are much more highly rated. However, the great American player, Hikaru Nakamura, for one, has argued that Morphy’s brilliance is such that he pushed the boundaries of the game before any of the tools players have today existed. His opening, e4, into a King’s Gambit (the sacrifice of a pawn on f4) has largely been refuted today. However, in his day, before the advent of computer analysis, Morphy decisively crushed all of his opposition. His recorded games show a roughly 80% win rate, to a 10% rate of loss (the other 10% being drawn). Most of his wins were decided within about fifteen to twenty moves, after a devastating attack his opponents didn’t understand how to stop. One may speculate that such talent, given more time to mature, and the tools of modern computers, would have risen definitively to the top against any collection of players, no matter how strong.
after returning from a successful tour of Europe, and premature death in 1884 at the age of 47 from a stroke.

From his childhood he grew as a chess player to defeat all of the American competition in 1857, which was not especially strong at the time. After proving his dominance in the underdeveloped American scene, he traveled to Europe where he defeated the German master Adolf Anderson seven games to two. His career peaked as the first player ever to be crowned “champion of the world” in 1859, at a time when chess had no official title. He was twenty-one years old.

His success in Europe made him famous, such that it is rumored he was offered an audience with Queen Victoria, and upon returning home in 1859, he could not escape from his fame. Lawson writes that Morphy, now attempting to live and work a normal profession as a lawyer: “chess hounded him, and his growing morbidity, extreme sensitivity, and increasing suspiciousness of those around him culminated in an imbalance that deprived him of practically all company except that of immediate family” (Lawson 303). Rather than going to his head, his success appears to have troubled him, and prevented him from living a normal life. There is no evidence that Morphy ever succumbed to his exalted position, and instead he was apparently embarrassed by it, retaining the unassuming modesty of a gentleman throughout his life (Lawson 314).

The story of Paul Morphy, the quiet gentleman from Louisiana, who wanted to lead a normal life as a lawyer, but could not flee from his own brilliance, is one which lends itself to the imagination. In the mind's eye, he is as the Paris newspapers called him “the handsome young man who plays blindfolded” (Lawson 299), the brilliant player who brushed off his nation's best
like flies, who bested the greatest players of the old world at the age of twenty-one. His famous
game at the Opera against the Duke of Brunswick, his blindfolded exhibitions against eight
opponents, and simultaneous matches against as many as five European masters bolster his
romantic image. These achievements only heighten the sorrow, since the real Morphy didn’t find
happiness in his success, leading an eccentric and lonely life until his premature death in 1884.
The day he died, he “dressed meticulously as always for his noonday walk” and took his typical
bath later than usual (Lawson, 324). He was found there by his mother, “his head resting on the
side of the bathtub, to which his hands were clinging” (Lawson, 324). He was pronounced dead
that afternoon, of a stroke caused by entering the cold water while still warm.

The story of Morphy is slightly disappointing when one learns that perhaps the most
brilliant player of all time was not as passionate about chess as many believe, as testified by his
friend Charles Maurian (Lawson, x). It is also a tragedy: his Uncle Ernest Morphy pushed him to
compete at a young age, and also was quick to publicize his success and talent. It is the familiar
story of the child prodigy compelled by a mentor to compete. From his letters, it is clear Morphy
did not love the game except as “recreation” (Lawson, xi), and did not place it ahead of other
avocations. If he had any pleasure in playing, it was only to defeat the great players of Europe, as
is testified by Maurian in a letter (Lawson, x). For this reason especially Morphy appears so
compressed by the debacle with the English master Howard Staunton, arguably the strongest player
in Europe, who Morphy never got the play for reasons that are not fully clear. On the one hand,
Staunton and his supporters criticize Morphy for not being able to pay the stake of five-thousand
dollars a match, because his family did not approve. On the other hand, it is possible that
Staunton, past his prime, hid behind the stake to avoid the confrontation for fear of losing to the
American. In either case, Morphy’s connection to chess appears, after 1859, to be completely diminished. The bitter conclusion to a brilliant tour, followed by years of erratic behavior and then a sudden stroke makes Morphy as fascinating as he is sorrowful. As with many cultural heroes, it is their work which describes them most favorably. For those to whom the game of chess is dear, Morphy’s games live on to represent him at the height of his power.101

Evident from the condition of Morphy, both Zweig’s and Nabokov’s protagonists have historical basis. Thus, what pervades both the literary and historical position of chess from the nineteenth century onward is not only as a game of brilliance, but also of psychological danger. The early modern writers are reticent about full devotion to chess for more practical reasons. Neither Montaigne or Castiglione could conceive of something as impractical as a professional chess player. For them, the game has its merits as an ingenious and refined pastime, but could never be praised as an occupation in itself. The hyper-professionalism of later societies which enables a sole devotion to chess could not have been more contrary to the humanist thinker.

Interestingly, Montaigne does suggest a dark danger when he writes “what string of [Alexander's] soul was not touched” by the game of chess. That threat, the game too grave to be true play, which can take a hold of a person's inner workings precisely describes what threatens Dr B in The Royal Game. Once the doctor comes to see the artistry of chess, it is elevated beyond mere notation on a page, as when a musician learns to hear the music from the symbols


This game was a consolation game against two strong amateurs in a box at the Paris Opera. It displays the type of brilliance hard to fully register without a serious study of chess. It is taught as an example of the importance of rapid piece development and the importance of king safety. Morphy sacrificed piece after piece, hunting the black king and delivering checkmate in 17 moves. This is how most of Morphy's games unfolded. He prioritized activity of pieces and as a result of their potential energy is able to make beautiful sacrifices in the pursuit of checkmate.
of the sheet. As with brilliant art, be it music or literature, chess has the capacity to touch the soul. *The Royal Game*, building from Montainge’s reservation, shows how the hold of chess upon the soul can be too tight.

The grip of chess upon the doctor is most palpable in the final confrontation between Zweig’s two chess masters on board the ship. For the reigning world champion, Mirko Czcntovic, the stake of the match is pride. The doctor, who has never played chess before against a strong opponent, is an amateur player challenging him in a casual game. The match does not affect official standings. Yet, the intimate, face to face confrontation of the game is the matter of the highest intellectual pride. Further, all of Czentovic’s self worth is predicated on chess, his only talent.

In their first match, the doctor takes over for the narrator and the other amateurs and plays the position to a draw (Zweig, 40). The doctor agrees to a second game after telling his story to the narrator. He agrees on the condition that he will only play a single match (Zweig, 91). Given the circumstances of his imprisonment, the stake of the match for the doctor lies in testing his brain against the world's best player. He says, “what interests and intrigues me is just a posthumous curiosity to find out whether everything in the cell was still chess or had already crossed into madness, whether I was close before or already over that dangerous precipice – just that, no more” (Zweig, 91). After playing the arrogant Czecnovic to a draw, the doctor cannot help but wonder if the feverish games of his mind were real or not, whether all his time devoted to chess while prisoner of the Gestapo had a substantive result. Did he undertake a prolific, superhuman effort of will that resulted in real brilliance, or were the games the insane ravings of a troubled mind. Implicitly, by describing his desire as “posthumous curiosity” he suggests two
things. First, that his descent into madness meant a death for his career as a chess player. In a sense, he is the retired competitor who wonders if he “still has it” ie. can compete despite being past his prime. Or the implication could be more dire, and “posthumous” operates figuratively to convey the death of self inside the cell.\(^{102}\) As a prisoner of the Gestapo, put through torture, it would not be surprising to find that something in the doctor has died due to his confinement, that his continued existance is as an afterlife to the inner death. Yet, this reading is troubled by the fact that Dr B seems to be somewhat recovered, if still suffering from a dangerous obsession.

Initially, the doctor is reluctant to play because the actual confrontation will be a true test of himself. It is different to intercede into a familiar position: it is like his comfortable engagement with the old games in the almanac. To play the world champion is an entirely different matter. After a tense match, the unbelievable happens. The narrator recounts, “the improbable had taken place, the world champion, the victor of innumerable tournaments, had struck his colors before an unknown, a man who in twenty of twenty-five years hadn’t touched a chessboard. Our friend, the inconnu, the debutant, had defeated the world’s finest player in a fair fight” (Zweig, 98). The test proves a success for the doctor. Evidently, all of the study by the doctor was not purely madness, since, even after a score of years away from the physical game he demonstrates incredible potential. This suggests that the madness was not such that it had no bearing in reality, but rather that it was its own reality. Thus, the danger is not that the world of the chessboard in the doctor's mind is not real, that it has no bearing upon the tangible, but that it does.

\(^{102}\) Troublingly, *The Royal Game* is Stefan Zweig’s final work published in his lifetime. A year later he and his wife were both found dead of overdose, the cause thought to be suicide. Dr B flees Nazi Germany, sailing to Buenos Aires from New York and Zweig himself makes the same migration. The flight and seeming escape from the Nazi’s appears successful for the doctor, as it does for Zweig. Yet, clearly given the circumstances of his death, the implication is unsettling, particularly because the escape of Dr B will be shown to be rather bitter-sweet.
The world champion Czentovic does not allow the defeat to stand. Remaining stoney, he says right away “Another game?” retaining his cool and casual air despite the humiliation of defeat. The request has an immediate effect on the doctor who says “Of course’ with an enthusiasm that worried me, and even before I could remind him of his resolution to leave it at one match, he sat down and began to set up the pieces with fervid haste. He grabbed at them so violently that twice a pawn fell to the floor from his trembling fingers” (Zweig, 98). Clearly, he is in what might be called a chess relapse. The victory, the proof of his own mental agility is an intoxicant that drives him to another game right away. He has had a draw and a win against the best player in the world, and two wins would show conclusively that he is the superior player, that his mental chess world is truer than Czentovic’s tangible one. The latter cannot play blind (Zweig, 15) a peculiarity which makes him a singular figure, despite his success. The inability to visualize the board, “in itself [a] nugatory defect revealed a lack of conceptual ability and was intensely discussed in those narrow circles as it would have been among musicians if an outstanding virtuoso or conductor had shown himself unable to play or conduct without the score open in front of him” (Zweig, 15-16). Czentovic, then, is a slow, but indomitable player, lacking a sense of the game in his mind. His foil, Dr B, is the reverse. He is swift and sharp, having learned in the feverish circumstances of his cell with only his mind as a field of battle. Despite difference and mannerism and style, they are similar in one essential regard: they are brilliant at chess because, for different reasons, that was their only raison d’être. Their mental combat is thus sharpened beyond mere competition. The chess match is more than a game.

After the initial defeat, Czentovic doubles down for the rematch, and plays slowly, strictly following the increment of ten minutes per move. The slowness is intentional since “it
seemed that he, practiced as he was in gamesmanship, had realized he could use his slowness to tire and irritate his opponent” (Zweig, 99-100). The psychological trick has immediate effects. The doctor quickly becomes frustrated by the intentionally ponderous pace. The void of time passing is reminiscent of the situation of his cell: time passes and there is nothing to divert his attention.

He begins to pace, as he did inside his cell, and to tap his fingers, and eventually seems to lose track of the game all together. The narrator, growing ever more worried, says “our friend's behavior became stranger from one interval to the next. It was as if he were no longer paying attention to the match, but had diverted his thoughts onto something quite else. He stopped his rapid pacing and stayed sitting on his seat. Gazing into space with a vacant and almost crazed expression, he mumbled incomprehensible words to himself” (Zweig, 102). Clearly, Dr B loses track of the game, his thoughts wandering off to work on other matches on the chessboard of his mind. The inner selves which played chess against each other in the cell have reawakened, and now cannot stop playing. The result is that the “real” game on the table ceases to hold him and the narrator suspects, “that Czentovic and the rest of us had been forgotten in this cold madness” (Zweig, 102). Having relapsed, the doctor cannot, as before, prevent himself from playing. Since Czentovic moves at an intentional snail's pace, the two sides of the doctor's mind rush back to the endless combat of the white and black pieces beginning over again. The change is ghastly: the once eloquent, amiable doctor becomes cold and sharp, liable to lash out verbally (Zweig, 101). His physical self mutates, reflecting externally the change and deadly struggle within.

Such is the stage upon which the ingenious, self taught player reveals his madness. The narrator recounts: at the nineteenth move the crisis broke. Hardly had Czentovic moved his piece
when Dr B, without even really looking at the board, pushed his bishop three squares forward and shouted so loudly that we all jumped: ‘Check! The king’s in check!’” (Zweig, 103). Of course, everyone leans in to look upon the extraordinary maneuver, expecting another sequence which will usurp the pride of the world champion’s crown. The two previous matches have cultivated such an air of respect that despite the doctor's unhinged behavior, no one expects him to be wrong. He is, of course. Czentovic says “I’m very sorry – but I don’t see any check. Do any of you gentlemen see how my king is in check?” (Zweig, 103). The doctor, lost in a flurry of other games, and playing for all intents and purposes blind, makes a mistake. The tangible world of the board does not line up with what he has conjured in his mind. Likely, playing a similar position in his mind, the doctor has mixed up the real board with his own imagined, separate game, and thus plays an impossible check. In such a match, the convention is clear: a miscalled move means an immediate loss.103 Coming back to himself, and shuddering at the sudden madness, the doctor accepts this loss gracefully. He says with his usual courtesy, “Please forgive the debacle – it was the last time I try my hand at chess” (Zweig, 105) and then vanishes quietly in the same manner he arrived. The ending is bittersweet: the doctor, having realized his capability, must abandon his great talent. He has had the posthumous confirmation of his chess skill, and a near brush with madness. His final escape from the game comes as something of a relief: so strong is the urge that an alternate, more tragic ending could easily be imagined, one where the doctor cannot escape from himself.

Yet, happy as is his escape from prison and then from both his salvation and bane, the chess of his mind, the book ends with a loss of potential. The ever arrogant Czentovic says

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103 As with a game like pool, one cannot make a mistake of this kind. The expectation of high level chess is that both players see the lines. Checks must be declared correctly.
“Shame. The attack wasn’t at all badly set up. For a dilettante, that gentleman is actually extraordinarily gifted” (Zweig, 105). He speaks as though he had not drawn and lost against his opponent, and then won through his gamesmanship, and a technicality, rather than skill. His condescending manner, as of a teacher to a wayward pupil, is irksome since both the audience inside the story, and the reader know that he appears to be the inferior player. If anything recommends him, it is his fortitude.

The end of The Royal Game returns to the question of preeminence versus mediocrity. It raises the question: is it good to be superhuman, to excel in matters of the mind through talent far beyond normal capacity? Or is this a cautionary tale against obsession, and the deterioration of the mind into madness? Simply: is it good or bad to possess mental brilliance, since it is the hottest fires which burn their fuel the fastest.

On the whole, the representation of the brilliant madman in the character of Dr. B casts the chess player in an unsettling light. He may be “exceptionally gifted” but cannot make use of his gift for fear of a mental collapse. Indeed, is not his character, the humble, enigmatic gentleman, a survivor by means of a transcendent mind not dreadfully compelling? Just as the feverish mind of the doctor cannot cease to thrive on the pleasure of fighting itself, neither can the reader fully escape from the burning desire to witness more of the doctor's brilliance, to wish the story was not cut short. Instead, The Royal Game delivers the bitter pill of Czentovic’s arrogance, and the question: “what if?”

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104 Reading Czentovic somewhat generously, to be a world class player, one must have mental fortitude. Part of greatness in this game is patience and consistency. To outlast one's opponent is critical. Czentovic is clearly a more practiced long form chess player. Yet, the need for the world champion to use every trick in his book to beat an amateur does not lend him the appearance of elegant brilliance.
A Global Phenomenon:

Chess, Addiction and Salvation in *The Queen’s Gambit*

Given its unprecedented success, this project cannot be complete without at least a brief mention of *The Queen’s Gambit*, directed by Scott Frank. Indeed, one cannot mention chess today without the mini-series being the instant association. The Netflix Original Series adapts a book of the same title by Walter Tevis, written in 1983, and follows the bildungsroman of the fictional chess protege Beth Harmon. In a game whose greatest contemporary and historical players are almost exclusively men (Judit Polgar is the only woman to break into the top fifty at fourty-ninth),¹⁰⁵ this story is a particularly fresh breath of air.

*The Queen’s Gambit* follows Harmon on her coming-of-age journey from her discovery of chess as a means of escape. It begins with flight from the dull lessons of the orphanage, to becoming a local phenomenon, and onwards from national champion, through the Soviet chess machine, to the confrontation with the Soviet world champion Borgov. In their previous matches, the Soviet grandmaster had beaten her quite decisively, but the final game in Moscow is different. The audience has been with Harmon for her whole journey as a player, seen her battle the addiction to the tranquilizers given to her as medicine at the orphanage, as well as overcome her drinking problem and gain a stronger sense of self. She is quite a different player in Moscow, for such is the structure of the bildungsroman narrative. When done as successfully as in *The

*Queen’s Gambit*, this structure enables the highest degree of satisfaction, for ultimately journey, growth and change are decidedly compelling things to witness.

The object here is not to leverage the Netflix adaptation, or the original book as fully as could be done, but rather to give a nod to the similarities with Nabokov and especially Zweig. Further, to end with Harmon is to end with the ultimate triumph of the brilliant, dynamic mind. Harmon’s story, unlike the two literary chess players, gets a happy ending. Dr B ultimately appears to escape from his dangerous obsession, and yet he is clearly a deeply troubled man, hindered from exercising his talent. For Nabokov’s Luzhin the conclusion is even more dire. He says to his wife,

“The only way out,” he said. “I have to drop out of the game.”

“Game? Are we going to play?” She asked tenderly, and thought simultaneously that she had to powder her face, and the guests would be here any minute.

Luzhin held out his hand. She dropped her handkerchief into her lap and hastily gave him her fingers.

“It was nice,” said Luzhin and kissed one hand and then the other, the way she had taught him.

“What is it Luzhin, You seem to be saying goodbye.” (252)

He is, of course, saying goodbye forever. In rare display of abstract thinking, the ponderous Luzhin describes his rapidly approaching suicide in terms of chess. The meaning is double: both that he has to drop out of the game against Turati, which he will lose; simultaneously he refers to life as a game. That he must “drop out” precisely describes his death, since he will throw himself from a window. The chess analogy perfectly encapsulates his end. Further, the second meaning of his words are tied directly to the first: the game and his life are inseparable. In abdicating the game, he also abdicated his life. He does so because in seeing he cannot win the match, he realizes all his preparation was an illusion. Luzhin’s own name has suggested the sound “illusion” from the start. The title then reads: *The Illusion Defense*, the implication being the
incongruity of reality and thought. As a savant, chess is all he has, and realizing the illusion of his defense, he himself becomes insubstantial.

Leaving these two troubled chess players behind, and returning to a more uplifting conclusion to a modern chess story: Harmon’s defeat of Borgov and her final touching gesture toward the true love of the game. The final scene of the show is not her receiving laurels and recognition by her country, who barely helped her at all on the long and difficult journey to Moscow. Rather, Harmon chooses, spontaneously, to leave her car and security, and goes to a park where elderly Russian men play chess for pure joy of the game. Having just unofficially unseated the world champion, she is recognized at once, and the entire park comes to shake her hand. There is a stark contrast between the tough, lined Russian men, in their dark heavy coats, and her smooth skin and all delicate white costume. However, it is clear that the barrier of class, language, age and even gender are superseded by the collective love of chess. Opposed to the final words of *The Royal Game*, ultimately bittersweet, Beth Harmon’s final words are “Let's play,” spoken to the elderly Soviet man, who challenges her to a match, in his own native tongue.
Conclusion

Though it is comforting to imagine life as linear, always forward moving, a journey of a single square at a time, the study of chess literature does not offer such an easy, prescriptive understanding of existence. Beginning with the Middle Ages, chess was used as an allegory for social structure, predicated on the virtue of interconnected roles. On the chessboard, pieces corresponded to different stations of society, and their position relative to each other suggested their connected duties. The suggestion at the end of the Liber that the chessboard can be expanded to encompass the world sets the trajectory for the whole argument. Also, the fact that the Liber is inherently an educational text informs the work of chapter two especially. The humanists were the most careful and reticent about chess, and Castiglione’s Courtier has many more pressing concerns. Yet, chess fits elegantly into the larger pedagogical mode derived from Lucretius. That the text itself uses play as a way to question the fundamental order of things informs the argument that chess, a game, can have weighty implications. Additionally, the play of chess corresponds directly to Ottaviano’s desire for the courtier to be advisor to the prince through the use of Lucretian philosophy. Further, just as the Courtier must be graceful, or at least nonchalant, so too must the chess player be able to win and lose well. The lessons of the Courtier should not be read prescriptively, however, this argument has attempted to do justice not only to the theoretical complexity but also to imagine how sprezzatura would actually play out in the world. Chapter three is a continuation in that regard, since it depicts a hostile and highly competitive confrontation at the chessboard. For the chess professional, nothing is more
frustrating than losing, heightening the difficulty of retaining grace upon defeat. Given the serious implications for self-worth at stake in *The Royal Game*, chapter three is most concerned with the chess obsession, which for the doctor, creates a dissociative world. This world keeps with the broader story of this argument because, for the doctor, chess is both a tonic and a sickness. It can be a world of escape from torturous idleness, or desolate childhood, but the pursuit of the game can lead down into madness, addiction and death. For people with strange and brilliant minds, Dr B, Morphy, or Harmon, chess is a game of self-fashioning and self-destruction.

As a passionate player, I have also attempted to articulate that the beauty of chess is partly responsible for its persistence in literature, and art more broadly. Chess, as I've said, retains a particularly interesting place in society as an ancient, difficult game. In general, in popular culture medievalisms are in high demand and usually well received. The aesthetics of the court and medieval battlefield remain fascinating even hundreds of years after our society has abandoned them. I have argued this is partly psychological, since the game fulfills a desire for combat and competition, without the anti-social consequences. It also itches the desire to solve puzzles and problems, which is not unrelated to the value of literature, since the parsing of complexity is inherently what makes reading pleasurable. It is within the layers of complexity that meaning is often found. Apt for the study of chess as well. Neither literature nor chess can be understood artistically when limited to their fundamental parts. In chess, the icons of pieces or how they move, or in literature, words, do not make the artistry. Rather, it is the active relationship between these parts, dynamism, combination, forethought, which creates pleasure. That I should be encouraged to write a project upon both simultaneously, and to find that chess
overlaps with both literary, philosophical and psychological traditions in a rigorous way has made it all the more enriching.

Of course, I am writing at a fortunate time for chess, indeed, possibly the most auspicious time in history. I cannot understate the rise of chess as recently as the last four years, occurring as I’ve completed my undergraduate degree. The reasons for its resurgence may be numerous, but at least two are quite central: the first is the global pandemic, which confined people to their rooms and created a huge streaming boom, and the Netflix Series The Queen’s Gambit. That a show about a chess protegee should hit top ten in ninety-two countries, and number one in sixty-three, not to mention winning eleven Emmy Awards should be evidence enough that the story of Beth Harmon caused a rupture across the globe. Of course, for such a show to land globally, the groundwork needed to exist already. My argument has touched upon a few of the cultural creations which enable such a reception.

Chess is currently at its peak. For a frame of reference, on a single chess website alone, chess.com, on March 7th 2023, over sixteen million games were played by 10:30 am when I went to class. Most impressive of all, over one billion games were played in the month of February of this year alone (which comes out to around thirty-seven million a day). I will refrain from delving into the statistics for viewership of professional chess, or chess related content, all of which I readily enjoy alongside millions of other chess enthusiasts. The prevalence of *The Queen’s Gambit* is something I know quite well, since when I mention this project, it is the first association. However, I conceived of this project before I watched *The Queen’s Gambit*, when I encountered a series of chess references in medieval sources. That it should appear in *The Song of Roland, The Life of Saint Louis*, and in William of Tyre’s *Historia* was suggestive of a broader
presence of chess in the Middle Ages. This is how the investigation began, but I genuinely never dreamed I would come across such a vibrant series of texts, all of which have delightful throughlines which have been a pleasure to unveil. Though not my inspiration, I will credit *The Queen’s Gambit*, and the popular broadcasters of professional chess with sustaining my energy across this last year. All this is to say, I’m profoundly grateful to be working at a time when chess has snuck back inside to claim its place in popular culture. As far as this project, the presence of such a lively community transformed an arduous labor of personal interest to be one of great pleasure and which requires less justification to the curious inquirer.

Though the journey of this project has come to a close, the world of chess literature remains an enthralling domain. I have often speculated upon a fourth chapter, and indeed a fifth. As it stands, there are three major areas which this thesis could have centered on, but for various reasons did not. First, tracking the progression of the ballroom chess allegory in Rabelais’ *Gargantua and Pantagrue*l. The scene, though brief, is vivid and beautiful, and would be a rich area for focus, especially because it has two evident offspring. Thomas Middleton’s *A Game at Chess* and Lewis Carroll’s *Through the Looking Glass*. The examination of these three would fit beautifully into the larger scheme of this argument, as chess expands to fill spaces: the ballroom, the Jacobean stage, and then in Carroll, a world inside of a mirror. This last in particular fits into my schema particularly well for the looking glasses association with self-reflection, and escapism. For the sake of the patient reader, it is probably fortunate I did not sink my teeth into these texts. However, I think the three could be a strong fourth chapter, or even a series of chapters. A second untrod course would be to examine chess as a simulacrum of the battlefield. Given the often warlike language of the texts, the psychology of the game, and the heated
conflict of chapter three especially, I’m certain a chapter of chess and military strategy would be compelling. Additionally, my findings on chess and stratagem could inform said chapter. The question of the ethics of deception in war could be much more deeply examined. Last, though I examined and discussed the early history of chess in the introduction, I believe a whole chapter could be devoted to the birth of chess. I am fascinated by the idea of the growth of chess being like that of the Homeric epic: a process of evolution undertaken by many minds across centuries to produce a lasting work. Additionally, I would be interested to explore the Arabic literature of the seventh-tenth century. These things could be done alongside each other.

In imagining the future of this project, I must make a note of the problem of primary source translation. In a future project, I would be interested in adding rigor to the argument by working with untranslated primary sources. In the case of *The Game and Playe*, I’m lucky that a Middle English edition exists, and that having read *The Canterbury Tales*, the more direct language of the sermon was manageable. However, there are many Old French and Latin texts which I would like to engage with directly. Indeed, though I have begun to learn the rudiments of Italian, I did not have the skills necessary to read *The Courtier* except in translation. I believe my argument has been faithful to the Italian, but the next stage is clearly to go right to the source and engage with the author's own untranslated language.
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