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# Queening: Chess and Women in Medieval and Renaissance France

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Queening: Chess and Women in Medieval and Renaissance France

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A thesis submitted to the faculty of  
Brigham Young University  
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

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## ABSTRACT

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This work explores the correlation between the game of chess and social conditions for women in both medieval and Renaissance France. Beginning with an introduction to the importance and symbolism of the game in European society and the teaching of the game to European nobility, this study theorizes how chess relates to gender politics in early modern France and how the game's evolution reflects the changing role of women. I propose that modifications to increase the directional and quantitative abilities of the Queen piece made at the close of the fifteenth century reflect changing attitudes towards women of the period, especially women in power. In correlation with this, I also assert that the action of queening, or promotion of a Pawn to a Queen, demonstrates evolving conceptions of women as well. This work seeks to add to the growing body of work devoted to the exploration of connections between chess and political and social circumstances during the periods under consideration. As the question of the interconnectedness between the game and gender relations is in its beginning stages of exploration, this thesis is offered as a further analysis of the gender anxieties and conceptions present in the game's theory and history.

Keywords: Chess, France, Women's History, Feminism

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## I. Introduction

Chess, as much as it seems to be a frivolous past time for old men or child mathematical prodigies, was once a leisure activity of choice for kings, queens and nobles in European society, and was indeed a case of play imitating life (Murray 418-19, 428-29; Wilson-Chevalier, “Art, Patronage and Women...” 475-76). Nobles recommended and encouraged their children to learn to play, as it was a lesson in strategy and cunning. It is not by happenstance that the board represents a battlefield where two armies compete against one another in an effort to protect their respective kings; a scene which is not all too uncommon during the period under consideration. A young heir who might find himself thrown turbulently into the political arena would surely find the imitative strategy of war a boon to his monarchical *savoir faire*.

As we know it today, the game consists of the following player pieces: King, Knight, Bishop, Rook, Pawn and Queen, each possessing their individual powers and attributes depending on the relative influence and symbolic rank of the piece. However, the game at the moment of its introduction into Medieval European society was somewhat different. Originally, the pieces maintained their Arabic names of *shah*, *faras*, *baidaq*, *oliphant*, *ruk*, and *fierz*.<sup>1</sup> The names of the pieces that were understood were translated directly or given an equivalent expression, while other words were left relatively the same depending on whether or not their translators understood the original term. The original board was also unchecked. (Murray 420-28, 452).

Just as the appellations differed at the moment of its introduction, the moves and capabilities of the pieces diverged from the modern rules. As it was conceived, square, or direct

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<sup>1</sup> These names correlate to: King, Knight, Pawn, Bishop, Rook and Queen, respectively.

linear movement, was categorized as being indicative of honesty and forthrightness, whereas the diagonal movements implied just the opposite. In addition to direction of movement as an indicator of moral and social standing, the number of spaces one could move also demonstrated the value and power medieval players placed on particular figures in their society. At its beginning in Europe, the King could still move to any adjacent square which was not held by an opposing piece. Both the Rook and Knight maintain today their original privileges in that the Knight moves in his distinctive L-shape, while the Rook can move forward, back and to the sides over an unlimited number of spaces. Interestingly, the Knight's movement is categorized as two-fold. His first step indicates justness in his actions, while the second oblique step to the side implies his ability to extort or perform misdeeds. However, the Queen and Bishop distinguished themselves as the only pieces to move strictly on a diagonal. The Queen could only move one space at a time, while the Bishop possessed the ability to jump over other pieces and move several spaces at a time (Murray 452, 530).

Focusing on the figure of the Queen, the *fierz*, or vizier, originally a powerful piece, when adapted originally by European players was equated to the duties of a female regent. However, due to European cultural perceptions of women, the piece lost its primordial capabilities. At that time, the Queen that appeared on the board was not known for her maneuvering power, which was limited, and she remained rather inert (Wilson-Chevalier, "Art, Patronage and Women..." 476). Her responsibility was to the king as a position of assistantship only moving in relation to his position on the board.

In the early chess moralities, prior to the modification of the Queen piece's abilities, her limited movement on the board was justified and devalued in status by stating that "The King's move and powers of capture are in all directions, because the King's will is law [...] The

Queen's move is aslant only, because women are so greedy that they will take nothing except by rapine and injustice" (Murray 530).<sup>2</sup> While comparing the European game as it developed and differentiated itself from the original Arabian chess, Murray specifies, that "The main use of the Queen was to keep her in close attendance on the King to interpose her when the opponent's Rook checked from the other side of the board," which was diametrically opposed the strategy of the Arabian game. Players in the Muslim world would make it a point to "secure a road for the Queen into the heart of the enemy's position, the European's kept her near home" (Murray 470), in other words, under the supervision and control of her male counterpart.<sup>3</sup> Author of *De ludo scaccorum*, Jacobus de Cessolis, further affirms that the king's position is justified as "the man hath power over her body," and that uncommon as it may be for a woman to go to "batylle for the fragylite and feblenes" of her race, it is only permissible as she does it for the "solace of hym and ostencion of love" (*Chesse*, ch. 2 and 3).

All modifications to the original Arab rules of movement were solidified near 1300, near to the same time that conditions for women really started to degenerate remarkably from their status in early Merovingian society as they transitioned into the Carolingian system (Murray 393; Wemple 9). However, in modern chess, the Queen is understood to be the most powerful on the board, moving in any direction and any number of spaces. From previous mention of movement direction and the number of spaces one can jump being indicative of attitudes towards a particular societal figure, one can infer that this contrast between early and contemporary abilities for this piece must be more than mere coincidence.

As it was constructed, the board represented the society in which members of the medieval period found themselves and they understood it as such. The act of playing further

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<sup>2</sup> As paraphrased from the *Quaedam moralitas de scaccario* or *Innocent Morality*.

<sup>3</sup> Murray here calls the Arabian piece a Queen, despite the Arab original designation of *fierz*. What is important here is the contrast between the piece's original abilities and those given to (or taken from) it once in Europe.



symbolized the power and gendered interactions that were common to the period and interiorized a struggle between societal and political actors, both male and female alike. Knowing that the game has been heavily permeated by sexual bias, one must take into consideration Natalie Zemon Davis' statement that "sexual symbolism [...] is always available to make statements about social experience and to reflect (or conceal) contradictions within it" ("Women on Top" 127). The evolution of chess in Europe, in addition to the sexualized and gendered attitudes and moralities that developed around the game, reflects both the political and social systems that they mimic, as well as the anxieties and opposition to such ideologies. Particularly, the evolution of the Queen, in addition to the possibility of promoting a Pawn to Queen, demonstrate instances of sexual and social inversion that symbolize a desire for reevaluation of long-held beliefs about the female sex. It is my belief that the increased capabilities of the Queen, both quantitative and directional, indicate increasing positive attitudes towards women, as opposed to the misogyny heavily propagated in the period prior to the alteration of her abilities. Likewise, queening a Pawn illustrates the ability for socially lower women to have greater political sway during the period in which the change was effectuated. This assertion builds off of previous arguments made by Murray and Jenny Adams (*Power Play*) showing the connections between chess and political and social circumstances and seeks to further elaborate its ties to gender relations.

Anyone familiar with the game of chess will understand the principle of 'queening' or promotion. For those who may not be, a brief explanation is here offered: when a Pawn reaches the eighth square or, in other words, attains the farthest reach of the opposing side, he may be promoted to a higher rank, thereby assuming the rights and privileges of such pieces while maintaining his original color. Amongst his options is that of Queen, Knight, Rook or Bishop, all of whom possess specific advantages. At the inception of this particular maneuver, the only

option was to promote to a Queen, as the Queen at the time of the medieval game was the weakest of the higher pieces and therefore not too unseemly a position to which an underling could advance (Murray 452). As it stands today, the Queen is the most common rank to which one chooses to promote a Pawn.

While some may simply write off chess is a mere game, Alfred A. Cleveland, in his work on the psychology of chess underlines the importance of such symbolic interaction through the medium of play when he writes

In summary we may say of chess as a form of human play that in the first place it is a contest, and, as such, it appeals to the fundamental fighting instinct [...] In the second place chess offers its devotees opportunity to exercise their ingenuity in the solution of problems [...]. (272-73)

Therefore, engagement in such play makes an ideal means of symbolic interaction and conflict resolution, as well as expression of inherent anxieties.

As examples of such conflict resolution, in both *Les Echecs amoureux* (1370) and *Le jeu de la dame, moralisé* (end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century), each protagonist is affronted with a rival against whom he or she must maintain their self-control and overcome certain vicissitudes in order to either win love or attain salvation.<sup>4</sup> Commenting on this idea of chess as conflict resolution, Anne-Marie Legaré cites the emir in *Huon de Bordeaux*, who also uses chess as a means of problem-solving when Huon must kiss his daughter to complete the required tasks for receiving pardon from death. However, the emir does not want to give away his daughter's virtue so easily, and therefore proposes a chess match as a means of deciding the matter (8-9).

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<sup>4</sup> Both *Les Echecs amoureux* and *Le jeu de la dame, moralisé* are of unknown authorship. Murray specifies that *Le jeu de la dame, moralisé* is dedicated to an unnamed lady of noble birth, but no other indicators are given in the documents of their authors (558).

Such connections to social, political and gender politics and conflict resolution were not few or coincidental. Highlighting this fact, Murray, in his exhaustive work on the history of the game, remarks that it was “symbolic of warfare, while the pieces could be made emblematic of the various elements of the society of the period” (439). He continues in further explaining the relation of chess to the allegorical and moralizing works on chess of the period, and that these works show the connection medieval players held between game and social circumstances, even if “the details [of the game] had to fit the explanation rather than the reverse” (530).

Further demonstrating the appearance of chess as a metaphor for daily life, Marie de France addresses the topic in the *lai* of *Eliduc*, where, in the 483-488<sup>th</sup> line of the *lai*, she sets up the scene with her protagonist Eliduc playing chess at the court of the king: “Li reis est del manger levez,/As chambres sa fille est entrez,/As eschés cumence a jüer;/A un chevalier d’utre mer,/De l’autre part del eschequer,/Devait sa fille enseigner”(159).

Eve M. Whittaker, in her study entitled *Marie de France’s Eliduc: the Play of Adventure*, has proposed, that upon closer examination, one realizes that the entirety of the story is constructed to mimic the progression of an actual chess match, and is in actuality a very early example of chess morality literature. Whittaker asserts that Marie adapts the Middle Eastern game to a European ideology, incorporating elements of courtly love and Christian virtues and ultimately becoming a metaphor for God in the lives of his earthly children (3).

What Whittaker further enumerates is that Marie de France’s method progressively represents the pieces as inanimate objects and then actual people. The distinction between the game and reality becomes progressively and increasingly blurred, and characters in the story are not as easily distinguished from the game they play. In this sense, she represents truly what the

original intention of the game was, which was to represent the condition of man as accurately as possible.

Outside the realm of the strictly literary, tangible examples of actual chess sets fabricated at the time demonstrate an emphasis on real individuals or the trades they represented. In the *Liber de ludo scachorum*, Jacobus de Cessolis, first written in the fourteenth century, gives telling descriptions of various pieces, encouraging the reader to identify himself as a piece on the board through the marks of his trade. While describing the first pawn, de Cessolis remarks:

*Fuit autem sic formatus: nam fuit in specie humana factus, habens in manu dextra ligonem, quo terra foditur. In sinistra habet virgam, qua armenta et cetera talia animalia diriguntur. In corrigia seu in cingulio habuit falcem seu sarculum, quo vineae seu arbores putantur, et eis superflua deciduntur. Ad haec tria omnis agricultura reducitur.*

[Thus he was formed: He was made in the shape of a human, having in the right hand a shovel with which the earth is dug. In the left he has a rod, with which the herd and the other such animals are directed. In the shoe string or belt, he has a scythe or a cutting tool with which the vines or trees are trimmed and extra growth is cut down from them. All agriculture can be reduced to these three things.] (Adams 36)

In the chapters that follow in his treatise, he indicates that the pawns should always be “*in humana specie factus*” or in “*forma humana*.” Within each description, he includes not only the specification that the piece can be correlated to a human counterpart, but also detailed

enumerations of the markers and external identifiers that go hand-in-hand with such individuals.<sup>5</sup> For example, in addition to the farmer holding a rod to direct animals, Cessolis imagines the innkeeper holding a loaf of bread with which to serve his guests (Adams 36).<sup>6</sup> In some cases, special customized chessboards were fashioned featuring real people and groups that had faced off politically or on the battlefield. The faces would be engraved on round checker-type pieces, resembling in great detail, from clothing all the way down to hairstyle, the social and political figureheads for whom they stood (Wilson-Chevalier, “Art, Patronage and Women...” 477-92).

The board itself played an important role in this allegory between figurative and literal. Often, in Persian and Chinese chess, the space between the opposing armies is defined as a river, whereas in European chess was sometimes conceived as the English Channel. With the conquering of England by the Normans already having taken place by this time and as the events that lay the foundation for the Hundred Year’s War were starting to get underway some sets included “ships and boatmen; some hav[ing] fish,” (Murray 126, 387-88; Whittaker 17). Furthermore, the introduction of the coloring of the squares, formerly between which no distinction was made, also brought about treatises regulating the strict starting position of the Queen after her introduction around 1200, while also symbolizing affiliations, life and death or falling in and out of the sovereign’s favor (Murray 393,453).<sup>7</sup> These demarcated individual places or points of refuge, chambers or strategic meeting points where individual pieces affronted each other could be reasonably likened to the concept of feudal land distribution: each

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<sup>5</sup> It is evident from Cessolis’ text that Pawns in this case are meant to represent the *laborantes* class. However, the promotion of Pawns in this study will be addressed mostly through a Pawn’s secondary representation as one of lower class moving to a higher social status.

<sup>6</sup> See p. 758-763, 769 in Murray for a renderings of such pieces made in *forma humana*, taken mostly from the Charlemagne chess pieces and the Lewis chess set in addition to descriptions from five different manuscripts.

<sup>7</sup> Murray notes that the Arabian *fierz* and the European Queen were used intermittently until the adaption to European culture was solidified and the piece was officially dubbed a Queen (425-526).

player meeting the opposition on his appointed front, or space and pieces assigned to defined spaces by the overruling power of the side to which they vowed loyalty.

In this same vein, medieval chess, unlike its contemporary counterpart, was also a game based on individual and voluntary affiliations, much like feudal society itself. As soon as a piece or player “forgot” their affiliation they could fall in the figurative battle. For this reason, colors played an important role in the early games. Some pieces could symbolically switch their colors, thereby changing their affiliation to an opposing king, much as knights, despite vows of loyalty, could change their loyalties depending on a variety of factors. Murray comments further on this fact when he describes the early European game as more “democratic” where “the player’s pieces are also termed *black* or *white* from the colour of the squares to which they are confined, and quite independently of the colour of the side to which they belong” (Murray 400, 545).

Additionally, the main figuring pieces only moved as they used their team of lesser pieces to coordinate moves on the board. This type of “democratic” set up, as Murray calls it, more-so belies a medieval system where pieces are perceived and depicted as feudal vassals, than the Renaissance game where absolute power is beginning to grow. The individual personalities and loyalties of each piece, as represented by the ability to change their colors during the game, are opposed to a system based on absolute power where nothing matters but the supreme power to which each piece is subjected and colors are fixed. From all of these examples, what one must conclude is that the game can neither be separated from the socio-political, nor can one overlook the importance of interaction between players across the board.

In this regard, it is essential now to understand that the principles of the game did not develop in a haphazard fashion or by any accident, but arise from certain philosophical beginnings based on true-to-life representation as well. As it was played in the twelfth century, it

was undergoing an evolution in order to be adapted to European mores; names of pieces and their abilities would ultimately be changed, but as Whittaker emphasizes in her work, the game of chess in the Muslim society where it originated was a game, amongst other things, about overcoming fatalistic attitudes and depicting the true nature of life as accurately as possible (5-6).

Ideologically, its origins find themselves in an Indian game called *chaturanga*, which involved pieces that represented the infantry and other members of the Indian military, dating back to the seventh century. (Murray 25-29). As legend would have it, an Indian king requested that a wise man invent a game depicting the influences of destiny and fate and the means by which “these forces work in man’s environment” (Whittaker 3; Murray 208). The game was so devised that it required “prudence, diligence, thrift and knowledge” in order to counter the fatalistic philosophies. The player, through strategy and well-thought out maneuvers and sacrifices of pieces, can take control of the board, and symbolically their world or their life (Whittaker 4; Murray 208-09).

As chess was a game of skill and not of chance, the implication is that one could take an active role in their fate. In Murray’s work on the history of the game, he states that

In Muslim literature it is upon the essential difference between chess as the game of skill and nard as the game of chance that stress is everywhere laid. The player’s complete liberty to select the move he wished to make in chess is contrasted with the player’s subjugation to the dominion of blind chance in nard. (208)

Chess, although not always free of wagering on the winner, was most often not associated with gambling for this very reason. Its freedom from mere chance made it a game wherein, despite “boundaries of rank, language, sex, national history or racial legend, even boundaries of faith did

not apply” (Whittaker 5). For players at the court in this early period, “across the chess board, men and women, kings and slaves, Sicilian emir and English monk, Muslim, Christian and Jew met on equal terms” and were left to their individual wits to come out of it well (Whittaker 5-6, 11).

As we can see, chess is a game of high intellectual skill and not physical prowess since no physical battle actually takes place, at least in theory (there is no lack of accounts of bloody brawls between players).<sup>8</sup> Once determined a noble and genteel pastime, being able to engage in this game successfully meant that women had attained a higher intellectual level to match their male opponent and reworking the placement or privileges of certain pieces meant figuratively rethinking the structures of society. For this reason, chess was an ideal and emblematic game for women to utilize to their ends in questioning predominant attitudes toward the female sex and reestablishing a sense of empowerment for their own, where they did not possess the physical means to enforce such recognition.

Speaking of this ability to psychologically reconstruct circumstances during the game, Alfred A. Cleveland, while discussing the mental skill required to play, indicates that the average player can plan anywhere from four to six moves in advance, anticipating and reevaluating what their opponent may do. Master chess players can plan beyond that, and are also capable of engaging in multiple games simultaneously, as well as recalling the entirety of former games. In any case, the mental engagement required of a chess player demands visual imagination, mental recall, strategic and analytical thinking in addition to the ability to detect subtle psychological cues from their opponent (274-75, 278-87). Tellingly, chess master Aron Nimzowitch declared, “*La beauté d’un coup aux échecs n’est pas dans l’apparence, mais dans la pensée qu’il contient*” (Mehl 11). Murray affirms that during the Middle Ages, and even into the Renaissance, accounts

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<sup>8</sup> See both A. van der Stoep, pp. 37, 41 and Mehl, 121-122 for examples of heavy games being used as weapons.



are given not only of women playing, but playing with great skill and demonstrating high analytical qualities in the literature (435). Such a demonstration of mental skill proves contrary to the medieval assumption that “the female’s mind was more prone to be disordered by her fragile and unsteady temperament” (Davis, “Women on Top” 125). With such a heightened level of strategy involved, one cannot discount chess as just any game. Reimagining and reanalyzing the game could have meant for women reimagining their social circumstances.

It is no surprise, then, that Anne de France considered the pastime important enough to recommend the learning and practice of it to her daughter Suzanne in publication of her *Enseignements* in 1505, along with the encouragement to play other games geared at developing what Kathleen Wilson-Chevalier specifies as “intellectual prowess and self-control, and deemed proper for princes and princesses alike” (“Art, Patronage and Women...” 474). Acknowledging the shortcomings of their mutual condition, Anne de France herself states that “La parfaicte amour naturelle que j’ay à vous, ma fille, *considérant l’estat de nostre povre fragilité, et meschante vie présente*,[...]me donne couraige et voulois de vous faire [...] aucuns petits enseignements.” In the course of giving other counsel, she emphasizes the learning of “eschez” and that “on en doit user” if one wishes to be a woman of “entendemens tant grans et si haultement eslevez” (*Enseignements* 1, 9, emphasis added). Again, historian Kathleen Wilson-Chevalier notes that “The finest tutors available, but court ladies, too, were pouring learning into the minds of the young masters and *demoiselles* destined to dominate the political-economic-social scene; and leisure activities were regarded as valuable components of the training of these most privileged youths” (“Art, Patronage and Women...” 475). As an example of such learning being emphasized even in fictional literature, in *Gargantua* the game heads the list of table

games amongst the other two hundred-some games enumerated as beneficial to the giant's learning (Rabelais, *Gargantua* 195).

As a yet further instance of the importance of female engagement in the game, women possessed their own boards and treatises on how to play, despite the fact that there were no female pieces on the board when the game was first introduced (Wilson-Chevalier, "Art, Patronage and Women..." 476). Isabeau de Bavière is noted to have ordered the fabrication of ivory and bone chess pieces, while Jeanne de Bourgogne was the owner of a finely embroidered chess board (Van der Stoep 34-35). Likewise, chess sets were also listed in the personal inventories of Valerie Visconti and Charlotte de Savoie (Mehl 204-5).

And yet, despite such examples of women's involvement and success in the game, gendered attitudes both then and presently, seek to exclude women from meaningful play, especially when a woman is up against a male opponent. The male-female dichotomy in early chess was not uncommon or unknown. The game has long been both gendered and sexualized, and the term *check-mating* loses none of its irony here. As an example, the aforementioned *Les Echecs amoureux*, which shares certain similarities with the *Roman de la Rose*, expresses this erotic tug of war for the upper hand as it allegorizes amorous conquest utilizing chess iconography. Exploring similar instances in French and Italian paintings and romances, Patricia Simons points out that frequently "an imprisoned or interiorized woman is erotically encountered through the medium of chess" (68).

Stretching outside of the realm of the literary, art work reflecting such gendered attitudes was also predominant during the Middle Ages. Commenting on just such artwork, Patricia Simons concludes that

a long European tradition genders chess as a fundamentally masculine pursuit, as an intense war-like battle of reason [...] The game gives the appearance of irrational impulses controlled by orderly rules and rational behavior. However, if chess is performed by a mixed-sex couple, the feminine presence turns the engagement into a sexual dalliance and it becomes a destabilized game of chance and passion more than wits and reason. (59)

Further stressing this point, Simons cites a chess problems manuscript written by Alfonso the Wise, featuring the author playing with his wife and directing a game amongst his harem as an early example of figurative male dominance in the attitudes towards the game (59). Drawing on Adam and Eve iconography, *The Two Chess Players*, attributed to Lorenzo Costa or Amico Aspertini, as well as *Love Garden with Chess Players* (15<sup>th</sup> century) by an anonymous artist and a detail from *The Chatelaine of Vergi* (end of 14<sup>th</sup> century) feature male and female players playing chess in a garden with a single tree figuring between them. Likewise, *Les Echecs amoureux* sets the plot within the confines of a garden. In each instance, both the tree imagery and the players' presence in mystical gardens draw to mind the Garden of Eden and the persuasive power of Eve in drawing Adam into transgression and destabilizing the perfect balance of the world at the beginning of its creation.

One would not be surprised to learn, then, that at its origin the term for checkmating is essentially to lay your opponent "bare." Murray also indicates other possible interpretations as "expose" or "vanquish" (159, 225, 228-29, 267). The image of nudity then is only logical when speaking of victory in regard to chess. Little wonder then that Evrart depicts Venus appearing nude in *Les Echecs amoureux* to the protagonist before entering the garden to play against his lover, and that by giving in to the draw of carnality, he is shamefully laid bare himself. The

expression of disappointment in his lack of strategy by the gods counseling him indicate that the general attitude was that the victory ought to have been the other way around (Legaré 28, 48-51, 77).

This scenario of male defeat to a seducing female stands in stark contrast to that of *Huon de Bordeaux*, which was published during the century just prior. Again, checkmating is used as a symbol of sexual dominance when Huon is presented with the dilemma of winning the game and bedding the emir's daughter, or losing the game as well as his head. Following the predominant presumption of male superiority of reason, he wins since the daughter, normally a chess expert, is so inflamed by her desire for him that she "loses her head" and forgets to play the game judiciously (Legaré 8). Although different scenarios, the message in both the *Echecs* and *Huon* is that men should exercise their presumed superior self-control when dealing with women so as not to sacrifice the upper-hand. Ironically enough, the Italian term for checkmate, *scacco matto*, implies that one renders the opponent "irrational or insane" (Simons 65).

Here, art serves yet again to demonstrate this notion. By contrast to the images given of heterosexual couples, images of men engaged in the game are set in contexts demonstrate strict reason and self-control. Again, Simons highlights several works to illustrate the point: *Two Chess Players* by Ludovico Carracci, which features two men, heads inclined towards each other indicating a meeting of the minds, and a small dog to demonstrate fidelity and constancy, in addition to Paris Bordone's work of the same title, here portraying two men in contemplative stances (61-62). In each case, the feeling is static, and one has a sense that chess played between homosexual couples lacks the imbalance and chaos implied in that of games where players are of the opposite sex.

This sense that play between a man and a woman turns the world, and thereby gender relations, topsy-turvy is explained best by Natalie Zemon Davis. She highlights that “the female sex was thought the disorderly one par excellence in early modern Europe” (“Women on Top” 124). Again, attributing this connotation to the Edenic scene of tempting Adam “to disobey the Lord,” Davis notes that instances of heterosexual interaction where the possibility for role reversal was possible allowed for “an expression of, and a safety valve for, conflicts within the system” (“Women on Top” 124, 130). She goes on to state that “play with the unruly woman is partly a chance for temporary release from the traditional and stable hierarchy” (“Women on Top” 131), thereby allowing a possibility to rethink previously held notions and social structures, whether or not they are altered in actuality.

As it represents the socio-political and gender context in which it was created, chess as it evolved from its first introduction through the Renaissance becomes a metaphor for the changing attitudes towards women over that same course of time. The growing predominance of “queening”, or promotion to a Queen piece, in addition to the temporary break with male dominance over the game at the end of the fifteenth century, as well as the multi-directional and quantitative improvements made to the Queen piece’s powers embodies just such overturning of attitudes through play. What it demonstrates is the acknowledgement of the deteriorating female condition in medieval Europe and the unspoken desire to rectify such vilification, by figuratively promoting women to a position of higher value, which they enjoyed, at least relatively, during the Renaissance. What these changes in chess represent for women is, as Eve M. Whittaker deems it in her analytical work, *Aventure*: “an organic experience, the realization of character in the crucible of an encounter with external circumstances” (6).

To enumerate the points of this argument more fully, I will first set the stage for the moment of chess' introduction into French society. This period, as Suzanne Fonay Wemple argues, was relatively favorable toward women as opposed to the medieval period which followed directly after. Secondly, the medieval game and its connections to gender politics and women will be discussed with special attention paid to the Queen piece. Finally, the changes made to the piece's abilities and how those modifications correlate to the Renaissance will be explored.

## **II. The Opening: Setting up the Checkerboard of Power**

As most chess players know, a chess game can be divided into three distinct stages: the opening, the middlegame and the endgame. The opening, although seemingly arbitrary to the untrained player, establishes the tone for the rest of the game and sets the stage for any strategic moves in the middle and endgame. Likewise, to understand the rise and fall of women's strategic influence within the game's history, one must also comprehend the power relations that set the stage for the game's introduction into European society. The conditions of the period just prior to its arrival on the European continent places women in a position of relatively elevated status in religious, economic and marital affairs compared to the predominant attitudes disseminated in the period that followed.

Speaking of religious matters, Suzanne Fonay Wemple highlights the active role of women in the spread of Christianity from its very beginning. As examples, she cites the women who accompanied Christ, "bemoaning and lamenting his suffering and death" (20). Additionally, she remarks their involvement as "prophetesses and missionaries" who proved useful by "converting members of their families and households and opening their homes and giving financial support to fellow Christians" (20). Evidence has been offered that this trend did not stop, but continued into the period of early Frankish society between the sixth and tenth centuries. As examples, Eliane Viennot highlights the role of two noblewomen converts to the Christian religion, Genviève and Clothilde (wife of Clovis), in influencing and converting other nobles between the years 451 and 493 (69). She also remarks that women ordained as deacons and participating in the administration of the Eucharist was not uncommon in the practices of the Church during this period (72).

In addition to their participation in the spread of the Church's message and the sacraments, women also instigated the building of a large number of churches and monasteries during the time under consideration. For example, Radegonde founded a hospital and also built the abbey of Sainte-Croix in Poitiers, while Brunehilde (also a contributor to Sainte-Croix) established her own female monastery in Etampes, in addition to both a feminine and masculine order in Autun. Moreover, she restored the abbey of Ainay and constructed a basilica in Laon dedicated to St. Vincent, as well as "de magnifiques églises en beaucoup de lieux sous le nom de saint Martin" (Dubreucq 55-71). One of the noblewoman's detractors went so far as to remark of her "Les edifices fondés par elle et qui durent jusqu'à ce jour sont si nombreux que cela semble incroyable qu'ils aient pu être contruits par une seule femme, et qui régnait seulement en Austrasie et en Bourgogne" (Dubreucq 55-71). Women such as these established a reputation for themselves as strong and influential defenders of the faith.

Coupled with increased female preaching and constructional undertakings, women religious between 600 and 900 A.D. were also permitted to participate in scholastic endeavors within the Church. Caesarius of Arles is noted to have insisted that sisters should be old enough to learn to read and write (Wemple 175). In correspondence documented between St. Caesarius and his sister, he also stresses the importance that women in the monastery should devote a significant amount of time each day to the "divina lectio" (Morin 39, 43). Likewise, edicts issued between 630 and 655 regarding nuns upheld a similar notion and stipulated that female monastic life should parallel that of monks (Wemple 176). Caesarius also emphasized that abbesses should encourage religious study and prayer over the common female practice of needlework and the fabrication of fine linens (Morin 43). As further evidence of the encouragement to educate such



females , the biographer of Herlinda and Renilda of Eyck specifies that the women were sent to the abbey of Valenciennes to be educated in the

divine doctrines, human arts, religious studies, and sacred letters. Whatever they were taught through books and lectures, they had memorized...In the aforesaid monastery, they acquired a thorough knowledge of the diverse forms of divine office and ecclesiastical ceremonies, that is, of the reading and modulation of chants and psalter, and what is even more admirable in our times, of copying and illuminating. (*Vita ss. Herlindis...* 4-5).

Noting that women were involved in such scholastic pursuits, Wemple remarks as well on the involvement of women in the creation of manuscripts. She cites the Cologne manuscripts created between 783 and 819 by a group of women signing their names as professional scribes, as well as codices found in the libraries of Laon and Cambridge (180).

Furthermore, outside of copying religious and scholastic texts, Wemple also points out the involvement of these early nuns in the development of female hagiography. She says that “female authors writing about women introduced feminine values and ideals in hagiography. They replaced the ideal of the asexual female saint, the ‘virago,’[...] with a heroine who relied on female attributes to achieve sanctity” (183). In addition to the traditional *topoi* of monastic life was added the nurturing qualities of mother figures and peacemakers to the accounts of Radegonde and Bathilde, elevating “feminine psychological traits to a spiritual plane” (183). Between 609 and 614, Baudonivia was the first of such female religious authors to characterize these saints in such a way and differentiate the biographies from previous manuscripts (Coudanne 45-51).

In this same vein, growing numbers of female hermits also created a more positive reputation for religious women and their relation to the community around them. It is noted that during this period, in the north of France twenty percent of the 340 documented hermits were women and fifteen percent of those women contributed to the founding of a city. From the eighth century onward this trend is seen as leading towards an increased number of female recluses preaching, “autre technique de relation de la femme avec les homme [qui] lui donne une certaine autorité sur le plan spirituel puisqu’elle est consultée très souvent” (Rouche, “Les Religieuses...” 21-22). All of this demonstrates what Viennot dubs a “mixité de la vie religieuse” (84), by indicating that women enjoyed an increased influence in religious matters prior to the eleventh century and the introduction of the game of chess in Europe.

Moving the focus away from strictly religious liberties accorded during this time, one must also take into consideration the legal and marital advantages given to women prior to the later medieval period. Since power and marital relations within the nobility often went hand in hand, the two will be examined simultaneously. Beginning with the sixth century, women in Frankish society were transitioning away from the barbaric culture which held sway during the previous centuries, which had left such examples for them as Fredegund, who, gathered an army, then subsequently drove out and pillaged the Austrasians and Burgundians (Wemple 28). Examples of women taking up arms in their own or others’ defense was not undocumented. However, as Germanic culture merged with Roman customs, women increasingly stayed away from the battlefield and remained more and more within the domestic realm. Although, that is not to say that women were devalued in comparison with their male counterparts.

Laws developed in the Merovingian period set prices of compensation in the event that members of a household were wrongfully killed. At first glance, the laws set an equal price on a

member of either sex at 200 *solidi*, however, the price was adjusted for a woman if she was of childbearing age. If she were aged anywhere from twelve to forty years old, her family would receive 600 *solidi* as compensation for their loss. Outside of these circumstances, such a high rate of compensation was only attached to the wrongful killing of counts, important military figures and priests. The implications of these regulations make it clear that during this period the role of women was valued as a main component of a well-functioning society (Herlihy 8; Wemple 29).

Along this line, women were also protected further from slander and sexual assault by the laws set in place. According to the *Pactus legis Salicae* calling a woman either a whore or a witch could be punished with a fine of between 45 and 52 *solidi*. Furthermore, varying degrees of sexual assault were punishable. For example, wrongfully disrobing a woman in public could result in a fine of 12 *solidi*, while physical contact with a woman could be punishable up to 45 *solidi*, depending on what part of the body was touched. If she were raped, she was to be compensated the price of her bridegift, or 52 *solidi* (83-84, 118).

Within the bond of marriage, women also exercised a substantial amount of sway in the governance of their households. Speaking of the relatively powerful position of wives during the ninth century, Karl-Ferdinand Werner remarks that the wife of a nobleman

pouvait devenir consors de duc ou de comte, comme la reine l'était du roi. On trouvera des titres féminins correspondant aux titres masculins, à savoir *ducissa*, *comitissa*, enfin *vicecomitissa*, voire, dans quelques cas bien spéciaux mais significatifs pour les mentalités, *épiscopissa*. (368)

Werner goes on to cite an example of one such woman in the tenth century, the countess of Flandres, who was accorded a privilege previously reserved for the queen only: visiting the interior of a male monastery (368).

Hand in hand with the designation of female nobles as equal counterparts to their husbands, the management of family goods and political decisions were also shared on a considerable scale during the period under consideration. In her examination of documents taken from the abbey of Marmoutier, Amy Livingstone concludes that 35% of property transactions made on behalf of donating families were completed in the presence of or under the consent of female family members (142-43). She also categorizes this and other examples as evidence of “des familles agissant en chœur dans le transfert ou la gestion de leurs biens. Des filles, aussi bien que des puînés, des épouses et des parents de toute sortes – y compris des consanguins ou des affins éloignés – participent aux décisions concernant l’avenir des biens de famille” (142). In 1977, Jo-Ann McNamara and Suzanne Fonay Wemple noted that women during this era acted as military leaders, judges, property owners, and sovereigns, supporting claims that women during this period exercised significant power with their husbands (109).

One cause of increased exercise of female power within family and political relations may be that contrary to the previous era’s trend of marriage between individuals of equal political and social standing, the ninth and tenth century saw the rise of “l’hypergamie des males dans l’ordre des guerriers” (Poly 327). Men were marrying more and more above their station in an effort to acquire more territory and influence. As a result, wives who brought significant gains to the marriage were prized more by their husbands and his extended family. These noblemen and their families also paid dearly to acquire wives of higher station. In the example of Arnould

de Gand, he offered “tout ce qu’il possédait” in addition to the territory of Ardres in order to have the “héritière du château de Baubourg” (Duby 219).

These trends in marriage unions belie the fact that women could inherit and pass along titles to the husbands and progeny, which stands in contrast to the custom of the Salic Law in centuries to follow. Wemple attests to this fact when she says “By testamentary bequest a man could settle property on his female relatives [...] the *formulae* also attest that husbands provided generously for their wives” (48). She cites Burgundofara, a Frankish woman living in 632, who was made an “equal and legitimate heir” with her brothers in her father’s patrimony as an example of women’s ability to participate in the transfer of power and property (48). Or, in the case of Aliénor d’Aquitaine, the wife, who had inherited the property of her father, could confer the rights to her land on her husband, but equally revoke and transfer them to her second husband, Henri Plantagenêt (Viennot 105).

Finally, once outside of the marriage contract, widows were also afforded more legal protection than their successors in the late middle ages. As just some examples of these instances of protection for those deprived of their husband, in 561 a decree was established indicating that compensation was to be paid to widows by the state. Likewise, in 673, another decree was issued stating that widows who chose not to remarry and stay in their deceased husband’s estate would be “sous la garde du prince” (Lantéri 159; Ganshof 53). Although not always accorded the full property of her husband at the time of his death, she was guaranteed at least a portion (in most cases, at least one-third) of his estate (Wemple 48).

In summary, women’s social and political position within French society from the sixth to tenth century was relatively higher in value and allowed for more social mobility than the period that would follow it. That is not to say that the conditions during this era were necessarily

ideal, however, strong attitudes of misogyny were not yet widely spread or enforced, nor were women as severely devalued as they would be in centuries to come. When chess arrived on the cultural scene in near the beginning of the eleventh century, attitudes towards women were in the process of evolving from what they had been in the period just discussed. In correlation with the growth and increased severity of misogyny, women lost some of the political and social privileges they previously possessed. As we shall see, these changes were reflected in the adaptation of the chess pieces to European values, and women were denigrated both inside and outside the game.

### III. Held in Check: The Status of Women and Chess in Medieval Europe

To begin the exploration of queening and how it relates to the progression of the social attitudes towards women during the Renaissance and ultimately, to understand why and how the queen became what it is today, one must understand certain key points about the medieval game as well as its connections to political and social occurrences of the period. Likewise, we must also explore how the game altered in order to represent changing social attitudes and political structures, as well as an exploration of what these changes meant for women.

Around the time that France was undergoing an important transition from the social organization of the Merovingians to the feudal society of the Carolingians, the game of chess was first being introduced in Europe. How the game got to Europe and eventually grew in popularity is not entirely known, and yet it found its way across thousands of miles and centuries to emerge on the European continent around the year 1000 AD. It was most likely introduced through repeated and continued contact with Arab culture during the period via the Crusades.<sup>9</sup> Eventually, around the thirteenth century, the game took its place amongst the most popular games at court (Murray 403). And, just as the Bishop and Queen would later switch powers, off the board, women and the clergy saw themselves at odds during the period that correlates with the game's introduction into European society.

Amongst the changes that caused major negative consequences for women at the time was the maneuver by Rome, made as a strategic power-grabbing stroke, to affirm itself as the source of priestly investiture, since some clergy members were being invested by the royal

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<sup>9</sup> For example, Charlemagne's contact with the Saracens as recounted in the *Chanson de Roland*. Such contact taking place from the 7<sup>th</sup> century onward.

families patronizing them. From this time onward, all clergy were under the obligation to pass by Roman standards in order to be authorized to occupy religious office (Viennot 125).

What were the consequences of such a policy, one might ask and how does it relate to the topic at hand? Prior to that point, priests were frequently married, as well as bishops and abbots. Furthermore, monastic life was not as strict as it was purported to be due to the many families dumping their unmarriageable and not-so-spiritually-inclined children into such establishments. Certain bans and restrictions were additionally placed on women's religious involvement, and privileges of the cloister were either strictly limited or taken away. Suzanne Wemple highlights that

the strict cloistering of women religious and the separation of the sexes in the monastic schools of the ninth century were not conducive to the realization of the intellectual potential of women. Rather, they resulted in the exclusion of women religious from the mainstream of education and led to the perpetuation of the misogynistic myth that, compared to men, women had weaker minds. (188)

An order was likewise issued against married clergy and also against passing their offices to their descendants. With former allies of the ladies in power now ousted and replaced, women found themselves yet further imperiled by the propaganda against marriage, which ultimately demonized females as a whole.

Playing off of the interdiction for priests to marry, one is met with a movement toward growing misogynistic literature. It is interesting to observe that, at its inception, misogynistic and anti-marriage literature is thought to have been only employed as a tool to keep monks celibate. Outside of the monasteries, it was not widely diffused, at least not to the extent that it would be in years to come. However, these members of the clergy were caught in what Viennot deems a



type of moral *schizophrénie*, as a seemingly irreconcilable dichotomy is drawn between the “femme-serpent-démon de la seconde version de la Genèse, censée respirer dans le corps de chaque femme, et les très concrètes dames-amies-collaboratrices avec qui l’on discute et travaille” (141). Out of the mouth of prelates often emerged both vituperate criticism and ecstatic praise.

One ecclesiastic, Pierre Damien, while denouncing the female companions of clergy members as “bauges des gras pourceaux”, “tigresses impies,” and “vipères furieuses,” also acknowledges that “aucun de ces pamphlets ne s’adresse ni à des femmes ni même à des laïcs: c’est pure affaire de discipline ecclésiastique” (Dalarun 38). Another, by the name of Hildebert de Lavadin, who himself even formerly had wives and children, makes the same distinction when he enumerates the dangers of “la femme, chose fragile, jamais constante sauf dans le crime,” an “être nuisible,” a “vil forum, chose publique, née pour tromper,” and yet later writes to his patron Adèle de Blois expressing his deepest admiration and reverence (Dalarun 38, 44).

As the clergy pulled themselves further and further away from the world into the realm of isolated religious practice and academia, proclaiming as Pierre Damien did that “on ne peut trouver Dieu qu’au desert,” they came to adopt the attitude towards women that “alors que, pas même du bout des doigts, nous ne souffrons de toucher un crachat ou une fiente, comment pouvons-nous désirer embrasser ce sac de fiente?” (Dalarun 36; Rouche 292-293). As Viennot puts it in her exhaustive work on the relation of women and power in French history, “le mépris du monde prend les traits de plus en plus exclusifs d’un mépris des femmes” (213).

As time passed by, however, the practice of preaching misogyny only within the confines of the monastery took a whole new turn. Georges Duby recalls in his work on women in the twelfth century that the reformers wanted to “purifier l’Eglise seculière après la monastique, lui

imposer la morale des moines” (62). With this intent, and not satisfying themselves with only preaching against the seductive power of women, reformers often urged men to leave their wives and children in order to take on “une vie plus sainte” (Viennot 214). Women were now frequently and publicly denounced as “la cause du mal, le début de la faute, l’incitation au péché” as Hugues de Fouillois demonstrates in his treatise *De nuptiis*. He further exhorts in his discourse that it is She who “fait tomber le juste, trompe le sage, surmonte le fort,” and she is like “la fleur, belle et colorée, mais qui se fane rapidement [...]. Car toute femme ou meurt jeune ou devient grand-mère [...]. Pourquoi s’attacher à ce qui déplaît si vite ou passe si rapidement?” (Alverny 36; Batany 27).

In addition to this, misogynistic alphabets appeared which detail multiple insulting names that could be applied to women. For example: “A: *avidum animal*; B: *bestiale baratrum*; C: *concupiscentia carnis*”, etc... (Batany 40). The Church’s exempla, also took on more and more the subject of the “femme pécheresse,” leading to the feminization of sin itself (Viennot 404). Even the proponents of marriage, convinced that family life has value, insisted on the absolute submission of the wife and hold to the Aristotelian philosophy of marriage as a “friendship among unequal partners” (Vecchio 141).

The front lines of the figurative battle do not stop there, but extend equally into the vulgar literature. Beginning with the “Lamentations” by Matheolus, a new genre of literature geared at disparaging married life, while encouraging the choice of young, inexperienced, “educatable” wives also begins to crop up. Fables such as *La Dame écouillé*, *La Dame qui demandait de l’avoine pour Morel* (a code word for sex) and *La Veuve* all depict women as “matrones bornées et vulgaires, assoiffées de sexe et de pouvoir” (Viennot 269).

Likewise, the burgeoning repertoire of chess moralities also began to reflect the growing misogynistic attitudes of the society which the board represented. In addition to the previous discussion on Edenic imagery in visual representations of chess, the *Innocent Morality*, already cited by Murray, justified the queen's mobility as diagonal movement, which was symbolic of dubious character. Also, in the chapter on the queen piece in *Cessolis' Liber*, he warns against what he must feel a predominating tendency towards female concupiscence when he recounts the story of Rosimond, former duchess of Lombardy. The widowed duchess, who betrayed her country for her desire to marry and bed the invading conqueror, finishes by being raped multiple times and impaled publicly on a pike. He justifies such treatment stating, "Such a wife [...] should have such a marriage" (Adams 40-41, paraphrased from the Latin).<sup>10</sup>

Moreover, in *Les Echecs amoureux*, which appeared between 1370 and 1400, love is portrayed as a game which must be deftly controlled and tightly contained to the end of maintaining civic order. The text resembles the *Roman de la Rose* in both the representative virtues given to the pieces and the presence of mythic gods giving the player council to advantageously play the game of love. Pallas, possibly the figure of Athena in Greek mythology, counsels the protagonist on the role of husbands, which is to govern his wife, giving her "Reigles et manières de vivre/Et lois à ses meurs accordables" (Galpin 302; Adams 73). However, the protagonist finally succumbs to his opponent's seduction, when she checkmates him from an angle indicating craftiness and trickery (Legaré 77).

Continuing prevalence of misogyny and exclusion of women influenced the elaboration of further justification for the both the Queen piece's and females' limited power and movement. Around the time of the mid-fifteenth century, the game of chess had adopted the rule that women could only move in certain directions and under certain conditions based off the position of the

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<sup>10</sup> "Talis libidinosa uxor[...]talem debet habere maritum."

king, because as the man is her head, she must invariably be ruled by him. Although by the time one had arrived at the current period under discussion, the Queen had been granted one privilege: a two space leap on the first move. Yet, according to French rules and nowhere found in any other country where the game was played, this “privilege” was limited by certain conditions: she could only complete the move when she was not blocked by an opposing piece, whereas the other assizes, or official game regulations, from surrounding European countries allowed the leap despite the orientation of hindering pieces. Although the Bishop, himself representative of the clergy, could only move on the diagonal, he could still leap more spaces than a Queen (Murray 452, 461-65).

In an attempt to further hinder women’s mobility in actuality, the clerics who were using the Church’s university system as a means to gain political and economic power, focused on acquiring those very means of power and keeping it within the confines of their class. The clerics attacked any viable rival, but most especially women. The situation as a whole is summarized as the following by Maria Giuseppina Muzzarelli,

En quelques siècles [...] l’inégalité entre filles et garçons face à l’héritage s’est accentuée ; une césure nette divise haut et bas Moyen Age, non seulement à cet égard, mais en ce qui concerne la condition ainsi que la considération accordée à la femme, et c’est dans la dernière période que les femmes semblent souffrir des plus grandes restrictions. (101)

Yet, one must understand that “l’université n’est qu’un moyen” (Viennot 229). In this same vein, the battle between these players, symbolic Bishop and Queen, rages on as we see the clergy members hold women’s economic power in check. One instance of such restriction is that female medicinal practitioners saw a stark decline in their numbers after an interdiction was

placed on any doctor not educated by the university where, not surprisingly, women were forbidden to study. By 1292, there were only eight females practicing medicine in Paris, and by 1313, only one. Midwives, as the sole exception, were allowed to continue their care under the protection of tradition and female modesty, but were forbidden to practice on anyone not of the female sex (Le Doeuff 135-9, 362; Opitz 312-14; Pernoud 253; Rouche 555).

As further reasoning for this type of limitation placed on public economic practice, the *Jeu des eschecs, moralisé* emphasizes the duties of a queen or, being interpreted under a general tone, all women, as the education and upbringing of their children. The author, speaking of a woman's engagement in open battle or, otherwise interpreted, public activity, states that "Elle feroyt contre son estat/Et mettroyt les gens en debat/Quar en malle heure fut fame née/Qui esbouge trop de melée." Affirming what activities would be befitting of her station, he specifies that "Fame doit nourrir ses enfans [...] Tant qu'ils deviennt grans Seignours" (*Le jeu des eschecs moralisé*). Moreover, the author again details the queen's limited mobility when he says that "Le royt puet bien partout aller/En blanc en noir par le tablier/Mes si la dame se siet en blanc/Elle tiendra touz dis son Ranc" (*Le jeu des eschecs moralisé*).

Amongst other tools of actual constraint reflecting the ideas of the chess moralities proposing limited female liberties, the male clergy once again gained the upper hand when, in 1298, a papal bull was issued regarding religious women by Boniface VIII that "précise les notions de clôture active—aucune sortie autorisée—et de cloture passive—aucune visite permise—et détermine les raisons d'extrême nécessité donnant lieu à la levée de clôture: l'incendie ou l'épidémie" (Leclercq 472 ; Henneau 632). These were no longer the monasteries of yesteryear where families could visit their cloistered daughters and relatives as they pleased, nor where women could leave to beg or preach; nuns were now a prisoner in their own homes.

Additionally, women belonging to “monastères doubles” were forced to leave to separated, strictly female cloisters towards the middle of the twelfth century. Autonomous nunneries acting as auxiliary branches of male orders were also deprived of their former self-regulation. They now had to defer, in the example of Marcigny, to the direction and judgment of the masculine order in all matters. Even at the cloister of Prébayon, known for its remarkable quality of female direction and independence, was placed under the direction of a new prior in 1260. Included among some complaints made under the direction of their new male administrator was the insufficient food, heavy watering down of the wine, the borrowing and non-repayment of funds given by the sisters, and finally, inadequate clothing (Riche 709; Racinet 202, 209-11).

The opposition between Bishop and Queen, clerics and women, stretched wider outside of the religious and educational realms into the legal sphere when patrician law practices began to crop up again as a rediscovery of ancient societies was underway as more and more university-educated clerics filled judicial positions. In a sort of “*bricolage* fait de neuf autant que d’ancien,” jurists from Orléans introduced laws taken from the Roman dialectic into the judicial science on a mass scale (Verger 69). What this meant for women was changes in the customs of the dowry, favoring a renunciation of her parental heritage and ultimately, “une perte du pouvoir économique et symbolique pour la femme mariée,” enacting further limitations on her social and political mobility. In addition to this, children now only inherited their father’s status and not their mother’s, whereas up until the beginnings of the thirteenth century, the mother was the source of the child’s social standing (Viennot 264). Truly, marriage was now as previously mentioned a “rapport d’amitié entre inégaux,” where, as Thomas Aquinas enumerated, “le mari est aimé davantage parce que doué d’une raison supérieure [...] tandis que l’épouse,

naturellement inférieure, reçoit une quantité d'amitié moindre mais proportionnée à sa nature” (Viennot 267).

Furthermore, from the late 1300s until the end of the fifteenth century, widows saw an increased difficulty in collecting their dues from their husband's will. Unless they had the means to pursue legal action, many widows were unable to enforce the recognition of their husband's last will and testament. One statistical study reveals that in 1385, in Lyon, widows represented only 2.88% of the poor, while that percentage would jump to 8.22% in 1499. (Verdon 267). A quadrupling of the rate of poverty within this group is no mere coincidence.

Due to being viewed as the freest and most powerful females, able to dispose of their means as they will and remarry upon the death of their husband, and many even preferring a “veuvage chaste” to being subjected to another's will yet again, widows, as a group and individually, received special attacks for posing a political and exemplary threat to the dominant order. Their donations to religious projects and institutions for the poor were considered a “dilapidation” of family funds, and their activities were highly criticized in addition to their diminished legal recourse (Opitz 334).

Just as the chess moralities had justified it, wives came even more under the legal control of their husbands as wives noted a diminishment in judicial effectiveness: the wife was given less say in matters, even when her husband qualified as physically or mentally incapacitated. Over the course of this period, husbands deferred less and less to the opinion or wishes of their spouse, and deals or contracts made by queens, and also by wives in general, from here on out could also be stripped of all validity if she did not have her husband's consent. Any contract made without his validation would be held in suspension until her husband died, that is, if she outlived him. Conversely, he could do more and more without her permission, including the

withholding goods belonging to the wife against her wishes and this state of affairs could be made durable until the death of the husband if he wished it so (Vandenbossche 246-7).

Women underwent one final, important blow before the period of the Renaissance that further limited their mobility within the sphere of power politics. What had been growing from a small-scale tradition to a kingdom-wide law would lay the foundation for even further female degradation. All the efforts to oppose any female rivals made by the clerics had only been a mere prelude to their *pièce de résistance*: the Salic law, which offered legal legitimization for male-prejudice, sealing and justifying their theories towards the female sex.

In 1358, while clamoring to justify the succession of French monarchs usurping the throne of Jeanne de France, a monk named Richard Lescot stumbled upon an old Carolingian version of the law, and amongst the multitudinous clauses, found one small point *intéressant*. Reconstructing the genealogy of the kings from male to male, as well as the following clauses of the law in question, he affirms that, although he does not know much on the matter, it seems that beginning with the first kings of France, that there was a custom as such that gave preference to male inheritance (Beaune 364-365; Contamine 71).

It does not take long for this idea to come to the attention of the king, and he more than eagerly lets it disseminate absent any formal confirmation of its validity. A chronicle conserved in the Vatican confirms the presence and circulation of this rumor when it states that “Philippe de Valois monta sur le trone en vertu de la Loi salique” despite the fact that the law, in any official form, did not exist, and the distinction of the original clause between *terra* vs. *regnum* was overlooked (Monod 519).

Jean de Montreuil, one of the main promulgators in the push to recognize the new interpretation of Salic Law excluding women entirely from the political arena, continues the



work of implanting the regulation. Faced with threats of British rivalry to the throne, as well as threats from domestic rivals touting the writings of Christine de Pisan as an argument for the legitimacy of female rulers, he decided to take matters into his own hands. Invoking the so-called Salic law for his unfounded theories, he states that

j'ai ouï dire au chantre et chroniqueur de Saint-Denis, personne de grande religion et révérence, qu'il a trouvé par très anciens livres que ladite coutume et ordonnance, qu'il appelle la loi *salica*, fut faite et constituée avant qu'il y eut roi chrétien en France. Et moi-même l'ai vu et lu icelle loi en un ancien livre, renouvelée et confirmée par Charlemagne empereur et roi de France. Laquelle loi, entre plusieurs autres choses qui sont très grandement de notre propos, dit ainsi et conclut en cette propre forme: *Mulier vero nullam in regno habeat portionem.*

(130-131)

The entourage of Charles VII took easily to this idea since it offered a foundation to withstand the threat of England. Propaganda began to appear, and clerics, by no means a surprise, welcomed these ideas as well since they supported their previously expounded campaigns. However, no verification of the theory put forward by Montreuil could be confirmed. Even after a commission was made by Charles VII to Gérard Machet to find and verify the copy of the Salic law that would make such a claim viable. Much to his dismay, no such copy was ever found (Beaune 369-70). Juvénal des Ursins, acknowledging that such a rule did not exist, still tried to defend such a position when he wrote

combien qu'aucuns aient voulu dire qu'on ne trouve point en la Loi salique que ladite clause y soit expressément contenue, on doit considérer que ceux qui l'ont écrit et allégué au temps passé ne l'ont pas fait sans ce qu'ils l'eussent vu et su

être vrai ; [...] et peut-être qu'aucuns, au temps passé mus de mauvais esprit, l'ont ôté ou délaissé [négligé] de mettre. (20-22)

Unfortunately, *jacta alea est*; it was too late to undo the damage that had already been done. Numerous supporters and propagandists for the French crown took up the argument in their own respective works. For example, the publication of *Bon et loyal français*, by an anonymous author, appeared in 1419 demanding that France respect this “custom” of passing the crown only from male to male as dictated in the *Lex Salica* (*Réponse* 319), while the text of *Contra rebelles suorum regum* in 1420 Jean de Terre Rouge adds the Aristotelian philosophy of the woman’s passivity in generation to the arguments for male to male succession (Hanley 21).

The Salic law, which never totally excluded women from the throne in its original form, could still allow for female inheritances under it in the past. The efforts of Phillippe de Valois and other interested men, now forbade women to inherit by principle and not simply by position in relation to other relatives. In the beginning, women were ceding the crown to their brothers. Now, it was to their uncles, their cousins, i.e. any male relation that is not a female could take precedence over the very daughter of the king, marking France as the most severe of any European country to enforce such a policy.

As a mark of such degradation the nomenclature of the Queen piece was affected by such policies taking place in the political realm. In most cases, she was now called the *dame* or *domina*, and eventually even deemed *mulier*, in lieu of Queen, betraying both a downgrade in her social status as well as a state of commonality. By the latter half of the fifteenth century and just prior to the changes made to the Queen to increase her mobility, *domina* and *dame* were the most common terms in usage for the piece within France, and that designation is again common in the country today (Murray 426-27,468).

In addition to this, Cessolis, in his discussion of the pieces and their real world significations in the *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium*, specifies that while the King and Knight remain true to their stations in real-life, the Queen can represent the queen, or women in general, there being made no differentiation between noble women and those less-educated, unlike that of the difference made between Pawn and Knight or King (Murray 542-43). Additional names for the piece came to include *amazone*. Despite the designation's later usage with a more positive connotation in relation to female leadership, the tone of the appellation at the time of its first introduction would be, one might say, less than complimentary. What it indicated during the latter half of the 1400s was a *femme belliqueuse*, otherwise, an unruly and churlish woman (Murray 426).

Along the lines of such degradation, not even noble women were safe from the vituperations of the clergy and intellectuals within French society. Among others is included Valentine Visconti (wife of Louis d'Orléans), Marguerite d'Ecosse (princess who established a well known literary circle) and Yolande d'Aragon (mother-in-law to the king), who were respectively accused of witchcraft, usurpation of male rights, as well as debauchery with the poets under their patronage (Lehmann 505-512; Sommé 14; Müller 604-606) .

Isabelle de Bavière was also the first queen to see changes made to her coronation ceremony. Highlighting the newly introduced modifications to the procedure, Natalie Zemon Davis writes that:

le roi était sacré à Reims, la reine à Saint-Denis; le roi était oint du saint chrême, cela lui conférait le pouvoir miraculeux de guérir les écrouelles ; la reine, elle, était ointe d'huile bénite, ce qui lui garantissait la fertilité. Le sceptre de la reine était plus petit que celui du roi, son trône moins important et, alors que la

couronne royale était tenue par les pairs du royaume, la sienne n'était portée que par les barons. ("La Femme 'au Politique'" 179)

Likewise, the practice of requiring female monarchs to walk behind the king, as well as the stipulation to have their tables lower than his became common (Averkorn 15). Such changes reflected both the enforced difference and increased inferiority applied to female rulers in France.

Perhaps in a way acknowledging the social guilt of such an unfounded belittlement, in some sort of strange recompense, in the latter half of fourteenth century they were granted the privilege of being interred at St. Denis. A tomb that was once "un 'cimetière aux rois' exclusivement" soon came under the vogue of "tombeaux jumelés" (Beaune 163-66). Essentially, they could enter eternity on equal footing, but they were not granted the same regard in mortality. Starting with Jeanne de France, daughters of kings, normally "exclues de la nécropole royale" could be interred with their fathers as well: what one might call a post-mortal payoff for getting her throne usurped on three separate occasions by male relatives (Beaune 167). The whole situation can be summarized as the following:

La dégradation générale des condition de vie, du statut, de la 'valeur' des femmes au XVème siècle ne saurait s'expliquer autrement que par cette capacité accrue à propager son idéal de vie d'un groupe d'hommes de plus en plus large, de plus en plus puissant, de moins en moins contraint par la puissance spirituelle, de mieux en mieux armé pour construire un consensus autour de l'ordre sexuel qu'il promeut. Cette capacité nouvelle est repérable dans tous les domaines de la vie sociale, politique, intellectuelle et religieuse. (Viennot 396)

Although the Queen piece and her real life counterparts underwent setbacks to their political maneuvering and power, the situation progressively changed, and in the centuries to follow, she regained the most strategic and powerful moves that can be had on the board: a nearly complete liberty of movement, quantitatively and directionally (Wilson-Chevalier, “Art, Patronage and Women...” 476). As a matter of fact, Murray divides the history of chess in Western Christianity into two periods, “the boundary line between them synchronizing with the conclusion of the Middle Ages and the general adoption of the modern moves of the Queen and the Bishop” (417).

The “revolution,” which took place towards the close of the fifteenth century supposedly under the influence of a female Spanish sovereign, introduced the female piece called the Queen as we know it. The fundamental change made in the powers of displacement for the Queen and the Bishop allowed the Queen to “move more boldly along entire diagonals and rows” (Wilson-Chevalier, “Art, Patronage and Women...” 476). The irony of the French designation for the new game under revamped rules is not lost: *le jeu de la dame enragée* (Mehl 126-7, 129-32; Vanderstoep 31, 156; Wilson Chevalier, “Art, Patronage and Women...” 476).

#### **IV. Check-Mating: Renaissance and the Re-Birth of Chess**

Murray, as mentioned in previous discussion, denotes the beginnings of the Renaissance as a period of climactic and decisive change in the history of chess as well as the world.

Manifesting itself at the same time as significant political changes and alterations are being made to the social hierarchy, chess saw its own changes in turn. The catalyst for such change was manifested in the following: whereas chess had remained relatively the same since its European inception near the twelfth century, at the close of the fifteenth and opening of the sixteenth century, it underwent a veritable “revolution,” that ultimately altered the pace of and relit enthusiasm for the game. Murray writes:

There is nothing in the chess records of the third quarter of the fifteenth century to suggest that the position of the game in popular favour was in any way different from what it had been at any time during the preceding century or that chess players were contemplating any changes in the method of play... Suddenly, in the closing years of the [fifteenth] century, we find a new variety of chess disputing with the older game in popularity in Italy, France, and the Peninsula. (776)

As Murray further enumerates, the new game differs mainly on this point: “The Queen and Bishop simply exchange their mediaeval rules and privileges for the moves which they still retain” and they can move a greater number of spaces in comparison to their medieval prototypes (776). The Queen piece of this generation could move to any square in any direction, both on subtle diagonal moves as well as straight moves representing an association with justice and forthrightness, as long as the way was clear. On the other hand, the Bishop still remains confined to the diagonal, despite the ability to move multiple spaces at a time (777). The Queen’s

metaphorical movements imply a new multi-directional power of political and social maneuvering on the part of women in Renaissance France, as well as an increased influence in political affairs.

The consequences of this change are not simply important for the implications they had allegorically, but also for the alterations it made to the practice and analysis of the game as well. The Queen, upon the application of the change, became the most valuable piece on the board, and therefore the most advantageous piece to which one could promote, while the King faced limitations similar to those of the Queen and her previous jumping privilege, as indicated by Rabelais in his fifth book of *Pantagruel* (Murray 465-66).<sup>11</sup> She, however, could put considerably more pressure on the opposition, forcing hasty blunders and an accelerated game pace. In addition to this, the drastically altered scheme of the game obliterated centuries of “problems” and analytical literature, as well as the moralities that drew inspiration from real-world social conditions. It is no wonder, then, that a pro-female chess morality literature emerged around the same time. Writing for an unnamed patroness, one author published *Le Jeu des Echés de la Dame, moralisé* in the late fifteenth century (Murray 778-80).

At the same time as the emergence of *Triomphe des dames*, the *Vraie disant avocate des dames*, *Bref discours que l'excellence de la femme surpasse celle de l'homme*, as well as the translation of Plutarch's *Les Vertueux Faits des femmes*, this revised, pro-feminine morality, which pits a female protagonist against the Devil, differs from its previous counterparts by placing a woman at the heart of the story, where it had usually always been a male figure in earlier literature. Likewise, the *déroulement* of this particularly morality makes no reference to

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<sup>11</sup> “Les Roys marchent et prennent leurs ennemis de toutes faces en carré et ne passent que de carreau blanc et prochain au jaulne, et au contraire, exceptez qu'à la première desmarche, si leur fillière estoit trouvée vuide d'autres officiers, fors les Custodes, ils le peuvent mettre en leur siege et a costé de luy se retirer” (Rabelais, *Œuvres Complètes* 1254).

amorous conquest or even political or economic dominance, but instead allegorizes the victory of an individual over personal temptations and character flaws, thereby embodying a more interior image of female self-actualization as opposed to the male-dominated moralities geared towards gaining control over the Other.

Murray does not specify the origin of the modification to the game, but he does indicate that it was player driven and not effectuated by the “problemists,” or authoritative game analysts of the period. According to his data, and consistent with the assumption that it was made by a queen of Spain, Murray concludes that it either originated in Italy, Spain or Southern France between 1475 and 1485, demarcating a new surge in influence and appreciation for women as the political system around them evolved into new forms (777-78).

Just as the female chess piece experienced an increase of mobility in imagined political relations, women off the board also witnessed a period of increased leverage in exchanges of power. Not even limited to the bounds of France, a resurgence of women in positions of influence calls up several international examples. In the case of England, this period included the advent of important mistresses eventually becoming wives, such as Anne Boleyn and Jane Seymour. But the enjoyment of newfound importance is not limited to extramarital affairs; this is also the period of Mary Stuart and Queen Elizabeth, as well as Jeanne, daughter of king Alphonso V, who took the regency of Portugal. In Italy, Catherine Sforza maintained the upper hand against the Borgias, while Isabelle d’Este turned the principality of Mantua into a veritable intellectual, political and artistic hub (Viennot 454-5).

Remarking on such a trend of female leadership and its relation to influences on courtly games of the period, Kathleen Wilson-Chevalier states that the “male leaders of these dynasties [...] ruled from their saddles. In the manner of their recent predecessors, and as many of their



European peers, they came to rely heavily on trustworthy women for the governance of their respective states” (“Art, Patronage and Women...” 474). Within the land of the Gauls, we find even more exemplary women which include: Louise de Savoie, Anne de France, Catherine de Medicis, Diane de Poitiers, Marguerite de Navarre, Marguerite de Valois and Jeanne d’Albret, all of whom gained significant political sway in conjunction with the queen piece’s symbolic elevation and mobility.

Anne de France, after the death of her brother Louis XI, saw the reins of power fall into her lap, despite political opposition. Along with her husband, Pierre de Beaujeu, she held the regency during the entire reign of Charles VIII, being the first sister to the king to occupy and maintain such a position. She also marked the beginning of a long succession of females who managed to do as much, if not more, occupying unexpected positions of power (Viennot 453).

Louise de Savoie, mother of François I, at forty years of age took the regency in behalf of her son after a long period of political preparation and experience; she was widowed at the age of nineteen and subsequently undertook and fought in order to instruct her children in the operations of power. After relinquishing her regency to her son upon his return from a military expedition, she would take it up again from 1523-1526 while her son was held captive. In 1529, she also acted as a main figure in the negotiation of the peace of Cambray, coincidentally known as the “paix des dames,” since it involved not only Louise, but also two other of her female contemporaries (Viennot 458). It is no surprise, then, that such a woman was featured in a depiction of a chess game. Her position within the composition places her as the point of focus implying dominance, while her male opponent remains anonymous turned with his back facing outward, indicating to the audience a sense of his insignificance in the context of the match (See Fig. 1 below).



Fig. 1. "Charles d'Angoulême et Louise de Savoie jouant aux échecs" from the Book *Échecs amoureux*, 16th century. Source: Bibliothèque Nationale, Paris

François was not Louise's only child; her daughter Marguerite, eventually queen of Navarre, had also been groomed to take the reins of power. Known for her literary skill, political acumen and protection for humanists and reformers in opposition to the ideas coming out of the universities, she represented a strong voice decrying the injustices towards women that the centuries before her had been put in place. Outside of her literary works representing the displeasure of the female voice, she also participated in the negotiation of the release of her brother, sat in place of her husband when he was banned from court, and also protected and encouraged Lefèvre d'Étaples' translation and publication of the Bible (Viennot 460-61).

As yet another example of growing and multi-directional female influence, after being assigned to be governess of the heir to the throne, Henri, Diane de Poitiers knew how to maximize the promotion to her benefit. Once grown, the young king had already been her lover for several years. Often eclipsing the queen herself, this powerful mistress made her status a thing of pageantry. She frequently requested the public *mise en scène* of mythological scenes of the goddess Diana during official ceremonies, and the king displayed her personal colors of white and black during royal galas, manifesting just how much sway she held with the king. Her personal castle was also filigreed with her own and the king's initials as a further public display of their bond (Viennot 459).

However, Diane's position as the king's favorite did not save her ousting upon his accidental death in 1559. Catherine de' Medici, the official queen, had herself a reputation of some renown. "D'une pugnacité à toute épreuve, d'un pragmatisme remarquable," Catherine knew how to make friends in high places and used her political prowess to keep her and her children in power up until her death in 1589: an Amazonian-type true to the depiction of the imagined representation on the chess board (Viennot 460). Writing of her involvement in the Wars of Religion, Catherine de Medicis recalled to one of her correspondants "Je suis devenue femme de guerre" (Catherine de' Medici 387). While accounts would say of her "les cannonades et les arquebusades pleuvaient autour d'elle, qu'elle ne s'en souciait autant que de rien" (Brantôme, *Recueils* 49). Harshly criticized for her struggles to produce an heir, she soon learned how to maneuver her way around the court, and became a virtuoso in political intrigue and power plays.

Catherine, not unlike Louise, had her own Marguerite to groom. Marguerite de Valois, also known as the Reine Margot, was the youngest daughter of the queen mother and was

heavily involved in political life. After her marriage to Henri IV, leader of the Huguenots, in an attempt to calm fighting between the two religious camps, she was involved in numerous official negotiations, including vying for the placement of her brother in the leadership of Holland (Viennot 462).

In a way, one might see Jeanne d'Albret as a Protestant counterpart to the Catholic Catherine de Medicis. After her conversion to the new faith in 1555, she imposed Protestantism as the official religion on the region of Bearn once her husband had passed away. Later, in 1568, she rallied to La Rochelle amidst the influx of Huguenots and published a declamation against the king and queen mother, enumerating her reasons to "prendre les armes." Subsequently, she took over as the leader of the movement following the direction of her brother, the prince of Condé (Viennot 462-3).

Government on a large scale aside, individual fiefs also saw the trend of female leadership, especially in Navarre. Outside of the illustrious Marguerite, the region had known multiple female rulers towards the dawn of the Renaissance. Beginning with Blanche de Navarre in 1425, the region would then pass into the hands of her daughter Eleonore d'Aragon in 1479. Later, Eleonore's granddaughter would take control from 1484 to 1516, and it would continue to fall into the hands of women governors until 1572, finally under the reign of the aforementioned Jeanne d'Albret. Other regions that saw a spike in feminine ruler-ship also include Leon-Castille, which was under the rule of Isabelle "la Catholique," and later her daughter Jeanne "la Folle," who despite mental illness managed to officially hold the region until her death in 1555 (Viennot 454).

Upon reading accounts of all of these women, one at once remarks their increased involvement in the Wars of Religion and other public affairs. Just as the Reform and humanistic

values reexamined formerly held notions on the female sex, the chess moralities, which dictated women should keep to the private sphere, were thrown out and the new morality quickly replaced such notions. For example, the aforementioned *Jeu des échecs de la dame, moralisé* draws a distinct line between the newly revised game and the “vieux Jeu des échecs” moralized by “anciens philosophes.” It also highlights the “très grand privilège” given to the female piece, while saying of the formerly most-powerful knight and rook, that “ils ne servent plus de rien” and encouraging a more actively engaged female virtue (*Jeu des échecs de la dame, moralisé*; Murray 470).

Drawing off of this evolving mentality, whether they were on the side of traditional Catholicism or in the camp of the Reformers, these women, amongst others, took an active role in the religio-political issues of their day, employing all means at their disposal. “Les affaires de la guerre regardent toutes les dirigeantes même si elles ne combattent pas, et l’encouragement des troupes exige qu’elles soient sur place,” standing in opposition to earlier moralities’ insistence that the Queen stay near home (Viennot 463).

Focusing again on the importance of appellations, as highlighted previously the name of the game was altered to *le jeu des dames* or *le jeu de la dame enragée* (Murray 776). The change in the nomenclature, or at least the context given to such nomenclature, also reached yet again into the individual distinctions of the pieces; the female piece was once again restored from a *dame* to a veritable Queen. The period also saw a resurgence of the appellation *amazone* for the Queen piece, however, with a different connotation than the name as it was used previously (Murray 791). No longer implying a churlish woman, the designation coincided with Amazonian and strong female imagery propagated by women and their supporters during the Renaissance. Amongst numerous examples, the use of such works as the *Amours d’Hippolyte* (queen of the

Amazons) for inspiration behind the decoration of their residences and the use of Antiquity imagery for statues made depicting Catherine de' Medici highlights the strategic reworking of such connotations instigated by the female nobility (Cloulas, *Catherine* 181; Viennot 509). Likewise, an Italian fresco dating back to the latter half of the fifteenth century features a scene of women at the chessboard. The fresco figures in a larger work portraying positive images of Diana and Hippolyta (Simons 63).

Natalie Zemon Davis also highlights the importance of Amazonian imagery in the “laughter of disorder and paradoxical play” that sexual inversion brings to systems where authority has grown tyrannical, such as the period discussed in the previous section, or where the system is in a process of transition, as from feudal governance to absolute monarchy (“Women on Top” 142). In addition to citing examples of the Amazon in French literature, depicting “virtuous viragos all, magnanimous, brave, and chaste”, she also notes that in Thomas Hobbes’ *Leviathan*, in the absence of stable rule (as is the case of this transitional period), one must revert to the law of nature, which is that “decision is made by those who generate children” (“Women on Top” 133, 143-44). Hobbes goes on to cite the Amazonian right to keep or render children to the father as a demonstration of the natural dominance of the mother.

In conjunction with the downgrading of the ceremonial aspects of queenhood that correlated with the degrading of the Queen piece to a *dame*, the redemption of the piece’s name and altering of previously negative Amazonian connotations also saw connections with the return of increasingly ostentatious coronations for queens and princesses. Particularly, where the ceremonial functions of queens had been remarkably differentiated from that of the king, Blanche de Navarre insisted on the splendid entry of Isabelle de Bavière into Paris, while Anne de France made Anne de Bretagne’s entrance similarly so and at the event of her crowning,

authorized a ceremony that made no deviance from that of the king. Furthermore, during the matrimonial procession of Claude de France, future wife to François I, Louise led a processional composed of numerous ladies all dressed in their finest attire. Describing the scene, one documenter quoted the *Cité des dames* in saying “Il semblait que le royaume de féminie y fut arrivé” (Viennot 485).

Along this same line, images of women from the latter half of the fifteenth century depict strong, virtuous women playing chess. For example, *The Chess Players* by Lucas van Leyden made in 1508 features a woman competing against a male opponent. In what seems an attempt to take one of her opponent’s major pieces, she moves confidently while he looks away distractedly. Likewise, Giulio Campi’s *Game of Chess*, which places the focus on the female player, shows us that the woman has already managed to successfully capture several of her opponent’s major pieces. In yet another example, *Sisters Playing Chess* by Sofonisba Anguissola painted in 1555, distinguishes itself as one of the few paintings to feature only females engaged in an otherwise male pastime of “contemplative quietude and pursuit of rationality” (Simons 70).

Expanding outward to the relation between chess and actual circumstances, this redemption of the portrayal given to women during the prior centuries extended beyond visual and symbolic representations and theorized chess moralities into a tangible literary medium. The Renaissance saw a period of significant female authorship compared to the prior generation, which posed a threat as they advanced on a domain which had, for a long time, belonged to the intellectual clerics. Viennot notes a subtle transition when she writes that

On ne parle pas ici des lettres missives, pratique si courante de tous les dirigeants politiques de l’époque, [...] mais d’autres productions qui les différencient des souveraines antérieures et de leurs homologues masculins. (405)

Furthermore, it was not just that these women were writing, but they were doing what a rare few women had done before: publishing their work.

Amongst some of these productions were the aforementioned *Enseignements* by Anne de France and the autobiographical historical accounts of Louise de Savoie. Her daughter, Marguerite, had published a considerable amount of written work including poetry, theater, prose and theological meditations. Her greatest work, the *Heptaméron*, a feminine response to the *Cent Nouvelles nouvelles*, would unfortunately never be finished. It would, however, become a lasting memorial to the female cause. Catherine de' Medici also inaugurated the publication of "lettres ouvertes" declaring her political intentions, and Jeanne d'Albret would also employ this medium to declare her religious points of view. Marguerite de Valois was also the first to publish the memoirs of a woman, written by a woman (Viennot 466).

That is not to say that the rivalry between Queen and Bishop was completely obliterated, as not all were welcoming to the idea of women publishing their own works. Marguerite de Navarre, who published and edited over twenty five works between 1531 and 1549, faced opposition from the Sorbonne who had already denounced one of her works as early as 1533 (Kemp 151-220). Similarly, in chess, traditional clerics had a hard time synthesizing the process of promotion, especially in light of recent developments, into their modes of thought. Evrart, when outlining the symbolism of the game, discussed only superficially the process, and quickly shifted his discourse to the ensuing figures. He justifies his poor synthesis "pour cause de brièfté"(Adams 87). Adams highlights that this gender juxtaposition proved "troubling for players," and a system of limitations was proposed in order to prevent too many Queens from being on the board at once (87-88).



And yet, Marguerite de Navarre stands again as an example of the flourishing literary life that grew around these female sovereigns. She acted as pensioner and counselor to a good number of writers, all of whom “lui doivent cet air de bonne société qui leur gagne le public des courtisans” (Solnon 98). These *patronnes* often defended the artists finding refuge under their wing from the diatribes of the Sorbonne not content to see its authority challenged.

While Marguerite contributed a significant amount of theatrical works herself, the misogynistic farces of yesteryear were ultimately supplanted by a new wave of theatrical works under the direction of Catherine de' Medici. Not content with “des farceurs, des Connards de Rouen, des joueurs de la Basoche et autres sortes de badins et joueurs de badinages, farces, momeries et sotteries,” she favored entertainments from the *comedia dell'arte* and other Italian imports of a less sexist nature. Amongst the new diversions was the “ballet comique de la reine,” of which the principal role was played by Louise de Lorraine, integrating dance, song and concert, not to mention the new female-friendly chess and other amusements (Brantôme, *Oeuvres* 256; Cloulas, *Catherine* 358)

Citing a certain, “souci d'équilibre [...] entre les sexes,” Viennot calls to attention the chess sets of Marguerite de Navarre, Louise de Savoie and Anne de Bretagne, amongst others. Each features pieces with the faces of renowned men and women; one set of pieces all women, the other all men, both on their respective sides of the board. Wilson-Chevalier indicates that these sets were most likely fabricated for the growing number of female artistic patrons (Viennot 489-90; Wilson-Chevalier, “Art, Patronage and Women...” 477-79). Instead of one female piece on each side surrounded by an entourage of men, this set up engenders a veritable case of “girls against boys.”

Beyond the confines of the *ludique* and the literary, the work of redeeming women's reputation also turned toward historical and religious exegesis. The goal of this group of noblewomen to set about the reimagining of women saw its realization on several levels: the record was set straight by *souveraines* commissioning historical, artistic and theological works about other women. In yet another example of the use of tropes from Antiquity, Symphorien Champier, commissioned by Anne de France wrote a work depicting the glory of Amazonian queens and dedicating it to the purpose of beating down "la rage de ceux qui accusent les dames," simultaneously reworking the tone of the designation given to the chess piece (Champier, *La Nef des Dames*). Her sister-in-law, Anne de Bretagne would also do her share of commissioning such works when she requested that Antoine DuFour write the *Histoire des dames illustres* and Jean Marot the *Vraie disante avocate des dames*. In response to the centuries-long defamation of women and bringing to attention the opposition between queen and cleric, Marot writes:

Si vous cherchez dedans leurs garde-robres/  
Vous trouverez Le Roman de la  
Rose,/ Mathéolus, toutes fables et lobes,/ Qui contre nous et notre honneur  
dépose./ N'y cherchez pas Valère, ni Orose,/ Le Champion, ou les faits [écrits de]  
maître Alain ;/ Ils n'y sont pas ; par quoi, je présuppose/ Qu'à clerc non noble il  
faut vivre vilain. (290)

Louise de Savoie added to this corrective undertaking by commissioning three notable historical works: an explanatory work aimed at the clarification on the personage of Mary Magdalen by Lefèvre d'Étaples, wherein he concludes that she was not the repentant prostitute she had formerly been depicted to be by Church authorities, but in fact one of three distinct women. Another work, *Gestes de Blanche de Castille*, elaborating on the life and works of the

regent, and finally, another biography recounting the life of a renowned sovereign formerly disparaged: *L'Histoire et Chronique de Clothaire premier...et sa très illustre épouse madame sainte Radegonde* (Viennot 489).

Just as in the new game of chess where the King piece's greatest and most powerful defender is the Queen, the rising monarchs, geared towards consolidating absolute power, found refuge under the wings of their closest females. One poem of Spanish origin written at the close of the fifteenth century and mimicking the allegory of *Les Echecs Amoureux*, tellingly illustrates that "to lose the Queen is to lose the game" (Murray 781). Aware of their need for strong female supporters, noblemen contributed to the elevation of their women in high places and enabled their growing influence at court.

After annexing Maine, Anjou, Bourbon, Provence, Bourgogne and Bretagne, as well as fending off civil wars and other pretenders to the throne, the monarchy much preferred to surround themselves with people of the same mind, buying their unflinching loyalty through the delegation of offices and honors, including women traditionally excluded from such. "Tous ces gens, dont la carrière et la fortune ne dépendent que du roi, sont évidemment beaucoup plus fidèles que les 'princes du sang' qui prétendent être ses partenaires naturels dans l'exercice du pouvoir" (Viennot 495). It is no wonder, then, that the king preferred to allow the queen more sway both on and off the board, to defend him more fully.

Such need for the figurative and literal support of their closest females is shown the case with royal mistresses who enjoyed their position solely based on the success of the king. If he loses his status, then so does she. For that, she was often one of his most devoted supporters and confidantes. Furthermore, she also represented the growing power of the monarch, as their relationship arises out of his "bon plaisir" and "seule volonté par-delà de celle de ses parents,

par-delà les contraintes sociales et politiques qui s'imposent à tous—et qui s'imposent à tous de se cacher...” (Viennot 495).

As yet one example of a king highly favoring his queen, Louis XII cherished his wife Anne. Most likely following the female-friendly attitude of his father, who ordered the conferral of power, as well as the tutelage of his heir, to Anne de France and her husband. Louis, after consolidating her position in Bretagne, defended her name and reputation from the vituperations of the clerics with a threat: if they engaged in such a program, then “il les ferait tous pendre” (Brantôme, *Recueils* 14). In 1505, he also accorded her the instruction of their daughter Claude, while also extending to her a considerable position on the regency council. Finally, at her death, he memorialized her in an elaborate funeral processional and various illuminated manuscripts (Bloem 131-160).

François I also showed his support for the “règne des femmes” by bolstering the influence of his mother, Louise. In addition to placing her on his council as regent twice, he also formed the county of Angouleme and repossessed the duchy of Bourbon in her behalf, and upon her death gave her a most honorable burial. Beyond familial ties, he also showed a great amount of favor to Diane de Poitiers, when he entrusted her with the education of his son Henri and also apportioned parts of his daughters' property revenues to her name. His own mistress was shown great favor when he gave her the castle of Fontainebleau and funded its renovation and decoration which, ironically enough, featured Amazons and classical goddesses (Viennot 499).

Evidence of such recognition of the important role women were accorded by the kings who needed them, it has been recorded by Venetian ambassador, Marino Cavalli, that the king spent over 1,500,000 *écus* during his final years in superfluous expenses. Of these splurges, 150,000 were related to hunting, 100,000 for building projects and 300,000 for pensions paid to

women, not including the “*menus plaisirs*” and the “*achats de bijoux, notamment de diamants, présents publics faits aux dames de la Cour.*” He insisted, as well, that courtisans attend as often as possible the *lever* and *coucher* of the princesses (Solnon 24, 138, 168).

Demonstrating that he as well understood that he needed powerful females to win the game, Henri II, making his affair with Diane more public than any monarch before him, displayed their initials together as well as initiating a mythic construction that featured Diane positioned above Mars and Jupiter (Cloulas, *Diane* 181-2). Surpassing his father yet further, Henri also received members of the court on official business at the home of his mistress, while seeming *chez lui*. In 1558, one ambassador would remark upon Henri’s confidential remarks to him that “*la distribution des bénéfices ecclésiastiques depend particulièrement d’elle*” (Cloulas, *Diane* 226, 241, 245, 269). Although preoccupied with his attentions to his mistress, Henri did not forget his wife. In 1552, he placed her on the governmental council, ordering that the body “*lui obéisse comme si c’était à lui-meme*” (Viennot 501).

Monarchs were not the only ones to have a vested interest in conserving the status of females in their circle; nobles as a whole took a stance as well. Defending the “*système de valeurs philogynes qui est l’une des marques distinctives de leur caste,*” men from the upper social strata benefited in numerous ways from the upholding of their female members. Beyond the clear interest in guarding political gains through matriarchal lines, these men also benefitted from women in high places who accorded favors to male relatives and friends, who utilized their multilateral, or *multi-directional* maneuvering power, much as a player uses the Queen piece in defense of the King. For example, Diane de Poitiers played a key role in winning bishoprics for her nephews, as well as the nomination of a relative to the office as marshal of France and governor of Normandy. Her imprisoned father would also, by her good graces, regain his

freedom and property. Other examples of other women playing such a role abound (Viennot 503). It is clear that woman still held a special place politically, socially and romantically in the hearts of their noble defenders, and this governing caste was not ready to relinquish their daughters, mothers, wives, relatives or friends to social or personal degradation.

Outside of the support given by their male counterparts, women, under these conditions and in correlation with the new *jeu de la dame*, created a court life which reflected the prevalent position of women in domestic and international political affairs. The men under the Neo-Platonic tutelage of such women, or simply as visitors to the court, often remarked on both its splendor and female predominance, where women were held in reverence as the real treasures of the societies which they animated. Brantôme remarks on this fact when he comments on the great queen mother, Catherine

Elle avait ordinairement de fortes belles et honnêtes filles, avec les quelles tous les jours en son antichambre on conversait, on discourait et devisait tant sagement et tant modestement que l'on n'osait faire autrement, car le gentilhomme qui y faillait en est banni et menacé [...] elles paraissent *déesses*. (*Recueils* 58, emphasis added)

What Brantôme unwittingly comments on is the sexual control which these women of the court ultimately imposed on the males under their tutelage and society. Indicating that they are “*déesses*” who permit men to frequent them only on certain conditions of chivalrous and modest behavior and conversation belies another occurrence of increased feminine influence during the period. It is no small thing that while completing negotiations with the queen mother, one would be obligated on the first day to “se pass[er] en compliments et à entretenir les dames; le lendemain on commença à traiter,” nor that her female attendants were now remunerated in the

same way as male officers (Cloulas, *Catherine* 389; Turenne 31).<sup>12</sup> Such a subtle imposition of respect toward the governing female before beginning any political process toys with the presumption of male superiority. One must wonder, in the context of checkmating as sexual or gender dominance, who was now being held in check?

In this same vein, women were not just kept at court, they were desired there. Officers attending court without their wives were given standard rooms, whereas men who brought their spouse along enjoyed better rooms in better locations (Wilson-Chevalier, “Femmes ‘au Politique’” 205). Brantôme continues further in his description of court life by affirming that “elles tenaient toujours la moitié des logis” (*Recueils* 59).

The doctrine of Neo-Platonism served well the purposes of female sovereigns, both in the control of male sexual desire and ambition and also in their own amorous liberation, likewise embodying the iconography of what Natalie Zemon Davis deems “women on top,” or, the chaotic positioning of set roles to call former practices into question. Playing off of courtly love practices started so long ago by the work that had done little for the reputation of women, the amorous ritualized tradition of the *Roman de la Rose* finished by having its rules reworked to the advantage of noblewomen. Leaving misogynistic Aristotle behind and taking up the reworked philosophies of Plato, who gave women a relatively egalitarian place in his *Republic*, women at the court employed this dogma to endorse love between non-married individuals. Although marital infidelity was condemned *de jure*, the platonically amorous pair may exchange “des mots, des regards et des sentiments.” The normal duties that are owed to a dominating husband

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<sup>12</sup> It is interesting to note as well that in some positions formerly held by men, women had now been placed by their mistresses. For example, Anne de Bretagne nominated women to the office of secretary, and the queen of Navarre, Marguerite, did the same for the position of first chamberlain (Viennot, 487).

may also be set aside for the obligations of this courtly practice, and after a time, even though infidelity is condemned, lovers are left with the policy of “pas vu pas pris” (Viennot 477-8).

Finally, speaking of the phenomenon of promotion within the game, Murray concludes that not only the Queen, but, “Incidentally, the Pawn also gained in value, for no alteration was made in its promotion rank, and the queening of a Pawn now increased the attack to a degree that was in nearly every case irresistible” (777). Speaking, rather unwittingly, of a sort of “trickle-down” effect that the elevation in status of the Queen had in likewise elevating lowly Pawns, Murray opens up the metaphor to be related to questions of class mobility. Once adequately empowered, women of high station could do much more for the women around them, utilizing their newfound multi-directional mobility to their advantage, specifically to help assist those close to them. The connection between the metaphor of queening and the promotion of women of lower rank to elevated social positions, such as mistresses and friends to women of noble rank can here be seen.

As several historical examples illustrate the increased awareness of a common plight coupled with increased political mobility allowed for women to assist each other wherever possible. Although still defending their own individual interests, we see several cases of inter-female assistance:

One cannot dispute that there indeed existed rivalry between noblewomen during this period. To overlook the dispatchment of Diane de Poitiers from Chenonceau ordered by Catherine upon the death of her husband, or the dispute between Anne de France and Louise de Savoie over the ducal seat of Bourbon would be a gross error in overenthusiastic idealism. What most historians have overlooked, however, is the moments of solidarity between individuals such as these, demonstrating this “trickle-down” effect between Queens and the “queened” Pawns



around them. For example, despite their disagreements, Catherine removed Diane only to place her in the still illustrious Chambord, while Diane showed her support for the queen, oftentimes encouraging her royal lover to fulfill his marital duties. In the case of Anne de France and Louise de Savoie, it is often not mentioned that conflict between them arose because each woman was protecting and vying for the interests of their daughters (Viennot 484)

In this vein as well, mothers were assisting their daughters more and more in the social and political arena. It has already been discussed how Louise de Savoie educated equally her son and her daughter. Sympathizers to the Reform and humanist ideas were generally more likely to encourage the education of their female children, however limited it may have been at the time. The transmission of information and counsel to their daughters via letters and treatises composed of political and social advice, specifically in the case of Anne de France, also reflects this desire to see their daughters better off than their mothers had been (Viennot 486).

On a more subtle scale, these women did not limit their inter-female protection to their own family or interests. Upon taking the throne, Anne de France returned the confiscated property of constable Saint-Pol to his impoverished daughters. Louise de Savoie, in her own right, added the upbringing and negotiation of profitable marriage arrangements of her husband's illegitimate daughters to that of her own children. Marguerite de Navarre defended and offered support to the reputation of her friend the duchess of Etampes. Finally, in a state of financial desperation, Marguerite de Valois received aid from Elisabeth of Austria, her former sister-in-law, who "l'envoya visiter et offrir tous ses moyens; si bien qu'elle lui donnait la moitié de son revenu du douaire qu'elle avait en France, et partageait avec elle comme si ce fut été sa sœur propre" (Brantôme, *Recueils* 503).

To summarize this period of transition for women and chess, it was a time characterized by reworking of previously held notions. In particular, notions of sex, power and theoretical perceptions of the female gender, even questions of social mobility, especially in the case of queening. As women and the men who supported them toyed with traditional norms, they placed into question the system as it had existed during the centuries prior. By tossing out the old chess moralities, they also tossed out everything those moralities stood for, and thereby, expressed their desire to see their reality from a new perspective. This toying with the game has set a precedent for chess to be utilized as a continuing expression of gender conflict and sexual rivalries, even into contemporary interpretations of chess and its symbolism.

## V. From Pawn to Queen: Promotion and and the Growth of Feminism

From previous discussion, we can see that the evolution of chess reflected the changing social milieu in which it was developed, and particularly reflects the beginning of a series of ideological re-workings which paved the way for modern feminism. As a disruption of the social norm, the modifications made to the game after its original conception demonstrated both the dissatisfaction with existing conditions in the medieval period and a period of growing influence during the ensuing century, as it regards power and women, and the transitional movements of that period into the Renaissance. After undergoing significant setbacks within spheres of social mobility, politics, economic power and conjugal rights, women found a symbolic means to bring such issues into question through chess, since legitimized means may not have been readily available under such oppressive conditions. Although such opposition did not bring immediate balance or equalization, it did effectuate a pattern of change in the centuries to follow. Taking the promotion of a Pawn to a Queen as a metaphor for social progress for women, we can see how the evolution of chess was both symbolic and significant for women then and now.

Although, that is not to say chess has consistently followed a trend of upward mobility for women after the Renaissance. Murray remarks that at the beginning of the eighteenth century, chess-play migrated from the court of the nobles into the café culture of the *Encyclopédistes* (845). It is noted that Voltaire, Rousseau and Diderot were all in contact with this culture and were known for being “persistent [although] weak players” (Murray 861). Contrary to what one may believe about the new modes of thinking in which these intellectuals participated, misogyny was still an ever-present element. Despite new discoveries in anatomy, natural and social sciences, the justification for male dominance persisted in positing the female as the natural

object of subjugation (Viennot 273-303). Again, chess became the game of masculine rationality, coupled with the new trend of public games, and it moved progressively out of the realm of feminine influence.

Today, many still perceive chess as a male-dominated game. In reference to chess, the common assumption stated in the film Joueuse that “c’est pas un jeu pour les femmes” betrays gendered attitudes toward the game that overlook its evolution and history as a game that should be favorable to women. At the mention of the word “chess” amongst members of contemporary society, visions of aged males in the park at chess boards might be the first thing that comes to mind along with the names of such male chess greats as Bobby Fischer, Aron Nimzowitch, Garry Kasparov or David Bronstein. Inge Morath, in her series of photographic works representing iconic scenes of New York City, demonstrated the continuity of male predominance in chess when she documented public, all-male games both in 1958 and 1997. Although the photographs reveal changes to external markers of time and place, the gender imbalance remains: only male players to the exclusion of any females at the board, the only woman present being a passive on-looker.

As an instance of dissonance with this modern assumption, some few insiders might recall the name of Judit Polgar, the youngest of the only four female grandmasters amid the 350-some top world players, but most agree with the New York Times assumption that “there will never be a woman world champion” (“Headliners”). Chess has long held that tradition, but as a development of social conditioning over centuries, and as we now see, not due to anything inherent in the philosophy of the game.

Understanding now its long history, one must wonder at a recent example of chess-play used yet again as an instance of dissatisfaction with the devalued status of women. The French

film *Joueuse*, which was released in 2009 and directed by Caroline Bottaro, recounts the story of a Corsican housekeeper, H  l  ne, who, bored with her mundane life, finds excitement and liberation through the game. Based off the novel entitled *La Joueuse d'  checs* by Bertina Henrichs (2005), the film is essentially a story about a woman who overcomes the odds that are against her, including strong gendered attitudes and finds her own independence. She develops this independence both as a woman and an individual, through means of this game which is, once again, dominated by men. The title itself, by means of linguistic markers, implies the out-of-place femininity against the backdrop of *  checs*, pitting *joueuse* against *joueur*. What Bottaro and Henrichs bring into question is whether or not women have been moving forward or backward since the so-called chess "revolution." Are there gains still to be made for the Queen or Pawns still to be promoted?

One may argue that there indeed is, especially in light of recent examples of chess iconography betraying misogynistic attitudes. In 1963, Marcel Duchamp appeared in a photograph as a well-dressed, thoughtful man across the table from a nude, and therefore implicitly vulnerable or exposed, woman (D'Harnoncourt 130-131). Members of modern society may even recall the famed and highly eroticized scene of chess-play between Steve McQueen and Faye Dunaway in *The Thomas Crown Affair*. One cannot overlook his distraction, frustration and agitation and not being able to keep his cool while up against his female partner and eventual disintegration into sexual aggression in order to regain control of the situation. Nor is it of any small consequence that she is wearing a flesh-colored dress. Is this not again the same situation faced by the protagonist of the *Echecs amoureux*, who is then chastised by the gods in the garden of D  duit for sacrificing his reason in face of such seductive traps set by his female opponent (Legar   77)?

In *Joueuse*, what H  l  ne’s daughter Lisa begs both her mother and women everywhere to do is forget outdated notions and remember is that “la dame est la plus puissante.” It is a reminder for H  l  ne to use her own powerful agency to set the model for her daughter to follow, when, as the young woman looks on, H  l  ne declares checkmate and overcomes the opposition to her personal fulfillment.

What the modification to chess during the fifteenth century allegorizes for women today and what *Joueuse* demonstrates is this opening up of further social freedoms and self-actualization for women on a broader and more general scale. Although the questions posed to social attitudes then and now, in addition to the efforts to rectify the denigration of women seem as small and insignificant as changing the rules to a board game, they are, in fact, the seeds of opposition that may germinate into more drastic attitude shifts in the centuries to follow. That is not to say that progress will be total or sudden, but queening and the symbolism of the Queen still signify what they did for women so long ago: desire for validation and the pursuit of self-actualization. Yet, one finds hope in the adage that “every Master was once a Beginner,” and every Pawn may become a Queen.

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