



## BOOK REVIEWS

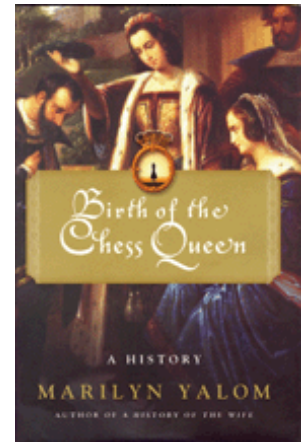


## There Is Nothing Like A "Dame"

George Mirijanian

*Birth of the Chess Queen: A History*, by Marilyn Yalom, 2004 HarperCollins Publishers, Hardcover, 304 pp., \$24.95

The genesis of this book grew out of a misconception. While preparing for a lecture in 1998 at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston on her book *A History of the Breast*, feminist author Marilyn Yalom was shown a small ivory figure of a Madonna and Child by one of the curators, who referred to it as a "chess queen." This figure of Mary suckling the baby Jesus captured her imagination. How could a 14th century nursing Madonna be a chess queen? Fascinated by this possibility, Ms. Yalom would spend the next five years tracking down every surviving medieval chess queen to determine whether the Gardner figure did or did not belong on a chessboard. As a senior scholar at Stanford University's Institute for Women and Gender who had written extensively on women and culture in her books, Ms. Yalom delights in examining the emergence of the queen as a chess piece and how it became an icon of female power, especially in the Western world.



The author had done her homework, drawing on many English and non-English reference works, including the classic H.J.R. Murray's *A History of Chess*. The book is well-indexed and has 14 pages of notes to document the five parts and 13 chapters of the volume. The book also incorporates poetry, anecdotes and legends. With more than 70 illustrations, 15 of which are in color, the book presents a history of the chess queen as well as real queens who influenced European history.

The author points out very early in the tome a fact that all serious chessplayers already know: the piece that we now know as the queen did not exist in the early days of chess. As a game that originated in India no later than the 6th century, it would not have made any sense to have such a figure on the playing board. After all, chess was resolutely and exclusively a war game enacted between male fighters mounted on animals or marching on foot. The precursor of the queen was the "firz" or "firzan," Arabic for counselor. This piece was weak in power. It could move only one square diagonally. [The modern-day queen is still referred to in many European and Asian countries by its Arabic origin: example Russian "ferz"]



*Romanesque chess queen packaged within a throne-lie structure.  
Spain, twelfth century.*

But with the arrival of chess in Europe, the queen was born. Around A.D. 1000, she made her first appearance. Ms. Yalom argues that she was modeled after Adelaide of Burgundy or Empress Theophano, both consorts of the Germanic Ottonian emperors with great influence who shared political power with their husbands. A Latin manuscript preserved in the Einsiedeln Monastery in Switzerland (A.D. 997) contains the first recorded mention of the chess queen (regina).

It wasn't until about 400 years later that the power of the chess queen was changed, probably in Italy. Before 1500 the new game, called for a while in Italy "scacchi de la donna" or "alla rabiosa" had spread to Spain ("axedrez de la dama") and France ("eschcs de la dame" or "de la dame enragee").

One of the most powerful queens in the history of the world who may have been the impetus in changing the power of the chess queen into what she is today was Queen Isabella of Spain, herself a chessplayer. The author suspects that the chess queen's rise to prominence was a response to the real-life Isabella, a monarch so powerful that when proclaimed queen of Castile and Leon, she didn't bother to inform her husband, King Ferdinand, until after the ceremony.



*Queen Arabel teaching Willehalm to play chess.  
The Willehalm Codex, Germany, 1334.*

Other real-life queens whom the author examines include Catherine

de'Medici, Elizabeth I of England and Catherine II the Great of Russia - all chessplaying rulers with wielded great power.

But now back to the genesis of the book: the ivory statuette of the Virgin Mary at the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum in Boston. Ms. Yalom's interest in the chess queen led to her eventual discovery of a hidden relationship between Mariolatry (worship of the Virgin Mary) and the game of chess. She devotes a whole chapter (Chapter 7) to Chess and the Cult of the Virgin Mary. In addition, she associates the rise of the chess queen with courtship rituals and well as as through the cult of romantic love. As evidence, she cites a treatise written around 1400 titled *The Edifying Book of Erotic Chess*, which details a match between lovers. The author of the treatise, Evrart de Conty, wrote that when the male player "saw that he was on the point of being mated, he shuddered and shivered. His body and his heart were so shaken that he lost his speech and his senses." She draws on many other French sources in presenting her arguments.

Some of the most interesting chapters deal with Chess and Women in Old Russia, Russian Chess Pieces, Chess and the Russian Orthodox Church, and Women Players. Other chapters deal with Chess and Queenship in Christian Spain, Chess Moralities in Italy and Germany, Chess Goes to France and England, and Nordic Queens On and Off the Board.

Ironically, with the rise of the power of the chess queen has come the decline of women players. The author devotes the 13th and final chapter in writing about this sad state of affairs. She points out that in the historical Arab lands and Europe females were proficient competitors whose participation in the game was readily accepted. But today, despite the considerable progress made by women in chess, they have a long way to go if they are ever to attain the common proficiency they enjoyed in the Middle Ages. During those times, everyone played chess - scholars and warriors, aristocrats and peasants, men and women. Medieval chess was a social activity. Ms. Yalom cites figures, writing that as of the year 2000 it had been estimated only five percent of players were women. In the United States that number rises to seven percent - still a meager showing, she asserts.



*Queens teaching their children to play chess.  
Alfonso's Book of Chess, Spain, 1283.*

Ms. Yalom's book is definitely a must-read for the chess history buff. Her captivating history of the emergence of the queen as a chess piece and real-life queens, with their intrigues and internal struggles for power in medieval courts, show the influence they had in shaping European history.

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[Order](#) *Birth of the Chess Queen: A History*  
by Marilyn Yalom



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