A THIRTEENTH-CENTURY MORALITY

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Although European religious authorities in the eleventh century often seriously objected to the playing of chess, on the grounds of vanity and frivolity, by the end of the thirteenth the game was being employed as a moral instrument. The most important example of its use in such a fashion is found in an allegory written by Jacobus de Cessolis in Italy and called the Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium, which later became known to English-speaking people as The Game and Pley of the Chesse. It was meant to appeal not only to chess players but to all who could, and to all who would, listen to its message. There is plenty of evidence that many did, not only then but for several centuries after. It was, without any exaggeration, an important literary work, and anyone who takes the trouble to read it will certainly be entertained whether he be morally improved or not.

Jacobus de Cessolis was a Dominican friar, and he was persuaded by the brethren of his order and by many of his secular friends to transcribe the sermon he had composed based on chess. It was about all ranks and conditions of men, who are allegorically represented by chessmen. The sermon was written in Latin during the last quarter of the thirteenth century and was copied and recopied during the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries and translated into French, Italian, German, Czech, and several other languages. A hundred or so of these manuscripts exist to this day, some with illustrations, as, for example, the Italian manuscript of 1390 in the Riccardi Library. There must, originally, have been thousands of them.

Caxton, basing his English version on the French translation by Vignay, printed it in Bruges in 1474. In this connection we can perhaps throw a little light on the controversy as to whether Caxton chose to print books to create a public or to satisfy a public. There can be no question but that in this case he was very sure of the book's good reception, and he printed a second edition some six years later in London, adding twenty-four woodcuts.

In 1495-1494 an Italian translation was printed in Florence by Antonio Miscomini with the title Libro di giuoco di scacchi intitolato de costumi deglihuomi & degli officii denobili. A copy of this now rare book has recently been acquired by the Metropolitan Museum. Of the four parts of which it consists, we have most of the second and all of the third, but lack the first, which tells of the invention of chess, and almost all of the last, which among other things deals with the moves of the pieces. In this particular case the losses may be accidental, though it is a known fact that the most highly prized parts of this work were the two central tractates: those which tell us of the virtues and vices of each rank of society and in which the actual game figures least prominently.

This Italian edition has fifteen woodcuts, all but three of which are in our copy, and one of the missing three is the same as the frontispiece which we have, the block having been used twice. These woodcuts (figs. 1, 2, and 6) are typical products of the Florence where Botticelli and Filippino Lippi were painting. The massing of the black and white is very skillfully handled, showing a clear understanding and mastery of the medium. Black is used as a color as well as an outline, and where the exigencies of the composition demand that it be less heavy, it is relieved by white lines or spots. It is obvious that the man who made them knew what he wanted to convey and, a suitable convention having been evolved both for the scenes and for the border designs that enclose them, he presented his material in a
Fig. 1. The rook, or king’s vicar, holding a staff in his hand and wearing a cloak lined with miniver. From the “Libro di giuoco di scacchi,” Florence, Miscomini, XV century

Fig. 2. The pawn before the king’s rook, an agricultural laborer with a spade, a stick for prodding animals, and a pruning knife. From the “Libro di giuoco di scacchi,” Florence, Miscomini, XV century
Fig. 3. The rook. A photographic reproduction of a woodcut in Caxton's 2nd edition of "The Game and Pley of the Chesse." From "Transactions of the Bibliographical Society," vol. VI. Slightly reduced

Fig. 4. The pawn before the king's rook. A wood-engraved copy of a woodcut in Caxton's 2nd edition of "The Game and Pley of the Chesse." From the reprint by Vincent Figgins, London, 1860
dignified, orderly manner. In a word, they have "style"—a quality woefully lacking in the woodcuts of Caxton’s edition, which give the effect of poor pen drawings.

This sermon of Cessolis’s is packed with quotations, more especially from Valerius Maximus and Seneca, but, like Burton’s Anatomy of Melancholy, which is also full of the gleanings of earlier writers, it bears the strong impress of the individuality of its author. The result is, metaphorically speaking, no bouquet of limp and faded flowers but a vigorous and lively plant, one indeed with plenty of humus still clinging to the roots. Cessolis knew very well that a sermon, if it is to attain its purpose, must entertain, as well as edify, in order to hold men’s attention. He sets out very definitely to achieve this. He knew the world and was of the world, and, despite his habit, he did not restrict the scope of his work by making it such that it would only be appreciated by overdelicate ears. Many of his stories are distinctly salty, but virtue, though sometimes exercised at considerable cost, is always applauded. At one point, Cessolis, not satisfied with the seventh commandment as amended in the Gospel of Saint Matthew, tells of a young and handsome notary who, observing the effects of his beauty on the women in whose company his profession called him, mutilated his own face to keep their thoughts pure. The appeals to chastity, it may be observed, could give pleasure to both the chaste and the unchaste, and one feels that Cessolis and Laurence Sterne would have understood each other perfectly. The saints, whom he often quotes, are not to unworlidlly. Saint Benedict, for example, plays dice, bets his horse against a man’s soul, and wins, scoring more than a normal maximum of points by having one of his dice break in two. The diplomatic answer is not scorned, and it is to be noted that, though the exact letter of the law may not be kept, the stories quoted are always dramatically correct. It is also obvious that the sermon was written not only for those who could read but also for those to whom it was read, a much greater through. It is easy to see that the appeal was to every man. In an age when the sermon has a somewhat diminished importance in the lives of most of us, it should be remembered that it was not so very long ago that sermons were what would now be termed “best sellers” and then, as in the days of Cessolis, people found in them not only instruction and consolation but also humor and entertainment.

The symbolism of this sermon, in which each chessman represents a class of society, was not entirely an invention of Cessolis: it had already been used, to a limited extent, in an earlier chess morality entitled Quaedam moralitas de scaccario, probably written by Pope Innocent III. H. J. R. Murray remarks in his History of Chess that it would indeed be surprising if popular amusements such as dice or chess escaped having allegorical interpretations, since one German writer in the early thirteenth century had discovered the articles of the Creed symbolized in ecclesiastical garments and another explained each piece of feminine attire as showing a virtue which a good woman ought to possess! The Policraticus, by John of Salisbury, Bishop of Chartres and onetime secretary to Thomas à Becket, which dealt with the duties of kings, knights, and statesmen, also strongly influenced our author.

Cessolis makes two main divisions of society: the nobility and the commoners, represented respectively by the major pieces and the pawns. Of the major chessmen, the king and the knight are symbols of their obvious ranks; the queen, of her sex in general as well as royal women. There remain two important pieces, the bishop, usually known in the thirteenth century as the aifin, and the castle, or rook, to which no single definite meaning had been attached at this time. Cessolis makes the former represent the judges, whose duty it is to counsel the king and to give sentence well and justly, and the latter, the king’s legates or vicars. God’s vicars and legates do not appear at all among the chessmen, so the Church is entirely neglected in this otherwise very complete community—a very strange omission.

The particular function of each rank is described, and apt stories are introduced to impress its moral duty on each group. A full de-
scription is also given of the appearance, dress, and attributes of each chessman in his symbolic role. It is obvious that Cessolus was not describing existing chess pieces, and this suggests that like a wise man he adapted his original sermon in such a fashion that it could be easily illustrated. Thus there is a strong similarity between the drawings and woodcuts that accompany the many editions, except, of course, in the quality of execution.

Cessolus differs from earlier writers in making each of the eight pawns represent two or three groups of men with definite functions or professions related to the chessman, or "noble," behind him in the initial alignment of the pieces on the board. The pawns, or "working-men," are described with the tools or attributes of these several occupations allotted them. Sometimes the link with the figure behind is none too obvious, but on the whole the arrangement is reasonable enough. Before one knight is the pawn that stands for smiths, armorer, carpenters, and before the other, the pawn for the city guards, customs officers, and toll collectors. In front of the two rooks, who are vicars of the king, are the pawns of farm laborers and the like on one hand, and of couriers, messengers, and dice players on the other. Notaries and advocates, of whom Cessolus has many hard things to say, stand before one alfin (judge), and tavernkeepers and victualers stand before the other. The king's pawn is symbolic, in this book, of merchants and money-changers, and here we have an illuminating reference to the East in the tale told of two merchants, one from Egypt and the other from Bardach (or Baldach, as the name is given in the Italian version). The second merchant is referred to as a Baldachino, that is, an inhabitant of Baghdad. When not applied to a person, the word "baldachino" was originally used to indicate a special stuff woven in that city and imported into Italy, where it was often used for hangings. Thus we can easily see the derivation of the name of the structure that is frequently placed over an altar and that was originally often draped with this material.

Before the queen stands the pawn representing apothecaries, spicers, and physicians. The physician is supposed to be well instructed in many things, including rhetoric, logic, astronomy, and music. In his professional manner he should be very sure of himself, and, though those who argue most and are most subtle are considered the wisest, he should leave disputa
tion behind him in the presence of the patient. Plasters, it is pointed out, should be cut exactly to the size of the wound. Apart from this the system of contraries is advocated (that of Aristotle and Galen, which has survived, though mostly in folk medicine, through Abu Sina [Avicenna] in the Near East to this day). According to this system, heat is to be cured by cold and cold by heat, and a similar reversal is to be applied to the perils of sorrow and of joy. Each piece on the board is given due attention and each man is warned against the moral disease peculiar to his occupation.

Cessolus's presentation of the moral duties of each group in this social world is extremely diverting, but his work has a further fascination for anyone interested in the Orient and its relation to the West. According to his sermon, chess was invented in Babylon in the land of the Chaldees, where reigned the son of Nebuchadnezzar, a king named Evylmerodach, who, as Caxton put it in his retranslation, was "a jolye man without justice, and so euel that he did do hewe his faders body in thre hundred pieces" and gave these pieces to the birds. His subjects, so the story goes, desperate with their lot in having such a ruler, approached Exerses, a philosopher who also had the Greek name of Philometor, to help them. He invented the game of chess in order to reform the king's evil ways, to keep him from idleness, and to satisfy the desire for novelty. It was through the last-named human need that the wicked king, watching the philosophers play, was inveigled into seeking to know how the game was played, to inquire why it was invented and what could be its meaning. The author goes on to say that in the time of Alexander the game reached Egypt and thence spread to all parts of the South. Since chess indeed came from Persia to Chaldea and the Land of the Two Rivers and was brought to
Egypt by the Arabs, it is interesting to note that the name of the philosopher would seem to be Xerxes, a Persian name. Though some association with Persia is thus still evident, the fact that the game originated in India has been entirely lost. In the writings of earlier Arab authors, however, this had not been forgotten; neither was the fact that the Arabs had acquired the game from Persia, where it had penetrated before the Arab conquest in the seventh century.

A very persistent theme in early Arabic writings on chess is that it was invented for a king. Ya'kubi, of the tenth century, tells us that when it was pointed out to an Indian monarch named Balhait that backgammon was an irreligious game he had chess invented to take its place. Mas'udi, also of the tenth century, has a somewhat similar story, in which the king immediately became interested in chess though it was not invented especially for him. Ibn Khallikan, of the thirteenth century, when writing in his Biographical Dictionary of As Suli, a great and famous player of the tenth century, states that the game was invented by Sissa ibn Dahir, of Hindustan, for the amusement of King Shihram. In the Persian Shāhnāme, written in the early eleventh century, we find a rather different version, in which we are told that chess was invented to convey to an Indian queen the news of the loss of her son when engaged in warfare with his brother. We also read there that when the Persians were set the task by a Hindu envoy of discovering how the game was played, the Persian sage who solved the problem insisted that it be played before the Shah. In addition to these stories we find many allusions to the game's being played before the caliph during the tenth century. The caliphs not only played themselves but had particularly skilled players in their courts in the same way that they had poets, and, like the poets, these players had to demonstrate their talents before the ruler's eyes.

As we have seen, the legend that chess was invented for royalty has been preserved in Cesolis's work. This theme is shown pictorially in the late fifteenth-century frontispiece of our Florentine book, where a king is seen seated behind a chessboard at which two men play while courtiers look on at each side (fig. 6). This picture calls to mind very strongly a similar scene in a fourteenth-century illustration of the Shāhnāme, also in the Museum (fig. 5), in which we see the game being played before the Shah by the Hindu envoy and the Persian sage. It is impossible to believe that this miniature, painted during the Mongol domination, is the first example of a Persian illustration of such a theme. It is most probable that as the Near Eastern literary theme of a game of chess played in the presence of a king is preserved in this thirteenth-century European sermon, so too a pictorial manuscript tradition has survived in this woodcut of two hundred years later. In fifteenth-century printed books we often see the final form of a manuscript tradition. Older drawings and paintings were reused and adapted in the same way as today old cartoons and designs are altered and reused in stained-glass work. The iconography of this chess scene, if not derived from the Near East, as seems highly probable, had certainly existed in Persia for almost two centuries.

There are several other interesting references to the Near East in the sermon. Cesolis, quoting Saint Jerome, says that the chessboard, like Babylon, was made square in every quarter and that the raised edges of the board represent the walls of the city, which, incidentally, were so high that within all was darkness. In referring to Babylon, Saint Jerome distinguishes between the two cities of that name, the one in Egypt and the other in Chaldea, the latter being the model of the chessboard. This comparison of city and chessboard is also encountered in the East. Mustaufi, a fourteenth-century Persian writer, says of the Sasanian city of Nishapur that it was originally laid out on the plan of a chessboard, with eight squares to each side.

Another sign of the influence of Eastern lit-
Fig. 5. The Persian sage Buzurgmihr demonstrating the game of chess before King Nushirwan. From a XIV century Persian miniature

Fig. 6. Chess being played before a king. From the “Libro di giuoco di scacchi,” Florence, Miscomini, XV century
Fig. 7. Death plays chess with a king. From a German engraving reproduced on plate 172 of volume VI of Max Lehr’s “Geschichte und kritischer Katalog des deutschen, niederländischen, und französischen Kupferstichs im XV Jahrhundert,” Vienna, 1908
erature in this work of Cessolis is the association of geometrical progression with the chess-board, an idea met with in the works of several tenth-century Arab writers and for many centuries since, in both East and West. In his description of chess Masʿudi gives the impressive total that is reached if, starting with one unit, the number on each square on the board be doubled and these numbers be added together. Cessolis does not follow Yaʿkubi and others who quote this number as the amount of the reward to be given for the invention of the game, sometimes in grains of wheat and sometimes in coins.

In spite of these references and allusions to the East, this sermon with its allegorical chessmen is essentially a product of the West. Like a true man of the Middle Ages, Cessolis emphasizes that the obligations of both noble and commoner are reciprocal. He is quite concerned about the relations between master and man, and he tells the story of a servant who donned his master's robes and lay on his master's bed so that he should be slain instead of his lord by enemies who had gained entrance into the house. Then, as it is given in Caxton's version, the author goes on to say, “We see nowadays many fools who deign not to use the gross meats of the commoners and flee the coarse clothing and manners of a servant. Every wise man a servant that truly serveth his master is free and not bonde, but a foole that is over proud is bonde.” He makes it clear, nevertheless, that an armorer could not become a knight, nor a servant a master. It is the same aspect of the world embodied in a verse of a well-known nineteenth-century hymn, a verse conscientiously omitted by some clergymen:

The rich man in his castle,
The poor man at his gate,
God made them, high or lowly,
And order'd their estate.

This state of affairs was believed in not only by Cessolis but by many through the nineteenth century and even down to the present day. Here we get a glimpse of the division between East and West. The Muslim might be rich or poor: that, indeed, was the will of God; but he was not bound by his Maker to any one estate or social class. The strong political flavor in Cessolis's book is quite foreign to the writings of Muslim philosophers, and such an allegorical development of chess, with political connotations emphasized as they are here, could never have grown up in the Islamic world.

In the East there were many poetical allusions to chess, and much play was made on the names of the pieces; but the allegorical significance of the removal of the pieces from the board after the end of the game was common to both worlds. The popularity of this allegory, with Death making the final move, was shown not only in the literary works of Europe but also in engravings such as that shown in figure 7. In Europe emphasis was often laid on the fact that the bigger the piece the lower it sank into the bag: a thought which afforded some consolation to the great majority in a rigidly defined society. Though this emphasis is necessarily missing in the East, the allegory was used in the twelfth century in Persia by Omar Khayyam, who wrote:

'Tis all a Chequer-board of Nights and Days
Where Destiny with Men for Pieces plays:
Hither and thither moves, and mates and slays,
And one by one back in the Closet lays.

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