

Birth of the Chess Queen: A History

Marilyn Yalom

HarperCollins 2004

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Birth of the Chess Queen is a history of chess in medieval Europe which focuses on the status of queens both on and off the chessboard. Starting sometime around the 10th century, the vizier inherited from Islamic chess began to be renamed a queen. This piece could originally move only to adjacent diagonal squares, but in the 15th century it gained the modern queen's move, making it the most powerful piece on the board.

Yalom describes these changes as part of a broader social history of chess and of women players. She looks at the Islamic and Byzantine world, Spain, Italy and Germany, France and England, Scandinavia, and Russia; the rulers who feature include Eleanor of Aquitaine, Margaret of Denmark, Isabella of Castile, and Catherine the Great, among many others.

Representations of chess queens can be linked to the cult of the Virgin Mary. Chess also had links with the cult of love and was a symbol of romance, as chess-playing was one of the few ways in which noble women could interact with men. In the early modern "end game" many of these connections weakened: as chess became more professional and public, Yalom argues, it ceased to be so acceptable a pursuit for women.

Much of *Birth of the Chess Queen* consists of potted histories of female rulers without any immediate connection to the game of chess. There is some discussion of the provenance and interpretation of manuscripts, chess pieces and sets, and paintings — illustrated with halftones and eight pages of colour photographs — but the sources are limited and the evidence simply isn't there to make more than a plausibility argument for a link between the changes to the game and the prominence of particular women.

Birth of the Chess Queen includes references and avoids the embellishments and exaggerations of pop history, but it is a lively, accessible work aimed at a general audience, which could be enjoyed by readers who know nothing about chess and little about medieval history.

October 2009