

Chaucer's *Duchess and Chess*

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“Amberley excelled at chess—a mark, Watson, of a scheming mind.” Arthur Conan Doyle

The crux occurs in the dialogue between the mourning knight and the dreamer.¹ The setting is a hart hunt and the two protagonists are engaged in heart-hunting. Word play, especially *traductio*, *ad nominatio*, and *significatio*, was used not only in Latin composition in the Middle Ages but also very freely in vernacular poetry. As a result of its use in this poem, we discover that the knight is John of Gaunt or, as he was known until 1372, John of Richmond,² and his dead wife is Blanche, the Duchess of Lancaster:

With that me thoghte that this kyng
Gan homwarde for to ryde
Unto a place, was there besyde,
Which was from us but a lyte
A long castel with walles white,
Be Seynt John, on a ryche hil,
As me mette;³

The external circumstances of this poem are unusually important and they leave many unanswered questions. We know that the work is an elegy and its subject is Blanche, held widely to be as beautiful as she is rich, and we also know that she died of the plague in September 1368. Who asked Chaucer to write the poem we do not know.

He must have come back from the overseas mission he began on 17 July 1368 to find that Blanche was either on the point of death or had already died. Queen Philippa, who was herself to die a year later, may have commissioned Chaucer because the two women were on friendly terms, both having come from Hainault. Chaucer probably began the elegy immediately, while his personal feelings were fully engaged.⁴ He was to be busy with his commitment to the war in France during the next three years, though there is evidence he made some returns to England during that time and, when Philippa died, Chaucer, a member of the royal household, was given funeral garments and presumably attended her interment. Queen Philippa,⁵ whose lady-in-waiting Philippa de Roet was Chaucer's wife, died in August 1369 at Windsor and was buried at Westminster.⁶

We assume that Chaucer's commissioned poem was written very soon after Blanche's death. Chaucer became increasingly occupied with current affairs and while he may have been involved in John of Gaunt's expedition into Northern France from July to November 1369,⁷ he was in the following year back in England when letters of protection were again issued to him. As a royal envoy, his role may have been connected with the treaty with Flanders (14 August 1370) and with the negotiations with Genoa. In 1371, John of Gaunt married Constance of Castile and became the King of Castile and Leon. In November he landed in Plymouth with his bride, a retinue of Spanish knights wearing Lancastrian livery, and a train of Spanish ladies in waiting.⁸ Chaucer's poem presumably was completed before that time; the circumstances may have contributed to its uniqueness. Many of the poem's unusual qualities have been remarked upon. The poem has 1334 lines and 914 of them are derivative. It relies heavily on the French mode that was popular at the time and has direct parallels in the *Roman de la Rose*⁹ and in the poems of Machaut and Froissart. The metre is French and the expression has an elegance familiar in contemporary French poetry. Despite this indebtedness to the French poets, however, the poem reads idiomatically and there is no sense that Chaucer is copying other texts. Rather, he is drawing from passages in his memory. Unlike the dream poems, *The Book of the Duchess* is concerned with real tragedy, and lacks the artificiality of the troubadours. The interest reflected in the poem, apart from its major themes, suggests the kind of audience that Chaucer had in mind and to which he may have delivered his poem. The nobility, which must have increasingly accepted Chaucer as one of its most distinguished members, "was an accomplished as well as a privileged group."¹⁰ It had certain well-defined interests.

This audience was erudite, usually capable in three languages and having knowledge of the classics to which Chaucer constantly refers. The religion of the nobility, according to Jeremy Catto, “was not that of passive or disinterested observers in matters essentially ecclesiastical. Its members had universally been brought up to a number of conventional observances and practices.”¹¹ Catto gives some examples of religious enthusiasm. Henry, the Earl of Derby, for instance, went so far as to wash the feet of poor men on Maundy Thursday.

Yet there was a difference in this religious zeal. It showed an increasing personal recourse to the supernatural and it took many forms. Much attention was paid to astrological predictions and many carefully executed astrological manuscripts appeared, suggesting that there was a market for such material. It was a time of superstitious forecasts and the fears concerning the plague were very genuine. Burckhardt (1860) describes the importance attached to divination and asserts that “we know positively that the humanists were peculiarly accessible to prodigies and auguries.”¹² Most of Chaucer’s readers would have had some technical knowledge of astrology and would be familiar with allusions to the ascendant, to planets in ‘angles,’ to the houses, and to other specifically astrological references.¹³ Astrology was almost an obsession at the time and many households employed their own diviners. Chaucer himself appears to have rejected judicial astrology, which claimed to be able to foretell the future, but he apparently accepted *astrologia naturalis*, the kind of astrology that claimed that planets affected some significant areas of human life.¹⁴ Boccaccio, Petrarch and many Europeans were familiar with astrology, and medical astrology was particularly popular. One of the most well-known poets was Gentile de Foligno, who considered that sickness, including the plague, was caused by certain planetary dispositions, and he gained further credence when he died (1348) of the plague himself. “Most astrologers suspected eclipses of the sun and moon and conjunctions of Saturn and Mars as prime movers, especially when they occurred in ‘human’ signs of the zodiac.”¹⁵ As the Parkers point out, the planets were suspected of producing a kind of rotting of the air, which became poisonous when breathed into the lungs. Gentile, like Chaucer’s Physician, recommended drinking potable gold.¹⁶ The innumerable references to planets and stars in Chaucer’s poetry and his own work on astrology for his son, little Lewis, indicate Chaucer’s keen interest in the subject. His familiarity with Nicholas of Lynn suggests that his own knowledge went far beyond the popular beliefs of the times. He evidently shared an interest which occupied the

elite when they were not at war or engaged in hunting or other sports, an interest which many women also shared.

Chess, in the fourteenth century, was the game played by royalty and the nobility in general. Historic instances of drama which occurred when chess was being played were sometimes cited: King John was playing chess when the deputies from Rouen arrived in 1213 to implore his help against King Philip Augustus who was besieging the city. The ill-fated Conradin was playing chess when his approaching execution was announced to him in 1268.¹⁷ The acquisition of a knowledge of chess was a considerable part of the education of a noble's children. There are many references to it in the romances from the twelfth to the fourteenth centuries and the hero is always the most distinguished chess player. Skill in play was regarded in a knight as an accomplishment befitting his position and rank. Another advantage of the game was that women as well as men played, and many instances of romance occurred between the players. While we now regard chess as a serious activity and do not attribute to medieval nobles the kind of mental ability the game requires, nevertheless it was favoured as a social game as well as one requiring skill. Illustrations show friends watching a couple playing chess and even giving advice.

Chaucer's poem, then, would have aroused keen interest from many points of view. It was in English, a new venture in a French-speaking court,¹⁸ unlike Froissart's charming tribute in 1373, "Le Joli Buisson de Jonece," a lament for both Philippa of Hainault and Blanche of Lancaster.¹⁹ Chaucer's subject was a famous young woman, daughter and heir of Henry, first Duke of Lancaster (died 1361), wife of Edward III's fourth son (married 1359), and mother of the future Henry IV. Chaucer's patron, John of Gaunt, spent lavishly on the funeral rites of the Duchess Blanche and even appointed the leading architect of the day, Henry Yevele, to erect an alabaster figure in her own image in Saint Paul's.²⁰

Chaucer's use of astrology, astronomy, and the game of chess were other interesting aspects. In the anonymous *Pearl* poem, one can trace a game that is played throughout,²¹ and allusively Chaucer in his poem manages to interweave ideas of chess, astronomy, and the supernatural.²² The fate of the lady is offered in a kind of riddle.²³ We are told that she has been taken as a chess piece by Fortune. The riddle, as W. David Shaw observes in *Elegy and Paradox*, often has an effect that is opposite to what

it appears to be. The lost queen in the chess game permits the riddler to draw a circle of words around his meaning, not because he is indifferent to a loss which, as Shaw states, "he makes the subject of an intellectual game, but because he suffers from an excess of concern."²⁴

There are, however, many kinds and ways of playing chess. Most critics of the poem have assumed that Chaucer was playing the standard game in the Middle Ages, which was described by Jacobus de Cessolis,²⁵ frequently translated, and used later by Caxton as the basis of his game, chess.²⁶ With the emphasis in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries on chess allegories, the relevance of the game to the heavenly bodies was sometimes maintained.²⁷ Already, an Arabian historian who died in 958²⁸ had perceived the similarities between chess and the movements of the heavenly bodies.²⁹ *The Vetula*, a Latin poem once ascribed to Ovid but now known to have been written by Richard de Fournivall,³⁰ describes the chess pieces in a novel way. The king is the sun, the queen is Venus, the bishop is Jupiter, the knight is Mars, the rook is the moon, and the pawn is Saturn.³¹ There was a round board, called celestial chess, with twelve squares corresponding to the number of constellations of the zodiac. There were also other varieties of chess that Chaucer could have been considering. We have to remember that Chaucer travelled widely and his knowledge of languages³² was such that he could even pun in German.³³ Boards themselves were frequently of German, Dutch, Flemish or Italian make,³⁴ and the play was altered at times with the intention of simplifying the game. Three varieties of chess are described in the Spanish manuscript known as the *Alfonso*,³⁵ written in 1283. One was played on a board of ten by ten squares, another on a board of twelve by twelve squares, and a third (which was played by four players) on an ordinary board.

The game that Chaucer's black knight plays is not any of these. When the knight says he longs for death because he has lost his *fers*, the dreamer replies:

Ne say noght soo, for trewely,
 Thogh ye had lost the *ferses twelve*,
 And ye for sorwe mordred yourselve,
 Ye sholde be dampned in this cas
 By as good ryght as Medea was,
 That slough hir children for Jasoun;
 And Phyllis also for Demophoun

Heng himself — so weylaway! —
 For he had broke his terme-day
 To come to hir. Another rage
 Had Dydo, the quene eke of Cartage,
 That slough himself for Eneas
 Was fals — which a fool she was!
 And Ecquo died for Narcisus
 Nolde nat love hir, and ryght thus
 Hath many another foly doon;
 And for Dalida died Sampson,
 That slough hymself with a piler,
 But ther is no man alyve her
 Wolde for a *fers* make this woo!³⁶

This response gives the knight his opportunity to describe his loss in terms that make use of the heavenly bodies, classical heroines, and, with some degree of conviction, the speaker's own emotion:

For I dar swere, withoute doute,
 That as the someres sonne bryght
 Ys fairer, clerer, and hath more lyght
 Than any other planete in heven,
 The moone or the sterres seven,
 For al the world so hadde she
 Surmounted hem alle of beaute,
 Of maner, and of comlynesse,
 Of stature, and of wel set gladnesse,
 Of goodlyhede so wel beseye —
 Shortly, what shal y more seye?
 By God and by his *halwes twelve*,
 Hyt was my swete, ryght as hirselve.³⁷

An obvious problem in this game concerns the pawns. There should on a standard board be eight of them and here there are twelve. A *fers* is a promoted pawn, its name derived from the Arabic *Firz*, *Firzan*, counsellor, and the queen was usually given a name distinct from the pawns. Murray says that at quite an early date Regina, Femina, Virgo, and Queen were the usual designations of the original piece, and a different name for the promoted pawn—deriving ultimately from the Arabic—was customary.³⁸

Among those who have tackled this problem was W.W. Skeat in 1894.³⁹ He arbitrarily counted eight pawns, one bishop, rook, knight, and queen in order to make twelve and he called them all *ferses*.⁴⁰ Stevenson (1940) tried to persuade us that the game was draughts and not chess but he had no evidence to surmount the problem of the extensive use of chess terms in Chaucer's passage. He could find no evidence that a draughtsman was ever called a *fers*.⁴¹ Cooley (1948) thought the article should be omitted although the manuscripts all include it. Without the article he interpreted the line as meaning "though your loss had been twelve times as great." Cooley also noted that the number is common in familiar reference, and perhaps the twelve apostles might provide an explanation.⁴² Bronson (1952) extended this suggestion and proposed that the twelve peers of Charlemagne might be a possibility. In that case "Doucepers" would have to be corrupted to "Docefers."⁴³ In 1949, French correctly noted that the loss of the queen was not in itself serious. However, he added his own theory that the game was given up prematurely because the Black Knight took no further interest in the game since the *fers* was lost, and in consequence was easily checkmated.⁴⁴ Helen Phillips (1983) appends, to a similar list of hypotheses,⁴⁵ the Courier game mentioned⁴⁶ but reaches no conclusion either then or in 1997.⁴⁷

Chaucer's passage owes something to the *Roman de la Rose*. There, however, the games of chess are actual battles between Charles of Anjou and his enemies. Murray in his classic *A History of Chess* in 1913 does not offer an explanation for Chaucer's *ferses twelve* though he remarks upon it. Richard Eales (1985) comments on the convention of man playing chess against Fate or Death and says that when Chaucer developed the theme he imposed a meaning on chess contrary to its rules "by making the whole game depend on the loss of his queen. This suited his allegory, but the queen or *fers* was one of the weakest pieces in medieval chess."⁴⁸ In the realm of literary artifice, wide readings and interpretations of references to chess are possible and some hermeneutical works find chess copiously imbued with hidden significance. The problem here seems to have defeated the most recent critics. Wilcockson in his commentary on line 723 says "The number twelve presents a problem to which no completely convincing solution has been found."⁴⁹ The latest critic on this subject, A.J. Minnis, remarks that "Chaucer's reference to *twelve* "ferses" remains an intractable problem."⁵⁰

That Chaucer would have presented his poem at one of the annual commemorations⁵¹ of the Duchess' death is unlikely because John of Gaunt was out of England during the memorials every year until the sixth anniversary in 1374.⁵² In September 1370 he was at the fall of Limoges; in September 1371 he was campaigning in Gascony; and in September 1372 he was at sea with the King in a vain attempt to lift the siege of Thouars in Aquitaine. In September 1373 he crossed to France on his disastrous march from Calais to Bordeaux. The year 1374 was probably the first of the anniversary services that the Duke was able to attend. However, when he read or heard the poem is difficult to determine. Lewis suggests that the series of annual anniversary services for Blanche began in 1370 and ended only with the Duke's own death in 1399.⁵³ Although it was on 13 June 1374 that John of Gaunt granted a life annuity to Chaucer "in consideration of the services rendered by Chaucer to the grantor" and "by the grantee's wife Philippa to the grantor's late mother and to his consort" and on 18 June 1374 that "the duke ordered the alabaster from which the master mason, Henry Yevele, was to erect a tomb for Blanche"⁵⁴—still, the public delivery of the poem would have been unlikely after Gaunt's remarriage in 1371.

Nevertheless, Chaucer's poem was a new and important venture and appeared to signal the new significance of literary works in the English language.⁵⁵ Goodman suggests that the poem was intended to be read by members of John of Gaunt's household,⁵⁶ whose French was probably like that of the Prioress—out-of-date. Whatever the linguistic inadequacies of a few, Chaucer would be addressing a very sophisticated audience. He evidently enjoyed the intellectual vanity of such people as Usk, Gower, and Strode, and was familiar with such knights as Richard Sturry, Sir Lewis Clifford, Sir John Clanvowe, and Sir William Neville. One must remember that his work would concern less than one percent of the population, a relatively small, conservative group which shared intellectual interests. This esoteric courtly group may have heard the poem either late in 1368 or in 1369. Queen Philippa may even have heard it before her death.

The chess game to which Chaucer refers might be an exclusive type of game which Chaucer's own group had devised. On the other hand, there were games in Europe which differed from the standard game and some of them, such as the Lombard Assize, actually came to Britain. The chess game that seems most appropriate is the Courier game, which was widely played in Germany from the thirteenth to the nineteenth

century.⁵⁷ It was played on a board with twelve rows and eight columns. The board was chequered but there was no fixed rule on what colour the left-hand corner square should have. Players had twenty-four pieces, twelve pawns, a king, a man (counsellor), a queen, a schleich (spy or smuggler, also translated as fool), two couriers, two bishops, two knights, and two rooks. According to Hans Bodlaender, the king, rook, and knight moved as in modern chess; the courier moved like the modern bishop; the bishop in Courier chess jumped two spaces diagonally, “so like the elephant in Shateranj” (which undoubtedly also is the origin of this type of move); the queen moved one square diagonally; the man moved one square in an arbitrary direction, the schleich moved one square horizontally or vertically. Pawns moved as pawns in modern chess but could not make a double move from the second row. The promotion rule for these pawns is not known but according to Bodlaender most likely “the rule is that a pawn promotes two queens (with the movement of a queen in Courier chess) when arriving at the last rank”:

While the object of the game was to mate the opponents, the rule on stalemate is not known. As had been the practice in the usual European game, the queen had to be taken before the pawns could be promoted, and the total number of *feses* which could be made was twelve. This game was popular among all classes of inhabitants in the village of Strobeck in the Harz Mountains and it continued until the nineteenth century.⁵⁸

The painting in the Königliches Museum, Berlin, said to have been made in 1520 by Lucas von Leyden, shows a game of Courier in progress.⁵⁹ It is interesting to note that the two players, a man and a woman, are surrounded by at least six men and a woman and one of the men is advising the female player. Obviously the game of chess remained in the early sixteenth century a more social game than it is now. In an early woodcut the Courier is depicted as a man on horseback with a horn to his lips.⁶⁰

Whether Chaucer was referring to the Courier game or to something similar, the question remains: why did he refer to *feses twelve*? What kind of game enabled Chaucer to refer to the *feses twelve* is less important than his use of this number. Some critics have offered suggestions as to the game but neither Murray nor Eales nor any of the others has come forward with an explanation of Chaucer’s intention. In my opinion the kind of chess to which Chaucer was alluding is less important than his intention.⁶¹ Through the details that he gives, Chaucer is alluding to beliefs that were held by his

audience. The twelve *ferses* refer to the twelve signs of the zodiac and he is able to show this meaning by use of a punning allusion to *ferus*, meaning "animal." Chrétien de Troyes also uses punning to extend the meaning of *fers*. Murray cites lines 11349-11352 from *Perceval*:

Ansi ne combati volontiers
 Fors dont quant on le sorqueroit:
 Dont ert *ferus* qui il *feroit*
 Puis le *mattoit* d'esgies de *fierge*.⁶²

Gauvains fu saiges chevaliers,
 Einz ne combati volantiers,
 Fors tant con l'an le reequeroit.
 Cil ert *feruz* cui il *feroit*,
 Plus le *mattoit* que de la *fierce*.⁶³

In this passage, Gawain would not voluntarily have fought if his adversary had not required him to do so, and at this early hour Gawain was the attacked (*feruz* or *ferus*) and his opponent was the one attacking him with the ferocity of a wild beast (il *feroit*...que de la *fierce*), intend on fighting to the death (*mattoit*).⁶⁴ *Mattoit* was another chess word (*mat*, persian, meaning "dead"; note also *chau mat* as *echec et mat*, check mate) meaning to render dead but also used, as Chrétien de Troyes used it, to mean fighting to the death.⁶⁵ Thus we have *feruz*, *feroit*, *fierce*, as well as *mattoit*, all derived from the Persian game of chess, and all serving to extend the meaning of the bare words of battle. Punning was not solely a Chaucerian prerogative, nor was the concern with death and Fate.

The continuing religious obsession of people in the Middle Ages had to do with the relationship of this world to the next. Much verbal and pictorial art was related to these concerns, and "astrological and astronomical motifs are common in areas that are not at all astrologically oriented."⁶⁶ According to Bonaventure,⁶⁷ the heavenly bodies illustrated the link between heaven and earth by their philosophical "nature." The cycles of the signs of the zodiac as reflected in the labours of the months and in many other pieces of decorative art were to be understood as a means of expressing man's relationship to eternity.⁶⁸ They were products of the Christian religion rather than paganism. The message that the dreamer is delivering to the mourner is a genuine,

human one. The knight has said that life was intolerable to him now that he had lost his *fers*, by which we understand him to be referring to the woman with whom he had been happily married. The dreamer cites various examples from the classics of famous characters who killed themselves for love, and he is saying that even if the knight were not under the edict of heaven and had free choice, he would be foolish to end his life. To give this explanation it is not necessary to determine the kind of chess that Chaucer had in mind, although the Courier certainly fits very well. An alternative to the whole problem occurs in Murray's *A History of Board-Games Other Than Chess* published in 1952.⁶⁹ No one seems to have remarked on his comments in this work on Chaucer's game. Murray declares here that Chaucer's game is not chess but a game of *ferses*. His evidence for the existence of such a game consists of three references. The first is found in an Arabic anthology of poems written by the Moors of Spain, compiled by the philologist ibn Dihya (born in 1149 in Valencia; died in 1235);⁷⁰ the second reference is to the *Chronique* of Philip Mousket (1243),⁷¹ a poet that Murray has referred to in his work on chess, where Murray says that Mousket repeatedly uses *Fiers* (*fers*) in the sense of a force without which it was not easy to win a war. In *A History of Board-Games Other Than Chess*, again referring to the *Chronique*, he apparently considers that *fers* is used in the sense of a game. His third reference he takes from the *Book of the Duchess* and he offers no examples apart from Chaucer of any detailed use of *fers*. He explains its use by Chaucer as follows:

By the loss of the *ferses twelve*, he can only mean the loss of everything. Skeat, in his note on the passage, realized this, and interpreted *ferses twelve* as meaning all the chessmen except the king, but this explanation is too artificial to carry conviction for an instant. The only satisfactory explanation is that Chaucer and the knight were playing at cross purposes, and that while the knight was thinking of chess, Chaucer was thinking of the game of *ferses*. The knight's reply, in effect, "you don't know what you are talking about," gains force by this explanation.⁷²

Murray is not content to leave this explanation. He deduces that the word *farisia*, contained in his first source, is an arabicised form of the Provençal *fersa*, named because the men with which it was played were *ferses* or chess queens. From his second source he deduces that the *fers* could be promoted to a king, and from his third source he makes the astonishing discovery that the game was a battle game in which each player

had twelve men. He adds, "The conclusion that *ferses* was draughts seems inevitable, and the life of the name *ferses*, c1150-1400, confirms this conclusion."⁷³ Thus we are back with Stevenson and his *ferses twelve*, who was also convinced that Chaucer was referring to draughts. Notwithstanding this possibility, I have to admit that since 1962 when that august journal of international repute, *Anglia*, published my first attempt to solve the problem, I have remained interested in this puzzle and am still groping for an answer.

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Notes

1 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Book of the Duchess, The Riverside Chaucer*, 3rd ed., gen. ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton, 1987), pp. 329-46, esp. pp. 336-46. All Chaucer quotations are from this edition. The prefatory dialogue, that of Watson and Holmes in the epigraph, is from "The Adventure of the Retired Colourman," *The Casebook of Sherlock Holmes* (London: J. Murray, 1927).

2 Simon Walker, *The Lancastrian Affinity 1361-1399* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1990), pp. 32-33. John of Gaunt's father "Edward III effectively moved the concentration of Lancastrian territorial power in Yorkshire to the south of the county...depriving him of the foothold within the 'Northern military zone' provided by Richmond and its adjacent lands." This loss of the name Richmond helps date the poem prior to 1373.

3 *Riverside*, p. 346.

4 Donald R. Howard, *Chaucer: His Life, His Works, His World* (New York: Dutton, 1987), p. 148.

5 Anne Crawford, ed., *Letters of the Queens of England 1100-1547* (Dover, N.H.: Alan Sutton, 1994), pp. 92-100.

6 Her tomb, like that of Blanche at Saint Paul's, was designed with an alabaster figure by the leading architect, Henry Yevele. As in the case of Blanche, her husband was later buried beside her. Henry Yevele is discussed in John Harvey's *English Medieval Architects* (London, 1954), pp. 312-320.

7 Sydney Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt* (London: Constable, 1905), pp. 70-74.

8 Armitage-Smith, *John of Gaunt*, p. 93.

9 Jean de Meun and Guillaume de Lorris (1237-1280), *Roman de la Rose* ed. Ernest Langlois (Paris: SATF, 1914-24); trans. Charles Dahlberg, *The Romance of the Rose*, Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1971).

10 Jeremy Catto, "Religion and the English Nobility in the Later Fourteenth Century," *History and Imagination: Essays in Honour of H.R. Trevor-Roper* ed. Hugh Lloyd-Jones, Valerie Pearl, and Blair Worden (London: Duckworth, 1981), p. 45.

11 Catto, "Religion and the English Nobility," pp. 43-45, esp. 45-46.

12 Jacob Burckhardt, *The Civilization of the Renaissance in Italy* (1860; New York: Random, 1954), cited by Donald E. Brown, *Hierarchy, History, and Human Nature: The Social Origins of Historical Consciousness* (Arizona: Arizona Univ. Press, 1986), p. 285.

13 Derek and Julia Parker, *A History of Astrology* (London: Andre Deutsch, 1983), p. 114.

14 Robert M. Durling and Ronald L. Martinez, *Time and the Crystal* (Berkeley: Univ. of California Press, 1990), pp. 37-45. Discussing the *Mineralium liber* by Albertus Magnus (1890-99:5, pp. 1-55), trans. and annotated by Dorothy Wyckoff (1967), and the analogy which Albertus saw between human art and the operation of the heavens, corresponding "to the operation of a tool that is moved by the hand and directed to the end conceived by the artisan," the authors point out, "the converse: that the process whereby the human artist shapes his material is like the shaping influence of the revolving heavens," a hypothesis with which Thomas Aquinas evidently concurs (*Summa contra Gentiles* 3.84 [Aquinas (1875) 12, p. 359]. Furthermore, "these astrological doctrines of the influence of the heavens in shaping sublunar things, of the transitivity of heavenly causality through such privileged objects as precious stones, of the direct influence, temperament (including faculties directly involved in all artistic creation), and of the analogy between the influence of the heavens and the shaping activities of human craftsmen are all reflected in the *rime petrose*" (45). If one substitutes "chess" for "precious stones" and "*The Book of the Duchess*" for "*rime petrose*" this passage gives a clear exposition of the astrological thinking underlying Chaucer's work.

15 Durling and Martinez, *Time*, p. 115.

16 Parker, *History*, p. 115.

17 H.J.R. Murray, *A History of Chess* (Oxford: Clarendon, 1913), p. 423.

18 Rossell Hope Robbins, "Geoffroi Chaucier, Poète Français, Father of English Poetry," *Chaucer Review* 13 (1978), pp. 93-115, esp. p. 97.

19 Jean Froissart, "Le Joli Buisson de Jonece," (1373), ed. Anthime Fourier, *Textes Littéraires Français* (Geneva: Droz, 1975).

20 Roger Sherman Loomis, *A Mirror of Chaucer's World* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1965). Note also William Dugdale, *History of St. Paul's Cathedral* (London, 1818).

21 Michael Olmert, "Game-Playing, Moral Purpose, and the Structure of *Pearl*," *Chaucer Review* 21.3 (1987), pp. 383-403.

22 Edward Grant, *Planets, Stars and Orbs: the Medieval Cosmos, 1200-1687* (Cambridge: Cambridge Univ. Press, 1994), p. 40.

23 Russell A. Peck, *Chaucer's Romaunt of the Rose and Boece, Treatise on the Astrolabe, Equatorie of the Planetis, Lost Works, and Chaucerian Apocrypha: An Annotated Bibliography 1900-1985* (Toronto: Univ. of Toronto Press, 1988), pp. 78-79. Peck discusses the Boethian interest "in the problems of calling things by the wrong names (II, pr. 6) and in the multiplicity and ambiguity of language (III, pr. 10-pr. 11)...and in the power of ideas in words, their playful quality which can make labyrinthine circles that hold errant ideas—a 'house of Didalus, so entralaced that it is unable to ben unlaced' (*Boece* III:11, p. 357). Both of these essentially linguistic attitudes appealed strongly to Chaucer, who frequently talks about the sly and deceptive nature of words as well as their precision and the great labor required in yoking words and ideas exactly."

24 W. David Shaw, *Elegy and Paradox: Testing the Conventions* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Univ. Press, 1994), p. 108.

25 Jacobus de Cessolis, *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium c1275-1300*. The oldest dated manuscript of the Latin text is apparently MS Leipzig, Pauline Library 42, from 1358, according to H.J.R. Murray in *Chess*, p. 539; also known as the *Liber de ludo scaccorum*, ed. Kipke (Brandenburg, 1879); this Latin edition cited by Murray p. 538n, also translated into French as *Le Livre des Eschecs Moralise en francais*, printed in folio 1504 and in quarto 1505 by Jehan de Vignay (MS C.U.L. Ff.1.33), known also as the "Chess of Love."

26 William Caxton, trans. *Games and Playe of the Chesse* translated from Vignay's French version of de Cessolis' work, 1st ed. Bruges, 1474; 2nd ed. Bruges 1480; intro. W.A. Axon (London, 1883).

27 Durling and Martinez, *Time*, p. 115.

28 Possibly al-Mas'udi. According to Murray, *Chess*, p. 343, "Only al-Mas'udi and al'Amuli of my Eastern authorities mention the Astronomical game...It is possibly the game of Escaques, described below from Alf." Al-Mas'udi's account runs:

Next, the round Astronomical board, which is called al-falakiya (the celestial). It has 12 squares, corresponding to the number of the constellations of the zodiac, divided into two halves. Seven pieces of different colours move on it, in agreement with the number and colours of the 5 planets and 2 luminaries.

29 Roswin Finkenzeller, Wilhelm Ziehr, Emile M. Buhner, *Chess: A Celebration of 2000 Years* (Toronto: Key Porter Books, 1989), p. 34.

30 Richard de Fournival, *The Vetula*, I (Cologne c1470 and 1479); again 1533 (place and printer unknown); Frankfurt 1610; Wolfenbittel, 1661 and 1702; cited in Murray, *Chess*, pp. 520-21. The work is also cited in Richard Eales, *Chess: The History of the Game* (London: B.T. Batsford, 1985), p. 62, although Eales uses the spelling "Fournival."

31 Murray, *Chess*, pp. 507-08.

32 R.A. Shoaf, "Notes Toward Chaucer's Poetics of Translation," *Studies in the Age of Chaucer* 1 (1979), pp. 55-66, cited in Peck's *Chaucer's...Annotated Bibliography*, p. 107. Peck states that "Chaucer was fluent in at least four languages and derived literature from all of them."

33 Helge Kökeritz, "Rhetorical Word Play in Chaucer," *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 69 (1954), pp. 937-52. Also Paull F. Baum, "Chaucer's Puns," *PMLA* 71 (1956), pp. 225-46.

34 Murray, *Chess*, p. 757.

35 Alfonso X of Castile, *Libro del Acedrex* (the MS. Alf), *Alfonso el Sabio*, pp. 24-7, *Giraldus Cambrensis, Opera* ed. J.S. Brewer, Rolls Series 21 (1861-91), II, pp. 356ff. Cited in Murray, *Chess*, pp. 348-9 and 482. Murray treats elsewhere Alfonso's

complaints about and solutions regarding the “weariness” of the game (507-8 and 520-21), according to Richard Eales, “The Game of Chess: An Aspect of Medieval Knightly Culture,” a paper delivered at the Strawberry Hill conferences, and published in *The Ideals and Practice of Medieval Knighthood*, eds. Christopher Harper-Bill and Ruth Harvey (Suffolk and Dover, N.H.: Boydell, 1986), pp. 12-34.

36 *Riverside*, p. 339, lines 722ff.

37 *Riverside*, p. 340, lines 820ff.

38 Murray, *Chess*, p. 427.

39 W.W. Skeat, ed. *The Complete Works of Geoffrey Chaucer*, 7 vols (Oxford: Clarendon, 1894), I, pp. 481-2.

40 Beryl Rowland, “The Problem in Chaucer’s *Book of the Duchess*,” *Anglia* 80 (1962), pp. 384-389, p. 384.

41 S.W. Stevenson, “Chaucer’s Ferses Twelve,” *English Literary History* 7 (1940), pp. 215-222.

42 F.D. Cooley, “Two Notes on the Chess Terms in *The Book of the Duchess*,” *Modern Language Notes* 62 (1948), pp. 30-35, p. 33.

43 Bertrand H. Bronson, “*The Book of the Duchess* Re-opened,” *PMLA* 67 (1952), pp. 863-81, p. 875.

44 W.H. French, “Medieval Chess and the *Book of the Duchess*,” *MLN* 64 (1949), pp. 261-64.

45 Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Book of the Duchess*, ed. Helen Phillips, Durham and St Andrews Medieval Texts (Durham, 1983), p. 158.

46 Murray, *Chess*, p. 482ff.

47 Helen Phillips, ed. *The Book of the Duchess* (Durham: Durham & St Andrew’s Medieval Texts, 1983), p. 158; see also her “*The Book of the Duchess*” in *Chaucer’s Dream Poetry*, eds Helen Phillips and Nick Havely (London and New York: Longman, 1997), p. 83.

48 Richard Eales, *Chess: The History of the Game* (London: Batsford, 1985), p. 62.

49 Colin Wilcockson, explanatory notes for Chaucer’s *The Book of the Duchess*, *Riverside Chaucer*, pp. 972-73.

50 A.J. Minnis with V.J. Scattergood and J.J. Smith, *The Shorter Poems*, Oxford Guides to Chaucer (Oxford: Clarendon, 1995), p. 146n.

51 Christopher Daniell, *Death and Burial in Medieval England 1066-1550* (London and New York: Routledge, 1997), p. 17. These services “could be funded by endowments of property, rent or possessions. One such use of property was consented to by the Bishop of Hereford, who agreed that Canon David ap Jake should rebuild five shops attached to his house so that the extra rent could be devoted to the obit services for Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster.” (William W. Capes, ed. *Registrum Johannis Trefnant Episcopi Herefordensis*, The Canterbury and York Society), p. 20.

52 Martin M. Crow and Clair A. Olson, eds. *Chaucer Life-Records* (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press and Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 1966), p. 31.

53 N.B. Lewis, “The Anniversary Service for Blanche, Duchess of Lancaster, 12th September, 1374,” *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* 21 (1937), pp. 176-92. I wish to thank the librarians at Bryn Mawr College, from whom Barbara Reid Bures, an alumna, obtained a copy of this paper for me.

54 Martin M. Crow and Virginia E. Leland, introduction to “Geoffrey Chaucer,” *The Riverside Chaucer*, p. xix.

55 Helen Phillips, general introduction to *Chaucer's Dream Poetry*: “Chaucer's dream poems...invented their own kind of narrative, marked by typically Chaucerian elements like humour, an intense concern with the relationship between modern writing and classical *auctores*, and with a more widely questioning exploration of the nature of love than we find in even the most ambitious French *dit*...making poetry out of the cadences and idioms of spoken English...they represented a stylistic and structural innovation of immense creative potential for late medieval and Tudor literature. Chaucer's courtly style, like that of Machaut and Froissart, acclimatizes classical references to a vernacular” (p. 42).

56 Anthony Goodman, *The Exercise of Princely Power in Fourteenth Century Europe* (Harlow, Essex: Longman, 1992), p. 38.

57 Blanche's father, Henry, Duke of Lancaster, travelled to Prussia in 1359.

58 Hans Bodlaender, material on chess online at <http://www.cs.uu.nl/~hansb/d.chessvar>, 10 February 1999.

59 Murray, *Chess*, p. 392.

60 Murray, *Chess*, p. 484.

61 T.A. Shippey, "Chaucer's Arithmetical Mentality and the *Book of the Duchess*," *Chaucer Review* 31 (1996), pp. 6-7. This article emphasises Chaucer's precise and deliberate choice of words and numbers, pointing out Chaucer's use of allusions which his audience would not understand. Shippey does not specifically refer to the mystery of the *ferses twelve* but he states that, "At least one can be fairly sure that Chaucer the professional accountant would be capable of exactness, as almost all of his literary contemporaries (and many of his literary successors) would not."

62 Murray, *Chess*, p. 753.

63 Chrétien de Troyes, *The Continuation of the Old French Perceval of Chrétien de Troyes Volume III Part I The First Continuation. Redaction of MSS A.L.P.R.S.*, ed. William Roach (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 1952), p. 57.

64 Chrétien de Troyes, *La Première Continuation du Roman de Perceval*, trans. into modern French, Henri de Briel (Paris: Librairie C. Klincksieck, 1972), p. 21.

65 Albert Dauzat, *Dictionnaire Etymologique de la Langue Française* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1938), p. 319 (*fer, fera, ferra*; 320 (*ferir=frapper, feroce, ferrement, feronniere, ferroviaire, ferre*); 321 (*ferse=der. anc. it. ferza=laniere, ferule, ferueur*); 323 (*fief, fier, defiance, mefi mefiance, defier fier-a-bras*); 326 (*firman*); 347 (*furet=voleur, furibond, furie furieux*); 463 (*mat=mort, chah mat=echec et mat, mater=faire mat, abattre, matir=rendre mat, matador=tueur, matar=tuer, matassin=d'origine arabe*); 464 (*matois=voleur=proprem. "enfant de la mate" [place des executions], mattoide=fou, mat=dead*). See also Thomas Rendall, "Gawain and the Game of Chess," *Chaucer Review* 27.2 (1992), pp. 186-99 for a lively discussion of the extended meanings of chess terms, especially *chekke* meaning "ruin, ill fortune, harm."

66 V.A. Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery of Narrative* (Stanford: Stanford Univ. Press, 1984), p. 37.

67 Saint Bonaventure, *The Mind's Road to God* (Indianapolis: Bobbs-Merrill, 1953).

68 Kolve, *Chaucer and the Imagery*, p. 365.

69 Murray, *Board-Games*, pp. 74-75.

70 ibn Dihya, ed. *Kitab al-mutrib min ash'ar ahl al-Maghrib*, copy in British Museum (Or, 77).

71 Philip Mousket (Philippe Mouskes), Bishop of Tournai, *Chronique*, 1243.

72 Murray, *Chess*, p. 753.

73 Murray, *Board-Games*, p. 75.