The Game of Politics:

Catherine de’ Medici and Chess

Susan Broomhall

This essay explores the performative capacity of chess for the sixteenth-century French queen and regent, Catherine de’ Medici. It argues that ludic activities such as chess, along with other games and pastimes at court, must be understood in their gendered political context. A number of scholars have considered whether the replacement of the vizier piece by a queen, the increased mobility of this game piece over the Middle Ages, and the connection to women in the sixteenth-century version of the game’s name in various European languages (such as scacchi de la dama and les eschecs de la dame enragée) may have reflected changing perceptions about powerful women at European courts in the period.1 However, such shifts need not be attached to the visibility of specific women to be of significance to gender analyses of early modern power. Courts were intense political environments that brought together women and men and required the development of a range of activities to promote conduct that reinforced hierarchies. Courtly play was, therefore, a performance of power.

Chess was a known pastime of Catherine de’ Medici. The inventory of Catherine’s rooms after her death listed among her possessions a handwritten book covered in velvet, entitled The Game of Chess. In a large cupboard were an ebony chess set and a lavishly decorated velvet bag trimmed with silver and silk, containing a chess set.2 This was not unusual. The inventories of Anne of

1 H. J. R. Murray, History of Chess (1913; New York: Skyhorse Publishing 2015); Marilyn Yalom, Birth of the Chess Queen (New York: Harper Collins, 2004); Mark N. Taylor, “How Did the Queen Go Mad?” Chess in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: A Fundamental Thought Paradigm of the Premodern World, ed. Daniel E. O’Sullivan (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2012), 175–89; Zita Rohr, “Playing the Catalan: The Rise of the Chess Queen; Queenship and Political Motherhood in Late Medieval Aragon and France,” Virtuous or Villainess? The Image of the Royal Mother from the Early Medieval to the Early Modern Era, ed. Carey Fleiner and Elena Woodacre (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 173–98.

2 Edmond Bonaffé, ed., Inventaire des meubles de Catherine de Médicis en 1589 (Paris;

Auguste Aubrey, 1874), 85, 90–91

Brittany also include heavily ornamented boxes and boards for chess and other games, as do those of Catherine's contemporary, Margaret of Austria.[3] Catherine was also widely reputed to be a skilled chess player. In his 1617 treatise, the chess theoretician, historian, and priest, Pietro Carrera, recalled a 1597 conversation with the Syracusan chess master, Paolo Boi. Carrera noted that Catherine "was a chess player against whom the Syracusan wished very much to play, although no opportunity to do so occurred." [4]

However, chess was more than a game to contemporaries. Its play provided important political training about statecraft, social hierarchies, and warfare. This was made explicit in the title of Jacobus Cessolis's thirteenth-century Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium super ludo scacchorum. Additionally, chess could offer subtle political messaging in its visual depiction. The representation of ten-year-old Carlo Emanuele I of Savoy, son of Marguerite de Valois and Emmanuel Philibert, on a checkered board as the game piece of the king, in the portrait by Giacomo Vighi around 1572, suggested much about the aspirations of his parents (Fig. 1). Marguerite, Catherine's sister-in-law, is a key presence; the portrait adopts her colors (red, gold, and black) and includes her dwarf beside Carlo Emanuele. [5] Elite women also became game pieces in a literal rendering of the contemporary European political world. A fine set produced around 1535 included powerful women of the French court: Louise of Savoy, Marguerite de Navarre, and Eleanor of Austria (Fig. 2).[6] Board games such as chess held performative capacity as elite political representation.

Contemporaries observed Catherine's enthusiasm for games of varied kinds. The courtier, Pierre de Bourdeille, seigneur de Brantôme, drawing upon the memories of a lady of the court, recorded that Catherine often watched Francis I

3 Examples listed in Arie Van Der Stoep, A History of Draughts: With a Diachronic Study of Words for Draughts, Chess, Backgammon and Morris, trans. Monique de Meijer (Prunuslaan: Rockanje, 1984), 34–35.

4 Pietro Carrera, Il gioco de gli scacchi (Militello: Giovanni de' Rossi da Trento, 1617), 94: "fù giocatrice di Scacchi, con la quale havēdo desiderio di giocare il Siracusano nō vi hebbe la opportunità". Translation of all Italian and French texts are mine, unless otherwise noted.

5 Robin O'Bryan, "A Duke, a Dwarf, and a Game of Chess," Notes in the History of Art 34.2 (2015): 27–33.

6 Kathleen Wilson-Chevalier, "Art Patronage and Women (including Habsburg) in the Orbit of King Francis I," Renaissance Studies 16.4 (2002): 483–85.

play paillemaille and the precursor to tennis, paulme, in her early years at court.7 Moreover, according to Brantôme, Catherine herself participated in many games and sports typically favored by men. As queen mother, she had leading architect Philibert de l'Orme design a wooden cover for her outdoor pall-mall court at Monceaux.8 Brantôme indicates that she took a crossbow on her walks, and was

7 Pierre de Bourdeille, seigneur de Brantôme, Oeuvres complètes, ed. Ludovic Lalanne, vol. 7 (Paris: Mme Ve Jules Renouard, 1853), 346.

8 Philibert de l'Orme, Nouvelles inventions pour bien bastir et a petits fraiz (Paris: Federic Morel, 1561), A4v.

an excellent shot. 9 An elegant crossbow, created from exotic Brazilian rosewood around 1540, likely Catherine's, displays fine decorations of masks and garlands, the initial C under a crown, and the symbol of the dolphin, reflecting her status as Dauphine (Fig. 3). 10 Furthermore, Catherine was careful to garner her father-in-law's affection by participating with him in leisure pursuits. Brantôme recorded that Catherine "always followed him on the hunt, for she was a very good and daring rider."11 Johan Huizinga articulated long ago that the rules and rituals of play create an exclusive community that extends beyond play time and space for its participants. 12 Through and within such games and pastimes, "emotional communities" developed affective practices specific to their needs and culture.13

9 Brantôme, Oeuvres, 346.

10 http://www.musee-armee.fr/collections/base-de-donnees-des-collections/objet/arbalete-a-jalet-dite-de-catherine-de-medicis.html (accessed 21 January 2017).

11 Brantôme, Oeuvres, 345: "le suivoit tousjours à courir : car elle estoit fort bien à cheval et hardie."

12 Johan Huizinga, Homo Ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture (1938; London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1949).

13 Barbara H. Rosenwein, Generations of Feeling: A History of Emotions 600–1700 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015); Monique Scheer, "Are Emotions a Kind of Practice (and Is That What Makes Them Have a History)? A Bourdieuan Approach to Understanding Emotion," History and Theory 51.2 (2012): 193–220.

In Brantôme's view, Catherine's cultivation of the king through games paid emotional dividends, as the king "loved her even more for it, and delighted in giving her the pleasure of hunting."14 These ludic activities, therefore, functioned in a precise politico-emotional context.

Leaders actively attempted to establish particular modes and expressions of feeling at the court through practiced emotional behavior. In a 1563 letter to her son, Charles IX, Catherine provided her impressions of the purpose of courtly games:

I heard it said by the king, your grandfather, that two things were needed to live in peace with the French and to have them love their king: to keep them happy, and to keep them busy at something. To do so, it often required combat on horseback or foot, lance throwing, and the King your father also, with other honest pastimes in which he involved himself and had them employed in. 15

Catherine's recommendations for Charles and his male courtiers can be conceptualized as a form of "emotional labor," as developed by sociologist Arlie Hochschild to explicate how certain work roles require particular affective comportment and emotional expression for successful achievement.16 For women and older courtiers, as well as whenever the weather was inclement, however, Catherine invented dances, ballets, and indoor games to occupy her household. Brantôme recalled that she passed her time "being most serious and disciplined when required." 17 Catherine's games sought to actively structure interactions between women and men in mixed-sex activities, and her emotional management within them set a tone to be modeled by her ladies.

14 Brantôme, Oeuvres, 345: "l'en ayma tousjours davantage; et se délectoit à lui faire donner plaisir à la chasse."

15 [8 September 1563], Lettres de Catherine de Médicis, ed. Hector de la Ferrière, vol. 2

(Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1885), 92: “j’ay ouy dire au Roy vostre grand-père qu’il falloit deux choses pour vivre en repos avec les François et qu’ils aimassent leur Roy: les tenir joyeux, et occuper à quelque exercise; pour cest effect, souvent il falloit combattre à cheval et à pied, courre la lance; et le Roy vostre père aussi, avec des autres exercices honnestes èsquels il s’employoit et les faisoit employer.”

16 Arlie Russell Hochschild, The Managed Heart: Commercialization of Human Feeling (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983).

17 Brantôme, Oeuvres, 346: “étant . . . fort grave et austère quand il falloit.”

Game play at court, therefore, embedded contemporary assumptions and expectations about appropriate behavior for women and men. The ludic character of these practices required rules to securely delimit a fantasy space in which conventional hierarchies and status ostensibly did not apply. But in doing so, they reinforced gender and social identities by the clearly bounded limits to game actions and interactions. The identity of elite women as women, regardless of their social position, marital status, or political role in the courtly hierarchy, always therefore underpinned performances within and outside a game. 18

Catherine’s games at court took place in a specific, gendered political context. Catherine had an extremely large entourage and noblewomen served in prominent office-holding capacities. 19 These powerful women evoked praise from some, but strong hostility from others as the queen’s “stable of whores.” 20 Supervising morality at court had long been a duty of its female leaders. Anne de France instructed her daughter, Suzanne, to regulate closely the conduct of her ladies, who should occupy themselves “honorably” with “pleasant games.” 21 Catherine told her son to have archers patrol court spaces “to prevent pages and lackeys from playing . . . with blaspheming and swearing, an execrable thing.”22 The reality was that Catherine’s courtly household was carefully controlled and scandals were rare. 23

Games were ambiguous: they risked creating inappropriate emotions but could equally sustain moral probity and educate. The prologue of the Heptaméron, first published in its entirety in 1559, publicized Catherine’s praiseworthy participation in literary games, explaining that she and Marguerite had together determined to produce a work imitating Boccaccio’s Decameron.24 Catherine’s own

18 Judith Butler, “Gender as Performance,” A Critical Sense: Interviews with Intellectuals, ed. P. Osborne (London: Routledge, 1996), 109–25.

19 Caroline zum Kolk, “The Household of the Queen of France in the Sixteenth Century,” The Court Historian 14.1 (2009): 3–22.

20 Satirical verses recorded in 1584 by Pierre de l’Estoile, cited in Una McIlvenna, Scandal and Reputation at the Court of Catherine de Medici (Farnham: Ashgate, 2016), 17.

21 Anne of France: Lessons for My Daughter, trans. Sharon L. Jansen (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 2004), 29.

22 Lettres de Catherine de Médicis, vol. 2, 92: “pour empescher que les pages et lacquais ne jouassent . . . avec blasfèmes et jurements, chose exécrable.”

23 Zum Kolk, “Household of the Queen,” 22. See also the monograph by McIlvenna on this subject, Scandal and Reputation.

24 Marguerite de Navarre, “Prologue,” Heptaméron (Paris: Claude Gruget, 1559).

senior ladies-in-waiting were likewise deeply engaged in contemporary literary and intellectual culture.

Chess was specifically represented as another means for women to accrue merit in the confined affective climate of the court. Anne de France recommended it as an honest pastime to her daughter, though not to be played “too eagerly.”25 Louise of Savoy commissioned a lavishly illuminated manuscript of Évrart de Conty’s Le livre des échecs amoureux moralisés in which the goddess Pallas gives profitable instruction to Amour on morals and an honest life. 26 The manuscript depicted Louise with her husband, Charles d’Angoulême, playing chess (Fig. 4). 27 Women at court were one of the target readerships of chess manuals. Jean du Vignay’s 1504 translation of Cessolis as Le Jeu des échez moralisé was dedicated by Antoine Vérard to an anonymous “high-born, powerful, and excellent lady.” 28 The frontispiece shows a king and queen at chess, observed by courtiers of both sexes (Fig. 5). A vellum manuscript of the same text depicts a young woman being offered the work in a garden with male and female courtiers. 29 Kings, princes, and princesses were among the clientele offered fine chess boards in an advertisement that appears at the end of Claude Gruget’s translation, Le Plaisant Jeu des eschez renouvellée, pour facilement l’apprendre et le bien jouer. 30

Nonetheless, chess presented considerable ambiguities as a game for and
about women. Patricia Simons argues that Renaissance Italian art showing chess
played by men and women together was strongly sexualized.31 A rare exception
was the 1555 painting, Sisters Playing Chess, by Sofonisba Anguissola, art tutor
to Catherine de' Medici's daughter, Isabel de Valois, at the Spanish court in the

25 Anne of France, 29.

26 Amandine Mussou, "Apprendre à jouer? La Partie d'échecs des Echés amoureux," Poetry, Knowledge and Community in Late Medieval France, ed. Rebecca Dixon and Finn E. Sinclair (Cambridge: D. S. Brewer, 2008), 50.

27 Bibliothèque Nationale de France (henceforth BNF), ms fr 143, 1r.

28 Jacques de Cessoles, Le Jeu des échez moralisé, trans. Jean de Vignay (Paris, Antoine Vérard, 1504).

29 BNF, Rés, VELINS-1018, 1v. See discussion of both texts in Mary Beth Winn, Antoine Vérard. Parisian Publisher, 1485–1512: Prologues, Poems, and Presentations (Geneva: Droz, 1997), 377–81.

30 Claude Gruget, Le Plaisant Jeu des eschez renouvellée . . . (Paris: Vincent Sertenas, Guillaume Lenoir, 1560), 46.

31 Patricia Simons, "(Check) Mating the Grand Masters: The Gendered, Sexualized Politics of Chess in Renaissance Italy," Oxford Art Journal 16.1 (1993): 59–74.

1560s.32 In his 1534 Les controverses des sexes masculin et féminin, the French poet
Gratien du Pont de Drusac's contribution to the querelle des femmes included
sixty-four unflattering descriptions of women plotted, intriguingly, onto the
squares of a chessboard. 33

By the 1550s, however, a growing number of publications in France high-
lighted concerns about the game's expression of female power. Scacchia Ludus, the
1527 Latin poem by the Italian bishop, Marcus Hieronymus Vida, was translated
a number of times. Vida's text emphasized the violent capability of the queen in
battle and the response of the game pieces to her power: "the strength of heroes
withers at her threats, / And where she rages all the war retreats." 34 Vida's inter-
pretation of the queen's destructive force through her exceptional mobility, as
female passion and power, suggested disruption to conventionally male military
conflict, an unease reprised in the mid-century translations. A dedication to the

princesses of France in Louis Des Masures's 1551 translation, twice reprinted, marveled that

The honor, the prize, the advantage, and the glory
Of all the camp belongs to the Princesses [who] . . .
Destroy all with their fury . . .
It is cruelty to see blood spilled
By one who should carry nothing but gentleness. 35

Vida's work was again translated in 1559 by Vasquin du Phileul, a canon at Nôtre-Dame des Doms, perhaps encouraged by his previous translation of Petrarch's works, dedicated to Queen Catherine. 36 These works, closely connected to the courtly world, focus on the chess queen as an unsettling disruption to conventional dynamics of war in a decade in which Catherine assumed public

32 Ibid., 70.

33 See Lyndan Warner, The Ideas of Man and Woman in Renaissance France: Print, Rhetoric, and Law (Farnham: Ashgate, 2011), 111–13.

34 Marcus Hieronymus Vida, Scacchia Ludus, trans. Samuel Pullein (Dublin: S. Powell, 1750), 55.

35 Poem by the Seigneur d'Everon, Guerre cruelle entre le roy blanc et le roy maure (Paris: Vincent de Sertenas, 1556), n.p.: "l'Honneur, le pris, l'avantage, la gloire, / De tout le camp aux Princesses appartient / Vous y verrez & la blanche & la noyre, / Saccaiger tout de fureur . . . / Cest cruaulté de veoir le sang espandre, / A qui deuroit ne porter que doulceur."

36 Le Jeu des eschez (Paris: Philippe Danfrie et Richard Breton, 1559).

visibility as regent and head of the king's council during the last engagements of the Italian Wars. 37

Other authors, however, drew parallels with women's conduct in contemporary political culture. The lawyer and author, Etienne Pasquier, devoted a chapter of his 1560 Recherches de la France to chess, where he specified that the queen piece should rather be termed "lady" because "nothing has so much authority over kings as do ladies, as [the kings] are not ashamed to publicize themselves as their servants. I do not mean those [ladies] with whom they are married, but those with whom they are in love." 38 The well-known political influence of Diane

de Poitiers, to which Pasquier referred in this passage, rested upon an emotional power and connection to Henri II that could not be challenged in the king's lifetime. By 1560, however, Henri's death made possible Pasquier's critique through chess of illegitimate female power.

Knowledge of Catherine's interest in courtly games and pastime was widespread. In 1551, a Bolognese gentleman, Innocentio Ringhieri, dedicated his Cento Giuochi Liberali et d'ingegno to Catherine. He proposed a decameron of games, ten books each containing ten complex and highly intellectual games, for the leisure of a queen taxed by high political affairs. He insisted that his moral advice and difficult philosophical challenges were particularly suitable for women and that critics "do a great injustice to the female sex, if they do not believe that among them can be found some who are very ingenious, expert, and suited to clarify other difficult matters."39 François Lecercle suggests a Petrarchan frame to Ringhieri's defense of women's dignity, but his text appears to offer women active participation in the establishment of their worth as courtly, cultural, and intellectual figures.

37 See Broomhall, "Counsel as performative practice of power in Catherine de' Medici's early regencies," Queenship and Counsel in the Early Modern World, ed. Helen Graham-Matheson and Joanne Paul (Basingstoke: Palgrave, forthcoming).

38 Cited in Jacques Chomarat, "Les Échecs d'après Vida," Les jeux à la Renaissance, ed. Philippe Ariès and Jean Claude Margolin (Paris: Vrin, 1982), 379: "il n'y a rien qui ait tant d'authorité sur les Roys que les Dames, dont ils ne sont honteux de se publier seruiteurs. Ie n'entens pas de celles qui leur sont coniointes par mariage, mais des autres dont ils s'enamourent."

39 (Bologna: Anselmoe Giaccerelli, 1551.) Translation adapted from George W. McClure, "Women and the Politics of Play in Sixteenth-Century Italy: Torquato Tasso's Theory of Games," Renaissance Quarterly 61 (2008), 770: "fanno gran torto al sesso Femminile, se tra loro non credono ritrovarsene delle molto ingeniose, & intendenti, & atte a sciogliere altre difficultadi."

Among Ringhieri's games was chess, which was morally and intellectually suitable to sit alongside those of his own invention.40 Ringhieri described a "rational, human chess," including both women and men whose choreographed movements in the game would be directed by two lords.41 This strongly echoed

Francesco Colonna's Hypnerotomachia Poliphili, first published in 1499, which included a dance of thirty-two court ladies on a checkered floor. Ringhieri's live, mixed-sex chess in which participants' corporeal movements were strictly articulated, bears similarities with the emerging balletic dances at Catherine's court. 42 The dance of chess, fantasized by Colonna and regulated by Ringhieri, received further treatment in the Fifth Book of Pantagruel, attributed to François Rabelais and published in 1564. This text staged an important scene at the court of Queen Quintessence (or Queen Whim) in which a lavish banquet was concluded with a ball containing a chess ballet. In typical Rabelaisian style, the account exaggerated the social interactions, prolix speech, and gustatory practices of contemporary court culture. 43 Pantagruel's observations about the chess performance included advice to the defeated [chess] queen to be "more wary, and keep near her king."44 Moreover, the Fifth Book emphasized the emotional and corporeal impact of the chess dance, intentionally reversing the constructive effects that Catherine's ludic political displays, such as the 1573 "Ballet des Polonais" staged in celebration of the election of her son, Henri III, to the Polish throne, aimed to achieve. 45 Jean Dorat described this ballet's interwoven choreography of its sixteen female dancers as more complex than the manner in which "a fleeing [chess] piece is lost to the swift enemy" (Fig. 6). 46 The Fifth Book's subverted balletic chess performance,

40 Ringhieri, chap. 98, 157v.

41 Ibid.: "Giuoco de Scacchi humani, & ragioneuoli."

42 François Lecercle, "La culture en jeu: Innocenzo Ringhieri et le Pétrarquisme," Les jeux à la Renaissance, 185–200.

43 See also Denis Crouzet, Le haut coeur de Catherine de Médicis (Paris: Albin Michel, 2005), 28–29, 184–85.

44 [François Rabelais], The Fifth and Last Book of the heroic deeds and sayings of Good Pantagruel, ed. and trans. Thomas Urquhart and Peter Antony Moteux (London: Gibbings, 1897), chap. 25, 119.

45 Ewa Kociszewska, "War and Seduction in Cybele's Garden: Contextualizing the Ballet des Polonais," Renaissance Quarterly 65.3 (2012): 809–63.

46 Jean Dorat, Magnificentissimi spectaculi (Paris: Federic Morel, 1573), trans. in Thomas M. Greene, "Labyrinth Dances in the French and English Renaissance," Renaissance Quarterly 54.4

(2001): 1405, 1463: “Quave fugax celery calculus hoste perit.”

however, does not induce calm, peace, or harmony at court, but rather an affective impulse for war:

> [T]heir motions and music would have forced smiles out of the most severe Cato . . . and the martial harmony moved our souls so powerfully that we easily believed what is said of Ismenias's having excited Alexander to rise from table and run to his arms, with such a warlike melody.47

The Fifth Book’s mockery of the queen’s lavish chess dance seems clearly to allude to contemporary practices at Catherine’s court.

Catherine was ever present in the game culture of her period. The complex intellectual and orderly strategic movements of chess offered a controlled and rational form of courtly play for women in a mixed-sex environment, whether as a board game or fashioned into stylized dance forms. Catherine, her female forebears, and those who sought her patronage, promoted chess, alongside other games and pastimes at the court, to conduct emotional labor, and model desirable modes and expressions of feeling, as a mechanism to socialize women and men at court, and to demonstrate the intellectual capacity of women. Chess play as boardgame or as balletic motion conveyed political meaning for Catherine as a female leader who was successfully regulating her household and thus demonstrating her authority and status in the political hierarchy. However, Catherine’s performance of chess as political play confronted and challenged contemporaries, who also turned to the chessboard to express anxieties about female violence, power, intimate political access, and tactical emotional gaming.

47 [Rabelais], The Fifth and Last Book, chap. 25, 120.