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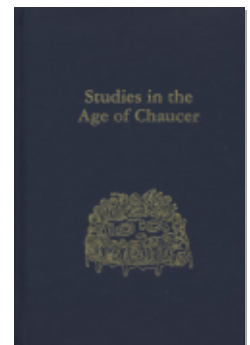
Power Play: The Literature and Politics of Chess in the Late Middle Ages (review)

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REVIEWS

JENNY ADAMS. *Power Play: The Literature and Politics of Chess in the Late Middle Ages*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2006. Pp. 252. \$49.95.

The main thesis of Jenny Adams's book is brilliantly illustrated in her first chapter by reproductions on facing pages of two woodcuts from the first and second chapters of the 1483 edition of William Caxton's *The Game and Playe of the Chesse*. On the left we see a king's body being hacked into many pieces; on the right, we have a frontal view of a man seated at a game of chess holding up his king, with other chess pieces of different ranks on and off the board. The black-and-white squares of the chess board are a miniature of those of the floor of the room; the game replicates life, with the reader-viewer in the position of the second player. According to Adams, it is not only an individual king (Evilmerodach) who is being dismembered and destroyed in the first woodcut, but it is also the older corporate model of the kingdom or state as the "body" of the king, an organic model whereby the body's different "members" had to accept their natural role of obeying the commands of and aiding or sustaining the head. Adams argues that the game of chess offered an alternative figure or metaphoric ground upon which to elaborate a theory of the proper functioning of the state (as well as of the individual).

In Caxton's second woodcut, the game's action occurs on the level playing field of the checkered board, where the opponent kings are the most important, but by no means the only chess pieces, and all must obey rules of movement defined by their status. Thus chess offers a different model of social order. As Adams puts it, "Rather than having their actions dictated by the 'head' of the state, who directed the actions of the body politic, members of a civic community are seen as beholden to a set of rules particularized to their own social station" (p. 11). The king's body has, in effect, been fragmented into a number of "independent bodies in the form of pieces bound to the state by rules rather than biology" (p. 20). The "state" in this figurative model is represented by the playing board itself, over which the viewer-player has a dominant

perspective, even as he projects himself into the different social roles and capabilities and tries to make them work to best advantage together.

Borrowed from Arabic culture around the turn of the millennium, the pieces of the chess game and their moves were adapted to western European society: the counselor became a queen; the elephant, a bishop; the horse, a knight. For Adams, these changes indicate that “medieval culture wanted to see itself in the game” (p. 2). Lengthy allegorical explanation of the chess board and its pieces as a figure of the state did not appear, however, until the end of the thirteenth century with the Lombard Jacobus de Cessolis’s *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium ac popularium super ludi scachorum* (The Book of the Morals of Men and the Duties of Nobles and Commoners, on the Game of Chess). Adams’s first chapter studies the ideological innovation reflected in Jacobus de Cessolis’s *Liber*, the importance of which is attested by more than three hundred surviving manuscripts and incunabula. The three following chapters treat the reception of this work—its rewriting, reframing, exegesis, and translation—in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries in France and England.

Chapter 2 examines the very substantial remodeling of the *Liber*’s allegory to focus on the psychomachia of the lover (in imitation of the *Roman de la rose*) in the anonymous late fourteenth-century versified *Echecs amoureux* and its commentary of fifty years later by Evrart de Conty. This prose commentary explains the *Echecs amoureux* on three allegorical levels, correlating regulation of individual passions to civic and to cosmological order. Adams argues that these French works “reinscribe the *Liber*’s contractually based (i.e., nonorganic) society within the framework of organic order (lover’s body as civic community) and natural structure (cosmos as chess game)” (p. 81).

The third chapter treats the symbolic uses of chess playing in Chaucerian fictions, especially the *Book of the Duchess* and the anonymous *Prologue* and *Tale of Beryn*. Whereas the *Liber* of Jacobus de Cessolis and the *Echecs amoureux* and its commentary focus on the benefits of chess as an art of governance, slight the risk of losing, and idealize a tied game, Chaucerian fictions focus on the danger of losing and treat chess as a form of imbalanced exchange or gambling.

In the fourth chapter, Adams first examines Thomas Hoccleve’s recycling in his *Regement of Princes* of parts of Jacobus de Cessolis’s *Liber*. Because Hoccleve, in giving advice to a king, adapts from the *Liber* so many exempla concerning the proper behavior of other estates (repre-

sented by chess pieces other than the king), Adams suggests that Hoccleve is implying “that the king might want to model himself on the virtues appropriate to other men” (p. 131). The second half of the fourth chapter treats differences between Caxton’s two editions of *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* (his English translation of a French translation of Jacobus de Cessolis’s *Liber*). Whereas the 1474 edition was addressed to the king’s brother to teach him good governance, the 1483 edition was addressed to all people as containing “wholesome wisdom necessary for every estate and degree.” Furthermore, Caxton illustrated the text of the new edition with a series of woodcuts that gloss the text in ways discussed above and also picture the different chess pieces (“such persons as longen to the playe”). Adams points out analogies between Caxton’s second edition of *The Game and Playe of the Chesse* and his second edition of *The Canterbury Tales*, to which he added twenty-three woodcuts showing Chaucer, the individual pilgrims (representing different estates and professions), and also the pilgrim group seated at a table.

In a brief but evocative epilogue, Adams suggests that drama became the most powerful way to represent social order in the Renaissance, displacing political symbolism “from board to stage.” *Power Play* makes an important contribution to our understanding of how late medieval thought is expressed in and elaborated around images.

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GAIL ASHTON and LOUISE SYLVESTER, eds. *Teaching Chaucer*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007. Pp. xi, 167. \$27.95 paper.

As a volume dedicated to addressing Chaucer pedagogy in the age of new media, *Teaching Chaucer* is an uneven offering. Its essays range from those that engage closely and creatively with the demands of teaching particular Chaucerian texts to those where Chaucer is all but lost within the authors’ fascination with pedagogic technology.

One of the volume’s main strengths, beginning with Gail Ashton’s introduction and continuing throughout the essays, lies in its diagnosis of the many challenges posed by students who are products of the “information age,” and in the various essays’ pragmatic acknowledgment