

GAMES AND VISUAL CULTURE  
IN THE MIDDLE AGES AND THE RENAISSANCE

STUDIES IN THE HISTORY OF DAILY LIFE  
(800–1600)

VOLUME 8

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# Games and Visual Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance

*Edited by*

VANINA KOPP AND ELIZABETH LAPINA

BREPOLS

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data  
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

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D/2020/0095/182  
ISBN 978-2-503-58872-8  
E-ISBN 978-2-503-58873-5  
10.1484/M.HDL-EB.5.119616

ISSN 2565-8212  
eISSN 2565-9561

Printed in the EU on acid-free paper.

# Table of Contents

<b>List of Illustrations</b>	7
<b>Introduction</b>	13
Vanina Kopp and Elizabeth Lapina	

## Games and Society

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<b>Rhetoric and Reality in the Visual Culture of Medieval Celtic Board Games: Literary and Archaeological Evidence Combined</b>	33
Katherine Forsyth and Mark A. Hall	
<b>‘Turne Over the Leef’: Games and Interpretation on Misericords</b>	77
Paul Hardwick	
<b>Gambling Miners</b>	93
Lena Asrih and Jennifer Garner	
<b>Chess and Cultural Crossings in Boccaccio</b>	109
Akash Kumar	
<b>Visualizing Chess and Love in <i>Les Eschéz d’Amours</i></b>	129
Daniel E. O’Sullivan	
<b>Games as a Sign of Social Status: Backgammon in Ottoman Literature and Visual Culture</b>	145
Tülün Değirmenci	
<b>Chess of the Gnostics: The Sufi Version of Snakes and Ladders in Turkey and India</b>	173
İrvin Cemil Schick	

## Materiality of Games

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- Playthings: Ivory on Ivory** 219  
Elina Gertsman
- The Playing Eye: On the Transfer of Game-Related Knowledge through Miniatures in Alfonso X's *Book of Games* (1283/84)** 237  
Michael A. Conrad
- Children's Toys in Italy, 1350–1550** 263  
Annemarieke Willemsen
- The Printed Book and the Visual Culture of Chess in the Late Middle Ages: William Caxton's 1483 Edition of *The Game and Playe of Chess*** 289  
Louise Fang
- Graffiti as Gaming: Vikings at Play in the Orkney Islands** 299  
Julie Mell
- Scratching the Surface: Graffiti Games in the Byzantine Empire** 333  
Walter Crist



## List of Illustrations

Figure 1.1.	Joust between Tristan and Palamedes. Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, ms. fr. 99, fol. 92 <sup>r</sup> , 1463.	13
Figure 2.1.	Board layout for <i>alea evangelii</i> . Oxford, Corpus Christi College, MS 122, fol. 5 <sup>v</sup> , ‘The Corpus Irish Gospels’.	35
Figure 2.2.	Selection of glass gaming pieces from a set of twenty-four found, together with three dice and the remains of a wooden board with ornate handles, in a furnished cremation grave, c. 10 BCE, Welwyn Garden City, Hertfordshire, England.	38
Figure 2.3.	Glass domed playing piece from Dundurn, Perthshire, Scotland.	38
Figure 2.4.	Selection of items from hoard of walrus-ivory gaming pieces from Lewis, Scotland, twelfth century.	48
Figure 2.5.	Anthropomorphic stone gaming pieces, Shetland, fifth–seventh centuries. Left: Mail. Right: Scalloway.	51
Figure 2.6.	Pegged wooden gaming piece in the shape of a bird, possibly a raven. Later Iron Age or Roman period, Braughing, Hertfordshire, England.	54
Figure 2.7.	Bone playing pieces with decorative copper alloy fittings, including pins for use on a perforated board. Viking Age, Lough Sewdy, Co. Westmeath, Ireland.	58
Figure 2.8.	Two of the gilt ivory gaming pieces from mound grave 1, Fyrislund, Uppland, Sweden.	58
Figure 2.9.	Carved yew gaming board from Ballinderry crannog, Co. Offaly, Ireland, tenth century.	60
Figure 2.10.	Romano-Celtic mask puzzle padlock (working replica): open; securing a leather pouch; closed shackle.	64
Figure 3.1.	Ball game. Gloucester Cathedral, fourteenth century.	79
Figure 3.2.	Dice players. Ely Cathedral, sixteenth century.	81
Figure 3.3.	A game of tables. Manchester Cathedral, sixteenth century.	83
Figure 3.4.	A game of tables. Windsor, St George’s Chapel, fifteenth century.	84
Figure 3.5.	A game with dice and balls or tokens. Gloucester Cathedral, fourteenth century.	86
Figure 4.1.	Wooden bowling game of Altenberg. Deutsches Bergbau-Museum Bochum, thirteenth century.	95
Figure 4.2.	Stone discs of Altenberg. Deutsches Bergbau-Museum Bochum, thirteenth century.	99
Figure 4.3.	Scribbled dice in the mining law of Massa Marittima. Firenze, Archivio di Stato. Statutum Communis et Populi civitatis Masse, n. 4: Ordinamenta facta per commune Masse super arte ramerie et argenterie, fol. 81 <sup>v</sup> , 1322–1325.	103

- Figure 5.1. Illustration of Filocolo's approach to Sadoc, the guardian of the tower in Boccaccio's early prose romance *Filocolo*. UB Kassel Ms. poet. et roman. 3, fol. 143<sup>v</sup>. Fifteenth century. 114
- Figure 5.2. Illustration of the chess game between Filocolo and Sadoc, complementing what is by far the lengthiest description of the series of games within the Floire and Blanchefleur tradition. UB Kassel Ms. poet. et roman. 3, fol. 144<sup>r</sup>. Fifteenth century. 116
- Figure 5.3. Detail of illustration of the chess game between Anichino and Beatrice in *Decameron* 7.7. Detail of Paris, BNF Arsenal 5070, fol. 260<sup>v</sup>. Fifteenth century. 121
- Figure 5.4. Detail of illustration of the chess game between Anichino and Beatrice in *Decameron* 7.7. Paris, BNF ms. ital. 63, fol. 221<sup>r</sup>. Fifteenth century. 124
- Figure 6.1. *Les Eschéz d'Amours* Dresden, Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Oc 66 (MS D), fol. 1<sup>r</sup> SLUB Dresden / Digital Collections / Mscr. Dresd. Oc. 66. Fifteenth century. 132
- Figure 6.2. *Les Eschéz d'Amours* Dresden, Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Oc 66 (MS D), fol. 22<sup>r</sup>. SLUB Dresden / Digital Collections / Mscr. Dresd. Oc. 66. Fifteenth century. 136
- Figure 6.3. *Les Eschéz d'Amours* Dresden, Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Oc. 66 (MS D), fol. 24<sup>v</sup>. Fifteenth century. 139
- Figure 6.4. *Les Eschéz d'Amours* Dresden, Sächsische Landesbibliothek, Oc. 66 (MS D), fol. 27<sup>v</sup>. Fourteenth century. 142
- Figure 6.5. Chess diagram from Venice, Marciana fr. app. 23, fol. 66<sup>r</sup>. Fifteenth century. 143
- Figure 7.1. A backgammon set, twentieth century. Private Collection. 152
- Figure 7.2. An Ottoman coffeehouse, *Album*, late sixteenth century, Dublin Chester Beatty Library, T. 439, fol. 9<sup>a</sup>. 156
- Figure 7.3. Backgammon players, Nihal-Mural Sungur Bursa Collection, c. 1900. 162
- Figure 7.4. *Costume Album*, mid-seventeenth century, Bologna, Bologna Biblioteca comunale dell'Archiginnasio, A 365, fol. 282. 163
- Figure 7.5. *Şehnâme-i Türki* by Medhî, 1620, Uppsala University Library, O. Celsing 1, fol. 1b–2a. 165
- Figure 8.1. Indo-Muslim gameboard, Delhi or Ajmer, c. 1815. Accession no. EA2007.2. 182
- Figure 8.2. Indo-Muslim gameboard, Delhi-Agra or Lahore, c. 1850. Collected and donated by Lt. Col. R. C. Lawrence. Accession no. 1951.995. 183
- Figure 8.3. Ottoman gameboard, printed by chromolithography, Istanbul, c. 1880. 193
- Figure 8.4. Manuscript Ottoman gameboard, Istanbul, c. 1900. 194
- Figure 8.5. Manuscript Ottoman gameboard, Istanbul, c. 1900. 194

- Figure 8.6. Turkish gameboard, Istanbul, 1948–1949. Calligraphy by Mustafa Halim Özyazıcı, illumination by Muhsin Demironat, snakes by Léopold Lévy. 196
- Figure 9.1. Ivory mirror case with a couple playing chess, Paris, 1325–1350, diameter: 102 mm. 222
- Figure 9.2. Saint Hedwig worshipping images of saints and of the Virgin and Child, Silesia, 1353. The J. Paul Getty Museum, ms. Ludwig XI 7, fol. 46<sup>v</sup>. 224
- Figure 9.3. Elephant and his handlers, from the so-called ‘Charlemagne’s Chess Set’, Salerno or Amalfi, Italy, c. 1075–1200, BNF, Paris. Elephant ivory, traces of gilding and red polychrome, 11.7 cm. 226
- Figure 9.4. Fountain of Youth, The Capture of the Unicorn; the Elephant with a Castle Upon Its Back, from a Casket with Scenes from Courtly Romances, 1330–1350 or later, France, Lorraine (?), ivory Overall: 9.8 × 25.9 × 1 cm. 227
- Figure 9.5. Christ’s body as a parchment charter, from the Carthusian Miscellany in Northern English, including an epitome of *Mandeville’s travels*, Northern England, 1425–1475, British Library, ms. Add. 37049, fol. 23. 229
- Figure 9.6. Panel with Hunting Scenes, c. 1350, Paris, France, ivory, 4 5/16 × 12 1/8 × 3/16 in. 230
- Figure 10.1. ‘Arab men playing chess and consulting a textbook on the game’, Alfonso X, *Libro de acedrex, dados e tablas*, Escorial, MS T-I-6, fol. 14<sup>r</sup>, c. 1283/84. 239
- Figure 10.2. ‘Four men playing the Chess of the Four Seasons’, Alfonso X, *Libro de acedrex, dados e tablas*, Escorial, MS T-I-6, fol. 88<sup>v</sup>, with lines of different colours added by the author indicating the typical compositional spaces of the game miniatures included to the book, c. 1283/84. 247
- Figure 10.3. ‘Tabular representations of two chess problems, with the names of chess pieces in black and red ink’, Nicolas de Nicolai or Boncompagno da Signa (?), *Bonus Socius*, problems 13 and 14. 254
- Figure 10.4. ‘Painted representation of a chess problem decorated with gold leaf, tendrils and drogeries’, Nicolas de Nicolai (?), *Traité du jeu des échecs*, MS BnF Latin 10286, fol. 4<sup>r</sup>, c. 1300–1380. 254
- Figure 10.5. ‘Two players at tables’, *Codex Buranus*, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek Munich (BSB), MS Clm 4660, fol. 91<sup>v</sup>, c. 1230 (with additions until the second half of the fourteenth century). 256
- Figure 10.6. ‘Two chess players’, *Ḥadīṭ Bay’ād wa Riyād*, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Vat. Arab. 368, fol. 31<sup>r</sup>, thirteenth century, Seville (?). 256
- Table 10.1. Tabular overview showing the structure of the *Libro de acedrex, dados e tablas*. 241
- Table 10.2. Tabular overview showing the image types in chronological order as they appear in the *Libro de acedrex, dados e tablas*. 244

- Figure 11.1. Frieze with boy holding whirligig, from Palazzo Chiaramonti at Palermo, early sixteenth century. Palermo, Galleria Regionale della Sicilia, inv. no. 98. 266
- Figure 11.2. Putto with whirligig in a painted loggia, Pietro Venale, 1550–1555. Roma, Villa Giulia. 266
- Figure 11.3. Maiolica dish with putto holding ball, Gubbio, c. 1530. Amsterdam, Rijksmuseum, inv. no. BK-17308. 268
- Figure 11.4. Fresco with boy riding hobby horse and girl holding pull-cart and doll, flanking the Moon, 1361. Padova, Chiesa degli Eremitani. 269
- Figure 11.5. Cancer in *Liber Physiognomia* with boy riding hobby horse and girl holding pull-cart and doll, flanking the Moon, c. 1440. Modena, Biblioteca Estense, ms. a.W.8.20, fol. 4<sup>r</sup>. 270
- Figure 11.6. Fresco with Moon, Old Age, Mars, and Infancy riding hobby horse, early fifteenth century. Foligno, Palazzo Trinci, Sala delle Arti Liberali e dei Pianeti. 272
- Figure 11.7. Birth tray with boy holding pinwheel and riding toy, Bartolomeo di Fruosino, Florence, 1430s. Isola Bella, Collezione Borromini, unknown inv. no. 275
- Figure 11.8. Maiolica dish with putto riding hobby horse, Pesaro or Venice, 1510–1520. Oxford, Ashmolean Museum, inv. no. WA1899. CDEF.C515. 275
- Figure 11.9. Putti spinning tops in manuscript margin, attributed to Francesco d'Antonio del Chierico, after 1455. Città del Vaticano, Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana, Urb. Lat. 224, fol. 2<sup>r</sup>. 277
- Figure 11.10. Maiolica relief with playing putti, one on hobby horse, 1540. Rimini, Tempio Malatestiano. 279
- Figure 11.11. Painting with various toys, Bernardino Detti, Madonna della Pergola, Pistoia, 1523. Pistoia, Museo Civico, inv. no. 42. 280
- Figure 11.12. Detail of Fig. 11.11 showing two rattles. 281
- Figure 11.13. Detail of Fig. 11.11 showing boy with whirligig and girl holding rag doll. 282
- Figure 11.14. Wooden spinning tops, excavated in the centre of Alghero (Sardinia), fifteenth century. Alghero, Museo Archeologico della Città di Alghero, showcase 14. 283
- Figure 12.1. A German chess board from the late sixteenth century. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. 291
- Figure 12.2. A knight. William Caxton's *The Game and Playe of Chesse*, 1483. 293
- Figure 12.3. A knight. An early sixteenth century German chess piece. Victoria and Albert Museum, London. 293
- Figure 13.1. 'Interior View of Maeshowe' Farrer, *Notice of Runic Inscriptions* (1862), Pl. II. 300
- Figure 13.2. Aerial view of Maeshowe, Edinburgh, Historic Environment Scotland, DP 273441. 304

Figure 13.3. General View of Maeshowe from N.E. Farrer, <i>Notice of Runic Inscriptions</i> (1862), Pl. II.	304
Figure 13.4. Maeshowe – cross sections and ground plan drawn by H. Dryden, Edinburgh, Historic Environment Scotland (Society of Antiquaries of Scotland Collection), DP 150448. 1861–1866.	306
Figure 13.5. Cross below inscription no. 3.	308
Figure 13.6. Crosses encircling inscription no. 17, Farrer, <i>Notice of Runic Inscriptions</i> , (1862), Pl. IX.	308
Figure 13.7. Inscription no. 5: <i>Vémundr reist</i> (Vémundr carved).	309
Figure 13.8. Type 1 graffiti – self-reflexive.	310
Figure 13.9. Type 2 graffiti – performative.	311
Figure 13.10. Decoding twig runes. Example taken from Farrer, <i>Notice of Runic Inscriptions</i> (1862), Pl. XI.	312
Figure 13.11. Above: Disguised runes, Lithograph No. 22. Below: Otter or dog, Lithograph No. 23. Farrer, <i>Notice of Runic Inscriptions</i> (1862), Pl. XI.	312
Figure 13.12. Type 3 graffiti – place and space.	314
Figure 13.13. Serpent knot carving located on north-east elevation at XXVI (see Fig. 13.9), Edinburgh, Historic Environment Scotland, SC 1330895.	315
Figure 13.14. Dragon carving located on north-east elevation at XXV (see Fig. 13.9), Edinburgh, Historic Environment Scotland, SC 1330893.	315
Figure 13.15. Spatial placement of inscriptions nos 25–28.	316
Figure 13.16. Maeshowe interior (1875).	320
Figure 14.1. Two <i>pente grammai</i> boards in the third intercolumniation on the step and stylobate of the Theodosian Basilica of Hagia Sophia.	337
Figure 14.2. Drawings of two double <i>pente grammai</i> games from the elite residence at Salamis/Constantia.	342
Figure 14.3. Merels game boards on the balustrade of the west gallery of Hagia Sophia in Istanbul.	346

## Playthings: Ivory on Ivory

In one striking episode of the thirteenth-century otherworldly *roman d'aventure* known as *Huon de Bordeaux*, the titular character, Huon — a young knight who wanders the earth, seeking to complete impossible tasks with the help of the fairy king Oberon — finds himself at the court of the Saracen emir Yvorin.<sup>1</sup> In the course of his conversation with the emir, Huon makes a series of boasts, claiming that in addition to his prowess in hunting, in horse-riding, and in the bedroom, he is extraordinarily adept at playing chess. Yvorin is riled by Huon's arrogance: 'J'ai une fille qui moult a de biauté / Des eskiés set à moult grande plenté / Ainc ne le vi de nul homme mater' ('I have a daughter who is very beautiful / and so good at playing chess / that no man has ever defeated her').<sup>2</sup> The game, far from taking the form of a pleasurable pastime, becomes a nexus of psychosocial intrigues and sociopolitical forces, a battle of religions and sexes. Hoping that the knight will not only be humiliated but also silenced for good, the emir proposes high stakes:

A li t'estuet, par Mahommet, juer / Par tel convent, s'ele te puet mater /  
Trestout errant aras le cieff cope. / L'autre partie te convient scouter /  
Que se tu pues me fille au ju mater / Dedens ma camber ferai .i. lit parer /  
Aveuc ma fille tote nuit vous girés / De li ferés toutes vos volentés / Et le  
matin, quant il est ajornés / De mon avoir .c. libres averés.

(I charge you, by Muhammed, to play the game with her according to this covenant: if she can defeat you, your head will be swiftly cut off. On the other hand ... if you can defeat my daughter at the game, I will prepare a bed in my chamber, and you will pass the whole night

- 
- 1 For the thirteenth-century edition, *Huon de Bordeaux*, ed. by Guessard and Loizeau de Grandmaison; for the fifteenth-century version, *Le Huon de Bordeaux en prose du XVème siècle*, ed. by Raby; for a succinct description of the text, see Picherit, 'Huon de Bordeaux', p. 467.
  - 2 *Huon de Bordeaux*, ed. by Guessard and Loizeau de Grandmaison, p. 221, lines 7427–29; entire episode, pp. 222–25.



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*Games and Visual Culture in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance*, ed. by Vanina Kopp and Elizabeth Lapina, HDL 8 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2020) pp. 219–235  
BREPOLS PUBLISHERS

10.1484/M.HDL-EB-5.120709

with my daughter and do what you like with her, and in the morning, when you say good-bye to her, I will give you 100 pounds [of silver].<sup>3</sup>

The girl is a fabulous, if reluctant, player; she nearly wins the game as Yvorin's barons burst out laughing, but in the end, smitten by Huon's beauty, she loses. The chivalrous Huon declines to sleep with her, much to Ivoryn's relief and to his daughter's bitter disappointment. If only she knew she were to be refused, she would have mated her opponent without fail.

Several concepts of play are, indeed, at play in this excerpt. One is play as a game: what the Oxford English Dictionary defines as 'an activity engaged in for enjoyment and entertainment'.<sup>4</sup> Huon and the princess are playing chess, a game that has a long history, which need not be rehearsed here.<sup>5</sup> Suffice it to say that the game originated in China or India, spread from there to Persia, and found its way to the Iberian Peninsula and then to Europe, probably by the eleventh century. Its exotic pedigree undoubtedly made it a game of choice in later medieval romances such as *Huon de Bordeaux* that took place in foreign lands. Another example is the English romance the *Stanzaic Guy of Warwick*, where the game of chess is played in remote Saracen lands between the sultan's son Sadok and a prince named Fabour (the game ends badly: Sadok assaults Fabour with a rook, and Fabour retaliates in kind killing Sadok with the chessboard).<sup>6</sup> The alluringly alien origin of the game, too, is perhaps responsible for the magical, enchanted chess sets that turn up in the French *Perlesvaus* and the Dutch *Roman van Walewein*.<sup>7</sup> But chess-playing extended well beyond episodic appearances in epic and romance literature. In Gautier de Coinci's *Les Miracles de Nostre Dame*, the entire world becomes a chess board: creation is reduced to a game between God and Satan, with Mary cast as the main figure on the board — the Virgin Queen — that checkmates the Deceiver.<sup>8</sup> The game's socio-political and moral symbolism was made clear

3 *Huon de Bordeaux*, ed. by Guessard and Loizeau de Grandmaison, pp. 221–22, lines 7430–39.

4 <https://en.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/play> [last accessed 24 December 2017].

5 The history of this game has been the subject of many books, from the classic study of Murray, *A History of Chess* to the very recent book by Sharples, *A Cultural History of Chess-Players*.

6 See Leitch, 'Ritual, Revenge and the Politics of Chess in Medieval Romance'. For the critical edition of the text, see *Fragments of an Early Fourteenth-Century Guy of Warwick*, ed. by Mills and Huws. Yet another fourteenth-century example comes from Jacques de Longuyon's *Les vœux du paon* (or the *Roman de Cassamus*), which features a chess match between princess Fesonas and the captured sultan Cassiel that takes place in Gardes. For the imagery of this *chanson de geste* and specifically that of the game of chess, see Leo, *Images, Texts, and Marginalia in a 'Vows of the Peacock'*, esp. pp. 61–74.

7 van Dalen-Oskam, 'The Flying Chess-Set in the *Roman van Walewein*', pp. 59–68; Weinberg, 'The Magic Chessboard in the *Perlesvaus*', pp. 25–35; for the study of the latter work, see Kelly, *Le Haut Livre Du Graal, Perlesvaus*.

8 See Taylor, 'God's Queen', pp. 403–19; on the changing role of the Queen piece, see Yalom, *Birth of the Chess Queen*, esp. pp. 107–50. Among most useful studies on medieval chess and its metaphors are Adams, *Power Play*; Moyer, *The Philosopher's Game*; Plessow, 'What the

in all manner of texts, from the allegorical treatise *Les echecs amoureux* to Jacobus de Cessolis's *Liber de moribus hominum* to Alfonso el Sabio's *Libros del ajedrez, dados, y tablas*.<sup>9</sup> Chess is a game of strategy and therefore was likened to war: that Richard the Lionheart wins the match against the Earl of Richmond in the fourteenth-century romance *Richard Coeur de Lyon* is directly correlated with his successful staging of battles.<sup>10</sup> In turn, the chess game as a metaphor for sexual desire, foregrounded in *Les echecs amoureux*, resonates powerfully throughout various Arthurian romances, such as the Middle English *Avowing of King Arthur*, where chess games often take place during staged seductions.<sup>11</sup> Indeed, the game's predicate of tactical and patient pursuit made it a potent stand-in not only for the game of war but also for the game of love — the latter made clear in *Huon de Bordeaux*, where the young woman falls in love with the knight as she plays the game: her loss in chess prefigures and parallels her loss of Huon himself.<sup>12</sup>

Such play is made visible in a fourteenth-century Parisian ivory mirror case, one of three that seem to have been carved by the same atelier (Fig. 9.1). The mirror itself, a disk of polished metal, would have fitted into the other side of the case. It is likely that the case, about four inches in diameter, was — like so many other similar objects — originally squared off by four monstrous beasts that formed its terminals: in this way, the mirror could have been hung on a wall with the help of a small drilled hole, or placed on a shelf.<sup>13</sup> Similar mirrors were popular in French and German wealthy households, surviving in large numbers. Accounts of the dukes of Burgundy contain many entries that concern their expenditures for the ivory mirrors, as, for example, this one: 'à Henry de Grés pour un estuy à 3 pignes, ung mirouoir et une broche, tout d'yvoire ... et pour ung autre petit estuy garni de 3 pignes, 1 mirouoir et une broche, tout d'yvoire' (to Henry de Grés for a case with three combs, a mirror and a brooch, all ivory ... and for another little case that included three combs, one mirror and a brooch, all ivory).<sup>14</sup> Indeed, the combination

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Artefacts Tell'; Bourgeois, 'Les échecs médiévaux'.

- 9 See *Les Eschéz d'Amours*, ed. by O'Sullivan and Heyworth; Jacob de Cessolis, *The Book of Chess*; Alfonso X, *Libros del ajedrez, dados, y tablas*; on this last work, see Serrano, 'Visual Frames and Breaking the Rules of the Reconquista', pp. 261–75; and Constable, 'Chess and Courtly Culture in Medieval Castile', pp. 301–47.
- 10 *Der mittellenglische Versroman über Richard Löwenherz*, ed. by Brunner, pp. 77–452; discussed in Leitch, 'Ritual, Revenge and the Politics of Chess in Medieval Romance', pp. 129–30.
- 11 For critical editions, see *The Avowing of King Arthur* ed. by Dahood; *The Avowing of King Arthur*, ed. by Dass.
- 12 See Juel, 'Chess, Love, and the Rhetoric of Distraction', pp. 73–97.
- 13 For the mirror, see, *inter alia*, Gertsman and Rosenwein, *The Middle Ages in 50 Objects*, pp. 142–45; Barnett, ed., *Images in Ivory: Precious Objects of the Gothic Age*, pp. 232–33; Randall Jr., *The Golden Age of Ivory*, no. 84; Wixom, *Treasures from Medieval France*, pp. v–18.
- 14 Prost and Prost, *Inventaires mobiliers et extraits des comptes des ducs de Bourgogne*, II, 294, entry 1677.



Figure 9.1. Ivory mirror case with a couple playing chess, Paris, 1325–1350, diameter: 102 mm. © Cleveland Museum of Art, J. H. Wade Fund 1940.1200.

of three combs, a mirror, and a brooch included in a single case seems to have been quite typical.<sup>15</sup>

Ivory mirrors often formed part of a trousseau and were given as gifts. The subjects carved on their cases were almost always secular. Some featured the God of Love, or the Castle of Love under attack, or the Fountain of Youth; still others presented scenes of courtship, jousting, and hunting, or narratives from romances.<sup>16</sup> The game of chess was a favourite, and the one represented on this mirror is purported to visualize a scene from *Huon de Bordeaux*, although its implied outcome is rather different. Here, a courting couple plays chess in an elegant tent. Propped up in the middle by a thin but sturdy pole, it is parted in the front to reveal the pair. The chessboard sits on a table between them, positioned ambiguously so as to suggest that it might also rest on their knees. The pole and the table fuse neatly into one. The

15 See, e.g., Prost and Prost, *Inventaires mobiliers et extraits des comptes des ducs de Bourgogne*, p. 395, entry 2577, where this combination is mentioned three times.

16 See Randall Jr., 'Popular Romances Carved in Ivory', pp. 63–79, esp. pp. 70–75.

man, legs crossed, intently focuses on the board, getting ready to put down his piece, while his companion tells him just where to put it: faintly smiling, she points her right index finger at the board. Another piece, already won, is held in her left hand.

The scene appears innocent enough, but all is not what it seems. The young man grasps the pole with his hand, encroaching upon the woman's space. The pole thrusts into the opening folds of the tent, echoing the suggestive folds of the woman's dress, which form a deep triangle with a central crease between her legs. The woman's wimple, too, visually repeats the draped tent flaps. Discussing a contemporaneous sister-piece of this mirror, which shows a similar scene augmented, however, by the presence of two chaperones, Michael Camille suggests that 'this mirror is an elaborate allegory of desire in which the man is about to "check" his mate' and that the curtains, penetrated by the tent pole, index not only 'the curtains around a bed, but also the anatomical opening of the woman's body, which cannot be represented as such'.<sup>17</sup> In this mirror, the male attendant holds a falcon, a reference to a hunt — that is, another trope for love and pursuit — while the female chaperone grasps an equally suggestive chaplet. The mirror cases, then, allude to what propriety forbids. In this way, the scene, perhaps, recalls a different OED definition of what it means to play: 'to behave as though one were.' Here, the lovers behave *as though* they are occupied with chess, while the image behaves *as though* it shows a scene of desire and not a scene of an intellectual pastime.

Ivory was particularly suitable for images of desire. White and smooth, warm when held and therefore flesh-like, it was fashioned — much like parchment — from a living, growing organ: a bone, a tusk. Bodies were compared to ivory: the description of the Pearl Maiden's countenance conjures up an image of an ivory statuette detailed in gold: 'That ivory visage, whiter than whale's bone / Like shorn gold sheer her hair then shone'.<sup>18</sup> Such statuettes, too, were liable to gain living agency, as happens on the pages of St Hedwig's vita: there, an ivory image of the Virgin and Child turns every which way in the hands of her owner, and settles down only when Hedwig is buried (Fig. 9.2).<sup>19</sup> It is no accident that Jean de Meun spends a fair amount of verbiage in the *Roman de la Rose* on recasting and amplifying the Ovidian tale of Pygmalion, and describing the unnamed statue (that is, Galatea) carved by Pygmalion and endowed with life. Pygmalion can work in many media, including metal and wood, but he chooses to create his 'ymage d'ivre' — that is, of ivory.<sup>20</sup> In Ovid, this material is so akin to flesh that the difference cannot

17 Camille, *Medieval Art of Love*, p. 124.

18 *Pearl*, ed. by Vantuono, p. 22, part IV, lines 205–06. On ivory as flesh, see Kessler, *Seeing Medieval Art*, pp. 27–28, and p. 184, n. 32.

19 See Schleif, 'St Hedwig's Personal Ivory Madonna', pp. 382–403.

20 Guillaume de Lorris and Jean de Meun, *Le Roman de la Rose*, p. 1076, line 20830. On the comparative study of the Pygmalion and Galatea narratives in the *Roman de la Rose* and in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, see Edwards, 'Galatea's Pulse', pp. 229–47. See also Stoichita, *The*





Figure 9.2. Saint Hedwig worshipping images of saints and of the Virgin and Child, Silesia, 1353 © The J. Paul Getty Museum, ms. Ludwig XI 7, fol. 46<sup>v</sup>.

be discerned by sight; even before petitioning Venus to bring the statue to life, Pygmalion has to touch his work to discern whether it is ivory or flesh (*Saepe manus operi temptantes admovet, an sit / corpus an illud ebur*).<sup>21</sup> Eventually, the statue grows soft and warm, surrenders to the touch and acquires a pulse. Jean stresses the dreamlike quality of the transformation, with Pygmalion calling it ‘a marvel’, ‘a dream’, and ‘a phantom’ (lines 21150–3). The sculptor *plays* with the sculpture — the unequivocal nature of this play is figured in this image by the erect tool emerging from Pygmalion’s apron — and the space of play gives way to the space of a reverie, and finally invades day-to-day waking life: ‘Tant ont joué qu’ele est ençainte’ (They played such games of love that she became pregnant) (line 21188).

Before moving on to the central point of this chapter, it might be useful to interrogate the very notion of ‘play’ itself, however briefly. The specter of Johan Huizinga haunts the scholars who endeavour to work through this fraught and complex subject. Huizinga famously defined the space (both temporal and physical) of play as emphatically separate from everyday life:

*Pygmalion Effect*, chapters 1 and 2.

<sup>21</sup> Ovid, *Metamorphoses*, 10. 254–55.

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside ‘ordinary’ life as being ‘not serious’ but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly ... It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner.<sup>22</sup>

Few would agree with him now — the two appear eminently permeable — but recently Mary Carruthers has rehabilitated Huizinga’s thesis, at least where medieval concepts of play and creativity are concerned: in her work on the experience of beauty in the Middle Ages, she argues for human creativity defined in the medieval discourse as ‘having a powerful ludic component [ ... ] Human making in each of the arts is thought of as witty game and generative playing, with particular procedures involving the rhetorically modelled trilateral agency of artisan ... artefact, and audience.’<sup>23</sup> In other words, because the artefacts are always, per force, artificial — that is, made up, like games — ‘they are not everyday life but ... a figment or “making” of it’. Not ordinary, they interact with the ordinary: artefacts are, as Carruthers writes, ‘always in play exactly on the ground between figment and actual, as are their creators when making them and we in experiencing them.’<sup>24</sup>

The mirror case as an object, then, is an embodiment of play, of *ludus* — a play that features play (that is, the game of chess), that plays with subjectivity (that is, suggesting a game of chess as the game of love), and that plays with the medium (that is, making a play on the comparison between flesh and ivory). This last is, certainly, of most interest, because the crux of the play in this case lies in the material medium of this mirror. The sensuous quality of this material is intimated here by the emphatic way the lady cradles, *plays* with her chess piece, and the way that the man handles his. Just as the players hold the ivory pieces in their hands, so did the owner of the mirror hold this ivory piece in hers, participating in the economy of desire that blurred sensation and representation in the multivalent ludic space.

This space, moreover, is predicated on the substance/object being played *with*. The couple is making a play with bodies, for sure, but not just their own: it is not only the skin that is figured and embodied through, and assimilated with, ivory — it is also the chess piece itself that indexes the nature of its medium. Medieval chess pieces and boards were made out of a variety of materials — the cheaper ones in wood, the costlier ones in

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- 22 Huizinga, *Homo ludens*, p. 13; for other discussions of play, especially as the very concept was understood during the long Middle Ages, see Cailliois, *Les jeux et les hommes*; Centro Pio Rajna, *Passare il tempo*; Mehl, *Des jeux et des hommes dans la société médiévale*; essays in Hardwick, ed., *The Playful Middle Ages* as well as in Patterson, ed., *Games and Gaming in Medieval Literature*. For the complex intertwining of play and drama, see Clopper, *Drama, Play, and Game*.
- 23 Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty*, p. 19, pp. 20–21.
- 24 Carruthers, *The Experience of Beauty*, p. 21.

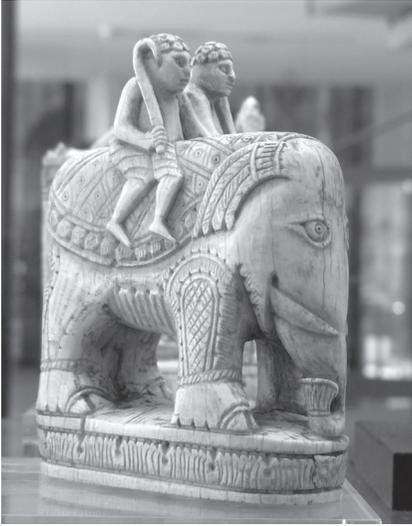


Figure 9.3. Elephant and his handlers, from the so-called 'Charlemagne's Chess Set', Salerno or Amalfi, Italy, c. 1075–1200, elephant ivory, traces of gilding and red polychrome, 11.7 cm. © Paris, Bibliothèque nationale de France, Cabinet des médailles.

metal and crystal — but the majority that survive are made out of walrus or elephant ivory. The Arthurian legends mentioned earlier also feature ivory sets, and it is not a coincidence that the name of the Saracen king who invites Huon de Bordeaux to play chess with his daughter for sexual favours is named Ivoryn (that is, 'd'ivoire' in Old French, 'made of ivory'). It is worth mentioning, too, that the figurines themselves, in their original incarnation, referred to their source material: what is now called 'bishop' was originally an 'elephant', and this nomination has been retained in a variety of languages: from the Russian 'слон', for example, to the Bengali 'hati'. The earliest chess pieces, in fact, feature precisely such elephants: in the famous eleventh-century chess set, once upon a time wishfully considered to have belonged to Charlemagne, the bishop is not a bishop but an elephant complete with his drivers (Fig. 9.3).<sup>25</sup>

Images of elephants similarly appear on ivory caskets. Carved at about the same time as the mirror case, one such casket features scenes of romances — Gawain and the Lion, Lancelot crossing the bridge of swords — and various stock images associated with erotic charge: the Fountain

<sup>25</sup> See Gaborit-Chopin, ed., *Le trésor de Saint-Denis*, pp. 132–41; Pastoureau, *L'Echiquier de Charlemagne*; Dumersan, *Histoire du cabinet des médailles, antiques et pierres gravées*, pp. 26–27.



Figure 9.4. Fountain of Youth, The Capture of the Unicorn; the Elephant with a Castle Upon Its Back, from a Casket with Scenes from Courtly Romances, 1330–1350 or later, France, Lorraine (?), ivory, overall: 9.8 × 25.9 × 1 cm.  
© Cleveland Museum of Art, John L. Severance Fund 1978.39.

of Youth, the wounding of the unicorn, the storming of the castle of love (Fig. 9.4).<sup>26</sup> Immediately to the right of the unicorn scene, but separated from it by a twisting column, is an elephant with a castle upon his back. The castle, we learn from bestiaries, provided protection for the Indian and Persian soldiers riding into battle.<sup>27</sup> Here, the god of love takes aim: having wounded the unicorn on the left, he is shooting a flower-capped arrow on the right, targeting the ladies in the castle, one of whom proffers him more flowers. The elephant is an unusual beast, clearly rendered by someone who did not have a first-hand, intimate knowledge of these animals: it features an equine tail, floppy ears that cover its head like a ragged curtain, human eyes, a trumpet-like trunk that seems to emerge out of its mouth, and hooves styled as high-heeled boots. The animal is recognizable, however, by a pair of tusks that jut out of its mouth, pushing against the column. Elephants changed their appearance with alarming frequency across late medieval imagery — some were pictured as hairy, wolf-like creatures; some resembled wild boars — but their tusks usually identified them.<sup>28</sup> While the tusks were considered to have some medicinal properties (good for the skin, good for the teeth), they were

- 26 Wixom, 'Eleven Additions to the Medieval Collection', pp. 110–26; and Klein, Fliegel and Brilliant, *Sacred Gifts and Worldly Treasures*, p. 188, cat. 67.
- 27 For an excellent compilation of sources concerning the appearance and description of elephants in bestiaries, see *The Medieval Bestiary*: <<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beast77.htm>>, bibliography at <<http://bestiary.ca/beasts/beastbiblio77.htm>> [last accessed 27 December 2017].
- 28 For the *Rochester Bestiary*, written in Latin and French in the second quarter of the thirteenth century (BL Royal 12 F XIII, here fol. 11<sup>v</sup>), see bibliography at <<http://www.bl.uk/catalogues/illuminatedmanuscripts/record.asp?MSID=95>>.

really prized as an expensive, exotic medium for carving. Elephants were understood to be intelligent animals, and the Christological interpretation left no doubt about their moral significance: because of their particular mating habits they were meant to represent Adam and Eve before and after the fall.<sup>29</sup>

The casket is steeped in fiction — rejuvenating fountains, unicorn-grasping virgins, knights from romances — but the elephant tusks are jarringly real: they are tusks carved out of tusks, a meta-comment on image-making in all of its uneasy materiality. This is a different kind of play altogether; and such play, where representation indexes either the source material or the making of the object, is not unique to ivory in later medieval art. Parchment, made out of skin, referenced skin: sometimes, the skin of an animal, and sometimes the pierced skin of Christ.<sup>30</sup> The living beast and the material that indexes this beast, for example, regularly fuse in medieval bestiaries, which often play with the notion of breached animal bodies and breach in the pages. In her recent study, Sarah Kay points to the insistent use of torn parchment for manuscript folios that feature the beaver — the animal who, when hunted for his medically beneficial testicles, purportedly would bite off his own bits and leave them for the hunters in order to escape with his life.<sup>31</sup> In turn, the elision of parchment and divine flesh is made evident in images that figure Christ's body as a charter of redemption between humanity and God, written with the ink of his blood and sealed with the wax of his heart. The early fourteenth-century handbook for preachers, *Fasciculus morum*, spells out the metaphor: 'Just such a charter did Christ write for us on the cross when he... stretched out his blessed body, as a parchment-maker can be seen to spread a hide in the sun.'<sup>32</sup> In one late medieval Carthusian miscellany, Christ both stands behind the charter and becomes one with it; the document is assimilated with the matter of parchment itself, as is Christ's body (Fig. 9.5).<sup>33</sup> Such self-reflexivity might shift in focus when an act of creation, predicated

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- 29 Hassig, *Medieval Bestiaries*, pp. 130–35. See also *A Medieval Book of Beasts*, ed. by Clark, pp. 127–30 for the original Latin text and translation; Benton, *Medieval Menagerie*, pp. 78–81; 'Elephants', in Friedman and Figg, *Trade, Travel and Exploration in the Middle Ages*, pp. 175–78; van Run, 'Hi sunt elephantes: olifanten in de middeleeuwse kunst', pp. 12–15; and Druce, 'The Elephant in Medieval Legend and Art', pp. 1–73.
- 30 On the materiality of medieval parchment see, e.g., Kay, *Animal Skins and the Reading Self*; Kay, 'Flayed Skin as *objet a*', pp. 193–205, notes on 249–51; Kay, 'Legible Skins', pp. 13–32; Kay, 'Original Skin', pp. 35–73; essays in Walter, ed., *Reading Skin in Medieval Literature and Culture*; Holsinger, 'Of Pigs and Parchment', pp. 616–23; Holsinger, 'Parchment Ethics', pp. 131–36.
- 31 Kay, *Animal Skins*, chapter 3, where she also considers images of the hyena and its many orifices. On beavers, see Isidore of Seville, *The Etymologies*, Book 12, 2. 21; Bartholomaeus Anglicus, *De proprietatibus rerum*, book 18.
- 32 *Fasciculus morum* then extends the metaphor: 'In this way Christ, when his hands and feet were nailed to the cross, offered his body like a charter to be written on. The nails in his hands were used as a quill, and his precious blood as ink' (*Fasciculus morum*, ed. by Wenzel, p. 213).
- 33 On this image, see Smith, 'The Monk Who Crucified Himself', pp. 59–61, with n. 48 containing important bibliography; and Brantley, *Reading in the Wilderness*, pp. 189–91.

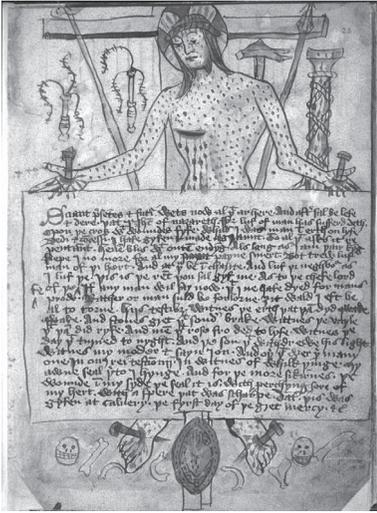


Figure 9.5. Christ's body as a parchment charter, from the Carthusian Miscellany (Religious Prose and Verse) in Northern English, including an epitome (summary) of Mandeville's travels, northern England, 1425–1475. British Library, ms. Add. 37049, fol. 23. By permission of the British Library.

on a specific medium, resonates with the subject of representation — as when an engraver incises a plate with an image of the suffering Christ, thereby inflicting tangible wounds on his represented body, or when an enamelled representation of St Agnes, who was martyred and so immortalized by fire, is placed in the flames that fused powder to gold, thereby torturing, liquefying, and subsequently eternalizing her body.<sup>34</sup>

In all such cases, the play with the medium is achieved through the explicit rhetoric of violence; ivory might suggest violence implicitly, especially when its materiality is called up metonymically: as in the case of oliphants, or hunting horns, which were themselves made from the hunted animals. The ivory casket with its high-heeled elephant is unusually blunt in foregrounding its source material, featuring an actual animal — in its entirety — whose brethren provided ivory for the coffer. More common is the representation of tusks turned oliphants in scenes that feature the hunt. Ivory hunting horns stood for an entire beast, not only because the form of the tusk was preserved in its carving but also semantically: the Old French 'oliphantus' means 'elephant'. On an ivory casket, within the fanciful scene of a stag hunt, the horns appear strikingly real: they are objects of bone carved from bone (Fig. 9.6). But what kind of a bone it is seems ambiguous: medieval hunting horns were often made

34 See Gertsman, 'Multiple Impressions', pp. 310–37.



Figure 9.6. Panel with Hunting Scenes, c. 1350, Paris, France, ivory,  $4 \frac{5}{16} \times 12 \frac{1}{8} \times \frac{3}{16}$  in. © Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Cloisters Collection, 2003; 2003.131.2.

from cattle horns — that is, from animals much smaller and more readily available than the elephant. Oliphants were the stuff of literary imagination and presentation pieces, often decorated with precious stones and metals, and more likely to be found in treasuries than in the thick of a hunt, or a war.<sup>35</sup> On this casket, then, the cattle horn is carved out of ivory, and the disjunction is part of the tug-of-war between the artifice and the reality, achieved through the recursive play with the medium.

The same reflexive, and fraught, references to the medium are even more apparent on the mirror case, with its ivory chess pieces (Fig. 9.1). This object, too, figures ivory through ivory, playing with the twined notions of visual device and material truth: the scene carved on the mirror case is make-believe, but its ivory chess pieces are, in a very immediate sense, real. To put it differently: the game of chess figured here belongs to the realm of play, but the chess pieces themselves belong to the realm of the everyday, or what Carruthers would call ‘actual’ and Huizinga would call ‘ordinary’. Ordinary, but not quite: they are not three-dimensional, not to scale — they are emphatically still representations, but representations that more closely approach reality than do any other elements of the image. The medium of ivory thus sets measure to the strata of the everyday: closest to the space of the actual are the represented ivory pieces made of ivory; further removed are the ivory-like bodies of the playing couple; still further away are the tent, the pole, and the lady’s dress, indexing those bodies; and furthest is the rest

35 On oliphants, and on the debate surrounding their potential Islamic provenance, see Sholem, *The Oliphant*; and, disputing some of his claims, Rosser-Owen, ‘The Oliphant’, pp. 15–58.

— the benches, the shoes, the headdress. Together, they form a complicated play that implicates ivory's materiality, the mirror case as an object, and the mirror's user who handles these many bodies in her own hands.

The very nature of the medium is thus mediatory: it constructs meaning by bridging the viewer and the object, and the object and its iconography, unleashing the full semiotic potential of play. Medieval writers, as is evident, have been acutely aware of this potential. Indeed, 'play' is a concept that serves as the very predicate of the Judeo-Christian Creation, as a key element of Wisdom's sojourn with God before he formed the world: 'I... was delighted every day, playing before him at all times; Playing in the world: and my delights were to be with the children of men' (Proverbs 8. 30–31). Play and delight are conceived as the constituent forces of known existence, from the divine macrocosm to the microcosm of the game, of *ludus*, in its many iterations: a game of chess; a game of love; a game of transformation — a tusk turned chess piece, a chess piece turned image, ivory turned flesh, artifice turned reality, and reality slipping back into artifice again and again, awakening a sense of wonder.

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