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Matthias Aumüller - Das Schachspiel in der europäischen Literatur [Chess in European Literature]

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by Siegfried Schönle [Original article in German is [here](#). Translation by DeepL]

Das Schach hat wie die Liebe, wie die Musik die Fähigkeit, den Menschen glücklich zu machen.

[Chess, like love, like music, has the ability to make people happy.]

Source: Dr. Tarrasch, Das Schachspiel. Systematisches Lehrbuch für Anfänger und Geübte, Berlin, 1st ed. 1931 : Deutsche Buch-Gemeinschaft, Preface p. 4.

or

Für das Schach ist wie für die Liebe ein Partner unentbehrlich.

[For chess, as for love, a partner is indispensable.]

Source: Stefan Zweig (writer); <https://www.schachbund.de/zitatensammlung.html>

Whether the reader of Matthias Aumüller's treatise Das Schachspiel in der europäischen Literatur will be "happy" or happier remains to be seen. But he certainly learns a wealth of knowledge and background - Europe-wide - to the texts presented, which are "primarily ... about love and its connection to chess" (p.9).

The book, which is highly recommended here, contains detailed reflections on five great chess poems

- Fenollar, de Castellvi, Vinyoles - Scachs d' Amor (nach 1470)
- Vida - Scacchia ludus (1527)
- Kochanowsky – Szachy (ca 1564)
- Marino – L' Adone (1623)

- Jones – Caissa (1763/1772)

They all have one thing in common, they are about chess games and the love of the players for each other!

Readers gain an insight into the mechanisms of European literary history, which has never developed in isolation in one country over the centuries, but always in the exchange of different literatures. Old Catalan, Neo-Latin, Polish, Italian, English - these are the languages in which the Chess Poems are written. Of course, we can read them in German. What they have in common is that a game of chess is their main theme in each case. (blurb)

The poems, here called chess poems, will be familiar to the vast majority of those interested in chess history in all its facets, at least by name. Poetry books are certainly not among the bestsellers on the book market! Those who cannot or do not want to show any further interest for this reason alone, since they are "only" poems, are referred here to the detailed table of contents. (Please click on the image for a larger view)

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Umschlagbild: „Mars und Venus beim Schach“, Alessandro Varotari, gen. Padovano (ca. 1631).

Quelle: Oldenburg, Landesmuseum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MarsandVenusinChess.jpg>

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So once again: One or the other chess colleague may be satisfied with knowing the poems from the title alone, but it must be said emphatically that this book is not a philologist's meticulous interpretation of poetry.

What awaits the reader?

"A foray through the literature of the Middle Ages and the history of chess in the early modern period, in which the texts and most important passages are presented in detail and explained in the context of the time" (p. 8). In addition, there are chapters with biographical information on the authors as well as notices on the respective historical background. Of course, the author also offers well-founded interpretations.

The introductory chapter (pp. 11-84) on medieval literature on chess shows, probably surprisingly for some, both the wide range of chess motifs in literature and the widespread use of chess in the European culture of the time. Worth mentioning here are the thematic aspects where does chess come from, furthermore: the medieval clergy, the 2nd estate, and the moral problem: is it Christian to play chess and to spend time with this game? In this context, the reader reads a good explanation Einsiedeln, the *versus de scachis* from the 10th century, followed by the game of chess as a "model" for an orderly society based on the sermons of Jacobus de Cessoli. But the chess game allowed for even more: it was a symbol of existence, referring to dualities such as life and death, sin and the expectation of salvation. The imagery that was made possible with the help of the chessboard and its pieces also radiated into other cultural spheres, because it could be used to explain difficult connections. - These aspects can be roughly assigned to the religious context.

The author manages a really helpful and easy-to-read overview by also turning to the aristocratic / courtly sphere of life: Chess and knights as well as the multitude of chess scenes in courtly epics and novels known today. This is indicated by *Tristen and Isolde*, the *Parzival* as well as *Flore and Blanscheflur*. In all texts, the central theme - chess and love - plays a role. Of course, the structure allows skipping the following contents (chess as a love metaphor and symbol; the allegory of love-chess) in order to study the summary (pp. 83-84) with profit.

Such subjectively weighted reading interest is due to the clear structure. This also applies to the following chapters, in which the individual chess poems are presented. Here too, depending on one's interests, one can limit oneself to *Vida* or *William Jones* or ... Information on the authors, the contemporary historical background (Renaissance, Baroque, 18th century), the contents of the poems and their language, not forgetting, of course, the interpretations offered by the author.

How does all this happen?

First and foremost, in a language that is easy to read and understand, because technical terms are largely dispensed with. If technical terms are necessary, they are well explained. The essays are also reader-friendly because there are no footnotes to impede the flow of reading. Each chapter is not "burdened" with references to secondary literature, but these can be read in separate sections at the end, if required.

The course of the analysis can be roughly summarised as follows:

The Catalan chess poem *Scachs d' Amor* is medieval in many respects. The style of play and the language conveyed in the poem reach into the early modern period (p. 180f). *Scacchia ludus* by Bishop *Vida* dispenses with the theme of love, but emphasises play as a divine art. Things are more worldly in *Jan Kochanowski's* work. In his poem *Szachy*, two men play for the favour of a woman in a feudal world. Here, however, the woman is no longer the active party, but the object of the action. This is under the

impression of the poem by Vida, to whom the Polish poet pays his respects.

The age of the Italian Baroque becomes more vivid with the poem *L' Adone* by Giambattista Marino. Adonis, the beautiful youth and hunter, and Venus, the goddess of love, are the protagonists and G. Marino allows their union at the end.

Of particular interest in terms of chess is Canto XV. A chessboard stands on a table, the splendour of which is described in detail, the pieces are explained as well as the rules of chess, which also state the goal. The game serves to pass the time of the lovers. It begins with a double move of the queen's pawn by *Venus*, exchange of pawns happens as well as castling. The knight fork is already known to the poet. With divine help, precisely *Mercury's*, with false play and the use of already captured pieces, *Adonis* apparently succeeds in winning. But *Venus* sees through this and, although she signals her love with her feet under the board, she angrily removes all the pieces from the board. It is then disputed who won this game.

Since the CH&LS (formerly KWA) has many members in the USA and England, I would like to go into more detail about the poem *Caïssa* by William Jones.

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[Internet Archive](#)

Caïssa, or the Game at Chess, a Poem - this is the full title of the poem with whose name the author made himself famous, because today the chess goddess *Caïssa* is well known.

Chapter VI concludes Matthias Aumüller's study with the poem *Caïssa* by William Jones (1746-1794).

In 1763, at the age of 17, Sir William Jones wrote the poem *Caïssa* in Latin hexameters, with strong references to *scacchia, ludus*, published in 1527 by Marco Girolamo Vida.

M. Aumüller calls the poem "a late echo" of Vida.

W. Jones indicated a mythical origin of chess with his juvenile work, which has become a kind of myth. *Caïssa* has since been called the "goddess" of chess, her name being used in various contexts in modern chess, including the language of the players.

Better known as a scholar, W. Jones also published an English-language version of the poem.

In the frame narrative, two nymphs, Sirena and Delia, play chess. Daphnis is their teacher and arbiter. In the interior narrative, in a mythical landscape, a tree nymph chases a stag, but is famous above all for her beauty, that is *Caïssa*.

In the poem, the nymph *Caïssa* initially fends off the love efforts of Mars, the god of war. Spurned, Mars seeks the help of a god who creates the chess set as a gift for Mars to win *Caïssa*'s favour. Mars receives her affection, but only because the latter takes a liking to his chessboard.

In the further frame narrative, in which Daphnis continues a losing game for Sirena, he also fails to win, as the beauty Daphnis triumphs. This is all during a king's gambit, in which a pawn conversion is also

described.

Detailed biographical remarks close the chapter. The reader learns of the poet's other abilities, including the fact that he mastered 11 languages [Update 2023-12-09] (p. 239). After his honeymoon, around 1783, Jones took up a judgeship at the Bengal Court. As a result, he occupied himself with Sanskrit. By the end of his life, he is said to have mastered as many as 28 languages to varying degrees [thanks to Harry Schaack, KARL]. [/Update]

In the introduction, the author formulates his aspirations and the final question is: does he succeed in realising them?

The author's language is deliberately chosen and not that of a specialist with specific technical terminology. The stylistic simplicity is a good choice by the author to minimise the distance between what is presented and the reader in order to appeal to the widest possible readership.

In the chapter on Vida, the author formulates a view that one does not need to know "too much" about literary predecessors to understand a work. "What one needs to know, it ideally contains itself."

In terms of the book, one can conclude that this treatise contains to a large extent what one should or could know about chess in literature from the Middle Ages to modern times.

Those interested in chess and its history should really read it!

Matthias Aumüller

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