



## Birth of the Chess Queen: A History

By Marilyn Yalom

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### Birth of the Chess Queen: A History By Marilyn Yalom

Everyone knows that the queen is the most powerful piece in chess, but few people know that the game existed for five hundred years without her. In India, Persia, and the Arab lands, where the game was first played, a general, or vizier (chief counselor to the king), occupied the square where the queen now stands. Not until the year 1000, two hundred years after Arab conquerors brought chess to southern Europe, did a chess queen appear on the board. Initially she was the weakest piece, moving only one square at a time on the diagonal, yet by 1497, during the reign of Isabella of Castile, the chess queen had become the formidable force she is today.

How and why did this transformation take place? *Birth of the Chess Queen* examines the five-hundred-year period between the chess queen's timid emergence and her elevation into the game's mightiest piece. Marilyn Yalom, inspired by a handful of surviving medieval chess queens, traces their origin and spread from Spain, Italy, Germany, France, and England to Scandinavia and Russia. In a lively and engaging narrative, Yalom draws parallels between the birth of the chess queen and the ascent of female sovereigns in Europe, presenting a layered, fascinating history of medieval courts, with their intrigues and internal struggles for power. Further, she shows the connection between the chess queen, the cult of the Virgin Mary, and the cult of Romantic Love, all of which influenced European society for centuries to come.

Illustrated with beautiful art throughout, this book takes a fresh look at the politics and culture of medieval Europe, the institution of queenship, and the reflections of royal power in the figure of the chess queen.

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## Editorial Review

From Publishers Weekly

A senior scholar at Stanford's Institute for Women and Gender who has written extensively on women's history, Yalom (*A History of the Wife*; etc.) sees the rise of female power throughout the centuries reflected in the history of the chess queen: "She has entered the academy of gendered icons, alongside the Earth Mother, the Amazon, and the Virgin Mary." For 500 years, chess was played in India, Persia and the Arab world minus a queen; she finally made her entrance in southern Europe around A.D. 1000. Drawing parallels between "symbolic queens on the chessboard and living queens at numerous royal courts," Yalom introduces readers to significant queens, empresses and countesses as she traces the spread of chess across Europe. With anecdotes, art, legends and literature, she shows how the chess queen became "the quintessential metaphor for female power in the Western world." Yalom offers an outstanding glimpse at chess as a courting ritual: "The chess queen and the cult of love grew up together and formed a symbiotic relationship, each feeding on the other." She also addresses the current status of female chess players—only 5% of the world's chess players are women—and wonders if "the best female players [will] ever be able to beat the best male players." Combining exhaustive research with a deep knowledge of women's history, Yalom presents an entertaining and enlightening survey that offers a new perspective on an ancient game. B&w illus. Copyright © Reed Business Information, a division of Reed Elsevier Inc. All rights reserved.

From [The New Yorker](#)

Chess was invented in India in the fifth century and was spread by Islamic conquests to Europe, where the piece known as the vizier became the queen—the only female in the all-male club of chess pieces. Yalom makes a credible, though circumstantial, case that this rise reflects the power intermittently accorded to, or seized by, female European monarchs. It was in the late tenth century, during the regency of Empress Adelaide, that the vizier underwent his sex change. Five hundred years later, in Queen Isabella's Spain, the queen was transformed from a timid lady mincing one diagonal step at a time into what one shocked Italian bishop called a "bellicose virago." But there's a sting at the end of this feminist historical fable: the queen's supremacy made the game so much faster and more competitive that it was considered unsuitable for upper-class women.

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From [Booklist](#)

How did a game that originated in India in the sixth century evolve to feature a game piece that now has iconic stature in modern Western culture? Both chess fans and those unfamiliar with the game will enjoy this absorbing look at the evolution of chess and the rise in power and stature of the chess queen in the last 500 years. Yalom (*A History of the Breast*, 1997) explores how chess evolved from a game of war to a romantic pastime and a domestic ritual, eventually becoming "thoroughly masculinized" when it moved from the private home into the public domains. Chess figured prominently in culture and literature in India, Persia, Arab lands, and eventually throughout Europe, as the pieces evolved from abstract figures to viziers and elephants and eventually to queens and bishops. Yalom highlights the influences of historical women, including Eleanor of Aquitaine, Queen Isabella, Catherine de' Medici, and Elizabeth I, on the growing power and stature of the chess queen as she evolved into the most powerful piece on the board. *Vanessa Bush*  
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