A GAME OF LOVE AND CHESS:  
A STUDY OF CHESS PLAYERS ON GOTHIC IVORY MIRROR CASES

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By  
Caitlin Binkhorst  
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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

Imagine a work of art that depicts emotional interaction between a man and a woman, while engaging in a thrilling game, made with the care of some of the most talented sculptors of the gothic period. Every line, an elegant curve. Every fold of fabric, every curl of hair, a delicate detail in a bigger picture of passionate emotion. An object that would be given as a gift or purchased as a memento of a wonderful memory, forever cherished by the owner and carried on her person. An object so popular that fifteen pieces with very similar subject, composition, and style survive into the modern era and nearly every major museum with a medieval art collection has one. Yet also imagine that such an object has been ignored by art historians.

Such is the case for gothic ivory mirror cases. George C. Williamson, author of *The Book of Ivory*, published in the 1920s, wrote a single paragraph on the subject, which summarizes our knowledge of the mirror cases then and since:

Mirror cases of ivory are to be seen in most museums and are sometimes of great beauty. They were often double like diptychs and contained the mirror inside, but were beautifully decorated on the exterior, generally with romantic scenes that would appeal to the fair ladies for whose use they were intended. The finest belong to the fourteenth century.¹

A total of 142 such mirror cases were catalogued by Raymond Koechlin in 1924,² and since then there has been no further publication that goes into depth on more than a

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handful of these ivories or analyzes them beyond the superficial details. These mirror cases portray a variety of subject matter, from scenes of contemporary literature to contemporary life, and have significant historical value in determining how life was lived in the fourteenth century. Yet many of the scenes do not appear in other kinds of ivories like caskets and even fewer appear in other media with the same high level of craftsmanship or elegance.

There are questions in nearly every of these areas that are unanswered. Where they were made, when, whether in multiple production centers, or in the same shop, is unknown. Many of the mirror cases still have mysterious subject matter, and the bigger picture, of why so many works of courtly love were created out of ivory in the fourteenth century has not been breached.

The subject of courtly love itself is often ignored by art historians in favor of religious art with better provenance, an art that can be attached to documents early on in its history. While many art museums have a section devoted to the courtly knight, usually including armor or painted shields and often a courtly love ivory, books on medieval art often ignore the subject. The concept is not a simple one. The four steps toward love and the very systematic way love was perceived in courtly love interaction are alien to modern ideas. Other courtly themes such as the concepts of adultery, secrecy, and jealousy are so ingrained in human nature it seems impossible that modern culture has not noticed the links to courtly love, nor how much these ideas penetrate our lives.

Courtly love is generally a bond between two people who usually are not married to each other, and who carry on an affair according to specific steps. These steps include
looking, speaking, touching, kissing, and the consummation of the relationship. None of these steps are alien to our modern ideas of courting. Courtly Love was popularized by a combination of troubadours, love courts of Aquitaine, and a book written on the subject by Andreas Capellanus in the twelfth century. The term courtly love is a modern one, but it accurately describes the secular art of this period, which focuses on courtly activity between amorous couples, scenes in popular romances, and on aspects of behavior alluded to in Capellanus’s love treatise.

The earliest courtly love objects were boxes made of bone or enamels, particularly those from the Limoges area in France. One of the most intriguing caskets to survive from the twelfth century is the enamel casket in the British Museum (Figure 1). On its front panel, we see a troubadour and dancer, a knight guarding a key, and a man in supplication to his lady. Although some have called this the earliest courtly love piece, the imagery strongly suggests a well developed courtly love culture complete with imagery and symbolism in the 1180s. It may be no coincidence that it was made at nearly the same time and in the same region of France that Andreas wrote his treatise.

A mere century and a half later, there was an absolute blossoming of courtly love art, seemingly independent from literature. Between beautiful illustrations in the Manesse Codex of ca. 1300 (Figure 2), the marginal images like those in the Romance of Alexander of 1344 (Figure 3), and the enamels created in the new techniques in translucent enamel around 1325-1340 (figure 4), courtly love imagery flourished. However, these objects are rare in comparison to the abundance of secular ivories produced at this time. There were caskets, combs, and mirror cases with depictions of

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hunting and jousting scenes, lovers exchanging gifts and embraces, battles over the castle of love, stories about women and unicorns, and tales such as that of Aristotle and Phyllis. Yet the question remains, why did courtly love themes become a popular subject in art at this time, and why were so many images created in ivory?

This study tackles only one of the many subjects depicted on ivory mirror cases, the chess scene (figure 5). The wealth of sexual innuendos and depth of emotion between the two chess players make it one of the most interesting mirror case subjects. Fifteen mirror cases depicting the chess scene survive (figure 5), some of better quality, others badly damaged over time, and still others that may be less than authentic, but all attest to the ongoing popularity of the theme. Yet one aspect ties these mirror cases together better than any of the other subjects depicted in ivory at the time, and that is their nearly identical compositions which distinguishes them from all the other mirror case subjects.

In this study, the reasons for this similarity will be examined, from the use of model books to modern copies, all of which attest to the incredible and ongoing popularity of the chess player scene. While this scene has been repeatedly connected to literature contemporary to the mirror cases, this study shows that the mirror cases do not illustrate these stories, but instead illustrate a scene of the incredibly popular game of chess. All of these aspects, including the shear abundance of courtly love themed ivories, point to the importance the theme of courtly love had in the early to mid 1300s, yet the reason for that importance is only conjecture.

Finally, this study will tackle the bigger picture of the fourteenth century courtly love ivories. Over one hundred and fifty mirror cases of a courtly theme survive the 1300s, along with boxes, combs, and other items. While literature of the time, as we will
see, points to a change from courtly love themed poetry to prose that creates an all-encompassing fantasy realm, courtly love themed art continued to display scenes that were common to daily life or represent ideas formulated when courtly love was at its peak in the late twelfth century. Because of this, I postulate that, the troubling environment of the fourteenth century, led to escapism through art objects, a harkening back to a time when courtly love flourished and life was easier. The abundance of courtly love ivories in the fourteenth century can be attributed to courtly love nostalgia.
CHAPTER II
ANALYSIS OF THE “CHESS PLAYER” MIRROR CASES

The “chess player” mirror cases have often been ignored because they are small functional objects, but every nuance of detail within these utilitarian ivories is a mark of beauty and the legacy of courtly love. The “chess player” mirror cases are some of the finest of surviving mirror cases in terms of elegance and detail. Yet, they are also unparalleled in their exact similarities and specific subject matter.

When Raymond Koechlin conducted his study of gothic ivories in 1924, he encountered 13 “chess player” mirror cases, all following a very similar composition. According to the Gothic Ivories Project at the Courtauld Institute of Art, fifteen “chess player” mirror cases are accounted for today (figure 5). Four of these cases were not included on Koechlin’s list, bringing to total of chess player mirror cases recorded in the last century up to 17, though some on the original list are now lost or remain unknown in private collections. Regardless, these can only represent a small sampling of the number of pieces that were made in medieval times.

The surviving mirror cases are astoundingly similar, and yet there is a good amount of variety among them. All of the “chess player” mirror cases show a male and female figure playing chess. Four of these include additional accompanying figures.

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4 Koechlin, Les Ivoires, 381-384.
Some of them show different hair styles, hand positions, and clothing. But overall, the compositions of the “chess player” mirror cases are astoundingly similar, the major difference being the skill with which they were carved. The cases in Cleveland and the Louvre, and one of the cases in the Victoria and Albert, possess an elegance of carving that the others are simply missing. Still others, such as the “chess player” mirror case at the Walters Art Gallery, are carved in an entirely different style.

The composition of the Cleveland Mirror Case (Figure 6) centers around two lover’s playing chess. The scene takes place, presumably within a tent, the curtains and center pole being the only clues to the location. At first, the chess table appears to be attached to the pole, but because a pole in the center of a chess board would be disadvantage to play, it must be in front of the pole. There is also a possibility that the chess board sits balanced on the two lover’s knees, giving even more intimacy to the scene. The curtains are tied back away from the couple, immediately giving the scene a voyeuristic atmosphere, as if what is going on beyond the curtain is private and intimate. Indeed, Micheal Camille notes that the way the curtains open suggests the intimate opening of a woman’s body.\(^6\) This reference further underscores the intimacy of the moment.

Indeed, in this mirror case, the figures are attended by no one, and proceed in their game of chess with many intimate gestures. Most obviously, the male figure grips the center pole, and pulls himself toward the woman. While the pole marks a division between the man and woman in this mirror case, the fact that the male crosses this boundary implies the crossing of other physical and emotional boundaries with the

\(^6\) Camille, *Art of Love*, 124.
woman. With his right hand he moves a chess piece, but the woman points at the board avidly, as if to warn him that if he places his chess piece there, it might be overtaken by one of hers, or he might put himself in checkmate. This could be a metaphor that in the game of love, one has to have foresight to avoid the troublesome problems that go along with courtly love, such as being caught in the act or having one’s secret relationship discovered. In the woman’s other hand, she very awkwardly holds a chess piece. In doing so, she reminds her partner that she has already overtaken one of his pieces, and that he is in danger of losing the game. He is not only in danger of losing this game, but also of losing his wits to the wills of love. Baffled by her beauty, and other qualities, he is being outplayed.

As noted before, the male’s grasp on the center pole, pulls his body toward the center, and toward the woman. Yet, her body is angled away from him, her feet are staunchly pressed to the floor. This gesture away from the male shows that she is resisting his advances. Yet her head is angled toward the male, creating additional intimacy as well as suggesting conversation. Interestingly, the only point where the two figures actually touch is their feet. The young man sits with one leg, casually crossed over the other, giving the viewer the impression he is very comfortable in this situation, and not stressed by the game. His right foot stretches out past the table support, and touches what looks like a triangular fold of fabric, but which is the woman’s right foot. While playing footsie under the table seems childish, it would have been the most secret way to touch one’s lover without anyone else knowing. The fact that they share this touch, erases any evidence of resistance. The lovers consent to be together, but due to any number of reasons, they cannot be together, and their body language suggests they are at
odds, while their intimate touch suggests otherwise.

The style of the lover’s garments continues the soft quality of the piece. Their garments hang loosely from their bodies, but still give indications of their anatomy. The male’s position is clearly articulated through the drapery, from the movement of his arms to the crossing of his legs. His position is completely believable. The woman’s clothing is equally believable, but the drapery hangs in a stiffer manner, suggesting it is made out of a different, heavier material. While the woman’s figure is largely mysterious, there is an indication of her breasts, and a deep fold of fabric between her knees. While this fold is naturalistic as to how a garment like this would fall, the deep carving and also attention to the minute folds surrounding this area, not seen in other places on the mirror case, emphasizes this deep fold. In turn, this alludes to the woman’s treasures and “penetrability” as Michael Camille puts it. While consummation of the relationship is against the rules of courtly love, the goal of consummation is clearly emphasized to here.

The depicted garments are typical simple every day clothes of the 1300s. The woman wears a simple dress, which has the same low neck line that Herbert Norris describes as popular during the reign of Edward II in England (1307-1327); he also notes that this was an everyday dress, not something worn by someone particularly wealthy or on a special occasion. Additionally, the woman wears a wimple (a piece of white linen that covers the neck, typical of “modest” woman from the twelfth century onwards). Over her head she wears a veil which covers the hairstyle described by Herbert Norris as the Ramshorn hairstyle. In this hair style “the hair was parted in the middle, and the two

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7 Camille, Art of Love, 124.
9 Norris, Medieval Costume, 120.
portions plaited into tails, which were brought round and twisted over the ears into a scroll like ram’s horns."¹⁰ The combination of the shape of her hairstyle and the veil over her hair gives “her face curious triangular effect” as noted by Thomas L. Chaney.¹¹ Margaret Scott argues that by the 1300s only married women wore veiled hairstyles.¹² If this is in fact true, the couple could not be a courting couple, but instead either a married couple or a couple engaged in courtly love outside of matrimony.

The young man is also in simple every day dress, but according to Norris his garments more closely relate to the more simple dress popularized by Edward I of the late thirteenth century.¹³ His hair is styled in a way that became popular around 1225 and continued throughout the rest of the century (figure 7).¹⁴ In this style, the hair was combed back from the brow and “rolled to form one long curl across the top of the forehead” while the side hair was curled “inwards and then outwards, leaving a background of shadow for the ears,”¹⁵ precisely how the chess player’s hair is styled. The chess player wears a band across his head, to keep his hair out of his face. The hood at his back is distinctively long as was popular during the thirteenth century, yet it is not as long as those under Edward I’s reign (see figure 8).¹⁶ He also wears stockings that hang snugly and define the shapes of his legs, but not the distinctively long pointy shoes that were popular during the 1300s, or shoes that follow “very closely the form of the foot,”¹⁷ but rather wears shoes that greatly resemble Norris’s portrayal of Edward I in state dress

¹⁰ Norris, Medieval Costume, 178.
¹³ Norris, Medieval Costume, 165.
¹⁴ Norris, Medieval Costume, 175.
¹⁵ Norris, Medieval Costume, 175.
¹⁶ Norris, Medieval Costume, 177.
¹⁷ Norris, Medieval Costume, 181.
Questions arise from Herbert Norris’s analysis of dress in the 1200s and 1300s. While the female clothing can date from the 1300s, her hairstyle and even variations on her clothing were popular before 1300 according to Norris. Because of the sumptuous and complex changes in male garments in the 1300s, the male chess player does not fit into this century either. Could it be possible that the dates of these ivories are too late? Or did fashions popular in the thirteenth century carry farther into the fourteenth than Norris was aware? A simple answer is that because of the smallness of the mirror cases, complex garments were too difficult to depict, yet there are small details on the furniture and both of the depicted heads that suggest complexity was not a problem for the carver. The garment choices were purposeful. The carver and his contemporaries responsible for the other “chess player” mirror cases, chose to depict simple and still recognizable garments in their ivories that would be recognizable as garments out of fashion or of a time slightly before. To the fourteenth century viewer, the garments would reflect on the simplicity of fashions of the past and might create a sense of nostalgia for simpler, less troubled times.

While this mirror case is beautifully preserved, the Cleveland Ivory could be in better condition. Firstly, mirror cases always came in pairs, and this case has been separated from its pair long ago. Originally, the case would have had four mythical beasts at the corners like the case from the Louvre (Figure 10), but these are long lost. They might have been cut off to create a less medieval arrangement to a later owner. There is also a drilled hole in the top of the Cleveland mirror case. While this appears in several other cases, it is unclear if it is original or a later addition to make it easier to
attach or to hang the mirror case. If original, it could have been part of a clasp or closing mechanism of the piece. Initially it looks like a hole to help remove the mirror that would have attached to the back, but the hole is outside of the rim where the mirror would sit (Figure 11). While these losses are considerable, they do not take away from the mirror case’s historical value.

From the time the Cleveland Museum of Art purchased the mirror case, they have closely associated it with the mirror case in the Louvre (Figure 10), but it is in fact quite different, and shows a close similarity to one of the mirror cases in the Victoria and Albert museum (Figure 12). The Victoria and Albert Museum has two other cases depicting chess players that are similar but have noted differences (Figure 13, 14). To get a bigger picture of the wide range of chess player mirror cases, we need to consider a case from The Walters Art Museum (figure 15). This mirror case was created later, and the figures are not articulated with the same attention to softness and gracefulness. Lastly, the Metropolitan Museum of Art has a wonderful tablet with scenes of courtship (Figure 16), one of those being a scene of chess players, which is very similar to the chess players in the other “chess player” mirror cases in the Victoria and Albert, Figures 13 and 14. While this is only a small selection of the surviving “chess player” mirror cases, this selection is a fair sampling of the similarities between the “chess player” mirror cases as well as their nuances and differences.

At first glance, the mirror case from the Louvre (Figure 10) is so similar to the Cleveland case that it is unbelievable. All of the major aspects of the composition are the same. The two figures are in the same location, with the tent fabric pulled back in order

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for the viewer to see the couple. A pole divides the piece, and the chess board is exactly in the center. The male sits on the left, the female on the right. Even the drapery of their clothing is exactly the same. But they are different in the details. In the Louvre piece, the way the male chess player grasps the pole now seems awkward and strained. The way his head is lowered gives the impression he is deep in thought, while in the Cleveland piece, the male’s facial expression seems more playful. While the his right hand is in the same position as it is in the Cleveland piece, it seems awkward and bent at a funny angle. The female also displays this same awkward stiffness. Her arms, while again in the same relative positions, are much more angular and unnatural looking. It is also important to notice that her left hand has changed position slightly, which gives her figure some semblance of surprise, rather than the contemplation seen in the Cleveland piece. In the Louvre case example, the drapery on her arms is cut much deeper, and the same is true for the rest of the drapery. Her upper torso seems to be squashed, giving more emphasis to her breasts and the folds of fabric between the female’s legs are cut much deeper than in the Cleveland piece, further emphasizing the woman’s sexuality.

The most notable difference between the Louvre and Cleveland pieces is the addition of two figures in the background. These figures create a different feeling in this mirror case, by reducing the quiet intimacy of a tent with two lovers to a more active scene. Yet this is consistent with much of courtly love literature. The appearance of attendant figures is important, as most courtly love stories, such as Tristram and Ysolt, include an attendant or confidant that facilitates the lovers meeting. At first glance, the figure behind the male chess player seems poised to place the cloak around the male chess player’s shoulders, but it is actually a feeding bird, a “traditional symbol of lovers”
as Michael Camille notes.\textsuperscript{19} The falcon is obviously a symbol of hunting, a frivolous activity performed by nobles, but also is a reminder that the “lover can be both the hunter and the hunted,”\textsuperscript{20} and of the captivity of love. The figure behind the seated female is holding a crown or chaplet, which is a typical object of love in courtly love art, used to crown one’s lover and the crown is often seen on combs in a more complex ritual of giving and accepting love.\textsuperscript{21}

These attendant figures also lack the soft natural quality of the Cleveland chess players. The right hand of the attendant figure with a crown looks impossibly positioned, due to the artist’s attempt at foreshortening it. While this attempt at foreshortening is impressive, the hand looks awkward and squashed between the chess player’s hand and the pole. The attendant holding the bird also looks awkward. He awkwardly holds the bird away from his body in attempt to give the viewer a complete view of the bird feeding. The figure is also leaning over the young man’s shoulder as if avidly anticipating the next move. This figure, as opposed to the others, looks awkward because seems to move forward, which adds tension and suspense to the scene. Yet, like the other figures, his hands are not naturalistic and lack the soft believability of the Cleveland piece.

While the Louvre piece has added qualities, such as foreshortening, movement, tension, and surprise, it generally lacks the soft beautiful and volumetric quality of the Cleveland mirror case. Although it has rarely been compared to the Cleveland piece, the “chess players” mirror case from the Victoria and Albert Museum (Figure 12) is very similar to the Cleveland piece including an added elegance and the volume of the figures.

\textsuperscript{19} Camille, \textit{Art of Love}, 124.
\textsuperscript{20} Camille, \textit{Art of Love}, 102.
\textsuperscript{21} Camille, \textit{Art of Love}, 56.
that is missing from the Louvre mirror case.

Like the Louvre case, this “chess players” mirror case (Figure 12) follows the same composition as the Cleveland piece, but it also has the same soft romantic qualities that the Louvre piece does not have. Despite cracks in the ivory, one can see the soft nuances of the drapery folds that fall in almost the exact same places on the young man in the Cleveland piece. Yet his partner is in a different pose and her entire figure is shifted toward the male instead of presented frontally to the viewer. Her left hand is positioned in the same outward surprised posture as the female figure on the Louvre piece. To heighten her surprise, her right arm is shown higher in the air, giving the whole composition a different feeling than the Cleveland piece. While the Cleveland case gives the impression the young man is about to lose the game, in figure 12, the young woman’s surprised response gives the impression that she is about to lose. Interestingly the male’s right hand does not change positions; it is only the change in her position that alters the perceived outcome of the chess game.

One important difference between Figure 12 and the Cleveland case is the spatial representation. In the Cleveland piece, all the architectural elements, the pole, the table, the benches, fall on straight or perpendicular lines, creating a very understandable concrete space. But in figure 12, the tent pole does not match up with the pole of the chess table. This gives the appearance that the tent pole stops mid air, instead of being behind the chess table leg. The chess table leg is very thin, and does not seem visually strong enough to hold up a chess table with heavy pieces. Another incongruity is seen in the bench the young man player sits on. It does not line up vertically with the tent pole or with the table leg, which makes the scene seem unstable.
The other two “chess player” mirror cases from the Victoria and Albert museum are radically different from the mirror cases just discussed. The first, figure 13, includes the same compositional elements, such as the tent fabric pulled back, the tent pole, the chess board in the center, but the figures are now radically different. For the first time the male figure’s legs are in a different position, and the female figure is angled more toward the male than in figure 12. Her hands are in yet another position. In this case, she holds a plethora of captured chess pieces in her left hand, and attempts to console the male chess player with her right.

In general, this piece has the soft quality seen in the Cleveland case, but the carver emphasized different qualities. While the Cleveland case has an emphasis on the soft nuances of the drapery, this piece emphasizes the complexity of drapery folds. This is seen particularly in the drapery around his legs and in the tent drapery. More attention is paid to the drapery folds than to the figure’s hands, which are very floppy and unnatural. The figures’ faces and hair also have a significant amount of detail on them, but the male’s head is misshapen. It looks as if the artist was attempting the same hair style as seen in the Cleveland piece, but because the head is now tilted backward, it looks awkward and unnatural.

There are also inconsistencies in the representation of the space. While the tent pole and the chess table leg do not line up, there is a line in between the folds of the young woman’s dress and the table leg, which represents the other side of the tent pole. Yet, the space the figures occupy seems oddly trapezoidal because of the way the folds of fabric of the tent pull away from the couple, instead of hanging straight down as they do in the other images. Lastly, the benches on which the figures sit slope toward the middle
of the composition, creating instability. Because of these small details, the space becomes distorted and is hard to read.

The third “chess player” mirror case from the Victoria and Albert Museum (Figure 14), is the smallest and, most likely, the latest in date. Because of its small size, this mirror case is not carved with as much detail as the others. Additionally, this mirror case has a decorative quatrefoil-like lobe pattern on the inner frame around the edge, that is popular in mirror cases around 1350. Yet, this decorative border takes up room, and thus takes away from the details of the composition. The pulled-back drapery now fades into the background, and there is significantly less attention paid to the garments of the figures. Most notably, the faces are very lightly carved and hard to distinguish, but it is possible that this is due to damage. Other details such as the positions of the arms, while in relatively the same positions as in other mirror cases, are here strange and awkward. For example, the female’s right arm is contorted in an absolutely impossible way. Because of its small scale, the lesser attention paid to details and the inaccuracies of anatomy, this case is the least successful.

The mirror case from the Walters is the strangest of the “chess player” mirror cases (Figure 15). It is probably the most recent in execution, and has been identified as German, although the origin of all of these cases is up for debate. Here, while there are hints to the pulled back curtains of the tent, the pole in the center has been transformed into a tree. The most notable difference is the strong use of a frame with ten lobes around the circle. While the third mirror case from the V and A also had lobes (Figure 14), they were soft and round. These are oval and nearly come to a point in different areas. While this mirror case is bigger than figure 14, the lobes take up so much space, that the image
of the chess players is smaller and less detailed. Yet, the figures retain the same postures and details as all three of the mirror cases from the V and A (Fig. 12, 13, and 14). While the style of carving, the use of a lobed frame and its condition are certainly different from these aforementioned mirror cases, the Walter’s mirror case still represents the same scene and is strikingly similar in composition.

While mirror cases were incredibly popular during the 1300s, writing tablets were used during this time as well, both for their functionality and the beautiful scenes that could be created on the reverse side. The Metropolitan museum of Art has a lovely tablet depicting four scenes of courtship (Figure 16), one of which is a scene of chess players. Instead of being framed by open tent curtains, this scene is framed by an architrave, which is a typical setting for these scenes of love. Rebecca Price-Wilkin wrote that “secular scenes are rarely portrayed in arcaded settings” when describing a similar writing tablet of nineteenth of twentieth century origins. While it is possible that this ivory was later in execution, there are too many similar writing tablets and mirror cases such as the chess player mirror case from the Walters that uses lobes to create a similar effect, to believe that it is fake based on this detail.

The chess players in the bottom left scene are most like those in the second mirror case from the Victoria and Albert Museum (Figure 13). It is clear that the female is winning this game of chess, as she holds several captured chess pieces in her left hand, and holds her right hand up to console the male chess player. He seems to be gesturing toward the board but it is unclear if he is holding a chess piece or simply gesturing toward the board, perhaps pointing out that he is not in checkmate yet. Also, because

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22 Peter Barnet, Images in Ivory: Precious objects of the Gothic Age (Detroit: Detroit Institute of the Arts, 1997), 305.
there is no central pole for him to grasp, he leans very casually upon an unseen ledge in the background and does not cross his legs, which is different than the other chess scenes. While the drapery of the scenes on the tablet do have the same soft quality as in the Cleveland case, there is much less attention to detail when it comes to the figures. The faces of the figures are oddly oblong, and the hands lack details such as thumbs giving them a cartoonish, rather than soft naturalistic quality.

Luckily, many great examples of chess players carved in ivory survive and are preserved in good condition, so that they may be compared and contrasted. Despite slight differences in composition, hand positions, details in drapery and clothing, all of these scenes are nearly identical (see figure 17). These tremendous similarities are not seen in other themes depicted on mirror cases, boxes or tablets, and the unique exactitude of the similarities is very puzzling.

To emphasize how completely similar the “chess player” mirror cases are, mirror cases reflecting courtly subjects of the “god of love” and “hunting” have been compiled in figures 18 and 19. These cases were selected for their similarities, but at first glance as well as under close evaluation, few contain as many similarities as these seen in the chess player mirror cases.

Like the “chess player” mirror cases, the hunting scenes (fig. 19) have been dated from the 1300s-1370s, are 3-4” in diameter, and all are made of ivory. At first glance they appear very different, containing different kinds of headdress, treatment of the animals, attendants, frames, and foliage. Yet they have many similarities as well, all of these cases have the same softness in carving that the “chess player” mirror cases have, which makes them beautiful to behold. All of the cases include a man and woman on
horseback, with an attendant or two, a bird here or there. Some of the figures even have the same posture. The woman in figures 19a, b, c, and d all are holding the reins the same way in their right hands, while the males in figures 19b, c, and d hold a bird similarly. Likewise, the males in figures 19a and e, put their left hands under the woman’s chin in the same way. Even the folds of the fabric of the female’s gown is very similar in figures 19a, b, and c. While many of the similarities, such as the placements of the arms or the drapery folds, are quite similar, they do not show the exactitude shown in the chess player pieces (figure 17).

Whether copying from a drawing book or from a mirror case itself, the artist or artists took more liberties in carving these cases than did the artists of the chess player cases. All five of the “hunting” cases include different types of hats. The positioning of the horses change from case to case, as well as how the rider sits upon the horse and the relation of the horse to the circular frame. None of the chess player cases include such compositional repositioning, save for the Louvre case, where the chess players are placed slightly lower than in other cases (figure 17b), to make room for the attendants. It is also true that the simplicity of the chess player scene is lost in these hunting scenes. Instead of two figures in a simple setting, these cases have attendants, animals, foliage, and decoration that the viewer gets lost in. Overall, these mirror cases are very similar in some ways, but their overall differences set them apart completely from the complete similarity seen in the “chess player” mirror cases.

Another popular mirror case scene is a meeting of lovers under a tree where the god of love watches them. These scenes are nearly identical in composition (figure 18). In the center of the mirror case stands a tree, inside of which the god of love sits. On
either side of the tree are the lovers or pairs of lovers. However, that is where the
similarities end. None of the cases have figures in the same posture, gesturing to their
lover in the same way, or place the god of love in the same position. Because of this, each
case projects a different message, while all of the “chess player” mirror cases projected
the same one. While in the hunting scene cases the drapery could be examined even if the
figures were in slightly different positions, in the “god of love” cases their postures are so
different that one cannot examine their drapery styles for similar folds. Figures 18a, b,
and c, seem to be wearing a similar style of garment as those seen in the Cleveland cases,
but figures 18d and e are wearing completely different styles. It is also true that several of
these mirror cases do not have the same delicate carving as the chess players. Only figure
18b is dated to the early 14th century which could account for the harsher quality of line
and style of dress in the other “god of love” mirror cases. Yet, the hunting scenes all
come from a similar date range. The similarities in general composition between the “god
of love” mirror cases are remarkable, especially when compared with the ever changing
compositions of the hunting scenes, but the figural differences and clothing styles are
more distinct.

While there are many other subjects depicted in mirror cases, from “attacking the
castle of love” to the “ritual positions of a lover,” these cases possess even fewer
similarities, or do not survive in enough number to provide a comparison. It is clear from
viewing the “god of love” scenes, while the compositions of the “chess player” mirror
cases vary slightly, the figures and details of the composition remain the same. Similarly,
while some of the “hunting” scene mirror cases share details such as postures and fabric
drapery, they do not share as many details as the “chess player” mirror cases do.
After analysis of these five “chess player” mirror cases, we can argue that the mirror case from the Cleveland Museum of art has the most delicate lines and naturalistic figures. Furthermore, we have sought to demonstrate that the group of “chess player” mirror cases are incredibly similar, especially when compared to mirror cases of other subjects are compared with them. The “chess player” mirror cases are so completely alike that the differences stand out, when they are viewed together (Figure 9), but one cannot ignore how similar they are and wonder how out of all the subjects of mirror cases that survive, the chess player mirror cases survive in such numbers as well as with such similarity.
CHAPTER III
WHY SO SIMILAR?

The extreme similarities seen in the “chess player” mirror cases is indeed puzzling. Should such extreme similarity show up in other mirror cases, they could be viewed as production work created in large quantities. However, because the similarities only appear in the “chess player” mirror cases, their production must be examined.

The mirror cases were pieces of production work, created in a workshop for patrons or sale in a shop. Some of the pieces created in the most similar style, the Cleveland, Louvre, and Victoria and Albert case (fig. 6, 10, and 12), were most likely made by the same artist. Other less elegant cases were possibly carved by apprentices copying their masters work. Still others may be copies from other contemporary ivory carvers, or from carvers at a slightly later date working either from an extant mirror case or from a patron’s description, as is probably the case for the Walters piece. Furthermore, artists from entirely different workshops and even countries may have used model books to transfer knowledge from shop to shop, artist to artist, and country to country.

Model books were used throughout the history of art for the transmission of knowledge from artist to artist, from place to place, and within workshops. Because of the irregular arrangement of images, and how they often fall in no particular order, it has been suggested that these model books were not made in a formal scriptorium to be used
in manuscript illumination, but instead in artists’ workshops of many media.\textsuperscript{23} Yet, because they were primarily utilitarian, they did not often survive through the ages, some drawings rubbed or scratched out to make room for new ones, others defaced by later additions.\textsuperscript{24} Originally, such drawings were on loose leaf pages that would be kept in an artist’s shop or on his person if he traveled, as is the case with Villard de Honnecourt, one of the few artists whom we know produced a model book.\textsuperscript{25} His drawings often resemble surviving artworks so well that historians have been able to connect the two.\textsuperscript{26} Later these loose pages were bound, possibly to “transfer the contents of an artist’s studio to a library or collector, and thus to a setting where aesthetic considerations or the achieving of documentary material began to play a role.”\textsuperscript{27} This stage marks a change in how viewers saw the model books, not as functional pieces to draw from, but instead works of art themselves. Later in the 16\textsuperscript{th} century, many model books suffered so much damage from later additions that Scheller remarks that they “were considered to be of little artistic value and were preserved by chance.”\textsuperscript{28} Thus, many of the model books survive by accident and are only a small sampling of the many that once were used by medieval artists.

While there are several fine model books and fragments of others that survive to modern times, no such model books remain that closely resemble the chess players. In fact, while many model books survive from the twelfth century; between 1275-1375 there is a complete absence of them. Few historians have speculated upon the reason for this.

\textsuperscript{23} Robert W. Scheller, \textit{Model-Book Drawings and the Practice of Artistic Transmission in the Middle Ages (ca. 900 – ca. 1470)}, (Amsterdam, Amsterdam University Press, 1995), 41.
\textsuperscript{24} Scheller, \textit{Model-Book}, 39.
\textsuperscript{25} Scheller, \textit{Model-Book}, 177-185.
\textsuperscript{26} Scheller, \textit{Model-Book}, 179.
\textsuperscript{27} Scheller, \textit{Model-Book}, 179.
\textsuperscript{28} Scheller, \textit{Model-Book}, 41.
Model books for objects such as the mirror cases would be well used, and probably too badly worn to be kept. It is also true that their secular iconography would have dissuaded collectors and libraries of the ecclesiastical sort, but as popular as courtly love ivories were, it seems unlikely that a nobleman would not keep a model book full of courtly love imagery, given the chance. Another contributing factor was the changing of popular artistic media. The early fourteenth century saw a huge rise in panel painting all over Europe which led talented artists away from illumination.  

At the same time there was a rise in books created specifically for the aristocracy such as illustrated romances and books of hours. This gives further evidence that the work of the model book was not done by an illuminator or two dimensional artist or draftsman, but by an ivory worker who understood the current style of depicting figures. Why these model books are lost to us remains a mystery.

One model book from the 1270s does show imagery similar in style to the “chess player” mirror cases, but it is religious in theme and may have been used as a model for chapel murals. Ms. Lat. 11907 from the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, created around 1275, shows figures in the same proportions and with an elegant grace to them as seen the mirror case figures, but they wear slightly different clothing (Figure 20). Most of the figures are male, and wear simple belted garments with cloaks, quite differently from their chess player counterparts. The few female figures wear belted garments as well. While these garments are different, they are handled in a very similar fashion, long

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elegant folds, lightly drawn folds give the viewer an idea of the bodies beneath. Some of the male figures such as those wearing crowns in Figure 20, have the same hairstyle as the male chess player, that lightly curls around the ears. The females, seen in Figure 21, have a very different hairstyle than the chess player, as their hair is down, and even those who wear their hair under a veil do not have the triangular shaped coif as the chess player does. Yet, the fact is that this is a religious manuscript, and these women may be nuns or virgins who wear their hair in a simpler less ostentatious manner. This cannot be said of all of the clothing, as the figures wearing crowns were surely meant to represent secular kings, who would wear courtly fashions rather than religious accoutrements. While these model book drawings do not reflect the exact style and clothing of the chess players, they give the viewer a good idea of what the now lost “chess player” model or pattern book would have looked like.

While it is unlikely that all the “chess player” mirror cases came from the same workshop, they display surprising similarities that are not seen in other mirror cases. These similarities could have derived from the use of a model book or page that would have allowed the original artist to create very similar copies, or another artist to make copies without being privy to the original.

While model books are a good answer as to why the “chess player” mirror cases are so similar, they would have been used for any variety of mirror case subjects and do not answer the question of why the others are so different from each other. At this point it is important to discuss the possibility of modern copies and forgeries. Without the scientific dating of the ivories themselves, it is very hard to determine if they are forgeries. Even with dating techniques the range of dates is enormous, usually of three or
four centuries. Furthermore, the modern forger could have used an old piece of ivory, or the medieval carver could have used an even older piece, making dating difficult.

Because of the abundance of ivory available in the eighteenth century onward, copies and forgeries of gothic ivories abound. In Williamson’s *Book of Ivory*, he mentions several instances of such forgeries. The reason the forger was discovered was not because of the style of the carving. The majority of situations Williamson notes that resulted in discovering forgeries revolved around a small incongruity in the piece, such as using the wrong grammar or vocabulary in inscriptions, something that would not be noticed by the average collector, but was noticed by scholars. Other pieces were only discovered after a larger forging operation was uncovered, the art dealers in question identified, and finally the works that they sold tirelessly scrutinized. Indeed it seems from his early research that only the most obvious of ivory forgeries are easily discovered.

Because gothic ivories include so many stylistic differences, and incongruities in inscriptions are rare, historians must look at aspects in the ivories to determine their authenticity. Generally, when historians look at ivories to determine if they are fake, they look at the style and clothing of the figures, as they did with Figure 22, a fragment of a mirror case with Knights and Foot Soldiers. They examined the armor styles of the soldiers and determined that they did not match up with contemporary armor. Yet, when they dated the ivory, the range was from 1160-1300, a date range Neil Stratford

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determined to be too close for a forger to be able to find.\textsuperscript{37} Stratford suggested that the artist simply was unfamiliar with contemporary armor, and worked from drawings in a model book.\textsuperscript{38} With the “chess player” mirror cases, it is harder to rely on clues such as the style of clothing, or even the style of the individual pieces because they are so similar. The clothing, as we saw from Norris, matched up with clothing worn at the end of the thirteenth century. It could be that the model that the chess players were made from was made during this time, and the mirror cases were made only a few years later, when that fashion had gone out of date, and the artist simply did not change the image. Furthermore, there could have been a nostalgia for “vintage” clothing, as we have today, and it is what the patron wanted on their mirror case.

Because of the sheer amount of beautiful and similar “chess player” mirror cases that survive, it is hard not to question the authenticity of at least a few of them.

Williamson points out that some of the forgeries discovered in the early nineteenth century were copied directly from originals, making them look very authentic.\textsuperscript{39} This certainly could be the case for some of the chess player cases, but because of their beautiful delicateness, it is impossible to determine if any of them are modern copies, except one.

The “chess player” mirror case owned by the Williams College Museum of Art (Figure 23) has been accepted as a modern copy. Clearly, this is a copy of the Louvre mirror case, but it is very different. The most obvious difference in the Williams mirror case is that the reverse is completely flat (Figure 24), there is no mechanism to attach it to

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\textsuperscript{37} Barnet, \textit{Images in Ivory}, 280.  \\
\textsuperscript{38} Barnet, \textit{Images in Ivory}, 280.  \\
\textsuperscript{39} Williamson, \textit{Book of Ivory}, 214.
\end{flushright}
the paired mirror case, nor is there a place for the mirror. Furthermore, when looking at
the reverse of the piece, one can see the ivory background of the chess players is so thin
that it is transparent, something that never appears in medieval cases. While it includes all
the elements of Louvre mirror case, stylistically it is quite different. The carving on a
whole is much deeper, there is much more attention paid to the carving on the faces and
in minute details. In general, the other mirror cases were all carved at the same depth,
with the same lightness of carving, and height of relief, making this piece an anomaly.
The faces are also much longer and angular, the poses slightly more angular and stiff, and
the bodies themselves much more volumetric. While some of the later cases, such as
Figure 25 from the Victoria and Albert Museum, include angular faces and stiff poses,
the figures have a weight to them that is very different from the volume of the Williams
case. The Williams case sets up a believable space, with right angles, but with awkward
figures, while many of the medieval cases have awkward spaces with elegant but
awkward figures. It is these very small differences that make it very clear the Williams
case is a modern copy, and that all of the others may indeed be medieval.

The Williams mirror case is so very different in style from the other mirror cases
that it is clearly a modern copy, but that does not mean that other cases are not copies
made by a more skilled carver. Regardless, the Cleveland, Louvre, and Victoria and
Albert mirror cases have a style that is very similar to other medieval ivory mirror cases.
The soft lines of the elegant figures draped in fabric, can be found on many other mirror
cases, combs, and other objects that are surely medieval, if not because of their charming
medieval character, but because of their frequent appearance. If any of the five “chess
player” mirror cases talked about in depth in this study are modern copies, they are
incredibly well done, and had to be created with knowledge of the other cases.

While one or more of these pieces may be copies, and were most likely created with the aid of a model-book, there is no doubt that this similarity is significant. There is something about the “chess player” mirror cases that sets them apart from mirror cases of different subjects. Rather than attributing this similarity to copyists (medieval or modern), it is very possible that the chess players were popular subject matter in medieval times because of the popularity of chess and how it relates to the most important courtly love subject of all: the game of love.
CHAPTER IV
CONNECTIONS OF THE “CHESS PLAYER” MIRROR CASES TO CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE

Before examining the topic of chess, it is important to discuss the concept of courtly love and the literature that surrounds it. The concept of courtly love has always had its roots in literature, and because of this many have postulated that courtly love pieces, such as the chess player mirror cases are illustrations of courtly love tales. To understand this, we must first examine the evolution of courtly love lyrics from the time of Eleanor of Aquitaine (1122?-1204), when the idea of courtly love began, to the time contemporaneous with the chess player mirror cases 150 years later.

In the twelfth century, a surprising change happened within secular literature. The change was a turn from heroic epics focused on male characters with trials and battles, to romantic poems focusing on the interactions of male and female characters as well as on the themes of love and the impossibility of love in many situations. This change can be attributed to the rise of troubadours, musicians who sang songs of love in southern France and spread romantic ideals throughout Europe, with the help of important cultured patrons such as Eleanor of Aquitaine and Marie de France (ca. 1185).

The songs of the troubadours are not simple love songs, they are complex and derive from an abundance of sources. John Jay Parry attributes many of the ideas sung by

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the troubadours to poems by the Roman poet Ovid, whose poetry was in wide circulation during the twelfth and thirteenth centuries.\textsuperscript{41} Ovidian poetry focuses on the rule that “husbands and wives cannot love each other” and the tricks one must use to deceive your spouse when taking a lover using evidence found in myths such as the story of Troy and the many lovers of Venus.\textsuperscript{42} Yet these were not the only ideas borrowed from Ovid involved with courtly love, they also focused on the dominating power of women, the secrecy of love, and the power of jealousy, which all became important rules in Capellanus’s treatise on love.\textsuperscript{43} While courtly love takes many of these ideas, they are used without the deception and power mongering that Ovid’s love seems to take. Men worship women because they should be worshiped, not because they are deceived into worship.\textsuperscript{44} Most importantly all lovers should be humble and suffer in love, love becomes a sickness rather than a happiness. While these ideas most likely came from personal experience with the trouble of being in love with someone who is unobtainable, they may have began elsewhere.

The addition of such ideas to Ovid’s courtly love may be attributed to influences coming from the courts of Spain. From the late ninth century to the early eleventh, the Iberian Peninsula experienced a period of “pleasure and luxury, of wine and love, but also a period of culture,”\textsuperscript{45} where Christians and Muslims lived side by side. It is probable that it was in these courts where the ideals of courtly love began to take shape, where the poet was held in the highest regard and trained seriously to create poetry that

\textsuperscript{41} Parry, Intro to \textit{Courtly Love}, 4.  
\textsuperscript{42} Parry, Intro to \textit{Courtly Love}, 5.  
\textsuperscript{43} Parry, Intro to \textit{Courtly Love}, 7.  
\textsuperscript{44} Parry, Intro to \textit{Courtly Love}, 7.  
\textsuperscript{45} Parry, Intro to \textit{Courtly Love}, 7.
expressed beauty.\textsuperscript{46} These poets were often used as ambassadors or message bearers because they were trained in telling bad news in a way that would not upset a disheartened ruler.\textsuperscript{47} Furthermore, when William VIII of Aquitaine went on a military campaign to Barastro, Aragon in 1024, he brought back a wealth of booty, including “an extraordinary number of \textit{quiyan}, enslaved women who sang for a living, young and attractive and very well-trained entertainers.”\textsuperscript{48} It is due to these women and the culture of the pleasure courts that they imported from Spain that inspired the courtly love culture that reached its height in France the early twelfth century before spreading thought out the continent and England.

The troubadours that made their way through southern France, and more particularly the area known as Aquitaine, sang upon a variety of subjects from politics and skirmishes, to satirical stories, but most often they sang of love and women.\textsuperscript{49} Their songs usually pertained to the subject of love from afar and impossible passions that should never be realized because of gaps between social status and bothersome marriage vows.\textsuperscript{50} Furthermore, their lyrics held women in the highest praise, a topic borrowed from both Ovid, and the ever more important cult of the Virgin, which was taking shape in France at this time, which had “induced something of a reverence for women in general.”\textsuperscript{51} It is important also to note that in southern France women already held more liberties than women elsewhere did. They were taught to read and write, and “enjoyed genuine liberty and mixed freely with the other sex,” freedoms which were not available

\textsuperscript{46} Parry, Intro to \textit{Courtly Love}, 7-8.
\textsuperscript{47} Parry, Intro to \textit{Courtly Love}, 8.
\textsuperscript{48} Jerrilynn D Dodds, Maria Rosa Menocal, and Abigail Krasner Balbale, \textit{The Arts of Intimacy: Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the making of Castillian Culture} (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2008), 105.
\textsuperscript{50} Seward, \textit{Eleanor}, 15.
\textsuperscript{51} Seward, \textit{Eleanor}, 14.
to northern ladies.\textsuperscript{52}

The twelfth century was dominated in particular by one very powerful woman, Eleanor of Aquitaine. She was duchess of Aquitaine at a young age, the queen of France, a crusader, the queen of England, and most important, a supporter of courtly love. At a young age she lived in the court of her grandfather, Duke William IX of Aquitaine (1071-1126), who is the first troubadour for whom written records survive.\textsuperscript{53} Her grandfather was a lover of poetry, everything rich, and the most beautiful women. His love of pleasure derived from growing up in the court of his own father, William VIII (1025-88), who as discussed earlier, traveled to Spain in 1064 and brought with him back to Aquitaine the entertainers from the Andalusian courts. Menocal posits that these women helped shape the courts of Aquitaine into courts that “were part of the Arabic cultural orbit, regardless of whether they were controlled politically by Muslims or Christians.”\textsuperscript{54} Yet, such frivolity did not go unnoticed by the superiors of the Duke of Aquitaine. Eventually, William IX repudiated his legal wife, and lived with his mistress, a misdeed that led him to die excommunicated from the church.\textsuperscript{55} Yet, Eleanor was not perturbed by this, and the courts of Aquitaine continued to host troubadours and the courtly love lifestyle even after she became the queen of France (1137-1152), and later after her divorce, the queen of England (1152-1189).

It was during her time as the queen of England when Eleanor was living at the Palace of Poitiers in Aquitaine, that she and her daughter Marie de Champagne began the

\textsuperscript{52} Seward, \textit{Eleanor}, 15.
\textsuperscript{53} Parry, \textit{Intro to Courtly Love}, 8.
tradition that gave courtly love its namesake. Courtly love was not simply the kind of love that was enjoyed at court, it was instead a court where decisions regarding the problems of lovers would be heard and judged. In these love/law courts, a “troubadour would sing a stanza about a problem that his love had encountered, whereupon another troubadour would sing a second stanza giving his opinion.” During this time the laws and traditions of courtly love were created, long loved romances like Tristram and Isolde and the Romance of Troy were put to pen, and in the 1180s, Andreas Cappelanus wrote his book the Art of Courtly Love.

While many authors penned stories that amplified the themes of courtly love, no one besides Andreas ever put the rules and laws of love explicitly to paper. The book was “undoubtedly intended to present us with a picture of life” in the circle of Eleanor of Aquitaine at Poitier. In his treatise, Andreas paints an interesting picture of courtly love that must be carefully considered against modern ideas on the subject:

Love is a certain inborn suffering derived from the sight of and excessive meditation upon the beauty of the opposite sex, which causes each one to wish above all things the embraces of the other and by common desire to carry out all of love’s precepts in the other’s embrace.

To these medieval people, the cause of love was the smallest hint of a thought about beauty, and the result was to suffer, trembling with fear and longing. Furthermore, the lover would be overcome with fears of rejection and every time he sees the lady in question he becomes incredibly anxious and plots on a way to win her heart. The suffering would forever torment the lover only to be alleviated if he received love from

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56 Seward, Eleanor, 110.
57 Seward, Eleanor, 111.
58 Parry, Intro to Courtly Love, 21.
59 Parry, Intro to Courtly Love, 20.
61 Capellanus, Courtly Love, 28-29.
Andreas discusses in his first book, how love may come about between lovers of different social standings and classes. In his second book he follows up with advice on how to keep and nurture this newly attained love, as well as special cases discussed in the style of Eleanor’s courts of love, and lastly the simple thirty one rules of love.

Legend says the rules of love were put to writing by a knight called the Briton who went on a quest for love. These rules give us the best idea of how love was thought of at the time. Some of the rules emphasize the value of love like the rule “the easy attainment of love makes it of little value; difficulty of attainment makes it prized.” Other rules emphasize the suffering of lovers: Rule XV. “Every lover regularly turns pale in the presence of his beloved,” and rule XXIII “He whom the thought of love vexes eats and sleeps very little.” Some of the rules even address the importance of jealousy to love, rule XXI “real jealousy always increases the feeling of love,” and rule XXII “jealousy, and therefore love, are increased when one suspects his beloved,” which further creates suffering due to love.

This very detailed treatise truly gives us a good idea of how love was addressed during the twelfth century and beyond. Indeed the work was very popular and had a range of influence well after the courts of love were gone. Twelve copies of the work survive, several of which were translated into the vernacular French in the mid to late thirteenth century, as well as Italian and German in the fourteenth. But it was in Spain where

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63 Capellanus, *Courtly Love*, 33-150.
64 Capellanus, *Courtly Love*, 184-186.
65 Capellanus, *Courtly Love*, 177.
69 Parry, Intro to *Courtly Love*, 22.
Andreas had the most influence, inspiring courts of love in Barcelona from 1350-1400. However, these courts of love are too late to have influenced the creation of the mirror cases.

The courts of Eleanor and the themes of courtly love influenced other literary patrons who in turn sponsored literature. The popularity of courtly love was no doubt the reason several copies of the lyrical version of Tristan and Isolde were put to pen in the later twelfth century, and other stories such as those by Chretien of Troyes. Later in the thirteenth century, stories such as the Romance of the Rose, the prose version of Tristram, as well as other stories like Huon of Bordeaux were written continuing the courtly love tradition.

The courts of love did more than just inspire literature, they inspired art as well. Many historians have tried to connect secular art with courtly love literature. Specifically, the “chess player” mirror cases have been connected to two stories, the Romance of Tristram and Ysolt and the story of Huon of Bordeaux. While no one can disagree that both of these stories and mirror cases accurately depict themes of courtly love, their connection together is less than sound.

The Louvre mentions that its “chess player” mirror case is inspired by a passage in the romance of Tristram and Ysolt. The first extant copy of the story Tristram and Ysolt of comes from the author Thomas of Britain around 1185 but according to Roger Loomis the story is referred to as popular and well known, around the same time. This evidence suggests the story was already well established at the time Thomas of Britain

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70 Parry, Intro to Courtly Love, 23.
wrote it down. Joan Grimbert mentions there is even evidence that the story reflects actual nobles in the sixth or seventh centuries in Britain, while W. J. McCann suggests the Persian story of Vis and Ramin parallels Tristan and Ysolt so closely that they must be related in some way. Yet, the rise in popularity of Tristram and Ysolt in the late twelfth century cannot be ignored. After Thomas of Britain’s version Beroul, Einhart, and Gottfried wrote their own versions in quick succession. Each author put his own spin on the story, satirical, religious, or courtly sticking to the basic story set out by Thomas. Later in the thirteenth century, the Prose Tristan was written in French between 1225 and 1275 and survives in several copies. It is hard to tell which if any of these versions would have been referred to by the ivory carvers of the fourteenth century. For the sake of this argument, both the lyrical version of Thomas will be examined because of its completeness and connection to the love courts, as well as the Prose Tristram, which would have been more contemporary for fourteenth century readers.

In Thomas of Britain’s *Tristram and Ysolt*, there are several mentions of chess. Yet, Thomas makes no mention of the couple playing chess together, as illustrated in the mirror cases. The first instance of chess involves Tristram playing chess with merchants at a port. They are impressed by Tristram’s cunning and decide to kidnap him. This scene is even depicted on the Chertsey tiles executed in the 1250-60s. A diagram of

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74 Grimbert, *Introduction to Tristan and Isolde*, xv-xxviii.
75 Grimbert, *Introduction to Tristan and Isolde*, xv-xxviii.
76 Grimbert, *Introduction to Tristan and Isolde*, xxxiv.
77 Loomis, *Romance*, 23.
which is shown in figure 26. It could be suggested that this is an image of Tristram playing chess with Ysolt, but the tile is far too damaged to determine who is playing with Tristram. Later in the story a chess board is used to block a light and hide Tristram and Ysolt, but there is no mention of the couple playing together in Thomas’s Tristram.

No mention of a chess scene between the lovers does not mean it did not happen. Thomas’s Tristram survives in only fragments, it is possible that this piece has been lost. Furthermore, the incredible popularity of chess might have made a mention of chess unnecessary. It would be obvious to the contemporary reader that the lovers would play chess together, even if it was not explicitly mentioned.

It is in the Prose Tristan that we find the mention of the lovers playing chess aboard the boat while Tristan and Ysolt drink the potion\textsuperscript{70}. There are a few visual clues on the ivory mirror case that connect the chess players scene to this one. Firstly, the pole in the center of the mirror case could be a representation of a ship’s mast. Secondly, the drapery pulled back around them may represent curtains hung within a ship to divide sections, which would be necessary to provide privacy for Ysolt on a ship full of men. Yet, there is no visual representation of the flask they drank the love potion from. If this is the scene in which they fall in love, why is the pivotal love potion integral to the scene absent?

Furthermore, there have been other mirror cases, with different subjects, that have been connected to the story of Tristan and Ysolt. Koechlin mentions three such cases in

his book on gothic ivories, all of which have clear imagery that connects them to the story. The first is an image of Tristan and Ysolt sitting under a tree, while King Mark sits above them in the tree spying on them (figure 27). This is a pivotal point of the story, when Mark finds out about the lovers deception. While this mirror case now in Rome, and another in the Musee de Cluny very similar to it, could connect to the story of Tristan, it also resembles scenes of the god of love ready to shoot down his arrows from a tree. Yet, most “god of love” mirror cases includes the god either holding arrows of love or shooting an arrow at the lovers, which this case does not have, making a clear case that it is an image of Tristan and Ysolt. Koechlin’s third mirror case with Tristan and Ysolt, refers to another scene entirely. This scene takes place after Tristan and Ysolt have left King Mark’s kingdom and are wandering through the wilderness, when a hermit offers them a place to stay. Figure 28 shows the couple being approached by a strange hooded man. This scene obviously connects well with the story, but could relate to another romance, such as a scene in Eric and Enide, or a scene praising the merits of fidelity. While the image of Mark in a tree above the lovers (figure 27) is almost surely an image from Tristan and Ysolt, this image is more ambiguous, just as the chess player image is ambiguous.

It is possible that the chess player mirror case depicts the Lovers Tristan and Ysolt, but because the mirror case lacks any visual clues particular to that story like the other Tristan and Ysolt mirror cases do, the point is moot. There are other stories that include lovers playing chess, and surely, others that are now lost. Without any specific references to the story in the artwork, it becomes impossible to tell if the chess players

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depict a specific story or not.

The chess scene has also been connected to another piece of medieval literature, the story of Huon of Bordeaux. Williamson includes this bit of knowledge in his *Book of Ivory*, when the Cleveland Mirror case was still in the possession of Mr. Eumorfopoulos, who may have been the origin of this information.\(^\text{82}\) The history of the story of Huon of Bordeaux is fragmented at best. According to Jean-Louis Picherit, three manuscripts of the romance date before the 1300s, and survive only in fragments\(^\text{83}\). Michel J. Raby’s in-depth analysis of the story includes a quick summary of the early additions and mentions the game of chess\(^\text{84}\). Because we know the earlier text mentions the game and all texts up until the mid 1500s have only been printed in French, the later printed addition of Huon of Bordeaux in English was consulted under the assumption that the earlier story changed minimally.

While this text includes a chess scene between its hero and a beautiful princess, it does not match up with the image of our chess players. Williamson describes the scene as “Huon of Bordeaux playing at draughts with the daughter of the Saracen Admiral,”\(^\text{85}\) though few could agree that this is what is taking place. In the story Huon goes through many trials, and one of which is to play chess against the daughter of a foreign king. If he wins he gets to take her to wife for one day and receive a sum of money, and if he loses, he dies. The daughter sees that he is very handsome and decides to allow him to win to have the chance to be his wife, but to preserve her honor he refuses and her father gives

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\(^{82}\) Williamson, *Book of Ivory*, 163.


\(^{85}\) Williamson, *Book of Ivory*, 163.
him a bigger sack of gold\textsuperscript{86}.

As noted before, in my analysis of the Cleveland mirror case, the young woman is clearly winning the game, holding several of his chess pieces in her hand. She also points at the board to warn her partner about the placement of his piece. Neither of these details point to the chess scene of Huon and the Princess. For one, in the story the Princess is purposefully losing the game, and would not have a collection of overtaken chess pieces. Secondly, her father becomes very upset when she loses to Huon, and cannot understand why she could not beat him. If she had lectured Huon on the consequences of his piece placing during the game, her father would have noticed and accused her of purposefully losing.

While these details make it unlikely that the mirror case depicts this scene, the details surrounding the chess players such as the drawn back curtains and the pole in the center of the composition, could be suggestive of a Persian tent. Because these surroundings do not appear in mirror cases of subjects other than the “chess players,” it could be that this is the artist's attempt at setting the scene in an exotic location. Yet, the artist makes no effort to change the dress of the lady, as she wears the clothes, hairstyle, and wimple, popular of contemporary dress in medieval Europe (ca. 1295-1300).

While the Cleveland Mirror Case, and the others discussed already do not connect with the story of Huon in these ways, there is one “chess player” mirror case that does. Figure 29, the chess player mirror case from the Musee Jaquemart-Andre includes significant details which connect it to the scenes in Huon. Most prominently, the woman is wearing a crown, which could identify her as the princess in the story. Also, the left

attendant figure wears a strange hat, the style of which is not mentioned in Norris’s book on medieval costume. While this does not mean it is exotic dress, it is a style that does not appear in any of the other mirror cases, and thus unusual. Contrary to this evidence, the mirror case retains the same problems that the other mirror cases have in conjunction with the story of Huon. The princess is clearly winning the game, and points toward the board as if to give advice, an unlikely action in the story of Huon. However unlikely it is that this piece may represent the story of Huon, it certainly has a better chance than the other chess player mirror case, and may be the origin of such ideas.

As with Tristan and Ysolt, it is possible yet unlikely that the “chess player” mirror case represents a scene in the story of Huon of Bordeaux. While the story involves a chess scene between two almost lovers, the mirror case is missing details that would further connect it to the story. Furthermore, the sheer number of “chess player” mirror cases suggests that they were very popular and widely known. While these stories were popular, it seems unlikely that they would be so popular to create this cult of ivory chess scenes.

It is clear that the “chess player” mirror cases were created with courtly love literature and themes in mind, but rather than depicting a specific scene from a story, they may show some general ideas of courtly love. The mirror cases act in the same way an image of a princess in a castle would evoke memories of Rupunzel, Sleeping Beauty, or even Snow White, but might not be any of these fairy tale princesses specifically, but instead evoke the theme of courtly love. Furthermore, they connect these ideals to everyday life in a way that many romances of the time do not, happening in far away

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times or places. The “chess player” mirror cases create a place for courtly love in everyday life, and connect to the very real lovers who played chess together routinely.
CHAPTER V

THE CONTENT OF THE PIECE: CHESS

The lack of visual clues connecting the “chess player” mirror cases to contemporary literature makes it unlikely that these mirror cases were made in response to a specific piece of literature. Instead, it is far more likely that they were created in response to a combination of courtly love ideas and their content: the game of chess.

The history of the game of chess is long and often disputed. A book published only sixty years ago refuted that the Lewis chessmen were of medieval date, and instead were part of “the stock-in-trade of some travelling merchant… [of] early seventeenth-century fabrication,” because the author did not believe that such a large shipment of chess sets (at least four sets were found on Lewis) would have been traded during medieval times. While there has been much speculation as to why the Lewis chessmen were found on the Isle of Lewis, there is no doubt that they are indeed medieval, dating from 1150-1200. The very reason why Hammond could not believe the Lewis Chessmen were authentic, demonstrates how popular chess was during medieval times.

The game of chess began sometime before the sixth century in India; from this time the game spread outward into Persia, and China, following a similar path to the

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90 British Museum, “The Lewis Chessmen.”
spread of Buddhism. At this point it split into two separate kinds of games, the Chinese one being significantly more complex than the game that traveled west into Europe. Chess was transmitted to Europe mainly through Moslems who played, taking it from Persia, through Egypt, Northern Africa, and to Spain. Chess entered the Christian world in Byzantium by way of Asia Minor, the Trans Mediterranean trade between North Africa and Italy, and through Muslim Spain around 1000. Some authors have speculated that chess came to Europe through the crusades, but while this might have made chess more popular in Europe, by the twelfth century, chess was already played widely throughout Europe. The cause of the spread of chess was far more likely the result of simple diffusion, as it became popular in one area, it soon became popular in areas nearby there. The type of chess played in Spain was the type that spread to France, and the type of chess that was played in Italy, spread to Germany and Scandinavia. While Murray argues that times of war would not have been suitable for the transmission of chess, Davidson argues that the game, played in camps would be played by both sides of a battle as well as learned by townsfolk in the area. Furthermore, chess was obviously part of a

92 Davidson, A Short History, 117.
93 Davidson, A Short History, 108.
94 Davidson, A Short History, 109.
95 Davidson, A Short History, 120.
96 Davidson, A Short History, 123.
97 Davidson, A Short History, 130.
98 Davidson, A Short History, 129-130.
100 Davidson, A Short History, 131.
young noble’s education. As we saw in Tristram, as early as the 1170s, skill at chess was so valued that the young lord was kidnapped. Pilgrimages offer another way of transport of the game across Europe. Interestingly the three directions that chess came from, also were pilgrimage destinations, Santiago de Compostela in Spain, Old St. Peter’s in Rome, Italy, and the Holy land by way of the eastern Mediterranean. Chess, as well as other ideas would have spread along these roads, even before the first crusades.

While these pathways of the transmission of chess seem insignificant, they illuminate a bigger picture of medieval Europe. During the eleventh century, Muslim and Christian relations allowed the transmission of knowledge and trade, and there was no blockade between Christian and non Christians that is often imagined in the medieval world. The pattern of diffusion of chess also shows that Italy was important for the spread of ideas to central Europe, while Spain was important to the spread of ideas toward France and England. While none of the authors on the history of chess mention pilgrimages as a way the game of chess traveled, these routes are the easiest means. Pilgrimages to and from France and Germany to Santiago del Compostela in Spain, as well as pilgrimages from Germany to Rome were taken by every rank of people in the medieval world. These patterns in the spread of chess also emphasize the break or disconnection between Europe and the Byzantine Empire, as the type of chess played in the eastern empire was slightly different than western chess, and was not played in Europe. The quick spread of chess also emphasizes its popularity. Within two hundred years, chess went from being a game only played in Muslim countries, to a game known by every noblemen in Europe and cited in literature, song, and art.

101 Davidson, A Short History, 133.
102 Davidson, A Short History, 131.
The popularity of medieval chess, as we saw from Hammond’s conclusions, is frankly astonishing. To underscore this popularity Murray writes,

> During the latter part of the Middle Ages, and especially from the thirteenth to fifteenth century, chess attained to a popularity in SWesteren Europe, which has never been excelled, and probably never equaled at any later date.\(^{103}\)

Besides appearing in popular literature such as Tristran and Huon, a plethora of manuscripts survive such as poems that explain the rules and collections of chess “problems” which are puzzles that players can use within the rules of chess.\(^{104}\) The fact that time was taken to write down this information about chess, information that does not appear with as much frequency after the printing press was invented,\(^{105}\) demonstrates the game’s popularity. Furthermore, writers such as the anonymous writer of *Les Echecs Amoureux*, took chess to another level all together, turning the game into a metaphor where the pieces represent different aspects and persons involved in the game of love, politics, and life.\(^{106}\) Not only the number and variety of manuscripts speak to the popularity and importance of chess in medieval times, but the depth of these instances emphasizes that people were not just playing the game, they were thinking about it deeply, and that it had an impact on their lives.

Chess also showed up in a variety of social circles. While, “skill in play was esteemed in a knight as an accomplishment befitting his rank and position,”\(^{107}\) the knowledge of chess spread from people intimate with court life to the wealthy merchant class, and also to traveling troubadours who would be expected to entertain with their

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\(^{103}\) Murray, *A History*, 428.

\(^{104}\) Murray, *A History*, 418.


skill at chess.\textsuperscript{108} While at first, religious orders were cautious of chess as a game of vices, men of monastic orders learned and played chess as an “alleviation of the monotony of convent life.”\textsuperscript{109} Importantly, Murray remarks, “the noble’s daughter learnt chess beside her brother, and grew up every whit as fond of the game as he, and proved in general as good a player as, or even better than, the knights of her acquaintance,”\textsuperscript{110} making knowledge of chess an important quality when at court or when searching for a husband. The popularity of chess, from the nobility to the merchant class, from clergymen to Muslims and even Jews in the medieval world was one that manages to surpass the popularity chess has had in the last few centuries.

As popular as chess was in the twelfth through fifteenth centuries, it is important to note that the game did not have the same connotations as it does today. As Murray puts it, “mental vigor, the concentration of attention, and the powers of calculation,” are not associated with the medieval knight or feudal noble,\textsuperscript{111} and indeed chess was a very different kind of game for a very different person in the middle ages. While it was a game of skill, and arguments, tempers, and even violence could result, it was a leisurely game. Chess was played by a noble whose days were spent hunting, hawking, or at the occasional tournament, who took every opportunity of distraction in traveling minstrels songs and games.\textsuperscript{112} It was no wonder chess became so popular, when distances were long, and distractions were often few.

Europeans were so taken by chess that after the 1200s they began to change the

\textsuperscript{108} Murray, A History, 428.
\textsuperscript{109} Murray, A History, 428.
\textsuperscript{110} Murray, A History, 435.
\textsuperscript{111} Murray, A History, 437.
\textsuperscript{112} Murray, A History, 438.
rules to create a more competitive play. Murray writes that these changes were brought on because Europeans felt disappointed in the Muslim game and the changes that they made were all directed to making the beginning of the game quicker. This emphasizes the need for a leisurely game that did not take copious time to start, and that the bulk of the enjoyment of the game would be centered around the middle and the end, resulting in active play. The medieval game changed in three ways, in the ways pieces could move, in the repositioning of pieces at the start, and in the enlargement of the board. While only one of these changes survived into modern chess, the fact that the medieval people experimented with chess, in an attempt to make the game more exciting, is testament to its overarching popularity, and of how it impacted daily life. Because many of these changes began on the local level, problems arose when people from different areas played together. To solve these problems universities became involved to find a solution.

While it is the least exciting, and does not impact the play of the game, an early change to chess important to our study in conjunction with courtly love, is that the name of the piece known as the Wiseman in the Arabic game was changed to the Queen early in chess history. While Murray remarks that the name was changed to complement the “symmetry of the arrangement of pieces,” the fact that it was changed to queen shows the importance of women in medieval society, especially when medieval people regarded “chess as a picture in miniature of the European state,” or by the later middle ages “as

113 Murray, A History, 94.
114 Murray, A History, 453.
115 Murray, A History, 454.
117 Murray, A History, 423.
118 Murray, A History, 423.
a royal court rather than as a replica of battle."\textsuperscript{120} The queen may also have been viewed as a wise man or advisor, as women especially those like Eleanor of Aquitaine were influential in matters of the state, but Murray suggests that the meaning of Wiseman did not translate from Arabic.\textsuperscript{121} Regardless, the queen was an important chess piece, and in European chess was expected to behave like a queen. For example, one of the very first changes in play from Arabic to European chess revolves around the queen. In Arabic chess, when a pawn made it across the board it would be changed into the Wiseman, whether the Wiseman was still on the board or not, and this was justified because in Arabia, the king could have as many advisors as he wanted.\textsuperscript{122} Yet, in Europe, this would not do, because the king could only have one queen, many years and countless rule changes to avoid having two queens on the board resulted.\textsuperscript{123}

In the modern chess game, the queen is often the most powerful piece on the board, being that she can move in any direction, any number of spaces; but this was not true of the medieval game. In the early medieval game of chess the queen could only move one space to an adjacent diagonal square,\textsuperscript{124} making her one of the weakest pieces on the board.\textsuperscript{125} The first amendment to the queen’s range of movement was the “leap” which allowed her to leap over a piece, but she still had to continue in a diagonal direction, and if there was no piece in the square directly to her diagonal, she could not leap over it.\textsuperscript{126} These rules were played into the mid 1450s, but by the 1500s, chess in

\textsuperscript{120} Davidson, \textit{A Short History}, 31.
\textsuperscript{121} Murray, \textit{A History}, 423.
\textsuperscript{122} Murray, \textit{A History}, 426.
\textsuperscript{123} Murray, \textit{A History}, 426-428.
\textsuperscript{124} Murray, \textit{A History}, 452.
\textsuperscript{125} Davidson, \textit{A Short History}, 28.
\textsuperscript{126} Murray, \textit{A History}, 457.
Europe was played with modern rules throughout the continent. In modern chess rules the queen is allowed to move in any direction, any number of spaces, but not allowed to leap over pieces. The other change revolves around the bishop. The bishop is now allowed to move diagonally any number of spaces, but not leap, which he was always allowed to do. These new rules added significant changes to how the game was played, opening up the game quicker, and allowing strong forces to contend from the onset.

While we can assume that the naming of the pieces in medieval chess had a direct correlation to the structure of medieval courts in Europe, these rule changes were made to make playing the game different and more exciting, rather than to associate the queen with the all-encompassing power she has in the modern chess game. Yet it is possible to speculate that after the fact, these associations were made, or even during the process. It is uncanny that the queen should have all the power of movement, while the king is subjected to move only one space at a time. Also interesting is the removal of the powers of the bishop’s leap, signaling the church’s decreased power in the medieval court, although the opposite may have been the case in the fifteenth and sixteenth century.

While Murray supposes that this change has little to do with the invention of the printing press and other changes erupting in the fifteenth century, chess was a game fully entrenched in medieval life. As the Renaissance unfolded, and feudal life changed, a game so important to the people of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries would not do for newer generations. It seems that after the change to modern chess was underway, medieval chess, sometimes referred to as the “Old Game” by Renaissance writers,

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127 Murray, A History, 767.
128 Murray, A History, 777.
129 Murray, A History, 780.
ceased to have the same connotations. Chess was no longer as popular, being replaced by cards and other games, and began to have the competitive connotation it has today. Most importantly, chess lost its connotations with medieval courtly life, in favor of a more competitive game.

One can only speculate the ways playing chess influenced courtly love. As we have noted before, the “old game” was played by both men and women, who were both equally skilled in it. The game would give lovers the opportunity to play together in relative intimacy, behind closed doors, or a curtain, such as seen in the “chess player” mirror cases. As in the example of Tristan and Isolde, the lovers drank the potion while playing chess, bereft of even Isolde’s handmaiden to warn her of the potion. While total privacy could rarely be achieved in a medieval household, particularly because few houses had private rooms, and those that did often needed to be traversed in order to access all the rooms, chess would allow lovers to converse in relative privacy without question to their motives.

Yet Murray remarks that chess was a social game, where bystanders would give advice, encouragement, and most important of all, try to interfere with the opposing player. It would have been very easy for lovers to share secrets and devotions while under the guise of giving advice on their next move. Advice could be coded in loosely made metaphors and witty language, not to mention ribald humor and naughty behavior, not unlike games that are played at parties today. In fact, as we saw in Huon of Bordeaux, betting and wagering were often involved with chess, the stakes ranging from dinner, to a

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132 Murray, A History, 476.
few coins, to a man’s life, or a woman’s virginity.

From these examples and the popularity of chess, we know that because the “old game” was a part of the daily medieval life, and also that of courtly lovers, chess can also be used as a metaphor for courtly love. Courtly love has always been given the status of a type of game, where players follow rules, with the end goal to win their lover’s heart. Andreas Capellanus outlined the stages of the game, “the first consists in the giving of hope, the second in the granting of a kiss, the third in the enjoyment of an embrace, and the fourth culminates in the yielding of the whole person,” much like stages to a board game or chess match. Michael Camille points out that chess is the perfect metaphor for love because “it articulated the playful tension and the often violent conflict inherent in the strategies of seduction” that surrounded the game of courtly love. Because of this, it is likely that the chess player mirror case not only represents a very popular game and a way for lovers to pass time together, but also the game of love itself.

Chess was the most popular board game in the middle ages. It was a game of strategy, intelligence, and excitement, as well as leisure and play. It was a means for lovers to communicate, as well as a metaphor for the game of love they embraced. There is no doubt that the “chess player” mirror cases depict a couple engaging in the game because it was a popular sport, adored by many, and played by nearly all. But the game of chess means more than just a strategic board game, or a single reference in a novel, or even a means to depict a lover’s favorite past time. Chess is the physical embodiment of courtly love.

133 Capellanus, Courtly Love, 42.
134 Camille, Art of Love, 124.
CHAPTER VI
CONCLUSION

Through the analysis of the “chess player” mirror cases, we have found five mirror cases with nearly exactly similar compositions and styles; the only difference between them involving slight changes in hand gestures and levels of delicacy in the carving. The larger set of fifteen mirror cases all have the same general composition, with the only differences found in decoration such as the use of lobes, or the addition of attendant figures. Furthermore, the similarities seen in the compositions of these mirror cases, do not exist in mirror cases of other subjects, making the fifteen “chess player” cases uniquely unparalleled in their similarities.

Why these similarities exist is puzzling when they do not appear in other subjects of mirror cases. They could have been created using model books, patterns, or copying of cases. Some of the cases may be modern copies, as the case at Williams College Museum certainly is. Regardless, the similarities attest to the popularity of the cases, and show that such a composition was in high demand by patrons.

This demand for the chess player mirror case relates directly to the popularity of chess, which only in recent centuries has regained the popularity it had during the fourteenth century. Nobles, merchants, lovers, women, and knights, all participated in the leisurely game. The game gave lovers, like the pair illustrated in the “chess player” mirror cases, an easy way to communicate and conduct secret affairs. However, in the
context of courtly love, the game of chess was something more. It was a battle between
two individuals, with excitement, chance, and eventual defeat, much like the game of
love.

While several institutions have tried to connect the “chess player” mirror cases to
specific pieces of medieval literature, the cases do not have details that would connect
them to a story. Instead, these mirror cases, embody the theme of courtly love, rather than
illustrate a story. They depict a couple engaging in a game, a relationship, and perhaps a
love affair. Furthermore, they depict the very essence of the theme of courtly love.

While the popularity of chess explains why so many of these mirror cases were
created, it does not explain those of other subjects. Even mirror cases that have clearer
connections to literature, like those illustrating the story of Tristran and Ysolt, represent
the theme of courtly love more than a specific scene in the story. The reason for the
popularity of courtly love themed objects in the early fourteenth century is as yet
unanswered.

The ivory mirror cases are simple, elegant, and recreate a lovely passion that
brings about a joyous emotion. Yet, they were created in a time of absolute strife. Nearly
all secular ivory objects were created in the very late 1200s through the mid 1300s. A
cooling period began in the late thirteenth century which gave rise to the great famine
which shook Europe from 1315-1317, then the black death depleted a population already
plagued by malnutrition. Matters of succession, vicious rulers, riots, and a hundred years
war added further conflict. Even on the theological level there were great problems;
between the Avignon papacy, early reformatory movements, new ecclesiastical orders,
and the expulsion of the Jews, Europe was often in theological conflict.
While most people can point to the plague as the biggest disaster of the 1300s, it was preceded far earlier by an intense climatic change. Much of the conflict of the fourteenth century began with the climate change in the 1280s. While this “Little Ice Age” has often been a topic of conflict and disbelief, Tamara Whited et al. wrote “that there was a Little Ice Age is now beyond discussion, but the consequences are not entirely understood,” yet the impact it had in the 1300s can be clearly seen. Before this time, medieval Europe experienced a warming period, where climate temperatures were near or above those of today supporting Viking colonization of Greenland, as well as the growth of vineyards in England. The warming period also supported a population boom. In three hundred years, the population of England nearly quadrupled, and France more than tripled, which was at or above the amount of food that could be produced to sustain the population. As early as 1215, areas of Greenland and Iceland were experiencing decreased temperatures and expanding sea ice, while there were crop failures in Poland and Russia. It was not until the 1310s that the whole of Europe saw the effects of the climate change, which doused the continent in unpredictable weather which continued without cease until the 1330s, when the climate became more regular albeit much colder.

The consequences of this climatic change were severe, and can be seen immediately in the great famine of 1315-1317. The early 1310s saw a rise in the price of food across all of Europe, and then in 1314, many writers noted that it rained more than

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usual.\textsuperscript{139} But this rain was nothing compared to the deluge that plagued the continent in 1315; floods were so great that they washed entire manors away.\textsuperscript{140} In this year the low countries and Great Britain were also plagued with vicious storms.\textsuperscript{141} These rains meant crops of barley, wheat, and oats were planted late and had no time to mature, so the autumn harvest was ruined.\textsuperscript{142} Yet it also meant that wine production was interrupted and even salt production was impeded by lack of sunshine in the evaporation process.\textsuperscript{143} By Christmas, most areas of Europe had completely exhausted their winter stores of grain, and prices doubled and quadrupled as the year went on.\textsuperscript{144} To combat the lack of grains and high prices, nobles depleted the countryside of farm animals as well as game.\textsuperscript{145} Lucas touches on a particularly terrible result of the lack of food:

\begin{quote}
Cannibalism certainly was common. Trokelowe relates how thieves who had been imprisoned, but who were neglected and given no food, ferociously attacked new prisoners and devoured them half alive. He also tells how he saw the emaciated forms of starving men and women in the streets of London; dirty dead bodies were everywhere to be seen in the wards and lanes.
\end{quote}

While in any famine, it is expected that the poor will suffer, even the rich such as Edward II of England often had trouble finding enough bread to feed his court.\textsuperscript{146} Starving people were more susceptible to disease, thievery, and other crimes and often went unpunished, contributing to the general disarray of the continent.\textsuperscript{147} Due to eating spoiled food, many people suffered from diseases such as St. Anthony’s Fire, as well as vitamin deficiencies.

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\item \textsuperscript{140} Lucas, “Great European Famine,” 346.
\item \textsuperscript{141} Lucas, “Great European Famine,” 348.
\item \textsuperscript{142} Lucas, “Great European Famine,” 351.
\item \textsuperscript{143} Lucas, “Great European Famine,” 351.
\item \textsuperscript{144} Lucas, “Great European Famine,” 352.
\item \textsuperscript{145} Lucas, “Great European Famine,” 355.
\item \textsuperscript{146} Lucas, “Great European Famine,” 356.
\item \textsuperscript{147} Lucas, “Great European Famine,” 360.
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that left them weak and possibly blind.\textsuperscript{148} To make matters worse, the crops of 1316 were once again hit with unseasonal rain, which left almost nothing to feed either the peasantry or the gentry in the coming year.\textsuperscript{149} This dearth in grains was supplemented by a dearth in proteins as many animals were not able to repopulate after overhunting from the year before.\textsuperscript{150} In those two years, it is unclear how many people may have died, from starvation, pestilence, or violence resulting from the former. Records survive that mention carts that would go through cities several times a day to cart away bodies to newly consecrated cemeteries or trenches dug outside the city.\textsuperscript{151} In Ypres an account survives that notes an average of one hundred and fifty people were buried each week from May until September in an areas whose population was probably between 25,000 and 30,000.\textsuperscript{152} Even from the sparse details about the price of grain and possibly exaggerated accounts of destruction by water and death toll, it is clear that this famine had a huge effect on the entire population of Europe, though it was only the first of many calamities.

While the cooling climate change was a lasting problem continuing all the way until the mid nineteenth century, and the great famine of 1315 devastated much of the population, this was a small event when compared to the horrors of the plague. While a summation of the black death can be converted into a series of numbers, for this study the emotional toll is much more important. It is important to remember the bad weather that caused the great famine did not cease. So when the bubonic plague hit Europe in 1347, it

\textsuperscript{149} Lucas, “Great European Famine,” 361.
\textsuperscript{150} Lucas, “Great European Famine,” 362.
\textsuperscript{151} Lucas, “Great European Famine,” 362-368.
\textsuperscript{152} Lucas, “Great European Famine,” 368.
hit a starving population, that had lived off poor harvests, depleted game, and starving farm animals. Emotionally, the people were frightened; there wasn’t anything they could do to prevent another year of bad harvests, and the weather was anything but predictable. The plague resulted in riots and acts of anti-Semitism that led to an expulsion of the Jews from nearly every country in western Europe due to unfounded rumors of well poisoning. A continent wide paranoia and fear spread as fast as the disease; groups of Flagellants emerged believing self mutilation would result in redemption, stirring the countryside into religious frenzy as well as fear and hiding. Between riots and paranoia, Flagellants and rumors, disease and continued bad weather, the plague wrecked havoc on an already stressed population.

By looking at the climatic change, the famine that resulted from it, and the plague that took advantage of a weak population, it is easy to see that living in the early fourteenth century would not have been pleasant for even the wealthiest of people. Yet, during this time of strife, and probably because of it, the people of the upper class turned to beautiful courtly love objects to get away from this vicious reality. It is easy to see why people turned to courtly love, romantic literature, and even chess as a means to escape the problems of the time. While the time of Eleanor of Aquitaine and her Courts of Love was not simple, it was as full of conflicts and crusades as any period of history. The romanticism of the period must have had an allure to the people of the fourteenth century as the Arthurian romances did, making courtly love objects popular and desirable.

While the environment of the early fourteenth century certainly points to a reason

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153 Fagan, Little Ice Age, 37.
154 Fagan, Little Ice Age, 43-45.
for courtly love nostalgia, changes in secular literature do as well. In the thirteenth century, romances were being written in prose form throughout Europe, focusing on many themes and stories similar to those found in early courtly love songs. These prose versions were meant to be read, rather than simply serving as records of lyrical poetry. This marks the transition from books that were made to be records, to books that were made to be read.\(^{157}\) Strangely enough, in Renee Curtis’s introduction to The Romance of Tristan, she writes,

> With the growth in trade and commerce and the rise of the bourgeoisie, there was a gradual tendency away from the rather narrow preoccupations of aristocratic society of the twelfth century, so interested in discussions on matters of love.\(^{158}\)

This is contrary to the extreme occurrence of courtly ivories in the thirteenth century. While perhaps readers were more interested in epic stories, there was clearly a market for courtly love objects. Furthermore, most of these objects, such as our chess players, relate to the ideas of courtly love, rather than specific scenes and stories such as Tristan. Yet, as these books were produced in prose, the concepts and ideas of courtly love were accessible to more people, enlarging the audience of courtliness.

Additionally, as the fourteenth century progressed, more and more books were translated or written in the vernacular.\(^{159}\) Christopher de Hamel points out that at the time, “girls were not customarily taught Latin as thoroughly as boys,” and women were often the patrons of these vernacular manuscripts.\(^{160}\) This also widened the base of romance readers and those aware of courtly love.

Importantly, as Elspeth Kennedy points out, as literature progressed from the

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\(^{157}\) Curtis, Intro to *The Romance of Tristan*, xvi.

\(^{158}\) Curtis, Intro to *The Romance of Tristan*, xvi.

\(^{159}\) De Hamel, *Illuminated Manuscripts*, 160.

\(^{160}\) De Hamel, *Illuminated Manuscripts*, 160.
thirteenth to fifteenth century, there was an attempt to make “the individual romance more comprehensive, to include as much as possible of the Arthurian world within it, rather than to use allusions outwards to tales told elsewhere in order to present the romance as part of a wider ‘reality’.”161 This means in the fifteenth century, readers were no longer aware of the theme of courtly love in daily life, but instead only interested love in specific romances and the courtliness of realms in which they lived. This alludes to the fact that courtly love was now an alien concept, no longer part of daily life but instead something only experienced in romances. Because so few of the courtly love ivories depict specific scenes in romances, it can be assumed that they represent a far off ideal, not necessarily events that occurred between lovers on a daily basis. Though, it is unclear at what time this change took place, whether the original owners of these pieces in the early 1300s still participated in such activities with their lovers is not clear. However, the emotions depicted in these pieces are founded in reality. Using images of a time not long ago to escape less pleasant realities may indeed be the purpose of these ivories.

The rise in courtly love themed ivories was a direct result of the uncompromising environment of the fourteenth century, and were created as a kind of escapist art in a time of courtly love nostalgia. While this certainly answers the question “Why was there a production of courtly love themed works in the fourteenth century?” it does not answer why they chose to use ivory as the chief media to represent courtly love themes.

To answer this, we return to a subject that has shown up time and time again in this study, and that is Spanish influence. The Iberian Peninsula and St James de

Compostela were popular pilgrimage destinations, and thus a route which goods and ideas traveled. As we saw from the study of this history of chess, the game traveled into France from Spain, and then spread across the continent and the channel to England. Furthermore, it was from Spain that the Duke of Aquitaine brought back his dancing entertainers who influenced the love courts of Aquitaine, and essentially began the courtly love phenomenon.

Spain was a very complex place in the middle ages. Once dominated by Muslims, by the 1300s the peninsula was nearly entirely Christian except for Grenada, a small portion to the south (figure 30). Yet many of the centers retained the splendor the Islamic courts brought to them, including the dancers, musicians, and singers that made the courts so popular in Aquitaine. Art made both before and after this period in Spain includes examples similar to those of courtly love. The Casket of Abd al-Malik, ca. 1000-1025 (figure 31), now in the Victoria and Albert Museum, is one of many early Andalusian works from Spain that contain examples of themes commonly seen in courtly love themed art in the north. On the front panel of the casket there are two scenes of pairs drinking wine and playing music. While this is quite different from the amorous scenes of couples commonly depicted on courtly love ivories, these figures are partaking in a common courtly activity of a “poetic soiree.” During such a gathering men would drink wine and listening to music as poetry was recited. Poetry, music, dancing, and wine are all aspects of the courtly love culture that flourished in Aquitaine, due to the influence of these Andalusian courts. Much later (1225-1250), a pillow cover (figure 32)

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163 Victoria and Albert, “Casket.”
was produced for the queen Berengaria (1179-1246), who was the daughter of Alfonso VIII of Castile, and Eleanor of England, and thus a grand daughter of Eleanor of Aquitaine. This pillow cover shows a couple dancing, one figure holds a tambourine, the other a cup. This is also a common image in courtly love enamels such as the Casket with Troubadours from the British Museum (figure 1). After looking at these examples, it is clear that the aspects of the Andalusian courts that inspired courtly love initially, continued to flourish after the Christian domination of the Iberian Peninsula. It is probable that these aspects, as well as the use of ivory in Al-Andalus, inspired courtly love objects in northern Europe in the fourteenth century.

Furthermore, there is the topic of the supply and trade of Ivory, which certainly influenced the production of ivory. While production of secular courtly love themed ivory does not really begin until 1300, production of ivory for ecclesiastical purposes in the form of statues of saints and the Madonna and Child flourished in the mid 1240s onward. This escalation in production points to a significant increase in the amount of raw ivory available in northern Europe, especially notable when production of ivories in the areas around the Mediterranean remained constant. Guerin relates this increase to the increase in trade between northern Europe and African traders for supplies necessary for textile production. The caravans trading the ivory and other supplies northward would travel on ground through Africa, and then be transferred to Genoese ships. After stopping at Gibraltar, the items would then be shipped around the Iberian Peninsula and

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166 Guerin, “Supply of Ivory.”
167 Guerin, “Supply of Ivory.”
taken straight to the port cities of northern Europe.\textsuperscript{168} This travel route would allow the ships to stop at many places along the Iberian coast, as well as spread influence from the still Islamic city of Gibraltar. While Guerin’s study on the Ivory trade during this period is a good beginning, much more research on medieval luxury trade needs to be completed before the Spanish influence on ivory production of this period can be completely understood.

Through this study, the motivations behind secular ivory carving have been uncovered. From an increase in ivory trade, to the courtly love nostalgia that influenced art production in a particularly unpleasant time in history, to Spanish influence. Furthermore, the motivations behind the “chess player” mirror cases, one subject of many, have been discussed in depth, from the popularity of chess, to representation of courtly themes. However, there is a need for improvement in nearly every area of this study. The subject of courtly love nostalgia and its true reach during this period deserves attention. The ivory trade, as well as other luxury good trades throughout Europe need to be researched further for historians to uncover the true influenced of different cultures from around the Mediterranean on art produced above the Alps. Additionally, it may be possible with further research to identify different styles of ivory carving and separate them into schools, artists, or even locations, rather than identifying all of these ivories with Parisian workshops.

Furthermore, the “chess players” are only one of many subjects that appear in courtly love themed ivories in the early to mid 1300s. There are dozens of other subjects that deserve the attention put on the “chess player” mirror cases in this study; from their

\textsuperscript{168} Guerin, “Supply of Ivory.”
connections to literature, to the popularity of everyday activities such as hunting, or even visual representations of the stages of love. These pieces need to be researched not only because there are so many of them, which demonstrates how popular it was to own such a luxury object, but also because of what the subjects depicted on the pieces represent. These are all aspects of daily life that medieval people took pleasure in, and the objects themselves are pieces of art that were treasured.

Often, the most overlooked aspect of Medieval art is how well the artists were able to capture emotion and create art that is easy to relate to even seven hundred years later. No one could argue that they have never sat at a table like one of the “chess players” across from someone he or she was attracted to. Perhaps he or she leaned forward in excitement, to listen to a story, or pointed out a wrong move with a shy smile. It is that smile across the table, that emotion that everyone has once experienced, a silent secret, that makes these pieces timeless. When we look at these pieces, we see more than just a beautiful elegant piece of art, we are reminded of that timeless emotion of love.
Figure 1. Casket with Troubadours, ca. 1180. Limoges Enamel, 21cm x 11cm x 15cm.

British Museum of Art, London.
Figure 2. Ulrich von Liechtenstein with his Venus Helm, from the Manesse Codex, Zurich, c. 1300. Cod. pal. Germ. 848, fol. 237r. Universitätsbibliothek, Heidelberg.
Figure 3. The offering of a heart, and the lover offers the lady cash, from the *Alexander Romance*, Bruges, 1344. Under the direction of Jean de Grise. MS Bodl. 264. Fol. 59r. Bodelian Library, Oxford.
Figure 5. A Collage of the Fifteen Surviving “Chess Player” Mirror Cases. Ivory, 14 date to the fourteenth century, one to the nineteenth century. Various museums.
Figure 6. *Mirror Case with Couple Playing Chess*, 1325-1350. Ivory, 4” x 4” x 3/8”.

Cleveland Museum of Art.
Figure 10. *Game of Chess*, c. 1300. Ivory, 4.5” x 4.5” x 0.5”. The Louvre, Paris.
Figure 11. Reverse of *Mirror Case with Couple Playing Chess*, 1325-1350. Ivory, 4” x 4” x 3/8”. Cleveland Museum of Art.
Figure 12. *Knight and a Lady Playing Chess*, 1300-1325. Ivory, 4” x 4” x 7/10”. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
Figure 13. *A Game of Chess*, 1300-1325. Ivory, 3.3” x 3.3”. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
Figure 15. *Mirror Case with a Couple Playing Chess*, mid 14th century. Ivory, 3 ¾” x 3 15/16”. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.
Figure 16. *Plaque with Scenes of Courtship*, 14th century. Ivory, 4 9/16” x 3 1/16” x 3/16”. Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York.
Figure 17. “Chess Player” Mirror Cases


b. *Game of Chess*, c. 1300. Ivory, 4.5” x 4.5” x 0.5”. The Louvre, Paris.


Figure 18. “Hunting” Mirror Cases

a. *Knight and Lady Hunting*, 1330-1350. Ivory, 12.5cm x 12.5cm. The Victoria and Albert Museum, London.


Figure 19. “God of Love” Mirror Cases


d. *Plaque with the God of Love*, third quarter of the 14th century. Ivory, 3 1/16” x 3 1/16”. The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore.

Figure 20. Ms. Lat. 11907, fols. 232v. Last quarter of the 14\textsuperscript{th} Century. Pen and black ink on parchment, 345 x 225 mm. Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.
Figure 21. Ms. Lat. 11907, fols. 232r. Last quarter of the 14th Century. Pen and black ink on parchment, 345 x 225 mm. Bibliotheque Nationale, Paris.

A version of this thesis with images is available through Kent State University School of Art.
Figure 22. Fragment of a *Mirror Case with Knights and Foot Soldiers*, 1350-1400 or 1800-1850. Ivory, 14cm in diameter. British Museum, London.
Figure 23. *Couple Playing Chess* Mirror Case, French, Early 19th century copy of a 14th century original. Ivory, 90mm x 92mm. Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts.
Figure 24. Reverse of *Couple Playing Chess* Mirror Case, French, Early 19th century copy of a 14th century original. Ivory, 90mm x 92mm. Williams College Museum of Art, Williamstown, Massachusetts.
Figure 25. *Couple Playing Chess in a Tent* Mirror Case. 14th Century. Ivory, 114mm x 114mm. The Victoria and Albert Museum, London.
Figure 26. Tristan Playing Chess, Chertsey Tile: Tristram Series. Late 13th Century.

Figure 29. Mirror Case with a Couple Playing Chess. Ivory, 92mm x 89mm x 8mm.

Figure 31. *Casket*. Andalusian, 1000-1025. Ivory, 27 cm x 27 cm x 16 cm. Victoria and Albert Museum, London.


