

Albescit primus: Playing Chess with Ovid in Two Medieval Latin Pseudepigrapha

The game of chess furnishes 20th-century literary authors like Eliot and Nabokov with operative metaphors for the dynamics of reading and writing. The proposed paper toys with an earlier chapter in this tradition through a consideration of two pieces of medieval Latin poetry about chess, both of which are ascribed to Ovid. The first is a 58-line encomium to the so-called “game of Ulysses” (*Ulixis / ludus*, 1.577-8) contained in the long hexameter poem *On the Old Woman* (1.577-635). The second, written later and seemingly with knowledge of the former, is a 36-line didactic poem in elegiac couplets on the rules of the game. Playing at reception in two very different Ovidian tones—the metamorphic hexameter and the didactic elegy—these two poems pursue different generic strategies and rhetorical tactics to play with their readers in the ranks and files of verse. Through an intertextual analysis of these poems’ engagements with the Ovidian corpus and a historicizing evaluation of the place of chess in their rhetoric, I show that these ludic pseudepigrapha playfully pin together the cultural history of chess and the classical tradition.

An example from my reading of each poem will illustrate its interpretive potential. The chess passage in *On the Old Woman* focuses on the idea that the chess board, with only six possible moves, can create infinite variety and thereby functions as an allegory for celestial motion (*sic ludus factus motus caelestis ad instar / est* 1.596-7). It is for this little-known reason the poet says that Ulysses, the inventor of the game, should be praised (582-3). In this way the poet engages with the words of Ovid’s Ulysses in *Metamorphoses* 13 who, in his competition with Ajax for the arms of Achilles, argues that the “brute and brainless soldier” (*rudis et sine pectore miles*, 13.290) was unable to appreciate the cosmological imagery on the “celestial gift” (*caelestia dona*, 13.289).

By covertly encoding a reference to an Ovidian rhetorical competition that only a learned Ovidian would catch, the poet sets a trap for the reader who might otherwise respond incorrectly.

In the elegiac *On the Game of Chess*, four lines are devoted to a description of pawn promotion, which occurs when a player's pawn reaches the opponent's back rank and is exchanged with another piece, or only the queen according to Medieval rules (15-8):

et si quando datur tabulae sibi tangere summa,
 reginae solitum praeripit officium.
uir factus mulier, regi ferus arbiter haeret,
 imperat et regnat, hinc capit, inde labat.

And if ever it is given to him (i.e., the pawn) to touch the end of the board, he carries off the accustomed duty of the queen. A man is made a woman, and as a fierce tactician he clings to the king and commands and reigns; here he captures and there he falls back.

Here, a subtle reference to *Amores* 1.1 compares the pawn to Ovid flirting with writing epic before slipping into elegiacs with a counterfactual image of a Venus who “takes up (*praeripiat*, 1.1.7) the arms of blonde Minerva.” In this way, perhaps, the elegiac author signals their own change of themes from the martial emphasis in *On the Old Woman* to an didactic/elegiac approach. At the same time, the gender transformation evokes the abruptness of Ovidian metamorphoses, and possibly alludes specifically to the metamorphosis of Tiresias into a woman in *Met.* 3 (*de viro factus mirabile femina...egerat*, 3.326-7). This reference may explain the fact that, despite the

gender change, the masculine phrase *ferus arbiter* is immediately used—the queen, in being promoted from a male, as it were becomes a male advisor. This perhaps suggests an anxiety present in early chess literature about the peculiarity of the strongest chess piece being gendered female.

These dynamics are captured well by how our elegist explains move order. With a striking logical transfer, the poet writes *albescit primus* (5): “white moves first,” or, literally, “first whitens,” while the opposite color “blushes” (*rubet*) or is black, grey, or red (6). The only time Ovid uses the word *albescit* is in *Fasti* 5, when he contrasts Ceres, who “whitens *albescit*, 5.357) in autumn, with Flora, who holds onto her colors. Considering this, while the poet of *On the Old Woman* choreographs chess into the movements of the world through astrological imaginary, the didactic poet imagines chess as terrestrial, vegetal growth over time. In both cases, the temporality of Ulysses’ game is at once a way of checking past sources and the flowering of inventive new variations.

Bibliography

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