

The Pawn in the Chess Game

In *Alice Through the Looking-Glass* Alice is bewildered by a chess game, presumably reminiscent of Alice Liddell's experience playing chess and other mind games with Lewis Carroll.

Alice



The chessmen populating the Looking-Glass World. John Tenniel (1870).

Alice faces the swirl of contradictory activities of the two sides of the chess game taking place around her as she progresses toward the status of becoming a queen in her seventh 'move,' much as Alice Capet no doubt felt when Henry II, the royal father, wooed her despite her engagement to his son. Lewis Carroll has Alice say:

“ ‘I should see the garden far better,’ said Alice to herself, ‘if I could get to the top of that hill: and here’s a path that leads straight to it – at least, no, it doesn’t do that –’ (after going a few yards along the path, and turning several sharp corners), ‘but I suppose it will at last. But

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Alice Capet, the daughter of Louis VII by his second wife, was explicitly a pawn in the Capet/Plantagenet chess game, being successively engaged to two of Henry II's sons.

Eleanor



Pieces from the anthropomorphic Lewis chess set (12th century).

Princess Alice (Alys or Alais) was used as a pawn for the acquisition of demesnes through Western Europe, particularly in relation to the disputed territory of the Vexin, the buffer zone between France and Normandy of which Alice became the countess. She was first engaged to her own stepbrother, Richard, Duke of Aquitaine (who was Eleanor's son with her second husband Henry II), since the marriage to Richard would also give the French King a claim on the territory of Aquitaine that he had lost with his divorce from Eleanor. Negotiations continued until Alice was aged 15, when Richard (who, however, showed no inclination to go ahead with the marriage because he suspected that his father had already had a relationship with her) renounced the engagement. At this point, Henry tried to marry Alice to Richard's brother, John. When it became clear that this marriage would not be permitted under the Treaty of Montmirail, which was still in effect, Henry attempted to marry Alice himself in 1174 (after his own break-up with the combative Eleanor, who was first for and then against the intended marriage), with the same result when the Pope intervened with a threat of excommunication.

how curiously it twists! It's more like a corkscrew than a path! Well, this turn goes to the hill, I suppose — no, it doesn't! This goes straight back to the house! Well then, I'll try it the other way'."

Alice Through the Looking-Glass, Chapter 2.

Alice herself learned chess from Lewis Carroll and was fascinated with the game.

Alice

"Much of *Through the Looking-Glass* is made up of ['stories told before the famous trip up the river to Godstow], particularly the ones to do with chessmen, which are dated by the period when we were excitedly learning chess."

(Alice Liddell at age 80, quoted in Hargreaves, 1932).

This fascination with chess at Oxford was reflected in Lewis Carroll's attendance at a chess tourney in 1866 that was highlighted by the game between Charles Ranken and Howard Staunton (the dominant English chess player who founded the International Chess Association in 1851 and designed the chess pieces that remain the international standard). Ranken and Lord Randolph Churchill, both Oxford undergraduates at the time, founded the Oxford University Chess Club in 1869. Prince Leopold, with whom Alice was romantically linked became president of the club in 1974.



Alice chess set with the Rabbit as the pawns (20th century).

" 'So he seeks a way to set me aside without any loss to himself,' Eleanor fumed. 'But if it will prove so difficult to divorce me, why is he doing it?'

'I do not like to tell you this, but he wishes to remarry,' Hugh of Avalon said gently, although his words came like a slap in the face. It was too much to take in; it had all been too much to take in, after months of quiet, uninterrupted monotony.

'Who?' she asked, thinking of Rosamund . . .

Was Henry really going to marry his mistress, the daughter of a mere knight? He must have lost his wits completely!

'The Princess Alys of France.'

'But she is Richard's betrothed!'

'Aye, but betrothals can be broken as well as marriages,' Hugh reminded her. 'Already, the King has sent to Pope Alexander, asking him to dispatch a legate to England to hear his case against you. The matter is being kept secret, of course, and the King insists specially on your discretion, since annulling your union is a serious step and may have far reaching consequences.' "

Captive Queen, by Alison Weir, 2010, p. 364.



Pope Alexander III receives an ambassador (1407)

Eleanor