

Chess and Shakespeare

Edward Winter

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C.N. 4051:

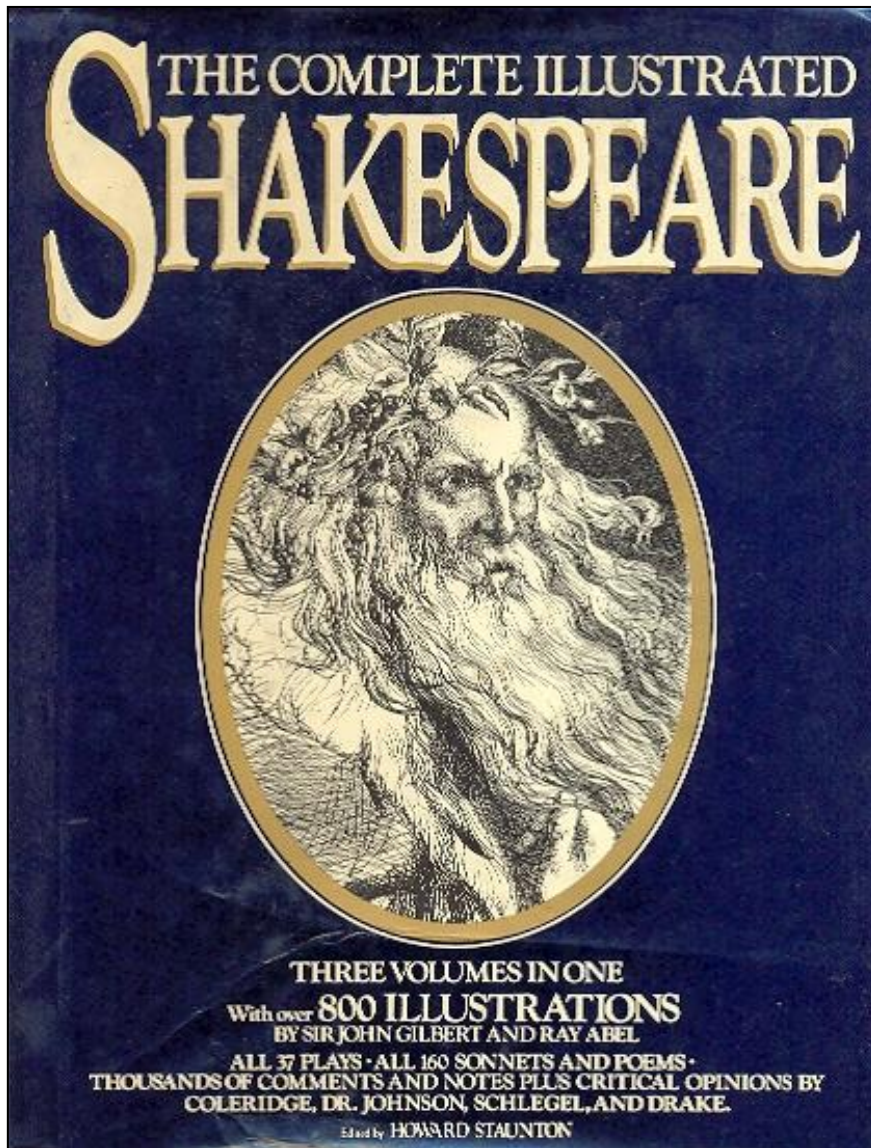
We present a digest of items from old chess literature about connections between chess and William Shakespeare.

- From pages 349-350 of the November 1860 *Chess Monthly*:

‘Mr Staunton has evidently edited the works of the great dramatist in a very loose way. If this were not the case, we should have had somewhere in the bulky volume some notice of the chess life of Shakespeare. That he must have possessed a large knowledge of the game is evident from the hastiest perusal of his divine writings. He speaks in *Winter’s Tale* of an “unkind mate” – and what chessplayer, who has been suddenly and ruthlessly mated at a moment when victory seemed about to perch upon his banner, does not know what that means? In some *Morphic* Evans, when towards the close of the encounter, the Amazonian queen, the militant bishop and the gallant knight bear bravely down upon the unlucky opposing king, what better describes the terminating struggle than the “warlike mate” mention in *Henry VI*? In the same play we find an allusion to an “unknown mate” or a mate given by one skilled in the written theories of chess. When, in *King Lear*, the renowned playwright speaks of “one self-mate” he unfortunately neglected to tell us to what particular suicidal problem he refers. How naturally Antipholus of Syracuse, in the *Comedy of Errors*, apparently wrought up into an insane excitement by the disastrous result of a combat on the sable and silver field of chess, exclaims that he is “not mad, but mated”. In a pretty punning way, in another play, Elinor accuses Constance of wishing Arthur to be King, in order that she may “be a queen and check the world”. Leontes of Sicily found that the “loss of his most precious Queen” was a thing to be “lamented”, as many men have done in these later times. The expression of Suffolk, “My King! tush! that’s a wooden thing!” shows what the material of chessmen was in the elder period of English chess history. In *King John* we discover a sort of proverbial reference to a close and crowded game in the comparison, “To lie like pawns, locked up”. In *The Taming of the Shrew* Katharine says,

“I pray you sir, is it your will,
To make a stale of me amongst these mates?”

And we might multiply quotations to prove how intimately the dramatist understood the nature of the game and its cultivators. We have had volumes on Shakespeare as a lawyer, and Shakespeare as a moralist. Pray, Mr Commentator Staunton, will you give us a tome on Shakespeare as a chessplayer?”

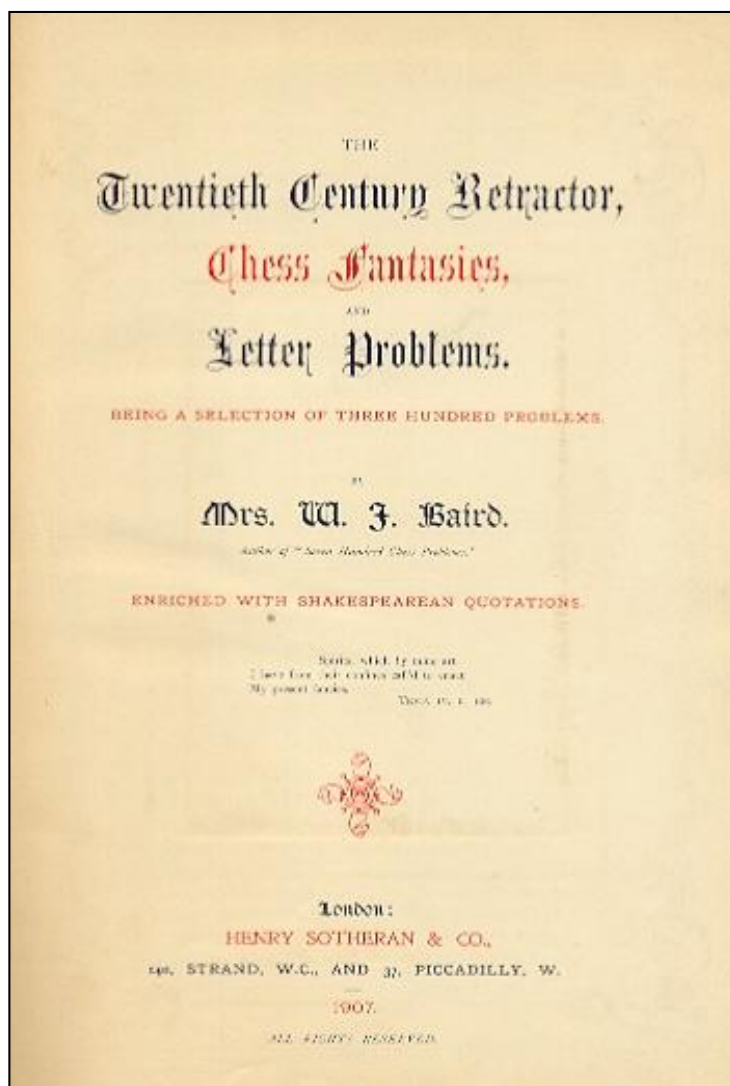


- A poem on Shakespeare and chess by W.M. Ogden was published on page 28 of the February 1901 *American Chess World*.

- A paragraph on page 117 of the June 1907 *American Chess Bulletin*:

“Though it has been surmised”, says George H. Ely, “that the scene in *The Tempest* in which Ferdinand and Miranda are discovered playing chess was introduced because Ferdinand was Prince of Naples, and in Shakespeare’s time Naples was the headquarters of chess play, there is no necessity for supposing that the dramatist had any purpose other than that of showing the lovers in a pretty and engaging attitude. It is notable, however, that nowhere else does Shakespeare make any direct reference to chess. Unlike Bacon and many other writers, he never uses its term by illustration or metaphor. The inference which these facts seems to warrant is that for Shakespeare the game had no great amount of attraction.”

- In 1907 Mrs W.J. Baird brought out one of the most beautifully produced chess books ever seen, *The Twentieth Century Retractor, Chess Fantasies, and Letter Problems*, ‘enriched with Shakespearean quotations’.



On page 301 of the July 1916 *Chess Amateur* P.H. Williams wrote:

‘I think it was Mrs Baird who did more to search Shakespeare for accidental (or deliberate) reference to chess, since all her retractors had Shakespearean mottoes, and her knowledge of the Avonian bard was obviously extensive. Her example was followed by other composers of retractors, who considered such positions would be incomplete without some reference to the poet.’

- On pages 65-67 of the December 1907 *Lasker's Chess Magazine* (an item from the *New York Evening Post*) Emanuel Lasker introduced a game (Spielmann v Janowsky, Carlsbad, 1907) as follows:

‘... The artistic conscience sometimes makes him who has it a coward – or, let us say, a Hamlet of the chess board.

I wonder if Hamlet was a chessplayer. From his character it seems indeed likely. If he was, he probably played a weak but imaginative game, with a craving to improve upon the best move and therefore often missing it.

Hamlets of the chess board are frequent types. Once in the meshes of combination they lose themselves in its intricacies, and evolve ideas that are so infinitely subtle that they have no vitality. Then is the moment when fate, usually with a somewhat brutal, matter-of-fact blow, wakes them out of their dreams.’

Lasker's remarks were quoted on page 152 of the July 1908 *American Chess Bulletin* (courtesy of

The Australasian) and on page 108 of the May 1911 *American Chess Bulletin*.

- Pages 302-304 of the *Chess Amateur*, July 1913 gave the correspondence game J.A. Shannon v G.W. Moses with annotations comprising quotes from Shakespeare.
- ‘Shakespeare and Jonson at Chess’. Page 120 of the May-June 1915 *American Chess Bulletin* quoted from the *St Louis Times-Democrat*, and on the authority of the *Brooklyn Eagle*, that:

‘... an original painting of Shakespeare, for which it is said that the late J.P. Morgan was prepared to offer \$1,000,000 on proof of its authenticity, is now in possession of Mrs Catherine de Heyman, of 269 Carlton Avenue, Brooklyn. Its history has been thoroughly investigated, and it is said that the possessor now has absolute proof that the painting is genuine ...

The picture is 30¾ inches in height and 38 inches wide and is painted on chalked linen, which was stretched over a frame. It is full of slits and cracks but is still fresh and beautiful in color. It represents Shakespeare playing a game of chess with his friend Ben Jonson, who was also a dramatist.

Investigation by the learned Dr Paul Wislicenus of Darmstadt, a member of the German Shakespeare Society, has resulted in ascribing the de Heyman painting to the brush of Karel van Mander as being one of his best works.

He says “The picture shows the hand of a master, at the turn of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The style of painting betrays the Titian school, then approaching the rococco. The composition is that of the Netherlands ...”

- Pages 130-131 of the July-August 1915 *American Chess Bulletin* reverted to the painting by quoting a statement by Frank de Heyman, the son of the owner, that ‘the portrait was painted in 1603, in Holland, while the plague was raging in London, and a large number of theatrical people had gone to other countries’. Dr Wislicenus summed up by saying: “Whoever has seen the death mask of Shakespeare and the Shakespeare and Ben Jonson’s picture is convinced that a greater likeness cannot be imagined ... A forgery ... is, not only from a historical but also from a technical standpoint, absolutely out of the question.’
- Pages 240-241 of the December 1915 *American Chess Bulletin* reported that a recent bulletin of the Good Companion Chess Problem Club had devoted two pages to the picture, and a reproduction was provided:



An attempt was also made to reproduce the position (although other proposals have been seen over the years):

'White: B. Jonson



Black: W. Shakespeare

The bishop in the hand of the player takes the white queen mate.

(Position of white pawns is impossible.)

Shakespeare holds a black bishop in his right hand which he has taken from Black's KKt5 square [*sic*]. Bishop takes queen mate. The mediaeval shapes of the white bishop at QB3, the black bishop and the white rook at Q7 are of interest.

The same designed bishops are given in the diagrams of the Alfonso Spanish 1283 Manuscript, and the double-headed rook appears in Caxton's London 1480 edition.'

- The same issue of the *Bulletin* (page 242) had a feature entitled 'England still skeptical' which remarked that 'Conservative England does not take kindly to the suggestion that something new concerning the immortal bard has been brought to light on this side of the ocean, if one may judge from an article which appeared in the *Cheltenham Chronicle*'. Below is part of the article, which was by W.S. Branch:

'If "absolute proof" why did not the owner of the picture secure that million dollars? We are sorry to throw cold water on anything that ought to be true, but the authorities re Shakespeare would say that there is no picture in existence of Shakespeare playing at chess or any game, and never has been so far as can be known. Ditto Ben Jonson. Further, that there is no evidence of Shakespeare having ever been a chessplayer. Of course he knew what the game looked like, and must have known some chessplayers. He probably knew the names of the pieces and how they should be placed for play. He may have known the moves. Possibly he played the game occasionally. He shows us Ferdinand and Miranda playing at chess, and Miranda complains of an illegal move, which Ferdinand denies making. Otherwise there is no clear allusion to chess in all "Shakespeare". There are several possible references, the most likely being the line "She shall be Queen, and check the world." Probably this was a conscious reference to chess, the more so that the chess queen, in England, had not long had her full power of checking at long range. There are several cases of the word "mate" being used – as "mated and stark mad". But the word in Shakespeare's time, though obviously derived from "checkmate", in the chess term, was often used by non-chessplayers, with the meaning of "beaten", "confused", "bewildered" or "amazed".'

The above item had also been quoted on page 12 of the October 1915 *Chess Amateur*. Page 44 of the November 1915 issue gave information about the painting and the diagram, courtesy of the Good Companion Problem Club Bulletin.

- 'Shakespeare and chess' was the title of a feature by H.M. Holgate on pages 107-108 of the January 1916 *Chess Amateur*, which included the following remarks:

'Much of the terminology of chess has passed into the language of everyday speech. No-one whose intellectual development has progressed beyond the point necessary to a perfect comprehension of the elementary principles of "Marbles" would fail to understand the meaning of such a word, for instance, as "Check" when used to describe some annoying situation in one's daily life; nor is it possible to imagine any similar difficulty occurring to anyone in Shakespeare's day when confronted with an idiom borrowed from the nomenclature of a game that was already centuries old; with a literature of its own extending back to ages of fable and myth.'



William Shelley Branch

- On page 137 of the February 1916 *Chess Amateur*, W.S. Branch wrote along the same lines as in his above-quoted *Cheltenham Chronicle* article. Regarding the painting he added:

'I have seen a small reproduction of the alleged Shakespeare-Jonson picture, and am interested. It looks old and good. I think the artist meant to represent Shakespeare and Jonson. If so the question is, was the picture printed in Shakespeare's time?

Up to date I doubt it.

If the picture were accepted by all authorities as being what it claims to be it would be very strong evidence – taken with other things – that Shakespeare and Jonson could play chess, and sometimes did.

A possibility is that the picture was painted in 1603 and signed as stated (though signing at that period was not usual) but had no connection with Shakespeare or Jonson. The likeness may be accidental. The players may have been two Dutchmen.'

- The *Chess Amateur* returned to the subject in its March 1916 issue (pages 170-172), reproducing the painting, quoting from the Good Companion *Folder* and including further comments by H.M. Holgate.
- W.S. Branch wrote again, on pages 204-205 of the April 1916 *Chess Amateur*. He began by quoting from Act II of *King John* 'That thou mayst be a queen, and check the world' and commented:

'Only one who knew the move and power of the chess queen would have written this line.

... I do not suppose that Shakespeare was a chess expert, but for the reason I have given, and a few others, I believe he could play chess. He introduces the game into one play, *The Tempest*. He knew all sorts and conditions of men, many of them men of culture. He had had a good education himself and was a very well-read man. Among his friends and acquaintances there must have been many who played chess. The game was then more widely known and more popular, in proportion to population, than it has been since Shakespeare's time. It went down very much with the rise of Puritanism and the Civil War, followed by a greater amount of card-playing and many other distractions later.'

Also on page 205 H.M. Holgate stated regarding the painting: ‘Personally, I am inclined to believe that this “old-master” will turn out to be a “fake”.’

- Pages 236-238 of the May 1916 *Chess Amateur* reproduced in full an article on the painting in the *New York Times Magazine* of 12 March 1916. Some extracts follow:

‘The inscription on the portrait proves to the entire satisfaction of Dr Wislicenus that the chess game refers to the famous “Stage Quarrel” and, consequently, to *Troilus and Cressida*.

“We have such a complete agreement between Mander’s picture and Shakespeare’s genuine death mask”, writes Dr Wislicenus, in a private report comprising 100 typewritten pages in the possession of Mrs de Heyman, “that the fact of Mander’s having painted the poet from the life, either in Holland or in England – probably the latter – is proved beyond the possibility of doubt.”

The account of how the picture came into the possession of the de Heyman family was related the other day to a representative of the *New York Times* by the son, Frank de Heyman. His father, Frank de Heyman, a real estate operator and lover of art, bought the picture in 1903 or 1904 from an art dealer in New York City while the family was spending the summer in the Catskills. Its previous owner was Colonel Miller, who paid \$18,000 for it in 1878 and who died at Mahwah, NJ in 1885. In a fire at the Miller home the documents accompanying the picture were destroyed.

The elder Mr de Heyman felt convinced of the picture’s historic value and made attempts to ascertain its real significance in the world of art, but had not made any noteworthy discoveries when he died in 1912. The brothers, Neville and Frank, decided to take it to Europe for expert testimony as to its authenticity, and Neville left New York in July 1912. He visited his uncle, Adolph von Heyman, in Bremen, by whom he was introduced to Dr Wilhelm Bode, Chief Director of the Berlin Museums. Dr Bode advised Mr de Heyman to consult a Shakespearean authority, with the result that a visit was made to the home of Dr Paul Wislicenus, who, after a study of the portrait and its inscriptions, pushed his hands through his hair and exclaimed, “I have never in my life seen anything like it. It is genuine. But now we must prove it.”

Dr Wislicenus spent the next two years in “toilsome work proving the genuineness of the picture “Ben Jonson and Shakespeare playing chess”.’

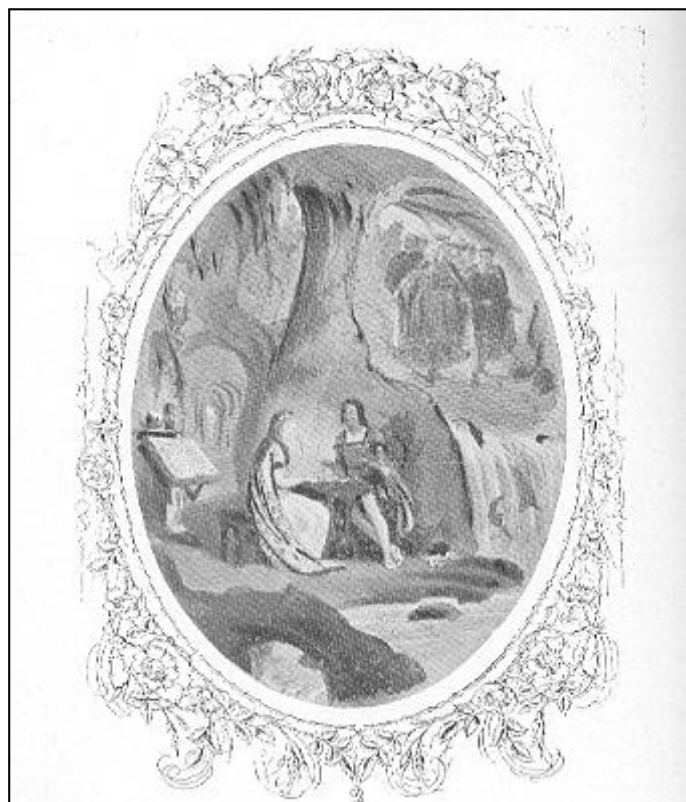
The article then quoted much detail from Dr Wislicenus’s report.

- The *BCM*, July 1916 (pages 221-225) and January 1918 (pages 4-6) presented two games won by C.F. Davie (Victoria, BC) against J. York annotated with quotations from Shakespeare.
- P.H. Williams’ column in the July 1916 *Chess Amateur* (page 301) had a feature entitled ‘Shakespeare and chess’ which began:

‘The *Pittsburg Gazette Times* issued a special Shakespeare Chess column, and the enclosed soliloquy from *Hamlet* (recast to suit the problemist) is well worth reading.’
The parody began:

‘Two keys, or not two keys. That is the question.’

- Pages 152-153 of “*Our Folder*” (the Good Companion Chess Problem Club), 1 April 1921 had three illustrations of *The Tempest*:



DRAWN BY A FRENCH ARTIST.

THE TEMPEST.—ACT V. SCENE I.

Here Prospero discovers Ferdinand and Miranda playing at chess.

Pro. Sweet lord, you play me false.

Fer. No, my dear'st love, I would not for the world.

Mir. Yes, for a score of kingdoms you should wrangle, and I would call it fair play.

Alon. Now all the blessings of a glad father compass thee about!
Arise, and say how thou camest here.





DRAWN BY AN ENGLISH ARTIST

Ver. Sir, she is mortal:
But by immortal Providence she's mine:
I chose her when I could not ask my father
For his advice, nor thought I had one. She
Is daughter to this famous Duke of Milan,
Of whom so often I have heard renown,
But never saw before; of whom I have
Received a second life; and second father
This lady makes him to me.

- ‘Shakespeare and chess’ on page 95 of the December 1923 *Chess Amateur*. W.S. Branch (in his *Cheltenham Chronicle* column) again quoted chess-related passages from Shakespeare’s plays and concluded:

‘Altogether we consider there is sufficient evidence to show that W.S. must have known “the moves”. But whether he ever became a real chessplayer is uncertain.

He probably understood draughts, which was well known in and before his time. But we have found no mention of the game of draughts, dames or checkers in his works. He refers to backgammon, then known as tables, and one variety as tic-tac. And to billiards. Also to several card games. Some of the outdoor games are mentioned, but not cricket.’

- The famous game Blake v Hooke was given with Shakespearean annotations by A.H. Spencer-Palmer on page 235 of the May 1926 *Chess Amateur*.
- After Sir John Simon had referred to Shakespeare and chess in a speech (see our [feature article](#) on him), W. S. Branch wrote further on the subject in his *Cheltenham Chronicle* column of 22 January 1927. His article was reproduced on page 159 of the April 1927 *BCM*. Once again *King John* (‘That thou mayst be a queen, and check the world’) was quoted, and Branch commented:

‘In John’s time the queen did not “check the world” and was a weak piece, but Shakespeare either did not know or did not care about that. To him and his audience the chess queen was the same as now – had been in England for 60 years or more.’

Branch concluded:

‘The late Sir Sidney Lee, the biographer of Shakespeare, in correspondence with the present writer, agreed that the line in *King John* clearly referred to the chess queen, and showed that Shakespeare knew that the queen was, as now, the most powerful piece in the game. Knowing that, he would in all probability know the other moves.’

It may be noted that the above-quoted remark by Elinor in *King John* was annotated by Staunton as follows:

‘It has been doubted whether Shakespeare, who appears to have had cognizance of nearly every sport and pastime of his age, was acquainted with the ancient game of chess; we believe the present passage may be taken to settle the question decisively. The allusion is obviously to the queen of the chess board, which, in this country, was invested with those remarkable powers that render her by far the most powerful piece in the game somewhere about the second decade of the sixteenth century [*sic*].’

- On 12 February 1931 Capablanca gave a simultaneous exhibition in New York against 200 opponents at 50 boards. Page 51 of the March 1931 *American Chess Bulletin* reported:

‘An exhibit which played an important part in adding to the attractiveness of the setting in which Capablanca displayed his prowess was a portion of the collection of unique chessmen owned by G.A. Pfeiffer of the Marshall Chess Club ...

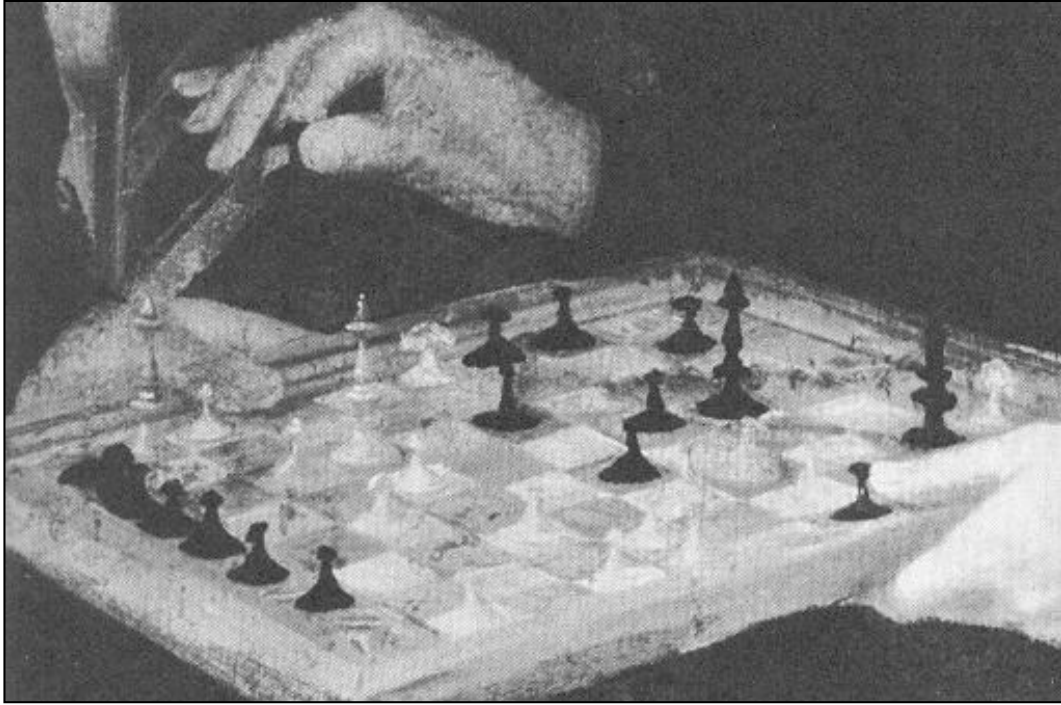
Not far from the glass case, in which they were tastefully arranged, was hung a large oil painting of Shakespeare and Ben Jonson playing chess, owned by Frank de Heyman of Brooklyn, with the history of which readers of the *Bulletin* have already been made acquainted.’

- Among the books which have included games with Shakespearean annotations are *Chess & Draughts* by A. Belasco (various editions), which featured a correspondence game between J.W. Shaw and T.W. Robbins, and various parts of *Chesslets* by J. Schumer (London, 1928).

In 1976 the alleged Shakespeare v Jonson painting was featured on a Nicaraguan postage stamp; see pages 57 and 92-93 of *Persönlichkeiten und das Schachspiel* by B. Rügsegger (Huttwil, 2000). Any further information on this entire subject will be welcomed.

C.N. 4054:

C.N. 4051 focussed on older chess literature, but Mark N. Taylor (Mt Berry, GA, USA) mentions a later article about the alleged Shakespeare-Jonson painting which is too good to be passed over: ‘Shakespeare’s Checkmate’ by Paul Leith on pages 8-13 of *Chessworld*, January-February 1964. Page 11 has a close-up of the board which readers may care to scrutinize:



C.N. 4069:

Also from Mark N. Taylor:

'A few comments on inaccuracies in the December 1915 American Chess Bulletin report on the van Mander painting:

"The mediaeval shapes": the shapes are not medieval at all, even granting the wide variety of medieval chess pieces.

"The same designed bishops are given in the diagrams of the Alfonso Spanish 1283 Manuscript": the bishops are not at all similar. In the Alfonso MS they resemble an old coffee pot. A modern font modelled on their design may be seen at Sonja Musser Golladay's [website](#).

"The double-headed rook appears in Caxton's London 1480 edition": this piece does resemble the older style rather than the more modern tower, but does not appear to be bifurcated as medieval rooks (including Caxton's) usually are. These may be easily compared with those pieces pictured in Murray or the better coffee-table books on chess pieces.

More nonsense in the May 1916 Chess Amateur on "Shakespeare's genuine death mask"; there is no such thing and there is no telling what the author is referring to.

A general remark: perhaps some 90% of what appears in most biographies of Shakespeare consists of legend, conjecture, and fancy – we have so few facts – so it is no surprise that most of what is written on Shakespeare and chess is mostly fancy. S. Schoenbaum, the author of the only truly reliable biography, William Shakespeare: A Documentary Life, ignores both the van Mander painting and the "death mask".'

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