

THE MENACE OF SEXISM IN CHESS



The Menace Of Sexism In Chess

I learned to play the game of chess when I was about eight years old. From about the age of thirteen I developed an intense interest in the game and decided that I was going to win the county championship, the British championship, become a Master, a Grandmaster, and perhaps go on to win the world title. I was rudely rebutted when, in my first tournament, I ended up with a mere four and a half points out of nine, but, undaunted, I studied theory and practised intensely, and the following year I did indeed win the county championship, outright, with seven and a half points out of nine - six wins and three draws.

Okay, this was the junior championship, and all the really good players were playing in the national championships down on the South-East Coast at the time, but I had won the Middlesex Championship!

I went on to play for the county, and in all the time I was playing I never lost for Middlesex, a record which I still treasure. I played on board one on at least one occasion, and I never lost a game of chess for my county! I played for my local club too, and although my results were nowhere near as impressive, I always won more games than I lost. Apart from the Middlesex juniors, my best result was in a congress at Gants Hill, Ilford, when I was joint first in a Major Tournament, (1) scoring five and a half points out of six.

In 1976 or 1977 I gave up. I played a bit from 1983-5, but only to pass the time and never at a club. Apart from that I hardly looked at a chess board again until January 1997, when, spending some time at Her Majesty's Pleasure, it was an excellent way of killing time. Following my acquittal and release in May 1997, I quickly joined my local chess club, and on May 18th, at the age of forty, I played in my first chess congress for 20 years. And won it! Actually, I scored five points out of six in a Minor Tournament (for players graded under 135) in a one day "Rapidplay" event. I came joint first with two other players - both of whom I beat; the one player who beat me having been beaten by both of them.

I played in two more tournaments in quick succession; a regular (ie non-Rapidplay) congress at the same venue, in which I scored three points out of five in the Minor Tournament (2 wins, 2 draws and 1 loss), and a very small

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Rapidplay tournament for players graded under 145 in North London. We played a total of 9 games in one day, each player having 25 minutes for all his moves. I scored an impressive 8 points out of 9 (7 wins, 2 draws), and was joint first with one other player. (2)

I have decided to continue playing chess, though I have no illusions now about ever becoming a Grandmaster, although I intend to play for my local club - if they'll have me, and maybe even for my county, Kent - if I'm good enough. (3)

A lot can happen in twenty years, and a lot has happened in chess. Recently, a machine has beaten the world champion for the first time. Some opening variations which were considered inferior have been reappraised. The so-called Pelikan variation of the Sicilian Defence has had new life infused into it and is now considered a formidable weapon for black, instead of a near guaranteed win for white when I was playing before. English classical or descriptive notation has all but gone out of the window; now it's no longer P-K4 but e4. Sigh. Some things though have remained exactly the same; in particular, old prejudices have remained the same, and have in many ways become more deeply entrenched. None more so than *sexism*.

Now, chess is still a *racist* game to some extent. As with snooker, almost all the best players in the world are white, (4) although there are not a few black and non-white players. The Rapidplay tournament I won in mid-May was controlled by a young black man. (5) There were quite a few non-white players, one of whom was joint first in the Minor Tournament with me. White still has the first move though, in every game ever played. And the player with the white pieces still wins the majority of the games. Even so, chess is nowhere near as *racist* as it could be. *Sexism* though is a different matter. What do I mean?

Well, when I played chess before, as a junior, and briefly as a young adult, female players were few and far between. If I recall, there were a few girls, or maybe one or two, at the Middlesex junior championships. And at junior events generally, including weekend congresses which had lots of entrants and many sections - including for juniors - there would be a handful of young girls. When I say young I mean eight or ten year olds. But women, that was always a different story.

I played for Hayes (Middlesex) Chess Club, which had no female members at all, as far as I recall. I also played at Harrow, and this club had one female member, who was, typically, the wife of another player, although I gather she

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was a strong chess player in her own right. I once played a girl in a junior tournament, and, like the chivalrous swine I am, I beat her! (6) There were three other girls I remember - all of them young, including one very perky ten or twelve year old. There was a tomboy type teenager called Susan, who was "one of the boys", who was quite a good player, and there was a stunningly attractive young thing called Lisa, who wasn't.

And there were hardly any women at all. Another chess club I frequented in the latter part of my first chess career, in South London, had two women members; neither of them were very good. One of these was a chess player in her own right, though she eventually married a player from a different club. The other was the mother of one of my best friends; her husband and her sons all played, so she did too.

My new, local chess club has one female member; she is not very good and it is painfully obvious that the only reason she plays is because her son does. He is very young, about seven or eight, and she acts as his chaperone. Rather than simply sit watching him play, she plays a game or two herself. And that is it, that is my personal experience of female chess players.

At the recent Rapidplay congress at which I took joint first prize, a number of women could be seen, but there no were female competitors: women or girls. The Canadian student who beat me in Round 4 brought along his attractive young girlfriend. Another of my opponents, a young boy, was accompanied by both his parents, and there were a few other women present, including the caterers, but that was the entirety of the female presence.

At the next congress, a two day non-Rapidplay event, there were, as far as I could tell, four female players: two women and two girls. One was graded 162, which is far above me; the others didn't appear to be very good at all. At the second Rapidplay event, there were no female competitors. Even the refreshments were served by a man!

There always have been and are still a handful of chesswomen who play at a higher level. Literally a handful. There was, well before my time, a woman player named Vera Menchik, who occasionally beat the odd world contender. And today there are the Polgar sisters. And that's your lot, mate. The question has to be asked, why?

There are only three reasons that I can think of: one is that there is a centuries' old conspiracy amongst the male chess players of the world; the second is that women are genetically inferior to men; the third is that chess

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players are the nastiest, most evil bunch of women-hating *sexists* who have ever walked the Earth. First, let me deal with the male conspiracy theory of chess and explain why I reject it.

There is a school of thought that says that in 929BC, a cabal of male chess players sat down along with King Solomon and a select bunch of ancient plutocrats and usurers and decided on a plan for men to dominate the game and art of chess in perpetuity. They encoded this plan in a sinister document called *The Protocols Of The Learned Elders Of Caissa*. Caissa is the goddess of chess; a female deity was chosen consciously to help conceal the machinations of this clique so that if at any time in the future a woman were to become suspicious about the unchallenged male dominance of the game and pointed to the existence of a sinister conspiracy behind it, she could be ridiculed. "Come off it, lovey. Us chess players aren't *sexist*, some of our best friends are women. Why, even the guiding spirit of our beloved game is a woman. Conspiracy? Ha, ha, ha."

According to *The Protocols*, this clique of male dominated ancient plutocrats and usurers maintains its hegemony over the game by a number of ploys. One is the secret men's handshake. Any player joining a chess club will, naturally, shake hands with the chairman or some other leading member. If the prospective new member shakes hands in a certain way the chairman will realise that the applicant is a man, and no barriers will be raised to his joining and progressing as far as he can. But if the applicant's handshake reveals her to be a woman she can expect to be subjected to all manner of distasteful treatment.

First and foremost the chairman will say something like: "Oh, you're a woman. We don't have many women members, but of course we welcome them. In fact we all wish we had more."

The Protocols claims, among other things, that as the male dominance of chess progresses, the Symbolic Snake of Caissa runs through the cities of the world, linking them together in an unbreakable chain. Starting with the birth of Paul Morphy at New Orleans in 1837 the Symbolic Snake progresses through San Sebastian in 1911 (the site of Capablanca's fine tournament victory) through New York in 1924 (site of the historic tournament) through Estoril in 1946 (the death of Alekhine) and back to New York in 1956 (site of the 13 year old Robert Fischer's immortal victory over Robert Byrne in which he played a spectacular queen sacrifice).

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The Protocols Of The Learned Elders Of Caissa came to light only in 1967, the year after the National Organization for Women was founded. This can hardly be a coincidence, and indeed it is clear that the *Protocols* was forged for a specific purpose, namely to discredit the nascent women's movement. Fortunately, the Anti-Defamation League of American Women managed to buy up the original manuscript and to suppress the story before it had been taken up by the male dominated media.

The conspiracy theory of the male dominance of chess is obviously complete baloney, but that hasn't stopped fanatics updating the course of the snake which is said to have travelled to Reykjavik in 1972 (when Fischer defeated Spassky) and to have oscillated between London and Leningrad in 1986 when Kasparov retained the world title against Karpov. (7)

There is some evidence that *The Protocols Of Caissa* was plagiarised from an earlier document, the *Communist Manifesto*, which made the absurd claim that the communist movement planned to take over the world. How could anyone believe such nonsense?

Protocols Of Caissa aside, I reject the male conspiracy theory of the domination of chess for two reasons. One is that I am myself a man and so far have not been invited to join this conspiracy! The second is because Caissa, the goddess of chess, can be dated only to 1763. (8)

So, if the male dominance of chess is not the result of a conspiracy, what is the cause? The second explanation, the one postulated by *sexists*, is that women are genetically inferior.

sexism - "after RACISM...The assumption that one sex is superior to the other and the resultant discrimination practised against members of the supposed inferior sex, esp. by men against women..." (9)

The arguments presented by the organised *sexist* movement are, superficially, extremely persuasive. For example, in their book *The Even More Complete Chess Addict*, two male authors - of course! - list the top 64 players of all time. And not one of them is a woman! (10) What other explanation could there be, the *sexists* cry? It must be in their genes! The current writer finds it rather ironic that, under other circumstances, the same men who protest so loudly that women have inferior genes never stop trying to get into their jeans by the most outrageous forms of flattery and shallow charm.

The best way, indeed the only way, to refute the arguments of the *sexists* is by the strict enforcement of a no-debate strategy. This has led to riots at several

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universities when male supremacist lecturers have been pelted with eggs, rotten fruit and used sanitary towels. There can be no suggestion that women are genetically inferior to men. No free speech for *sexists*.

That leaves by necessity only one possible explanation for the underachievement of women chess players. Male chess players are the nastiest, most evil bunch of women-hating *sexists* who have ever walked the Earth; they exclude women from the game not by anything so overt as a conspiracy but by an unconscious though wilful process of discrimination. There are no secret handshakes, except among those male chess players who are also Freemasons, (11) but there are at every level of the game sophisticated barriers to female emancipation and achievement. These barriers are difficult to detect, but occasionally the mask slips. An excellent example is in the biased, *sexist* way the history of chess has been recorded.

The 1996 book *The Guinness Book Of Chess Grandmasters* is an excellent example. Written by William Hartston, for many years one of Britain's leading players, this book says of Mir Sultan Khan (1905-66) that he was "one of the greatest natural talents the game has seen." (12) Who was Sultan Khan?

He was the servant of Sir Umar Hayat Khan, who brought him to England from his native India in 1929. Khan proceeded to win the British title on three occasions and on one occasion even beat Capablanca. (13) Capablanca by the way, was a notorious *sexist* and womaniser, as was Alekhine. It was said of Capablanca that during the 1922 London Tournament when they were taken to a show, Alekhine never looked up from his pocket chess set and Capablanca never took his eyes off the chorus line. Alekhine, by the way, was married four times, and like the Jewish-born Robert Fischer, was also a raving anti-Semite, a typically bourgeois, reactionary vice. (14)

Where was I? I do get carried away. Yes, Sultan Khan. While we would applaud the lack of *racism* shown to Sultan Khan, we would point out that he was never any sort of world champion, yet the name Vera Menchik does not even appear in the index to Hartston's book. Yet Vera Menchik was women's world champion from 1927 until her death in 1944.

The non-treatment meted out to Vera Menchik by Hartston is matched if not exceeded by the treatment meted out to her on her death. Vera Menchik was killed in the Second World War; her death was reported in the *Times*, June 30, 1944, and a short appreciation, by the paper's chess correspondent, was published in the July 4 issue.

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The title of the first of these articles was *MRS. VERA STEVENSON*. She was, you see, the widow of R.H.S. Stevenson, the Secretary of the British Chess Federation. She was "easily the strongest woman chess player that has ever lived", the paper said. She regularly won the women's world championship "with the greatest of ease". Yet she is remembered here not as a chess player in her own right but as the wife of a deceased player! Charming.

Although in his aforementioned study of Chess Grandmasters, William Hartston does not see fit to mention a lady who was at one time "easily the strongest woman chess player that has ever lived", he does mention her successor. The young Judit (or Judith) Polgar is said by Hartston to be "the strongest female player of all time". (15) She was also at one time the youngest Grandmaster ever. (16) Incredibly though, Hartston credits this, not to Judit Polgar herself but to her parents (read her father) who used hothouse techniques to produce a brood of young chesswomen! (17)

This biased and patronising attitude permeates the chess world and always has. Three examples will suffice.

The earliest known work on modern chess was written by Luis Lucena, who flourished c1500. Almost nothing is known about Lucena, except that he was both a crap chess player and a male chauvinist pig! According to chess author William Hartston: the second half of Lucena's book (18) is an analysis, full of elementary errors, of eleven chess openings. While, incredibly, "The first half of the book is an attack on feminism..." ! (19)

Another male chauvinist pig - of the modern era - is Russian Grandmaster David Bronstein, who is credited with the following patronising remarks. "Men play better than women because they know far more chess combinations of the type that may be repeated ad infinitum in almost any game, whereas naive women always want to play independently, relying only on their own beauty, imagination and temperament - that is, not trusting in the real life of the chess pieces." (20)

And, coming right up to date, a flyer and entry form for the 28TH THANET CHESS CONGRESS, Friday 29th August to Sunday 31st August 1997, offers a "special prize" £20 for the best score by a lady player £20. Yes, a special prize; the first prize in the Open is £200 and in the Minor Tournament, £80. And the best prize for a woman is a miserable twenty quid. If that's not proof of discrimination and blatant *sexist* bias, what is? (21)

Conclusion: What Is To Be Done?

Chess has been *sexist* from the very beginning. Why else is the king, a male piece, the most valuable? (22) Obviously the only cure for the male domination of chess is to eradicate *sexism* by a programme of legislation. Equality of opportunity throughout the chess world must be extended to both sexes. This means that *affirmative action* will have to be introduced. In practice this will mean that men and boys will have to give women and girls odds, perhaps of queen's knight, queen's rook, or even odds of queen in some cases, in order to make up for past redresses.

All prizes in chess tournaments must be awarded on the basis of merit to men and women, boys and girls equally. And women and girls must receive special prizes in the name of equality of opportunity.

Any tournament organiser, controller or other official who discriminates in any way, manner, shape or form against female chess players must be thrown out of the BCF and into gaol. The *Sex Discrimination Act* must be extended to chess.

Any chess player who makes derogatory or *sexist* remarks to, about or against any female player, must be fined and subjected to a mandatory programme of non-*sexist* education, and, if necessary, thrown into gaol.

The term chessmen must be outlawed and replaced with the term chesspersons. A new rule must be introduced replacing the current definitions of check and checkmate. In future, a player who threatens his opponent's queen as well as his king must call check. Checkmate will be delivered and the game will end when either the queen or the king is captured. As part of the programme of *affirmative action*, the queen will continue to have superior powers to the king. *Racism* must also be totally eliminated from chess, and in future white will not move first automatically. At the start of the game, the players will toss to decide if white or black has the first move.

Notes And References

(1) For players below a certain grade - 160 in this case I believe. In Britain, all active chess players are graded by the British Chess Federation.

(2) This will almost certainly be my last tournament victory for some time maybe ever, because soon I will be graded and will no longer be eligible for playing in Minor Tournaments. [But see also footnote 6].

(3) Which I doubt very much. Since I wrote the bulk of this short dissertation I have played in further tournaments, and the one thing I can state uncategorically is that the standard of play has improved enormously in the past twenty years. I once played on board one for Middlesex juniors; I doubt if I would be good enough to play on bottom board nowadays.

(4) Only two overseas players have ever won the world professional snooker championship: a Canadian, and the current champion, who is from the Irish Republic. No non-white has ever won it.

(5) The person in charge of a chess tournament is called the controller.

(6) If I recall, her name was Elaine Sadler; I think I played her at a congress in Islington. The woman from Harrow was indeed a strong player in her own right; she is still playing to this day, although she has since divorced and remarried (to another chess player! and one I was once beaten by).

A supplement to footnote 2; since writing these words and while proofing the text I have won another Minor Tournament! On the first weekend in October 1997, I scored 5 wins out of 5 in the Metropolitan Chess Club's 7th Annual Congress, (the first time I have ever scored 100% in any tournament). I had a very easy ride although in the 4th round I played and nearly lost to, a very attractive young lady who, like me was ungraded (she was coming off a four or five year lay off), and is the girlfriend of a grandmaster (who won the Open Tournament at the same Congress). As well as nearly becoming the first female I ever lost to in a tournament, she scored an impressive 4 points and but for me, she would surely have won it; (two very strong women international players competed in the Open Tournament). In August I played a young girl in a blitz tournament at another event (blitz doesn't count) and beat her comfortably.

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(7) Kasparov won the title from Karpov in 1985 in controversial circumstances.

(8) *CAISSA. OR THE GAME AT CHESS. A POEM.*, by Sir William Jones, was written in 1763. It is a lengthy poem composed in couplets of iambic pentameter and can be found in, among other volumes, *STUDIES OF CHESS; CONTAINING CAISSA, A POEM, BY SIR WILLIAM JONES; "A Systematic Introduction to the Game"; AND THE WHOLE ANALYSIS OF CHESS, COMPOSED BY MR. A.D. PHILIDOR: WITH Original Critical Remarks. IN TWO VOLUMES*, published by Samuel Bagster, London, (1803).

(9) *THE OXFORD ENGLISH DICTIONARY*, published by Clarendon Press, Oxford, Second Edition, (1989), Volume XV, page 112.

(10) *THE EVEN MORE COMPLETE CHESS ADDICT*, by Mike Fox & Richard James, published by Faber and Faber, London, Revised Edition, (1993), pages 119-21. There are actually 67 players in this list because of a five way tie for 63rd place. [A stop press on page 123 of the same book says that as of July 1, 1993, Judit Polgar's rating had risen to an ELO grading of 2630, which would have made her about the 45th strongest player in history.]

(11) The vast majority, it would appear. Recently, FIDE * issued a policy document which proposes that all chess players who are also Freemasons should declare their lodge membership.

* The international governing body of chess.

(12) *THE GUINNESS BOOK OF CHESS GRANDMASTERS*, by William Hartston, published by Guinness Publishing, Enfield, Middlesex, (1996), page 215.

(13) Fox & James, *The Even More Complete Chess Addict*, page 114, (op cit).

(14) Fox & James, *The Even More Complete Chess Addict*, page 262, (ibid).

(15) Hartston, *The Guinness Book Of Chess Grandmasters*, page 187, (op cit).

(16) Another blatantly sexist term, but Grandmistress sounds even worse.

(17) She has two sisters who are also extremely strong chess players.

(18) *Repeticion de amores e arte de axedrez con cl iuegos de partido.*

(19) Hartston, *The Guinness Book Of Chess Grandmasters*, page 205, (op cit).

(20) Quoted in *Secrets of Chess Tactics*, by Mark Dvoretsky, Translated by Malcolm Gesthuysen, published by B. T. Batsford, London, (1992). [1994 Reprint], page 15.

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(21) I remember one tournament from my early chess career in which the teenager Susan (mentioned above) won a prize for the best female just by entering the tournament. She was the only female!

(22) Critics might reply that the queen - a female piece - is the most powerful, but this power is, as ever, totally illusory. In the first place, because she is so powerful the queen is, like the king, vulnerable to attack, and must be well protected. In the second place, chess games are frequently won after the queens have been exchanged or even by a player who has lost or sacrificed his queen. No chess game has ever been won by a player sacrificing his king!

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