

The King is Dead, Long Live the Game: Alfonso X, el Sabio, and the *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas*¹

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“... daboque tibi tabulas lapideas et legem ac mandata quae scripsi ut doceas eos” (*Vulgate Bible, Exodus 24.12*)

[and I will give you stone tablets and the law and the commandments that I have written so that you may teach them]

In the comprehensive code of law known as *Las Siete partidas*, Alfonso X, el Sabio [the Wise], King of Castile and León (r. 1252-1284) and aspirer to the throne of the Holy Roman Empire, sought to ascertain and regulate virtually all aspects of the lives of his subjects.² In that monumental work, he included explicit discussion of the importance of pastimes—hunting, songs and music, chess and backgammon, stories and romances—as appropriate forms of refreshment and comfort, for kings and rulers, especially in times of trouble (*Segunda partida* V.21).³ Alfonso's sense of the seriousness and importance of games, both to a king and to his subjects, made the matter of gaming into an explicit topic of his meditations in other scholarly and legislative works, especially the *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas* and the law code, *Ordenamiento de las tafurerias*, this latter one intended to regulate operations at the casino-like, gambling establishments known as *tafurerías*. In the *Libro de açedrex*, Alfonso asserts that games provide “toda manera de alegría,” but also stresses their *semeianças* to the political realities and other challenges confronting kings of the past, present and future (Fols. 1r-1v):⁴

... iuegos a y de muchas maneras. pero todos fueron fechos a semeiança de las cosas que acaecieron segund los tiempos que fueron o son o podrien seer mostrando de como los Reyes en el tiempo de las guerras en que se fazen las huestes han de guerrear a sus enemigos ... E otrossi como en el tiempo de las pazes han de mostrar sus thesoros & sus riquezas & las cosas que tienen nobles & estrannas. ... E todo esto fizieron por grandes

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² “... he legislated about everything, from institutions of State and Church, to food, entertainment, and urban sanitation, environmental protection, and the garments to be worn by his subjects, the nobility, and the plebeians, the Jews and the Moors. He dictated norms for proper speaking, poetics, and guidelines to avoid not only the breaking of grammar rules but also offensive expressions ...” (Martínez, 277). As noted by O'Callaghan, the *Siete Partidas* (*Libro de las Leyes*) was a revision and amplification of the earlier *Espéculo* and its writing was motivated by Alfonso's “hope of gaining the crown of the Holy Roman Empire” (36); though it is sometimes argued that the *Siete Partidas* were not officially enacted, the King's right to amend previous laws without having to re-promulgate them makes it clear that “the *Partidas* had the force of law during the reign of Alfonso X” (O'Callaghan, 37).

³ Alfonso X (1807), 2: 40-41.

⁴ PhiloBiblon (BETA) manid 1090, MS T.I.6 (Sevilla, 1283), Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial. Eds. Orellana Calderón (2007); Sánchez-Prieto *et al.* (2006); Canettieri (1996); Crombach (1987); Steiger (1941). All quotations of Alfonso's *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas* from the edition of Sánchez-Prieto *et al.*

semeianças segunt los saberes antigos; que usauan los sabios. (Fol. 2v)

Understood, in that sense, as an extension and reflection of his labors as king, Alfonso's work on games can be seen not only as a way of promoting his preferred pastimes, but also an aspect of his own planning and meditation on military, political and social projects.⁵ Game-playing and game-design, rather than escapes or self-contained spaces outside the real world, constituted for Alfonso a place of reflection into which he could retreat to draw or redraw a course of action⁶—a serious playground for the troubleshooting and testing, design and redesign of strategies and moves that could be applied to the real-world arenas of military confrontations, politics, and the regulation of his subjects' lives.⁷

Alfonso further understood games as capable of representing not only the interactions of human agents with one another but also with larger, natural and transcendental forces, such as *uentura*, and their role in the unfolding of human history and destiny.⁸ Certain games such as *açedrex* are presented in Alfonso's meditations as evidence of the powers of *seso*, and thus stress the influence of personal ability and free will in the outcomes of the game itself and of the human existence symbolically represented by the game. A fatalistic determinism, on the other hand, is embodied in games of pure chance, like *dados*, which assert *uentura* as the sole source of destiny, regardless of human intervention or choice. The games known as *tablas*—board games like backgammon, requiring both intelligence and luck—were seen as a mixed genre

⁵ In her study of Alfonso's work as *translatio studii*, Ferrero characterizes "el ajedrez como *imago mundi* ... micro texto de cultura" (66); and "intento de legitimación de la sociedad estamental que él [Alfonso] representa como cúspide" (65). Classen (2012) notes chess in the Middle Ages was considered a "representation of courtly society at large, ... courtly love, cultural transgression, military strategies, meditation and wisdom ..."; "the chessboard and its pieces powerfully served ... poets and writers as some of the most fascinating and far-reaching literary images to reflect upon fundamental ideals, values, principles, and concepts determining courtly society and its relationship both to the lower classes and also to God" (42). Adams points out chess, as represented in literary texts and political treatises of the late Middle Ages, is a form of "civic imagining" encoding "anxieties about political organization, civic community, economic exchange, and individual autonomy" (2).

⁶ In this respect, it is significant that Alfonso's treatises dealing with games date to the very troubled period at the end of his life, as he confronted the rebellion of the nobility and of his own son, Sancho, civil war, and the collapse of his authority (Martínez, 518-519). In her study of Luis de Lucena—a fifteenth-century Jewish convert, *tahúr*, and author of the *Arte de axedrez* and *Repetición de Amores*—Gómez-Ivanov notes that Lucena "Fué un ajedrecista empedernido ... Ese continuo refugiarse en el mundo onírico aunque armonioso y perfecto del ajedrez satisfacía la necesidad de escapar de una realidad ultrajante y aborrecible" (110).

⁷ "Darüber hinaus betont jedoch Alfonso, daß das Spiel nicht bloß als Mittel zur Belustigung aufzufassen, sondern vielmehr als Spiegel der Realität zu begreifen sei" [Moreover, however, Alfonso stressed that play should not be seen only as a means of entertainment but, more importantly, it should be understood as a mirror of reality]; "Spiel ist nicht bloß eine Aktivität von Kindern oder kindlichen Menschen, sondern beweist sich bei näherer Betrachtung generell als stellvertretendes Ausüben von menschlichen Handlungen, als Demonstration von Schicksalen und als Experimentieren mit Möglichkeiten der Wirklichkeitsbewältigung" [play is not just an activity for children or childish adults but rather proves itself, upon closer inspection, as a training ground for human activities, as an illustration of fate and as experiment with the different possible ways of coping with reality] (Classen [1989], 7-8). "Chess has always had metaphorical connotations ... and represented or mirrored society and its hierarchical structures. It was used to master the realities of life and was interpreted as the theatre of the world *en miniature*" (Wollesen, 282).

⁸ "El ajedrez, aun siendo la parte mas voluminosa y elaborada del Códice, no es para esta mentalidad que lo inspira más que una de las formas simbólicas en que el hombre puede interrogarse sobre su propio destino. Ya en los tratados árabes mas antiguos se contraponen las dos actitudes diferentes que simbolizan por un lado el voluntarista juego del ajedrez, y por otro los fatalistas juegos de azar" (Calvo [1987], 150).

illustrating how the astute and cautious individual, exercising *cordura*, can make the best of situations involving uncertainties that cannot be managed by reason alone (Fol. 1v).⁹

Yet other types of games, also described by Alfonso, sought to represent the laws and larger structures of the natural and cosmic orders. For Alfonso, games like the “Grant Acedrex,” the games “de los quatro tiempos dell anno,” and those “por Astronomia” were not only forms of entertainment and tools useful in the understanding of the human existence, but also heuristic mechanical devices capable of representing the cycles of the seasons, the movements of the stars and constellations, the natural and supernatural orders of a cosmos governed by God's laws (Fols. 81r-97v). Accomplishment in those sorts of games, therefore, required not just intelligence, wisdom and luck, but also specialized knowledge of esoteric subjects—as in the astrological type of games that Alfonso characterized as “muy noble & muy estranno e muy apuesto. e de grand entendimiento; pora los entendudos. e mayormiente pora aquellos que saben la Arte de Astronomia” (Fol. 95r).¹⁰

Alfonso's contributions to the discussion and playing of games were, furthermore, not merely descriptive but also creative and transformative, seeking to modify existing pastimes to make them more enjoyable and also more educational and capable of yielding knowledge, especially glimpses of hidden but intelligible realities and of things to come.¹¹ Perhaps not entirely unlike how engineers today redesign computers to be able to model more complex phenomena, like the weather and the dynamics of large populations, and also to operate at higher speeds and handle ever more complex data and algorithms, Alfonso tinkered with the rules and artifacts of the games known to him and others of his own invention. Perceiving games like the *Grant Acedrex* and the *Acedrex de las diez casas* (a ten-square chess variant) as cosmic *abaci* whose calculation capabilities could be improved, he designed and introduced special octahedral and heptahedral dice that accelerated the pace of the games, thus making them less tedious and more quickly revealing of the outcomes associated with certain moves and strategies (Fols. 83r-85v).¹²

The King's work and meditations on games and gaming, therefore, cannot be seen as just academic or purely theoretical/philosophical exercises, as they constituted integral facets of his desire to know and control, order and wisely rule earthly lands and peoples, kingdoms and

⁹ Classen (1989), 7; Golladay, 417; Wollesen, 286-287.

¹⁰ “Alfonso el Sabio endeavoured to reveal the secrets of life and his existence by means of intelligence and wisdom. Given his background of Arabic learning, he did not work from conventional western theology, but instead based his philosophy of life on the study of the influence of the stars on man, ... a more unorthodox approach in his search to reveal the causes and the destiny of human existence which is concealed in this collection of (chess) games” (Wollesen, 289). “La *Crónica General* nombra con frecuencia a los *agoreros y estrelleros*, por lo confundidos que entonces aparecían los estudios astrológicos con los astronómicos. En el pasaje el rey manifiesta: 'era muy sabio en la Astronomía, que es el saber de las estrellas'”; among other occult sciences, Alfonso was familiar with the *Cábala* (Ballesteros Beretta, 508, 510). “Sus intereses son muy variados, casi podríamos decir que enciclopédicos. Empieza patrocinando versiones del árabe de obras de astrología y de magia, el célebre Picatrix, un manual de magia helenística, pues Alfonso creía sin que pueda haber de ello duda, en el influjo de los astros y en la eficacia de los conjuros” (Vázquez de Parga, 15).

¹¹ “Game boards share their geometrical origins with the sacred spaces and shapes of temples just as the random elements of dice and cards, games themselves, have a kinship with tools of divination” (Golladay, 88, 667; Calvo [1987], 152).

¹² The *Acedrex de las diez casas* is mentioned but not actually described in Alfonso's work, an omission that has led to speculation and debate on the possibility of missing folios (Golladay, 525 ff.).

empires, as well as understand, engage, and interact, in harmonious and enlightened ways, with beings and powers, natural and transcendental, at all levels of the cosmos.¹³ As King of Castile and León, and aspirer to the throne of the Holy Roman Empire, Alfonso sought to realize in himself and his political and cultural projects the dream of an orderly, civilized, and unified secular empire led by an enlightened and benevolent ruler, a wise king representing God on earth and governing by law, love, knowledge, and reason.¹⁴ In support of those aims, Alfonso played a multiplicity of roles, including those of courtier and lawgiver, troubadour and astronomer, warrior and historian, scientist and magician, theologian and ladies' man, as well as patron of invaluable literary, scholarly, translation and scientific works that documented and preserved for posterity the fruits of two centuries of courtly civilization.¹⁵

The simultaneity and relatedness of the political, the practical and the ludic in the activities of Alfonso can be observed, as he envisioned it himself, in the miniature in Folio 65r of the *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas*, which shows the King dictating to a scribe instructions for the manufacture of gaming dice, while petitioners await his judgment on legal issues, likely matters concerning the laws and regulations in the *Ordenamiento de las tafurerias* (Figure 1).¹⁶ The petitioners at court, in this case, appear to be gamblers, shown almost naked as a consequence of their gaming vices.¹⁷ In stark contrast with the well-dressed and composed Alfonso and other members of his court, the poverty and dishevelment of the *tafures/tahures* is seen as the result of their disorderly life, the gamblers representing uncourtly subjects, raw human creatures, uneducated and unrefined, driven purely by the appetites of their, accordingly

¹³ "Besides being a great ruler, Alfonso was the first humanist king who, consciously integrated knowledge into the duties and obligations of the Crown. Likewise, he was the first professional king of letters who, in addition to presenting himself to his subjects as a ruler and legislator, also did so as a teacher and intellectual guide of his people, making knowledge available to all, so everyone could benefit from it" (Martínez, 1). Burns notes "his polymath hunger to absorb all beauty and learning, to codify and shape it, and to propagate it throughout his somewhat backward society with a missionary fervor" (Burns, 1).

¹⁴ Jennifer Cooley notes the problems of the Alfonsine political vision of multicultural coexistence and individual freedoms "whose ultimate beneficiary may be the state itself, and not necessarily the individuals who resided therein," in effect "sustaining discrimination in a palatable and functional manner" (143-44).

¹⁵ The learning and ambitions of Alfonso were perceived by some of his contemporaries as blasphemous and hubristic. Certain accounts, perhaps apocryphal and originating in the atmosphere of rebellion toward the end of his reign, suggest that Alfonso, "... engreído por su sabiduría, hubo de exclamar un día: 'Si yo estuviera con Dios cuando formó el mundo y todas las cosas que en él son, muchas menguas que se hicieron no se hubieran hecho'" (Ballesteros Beretta, 209).

¹⁶ Golladay notes that, in spite of the explicit caption in the manuscript indicating this to be an illustration of Alfonso dictating details of dice manufacture, the text actually being written by the scribe is the *Ordenamiento de las tafurerias* (959-60). Menéndez Pidal observes: "a la izquierda del Rey un personaje con capiello y traje talar que se dirige a unos tahures medio desnudos; bien podemos imaginar que éste sea el Maestre Roldán, el que siete años atrás, por encargo de Alfonso, había intentado con su fuero poner orden en las tafurerías estableciendo sanciones contra las trápalas de semejante gentuza" (46-47). "Master Roldán ... was assigned to prepare the *Ordenamiento de las tafurerias* regulating games of chance and gambling in 1276, because these matters were not included in the other law books" (O'Callaghan, 138).

¹⁷ "... un grupo de varios personajes semidesnudos y alborotadores. Se trata sin duda de cuatro jugadores de dados que hacen honor al carácter desenfrenado del juego que se verá en numerosas miniaturas del Libro de Dados. Todos ellos presentan actitudes de súplica que hacen quizá alusión a sus deseos de que el monarca legalizara los juegos de dados" (Domínguez Rodríguez [2010-2011], 154).

exposed, physical bodies.¹⁸ As revealed by their postures of supplication, these non-aristocratic subjects stand in dire need of being protected against their own passions, of being saved from themselves by the laws of a higher authority and of a wise ruler engaged in the task of bringing reason and order into their lives. Much in the same way as the rules of courtly *fin'amor* sought to transmute carnal desire into the ethereal affections of self-sacrificing courtly lovers, the gaming laws of Alfonso are seen here acting to regulate and bring under control the greed and impetuous foolishness associated with the naked bodies and unruly passions of the gamblers.¹⁹

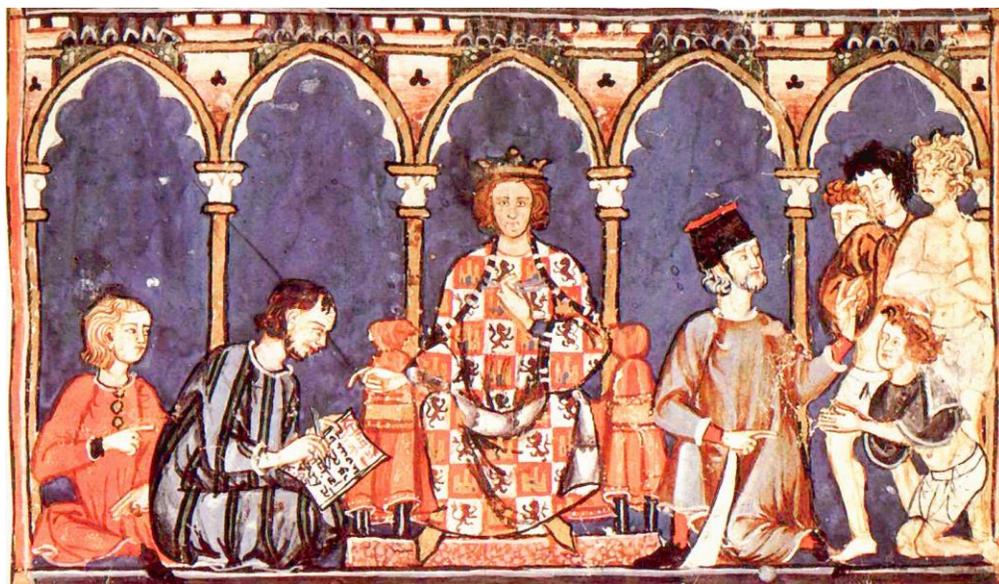


Figure 1. Alfonso at Court. *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas*. Folio 65r. MS T.I.6. Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial.²⁰

Point of convergence of the writing of a book on games, the administration of justice, the regulation of gaming behavior, and the representation of individuals of different social orders, this illustration is particularly valuable as evidence of the serious aspects of games and gaming. In this case, games can be seen to have symbolic, social regulatory and political purposes, as they are explicitly engaged in the shaping and disciplining of the body, the expression and redirecting of its desires.²¹ Notable here is the figure of the king wearing a checkered robe with

¹⁸ As García Morencos notes, the individuals in the book's illustrations are presented "ataviados a la usanza de su raza y condición, lo que le da a este códice un valor inapreciable para el conocimiento de la indumentaria de la época" (19). Menéndez Pidal observes that, around the board games depicted in the codex, "... el miniaturista ha colocado casi setecientas figuras en las que se esforzó por darnos un catálogo de todos los tipos que constituían la sociedad cristiano-islámica de España, vestidos según diversas modas, calzando toda clase de calzado y tocándose con los mas diversos tocados (12).

¹⁹ On the rise and influence of courtly civilizing ideals see Elias (1982), Jaeger (1985).

²⁰ All images in the public domain. Source: MacGregor Historic Games.

²¹ Games and the courtly arts, including manuscript writing and illumination, illustrate in this case the exercise of a Foucauldian biopolitics—similar to what Marcuse called "repressive desublimations"—a form of domination operating not by violence but by the unleashing and re-harnessing, the reorienting of the objects, and hence the

two-colored squares, much like a chessboard, imprinted with the insignia of the realms of Castile and León—the castle and the lion—placed on the squares as if they were chess pieces.²² The design of the clothing makes the body of the king into the visible reality of the political union of the two kingdoms and also suggests his embodiment of the political game by which such arrangements are accomplished, as well as his understanding of the individual kingdoms as game pieces in a larger game under the monarch's guidance.

Also notable in the illustration on Folio 65r is the centrality of the king as mediator between the laws being written toward his right and the crowds of unruly subjects standing and kneeling down toward his left²³—an image that shows him in the very act of creating order out of the chaos of the unregulated human existence. Read as if it were a text flowing from Alfonso's left toward his right, the images create the effect of a cultural assembly line that begins with the raw material of naked creatures and ends with the highly-polished end-product, at Alfonso's far right, of a blond and well-dressed courtly youth, perhaps Alfonso's grandson, the *Infante* Alfonso de la Cerda, whom he wanted to be his successor at the throne.²⁴ The gesture of the youth pointing toward the scribe writing the laws appears in turn to acknowledge the source and reason of his own existence as a privileged and exemplary courtly subject—a superior human being shaped and defined by the Alfonsine rules that clearly separate him from the masses of the common people thronging to the King's left.²⁵ The metaphor at work in such images, that of different types of games corresponding to different types of subjects, suggests an educational ideal involving the possibility of the transformation, through the mediation of the wise king and his laws, of brutish dice players, the common rabble, into elevated subjects capable of playing the more courtly chess, and even higher orders of games.²⁶

The gap that separates the refined courtly subject from the common man is indeed

manipulation, of raw desire (Foucault, 139; Marcuse, 56-83).

²² Menéndez Pidal describes the King's clothing: "Viste manto y *piel* de tapiceria, y un ajedrezado de castillos y leones cubre todas sus ropas" (37).

²³ Commenting on the use of space in the images, Bamford notes: "Operan, ... las leyes de centralidad, o el predominio del centro sobre el margen, de verticalidad, y también de la lateralidad diestra, en que lo que está a la derecha en la imagen se considera más importante que lo que está a la izquierda" (19).

²⁴ Bamford notes the "habitual principio constructivo de secuencialidad temporal de las viñetas, leídas de izquierda a derecha" (21). Constable observes the images are not just illustrations of players and game scenarios but "also engage in social commentary and satire and make allusions to contemporary literature, romance, music, sport, personalities at court, history, and humor" (305). Golladay believes the blond *infante* in this image is the eighteen-year old Sancho (960).

²⁵ Commenting on Alfonso's ambitious cultural works and their intended effects on his subjects, Burns notes that "by the great creations he presided over and participated in, he intended more: nothing less than to reshape and elevate that society in its future generations" (1). The special significance of the gesture of pointing with the index finger is discussed by Domínguez Rodríguez (1987) in illustrations of manuscripts of the *Cantigas*, the *General Estoria*, the *Estoria de España*, the *Primera Partida*, and the *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas* where Alfonso is shown "con el dedo índice de una mano enhiesto y un libro abierto en la otra. Es el gesto del filósofo y el sabio pues, como nos dice el libro *Bocados de Oro*, también Sócrates "cuando fablava movía el dedo que es dicho index" (45). In some of the illustrations of manuscripts of the *Cantigas*, Alfonso points directly to images of the Virgin, also stressing the importance of astrological knowledge (51-52). In the context of chess games in the *Libro de açedrex*, Calvo (1987) noted the pointing encodes "claves ajedrecísticas" and is related to the specific moves and squares relevant to the represented positions of the pieces on the board (131).

²⁶ "... las imágenes reflejan la realidad, o incluso una serie de aspiraciones o esperanzas sociales para dicha corte" (Bamford, 27).

manifested in corresponding differences between the games those different subjects play. From lower to more noble, from games of pure luck, like dice, to games of intellect, like chess, and even higher games patterned after the activity of the stars, games themselves express a hierarchy of human, moral and cosmic realities. The simpler games of dice, like *Azar*, use the crudest tools, a plain brown board and three six-sided dice, and are played mostly by unruly and coarse people who wear humble or hardly any clothing at all (Figure 2):²⁷

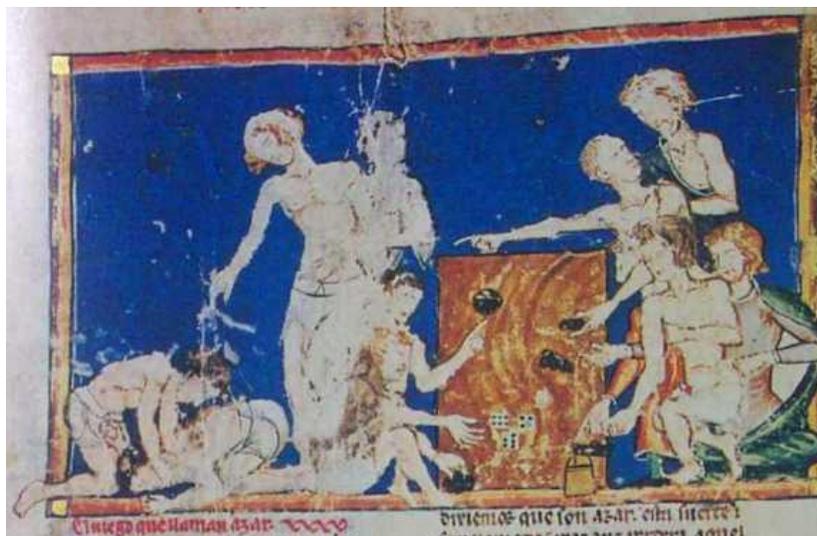


Figure 2. Game of Azar. *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas*. Folio 67r. MS T.I.6. Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

Stripped down to their underwear, the gamblers argue and fight. The leftmost position of this scene—which in Folio 65r was occupied by the privileged courtly youth—is here the site of a wrestling brawl between two men, clearly the inevitable outcome and essence of the kind of game they play.²⁸ Sitting in the rightmost position, an individual of higher social class, wearing much more and richer clothing, is seen also participating in the game. The visual contrast of the naked players with this figure is strong, but the differences end there, as the nobleman playing *Azar* among rowdy folk is no less crude than they are, debased by the setting in which he finds himself, in spite of his luxurious apparel. The tight fitting garment he wears under a green mantle is in fact so snug against his body that it reveals its anatomical features almost as clearly as the nakedness of the other gamblers. This detail manages to suggest the instability of the gambler's

²⁷ Golladay, 817, 969-71. Janer describes the scene: "Todavía es más baladi la gente que aquí juega, desnuda casi del todo y de malísimo porte. Dos de los jugadores han venido ya á las manos y el uno tiene al otro contra el suelo cogiéndole por el pescuezo. El juego que se explica al pié llaman azar" (250).

²⁸ As noted by Carpenter, Alfonso was highly concerned with the regulation of the behavior of players in gambling houses, in particular the ways in which the playing of dice was seen to lead to a variety of problems, "... including cheating with illegal dice, physical violence, fraud and cover-ups, the pawning of weapons and human beings, ... sportive clergy, edibles and potables as stakes, and the distinctive oaths required of Christian, Jewish, and Muslim deponents. Consonant with his aim to abolish blasphemy in the royal casinos, Alfonso adopts a harsh stance toward dicers who damn heaven for their losses at the gaming table" (334).

life, that can go from wealth to naked poverty in an instant, as well as the illusion of difference between this particular nobleman and the commoners around him, who are all identified by vices of character. The choice of game is then presented in this illustration as a manifestation of the character of the players—evidencing a humanist understanding of the order of the cosmos and the possibility of upward or downward movement, according to one's own choices, in the moral and ontological ranks of that order. Who you are and where you stand in the order of God's creation is, according to these representations, a function of the games you choose to play.

Very differently from games of *Azar*, *Acedrex* [chess] is depicted in much more elegant settings, using elaborate boards and *trebejos* [chessmen], and played by wealthy and well-dressed members of the court, who often can also be seen engaging in other appropriately courtly activities, such as playing music. The miniature in Folio 18r depicts a game of *acedrex* between two women—identified by Golladay as Alfonso's mistress, Mayor Guillén de Guzmán (dressed in a semi-transparent garment), and Violante, Alfonso's wife (dressed in green)—accompanied by a young lady who plays the lute and who, as pointed out by Golladay, is likely Beatriz, the illegitimate daughter of Alfonso and Mayor (Figure 3):²⁹

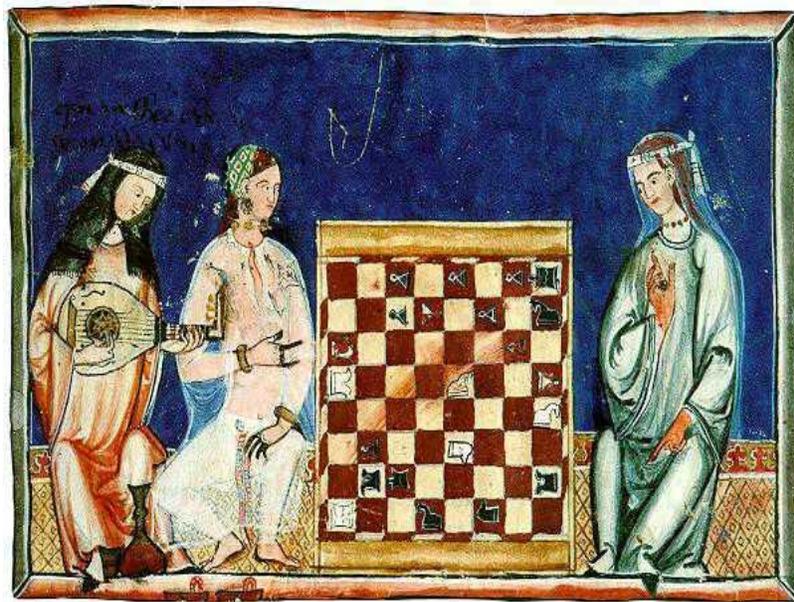


Figure 3. Game of *Acedrex* [chess], *Libro de achedrex, dados e tablas*. Folio 18r. MS T.I.6, Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

The differences between this image and that in Figure 2 couldn't be greater. Whereas the latter is marked by tumult, disorder, ugliness and even violence, here everything speaks of harmony, balance, reason and beauty. Interestingly, the semi-nude human body is featured in both scenes

²⁹ Golladay, 742-43). David Arbesú (2013) recently published a transcription of a contract, dated 24 July 1276, in which Beatriz commissions the building of the tomb of her mother, Mayor Guillén de Guzmán. Vázquez de Parga, following Gonzalo Menéndez Pidal and Carmen Bernis, believed both players to be Muslim women (21). Janer was of the same opinion: "Moriscas son las tres mujeres que aparecen en esta miniatura jugando al ajedrez" (242).

but its significance is as different as that of the games, *Azar* and *Acedrex*, that anchor and define them. Whereas Figure 2 shows rude, semi-naked gamblers playing *Azar* accompanied by one well-dressed nobleman who is thus assimilated to their debased condition, Figure 3 shows very well-dressed courtly people including a woman wearing sheer garments that partially expose her body but who is seen as similarly elevated as her more fully clothed counterparts. Unlike the ugliness of the *Azar* players, here the seeming nakedness of the chess player's body is rendered erotic and aestheticized by the magic of diaphanous silks, jewels and cosmetics.³⁰ As Golladay notes, the figure is likely Alfonso's mistress and is featured in at least four of the illustrations of the *Libro de achedrex*, on Folios 18r, 40v, 48r, and 58r:

... a beautiful woman, scantily but finely dressed and adorned with rich, embroidered bathing gowns and wooden sandals in the Moorish style, gold bangle bracelets and necklaces but above all tiny but beautifully formed bare feet and hands dyed with henna or with red polished nails. (742)

In the illustration of Folio 18r, the exotically-dressed woman is ennobled not just by her luxurious and tantalizing clothing but also by the elevated game she plays and the harmonies, aural and spiritual, suggested by the lute player to her right. The composed postures and thoughtful demeanors of the individuals in the scene similarly hint at the inner beauty of their well-balanced minds and affects. Very much similar to the eroticism of troubadour lyrics, the sensuous elements of the scene result from the artful exploitation of desire, a "repressive desublimation," simultaneous revelation and veiling of the body, carefully contained and controlled by the formal structures and intellectuality of the game.³¹

Orchestrating that transfiguration of the human body from beast into quasi-angelic being, from lowly commoner into courtly subject, the chess game not only mediates the interactions of the represented individuals, but is given the centrality and role that in Folio 65r belonged to the King. The board, in important respects, plays here the role of judge of outcomes and dispenser of justice that in Folio 65r was played by Alfonso. Though the judge here is a purely mechanical device, its rule-driven operation makes the apportionment of gains and losses seem fair, objective and, moreover, a result of the players' own talents. The effect of this image, when compared to Folio 65r is to suggest that the chess game acts as a surrogate of the king, a kind of robotic deputy embodying his laws and delivering appropriate judgments. Alfonso then could be said to be present in Folio 18r, not visibly as in Folio 65r, but in the vicarious form of the chess game that mediates the encounter and interactions of the two players, in this case apparently his wife and mistress. Interestingly, reinforcing the suggestion of the invisible presence of the king, the chess board here features squares in a color scheme very similar to that of Alfonso's robe in Folio 65r. Wearing the king's livery so to speak, the chess game arbitrates the potentially

³⁰ Other images in which the chess players are almost naked include the miniatures on Folios 40v and 48r, the latter featuring two women chess players wearing fully transparent bath robes, while the king himself, elegantly dressed, sits on a throne toward their right and comments on their game (Golladay, 724; Domínguez Rodríguez [2010-2011], 156-57; [1987], 56; Calvo [1999] identifies the individual represented not as the king but his son Sancho (136-37). The arrangement of the figures, including a courtly youth sitting to the right of the king, as well as the architectural setting, make this image highly reminiscent of that on Folio 65r, hence suggesting a similar biopolitical impulse toward the shaping of the body, mediated in this case by the king and the chess game. Menéndez Pidal discusses transparent robes as characteristic of Muslim dress (95-96).

³¹ Wollesen notes the intriguing similarities of these scenes, especially that in Fol. 48r, with a 1963 photograph of Marcel Duchamp playing chess with a naked woman at the Pasadena Art Museum (289, 295).

explosive interactions of the king's wife and lover, rendering them harmonious and transmuting any possible rivalry into a highly civilized and orderly contest. Replaced by his mechanical avatar, however, Alfonso has also made himself irrelevant and absent, in a way no longer needed in the matter of the arbitrating of disputes and the administration of justice.³²

The creation of surrogates, substitutes and other devices capable of doing his work and continuing his missions appears to have been central to the concerns of Alfonso. Thus, also as in Folio 65r, the scene in 18r represents courtly activities that are productive of highly refined subjects, the blond youth in the former, the dark-haired musician girl in the latter. Both figures are placed, in their respective illustrations, in the leftmost position for the reader and the rightmost for the king and the chessboard. This field of the image, and the figures it contains, is treated as a special one in the illustrations of the *Libro de aqedrex, dados e tablas*, functioning effectively as a sort starting and ending *casa* [square, slot], to use the language of Alfonso's games. It seems indeed to be a space reserved for the expression of outcomes and final products, from the King's and the game's perspective, and of beginnings and starting points, from the readers'/viewers' point of view.³³

In this case, the end products of the courtly life are the results of the king's game and the king's labors. The exemplary courtly youths in these images, in that sense, are offered to the reader/viewer, and to the King's people, as Alfonso's creations and objects worthy of admiration and emulation. The idealized final products are, however, also beginnings in that they constitute the subjects of the future and also the starting point of the readers' own instruction, an education by exposure to the worthy examples offered in the king's works. Embodied in books, art works, palaces, games, the refinements of the courtly life, and even his children and grandchildren, Beatriz, Fernando and Alfonso de la Cerda, Alfonso clearly strove to leave behind a legacy of living and mechanical artifacts capable of guiding and inspiring his people in the journey toward the better life promised to those willing to learn and submit to the king's laws.

Although he valued chess very highly, Alfonso had a personal preference for games of *tablas*, which were special objects of his attention. Among those games, some were of his own design and expressive of his personal concerns and aspirations. Most notable perhaps, the *tablas* game of *Emperador*, so named by Alfonso himself, echoes the political ambitions of the king and is also suggestive of his interest in the regulation of the competition between powerful rulers with designs on the imperial throne.³⁴ The miniature depicting the game is very significant because it shows two kings amusing themselves and also competing, even if only in the make-believe world of the game, over the title of *Emperador*, a king of kings (Fol. 76r). The position and shape of this illustration, a reverse "L" (J), is framed by text both above and below on the

³² Adams perceives similar effects of the chess game, decentralizing the figure of the king, in late medieval literature, especially Ch. 1 "(Re)moving the King: Ideals of Civic Order in Jacobus de Cessoli's *Liber de ludo scachorum*" (15-56).

³³ The relevance and complementarity of the reversible perspectives is validated by the reflective habits of thought of players of chess, and also of painters, for whom the opponent and the represented subject are mirror realities whose points of view have to be considered and understood. In the rich cultural context of Alfonso's court, that reversibility of perspectives was further suggested by the handling of Latin, Greek, Arabic and Hebrew manuscripts (Domínguez Rodríguez [1987], 59), written in scripts that were read and written both left-to-right and right-to-left.

³⁴ "Otro iuego a y de tablas que llaman en Espanna ell emperador porque el lo fizo" (Fol. 75v). "... se trata de una modalidad de tablas inventada personalmente por el rey Alfonso X el Sabio (que se titulaba emperador por sus pretensiones a a corona alemana por ser hijo de Beatriz de Suabia)" (Calvo [1987], 139).

folio, and are designed to separate the discussions of the games of *Emperador* and *Medio Emperador* (Figure 4):



Figure 4. Game of *Emperador* [Emperor], *Libro de los juegos*, Folio 76r, MS T.I.6, Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

This layout is rare in the manuscript, where most of the 151 images are rectangular and occupy the top third of their respective folios.³⁵ Only about a fifth of them have text both above and

³⁵ While stressing "the strictly formulaic layout of each picture" in the *Libro de açedrex*, Constable notes that "in three early images—for games 3 (fol. 7r), 11 (fol. 12v), and 15 (fol. 15r)—the illumination breaks out of its rectangular border and occupies an irregular L-shaped space on the page, and in one case—on the final folio (fol. 64r) the illustration is allowed an entire page with no surrounding text. The significance of this final folio, its number corresponding to the number of squares on a chessboard and its placement marking the end of the section devoted to the discussion of chess, probably accounts for its unusual layout" (310, 329). The L-shape and other layouts are also discussed by Domínguez Rodríguez (1987): "En el *Libro de los Juegos* predominan las miniaturas de formato rectangular, que ocupan el equivalente a un tercio de la caja de escritura y aparecen en la parte superior, media o inferior de la página. Pero de la inventiva y libertad con que se movieron los pintores nos hablan esas miniaturas, a veces las mas hermosas, que ocupan un espacio en L en medio del texto, o incluso algunas a página entera, y que sustituyen por completo al mismo" (35); also Golladay, 788-789. Numerological considerations were highly important to Alfonso, who had a special interest in their symbolic properties, especially those of the number 7 (Golladay, 30-31; Martínez, 277 ff.). "Hay una evidente presencia de la numerología mística en toda la obra

below, and only eight a non-rectangular layout in the L-shape (L) or its reverse (J). Of the latter, only one of them, the one showing the game of *Emperador*, is framed in that manner without the mediation of architectural imagery. The other seven—in Folios 2r, 7r, 12v, 15r, 68r, 68v and 71v—all use architecture to shape the space.³⁶ That the device is not merely a way of filling an L-shaped blank space, in between text describing different games, is demonstrated by the layouts of the images in Fols. 68r, 68v, and 71v, which could have been drawn in standard rectangular frames.

Several images, although contained within standard rectangular frames, also feature the L-pattern, not in the shape of the space where they are laid out, but in the arrangement of the human figures within the picture. The most notable of these are those depicting Alfonso himself speaking to his courtiers, with his body constituting the upright member of the capital "L," while the human figures lying before him constitute the horizontal beam of the design (Folios 1r and 72r, the openings of the *Libro de açedrex* and the *Libro de las tablas*).³⁷ To the modern mind, the "L" and reverse "L" layouts of the pictures, or the figures within them, can seem mere whims of the artist or aspects of the represented situations, where indeed the king is often going to be seen standing or sitting in a position which is higher than that of the subjects he addresses. Seen from the standpoint of the medieval imagination, however, and in the context of the allegorical and iconic modes characteristic of medieval traditions of thinking and writing, such patterns cannot

alfonsina, y el tratado de los Juegos no es ninguna excepción" (Calvo [1987], 129, also 152).

³⁶ The image on Folio 2r features an Indian king commissioning three wise men to embark on a game quest. The figures are contained within the space shaped by a building with three towers and two cupolas, creating both L and reverse L patterns. The illustration on Folio 7r is contained by buildings, creating a reverse L pattern, and features a king, likely Alfonso, playing chess while receiving a wine glass from an attendant (Calvo [1987] points out a jug or cup are generally offered to the winner "de hecho casi siempre que se ofrecen a un personaje manjares o brebajes o tiene a sus pies un vaso or una bebida es en el lado de las piezas que van a ganar en la combinación ajedrecística" [131]). Folio 12v shows a chess game played outdoors with a background of buildings, also filling a reverse L space. Folio 15r has two kings standing behind two youths engaged in a chess game, all within a reverse L space formed by a cupolaed tower and a horizontal arcade. On Folio 68r, a game of dice is depicted framed by architecture on the left and a standing musician on the right that create both an L and reverse L patterns. On Folio 68v semi-naked gamblers play a game of dice while two women, likely tavern keepers, stand under cover of a building and serve them drinks (Vázquez de Parga notes the gamblers may be pawning or selling their clothing in this scene [25]). Folio 71v shows a game of dice played within an architectural-and-garden setting showing both L and reverse L patterns corresponding to the effects of the architecture and of the tall trees in the garden. Other unusual layouts include the miniature in Folio 62v painted on a triangular space defined by an outdoor tent, and that in Folio 64r, also an outdoor tent in a pentagonal shape. A slightly ambiguous, though ultimately rectangular, layout can be observed in Folio 67v, where arriving horsemen are greeted by players sitting under an arcade.

³⁷ The illustration on Folio 2v also features the L-arrangement of the figures and shows the legendary Indian king receiving the three wise men bringing him different games (chess, dice and backgammon) as proof of their views on the relative roles and effectivity of reason and luck in the unfolding of human life. Other illustrations that can be included in the category of images featuring human figures arranged in an L-pattern, more or less distinctly, occur in Folio 68r, which also features architecture; Folio 1v with scribes at work; Folio 3r showing the manufacture of a chess board and pieces; Folio 7r with a king chess player taller than his opponent, reinforced by architecture; Folio 10v with a lady chess player towering over her male opponent; and Folio 62r, where a blond lady is also shown as much taller than her dark-haired male rival in a game of chess. A number of images show symmetrical arrangements of players and attendants that also produce L and reverse L patterns, e.g. in Folio 8r, 11v, etc. In total, about 27 images in the manuscript can be said to contain some form of L-pattern, in layout or arrangements of the figures in the picture. This does not include the L patterns that can also be seen in the displayed text due to the two-column division of the individual folia and the effects created by the interplay of text and illuminations.

be dismissed as accidental. Highly-ornate capital letters are in fact one of the most distinctive and recognizable characteristics of medieval illuminated manuscripts. Such decorated initials were often deliberately designed by painters and scribes in ways that allowed for the interplay and blending of letters and pictures, linguistic and iconic signs. The *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas* is no exception to this artful use of text and image.³⁸



Figure 5. Alfonso dictating the *Libro de açedrex* to a Scribe. *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas*. Folio 1r. MS T.I.6, Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

In effect, the special significance of images featuring "L" and reverse "L" patterns in the *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas* is established from the very beginning of the book and is confirmed by the ornamented initials used in the text. Folio 1r (Figure 5) opens the work with an illustration where the king is shown dictating the book itself.³⁹ Though the layout of this

³⁸ As noted by Domínguez Rodríguez (1987) the production of the manuscript involved a three-stage process: "el proceso intelectual de creación del texto, la fase de escritura o copia del mismo (scriptorium) en la versión definitiva tras una serie de borradores del mismo ... y, por último, la ilustración con miniaturas en los huecos dejados intercalados en el texto" (32).

³⁹ Janer believed the figures accompanying Alfonso are a scribe and two chess players or court sages: "En la primera miniatura se representa al rey Don Alfonso sentado, y cubierto con un manto en que están bordados los leones y castillos de las armas de su regia estirpe, con la corona de oro en la cabeza. Está ricamente calzado. Su cabellera es rubia. Dicta á uno de sus secretarios. ... Á la izquierda del rey, en el segundo compartimento, se hallan sentados á la

particular image is a standard rectangle occupying the top of the page, the figure of the king and the courtiers in front of him are arranged in an L-pattern, with other human, architectural and decorative elements also hinting at letter-like shapes that interact with the actual text below them. The pattern is repeated at the opening of the *Libro de las tablas* (Folio 72r, Figure 6):



Figure 6. Alfonso dictating the *Libro de las tablas* to a scribe. *Libro de achedrex, dados e tablas*. Folio 72r. MS T.I.6, Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

On a basic level, as an image rather than a letter, the L-pattern conveys ideas of the higher importance and authority of the element(s) on the vertical plane of the design, the I-part of the L-shape, such as the body of Alfonso as he dictates a book or passes judgments on his subjects. In the illustration on Folio 76r depicting the game of *Emperador*, the L-design helps in fact identify one of the kings, the one on the right, as Alfonso himself, the dominant figure who no doubt is winning and, enjoying the benefit of greater head room, is more worthy of the crown of *Emperador*. The L-shape of this and other figures in the *Libro de achedrex, dados e tablas* is not, however, purely a signal of the different worth and authority of the represented figures. That authority is in fact derived from the principle that, reading the pattern as a letter, is the likely referent of the capital "L," a letter emphasized not just by the patterning of given images but by

usanza oriental sobre alfombras, dos personajes, casi cubiertos con sus mantos, y que probablemente serán dos jugadores experimentados en el ajedrez, ó dos sabios á quienes consulta el monarca" (238). Golladay is likely correct however that the figures represented include members of Alfonso's family: "on the floor sit two young men I believe to be Alfonso's sons, Fernando de la Cerda at left whose higher position in the birth order is indicated by his closer proximity to the king, and Sancho at right, identified by the marring of his portrait here and on fols. 72r, 88v, 96v and 97v" (793). Following the same logic of succession, however, rather than just a scribe, the young man sitting in front of Alfonso, is likely his grandson, Alfonso, the *Infante* de la Cerda, whom he preferred as heir over Sancho. Quite possibly painted after his death, Fernando's shape, as a tribute to him, appears to have been deliberately drawn in the pattern of the stars in the Pleiades constellation, his arms also positioned in a manner suggestive of their encircling the shape of an invisible orb, the symbol of world and universal empire. The rightmost figure, furthermore, may not be a man at all, as generally supposed, but the queen Violante herself, as suggested by her demure sitting posture, the finely delineated fingers of her left hand, and the erasure over the chest area. If that is the case, this is then a portrait of the royal family, but one altogether excluding the hated son, Sancho.

its insistent use, throughout the *Libro de açedrex* (Folios 1-64), as the preferred illuminated capital.

In effect, the *Libro de açedrex's* folia contain a total of 139 illuminated initial capitals in both recto and verso sides. Of those, 1 is an "S," 2 are "P"s, 21 are "E"s and 115 are "L"s. The pattern could be dismissed as accidental and resulting from the common use of the plural definite article, "Los," as the beginning word of many of the book's sections, especially since they describe chess problems where either the white or the black pieces, "Los blancos" or "Los prietos," have the first move. That is not the pattern of the *Libro de los dados* (Folios 65-71), the *Libro de las tablas* (Folios 72-80), or the final sections on the *Grant Acedrex*, the *Acedrex de las diez casas*, the games of the seasons of the year, *Alquerque*, and astronomical checkers and *tablas* (Folios 81-97). Out of the 60 stylized capitals occurring in Folios 65-97, 23 are "E"s, 21 are "O"s, 6 are "P"s, 3 are "L"s, 3 are "M"s, 1 "D", 1 "S", 1 "I", and 1 "V". What that suggests then is that, although it is a pattern of the language of describing chess problems where "los blancos" or "los prietos" move first, the 115 "L"s occurring in Folios 1-64 are not a natural pattern of the language of the overall work and their high concentration artificially calls attention to the "L" letter motif as it claims 83 percent of the stylized initial capitals of the *Libro de açedrex*, while it is barely present, only five percent of the capitals in the rest of the work. Overall then, of the 199 stylized capital letters featured in the *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas*, a total of 118 are "L"s, that is, nearly 60 percent.

Given the notable L-patterning of figures and layouts of key images in the *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas*, the unusual concentration of decorated capital "L" letters in Folios 1-64, together with the legislative and regulatory spirit of Alfonso's work and the centrality to it of written law, it is not entirely farfetched to suggest that the L-like patterns and "L" capitals could be interpreted as evoking the initial letter of the Latin and Spanish words *Lex/Ley* [law] and *Liber/Libro* [book]. Such words, in effect and in substance, constitute the fundamental coordinates, conceptual and material, of all of Alfonso's political, cultural and other efforts—the cornerstones of his authority as king and teacher to his people. Inspired by the precedent of *Lex Romana* [Roman law], known in the Iberian peninsula as the *Lex Romana Visigothorum* [Roman law of the Visigoths], Alfonso's *Libro de las Leyes* (the original title of *Las Siete Partidas*), as well as his other regulatory treatises, including the *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas*, constituted attempts to revive the spirit of order and high civilization, the mechanisms of subjection, as well as the reach of the political power that once were Rome's.⁴⁰ The *Lex/Ley* and the codices that embodied it, however, as Alfonso saw them, were not exclusively punitive or coercive phenomena, but had a gentler side in the forms of subjection-by-pleasure falling under the rubric of *ludus* [game]. *Ludus*, in particular, was a word used by the Romans to refer to board games like the *ludus latruncularum* [game of robbers], a Roman game with some similarities to chess, and the *ludi circenses* [circus, gladiatorial games] that, in ancient Roman life, were an integral part of the apparatus of social and political control of the Roman *populus*. *Ludus*, furthermore, was also the word used by the Romans to refer to a school, a training ground, or an educational

⁴⁰ The *Lex Romana Visigothorum* was embodied in the codex that later came to be known as the *Breviarium Alaricianum*, a compilation of Roman law commissioned and put into effect in 506 by the Visigothic king, Alaric II. The *Breviarium* was a work intended to make explicit the laws and regulations pertaining to the lives of Alaric's Romano-Iberian and Gallic subjects. It was the main source of knowledge of Roman law in western Europe, outside of Italy, till the eleventh century (Landau, 119). O'Callaghan, 17-18, 147-50.

institution meant to shape either young people or gladiators.⁴¹

Books of rules and laws, in those contexts, whether on serious or ludic subjects, were not intended as ends in themselves, but as tools to shape and form human subjects agreeable to the needs of the social and political groups sponsoring the production of such books. The letter of the law is an abstraction that ultimately has to find concrete manifestation in the visible properties, of conduct and deportment, of living human bodies. Accordingly, Alfonso's book exhibits an impulse to draw and model the human figure in the pattern of the given laws, with the King himself presented as the visible manifestation of the principle of Law. The authority of Alfonso, as king by *Ley* and *Libro*, is appropriately embodied, in symbolic form, in the L-letters and L-patterns visible throughout the manuscript—a pattern that is interpreted, in Alfonso's own description of the L-shaped movement of the knight in chess, as a sign of good leaders, "los buenos cabdiellos":

LOs cauallos saltan a tres casas contando las dos en derecho dessi; & tomando la tercera en sosquino a qual parte quiere. E esto es a semeiança de los buenos cabdiellos que acabdiellan las azes boluiendo los cauallos a diestro & a siniestro pora aguardar los suyos; & uencer los enemigos. (Folio 3v)

Seeking to be the best of kings, Alfonso modeled his *Libros* and *Leyes* after Roman laws and codices, and envisioned himself as a Roman emperor, a player-king playing the game of *Emperador* and a real king aiming to become Holy Roman emperor, a new Caesar or Augustus, or a Frederick II, Alfonso's cousin and contemporary, whom he aspired to emulate.⁴² *Lex* and *Ley*, as embodied in Alfonso's written works and in his living person, constituted then closely related juridical constructs and also cultural mirror images of each other (L and J), Latin and Vernacular, Roman and Germanic, the two edges, ancient and medieval, of the idea of *Imperium* [empire], of its fundamental enforcing principles, *Ius* [right, law] and *Iustitia* [justice], and its more playful facets as *Ludus* and *Iocus*.

Anagrammatic games and visual puns within the *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas* are not confined to the "L" motif. Also significant is the depiction of narrow slit windows—characteristic of Romanesque/Norman architecture—in towers and other structures, that strongly evoke the letters/numbers "I" and "II." The motif, suggestive of a capital "I," is very prominently featured in the central column of the architectural setting in Folio 1r (Figure 5). The "II" is notable, for example, atop the columns in the architectural elements of the image in Folio 72r (Figure 6). Since both of those folios are the beginnings of major sections of the work, the *Libro de açedrex* and the *Libro de las tablas*, respectively, one could be tempted to think of them as numbering devices marking volumes of the treatise. That however is not their function, as the

⁴¹ The word *iuegos*, used by Alfonso to refer to the various games he describes in his book, is derived from Latin *iocus/jocus* [jest, joke], but, as evident in its application to games like chess, it expresses much of the sense of Latin *ludus*, rather than *iocus*.

⁴² "The death of the German emperor Frederick II Hohenstaufen in December 1250, followed closely by that of his son Conrad IV, left a long international political vacuum that lasted over twenty years. This period, known as the 'Great Interregnum of the Empire,' was an important time in Alfonso's reign, the first twenty years when his initiatives and ambitions reached their zenith in his political career. If on the one hand the lack of a civil head symbolizing the union of Christendom threatened the stability of international politics, from the perspective of Castile, a number of possibilities opened up for Alfonso, among which was the chance to aspire to the imperial crown of his relative Frederick II, given the fact that Alfonso was a descendant of the Staufens" (Martínez, 117).

markings appear in no fewer than 55 of the illustrations, sometimes as "I"s, "II"s, or a combination of them. In some cases, the letter/number patterns are figured by imagery other than architecture, as in the miniature of Folio 64r (Figure 7), the end of the *Libro de açedrex*, where two men play chess under a tent, their spears outside forming a prominent "II" pattern, the tent-mast an "I":⁴³

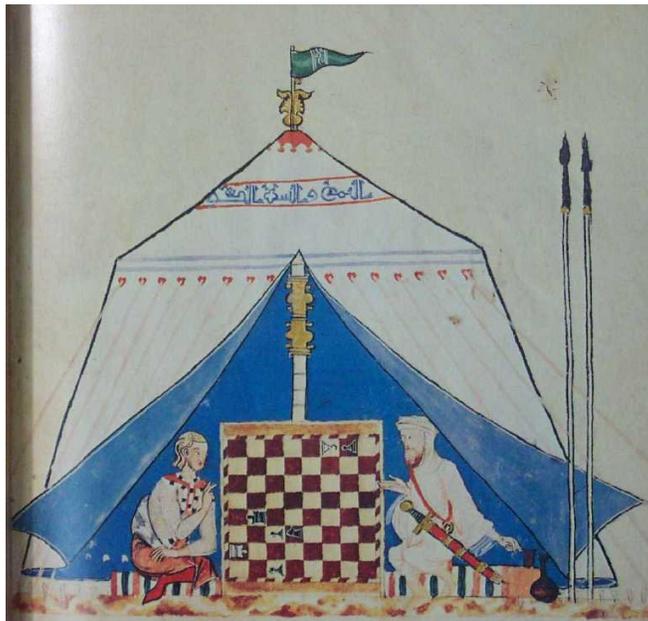


Figure 7. Two men playing chess under a tent. *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas*. Folio 64r. MS T.I.6, Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

Not purely decorative imagery or mechanical counters, such devices have to be considered in terms of the textualization of specific ideas and the imaging of text at work in the manuscript. In that sense, "I"s and "II"s, as well as "L"s, can be understood as having complex values, as letters and as ordinal ideas, that is, as readable elements and as archetypal shapes related to notions of dominance and subordination. The "I" then, as suggested by its dominant position as the vertical

⁴³ Constable notes that this illustration's place in the manuscript, as well as its layout and details—such as the unarmed Christian player and the fact that the Muslim player has the winning position—suggest special significance, perhaps of a historical or narrative nature: "in one case—on the final folio (fol. 64r) the illustration is allowed an entire page with no surrounding text. The significance of this final folio, its number corresponding to the number of squares on a chessboard and its placement marking the end of the section devoted to the discussion of chess, probably accounts for its unusual layout" (310; also 332-33, 341). The correspondence of the folio number with the number of squares on the board is also noted by Calvo (1987): "Tantos folios como cuadros tiene el tablero de ajedrez" (129); also Wollesen (285). Calvo (1987) further observes the efforts to fill space in the manuscript, even by repetition of chess situations, "sea por escasez no prevista de material a incluir, o por haberse decidido alargar la parte ajedrecística hasta el folio 64 por concordancia numerológica" (135). Golladay identifies the Arabic inscription on the tent as a Cufic basmala: "Transliterated 'Bismillahir-Rahmanir- Rahim' and translated 'In the name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful,' ... The implications of its placement here at the top of [the] tent and at what seems to the European reader to be the end of the 'Libro de açedrex' are very significant. From the perspective of an Arabic reader this folio would represent the beginning of the 'Book of Chess' rather than the end and therefore supports the conclusion that Alfonso's compilers were Muslims working with Arabic textual sources" (956, n. 682).

element of the L pattern and its representing of the idea of primacy and priority, is a symbol of Alfonso himself in his role not just as king, but *first* among princes and nobles, the "I" among the "II"s, the *primus inter pares*, master of the game of kings, *Imperator/Emperador*, king not just over the Iberian peninsula but over the entirety of the Holy Roman Empire.⁴⁴ Folio 1r in that sense, as the opening of Alfonso's book of games, sets the tone for a book that is in itself a gigantic rebus game, a puzzle of objects rendered readable and living bodies transfigured into text. And while its secrets are for the most part yet to be deciphered, the book's opening page tantalizes the reader/viewer with the anagrammatic figuration of the fundamental word-idea that fascinated and informed all of the endeavors of a man who aspired to become the king of kings—in this case not just the principle of *Lex* and the medium of the *Liber* but the very person of the king as the supreme ruler, that is, as *Imperator/Emperador*.⁴⁵

According to the impulse to evoke the word and concept of *Imperator/Emperador*, the "I" of the slit window on the central tower of the architecture in the miniature of Folio 1r—and those evoked by the columns and other towers and vertical structures—are not the only images readable as letter-motifs in that particular scene (Figure 8):

⁴⁴ Martínez comments on the discontent of the nobility with Alfonso's rule as being related to the emerging notion of the king as *primus inter pares* ("first among equals"), relative to the other worthies in his realm (295). On the notion of the king's supremacy and sovereignty over everyone in his realms, see O'Callaghan, 25-26. Bamford notes the significance of verticality as emphasis on the importance of the visual elements in the illustrations (19).

⁴⁵ As noted by Menéndez Pidal, the mantle and robe that Alfonso wears in Fol. 1r are decorated with circular designs, enclosing the heraldic lions and castles of León and Castile, and meant to evoke the idea of empire: "para Alfonso la emblemática circular tenía una indudable relación con el Imperio" (39). He further notes this is the very robe in which Alfonso was buried, as a tribute to his imperial ambitions (38, 40). "Perhaps Alfonso X's most consuming passion was his quest for the crown of the Holy Roman Empire" (O'Callaghan, 198).



Figure 8. Possible letter-motif readings of the imagery in the miniature of Folio 1r

The two arches that form around that central column—as well as the stand that divides the second arch into two sub-arches—are reminiscent of the shape of a letter "M." The decorated capital in the text immediately below the figure of Alfonso provides the clue for the next meaningful element, the "P" (also echoed within the main arches). The King himself—as he leans his head forward and points at the scribe in front of him with his right hand and his left foot—embodies the elements of an "E," while the young man under the second arch outlines a minuscule "e." The capital "E" can also be perceived in the rectangular architectural enclosures corresponding to the two halves of the scene. The crenellated arch Alfonso sits under, together with the diagonal that can be drawn between the heads of the two human figures in that space, constitute an "R" (the same effect is produced by the second arch and the angle defined by the capital of the central stand and the head of the rightmost figure). Alfonso, the young man before him, as well as the figures on the right, delineate "A" and "a." The central column with its arches opening left and right, as well as the stand occupying the center of the second arch, trace the perpendicular axes of "T". The young man under the second arch cradles an "O" between his arms. Multiple other echoes of the O-shape are visible in the scene, including the circles that decorate the King's robe. Finally, the right-hand arch growing from the central column, together

with the rightmost human figure, constituting the strokes of the closing "R."

Quite aside from any real or imagined layouts or clever interplays of linguistic and iconic signs, what is notable in all 151 of the illustrations of the *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas* is the visual containment, shaping and ordering of the represented human figures within fields of text and textiles, game boards and decorative frames, furnishings and architectural motifs, as well as other visual elements of the book.⁴⁶ These various fields create visible boundaries that frame and define the human figure, giving it a cipher-like value and making it function in relation to the other signifiers of a "courtly grammar" that includes the laws of the kingdom, the rules of games, and other codes of courtly conduct. Such shaping and grammaticalization of human bodies stretches even to the figures of kings and would-be emperors, as subjects of the lawful realms of game, kingdom, empire, and God's creation. Acting as a series of nested and interacting regulatory structures, the many forms of fashioning and legislating of the human body in Alfonso's works expressed and participated in the simultaneously medieval and early modern phenomenon of the growth of state power and its legal institutions. The increase of those powers corresponded of course to the diminishing autonomy and significance of the individual, who, whether commoner or king, found him/herself ever more bound, framed, limited, and even entirely absorbed by the letter of the law, whether in the form of legislative treatises or the more playful rules of books of games.

The manuscript book, in effect, with its written text and other inscriptions, including art works, was one of the fundamental factors in the transformations of consciousness, subjectivities and sensibilities that affected Europeans during the courtly ages. A manifestation of those effects, an intriguing facet of the images of Alfonso's *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas* is their suggestion of the allegorical significance of the physical media of the games discussed in the book. The wooden *tableros* [game boards] in effect, particularly in the *Libro de las tablas*, cannot help but hint at a curious resemblance of the game board and the book that talks about it—a similarity and structural affinity between the facing folios of a codex and the symmetrical halves of the represented game boards. Indeed, the carefully ruled and inscribed pages of the manuscript and the orderly fields of the *tableros*, the former bearing words and images, the latter *trebejos* and *tablas* [moving game pieces], constitute homologous devices that contain and structure, fixing in time and space, what are otherwise the fluid and unruly phenomena of spoken language and living, moving human bodies. The games and corresponding books that regulate and assign identities and roles to human beings, furthermore, are seen to derive their authority from textual, historical sources such as, in the case of Alfonso's work, codified Roman law, and, no less importantly, the divine law that, for medieval Christians, was embodied in the text of the Vulgate Bible and, ultimately, the *duas tabulas* [two tables] of the written laws that God gave to Moses (*Exodus* 31.18, 32.15).

In that sense then, the two halves of a modern backgammon board, or of a portable chess

⁴⁶ Though the peculiar patterns of layouts, decorated initials and other uses of letters, numbers and readable motifs may strike modern readers as outlandish, they are entirely consistent with medieval culture in general and, in particular, with the obsessive manner of thinking of Alfonso, who may have suffered from a mental illness that intensified those tendencies, and whose condition is often discussed in the scholarship as signs of either madness or genius (Martínez, 280). "The king was obviously suffering from a dread disease that despite periods of remission continued to worsen. As it did so, his actions became more extreme, to the consternation of his people" (O'Callaghan, 241, also 279-80).

set, joined by a hinge that allows them to fold like a book, are not just a matter of convenience related to the storage and transportation of the game board and its pieces. Instead, they are part of the historical continuity of a perceived affinity between game and book that was already active in the medieval period. In that respect and in the English context, *tablas* games were known simply as “tables,” all the way up until Tudor times, because the board consisted of two hinged tables.⁴⁷ The word *backgammon* did not come into use till sometime in the seventeenth century and is supposed to have originated in the notion of “back-game, back-play ... ‘because the pieces are (in certain circumstances) taken up and obliged to go back, that is re-enter at the table’” (OED).⁴⁸ That said and acknowledged, there is, however, a distinct possibility that the underlying word-compound in *backgammon* is not “back-game” but rather “book-game” [Middle English *bok + gamen*] because of the resemblance of the backgammon board to a book, due to its two leaves joined by hinges.

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Alfonso's crafting of books of laws and games had the unequivocal purpose of advancing his projects of civilization and political subjection of the inhabitants of the Iberian peninsula and of the peoples of a much larger Christian western empire. Those goals however were only the most immediate and most evident aspects of his cultural and other endeavors. Indeed, beyond the ambitions of a revival of the old Visigothic kingdom and the gaining for himself of the Holy Roman German imperial crown, Alfonso harbored even greater ambitions, of a no less than global and even cosmic magnitude, which can be surmised from further examination of the games he played. While games like *acedrex* and *tablas* seemed relevant to Alfonso in the modeling and understanding of strategic, tactical and practical aspects of governing and the negotiation of political, military and social advantages, other kinds of games appeared equally promising as ways to access knowledge, and potentially power, of a higher order.

At the pinnacle of the hierarchies of forms of entertainment defined in the *Libro de achedrex, dados e tablas*, games like the “iuegos de los quatro tiempos dell anno” and “iuegos por Astronomia” were reserved for very special and unusually learned individuals, like Alfonso himself, who possessed knowledge and understanding of natural and occult sciences, of astronomy and astrology, and of esoteric lore connected to magic and mythology.⁴⁹ Featuring the most complex designs, games like *El Mundo* (Figure 9), *Escaques por Astronomía* (Figure 10), and *Tablas por Astronomía* (Figure 11) are notable for features such as circular and many-sided boards, polyhedral dice, and multiple players—as many as seven in the astronomical games—replacing the standard cubic dice, square boards and two-player scenarios of most of the simpler games:

⁴⁷ Golladay, 414, citing Stone (1960).

⁴⁸ “Backgammon, n.” OED Online. Oxford University Press. <http://www.oed.com> (accessed November 12, 2012).

⁴⁹ Domínguez Rodríguez (1987), 59, 62, 65 ff.

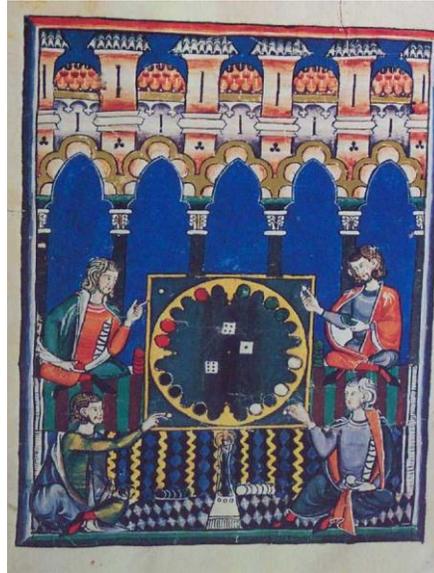


Figure 9. Game of *El Mundo*. *Libro de achedrex, dados e tablas*. Folio 89v. MS T.I.6, Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

In a way, as the referents of the games, and the ambitions of the players, reach toward global levels and the heavenly spheres, the shapes of the gaming devices change accordingly, the squares evolving toward more complex polygons and circles, the players assuming the roles of god-like beings, casting dice and making moves of unimaginably far-reaching consequences for the mortals under their rule.

The idea of an aristocratic player participating with others of his kind in a game of *El Mundo* or of *Tablas por Astronomía* offers an interesting glimpse into the subjectivities of privileged courtiers and of their understanding of themselves and their position in the world they inhabited and sought to dominate. A game in effect is never just a game, just as a joke is never without ulterior meaning. In that sense, games of such elevated dimensions speak in substantial ways about the psyches of courtly agents whose ambitions were nothing short of the desire for world domination and even mastery of the universe.



Figure 10. *Escaques por Astronomía*. *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas*. Folio 96v. MS T.I.6, Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

In the game of *Escaques por Astronomía*, apparently invented by Alfonso—he calls it "este iuego nueuo" (359)—seven players participate, each taking turns to roll special heptahedral dice, also of Alfonso's design, and each being assigned a moving piece associated with personifications of one of the seven heavenly bodies: Saturn, Jupiter, Mars, the Sun, Venus, Mercury and the Moon. The descriptions of the pieces are informed by medieval traditions of classical mythology, but several of them are also quite telling of the human attributes that Alfonso and his courtiers found desirable and admirable and which they projected onto the celestial powers:

Ivpiter ... ha semeiança domne de mediana edat. & de cara alegre & uestido de pannos uerdes & que tiene en la cabeça coffia ultra marina & tiene un libro antessi. ...

Mars ha semeiança de omne mançebo. & uestido de armaduras antiguas de grecia todas uermeias & tiene en la mano derecha una espada sacada de la uayna. & en la otra una cabeça domne colgada por los cabellos frescamiente descabeçada. ...

El sol ha semeiança de Rey mançebo que tiene corona doro en la cabeça. & uiste pannos doro reluzientes. & tiene en la mano siniestra una maçana redonda. & en la otra ... un Ramo con flores assi como los Emperadores quando los coronan. ...

Uenus ha figura de mugier mançeba muy fremosa & los cabellos muy ruios luengos por las espaldas & tiene en la cabeça guerlanda de Rosas & uestida de pannos de violet. & tiene en la mano derecha un penne & en la otra un espeio en que se cata. ...

Mercurio ha semeiança domne mançebo uestido de pannos de muchas colores. & que esta escriuiendo en un Libro. ...

LA Luna ha semeiança de mugier manceba; uestida de pannos blancos. & tiene con amas la manos sobre su cabeça una figura de Luna. (Fols. 95v-96r)

Similarly ambitious and complex, the game of *Tablas por Astronomía* was patterned after the

Escaques, and was therefore also likely an Alfonsine invention.⁵⁰ The illustration on Folio 97v shows Alfonso presiding over a game of astronomical *tablas*, sitting in front of a red couch with a heptagonal *tablero* in front of him. In this particular game, Alfonso plays the part of the Sun, as indicated by his yellow *tablas*. Perhaps the first recorded image of an European “sun king,” the role is also revealing of Alfonso's vision of himself as both king and emperor: “Rey mançebo que tiene corona doro en la cabeça. ... assi como los Emperadores quando los coronan.”⁵¹ The other players in the game seem to include scholars and noblemen of high rank, perhaps royal peers and counselors, including Alfonso's son Sancho, who is sitting to the king's right in the upper left side of the image, and is associated with the red game pieces of the violent god/planet Mars.⁵²

Truly “deep play,” in Clifford Geertz's terminology, the stakes of this particular instance of astronomical *tablas*, given its participants and the nature of the game itself, are of national and also universal significance, as if the players were indeed gambling not just for control of Spain, but of the whole earth and worlds beyond.⁵³ As Golladay notes, the defacement of the figure of Sancho is likely deliberate and related to the enmity between father and son and the civil war that broke out over the question of the succession to the throne, which Alfonso had wanted to leave to his firstborn, Fernando de la Cerda, and, after Fernando's death in 1275, to Fernando's son, the *infante* Alfonso de la Cerda, rather than to Sancho.⁵⁴ The conflict with Sancho was a particularly painful one to Alfonso as he not only found himself betrayed by his closest kin but also politically outsmarted at the games of power, and ensnared by the very laws he had written to ensure peace and stability in his realm. It is notable, in fact, that the succession struggle at various points favored Sancho because the nobles resented Alfonso's use of laws to limit their privileges.⁵⁵ The laws of succession themselves appear to have been rewritten to override the King's desires and accord to the will of Sancho and the nobility, as expressed at the *Cortes* that took place at Burgos (1276) and Segovia (1278).⁵⁶ Sancho also proved to be a very shrewd political strategist, as he exploited the nobles animosity toward his father and made promises and concessions intended to gain allies and undermine Alfonso's authority. One of Sancho's key accomplishments in the fierce political *açedrex* he played against his father was the capture of

⁵⁰ “... la ciencia tan cultivada por el Rey Sabio en sus *Libros Astronómicos* aparece tambien aquí reflejada en este juego, cuya procedencia no se indica en el códice y que bien pudo ser invención del propio rey castellano” (García Morencos, 47).

⁵¹ As noted by García Morencos, “Como curiosa anomalía, cabe señalar que la figura del rey Alfonso aparece siempre joven en este códice, no en la madurez, ni en la ancianidad, que es cuando realmente se terminó este manuscrito” (22). On the iconography of political absolutism, see Domínguez Rodríguez (1985).

⁵² Golladay, 1038-42.

⁵³ Discussing the symbolic role of cockfights in Balinese society, Geertz noted the practice “... provides a metasocial commentary upon the whole matter of assorting human beings into fixed hierarchical ranks and then organizing the major part of collective existence around that assortment” (448).

⁵⁴ Golladay, 1038.

⁵⁵ Martínez, 12, 295-96; Orellana Calderón, xxiii. “... it was precisely his political and social activity at all levels, national and international, legal and legislative, linguistic, and even in terms of environmental protection, that would end up costing him not only the imperial crown, but also that of his own kingdom” (Martínez, 15). Martínez observes that the discontent of the nobility was an understandable reaction to the growing powers of the monarchy and its encroachment on the privileges of individuals (295). Orellana Calderón comments on the difficult character of Alfonso and his marital problems (xviii, xx); Martínez notes “Alfonso's haughty temperament and inability to accept defeat” (279).

⁵⁶ Orellana Calderón, xv-xvii; Martínez, 276ff.; O'Callaghan, 236-38.

Alfonso's queen.⁵⁷ Indeed, as the succession became problematic following Fernando's death, Alfonso's wife, Violante, fled from the King's side and returned to his court only at Sancho's urging, and then only to aggravate the rift between father and son.⁵⁸ She finally sided with the latter at the 1282 Cortes of Valladolid, conducted in Alfonso's absence and resulting in the effective deposition of Alfonso and the usurpation of his authority by Sancho.⁵⁹

In that context of fierce political struggle, the miniature on Folio 97v illustrating the game of *Tablas por Astronomía*, the last one in the manuscript, is an apt embodiment of the overlap of the historical, the ludic, and the cultural at Alfonso's court. Games like the *Escaques* and *Tablas por Astronomía*, appear to have been developed and practiced by Alfonso as part of efforts to come to grips with a very unwieldy historical and personal situation, much perhaps as someone facing trouble might feel tempted to consult an astrologer or some other such resource promising to bring a degree of clarity into an otherwise murky and problematic situation. Thus, the description of such games and the image of the monarch playing them, around 1283, the year of the completion of the book and just months away from his own death, yield significant insight into the troubled state of his heart and mind.⁶⁰ In that sense, the playful setting of Alfonso's Sun King engaged in battle against the bloody forces of Sancho/Mars and the powers of the other five planets, directed by other courtiers, is readable in ways that go beyond the cheerful picture of aristocrats amusing themselves at their favorite pastimes.

An alternative reading of the illustration on Folio 97v is possible in terms of the images themselves and the description of the elements of the games involving astronomy. In a way what we observe here is not a happy occasion involving friendly courtiers but a representation of the isolation of the King outnumbered by his enemies and, more importantly, of the darkness and despair rising in the heart of the father betrayed by a beloved son, the sadness of a ruler dethroned by his own offspring. The shining image of the youthful Sun, as Golden King and Emperor, could not possibly represent such a situation with any accuracy, or the state of mind and spirit of Alfonso at the end of his reign. Saturn, on the other hand, the mythological king ousted by his son, Jupiter, could certainly do the job:

SAturno es el primero que esta mas alto de todos & fizieronle a figura de omne uieio & magro que anda coruo & desnudo todo si no pannos menores & enbuelto en una manta negra sobre la cabeça & que es triste de cara & tiene la mano a la mexiella como omne

⁵⁷ The queen as a chess piece appears to have been in use in Europe since the eleventh or twelfth centuries (Yalom, xviii). Due to strong Arabic influence, however, the variety of chess played by Alfonso did not yet feature a queen but an *alferez* corresponding to the vizier of the Eastern forms of the game. The tension of Eastern and Western customs is seen in Alfonsine chess in the fact that the name of the piece underwent a gender change, from *alferez* to *alferza*, a feminine form of the word deemed incorrect but nevertheless adopted in Alfonso's work: "esta otro trebeio que es a semeiança del alfferez que tiene la senna de las sennales del Rey. & algunos omnes a que non saben el nombre; & llamanle alfferza" (Fol 3r). Golladay, 111-12, n. 175. The development of modern chess, and of the queen as the most powerful piece on the board, is first recorded in Luis de Lucena's *Arte de axedrez* (c. 1497) during the reign of Isabel I de Castilla: "The work is not only the first printed book on chess playing; it is also the earliest documentation of a radical alteration in the rules of the game ... this revolutionary change centers dramatically on the only female piece on the chessboard, the Queen" (Weissberger, 151).

⁵⁸ O'Callaghan, 244-51.

⁵⁹ Orellana Calderón, xxiii-xxiv. O'Callaghan, 260-61.

⁶⁰ In the final two games, Domínguez Rodríguez [2010-2011] observes "el mismo espíritu de despedida y de expresión final de su concepción del mundo parece desprenderse de estos dos juegos astronómicos" (158).

cuydadoso. (Fol. 95v)

Thus described as a broken and destitute old man, identified with the black game pieces, Saturn is played in this case by a courtier sitting directly opposite of Alfonso, just as Jupiter, with his green game pieces, is played by a courtier sitting exactly opposite to Sancho. Thus arranged in a chiasmus of alter egos, the players commanding the pieces of the Sun and Mars, Saturn and Jupiter replay, on the mythological and the game worlds, the drama of son overcoming and dethroning his own father, confining the latter, for all eternity, to the shades of Tartarus.

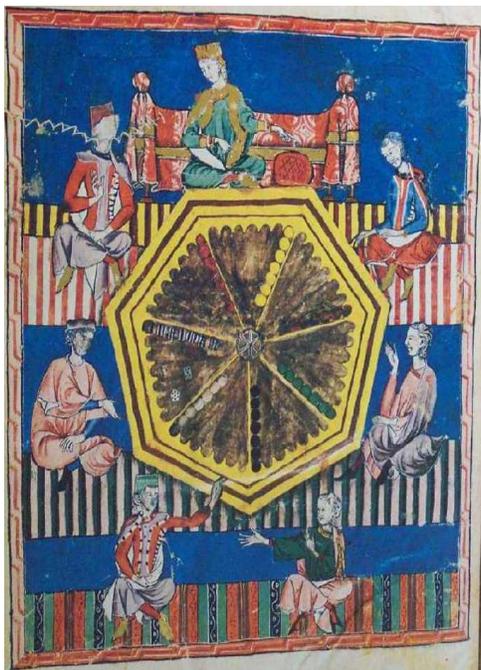


Figure 11. Game of *Tablas por Astronomía*. *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas*. Folio 97v. MS T.I.6, Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

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The period from about 1275 to 1283, corresponding to the composition and completion of the *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas*, was, for Alfonso, a very troubled time marked by foreign invasions, the death of his favorite son, the crumbling of his dream of becoming emperor, rebellion of the nobility, denial of his choice of heir, subversion of his legislative works, illness and economic troubles, abandonment by his wife, civil war, and the usurpation of his authority by his son Sancho.⁶¹ As the book came to completion in 1283, Alfonso fully expected his own

⁶¹ O'Callaghan, 234-69. While 1283 is unequivocally the time of the completion of the *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas*, 1275-1276 was, according to Orellana Calderón, the likely stage of its beginnings (xxxv). Sancho finally succeeded in deposing his father at the Cortes of Valladolid of 1282, which were summoned by Sancho and held, in Alfonso's absence, with the support of the queen Violante and the king's brother Manuel (xxiii-xxiv). Canettieri points to the 1260s as the period of the work's inception (8). Calvo (1987) suggests a period of peace corresponding to 1262-1264, "cuando el rey Alfonso se acomodó en Sevilla tras haber dominado con éxito la insurrección

death and undertook to writing and amending his will, fluctuating between condemnation and forgiveness of Sancho.⁶² Given the events of the last decade of his life, the book of games was for Alfonso an understandable flight into a realm of fantasy that offered some distraction to the embattled monarch but, on the other hand, also constituted an attempt to buttress his position and shed some light into the murkiness of his present and the secrets of an uncertain future.

Of a kind with his other legislative and political efforts, Alfonso's gaming had indeed a very serious side related to his attempts to fulfill his ambitions, and also to the emergence, in the High Middle Ages, of more impersonal, textualized and tabulated, forms of social and political control.⁶³ Revivals of ancient Roman tools of domination and also early sketches of the technologies of power later realized in the modern national states and their quest for global empire, the experiments in subjection that took place in medieval courts, such as that of Alfonso, offered more than just a taste of what the future had in store for Europeans and the peoples of the world destined to fall under their domination.⁶⁴ The very tools deployed in the pursuit of those goals, however, proved to have a double edge, as much subjecting others as reducing the master legislator and engineer of the game himself to the status of just another player, pawn and subject of the game and of the law.⁶⁵

Rather than answers to his desire for uncontested supremacy and victory over his enemies, a growing apparatus of games and laws, whether Alfonso knew it or not, could only entrap him, ever more firmly, within an increasingly complex matrix of rival interests. The clever modifications by which plain chess could be transformed into the daunting *Acedrex de las diez casas* were just a small indication of the possibilities of ever larger and infinitely vast checkered boards—*acedrex* of not just ten, but a hundred, a thousand and a million *casas*—Borgesian labyrinths exceeding all boundaries of human reason and imagination. Similarly for *tablas*, once the boards and the dice burst out of their modest square shapes and radiated into more complex polygonal and polyhedral forms, they allowed for not just two but four and seven and ever greater numbers of opponents to vie simultaneously—on inhumanly complicated *tableros* parceled out according to their ambitions—for control of the whole *Mundo* and even the

musulmana de Niebla" (128). Golladay believes the book could have been started as early as 1254, most likely between 1256 and 1275 (35).

⁶² Orellana Calderón, xxvi-xxvii; Martínez, 504 ff., 521 ff. O'Callaghan, 264-69.

⁶³ "... it is scarcely possible to deny that a new direction, 'un tournant dans l'histoire du droit,' was taken in the closing decades of the eleventh century, marking a clear historical transition in the development of law. ... a definitive espousal of written forms of law and a renunciation of previous approaches which depended extensively on the continual adaptation of oral traditions" (Landau, 113). Not just authority and the administration of justice, but also the sense of self and society, morality and reason, came to be understood in relation to texts and documents, at least since the eleventh century (Stock, 45, 113-14, 122, 132, 136).

⁶⁴ "By means of the law codes compiled under his direction, the idea of the state was implanted in the minds of his people, a major step toward the modern world ... Alfonso X presented the ideal of the state as a corporative or organic entity and developed the institutional means to achieve that goal" (O'Callaghan, 273).

⁶⁵ "... [in Jacobus de Cessolis' *Liber de ludo scachorum*] the chess allegory captures a different technology of power emerging in the late medieval world, a power organized less around overt force and more around coercion, exposure and shame. This form of power ... does not offer a system that makes its subjects any more free. Nor does it protect them from the violence and chaos of a tyranny ... Rather, it relies on the coercive abilities of the secular state, which in turn exists as a matrix of social forces and lacks any one person at the center"; "the chess allegory imagines its subjects to possess independent bodies in the form of pieces bound to the state by rules rather than biology. If the chess king advances, the pawns are not beholden to do the same" (Adams, 18-19, 20).

entire universe.

Lacking the advantages of hindsight, and of proper heuristic/theoretical tools of self and world-historical analysis, Alfonso could not have foreseen, around 1275-1276, when the writing of the book likely began, the personal and historical tragedies that were about to unfold, for him in particular and for the modern western world that the courtly ages inaugurated. From the privileged perspective of the inhabitants of the postmodern endgame, however, it would seem as if the outcomes were always predictable and, ironically, quite visible already in the games people were playing eight hundred years ago. The games were charming in many ways, symbolic images of a regulated society proud of its sophistication, beauty and rationality, its accomplishment in the overcoming of the ugliness of savagery and brute force. What the games could not make evident however was their own insidious replication and harboring, within the orderly realms of their rules and carefully defined actions, of the same desire to overcome and subject others that is the root of all uncivil and unruly social states. In games where opponents clash against one another, cutting down rivals and seeking to win it all, the harm done is real and the victories always pyrrhic and always bound to breed resentments and endless future conflicts.

In that respect, it is interesting to consider that many of the images in Alfonso's book of games include evidence of the unhappiness, distress, anger and even violence of at least some of the players.⁶⁶ The games in that sense take place within an artificial paradise where not all is well and where the chaos of hate seems always ready to erupt into violence that threatens the game itself and obliterates the beautiful arts that support it.⁶⁷ Evidence of that latent violence, images like that in the miniature of Folio 71v, at the end of the *Libro de los dados*, depict a scene of almost unearthly beauty, a garden setting with palm, fruit and ornamental trees on the right, a graceful building on the left, and two groups of men playing dice in their midst. All that beauty and seeming playfulness notwithstanding, the scene is marred by the anger of the players on the left, one of whom flashes an obscene hand gesture in the face of the man opposite to him across the game board (Figure 12).⁶⁸

The zero-sum games where the winner takes all, including those of global conquest and domination, are, on the other hand, not without their instructive lessons. It seems in fact that his

⁶⁶ Classen (2012) comments on the continuity in modern times of the idea, already current in the Middle Ages, of chess' association with dark forces capable of driving the individual to despair, and even self-destruction. He notes specifically Stefan Zweig's *Schachnovelle* (1942) [Chess Novella], its concern with the effects of fascism and technocratic totalitarianism on the individual, and its relations to Zweig's suicide. Classen describes the work as "a most powerful twentieth-century novella in which chess assumes central importance as an icon, a metaphor, and as a most complex symbol of how man can get caught in social, political, and ideological constraints and then faces the danger of breaking down in that system" (18). Jenny Adams discusses, in the context of Chaucerian fictions, "the use of chess as a metaphor for economic loss ... the games in the *Tale of Beryn* foreground the inequality brought about by playing, and chess itself becomes intertwined with the act of exchange and embedded in a larger, predominantly negative, discourse of gaming" (97).

⁶⁷ As Golladay has noted, Alfonso's *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas* bears signs of having been the object of deliberate and angry attempts to deface some of its images, particularly those that represented the treacherous Sancho who caused so much grief to his kingly father (1038).

⁶⁸ Golladay identifies the dice game as *Guirguesca* and the obscene sign as a "figa hand gesture" (983). Barros-Grela has noted similarly puzzling use of obscene images in the manuscripts of Alfonso's *Cantigas de Santa Maria*: "la presencia de elementos obscenos en la obra mariana de Alfonso X lleva a preguntarse el motivo de tan llamativa senda bidireccional. ... una multidimensionalidad a cuya comprensión no podemos llegar más que limitadamente" (204).

experiences should have suggested to Alfonso that, as much on a chessboard as in the arenas of real-life political struggle, the king is not an absolute ruler but just another game piece, and a rather weak and dependent one at that. Subject to attack and check at every turn of the way, the king is never safe, remaining always vulnerable to the ruses of enemies, failures of his own vigilance, miscalculations and errors of judgment, vagaries of fortune, as well as the mis-performance and even the betrayal of his own men and women. Relentless and unstoppable once in motion, the game, of chess or of political intrigue, is brutally demanding of the intellectual and physical resources and energies of its players. The chances of being the winner of a given encounter improve of course with arduous effort and vigilance. The chances of being always the winner are, however, slim to none, especially in the real-life scenarios where the human organism has to face its own physical, psychological and emotional limitations. Ultimately the limit is that which mortality imposes on any lifetime and the fact that the contender's seat can always be occupied by new and younger players, as well as by ever more sophisticated machines endowed with analytical, memory and heuristic powers dwarfing the talents of any single player. In that sense then, the game has a life and a clock of its own that, like history, operate on unimaginably large scales way beyond those of any human life, chasms of time unbridgeable to mortals, regardless of patience and cunning, power and rank, ambition or will to power.⁶⁹

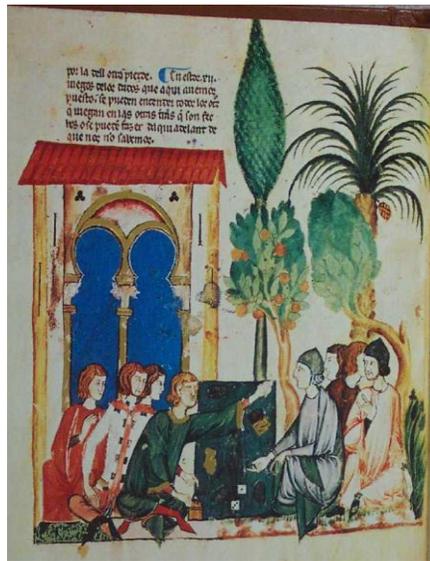


Figure 12. Game of Dice in Garden and Architectural Setting. *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas*. Folio 71v. MS T.I.6, Real Biblioteca del Monasterio de San Lorenzo de El Escorial.

⁶⁹ A game like chess, again, presents intriguing parallels to the mechanics and dynamics of history and the human power struggles that define it. Shenk speaks of chess as, "... a game that could not be contained by religious edict, nor ocean, nor war, nor language barrier. Not even the merciless accumulation of time, which eventually washes over and dissolves most everything, could so much as tug lightly at chess's ferocious momentum. 'It has, for numberless ages,' wrote Benjamin Franklin in 1786, 'been the amusement of all the civilized nations of Asia, the Persians, the Indians, and the Chinese. Europe has had it above 1000 years; the Spaniards have spread it over their part of America, and it begins lately to make its appearance in these States'" (4).

Albert Einstein was aware of the game's power to crush its own players: "chess holds its master in its own bonds ... shackling the mind and brain so that the inner freedom of the very strongest must suffer."⁷⁰ His gloomy assessment was part of an emerging understanding of the nature of competitive games that developed during the first half of the twentieth century, in connection to the historical experience of the world wars and the then new discipline of game theory.⁷¹ Toward the end of World War II and during the ensuing Cold War, work in the field of game theory began to support the idea that there was indeed something quite predictable, and frustratingly dissatisfying to the players, about the outcomes of a variety of "game" interactions, including non-cooperative and cooperative varieties—an endgame to the overall game playing, so to speak, always already implicit in the rules and choices faced by the players.⁷² So long as one faces opponents, even when they are also partly allies, rivals with similar goals and choices of strategies, the chosen moves and the resulting payoffs, over repeated instantiations of the conflict, are foreseeable and limited, determined by the game's structures and the efforts of the competitors, as each seeks his/her own gain. How limited the gains are is a function of the intensity of the competition, with the lower overall expected payoffs corresponding to the higher levels of competition and the greater rewards resulting from weak competition, more cooperative interactions, or, in the best of cases, the complete absence of competition—this latter case being of course purely theoretical, a utopian state where the concept of a game ceases to have any meaning. The idea that the highest possible payoff exists only outside and beyond the confines of the conditions imposed by the game suggests, however, that accepting to play the game is, in the first place, the mistake that binds the player to a predictable eventual defeat. Playing the game asserts only the game itself, i.e. the state of unending conflict in which the best possible outcomes are always disappointing, the certainty only of an eventual total loss.

The implications of game theory concerning arenas of conflict such as totalitarian and imperialist politics, world war, nuclear confrontations, and the stock market are, of course, even more serious than those that apply to the tragedy of an individual wasting his life and resources playing cards or betting on the home team. Whether Alfonso should have been able to derive those conclusions from his studies of games is perhaps debatable. We do know however that he did a significant amount of tinkering with the rules and devices of existing games and came up with some of his own. We also know that, at the end of his life, shortly after the completion of the *Libro de açedrex, dados e tablas*, he considered forgiving his rivals and giving up the struggle against political enemies, including his own ungrateful son Sancho, whose betrayal and schemes caused Alfonso immense bitterness, and likely contributed to the decline of the King's mental health and physical condition in the last decade of his life.⁷³

⁷⁰ Qtd. in Shenk, xvi.

⁷¹ Von Neumann and Morgenstern (1944).

⁷² "The notion of an *equilibrium point* is the basic ingredient in our theory. ... It turns out that the set of equilibrium points of a two-person zero-sum game is simply the set of all pairs of opposing 'good strategies.' ... a finite non-cooperative game always has at least one equilibrium point" (Nash [1951], 286). "We give two independent derivations of our solution of the two-person cooperative game. In the first, the cooperative game is reduced to a non-cooperative game. ... the players' steps of negotiation in the cooperative game become moves in the non-cooperative model. ... The second approach is by the axiomatic method. One states as axioms several properties that it would seem natural for the solution to have and then one discovers that the axioms actually determine the solution uniquely" (Nash [1953], 129).

⁷³ "Recent scholarship on Alfonso points to the importance of his health problems as a way to explain his

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As suggested by the cultural works and historical experience of Alfonso X, el Sabio, the unstable equilibrium and fragile harmony established by legislation, in both serious and playful competitive human interactions, put in evidence a key problem of the social and political organization of the courtly medieval kingdoms, and of the modern nation-states that have inherited their social and juridical structures, as well as their ambitions:

His code [of law] is vital ... to the legal life of the United States; 'civilized law began' with Alfonso's code 'in a considerable group of jurisdictions' here and can still be cited from Louisiana and Louisiana Purchase states to California and the Mexican War acquisitions.⁷⁴

Politics like the contemporary United States, where citizens understand their lives as defined by the "pursuit of happiness," have been influenced, indeed, not just by the Alfonsine laws but also the social ideologies and ludic methods of biopolitical control of medieval European courts like that of Alfonso. A postmodern nation where competitive games and entertainment take center stage and symbolically mediate all other aspects of life—social, affective, economic, and political—is indeed unthinkable without the precedent of the kingdom of gamers, and law-abiding citizens, envisioned in Alfonso's work.

The king who invites his subjects to play the games of power, however, is, in a sense, also inciting his own "checkmate" (< Middle Persian *shāh māt* [the king is dead])⁷⁵—his own and his nation's eventual defeat at the hands of rivals with ambitions equal to or larger than his own. Laws and games, however complex and orderly, constitute artificial devices that act on the level of external appearances, encouraging procedurally correct visible behaviors and law-abiding gestures, but leaving untouched the darkness at the core of the subject, as well as the similarly dark purposes of the game and of the state. Thus, for all the sophistication of his cultural and legislative endeavors, Alfonso bet on and chose to play a cruel and inhuman game of perpetual antagonisms—black against white, red against yellow, green against violet, the father against his golden-haired but black-hearted son, an enemy, not unlike the Arthurian Mordred, of his own begetting and made in his own image. Ultimately, what the games he studied should have taught Alfonso, and to us by inheritance, is the fact that, in the quest for absolute kingship, empire and dominion of the world, the opponents are ruthless and endless, the board infinitely

erratic and even callous behavior in decisions made in the last two decades of his life. As possible causes of his excesses, scholars cite a list of physical ailments he suffered and which might have caused his mental imbalance" (Martínez, 215, 277 ff.). In his testament of November 8, 1283, where he disinherits Sancho, Alfonso hints at the effects on his health of his son's treachery: "lo que fizo contra nós ... tomando nuestras heredades a muy quebrantamiento de nós": qtd. from *Memorial Histórico Español* II, Madrid (1851) in Orellana Calderón, xxv-xxvi. By early 1284 however, Alfonso had changed his mind, modifying his previous testament, apparently forgiving his enemies and going so far as to write to the pope, Martin IV, asking for forgiveness for Sancho (*Crónica de Alfonso X*) (Orellana Calderón, xxvi).

⁷⁴ Burns, 1, quoting from Charles Sumner Lobingier's introduction to *Las Siete Partidas* (1931).

⁷⁵ "EL Rey pusieron que nol pudiessen tomar. mas quel pudiessen dar xaque porquel pudiessen fazer salir de aquel logar do souiesse; como desonrrado. E sil arenconassen de guisa que no ouiesse casa do yr; pusieronle nombre *xamat* que es tanto como muerto" (Fol. 3v). Forbes suggests the original Old Persian term is *shāh mānd*, "the Prince is reduced to the last extremity" (70).

complex, the game itself impossible to win.

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