



A FEMINIST READING OF *THE QUEEN'S GAMBIT*: ABSTRACT REASONING AND THE PUBLIC SPHERE

MÓNICA FERNÁNDEZ JIMÉNEZ
UNIVERSIDAD DE VALLADOLID

It has been reported that after the worldwide success of Netflix's miniseries *The Queen's Gambit*, created by Scott Frank and Allan Scott in 2020 and based on a homonymous novel written by Walter Stone Tevis, there has been a sharp rise in the sale of chess boards (Fazio 2020). To make things interesting, it is among women where there has been a more increased success in the sales (Jankowicz 2020).¹ This fact evidences the power of female referents in fiction as agents that make change possible, since, as the series insists on showing, chess competitions have historically been masculine spaces.

This successful breakage of stereotypes in fiction is not only relevant because of its consequent drift towards social transformation, but also because it rightfully addresses the epistemological principles by which one tends to associate chess with male innate ability. Chess is considered one of the most difficult games ever invented; unlike draughts, it involves strategy, anticipation, and speculation. As such, the predominance of the male participation in this game equals the visible gendered composition of certain academic careers. While degrees on arts or education have their classes crowded by women of different backgrounds, mathematics, engineering or architecture faculties are traditionally masculine spaces (Barberá, Candela and Ramos 2008, 276). These facts have derived into assumptions about the existence of clearly differentiated male or female brains that make their porters good or bad at certain

¹ Leon Watson, the runner of London's Battersea Chess Club which has moved its activities online, has reported the growing enthusiasm of women for such activities, claiming that the club has "probably had more inquiries from women in the last couple of weeks [straight after the release of *The Queen's Gambit*] than we have had in the last five years" (Jankowicz 2020).



disciplines² (Correll 2004, 94; Arango Gaviria 2006, 131). Research has nevertheless demonstrated that there is a prejudiced social discouragement primarily based on the contexts of the family and the school by which girls are directed towards career paths that involve caretaking or imaginative activities (Barberá, Candela and Ramos 2008, 276; Correll 2004, 94).

Genevieve Lloyd's ground-breaking book *Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy* (1984) situates the origin of these stereotypes in Enlightened Western Philosophy. Studying the effects of the imposition of colonial epistemology on indigenous American societies, Peruvian sociologist Aníbal Quijano explains why abstract reasoning occupies such a central role in the Western worldview. According to him, it all began with Christian tradition, which instituted the separation between the body and the soul—a historic separation present in most societies addressing the coexistence of body and non-body as part of human nature (2000, 554). With the Enlightened secularisation of thought—which Quijano has repeatedly situated throughout his oeuvre as the epistemological building blocks of the modern world-system—soul became replaced by reason (2000, 555). The new rational *subject* of European Enlightenment was able to reach complete knowledge through the use of reason; the rest—the body, nature...—were only *objects* of that knowledge (ibid). Because of the "objectification of the body as nature" Quijano contends that "races" could be scientifically theorised upon (2000, 555). This is the way non-Europeans became inferior, as the rational subject was only Western: "[f]rom the Eurocentric perspective, certain races are condemned as inferior for not being rational subjects. They are objects of study, consequently bodies closer to nature. In a sense, they became dominable and exploitable" (ibid). The indigenous populations of the Americas thus became savage Others and objects of knowledge, just like nature.

Quijano adds that "[t]his new and radical dualism affected not only the racial relations of domination, but the older sexual relations of domination" (2000, 555). The much endorsed—even by ecofeminists (Garrard 2004, 24)—innate relation between women and nature drinks out of this tradition: "[w]omen [...] remained stereotyped together with the rest of the bodies" (Quijano 2000, 555). Genevieve Lloyd reviews the Enlightened tradition—with a special emphasis on the writings of Kant, Rousseau, Hegel, and Schopenhauer—that universalised the female inability for abstract reasoning in terms of the two sexes being complementary (1984, 76). "In matrimonial

² Even the female player Koneru Humpy, 2002 Grandmaster, shares this belief: "It's proven [...] You have to accept it" (quoted in Khandekar 2020). World Chess Champion Garry Kasparov replicated the idea alluding to women's *nature* while Judit Polgar took another perspective and explained "that society and even parents can undermine their daughters' efforts to improve [at chess]" (Loeb McClain 2020).



life the united pair should” Kant contended “constitute a single moral person, which is animated and governed by the *understanding* of the man and the *taste* of the wife” (emphasis mine; 1763, 95). Through Lloyd’s exploration of these canonical texts, we reach a problem widely present in *The Queen’s Gambit*: women’s removal from the public sphere. These Enlightened authors did not assess the female inability for reason as something necessarily negative: it was related to the sensibility so necessary to lead a successful familiar life (1984, 76). This line of thought, however, hid the female “exclusion from male attainment” (ibid). One of these detours was theorised by Rousseau, who thought that passion and maternal feelings could “threaten the proper functioning of the State” (Lloyd 1984, 77). Thus, the two complementary beings also became respectively situated within private and public spaces (ibid). Perhaps non-coincidentally, in *The Queen’s Gambit* the domination of chess technique goes accompanied with the protagonist’s—and her mother’s—gradual conquering of the public sphere.

The Queen’s Gambit successfully addresses the way these epistemological principles are manifested in everyday life. The series revolves around the growing up process of Beth Harmon (Isla Johnston and Anya Taylor-Joy), an orphaned young girl who at the age of thirteen is adopted by Mr. and Mrs. Wheatley (Patrick Kennedy and Marielle Heller). Soon in her life, while she is at the orphanage, Beth demonstrates a striking ability for playing chess, to which she is introduced by an old janitor—Mr. Shaibel (Bill Camp)—who keeps a board in the institution’s basement. However, after leaving the orphanage Beth encounters many difficulties when she tries to pursue her passion. In the second episode, every time Beth suggests that she wants to play chess Mrs. Wheatley disapproves, perhaps because she does not find it a very feminine activity, following Kant’s idea on the “lack of abstract thought” in females (Lloyd 1984, 76). In fact, when Beth suggests that she could find a job, Mrs. Wheatley seems to approve of the idea believing that Beth wants the money to buy some clothes, but changes her mind when Beth claims that the reason is entering a tournament.



Figure 1 Mrs. Wheatley playing the piano at her house, Episode 2.

An example of a feminine activity that the series might portray is piano playing, at which Mrs. Wheatley is very good. However, as we can see throughout the episodes, this activity for her is relegated to the house's confines and not directed towards playing in an orchestra as she claims used to be her dream. In fact, Mrs. Wheatley barely leaves the house while her husband has the mobile job *par excellence*: he is a

salesman. It is this disconnection between both of them in terms of space which ends with the couple's separation when Mr. Wheatley becomes "indefinitely detained in the Southwest," which is suggested is a euphemism for his leaving his wife. Every time the separation is too long Mrs. Wheatley seems to leave the house less and less, partly because of his taking the car with him rather than renting one on the grounds that she is "a terrible driver anyways," and spends long periods of time inside her bed sedated by pills and alcohol.

Mrs. Wheatley suffers the classic 1950s "problem that has no name" (1974: 11) which Betty Friedan so insightfully theorised in *The Feminine Mystique* (1963). Friedan associates the neurosis that was becoming commonplace among 1950s American women in suburban neighbourhoods with the era's "unquestioned gospel that women could identify with nothing beyond the home—not politics, not art, not science, not events large or small, war or peace, in the United States or the world, unless it could be approached through female experience as a wife or mother or translated into domestic detail" (1974: 4). Mrs. Wheatley is depressed and Mr. Wheatley—who, furthermore, psychologically abuses her—is the one who decides that adopting a child, again associating motherhood with female instinct and, hence, happiness, would be beneficial for her. Interestingly, what cures her condition is precisely related to Beth, but not solely to taking care of her: the solution lies in how Beth's eventual chess success allows Mrs. Wheatley to leave the house.



Mrs. Wheatley playing the piano in the Mexico tournament, Episode 4

The series intelligently couples each of Beth’s ventures out of the house with chess-related activities (therefore, those associated with reason and, as per Lloyd, public life), even when these activities precede actual chess-playing. This last example is the case of the first time Beth leaves the house on her own after Mrs. Wheatley asks her to go buy some cigarettes and, in the shop, steals a chess magazine. On top of this, Mrs. Wheatley also manages to leave the house and enter public life through Beth’s chess success, thus overcoming her depression. Mother and daughter travel throughout the country on chess tournaments whereby Mrs. Wheatley’s social life radically changes: from being completely isolated she engages in conversation with people from many backgrounds and even sporadically reconnects with an old lover. This last event happens in Mexico, where we are also witnesses to Mrs. Wheatley playing piano for the first time in front of an audience who cherishes and applauds her skill. Mrs. Wheatley, confronting Friedan’s previous quote, also acquires hobbies other than those related to housewifery: she becomes interested in chess and follows Beth’s gradual success to the point that she is able to discuss most specificities on how tournaments work.

In conclusion, Mrs. Wheatley’s overcoming of Friedan’s “problem that has no name”—“a strange stirring, a sense of dissatisfaction, a yearning [that] [e]ach suburban wife struggled with [...] alone” (1974, 11)—occurs at the moment when Beth demonstrates that women have the ability of abstract reasoning. The fact that female emancipation in this series comes when one character manages to become a chess champion successfully addresses the epistemological principles which Lloyd contends were pillars for relegating women to the home through apparently logical arguments. Feminists like Bolshevik Alexandra Kollontai have argued that this sought-for emancipation would come through work (Evans Clements 2017, 327). However, it is



not only work that is addressed but the abilities apparently necessary to have a dignified one. It is not a coincidence that the jobs that are more associated with caretaking and normally carried out by women (Carrasco, Borderías and Torns 2011, 72) are less valued in society (Correll 2004, 94), worse paid (Steinberg 1990, 452; Carrasco, Borderías and Torns 2011, 72), and recommended to women by their families and school teachers (Correll 2004, 95). Encouraging caretaking occupations for women on the sole reason that they are naturally good at them derives from the same logic that causes current rates on job abandonment by females or the reduction of their working hours to care for children or dependent persons (that is, for carrying out unpaid work) (Alcañiz and Monteiro 2016, 8). Though not as obvious at first sight, *The Queen's Gambit* addresses what is behind this form of gender inequality by associating the mastering of abstract thought to the abandonment of the house and the taking over of the public space.

BIBLIOGRAPHIC REFERENCES

- Alcañiz, Mercedes and Rosa Monteiro. 2016. "She-Austerity. Women's Precariousness and Labor Inequality in Southern Europe." *Convergencia: Revista de Ciencias Sociales*, (72): 1-28.
- Arango Gaviria, Luz Gabriela. 2006. "Género e Ingeniería: La Identidad Profesional en Discusión." *Revista Colombiana de Antropología*, 42: 129-156.
- Barberá, Ester, Carlos Candela and Amparo Ramos. 2008. "Elección de Carrera, Desarrollo Profesional y Estereotipos de Género." *Revista de Psicología Social*, 23(2): 275-285.
- Carrasco, Cristina, Cristina Borderías and Teresa Torns. 2011. "Introducción. El Trabajo de Cuidados: Antecedentes Históricos y Debates Actuales." In *El Trabajo de Cuidados: Historia, Teoría y Políticas*, edited by Cristina Carrasco, Cristina Borderías y Teresa Torns: 13-96. Madrid: Los Libros de la Catarata.
- Correll, Shelley J. 2004. "Constraints into Preferences: Gender, Status, and Emerging Career Aspirations." *American Sociological Review*, 69: 93-113.
- Evans Clements, Barbara. 2017. "Emancipation through Communism: The Ideology of A. M. Kollontai." *Slavic Review*, 32(2): 323-338.
- Fazio, Marie. 2020. "'The Queen's Gambit' Sends Chess Set Sales Soaring." *The New York Times*. Accessed December 19, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/23/arts/television/chess-set-board-sales.html>.



- Friedan, Betty. 1974. *The Feminine Mystique*. New York: Dell Publishing.
- Garrard, Greg. 2004. *Ecocriticism*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Jankowicz, Mia. 2020. "Interest in Chess has Exploded since Netflix's 'The Queen's Gambit' Aired and the Sport's Leaders are very very Excited." *Insider*. Accessed December 19, 2020. <https://www.insider.com/netflix-queens-gambit-spike-interest-chess-2020-11>.
- Kant, Immanuel. 1763. *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime and Other Writings*. Translated by John T. Goldthwait. Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press.
- Lloyd, Genevieve. 1985. *Man of Reason: "Male" and "Female" in Western Philosophy*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Khandekar, Omkar. 2020. "Why Women Lose at Chess". *Mint*. Accessed January 8, 2020. <https://www.livemint.com/mint-lounge/features/why-women-lose-at-chess-11601626319872.html>.
- Loeb McClain, Dylan. 2020. "How 'The Queen's Gambit' Started a New Debate about Sexism in Chess". *The New York Times*. Accessed January 8, 2020. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/11/10/arts/television/queens-gambit-women-chess.html>.
- Quijano, Aníbal. 2000. "Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America." *Neplanta*, 1(3): 533-580.
- Steinberg, Ronnie J. 1990. "Social Construction of Skill: Gender, Power and Comparable Worth." *Work and Occupations*, 17(4): 379-398.

SUGGESTED CITATION: Fernández Jiménez, Mónica. 2021. "A Feminist Reading of *The Queen's Gambit*: Abstract Reasoning and the Public Sphere." *PopMeC Research Blog*. Published January 22.