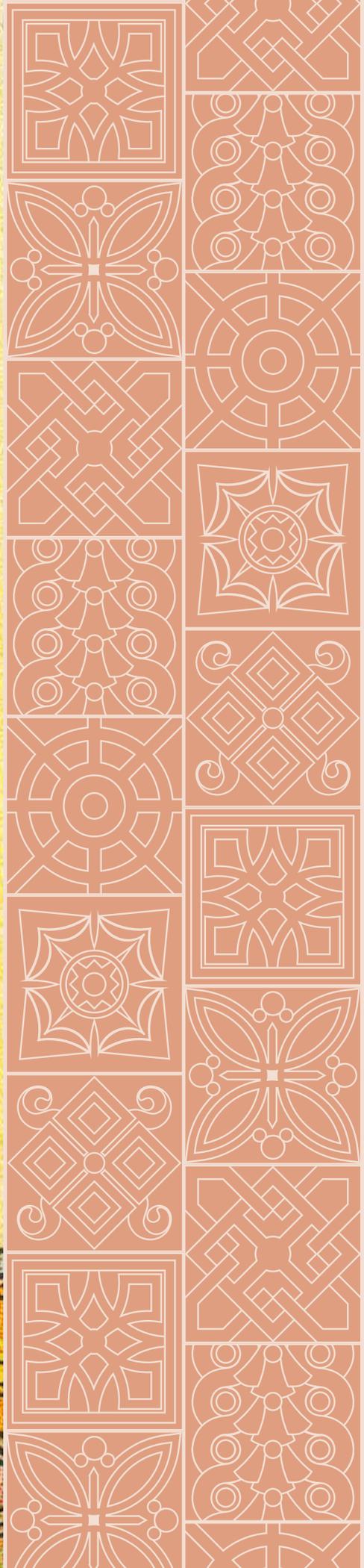
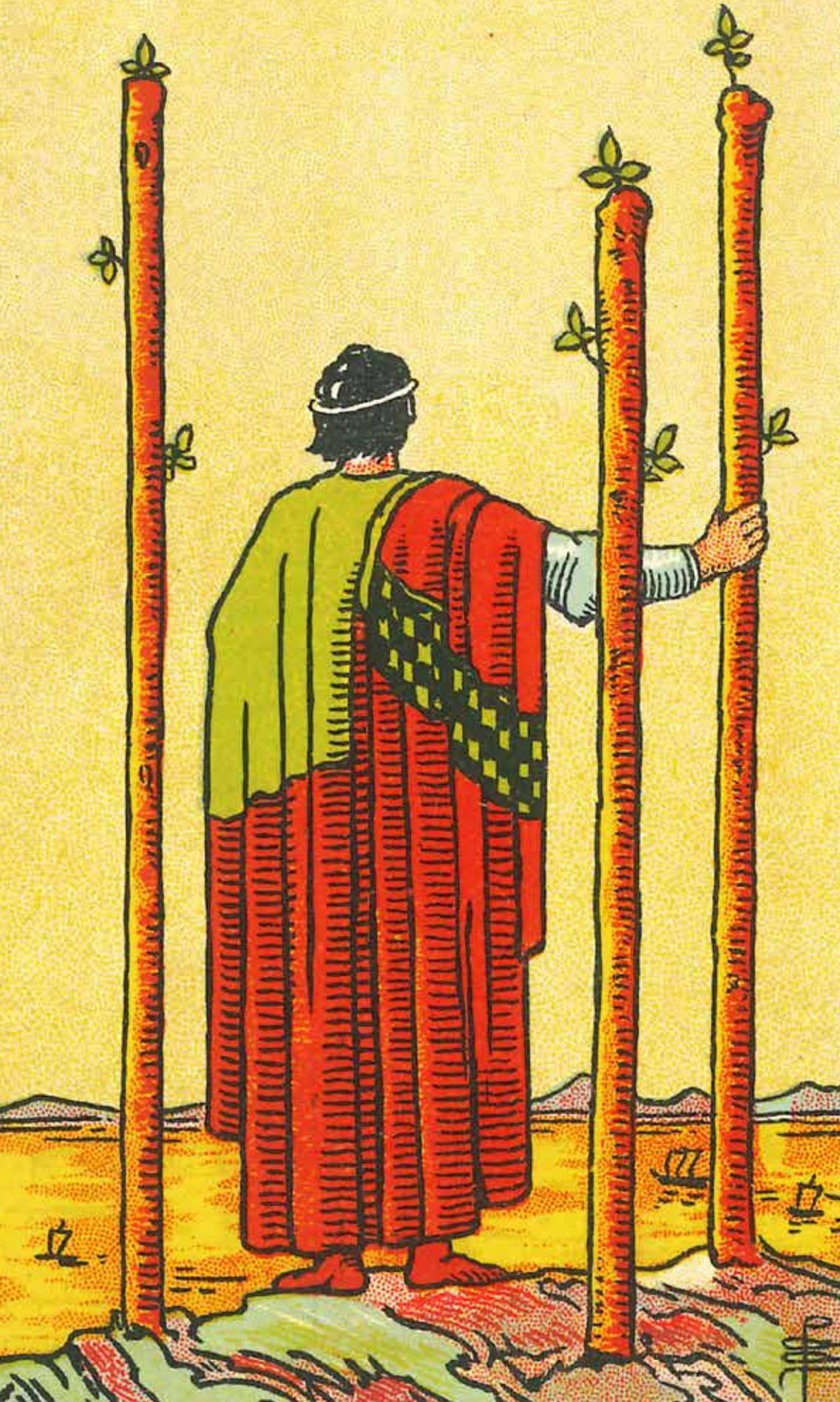


# Shogi

A GAME OF CHESS



Saint Louis born poet and playwright T. S. Eliot left a profound legacy. In 2023, the WCHOF celebrates his life through the lens of chess. Eliot played chess with his father, and the game is featured in his poem *The Waste Land*. Curated by Dr. Frances Dickey, *T. S. Eliot: A Game of Chess* explores how he wove reflections on love and loss from his life into a poem that became a landmark of Western literature. The exhibition features loans from numerous local institutions, including the Julian Edison Department of Special Collections at Washington University; the Kristine Kay Hasse Memorial Library, Concordia Seminary St. Louis; the National Building Arts Center; and the St. Louis Mercantile Library at UMSL. Collectors Tom Gallegos and Luann Woneis loaned artifacts to the exhibition, which also includes a new donation from David DeLucia. These artifacts include rare books, tarot cards, and letters related to Eliot's mother and the Hydraulic Press Brick Company, which provide insight into the sources that inspired the poet as well as his early life in Saint Louis. We hope visitors will enjoy this exhibition and be inspired to learn more about his remarkable writings.

*Emily Allred, curator, World Chess Hall of Fame*



Photographer unknown, Henry Ware Eliot Sr. Playing Chess, Date unknown, Courtesy of the National Building Arts Center



T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land* has held up a mirror to its readers for a hundred years. With its dark portrayal of modern life, fragmented voices, and challenging literary allusions, the poem seems to warn of the collapse of Western civilization. Yet beneath this intimidating surface, it is also a personal poem shaped by Eliot's own experiences and interests. One way Eliot wove his life into *The Waste Land* was through the theme of chess, as announced in the title of Part II: "A Game of Chess."

# St. Louis Royalty

Henry Ware Eliot, Sr., the poet's father, was a captain of industry in Saint Louis—and an avid chess player, as seen in the photo from the archives of the Hydraulic Press Brick Company. He began working as the company's payroll master in 1874 and advanced to President after thirty years. Supplying an extra dense, strong brick in a region with few other options for building materials, Hydraulic grew to be one of the largest brick companies in the Midwest. Even after retirement in 1908, Henry Ware stayed in the game as Chairman of the Board. His father, Rev. William Greenleaf Eliot, had settled in Saint Louis in 1834 as a Unitarian missionary and became a leading citizen of the city, founding Washington University and helping to establish the Saint Louis Art Museum, the public school system, and other institutions. Though the wealth of the Eliot family was modest by Gilded Age standards, as builders of the city, they could be considered Saint Louis royalty.

Growing up in the shadow of his grandfather's house, Thomas Stearns Eliot felt the honor of his family's achievements and the burden of their expectations. A precocious child, he enjoyed the vibrant musical culture of his neighborhood, next door to Uhrig's Cave, an outdoor theater on Locust Street, with ragtime tunes always in the air. He read voraciously and had a mischievous sense of humor. Yet a shadow fell on him as he entered adolescence, as he wrote in "Animula":

The heavy burden of the growing soul  
Perplexes and offends more, day by day...  
With the imperatives of 'is and seems'  
And may and may not, desire and control.

Perhaps it was to escape these imperatives that the Eliots' youngest child did not return to Saint Louis after 1905, when his parents sent him away to school in Massachusetts. He attended Harvard University for college and graduate school, and in 1914 he traveled to England to complete his doctorate in philosophy.



Eliot did not intend to settle in England for life, but World War I broke out in 1914, making transatlantic travel dangerous. Then, he met a young woman, Vivien Haigh Wood, whom he quickly wed in 1915. She “danced all the modern dances” (“Cousin Nancy”), and marrying her gave him an excuse to stay in London, the center of the literary world. He turned to teaching school, but what he made was not enough to live on, let alone cover his wife’s medical bills (he did not yet know about her substance abuse problems). He had to ask his father to pay his rent. In letters that spoke hopefully about Vivien’s recovery and his own prospects for advancement, Eliot also played correspondence chess with his father. But his parents understood without being told that his marriage was not a happy match. Eliot later said that his father “died still believing, I am sure, that I had made a complete mess of my life—which from his point of view, and possibly quite rightly, I had done. I cannot forget him sitting in the railway station before my last departure, looking completely broken.” Henry Ware Eliot unexpectedly died in January 1919 without seeing his son again.



# The King My Father's Death

Despite his poetic ambitions, Eliot did not feel that he measured up to the family standard of greatness. Instead, he found himself bound in an incompatible union, working days in the basement of Lloyds Bank and nights writing book reviews to make ends meet. Every morning he crossed London Bridge with a crowd of half-alive commuters who reminded him of the souls in Dante's limbo and arrived at his office (if he was lucky) just as the bell of St. Mary Woolnoth rang out "With a dead sound on the final stroke of nine." This church across the street from Lloyds served as the entrance for an Underground station; passengers descended through the former crypt where dead parishioners had once been laid to rest. It was just one more reminder of his loss and grief. He said little about his father but sank into what he called "aboulie" or lack of will—probably depression.

During 1920 and 1921 Eliot gradually put together a poem imagining modern London as a dry, "wasted" land ruled by a wounded Fisher King. He drew this story from the Arthurian romances he had loved to read as a child and from modern retellings of the ancient quest narrative, especially Richard Wagner's opera *Parsifal*, James Frazer's anthropological work *The Golden Bough*, and Jessie Weston's folklore study *From Ritual to Romance*. In these stories, a brave quester must undergo trials in order to renew the ailing land, either healing the king or becoming king himself. With a twist, *Parsifal* features three generations: Titurel, "the noble father, slain by his son's misdeed"; his son Amfortas, who suffers a grievous, unhealed wound in his side, symbolizing his sin; and the innocent hero Parsifal who must retrieve a holy spear that allows Amfortas to die in peace. The plot of this opera must have reso-



nated with Eliot, who believed he had ruined his life and that his own failures contributed to his father's death.

Eliot also wove in references to other stories about dead kings and their sons. In Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the shipwrecked Prince Ferdinand disconsolately mourns his father, whom he believes drowned: "Sitting on a bank, / Weeping again the king my father's wreck..." In his poem, which he eventually called *The Waste Land*, Eliot combined Shakespeare's words with his memories of the brickyards and other industrial spaces of Saint Louis over which his father had reigned:

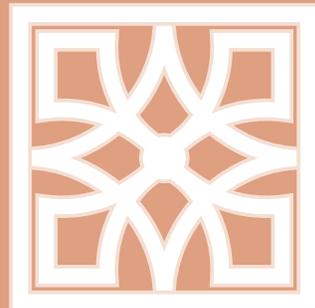
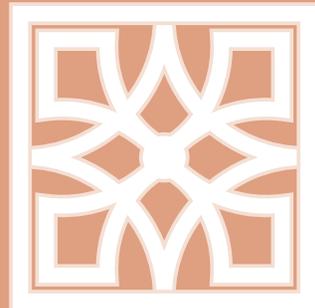
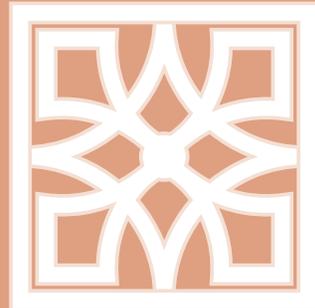
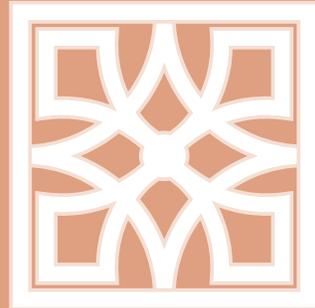
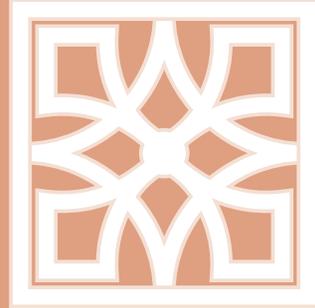
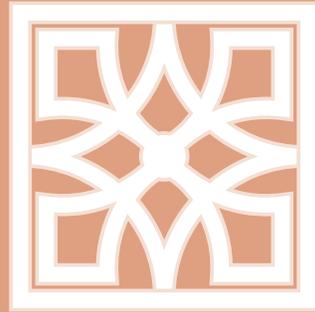
While I was fishing in the dull canal  
On a winter evening round behind the gashouse  
Musing upon the king my brother's wreck  
And on the king my father's death before him.

The "gashouse" was a relic of the coal gas industry that converted solid coal to a gas used for lighting. Gasworks discharged toxic residues into nearby bodies of water—hence the "dull canal." By the early 1900s, coal gas had become obsolete, replaced by electricity, but the industry's distinctive holding tanks and its pollution remained. There were many gasworks in Saint Louis, including near Hydraulic brickyards, which produced their own pollution in the form of coal smoke.

Just as the wounded Fisher King represents an ailing land, Eliot's memories of "the king my father" evoke the image of sickened—"wasted"—nature at the heart of the city. His feelings about his father were complex. But the grief was real. Suffering a nervous breakdown in 1921, Eliot sought the care of a psychologist in Lausanne, by Lake Geneva, or "Lac Leman." Here he finally allowed himself to grieve, and he swiftly completed his poem. "By the waters of Leman I sat down and wept," he wrote above the "dull canal" passage.

*The Waste Land* is an elegy, or poem of mourning, in addition to a quest narrative. With a long history going back to ancient Greek sources, the elegy reflects traditional funeral rites such as the offering of flowers and a procession of mourners. Eliot's poem has five parts. Part I: "The Burial of the Dead," opens with flowers:

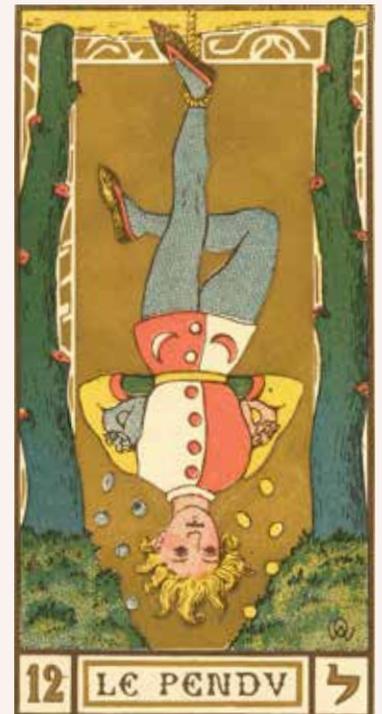
April is the cruellest month, breeding  
Lilacs out of the dead land...



After following a crowd over London Bridge, it concludes with a conversation about burial:

That corpse you planted last year in your garden,  
Has it begun to sprout?

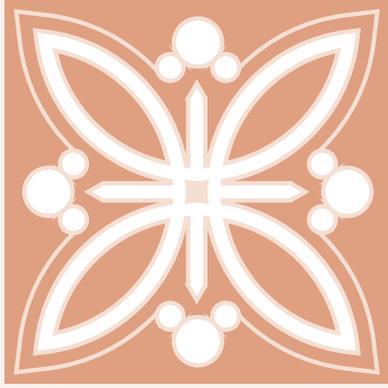
Water, suggesting both tears and life-giving rain, plays a central role in elegies. The poet passes through arid landscapes where “The dead tree gives no shelter...and the dry stone no sound of water;” he crosses the River Thames, he hears thunder “bringing rain” although no rain falls, and the fortune-teller Madame Sosostriis warns him to “Fear death by water.” Part IV: “Death by Water,” memorializes “Phlebas the Phoenician, a fortnight dead,” a drowned businessman who has now forgotten “the profit and loss” but was once (the poet tells us) “handsome and tall as you.” Eliot probably had two people in mind for the figure of Phlebas: Jean Verdenal, his roommate for a year in Paris, who died in the naval battle of Gallipoli in World War I, and his father, who also “died by water” in another sense: beside the Mississippi River. In *The Waste Land* Eliot mourns the cataclysmic fatalities of the recently concluded war, 20 million all told; he mourns his father, and himself. With his likeness to his father, he recognizes his own mortality and the transience of human accomplishments. Yet, to express all this is also a major achievement that remains after the poet’s death. “Those are pearls that were his eyes,” sings Ariel in *The Tempest*, referring to Prince Ferdinand’s father. So Eliot’s poem, too, transforms grief into pearls.





# We Shall Play a Game of Chess

The death of the King is one strand of the chess theme in *The Waste Land*. In Part II: “A Game of Chess,” Eliot also brings chess into his poem as a metaphor for marriage and sexual intrigue. As a book reviewer and literary critic, he read widely in Renaissance drama, including Thomas Middleton’s *A Game at Chesse*. First performed in 1624, the play represents political conflict between England and Spain as a chess match. The chess allegory allowed Middleton to make suggestions about King James I that would not have otherwise passed the censor. The stage is a chess board, the characters are black and white chess pieces, and when they die, they go to “the bag” where they continue to torment each other. Characters may capture each



other by seduction as well as murder, and the Black Queen's Pawn sexually entraps the White Queen's Pawn through the use of a "magical mirror." Middleton's use of allegory may have contributed to Eliot's strategy for concealing his personal story with elaborate symbolism. The "glass/Held up by standards wrought with fruited vines" that opens "A Game of Chess" may owe something to Middleton's mirror. Eliot also evokes Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting *Lady Lilith* (1872), showing a woman at her dressing table, brushing her auburn hair. Rossetti wrote that Lilith "Draws men to watch the bright web she can weave" and captures their hearts with "one strangling golden hair." The claustrophobia of Lilith's dressing room and the airless hell of Middleton's "bag" contribute to the atmosphere of confinement in "A Game of Chess," which Eliot originally called "In the Cage," the title of a short story by Henry James. Together the literary allusions suggest a loveless relationship in which both partners feel trapped and watch each other warily for the next move.

Behind this dense texture of literary sources, Eliot's personal misery lay in plain sight for those who knew him. "Wonderful," wrote Vivien alongside the words of the neurotic wife ("My nerves are bad tonight") and the thoughts of her sullen husband ("I think we are in rats' alley/Where the dead men lost their bones"); "photography," added his friend and editor Ezra Pound. Eliot's confidants, including Virginia Woolf, recognized his depiction of a wife who tormented him with her demands while suffering from his emotionless silence. The Eliots' dysfunction was an open secret. In 1919, along with his father's death, T. S. probably learned of Vivien's infidelity with his own mentor, the philosopher Bertrand Russell. Russell made advances to Vivien within weeks of her marriage, and the three of them shared lodgings on several occasions. The sexual intrigue was up to the level of Jacobean drama—or a Dostoevsky novel, as Eliot commented to his brother. In another play by Middleton, *Women Beware Women*,

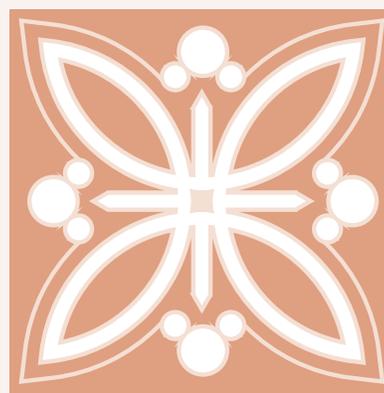


a young bride named Bianca is seduced by a powerful older man a few weeks after her marriage. The seduction takes place during a chess game used to distract Bianca's mother-in-law, who is supposed to be protecting her. After this, the newlyweds' relationship quickly degenerates into bitter point scoring. The chess game is both a plot stratagem and a foreshadowing of the intrigues by which characters get the best of each other, ending in a scene of bloodthirsty revenge. Middleton's vision resonated with Eliot, whose home life had come to resemble the formalized conflict of a chess game.

The most explicit reference to chess in *The Waste Land* appears at the end of the conversation in Part II, in answer to the husband's silent question: "What shall we ever do?"

The hot water at ten.  
 And if it rains, a closed car at four.  
 And we shall play a game of chess  
 Pressing lidless eyes and waiting for a knock upon the door.

Eliot wrote and then deleted an additional line after the word "chess": "The ivory men make company between us," suggesting that chess has become a substitute for intimacy within the couple's marriage. As in *Women Beware Women*, while characters play chess to kill time, the game symbolizes their sexual politics. Romance no longer interests this couple; they cannot engage directly with each other, only through the mediation of chessmen or, perhaps, another man who "makes company between us." Some scholars guess that Vivien asked Eliot to cut this line because it alludes to her infidelity. In this impasse, time passes incredibly slowly. You can feel the hostile silence between these two miserable people.



# Queens & Pawns

Eliot deploys the chess metaphor more subtly across “A Game of Chess” through references to royal characters in Shakespeare’s plays. The section opens with a parody of *Antony and Cleopatra*, in which a dazzled Roman describes the Egyptian queen floating in state down the Nile River:

The barge she sat in, like a burnish’d throne,  
Burned on the water...

In Eliot’s poem, by contrast, a woman is seated at her dressing table making herself up:

The Chair she sat in, like a burnished throne,  
Glowed on the marble...

Nature enhances Cleopatra’s splendor, but in Eliot’s indoor scene, all pleasures are artificial. While “pretty dimpled boys, like smiling Cupids” fan the Egyptian queen, a lifeless “golden Cupidon” holds up the dressing table mirror in Eliot’s poem. His modern woman lacks Cleopatra’s magnetic natural beauty, wielding power only through her biting words:

...her hair

Spread out in fiery points  
Clawed into words, then would be savagely still.





15

So Eliot pieces together his “Shakesperian Rag” with allusions to *Antony and Cleopatra*, *The Tempest*, and *Hamlet*, recalling Gene Buck and Herman Rudy’s tin pan alley song and the ragtime tunes of his Saint Louis childhood:

O O O O that Shakesperian Rag  
It’s so elegant  
So intelligent

“A Game of Chess” then looks to the pawns, characters at the other end of the social spectrum, gossiping in a London pub as last call for drinks goes out:

When Lil’s husband got demobbed, I said—  
I didn’t mince my words, I said to her myself,  
HURRY UP PLEASE ITS TIME

Just as the bored husband and wife eye each other warily from opposite sides of the chess board, this working-class Cockney speaker is engaged in her own power play. Men were a scarce commodity in postwar England, and all’s fair in love and war, the woman tells Lil:

He’s been in the army four years, he wants a good time,  
And if you don’t give it him, there’s others will, I said.  
Oh is there, she said. Something o’ that, I said.  
Then I’ll know who to thank, she said, and give me a straight look.

Two women competing over a man—it could be straight out of *Women Beware Women*. The scene ends in the middle of a move (“And they asked me in to dinner. . .”) as the bar closes; their time is up. “Good night, ladies, good night, sweet ladies, good night, good night,” says Ophelia from *Hamlet*, reminding us that the night—or the chess bag—awaits us all.

From the banks of the Mississippi to the waters of the Thames, *The Waste Land* weaves together Eliot’s two worlds: his vanished Saint Louis childhood and the emptiness of the present. He later dismissed his poem as the “relief of a personal and wholly insignificant grouse against life... just a piece of rhythmical grumbling.” If the poem were only about his life, that might be true, but it is obviously so much more. In testifying to his grief



and his longing for love, the poem expresses universal human emotions in a modern idiom. For many readers, it has opened doors to European and Indian literary traditions, philosophy, religion, history, and more. The music of Eliot's poetry inspired twentieth-century writers, such as Ralph Ellison, who heard jazz rhythms in *The Waste Land*. Eliot struggled to articulate the experience of modernity—motors, typewriters, lonely apartments, crowded streets—with raw honesty. Yet writing poetry also connected him to an ancient cultural heritage that belongs to us all as citizens of the world.

Frances Dickey is a T. S. Eliot scholar and English professor at the University of Missouri. Her books include *The Complete Prose of T. S. Eliot* (Volume 3), the *Edinburgh Companion to T. S. Eliot and the Arts* and *The Modern Portrait Poem from Dante Gabriel Rossetti to Ezra Pound*. Dickey served as president of the International T. S. Eliot Society (based in Saint Louis) and now edits *The T. S. Eliot Studies Annual*. She enjoys living in Saint Louis with her family and discovering the city's hidden past.

#### Note about sources

All quotations of Eliot's poetry are taken from *The Poems of T. S. Eliot*, Vol. 1, ed. Christopher Ricks and Jim McCue (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2015); many of his poems are also freely available on the internet. For lines deleted from the original manuscript, its marginalia, and Eliot's comments about his poem, see *The Waste Land: A Facsimile and Transcript of the Original Drafts Including the Annotations of Ezra Pound*, ed. Valerie Eliot (Harcourt Brace & Co., 1971).

Eliot wrote to James Joyce on Jan. 4, 1932, about the death of his father; see *Letters of T. S. Eliot*, Vol. 6: 1932-1933, ed. Valerie Eliot and John Haffenden (Yale University Press, 2016), p. 13. There are 9 published volumes of Eliot's letters and more at [tseliot.com](http://tseliot.com). Eliot's life up to the publication of *The Waste Land* has been ably recounted by Robert Crawford in *Young Eliot: From St. Louis to The Waste Land* (Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2015). The best biography of Vivien Haigh-Wood is Ann Pasternak Slater's *The Fall of a Sparrow: Vivien Eliot's Life and Writings* (Faber and Faber, 2020), and for the story of his secret love for the American woman Emily Hale, see Lyndall Gordon's *The Hyacinth Girl: T. S. Eliot's Hidden Muse* (W. W. Norton, 2022). All these books consider the question of Viven's fidelity, and Gordon also reveals Eliot's own affair with Nancy Cunard, perhaps another model of the Cleopatra-like figure in "A Game of Chess."

All quotations from Shakespeare's play *The Tempest* can be found in Act I, Scene 2, lines 465-85. The quotation from *Antony and Cleopatra* ("The barge she sat in...") appears in Act II, Scene 2, lines 227-28. Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting *Lady Lilith* and its accompanying sonnet, "Body's Beauty," can be found at the [Rossettiarchive.org](http://Rossettiarchive.org). Ralph Ellison refers to Eliot's influence through-out his *Collected Essays* (Modern Library, 2003); the comment about jazz appears in "The Art of Fiction: An Interview," p. 210.

# T. S. ELIOT: A GAME OF CHESS

May 17, 2023–January 21, 2024

**Curated by Dr. Frances Dickey with Emily Allred as project manager**

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