

## The nobiliary concept of play as a mechanism for ethical-political distinction in the Late Middle Ages.

### El imaginario lúdico de la nobleza como dispositivo de la distinción ético-política en la Baja Edad Media Occidental.

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#### **Abstract**

This article examines the problematic meaning, both in concept and practice, of games in the late Middle Ages, using Norbert Elias' theoretical perspective of the civilizing process. Starting from the fundamental assumption that play is not a practice free of political and ideological content, whose meaning is often found at the heart of social struggles, an evolutionary model of play is proposed where it is not the transformation of practices which is given most importance, but rather the shaping of concepts around the social divisions which these practices reflect. To this end, the comparative methodology used reveals how, in the context of social transformation and medieval mentality, two binary categories of games, parallel and differentiating (games for the nobility/games for the commoners, and games for adults/games for children), developed.

At the same time, this paper also addresses the more specific case of physical challenge, and its fundamental role in mental and behavioural changes, over and above the conditions which gave rise to different types of competitions. In particular, the emergence of the concept of infancy, public decorum and politeness, in the context of increasing levels of mechanisms for behavioural self-control, will be studied.

#### **Resumen**

El artículo aborda la problemática significación conceptual y práctica del juego en la Baja Edad Media bajo la perspectiva teórica del proceso de la civilización de Norbert Elias. Bajo la idea matriz de que el juego es una práctica no exenta de contenido político e ideológico, que a menudo encuentra su sentido en el seno de las luchas sociales, se plantea un modelo evolutivo del mismo donde no prima tanto la transformación de las prácticas como la configuración de imaginarios alrededor de las divisiones sociales que estas expresan. A este respecto, la metodología comparativa induce a atisbar, en el contexto de las transformaciones sociales y de mentalidad medievales, el desarrollo de dos categorías lúdicas binarias, paralelas y distintivas (juegos nobiliarios/juegos villanos y juegos de adultos/juegos infantiles).

Se tratan, asimismo, e indistintamente de lo anterior, los casos particulares de los retos de competencia física y su incardinación en los cambios de mentalidad y comportamiento, más allá de las condiciones que propiciaron las distintas modalidades de concursos caballerescos o villanos, de adultos o infantiles: especialmente la emergencia del concepto de infancia, decoro público, cortesía-civilidad, etc. en un entorno de progresivo aumento de los mecanismos de auto-control de la conducta.

**Key words:** play, social domination, distinction, Middle Ages

**Palabras clave:** juego, poder, distinción, Edad Media

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## Introduction: defining the subject

The Middle Ages comprise, as is known, a collection of cultures whose extension over time, and whose diversity, means they cannot be treated as stable and homogenous categories without the risk of falling into irrelevant epistemological reductionism. In this sense, although a rigorous and careful delimitation of themes is necessary in all historical research, it is especially pertinent in the study of any medieval field. All the more so when, as in the case of games, a subject is dealt with which is especially plural as regards linguistic definitions and political dynamics, and is sociologically undefined.

In this respect it is necessary, in the first place, to establish the temporal limits and even the political-geographical boundaries in order to define the subject under investigation with precision. This does not mean, however, that it is not possible to establish causal relationships or discern concurrent developments in other moments and places in the Middle Ages.

This analysis covers the late Middle Ages in the Europe. That is, this analysis will cover the 14th and 15th centuries which, whilst they are defined by the ideological and political coordinates of theocentric Christianity and the Chivalric tradition, are also in a period of transition towards modern sensibility. A period where a progressive refinement of manners, the internalisation of moral and behavioural controls, and the institutional legislation of public life comprise a fundamental basis for the social transformation underway, especially as concerns a new sensibility with regard to care of the body, in terms of hygiene, medical care, education and recreation.

The second definition necessarily deals with the concept of play. The polysemic nature of play demands a minimum of conceptual and semantic reflection on what should be included in this category, although there is no intention here of reducing the analysis to a list of games in particular. Rather, it is of interest to look that the purpose of our article is to uncover the conceptual and physical elements of play as a socio-cultural manifestation shot through with, and defined by, political, religious, philosophical and pedagogical practice and discourse. Over and above all, this paper will look into the expression which play represents, and as the title suggests, of a mechanism for ethical-political differentiation; that is, as a symbolic and practical category which takes on the dimension of a structure which configures and legitimises power relations. To this end, the socio-historical perspective of Norbert Elias' *civilizing process* theory (1988) is applied, according to which a certain refinement in interpersonal relationships – gestures, sensitivity, manners – and a recurrent tendency towards social differentiation – as a shaping force in the expression of power – takes on a paradigmatic nature in the somatic and emotional self control which defines the civilisation of manners.

Given this fundamental assumption, and taking into account both the methodological contributions which Philippe Aries (1987) has made with respect to the concept of infancy, and the concept of play proposed by Elschenbroich (1979), this paper will investigate the casuistry of play and its significance in the late Middle Ages in the Christian West, based on the assumption that play constitutes a heterogeneous practice which is not free from political and ideological content which often reveals its cultural meaning in the heart of social conflict. With this in mind, an evolutionary model of lay is proposed for play behaviour in the historical period referred to, where it is not the transformation of practices and their internal logic which is given most importance, but rather the shaping of concepts around social divisions which

these reflect. To this end, the comparative methodology used uncovers the development of two binary categories of games, parallel and differentiating (games for the nobility/games for the commoners, and games for adults/games for children), whose fundamental social role, over and above the particular conditions which gave rise to different types of games, demonstrates mental and behavioural change: in particular, the emergence of the concept of infancy, and the displacement of politeness in favour of civility-urbaneness, in an environment of a progressive increase in mechanisms for expressional self-control.

### *Categories of play*

If we take into account the meanings of the word *play* in Castilian Spanish, we can see that in the first place it serves to designate a range of practices, from exploration in early infancy to betting, and includes such diverse activities as a game of chess, cards or dice, bowls, ball games, wrestling or simply corporal pleasure. To this should be added other meanings commonly found in other languages, such as playing an instrument or acting in a theatrical piece. On the other hand, if the concept of *ludus*, used by such a distinguished source as Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*, is taken to define the field of medieval play, the semantic field is widened even further: and more so if we take into account that from the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards the Latin term *jocus* was added to the previously accepted meanings. Until then, *jocus* referred specifically to verbal pastimes such as jokes, puzzles, or guessing games.

When Saint Thomas dealt with play he was referring, in the first place, to adult forms of play, in the sense that the Castilian Spanish word *concurso* (competition) has today, that is, to challenges where two or more individuals put their skills to the test in open competition, whether physical or otherwise, or, similarly, to challenges where the outcome is purely in the hands of fate. But secondly, he was also referring to humour; good humour, joviality, jokes and levity manifested both in speech and action, and which makes, as he pointed out, co-existence pleasant, fun and amiable (Tomás de Aquino, 1998, 561). Mental rest, spiritual delight and, by extension, all types of entertainment and forms of amusement, can be included in this category. Of all of them it is obligatory to mention those which in medieval Castilian were beginning to be designated by the word *depuerto*, semantically as undefined then as its derived term, *deporte* (sport) is today (Piernavieja, 1966 and Trapero, 1979).

Far from condemning play in all its aspects, Thomas Aquinas (1998, 560-563) exhorted men to play, with no other condition than that already mentioned in Antiquity by Aristotle, on whom he effectively based his reflections: namely, that play should be subject to the *eutrapelia*, that is, guided by fair play, reason, moderation and, above all, modesty. He defined play, in this sense, as a virtue of co-existence, and although he established some conditions and limits so that its practice was permissible and in accordance to Christian teachings, the primary and conclusive evaluation of play could not be, contrary to expectations, more important, persuaded as he was of the necessity for mental rest, for joviality, and for enjoyment imposed by the carnal and social condition of humankind. In this respect, if an excess of play, or immoderate or unreasonable indulgence in play, was a vice, according to Thomas Aquinas, so too was the absence of play and pleasure, as being contrary to human nature. In his *Treatise on Temperance*, dealing with, among other things, the virtues and vices which emanate from the body, its condition and its movements, he deals with the virtues of the act of play. After objecting to the Ambrosian thesis, according to which humankind should refrain from play in all its aspects in order to achieve virtuous fulfilment, and to the thesis of John Chrysostom, according to whom play was the invention of the Devil,

Saint Thomas affirmed that playful enjoyment was necessary rest for the hard-working soul, as well as for the body:

*“In the same way as man needs bodily rest in order to comfort the body, which cannot work incessantly because its capacity is finite, and limited to certain tasks, so it is the same with the soul, whose capacity is also limited and restricted to certain tasks....when the soul rises above feeling through the work of reason, then weariness appears in the soul, whether man is using reason for practical or speculative ends. In either case, he suffers from a weariness of the soul, and the more effort that is put in to the use of reason, the greater the weariness. And in the same way that physical weariness disappears through bodily rest, so too spiritual agility is restored through spiritual repose. Now, pleasure is the soul's rest: thus it is appropriate to provide a remedy against weariness of the soul through some kind of pleasure, procuring in this way a relaxation in the tension of the spirit...These sayings and acts, where nothing more is sought than the pleasure of the soul, are called diversions, or play. Thus it is necessary to make use of them from time to time, to give some rest to the soul”.* Tomás de Aquino (1998, 560 y 561).

From the outset, this alone gives us some idea of the modern prejudice which has tended to spread the impression of the Middle Ages as a repressive time, negating pleasure and play. Although it is not the intention here to debate the concept of play in Saint Thomas' vision of the cosmos, his thoughts serve as a warning to us, in as much as his work constituted a reference for thinkers who participated actively in the construction of medieval sensibility, such as King Alfonso X, in Spanish Castile and León, whose writings on the subject of play highlight a very tolerant attitude towards play; much more tolerant in fact, than that developed by some champions of moral order in the Modern Age, who set their faces resolutely against all expression of hedonism. Compare the intention and the tone of *Ordenamiento de las tafurerías* (Management of bull-fighting), and above all the *Libro del Ajedrez, tables y dados* (Book of chess, board games and dice), written by the sage king with the intention and tone of the *Tratado del juego* (Treatise on games) by Francisco Alcocer, the *Fiel desengaño contra la ociosidad* (Faithful revelation against leisure and games) by Luque Fajardo, or the *Del rey y de la institución real* (On the king and the institution of royalty) by Father Juan de Mariana, among others, whose invective against play in the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries is unreserved.

In the introduction to his book on chess, board games and dice, the sage king points out, in what can be considered to be the first definition and classification of play in the Spanish language, that play is a concession from God, which helps men to bear toil and trouble:

*“Because all manner of cheer God wished that men had for themselves naturally so that they could bear troubles and hard work when it befell them; For this reason, men sought diverse ways to achieve this happiness. And for this reason they found and made all manner of games and entertainments with which to cheer themselves. Some in riding, others jousting, or taking up shield and lance, or shooting with a crossbow or a bow and arrow... And although this entails the use and wielding of arms, it is not fighting, but a game”.* (Alfonso X (2007, I).

With respect to the above, it is necessary to insist that although a good part of educated ecclesiastical discourse tried to limit the practice of games, the actual frequency of prohibitions was very low. In fact, the underlying communal nature of popular culture meant that expressions of joy were a primordial feature of daily life, when poverty did not prevent it. In addition, the absence of institutional control, and the underdeveloped character of public moral life was a determining factor in the continued presence of games at all levels of society in spite of the persistent calls to renounce them both to commoners and to the nobility (Vicente, 2003).

Given this, it is also necessary to highlight the contrast between the image of the dour, severe, ascetic and intolerant Middle Ages forged in the age of Humanism – and then later reinforced in the Enlightenment – and the lewd and playful Middle Ages described by Huizinga in his

most famous work *The autumn of the Middle Ages* (Huizinga, 1990); the Middle Ages built upon the ethical and aesthetic code of chivalry, but, above all, the playful Middle Ages, that of the country folk, the craftsmen and the bourgeoisie participating fully in street life, that of the permanent neighbourly co-existence in villages and towns; the Middle Ages where the precariousness of resources was not faced with resignation, but with the vivaciousness of the festive pleasure afforded by theatre, dance, banquets and play; the Middle Ages which wore its heart on its sleeve, prepared to express itself in a never-ending series of ways but especially through bodily jubilation. It is therefore precisely for this reason, to emphasise the jovial and communal aspects of the Middle Ages, that from the wide range of games in which this study could focus, the decision has been made to focus on those games which in and of themselves constitute a celebration of the body. Of these, those games which constitute the so-called competitions or challenges, that is, those games in which two or more individuals confront one another, putting their skills or bravery to the test, for both their ideological and moral symbolism – as well as the conditions under which they are practiced – most emphatically articulate their political context. In fact, whilst games represent an articulation of leisure, which through its very being represents a certain level of transgression of the established order, above all because it represents an unproductive use of time granted by God, competition or challenge is a double transgression because as well as the above mentioned waste of time, it exalts that which morality tries to deny; certain aspects of bodily existence, and leads to show, ostentation and luxury.

#### *Challenges as a symbolic expression of power*

Far from the position defended over a long period by some essentialist rhetoric<sup>1</sup>, whereby play forms an exclusive world freed from the conditions of reality, an absolute whose timeless nature bestows a universal sense, this paper starts from the position that play is a cultural product, and as such it is impossible to separate the behaviour of play from the social conditions which produced it. It is a solid part of those conditions, and, in this sense, the result of the different processes of tension or political, ideological and economic struggle which have combined to produce the development of civilisation. It is especially bound, it could be added, to the conditions and tensions which have contributed to the process of the configuration of the concept of the body given the extent of bodily expression contained within play. In fact, given that to a great extent it is the social image and representation of the body which determines the customs and practices of private and public life – from ceremonial and administrative acts to medical and personal hygiene customs, and including aesthetic sense and customs related to co-existence – it is also, in the last instance, these images and representations which configure the symbolic and practical base on which recreational models in general, and games of challenge in particular, are constructed.

There is no doubt, in this respect, that time available for leisure, its distribution, the activities it generates, the quantity and form in which it is employed by the different social levels and groups, or the awareness and perception that each group has of the other, constitutes a significant and symptomatic insight into society and its categories. If, as this paper argues, play is cultural product, and for this same reason, an ideological, political and economic

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<sup>1</sup> The author refers to the concept of play – and in particular to sports – well defined in Johan Huizinga's thesis (1984) and in the writing of José Ortega y Gasset (1966). Both tended to attribute an historically permanent presence of play in the history of humankind, as well as an illusory, magical and dreamlike dimension – an essence – which transports humanity to a state of sublimation and transcendence.

construction, then the study of its forms and manifestations should furnish truly valuable elements of historical understanding with regards to the social conditions which shaped it, as well as helping us understand our own relation to play, our own games, and their development and distribution within our culture.

As an hypothesis, this paper suggests that the social distribution of the different practices related to play in the Middle Ages can be explained as the result of power struggles between the various levels of society, in their attempts to maintain or obtain some level of social hegemony: or at least to obtain or maintain a certain identity or a certain socio-cultural control in addition to the *social class* mechanisms of differentiation. To a certain extent, this meant that play was divided into cultured games and common games, games for the nobility and games for commoners, permissible games and forbidden games. In the same way as dress, pose, language and taste, play represents a power space; especially in so far as its practise represents the availability of energy and time in an era which was precarious for the great majority, and very unequal in the distribution of symbolic resources.

This does not mean, however, that the distribution of play was precisely distributed in a linear manner, or well-defined according to the different levels of society. It was, as it continues to be, permanently subject to diffusion between higher and lower levels, in such a way that some games, whose origins can be traced to the lower levels of society, and which are thus related to those forms and styles of life, were sometimes adopted by the higher levels of society, although in this case with added sophistication, and bestowed with a new meaning. This would seem to be the case with certain ball games, where the structure and modification of the space of the game, the variation in the use of materials or the alteration of some of the rules functioned to transform particular rituals related to play popular among the lower classes. Nevertheless, the reverse was more commonly true: the vulgarisation of forms of play as a result of the tendency towards social climbing, which inspired many to adopt the tastes and practices of those situated on a higher social scale. In these cases, the meaning of the game also underwent a modification in so far as each group would imprint their own social values on the game (Elschenbroich, 1979).

One could ask how these processes of diffusion came about. Although medieval social class was strictly divided into closed groups, where lineage played an extremely important role as a justification for these divisions, and as a barrier to social mobility, it was in no way free of tensions; in particular, social tensions generated by opposing forces both within each social strata and between the different strata:

- among the lower levels of society, the opposition, first, between the tendency to identify with higher levels though the adoption of their customs- and, of course, the adoption of their games – and, secondly, the tendency to reaffirm their status or identify themselves with their class through identification with their own customs, rejecting or disdaining anything unfamiliar, even if it came from higher levels of society;
- among the higher levels of society, the opposition between, first, the tendency to distinguish oneself through the use of exclusive models of behaviour – also through games and pastimes exclusive to their class – (the tendency to seek new forms of play when the old ones are no longer exclusive), and, secondly, the tendency to impose their own norms on the whole of society as being the only acceptable ones, and thus create a hegemony.

These tensions, according to Norbert Elias (1988, 38-40), constituted the stimulus for the continual ordering and reordering of mannerisms. They also constituted the main stimulus for the internalisation of behavioural controls, first among the dominant levels of society, and later among the rest of the social levels, in a permanent flux of transformation, with temporary advances and retreats but with a constant direction overall; that of the progressive refinement and moderation of conduct. A gradual refinement which, however, shaped behavioural styles according to a dichotomy; refined or uncouth manners, noble or common, high-brow or low-brow, according to whether the practice was endorsed, or not, at any given moment, by the higher levels of society, the dominant levels. This development, which was valid for all customs, whether related to the body or not, for dress, for personal adornment, for language, for literary tastes etc., was especially blatant in the case of recreational activities, in games, which, as has been pointed out, constitute a privileged field where social relationships subjected to the exercise of power are represented. That is, a game will be considered noble or plebeian depending on whether it is endorsed or not by the tastes and customs of the ruling classes, but this will not be a permanent categorisation – for reasons intrinsic to its practice – but rather its classification will depend on whether the tastes and customs of the ruling class continue to endorse the practice.

Taking the above into account, it is necessary to highlight how, before the constitution of a true nobility based in lineage – around the 12<sup>th</sup> century, when notions of chivalry, united to ideas of hereditary excellence, crystallised (Keen, 1986, 34) –, the majority of games, if not all, according to Philippe Ariès (1987, 57-77), were common to all members of society regardless of their social status, and with few differences with relation to age, either: something which should not surprise us if we consider that the concept of infancy had barely begun to be developed in the West in medieval times. In this respect, it is necessary to indicate the co-existence of two distinct but parallel processes which were closely related in the course of the historical conformation of ideas about play: the first is that which tends to differentiate between upper- and lower-class games, and the second is that which tends to differentiate between games for adults and games for children. Thus, it was the symbolic and practical universe of the nobility, and its power to transform society which brought about these two levels of distinction, as we shall see.

### *Games of the nobility, games of the peasantry*

With respect to the distinction between games for the nobility and games for the peasantry, it should be highlighted that this was constructed, above all, as a result of the long process of behavioural transformation whereby comportment became both increasingly elaborate in appearance, and at the same time, moderated. Within this behavioural transformation, which especially affected personal hygiene, table manners and use of language, can be found, naturally, the changes which pastimes and games underwent. Among these latter, tournaments, jousting, and any of their derivatives, would seem representative of the typically chivalric combats. At the end of the day, the ideals of courtesy which reveal the civilising refinement of the Middle Ages are no more than the ritualised expression of the capacity of a particular social class – the lay aristocracy- to dominate others and themselves. Their existence was encoded through the distinctive character of their warlike sports, which became increasingly ritualised, and through the measured mannerisms of court life: that is, through the distinctive character which an exclusive form of understanding physical excellence conferred on them (Vicente, 1999, 13-22).

Of all the warlike sports they practiced, it is perhaps the tournaments which best represent medieval nobility's sense of play. Over and above what tournaments represented in terms of the expression of epic ideals in the lists, they showed themselves to be the most common and efficient means of manifesting all of the chivalric virtues and philosophy of life; virtues and philosophy typical of the battle field, but which also ruled behaviour away from battle.

Although the prehistory of this type of pastime, between noble game and battle training, is difficult to determine, and it would possibly be necessary to go back in time to certain combative rituals among the primitive Germanic tribes, it seems that the medieval form is closely related to cultural and ideological categories deriving from the epoch when the concept of chivalry began to take form as a means of denoting social standing. That is, approximately, between the end of the 11<sup>th</sup> century and the middle of the 12<sup>th</sup> century, a period when rituals of admission to the different chivalric orders began to crystallise into a privileged initiation ceremony, with a lavish investiture, which bore witness to the appearance of a certain collective consciousness of distinction and a sense of belonging.

As Maurice Keen (1986, 115-118) points out, tournaments began as truly bloody simulations of battle which, far from constituting a form of catharsis in times of peace, frequently moved towards conflicts, the costs of which, in human and material terms, were socially unsustainable. Nevertheless, little by little they turned into a kind of warlike game and a courtly spectacle; above all as restraints were imposed limiting the physical violence involved, and, at the same time, restrictions were introduced in relation to the noble lineage of the combatants. If, at the beginning, the combatants did not need to fulfil any other requirement than that of having a horse and weapons, as time passed tournaments became – as did the medieval epic consciousness in general – an exclusive and distinguished space reserved for the lay aristocracy; an aristocracy which increasingly identified itself with heroic ethics, aesthetics and sensibilities, but was also increasingly determined to discipline, moderate and ritualise the expression of these values (both on and off the battle field), through a parallel process of inculcating courtly behaviour into its knights (Vicente, 1997, 37).

For these reasons the most significant factor in the tournaments was that they constituted, in and of themselves, along with the rest of the nobility's pastimes, the most normal and effective way to bring their society together, producing ties and identities, and forging ideologies which legitimised the norms of public behaviour in general, and the norms of corporal externalisation in particular. It could be said that through the celebration of this kind of struggle with its accompanying *mis en scène*, one of the most important forces for the expansion and unification of the European aristocracy's social models, so important for the ultimate process of civilisation, was formed. These models, which cannot be separated from the restrictions on combat via increasingly scrupulous and strict regulations, demonstrate, among other things, the increasing rejection of violence and the progressive containment of impulsive behaviour through codes of behaviour; codes which were hardly ever written down but which slowly came to characterise the sensibilities of the hegemonic levels of society, and later filtered down to the other levels. In effect, the new practice of military games, like the good reproductions of war that they were, gave unsurpassed opportunities for the construction of epic examples through describing the skills, and singing the praises of, those famous men who became heroes. In this way, the diffusion of, and social adherence to, chivalric ideals and values were assured, and at the same time, emergent forms of courtesy were implanted; that is, the concept and practice of measured behaviour, the concept and practice of a decorous attitude, a distinguished appearance, and orderly mannerisms. In short, tournaments constituted an environment where the marriage between the heroic attitude and the courtly



attitude proved to be profoundly fertile in terms of the elaboration and perpetuation of everything related to the so-called *good government of the body*, and which, from the 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> centuries, came to differentiate nobles from peasants.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, the hereditary boundaries became more severe when the incipient bourgeoisie, the new economic elite, showed interest in the recreational and expressive customs of the nobility, causing the latter to fear for their position and close ranks around their identity (Nieto, 1993).

However, it was from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards when tournaments took on their most ritualised and regimented form; when they became increasingly a theatrical display with little physical risk for the combatants through the adoption of preventative measures such as delimiting the battle field with lists, observing places of sanctuary, the previous determination and imposition of specific weapons, placing time limits on the duration of the combat, the establishment of mechanisms for the exchange of prisoners, the limitations placed on the level of injury permitted, or the incorporation of a judge capable of distinguishing and classifying actions. At the same time, the adornments which accompanied the game and the heraldic system of symbols (plumes on the helmets, coloured suits of armour, standards around the field) began to take on an unusual importance, alongside two parallel processes. The first was the hypertrophy of luxury and ostentation which took place around the tournament, consisting in a great spectacle based on multitudinous investitures, enormous banquets, offerings, betrothals, marriages, triumphant entrances, not to mention an extension of events to round off the festivities such as, from the 14<sup>th</sup> century onwards, horseback bull fighting (especially in the Iberian kingdoms); and the second was the development of a courtly sensibility which, among other things, made the lady the centre of the festival (combatants fought on her behalf, she consecrated triumphs, it was from her hand that the winner received his prize); an unsurpassed opportunity, as can be seen, to perpetuate the values of virility.

It was precisely in this environment of moulding and moderating behaviour when other types of combative games, less violent, more economically attainable, and easier to organise, reached their peak; They were also, to a certain extent, more refined – although easy to carry out – and were always associated with tournaments. We are referring, above all, to jousting and to individual combat between two contestants on horseback where, initially, the ability to unseat one's opponent was valued; later, different systems of evaluation and appreciation came into being such as breaking one's lance on the body of the opponent, the beauty of the strike, the ability to endure the helmet on the head during successive fights, etc. This type of combat also underwent a process of moderation of the consequences, parallel to the moderation of behaviour, where an increased sensibility opposed to violence imposed measures such as more complete suits of armour, thicker chain mail, protective shields which were more resistant, or the separation of the lanes by a barrier, which at least impeded a head-on collision between horses and combatants.

However, tournaments and jousting matches were not the only chivalric games, even if they were the most characteristic. Throughout the Middle Ages, different forms of combat were developed such as *los pasos de armas* (challenging other knights to force a passage), simulated operations of war like storming a castle or defending a bridge – in the mid-15<sup>th</sup> century, the celebrated Paso Honroso made Don Suero de Quiñones from León famous, for

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<sup>2</sup> Note, in this respect, how some of the treatises on monastic conduct in the 12<sup>th</sup> century and beginning of the 13<sup>th</sup> century such as *Disciplina clereicalis* (Pedro Alfonso), the *De Disciplina Scolarium* (PseudoBoecio), el *De institutione novitiorum* (Hugo de San Victor) or the *De eruditione filiorum nobilium* (Vicente de Beauvais), would form the basis of courtly concepts of behaviour as the mirror of princes. Immediately following these as a model is the *Regimine principum* (Egidio Romano). See also, in this respect: Vicente and Nanu (2007).

trying to break three hundred lances on the bridge over the river Órbigo (Onieva, 1961, 227-250). In the same way, the so-called combat at the fence was very popular. In this combat, two combatants, on foot and separated by a medium height wooden fence, had to try and disarm or knock over their opponent, using weapons which had been established previously; a kind of fencing with a separation of spaces. Within this type of combative contest, it is worth highlighting those which derived from tournaments such as jousting matches, *la sortija* (spearing ribbons from horseback), *la estafermo* and *las cañas* – in Castile, called *bofordos* (jousting with a wooden bar) – which, their practice and, no doubt, meaning changed, ended up transformed into popular pastimes. Later, once infancy had acquired a certain consideration as a social category, they became games of simulation considered appropriate for children.

In any case, play among the nobility in general and knights in particular was not limited to warlike challenges based on displays of physical skill or the other pastimes and games of a chivalric nature which have been mentioned. Contrary to what is commonly believed, the majority of games which are generally thought to belong to and originate in the common populace, such as bowls, marbles, the spinning top, hopscotch, *el marro*, *el mallo*, or *la cachaba* – and their predecessors – were initially games practiced by all levels of society, and in fact probably more by the nobility, whose members presumably had more time for leisure activities (Le Goff, 1983, 63-64).

In this respect, one imagines that initially the differentiation arose above all from availability of free time and thus, from a greater possibility of spending more time in play; play which essentially would have been the same between social classes. The distinctive symbolism of play would have reached a decisive turning point when, in addition to the quantity of time spent in play, the self-same activity of play began to take on differentiating features. Firstly as a consequence of economic barriers implied in chivalric games – in so far as they necessitated the ownership of a horse and weapons – and secondly, as a result of the social barriers which the nobility began to impose around themselves – in terms of ostentation and certain levels of ‘belonging’ or ties. These barriers, whilst evident from early on, became higher precisely when the nobility internalised chivalric sensibility, and tournaments changed from being a mere skirmish in times of peace to being a truly courtly ceremony.

As the barriers around the practice of tournaments became higher, games not associated with chivalry lost their distinctive value and because of this, began to be abandoned by the nobility. It was the middle and lower classes who kept these games alive; games which later have come to be known as popular or traditional games.

### *Adult games and children's games*

This process of differentiation between games considered appropriate for the nobility and games more properly practiced by the peasantry, which is no more than the expression of the changing tastes and the distinguishing sensibility of the nobility, and as such, an expression of power relations which led to the crystallisation of the movement towards civilisation, is marked by a second process of differentiation in the area of play whereby a distinction began to be made between games appropriate for adults and games considered to be more appropriate for children.

It is necessary here to stress the meaning of infancy in the Middle Ages, so different to the modern concept. As modern histories of infancy have highlighted (Ariès, 1987), the

difference between the condition of adulthood and childhood were much more tenuous, more diffuse; only the process of modernisation of sensibilities has brought about an increased distance between the two, establishing frontiers which are increasingly diaphanous in terms of what is considered to be behaviour proper to adults and behaviour proper to children. It is not only that the individual began to participate in the daily tasks of life earlier and in a more natural and spontaneous way, but that, above all, the very notions of child and childhood were based on a *vague rationale* of the stages of life, where expectations of behaviour did not vary greatly for children and adults, except in so far as the greater physical precariousness of the former. This is not to say that there were not games considered appropriate for children, but these were very similar to adults' games, as were the rules and controls imposed on their play. Given that the frontiers between adulthood and childhood were not diaphanous, it is not possible to speak of a true separation or segregation of the child from adult life and contact from adults in the way that modern thought tends to separate them. Apart from the games of earliest infancy (above all, games of an exploratory nature without toys, or experimentation with toys such as the rocking horse, the windmill, dolls or models, and also what could be called games without rules, such as some kinds of fighting, or games of imitation or imagination), it is not possible to speak of children's games as being different to those of adults, when classifying games in the Middle Ages: at least, not until very late on in this period. The reason why it is not possible to talk thus of differentiation of games is because in general, childish behaviour did not exist as would be understood now, or it only existed in a very rudimentary form. Renowned medieval historians such as Jaques Le Goff (1999, 258-259) suggest that infancy appeared as a consequence of the development of domestic life in modern cities in the late stages of what is commonly known as medieval culture. The family and childhood historian, Philippe Ariès (1987, 57-61), places the emergence of an awareness of the condition of infancy, with all that this implies in terms of behaviour, both for children and adults, as not having occurred until well into the 16<sup>th</sup> century. On the same theme, D. Elschenbroich (1979, 39), writing on the relationship of children to games, points out that by ignoring the historical character of the conditions and behaviour surrounding play, 20th century psychological theories of play have played a part in making the status of infancy an entity without a history, something beyond time. A further result is that an analysis of the influence of social structures on the shaping of behaviour in different phases of life is lost; in particular, the creation of infancy as a result of bourgeois social structures.

In this sense, from the historical perspective of infancy and its related behaviour, and taking into account medieval structures of thought and sensibility, it is understandable that from an early age the *little adults*, as Le Goff (1999, 90), calls them, played the same games as the adults; sometimes with adults, and sometimes with their peers, but in general they played the same games with no other limits than those imposed by their physical constitution, their abilities or their experience. It is easier to find evidence of segregation in play based on gender than on age (Le, Goff, 1999, 91). Segregation did not exist to the point that, when medieval sensibility and moral control did not forbid absolutely gambling and betting, this applied equally to adults and to children, as can be seen in numerous paintings dealing with the subject, where children are shown betting on dice completely naturally.

The structuring of society into classes more or less defined by age, and therefore, the configuration of distinct categories of behaviour can be seen as one of the direct consequences of the process of refining conduct and customs. Parallel with the introduction of new customs relating to hygiene, new sentiments of privacy and shame, or new table manners, the development of a differentiated treatment for children, progressively gentler and more tolerant

but at the same time more restrictive in terms of placing limits on their universe, constitutes yet another aspect of the civilising refinement of customs. The conditions of this refinement reflect the emergent conditions and style of life of the nobility at court who, as has been shown, bolstered their existence with, among other things, the exclusivity of their behaviour; an exclusivity obtained through measure, refinement and, above all, artificial distinctions when dealing with others. Infancy, therefore, can be considered as initially having been an expression of these artificial distinctions; an artifice whose distinguishing social feature was initially to attribute to children the values of naïveté, innocence and spontaneity, as well as ignorance and ineptitude in fulfilling the tasks and functions of the nobility, so that limits were put on their behaviour. It represents, therefore, a combination of segregation and over-protection of their own offspring first, and later, the descendants of the rest of society, which also affected modes of play; a level of feminisation of infancy, if the female condition in medieval times is seen as a condition of subordination and dependency (Vicente and Brozas, 1995, 163-172).

From the point of view of a social and historical analysis of play, the most important issue is how, at the same time as the nobility appropriated the practice of chivalric games, with the consequent abandonment of other games – which then became representative of common tastes – a concept, however limited, of childhood began to develop. At the same time as they began to restrict the general population's participation in chivalric games, the children of the nobility also saw their activities limited through a kind of intensification of distinguishing features; a tightening of the restrictions placed on the use of customs and practices which conferred exclusivity on the nobility, in this case, according to age. From this point of view, it could be said that the concept of infancy was born with the sense, to some extent ritual, of being a pilgrimage towards the modern concept of *full existence*, that is, adulthood following an enforced period of separation of adults and children; a pilgrimage which for the medieval nobility, where the concept of infancy began to take on sense and shape, signified above all a transition period before exercising fully the privileges and customs of their class.

In consequence, what came to be considered the general population's heritage, later considered crude, vulgar or undistinguished, was also for a long time the repertory of games for noblemen's children, as if they had been granted a temporary dispensation for simplicity or freedom from responsibilities. For a long time after the nobility introduced the separation between adults and children in terms of play, other social classes can be seen to have continued playing together at all manner of games. Moreover, it seems that adults made no special concessions to children with regard to their fragility, according to Philippe Ariès (1987, 100-102), among others, given that the children of the general population still did not enjoy the special status conferred by innocence, naïveté or fragility attributed to their noble peers who, in contrast, were now forbidden to play the same games as their progenitors, and could only simulate their games. The children of the nobility can be seen imitating tournaments, riding on the shoulders of other children in much the same way as adults and children from the general population did.

As the concept of infancy began to take hold in the imagination of the general population, first among the members of the nascent middle classes and later among the lowest social classes, the repertory of games was rearranged according to age: adults slowly began to abandon the simpler games, and adopted more complex and elaborate ones, following a tendency influenced by the semi-conscious desire to rise socially through the adoption of customs and sensibilities considered proper to the upper classes. Thus the tournament, *la sortija* or *el estafermo*, for example, which were highly attractive to the middle classes when

they constituted a form of self-affirmation for the nobility, later became the heritage of children, both noble and otherwise, but especially the latter as the nobility's ideals of measured behaviour, refined manners and more elaborate, less violent conduct, took hold on court life and on the middle classes. When the concept of infancy took root in social consciousness, infancy became the repository for customs abandoned by adults. This aspect, which can be seen in nearly all facets of behaviour, would seem to be especially the case when dealing with play behaviour, as far as games are concerned, in so far as they represent a symbolic expression of distinction and power in social relations.

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