The Chess Players

A Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Liberal Studies

by

Gerry A. Wolfson-Grande

May, 2013
NOTE TO THE READER:

For my thesis project, I have written a novel-in-stories called *The Chess Players*. This companion piece, “A Game for All Reasons: Musings on the Interdisciplinary Nature of Chess,” is intended to supplement the creative narrative with my analyses assembled over the course of the MLS program.
A GAME FOR ALL REASONS:
Musings on the Interdisciplinary Nature of Chess

By
Gerry A. Wolfson-Grande

May, 2013
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enter the Queen</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Art, Improvisation and Randomness</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fortune and Her Wheel: Chess in the <em>Book of the Duchess</em> and <em>Knight’s Tale</em></td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Artwork</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chess invites metaphor. From the names of the pieces to the precision of the rules, the implications for the human condition are legion.
—Theodore Rabb

**Introduction**

Why chess? I have been asked this question several times over the course of my graduate study, and my answer has been elaborate or short and sweet as the occasion permitted. More often than not, I explained that chess is a reflection of the human struggle in microcosm, and therefore worthy of examination on a variety of levels. Originally conducted primarily as a game of war and strategy, chess has evolved to reflect historical developments in Western civilization as well as served to inspire literary and artistic endeavors in such a fashion as to provide comment, often as metaphor, on the human condition and our place in a cosmos influenced as frequently by chance as by order.

The common perception of chess is that it is an intellectual exercise requiring logic and problem-solving skills, geared more for right-brain than left-brain thinkers, assuming allowances are made for the latter in the first place. This image has been bolstered by the starkly analytical minds of most of the famous chess players of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, as well as the stereotypical image of the “chess geek,” more comfortable with concrete facts than flights of fancy. Yet this view only comprises part of the picture; the hand of chance wields more influence, even when interfering in realms supposedly constrained by the laws of logic, than one might think.

---

Thus, the most skilled player, able to construct in his head lengthy series of moves and countermoves, including likely alternatives as necessary, would be well-advised to leave room for improvisation, unless his opponent is his mirror twin. Even computer chess programs—unless the software is so badly written that every possible move is wholly unsurprising—allow for a random element simply to prevent repetition and predictability, if for no other reason than to ensure continued use and interest for the human participant. If one player, then, relies not only on traditional chess-playing skills but an ability to make intuitive decisions that can change the entire playing field, the other player inevitably will face checkmate unless he can rise to the challenge.

Over the course of my study, I explored the evolution of the game itself, and particularly of the modern chess queen; I contemplated a variety of artistic works by painters ranging from the Renaissance to the twenty-first century which employ chess as more than a simple part of the composition; and I considered the significance of the forces of chance—represented by fortune and chaos—and those of logic and order in the writings of Geoffrey Chaucer, arguably the most brilliant literary mind of the Middle Ages.

While both The Chess Players and this paper are stand-alone works, I hope that the latter may prove of interest to the reader desiring to investigate the academic background behind my thesis project in more detail. I certainly enjoyed every bit of both.
Enter the Queen

The chess queen herself, the primary leitmotif for The Chess Players, is a case in point. When chess arrived in Europe sometime during the ninth century, courtesy of Saracen travelers, this weakling piece was not even a woman, but a man, the king’s vizier, which could stump one square on the diagonal only, with the exception of its opening move, when it could move to a second square instead.¹ The reason for the gender change (as well as the transformation of the original Arabic chariot into a rook, and the elephant into an old man, the precursor of the bishop) is unknown; it may have simply been part of a Westernization of the pieces by Catholic Europe. Certainly the elephant would have been an exotic creature unfamiliar to most, and, as the Crusades got underway, the notion of an infidel as protector to the king may have required redefinition to the more acceptable idea of a queen. The earliest extant chess pieces, the Lewis Chessmen, dated to the mid-twelfth century, reflect the change in characters; the king’s companion is clearly a female figure.² Despite promotion from servant-adviser to wife-consort, however, the queen continued to serve primarily as a defensive rather than offensive piece, her job solely to protect the king, one halting diagonal step at a time.

Yet this piece, more limited in movement and strength than any other on the board, within approximately three hundred years had become the most flexible as well as most powerful of all, and there is no definitive documentation explaining her second transformation.

Chess historians are divided on the specific trigger for this change. Some credit as factors the effect of the Renaissance, the development of humanism and the associated trend toward individual independence, and new scientific discoveries, such as the printing press. Some ascribe it to the influence of a number of powerful European noblewomen during the High Middle Ages, such as Eleanor of Aquitaine, Blanche of Castile (Eleanor’s granddaughter, who married Louis VIII of France and later served as regent for their son, Louis IX), and Isabella of Spain, all of whom would have learned to play chess as part of their normal education, setting an example for the chess-playing nobility and possibly inspiring the concept of a more powerful chess queen. Isabella in particular, according to David Shenk, was the “personification of new female power, equally admired and feared,” and he does not think it coincidental that “a new chess Queen with new unprecedented powers on the board” was proposed by the chess literati in the same country and during the same time period as Isabella’s reign. Furthermore, most chess scholars agree that Luis Ramirez Lucena’s Repetición de amores y Arte de axedrez, published in either 1496 or 1497, was not only the first description of the new rules, giving the queen her enhanced powers, but the first printed book specifically on the subject of the method of play, and additionally was dedicated to Prince Juan, son of Ferdinand and Isabella.

Another factor in this transition was the increasing use of chess as a metaphor for the conflict between good and evil in sermons and religious treatises. Chess had been

adopted by the Church, originally as a tool used by monks involved in the education of young noblemen, and later as a method of illustrating morality. The Devil’s association with the game of chess (i.e., the black pieces) was already affecting his ability to win souls in period literature, both ecclesiastic and secular. One of the most famous of the religious writings was the “Innocent Morality,” *Quaedam moralitas dee scaccario per Innocentium papum*. The world in general was compared to a chess board, where the white squares constituted good and black evil, “following the dual state of life and death, praise and blame.”

One of the most famous of these texts is Jacobus de Cessolis’ *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium super ludo scacchorum* (“Book of the customs of men and the duties of nobles or the Book of Chess”) a series of sermons delivered in 1275 which employed chess as a metaphor. Cultural historian Jenny Adams considers de Cessolis’ use of chess an analogy reflecting a fundamental transition in the medieval understanding of oneself and one’s role in the community. Up to that point, the human body was typically used as a metaphor for the state, with individual types representing its subordinate parts. De Cessolis, however, examined the entire chess set, assigning differing qualities to individual pieces. Unlike the *Quaedam*, which considers the king and rook the only good or virtuous pieces, and particularly criticizes the queen’s diagonal

---


7 Eales, *Chess: The History of a Game*, 64.


movement as proof that women are “inherently corrupt” and “take things through unjust seizure,” de Cessolis contended that the queen was inherently virtuous; despite her limited capability for movement, she was indeed capable of taking a stand against the evil in the world, moving to capture or retreat as appropriate to her role.10

The Devil was also dragged willy-nilly onto the chessboard in less institutional writings. In the *Le Jeu des Eschés de la Dame, moralisé*, a late fifteenth-century allegory, the Devil’s opponent is a woman, who counters the temptations represented by the Devil’s moves with the defenses her religion gives her, such as her pawn named “Love of God,” against the diabolical pawn “Love of Self.”11 Of course, the Devil is unable to prevail against the lady’s virtue, and he is forced to go away unsatisfied.

The increase in the veneration of the Virgin Mary as a significant religious figure in her own right appears to have contributed to the chess metaphor as a symbol of the conflict between good and evil. Now it was not just human versus Satan; Mary herself was invoked as warrior and defender of humanity in the battle against evil.12 In the prologue to Book I of his *Les Miracles des Nostre-Dame (The Miracles of Our Lady)*, thirteenth-century French poet Gautier de Coinci uses the lavish language and musical style of the *trouvères* to create a stunning image of the Virgin as the chess Queen of God himself, who takes the Devil on in battle for humanity’s souls, ultimately sending him fleeing from the board without them.13 Of particular interest here, however, is the fact that de Coinci also posits enhanced powers for the chess queen more than two hundred

11 Eales, *Chess: The History of a Game*, 75.
years prior to the emergence of the modern game, although it is unknown if this was simply due to his particular vision of the Virgin Mother. Logically, the all-powerful Queen would of necessity have to be able to move more than a single diagonal square at a time in order to defeat her nefarious opponent. In any event, de Coinci’s chess Queen owns the power of movement in all directions for as far as she chooses to go, mating the Devil “head on,” “in the angle,” “goad[ing] him everywhere,” and “driving him square to square.”

Regardless of whether de Coinci’s Queen was spiritually empowered, or if he offered a foreshadowing of the modern chess queen, within three hundred years that incarnation had come into being. By the end of the fifteenth century, the chess queen could indeed move as de Coinci’s, in all directions, vertically, horizontally, and diagonally, and at length, harrying the opposing king as she wished, limited only by one of his men blocking her way (and potentially inviting capture). No other piece has this ability. As a result, the game acquired a number of new descriptive soubriquets: in Spain and France, it was known as “the queen’s chess” (*axedrez dela dama, eschês de la dame*), or, less politely, as the French *eschês de la dame enragée*, “the mad queen’s chess.”

Although there is no record of the medieval queen having enjoyed any change in ability prior to the late fifteenth century, the absence of such does not preclude the possibility. Most scholars agree that the new rules replaced the old ones in most of

---

14 Ibid., 112-114.
Europe within fifty years.\textsuperscript{17} With the exception of the game of courier chess, a variation which added eight pieces per side (four ranking pieces, each with their individual move capability, and their corresponding pawns), increasing the size of the board accordingly, and which lasted into the seventeenth century in some areas of Germany, the modern chess queen ruled from that point onward.

This trend is reflected in portraiture and genre painting of the period. While many artists used chess-related elements merely as composition, others either employed them as metaphor, or, as in the work of late Renaissance artists Lucas van Leyden, Giulio Campi, and Sofonisba Anguissola, as genre slice-of-life paintings that could be interpreted to reflect the transition from old to new in both the representation of the pieces as well as of the players. The few paintings executed prior to this period which depict the game focus mostly on the players, all men; any women are purely background characters (usually whores or amoureuses merely observing a game played between men), even non-essential ones.

Van Leyden’s \textit{The Game of Chess} (1508) brings them to the foreground: a young, middle or burgher class woman and an older woman, presumably her attendant or chaperone.\textsuperscript{18} She appears to be receiving guidance from an older man, who is either an older relative—father, perhaps—or another member of her small retinue. The other player, male, is either his opponent’s husband or suitor, since the level of his style of dress is equivalent to hers. The remaining figures grouped around or near the board, either actively paying attention or in conversation with each other, are all men. But the

\textsuperscript{17} Weissberger, \textit{Isabel Rules}, 151.
\textsuperscript{18} This painting is also one of the few extant representations of the courier chess variant, displaying several of the additional pieces quite clearly as well as the enlarged board.
young lady has a somewhat blank look, as if she is unsure of her qualifications to attempt this occupation. The expressions on the men involved—the avuncular look of the man helping her (or criticizing her move), the only semi-attentive faces of the two men standing more or less center, and then not only the expression but the body language of the other player, who is making almost no effort whatsoever to be interested (or is sleeping with his eyes open) in his opponent’s play, skilled or otherwise—imply she is out of her league in this presumably male-dominated activity. Historian Mary Garrard, noting that the young woman “makes her move timidly, with some coaching, as her male opponent relaxes, bored and self-satisfied,” interprets this painting as a “comic joining of the rules of chess, old and new, with the battle of the sexes” rather than any kind of statement as far as how seriously a woman might be taken as having the brains to mount any kind of serious chess defense, much less an aggressive offense.19

If, however, one counts up the captured pieces on each side, it appears that the young woman, not her bored (and possibly drunk) opponent, is winning; perhaps van Leyden is only paying lip service to the idea that a woman would be the inferior player. Unlike Garrard, who sees the scene as a gathering of male chauvinist pigs taking advantage of an unworldly young woman, chess historian Rick Knowlton contends that not only is the chessboard the focal point of the painting, but the young lady is about to wipe it with her loutish opponent; her pieces outnumber his, and her courier and rook are about to force checkmate.20 Given the possible position of the courier variant in the chess

development timeline, this situation raises the intriguing possibility that van Leyden was hinting at the imminent arrival of *la dame enragée* in the premise of this painting.

The figures in Giulo Campi’s *La Partita a Scacchi* (“*A Game of Chess*”), painted in 1550, are definitely upper-class or even possibly of the nobility. The young woman who is the focus of the painting is very well-dressed and clearly in charge of both the gathering and the game, having already collected several of her opponent’s pieces. In Campi’s scenario, the competition appears to be more intimate, a variation on the game of love; what little we do see of the male opponent indicates that he is not only paying attention to the game (unlike van Leyden’s player) but appears to be reacting with equanimity to the prospect of being bested—in this game, at least—while at the same time the presence of the rose on the table implies that the competition may extend into another arena. Certainly the somewhat smug look on the woman’s face as she points to the chessboard, as if to emphasize the significance of her move to the jester at her side, could be construed to denote a sexual victory. The single rose then can be viewed as a sexual token offered by the woman’s opponent, as a gift or a promise, although under the circumstances it may very well represent the spoils of his defeat—or as her own signal of availability, should she lose the game.

While she acknowledges that a case can be made for viewing the painting as a study in amorous byplay, with a side of moral ambiguity, given the period in which Campi flourished, Garrard points to the development of the modern game as a potential influence on Campi’s choices. Assuming the woman’s opponent is the armored figure in the foreground with his back to the viewer, Campi’s decision to place him there could
very well represent the effect the new queen, with her enhanced powers, would have on the traditional warriors in the game, i.e., the knights and pawns.\textsuperscript{21}

Sofonisba Anguissola’s \textit{Partita a Schacci} (1555) dispenses with male figures altogether in her portrait of her younger sisters around the chessboard. As the daughters of “liberal” nobility, Sofonisba and her sisters (who also engaged in portraiture into their adult years) would have been taught the game. The lines of vision from one girl to another are interesting in that they go from youngest to eldest (Sofonisba, who is out of frame). Lucia, who is about to play, appears to be looking for approval or some type of reaction from her elder sister, while her opponent, Europa, is either afraid of what the move will be or waiting impatiently to counterstrike. Young Minerva’s placement implies she is supporting Lucia (at least this time around—sibling alliances have a tendency to shift constantly), and the smile on her small face looks more like a gleeful smirk as she waits for her other sister’s defeat.

This is not a stiff, stylized grouping of female figures, but rather a skillful capture of a moment between movements, either before the eldest sister, behind the camera as it were, gives a nod of approval to the elder player to continue, or the latter triumphantly calls checkmate and sets action in motion, while the youngest member of the group is merely waiting for either one to act so she can safely indulge in giggles at her other sister’s defeat. Even the duenna, despite her minimal position in the picture, is watching carefully, ready to deal with any sibling mischief or misbehavior pending the outcome of the game, rather than simply patiently enduring the activity. There is also a subtle hint of feminism in the picture that goes beyond the acceptance commonly given to such

\textsuperscript{21} Garrard, “Here’s Looking at Me,” 601.
groupings in this period, partly because of Anguissola’s ability to breathe life into her subjects, but also in her choice of a chess game as the focal point. Additionally, as noted by Garrard, Anguissola discards the prior conventions favoring males as the primary figures in favor of not only an all-female cast but one which shows a hierarchy between the girls as well as a battle between queens. Such a reading even allows for inclusion of little Minerva as a player, a pawn with the potential to become queen in her own right.

The man’s world of Italian Renaissance art used chess both in comic pieces as well as more serious studies, wherein men played without any female distraction, good or bad, and the implication is that, either way, true insight concerning the game remained a male prerogative. Patricia Simons points out that Anguissola’s painting is a milestone because not only does it show that women, with or without male companionship, “also engage in the reasoned rather than sexual, entertaining aspect of chess,” but it also becomes “an occasion for lively fun, animated gestures and familial closeness.” Here, Minerva’s grin takes on yet additional meaning, as she invites the viewer to consider the fact that these four young women are able to compete with adult men on a serious level while simultaneously entertaining themselves—no feeble adult attempts at amusement, with or without alcohol and loose women, needed.

“Chess has been enacted as a sign for strategic reasoning, whether on the battlefield, in economic and political struggles, or in the skirmishes of love and sex; for too long the West has coded such negotiations and rationality as a masculine prerogative of pursuit and victory, occasionally ceding a place to a woman at the chessboard when her power was recognized as an exclusively sexual, seductive embodiment or as an inconsequential domesticated creature of leisure. . . . The blending of gendered boundaries

22 Ibid., 603.
might be performed, in which supposed contradictions such as the pleasures of reason and the logic of allure could be enjoyed during the intensity of a chess match.”

Simons’ conclusion goes to the core, and emphasizes the inherent irony, of presumptions about chess as a mostly, if not exclusively, male activity, which continue to prevail to a large extent (even allowing for the disparity in numbers between male and female players), when the most powerful piece on the board is the queen. Given that those modern rules were still relatively new at the time Anguissola engaged in her painting career, her choice of portraying the game in a solely female and very proper environment is significant. She may or may not have intended to make a feminist statement, and it is certainly a gentle one, but a statement it is.

These three paintings present a contemporary slant on the changing roles of gender where the game of chess was concerned, both on and off the board. The evolution of the modern game, as well as the modern queen, suggests a correlation with changing views and depictions of women’s participation in this activity which bears noting. It is this change, and sense of emancipation, strengthened by the familial ties from generation to generation of Orzel women and their shared love of the game, which I envisioned as the thematic core of The Chess Players. As heir to this legacy, Irina Orzel becomes the agent of change, arriving in the all-male enclave on an unexpected spring breeze, and eventually nudging the players, as inexorably as checkmate, to acceptance that tradition also depends on the ability to recognize the hand of chance, and improvise accordingly, in order to evolve and survive.

24 Ibid., 71.
Art, Improvisation and Randomness

During the twentieth century, Marcel Duchamp, one of France’s most innovative proponents of Cubism, made a life’s work of emphasizing the roles, and importance, of chance and improvisation in creativity. Melding his passions for art and chess into a shared activity, he created chess-related artwork which expanded beyond the portraiture or compositional arrangement typical of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, particularly in terms of how he chose to incorporate the mechanism of movement into his painting.

Duchamp was primarily influenced initially by post-Impressionism as well as Cubism and Fauvism. His early mentor was his older brother, Jacques Villon, but Duchamp soon began to use more angularity and repetition in his shapes, and then developed an interest in adding movement and dimension beyond the typical Cubist style. The wide variety in genres in France at this time, particularly in Paris, and the social and professional interaction between many of the artists, gave Duchamp a virtual banquet of styles and influences to sample and develop with his own concept of what art should involve. A lesser talent would have been considered a mere dilettante, but Duchamp’s sense of innovation and aloofness, as well as his cerebral approach to art and chess as equally co-existing entities, combined to create a body of work that stands on its own.

One of Duchamp’s most intriguing pieces that typifies his cerebral and improvisational method regarding chess-as-art is *La Mariée mise à nu par ses célibataires, même* (The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even), also known as the
Large Glass, which he worked on from 1915 to 1923. Although Duchamp never quite finished it, he described it as his “most important single work.”¹

The Large Glass (aptly named, for it consists of two glass panels, one atop the other, the entire work approximately nine feet high, six feet wide, and three inches deep) is constructed mostly using oils, lead wire, and lead foil. The top panel contains a lone metallic figure (the “Bride”), in front of a shape that suggests some kind of cloth. Her upper body is a rectangular piece of metal, with a skinny torso leading to pelvic region and equally bony legs; presumably the upper body is more substantial to allude to breasts. She is holding a scepter, but it does not seem to make a difference to her situation. The “cloth” behind her is being stripped by a series of wires, which have already done the job on her body, and even her head seems to be flattened and elongated by their pull. These wires cross down into the lower panel, where they interact with a different series of shapes—nine figures on the left, the “Bachelors” or “Malic Molds”— and a blocky figure on the right which appears to be a reconstruction of the Bride, but in a different form. Each Mold has a different shape, or uniform, implying that each has a specific role, and their general construction gives the appearance of individual chess pieces. The wires continue through the lower panel, swirling about a large and ambiguous (even for Duchamp) figure on the right.²

Viewed in its entirety, the work represents the chess metaphor. The Bachelors must capture the Bride, much as the pieces in a chess game are tasked with capturing the

² A fair amount of scholarship exists regarding The Large Glass as erotic metaphor, some in almost painful depth and specificity depending on the individual interpretation. This might have been interesting to investigate under other circumstances, but for the purposes of this project, I chose to focus exclusively on the relationship of The Large Glass to chess.
opposing king, preferably without losing their own queen.³ Duchamp scholar Francis M. Naumann, who supports this interpretation, bases his contention on Duchamp’s own notes for the *Large Glass*, stating that the details of mechanical movement in the piece, especially where the Bachelors are concerned, are similar to and as “intriguing” as the progression of moves in a “well-played game of chess.”⁴ Such an interpretation is supported by the intricacy of Duchamp’s design as well as the focus required to follow it through to a satisfactory solution.

The chess metaphor can be applied even more broadly when one considers the Bachelors. From an earlier study which Duchamp then incorporated into the *Large Glass*, the “Malic Molds” originally were eight figures, designed to correspond to the eight files on the chessboard. He assigned them specific identities based on their uniforms (Busboy, Cuirassier, Department Store Delivery Boy, Flunky, Gendarme, Policeman, Priest, and Undertaker), much as each of the primary chess pieces are identified by their shape and accoutrements, which can range from simple to fairly elaborate depending on the design of the set.⁵ Bradley Bailey has focused on the historical link Duchamp has forged with the medieval game of chess by his creation of the Malic Molds, drawing a connection between these figures and the medieval chess moralities. As discussed above, these allegorical sermons were designed to provide instruction by using the chess pieces to

⁴ Ibid.
represent the various classes of men, using the names and moves of the chessmen as the foundation for "ethical, moral, social, religious and political precepts."\(^6\)

While the roles of the primary chess pieces were obvious, the pawns were another matter. De Cessolis divided them into eight groups: laborers/farmers, smiths, merchants, weavers and notaries, innkeepers, physicians, city guards, and gamblers/other risqué types, all recognizable by their clothing as well as their tools and other accoutrements. Similarly, Duchamp’s Molds have individual “uniforms” loosely suggesting their vocations, as well as different hats for identification.\(^7\) Such a contention might suffer from the observation that each of the pawns in the moralities was related in purpose to the piece it protected (e.g., the pawns representing the smiths and the city guards stood in front of the two knights), but in the *Large Glass* Duchamp’s Bachelors are milling in a clump in the lower left portion of the piece, apparently not serving any individual career-related purpose of placement. However, Bailey also points to the allegorical nature of chess as a whole, which can also be traced back to the chess moralities, that all of the pieces, despite their rank and power during the game, were reduced to equal stature upon being captured or at the end of the game, thus providing a “convenient” analogy for the finality and inescapability of death.\(^8\) Bailey cites H.R. Murray, quite possibly still the ultimate authority on the history of chess, referring to the notion of a bag where the pieces all lie “in promiscuous confusion,” cheek by jowl with each other in no particular order.\(^9\)

---


\(^7\) Bailey, “Passionate Pastimes,” 71.

\(^8\) Ibid.

This concept be traced back even farther to the *Quaedam moralitas dee scaccario per Innocentium papum*, the so-called “Innocent Morality,” which, in addition to comparing the world in general to a chess board, as mentioned previously, posited a common bag where all pieces—i.e., mankind—began and to which they returned at their end. The *Quaedam* additionally made no distinction for rank or class inside the bag, on the basis that all men come from a common bag or place at the onset of the game, and are returned to that place at the end, with no separation between the pieces or, in the case of humanity, between rich and poor. Duchamp may not have specifically delineated a bag, or any other kind of container or enclosure for the assembled Bachelors, but nonetheless their placement and positioning, along with the fairly minimal designation of individual characteristics, and particularly their common purpose, fit the definition of the medieval morality bag.

One other interpretation of Duchamp’s idiosyncratic approach to art as chess, and vice versa, is that by Dalia Judovitz, who posits the existence of chance as a relevant and determining factor in Duchamp’s work. As noted, this is not a concept which is generally taken into consideration with regard to chess, an activity typified by logic as well as detailed and thoughtful planning; most people do not envision room for chance in the process. Yet Judovitz raises the possibility, claiming that Duchamp not only did so but celebrated the presence of chance as an integral element in his artistic construct. According to Judovitz, Duchamp’s retreat from making artistic decisions was not so much eschewing art altogether as reluctance to interact with the physical conventions;

---

instead, he chose to remodel his approach to art as “intellectual expression.”\textsuperscript{11} If chess gamesmanship, involving movement and placement with regard to one’s opponent as well as the board altogether, is applied as a model for making decisions in art, chance not only does not disappear from the scenario, but it serves as a resource to be used in tandem with “other forms of determination in order to develop a notion of strategic play.”\textsuperscript{12}

Judovitz identifies the growth of hypermodernism in chess as an influence in Duchamp’s thinking. Developed in the 1920s, hypermodernism was a response to the classical style, characterized by a “more static, positional approach,” which focused on the center chess positions to dictate the strategic dynamics of the game and manipulation of the pieces.\textsuperscript{13} Judovitz comments that, interestingly, this transition in chess styles resembled changes in art styles and movements as well.\textsuperscript{14} Hypermodernism provided a new view of contrasting systems which could be applied to the same chess problem, namely “opposition,” i.e., the classic or traditional way of looking at the board, based on the alignment of the two kings and their positions in relationship to the different files, ranks, or diagonals, and “sister squares,” or connections between related squares which are only revealed through conceptual rather than physical alignment; recognizing both systems allowed Duchamp to look to “a new system of relations whose logic would bypass the constraints of both unity and dualism.”\textsuperscript{15} Duchamp was able to apply his focus

\textsuperscript{11} Dalia Judovitz, \textit{Drawing on Art: Duchamp and Company} (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010), 109.
\textsuperscript{12} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{13} Ibid., 118.
\textsuperscript{14} Ibid., fn. 37, 255.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid., 118.
on mechanical movement to both chess and his art, which paradoxically allowed him to incorporate both the logic of chess and the element of chance into his artistic endeavors.

But this still does not quite satisfy the question of how something as arbitrary and feckless as chance can achieve a reasonable intermingling with the logic of the game, much less explain Duchamp’s ability to apply the mixture to art. Duchamp himself claimed that the attraction of “pure chance” was its proffer of a way to oppose “logical reality,” and he believed it both implied “a radical critique of rationality” as well as symbolized “an appeal to freedom from [modern] conditions of alienated production,” i.e., the process of manufacture associated with production of art to which he objected so much. Consequently, Judovitz notes, Duchamp’s redefinition of art to include the chess construct, combining concepts of strategy and opposition with individual artistic expression, and discarding the current conventions, opened the door for chance to act “as a trigger for the production of new, even groundbreaking work.”

Apparently the gray matter of some of Duchamp’s contemporaries was less open to the possibility that, regardless of whether he was right, not only could art have a cerebral quality, but it could be enjoyed on an equal basis and even integrated with chess as a pursuit worthy of the artistic mind and/or soul. He remained indifferent to the naysayers, experimenting with movement and mechanics, “effacing the boundaries tacitly imposed on the theoretical questions art could legitimately raise,” while expanding the

---

16 Cabanne, *Dialogues with Marcel Duchamp*, 46, quoted in Judovitz, *Drawing on Art*, 120.
17 Judovitz, *Drawing on Art*, 121.
definition of what constituted art, and establishing his vision of art-as-chess and chess-as-art. 18

Duchamp’s views on the nature and influence of chance were equally controversial. Whether he was being judgmental or simply stating his opinion, Duchamp did not consider the viewing public ready to accept his ideas, but he believed that people would come to at least accept the possibility of chance as a significant determining factor.

I don’t think the public is prepared to accept it . . . my canned chance. This depending on coincidence is too difficult for them. . . . In fact the whole world is based on chance, or at least chance is the definition of what happens in the world we live in and know more than any other causality. 19

This is a sentiment which he applied on a daily basis, to his art, to his chess playing, and to his personal philosophy. It is worth considering not just on the level of worldview in general but in its application to chess; Duchamp, with his immense talent and intellect, assigned similar value and/or significance to chance in chess in tandem with an artistic activity. To borrow from the master himself:

A game of chess is a visual and plastic thing, and if it isn’t geometric in the static sense of the word, it is mechanical, since it moves . . . In chess there are some extremely beautiful things in the domain of movement, but not in the visual domain. It’s the imagining of the movement or of the gesture that makes the beauty, in this case. 20

Even in a chess metaphor more grounded in the concepts of war, destruction, and the human condition, the element of chance, if not omnipresent, has been engaged to play a significant part, as in Samuel Bak’s surrealist depictions of chess pieces and their

---

playing fields, the chess boards themselves. These paintings reflect his intense interest in history and heritage, and how each informs the other. As a survivor of the Holocaust and the Vilna ghetto, Bak, who gave his first exhibition at the age of nine, addresses war, memory, and social ethics in his art. Although Bak’s chess paintings are clearly anti-war, he also includes elements of hope and chance, and frequently humor, as if to emphasize the commonality of his themes and their universal applicability to the human condition. In Bak’s hands, the chess pawn plays many roles, from aggressor to victim to jester, much as humanity does. However, Bak might never have chosen to include chess as the theme for one of his many series of works; if not for his stepfather, Nathan Markovsky, who introduced him to the game, he “would never have landed in these strange landscapes, populated by all those relics of ancient battles.”

Bak’s chess figures are almost always depicted outside of the normal realm; as opposed to being placed neatly about a board, focused on a game in progress, these exist in a state of damage or decay, strewn about the landscape, frequently cowering in small spaces or attempting to look invisible. This representation of normally static pieces as anthropomorphized figures, according to reviewer David Schifrin, forces the viewer to recognize the inherent frailty and isolation of these characters; the very “strangeness of this humanization makes it more compelling.” At the same time, the landscape in the background appears relatively tranquil, as if to suggest that the existence of immediate

turmoil does not necessarily guarantee its continuation, or at least that hope remains a reasonable quantity in the human condition. His use of pawns generally puts them in the greatest peril, usually after inflicting considerable injury on them, but then every so often he creates a painting showing a pawn in a transitional state heading towards survival at least, if not something greater, not unlike the determined journey of a resolute and skillful pawn towards the eighth rank and the ultimate power of queenship. Once in a Blue Moon (1998) is an excellent example of the pawn’s triumph as it scales the heights from first to eighth rank, and literally bursts through the limitations of its former world.

Regardless of how the game is played, the goal is not necessarily to establish peace but to win and play again. Bak’s paintings in his series The Game Continues show that very condition, not a “landscape of closure” but an “alternating rhythm of invasion and retreat, triumph and humiliation” which exemplifies our current era of strife.23 Thus, the lack of “formal restriction” in the images portrayed in The Game Continues are a “stimulating but disturbing commentary on the richness and the limits of metaphor in art.”24 Yet Bak succeeds in pushing the boundaries of these limitations with his choice of chess as metaphor for the human experience. In chess, different options for moves exist simultaneously, the value of each dependent on the individual piece’s move capability and position, as well as those of pieces in opposition, each with its own set of potential moves and responses. Langer sees this same dynamic of roles of pieces in a state of flux, between movement and rest, the exchange between them producing “an austere and sometimes sinister beauty” in many of Bak’s landscapes, not unlike the more complex

23 Ibid.
24 Ibid., 12.
combinations of moves in the game, which Langer contends develop with a “precision and mastery that resemble the controlled supremacy of art.”

*Your Move: Chess in the Art of Samuel Bak*, which ran at the Pucker Gallery from August 2, 2003, through September 1, 2003, exhibited a number of newer paintings, which led *Boston Phoenix* art columnist Jeffrey Gantz to suggest that the then-current political situation in the Middle East might have precipitated some of these works, or, alternatively, that the artist was focusing on “postlapsarian humanity and putting the question to God.” This exhibition, according to Gantz, mixed Holocaust imagery even more effectively with Bak’s usual chess metaphors of anthropomorphized and stricken pieces and settings than in his prior paintings; throughout the series, the rules of the game (and life) are broken, boards cracked and crushed like the rubble of bombed-out cities, and Bak’s large stone dice cubes “suggest that what should be a test of skill has become a game of chance.” In the accompanying commentary in the catalogue for this exhibit, Theodore Rabb observes that chess, despite its ordered structure, can reflect substantial variation in behavior, situations, and outlook, thus providing extremely “fertile stimuli” for an artist like Bak; with his mastery of surrealist technique, the history of art, and his instinctive recognition of symbolic meaning and power, it should not surprise anyone that Bak chose to focus on the variety and number of “layers of meaning” involved in and produced by the game.

---

25 Ibid., 13.
27 Ibid.
Bak’s use of block-type structures, either specifically portrayed as or suggesting dice, and often representing actual squares on the chessboard, is especially noteworthy. Given Bak’s historical knowledge, this may also be a reference to the original connection between chess and wagering—i.e., chance—and the relationship between the two. Langer attributes Bak’s choice of the recurring image of dice to the “unforeseen possibilities that often frustrate carefully laid plans or open hitherto unsuspected opportunities for conquest”; chance, he says, “restores to human nature a certain humility that is lost when cultures are consumed by the arrogance of aggression.”

Bak’s dice, when incorporated within the chessboard, appear, often in broken pieces, in a scattered non-pattern, contaminating its former pristine geometry with what Langer describes as the “brooding menace of chance.” Thus, Langer contends, on a metaphysical level, chess as a metaphor changes with the arrival of randomness and its influence on the human condition within a formerly structured universe; drawing an analogy between humanity and the fragile pawns of Bak’s paintings, he comments that the latter “become projectiles hurled aloft toward an uncertain destiny.”

Even in the most predictable scenario, in Bak’s surreal images, fickle Fortune continues to maintain a presence. Likewise, during a game, a predictable progression of moves can suddenly turn turtle by the introduction of the unexpected, such as a rash move made too quickly under pressure from a ticking chess clock, opening the door for further improvisation by both players in their pursuit of checkmate.

30 Ibid., 18.
31 Ibid., 19.
Fortune and Her Wheel:  
Chess in the Book of the Duchess and the Knight’s Tale

Although the Book of the Duchess is Chaucer’s only known work to specifically reference the game, a case can be made for relating the character of Fortune, as she appears elsewhere, particularly in the Knight’s Tale, in a chess context. By Chaucer’s day, several literary works on chess had been published. He would undoubtedly have been familiar with at least two of the existing literary works on chess, Jeu de Echecs by Jehan Vignay, as well as de Cessolis’ chess-themed moralities and the personae represented by the different pieces.1 Even though Chaucer made few references to the game in his own work other than the Black Knight’s soliloquy in Book of the Duchess, his access to the poems and romances of the period, rich in “chess lore and myth,” would have given him more than enough familiarity with the game and its conventions, literary and otherwise.2 Furthermore, according to medievalist Mark Taylor, Chaucer’s reference to “jeopardyes” is based on specific knowledge of written collections of chess problems, also known as jeopardies or partita, two of which surviving today have been dated to the late thirteenth or early fourteenth century in England.3

On first blush, the Knight’s Tale does not incorporate a direct chess metaphor, but an analogy may be made between its central themes and chess, particularly when it is

read in connection with the *Book of the Duchess*. Both poems are based on love pursued and won, only to be lost arbitrarily and capriciously despite the ordered environment in which they take place. In the *Book of the Duchess*, this process is compared specifically to a chess game between two individuals, the grieving Man in Black and the personification of fortune. The *Knight’s Tale* increases the cast of characters, the playing field, and even the number of levels of the game, wherein Fortune is not portrayed so much as a specific character but as an impersonal force which influences the actions of gods and humans, and the struggle to impose order on disorder plays out in both spheres as well. While there is no direct evidence that Chaucer may have entertained such a premise, in effect, the *Knight’s Tale* can be viewed as a multi-dimensional chess game played by primary and ancillary opponents on a variety of levels from the individual and mundane to the cosmic.

The influence of fortune is at the heart of both poems. In the *Book of the Duchess*, Chaucer links it directly to the chess metaphor, presenting “fals Fortune” as the Black Knight’s opponent. As was common in both chess practice and literature in the Middle Ages, the Black Knight has chosen to gamble on this match, but the stakes are much more substantial than a typical wager, for he is playing with the life of his lady. It is also a pointless bet; at a crucial point in the game, Fortune captures the Black Knight’s *fers*, or queen, representing his lady, and polishes him off with an errant pawn one move later.7 Within a few moves, Fortune displays just how quickly her wheel can fling a hapless

---

5 Adams, “Pawn Takes Knight's Queen,” 133.
7 Ibid., 654-661.
mortal from its top to the ground. Mark Taylor points out that the Black Knight’s ignorance of Fortune’s dual nature allowed him to delude himself as to “what to expect at the height of his happiness.”8 But the Knight’s resentment of Fortune’s whim is temporary; he eventually does acknowledge, however ruefully, that he “wolde have drawe the same draughte” regardless of any opportunity for foreknowledge of Fortune’s capricious nature.9 His grief, then, is for the actual physical loss of his love rather than constituting an embittered outcry towards his opponent, whose influence over the lives of men he understands and accepts even while wishing she had treated him differently.

The concept of Fortune as an impartial and arbitrary entity was a continuing focus during the Middle Ages. Howard Patch delineates three primary viewpoints: the romantic, “content to leave things to chance, with or without personification”; the rationalist, who, in the Aristotelian-Aquinian tradition, denied Fortune’s existence; and those in the middle, who “held to a belief in chance subordinate to reason, a kind of personification of Aristotle’s causa per accidents.”10 He notes that, in a contest between the philosopher and the poet to further define the third category, the poet would succeed in refuting the “hardheaded philosopher” by “relying that even the philosopher must admit the existence of apparent chance.”11 Patch also contends that Fortune’s increased literary visibility during a time when poets freely borrowed from their predecessors and each other, as well as the highly unstable political and social environment, increasing a

---

8 Taylor, “Chaucer’s Knowledge of Chess, 308.
9 Chaucer, The Boke of the Duchesse, line 682.
11 Ibid., 378.
sense that “circumstances really turn on the wheel of the fickle goddess,” also contributed to bringing Fortune’s role, now super-sized, back into the popular spotlight.12

This is the Fortune of the Knight’s Tale, perhaps more force than persona, but Chaucer deliberately makes her powerful enough to affect the orderly progression of life and the fates of the tale’s characters, diverging from Boccaccio’s example. In the Teseida delle Nozze d’Emilia, Fortune is frequently characterized as “angry,” “wretched,” and “cruel,” or reviled with specific reference to the individual complaint.13 Only at the beginning of Book VI does Boccaccio acknowledge her random whimsy:

> Fortune, that lofty governess of the world who changes one thing into another over and over with her inconstant movements . . . just as it suits her to do and how and when it suits her.14

Chaucer views her with more consistent objectivity.15 Palamon and Arcite are ruled by Fortune in all of her aspects, although Arcite acknowledges it far more frequently, beginning with his observation while both share the same prison that Fortune gave them “this adversitee.”16 Having acknowledged Fortune’s influence, Arcite is even inclined to fling himself toward what she might hold for him regardless of any potential cost, proclaiming, “And everich of us take his aventure,” and clings to this belief despite being exiled from Athens (and Emelye).17 While Palamon acknowledges the power of

---

12 Ibid., 379.
14 Ibid., Book VI, line 1.
15 It should be noted that the word “fortune” itself appears twelve times over the course of the tale; its equivalent, “aventure,” twelve times as well, and other references such as “wheel” and “destynee” or “destinee” appear at least another seven times.
16 Geoffrey Chaucer, Knight’s Tale, The Canterbury Tales Complete, ed. Larry D. Benson (Boston: Houghton, 2000), fragment 1, line 1086.
17 Ibid., lines 1186, 1238.
Fortune, he does not understand the connection between it and any actions he might take. This dynamic is emphasized in the relationships between the two and their respective patron gods, Mars and Venus, who “act along the most simple lines of policy as if they were pieces in a game of chess,” as well as the influence of Fortune on all four. Alexandra Cook has observed that the lovers perceive a connection “between the act of surrendering oneself to the mercy of capricious, whimsical gods and surrendering oneself to the experience of romantic love.”

Nor is Fortune content with merely ruling the affairs of Palamon, Arcite, and the object of their mutual desire, Emelye. Even the social and political structure created by Theseus is subjected to Fortune’s regard, and the case could be made that it is the true target of Fortune’s actions. The Knight’s Tale contains a distinct progression of actions and events, much as the progression of a chess game: move, encounter/attack, immediate result, and ramifications reaching beyond the initial battle to affect the stability and fortunes of both sides. The element of chance represented by wagering in the medieval game, including dice play that frequently involved variations to moves dictated by the roll of the dice, equates to the role of Fortune in the tale. Even when a particular encounter appears to be moving toward a specific and perhaps obvious conclusion, Fortune’s hand tosses the dice and introduces an unexpected element to change the direction of the game.

Merle Fifield has analyzed the patterns of specific incidents within the *Knight's Tale*, contending that they “follow a simple cause-to-result climactic order resolved by the intervention of Fortune or her agent,” with the additional element of celestial disorder “resolved by the intervention of Fortune in the character of Saturn” during the theater section:

The opening section demonstrates the irresistible force of Fortune; the duel illustrates the failure of individual action; the description of the theater proves the failure of all earthly order; the tournament illustrates the failure of corporate action; and the sermon offers the only solution to survival in a world governed by eternal change against which both man and society are powerless.22

This pattern is not dissimilar to a chess match: opening exploratory moves; interaction between questing lesser pieces aimed at winnowing down the opponent’s forces; extended battling by lesser and key pieces; and eventual mate or resignation acknowledging inescapable helplessness. Even though, like Arcite, the player may attempt to anticipate his opponent’s actions, accepting their likelihood and that of his own contribution to the direction of play, the element of the unknown, or chance, can deliver the unexpected at any time and send the game careening in a different direction. Fifield points out that the “consistent original impetus of all action is force—Theseus’ force and Fortune’s force—neither of which can be directed or reversed by Palamon and Arcite.”23

One goes off into exile, the other remains in prison, and the Knight asks the company which “hath the worse.”24 The hand of Fortune lies equally heavily on them both.

Fortune returns with equally arbitrary impartiality in Part II of the *Knight’s Tale.* Through somewhat vague circumstances involving assistance by an unidentified “friend,”

23 Ibid., 99.
24 Chaucer, *Knight’s Tale*, line 1348.
but which the Knight imputes to “aventure or destynee -- / As, whan a thing is shapen, it shall be,” Palamon slips his leash and escapes. Fortune then turns her attention to Arcite, who coincidentally manages to blunder into the same shrubbery where Palamon lurks “as by aventure.” Fifield contends that the degree to which their enmity is renewed is the result of their mutual realization that, rather than each being free to pursue Emelye’s hand without interference, they have both been duped by Fortune once again, and that this is the cause of the animal viciousness with which they fight. Once again, however, Fortune interferes, this time by utilizing the would-be agent of order, Theseus, who stops the duel, separates the players, and imposes his own interpretation of Fortune’s will upon them: “That ech of yow shall have his destynee / As hym is shape, and herkneth in what wyse; / Lo heere youre ende of that I shal devyse.”

The construction of the lists and associated temples in Part III is representative of the continued order instituted by Theseus, the wheel of Fortune notwithstanding. Chaucer’s lengthy descriptive passages accentuate this aspect by their comprehensiveness, to the point where, as Muscatine remarks, the descriptions seem to “consume the full fifty weeks that Theseus allows for it.” The ponderous progression is also reminiscent of the mid-game in chess, as lengthy combinations of moves are made in an attempt to establish a defensive bulwark from which to launch one’s own offensives. The setting is relatively secure as the three supplicants visit the temples of their

---

25 Ibid., lines 1465-1466.
26 Ibid., line 1516.
28 Chaucer, Knight’s Tale, lines 1842-1844.
respective patron gods (or goddesses). Even the varying degrees of vague assurance rendered are not overly disturbing: Venus shakes and makes an indeterminate “signe”; the metal accoutrements and doors on Mars’ temple ring and clatter, and Arcite believes he hears a voice saying “Victorie.”30 Ironically, the ever-present Wheel does not cast as large a shadow for the young men during their supplications, despite their frequent references to its owner up to this point, as for Emelye. Only Diana is willing to concede the potential influence of Fortune, telling Emelye that she cannot say which rival will claim the reluctant maiden.31

With the focus on the two young men and their patrons, this reminder of Fortune’s role may not necessarily seem significant. Chaucer’s descriptions of the temples, however, should give it more weight. His inclusion of a blind Cupid “as it is often seene” in Venus’ temple as well as geomantic figures Puella and Rubeus in Mars’ entourage point more specifically to Fortune’s influence.32 Then there is Diana’s temple, where the goddess, standing on a “wexynge” moon that “sholde wanye soone,” is surrounded by representations of unfortunates in Greek mythology who underwent transformations of some sort through her agency, and most of whom were her victims.33 When the mutability aspect of the moon, personified in Diana, is added to these representations, the looming persona of Fortune is no longer avoidable.34

30 Chaucer, Knight’s Tale, lines 2265-2266, 2422-2432.
31 Ibid., lines 2351-2353.
32 Ibid., lines 1963-1965, 2043-2045.
33 Chaucer, Knight’s Tale, lines 2078, 2062-2072; Susan Crane, Gender and Romance in Chaucer’s Canterbury Tales, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1994), 182.
Once Fortune enlists the participation of Saturn, however, the course of the tournament is firmly under her control. This is a major deviation from the *Teseida*; Boccaccio does not release Saturn from his Tartarean pit, but assigns the task of retrieving the hellish Furies to Venus in accordance with the agreement she has made with Mars as to the resolution of the battle. Chaucer, however, frees the Saturn/Cronus figure and puts him to work. In fact, he first appears in Arcite’s initial mention of Fortune and her influence upon the unfortunate cousins’ paths in life:

Fortune hath yeven us this adversitee.  
Som wikke aspect or disposicioun  
Of Saturne, by som constellacioun,  
Hath yeven us this, although we hadde it sworn;  
So stood the hevene whan that we were born.

One school of criticism sees Saturn as the “evil genius” of the *Knight’s Tale*, a malevolent power superseding even Jupiter. Yet the Knight’s introduction of Saturn does not ascribe absolute independence to Saturn’s force; at most, it implies equality with Fortune. However, Fortune receives primary billing where Arcite (who comments frequently on Fortune and her actions) is concerned, and it is only a heavenly “aspect or disposicioun” of Saturn, rather than the entire personality, which he mentions secondarily. Additionally, Saturn himself is surprisingly reticent about the extent of his powers. He begins by claiming that his “cours, that hath so wyde for to turne, / Hath moore power than woot any man.” Yet his self-proclaimed orbit of influence is limited; although he governs such matters as punishment of criminals, pestilence, and other dark

---

36 Chaucer, *Knight’s Tale*, lines 1085-1090.  
38 Chaucer, *Knight’s Tale*, lines 2454-2455.
and fatal areas, he then points out that “I do vengeance and pleyn correccioun, / Whil I dwelle in the signe of the leoun.”39

This last statement presents an interesting question as well. In The Age of Saturn: literature and history in the Canterbury Tales, authors Brown and Butcher examine several of the tales, including the Knight’s Tale, in the context of historical events during the latter part of the fourteenth century.40 Saturn’s journey from one zodiacal sign to another takes about twenty-five months, requiring approximately twenty-nine years (including retrograde movement) to complete the entire tour; it would have been in Leo between July 1387 and August 1389.41 If one accepts Brown and Butcher’s premise, Chaucer might very well have taken this factor into consideration. However, according to astrologer Stephanie Johnson, Saturn’s dominant signs, its “Essential Dignities,” are Capricorn and Aquarius; Leo, as a sign in direct opposition and thus an “Essential Debility,” would have actually decreased Saturn’s influence.42 Considering the various astronomical and astrological references in the Knight’s Tale alone, it seems that Chaucer would have been aware of Saturn’s ascribed abilities in the different signs. While Saturn would still evince his malefic aspect during his journey through Leo, he would not have been considered to possess any significant degree of clout at that time. Chaucer could have easily placed him in Aquarius or, better yet, Capricorn, the stronger of Saturn’s two dominant signs, thus giving him the necessary standing.

39 Ibid., lines 2461-2462.
40 Brown and Butcher, The Age of Saturn.
Chaucer deliberately evokes Saturn’s planetary aspect rather than giving him omnipotent maleficent powers, referring to him as “pale saturnus the colde,” with orbit “so wyde for to turne.”\textsuperscript{43} According to David Gaylord, Saturn may have more power than any man knows, but he is only “an astrological adjunct to Boethian themes of providence, destiny, and free will.”\textsuperscript{44} Dorothy Bethurum Loomis makes a similar observation, noting that Chaucer’s use of Saturn represents the Neoplatonist view that “all [planets] express the will of Providence.”\textsuperscript{45} Perhaps even more significant is the fact that, as Gaylord points out, other than Arcite’s initial reference to Fortune and Saturn, none of the key human players even acknowledge Saturn’s existence in general or view him as a maker of destiny, much less as one on a par with or superior to Fortune.\textsuperscript{46}

Given the overwhelming influence of Fortune through the first three parts, then, as well as the failure of any character to echo or even refer to Saturn’s declarations, not to mention the purely arbitrary choice of mechanism employed to fling Arcite from the top to the bottom of Fortune’s wheel, embodied in the Fury summarily summoned by Pluto at the snap of Saturn’s fingers, it is difficult to credit that Fortune has conceded her control of the game to a sole god, however inimical, who is technically subservient to another god. An analogy could be drawn between the Fury of the \textit{Knight’s Tale} and the “poune erraunt” of the \textit{Book of the Duchess}; having established her supremacy on both playing fields by capturing the Black Knight’s queen on the one and successfully inciting Venus

\textsuperscript{43} Chaucer, \textit{Knight’s Tale}, lines 2443, 2454.
\textsuperscript{46} Chaucer, \textit{Knight’s Tale}, lines 1085-1090; Gaylord, “The Role of Saturn in the Knight’s Tale,” 184.
and Saturn to conspire to wreak havoc on the other, Fortune can employ lesser means to finish off her chosen victims.\textsuperscript{47}

It is far more conceivable, therefore, that Saturn is acting as Fortune’s agent. Fifield states that men and gods alike are ruled by Fortune; “a meaningless human order is dedicated to a disordered hierarchy of minor controlling forces who, in turn, are subject to Fortune grinding all beneath Her wheel. . .the intervention of Saturn [in achieving Arcite’s downfall], as Fortune and not what men think Fortune is, makes the expected reversal which more completely separates the lovers than before.”\textsuperscript{48} Even Brown and Butcher concede that Egeus, Saturn’s representative, possesses “mind-numbing ‘wisdom’ . . .based on the life-long observation of change. . .The ‘up and down’ process is the movement of Fortune’s wheel.”\textsuperscript{49}

Chaucer leaves no room for doubt in the \textit{Knight’s Tale} as to the role of Fortune and the effect of her wheel, deliberately choosing to intermix the latter concept with the Knight’s “concern with the instability of human ‘wele’ astride the ever-turning wheel of Fortune.”\textsuperscript{50} Saturn’s comment to Venus concerning his wide-turning course is further evidence of Chaucer’s play on words, emphasizing the fact that neither gods nor humanity have any control over either the wheel of Fortune or the course of her agents, the planet deities.\textsuperscript{51} As Kathleen Blake notes: “The deciding force is actually Fortune, which pervades the tale. At every step of the way we hear of Fortune, Fortune’s wheel,

\textsuperscript{47} Chaucer, \textit{The Boke of the Duchess}, line 661.
\textsuperscript{48} Fifield, “The \textit{Knight's Tale}: Incident, Idea, Incorporation,” 103.
\textsuperscript{49} Brown and Butcher, \textit{The Age of Saturn}, 228; referencing Chaucer, \textit{The Knight’s Tale}, lines 2839-2841.
\textsuperscript{51} Chaucer, \textit{Knight’s Tale}, line 2454; Van, “Second Meanings in Chaucer's \textit{Knight's Tale},” 73.
Fortune’s dice, Fate, ‘Nature,’ ‘aventure,’ ‘cas,’ ‘nedes coste,’ providence, Boethian ‘destinee,’ the stars, the gods.”\(^5^2\) Clearly, it is Fortune who is in charge here, of men and gods alike.\(^5^3\) Saturn’s equivalent in my retelling may be a senior god, wielding more influence than the average deity, but he is still no match for his sister Fortune when she is in a good mood, much less when she is determined to spin her wheel and bring recalcitrant gods and humans to heel.

Having made his plan for the tournament, Theseus congratulates himself on having perpetrated the “beste game of alle” on the two knights because the object of their desire, Emelye, is totally unaware of her role in their rivalry.\(^5^4\) Larry Benson, editor of the *Canterbury Tales Complete*, defines “game” here as “joke,” although the Middle English “game” carries a variety of other meanings as well, including “[a]n athletic contest; also, a game of chess, backgammon, dice, etc.; a tournament or jousting.”\(^5^5\) This incorporates the sense of a prank being played within the larger gameplay of the tournament, and within the even larger cosmic game of chess. It is not unreasonable, then, to view Chaucer’s choice of words as significant.

When Fortune takes her place in the design, the scope of the “game” transforms from a minor contest into the greater conflict between chaos and order, with the element

---

52 Blake, “Order and the Noble Life in Chaucer’s *Knight’s Tale*,” 11.
53 Brown and Butcher’s *The Age of Saturn* contains an illustration captioned “Dicing, gaming and sudden death: the children of Saturn,” which displays *De sphaera* by Johannes de Sacrobosco. The painting shows Saturn standing in a sphere accompanied by two smaller ones containing his astrological signs, above a village scene. Gamblers are dicing on the left side of the street; sudden death (presumably of the gamblers) is happening on the right. In the middle is a walkway set out in a checkerboard pattern, and a chess game is in progress in the front center (Plate 1).
54 Chaucer, *Knight’s Tale*, lines 1806-1808.
of dispassionate chance perpetually shifting the balance. Fortune’s wheel does not dictate a specific fate for the individual. Rather, it allows for the possibility of change, which may be the consequence of mischance or occur at the arbitrary instigation of some other factor, and which may have a positive or a negative result, or both. The *Book of the Duchesse* and the *Knight’s Tale* ultimately end in tragedy, capped by the actions of the errant pawn and the short-lived Fury, both representations of Fortune’s capricious nature. Whether in play with a single individual or on a larger cosmic board, Fortune wields the chess pieces, enlisting the assistance of forces of order and chaos as she sees fit.
Conclusion

The game of chess—with its richness, complexity and barely suppressed violence is an extraordinary metaphor for the human condition. Some of the most important fiction writers and poets of the last two centuries—Nabokov, Borges, Tolstoy, Canetti, Aleichem, Eliot, and others—have fully recognized the uncanny ability of a chess game to represent the contradictions, struggles, and hopes of human society. Despite the gigantic shadow cast by IBM's super crunching Deep Blue computer's win over Garry Kasparov, the game of chess continues to offer lessons about what makes us essentially human.

—Daniel Schifrin, “Chess midrash”

The game of chess has been a part of my life now for over fifty years, some more actively than others, but nonetheless a part of my personal vocabulary and worldview. While numerous pastimes and games of skill and/or chance are based on one moral or social precept or other, chess is unique as a reflection of human endeavor. The evolution of the game itself, particularly the promotion of a weak and relatively unimportant piece to the most powerful, at a time when a similar shift was taking place in the real world (even though much of that ground was lost a few centuries later), ensured its survival as it served as an educational tool, an entertainment, and a method for developing military strategy. It has even been adopted as an empirical device for research in cognitive thinking.

At the same time, chess has provided inspiration for writers and artists (and even filmmakers) alike in varying degrees, whether on the sidelines or as part of the general composition, or providing more substantial thematic material. Here, too, chess has served as a metaphor for the human condition, depending on the specific intent of the piece.

Finally, it is a reflection of humanity’s place in the cosmos altogether. The constantly shifting balance between order and chaos, and how it affects the human condition, is perpetually subject to randomness, a chance factor which, while chaos by
nature involves randomness, does not necessarily guarantee the disruption of order that by definition is chaos. It does, however, introduce choice into the equation: a choice between options which may lead to chaos or order depending on the human element. The game of chess incorporates all three of these aspects. Each offensive move threatens chaos in the loss of warriors and eventual checkmate, while defensive strategies seek to instill order. The hand of chance, serendipitous or not, presents a set of options raised with each move, series of moves, or revised strategy, to the player with the imagination to trust his—or her—intuition to choose wisely. How those choices are made informs the rest of the game—whether it is on an actual or a metaphorical board.
Bibliography


http://www.seeingwithstars.net/images/EssDig.pdf.


Weissberger, Barbara F. *Isabel Rules: constructing queenship, wielding power*.


Artwork

*Chess Game* (c. 1508)
by Lucas van Leyden, 1494-1533
Oil on wood
27 x 35 cm
Repository: Gemäldegalerie (Berlin, Germany)
Collection: ARTstor Slide Gallery
Source: Data from: University of California, San Diego
La Partita a Scacchi (c. 1530-34)
Giulio Campi (ca. 1507-1573)
Oil on canvas
90 x 127 cm
Repository: Museo civico d'arte antica, Turin, Italy
Collection: ARTstor Slide Gallery
Source: Data from University of California, San Diego
Partita a Schacci (1555)
Sofonisba Anguissola (c. 1532-1625)
Oil on canvas
72 x 97 cm
Repository: Muzeum Narodowe, Poznan, Poland
Collection: Art, Archaeology and Architecture (Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives)
ID Number: 40-08-05/6
Source: Image and original data provided by Erich Lessing Culture and Fine Arts Archives/ART RESOURCE, N.Y.
Rights: Photo Credit: Erich Lessing/ART RESOURCE, N.Y.
The Chess Game (1910)
Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968)
Oil on canvas
44 7/8x57 1/2 in
Collection: ARTstor Slide Gallery
Source: Data from University of California, San Diego
Rights: © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Succession Marcel Duchamp
Portrait of Chess Players (1911)
Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968)
42 1/2 x 39 3/4 in
Collection: ARTstor Slide Gallery
Source: Data from: University of California, San Diego
Rights: © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Succession Marcel Duchamp
*The Bride Stripped Bare by Her Bachelors, Even (or, The Large Glass)* (1915-1923)
Marcel Duchamp (1887-1968)
Oil, lead wire/glass
109.25” x 70” x 3”
Collection: ArtStor Art History Survey Collection
Source: Data from: Digital Library Federation Academic Image Cooperative
Rights: © 2007 Artists Rights Society (ARS), New York / ADAGP, Paris / Succession Marcel Duchamp
At War (1990)
by Samuel Bak (1933 - )
Oil on Linen
18 ¼ x 21 ¾
Image Courtesy of Pucker Gallery
www.puckergallery.com
Second Revolution in the Middle Game (1998)

by Samuel Bak (1933 - )

Oil on canvas

34 x 50”

Image Courtesy of Pucker Gallery

www.puckergallery.com
Distant Fire (1998)
by Samuel Bak
Oil on canvas
32 x 39"
Image Courtesy of Pucker Gallery
www.puckergallery.com
Royal Couple (2003)
by Samuel Bak
Oil on canvas
36 x 24”
Image Courtesy of Pucker Gallery
www.puckergallery.com
Once in a Blue Moon (1998)

By Samuel Bak

Oil on canvas

36 x 24”

Image Courtesy of Pucker Gallery

www.puckergallery.com