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Four. Chess: Performative History and Dynastic Marriage

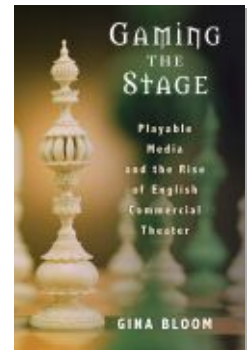
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FOUR | Chess

Performative History and Dynastic Marriage

Of all the sitting pastimes discussed in this book, chess is the one that may have been most frequently and certainly was most famously dramatized in the early modern theater—surprising, since it would seem the most difficult to stage. A card game, as we saw in Chapter 2, is well suited to theatrical performance because it offers theater spectators a similar perspective on the ludic action as onstage players and spectators: all have only partial access to information. Theatricalized chess, by contrast, offers radically different information to those on the stage and off. Whereas onstage players and spectators have equal visual access to the board, theater audiences cannot view the details of the board at all and so, unlike spectators of a regular chess game, they cannot play vicariously in the ways spectators of a card game might. When dramas stage chess, they capitalize on its status as a game of perfect information to solicit and sometimes frustrate theater spectators' application of their knowledge of the game. Despite, or perhaps because of, these problems, chess works in complex ways as the setting for moments of revelation and concealment in dramatic literature. The game appears in at least eight plays written by well-known dramatists such as Chapman, Fletcher, Middleton, and Shakespeare, and it is often used to highlight plots of political maneuvering or intrigue. For instance, the pivotal scene in the plot of Middleton's *Women Beware Women*, the Duke's sexual assault of Bianca, is performed "above" in the theater's balcony while Bianca's unaware mother-in-law plays chess below with the Duke's procuress. In Ford's *Love's Sacrifice*, the besotted Fernando finally confesses his illicit feelings for his Bianca during a chess game with her, while her jealous sister-in-law secretly watches.¹

We often think of chess as a game about political strategy because of its narrative content—the pieces on the board representing kings, queens, knights, and so on—and certainly the game has long been part of the training of rulers.² But theatrical stagings of chess reveal that its political content is conveyed less through the symbolism of its pieces than through the

gameplay experience itself. In particular, I focus in this chapter on the temporal experience of chess play, which, I argue, can be politically seditious. Early modern staged chess scenes are exquisite sites for examining how the temporality of a chess game can stimulate the political imaginations of its players, actual and vicarious. My case studies are two dramas strongly associated with seventeenth-century English politics: Shakespeare's *The Tempest* and Middleton's *A Game at Chess*, the former being the most canonical early modern example of staged chess—one of the Bard's most well-known plays—and the latter the most elaborate. *A Game at Chess* turns the theater stage into a chessboard with each of the play's characters embodying a different chess piece: White Queen, Black Bishop, and so on.

It is in part because of their associations with Jacobean politics that *The Tempest* and *A Game at Chess* beg to be singled out among the many early modern plays that dramatize chess. Both plays have been read as integrally related to their historical moment and reflective, in particular, of King James I's political policies.³ Taken as a pair, *The Tempest* and *A Game at Chess*, both performed by the playing company The King's Men about ten years apart, function as theatrical and historical bookends in King James I's decade-long use of dynastic marriage to solve his political problems abroad, effectively offering us, through drama, a direct meditation on this particular political policy. The connection between James's policy and *The Tempest* is evident partly at the level of narrative: the play is all about Prospero's attempt to arrange a dynastic marriage for his daughter, an arrangement revealed during the play's culminating chess game. The link to James is further evinced by the play's performance history: it was performed at court in 1613 in celebration of James's daughter Elizabeth's marriage to Frederick V, the Elector of Palatine.⁴ That match was meant to shore up James's Protestant alliances abroad. *A Game at Chess* has links to another historically important dynastic union, one with complex ties to that of Princess Elizabeth. In the same year that *The Tempest* was performed in celebration of Elizabeth's marriage, England welcomed a new Spanish ambassador who would for the next decade advocate a Spanish Catholic union for Elizabeth's brother Charles—a match that James hoped would fix the turmoil that had ensued after his daughter's marriage. The fuller story is worth rehearsing briefly. In the early 1620s, Catholic Imperial forces had ousted Elizabeth's husband, Frederick, from his reign as king of Bohemia and deprived him of control over the Palatinate, sending Frederick and Elizabeth into exile. James hoped that by marrying his son Charles to the Spanish Infanta, he would generate the funds and alliances to restore power to his son-in-law. In 1623, a year before Middleton's play was per-

formed, Charles's marriage negotiations began to fall apart, however, after Charles and the Duke of Buckingham pulled off a dramatic public relations stunt: after a secret visit to Spain presumably to negotiate the marriage terms, they returned to England without a Spanish bride and were received by the anti-Spanish, anti-Catholic English populace as heroes for fending off popish incursions into English sovereignty. A few months before Middleton's play was licensed, James I, under pressure from the English populace, nullified the marriage contract between Charles and the Spanish Infanta. Middleton's play—performed in sold-out theaters for nine days straight before being shut down by court officials—has long been interpreted as a commentary on these events, especially because it ends with the chess piece characters of the White Duke and White Knight (purportedly the Duke of Buckingham and Prince Charles, respectively) appearing to defect to the Black House only to emerge as heroes as they use deception to give “check mate by discovery” (5.3.174).⁵

With their barely disguised political commentary and the Jacobean court's investment in their performances, it is no wonder that *The Tempest* and *A Game at Chess* have been ripe for “topical” historicist analysis. Readers of these plays are, for good reasons, drawn to analyzing the plays in terms of their historical context, the assumption being that political events at a particular moment in time straightforwardly influence plays that were written at that same moment. My chapter puts pressure on that assumption by focusing closely on how chess functions as the setting for these dramatic narratives about dynastic marriage. Although I am interested in the intersections between early modern drama and politics, I maintain that the plays, through their staging of chess, raise questions about whether drama should be analyzed within a precise historicopolitical context. The plays instead encourage today's historians to experience time in the way chess players do: as moving in multiple directions at once—as *polytemporal*. My discussion below suggests that chess, more intensely than games of imperfect information like cards, is structured by a recursive rhythm: the game encourages players and their spectators to switch temporal frames constantly as they draw on the history of a match to project potential outcomes of a move. Whether or not conscious of this work, players and spectators of chess games become familiar at a deeply embodied level with time's recursivity.⁶ The same was true when early modern spectators watched scenes of chess play in drama; though undoubtedly aware that a staged chess game was a theatrical construct, spectators—familiar with the game from having played or bet on matches in taverns and parlors⁷—could experience a staged game much as they would a

game watched elsewhere. As *The Tempest* and *A Game at Chess* invited spectators to play chess vicariously, to feel *as if* they were playing the games onstage, so, too, they invite modern historians to play differently with the past, arriving at a less linear sense of history.

I am suggesting, then, that drama offers us insight into the history of gameplay but also into how to go about *producing* a history of gameplay. Drama, in other words, is both my object of study and the inspiration for my method of analysis. In this chapter, as throughout this book, I argue that gamification enabled the early modern commercial stage to compete with more overtly interactive forms of entertainment, such as blood sports and festive games. Staged games provide particularly intriguing material examples of the gaming structures at the heart of the commercial theater enterprise. I have also suggested that the mechanisms of and the ideological effects of these gaming structures can be appreciated especially well by the critic who can draw on her own embodied knowledge of gameplay to access and reenact game scenes.⁸ As such, the bodies of researchers should be more explicitly implicated in producing archival knowledge about the playable media of the past. The historian is a spectator of the past—not the kind of spectator who sits back and receives, but the vicariously playing spectator I have theorized throughout this book. Lacking total authority or total knowledge, the historian-spectator cannot be certain about what game and theater participants in the past knew or didn't know. Instead, like the spectator envisioned by avant-garde playwright Bertolt Brecht, the historian-spectator is produced in dialogue with her objects of study.⁹

It may be no coincidence that Brecht, who thought about the spectator as an historian, played chess on many occasions with philosopher Walter Benjamin, whose famous essay "On the Concept of History" begins with a story about cheating at chess. Through this story, Benjamin sets up his influential critique of the way history is conventionally told—as a linear story of progress—and offers an alternative narrative of time and, consequently, revolutionary ideas about political power. In what follows, I draw on Benjamin's and Brecht's descriptions of chess's temporality to explore how *The Tempest* and *A Game at Chess* dramatize the game. I suggest that the plays use the spectacle of cheating at chess as a way of critiquing the Jacobean state, and particularly its narrative of dynastic marriage, which was undergirded by a conventional, linear view of history. Staged chess mobilizes theatergoers to query the Jacobean state's view of dynastic marriage by engaging them in a more polytemporal experience of time. Through staged chess, theater spectators honed their skills not only in interpreting political history, but in consuming commercial

theater—which, we shall see, is defined by the same polytemporal rhythm that characterizes chess play.

THE TEMPORALITY OF CHESS IN BENJAMIN AND *THE TEMPEST*

Cheating is at the center of both Shakespeare's and Middleton's stagings of chess. In the case of *The Tempest*, when Prospero draws aside the curtain to show Miranda and her betrothed playing chess, the audience witnesses only the moment in the game when Miranda accuses Ferdinand of foul play. *A Game at Chess* also ends with allegations of cheating, as the White Duke's checkmate strategy involves pretending to be "an arch-dissembler" (5.3.145) to trick the Black House into confessing their own dishonesty. To understand what is at stake for temporality, historiography, and politics in these allegations of foul play, it is useful to turn briefly to Walter Benjamin's treatment of chess in his essay "On the Concept of History." The essay opens with a story of an eighteenth-century chess automaton, a puppet in Turkish dress, that won every game played against it, though it was discovered forty years and many games later that the puppet was, in fact, operated by a "dwarf" chess master hidden in a cabinet beneath the board. Benjamin allegorizes the puppet as historical materialism and the hidden chess master as "theology," historical materialism's secret weapon, which pulls its strings, allowing it to "win all the time."¹⁰ I want to think about the opening of Benjamin's famous essay not to offer a novel or even very detailed analysis of Benjaminian historiography—an endeavor that can and has been done more effectively by philosophers and historians dedicated to that particular task—but because Benjamin's story about chess opens up for me, as it does for him, a way of thinking about the temporality and the politics of cheating. When Benjamin figures the hidden chess master as pulling the strings of historical materialism, he sanctions cheating as a way to defeat the reigning victors of history (i.e., Fascists and Social Democrats), who, he argues, adopt a rhetoric of historical progress to maintain their power. According to Benjamin, this rhetoric, articulated by some historians and politicians alike, presumes that time moves in one direction toward inevitable improvement, thereby enabling history's victors to silence the stories of, and secure continued power over, others: "*even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious. And this enemy has never ceased to be victorious" (391). The only way to defeat such an indefatigable opponent, Benjamin argues, is to covertly allow "theology" to drive one's actions, violating the unfair rules of the game so that historical materialism

will win it. What Benjamin means by theology might best be understood through his concept of “redemption,” a future state of happiness to be achieved, paradoxically, by disrupting the fluid temporality of progress. Counterintuitively, Benjamin argues for the value of taking action toward that future during moments of stillness. He maintains that revolutionary classes at the moment of action are marked by an “awareness that they are about to make the continuum of history explode” (395); thus a proper historical materialist must hold to a view of the present as not a time of transition but a time “in which time takes a stand [*einsteht*] and has come to a standstill” (396).

Although Benjamin’s essay does not expand on the chess analogy, an understanding of what it feels like to play chess helps explain Benjamin’s and, more important for my purposes, Shakespeare’s and Middleton’s investments in chess as a material analogy for an alternative approach to history. Chess encourages its players and invested spectators to switch among multiple temporal frames, holding the future and past in tension as they contemplate a move in the present. This competency, though part of many games, is especially essential in chess because of its status as a game of perfect information. Although a specific chess match may be affected by factors beyond players’ control (i.e., a player is having a bad day and so fails to notice an available move), the formal setup of the game is meant to ensure to the greatest extent possible that both players have the same basic facts about the game during every moment of play.¹¹ A comparison with cards elucidates the issues at stake for players and spectators of chess. As discussed in Chapter 2, cards, being two-sided, are designed for use in games where information is at times hidden and then divulged strategically during the course of play. Thus, card games provoke participants to develop their interpretive skills so that they can figure out hidden information and use it effectively before other participants do. Chess relies on, encourages, and teaches mastery in a different set of competencies. To be sure, there are unknowns in chess: each player works to figure out the opponent’s overall strategy, which the opponent tries to keep secret for as long as possible. But because the objects of chess play (board and pieces) can be seen at all times equally by both players, as well as by spectators, there is nothing internal to the game that prevents a player from discovering and undermining the opponent’s broader strategy. Because of its formal structure, chess has long been seen as a game of skill at which anyone practiced enough may flourish. In John Florio’s *Second Frutes* (1591), one of the characters describes losing at chess as more shameful than losing at cards:

In Chess-play . . . all is unskilfulness, and carelesnes of him that loo-
 eth and providence and attentivenes of him that is the winner; so
 when a man is overcaught in a matter within his own power, wherein
 he cannot pretend any excuse or hindrance, but his owne ignorance,
 he cannot choose but be ashamed.¹²

As a game of perfect information, chess rewards players who have “atten-
 tiveness” and “providence”: careful focus on what has happened thus far
 in the match combined with keen analysis of the repercussions of potential
 moves. These skills, entirely “within [the player’s] own power,” facilitate
 victory.

It is not just the temporal unfolding of a particular match that matters in
 chess; as participants assess the consequences of a move, they may also
 draw on memories of prior games played, watched, or read about. The rela-
 tion of such memories to players’ decisions in the present is so elemental
 and virtually peculiar to chess that the game has been at the center of cogni-
 tive research on memory and decision-making.¹³ Regardless of whether we
 buy into the empirical methodologies of this research, its terms for theoriz-
 ing the temporality of chess are worth noting in light of Benjamin’s and
 early modern dramatists’ treatments of the game. Some researchers of
 chess and cognition maintain that when chess masters contemplate a move,
 they do not methodically rehearse a series of scenarios that would follow
 from each possible choice; this would take far too long. Instead, they filter
 the information on the board through recollections of prior games—
 whether played, watched, or read about—which have been stored in play-
 ers’ minds as memory modules.¹⁴ It is as if at each moment of the game,
 proficient chess players take a mental photograph of the board’s configura-
 tion and unconsciously check this against images of prior play scenarios.
 Chess masters, many studies maintain, are not any smarter than the rest of
 us; they simply have stored up more memories through more frequent ex-
 posure to the game. The past shapes the present and future of a match, but
 it does not limit that future, since no matter how many memory modules
 players have stored, they cannot anticipate every eventuality.¹⁵ Although
 each moment of the game bears traces of prior moments (within this and in
 relation to other matches), even the best of players cannot be sure of vic-
 tory, for every time the pieces on the board change positions, that future is
 reshaped. So unpredictable is chess that mastering its algorithm has been
 and remains a holy grail of contemporary artificial intelligence (AI) re-
 searchers.¹⁶ The dream of a modern-day chess automaton, a computer that
 can repeatedly and consistently play chess as well as a grand master, re-

mains unfulfilled, because the full scope of the chess experience is ultimately too complex to replicate. Chess participants, even as early learners, excel at the game if they are able to perform this complicated and creative temporal juggling, projecting possible futures by looking to a/the game's continually unfolding history.

Crucially, this balancing of past and future happens in the moment between the move of one player and the move of the other. This moment is charged in any turn-taking game, but is particularly significant in a game of perfect information because the status of the game—the information that players have—depends *only* on what a player chooses to do after this pause. Once a move is made on the board, the information both players have changes: new algorithms for victory are produced, new strategies formulated, and the past of the game is brought into new relief. Perhaps this might explain on some level Benjamin's use of chess to introduce an essay on his concept of "now-time" (395), the pregnant pause of history, for in a chess game the pause between each move is full of potential for bringing about a redemptive future that will, in turn, create new understandings of the past.

Given how central cheating is to Benjamin's and early modern dramatists' representations of chess, it is useful to explore why the pause in chess play is instrumental in cheating. Here, a *phenomenological* approach (attending to the embodied, lived experiences of chess play and chess spectatorship) offers insights that a more traditional literary approach (focusing on chess primarily as a metaphor or abstract representation) can miss. Although the history of chess is full of stories of cheating, the diceless form of the game played in the early modern period—the same version played by the chess automaton in Benjamin's account and by most players today—is, in practice, exceedingly difficult to rig. Players can cheat at games of imperfect information like cards or backgammon without being easily detected because they can convert unknown into known variables by doctoring the objects of play before the game begins. For instance, a backgammon player who needs to roll a certain number at a particular moment can use loaded dice or a false dice cup. And, as I point out in my discussion in Chapter 2 of the card game in *A Woman Killed with Kindness*, cards can be marked and placed strategically in the deck so as to advantage a player at just the right time. In effect, participants in games of imperfect information like cards and backgammon cheat by exploiting the disparities in knowledge that structure these games. Since in chess there is no formal difference in participants' knowledge, cheating requires very different approaches. One way to cheat is by colluding with someone else (a spectator, one's oppo-

ment, or some other external source, such as a reference book of chess strategies), as was done by the famous chess automaton Benjamin describes. Other ways of cheating can conceivably be obvious to anyone who is paying close attention to the match: for instance, reintroducing a piece that had been captured or disobeying the rules that govern the movement of pieces. These techniques of foul play help explain the development of the *touch-move rule*—where a piece that is touched must be played if there is a legal move it can make. As Cotton explains it: “What man or Piece soever of your own you touch or lift . . . you must play it for that draught if you can.”¹⁷ The rule, still used today, helps counter any sleight-of-hand techniques by which a player might cheat through mishandling pieces on the board during a turn.

The presence of the rule highlights the degree to which cheating at chess relies on players’ bodily interaction with gaming objects *during* the match itself. Although a chess player may intend on cheating well before the game begins, the actual cheating can occur and be caught only when it is the player’s turn to interact with the board, that is, during the pause between the completion of the opponent’s move and the enactment of the player’s own.¹⁸ It is no wonder that chess rules attend so carefully to what happens during this window of time, which, in some versions of chess, is even regulated by a clock.¹⁹ Since at least the sixteenth century, chess rules establish that players can formally raise accusations of cheating only during the pause between moves. As one early modern writer explains, “If your adversary play a false draught, and you spy it not before you play the next draught, tis then too late to challenge him.”²⁰ Cheating is somewhat easier to detect today because of the evolution of video recording technology, which allows one not only to replay the action, but to slow down the interval between moves.²¹ By interfering in the organic temporality of the game, video technology helps underscore that cheating at chess is, in effect, a way of exploiting the pause that is structurally necessary in any turn-taking game, but that is particularly replete with possibility in a game of perfect information.

Cheating is not simply an ethical violation, then; it and, indeed, debates about it are acts with the power to change or, as Benjamin would say, to revolutionize historical processes. Game studies scholarship on cheating has suggested something similar in demonstrating how new forms of a game emerge out of creative efforts to rethink and challenge its rules.²² Recall the discussion in Chapter 2 of “griefers,” who theatrically break the rules of online games.²³ Griefers call attention, by refusing to conform, to the frame of the game. And as they interfere in the game-as-played in order

to spur discussion about its rules, grievers perform what anthropologist Gregory Bateson, in his groundbreaking study of play, describes as a meta-communicative act with transformational possibilities.²⁴ That is, grievers cheat in order to raise awareness of how a game is being played by others, and their commentary on gameplay has the potential to change it, as well as to reflect on its social and political implications.

The Tempest makes room for this potential when, as Prospero draws aside a curtain to display Miranda and Ferdinand playing chess, the former is found to be accusing the latter of cheating.

Here Prospero discovers Ferdinand and Miranda, playing at Chess

MIRANDA: Sweet lord, you play me false.

FERDINAND: No, my dearest love,

I would not for the world.

MIRANDA: Yes, for a score of Kingdoms you should wrangle,
And I would call it fair play.²⁵

In openly raising the specter of cheating, Miranda essentially acts the part of griever to Prospero's game, pausing play—and pausing *the* play—to question, and possibly change, the game rules. Specifically, when she halts the chess game with her accusation of foul play, she interrupts the steady march of Prospero's plot to marry her to Ferdinand and, thus, Miranda opens up a space and a time for theater spectators to rethink Prospero's conception of dynastic marriage as inevitable historical progress.²⁶

In his pursuit of not only revenge, but a long-delayed and future-oriented form of political reconstitution, Prospero in many ways resembles the historians Benjamin critiques. Others have observed the ways Prospero narrates the past in order to impose his own view on the present and thus shape the future. His most powerful and troubling weapons are his attempts to master time and to control history by framing his unethical actions in the present—from the subjugation of Caliban and Ariel to the emotional and physical manipulations of the ship's passengers—as natural evolutions of past injustices. Prospero represents himself to Miranda and theater spectators as a victim of history (of Antonio and Alonso's past mistreatment of him), but he is, in truth, more victor than victim.²⁷ Like the victors of history Benjamin describes, Prospero tells the stories of those he has oppressed (Caliban, Ariel, and Miranda) in his own language so as to suit his own triumphal narrative. For Prospero, history is a totality, where the past's injustices legitimate his actions of the present, which will lead to

a future victory. The telos or inevitable end point of this narrative is Miranda's marriage to Ferdinand and, thus, the installation of Prospero's heir (the issue of that marriage) as a leader of Milan *and* Naples. In other words, Prospero's reconciliation plot is designed not simply to right past wrongs and return to the political state/State that existed before Prospero was ousted; it is a bid for progression beyond that state/State.²⁸ Through this auspicious match, Prospero hopes to control the future of Europe even from beyond the grave.²⁹ The chess game between Miranda and Ferdinand is a seemingly perfect image of this progression, perhaps because of the game's symbolic cachet for representing both good governance and romantic love,³⁰ the key variables Prospero manipulates in his plot to convince Miranda and Ferdinand that their dynastic marriage is actually a match of their own choosing.³¹ But the play complicates this historical narrative and its heady determinism by revealing Prospero's crowning achievement through a moment of imperfection, a moment where the strict rules and logical progression of a chess game are overturned by Prospero's own pawns.

The scene's intriguing staging raises the stakes of Miranda's accusation of cheating. Members of the theater audience witness only the moment in the game where her allegation is leveled and debated. Even after the curtain is pulled aside to "discover" the match in progress, much would have remained unknown to the play's early modern audiences since the game board must have been placed in the alcove of the theater's hidden "discovery space,"³² thereby denying spectators (even those that paid more for a stage stool at the Blackfriars or a balcony seat at the Globe) the bird's-eye view of the board granted to Miranda and Ferdinand. This limited perspective of the game must have been unfamiliar and perhaps uncomfortable for theatergoers familiar with chess. Chess was a spectator sport in early modern taverns and parlors, as is the case today in some cultures and venues where chess is played. As discussed in Chapter 1, in the early modern period new rules that made for faster matches encouraged a culture of betting on chess games. And since spectators often had a monetary stake in the outcome of a match, they were used to watching the board closely. Chess lends itself especially well to this sort of vicarious play because spectators have the same information as the players on whom they bet.

When staged in early modern commercial theaters, however, chess became for spectators a game of imperfect, not perfect, information, since spectators were positioned so far away from the board that they could not hope to follow its action in the ways to which they were accustomed. Had this been a staged card match, the audience's experience of it would re-

semble that of card games watched and bet on in any range of venues, within and outside the theater. For, as discussed in Chapter 2, wherever they are played, cards are games of imperfect information for players and spectators alike.³³ *The Tempest's* enactment of chess draws attention to the fact that the scene divides onstage gamers from theater spectators. Spectators were theatrically prevented from exercising the chess-playing competencies they may have developed from playing or watching in other contexts. Although audiences then, like scholars today, may have been invested in ascertaining whether Ferdinand is playing honestly, what matters here is not whether Ferdinand cheats but that the play withholds an answer to that question.

By staging only the pause after the alleged cheating has taken place and by hiding the board inside a curtained-off alcove, the play explicitly renders this information unknowable not just to theater audiences but to all onstage spectators of the game, including Prospero. In effect, the scene produces a cognitive tension for on- and offstage spectators between the game of perfect information they ought to experience and the game of imperfect information provided. And as such, it underscores through the *phenomenology* of gaming a logical flaw in Prospero's political plots. Throughout *The Tempest*, Prospero's character plays something like a game of imperfect information with theater spectators and with inhabitants of and visitors to the island, restricting their access to information: for example, Prospero hides Ferdinand from his father; Ferdinand's true identity from Miranda; his own interest in the marriage of Miranda and Ferdinand from the couple; and the full scope of his plots from theater spectators. No one, not even his spritely assistant Ariel, is made fully privy to all details of Prospero's plots. Prospero presents this monopoly on information as a way to ensure victory. Many of the play's readers have followed suit in viewing the dynastic marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda as a successful political outcome for Prospero, even if his means do not justify his ends.³⁴ But *The Tempest's* staged yet partially occluded chess game intimates that Prospero cannot hold all the cards, as it were; if he is playing a game of imperfect information, so are others. *Pace* the presumption that Miranda's dynastic match amounts to political progress, there is no way for anyone to know or control what will transpire when Prospero's pawn marries Naples's heir and gets promoted to queen.³⁵ Perhaps antagonism between Naples and Milan will persist, despite the union of their princes. Perhaps Miranda will not be the dutiful wife Ferdinand and Prospero expect, complicating domestic and national balances of power. Or perhaps Miranda will fail to produce the heir who is

needed to secure the unity of Milan and Naples well into the future. In short, the peace of entire states, nations, even empires rest on a partnership whose positive outcome cannot, in fact, be guaranteed.

Through its staging of chess, *The Tempest* suggests that dynastic marriages are politically ineffective because they are (like all marriages) games, involving conflict and competition. And if marriage, as scholar Frances Dolan has suggested, is a zero-sum game, then the only way to control its outcome is by cheating, imposing a certain ending on an otherwise wholly unpredictable venture.³⁶ Nevertheless, even in such a rigged game, one side will likely lose. *The Tempest's* chess scene challenges Prospero's account of dynastic marriage as a linear and teleological story, where both sides inevitably win, instead exposing such unions as games with uncertain outcomes, played by wily participants who may even refuse to follow the rules.³⁷

There is more at stake here than simply underscoring Miranda's and Ferdinand's control over their marital options. For if Benjamin is right that an alternative conception of history is possible if cheaters remain undiscovered—if covert theology drives historical materialism, like the hidden chess master who pulls the strings of the chess-playing puppet—then when early performances of *The Tempest* used the stage's "discovery space" to inhibit spectatorship of the chess game, they covered up Ferdinand's alleged cheating and in effect put the "dwarf" back into the cupboard to let the revolutionary potential of this moment linger. In this way, *The Tempest's* chess scene prompted its spectators to question the logic of dynastic marriage: the belief that the conflicts of the past can be remedied in the present through a marriage that inevitably ensures peace in the future. The performance of dynastic marriage through chess, a game that plays on and through time's recursive qualities, destabilized this sort of linear temporal logic.

A GAME AT CHESS AND POLYTEMPORAL HISTORY

It is tempting to speculate on how this lesson would have been received in 1613 when *The Tempest* was performed as part of the celebration of the dynastic marriage of King James I's daughter Elizabeth. If, as I've argued, theater spectators familiar with chess are especially well positioned to grasp the play's critique of dynastic marriage as a political solution, then to what extent was this critique available to King James's children? Unlike James's predecessor, Queen Elizabeth I, who apparently was an avid chess player, King James denounced the game as "over fond," advising his son to choose

games that are more “light” and could better distract from the serious affairs of state.³⁸ If Charles I or the princess Elizabeth took seriously their father’s advice, perhaps they were ill-prepared to grasp the message about dynastic marriage that *The Tempest* makes available to spectators experienced with chess play. Regardless of whether James’s failures of foresight can be attributed to his lack of exposure to chess, those failures would have been acutely visible in the early 1620s, when Middleton’s *A Game at Chess* was first performed. After all, the dynastic union that Middleton’s play ostensibly allegorizes through a chess game—between England’s Prince Charles and the Infanta of Spain—was being arranged to remedy the political problems facing James’s son-in-law Frederick. The new dynastic marriage was an attempt to fix the problems that resulted from the earlier one. The historical ironies are palpable.³⁹ The concept of historical irony is useful to a reading of *The Tempest* and *A Game at Chess* insofar as it can underscore the polytemporal terms of historiography.⁴⁰ But the concept is limiting if it presumes a narrowly synchronic relationship between history and drama, such that Jacobean politics are “historical context” for these plays.

Even more pervasively than *The Tempest*, *A Game at Chess* has been interpreted as a topical play that reflects and comments on a very particular historical and political context, perhaps even directly representing a specific historical event.⁴¹ But through its staging of chess, the play calls for a different approach to temporality, one that puts pressure on conventional readings of the play’s relationship to its historical moment. I argued above that for *The Tempest*’s audience members, as for players and spectators of games of chess, time does not necessarily exist in discreet units such that one event (a marriage of princes) shares the self-same moment as another event (the performance of a drama). Like participants in a chess match, theater spectators can experience the present as infused with both memories of the past and potentialities for the future, producing an experience of recursive time and a perspective on history not as unfolding but as folding in on itself at every turn.⁴² Middleton’s *A Game at Chess* invites its audiences to experience precisely this kind of polytemporal history, and it does so through even more theatrical means than does *The Tempest*. For unlike *The Tempest*, which obscures its chess game, hiding the ludic action from the theater audience’s view, *A Game at Chess* turns the stage into a literal chess game; “the boards” become a chessboard. Middleton does for staged chess what seems possible only for games of imperfect information like cards: he offers theater spectators a perspective on the game that they would have if watching it played in a tavern or parlor. As such, unlike *The Tempest*, which frustrates theater spectators’ desires to see the board—and thus know

whether Ferdinand is cheating—*A Game at Chess* bares all, rendering vicarious play a real option. When the Prologue tells audiences that the actors' great hope "[i]s to play our game to avoid your check" (Prologue, l. 10), he not only pleads for the audience's appreciation of the performance, but presumes the audience to be vicarious players of the staged game. Middleton's drama is, thus, an ideal final case study for my book's argument about theater as playable media.

This is not to say that *A Game at Chess* provides spectators the exact kind of chess game they might have experienced elsewhere. Although the chess piece characters sometimes move according to chess rules and perform legible game strategies (like the "checkmate by / Discovery" [5.3.160-61] that ends the play or the Queen's Gambit that begins it), there are plenty of inconsistencies. This lack of consistency in Middleton's representation of chess play has led most readers to treat the play's chess setting as merely an allegory, with little to no relationship to actual chess play.⁴³ But the significance of chess is not limited to its symbolism, particularly when the drama is performed. *A Game at Chess* invites spectators to play along, not to experience a particular game in progress so much as the feeling of chess play more generally.

The Prologue intimates as much when opening the play with this somewhat cryptic promise: "What of the game called chess-play can be made / To make a stage-play shall this day be played" (ll. 1–2). According to the Prologue, the actors will not perform a chess game in the abstract but rather the game as it is *played*, "[w]hat of the game called chess-play." The precise meaning of "chess-play" is left unclear because of the interrogative pronoun "what," a lack of clarity that recognizes the impossibility of staging an actual chess game in exactly the ways spectators might know it: all the actors can offer, can "play," is the *part* of "chess-play" that can be made into a "stage-play." Those who have even the slightest familiarity with chess can experience through Middleton's drama something of the ethos of chess play. Using modern critical terms, we might say that the Prologue invites theater audiences to adopt a *phenomenological* approach to the chess game, presenting chess not simply as a set of symbols meant to be decoded, but as a multisensory phenomenon meant to be *felt*. Approached this way, Middleton's chess setting offers audiences a way to feel time's recursivity and thus to understand at a deeply embodied level the polytemporal terms of historiography. As Benjamin's treatment of chess shows us, there is much at stake politically in this understanding of historiography.⁴⁴

Prior readers have failed to see how chess does political work in the play because, by approaching chess primarily as a symbol, they oversim-

plify the game and our understanding of its ideological effects.⁴⁵ For instance, chess (with its two opposing sides, grid lines, and set rules for movement) has been viewed as a game about absolute distinctions and clear regulations, which contrasts with politics—a “game” played best by those who work around rules and who do not blindly follow authorities.⁴⁶ Yet early modern chess was anything but rigid in practice, partly because it was a betting game, and increasingly so in this period. Its rules were constantly being debated and transformed to suit the dynamic and contentious contexts of wagering. To appreciate the political meaning of chess in Middleton’s drama, we need to think in very precise terms about how the game works *in play*. I want to suggest that for Middleton, chess is less an allegory for politics than it is a material metaphor through which an audience can experience, and subsequently critique, certain political ideologies, particularly those concerning dynastic marriage.⁴⁷ As does *The Tempest, A Game at Chess* undermines the state’s ideology of historical progress in part by setting up a tension between the experience of temporality produced by the chess game-as-played and the narrative about temporality told by characters on the stage. But whereas *The Tempest* establishes one character, Prospero, as its disparaged conventional historian, Middleton distributes this work among a range of characters with ties to the Black House.

It is not surprising that in a jingoistic play that associates the Black House with Catholicism and Spain, the Black pieces prevaricate constantly; but in light of the chess *mise-en-scène*, it is worthwhile noting that when pieces of the Black House play false, they tend to play false with time. Indeed, manipulations of temporality are one of the Black House’s defining features from the start, with the entire play being motivated by Ignatius’s claim that he is a victim of history, and of the Christian calendar in particular. In the induction frame, Ignatius—the founder of the Jesuit order—complains that the Church took too long to canonize him, and, even worse, that when they finally did, they made his saint’s day February 29, the intercalary day that occurs only every four years. It is his sense of mistreatment by time that provokes Ignatius’s scheme for revenge, enacted through the play proper. Ignatius awakens the allegorical character Error, who describes and then goes on to stage his dream of a chess game between Ignatius’s Black House and their enemy, the White House. Much like Prospero, Ignatius frames himself as a victim of past events and presents chess as an ideal material metaphor for his plot to reclaim command over the past and, thus, secure his future place in history. “O with what longings will this breast be tossed / Until I see this great game won and lost” (Induction, ll. 77–78).

In the play proper, Ignatius's disciples and especially his "son and daughter" (l. 60)—the Black Bishop's Pawn and the Black Queen's Pawn, respectively—seem to answer their holy father's desires to dominate time. To fulfill their plot to steal the virtue of the White Queen's Pawn, they manipulate ordinary time repeatedly. Early in the play, when the White Queen's Pawn threatens to reveal the Black Bishop's Pawn as an "arch-hypocrite" (2.1.147) after he attempts to rape her, the Black House is thrown into a state of crisis until the canny Black Bishop himself develops a plan to thwart her accusations by playing false with historical facts. He directs his guilty pawn to produce fraudulent letters that make it seem as though the accused was out of the country when the rape attempt took place:

Away, upon the wings of speed take post-horse.
Cast thirty leagues of earth behind thee suddenly;
Leave letters antedated with our House,
Ten days at least from this. (2.1.180–83)

The plan is successful. When the White Queen's Pawn publically accuses her attacker, she is warned that if she does not "with all speed . . . plead distraction" (2.2.166–68), she will be taken, "play how thou canst" (2.2.178). Her examiner figures the time of the attempted rape as the linchpin of the case, thrice asking her to declare that time: "Bring forth the time of this attempt's conception" (2.2.185); "The time, Pawn?" (2.2.192); and once she gives him his answer, "Is it he [the Black Bishop's Pawn], / And that the time?" (2.2.203–204). The Black House then uses forged epistolary evidence as to her attacker's whereabouts at that named time to undermine her story.

The effort of members of the Black House to manipulate history are, undoubtedly, central to the play's anti-Catholicism, suggesting, among other things, the danger of Catholic beliefs that practicing the sacraments can change one's spiritual destiny. Post-Reformation views of providential time and the doctrine of predestination directly countered such beliefs. Much more can and has been said on the play's religious allegory, which is inextricably linked to its political allegory. But for the purposes of my chapter's interests in temporality and history, my discussion below brackets the play's commentary on religion in order to think more broadly about its commentary on historiography. Not unlike the historians Benjamin critiques (Fascists as well as overly idealistic historical materialists), who retell the past in their own words so as to suit their narratives of victorious progress, the Black House's manufactured evidence rewrites history—in

this case, literally—producing an alternative narrative of historical events that will help their “business of the universal monarchy / Go[] forward” (1.1.243–44). And because the Black House gives proof through the written word, their version of the past is more convincing than the oral narrative of rape provided by the White Queen’s Pawn. With her unmarked body her only source of evidence, her narrative of the past cannot compete in this conventional knowledge economy.

As is also the case for the historians Benjamin disparages, the Black pieces’ confidence in their capacity to manipulate time is a function of their belief—and their ability to convince others—that time moves in a linear fashion. The Black Bishop’s Pawn expresses this view of time elegantly when questioned about how the seduction of a white pawn could possibly help the Black House achieve its plot of world domination. When his superior expresses concern that he “cannot see[]” how this part of the plan would work, the Black Bishop’s Pawn responds, “You may deny so / A dial’s motion, ’cause you cannot see / The hand move” (1.1.292–94). Time, the pawn maintains, moves forward in one direction, and a timepiece with its hidden moving hand offers an external record of this given, even if sometimes insensible, fact. The pawn articulates here what philosopher Edmund Husserl calls “objective time.” Husserl criticizes the clock for its part in debasing more immediate experiences of time, which end up being relegated to the subjective and thus ostensibly unreliable realm of feeling.⁴⁸ Husserl maintains that at the level of immediate experience, time is much thicker and layered than dials would have us believe. The clock does not reflect but actually manipulates time so that it only appears to be linear in its movement. Middleton’s play offers a similar critique by having its most suspect characters, like the Black Bishop’s Pawn, claim an ability to harness time’s linear unfolding.

This ideology of time proves to be the greatest threat to the character of the White Queen’s Pawn, who gullibly buys into it. One of the troubling flaws of the White Queen’s Pawn is her lack of patience for a better future, a weakness of which the Black House takes repeated advantage, encouraging her to move more quickly toward a promised end. Indeed, the Black Bishop’s Pawn is initially able to get close enough for a sexual attack because she is overly eager for his spiritual guidance and the transformation it promises. When he sees her again after their first encounter, during which he had given her a book on obedience to help her “forward well” (1.1.191), he finds her voraciously reading the book and marvels at “with what alacrity of soul / Her eye moves on the letters” (2.1.30–31). The White Queen’s Pawn’s speed-reading is matched by an ardent desire to show her

obedience as swiftly as possible. When she sees the Black Bishop's Pawn, she addresses him, "Holy sir, / Too long I have missed you; O, your absence starves me. / Hasten for time's redemption, worthy sir, / Lay your commands as thick and fast upon me / As you can speak 'em" (2.1.31–35). Craving a spiritual awakening that will transport her from the mundane temporality of her "poor span of life" (2.1.37), the White Queen's Pawn begs for quick deliverance and agrees to do anything he, as her spiritual advisor, commands. As the black pawn lures her in, she innocently persists in her willingness to obey him, only pausing and desisting from "go[ing] rashly on" when she is "on a sudden" (2.1.58) given the command that she kiss him. As her corrupt spiritual guide urges her to "come forward" (2.1.92), the White Queen's Pawn finally holds herself back. She is, unfortunately, too late, and the only reason she manages to avoid being taken is because another character, the Black Queen's Pawn, stages a disruption.

It turns out that the Black Queen's Pawn's real motivation is not to save the virtuous White Queen's Pawn but to entrap and thus satisfy a personal revenge against the corrupt Black Bishop's Pawn. Although her motivations may differ from those of other pieces in the Black House, her means are quite similar. She, too, corrects for past injustices by claiming to have the power to control time and bring the future forward more quickly, a promise that continues to entice the White Queen's Pawn. Although initially the latter learns her lesson about speeding through time, pledging to practice "patience" (2.2.265) when unfairly punished for allegedly lying about her rape, she soon reveals, once again, a vulnerability to the Black House's rhetoric of linear, progressive time. With surprising alacrity, she believes the Black Queen's Pawn's claim to have foreseen in a magical mirror the white pawn's destiny: her marriage to a gentleman in the Black House. When the naive white pawn insists she has no interest in marriage and feels no stirrings of desire for the man she is presumably destined to wed, the Black Queen's Pawn proclaims that there is no way to change one's destiny, only to speed up its arrival: "We do not always feel our faith we live by, / Nor ever see our growth, yet both work upward" (3.1.338). The Black Queen's Pawn takes advantage of the White Queen's Pawn's impatience—"I long to see this man" (3.1.345)—and offers to satisfy her "instantly" (3.1.346).

The play pauses, however, before satisfying the White Queen's Pawn's curiosity. In Middleton's earliest manuscript version of the play, sandwiched between the Black Queen's Pawn's promise to reveal the future and her delivery on that promise is a seemingly peripheral scene in which the Black Jesting Pawn, eagerly looking for an opportunity to capture a mem-

ber of the White House, is suddenly taken himself. Instead of having the chance to turn an unspecified White Pawn into his personal slave, he is taken and enslaved by another White Pawn. The Black Jesting Pawn immediately begins plotting his rebellion:

BLACK JESTING PAWN: I shall cozen you:

You may chance come and find your work undone then,
For I'm too proud to labour; I'll starve first,
I tell you that beforehand.

WHITE PAWN: I will fit you then

With a black whip that shall not be behind-hand. (3.2.16-20)

The Black Jesting Pawn undermines the White Pawn's certainty about a victorious future by telling him "beforehand" that he plans to be a disobedient slave.⁴⁹ The White Pawn responds by promising a punishment that will perfectly fit the Black Pawn's crime of withholding his body from labor, an aptness underscored when he echoes the form of the Black Jesting Pawn's remarks but reverses their content: where the Black Jesting Pawn began midline with "I shall cozen you" and ends with "beforehand," the White Pawn begins midline with "I will fit you" and ends with "behind-hand." The description of the White Pawn's whip as "not behind-hand" likely means it will not be late or tardy,⁵⁰ suggesting that the whip will be used as swiftly as it is needed. But the term can also mean "[i]n a state of backwardness, less advanced than others [in], ill provided or prepared,"⁵¹ which happens to be an ironically apt description of the White Pawn himself. So busy imagining his future as master over the Black Jesting Pawn, he doesn't look behind him and is taken by a different black pawn who approaches "in the breech" (3.2.31). For the White Pawn, the future turns out to be not ahead but, literally, behind him.

The scene that began with the threat of a white master planning to whip a black slave evolves into a queer erotic comedy where one pawn is "fir[k[ed]" (the early modern equivalent for our modern slang term "screwed") from behind by another pawn, who is subsequently "fir[k[ed]" (3.2.34; 35; 35) from behind by yet another. A narrative of violent capture is transformed into one of comic and, arguably, erotic pleasure for members of the theater audience, and also for the pawns. Indeed, the pawns debate who will get the most enjoyment out of this intriguing arrangement whereby they find themselves like "three flies with one straw through their buttocks" (3.2.39):

WHITE PAWN: We three look like a birdspit, a white chick
Between two russet woodcocks.

BLACK JESTING PAWN: I'm so glad of this.

WHITE PAWN: But you shall have small cause, for I'll firk you.

SECOND BLACK PAWN: Then I'll firk you again.

WHITE PAWN: And I'll firk him again. (3.2.32-5)

In this cross-color sexual triad, the earlier threat of White whipping Black is reinterpreted as a sadomasochistic performance of master–slave relations, one that, especially as it evolves into a kind of masochistic orgy, generates not only pain but pleasure for those involved and for those who watch.

Middleton was no stranger to dramatizing the erotics of violence, having explored the subject of masochism in much more detail in *The Nice Valour*, a play he wrote just a few years before and which has much in common with *A Game at Chess*.⁵² Not only do both plays use sexuality to reflect on Jacobean court politics, but one plotline of *The Nice Valour* concerns a masochistic courtier who eagerly displays his marked flesh, enjoying, instead of being shamed by, the beatings other courtiers inflict on him.⁵³ *A Game at Chess* similarly uses masochism to destabilize conventional social arrangements. The firking pawns scene figures its anonymous pawns as extraneous, expendable, and unproductive in terms of chess, politics, and the larger plot of the play—so much so that the scene was cut from some published versions of the play.⁵⁴ But, if included, the scene is intriguingly disruptive in a number of ways. With their eroticization of capture, the pawns disrupt a fictional political world where being “taken” is supposed to be shameful to one’s house—and, in terms of the political allegory, one’s nation and religion. And with their nonreproductive sexual practices, the pawns present a comic alternative to the play’s weighty issue of marriage and its promise of a productive future through the creation of heirs—the fictional and allegorical matter at hand in *A Game at Chess*. Finally, as the firking pawns put the play’s central business and plot on hold, even for just a few minutes, they disrupt the progression of the play and of the Black Queen’s Pawn’s plot more specifically, a plot that is heavily invested in linear models of progress.

The performance of sadomasochism in the firking pawns scene, in its content and in its interstitial placement, offers a cautionary tale about the dangers of investing in a linear and teleological view of history, where a better future is always ahead. Unlike the “angel of history” Walter Benja-

min describes in his aforementioned essay on historiography, the pawns in Middleton's scene do not pause to see what is behind them, and they end up screwed as a result. This lesson is made available both to the White Pawn, as he is positioned between two black pawns, and to theater spectators who watch the firking pawns scene, itself sandwiched between two parts of the Black Queen's Pawn's plot. The lesson threatens to be lost, however, on spectators (and readers) who view the scene as an interruption of the play's progression, an unproductive pause of the central narrative. And perhaps my own reader will wonder why I have spent so many pages of this chapter on such a brief and seemingly inconsequential moment in Middleton's play. But, as I argued above in relation to *The Tempest*, in a game of chess—and in *A Game at Chess*—the pause between moves is a moment of anticipation and creativity. As it holds the present, past, and future in tension, the pause makes possible a different approach to history.

Unlike readers and audiences who may enjoy the pause for itself and on its own terms, the White Queen's Pawn is impatient to get on with her story. As a consequence, she puts herself in danger of being firked once again when she is easily convinced that the rich gentleman she sees in a trick mirror—in fact, her former clerical attacker in a nobleman's disguise—is her future husband. To be sure, the pawn doesn't have much time to consider the danger, for the man appears only momentarily "like an apparition" (SD 3.3.52) before he disappears, leaving the White Queen's Pawn ravaged by desire and wanting more time to see her promised love: "O let him stay a while, a little longer!" and again "If he be mine why should he part so soon" (3.3.52; 54). Though she remains uninterested in marriage, it does not take much time for the Black Queen's Pawn to persuade her that "What we still write is blotted out by fate" (3.3.58), and that the apparition in the mirror is her certain future. The White Queen's Pawn tries half-heartedly to let fate run its course when she later encounters the man she had seen in the "mirror" and resists the temptation to bring about a meeting. In response to the Black Queen's Pawn urging to talk to the man, the White Queen's Pawn insists, "The time you see / Is not yet come!" (4.1.41–42) and, "Let time have his full course" (4.1.46). But she does not put up much of a fight when the Black Queen's Pawn aims to intervene, having articulated, once again, the Black House's seductive logic: "'tis in our power now / To bring time nearer" (4.1.42–43). The Black Queen's Pawn hastily keeps the game moving, for any delay would give her opponents a window during which to recognize her cheating. She counsels the White Queen's Pawn and the disguised Black Bishop's Pawn to consummate their fated marriage right away and not to "let time cozen you, / Pro-

tracting time, of those delicious benefits / That fate hath marked to you” (4.1.106–108).

Although the promised marriage between the White Queen’s Pawn and her fated partner from a different House is not technically dynastic—she is a mere pawn—it nevertheless supports the play’s political allegory concerning the thwarting of the unpopular union between England’s Prince Charles and the Spanish Infanta. The White Queen’s Pawn misunderstands how chess works and misplays the game, tempted by the Black House’s claims that actions in the present will bring about more quickly a better future whose telos is certain. The White Queen’s Pawn endangers herself when she buys into this logic.⁵⁵ At stake is the progressive, teleological perspective on time and on history that, I have been arguing, is so fundamental to the Jacobean state’s rhetoric about dynastic marriage. Although *A Game at Chess* does not critique dynastic unions directly in its plot, it opens the way for such a critique through its scrutiny of the White Queen’s Pawn’s investments in marriage. Her beliefs in marriage as her determined end—that the man she has been shown in the mirror “lately” must be her “own for ever” (4.1.95–96)—and that this destined union ensures her a better future are represented as foolish and hazardous. What imperils the White Queen’s Pawn, over and over, is the Black House’s investment in teleological history, the grand plan of future world domination that, they insist, can be ascertained through present action.

A critique of this philosophy of history is best articulated by the White King, who, as he berates the Fat Bishop (a member of the Black House, who defects and subsequently returns), indicts the whole Black House for their teleological historiography:

For thee, Black Holiness, that workst out thy death
As the blind mole, the proper’st son of earth,
Who in the casting his ambitious hills up
Is often taken, and destroyed i’t’h’ midst
Of his advanced work, ‘twere well with thee
If like that verminous labourer, which thou imitat’st
In hills of pride and malice, when death puts thee up
The silent grave might prove thy bag for ever,
No deeper pit than that. (4.5.40–48)

In comparing the Fat Bishop to a “blind mole,” the White King employs an image whose use by Shakespeare in *Hamlet* captured the interests of Hegel and Karl Marx in their theorizations of history and revolution. According

to scholar Margareta de Grazia, the mole—which digs its tunnels slowly and steadily for years, finally speeding up as it sees the light at the end—symbolized for Hegel “the progress of world history, its strenuous drive forward toward its end of self-determining freedom,” and for Marx a more radical historical materialist praxis, where political and social change is forward-moving and breaks completely with what have been considered revolutionary models of the past.⁵⁶ De Grazia points out that the image of the mole persists in the writings of philosophers until Jacques Derrida gets rid of it, calling instead for a model of temporality that is more akin to that of Hamlet’s Ghost, a “hauntological” time characterized by disjointedness and rupture.⁵⁷

Middleton’s staged chess game anticipates Derrida’s derision of *Hamlet*’s mole, offering a similarly Benjaminian critique of linear, teleological historiography and an alternative model of political change. When the White King compares the Fat Bishop—and, by proxy, the entire Black House—to a mole, he uses the image to warn about the dangers of subscribing to the linear, progressive view of time that the mole represents. Whereas Hegel and Marx celebrated the mole for its forward-looking persistence and resistance to delaying in its end goal, the White King frames these qualities as evidence of sinful, short-sighted ambition. As the mole tunnels up and up, further and further, the progress it makes is toward not a better life but, ironically, the end of life; the closer the mole gets to the surface, the more easily it can be captured and thrown into the “bag” that represents, at the end of the scene and throughout this play, death.

In Middleton’s heavily moralistic play, the Fat Bishop’s foolishness has the potential to teach theatergoers a lesson about political power and history; but the extent to which they learn the lesson is a function of how they approach the play’s chess *mise-en-scène*. Should they decode the symbolism of chess (a semiotic approach) or experience the overall feeling of chess play (a phenomenological approach)? The White Queen’s Pawn speaks to differences between these approaches when, as she recognizes the error of her ways and berates the Black Bishop’s Pawn for his insincere religiosity, she uses a theatrical analogy to condemn his deceptive clerical dress: “The world’s a stage on which all parts are played; / You’d count it strange to have a devil / Presented there not in a devil’s shape, / Or, wanting one, to send him out in yours (5.2.19–22).⁵⁸ As she urges him to present the part of devil accurately, she draws an analogy between audience members’ competencies in theatergoing and chess play, suggesting, in effect, that semiotic approaches are as insufficient in the former as they are in the latter. The Black Bishop’s Pawn’s devilish character is difficult for audiences to read

semiotically, for only if the parts are “fitted” can “the spectators / Know which is which. They must have cunning judgements / To find it else, for such a one as you / Is able to deceive a mighty auditory” (5.2.30–33). Yet the Black Bishop’s Pawn’s deceptive act is easily exposed when theatergoers set aside interpretation of his sign system—his clerical dress and accoutrements—and use all their senses to attend to the *way* in which he plays. She continues, “Nay those you have seduced, if there be any / In the assembly, when they see what manner / You play your game with me, they cannot love you” (5.2.34–36). Gesturing outward to theatergoers—the “assembly” around her—the White Queen’s Pawn contrasts two sorts of spectatorial competency. Those spectators who approach the play semiotically may be seduced by the evil Black Bishop’s Pawn’s clerical dress, much as she was tricked by it and, later, by his gentleman’s clothes. Just as his gentleman’s costume covered up his true identity, so his bishop’s garb hides his real character, the devil. But those spectators who attend to him not as a representation but as a chess piece in play—using their embodied experience of chess play to perceive *how* he plays the game—will easily uncover his evil and despise him for it. The distinction the White Queen’s Pawn makes is one that holds in a regular game of chess, too. Because the pieces resemble noble figures as if collected for battle, the game has tended to be read in a symbolic vein. But as some “ludologists” in the field of game studies remind us, the representational qualities of a game are not always that essential to the experience of playing it.⁵⁹ While imagining oneself moving kings, queens, and bishops around a battlefield is undoubtedly interesting and enjoyable, the successful game player generally brackets that symbolic meaning, focusing not on what these pieces represent but on how they occupy the space on the board in relation to each other.

When Middleton pursues his didactic aims by inviting audiences to approach chess imagery *phenomenologically*, he adapts to drama a technique that was pervasive in medieval poetry about chess. In a number of medieval texts, the chessboard functions as a kind of organizing grid that, like other mnemonic devices, helped readers understand and remember a text’s content, sometimes by requiring the reader to play along.⁶⁰ The same is true for Middleton’s play, though the effects are different because reading about chess and seeing a game in action are dissimilar experiences.⁶¹ In a theatrical performance, as in a regular chess game, chess functions not as a grid but, to quote Michel de Certeau, as “an area of free play (*Spielraum*).”⁶² As in the checkerboard to which de Certeau gestures here and the backgammon board I discussed in Chapter 3, grid lines and clear rules discipline and limit players’ actions, but gameplay requires much more dy-

dynamic interaction with the board. Because of the complex possibilities of chess movement and its lack of unpredictable variables like dice, the game not only prompts transgressive spatial practices, like the backgammon play discussed in Chapter 3, but temporal ones as well. The use of chess as a setting in medieval poems may discipline the time of reading, but in the theater chess opens up *play* with the temporalities of spectatorship. As I demonstrate further in the next section, when chess scenes encourage theater spectators to experience time's recursivity, they teach spectators not only about the limits of linear and teleological models of time—the very models used in state rhetoric around dynastic marriage—but also about the work of theatergoing itself. In so doing, chess scenes go on to school contemporary scholars about theater and, subsequently, how best to study its history. For like the history of games, theater's history is produced through repeated performances.

PERFORMATIVE HISTORIES

I have begun to outline some of the limitations of traditional methods of historiography, limitations that become especially clear when we attempt to construct histories of chess—indeed of all games. To be sure, games leave material traces that invite these analytic methods. A range of evidence—including, in the case of chess, early pieces, verbal and visual representations of the game, and books of chess rules and problems—can document how the game has changed over time. They can tell us, for instance, that in the early modern period the chess queen had significantly more mobility, resulting in a faster game. But, as discussed in Chapter 1, material remnants are only part of a game's history. Players bend rules and redesign gaming objects all the time to create more pleasurable gaming experiences, and variations may be reiterated over and over until they become institutionalized. In other words, the rules and objects that comprise and define a game materialize through repeated performances.⁶³ Chess is a particularly rich game through which to investigate the performative history of games because, as I have demonstrated, recursive temporality is so fundamental to the experience of playing and watching this particular game. During every pause between moves, players and spectators anticipate the future of a match by rehearsing its past at the same time that they recall the past (of this match and other matches) in order to envision possible moves that may lead to victory.

The polytemporality of chess urges a rethinking of some commonplace

methods for studying drama as well,⁶⁴ challenging in particular the assumption of an event-based model of performance: that a theatrical performance occurs in a particular place and at a particular time. I would maintain that not all, if any, elements of a performance can be fixed spatially and temporally, however. Theatrical performances, no matter how unique each may seem, draw on—indeed are made from—a common and temporally diffuse repertoire of gestures, actions, and styles. Thus, the relation among various “instances” of performance may be defined by a logic that is not always chronological. All theater, we might say, is *intertheatrical*.⁶⁵ Certainly, one can pursue a *diachronic* analysis of a play by searching for a point of origin of a particular stylistic convention and then tracing its genealogy. And one can pursue a *synchronic* analysis by situating that convention in relation to events and discourses coterminous with it. There are other options, however. One can also focus on how a convention becomes intelligible to theater audiences through the very operation of its repetition. Accounting for the “intertheatricality” of dramatic performance can thus alter our sense of the relation between theater and history. The polytemporality of theatrical performance challenges an oft-cited truism: that performance is ephemeral and always disappearing, as the performed “event” passes into history. To the contrary, as Anston Bosman, William N. West, and I have maintained, history is constantly being made in and through theater, which “stretches the event open, such that it is simultaneously a preservation of the past and a preparation for the future.”⁶⁶ For theater performers and their spectators, the present is a sedimentation of the past, but through performance, the past passes into the future, which is set before audiences as a range of possibilities, or what scholar Daniel Sack describes as “potentiality.”⁶⁷

If we follow this line of reasoning, then the staging of dynastic marriage through a chess game does not stabilize *The Tempest*'s and *A Game at Chess*'s relationships to particular moments in English history. Instead, these chess games urge early modern spectators and modern readers to treat the plays as part of a temporally and spatially diffuse network of chess matches, some “staged” in the taverns and parlors that competed with early modern theaters for customers, others staged in politically engaged dramas. Thus, *The Tempest* and *A Game at Chess* are also in dialogue with Shakespeare's *King John*, a play centrally concerned with doomed dynastic marriage and which also, perhaps not coincidentally, is the only other Shakespeare play besides *The Tempest* explicitly to use chess imagery.⁶⁸ In 2.1 of *King John*, the eponymous character and his mother, Eleanor, berate Lady Constance for trying to put forward her son, Arthur, as the rightful king of England, a

claim that King John's side disputes, arguing that Arthur is a bastard. Eleanor accuses Constance, who has the support of France, of using her son for her own political gain, a strategy she compares to that of chess: "Thy bastard shall be king / That thou mayst be a queen and check the world" (2.1.122–23). The women's fight over Arthur's rightful place is mirrored by the fight between the kings of France and England over the city of Angiers, in front of which they stand. The kings are about to ransack the city, which will not choose a side, when the Citizen speaking for Angiers suggests a compromise: a political marriage between King John's niece, Blanche, and the French king's son, Louis, the Dauphin. To justify the proposal, the Citizen appeals to the commonplace view of marriage as the joining of two souls:

He is the half part of a blessèd man,
Left to be finishèd by such as she;
And she a fair divided excellence,
Whose fullness of perfection lies in him.
O, two such silver currents when they join
Do glorify the banks that bound them in,
And two such shores to two such streams made one,
Two such controlling bounds, shall you be, Kings,
To these two princes if you marry them. (2.1.438–46)

As husband and wife become one, so, according to the logic of dynastic marriage, the kings and their warring nations will unite. The ideology of two becoming one is so convincing that the kings jump at this deal, and the marriage is solemnized within minutes.

Unlike *The Tempest* and *A Game at Chess*, which are more subtle in their critiques of dynastic marriage, *King John* offers an explicit indictment of it, once again through the imagery of gaming. The canny character of Philip Faulconbridge, suspicious of the way Angier's Citizen has used the rhetoric of ideal marriage to sell the advantages of this peace treaty, figures the Citizen as the consummate courtier and presciently predicts the downfall of the treaty, which depends on the word of another courtier, the completely untrustworthy French king. In his famous cynical speech about the degeneracy of a world ruled by "commodity" (i.e., self-interested gain), Faulconbridge describes "commodity" as a "smooth-faced gentleman" (2.1.574) who cheats when he gambles so that he can always win and take all from those he beats: he "wins of all, / Of kings, of beggars, old men, young men, maids, — / Who having no external thing to lose / But the word

'maid', cheats the poor maid of that" (2.1.570–73). The reference is to King John's niece, Blanche, who will lose her maidenhood status through the political marriage. As Faulconbridge predicts, the dynastic marriage accomplishes none of the aims for which it was designed. In the very next scene, just after the wedding, the pope's legate arrives and pressures France to continue its war against England. Blanche finds herself pulled between her allegiance to her new French husband and her allegiance to England, a situation she compares to dismemberment by competing armies: "I am with both, each army hath a hand, / And in their rage, I having hold of both, / They whirl asunder and dismember me" (3.1.254–56). Recalling Eleanor's earlier ludic imagery for politics, Blanche describes her situation as a rigged game: "Whoever wins, on that side shall I lose, / Assured loss before the match be played" (3.1.261–62).

King John tempts the scholar to read dramatic history in a linear fashion, for as it uses game imagery, including that of chess, to undermine the logic of dynastic marriage as a political solution, it falls nicely in line with other plays discussed in this chapter. And it is tempting to try to establish a genealogy, whereby *King John* influences *The Tempest*, which in turn influences *A Game at Chess*. But such a linear story discounts the impact of the many other games of chess, real and imagined, the play's spectators had experienced. It seems more useful to approach the three dramas as part of the same performance network—a web that also includes every game of chess theater spectators had played, watched, or read about. I would resist relating this web to the concept of "intertextuality," which might imply that the process of citation is traceable, if not necessarily intentional.⁶⁹ The lines of influence or precedence among nodes in the performance network I am describing cannot be so neatly delineated, because theater, much like other gameplay, is encoded in and through bodies. Not always expressed through texts, the embodied practices that comprise theater and games are not always legible enough to be traced, even indirectly, from one point to another.⁷⁰ Indeed, members of theater audiences, like other game participants, do not themselves always know how they have developed competencies of play. They may feel the recursive temporality of a chess game, for instance, without knowing for sure how, where, when, or even whether they have experienced it before.

This is a somewhat unique aspect of theater and of games, distinguishing the temporality of these playable media from that of other media, like paintings and films. Film shares somewhat the protracted temporality of theater and games—unlike painting, film can withhold parts of a narrative from the audience, divulging that narrative as time goes on, which is partly

why plays lend themselves so well to cinematic adaptation. But in other ways, the temporality of film is nothing like that of theater and games. Film separates producers and receivers temporally and spatially (the action is consumed long after and in a different place than it was produced), and because of this, film has the capacity to be reperformed in much the same way time and time again. We can appreciate this difference in media by considering how a game like chess would work when represented in each medium. When a chess game is staged in a conventional theater, the spectator doesn't have the option to zoom in on the scene⁷¹ or to slow down or repeat it, as is the case with film; the scene cannot ever be repeated in quite the same way, for theater, like chess, is predominantly live, and thus even if performed with the same actors, props, and so forth, some slight variations occur from one performance to another. This is not to say that every performance of a play is an isolated, unique event with no connection to any other. To the contrary, as I have suggested, theatrical performances recycle earlier and anticipate later performances in manifold ways. Every gesture, costume, actor, word on the stage looks back to past and ahead to future performances. Each moment of a performance is like a pregnant pause between moves in a game of chess. Similar to spectators or players of chess, theatergoers become aware of what is happening at any moment in the play by drawing (usually unconsciously) on prior moments with which they are familiar. In effect, spectators of plays could develop theatergoing competencies in much the way they did gaming competencies: through repeated exposure to and practice with these playable media. Like players and spectators of chess, theatergoers could become more competent at theater as they became better able to engage in the recursive temporality of its form.

RECURSIVE TEMPORALITY, POLITICAL AGENCY, AND EMBODIED SKILL

At stake in theorizing this recursive temporality — a feature of chess, theater, and, to follow Benjamin, history itself — is our understanding of the political power available to spectators of *The Tempest* and *A Game at Chess*. These stakes become clearer when one considers how Benjamin's theories of history resonate with his embodied experience playing chess with dramatist Brecht, who famously used the theater to spur his audiences toward political critique and social transformation. It is well known that Brecht and Benjamin influenced each other's conceptions of historical materialism, though

virtually nothing has been said about the role of chess in their political thought.⁷² Yet three of the four surviving photographs of these friends show them playing chess together, which seems to have been their nightly ritual whenever they lived and worked in close proximity.⁷³ One of Benjamin's many mentions of playing chess with Brecht is worthy of closer attention in relation to "On the Concept of History." Several years before writing the essay, Benjamin described Brecht's idea for a new version of chess:

So, when [Marxist theoretician Karl] Korsch comes, we ought to work out a new game with him. A game where the positions don't always remain the same; where the function of the figures changes when they have stood in the same place for a while—then they would become either more effective, or perhaps weaker. As it is now, there is no development; it stays the same for too long.⁷⁴

Benjamin records Brecht complaining about the problem of stasis in chess and proposing a creative solution: propel the game forward by allowing the past of the pieces to impinge upon their present function. How long a piece has stood in its place will determine its options for movement. Benjamin's model of history and political agency in "On the Concept of History" proposes a similar solution to the problem of historical stasis. Criticizing the staleness of conventional historicism, its view of history as "homogeneous, empty time," Benjamin argues that political change is impossible if we associate history solely with the past. At the same time, Benjamin questions the kind of historical "development" posited by Fascists and others who envision history as a totality and the present as a transition on the way toward "progress."⁷⁵ As will Benjamin in his later essay, Brecht's experimental form of chess conceives of the relationship among past, present, and future quite differently: use the past to pressure the present so as to compel the game forward. In a similar way, Benjamin imagines that revolution will best be achieved by pausing in a "now-time" that holds the past and future in productive tension with each other. For Benjamin, as for Brecht, this pausing in now-time comprises a strategy for political action. Feminist theorist Wendy Brown summarizes Benjamin's polytemporal view of political agency especially clearly:

In contrast with a conventional historical materialism that renders the present in terms of unfolding laws of history, Benjamin argues for the political and the philosophical value of conceiving the pres-

ent as a time in which time is still(ed). But not only still—rather it is a present in which time has come to a stop, thereby implying movement behind it. The affirmation of this temporal rush behind a still present . . . avoids presentism and ahistoricity in political thinking even as it conceptually breaks the present out of history.⁷⁶

The value of this breaking is that we get “a present that calls to us, calls on us to respond to it.”⁷⁷ It leads to a sense of political urgency that is not determined entirely, but still informed, by the past.

Brecht and Benjamin prompt further consideration of how *The Tempest* and *A Game at Chess* use chess to issue this kind of call. Through their staging of chess, the plays invite spectators to question the temporal logic that underwrites the politically “progressive” narrative of dynastic marriage, showing it to be a kind of false consciousness. They do so not simply through an abstract symbolic economy where chess is an analogy for political marriages, but by appealing to, drawing their energies from, and exploiting spectators’ phenomenological experience of chess play. Whether partially hidden or fully exposed, the chess games in these dramas call upon spectators to engage their embodied knowledge of gameplay in order to make sense of the dramas and of history.

Although my chapter has focused on what it feels like to participate in a game, particularly chess, my broader aim has been to show how plays and/as games accentuate the body as a site of knowledge production and acquisition, a kind of living archive. Whether playing directly or vicariously, participants build up knowledge about a game through exposure to it. When the body operates in this way as a house of memory and a medium of (re)enactment, the information it carries and transmits can compete powerfully with official narratives about the past and future⁷⁸—including the narrative Prospero spins to justify his plots. Thus, games and dramas, regardless of whether they take up explicit political themes, can inspire political action through their playable form. By playing or playing along, participants generate alternatives to authored/authorized texts and narratives. Gaming is an especially interesting example of how political power emerges out of embodied knowledge practices because games showcase the degree to which embodied knowledge may be produced and communicated beneath the horizon of consciousness. Work in the cognitive philosophy of sport explores how bodies that engage repeatedly in a particular routine or practice develop often unconscious “habit memory.”⁷⁹ Habit memory is produced through repeated performances of an action or

an experience closely related to it.⁸⁰ Through this process of rehearsal, knowledge becomes entrenched in our bodies without our even knowing it is there. Few of us can say when we first learned to play chess, for instance, but through repeated practice and by watching others play or reading about the game, many of us have developed a deep knowledge of what it feels like to play such that when we begin a match, we know generally what to do, even if we need reminding of the precise rules.

This kind of process of repeated exposure to routines and practices brings about the “enskillment” of participants in both games and theater—participants learn to master these media forms via the experience of playing them.⁸¹ At the moment when commercial theater was emerging in London as a new form of entertainment, the skill of spectatorship had to be learned. And participants became enskilled in this “new media” not only through repeated exposure to commercial plays themselves, but also, I’ve been suggesting, through engaging in (other) sitting pastimes. Playing a game of chess in a tavern or watching others do so could contribute to spectators’ competencies in commercial theatergoing and, perhaps, vice versa. If we think of drama as playable media, then we can see how gameplay outside the theater, instead of being only a source of competition for the commercial stage, could function in partnership with it.

I have argued, moreover, that as staged games honed theatergoing skills, they could simultaneously provoke political engagement. As *The Tempest* and *A Game at Chess* solicit and frustrate spectators’ application of their experience of chess play to the dramatic narrative, the plays open up avenues for critique not only of Prospero or members of the Black House, respectively, but of current, past, and future arguments for the strategic value of dynastic marriage. Invited to repurpose their chess-playing competencies—specifically, their capacity to experience time in nonprogressive terms—early modern spectators could inhabit their present as a now-time infused by possibility. Chess scenes set up the conditions for imagining future historical outcomes that official state narratives of dynastic marriage foreclosed. It may seem too ambitious to follow Benjamin and Brecht in claiming that such scenes could inspire revolution on a broad scale; but at the very least such scenes help us to think about the early modern commercial theater as a space of political transformation not only or necessarily because of the political content of the plays, but because of their temporal form.

In a book on medieval chess literature, Jenny Adams argues that one reason the chessboard ceased serving in the early modern period as a space

for negotiating political conflict was because the theater began to serve this role.⁸² But if the stage took over for the chessboard, then it was because this particular stage, part of a commercial theater entertainment industry, relied on and taught many of the same competencies as chess play. As Shakespeare's and Middleton's dramas demonstrate especially well, the stage was not an incidental alternative to, but a compensatory version of, the chessboard.