Chapter 1

# 1,500 Years of Magic: a History of Chess in Popular Culture

> 'Chess was practically the only game known in which there was any real mental exercise possible. It was also recognised as symbolic of warfare, while the pieces could be made emblematic of the various elements of the society.'
>
> H. J. R. Murray, *A History of Chess*, 1913

On 19 November 2022 a picture on Instagram quickly became one of the most-liked posts ever. It was the day before the opening of the FIFA World Cup in Qatar, and the leading fashion house Louis Vuitton shared a photo of Lionel Messi and Cristiano Ronaldo playing chess. Accompanied by the text 'Victory is a State of Mind', the photo was shot by the legendary celebrity portrait photographer Annie Leibovitz and posted on Messi's, Ronaldo's, and Louis Vuitton's Instagram channels. The image, which gathered more than 84 million likes, showed the two football stars using a Louis Vuitton checkered suitcase as a chessboard. Two years after the release of *The Queen's Gambit*, chess witnessed a new outing in popular culture that might have reached even more people than the incredibly successful Netflix series.

Incidentally, the picture – which was shot at different moments in time, with Messi and Ronaldo not actually in the studio together – used an actual chess position taken from a real game. The coach of world number one Magnus Carlsen, the Dane Peter Heine Nielsen, tweeted that the position came from a game between Carlsen and Hikaru Nakamura, the two biggest stars in chess, played in Norway in 2017. Carlsen retweeted Nielsen's tweet with the witty line: 'Second greatest rivalry of our time mimicking the greatest.'

Messi and Ronaldo playing checkers or cards would have been far less likely. And it wouldn't have worked. The visual possibilities, symbolism, tradition and complexity of chess give it power. Chess has fascinated emperors, kings, maharajas, shahs, tsars, generals and presidents. It has inspired painters, poets, playwrights, novelists, directors, screenwriters, athletes and politicians. The magic of chess has enthralled us for 1,500 years.

## The Origins of Chess

Once upon a time, a bright queen in India named Jūshīr faced a rebellion. She sent one of her sons to fight back, but a rebel killed him, distressing the people of her kingdom. Fearing to tell her the news, they gathered before one of their wise men, Qaflān, and told him what had happened. He said, 'Give me three days,' and went away to think. Then Qaflān told one of his pupils, 'Bring me a carpenter and wood of two different colours, white and black.' The carpenter created chess pieces, instructed by Qaflān, who then said, 'Bring me tanned leather.' A chessboard with 64 squares was made, and Qaflān started playing the game with one of his pupils until they understood it and became proficient in it. He told his pupil, 'This is a war without loss of lives.'

The kingdom's people realised they were witnessing a piece of wisdom no one else could have arrived at. When Queen Jūshīr

heard about the game, she summoned Qaflān to show it to her. He arrived at her palace with his pupil, and the two started playing chess. One defeated the other and said, 'Checkmate!'

Understanding what he meant, the queen asked Qaflān, 'Has my son been killed?'

'You have said it,' he replied.

She told her chamberlain, 'Let the people in, that they may offer me condolence.' She then turned to Qaflān and said to him, 'Ask for whatever you need.'

His reply will probably ring a bell for many readers. 'Your Majesty, I do not seek great wealth or power. Instead, I ask for a simple reward: I request just one grain of wheat for the first square of the chessboard, two grains for the second square, four grains for the third square, eight grains for the fourth square, and so on.'

The queen initially laughed off the request as a meagre prize for his brilliant game, and readily agreed. However, her advisors soon pointed out the astonishing consequences of Qaflān's request. The chessboard has 64 squares, and because the number of wheat grains doubles for each square, the total amount of wheat required would be $2^{64}$-1, an amount not available in the entire world. (A recent calculation suggests it is over 16 hundred times the global wheat production.)

The legend about the grains of wheat and the chessboard, which still serves in mathematical education as a cautionary tale about the power of exponential growth, exists in several forms. One involves rice grains and the Indian god Krishna, while the most famous version of the story has the Brahmin mathematician Sissa inventing chess to teach his king a lesson in humility. Just like in the game, his fate is connected to the weakest of his subjects, and, as the king, he is the most powerful entity but still needs all the other pieces for his protection.

The version I chose above is the oldest one, 'dating back to pre-Muhammadan days', according to H. J. R. Murray, a renowned and

incredibly erudite chess historian who published his monumental *A History of Chess* in 1913. The legend was told by Ibn Wāḍiḥ al-Ya ʿqūbī, a Muslim imperial official and polymath of the ninth century whose works represent some of the earliest historical and geographical writings to survive in Arabic literature. Interestingly, al-Ya ʿqūbī refers to a queen (Jūshīr) instead of a king, and his story suggests that chess was already used as a metaphor the moment it was invented. From its infancy, chess was larger than chess.

Whether it's a true story is not a serious question. One thing most chess historians agree on is that the game originates in India. It originally sprung out of another board game called *chaturanga*, first appearing in the Gupta Empire around the sixth century AD. *Xiangqi* (Chinese chess), *janggi* (Korean chess), *shogi* (Japanese chess), *sittuyin* (Burmese chess) and *makruk* (Thai chess) are all believed to share *chaturanga* as a common ancestor.

The Sanskrit word *chaturanga* means 'having four limbs/parts' – from '*chatur*', meaning four and '*anga*', meaning parts – and refers to the four divisions of an army: elephantry, chariotry, cavalry and infantry. The game was played on an eight-by-eight board with 64 squares – note that these were all one colour. The types of pieces were similar to chess: there was a king, a *ferz* (a counsellor to the king), a chariot (rook), an elephant (an early form of a bishop), a horse (knight) and a foot soldier (pawn). We are clearly dealing with a board game that mimics the fight between two old-Indian armies. (Note that a millennium later, some languages still use the same words for certain pieces. For example, a bishop in Russian is *слон*, meaning elephant.)

Chess spread to Asia and Persia (present-day Iran), likely in the sixth century, too. How that happened involves another legend pointing to India as the game's birthplace. It was told in the *Shahnama* (*Book of Kings*), composed by the Persian poet Ferdowsi and completed around the year 1010.

Bozorgmehr (bottom row, second from left), minister to sixth-century Persian king Khosrow I, plays chess with an Indian envoy, as depicted in a c. 1330–40 folio from Ferdowsi's *Shahnama (Book of Kings)*.

One day, a richly equipped mission of envoys from the Raja of India arrived at the court of King Khosrow of Anūshīrvān, the Sāsānian king who ruled Persia from 531 to 579. Among the many treasures they brought was a beautiful, checkered board. A message written on silk described the board and the type of pieces that belonged to it, and noted that if anyone could detect how this game ought to be played, the Raja would happily pay the requested taxes. After a day and night of studying, Khosrow's minister Bozorgmehr gave a complete description of the rules of chess, to the horror of the Indian envoys. To make

matters worse, he went on to invent the game of *nard* (an early form of backgammon) and sent back a similar challenge to the Indian king – one his advisors failed to solve. 2–0 to the Persians.

After the Muslim conquest of Persia in the middle of the seventh century, the Arabs got acquainted with chess, which the Persians had called *chatrang* and which they changed to *shatranj*. Chess grew in popularity and spread throughout the Arab–Muslim world. By the ninth or tenth century, chess was widely known in the Arab world, from India all the way to Spain. The first books about chess were written, containing more legends, poems and expressions. One example described drunkenness: 'He came following the path of a rook but left following the path of a knight.' The rich Arab chess literature further described links with mathematics, logical thinking and even eroticism, while including chess instruction.

Also, the *manṣūbāt* were introduced: chess puzzles from endgame positions with well-defined tasks, such as finding a forced checkmate in a few moves. A famous one is the Dilaram problem, supposedly coming from a chess game played by a nobleman named Murwardi. In financial dire straits, he had wagered his beautiful wife Dilaram on a game and ended up winning it thanks to her. When the position of the puzzle arose, she was the one who found the solution, saying to her husband, 'Sacrifice your two rooks, and not me.'



## Chess in the Middle Ages

Arab players brought chess to Europe through the Iberian Peninsula and the Byzantine Empire, probably during the tenth century. It also spread to northern Europe, often following the routes of victorious armies. When the Normans conquered England, chess came with them.

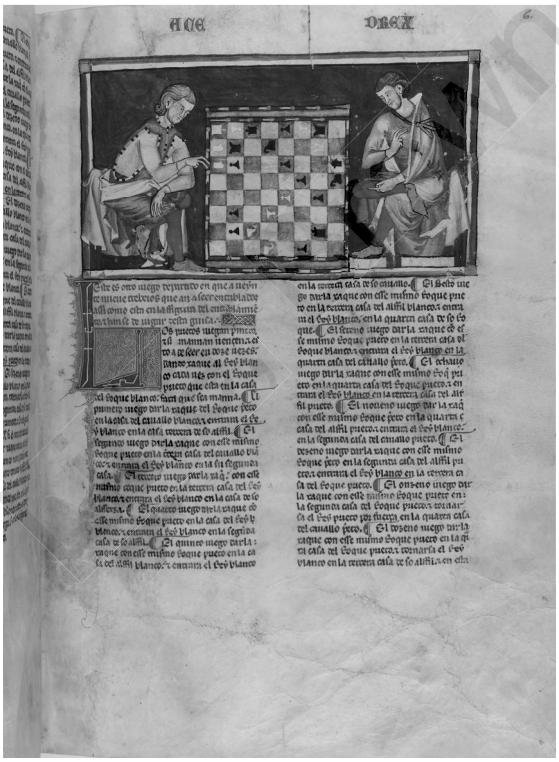
One of the earliest references to European chess is a famous letter from 1061 by Cardinal Bishop Petrus Damiani to the Pope-elect Alexander II and the Archdeacon Hildebrand (later Pope Gregory

VII). In the letter, Damiani suggested that some clergy members had sinned by participating in certain leisure activities, including chess. The bishop of Florence defended himself by pointing out that, unlike other games which involved luck, chess was a game of skill.

Until the mid-thirteenth century, the Church regularly prohibited playing chess (thus also demonstrating its popularity) as it did not clearly distinguish between chess and dice games. That is more understandable if you realise that, in those years, chess *was* often played with dice, with the numbers indicating which piece had to be played. But at some point, the Church's stance changed. Murray wrote: 'By 1250, the early prejudice of the Church against chess had begun to weaken in view of the royal and noble patronage of the game, and the monastic orders were freely accepting chess as a welcome alleviation of the monotony of convent life, while a knowledge of chess had spread downwards from the inmates of castle and monastery to the wealthier burgesses and merchants of the towns.' In other words, attempts to eradicate the game failed miserably, as chess simply could not be stopped.

Chess became a regular feature of European nobility and courtly life in the course of just two centuries. Kings, priests, knights and other members of the feudal nobility liked to play. In his influential work *Disciplina Clericalis* from the twelfth century, the Spanish physician, astronomer and writer Peter Alfonsi listed it among the seven skills a good knight must acquire: riding, swimming, archery, boxing, hawking, verse writing and chess. The game's fame grew fast, as is shown by the hundreds of allusions to chess in literature from the thirteenth century onwards. I quote Murray again: 'During the latter part of the Middle Ages, and especially from the thirteenth to the fifteenth century, chess attained to a popularity in Western Europe which has never been excelled, and probably never equalled, at any later date.' Well, the book you are reading has something to say about that last claim . . .

A historically essential work is the *Libro de los Juegos* (*Book of Games*), commissioned by King Alfonso X of Castile and Léon in 1283. This stunningly beautiful manuscript, kept in the El Escorial monastery library close to Madrid, includes 97 leaves of parchment, many with beautiful colour illustrations, and more than a hundred chess puzzles for the reader to solve, mostly taken from earlier Arabic sources (including the Dilaram problem). The puzzles are consistently shown on a chessboard in the middle of the illustration, with both male and female players to the left and



Two men play chess in this illustration from the historic Spanish illuminated manuscript *Libro de los juegos* (*Book of Games*), or *Libro de axedrez, dados, e tablas* (*Book of Chess, Dice, and Tables*), 1283.

right looking at the board. This important book deals with chess and other games, such as dice and an early form of backgammon, but notes, 'Since chess is the noblest game, which requires the most skill compared to all the other games, we are going to talk about it first of all.' Chess quickly emerged as the most popular game due to its complexity and resemblance to medieval culture.

A name change for some pieces helped chess become even more popular. Where *chaturanga*'s king had the Arabic *ferz* alongside him, Western chess replaced this piece with a queen. Other pieces were Westernised too: the horse became a knight, the chariot became a castle (or rook), and the elephant became a bishop. We now had pieces seemingly designed to match European social roles.

## The Birth of Modern Chess

As chess spread from India towards Persia, the Arab empire and into medieval Europe, the way it was played remained essentially the same. Some minor changes occurred, such as colouring the 64 squares to create a checkered board. Also, pawns were allowed to advance two squares instead of one on the first move, to speed up the game.

Multiple versions of the game were played in different territories, even within Europe, with specific rules often varying from area to area. But then, around the end of the fifteenth century, chess underwent significant changes and reached a more or less unified form played all over the Continent – the way we play it today.

Two changes involved the movements of the bishop and the king. Instead of jumping diagonally by two squares, the bishop could now move to any square on a diagonal. The king was allowed to run to safety by making a joint movement with one of the rooks, known as 'castling'. A genuinely groundbreaking change, however, involved the queen. Like the Arabic *ferz*, hitherto the queen could only move one diagonal square at a time, making her

the weakest piece on the board. Yet, by the turn of the fifteenth century, she could move as far as she wanted, following straight lines and diagonals. In what is generally called 'modern chess', she had become more potent than any other piece on the board. How this happened remains a bit of a mystery.

One theory, now refuted, is that the newly empowered chess queen had been inspired by Joan of Arc, the peasant girl who claimed to have received divine visions while helping France defeat England at Orleans in 1429 during the Hundred Years' War. Most chess historians, however, agree that the change for the chess queen was more than likely inspired by the new powers of an actual queen: Queen Isabella I, who reigned over Castile (part of present-day Spain) from 1474 until she died in 1504. Fittingly, she was considered more powerful than her husband, Ferdinand II, the King of Aragon.

The first recorded tournament, probably played with the new rules, took place in Heidelberg, Germany, in 1467. Chess was played in many German cities in the late Middle Ages, and Heidelberg already had a chess club. Sponsored by Frederick I, Count Palatine of the Rhine, the conditions included accommodation and prizes for the winners. Chess had a sport element to it, like poetry and fencing had in those days.

The new rules made the game faster, more complex and rather tricky. Still, the popularity of chess hardly declined in the coming centuries, according to the historian Richard Eales in his 1985 book *Chess: The History of a Game*: 'If the technical chess literature preserved in late medieval manuscripts and printed books compared with that in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century manuscripts and printed books, or if the casual references to the game in wills, inventories, letters, and general literature are contrasted for the two periods, there is nothing to suggest a measurable decline in its popularity.'

Part of this is explained by the fact that the social status of chess hardly changed either. It remained a respected pursuit among the upper classes (while also widely known among the lower classes), held in high esteem, not in the least due to its ancient history and many interpretations and analogies, which we'll dive into somewhat deeper in the next chapter.

## An Increased Market Size

By the eighteenth century, chess was in competition with various card games, especially the trendy game of whist. Still, the number of individuals playing chess kept growing. As Eales explained, there was a general increase in prosperity, giving more people the time and money to spend on leisure activities. In economic terms, the market size was increasing. Choosing to play chess became a matter of taste, which started a new phase for the game and how it was treated.

Chess started to have a broader appeal than ever before and began to see more organised forms. For instance, it was increasingly becoming a pastime enjoyed at coffeehouses. In London, you had the Old Slaughter's Coffee House in St Martin's Lane, which opened in 1692 and was visited by architects, painters, poets and politicians. Even more famous was the Café de la Régence in Paris. Opened in 1681, the café welcomed a wide variety of intellectuals and many famous chess masters, including the best player of his time, François-André Danican Philidor (1726–1795). In the Régence, Philidor met Voltaire and Robespierre and played chess with Rousseau. Coffeehouse chess soon led to the founding of the first *gentlemen's* chess clubs in London and Paris in the late eighteenth century. They started to blossom in the early nineteenth century, and clubs soon opened in countries like the Netherlands, Germany and the United States.

While chess was growing at this point, it also became a men's game. Women rarely attended the coffee houses and were often not allowed into the chess clubs. Chess was also increasingly becoming a serious leisure activity (some even started considering it a sport), further stimulating the discrimination towards women in chess. Industrial society no doubt played a role here as well. While men shifted from doing paid work in the household to the factory, women remained in the private sphere. The two sexes lived more separate lives, and the women weren't allowed much time for leisure activities at home.

The first half of the nineteenth century also saw the organisation of the first major chess events, adding to the game's prestige. The biggest masters often played *matches* against each other (series of multiple games between two opponents), such as those between Louis-Charles Mahé de La Bourdonnais of France and Alexander McDonnell of Ireland, or England's Howard Staunton versus Frenchman Pierre de Saint-Amant – battles that were published widely and closely followed by chess fans all over Europe. Staunton was also the main organiser behind the first major international chess tournament in London in 1851.

The increased interest in chess was reflected in the growing number of published chess-related books and the very first newspaper column (in the *Liverpool Mercury* in 1813) and magazine (*Le Palamède*, in 1836). Also, early attempts were made to systematically cover what was known about chess openings, in surveys such as Aaron Alexandre's *Encyclopedia of Chess* from 1837. Chess tournaments started being held regularly in many countries, especially England and Germany.

At the same time, the game generally became more organised and regulated as official federations were founded, in the same spirit as sports like football, athletics and cricket. The first official World Chess Championship was held in various cities in the

United States in 1886 when Wilhelm Steinitz beat Johannes Zukertort to earn the first World Chess Champion title.

This particular championship started a long and wonderful tradition that continues today: a growing list of legendary world championship matches, two-player battles for the highest throne and eternal glory. The Fischer–Spassky match in 1972, with the Cold War as the backdrop, is the most famous. Every serious student of the game knows that the tradition goes back much further, and they can name all the world champions (and maybe even in the right order). I give them followed by the years when they held the title:

1. Wilhelm Steinitz (1886–1894)
2. Emanuel Lasker (1894–1921)
3. José Raúl Capablanca (1921–1927)
4. Alexander Alekhine (1927–1935, 1937–1946†)
5. Max Euwe (1935–1937)
6. Mikhail Botvinnik (1948–1957, 1958–1960, 1961–1963)
7. Vasily Smyslov (1957–1958)
8. Mikhail Tal (1960–1961)
9. Tigran Petrosian (1963–1969)
10. Boris Spassky (1969–1972)
11. Bobby Fischer (1972–1975)
12. Anatoly Karpov (1975–1985)
13. Garry Kasparov (1985–2000)
14. Vladimir Kramnik (2000–2007)
15. Viswanathan Anand (2007–2013)
16. Magnus Carlsen (2013–2023)
17. Ding Liren (2023–)

(Note that this list doesn't mention the FIDE world champions Alexander Khalifman, Ruslan Ponomariov, Rustam Kasimdzhanov

and Veselin Topalov, who won their titles between 1999 and 2005 during a messy situation the chess world was in, described in Chapter 4.)

Alongside the 1924 Olympic Games in Paris, the French Chess Federation held an international team chess tournament, with 54 players from 18 countries. On 20 July, the day of the last round, 15 participants founded the International Chess Federation under the French acronym Fédération Internationale des Échecs (FIDE). It started to organise official Chess Olympiads modelled on the Olympic Games and, from 1948 onwards, became the official body responsible for those world championships, with a separate category for women. The female champions are:

1. Vera Menchik (1927–1944†)
2. Lyudmila Rudenko (1950–1953)
3. Elisaveta Bykova (1953–1956, 1958–1962)
4. Olga Rubtsova (1956–1958)
5. Nona Gaprindashvili (1962–1978)
6. Maia Chiburdanidze (1978–1991)
7. Xie Jun (1991–1996, 1999–2001)
8. Susan Polgar (1996–1999)
9. Zhu Chen (2001–2004)
10. Antoaneta Stefanova (2004–2006)
11. Xu Yuhua (2006–2008)
12. Alexandra Kosteniuk (2008–2010)
13. Hou Yifan (2010–2012, 2013–2015, 2016–2017)
14. Anna Ushenina (2012–2013)
15. Mariya Muzychuk (2015–2016)
16. Tan Zhongyi (2017–2018)
17. Ju Wenjun (2018–)

All these players always brought a special aura whenever they entered a playing hall: *a world champion has entered the building*. They are the chess equivalent of the ancient residents of Mount Olympus, and it's only natural that you'll find many of their names throughout this book.

## Chess is Everywhere

Phoebe and Joey are playing a fast game of chess. As they move their pieces with one hand, they bang a chess clock with the other. It quickly becomes apparent that they have no idea what they're doing.

Joey says, 'We should really learn how to play the real way.'

Phoebe answers, 'I like our way. Look!' She moves a piece, jumping over several of Joey's as if they were playing checkers. She removes one of the enemy pieces and shouts triumphantly, 'Chess!'

Joey looks impressed and says, 'Nice move!'

*Friends* aired on NBC between 1994 and 2004 but, two decades later, the series is still watched worldwide via reruns and streaming services. In what is one of the most popular comedy shows of all time, chess made multiple appearances, most prominently in episode 20 of season eight, 'The One With Rachel's Big Kiss'. A deep analysis isn't necessary to understand that chess was portrayed as a complicated game, while Phoebe and Joey weren't exactly known for their intellectual skills.

Jerry Seinfeld, however, the titular character of that other, enormously popular nineties sitcom *Seinfeld*, was fairly smart. In episode nine of season three, titled 'The Nose Job', he describes a woman he started to date: 'Isabel, she is the most despicable woman I have ever met in my life. I have never been so repulsed by someone mentally and so attracted to them physically at the same time. It's like my brain is facing my penis in a chess game.' At the end of the

episode, we see an actual chess game between two Jerry Seinfelds (through some special effects), one acting as his penis and one as his brain. The latter wins as the former laments a lack of energy.

In the same series, Seinfeld's friend George Costanza is, well, the less clever guy. At the start of 'The Engagement', the first episode of season seven, George plays chess with his current girlfriend Alice. The opening scene focuses on the chessboard. George makes a move with the black pieces, sits back rather happy with himself, and says, 'Well, you got no place to go. I'll tell you what your problem is: you brought your queen out too fast. What do you think? She's one of these feminists looking to get out of the house? Nah, the queen is old fashioned, likes to stay home, cook, take care of a man, makes sure he feels good.' With a stern look, Alice moves a piece and says, 'Checkmate.' George studies the position closely and says, 'I don't think we should see each other any more.'

From *The Big Bang Theory* and *Frasier* to *Cheers* and *The Simpsons,* chess scenes appear in many popular shows – in fact, there's a special cameo appearance in the latter's season 28 by none other than Magnus Carlsen. It's almost impossible to watch a TV series these days and *not* come across chess at some point. It happens so frequently that in my household, we have developed the habit of saying 'No escape!' when we're sitting on the couch and spot a reference to chess.

My friend and Chess.com colleague Mike Klein told me a relatable experience:

> Around 2008, I wanted to write an exhaustive story for the American magazine *Chess Life* about chess references in pop culture – movies, songs, advertisements and the like. But I soon realised that there were far, far too many to write anything at magazine length. So I changed courses. I decided I would chronicle, for one year, all the pop-culture chess references that came to me organically. When watching TV

and a chessboard appeared in a commercial, I would break out a pad and paper and jot it down. I gave up after about four weeks. Even when not seeking out the game, it found me far too often, and the many references inundated me.

One very binge-watchable Netflix show from 2020 was different because chess played a major role in *every episode*. It treated the game of kings most wonderfully and caused an incredible surge in the popularity of chess, this time also among girls and women. You probably already know what I am talking about.

## *The Queen's Gambit*

The Netflix miniseries *The Queen's Gambit* premiered on 23 October 2020. It helped that it was broadcast right in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, but, just four weeks later, 62 million households had watched the show, which reached the top ten in 92 countries and occupied the number-one position in 63 of them. It took less than a month to become Netflix's most-watched scripted limited series. Walter Tevis's novel from 1983, on which the show was based, entered the *New York Times* bestseller list 37 years after its release. The Google search 'How to Play Chess' hit a nine-year peak. Sales of chessboards and pieces rose by more than a thousand per cent and memberships on Chess.com went through the roof. The show created an incredible chess boom. In that sense, the series was the most influential use of chess in popular culture ever, at least in how it boosted the sport.

Named after a popular chess opening, the miniseries follows the life of Beth Harmon (played as a young girl by Isla Johnston and as an adult by Anya Taylor-Joy), who discovers a prodigious talent for chess at a young age. Raised in an orphanage, she develops a tranquiliser addiction and hones her chess skills through dedicated

Anya Taylor-Joy as fictional chess prodigy Beth Harmon in a promotional still from the highly successful Netflix miniseries *The Queen's Gambit*, 2020.

practice. As she grows up, Beth enters the competitive world of chess, facing challenges and triumphs while battling her personal demons. That's all very fascinating but, still, why the huge success?

The answer might be that the show is not so much about chess, after all. When I interviewed the screenwriter Scott Frank for Chess.com in October 2020, he told me, 'It's about a child growing up, interrupted by this brilliant talent that she has. It's very difficult to have a normal life if you have an extra-normal ability in almost any area, so this story is much more about her demons than it is about her obsession with chess. In fact, there's nothing you need to know about chess.'

Frank, who happens to be a Chess.com member and regularly plays on the site, made sure that the Beth Harmon character wouldn't be another cliché of the troubled mind. He was helped by a famous chess player. 'Garry Kasparov and I had many talks about this, and I didn't wanna just hammer that. It's mostly about

genius in general and how it takes a cost on you. The thing about Beth Harmon is that she's both the protagonist and antagonist in her own story.'

Sir Tim Rice, the man behind musicals such as *Jesus Christ Superstar* and *Evita* and Disney productions *Aladdin* and *The Lion King*, told me about the series in a video call in May 2023: 'It made clear that people who play chess are not all weirdos or automatons; they're human beings.'

Personally, I think *The Queen's Gambit* is great because all the important individual aspects are great. The story is compelling: it combines a character-driven narrative with high-stakes chess games that create a sense of tension and intrigue. (Walter Tevis's stories tended to do well on the big screen; he also wrote *The Hustler*, *The Colour of Money* and *The Man Who Fell to Earth*, all made into movies.) Apart from being a refreshing choice as a female star in a male-dominated subdomain, the main character is also a complex and relatable protagonist played wonderfully by Taylor-Joy. Furthermore, the excellent cinematic presentation of the actual chess games, the series' detailed 1960s setting and the beautiful costumes (including lots of chess-themed clothes worn by the main character) contributed to the visual appeal.

*The Queen's Gambit* won many prizes, including a Golden Globe for limited series and a Golden Globe for Taylor-Joy, who beat Cate Blanchett (*Mrs. America*) and Nicole Kidman (*The Undoing*) in 2021. Among other prizes, she won Best Female Actor in the TV Movie or Limited Series category at the 27th annual Screen Actors Guild Awards. Taylor-Joy even joined the chess boom herself. When asked, after winning her Golden Globe, if she had had enough chess for a lifetime, she replied, 'Oh goodness, I could never say that. I love chess! I've had to pick up new skills for the movies that I've been doing, so I'm looking forward to having some time off so I can get back to chess.'

## Chess and Politics

Alfonso X, Pope Leo XIII, Ivan the Terrible, King Edward I, Benjamin Franklin, Thomas Jefferson, Napoleon, Karl Marx, Vladimir Lenin, Ernesto 'Che' Guevara, Fidel Castro, Jimmy Carter – all of them enjoyed a game of chess. Yes, I am jumping to the world of politics, an area where the omnipresence of chess is strongly felt.

Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, was also one of the first politicians to write about chess. In his short essay from 1786 titled 'The Morals of Chess', he noted that chess is more than idle amusement: 'Several very valuable qualities of the mind, useful in the course of human life, are to be acquired or strengthened by it, so as to become habits, ready on all occasions.'

In one instance, Franklin used chess as an excuse for his political ploys. In December 1774, the period of rebellion by British colonial separatist leaders that would soon spark the American Revolution, he met several times with Caroline Howe, the sister of Admiral Richard Howe and General William Howe. The two brothers would later become commanders of the British naval and land forces during the American Revolutionary War, but they were both still somewhat sympathetic to the American cause at the time. Franklin played chess with Mrs Howe, but these meeting were also an opportunity for him to meet with her brother Richard and discuss possible ways of reconciling the Continental Congress and the Thirteen Colonies.

Franklin was a fanatic, but in politics Che Guevara was the biggest chess lover of them all. As a young boy, his father took him to the Chess Olympiad in Buenos Aires in 1939, where Che saw the great Capablanca, got interested in Cuba and caught the chess fever. Later, he would call chess '*mi segunda novia*' (my second girlfriend). Che and Fidel Castro played chess to kill time while detained in Mexico, and, after the revolution, in his role as

This 1853 engraving depicts Benjamin Franklin playing chess with Caroline Howe in December 1774. He had arranged several games as cover for peace talks with her brothers, Admiral Richard Howe (shown at centre) and General William Howe.

industry minister, Che began promoting chess. He ensured Cuba was represented at the 1960 Leipzig Chess Olympiad and launched a local team tournament.

Che's most significant chess legacy was establishing the annual Capablanca Memorial in Havana, which still runs today. In the early years, many strong Soviet and European grandmasters participated as the prize fund was higher than at many tournaments elsewhere. I guess it helped that Che was both the industry minister and director of the National Bank. He and Castro were daily visitors at the inaugural tournament in 1962 in the Habana Libre Hotel, and both participated in simultaneous exhibitions against