Playthings in Early Modernity
Ludic Cultures, 1100–1700

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Playthings in Early Modernity
Party Games, Word Games, Mind Games

Edited by
Allison Levy

Ludic Cultures, 1100–1700

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Contents

List of Illustrations vii
Acknowledgements xv
Introduction: Playing the Field  
Allison Levy 1

Performing Pictures: Parlor Games and Visual Engagement in  
Ascanio de’ Morì’s Giuoco piacevole  
Kelli Wood 9

“Mixt” and Matched: Dance Games in Late Sixteenth- and Early  
Seventeenth-Century Europe  
Emily F. Winerock 29

Ludic Intermingling/Ludic Discrimination: Women’s Card Playing  
and Visual Proscriptions in Early Modern Europe  
Antonella Fenech Kroke 49

Leonardo da Vinci, Parody, and Pictorial Magic  
Chrsicinda Henry 73

Letter Games: Machiavelli and Guicciardini in Carnivalesque Correspondence  
Sergius Kodera 97

The Rules of Passion and Pastime: The Game of Lurch in a Late  
Renaissance Poem  
Manfred Zollinger 117

“Sportes and Pastimes, done by Number”: Mathematical Games in  
Early Modern England  
Jessica Marie Otis 131
Predictive Play: Wheels of Fortune in the Early Modern Lottery Book
   Jessen Kelly

Virtuous Vices: Giuseppe Maria Mitelli’s Gambling Prints and the Social Mapping of Leisure and Gender in Post-Tridentine Bologna
   Patricia Rocco

Trading and Trick Taking in the Dutch Republic: Pasquin’s Wind Cards and the South Sea Bubble
   Joyce Goggin

The Problem of Excessive Play: Renaissance Strategies of Ludic Governmentality
   Andreas Hermann Fischer

Imaginary Cartographies and Commercial Commodities: Geography and Playing Cards in Early Modern England
   Serina Patterson

Land of Elusion: Portuguese Perceptions and the Matter of Play and Gaming in Vijayanagara
   Elke Rogersdotter

Visual Frames and Breaking the Rules of the Reconquista: Chess and Alfonso X, el Sabio’s Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas
   Nhora Lucía Serrano

The Prisoners’ Dilemma: Strategies and Ruses in the Inquisitorial Jails of Early Modern Cuenca
   Patrick J. O’Banion

Bibliography

Notes on Contributors

Index
List of Illustrations

Kelli Wood

Figure 1.1. Antonio Tempesta, January, from a series of etchings of the months, published by Giovanni Antonio de Paoli in Rome, 1599, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence. 10

Figure 1.2. Antonio Tempesta, January, detail, from a series of etchings of the months, published by Giovanni Antonio de Paoli in Rome, 1599, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe degli Uffizi, Florence. 11

Figure 1.3. Detail from Il Piacevole gioco dell’oca, woodcut, seventeenth century, British Museum, London. 14

Figure 1.4. Elevation of the Arch of Trajan, Ancona from Sebastiano Serlio, Libro d’architettura. Il terzo libro (Venice: Gio. Battista et Marchio Sessa, 1559–62). Photo: author. 17

Figure 1.5. Ignazio Danti, View of Ancona, fresco, 1581–82. Galleria delle Carte Geografiche, Vatican City. Scala/Art Resource, NY. 18

Figure 1.6. Giuseppe Maria Mitelli, Il giuoco del blasone, etching, 1714–18, British Museum, London. 21

Emily F. Winerock

Figure 2.1. Pieter Aertsen, The Egg Dance, 84 × 172 cm, oil on panel, 1552, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam. 33

Figure 2.2. After Maerten de Vos, published by Johannes Baptista Vrints, The Egg Dance, 23.2 × 29.7 cm, engraving, late sixteenth century, Elisha Whittelsey Collection, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. 34

Figure 2.3. Attributed to Daniel Vinckenboom, detail from The Thames at Richmond, with the Old Royal Palace, 152.1 × 304.2 cm, oil on canvas, ca. 1620. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge. 35
Figure 2.4. Emblem IV, Johannis de Brunes, *Emblemata of Zinne-werck* (Amsterdam, 1624), p. 23.

Antonella Fenech Kroke

Figure 3.1. Unknown artist, *Allegory of the Plague*, Biccherna book cover, 1437. © Kunstgewerbemuseum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.

Figure 3.2. Hans Holbein the Younger (after), Wenceslaus Hollar (primer), *Death and the Devil Strike a Player* (Antwerp, ca. 1680), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Figure 3.3. Monogrammist SH, *Giovanni da Capistrano Preaching against Games*, frontispiece of the *Vita Iohannis Capistrani. Sermones eiusdem* (Augsburg, 1519).

Figure 3.4. Woodcut illustration from chapter 77, “On Gamblers,” from Sebastian Brant, *Das Narrenschiff* (Basel, 1494).

Figure 3.5. Niklas Stör (or Erhard Schön), *Couple Playing Cards*, from H. Sachs, *Welcher ein schon weyb pulen zvil. Der musz auch von yhr leyden vil. Das lie der untrew mit im spil* (Nuremberg, ca. 1530), Schlossmuseum, Gotha. http://www.zeno.org – Contumax GmbH & Co. KG.

Figure 3.6. Master of the Amsterdam Cabinet, *Card Players*, end of the fifteenth century, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

Figure 3.7. After Lucas van Leyden, *The Card Players*, oil on panel, probably ca. 1550/1599, Samuel H. Kress Collection, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.


Figure 3.10. Jacob Matham, *Two Men Argue and Fight over a Game of Cards*, engraving from the series *The Consequences of Alcoholism*, ca. 1600, British Museum, London. Courtesy © Trustees of the British Museum. 62

Figure 3.11. Girolamo Romanino, *Tarot Card Players*, detached fresco, mid sixteenth century, originally part of the decoration of the Sala del Capitano in the Broletto, Brescia. Private collection. 64


Figure 3.13. Giovanni Antonio Fasolo, *Card Players*, fresco, ca. 1570, Villa Caldogno, Vicenza. De Agostini Picture Library/Bridgeman Images. 66

*Chriscinda Henry*

Figure 4.1. Leonardo da Vinci, *Phyllis (or Campaspe) Riding Aristotle* (recto), 9.6 × 13.5 cm, pen and ink over metalpoint on paper, ca. 1475–80, Hamburger Kunsthalle, Hamburg. 74

Figure 4.2. Leonardo da Vinci, *A Satire on Aged Lovers (Grotesque Couple)*, 26.2 × 12.3 cm, pen and ink over black chalk on paper, ca. 1489–90, Royal Library, Windsor Castle. Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2016. 75

Figure 4.3. Leonardo da Vinci, *A Man Trick by Gypsies (Five Grotesque Heads)* (recto), 26.0 × 20.5 cm, pen and brown ink on paper, ca. 1493, Royal Library, Windsor Castle. Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2016. 76

Figure 4.4. Florentine (circle of Baccio Baldini?), *Phyllis and Aristotle, Surrounded by a Young Man and Woman with Eros, and a Reclining Nude Woman with Two Children*, 16 cm diameter, engraving (Otto print), ca. 1465–80, private collection. Photo © Christie’s Images/Bridgeman Images. 79

Figure 4.5. Baccio Baldini (or workshop), *Death and the Lovers (Allegory of Love and Death)*, 25.4 × 20.4 cm, engraving, ca. 1465–70, British Museum, London. Courtesy © Trustees of the British Museum. 82
Figure 4.6. Baccio Baldini (or workshop), *Garden of Love*, 19 cm diameter, engraving (Otto print), ca. 1465–80, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin. 83

Figure 4.7. Tuscan marriage box, 18 × 27.5 cm, beech with tempera and gilded decoration over a gesso ground, ca. 1400–25, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Photograph © 2017, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. 84


**Manfred Zollinger**

Figure 6.1. *Wolf (Protestant) Playing against a Cow (Catholic)*, exterior wall painting, early sixteenth century, Vienna. Photo: author. 120

**Jessica Marie Otis**

Figure 7.1. *Teaching a Child to Use a Counting Board*, from Robert Recorde’s *The Ground of Artes* (1615), The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford, Bodl., Douce R 466, f. 1v. 133

Figure 7.2. *A Divination Game Explained*, in Robert Recorde’s *The Ground of Artes* (1615), The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford, Bodl., Douce R 466, p. 554. 135

**Jessen Kelly**

Figure 8.1. *The Wheel of Fortune*, late fourteenth century, The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford, MS Douce 332, fol. 58r. 146

Figure 8.2. *The Sign of the Dragon*, from Lorenzo Spirito, *Libro de la ventura* (Venice, 1547), Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Res/4 A.lat.a. 445, fol. 13r. 148

Figure 8.4. *The Sphere of Cancer*, from Lorenzo Spirito, *Libro de la ventura* (Venice, 1547), Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Res/4 A.lat.a. 445, fol. 20r.

Figure 8.5. *The Circle of Prophets*, later fifteenth century, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Ms. Cgm 312, fol. 125v.

Figure 8.6. Frontispiece, from Lorenzo Spirito, *Libro de la Ventura* (Venice, 1557). Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice.

Figure 8.7. *The Four Pairs of Lovers*, later fifteenth century, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Ms. Cgm 312, fol. 142v.

Figure 8.8. *Four Angels*, later fifteenth century, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Ms. Cgm 312, fol. 143r.

Patricia Rocco

Figure 9.1. Giuseppe Maria Mitelli, Game of Truth, etching, 1688. Collezione d’Arte e di Storia della Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Bologna (CACR).  

Figure 9.2. Giuseppe Maria Mitelli, Game of Husbands and Wives, etching, 1691. Collezione d’Arte e di Storia della Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Bologna (CACR).  

Figure 9.3. Giuseppe Maria Mitelli, Game of the Beloved with Her Lovers, etching, 1690s. Collezione d’Arte e di Storia della Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Bologna (CACR).  

Figure 9.4. Giuseppe Maria Mitelli, Game of Eyes and Mouths, etching, 1690s. Collezione d’Arte e di Storia della Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Bologna (CACR).
Joyce Goggin

Figure 10.1. *Pasquin’s Wind Cards on the Wind Trade* (Amsterdam, 1720), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.

196
Serina Patterson


Elke Rogersdotter

Figure 13.1. Pavilion popularly known as the Lotus Mahal, Vijayanagara, fifteenth or sixteenth century. Photo: author. 244

Figure 13.2. Female dancers and soldiers, possibly from the nine-day *Mahanavami* feast, detail of frieze on the outer face of the enclosure wall of the Ramachandra temple, Vijayanagara. First half of the fifteenth century. Photo: author. 246

Figure 13.3. Plan of the western part of the urban core and the royal center of the city of Vijayanagara (ca. 1350–1565), showing the localities with game boards along with the outline of structures, outer and inner fortification walls, and ancient thoroughfares (redrawn by the author, from Fritz, Michell, and Nagaraja Rao, *The Royal Centre at Vijayanagara*, Fig. 4.12). 247

Figure 13.4. The gateway of group A, seen from the south, unknown date of origin—possibly before the mid fifteenth century. Photo: author. 248

Figure 13.5. The southern gateway of group B, seen from the north and with the remains of the structure of group C, the audience hall, in the background, unknown date of origin—possibly fifteenth or sixteenth century. Photo: author. 249
Figure 13.6. An alquerque-type board, a larger merels board, and a board for the playing of race games, seen along the inner edge of one of the platforms of the northern gate of group B. These boards cannot be individually dated but are understood as having been engraved during the period under consideration. Photo: author.

Figure 13.7. A race game board of meandering shape and made up of lines, found on a boulder of group A. Photo: author.

Figure 13.8. A race game board of meandering shape and consisting of pits, visible on one of the platforms of the northern gate of group B. Photo: author.

Figure 13.9. An alquerque-type board and a larger merels board found in close vicinity of each other (the larger merels board is only partly to be seen at the top). They are from group C and appear on the eastern side of the basement of the audience hall. Photo: author.

Nhora Lucía Serrano

Figure 14.1. Alfonso X and His Three Advisors, from the Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas (Toledo, 1283), folio 1R. © Patrimonio Nacional.

Figure 14.2. The Three Advisors of Alfonso X, from the Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas (Toledo, 1283), folio 1V. © Patrimonio Nacional.

Figure 14.3. Alfonso X and His Three Advisors with Game Boards, from the Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas (Toledo, 1283), folio 2V. © Patrimonio Nacional.

Figure 14.4. Muslim Artisans Create Chessboards and Carve Figurines, from the Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas (Toledo, 1283), folio 3R. © Patrimonio Nacional.

Figure 14.5. Two Men in a Tent Playing Chess, from the Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas (Toledo, 1283), folio 64R. © Patrimonio Nacional.
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A. L.
New York
Introduction: Playing the Field

Allison Levy

Playmates and Game Changers, Teammates and tricksters, matchmakers and deal breakers, gamblers and grifters, scripts and ventriloquism, charades and masquerades, game pieces and pawns. Playthings in Early Modernity: Party Games, Word Games, Mind Games emphasizes the rules of the game(s) as well as the breaking of those rules. Thus, a “plaything” is here understood both as an object and as a person, and play, in the early modern world, is treated not merely as a pastime, a leisurely pursuit, but also as a pivotal part of daily life, a strategic psychosocial endeavor: Why do we play games—with and upon each other as well as with ourselves? When are winners also losers, and vice versa? How and to what end do we stretch the spaces of play: from the salon to the street, from the piazza to the pulpit, from the palace to the prison, what happens when players go “out of bounds,” or when games go “too far”? Moreover, what happens when we push the parameters of inquiry, when we play with traditional narratives of ludic culture?

Re-defining the early modern plaything and re-thinking the study of play generally, this volume contains fifteen provocative essays at the nexus of material culture, performance studies, and game theory. The contributors represent a range of disciplines, including art history and archaeology, film and media studies, modern languages and literature, history, philosophy, psychology, and economic and social history. Yet central to their investigations is the plaything itself, be it a game board, a jeton or die, a deck of cards, a lottery book, a letter, a rumor or a whisper, a dinner guest, a dance partner, a pen pal, a gambler, a horse trader, or a cellmate. The majority of essays collected here emphasize the visual or material thrust of play in and against textual sources; thus, the volume is lavishly illustrated, with over seventy images related to early modern play, from painting, sculpture, and architecture to drawing and print media, manuscript illumination, and decorative and everyday objects.

Because all of the essays engage in varying degrees with the psychosocial aspects of play and with the ever-shifting objectives and outcomes of games, the volume is not divided into firm sections—despite the book’s subtitle: Party Games, Word Games, Mind Games. Rather, the loose organization presented here acknowledges the overlap of such themes within the individual essays, and it invites—indeed, challenges—the reader to play with the text as a whole. That is, echoing the mandate made to the authors to go
“out of [disciplinary or methodological] bounds,” the reader likewise is encouraged to do the same, to move, for instance, from Elizabethan England to the Vijayanagara Empire in consecutive chapters, or to jump forward or backward at will or by chance—in other words, to read without rules.

Thus, in pushing the boundaries of inquiry, the individual essays as well as the volume as a whole, it can be argued, are playing the field. For all of the strategic re-writing of the rules that goes on in the following pages, the contributors are never playing solitaire. In addition to an abundance of primary sources, classic studies of ludic culture and more recent works are always on the table, from Johan Huizinga’s *Homo ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture* (1955; originally published in Dutch in 1938) to Roger Caillois’s *Les jeux et les hommes* (1958); from Philippe Ariès and Jean-Claude Margolin’s edited volume *Les jeux à la Renaissance. actes du XxIe Colloque international d'études humanistes, Tours, juillet 1980* (1982) to the two-volume *Passare il Tempo, La letteratura del gioco e dell'intrattenimento dal XII al XVI secolo. Atti del Convegno di Pienza 10–14 settembre 1991* (1993); and from Alessandro Arcangeli’s *Recreation in the Renaissance: Attitudes towards Leisure and Pastimes in European Culture, c. 1425–1675* (2003) to Jean-Michel Mehl’s *Des jeux et des hommes dans la société médiévale* (2010). Other publications have also brought attention to the significance of play in the medieval and early modern periods. What the present volume brings to the table is twofold: a re-thinking still further of what defines a “plaything” and, most innovatively, an underscoring of the importance of the material and the visual within ludic culture.

The volume opens with a reconsideration of parlor games in sixteenth-century Italy. Using Ascanio de’ Mori’s understudied but evocative *Giuoco piacevole* (pleasant game) of 1575 as a point of entry, Kelli Wood investigates the popular aristocratic pastime beyond the textual by emphasizing the role of the visual and the sensory in the communal production of parlor games. As Wood explains, players relied on memory and experience of images, objects, sites, and spaces as well as direct visual engagement with their surroundings in the actual salon in order to participate in complex storytelling games such as the “game of the host,” wherein players relate stories of travel that re-create the visual experience of urban space, or the “game of painting,” in which players pose as famous artists and recount the fundamental qualities of excellent painters. Moreover, such interactions in the space of the domestic salon were not inextricably tied to text, and thus parlor games allowed groups without rigorous literary education, such as women, to participate in the reception and production of culture and knowledge through the vehicle of play in a multi-sensory environment.

Dancing was another frequent occurrence at private gatherings as well as at religious festivals and civic celebrations. While some of these occasions were solemn affairs
that called for only the most sober and stately measures, most dances featured at least an element of play, and there were a substantial number of dances specifically devised as dance games. Thus, attending to dancing can enhance our understanding of early modern playfulness—and its boundaries. Emily F. Winerock examines three types of dance games—courtship games, group dances, and dance competitions—and argues that these dances were not simply enjoyable recreations, but that they also helped communities manage potentially disruptive behavior. Certain dance games, however, were not considered appropriate for everyone in every circumstance. The acceptability of a dance game was shaped by when and where it occurred. Protestant reformers, for example, strongly objected to dancing around maypoles, but when such dancing occurred on a Sunday or in a churchyard, those objections were much more likely to find support from the parish at large. In early modern Europe, Winerock demonstrates, dancing as a form of play was both common and contentious.

Indeed, as a complex symbolic system, playing games is a vector of sociability destined to connect but also to discriminate. As Antonella Fenech Kroke points out, images of the femina ludens, women playing cards together as well as with and against men, attest to and affect ludic discrimination. Her essay considers the context, function, and circulation of representations of female card players produced between the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, looking first at images of ludic intermingling in which the dangers of card play are embodied in the figure of the femina ludens and, second, at those in which the femina ludens herself is cheated by the courtly “rules of the game.” In both cases, the implicit and explicit misogyny of these images finds its inspiration and justification, Fenech Kroke proposes, in early modern erotic and love imagery. Thus, the femina ludens, ultimately, is dealt a losing hand insofar as her presence at the gaming table, even if she “wins” the match, reveals less about the ludic practices of women and more about the predilections of her male opponents.

When we re-think gameplay in early modernity, we must also reconsider the medium and the means of play. For example, game boards and game pieces are generally understood as essential components of play. But games can also be played without such manipulatives. Indeed, some games rely entirely on tricks of the hand or of the eye, on fantasy and imagination. Chrsicinda Henry seeks to understand how Leonardo da Vinci’s grotesque narrative drawings parody social and pictorial conventions and disrupt conventional patterns of thought and seeing prevalent in the elite society of late fifteenth-century Europe. She asks the further question of whether Leonardo’s virtuosic quick-fingered graphic experiments—considered here as pictorial deceptions or sleight of hand akin to the magic tricks he performed at the Sforza court—should challenge our understanding of the truth-value of Renaissance art more broadly. Namely, Leonardo’s sly and difficult picture-puzzles prompt the modern viewer to reconsider playfulness, humor, theatricality, and deception as claims for the status of the autonomous artwork around 1500, revealing the role of comic invention within the broader experimental
development of painting at that pivotal moment and arguing for his—and, indeed, the Renaissance artist’s more broadly—ambivalent status as a trickster and master magician.

Deception in political matters is taken up by Sergius Kodera in his careful reading of a carnivalesque letter game played out over three days in May of 1521 between Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini. The objective of the game was to trick Sigismondo Santi, an acquaintance of Guicciardini, into believing that Machiavelli, Santi’s houseguest at the time, was involved in some secret and very important matter of state and that Machiavelli therefore had to be treated with the utmost courtesy during his stay in the remote village of Carpi. The innocuous game proceeds as planned, with Machiavelli receiving increasingly lavish meals and attention, until day three, when the suspicious host intercepts Guicciardini’s last extant letter to Machiavelli and the ruse is discovered. Kodera focuses as much on the materiality of the six surviving messages as on the game being played, positing that the performances associated with these epistolary objects—writing, delivering, reading, and witnessing—are themselves games. Thus, what we find here is an example of a game that not only revolves around language but also specifically revolves around the performance of language. Yet, unlike Kelli Wood’s investigations of verbal parlor games, Kodera (and later O’Banion) delves into the relationship between performance, communication, and politics.

Manfred Zollinger presents another example of a playful text made “playable.” His examination of lurch, a board game akin to backgammon practiced in some parts of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Europe, revolves around two literary sources: the hitherto almost unnoticed poem Lorzius aleae ludus descriptus of 1570 by the relatively unknown writer Carl Leuschner, and its German revision published anonymously in 1615. The original edition is the first printed book about lurch and describes its basic components within a fictional setting featuring Dido and Aeneas as protagonist gamblers. The practice-oriented revision, though not a proper game manual, actually makes the poem “playable.” Zollinger discusses the destiny of both the poem and the game against the background of shifting conditions in the relationship between texts and gaming practices, concluding that Leuschner’s poetical rules, in both editions, were eventually abandoned and forgotten like the name of the game itself—that is to say, left in the lurch.

Foregrounding numbers over words, Jessica Marie Otis provides an overview of mathematical games in early modern England, where, until the beginning of the sixteenth century, most people expressed numerical concepts through a combination of performative and object-based symbolic systems, such as tally sticks and counting boards. By the end of the century, however, the advent of vernacular arithmetic textbooks combined with rising literacy rates to encourage the adoption of a single written system: Arabic numerals. It is in this period of transition that we see mathematics emerge as a form of play, both in its own right and as an auxiliary to older games. For instance, textbooks taught a variety of party trick games, including variants of the familiar modern challenge:
pick a number between one and ten. At the same time, early modern men and women increasingly used mathematics as an aid in games of chance such as dice or card games, attempting to calculate the “odds”—a term which itself only emerged in the late sixteenth century—of a chance occurrence.

Jessen Kelly investigates the depiction, material configuration, and ludic activation of Fortuna's wheel in the early modern lottery book. A form of bibliomancy, lottery books employed mechanisms of chance to direct players through the pages to statements about their personal future. Lottery books already had a long history, but in the fifteenth century these volumes emphatically asserted their identity as playthings—specifically as games of chance. Not only did the lottery book entail the use of dice and spinning dials, for example, but images of dice and cards populated the pages. Here, Fortuna's wheel was encountered not as static motif, but as an instrument of play. Historians have highlighted Fortuna's iconographic transformation around 1500, when the wheel was seemingly deposed by a classicized nude perched precariously atop a globe; unlike the wheel, this figure could be “grasped” and mastered. This change has been interpreted as emblematic of a key tenet of Renaissance studies: the “birth of the individual” as an autonomous agent capable of triumphing over the whims of chance. Kelly makes clear, however, that the multiple depictions of Fortuna's wheel in the lottery book complicate these assessments.

Patricia Rocco explores the power of print from a slightly different angle, examining the function of popular game sheets produced by the Bolognese artist Giuseppe Maria Mitelli during the Counter-Reformation. Certain examples of this imagery pay special attention to the subject of women's virtue and thus adhere to contemporary religious propaganda. Promiscuity, for example, was regarded as a vice that accompanied, or was a consequence of, gambling. Despite the didactic demands of the Church, not to mention the prohibition against playing dice games in the Papal States, Mitelli's game sheets provocatively “play” with the Church's official position on gambling—the moralizing messages of the broadsheets can only be reached by rolling the dice. Thus, in seventeenth-century Bologna, print becomes practice, an ambiguous site of both compliance with and resistance to the Church's disciplinary strategy.

Moving from religion to finance, Joyce Goggin discusses a deck of cards printed in the Dutch Republic in 1720 in commemoration of the bursting of the South Sea Bubble, an event often referred to as the first market crash. Given the grief and loss of life that this and other financial bubbles caused across Europe as the result of speculation, one wonders why someone would print a deck of cards narrating the catastrophe with which people could gamble, thereby engaging in speculation’s closest, and perhaps riskier, cousin. In fact, these “bubble” cards were printed and disseminated at a moment when the line between speculation, a relatively new practice, and gambling, a patently ancient activity, had yet to solidify. This becomes evident upon closer examination of the verses printed on each card, which may be read as cautionary tales or humorous ditties. As such,
these cards materially embody the mixed reception that finance received in the early modern period, as a magical source of wealth and as an ill wind that carries disaster.

Pathological gambling was indeed a real concern in early modern Europe. Andreas Hermann Fischer investigates the constant communal problem of excessive play and the various strategies or therapies devised to combat ludomania. Focusing on three mid-sixteenth-century authors—Olivier Gouyn, a former gambler; Eustachius Schildo, a Lutheran preacher; and Pascasius Justus, a Flemish physician and philosopher—Fischer understands their attempts at player micro-management as a contribution to governmental measures against abnormal play, generating profit for the state by changing the most important plaything of all: the player. By examining the diverging therapeutic strategies and anti-ludic measures proposed by the texts and by revealing their implicit assumptions on the difference between legitimate and excessive play, Fischer is able to show the broad range of cultural, religious, and scientific discourses on ludic governmentality in early modern Europe as well as the fluidity of what it meant at the time to go “too far” in gameplay.

Serina Patterson addresses the relationship between playing cards and geography in early modern England in two distinct but interrelated ways. First, with the rise of the printing press, playing cards became more widely accessible and portable, thereby assuming a new level of popularity. But as the production of cards increased, English card makers and merchants competed with foreign importers, and this in turn led to royal bans on the production, distribution, and use of playing cards. Indeed, viewed with suspicion born of both moral and mercantile anxieties, playing cards were things perceived to be in need of containment and control. Second, the increasing focus on the regional production and trade of playing cards was not the only changing aspect of the medium in early modern England. Departing from the French courtly style, early English “geographical cards,” produced by cartographers and engravers, were the first of their kind in Europe to embody specific representations of the real world beyond simple iconic or representational markers. Subsequently, Patterson notes, games change from abstract, positional game boards to representations of real places and, later, fictional worlds.

Exploration and the perception of foreign lands are central to Elke Rogersdotter’s essay, which strives to reduce the methodological gap between a celebrated written account of the South Indian city of Vijayanagara, authored around 1520 by the Portuguese horse trader Domingos Paes and translated into English in 1900, and the archaeological evidence of gameplay found in the same locality, namely the material traces of game boards found in the hundreds among its ruins. A variety of board types in the shape of non-portable, often well-preserved engravings appear in different kinds of structural foundations, including solid rock. Save for a few remarks on the existence and function of these boards, this archaeological evidence has largely been unattended to in the scholarship on Vijayanagara. Rogersdotter aims to remedy this oversight and to pinpoint a more interactive play of the sources by shifting the starting position from the city
at large to the play-world itself. Thus, she uses examples of game boards engraved in the palatial and military foundations of Vijayanagara as a springboard for locating perceptions of play in the early sixteenth-century depiction of the city by Paes.

These themes of competition and coexistence continue in the next essay. In 1491 the Catholic Monarchs, King Ferdinand II of Aragon and Queen Isabella I of Castile, and the Sultan of Granada signed the Treaty of Granada, signaling the end of Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula and the completion of the Reconquista. This prolonged 781-year ideological melee was as much a political dispute as a religious quarrel for supremacy and dominance. This Iberian clash of cultures was not only played out in the battlefield, but also on the chessboard, according to Nhora Lucía Serrano, whose essay focuses on Alfonso X, el Sabio’s Castilian illuminated manuscript, the Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas (Book of Chess, Dice, and Tables, 1283), in which the Reconquista stands in dueling contrast with the other dominant grand narrative of Alfonso’s time, the convivencia—the peaceful coexistence of three dominant cultures (Christian, Jewish, and Muslim) in the thirteenth-century Iberian Peninsula. In fact, by depicting women, men, and non-Christians playing among each other, the Libro de ajedrez offers a window into the multiplicity of cultures and religions coexisting within the Iberian kingdoms. Ultimately, Serrano proposes, Alfonso X and his scriptorium play the role of political critic, challenging the rules of the Reconquista through the visual representation of chess on the pages of the Libro de ajedrez.

Games most certainly could be political; sometimes they were matters of life and death. Patrick J. O’Banion, in his examination of a non-physical game, considers the high-stakes games of deception played in the secret jails of the inquisitorial tribunal at Cuenca in the early seventeenth century as revealed through a series of interrelated trial records. These trials pertain to a group of moriscos (i.e. the descendants of Iberian Muslims baptized in the early sixteenth century) from the small Castilian town of Deza and depict life in the secret jails with rare detail thanks to the frequent reports made by Gabriel de León, an inquisitorial informant who lived among the incarcerated moriscos. While inquisitorial procedure demanded strict solitude and secrecy for prisoners, the reality is that life in the cárcceles secretas was highly communal, especially for Deza’s moriscos, who devised a remarkable series of ruses, deceptions, and gimmicks to communicate with one another and fool their inquisitors and wardens (theirs was a private word game, if you will, much like the letter game played a century earlier by Machiavelli and Guicciardini). But their successes in these endeavors, few as they were, brought little succor. For the more information prisoners gained about their incarcerated friends and relatives, the more difficult it became to trust that others would keep faith and resist the temptation to implicate their neighbors. Yet the most striking game player of them all proved to be Gabriel de León himself, who through his creative self-promotion and manipulation undermined not only the confidence of his cellmates but also the very foundations of inquisitorial procedure and method. In so doing, he tapped into a gnawing sense of
epistemic uncertainty that is increasingly being recognized as emblematic of Spanish culture during the Golden Age.

Finally, the objective of this collection as a whole is to call attention not merely to the ubiquity of play in early modern culture, but to its multiplicity—that is, the presence of play within play: parlor games as mind games, players as pawns, card makers as cultural critics, and so on. Re-viewing early modern play through this kaleidoscopic lens can be a real game changer, a strategic breaking of the rules of the game of inquiry, without which we are all cheated.
Performing Pictures:
Parlor Games and Visual Engagement in
Ascanio de’ Mori’s *Gioco piacevole*

Kelli Wood

*E giochi, e balli, e risi, e sguardi ...*
(And games, and dances, and laughs, and looks ...)
—Antonio Tempesta, *January*

**Introduction**

In his *January* from a series of etchings of the twelve months, Antonio Tempesta depicts an uncommon view of the sixteenth-century domestic interior: the bustling activities of an aristocratic gathering (Figure 1.1).¹ The composition is dominated by the space of the kitchen; in the foreground servants roast meats over the billowing fire, wash dishes, and plate meals, while in the background guests occupy the *sala*, or salon, the designated room for sociability—dining, entertaining, and playing games. Tempesta imaginatively links the party preparations in the kitchen with the festivities in the salon to unveil the labor behind the *sprezzatura* of the leisure in the background.² He places a banqueting table set with plates and food against the right wall of the room, with three gentlemen standing just to the left of it, gesticulating in discussion (Figure 1.2). A grand credenza rises up against the left wall, showcasing the household’s lavish plates and vases for the guests to admire, as was customary. In front of this credenza three musicians play stringed instruments, and in the center of the room three couples dance. The activity in Tempesta’s salon is described in a poem accompanying the image: “*E giochi, e balli, e risi, e sguardi*” (And games, and dances, and laughs, and looks).³

Games were a central activity in aristocratic salons.⁴ Chess, backgammon, printed lottery games known as *biribisi*, chance games such as the *giuoco dell’oca* (game of the goose), and cards were popular pastimes for aristocrats in the sixteenth century. Both aristocratic men and women participated in these games; Eleonora da Toledo invited gentlemen around Europe to play cards with her at Poggio a Caiano,⁵ while Ferrante Gonzaga’s guest Juan de Maona busied himself with both cards and table games at the country villa.⁶ Yet the constellation of dinner, dancing, and games in Tempesta’s image suggests another type of popular game related to cards and board games: the parlor game.
Several sixteenth-century texts sketch out this particular social realm. Bolognese author Innocenzio Ringhieri published the first collection of parlor games, *Cento giuochi liberali, et d’ingegno* (1551), in which he described the rules of one hundred such games, adding anecdotes and reasons why each would be of interest to their dedicatee, Catherine de’ Medici. And Girolamo Bargagli’s *Dialogo de’ giuochi che nelle vegghie sanesi si usano di fare* (1572) gives an exhaustive account of the context and rules of parlor games played by the Sienese Academy of the Intronati. Both of these works serve as handbooks, cataloguing the different games and detailing their rules for would-be players. Other literary works describe the play of parlor games in the space of the salon. Primary among these are Baldassare Castiglione’s iconic *Il Cortegiano* (1528) and Ascanio de’ Mori’s *Giuoco piacevole* (1575), both of which envision the performance of parlor games in the home.

Castiglione’s *Il Cortegiano* (The Book of the Courtier) is by far the better-known text, but it is not always thought of as an imaginative representation of parlor games following dinner and dancing at the court of Elisabetta Gonzaga. The conversational game of how to describe a perfect courtier builds the scaffolding for *Il Cortegiano*, in which Castiglione uses the frame-story of the parlor game to make vivid for his readers...
the attributes of the ideal courtier. Castiglione’s description of his book as “a painted portrait of the court of Urbino, not in the hand of Raphael or Michelangelo, but that of a lowly painter” situates his work within the revived Horatian tradition of *ut pictura poesis* and the *paragone* debates between poetry and painting.

Although de’ Mori’s work has received less attention than Castiglione’s, the *Gioco piacevole*, like *Il Cortegiano*, creates a kind of portrait, a social model for the perfect aristocratic player delineated by the rules of the parlor game. The *Gioco piacevole*, dedicated to Vincenzo Gonzaga of Mantua, is a dialogue depicting upper-class domestic sociability. The work begins with an account of dining and dancing leading up to the titular parlor game, the *giuoco piacevole*, or pleasant game. On the last night of carnival in 1566, a group of noble women called upon socialite Barbara Calina. Renowned as one of the most beautiful and honorable ladies of Brescia, she received the women graciously, seating her guests in the parlor and treating them to a splendid meal.
Determined to make the most of the last night of carnival, Barbara entreats the ladies to stay and entertain themselves as she sends for musicians. Four gentlemen then join the festivities, and after the group of men and women tire of dancing they decide to play a game. \textit{Giuoco piacevole} purports to narrate in detail the privileged ludic experience of the nobility in their domestic space, a game played by the invited few at the end of an evening of feasting and dancing. De’ Mori’s story accords with the impression we get from Tempesta’s engraving; parlor games are present but elusive, part of the background, the most intimate part of the gathering.

Although the aforementioned literature would suggest that \textit{giochi d’ingegno}, or parlor games, were a trendy pastime in sixteenth-century courts and aristocratic homes,\textsuperscript{16} only recently have parlor games been recognized as a central aspect of entertainment in the sixteenth century, in particular by George McClure in his study of the Sienese contributions of parlor games in literature and their historical implications for the public identity of women.\textsuperscript{17} Recent scholarship has often emphasized the linguistic thrust of the parlor games, focusing on these games’ contributions to the \textit{questione della lingua}, with some scholars asserting that these games were essentially just conversations or linguistic tools for memory.\textsuperscript{18} Using de’ Mori’s \textit{Giuoco piacevole} as a point of entry, I examine the parlor game in sixteenth-century Italy as a performance, a social practice, an artistic representation in the space of the domestic interior. While some games were shared and transmitted through literature and others through word of mouth, every iteration and performance of play was created by a group of people and their shared knowledge and experience. Ringhieri’s and Bargagli’s handbooks illustrate the breadth of possibilities and mechanics of parlor games, but de’ Mori’s work, like Castiglione’s, imagines the group enactment of play in a salon and thus the communal production of the game.

Moreover, this essay examines the role of the visual and the sensory in the communal production of parlor games, and explores how the kinds of games noted by de’ Mori, Castiglione, Ringhieri, Bargagli, Tempesta, and others all draw upon vision in their play and didactically contribute to the experience and analysis of the visual. Considering de’ Mori’s fictional account of a parlor game in the context of handbooks that described the rules of other parlor games being played at the time, it is clear that players relied on memory of images and spaces as well as direct visual engagement with their surroundings in the salon in order to participate. The \textit{Giuoco piacevole} involved aspects of several games noted in Ringhieri’s and Bargagli’s handbooks, incorporating facets of games such as the \textit{giuoco dell’hoste} (game of the host), where players relate stories of travel that re-create the visual experience of urban space, or games such as the \textit{giuoco della pittura} (game of painting), in which players pose as famous artists and list the fundamental qualities of excellent painters using their visual surroundings to aid their descriptions. These parlor games provide us with what Michael Baxandall called “words for pictures,” a linguistic framework in the sixteenth century that framed the experience of the visual world, and art specifically.\textsuperscript{19}
In their studies of a Cinquecento humanist society of academicians and courtiers, scholars have often seen the textual as paramount in the production of culture and information. Parlor games, however, demonstrate that these communities functioned equally in an economy of images and senses in space, and that groups without rigorous literary education, such as women, could participate actively. Salons and the parlor games played within them became sites of socialization for thinking about the visual, creating a communal sense of visuality.

Parlor Games in the Salon

The terminology for sixteenth-century parlor games (giochi ingeniosi, giuochi liberali et d’ingegno, giuoco piacevole, dilettevoli giuochi) defines them by enjoyment and by the skills used in play rather than the space in which they were played, as in the later emergence of the popular Victorian term parlour game. For example, Castiglione describes the after-dinner entertainment in the salon of Elisabetta Gonzaga as giochi ingeniosi, or games of wit involving clever discussion and creative arguments, while de’ Mori describes his Giuoco piacevole as a form of entertainment to cheerfully pass the night. The giochi ingeniosi, however, were indeed played in the space of the parlor (salon), and this environment was an important aspect of the games as it abounded with visual and sensory experiences that participants drew upon during play.

Literary accounts of parlor games often describe the domestic space within which the game takes place, evoking the visual and material surroundings of the games. Il Cortegiano sets the stage for the parlor game by describing in detail the luxurious furnishings and works of art in the parlor. Though Castiglione’s description of the game of the courtier is likely fictional, it was probably inspired by real events that took place in the apartment of Elisabetta Gonzaga, whose guests move from dinner to the duchess’s apartments to play games, suggesting a move from the Sala dei Banchetti to the Sala delle Veglie on the piano nobile, the outermost salon of her actual apartments. For Elisabetta, a woman, to preside over the festivities in the salon was not at all unusual. The salon in particular activated nodes of social interaction that were open to women, insofar as the donna di casa, or lady of the house, managed many aspects of the home, including the salon, and played a central role in organizing parties and games.

De’ Mori takes care to conjure the sensory ambience of domestic space surrounding his parlor game: the city of Brescia is festive and boisterous during carnival; the women ascend the stairs of Barbara Calina’s palace to find her at the dinner table; they are then conducted into the salon for a meal followed by music and dancing when the gentlemen arrive. De’ Mori then narrates the sensory and corporeal aspects of the salon: Count Alfonso Cavriolo tries to take the hand of Barbara, Leonora Averolda sings and Florenzio smoothly plucks the strings of his instrument, and men and women pair off to dance the gagliarda, or galliard.
Salons provided a rich experience—visual, intellectual, and musical—for social occasions such as those described by Castiglione, de’ Mori, and Tempesta. Although documentary evidence related to games in these salons is sparse, the sources that do survive confirm what takes place in literary and artistic representations of play in salons. The central scene of a seventeenth-century giuoco dell’oca woodcut depicts games in action in a salon (Figure 1.3).\textsuperscript{23} A company of five card players surrounding a cloth-covered table gesticulates in discussion and drinks while a host pours wine from a fiasco. A woman carrying a basket of fruit enters the room from a portal on the right, showcasing both the frivolity of the salon and, as in Tempesta’s print, the work of the servants. This giuoco dell’oca then functioned as a kind of mirror of the salon; players would look at the image of games in the central vignette as they rolled the dice on their own table in their own salon. The court at Ferrara (the inspiration for de’ Mori’s Giuoco piacevole) participated in similar festivities; one account by an ambassador visiting Ferrara recalled that in the salon they ate twice a day and held parties until late at night where there was talking,
playing, drinking, and dancing. And a report from Rome to Florence dated February 5, 1580 recaps carnival celebrations attended by members of noble families, including that of Vincenzo Gonzaga, de’ Mori’s patron. Part of these celebrations included a dinner followed by dancing and “altri trattenimenti,” or other entertainment, in the salon.

Reading this letter in light of the frequent representation of parties progressing from dinner to dancing to parlor games, the entertainment referenced would indeed have included such games. What’s more, Scipione Bargagli, brother of Girolamo Bargagli, in his treatise on parlor games published only seven years later, refers to parlor games as *trattenimenti*. While on the one hand these prints and letters corroborate the literary and artistic evidence supporting the entertainment that was prevalent in the sixteenth-century salon, on the other hand they do not provide details about the specific rules and play of the games. De’ Mori’s *Gioco piacevole*, however, does just that, offering the reader a narrative of an imagined parlor game.

**Performing Pictures in the *Gioco piacevole***

De’ Mori’s description of the *gioco piacevole* both situates the game in a recognizable domestic space and chronicles a parlor game that corresponds with the kinds of games we find in Ringhieri’s and Girolamo Bargagli’s handbooks. After de’ Mori shapes the scene for his parlor game by making vivid the home and salon, the dinner and guests, the text proceeds in the form of a dialogue among the participants. Barbara Calina proposes the parlor game for the group that ultimately serves as the frame for the rest of de’ Mori’s work, a game which asks the players to call upon their memory of sites and artworks, to imagine fantastical scenes, and to analyze their visual surroundings during play.

The game proposed by Barbara Calina combines elements of several parlor games mentioned in Ringhieri’s and Girolamo Bargagli’s lists of games. The initial premise of de’ Mori’s parlor game is that each player is assigned a letter of the alphabet that must be used to begin words in a complex story told by the player. This aspect of the game is similar to what Girolamo Bargagli calls the *giuoco del A.B.C.* (the alphabet game). In this game each player must take a letter and recite a verse that begins with that letter, and then the next player must respond to the verse with their corresponding letter, making the game more difficult as it continues. The alphabet game went beyond a demonstration of verbal wit to involve the sensory, for Girolamo Bargagli suggests that players also animate their verses by using their “voice, gesticulations, and related concepts to what their phrase represented.”

The story told by players in de’ Mori’s game involves recounting a trip, including an inn and its host. This aspect of the *giuoco piacevole* derives from Ringhieri’s *giuoco dell’hoste*, or game of the host. In the *giuoco dell’hoste* players pretend to be travelers and innkeepers, each choosing an inn from the list Ringhieri provides and describing the experience of journeying to the inn: describing the city, the sights to see, the food and
wine, and their stay at the hotel. Lina Bolzoni has rightly pointed out that Ringhieri’s games require “an enormous heritage of cultural memory,” as in the *giuoco dell’hoste* when players rely upon knowledge of their travels and the monuments and cuisine in each city. But unlike Bolzoni, I disagree that the “true and proper game ... appears little more than a pretext” for this cultural memory. Rather, the performance of the game itself is a vital part of this heritage, the creation of collective experience, not just a stage for memorization. For example, the recall of Rome’s “pan bianco, vin del monte, & buoni caponi” includes a gustatory element of the game, wherein the narration of memory collectively reproduces the taste experience.

The extended descriptions of travel to cities in de’ Mori’s game, where players performed their monuments, spaces, and gardens through words and gestures, relied on both sensory memory and imagination. Barbara Calina begins the game with her account of a visit to Ancona: “I stopped by ANCONA, the main city in le Marche region ... where I was received by the host, a most honest name named ANTONELLO ... I saw what is most beautiful in the city: the churches, the arch, the loggia of merchants, the trading posts, and many nearby gardens.” The description evokes the urban fabric of Ancona, bringing to mind the important sights for the participant who had visited the city or seen images of it, including the churches, loggia, trading posts, and an arch. Here the arch is Ancona’s Arch of Trajan, which was sketched in detail in Sebastiano Serlio’s *Libro d’architettura* (Figure 1.4) and which Ignazio Danti heralded as the hallmark of the city in the banner of his *View of Ancona* in the Galleria delle Carte Geografiche in Vatican City (1581–82), “ANCON CIVITAS DORICA CVM PORTV TRAIANI” (Figure 1.5). The next part of Barbara’s description calls on classical literature in the creation of a garden scene with Arethusa, the Nereid nymph, chased by the river god Alpheus and transformed into a spring, known in the sixteenth century through printings of Ovid’s *Metamorphoses*. The other elements in the garden, notably a unicorn and a heron, are not consistent with the Ovidian myth, pointing to the inventive combination of imagery by de’ Mori and in the game.

The recitation of the journeys in de’ Mori’s parlor game emulates the kinds of observations made in epistolary accounts of travel around the same time. For example, in a letter dated August 28, 1570, Italian politicians Lodovico Antinori and Belisario Vinta write to Antonio Serguidi, secretary to Francesco I de’ Medici. Following a night of festivities the men request a description of Pratolino, which was known for its villas and gardens, so that they too “can virtually participate in its pastimes.” It is precisely these kinds of descriptions that are involved in de’ Mori’s parlor game, and it is significant that the men request this kind of description after an evening of festivities, during which, perhaps, parlor games like *giuoco piacevole* were played.

As we can see from the comparison with Ringhieri’s *giuoco dell’hoste*, in each turn of de’ Mori’s game the player reinterprets the experience of sights and places,
Figure 1.5. Ignazio Danti, *View of Ancona*, fresco, 1581–82.
Galleria delle Carte Geografiche, Vatican City. Scala/Art Resource, NY.
artistically merging his or her sensory memory and other cultural knowledge. Although de’ Mori’s *Giuoco piacevole* and Ringhieri’s handbook are themselves texts, their games are dependent on memory and analysis of images, artworks, sites, and spaces. This is seen no better than when, on her turn to play, Livia, one of the interlocutors in de’ Mori’s work, recounts a magnificent palace and fountain in Verona: “There is a view, the most delightful view that one could desire, a superb palace, where there is not missing arches, giants, pyramids, obelisks, springs, and things of similar greatness.” Livia narrates the architectural features of the grand palace, including the arches, pyramids, and obelisks of the structure, and notes that the act of *seeing* them was delightful.

The next required part of the story to be recounted by each player in the *giuoco piacevole* is a garden, so Livia describes a garden with a fantastical fountain. The fountain is characterized by a huge sculpture of Triton with water gushing from his horn and mechanics that allow the water to spurt up from underground, the smell of salt in the air, and a harmonious sound of water from the falling precipitation. Here Livia describes the sights and sounds of the fountain and also compares it to known works of Barchi and Botticino. Although the fountain is imaginary, Livia’s description, for the players and the audience of de’ Mori’s book, elicits memory of the tactile and visual engagement with this kind of sculpture. Livia describes not only the medium of marble and its “baso rilievo,” but also its style “in mille belle maniere” and sculpted ovals with figures of princesses and a prince.

Count Alfonso continues with Livia’s account of the sculpted medallions, explaining that the allegorical figures in the sculpted ovals represent the Duke of Mantua and his family as could be seen in their portraits by Lorenzo Costa. The Mantuan painter Lorenzo Costa the Younger did indeed paint portraits of the Gonzaga family, although these are now lost. By transposing painted portraits by Costa into the place of the bas-relief oval in the fountain, de’ Mori translates the memory of the painting into the imagination of the sculpture. Alfonso’s exhortation that one could see the figures, created so diligently from nature that they lacked only the soul, entreats the players not only to remember their experience of seeing these portraits or similar paintings and sculptures, but actually to see Livia’s composite, imaginary fountain in their mind’s eye.

The remaining part of de’ Mori’s game asks the player to envision an animal in the imagined garden, to assign this animal a motto, and to recite a song from that animal in the form of a sonnet or a madrigal. That the player should create a motto for his or her imagined animal in a fantastical garden calls to mind the act of inventing for oneself an *imprese*. *Imprese* were personal emblems, devices that represented their bearer’s identity through an image and a brief motto. The ingenuity required to devise and interpret the abstruse *imprese* made them an apposite subject for courtly play. Alongside spirited discussion and other parlor games, Castiglione notes the creation of *imprese* as one of the pastimes often enjoyed in the salon of Elisabetta Gonzaga. Ringhieri’s and Girolamo Bargagli’s treatises also included games involving *imprese*. In Book X of the *Cento giuochi*...
liberali, et d’ingegno, Ringhieri describes a game called giuoco dello scudo et dell’impresa del Re, et della Reina Christianissimi di Francia, in which players follow a complex set of rules to memorize the parts of shields and imprese of different rulers and then recombine the pieces as a group to accurately re-create the shields and imprese. Bargagli’s Dialogo de’ giuochi also includes a game called the giuoco dell’imprese, in which players imagine imprese according to a set of rules Bargagli sets forth about what constitutes an ideal imprese.

The contingency between the motto and the picture in the imprese, in particular, inflamed the paragone of word and image in both courtly discussion and for academic writers. The Brescian Academy’s Rime de gli Academici occulti con le loro imprese et discorsi (1568) proffers of the imprese that “the picture is mute poetry, the poetry a speaking picture.”

Girolamo Bargagli initially comes down on the word’s side of the paragone when it comes to imprese in parlor games, writing “the regular imprese needs to be striking, and in this primary aspect to have a beautiful appearance. But similarly when describing an imprese in a game, this quality is not important, it does not have to appear sculpted or painted, but is related through the words of the author.” Despite Bargagli’s concession that game imprese need not appear painted or sculpted, many of the imprese games he describes ask the player to verbally produce a painted or sculpted imprese. One such game is the giuoco del pellegrinaio (pilgrimage game), where players pretend to make a vow at the temple of Venus on account of some escaped danger or ailment in love, and this vow will be in the form of a painted imprese that each player then describes. Another game that Bargagli relates to imprese is the giuoco de rovesci (game of reverses), in which each male participant imagines a medal on one side of which is the countenance of one of the ladies present. Then the men create an appropriate reverse for each woman’s medal, including a motto. Even though, as Bargagli states, the imprese in these games are not actually painted or sculpted, the idea of the painted or sculpted image holds through the change in media, translating the face of a woman into a sculpted medallion, or envisioning a painted imprese through words.

What’s more, in the centuries following the descriptions of verbal games by de’ Mori, Bargagli, and Ringhieri, printed board games incorporated facets of these parlor games. For example, in the early eighteenth century Giuseppe Maria Mitelli created a game, the giuoco del blasone (game of coats of arms), for the Bolognese senator Lorenzo Bentivoglio (Figure 1.6). This etching schematizes the rules of games such as giuoco dello scudo et dell’impresa del Re and the giuoco dell’imprese, providing images of important heraldic elements to be combined mentally by rolling a die in the quest to create coats of arms of the French court. Each of these games solicits the player to use memory, imagination, and vision as essential aspects of play, demonstrating the extent to which players’ shared cultural heritage was founded on a sophisticated engagement with the space around them and their visual world.
De’ Mori’s game, like Bargagli’s *imprese* games, relied on the visual, both through memory and experience of art. References to the Arch of Trajan in Ancona and the portraits of Lorenzo Costa the Younger in *Giuoco piacevole*, as well as references to media such as sculpture and painting in de’ Mori and Bargagli, assert the importance of visual memory for parlor games. The *giuoco de rovesci* on the other hand incorporates direct seeing into the parlor game; male courtiers fix their gaze on women and render their faces into portraits on medallions. Similarly, Bargagli refers to the *giuoco del ritratto della vera bellezza* (game of the portrait of true beauty), a game in which the men integrate the
most beautiful feature of each of the ladies present to create a painting with the words of Petrarch or Ariosto. 51

While these games assimilate something seen into an imaginary artwork, de’ Mori’s game may also give us an example of players, including artworks currently visible to the players during the discourse of the game. During Count Alfonso’s turn with the letter “N,” he describes a journey he took to Naples and the nymphs he saw at the archbishop’s garden: “there was a company of graceful nymphs ... among them was one Neriglia ... around which blew the sweet wind ... In the same way it seems that one can see the breeze wafting around the veils of that Helle by Titian, that you have, Signora Barbara, a gift given to you from him.” 52 In comparing the appearance of the nymph Neriglia to Titian’s Helle, Count Alfonso makes use of an image visible to the players. Titian was, in fact, in Brescia in the autumn of 1564 to work on the Palazzo Comunale, and it is very likely that he would have met the important socialite and patroness of the city, Barbara Calina. Jonathan Shiff has argued convincingly that since there is corroboration that the other artworks mentioned by de’ Mori actually existed, and that the figure of Helle was a fairly obscure figure, de’ Mori’s reference to Barbara’s painting by Titian must have been to clarify the description of the nymph in the text by comparing it to a known image. 53 Not only is it credible that Titian’s Helle existed and belonged to Barbara Calina, but furthermore Barbara could have displayed such an artwork in her parlor. In the text Count Alfonso displays his knowledge and memory of the painting of Helle, detailing Titian’s treatment of the veil so that it appeared wafting in the wind, and the reader can envision Count Alfonso gesturing toward the painting in his performance of the nymph-filled garden. The game activates not only the collective erudition and memory of the players, but also their experience of their surroundings. It activates the space of the salon and the sensory environment.

Games such as de’ Mori’s giuoco piacevole and Bargagli’s giuoco dell’imprese, rovesci, and ritratto della vera bellezza were a showcase for intellect, a way to demonstrate one’s knowledge of arts and literature. But more than this, games had a didactic function, not only serving as a site of experimentation and trial through play, but also teaching strategies for engagement with literary and visual material. Ringhieri outlines one game in particular that focuses on teaching the analysis and appreciation of artwork, the “giuoco della pittura.” 54 Each player is given the name of a famous painter from a list that includes artists such as Apelles, Michelangelo, Mantegna, Raphael, and Titian. The players then pose as their assigned artist, being called upon to list, from seven categories, the fundamental qualities of an excellent painter. The first category, for example, lists animal species, such as the lion, the leopard, and the deer; the fifth category requires knowledge of colors, light, shade, and the quality of skin. Once the players have worked through the seven categories, they must answer a list of questions provided by Ringhieri, including “Whether one can say painting is nobler than sculpture, at expressing ... colorful things.” 55 The list of colorful things for players to consider includes eyes, hair,
coats of arms, gardens, and cities—precisely the kinds of visual things players imagine and evaluate in the games we have already considered.

Ringhieri’s *giuoco della pittura* culls from a variety of sources several important issues about painting. Cecil L. Striker has proposed that the artistic terms employed by Ringhieri were taken from Paolo Pino’s schematic *Dialogo di pittura* (1548), including the terms *disegno*, *colori*, *lumi*, and *giudizio*. The game also recapitulates Castiglione’s passage in *Il Cortegiano* on the usefulness for the courtier to understanding painting and drawing and invokes the theoretical questions in vogue about art, including the *paragone* of painting and sculpture, the importance of *disegno*, and the art of perfecting nature. The *giuoco della pittura* supplied players with a vocabulary and a set of values with which to approach artworks, a kind of popularization for those not already engaged in the intellectual circle of the academies and humanist writers. We can imagine that, just as de’ Mori’s *Giuoco piacevole* combines several elements of different games, the *giuoco della pittura* too could have many permutations. Players could recall artworks that exemplified the qualities they were listing, as in Titian’s *Helle*, using the game’s questions and categories to analyze by flickering candlelight artworks present in the salon.

The didactic function of these parlor games and a top-down economy of knowledge are particularly important when we consider women’s involvement. Both Ringhieri and Girolamo Bargagli dedicated their works to Medici women, Catherine de’ Medici and Isabella de’ Medici, respectively, with the idea that the works would be both entertaining and useful for learning. Although Cinquecento etiquette handbooks sometimes stipulate that education could be unnecessary or even dangerous for women, women’s participation in parlor games offered an alternative venue for female education. Moreover, the kinds of activities involved in parlor games may also have been considered beneficial for a woman’s role as wife. Venetian author and humanist Lodovico Dolce in his treatise of 1547 dedicated to the manners and education of women notes that wives should comfort their husbands by creating pleasing mottos and telling stories, and through playful words—many of the same skills employed in parlor games. Parlor games such as the *giuoco piacevole* allowed women, through their knowledge of cultural heritage and mastery of wit, to appropriately demonstrate their erudition to the rest of their compatriots, gave them skills for managing guests in their home and pleasing their husbands, and, as in the *giuoco della pittura*, provided them with tactics for engaging with their visual world.

**Conclusion**

The parlor games at the center of this study seem at once vibrant and elusive—so clearly a part of the important cultural milieu of recreation in aristocratic and noble homes and yet somehow discrete from any individual piece of evidence. The episodic and ephemeral parlor games played throughout Italy in the sixteenth century come to us mediated through other representations and spaces, whether through literature
(de’ Mori’s dialogue) or through images (Tempesta’s engraving). The scattered evidence for parlor games has caused recent scholarship to emphasize the linguistic thrust of the *giuochi d’ingegni*, focusing on these games as contributions to the *questione della lingua*. The focus on conversation and language is both fruitful and understandable given that much of the evidence for *giuochi d’ingegno* exists in the dialogue format of works such as de’ Mori’s *Giuoco piacevole*, which is, after all, a text, a dialogue written by de’ Mori about a *giuoco d’ingegni*.

De’ Mori’s work does, however, help us to imagine the performance of games in early modern homes. He creates a kind of virtual salon; his reader becomes a voyeur to the playful interactions between the characters participating in Barbara Calina’s game in her imagined parlor. And in fact, parlor games and their performance in salons were not enacted merely through words. Rather, as the *Giuoco piacevole* demonstrates, these games were part of a rich economy of senses, of listening to speaking and music, of touch and movement through dancing, and of looking at, imagining, and describing images. The interactions in the space of the salon were not inextricably tied to text, and they allowed women to participate in the reception and production of knowledge through the vehicle of play in a multisensory environment.

Parlor games reach beyond the text of books like the *Giuoco piacevole* when we consider the performative and structural features of games. In one way de’ Mori’s description of the rules of the *giuoco piacevole* is an invitation; just as in Ringhieri’s and Girolamo Bargagli’s treatises, the *Giuoco piacevole* offers the reader the option to play—not to replicate the text, but to create scenarios anew in the reader’s own salon, using memory, sight, hearing, and touch, a process both imitative and creative. The *Giuoco piacevole* not only provides an example of past play for present contemplation, but it also serves as a paradigm for future play.

For art historians, parlor games give us a new lens on visuality in the social space of the home as participants engage with images directly and memory of images indirectly. The lettered turns from “A” to “V” by de’ Mori’s interlocutors give us stories of travel that both render experience of the visual and spatial verbally, as through the *giuoco dell’hoste* aspect of the game, and also verbally create the motto and images of *imprese*. In this way the *giuoco piacevole* shows us the “words for pictures” that mediated sensory comprehension for the Barbara Calinas of the sixteenth century. While de’ Mori’s work demonstrates a discourse that draws upon and imagines images for the reader-player, the *giuoco della pittura* goes so far as to provide a predefined set of terms with which to approach and evaluate artworks.

But as much as the parlor games in de’ Mori’s and Ringhieri’s works comprise “words for pictures,” there is equally a sense in which parlor games are constituted by “pictures for words.” The paradigm of the parlor game as a call to play asks participants to draw upon memory and experience of images, objects, and spaces, such as the city of Ancona and the Arch of Trajan, the wine and bread in Rome, the sight and texture of a
marble fountain, a portrait by Lorenzo Costa, a beautiful woman’s face, an *impresa*, or an image of *Helle* by Titian. Players take on the role of the artist as they create images in parlor games such as the *giuoco dell’hoste* and the *giuoco della pittura*. Even more than participating in the revival of Horatian *ut pictura poesis*, parlor games contributed to self-fashioning within the court. Just as Castiglione’s work was “a painted portrait” of the ideal courtier, we can see parlor games as creating portraits of the participants. The *giuoco dell’impresa*, *giuoco de rovesci*, and *giuoco della vera bellezza* all produce identity for the game players, be it through creating a personal *impresa* or a portrait of a woman in the guise of courtly love.

Returning to our opening image, Antonio Tempesta describes the activities in his image as “e giochi, e balli, e risi, e sguardi.” The social environment of the salon for Tempesta is constituted principally not only by dancing and joking and playing games, but also by the faculty of sight and the analytical process of looking, one that was modeled and taught through games like the *giuoco piacevole*. In this way we can see the parlor, and in particular the parlor game, as a site of socialization for thinking about the visual and sensorial. Playing with memory and experience as a group in the salon created a kind of communal visuality, a shared way of seeing and performing pictures.

**NOTES**


2 For a consideration of the layout of the home, see Thornton, *The Italian Renaissance Interior*.

3 Part of the inscription accompanying Tempesta’s image reads, “E giochi, e balli, e risi, e sguardi apporta Himeneo che le Nozze e Prandi adduce Borea rinforza el Sol con fosco velo Lungo in appar nel freddo Aquario in Cielo.”

4 For a useful overview of entertainment and games in the Renaissance, see Arcangeli, *Recreation in the Renaissance*.

5 For example, in a letter in the Archivio di Stato Eleonora invites three gentlemen to join her at the villa Poggio a Caiano to play the card game *primiera*. Archivio di Stato di Firenze (ASF), Mediceo del Principato, vol. 1170a, insert 1, fol. 85. August 22, 1545.


7 Ringhieri, *Cento giuochi liberali*. Two editions were printed in Venice by Bonelli in 1553 and 1558, and a French edition was printed in Lyon in 1555.

8 Bargagli, *Dialogo de’ giuochi*.


10 Castiglione, *Il libro del cortegiano* (1998), 23: “tra l’altre piacevoli feste e musiche e danze che continuamente si usavano, talor si proponeano belle questioni, talor si faceano alcuni giochi ingenossi ad arbitro or d’uno or constanti allegoricamente i pensier sui a chi piú loro piaceva.”

12 *Giuoco piacevole* was fashionable in its time, evidenced by several printings between 1575 and 1590.

13 For the *Giuoco piacevole* as a model for courtly behavior, see Maria Giovanna Sanjust’s commentary in de’ Mori, *Giuoco piacevole*, 13.

14 Shiff, “Titian’s *Helle* and Ascanio de’ Mori,” 519, discusses the change of name from Barbara Calina in the first edition to Beatrice Gambara in subsequent editions.


16 There is also some evidence that versions of these kinds of games were prevalent in more modest homes and even popular street culture, but more work needs to be done on this subject. See Wood, “The Art of Play.”

17 McClure, *Parlour Games*. One of the earliest treatments of parlor games comes from Crane, *Italian Social Customs*.

18 Sanson, “Orsù, non più, […] Tornate a Segno,” 105, sees the game of the courtier as “effectively a conversation.”

19 Baxandall, *Words for Pictures*.


21 de’ Mori, *Giuoco piacevole*, 64: “fine al danzare e che non qualche trattenimento di giuoco cerassimo di passare allegramente questa notte.”

22 de’ Mori, *Giuoco piacevole*, 64. In the present volume, see “‘Mixt’ and Matched: Dance Games in Late Sixteenth- and Early Seventeenth-Century Europe” by Emily F. Winerock.


24 ASF, Mediceo del Principato, fol. 2895. February 18, 1577. From Canigiani: “e poi festone in palazzo sino alle Cenere … non ci resta persona utriusque sexu che possa resistere alla lena della signora contessa di Sala di Duca, in bachettar due volte il di et vegliar sempre sino a dieci ore, cianciando /giuocando /beendo/ et ballando continuamente.” For further context of musical gatherings at the Ferrarese court, see Newcomb, *The Madrigal at Ferrara*.


26 Bargagli, *I trattenimenti*.

27 de’ Mori, *Giuoco piacevole*, 68. “Fatto questo, ognuno, recitando un avenimento o vero o finto, vi nominerà una città e in quella un albergo con l’oste; poi un giardino, il quale sia parimente nelle medesima città, o se fuori, sà nel contato non molto discosto, nel qual giardino vi sia una ninfa, un arbore e un animal terrestre, al qual animale per ognuno di noi s’applicherà un motto, o volgare o latino, come più piacerà. Similmente vi sia un uccello su l’arbore, il qual uccello canti un verso che soni umanamente e nella nostra lingua in rima, o sia sonetto o madrigale o stanza o altro simile componimento.”

28 Bargagli, *Dialogo de’ giuochi*, 170, game 104: “giuoco del A.B.C. quando si fa pigliare a tutti una lettera, et poi si fa dire un verso, che cominci per quella, ben o vero, che per havere a comincare il verso per la lettera persa, si rende maggior la difficut della haver a rispondere in proposito.”
Bargagli, *Dialogo de’ giuochi*, 170. “Ma passando più oltre, bisogna avvertire ancora, che qualhor cosa ne convien dire, che vada in qualche imitazione accompagnata, d’imitar del proprio, et con la voce, et con gli atti, et con i concetti qual che si rappresenta.”

Ringhieri, *Cento giuochi liberali*, book 7, 98v. Several of the inns listed by Ringhieri are used by players in de’ Mori’s game, indicating a link between the two games.


Ringhieri, *Cento giuochi liberali*, 98v.

de’ Mori, *Giuoco piacevole*, 69: “passai per ANCONA, città molto principale nella Marca, e alloggiai all’ANGELO, dove fui ricevuta dall’oste, assai galantuomo chiamato ANTONELLO ... mi fece veder quanto è di più bello in quella città: le chiese, il porto, la loggia de’ mercanti, i fondachi e molti giardini appresso.”


ASF, Mediceo del Principato, vol. 1117, fol. 441. August 28, 1570. “e fo’ per questa sera breve risposta con queste due domande, l’una dove sia, e come fatto Pratolino, affinchè possiamo anchor noi sin di quà participar de’ lor passatempi.”

de’ Mori, *Giuoco piacevole*, 159. “Quivi è una vista la più dilettevole che si possa desiderare, un superbissimo palagio, al quale non mancano gli archi, i colossi, le piramidi, gli obelischi, i termini e altre simile grandezze.”

de’ Mori, *Giuoco piacevole*, 159: “una fonte che non invidia alla nostra famosa di Barchio di Botticino (s’io non mi lascio vincere da passione, il che non credo di fare) ... dove passa per la buccina d’un gran Tritone l’acqua che maestrevolmente viene levata fuori del letto del fiume con cannoni d’acero nascosti sotto terra, e sale tanto nell’aria che rende grandissimo stupore, onde ricadendo in guisa di pioggia per la diversità del cadere degli infiniti zampilli rende un armonioso e dilettevole mormorio.”

Although it has been suggested that such fountains were purely imaginary, recent work on the technology of water effects demonstrates their very real presence by the end of the sixteenth century. See Tchikine, “Giochi d’acqua.”

de’ Mori, *Giuoco piacevole*, 159. “Ella viene poi accolta in un capace vaso fatto in perfetto quadro di candidissimo marmo in mille belle maniere nel quale sono intagliate varie imaginì di baso rilievo ... A pena era scoperta la facciata dinanzi, nella quale in un bell’ovato si vedeva in maestà sedere coronato di due corone ducali fra due principesse similmente coronate un principe ... Questo compartimento era a meraviglia bello, ma che rappresentassero quelle figure non vi saprei dire.”

This text was added during the second edition of de’ Mori’s *Giuoco piacevole* (Mantua, 1580): 4 IV. Transcription from Shiff, “Titian’s *Helle* and Ascanio de’ Mori,” 521. “Questo tutto e quanto rappresentanole figure di quell’ovato Signora Livia mia; lequali agevolmente si potranno veder’ hora dal naturale in guisa, che nulla altro loro manca, che lo spirito ritratta dalla molta diligenza del secondo Lorenzo Costa, che col pennello ardisce di contendere con la Natura, & ischernirla.”

Shiff, “Titian’s *Helle* and Ascanio de’ Mori,” 521.

The first theoretical treatise dedicated entirely to *imprese* was written by Giovio, *Ragionamento di monsignor Paolo Giovio*.


Ringhieri, *Cento giuochi liberali*, 159r–60v.
45 For an analysis of the paragone implications of imprese, see Caldwell, “The Paragone between Word and Image.”

46 Rime de gli Academici occulti con le loro imprese et discorsi (Brescia, 1568), 52v: “la pittura è dimandata poesia muta, la poesia pittura parlante.” For an analysis of the trope of silence and image in the Rime, see Chayes, “Language of Words and Images.” Additionally, Barbara Calina was lauded by and was a patroness of the Brescian Academy.

47 Bargagli, Dialogo de’ giuochi, 200: “l’impresa ordinaria vuole esser vistosa, e che nel primo aspetto abbia bella apparenza. Ma in simile occasione di referire una impresa a giuoco questa qualità non importa, non dovendo ne scolpita ne dipinta apparire, ma venendo referita dalle parole dell’autore.”

48 Bargagli, Dialogo de’ giuochi, 180, game 116. “quello del Pellegrinaio ancora nel quale sapete, che fingendosi d’haver fatto voto al Tempio di Venere ... si dice quel che altri andando a sodisfare il voto portarà dipinto nella tavolella, il che ... in impresa.”

49 Bargagli, Dialogo de’ giuochi, 206, game 119.

50 Giuseppe Maria Mitelli, Il giuoco del blasone, etching, 1714–18, British Museum, London. On the giuoco del blasone, see Varignana, Le collezioni d’arte della cassa di risparmio in Bologna, 442; and Mascheroni and Tinti, Il gioco dell’oca, 63. On Mitelli and gambling, see the essay by Patricia Rocco, “Virtuous Vices: Giuseppe Maria Mitelli’s Gambling Prints and the Social Mapping of Leisure and Gender in Post-Tridentine Bologna” in the present volume.

51 Bargagli, Dialogo de’ giuochi, 180, game 111.

52 de’ Mori, Giuoco piacevole, 24: “vi era una compagnia di leggiadre Ninfe ... fra le quali una ... ch’era Nerigla ... intorno a cui spirando la dolce Aura ... In tal maniera pare, che essa si vegga vagare intorno a’ veli di quella Helle di Titiano, che voi havete Signora Barbara, dono fattovi da lui.”

53 Shiff, “Titian’s Helle and Ascanio de’ Mori,” 522.

54 Ringhieri, Cento giuochi liberali, 144–46.

55 Ringhieri, Cento giuochi liberali, 146v. “Se può dirli la Pittura dell Mamoraria più nobile, isprimendo gli occhi neri et azzurri con quei raggi amorosi, il color de Capelli, lo splendor dell’Armi, una scura Notte, una Tempesta di mare ... cielo, aurora, terra, monti, selve, pratti, giardini, fiumo, citta, et altre cose colorate assai.”

56 Striker, “Innocenzo Ringhieri’s Giuoco della Pittura,” 168. Pino, Dialogo di pittura di messer Paolo Pino. For more on Pino’s treatise, see Pardo, “Paolo Pino’s Dialogo di Pittura.”


59 Lodovico Dolce, De gli Ammaestramenti pregiatissimi, 93: “farà al marito l’esser ricreato dalla moglie con qualche dolce motto, o piacevole novelletta: e massiamamente quando o dalli strepiti del palazzo, o dalle onde de’ negotii civili, a casa, come ad albergo di quiete, et a porto di gratissima consolatione si riconduce ... et grate finalmente gli faranno a luoghi, et tempi convenevoli le parole giuocose.”

60 Baxandall, Words for Pictures, 15, briefly mentions Ringhieri’s game as an example of training for looking at pictures, although he, like others, seems to dismiss the ludic aspect of the game as an essential part of the didactic, putting the word game in scare quotes.
“Mixt” and Matched:  
Dance Games in Late Sixteenth- and Early  
Seventeenth-Century Europe  

Emily F. Winerock  

DANCING WAS A FREQUENT OCCURRENCE at private gatherings, religious festivals, and civic celebrations in the early modern period. While some of these occasions were solemn affairs that called for only the most sober and stately measures, most dances featured at least an element of play. In fact, there were a substantial number of dances specifically devised as dance games; thus, attending to dancing can help us understand early modern playfulness—and its boundaries.

This essay examines three types of dance games—courtship games, pantomime dances, and “social mixer” dances. It argues that these dances were not simply enjoyable recreations, but also helped communities manage potentially disruptive behavior. At the same time, this function of dancing was not uncontroversial: some critics argued that rather than containing or diverting lustful tendencies, dance games encouraged them. However, since dancing was generally considered among the adiaphora, or things indifferent, it was the contextual details of a dance—who danced it, in what style, and under what circumstances—rather than a dance’s steps that decided its acceptability and appropriateness.1 It is therefore important to attend to contextual details to understand how early modern dancers and spectators interpreted a dance’s significance and playfulness.

In the early modern period, the term dance described a wide variety of movements, including several activities that modern-day observers might not define as dance. These include rope dancing, which was almost identical to modern-day tightrope walking, and processional dancing, which we might describe today as marching, parading, or simply walking to music. The dancing found in dance games, however, would have been easily recognized as such by the modern observer. Dance games involved either choreographed or improvised steps and figures performed to musical accompaniment. Choreographed dances had predetermined arrangements of steps and dancers performed those steps in the same way each time the dance was presented. Improvised dances involved creating a new series of movements each time the dance was performed, dancing “after sundrie fashions.”

Improvisations were not completely random movements, however. They drew from a known body of dance steps and had to take into account the rhythms and structure of the music.3 There were also hybrid forms. Dances like the galliard and the canary
incorporated improvised solos into a larger choreographed duet structure. A male–female couple performed the opening, closing, and “chorus” figures together, but in between, the man and woman took turns improvising four to sixteen musical bars’ worth of kicks and jumps (for the galliard) or stamps and toe taps (for the canary). Dancing masters also encouraged experienced dancers to use embellishments or “accidental” steps to add variety to the regular or “natural” steps specified in choreographed dances. While certain choreographed dances were devised as dance games or had strong playful elements, improvisation brought an element of play into other dances as well and was a key to success in dance competitions.

Most of what we know about the steps and structure of dancing in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries comes from a dozen or so dancing instruction manuals written by dance instructors and aficionados. Formats vary, but all the extant dancing manuals include one or more of the following: step descriptions, set choreographies for different dance types, accompanying music, accompanying illustrations, recommendations for performance, rules of ballroom etiquette, and defenses or rationales for dancing based on Greco-Roman writings, biblical passages, and historical precedents. All the manuals are aimed at elite audiences and describe court dances, with the exception of Thoinot Arbeau’s *Orchésographie* (1589), which is addressed to a middling-status audience and contains a mix of courtly and rustic dances.

A handful of the manuals are comprehensive enough to enable full-fledged reconstructions of choreographies—most notably the manuals of Fabritio Caroso, Cesare Negri, and Thoinot Arbeau—but some of the less step-focused manuals, such as Juan de Esquivel Navarro’s *Discursos sobre el arte del danzado* (1642), nevertheless provide welcome details about dance instruction, styling, and dance competitions. While one must be cautious in assuming that the dances in a French manual would be known to Italian dancers and vice versa, the higher the status of the dancers, the more likely this would be the case. Barbara Ravelhofer, among others, has argued convincingly for a pan-European courtly dance culture created and supported by the frequent movement of dance instructors among European courts, whether as an invited guest, independent entrepreneur, member of a foreign visitor’s entourage, or a royal bride’s household accompanying her to her new home.

Several of the surviving dance instruction manuals include choreographies for dance games, providing concrete descriptions of steps and floor patterns. However, dance manuals only give the steps the dancers were supposed to do, not necessarily the ones they actually did. In addition, they do not usually offer details about the contexts in which dance games occurred, how they were perceived by spectators and participants, and what factors influenced their reception. For these aspects, other sources must be consulted. Happily, archival records can sometimes provide these missing details.

An examination of dancing practices in urban and rural England from approximately 1560 to 1650 indicates some interesting aspects of dancing in context that may
have also held true in other European countries. Religious moralists such as Philip Stubbes and Christopher Fetherston argued that youths and maidens were naturally drawn to dancing, but archival records support only part of this contention. Young people are mentioned in dance-related archival records more than either children or older adults, but men actually appear more often than women. This may be due to the fact that many of the records are court prosecutions, and men seem to be more likely to end up dancing in a problematic manner than women. Nevertheless, these records clearly show that men were dancing regularly. Moreover, they also demonstrate that men danced in single-sex groups (as did women), despite the claim by critics that their contemporaries were only interested in “mixt” dancing of men and women together. Another nuance is that whereas young people were more likely to do most of the actual dancing, older members of the community were frequently the hosts or sponsors of dance events. They also defended dancing in court cases by testifying to the antiquity and long-established acceptability of their parish’s dancing traditions.

Other details that emerge from these records include typical times and places for dancing. Dancing on Sundays was common but problematic, especially in Protestant areas with more Puritan or Calvinist leanings. In other areas, however, dancing on Sundays or holidays was only a problem if the dancers also skipped church services. The time of day in which dancing occurred is occasionally mentioned, especially when it was unusual or problematic. From these records, we learn that people danced at all times of day and night, but that morning dancing was almost never controversial, and afternoon dancing was only a problem on Sundays or when the dancers were supposed to be engaged in other activities. Dancing in the evenings, however, was not only more frequently accompanied by problematic behaviors such as drinking, dicing, and fighting, but it was also viewed as inherently more morally suspect than dancing during the daytime.

The examined archival records sometimes noted the type of event in which dancing occurred and the venue in which it took place. Among the named event types, informal social events were unquestionably the most common. The next most common events were ales (both those sponsored by the parish and by private individuals or groups), followed by holy days and seasonal celebrations. Dancing was also mentioned in a handful of accounts of life-cycle celebrations like weddings and baptisms, civic entertainments, the performances of traveling players, and private dance lessons. The most common venues for dance events were private homes and estates and church and chapel areas, especially the local parish church’s churchyard. Also popular were alehouses, inns, and public spaces such as the village green. One complication was that some of the homes in which dancing occurred were unlicensed, de facto alehouses, often run by widows or others fallen on hard times. “Tippling,” or drinking, might be listed in addition to dancing as an offense in such cases.

Most dance games were not inherently controversial, but the context in which they occurred could make them disreputable by association. For example, depictions of the
Dutch egg dance generally place it near an alehouse with many of the onlookers indulging in drinking, dallying, and other disorderly behavior. In Pieter Aertsen’s painting *The Egg Dance* of 1552, the dance occurs in a scene of drunken disorder and wantonness (Figure 2.1). In the foreground, an inebriated young man seemingly in mid speech or song holds a pitcher in the air, his left arm draped over a young woman’s shoulder and his hand resting on her breast. The floor of the alehouse is littered with so much debris that, at first glance, one does not even notice the egg and bowl that indicate that the young man with his right foot in the air is dancing the egg dance. A seated young man and an old woman who also holds a pitcher watch the dancer intently, and there is a musician who provides accompaniment with a bagpipe. Adding a touch of innocence are the little boy and his mother framed in the doorway in the upper right hand corner. The boy watches the dancer, while his mother leans over him protectively.

The message the painting conveys about dancing is complex. On the one hand, it presents the egg dance as the sort of activity that takes place in disorderly dens of iniquity. On the other hand, by having the little boy and the man and woman sitting by the hearth watching so appreciatively, Aertsen acknowledges that the egg dance was a genuinely challenging physical feat that required substantial skill and a great deal of practice to master. At the same time, while presumably this image was not supposed to laud or encourage drunkenness, it would have reminded those familiar with the egg dance that dancing it while inebriated would have been much more difficult, and thus more impressive, than dancing it sober.

A late sixteenth-century engraving after Maerten de Vos published by Johannes Baptista Vrints, and also known as *The Egg Dance*, conveys similarly mixed messages (Figure 2.2). In this picture, a crowd gathers outside an alehouse or inn to watch a man dance the egg dance. Some of the spectators are seated, as is the musician who accompanies him on the bagpipes. At least one of the women watching the dance is drinking, but it is wantonness rather than drunkenness that is the dominant sin in this scene.

The engraving depicts two amorous couples. One couple sits together in the left foreground, their arms around each other and their eyes locked. Just to the right of the man dancing the egg dance is another couple. Unlike the others in the picture, they wear notably elegant courtly attire. The man embraces the woman closely, his right arm on her chest and his eyes on her alone, but the woman watches the egg dancer. Moreover, while most of the other spectators are focused on the dancer’s feet, the precise object of this woman’s gaze is less clear. Is the artist insinuating that viewing dancing makes spectators like this gentlewoman more receptive to amorous advances, such as those of her companion? Has the skill of the dancer made him an inappropriate object of desire? Either way, the two embracing couples situate the egg dance within a context of license and lasciviousness.

At the same time, just as in the Aertsen painting, the engraving calls attention to the technical difficulty and impressiveness of the egg dance itself. By having so many of the spectators within the picture watching the dancer’s feet, the artist encourages the
Figure 2.1. Pieter Aertsen, *The Egg Dance*, 84 × 172 cm, oil on panel, 1552, Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
viewer’s eyes to do so as well. The positioning of the dancer—his right leg impossibly poised in the air above a large egg, defying gravity—similarly stresses his skillfulness.

While no surviving dancing manuals give a choreography for the egg dance, descriptions of its overall characteristics in other sources are consistent. To dance the egg dance, the dancer—using only the feet—carefully removed an egg from a bowl, danced around and over it, and returned it to the bowl, all without breaking the egg or allowing it to roll away. While most of the pictorial and anecdotal evidence depicts it as a man’s dance, it is a woman who toes the egg in Pieter Brueghel the Younger’s The Egg Dance, suggesting that the egg dance, like the galliard, was available to female dancers wanting to show off their athletic skills, whether sober or otherwise.20

Excess drinking may also have contributed to several of the fights among morris dancers or between them and audience members that are described in English court records.21 Morris dancers, usually four or six men, wore bells at the ankle and knee that
jangled merrily as they performed athletic kicks and jumps in intricate patterns. To accentuate their arm movements, they wore coats with long dagged sleeves, tied ribbons around their arms, or carried handkerchiefs. They also used props like sticks or swords for mock battle choreographies. Morris dancers belonged to recognizable groups or teams who rehearsed together, performed together, traveled regionally, and competed against other teams at fairs and festivals. Costumed characters from the Robin Hood tale often accompanied the dancers, especially Friar Tuck and a cross-dressed Maid Marion. Other common accompanying characters included the fool, the foreman, and the hobbyhorse. Dancers traveled with their own accompanist who played pipe and tabor.22

Many of these aspects are visible in the depiction of morris dancers in *The Thames at Richmond, with the Old Royal Palace*, an early seventeenth-century painting in the Flemish style in the Fitzwilliam Museum in Cambridge sometimes attributed to Daniel Vinckenboom (Figure 2.3).23 The troupe comprises six performers and a musician playing pipe and tabor. Three of the performers wear white shirts with ribbons tied to their sleeves as well as morris bells on their legs. Two typical costumed characters dance along with them: a Maid Marion and a hobbyhorse. These dancers would likely also be wearing morris bells, but their costumes obscure their legs from view in the painting. The sixth performer, the fool (distinguished by his particolored coat), offers his ladle

![Figure 2.3. Attributed to Daniel Vinckenboom, detail from *The Thames at Richmond, with the Old Royal Palace*, 152.1 × 304.2 cm, oil on canvas, ca. 1620. © Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.](image-url)
to some well-heeled spectators whom he has persuaded to make a donation. Part of the “game” of a morris performance was the playful harassment of spectators by the costumed characters who threatened and cajoled in order to extract donations. While occasionally these exchanges could escalate into actual harassment or violence, generally the ribbing was tolerated or even enjoyed, as appears to be the case in the scene depicted.

Morris dancers were semi-professional, receiving compensation for their dancing through contractual agreements as well as from tips and donations. The account books of churchwardens, town treasurers, and local elites contain numerous entries for payments to morris dancers hired as an added attraction for May games, Whitsuntide festivities, church ales, town watches, fairs, guild processions, and other festive occasions. That dancers were sometimes paid in ale and carried sticks or swords as props likely increased their tendency to get into fights, but an overly keen competitive instinct might also have been a factor, especially when the morris dancers were “on tour” in neighboring villages.

In addition to their association with drunken disorder, dance games could also cause controversy because of their potential to arouse illicit sexual interest. Religious and moral critics decried dancing that was lascivious in its movements, but they also cautioned that dancers had little control over the reception of their performance. Even the most chaste dancing was capable of inspiring lust in the eyes of a viewer inclined to wantonness, and occasions of dancing, in which the sexes mingled more than usual, provided ample opportunities for such wanton-minded persons to corrupt the naïve and innocent. Kissing dances, including the cushion dance, are mentioned in a number of sources, but they represent only a small portion of the surviving choreographies from the period and were probably not danced nearly as often as anti-dance writers like Philip Stubbes seemed to believe. Moreover, while kissing dances and other “social mixer” dances like “The Candlestick Branle” facilitated interactions between men and women, they were just as likely to lead to legitimate marriages as to illicit liaisons.

Social mixer dance games, so called because they involved more “mixing” or intermingling of the dancers than was otherwise customary and possessed game-like characteristics such as choice and uncertainty, provided a structured form for flirtation, usually in a safe and supervised context. This may have been helpful to further the legitimate courting of young men and women whose spheres did not often otherwise overlap. As Thoinot Arbeau observes in his dancing manual *Orchesography*, “If you desire to marry you must realize that a mistress is won by the good temper and grace displayed while dancing,” and that “without a knowledge of dancing, I could not please the damsels, upon whom, it seems to me, the entire reputation of an eligible young man depends.”

Arguably, all couple dances can be considered playful or flirtatious to some extent, but the choreographic structure of many Renaissance courtly couple dances heightened this potential. These dances featured a “chorus” danced by the man and woman together,
“MIXT” AND MATCHED

and “verses” in which the man and woman alternated dancing solo. Fabritio Caroso, whose dancing manuals contained a number of choreographies following this pattern, referred to these back-and-forth alternating solos as a “pedologue,” or conversation of the feet: “Just as we say that when two people converse they are engaging in a dialogue, so here, when the gentleman danced one group of steps (or one variation) with his feet, and the lady answers the same way, this foot conversation leads me to term it ‘pedalogue.”

Some of Caroso’s pedalogues involve fairly long sequences for each dancer that seem more like alternating monologues or speeches than conversations. However, a few dances utilize quicker alternations.

In the galliard section of the balletto “Forza d’Amore” (The Power of Love), Caroso describes a sequence in which the dancers do four destice, or “dexterous steps,” as a pedalogue, “that is, the gentleman does one with his left hip in; the lady does another; the gentleman repeats this to the other side, with his right hip in; the lady does the same.”

The speed of the alternations gives this “conversation” the feel of playful banter between close friends or lovers.

A few dances of this type emphasized the playful, flirtatious aspect of the pedologue even further. In the canario, or canary, a dance with supposedly Spanish origins and percussive footwork, the solos for the man and woman follow a floor pattern of approach and retreat. At the end of the opening figure, the dancers separate. Then during the man’s solo, he first approaches the woman doing a series of stamps and kicks before retreating in a zigzag pattern back to where he started. After doing the chorus figure together, the woman performs the same solo, dancing across the room towards her partner and then zigzagging backwards. Another chorus follows, as does another set of solos (with a similar floor pattern but with different steps), and the two dancers “continue to sally and retreat as many times as the variety of passages permits.”

While for each pair of solos the man dances first, the dance is otherwise quite egalitarian. The woman dances the same steps as the man and advances across the floor towards her partner with aggressive stamps and kicks in her solos just as he does. Perhaps this gender equality is made more acceptable because of the canary’s playful, theatrical spirit. Arbeau describes the dance as “gay but nevertheless strange and fantastic with a strong barbaric flavour.” Regardless, the alternating advancing and retreating solos of the man and woman with their loud, percussive footwork suggest an intense, tumultuous courtship or relationship.

A more lighthearted but no less flirtatious choreography is found in the version of the coranto, or running dance, that Thoinot Arbeau outlines in Orchesography. After detailing the distinctive coranto single and double steps, which “must be executed with a spring which is not the case in the pavan or the basse dance,” Arbeau goes on to describe “a kind of game or mime” that uses the steps and music of the coranto, quoted here in full from Mary Stewart Evans’s translation:
In my youth there was a kind of game or mime arranged to the coranto. Three young men would choose three young girls, and, having ranged themselves in a row, the first dancer would lead his damsel to the other end of the room and then return alone to his companions. The second dancer would do the same, then the third, so that the three girls were left segregated at one end of the room, and the three young men at the other. And when the third dancer had returned, the first one, playing the fool and making amorous grimaces and gestures while pulling up his hose and adjusting his shirt, went off to claim his damsel who refused his suit and turned her back upon him, until, seeing the young man was returning to his place, she feigned despair. The other two did the same. Finally [the young men] all three advanced together, each to claim his own damsel and to implore her favour upon bended knee with clasped hands. Whereupon the damsels fell into their arms and they all danced the coranto helter-skelter.35

Arbeau calls this dance a game, and its playfulness derives from having young people on the dance floor both imitate and mock the rituals and dynamics of courtship off the dance floor.

The coranto pantomime conveys a complex picture of gender relations and agency. Although the choreography is for six dancers, the courtship rituals enacted are monogamous: the three couples are maintained throughout the dance, and the language emphasizes these pairings, with the female partner “belonging” to the male partner. After separating to the sides of the room, each young man seeks to “claim” his partner, who is referred to as “his damsel” or “his own damsel.” The men are also more physically active than the women, crossing the room several times while the women remain in the same place waiting. However, the women and men play equal parts in the pantomime, and the women’s responses to the men’s suits are an essential component of the game. That the women initially spurn the men’s advances reminds the modern commentator and would have reminded the early modern observer that women were entitled to accept or reject their suitors, even if they were expected to wait for the men to make the first move. That the men have to beg for the women’s favor on bended knee further emphasizes women’s power in the game of courtship. Likewise, in the “helter-skelter” dancing of the coranto that follows the pantomime section, the women would be just as active and engaged in the dance as the men, perhaps suggesting that in the actual marriages that follow courtship both partners must be active participants. Finally, there is a layering of fiction and fact in this dance. Arbeau specifies that it is young people who play this dance game. Yet, participants who are “playing at” courtship may also be courting, or at least flirting with, potential spouses.

As previously stated, Arbeau’s coranto dance game describes couples who dance with each other for the duration of the dance, which was typical for group dances featuring several couples. However, in a comment that follows his description of the coranto pantomime, Arbeau notes that sometimes, “When a dancer’s companions perceive that
he is weary they go and steal his damsel and dance with her themselves. Or else they provide him with a fresh partner if they see the first one is fatigued. Phrases like “steal his damsel” continue to emphasize that the female dancer belongs to her initial male partner. Yet, one might still end up dancing with a different partner at the end of the dance. The uncertainty of one’s final partner adds to the playfulness of the dance and makes it much more like social mixer group dances. On the other hand, unlike most other dance games, including the social mixers, there are clear “losers” as well as “winners” in this version of the coranto.

The coranto was not the only pantomime dance game popular in early modern Europe. In *Orchesography*, Arbeau offers instructions for a number of different dances that he categorizes as mimed branles. He distinguishes these from the other branles such as double branles and mixed branles, because in mimed branles the dancers imitate animals, foreigners, clergy, and other groups with distinctive gestures. Arbeau does not directly call these dances games as he does for the coranto pantomime. Nevertheless, their playful character is apparent from his descriptions and the choreographies themselves.

Branles were usually circle dances, although a few such as “Branle de la Montarde” were line dances. Branles could be danced by any number of people of any gender, but typically they were structured as a circle of couples, with men and women alternating around the circle. They were simpler and more rustic in style than galliards and corantos, and Arbeau mentions them being danced by “lackeys and serving wenches.” Nevertheless, he considers even the more energetic branles to be suitable for young gentlemen and gentlewomen to dance in the ballroom, either in a masquerade “disguised as peasants and shepherds” or “for a lark” in a private gathering.

One such branle that might be fine for a private party but inappropriate for a more public event is “The Horses Branle.” The choreography calls for the dancers to tap one foot on the ground twice in a row in between the more typical branle steps and turns. Arbeau comments, “These tappings remind me of horses when they want water or of palfreys when they are kept waiting for their peck of oats.” Other branles imitate the dances and gestures of foreigners. “The Scottish Branle” ends with a big jump and a caper in the air, while in “The Branle of Poitou” the women “stamp their feet in the second and third bars of triple time” to approximate the “agreeable noise” that women from Poitou make in their wooden shoes. “The Maltese Branle” was originally danced in a court masque in Turkish costume and features dramatic facial expressions, “twisting movements of the body,” and “touching the hands, or … raising them in mock praise with the head thrown back and eyes lifted heavenwards.” It is not clear from Arbeau’s descriptions how accurate these foreign-inspired dances were nor whether contemporaries from Scotland, Poitou, or Malta would have found them complimentary or insulting.

What is clear is that Arbeau believes these dances are amusing, enjoyable, and done “all in good fun.” When Arbeau is concerned that a dance might not be in good taste,
he says so, although he still provides instructions for the dance. In his introduction to “The Hermits’ Branle,” he cautions against dressing up like hermits as the young men did who first performed the dance in a masquerade. He even questions whether doing the dance at all is appropriate: “I do not advise you to wear such habits for fancy dress, nor to mimic the behaviour of a Religious Order, because one should respect both their cloth and their persons.” The pantomime gestures are not inherently irreverent; the dancers simply “cross their arms and bow their heads as young novices do.” But, as Arbeau notes, imitating clerics’ gestures may be more playful but is not particularly respectful.

While there would be an element of play involved whenever higher-status men and women intentionally danced in the style of their social inferiors (and vice versa), mimed branles like “The Washerwomen’s Branle” exaggerated this aspect. In this branle, the dancers clap their hands vigorously at several points in the dance in order to “make a noise like the women beating the washing on the banks of the Seine.” The dancers also “place their hands upon their hips” and “shake their fingers” at their partners elsewhere in the dance. Arbeau does not explain these gestures, but they likely allude to the stereotype of lower-status working women being shrewish and quarrelsome.

In his section on branles, Arbeau also gives a choreography for “The Candlestick Branle,” or “Torch Branle.” This dance is not a mimed branle, but it is a dance game—what I call a social mixer dance. In this type of dance game, participants dance with more than one partner of the opposite sex during the dance, and one or more partners are selected by the dancer during the dance. This is quite unlike group dances like the coranto pantomime where one dances with the same partner for the whole dance.

In “The Candlestick Branle,” one or more men “take a candlestick with a lighted candle, or a torch or link, and make one or two turns around the room walking or dancing forwards and looking to right and to left the while for the partner of their choice.” Once a man finds “the damsel he fancies,” they dance together “for a little while,” and then bowing, he hands her the light and exits the dance floor. The woman “then repeats what she has seen the young man do and dances off to choose another partner.” Arbeau concludes with the explanation that “in this manner all are invited in turn to join in the dance.”

Fabritio Caroso describes a somewhat similar dance to “The Candlestick Branle” in Nobiltà di Dame. In “Ballo del Fiore,” a man starts with a flower and invites three women to dance, one by one. He then invites another man to join them, and the men and women form two lines opposite each other. The men “pass between” the women “who are at either end,” and then the woman in the middle passes between the men, the “gentlemen gently
doffing their bonnets (or hats)” as she does so. All the dancers then turn and change places. Caroso observes, “Formerly, it was customary to do only one passage, but it is much better to do two, for in this way the gentleman who leads this dance will end up with his own lady,” and the other dancers will also be “back in place.” The dancers do another figure in which each man dances with each of the women in turn. Finally, the man leading the dance gives the flower “to the lady of his choice,” although Caroso adds that “in my opinion he should properly give it to the first lady he invited, for she should take precedence.” The woman who receives the flower is the new leader, and she remains on the dance floor, while the two men accompany the two remaining women back to their seats.

The new leader “follows the same procedure” as the first leader, except that she invites three men to dance and one additional woman. They dance the same passages described, but with the gender roles reversed. “At the end she gives the flower to the gentleman of her choice,” and she and the remaining dancers exit the floor, while the new leader picks new dancers to join him, and so on. “Ballo del Fiore” is a more elaborate choreography than “The Candlestick Branle,” with more dancers involved in each repetition of the dance as well as more complex figures and steps. Nevertheless, the overall structure of the two dances is similar. Men and women alternate leading the dance and picking their partners, thus enjoying equal agency, and there is uncertainty at the beginning of each iteration of both dances as to who will be picked. In addition, although Caroso frowns upon it, there is another layer of uncertainty throughout the duration of each repetition of “Ballo del Fiore.” The leader can give the flower to any one of the three opposite gender dancers, even if it is customary to give the flower to the first partner selected.

Social mixer dances differ from group dances such as the country dances in John Playford’s manual, *The English Dancing Master* (1651), in which two or three couples form a “set,” or small group, and dance with each other’s partners at different points in the dance. The main distinction is that in such dances, no matter how many different partners one dances with during a particular figure, usually by the end of the figure, and most definitely by the end of the dance, one has returned to one’s original partner. Indeed, in *The English Dancing Master*, the dancers are referred to as “first man,” “first woman,” “second man,” “second woman,” and so on throughout the dance, even when they dance with others. For example, in the dance “Petticoat Wag,” the second figure specifies that “First man crosse and goe behind the 2. Wo. the first Wo. going behind the second man,” while the fourth figure begins with the “first Cu.” crossing behind the second couple.

Since these dances are completely choreographed, at least as far as partners are concerned, once partners have been chosen for the dance and the set of couples assembled, there is absolute certainty about with whom one will dance during the piece and with whom one will exit the dance floor. This is quite the opposite of social mixer dances, in which the choosing of the next partner is a central aspect of the dance. To reiterate, uncertainty is an inherent characteristic of these dance games and part of what makes them playful.
A related consequence of the uncertainty and mutability of partnering in social mixer dances is that all of the participants spend part of the dance as free agents. While they enter the dance by being chosen by another dancer, they then get to choose their next partner. This is quite different from nearly all other couple and group dances for which choreographies survive. The phrasing of *The English Dancing Master* articulates what the manuals of Arbeau, Caroso, and Negri insinuate: partners “belong” to each other for the duration of the dance. For example, the country dance, “Saturday Night and Sunday Morn,” includes the instruction, “Meet againe, take your owne We.” while the final figure of “Jenny Pluck Pears” has “First man take out his Wo.” Of course, as one sees from these examples and previously in the coranto pantomime, although the insinuation is that both partners belong to each other, when this possession is overtly stated, it is nearly always in terms of the female dancer belonging to her male partner.

Interestingly, however, the usual early modern gender biases and inequalities are largely absent in social mixer dances. Indeed, one of the most fascinating aspects of these dance games is the substantial amount of agency given to female participants. Although all social mixer choreographies describe a man beginning the dance, they then specify that the woman with whom he chooses to dance becomes the next leader. As leader she does all of the same steps and gets to make all of the same choices as did the man, including choosing her next partner from among the other men present. The man she chooses then becomes the next leader, and the dance continues on in this fashion, alternating male and female leaders, until the dance ends. This is the structure for more decorous social mixers such as “The Candlestick Branle” and “Ballo del Fiore” as well as for kissing versions such as the cushion dance discussed below.

The alternation of men and women leading part of the dance provides evidence that, in practice, it was considered acceptable for women to dance and interact with men in ways that, in theory, should have compromised their modesty. In order to ask a man to dance, a woman had to approach him and indicate her desire to dance with him. According to conduct and advice manuals, modesty prevented women from making eye contact with men outside of their close acquaintance. However, Fabritio Caroso explains with a hint of exasperation in *Nobiltà di Dame* that women who out of excessive modesty do not make eye contact when asking men to dance are actually guilty of much worse violations of etiquette than women who are more forward. This is because overly modest women “cast their eyes so low that the gentlemen cannot tell which one of them has been invited,” and the wrong gentleman may respond, or worse, several gentlemen may rise to their feet and “give her their hands, with the result that she does not know which one to take.” This passage clearly shows that even upholders of dance-floor decorum like Caroso assumed that there would be occasions in which women would be asking men to dance and that emphasizing one’s feminine modesty was less important than avoiding confusion and offense.
Kissing dances also downplayed feminine modesty, although they lacked the persuasive rationalizations that Caroso provides. Thoinot Arbeau provides one of the only known choreographies for a kissing dance: the gavotte. The gavotte was a collection or suite of branles “selected by musicians and arranged in a sequence” and danced energetically by several couples at a time “with little springs.”\textsuperscript{59} The simple sideways steps of the generic branle were embellished by “passages borrowed at will from the galliard,” which would have included kicks and jumps.\textsuperscript{60} The opening figure of the gavotte is danced in a circle or line holding hands, but after “those taking part have danced a little while, one couple detaches itself from the rest and executes a few passages in the centre of the room within view of all the others.”\textsuperscript{61} The couple then separates, and the man “proceeds to kiss all the damsels in the room” while his partner “kisses all the young men,” after which “they return to their rightful places” in the group.\textsuperscript{62} The dance continues with the second couple dancing in the center of the room, kissing the others, and so on, until all the dancing couples have had their turn. As with the previously described social mixer dances, men and women dance the same steps and figures and have equal choice in deciding whom to kiss.\textsuperscript{63}

Arbeau notes a variation in which “this prerogative of kissing” belongs only to the male and female hosts of the event. At the end of the gavotte, the hostess presents a garland or bouquet to one of the dancers, and this dancer becomes the host of the next gathering, which includes the responsibility of paying the musicians who play for the dancing.\textsuperscript{64} At that next gathering, that host “will then avail himself of the same prerogative and thus it is taken in turn.”\textsuperscript{65} While this alternative gavotte does not necessitate kissing all and sundry, there is nothing in Arbeau’s description to suggest that the motivation for this variation is modesty or propriety. Rather, it repurposes the playful aspects of the kissing gavotte to help decide who should be the host (and who should foot the bill) of the next dance party.

Archival sources describing the cushion dance, another kissing dance and social mixer, can help illuminate some of the fine lines between appropriate and inappropriate dances.\textsuperscript{66} A deposition in a 1602 church court case against John Wilmot, the parish rector of Tortworth, Gloucestershire, provides an unusually detailed account of this dance:

\begin{quote}
upon the sunday before St. Thomas day last past at a wedding and in the Church house of Tortworth after Candellighting this deponent did see mr wylmott articulate amongst divers others of his parishioners dance and lay a Cushion on the ground and kneele downe uppon it and kysse a woman that then daunced with him, as all the rest that then daunced with him (being v. or vj. or more) also did, and ymedyatly after, this deponent did heare the said mr wylmott say thus in effecte viz. Bycause my Lord Byshopp of Gloucester will not geve me leave to preach, I will studdy noe more on my booke and nowe I will studdy knavery.\textsuperscript{67}
\end{quote}
The deponent, William Lawrence, who was one of Wilmot’s parishioners, describes a dance with some now familiar components. The leader, in this case Wilmot, dances around the room and lays a cushion down in front of a member of the opposite sex so that they can “kneele downe uppon it and kysse.” They then dance together, and the five or six other men do the same. It is not clear whether the other men also kissed the woman Wilmot chose or whether the explanation that “all the rest” who danced with Wilmot “also did” what he did refers to their each leading the dance and each choosing a woman to kiss. Regardless, once Wilmot had led the dance through its first iteration, he would have passed the cushion to another dancer, although again it is not stated in the deposition whether that would be to the woman, “one goodwife Hickes,” whom he had kissed or to the next man in the line “that then daunced with him.” As the earlier discussion of social mixer dance games shows, there is precedent for the latter, but the former is more likely. Pictorial evidence can help fill in gaps left by the lack of published choreographies of the cushion dance before the late seventeenth century.

A Dutch emblem book by Johannis de Brunes first published in 1624 likely depicts a cushion dance (Figure 2.4). In the image, a gentleman, holding a cushion on his back or shoulder, bows in front of a seated lady, holding his hat with his other hand, as was customary. The woman returns his gaze, while the other men and women in the room, also seated, either watch this encounter or converse. The gentleman bowing appears to be the only one dancing, so this may indicate that, at least in this version of the dance,
he will give the cushion to the woman after they dance together, and she will lead the
next iteration. The woman’s coy, slightly challenging expression and her suggestively
downward-pointing finger also hint at future amorous possibilities should the gentleman’s
dancing please. The accompanying text gives a short history of kissing and compares good
and depraved types, arguing that one can “savor this temporary life” without necessarily
losing oneself to “sinful wickedness.” The theme of the emblem’s text adds further
support for the belief that the image is indeed of the cushion dance, a kissing dance.

The company in the emblem appears to be of a higher status than the villagers
who dance the cushion dance in Tortworth, but the way in which the man approaches
the seated woman, holding the cushion in one hand and doffing his hat with the other
while he bows, is likely similar to the village version. However, many questions remain,
including what were the steps and footwork of the dance, how many times was the dance
repeated with different leaders, how long did it take, how much improvisation was
expected, and what was the musical accompaniment? Later sources can provide some
answers, including musical scores, but not without raising new questions.

What is clear is that the cushion dance was not a forbidden dance. None of the
other dancers was prosecuted for participating. In fact, it must have been an established
piece of the local dance repertoire, or John Wilmot would not have been able to call for
a cushion dance and have five or six other men spontaneously join in. Kissing dances
might have been mildly titillating, but the amount of sexual contact was minimal, regu-
lated by the watchful, multi-generational audience and the structure of the dance itself.
The problem was that Wilmot was the parish rector, and clergymen were held to stricter
behavioral standards than lay people. Moreover, Wilmot led the cushion dance “before
all the people,” and in so doing opened himself up to “publique dirision,” according to his
supervising bishop. Wilmot’s own assertion that it was “knavery” for him to lead the
cushion dance acknowledges that he knew he was dancing inappropriately.

This exploration of dance games in early modern Europe suggests two conclusions. First,
dance games, especially social mixers in which men and women alternated leading the
dance, offered women substantial agency. Not only did they perform the same steps as men,
but they also got to choose their partners. Moreover, women were expected to ask men to
dance, which required approaching men directly and maintaining eye contact, actions that
might otherwise have been considered immodest. Dance games can therefore help paint
a more accurate and nuanced picture of early modern gender relations and expectations.

Second, the steps and figures of dance games, even ones with kissing, were consid-
ered morally neutral; it was the details of the context in which the dance was performed
that decided whether it was appropriate or not and shaped its meaning to dancers and
spectators alike. This mutability of meaning is particularly important when discussing
courtship games like the coranto and social mixers like “Ballo del Fiore,” because of the
ease with which the boundary between innocent flirtation and lascivious wantonness
could be crossed. However, it also applies to other playful dances like mimed branles
since contextual details influenced whether imitated gestures were perceived as irreverent
or offensive or “all in good fun.” Finally, the case of John Wilmot and the cushion dance
demonstrates how a dance deemed acceptable for some to perform in a particular context
could be considered inappropriate for others.

Many, if not most, of the dances of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries
have an element of play. However, it is in intentionally choreographed dance games that
one sees early modern society at its most egalitarian, allowing women significant agency
and near equality with men while still policing the boundaries of modesty and propriety.

NOTES

1 Lowin, Conclusions upon dances, sig. B1v.
3 Sparti, “Improvisation and Embellishment,” 122, 118.
4 Kendall, “Ornamentation and Improvisation,” 183; Caroso, Courtly Dance of the Renais-
sance, 164. English quotations are from this translation.
5 Nevile, “Disorder in Order,” 147.
6 “List of Dance Treatises and Manuscripts, Modern Editions, and Translations,” in Nevile,
8 The study examined 325 references to dancing found in the archives of Lancashire, Cheshire,
Shropshire, Herefordshire, Worcestershire, Gloucestershire, and Somerset, most of which have
been published in the Records of Early English Drama collections for those counties. Most of
the references to dance occur in church court presentments, but there are also a smaller number
in secular court prosecutions as well as in household and churchwardens’ accounts, personal
writings, and so on. See “Early Modern Dance Fundamentals” in Winerock, “Reformation and
Revelry,” 42–118.
10 Winerock, “Reformation and Revelry,” 91.
11 Stubbes, The anatomy of abuses, book I, sig. N2r; Fetherston, A dialogue against light,
lewd, and lascivious dauncing, sigs. D4v, D6r.
12 Winerock, “Reformation and Revelry,” 88–89.
13 For Scotland, see Todd, “Profane Pastimes and the Reformed Community.” For England,
see Hutton, The Rise and Fall of Merry England; and Parker, The English Sabbath.
14 For England, see Marcus, The Politics of Mirth; Racaut, “The ’Book of Sports’ and Sabbatar-
ian Legislation in Lancashire;” and “Performative Interpretations” in Semenza, Sport, Politics, and
Literature, 85–114.
15 Winerock, “Reformation and Revelry,” 96–100.
18 Winerock, “Reformation and Revelry,” 108.
19 The sign hanging from the tree clarifies that the group is outside of an inn or alehouse. According to Stephanie Porras, the sign depicts a codpiece. Porras, “Copies, Cannibals and Conquerors,” 252.
20 Newall, “The Egg Dance.”
21 See, for example, the “Examination of Ralph Whoode and Others” in the Borough Court Books, which mentions a fight between several morris dancers and bystanders in Shrewsbury in 1619. Shropshire Record Office: 3365/1198/1 pp. 1.15–1.17 (June) and 3365/2637; quoted in Somerset, ed., Records of Early English Drama, vol. 1, 309–12.
22 See Forrest, The History of Morris Dancing. The Betley Hall stained glass window now in the Victoria & Albert Museum features morris dancers wearing bells and coats, a pipe tabor player, a hobbyhorse, Maid Marion, and Friar Tuck, as well as a maypole. Winerock, “Reformation and Revelry,” 72.
24 Forrest, “Morris Dance.”
25 A substantial number of studies have examined this subject. See, for example, Wagner, Adversaries of Dance; Arcangeli, “Dance under Trial;” Goring, Godly Exercises or the Devil’s Dance; and Pennino-Baskerville, “Terpsichore Reviled.”
27 Arbeau, Orchesography, 11–12. English quotations are from this translation.
28 There has been little work on dance and flirtation in the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, or even on dance and courtship more generally, but a number of studies touch on dancing, flirtation, courtship, and playfulness for later periods. See Kaminsky, “Gender and Sexuality in the Polska.” Rothman, “Sex and Self-Control,” describes the flirtatious, sexually playful aspects of courtship (415) and mentions several courting couples who attended dances together (410, 411, 414), but she does not discuss any instances of flirtation while dancing.
29 Caroso, Courtly Dance of the Renaissance, 164.
30 Caroso, Courtly Dance of the Renaissance, 93, 230.
31 Arbeau, Orchesography, 179–80.
32 Arbeau, Orchesography, 180.
33 Arbeau, Orchesography, 180.
34 Arbeau, Orchesography, 123.
35 Arbeau, Orchesography, 123–24.
36 Arbeau, Orchesography, 124.
37 Arbeau, Orchesography, 136.
38 Arbeau, Orchesography, 136.
39 Arbeau, Orchesography, 165.
40 Arbeau, Orchesography, 151, 147.
41 Arbeau, Orchesography, 153–55.
42 See, for example, his caveats, as well as his instructions, for the volta. Arbeau, Orchesography, 119–23.
43 Arbeau, Orchesography, 159.
44 Arbeau, Orchesography, 159.
45 Arbeau, Orchesography, 155.
Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 156.
51 Caroso, *Courtly Dance of the Renaissance*, 281.
56 Playford, *The English Dancing Master*, 80, 95. Italics are mine.
57 For a fuller discussion, see Winerock, “Performing’ Gender and Status on the Dance Floor.”
58 Caroso, *Courtly Dance of the Renaissance*, 146.
59 Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 175.
60 Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 175.
61 Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 175.
62 Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 175.
63 Arbeau writes that the dancers kiss all the members of the opposite sex in the room, but, in practice, the leading couple likely only kissed some of the spectators though they may have kissed all of the other dancers. Regardless, the male and female dancers had the same degree of choice, whether that was a lot or a little.
64 Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 175.
65 Arbeau, *Orchesography*, 175.
66 For a more detailed discussion of John Wilmot and the cushion dance, see Winerock, “Reformation and Revelry,” 307–21.
69 The first full choreographic description does not appear until the seventh edition of Playford’s *The Dancing-Master*, 208, where it is entitled “Joan Sanderson, or The Cushion-Dance, a Round Dance.” Christopher Marsh sees a “striking resemblance” between the cushion dance by John Wilmot in 1602 and Playford’s version. Marsh, *Music and Society*, 385.
70 Caroso’s instructions for how to ask a woman to dance begin with a detailed discussion about how to “doff,” or remove, one’s hat. Moreover, all the other men in the emblem picture are wearing their hats. Caroso, *Courtly Dance of the Renaissance*, 96.
71 I am indebted to Bert Roest for translating the emblem text. The translation is in the Appendix of Winerock, “Reformation and Revelry,” 366.
73 Articles Objected, GRO: B4/1/2642, fol. [1r].
Ludic Intermingling/Ludic Discrimination: Women’s Card Playing and Visual Proscriptions in Early Modern Europe

Antonella Fenech Kroke

A S A COMPLEX SYMBOLIC SYSTEM, playing games is a vector of sociability destined to connect but also to discriminate. By looking critically at images of female card players, this essay will examine the implicit and explicit “misogyny” of many early modern discursive and social practices. Since the middle of the fifteenth century, an image of the femina ludens, showing women playing cards together as well as with and against men, emerges, attesting to and affecting ludic discrimination. Indeed, representations of ludic intermingling offer up visual proscriptions for both men and women and amplify the social and moral misogyny that characterizes the history of women during the early modern period.

The implication of cleverness, the function of chance, and the role of gambling in card playing further complicated the image and interpretation of the femina ludens. Because card games require intellectual skill, they were regarded as incompatible with what was considered to be woman’s innate feebleness or incapacity—physical, intellectual, and juridical—engendered by her imbecillitas or infirmitas sexus, as the Roman law called it. Furthermore, because of the fundamental roles of chance and gambling in the mechanism of card play, such games were generally condemned by religious and juridical authorities as well as in contemporary moralistic literature.

This essay considers the context, function, and circulation of representations of female card players produced between the end of the fifteenth and the beginning of the seventeenth centuries, looking first at images in which the dangers of card play are embodied in the figure of the femina ludens and second at those in which the femina ludens herself is cheated by the courtly “rules of the game.” In both cases, the implicit and explicit misogyny of these images finds its inspiration and justification, I propose, in early modern erotic and love imagery.

The Consequences of Women’s Gameplay

From the beginning of the fifteenth century, the popularity of card games among aristocratic elites, as well as among common people, ran parallel to the (totally unavailing) condemnation of these ludic practices by political authorities and religious institutions.
The public sermons of Franciscan preachers Bernardino of Siena in Italy and Giovanni da
Capistrano in Northern Europe, for example, enjoined people to abstain from all sorts
of games. It is not surprising, then, that by the end of the sixteenth century card games
were listed among forbidden games by the fathers of the Council of Trent and were even
considered *ludi diabolici* in moralistic literature.6

Naturally, images play an important role as instruments of this condemnation; in
order to serve and give form to the disapproving discourses of moralists, two different
visual strategies were adopted. The first typology of images unambiguously condemns
gambling games. A painted cover of the financial register (1437) of Siena’s chief
financial office, called the Biccherna (Figure 3.1), depicts a winged personification of

Figure 3.1. Unknown artist, *Allegory of the Plague*, Biccherna book cover, 1437.
© Kunstgewerbemuseum, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin.
Plague astride a charging black horse shooting arrows at the players and observers of a gambling game underway in a simple interior. Almost two centuries later, in a woodcut illustration of *Imagines Mortis* (The Dance of Death), Hans Holbein the Younger depicts four gamesters playing cards and dice in what appears to be a tavern (Figure 3.2). Death strangles the player in the center of the composition, while the Devil, who has already thrown down the man at the far right, pulls the assaulted player’s hair.

Another visual device employed to condemn gambling games links game apparata with religious denouncement and censorship. One example of this type is a woodcut by the Monogrammist SH (Figure 3.3). In this “Bonfire of Vanities,” playing cards and backgammon boards, together with elegant shoes, are being burned in front of the Liebfrauenkirche during a sermon by Giovanni da Capistrano in Nuremberg in 1452. Later commentators and followers of this Franciscan monk perhaps overestimated his aversion to games; however, it is significant that the author of this image conjoins the

![Figure 3.2. Hans Holbein the Younger (after), Wenceslaus Hollar (primer), Death and the Devil Strike a Player (Antwerp, ca. 1680), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.](image-url)
condemnation of female vanities with that of gaming activities: noblewomen stand ready to throw luxurious fashion ornaments (a belt and a necklace) onto the fire as a man burns a backgammon board and a repentant female player prepares to throw a pack of playing cards into the flames.

A second, more ambiguous visual strategy, particularly popular in the Netherlands and Germany, introduces female players into the company of male players. In these scenes of ludic intermingling, the presence of the *femina ludens* activates and charges the images’ moralistic virulence. The players’ social homogeneity, the exchange of looks between them, references to insanity and to folly, and symbolic gestures aimed at eroticizing the relationships between players are all common features of this typology, a visual formula that links card games, female emancipation, and love and erotic themes—an interpretation assigned to chess play during the medieval period.

Figure 3.3. Monogrammist SH, *Giovanni da Capistrano Preaching against Games*, frontispiece of the *Vita Iohannis Capistrani. Sermones eiusdem* (Augsburg, 1519).
This visual complexity becomes all the more apparent in one of the woodcuts—credited to the young Albrecht Dürer—illustrating chapter 77, “On Gamblers,” of Das Narrenschiff (The Ship of Fools) by Sebastian Brant published in Basel in 1494 (Figure 3.4). Brant’s poem and Dürer’s woodcut are particularly relevant insofar as the book was reprinted in numerous authorized editions in Germany, Holland, England, and France, thus disseminating widely a condemnation of ludic intermingling. The image presents two women sitting at a gaming table playing dice and cards with two men; significantly all four players are wearing foolscaps. The composition illustrates Sebastian Brant’s moralistic position, a condemnation not only of gambling in general, but also, and above all, of the intrusion of women into men’s games:

And many women are so blind
That they forget their sex and kind
And know not that propriety
Forbids such mixed society.
They sit together ’mongst the men
And never feel dishonored when
They shake the dice and bet and game,
For all good women great the shame.
The distaff they should tend and wet
And gamble not with men and bet!8

Analogous intellectual positions and misogynistic rhetoric are reformulated slightly later in a new humanist vein by Erasmus in one of his Colloquies of 1529 dedicated to the game knucklebones (“Astragalismos, sive talorum lusus”). In addition to stressing a more conventional idea that gameplay and gambling are foolish and immoral activities, the author underlines, through the voice of the two protagonists of the dialogue, Quirinus and Charles, a much larger transgression on the part of women, recording that they had also moved improperly into activities and areas of thought (voluptas and honestas) associated specifically with masculinity: “Quirinus: For this sort of game has scorned even girls today; they take up dice, cards, and other masculine amusements instead. —Charles: No wonder, since they take up theology, too.”9

The Italians also looked askance at the intermingling of the sexes in the playing of card games. This is clearly the point of view of Stefano Guazzo in a short dialogue included in his Dialoghi piacevoli (1586): the interlocutors of Dell’onor delle donne firmly condemn female players gaming in the company of men since this activity is considered proof that women no longer care for their onore and chastity. If taken separately, a man and a woman are both meritorious and worthy; when they join themselves together, Guazzo opines, the result is necessarily defective and hideous, exactly as water and earth, which, when mixed together, will always produce only mud.10

A similar misogynistic point of view is discernible in a woodcut by German printmaker Niklas Stör, or Erhard Schön, which shows an aristocratic couple playing cards in
Figure 3.4. Woodcut illustration from chapter 77, “On Gamblers,” from Sebastian Brant, Das Narrenschiff (Basel, 1494).
the loggia of a palace, a commonplace in courtly game imagery since the late medieval period (Figure 3.5). Printed to illustrate a moralistic leaflet, the engraving complements a poem by Hans Sachs published in Nuremberg around 1530. As the title of the poem states—“Who wants to court a beautiful wife / must suffer a lot, / [because] she will play unfaithful with him”—the text takes the form of a dialogue between a man and a woman playing cards; they discuss a new game, which the woman names Der Untrew (the Unfaithful). The whole composition plays on the equivocation between Unfaithful (the game) and feminine unfaithfulness. The woman defends her disloyalty: if she cheats on him in order to win at gambling, it is because she blinds him with her beauty. In this way the author of the verses associates the game’s exchanges, metaphorically and literally, with unfaithfulness, deceit, and lust in a vein typical of contemporary “power of woman” literature and, in so doing, warns men not to place their trust in women precisely because of their inconstancy.

If the rhyme plays on the double entendre of topics such as playing, gambling, and the struggle of love and erotic exchanges, the image itself expresses an analogous point of view. The woodcut is not only presented as a gloss of the poem (being placed in its margins), but it does so in a very suggestive and significant way. Here the card game matches a metaphoric trope, the literary and poetical theme of the “warfare of love,” since the gentlewoman is portrayed as just having played an ace of hearts, at which she points. This particular visual device makes especially intelligible the allegorical significance of the image. But there are still others. The presence of coins on the table alludes to gambling as an evil consequence of playing. And in the lower foreground two elegant jugs are placed in a tub used to maintain proper temperature, an illustration of the proverb “Kaart, keurs en kan bederven menig man” (cards, tankards, and petticoats have ruined many a man). Immediately to the left a dog is shown defecating—in a naturally shameless attitude—next to its own food, two big bones to which the dog will presumably return after appeasing its other natural need. In medieval and Renaissance iconography, the dog is charged with a double meaning: the predominant one is definitively positive and relates to faithfulness and wisdom, especially in marital contexts; less frequently, the dog refers to capital vices such as avarice and gluttony, to promiscuity, and to a corrupted sexuality, a symbolic heritage established in the Book of Proverbs, in the Second Epistle of Peter, and later in emblem literature. In the fifteenth century, Sebastian Brant associates the dog with the sinner more generally, as did medieval preachers before him. The introduction of the dog to the foreground of the picture plane, directly between the card players and the viewer, underscores the parallels between animal and human urges, namely the corporeal appetites of the man and the woman—hunger and thirst, for sure, but also carnal and sexual pleasures, the latter announced metaphorically by the ace of hearts in the center of the table.
Figure 3.5. Nikola Stor (or Erhard Schön), Couple Playing Cards, from H. Sachs, Mücke in schon...
A similar scenario unfolds in a late fifteenth-century print by the Master of the Amsterdam Cabinet, in which a woman, surrounded by three male players and two dogs, has just played a trump card (Figure 3.6). The amorous/moral overtones are equally evident, but the relationship between the men and the woman is more ambiguous. As in Sachs’s poem, the young men’s facial expressions reveal just how much the female player has beguiled them, a situation underscored by the inclusion of a fool figure on the far right. But here the folly is mainly related to the double dealing, at once ludic and erotic, evoked by the woman’s attitude: while receiving the attentions of a first player, she unveils her cards to a second one. Moreover, in the left background of the image, a couple of lovers disappears into the forest on horseback followed by a dog, thereby suggesting the outcome of the love triangle staged in the foreground. With this combination of motifs—the woman, the card game, the cheating, and the fool—two forms of condemned pleasures converge: the game and the flesh. Indeed, in early modern culture, lust, avidity, and deceit were looked upon as intrinsically tied to woman’s nature.

Much more subtle is the visual strategy employed by Lucas van Leyden in his various paintings of card players. The Card Players, ca. 1550/1599, considered a copy of a lost original, depicts a total of eight figures seated around a gaming table. Two women and two men play a card game, perhaps fluyssen (flusso, or flush), which arrived in the Netherlands from Italy around 1500, while three men and one woman observe (Figure 3.7). The man in the right foreground might appear to be the winner, a designation suggested as much by the mass of gold coins in front of him as by his rich costume—he wears a red hat and a red robe with fur collar. But the female player on the far left, staring out toward the viewer and showing her heart card as the elderly man behind her slides his hand forward to caress her breast, emerges as the cunning victor. Consider another provocative pairing: in the background, a man hides his left hand inside his green cloak. To the right, a female spectator places her left hand over the shoulder of one of the male players, indicating the value of the ace with her downward-pointed finger. If the first gesture has generally been associated with the vice of sloth since the Book of Proverbs (“A sluggard buries his hand in the dish; he will not even bring it back to his mouth,” 19:24), the second recalls the digitus infamis or impudicus (the “finger”), known and codified since Antiquity; further, the woman’s obscene gesture contrasts with her otherwise shy comportment, a contradiction that itself embodies deceit.

The encoding of the above game scenes, which portray the polite merchant society of Northern Europe, is subtle and complex. Such visual games on the part of the artist become much more explicit, however, when the subject shifts to the lower social stratum at play, typically in a tavern setting. Depicting the literary and artistic motif of “unequal couples,” Quentin Massys’s The Ill-Matched Lovers, ca. 1520–25 (Figure 3.8), is an excellent example of the “power of women” theme and of the mastery of women over men. In this much discussed image, Massys expands the conventional two-figured composition
of unequal lovers—a courtesan and a lecherous elderly man—by integrating, at left, the figure of the fool, who helps the woman to rob the old man’s purse. The fool’s presence exaggerates the silliness of the relationship between the central players and amplifies the idea of female sexual power. However, Massys situates the fulcrum of the moral message in the lower left corner of the composition, where, near a loose stack of coins, he depicts
a deck of cards with a heart card on top, thus likening woman, love, and sex to a foolish, insidious, and fraudulent game. The reaching hands of the courtesan and the fool, the elder man’s purse, the gambled coins, and the deck of cards all synthesize as an emblem of both early modern misogyny and ludic discrimination, with the female gamester as the embodiment of deceit, cupidity, and folly. In this regard, Erasmus writes:

a woman is always a woman, that is, a fool, whatever mask she wears. [...] In the first place they have the gift of beauty, which they rightly value above everything else, for it ensures their power to tyrannize over tyrants themselves. [...] Next, what else do women desire in this life but to give maximum pleasure to men? Isn’t this the purpose
of all their attention to their persons, all that make-up, bathing, hairdressing, and all those ointments and perfumes, as well as so many arts of arranging, painting, and disguising face, eyes, and skin? Now, does anything count more in winning them men’s favors than their folly? There’s nothing men won’t permit to women, and for no other return than pleasure, but it’s women’s folly which makes them delight men.22

By the end of the sixteenth and into the seventeenth centuries, engraved images of the female player laden with erotic symbolism had spread throughout Europe, attesting to a multitude of anxieties that plagued early modern society, beyond mere gambling now to matters of public order and health. (In his treatise on pathological playing of 1561, for example, Pascasius Justus (whose full name was Pascasius Justus Turcq) reiterates the proverb that love and gameplay are the two illnesses that overpower and weigh down a man’s life: “Amor et alea duo vitae praeципua mala.”23) Two examples from The Consequences of Alcoholism, a print series of 1600 by Jacob Matham, provide a clear illustration of the culturally perceived relationship between women, gambling, violence, alcoholism, and prostitution, which the bilingual (Latin/Dutch) verses below each print make explicit. In the first image, a man and a woman play backgammon while a youth at the far end of the table holds up a large goblet (Figure 3.9). In the second, all hell has broken loose: in the foreground, a woman tries to break up a fight over a card game between

Figure 3.8. Quentin Massys, The Ill-Matched Lovers, oil on panel, ca. 1520–25, Ailsa Mellon Bruce Fund, National Gallery of Art, Washington. Courtesy National Gallery of Art, Washington.
two men, one of whom threatens the other with a dagger; a gaming table, scattered with cards and boards and coins—and a jug of wine, is overturned in the scuffle. In the background, a person is attacked with a knife in bed, and through the rear window a murder scene unfolds (Figure 3.10).24

By the seventeenth century, contradictory demands are placed on the image of the *femina ludens*, which is now expected to serve both the invective against the “power of woman”—her inherent and congenital cupidity and duplicity—and the fight against the so-called ludic plague orchestrated by political, judicial, and religious institutions. The result was a polysemous image, as blurry and thus as ineffective as the legal and moral agenda for which it was created.

Writing the Rules, Cheating the System

A second typology depicts aristocratic men and women playing cards together in the garden, generally understood as an activity-space of elevated and unproductive *otium*. Needless to say, this type of imagery has neither the same exact function nor circulation as that considered up to now. Rather than focusing on the moral, social, and economic menaces of gaming and gambling, for instance, the following scenes seem instead to offer up an idealized portrait of courtly life. Yet here, too, there is a gender politics at play.

Ludic intermingling in this context, I propose, might have contributed to the rise of the iconography of cheating during the second half of the sixteenth century. As early as
the 1560s, scenes of cheaters at the gaming table appeared in Venice, Bologna, and Milan, pre-dating Caravaggio’s *The Cardsharps* ca. 1594, a painting often credited with popularizing gamblers and cardsharps in genre painting at the beginning of the seventeenth century. Moreover, the formal construction of these pictures, characterized by close-ups of staged figures, allows the viewer to take part in the game. Thus, discernible in these images is a provocative bending of the rules of the game insofar as the boundaries of both the game space and the picture plane are stretched. But to whose advantage?

Let us turn to two depictions of noblewomen playing cards with each other in front of male spectators, gamers themselves who participate indirectly by manipulating the female players in their company. As noted by Gail Feigenbaum, one of the earliest works in which the cheater appears is a Lombard fresco by Girolamo Romanino, probably painted in the mid sixteenth century as part of the now lost decoration of the Sala del Capitano in the Broletto in Brescia (Figure 3.11). Gathered around a gaming table in the loggia of a palace, three noblewomen play cards; a fourth, in the foreground, leans on a balustrade, while three men standing in the background observe the women at play. Here again, the exchange of glances between figures is telling. Among the players, the women seated at left and in the center of the composition are clearly distracted by the man in the far left corner who is depicted in sharp profile with his back twisted toward the viewer. As such, he is figured as an accomplice in the cheating scheme, which clearly favors the third female player, at right, perhaps because of her age and status (she appears to be older and is more elegantly dressed than the other players); she exchanges a glance with the central male figure, who tips the hand of the distracted female player seated before him.

Romanino’s fresco echoes another mid century game scene, this one of tarot card players painted by Nicolò dell’Abate for the Sala dei Concerti of Palazzo Poggi in Bologna (Figure 3.12). The setting is once more an aristocratic garden—a courtly *hortus conclusus* separated from the outside world by a trellis of rose vines and jasmine. Four elegantly dressed female players strive to play their game as four gentlemen busily attempt to distract them, either by making love gestures or by indicating something outside the picture frame. Here again, trickery is depicted via a series of intense glances among members of the gaming party. The woman on the left, who is playing a four of swords, makes eye contact with the man in black at the center of the composition who places his hand, or rather his two fingers, on the right shoulder of the distracted woman at center left. Two centuries later, in the middle of the eighteenth century, an engraving of this fresco appeared in the book *Le pitture di Pellegrino Tibaldi e Niccolò Abbati* (Venice, 1756). In addition to modifying the cheaters’ facial expressions, changed substantially to take on an unfriendly air, the following commentary was added: “Qui tutto è gratia, tutto è beltade. / Felici carte da così tenere, / Da così morbide mani trattate. / Ma tra Letitia tanta, e tal gioco, / Guardate, o Belle Fanciulle amabili, / Che non tormentovi d’Amore il foco.” (Here everything is grace and beauty. Happy cards handled by such tender, by such
Figure 3.11. Girolamo Romanino, *Tarot Card Players*, detached fresco, mid sixteenth century, originally part of the decoration of the Sala del Capitano in the Broletto, Brescia. Private collection.
soft hands. But between this enjoyment and this game, be careful, beautiful and lovely girls, to not let the flame of Love torment you.)

A card game scene from the Villa Caldogno in Vicenza, painted by Giovanni Antonio Fasolo around 1570, adds an interesting twist to the iconography of cheating, particularly as regards the inclusion of the male figure with his back turned toward the viewer (Figure 3.13). As with the other scenes examined thus far, the players and observers in this fresco are elegantly dressed and set within the loggia of a villa that opens onto an idyllic country view. Yet unlike the previous examples, the noblewomen play not among themselves but against a man. The seated female player at right seems to have abandoned the game as she has turned her body away from the table and toward the landscape, though she twists her head back toward the viewer, as does the noblewoman standing at left, both figures assuming the role of *admonitor*. Meanwhile, the only male player in the game tips his hand to the viewer. The woman seated at left concentrates on the game, so much so that she fails to realize that the woman playing next to her stretches to observe from behind the gesture of the male accomplice at left. Alas, he in turn reveals the hand of the woman in front of him to someone else: the man on the other side of the table.

This “accomplice posture”—back-to-the-viewer with gesturing hand—is an interesting formal invention, for this figure connects the fictional space of the game scene with the real space of the viewer. Moreover, this figure, both observer and participant, constitutes a sort of invitation to the spectator not only to enter the game space but also to take part in the cheating scheme that unfolds there. This becomes particularly true in
Caravaggio’s *The Cardsharps* and, subsequently, in most of the card game genre paintings of the seventeenth century. Thus, the image itself becomes a game board insofar as the act of viewing can trigger not only a sort of fictional immersion into the game space, but also a virtual invitation to join the ludic action by anticipating or calculating winning strategies. Unfortunately, in the Villa Caldogno fresco the suits and the values of the hands are not legible, making it impossible to understand entirely the effect the cheating will have on the outcome of the game.

For a better understanding of the cultural implications of these Italian scenes of female card players and cheats, which are quite different from the earlier images of sly and greedy women depicted by Northern European artists as well as from the later images of cardsharps and gamblers, it is necessary to review the early modern literary debate on games. George McClure has made a fundamental contribution to this area in his study of two dialogues of Torquato Tasso, written in the early 1580s during the poet’s internment in Ferrara, which McClure describes as “the most ambitious theoretical attempt in the Cinquecento to develop a theory that embraces all types of games.”

del giuoco and its revised and amplified version *Il Gonzaga secondo overo del giuoco* are set at the court of Alfonso II d’Este of Ferrara, *baut-lieu* of ludic Renaissance culture. For not only was this prince a passionate player of *jeu de paume*, ball, cards, and chess, among other games, but also the first modern treatise on ballgames, Antonio Scaino da Salò’s *Trattato del giuoco della palla* (1555), was dedicated to him.

In his two dialogic texts Tasso sketches a theoretical discourse about play in general and about specific types of games, above all *primiera*. In his intellectual approach to the latter, Tasso underscores the role of fortune and gambling as well as the intellectual skill necessary to play the card game; he also delineates a portrait of the ideal player. Above all Tasso propounds a theory about men’s attitude toward the reality of ludic intermingling. In so doing, his stance might be read as an act of “positive discrimination.”

The first dialogue, the *Romeo*, takes place amidst the 1579 carnival festivities in Ferrara. Margherita (Bentivoglio) expresses disapproval of the fact that noblemen cunningly lose when playing cards against gentlewomen, in response to Annibale Pocaterra’s remarks on the virtues of the “liberal player,” as opposed to the greedy one:

> He with whom you might play, gracious lady, would be able rightfully to place the victory in losing and artfully allowing [you] to win, as do some courteous men, who playing with women allow [them] to win on purpose [...]. But as it is politeness and courtesy to allow women to win, so it would be foolish for him to willingly allow men to win, because everyone ought to strive to be superior to others in things honest and praiseworthy, but victory is the most honest and most praiseworthy.31

Since *primiera* is a game of both chance and skill (*ingegno*), it connotes courage, strategic thinking, and political prudence—in other words, masculinity. Accordingly, when women compete against men, they are in an (inherently) unequal position, above all because of their intellectual inferiority: “In all the aspects of life the [women] are inferior to men.”32

One year after the publication of the *Romeo*, in his *Discorso della virtù feminile e donnesca*, Tasso expounds that speculative and intellectual qualities do not belong to the “normal” woman, whose feminine virtues consist rather of modesty, humility, and chastity.33 Yet when it comes to affairs of love, all women win, as long as they continue to play as lovers: “In the kingdom of Love, female fortune rules, because the woman, to the degree she is loved, is always superior to the lover, although to the degree she is wife, she is inferior to the husband. [...] Only Love makes perhaps women equal to men, because it equalizes their inequalities.”34

Tasso’s position on the dance between gaming and gender roles is revised in the *Gonzaga secondo*. Through the voice of Margherita, Tasso now argues with greater complexity on the topic of condescending courtesy by male players, outlining an image of the woman who possesses both the intellectual capacities and the resoluteness to be considered and accepted as a complete player.35 As mentioned previously, within male ludic
strategies fake victory falls under the rituals of polite behavior and seduction, against which Marguerite (alias Tasso, a man!) states *sotto voce*: “You call [false victory] politeness and courtesy, but I consider it deceit and artifice because men often allow women to win just to win them over in other more important struggles.” By asserting women’s intellectual capacity, Margherita here contradicts the “positive discrimination” expressed one year earlier in the *Romeo*, since at the beginning of the text she asks the two male interlocutors “how one who wants to win ought to play.” As a result, the final section of the *Gonzaga secondo* is devoted to explaining the various tactics necessary for winning at *primiera*. If Tasso is never clear about the possibility of women becoming accomplished gamesters he does attempt—at least theoretically—to shift the discourse of ludic intermingling from the realm of love and courtesy to one of competition.

It is in this light that consideration must be given to the imagery of cheating in scenes of courtly gameplay. We might further contextualize this *modus ludendi* by closing with two historical accounts. In the first, a letter of 1546 to Pier Francesco Riccio, major-domo of Duke Cosimo I de’ Medici, we learn that during an after-dinner card game between the Duchess Eleonora of Toledo and the courtiers Sforza Almeni and Ugolino Grifoni the latter gave proof of his *grandeur* by losing intentionally at *primiera* against the Duchess. And in a second letter, of 1577, Pietro de’ Medici writing to the Grand Duchess Giovanna of Austria reveals that he was spending a pleasant time in Genoa partying and playing cards with gentlewomen “greedy for victory”—perhaps he also meant eager for a “true” victory!

If there is no doubt, based on the visual and literary representations of the *femina ludens* presented in this essay, that women played and liked to play card games with and against men, this imagery, produced by men, also emphasizes the impossibility of an equal ludic interaction between the sexes. For in early modern Europe, the female player couldn’t gamble with anything other than herself, the female body ever an object of male desire, whether courtly or common. Thus, the *femina ludens* ultimately is dealt a losing hand insofar as her presence at the gaming table, even if she “wins” the match, reveals less about the ludic practices of women and more about the desires of her male opponents.

**NOTES**

1 I am very grateful to Thierry Depaulis and John McClelland for their fruitful advice and suggestions.

1 In his important study on the historical evolution of sexualized roles in game activities, Zollinger, “Gluck, puerelcy und spiel verkert sich oft und viel,” analyzes seventeenth- and eighteenth-century textual sources. Whereas Mehl, “Femmes en jeux,” pointing to the paucity of women in contemporary legal documents, emphasizes the difficulty of talking about female players at the end of the Middle Ages. For one of the more interesting but still rare contributions to the study of the gender politics of games and images, see Simons, “(Check)Mating the Grand Masters.”
2 Hoffmann, Le monde de la carte à jouer.

3 The bibliography on the querelle des femmes and early modern perspectives on women’s place and dignity in society is extensive. See, in particular: Rossi, “Statut judirique de la femme;” Kelly, Women, History, and Theory, especially ch. 2; and Cox, Women’s Writing.

4 Jordan, Renaissance Feminism, 168. The positions of the early modern authors vary from moderately sympathetic approaches to women’s condition to very discriminative ones. For the first case, see especially Vives, De institutione feminae Christianae, 1:74–75. Other authors argued that women were feeble, weak-willed, and intellectually worth no more than children or beasts; see, for instance, Dolce, Dialogo della institution delle donne; and Domenichi, La donna di corte, fols. 3r–4r.

5 Covarrubias, Remedio de jugadores; Gouyn, Le mespris; Rocca, Trattato per la salute dell’anime; and Ortonelli, Parenesi prima a’ giuocatori di carte. On the condemnation of games of chance (alea), see Arcangeli, Recreation in the Renaissance, chs. 4 and 5; Fiorin, Fanti e denari; Taddei, “Gioco d’azzardo, ribaldi e baratteria;” and Reith, The Age of Chance.


7 Depaulis, “‘Breviari del diavolo so’ le carte e naibi.’”

8 Brant, Das Narrenschiff. For the English translation, see Brant, The Ship of Fools, 256–57.

9 Erasmus, Colloquies, I:895.

10 Guazzo, Dialoghi piacevoli, 400.

11 Sachs, Welcher ein schon weyb pulen zvil. On Sach’s work, see Sachs, Die Welt des Hans Sachs, 94, fig. 107. Moreover, on this kind of one-leaf illustrated text, see Röttinger, Die Bilderbogen des Hans Sachs; and Oelke, Die Konfessionsbildung.

12 “Welcher ein schon weyb pulen zvil / Der musz auch von yhr leyden vil / Das lie der untrew mit im spil.” The last verse can also be read as: “[because] she will be unfaithful to him.”

13 This is a relatively conventional motif found also in Couple of Card Players engraved ca. 1480 by the German Master BXG, Munich, Staatliche Graphisches Sammlung.

14 An illuminated initial of the Saint-Omer Psalter in the Bodleian Library (MS. Douce 49, folio LXIII v) presents Francis preaching to birds and, on the hook of the Q initial, a dog defecating and disregarding the words of the saint. Later, Titian (Submersion of Pharaoh’s Army, 1515–16) and Rembrandt (The Good Samaritan Bringing a Wounded Man into an Inn, 1633) also depict a dog in the same attitude. See D’Elia, “The Decorum of a Defecating Dog.”

15 “As a dog returns to his vomit, so a fool repeats his folly,” Proverbs, 2, 11. “But it is happened unto them according to the true proverb, the dog is turned to his own vomit again; and the sow that was washed to her wallowing in the mire,” 2 Peter, 2:22. See also Persels and Ganim, Fecal Matters; Cohen, Animals as Disguised Symbols, 211; Harbison, “Sexuality and Social Standing;” Leach, God Had a Dog, 325–29; Rowland, Animals with Human Faces, 59–63; Maspero and Granata, Bestiario medievale, 91–94; and Levi D’Ancona, Lo Zoo del Rinascimento, 72–76.

16 Kok, Livelier than Life, cat. 73.

17 On this topos, see Castelli, L’umanesimo e la “Follia;” Westmoreland Ille, “Jocus;” and Grössinger, Humour and Folly.

18 Smith, The Paintings of Lucas van Leyden, 50–56. See also Büttner, “Das Motiv der ’femina ludens.’”

19 Flusso is, in a way, a forerunner of the game of poker and a direct ancestor of primiera, the most widespread card game of the sixteenth century; flusso, played with hands of three cards, is considered an easier game than primiera.
20 Fleckner, “La rhétorique de la main cachée.”
21 Stewart, Unequal Lovers, esp. 68–71, 146, no. 18, fig. 40. See also Silver, “The Ill-Matched Pair” by Quinten Massys,” and Hand and Wolff, Early Netherlandish Painting, 146–50.
22 Erasmus, Collected Works of Erasmus, 96.
23 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], Alea, 17. See also Arcangeli, Recreation in the Renaissance, 41–45, and in the present volume essays by Andreas Hermann Fischer and Manfred Zollinger.
24 These same themes would later interest the artist Marcellus Laroon the Younger, as seen in an engraving that visually transcribes the views of the Pascasius. British Museum, London. Depaulis, “Cardan et Joostens.”
26 See Ridolfi, Meraviglie dell’arte, vol. 1, 253; Ferrari, Il Romanino, 49, pls. 96–97; Nova, Girolamo Romanino, 313; and Feigenbaum, “Gamblers, Cheats and Fortune Tellers,” 155–56. This fragmentary fresco has been detached and is today part of a private collection (unknown location). The hypothesis of an execution in 1558 (Ferrari) is controversial; on the basis of stylistic observations, Alessandro Nova argues instead that the painting was made during the 1560s.
27 Béguin, Mostra di Nicolò dell’Abate, 74–76; Cavicchioli, “Musica e ‘bellezza dell’anima.’”
28 A nascent literature on probability theory, beginning with the Liber de ludo aleae of Girolamo Cardano (1560s), continues to grow in the seventeenth century and includes the publication of treatises and manuals concerned with techniques for card manipulation and cheating.
29 McClure, “Women and the Politics of Play;” and McClure, Parlour Games, 4–13 (for Tasso’s dialogues), citation at 5.
30 Tasso, Il Romeo overo del giuoco; the dialogue was printed within the Rime del sig. Torquato Tasso. Tasso, Gonzaga secondo.
31 “Chi con esso voi giocasse, graziosa signora, potrebbe ragionevolmente por la vittoria nel perdere e a bell’arte lasciarsi vincere, come fanno alcuni cortesi, i quali, giuocando con le dame, si lasciano vincere a bello studio […]. Ma si come è creanza e cortesia il lasciarsi vincere dalle donne, così sciocchezza sarebbe quella di colui che da gli uomini voluntariamente vincer si lasciasse, perché ciascuno dee procurare d’esser altrui superiore ne le cose oneste e lodevoli; ma onestissima e lodevolissima è la vittoria.” See Tasso, Dialoghi, 47–48. For the English, see McClure, “Women and the Politics of Play,” 757.
32 “In tutti gli altri uffici de la vita nascono a l’uomo inferiori.” Tasso, Dialoghi, 49.
33 On the contrary, the donnese virtù, or ladylike virtues, belong only to the “heroic women,” who should not be judged by the standards of normal women. Tasso, Discorso. See also Cox, Women’s Writing, 168–73.
34 “Ma le donne non possono con gli uomini né d’ingegno nè di fortuna contendere […] Ma nel regno d’Amore signoreggia la fortuna femminile: perciòché la donna, in quanto amata, è sempre superiore all’amante, se bene, in quanto moglie, è inferiore al marito. […] solo Amore è forse quel, ch’agguagliando le lor disagguaglianze, rende le donne eguali a gli uomini.” Tasso, Dialoghi, 48–49. For the English, see McClure, “Women and the Politics of Play,” 759.
36 “Quella degli uomini, che da voi è stimata creanza e cortesia, da me è riputato a inganno e artificio; perciò che gli homini, molte fiate si lascian vincenre, per vincere le donne in altri contrasti di maggior importanza.” Tasso, Gonzaga secondo, 13v (author’s translation).
“come debba giuocare chi desidera di vincere.” Tasso, Gonzaga secondo, 4v.

McClure asserts that these “doubts concerning the intrusion of such artificiality in the game realm can be found, prior to Tasso’s treatise, in a parlour-game book by the Mantouan Ascanio de’ Mori […] Giuoco piacevole, written in 1575,” in which female players take “increasingly feminist attitudes.” McClure, Parlour Games, 10. See also de’ Mori, Giuoco piacevole; and the modern edition, de’ Mori, Giuoco piacevole (1988).

“Con avaritia di vincere.” Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Mediceo del Principato, vol. 5927, fol. 119; for the previous citation, see Mediceo del Principato, vol. 1172, insert 2, fol. 39.
Leonardo da Vinci, Parody, and Pictorial Magic

Chriscinda Henry

Things that we normally view with disgust we instead view with pleasure when images of them are portrayed with accuracy ... The reason for this is that learning gives great pleasure.¹

—Aristotle, Poetics

Introduction

This essay addresses the overlooked element of narrative in Leonardo da Vinci’s comic and grotesque drawings, interpreting them as experiments that play with the aims and formal conventions of portraiture to capture both accurate likeness and moral character, and that expand the expressive purview of the Albertian istoria to treat all manner of human character, behavior, and action.² Only a handful of Leonardo’s surviving comic and grotesque drawings that date from the 1470s to the 1490s feature overt narrative content, yet I argue they together form a distinct corpus that merits consideration.³ Here I focus on just three examples in chronological succession: Phyllis (or Campaspe) Riding Aristotle of ca. 1475 (Figure 4.1), A Satire on Aged Lovers (Grotesque Couple) of ca. 1489–90 (Figure 4.2), and A Man Tricked by Gypsies (Five Grotesque Heads) of ca. 1493 (Figure 4.3). Such drawings should be understood on a number of levels: as vehicles for moral-philosophical reflection on aspects of human character and everyday life; as comic-serious parodies of social and pictorial conventions that disrupt patterns of thought and seeing prevalent in the elite society of late fifteenth-century Europe; and as pictorial deceptions—quick-fingered sleights of hand—akin to the magic tricks Leonardo performed for his friends and at the Sforza court.

Leonardo’s increasingly virtuosic and complex graphic experiments with visual humor and deception stand to further complicate our understanding of the purported truth-value and “realism” of Renaissance art, as scholars have claimed Caravaggio’s early genre paintings of cardsharps and gypsy fortune tellers did some one hundred years later.⁴ Leonardo’s A Man Tricked by Gypsies, in particular, is a sly and difficult picture presented as a multi-layered puzzle for the viewer to solve. Almost certainly related to a larger body of narrative graphic production that does not survive, the drawings should
prompt us as art historians to reconsider playfulness, humor, theatricality, and deception as claims for the status of the autonomous artwork around 1500, for they reveal the role of comic invention within the broader experimental development of painting at that pivotal moment. Alexander Nagel has productively reframed both Leonardo and Giorgione’s experimentation with the lability of subject matter and pictorial structure in the production of meaning as a series of complex inter-pictorial reconfigurations, which he appropriately terms as “controversions,” with particular regard to portraiture and religious painting.\(^5\) The present intervention recovers the idiom of Leonardo’s comic controversies—his deep pictorial play with decorum, genre, and the aims of humanist art to achieve a correspondence between moral truth and external appearance—and argues for his (and, indeed, the Renaissance artist’s more broadly) ambivalent status as a trickster, master magician, and revealer of “truths” potentially in line with the political and moral “realism” of authors of comedy like Niccolò Machiavelli and the social function of other entertainers at court, such as jesters and buffoons.\(^6\)

Following close on the heels of Northern graphic artists like the Housebook Master and alongside Israhel van Meckenem and painters like Hieronymous Bosch, Leonardo’s
comic *istorie* brought the grotesque comic imagination from the pages of manuscripts, sketchbooks, and drawing manuals to the center of pictorial subjecthood, although not so far as we know into the realm of independent painting, a move apparently left to those artists working in the early sixteenth century who were immediately influenced by Leonardo’s graphic inventions (most notably Lucas van Leyden, Quentin Massys, Albrecht Dürer, Lucas Cranach the Elder, and Bartolomeo Veneto).7 His interest in comic subject matter was conditioned by Northern prints and paintings that circulated in Florence from the 1460s onward, important examples of which were owned by his early supporter Lorenzo de’ Medici.8 The surviving narrative drawings are small—at 26.0 × 20.5 centimeters, *A Man Tricked by Gypsies* (traditionally known as *Five Grotesque Heads*) is the largest of the group at just under the size of a standard sheet of paper—and were almost all produced between 1485 and 1495 when Leonardo was in the service of Ludovico Sforza, Duke of Milan. Historically, *Five Grotesque Heads* has been interpreted as registering five types of madness or laughter, or in terms of Renaissance physiognomy and humoral theory, the stages of melancholy that devolve into madness.9 More recently, Michael Kwakkelstein and others have argued that Leonardo’s sketches of grotesque figures functioned as didactic illustrations for the never-completed treatise on painting or a related physiognomic drawing book he was working on at the time.10 Whether supporting these specific arguments or not, most Leonardo scholars concur that the Windsor drawings form a crucial part of Leonardo’s stated project in relation to his theoretical writings of the 1480s and 1490s to map the physiognomic expression of the motions and intentions of the mind, what he called the *moti mentali* and *passioni dell’anima*.

However, in such otherwise apt interpretations, the narrative engine—indeed, the ostensible subject—of the figural composition is ignored. Despite numerous art historical interpretations by scholars from Ernst Gombrich to Martin Kemp, Windsor Library
Figure 4.3. Leonardo da Vinci, *A Man Tricked by Gypsies (Five Grotesque Heads)* (recto), 26.0 × 20.5 cm, pen and brown ink on paper, ca. 1493, Royal Library, Windsor Castle. Royal Collection Trust/© Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2016.
curator Martin Clayton was the first to recognize the subject of *Five Grotesque Heads* as a man tricked by gypsies, a finding he published in a short but important article of 2002.\textsuperscript{11} This is not the result of a failure of perception on the part of art historians. Rather, it can be largely attributed to the fact that the drawing was cut down along its right side, where the truncated reaching gestures of the figures at the center and far right confirm the act of palm reading that originally transpired at the center right margin. But the difficulty of reading the composition is not only an accident of history; rather, visual trickery and lack of recognition form the real, core interest of the composition, as the written gloss on the *verso* would seem to confirm.\textsuperscript{12} Although the meaning remains cryptic, the inscription is a meditation on how good people—those who possess “compassion and kindness,” including Leonardo himself—are abused by villains who are bad if outwardly hostile but worse if they appear friendly. In a sort of reverse phrasing, Leonardo also evokes the truism of keeping your friends close but your enemies closer.\textsuperscript{13} Just who beyond the artist should benefit from this moral lesson on the duplicity of false friends and the deceptive nature of appearances illustrated (or, rather, exemplified) through comic narrative on the *recto* we cannot know. Given the lack of historical evidence, we can only speculate based on Leonardo’s other duties and activities at court as to whether such small but virtuosic drawings circulated beyond the confines of the workshop and his planned treatise on painting to be enjoyed as sources of informal entertainment—ingenious parlor games and stimuli for discussion and self-reflection at the Sforza court.\textsuperscript{14} Such a function would however be completely in line with what we know about Leonardo’s activities at court.

**Phyllis (or Campaspe) Riding Aristotle**

Because Leonardo’s few surviving comic narratives have not been examined in relation to each other, it will be useful to trace chronologically the arc of Leonardo’s comic *istorie* between ca. 1475 and 1493–94. The unique example to survive from Leonardo’s early career in Florence is the small pen drawing *Phyllis (or Campaspe) Riding Aristotle* (Figure 4.1).\textsuperscript{15} This early experiment with visual humor takes the form of a somewhat rapidly worked out transcription of an archetypal comic narrative, and shows no engagement with the grotesque distortion of human physiognomy. Although actually late medieval in origin, the subject of the famous philosopher humiliated by his inappropriate but untamable physical desire for a beautiful young woman (Phyllis or Campaspe in competing versions of the tale) possesses a classicizing pedigree. As Krystina Stermole has argued, for an elite late fifteenth-century Florentine audience, one aspect of the image’s humor rested on Aristotle’s presumed authorship of the *Economics*, the third book of which explores the proper relationship of wife to husband as one of almost total subservience and obedience.\textsuperscript{16} This, along with the classicizing architecture and costume Leonardo employs in the composition, is in keeping with the humanist strain of humor current in Florence at the time. It is especially indicative of Leonardo’s close connection
to Poggio Bracciolini, whose collection of facezie (brief comic tales or anecdotes), the Liber Facetiarum (1438–52), focuses with particular relish on the moral foibles of the clergy and scholars and is rendered in perfect Latin despite its “low” status as a literary form. In the drawing, Phyllis/Campaspe is figured as one of Leonardo’s young and idealized beauties with coiled hair, a precursor of the later Leda type. The cowed Aristotle retains a relatively noble countenance and idealized, muscular physiognomy despite his age, his physical and intellectual humiliation, and his reduction to a semi-bestial state. This mode of idealized figural representation transforms in Leonardo’s humorous art across the following decades as he adapts his pictorial language to better express the nature of his comic subjects—in the Aristotelian sense of the comic as pertaining to ugliness and deformity—through experimentation with physiognomy, including the animal characteristics of human faces as a reflection of their inner character.

The popular late medieval legend of Aristotle being ridden by his own consort Phyllis or, in another version, by his pupil Alexander the Great’s beautiful young mistress Campaspe, was a subject current in Florentine engraving, manuscript illumination, and material culture from at least around 1460. The subject, a comic-didactic allegory on the power of women, appears primarily in the context of courtship, marriage, and childbirth imagery such as illustrations for Petrarch’s Triumph of Love. In keeping with the pictorial tradition of the Albertian istoria, Leonardo’s rapid sketch elaborates the cursory figural groupings of the early engravings by providing a stage set for the pair, in this case a classicizing but contemporary urban domestic interior filled with anecdotal detail rather than the outdoor courtyard that had been the typical setting for the earlier medieval imagery. The two protagonists are now imagined in Aristotle’s private chamber, tightly framed at left by a raised alcove bed, with its obvious potential as a site for sexual encounter, or the “marriage bed,” and at right by Aristotle’s scriptorium and bench, his place of work and intellectual refuge, which is given a moralizing tone by the presence of an hourglass on the windowsill. This memento mori reminds the viewer that old age should be dedicated to quiet work and contemplation rather than wasted in fruitless pursuit of love and sensual pleasure. The setting, transferred from the outdoor gardens and courtyards of earlier engravings where anyone might observe Aristotle’s humiliation, turns the tale into an intimate domestic comedy. The drawing also complicates and enlivens the pose and action of the traditional figural grouping deployed in the twisting and reaching manner typical of Leonardo’s interests in the torsion and extension of bodies and their rotation in space. In comparison to the engravings of the subject he would have seen, his treatment both naturalizes and classicizes the appearance of the figures, thus updating the humor for a sophisticated contemporary audience steeped in humanist culture, men like Poggio Bracciolini and Lorenzo de’ Medici.

On the verso of the Hamburg sheet, Leonardo provides a handwritten glossary of the antithetical terms, identified at the top of the list as compagnie, “associations or companies,” that he associates with love and marriage, the ostensible signified of the
allegorical illustration. The four pairs, “lust/regret; love/jealousy; happiness/envy; fortune/suffering,” are followed by the single word *sospetto*, “suspicion” or “doubt.”

Rather than listing ideal virtues associated with the female and male partners involved in love and marriage, such as faithfulness and chastity (female), or knowledge and strength (male), Leonardo pairs the “real life” conditions experienced in conjugal practice, ones explored in countless Renaissance *novelle* and comedies about misdirected or unrequited desire, duplicity and mistaken identity, infidelity, cuckoldry, punishment, and resolution. The visual humor of reversal in which a young woman (in some versions of the tale a courtesan, in others Alexander’s concubine) rides her elderly conquest (lover or husband) and thrashes him with a whip like a horse should be immediate in the vivid absurdity of its animal metaphor, but Leonardo removes the bit from Aristotle’s mouth and reins from his rider (although she does raise a switch), diminishes his “horse-ness” from a physiognomic perspective, and uses the written gloss to suggest the moralizing aspect of humor’s lasting resonance and its function as a reflective device, a mirror of the human condition meant to clarify our understanding of ourselves in the ambit of “private affections,” as Niccolò Machiavelli argued in his definition of comedy drawn from late antique sources.

This function of the subject, as a symbol for the ambivalent and uneasy state of conjugal union, echoes the comic-didactic commentary on love and marriage in earlier Florentine imagery, perhaps most clearly laid out in one of the so-called Otto prints, a series of Florentine engravings made in the 1460s and 1470s that scholars have hypothesized, based on their format, diameter, iconography, and ornament patterns, were originally employed as models for the decoration of the lids to round or oblong courtship, betrothal, and marriage boxes (*schatole* or *forzerini*) designed for women’s household use. A circular engraving formerly associated with the workshop of the Florentine goldsmith Baccio Baldini shows Phyllis riding Aristotle in a central roundel set apart by a linear border from a surrounding scene of aristocratic courtship (Figure 4.4).
In the larger-scale surrounding scene, a young man at right about to be struck by the arrow of a blindfolded Cupid doffs his hat for the young woman standing across from him, who wears an elaborate garland on her head (another token of favor given by her suitor) and holds the scroll unfurling from it, which is inscribed “FE/DE” (faith). Their eyes lock in a taut gaze that skims the top of the central roundel without penetrating its separated semantic field. Below, a reclining nude earth mother with swollen belly, a symbol and talisman of fertility familiar from the inner lids of painted cassoni (marriage chests), cavorts with her two small children in a leafy landscape denoting natural increase. Several of Leonardo’s positive and negative terms are at play here already, but the question remains whether Leonardo’s comic gloss on the subject of love and marriage was devised for his personal amusement, and that of his friends and workshop associates, or whether it served as a model for a more finished composition intended to delight the same type of aristocratic patrons and consumers as the Otto prints.

*A Satire of Aged Lovers*

Leonardo again approached the subject of aristocratic courtship some ten to fifteen years later in a drawing, *A Satire of Aged Lovers*, commonly referred to simply as a *Grotesque Couple* (Figure 4.2). By this point in his career, Leonardo had left Florence for the court of Ludovico Sforza in Milan, and his approach had shifted from the classicizing or “naturalizing” of the comic tale to the physiognomic distortion and parodic inversion of its protagonists. In this drawing, Leonardo substitutes a decrepit pair of grotesque lovers for the traditional late medieval chivalric image of a young couple en promenade, the noble knight and his lady familiar from *Garden of Love* imagery. The scene is now a cropped and close-up character study focused on the physiognomic attributes of the pair and their intimate dialogic exchange. A grimacing old man turns to address his lover and offer her a flower, the schematic circular bloom of which is legible just above the line of his shoulder. Their fingers begin to interlace. In her other hand, the old woman, disfigured by a smashed nose, tooth loss, and dramatic underbite, delicately raises her voluminous skirt to signify perambulation. The elaborate and anachronistic costuming parodies the pretention of Burgundian fashions that had been very much in vogue among young elites in Florence and the North Italian courts during the mid fifteenth century.

As Martin Clayton has pointed out, “the drawing is a rather cruel satire on the vanity and ridiculousness of the elderly behaving like young lovers.” The aged pair mimic the ritualized courting behavior of young, aristocratic couples walking elegantly arm in arm found in earlier Northern European and Italian courtly imagery of lovers associated with commissions for betrothal and marriage, as extracted from scenes of the *Garden of Love* in tapestries, boxes, and other items of domestic furniture. More pointedly, Leonardo has translated the subject of *Death and the Lovers* from the same corpus of secular imagery he drew on for *Phyllis (or Campaspe) Riding Aristotle*. A Florentine engraving of ca. 1465–70
by Baccio Baldini or his workshop (related to the Otto prints but rectangular in format) provides a general idea of the type of source material Leonardo drew on for his grotesque metamorphosis from youth to decrepitude (Figure 4.5). The engraving features an extravagantly costumed pair of young lovers who are warned by Death as he approaches with his wooden cart (a stretcher for transporting corpses): “Neither your fine honor and pomp, nor state nor riches nor knowledge will avail against my harsh will which breaks every pleasure in you.”

As a pictorial counterpoint of the vanitas imagery related to young love, beauty, and pleasure, Leonardo’s darkly comic invention is brilliant. Instead of the skeletal specter of Death approaching from behind, having crashed through a masonry wall with his wooden stretcher to threaten the oblivious young couple as they are serenaded by a musician, in Leonardo’s drawing Death is in a very real and visceral sense already present within the bodies of the paired lovers, corrupting their flesh and rendering their planned union futile, absurd. It is worth remembering that the endgame of youthful courtship—and the range of imagery and objects associated with it, even the most playful and humorous—was socially sanctioned marriage, the adoption of an adult moral code of behavior, and the production of legitimate offspring. By having Death inhabit the bodies of the lovers, which become abject through his virtuosic agency, Leonardo unleashes the moralizing intent of the image type to fully subsume the comforting visual celebration of sensual and material delights still available in the earlier engraving and related imagery.

Through this visual mode, Leonardo’s A Satire on Aged Lovers also parodies traditional cultural norms, in this case the ways in which Florentine, Milanese, and other Italian elites imagined and figured themselves as idealized avatars of a fantasy court culture, by appropriating French language and dress and enacting a series of ritualized courtly manners and behaviors in their daily lives. The drawing satirizes a saturated domestic visual culture associated with elaborate self-fashioning and highly orchestrated romance, of which much does not survive, although the Otto prints provide one rich if under-examined source of information. In one sense, Leonardo’s flirting and courting old couples are a mockery, a comic perversion of such amatory imagery, for example the ubiquitous Garden of Love seen in another of the Otto prints, which highlights the sensual pleasures of young love: fooling around, eating, drinking, gaming, making music, and reciting poetry within the protective walls of an enclosed garden of delights (Figure 4.6). As mentioned, such engravings were most likely produced as workshop models to be used in ornamenting the exterior (and possibly interior) lids of round boxes intended for women’s domestic use, including the storage of precious “vanities” and other personal items such as cosmetics, jewelry, love letters, and sewing supplies.

We generally assume that young men gave such relatively inexpensive and perishable objects—crafted of painted and gilded wood or tooled leather and decorated with gesso pastiglia (pastework) or papier-mâché—to favored young women as love tokens at dances and jousts, and more formally as part of courtship and betrothal rituals. Few such
Figure 4.5. Baccio Baldini (or workshop), *Death and the Lovers (Allegory of Love and Death)*, 25.4 × 20.4 cm, engraving, ca. 1465–70, British Museum, London. Courtesy © Trustees of the British Museum.
Figure 4.6. Baccio Baldini (or workshop), *Garden of Love*, 19 cm diameter, engraving (Otto print), ca. 1465–80, Kupferstichkabinett, Berlin.
perishable objects survive, although an early fifteenth-century Tuscan marriage box in the Museum of Fine Arts Boston bears the same circular format and segmented decorative border as the Florentine Otto prints, if not their more elaborate narrative imagery (Figure 4.7). As Martin Clayton has observed, Leonardo also satirizes other genres associated with the aristocratic culture of love and gift giving such as the paired profile portrait, while Martin Kemp has pointed to his burlesque mockery of Petrarchan love poetry. Leonardo’s small-scale drawn pairs of grotesque old men and women facing each other would seem to parody the imagery of contemporary pendants and other personal accessories that feature generic young couples en buste in intimate proximity. This game of mimicry and subversion is not one Leonardo invented, but rather one he learned from earlier Northern imagery collected by the Medici (and likely other Florentine elites) in the 1460s and 1470s, which was also enacted in several of the Otto prints. It is one he

Figure 4.7. Tuscan marriage box, 18 × 27.5 cm, beech with tempera and gilded decoration over a gesso ground, ca. 1400–25, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston. Photograph © 2017, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston.
plundered more profoundly in terms of its graphic and physiognomic possibilities from early in his career until at least the mid 1490s. 34

* A Satire on Aged Lovers participates in an emerging tradition of painting and graphic media that assert the power of art by forcing the viewer to marvel at tight-focused vignettes of violence, ugliness, depravity, and deception as part of their moral education and pleasure in learning as advocated by Aristotle’s *Poetics* (in the quote included at the start of this essay). 35 Nowhere is this demand on the viewer more cogently expressed than in an inscription on the illusionistic frame of a slightly later Leonardoesque print, a close early copy of *A Grotesque Seduction* by Agostino Veneziano of ca. 1516–30 (Figure 4.8). 36

![Figure 4.8. Copy after Agostino Veneziano, *A Grotesque Seduction*, 15.2 × 12.1 cm, engraving, ca. 1516–30, British Museum, London. Courtesy © Trustees of the British Museum.](image-url)
The engraving shows a bad moral example of greed, vanity, and lasciviousness through a narrative involving three figures derived from Leonardo's vocabulary of grotesque types: a lecherous man paying a prototypically ugly woman (a whore or someone who will become one if she accepts the proffered bag of coins) for her favors in the presence of her highly masculinized old bawd, who confronts the viewer with a leering stare. The inscription above warns the viewer that it is necessary to witness and recognize sinfulness and vice: “Who does not want to see this should pluck out their eyes.” This type of suggestive language ties even more closely to the visuality of Leonardo’s slightly later drawing of *A Man Tricked by Gypsies*, as will be examined below.

What we do not know is if Leonardo also made this type of imagery to share with his courtly patrons, Lorenzo de’ Medici and his circle in his early Florentine career, or in the case of *A Satire on Aged Lovers* and similar imagery of the 1480s and 1490s, with the Milanese Duke Ludovico Sforza and members of his court. Did the ideas isolated in such small, quick sketches potentially designated for Leonardo’s planned art treatise circulate only in the environment of the artist’s workshop? Based on the Medici property inventories of the 1480s and 1490s and other documented examples of comic prints and paintings hanging on the walls of Renaissance palaces and villas, I am inclined to argue for the circulation of such drawings not just as fodder for further invention among artists (a relatively closed network), but as intimate conversation pieces passed informally by hand in urban palaces and at court, as sources of didactic amusement across overlapping networks of artists, patrons, and their social circles. As Monica Azzolini has hypothesized, in the late 1490s Leonardo may have engaged in defending the status of painting as a superior art by disputing the *paragone* (specifically the comparison of painting to poetry) as a courtly performance, a form of self-promotion and entertainment for his patron Ludovico Sforza and his courtiers. Imagine the potential utility of Leonardo’s graphic inventions—as evidence for the power of the artist’s *invenzione* and *fantasia*, and their basis in *scientia*—in such a context.

**Delusion and Deception**

By around 1493, when Leonardo drew the composition of *A Man Tricked by Gypsies*, or *Five Grotesque Heads* (Figure 4.3), his interest had clearly shifted from the idea of devising a comic analogue for the Albertian *istoria*, with its clearly directed narrative cues and description of all the principal compositional elements including a setting, to the cropped, close-up, and scene-less character study similar in its pictorial aims to portraiture. In this type of study—based on the ancient topos that outward appearance reflects inner character—Leonardo seeks to capture the *moti mentali*, emotions or motions of mind, as registered in the active, highly articulated physiognomy of five typologically differentiated faces, which he referred to as *visi mostruosi*. This much has been noted many times, but what has not been emphasized is the persistent presence of a comic narrative
thread, no matter how attenuated it is in its visual articulation. As mentioned, Martin Clayton first identified the subject of the drawing as a scene of fortune telling in which the central figure, a goitrous old man in right profile crowned with oak leaves—the corona civica, the second-highest ceremonial honor an ancient Roman citizen could receive—is tricked and robbed by a pair of highly masculinized female gypsies to his left and right.

Before the drawing was cut down along the length of its right side, one would have seen the right hand of the central figure, who reaches out to his right, and that of the Simian-lipped gypsy positioned on an acute right angle before him, where they touched (or perhaps almost touched) near the right edge of the paper.41 This narrative locus at the right edge of the composition revealed one of the primary actions of the narrative: either the act of palm reading itself or acceptance of payment for an impending palm reading, while a second revelation occurs at another narrative locus at the bottom center (and front) of the composition. Here the second old crone in the tightly wrapped and fringed headscarf—positioned at left directly opposite her partner—reaches surreptitiously around the back and under the right sleeve of the unsuspecting victim to steal his purse, which he wears around the waist. Although Clayton does not much discuss them, in such a reading the two male figures at the upper left and right become witnesses, commentators, and potential accomplices to the deception and crime, as does the viewer. The obscene, full-throated, screaming laughter of the character at upper left becomes the menacing, even deafening soundtrack for the scene; this is a dark and serious humor to be sure.

The composition is set up as a classic Florentine beffa, or mockery, the type of popular comic narrative in which one character (or set of characters) gets the upper hand over another through means of deception, usually gaining some form of financial or sexual advantage in the outcome.42 As Richard Andrews notes, the typical beffa “sets up a simple opposition of a winning trickster against a losing sucker (the fesso or idiot), and it is assumed that the reader or spectator is going to participate vicariously on the side of the winner.”43 According to Boccaccio, Vasari, and others, some of the most famous Florentine practitioners of beffe were artists and artisans, as in the famous tale of Grasso Legnaiuolo (The Fat Woodcarver) by Antonio Manetti, in which the sculptor-architect Filippo Brunelleschi is the trickster who pulls off an elaborate and illusionistic practical joke on a gullible colleague.44 As Johan Huizinga reminds us, the term illusion itself derives from inlusio, inludere (literally “in-play”).45

With regard to Leonardo’s composition, however, the grotesque exaggeration of age and distortion of physiognomy with regard to gender and even species makes it all too clear that we are not meant to sympathize with the female tricksters, nor necessarily with the deceived man; in fact with none of the physically deformed and hyperbolically ugly characters at all. Further, Leonardo makes it difficult to “read” the narrative in the first place. As mentioned, the narrative engine of Leonardo’s composition—where the outstretched palm of the old man at center met the tricking fingers of the gypsy palm reader standing directly before him—was excised when the drawing was cut down along its right
side, leaving only the stub of the gypsy’s right hand where it emerges from her tightly wrapped blanket-mantle. The drawing’s connective tissue—the gestures enacted between the principal figures—is rapidly traced in spidery and almost illegible lines, as if incidental to the real physiognomic focus of the drawing on the revelatory description of character. This is particularly the case with the figure of the cackling, toothless old gypsy at left with the fringed veil where she reaches with a ghostlike right arm behind the old man’s back and around his waist under his sleeve to steal his purse. Of course, one could argue that the drawing is unfinished, but Leonardo has already lavished meticulous, reiterative attention on the heads. Further, the sense of a narrative unfolding in and across space, as, for example, in *Phyllis (or Campaspe) Riding Aristotle*, becomes compressed into a tight circular composition against a blank ground, producing an overlapping network of carefully angled, offset poses, curving counter-clockwise circular movement, and misaligned gazes that fire off unreturned in five different directions: up, down, right, left, forward. The resulting effect is of a tense almost “claustrophobic menace,” to borrow Clayton’s phrase, heightened by the extremely contrasted physiognomies and facial expressions, but also one of almost total disjunction. The old female gypsy at right (who should be staring intently at the old man’s palm) instead looks across to her accomplice (who fails to meet her gaze) in order to reveal their complicity to the viewer by directing the viewer’s gaze.

Martin Kemp has referred to the central figure of the goitrous, bald old man as a “shop-soiled and bemused Caesar with his crown of oak leaves.” His profile is that of the virile but exaggerated “nutcracker” type of choleric old man, so called because of the exaggerated profile with its excessive protrusions and recesses associated with old age and a lifetime of aggressive expressions, which is familiar from many of Leonardo’s grotesque drawings. I would also tentatively relate this figure to the character type of the ancient worthy (Caesar, great hero, poet, or philosopher) tricked and humiliated by the powers of women. In such a reading, the humor runs in the same vein as Leonardo’s earlier take on the late medieval comic conceit of Aristotle ridden by Phyllis, and related imagery of Virgil hanging in a basket below the window of the Emperor Augustus’s daughter or Samson shorn by Delilah, all variations on the popular theme of the power of women to make fools of even the wisest and strongest of men. As a character type, he becomes the vain and pompous older man gratified by his superior social, intellectual, and political status, the type of figure who in ancient satire was mocked for “resting on his laurels.”

The copious wreath of oak leaves around his head is the *corona civica*, a rare reward presented to a Roman soldier who preserved the life of another soldier in battle in an act of special bravery and valor, and also given to several emperors starting with Augustus Caesar. In the case of Cicero, it was conferred because he detected and punished a major conspiracy during his consulship. According to Pliny the Elder’s *Historia Naturalis*, which Leonardo owned and used frequently as a reference in his work, the civic crown was made of leaves from the *quercus* genus of oak, just as Leonardo’s wreath is in *A Man Tricked by Gypsies*. The subject or target of Leonardo’s caricature is thus obviously classicizing
in its intent, but what did he know about the ancient tradition of visual satire? There are a few descriptions of painted caricature in Pliny, but my point is not to search the classical sources for Leonardo’s potential impetus for imitation because imitation, even if one potential starting point, does not seem to be what this small sketch is really about.

I would instead argue that the composition ridicules ancient learning and intellectual pretension in a broader sense. Clayton has looked to contemporary Milanese social history for Leonardo’s impetus in choosing the subject of deceitful gypsies, noting that in 1493, the year in which Leonardo likely made the drawing, gypsies were expelled from the Duchy of Milan due to their growing numbers and anti-social activities as “bandits, ruffians, and charlatans.”\(^\text{48}\) Leonardo himself professed not to believe in the “chimere” (chimeras) of “false physiognomy and chiromancy,” which he briefly discussed together in his writings around 1504. While he held that “the signs of the face display in part the nature of men, their vices and their temperaments,” he did not believe in a fixed system of facial signs that could be read in a precise way to reveal character, or in the similar practice of palm reading.\(^\text{49}\) However, as Clayton notes, Leonardo did own several books on the subject of palm reading entitled *De chiromantia,* and dedicated a small amount of his household budget “per dire la fortuna” (for fortune telling).\(^\text{50}\) He also famously performed magic tricks, and while they were living together in the late 1490s, Leonardo’s close friend and collaborator, the Franciscan monk and mathematician Luca Pacioli, penned a treatise on the mathematical and magic arts. Titled *De viribus quantitatis* (On The Power of Numbers), it includes card tricks, number puzzles, and language and science games, like how to make an egg walk or wash your hands in molten lead.\(^\text{51}\) In the text, Pacioli emphasizes to his erudite readers the scientific knowledge exemplified in each trick but also its performative marvel, stating repeatedly that: “to the uneducated ... it will appear to be a miracle.”\(^\text{52}\) Although created prior to Pacioli’s arrival in Milan, Leonardo’s drawing of fortune telling suggests a correlated fascination with the vivid illusionism of performance and the participation of discerning and privileged viewers in knowledge of how tricks are performed.\(^\text{53}\) Alongside the types of tricks, puzzles, and enigmas compiled by Pacioli, Leonardo’s clever drawings could plausibly have participated in the type of courtly leisure culture that involved such stimulating “solazzi et piaceri recreativi” (recreative pastimes and pleasures).\(^\text{54}\)

The obscure inscription on the *verso* of Leonardo’s drawing complicates and personalizes matters; it would seem to indicate that the gypsies function symbolically for the potentially false nature of any person one might let close. The final paragraphs offer a lament addressing defects of character and the abuse of kind and compassionate people, whom Leonardo identifies with himself, by others who are duplicitous in their appearance and behavior.\(^\text{55}\) As Clayton rightly points out, the passage would seem to relate to a less obscure note from the *Codex Atlanticus* of a decade later: “A wretched person will be flattered, and the flatterers are always the deceivers, robbers and murderers of the wretched person.”\(^\text{56}\) Thus, the ostensibly comic subject was possibly intended to trigger,
indeed was probably inspired by, a more serious contemplation of moral character, in this case a reflection on self-knowledge and self-deception. Thus, as Clayton argues following from Gombrich, there may be some truth in the speculation that the wretched “central figure is at some level a likeness of Leonardo.”

Along this line of Leonardo’s potential self-identification with the duped figure, I would also place the concept of the drawing in a satiric category based on classical precedent given the classicizing garb and subject matter. A potential pedigree for Leonardo’s subject of an oak-crowned poet-philosopher or wise “Caesar” tricked by gypsies can be found in the corpus of Roman invective literature against old women. Leonardo’s description of how old women should be depicted in painting, written around 1492, strongly suggests his knowledge of such a classical stereotype. “Old women,” he writes, “should be represented as shrewlike and eager, with irascible movements in the manner of the infernal furies,” a misogynistic description clearly not based on the firsthand observation of real women. As Karen Cokayne has noted, the writing of Tibullus, Propertius, Horace, Ovid, Apuleius, and Petronius satirizes old and socially marginalized women who practice fortune telling (i.e. non-religious palm reading) and love magic as “hag-faced and evil” witches “of a fearsome and wild physique, which was symbolic of their malicious and chaotic nature.” In lived reality—as emphasized in the writings of Cicero and Seneca—the Roman educated classes were meant to know better than to believe in magic and generally viewed such women as charlatans. Thus, for a stoic poet-philosopher or “Caesar” to be duped by such a pair of hideous and cackling crones must reveal a lack of moral intelligence, portrayed visually in Leonardo’s drawing as a failure of attention and perception, the same sort of visual duplicity suggested by the inscription. Staring resolutely forward into space, the old man at the center of the composition fails entirely to register the presence of the other figures. He does not even respond to the physical sensation of the old crone’s fingers as they poise to touch or perhaps already trace the lines of his palm (in the removed portion of the composition). Leonardo does not offer the old man to our gaze as a figure of sympathy then, but rather as a cautionary tale about attention and good judgment in the type of people you allow close to you.

Of course our attention to the picture comes from the ideal frontal position of the omniscient viewer and is rewarded by full knowledge of the gypsies’ character through almost total revelation of their actions (only the purse is hidden beneath the man’s sleeve) and detailed description of their grotesque, animalistic appearance. As viewers we are privileged to be in on the trick because the action of theft occurs at the front and center of the composition at the point closest to our subtle da sotto in su vantage point. Yet, as mentioned, we still have to work to see what is going on. The visual humor, that what the subject is most oblivious to (and what no other figure in the composition can see) is made the most central feature of the composition, is provided by Leonardo as a commentary on the nature of art as a revealer of ugly truth versus the shifting, unreliable nature of appearances in reality.
Conclusion

Such rapidly but intensively sketched glimpses of Leonardo’s interest in visual humor were to be reinforced by his planned Treatise on Painting, for which he intended a book on the moti mentali that was to include his descriptions of how to paint various forms of laughter and types of madness accompanied by small-scale physiognomic drawings and character studies of heads and full figures. Leonardo’s grotesque drawings of the 1480s and 1490s, made when he was at work on the treatise, in turn laid the fertile ground for an independent genre of comic painting pursued by Leonardo’s followers in Milan and elsewhere in Europe, while the pictorial topos of fortune telling was put to great use in the illusionistic cabinet paintings of Caravaggio and his followers. But somehow none of these playful, comic pictures and pleasant painted deceits holds the same power as Leonardo’s original sketches to arrest and unsettle the viewer (despite what Caravaggio’s early critics claimed). This is in part because Leonardo’s idiom involves an active, open-ended inventive power, an essentially graphic force already well discussed in relation to his drawings of natural disasters and deluges. In his comic narratives it is a power like ancient graffiti to interrupt, deface, and subvert. In other words, the very “real” power of such sketches lies in the fact that they were never made into paintings.

NOTES

1 This is the translation of the famous passage from Aristotle, Poetics, 1448b, given in Eco, On Ugliness, 33.

2 For critical analysis of the mimetic and revelatory aims of Renaissance portraiture most relevant to Leonardo’s grotesque character studies, see Loh, “Renaissance Faciality,” and Zöllner, “The ‘Motions of the Mind’ in Renaissance Portraits.” For close examination of the Albertian istoria as a conceptual term, see Grafton, “Historia and Istoria.”

3 Copies survive of further examples, such as Leonardo’s influential drawing of an Unequal Couple, known through a drawn copy by Jacob Hoefnagel of 1620 now in the Albertina, and an etching by Wenceslaus Hollar from 1646. These examples, along with Northern paintings related to Leonardo’s lost composition(s), have been collected in a useful handlist by Stewart, Unequal Lovers. Leonardo’s painted profile busts of contrasting character types facing each other (e.g. several of grotesque older men and women) also strongly imply dialogic narrative. One example from the Royal Collection (RCIN 912490) shows a grotesque old woman chucking the chin (an erotic gesture) of a “Nutcracker-type” old man.

4 See, most recently, Feigenbaum, “Perfectly True, Perfectly False.”

5 Nagel, The Controversy of Renaissance Art. D’Elia, “Niccolò Liburnio on the Boundaries of Portraiture,” has also explored the blurred boundaries of genre and the ambiguous role of art as evidence in Venetian painting of the early sixteenth century.

6 On the artist as performer in the court context, see Welch, “Painting as Performance.” On Leonardo’s entertainment activities at the Sforza court, see Mazzocchi Doglio, Leonardo e gli spettacoli and Angiolillo, Leonardo. In this vein, we should, of course, also remember Giorgio Vasari’s
famous descriptions of the hybrid half-living, half-crafted animal marvels Leonardo invented to
frighten and amuse his friends and patrons throughout his career. According to Vasari, Leo-
ardo “fece infinite di queste pazzie,” referring to his spectacular and hybrid creations, such as the
“dragon” fashioned from a real lizard to which he fastened wings laced with quicksilver, horns,
eyes, and a beard. Vasari, Le vite, vol. 4, 46.

7 Meijer has explored Leonardo’s influence on artists working in both Northern Italy and in
Northern Europe in broad terms: see “Esempi del comico figurativo,” “From Leonardo to Bruegel,”
and “L’arte non deve schernire.”

8 On the circulation of Northern paintings and prints in Florence, see, most recently, Meijer
et al., Firenze e gli antichi Paesi Bassi, 1430–1530, and on the Medici collection in particular, Nut-
tall, From Flanders to Florence.

9 In his classic study, Gombrich, “Leonardo da Vinci’s Method of Analysis and Permutation,”
reviews earlier iterations of these arguments before offering his own, more autobiographical inter-
pretation. Kemp, in Leonardo da Vinci, provides a succinct overview of the drawing in relation to
Renaissance physiognomy and humoral theory and to Leonardo’s interest in them. And Bambach
in Bambach et al., Leonardo da Vinci, Master Draughtsman, cat. 69–75 and 451–65, discusses the
small-scale individual profiles of visi monstruosi (grotesque faces), not the more complex multi-
figured compositions, with regard to the projected treatise on painting.

10 See Kwakkelstein, Leonardo da Vinci as a Physiognomist, and “The Lost Book on ‘Moti
Mentali.’”

11 Clayton, “Leonardo’s ‘Gypsies.’”


13 For Clayton’s commentary on the relevant paragraphs of the inscription, see “Leonardo’s
‘Gypsies,’” 29.

14 In his important overview of comic art in the Renaissance, Meijer, “From Leonardo to
Bruegel,” 405, first suggested that the drawings of grotesque heads, beyond a function as physi-
ognomic studies, may have served the purpose of entertaining Leonardo’s friends, colleagues, and
patrons, specifically those at the Milanese court in the 1480s and 1490s. Likewise, Ede, Leonardo
da Vinci, cat. 74, 265, hypothesizes that the grotesque drawings “were very likely shown to people,
perhaps at court, as a source of serious and amusing entertainment, often satirizing or mocking
well-known types.”

15 On the drawing and its dating, see most recently Bambach in Bambach et al., Leonardo da
Vinci, Master Draughtsman, cat. 25, 312–13, and also Brown, Leonardo da Vinci, 96–97. On the
medieval origins of the tale and its representation in art, see Smith, The Power of Women.

16 Aristotle, Economics, book 3, section 1. The text is now attributed to Aristotle or one of
his students or successors. See The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation,
implications of Aristotle’s philosophy and Leonardo Bruni’s translations of the Economics on the
prevalent imagery of the philosopher’s humiliation in fifteenth-century Florence.

17 Bracciolini, Facezie. For an in-depth consideration of Leonardo’s literary interests and their
effect on his artistic production, see Kemp, “Leonardo da Vinci.” Here Kemp briefly discusses
Leonardo’s own facezie, the influence of Bracciolini, and the grotesque figures.

18 This can be partially attributed to the fact that Aristotle’s origins as a figural type can be
traced to a crawling soldier from Verrocchio’s terracotta relief of The Resurrection in the Medici
villa at Careggi which dates to the 1470s, as both Brown and Bambach have pointed out. See Brown, *Leonardo da Vinci*, 96–97 and Bambach in Bambach et al., *Leonardo da Vinci, Master Draughtsman*, cat. 312.

19 “Comedy, as we have seen, is a representation of inferior people, not indeed in the full sense of the word bad, but the laughable is a species of the base or ugly. It consists in some blunder or ugliness that does not cause pain or disaster, an obvious example being the comic mask which is ugly and distorted but not painful.” Aristotle, *Poetics*, 1449a, in Fyfe, *Aristotle*, vol. 23, 45.


21 Co[m]pagnie / volupta · dispiacere / amore · gielosia / felicita · [n]vidia / fortuna · penjte[n]za / sospetto. See the entry in Bambach et al., *Leonardo da Vinci, Master Draftsman*, cat. 312–14, for a reproduction of the *verso*, although Bambach refers to the list without noting the paired nature of the four sets of terms. Kemp, “Leonardo da Vinci,” 201, rightly discusses the pairs as examples of antithesis and argues that the pairing “expresses the idea that a virtue is born in the inevitable company of its consequent vice.”

22 Niccolò Machiavelli, author of *La Mandragola* (1518), among other comedies, claims that “the point of a comedy” is to “propose a mirror of a private life … that concerns … the life of a person not in their public functions but in the ambit of their private affections.” He based his description on the famous definition of Donatus: *imitatio vitae, speculum consuetudinis, imago veritatis* (imitation of life, a mirror of custom, and an image of truth). See Baratto, *La commedia del Cinquecento*, 72–73.

23 On the Otto prints, see Zucker, *Early Italian Masters (The Illustrated Bartsch)*, 127–57. For the potential connection of the prints to decorated boxes, see Randolph, *Touching Objects*, 123–37; Musacchio, *Art, Marriage, & Family*, 131; Randolph, *Engaging Symbols*, 223–28; and Nuttall in Meijer et al., *Firenze e gli antichi Paesi Bassi*, cat. nos. 16–19, 126–31. It is also possible that such engravings were hand-colored and pasted directly to the exterior and interior lids of boxes, although we have no historical evidence for this practice. Or, as Musacchio suggests, the engravings could have functioned as independent artworks that merely reflect the box form and ornament.

24 On this engraving, which survives in a unique later impression from the reworked plate, see Zucker, *Early Italian Masters (The Illustrated Bartsch)*, 145. The engraving was sold at Christie’s in 2009 to an undisclosed buyer (Sale 7781, Old Master Prints). Zucker attributes the engraving to a Florentine workshop other than Baldini’s based on technical grounds. Such early Florentine engravings were likely adapted from illustrated manuscripts and domestic luxury objects.

25 Zucker, *Early Italian Masters (The Illustrated Bartsch)*, 145.


28 Death speaks to the couple via a large scroll at the upper right of the composition: NONVOSTRE LEGIADRIE HONORE OPO[PE]/ NESTATO NERICHEZA NESA-PERE/ NONGIOVA CHONTRTO ALMIO ASPRO VOLERE/ SIPVO CHENVVOI OGNI DILETTO ROMPE. Janson, “A ‘Memento Mori’ Among Early Italian Prints.” See also Zucker, *Early Italian Masters (The Illustrated Bartsch)*, 249–50.

29 This Otto print is preserved in the Kupferstichkabinett, Staatliche Museen zu Berlin. See Zucker, *Early Italian Masters (The Illustrated Bartsch)*, 143.
On Florentine courtship, betrothal, and marriage boxes (*schatole* or *forzerini*), which were apparently often lined with fabric and scented, see Randolph, *Touching Objects*, 103–37; Musacchio, *Art, Marriage, & Family*, 127–35; and her catalogue entries in Bayer, *Art and Love*, cat. 38a–b, 107–8. The Florentine boxes relate closely to contemporary German wooden *Spanischachteln* (e.g. GNM, inv. HG331) and thus probably to a broader international (one presumes also Burgundian and Netherlandish) tradition, which would in turn help to explain the type of Northern courtly imagery found in the Florentine Otto prints.

This typical circular box of ca. 1400–1425 is formed of bent wood and entirely painted with hunting scenes and two coats of arms in the center of the cover, while the interior is painted red. The diameter of its lid compares closely to that of the Otto prints.

In referring to Leonardo’s drawing of facing profiles—a grotesque old woman chucking the chin of a “Caesar”-type man (RCIN 912490)—Clayton, *The Divine and the Grotesque*, cat. 27, 79, calls the aged pair “a parody of the opposed profiles of married couples that was one of the standard modes of fifteenth-century portraiture.” On Leonardo’s mocking of Petrarchan tropes and appreciation of burlesque poetry, see Kemp, “Science and the Poetic Impulse,” 203–5.

33 See, for example, the silver gilt pendants and girdle ends discussed by Musacchio in Bayer, *Art and Love*, cat. nos. 35a–b, 36b, 103–6.

On the grotesque and humorous Otto prints, see Nuttall’s catalogue entry for an engraving depicting a grotesque lutenist, *Firenze e gli antiche Paesi Bassi*, cat. 16, 126. I am currently preparing a broader project on Leonardo’s early comic influences and the visual culture of Florentine carnival in the 1460s and 1470s.

Other than Leonardo, the most important near-contemporary examples are by Hieronymous Bosch and his workshop and include images of surgery, for example *The Extraction of the Stone of Folly* (ca. 1490, Museo Nacional del Prado); tooth extraction, for example the central panel of *The Haywain Triptych* (ca. 1516, Museo Nacional del Prado); and magic tricks, for example *The Conjurer* (ca. 1502, Musée Municipal, St.-Germain-en-Laye). Lucas van Leyden’s extraction of the tooth-pulling scene for an independent engraving of 1521 exemplifies the same phenomenon of close focus and ambivalence as Leonardo’s grotesque narratives. In Bosch’s *oeuvre*, the scenes allegorize vice: the surgeon/tooth puller/conjurer is a charlatan and a swindler while his victims are unwitting fools. These are exactly the terms of Leonardo’s *A Man Tricked by Gypsies* (Figure 4.3).

The engraving (BM 1872,0113.380) reproduces Agostino Veneziano’s print of 1516 (BM 1854,0614.393; BM 1854,0513.43), both inscribed top right ‘1516 AV’. The copy features an illegible monogram in the place of Agostino’s. Veneziano’s print, which is either adapted from a composition by Leonardo or an early narrative composite of his character types, does not feature the inscription in the illusionistic frame. The treatment of the subject relies on Leonardo’s lost *Unequal Couples* (known only in copies), while the types of the old woman and fool repeat in varying iterations throughout the grotesque repertoire of Leonardo and Francesco Melzi, as well as in the dependent prints of *Unequal Couples* (ca. 1510–15) by Giovanni Antonio di Brescia (formerly known as Zoan Andrea).

The inscription reads: “Chi non ci vol veder si cavi gli occhi.”

As Luke Syson and others have pointed out, Leonardo’s workshop during the 1490s was small and the practice there was informal, collaborative (although, of course, still hierarchical), and limited to only a few pupils and assistants. See Syson, “The Madonna Litta,” 212–15.
Azzolini, “Anatomy of a Dispute,” Syson, “The Rewards of Service,” 29, likewise claims that Leonardo’s writings on the paragone and treatise on “painting and human movements” “emerged from the intellectual debates ... staged at court—argument enjoyed as a form of elite entertainment.”


This occurred at an early date since most of the drawn and engraved copies do not show the full narrative. On the drawn copies, see Kwakkelstein, “The Lost Book on ‘Moti Mentali,’” 64.

In a similar vein, Kemp, “Science and the Poetic Impulse,” 203–5, has discussed Leonardo’s grotesques in relation to burlesque verse and frames the narrative of drawings like *A Man Tricked by Gypsies*, which he refers to simply as “five characters,” as belonging to the world of *facezie* and novelle.


For an overview of Italian artists’ sense of humor and practical jokes, see the classic study by Barolsky, *Infinite Jest*, 10–17.


See, for example, the famous graffito in the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii, a profile caricature of a laurel-crowned old man identified as Rufus (“Rufus est”). Milnor, *Graffiti and the Literary Landscape*, discusses the literary context for such imagery. On Roman satiric visual culture more broadly, see Clarke, *Looking at Laughter*.


He owned one text on chiromancy by the early 1490s and two by the following decade. In a 1505 list of expenses, he lists six soldi as set aside for fortune telling. See Clayton, “Leonardo’s ‘Gypsies,’” 29.

Written between 1496 and 1508, this manuscript (Cod. 250, Biblioteca Universitaria di Bologna) is a collection of “ludi matematici” (mathematical games and enigmas), that also includes magic tricks, word games, riddles, proverbs, and anecdotes, intended as “solazzi et piaceri recreativi” (recreative pastimes and pleasures). For a modern edition, see Pacioli, *De Viribus Quantitatis*. Pacioli also wrote a treatise on games, *De ludis*, dedicated to Francesco Gonzaga and Isabella d’Este, now lost. He refers to it in the dedication to *De viribus quantitatis* as the “iocondo et alegro tractato de ludis in genere” (amusing and lively treatise on games in general).

He makes this claim often with regard to individual tricks, drawing a distinction between his elite readers and “commoners,” for example, in explanations on how to write a sentence on the petals of a rose or wash one’s hands in molten lead.

In his introduction, Pacioli states that he does not advocate *ludi* for an “uncultured” audience because of their impressionability, although he repeatedly emphasizes the power of the tricks in terms of amazing just such an audience. *De viribus quantitatis* does not include palm reading (false chiromancy) or “the magic art of divination” because Pacioli (like Leonardo) felt they had no scientific basis, although he does include card tricks and other sleight-of-hand demonstrations that could fool “those who do not know the way” into thinking they are witnessing acts of divination.
In his introduction to *De viribus quantitatis*, Pacioli states that he considers the contents as “solazzi et piaceri recreativi” in relation to his earlier treatise, *De ludis*, on games including chess.


Kemp and Walker, *Leonardo on Painting*, 147. In a related vein, Vasari and Lomazzo famously comment on Leonardo’s fascination with recording the outward appearance and character of peasants, although his image of their animalistic simplicity and wild nature would have relied on deeply stereotyped satiric commonplaces. On this see Meijer, “From Leonardo to Bruegel.”


See, for example, Rosand’s discussion of Leonardo’s drawing hand in *The Meaning of the Mark*. 
Letter Games: Machiavelli and Guicciardini in Carnivalesque Correspondence

Sergius Kodera

Introduction

OVER THREE DAYS IN LATE May 1521, Niccolò Machiavelli (1469–1527) and Francesco Guicciardini (1483–1540) engaged in a playful and hilarious exchange of letters. The six surviving messages not only mark the beginning of a closer acquaintance—if not friendship—between the two men, but their correspondence also points to what I describe as a carnivalesque “letter game.” These texts belong to a particular literary genre: lettere familiari, or private letters often written with the aim of dispelling melancholic and sad moods. The lettere familiari of Machiavelli and Guicciardini, however, may be read as a parody of what was then an emerging literary convention. Contemporary familiar letters were used as a slate for literary experimentation, especially in recording introspective thought, not least because this genre had no rigorous form. Yet, as will become clear in the following pages, it is precisely this lack of form that allowed Machiavelli and Guicciardini to reflect upon the materiality of their communication. The present essay focuses as much on the materiality of these epistolary objects as on the game being played with them.

Briefly, the objective of their letter game was to trick Sigismondo Santi, an acquaintance of Guicciardini, who also acted as chancellor to Teodoro Pio, the lord of Carpi, into believing that Machiavelli, Santi’s houseguest at the time, was involved in some secret and very important matter of state and that Machiavelli, therefore, had to be treated with the utmost courtesy during his stay. The game proceeds as planned, with Machiavelli receiving increasingly lavish meals and attention—until day three, when the suspicious host intercepts Guicciardini’s last extant letter to Machiavelli and the ruse is finally discovered.

The Prelude, or an Ex-Chancellor on an Absurd Mission

In May 1521, at the age of fifty-two, Machiavelli was sent by the Florentine government, the Otto di pratica, to Carpi, an important town in the Papal State. His task was to negotiate an exemption of the Florentine Franciscans from the rest of the Tuscan congregations.
Yet when Machiavelli arrived in Carpi on May 16, he received a different commission—to find for the powerful and economically important Florentine Arte della Lana, or wool merchants’ guild, a Franciscan preacher for the weeks of Lent. This task was absurd for at least two reasons: it was humiliating to send a Florentine ex-chancellor on such a lowly and insignificant mission; yet, from 1512 onwards, when the Medici had overturned the republican government of Florence, Machiavelli’s social role had been marginalized. Another almost grotesque aspect of this mission to Carpi was Machiavelli’s pronounced irreligious stance. Between 1512 and 1520, during the years of forced political inactivity, Machiavelli had written the two texts that would come to define him for posterity: Il Principe (The Prince) and I Discorsi (Discourses). Especially so in his Discorsi (II, 2), Machiavelli adopted one of the most explicit anticlerical stances during the entire sixteenth century (and well beyond), denouncing Christianity in general and blaming the papal government for the failure of Italian politics. Even though the texts were not printed in his lifetime, Machiavelli’s ideas circulated widely, and his correspondent in the letter game was well aware of them.

The First Letter: Setting the Carnivalesque Tone

In his letter to Machiavelli from Modena, dated May 17, 1521, Guicciardini ironically addresses Machiavelli as “Florentine ambassador to Carpi,” pointing to the absurdness of the decision of the Florentine council to send Machiavelli—of all people—to find a preacher, a mission as absurd, Guicciardini adds, as sending Pacchierotto or Ser Sano (two Florentine citizens with a reputation for being homosexuals) to find a beautiful and elegant wife for a friend. Guicciardini also implies that Machiavelli’s assignment points to the ineptness of the Florentine Signoria: how could they have sent him on such a mission in light of his former career and his avowed distrust of the Church and of religious matters in general? Guicciardini (comically, but quite rudely) maintains that it would be very unbecoming to Machiavelli’s reputation if he now, in old age, were to change his mind, for everybody would then believe that he had become senile and, therefore, childish. Thus, Guicciardini, from the outset, writes from a position that underscores his social superiority (he was, at that time, papal governor of Modena for Pope Leo X) and pokes fun at Machiavelli’s task. By setting a carnivalesque tone with the introduction of obscene sexual imagery, as well as a mixture of high and low stylistic elements, Guicciardini establishes the type of letter the two will exchange: the lettera faceta.

Continuing in this vein, Guicciardini writes that for ages the climate of Carpi has infected its inhabitants with the diseases of hypocrisy, and with an inclination to become liars. In a parody of contemporary medical theories of contagion, Guicciardini advises Machiavelli to leave the place as soon as he possibly can, for he himself is in imminent danger of being infected by the unhealthy air and the astrologically unfavorable
disposition of Carpi. Further, Guicciardini maintains that the danger to one’s health is especially great when one lives in the house of one of its inhabitants; in addition to becoming infected through his contact with Santi, Machiavelli, Guicciardini warns, is as likely to catch the disease from the Franciscans. On the other hand, he adds, if Machiavelli has already had the chance to meet Teodoro Pio, bishop and governor of Carpi, then he has already come into contact with a fine specimen of the diseased people with whom the town is so heavily infested.

Of special importance, Guicciardini reports in this same letter that he has sent a letter of recommendation (now lost) on behalf of Machiavelli to Pio. It becomes clear that he has also already corresponded with Santi on Machiavelli’s stay. Given the brevity of the first letter, which is mainly intended to call Machiavelli to Bologna as soon as possible, we may also deduce that Guicciardini was already familiar with Machiavelli’s futile mission in Carpi. Thus, even though these intertexts are lost, they play an important role in the letter game that now unfolds.

The Second Letter: A Cure for the Melancholy of the Cesspool

In his reply from Carpi, dated May 17, 1521, Machiavelli addresses Guicciardini in highly official, almost bombastic Latin formulae—Magnifico Domino Francisco de Guicciardinis I. V. doctori Mutinae Regique gubernatori dignissimo suo plurimum honorando. Magnifice vir, major observandissime—only to shift in the first sentence from high style to coarse facetiousness. For he reports that when Guicciardini’s messenger on horseback delivered the letter to the house of his host, he had just been sitting on the latrine, meditating on the task at hand: finding a suitable preacher for his fellow Florentine citizens. Machiavelli writes that he had just come to the conclusion—presumably in the act of defecating—that he would prefer to appoint a priest with an expertise in teaching the road to hell. In what, perhaps, may be read as a travesty of the methods of the venerable medieval Lullian combinatory art of divine virtues, Machiavelli continues by arguing that such a preacher would have to be a combination of the three most repugnant types of friars one has ever known. He gleefully reports that he has found his man, a friar he names as Il Rovaio. (One cannot help but surmise that Carpi, with its unfavorable climatic disposition, must have been the perfect place for finding such an abject individual.) During the period of leisure he now enjoys, Machiavelli promises to create as much mischief among the Franciscans as he possibly can, for the friars have now gathered in Carpi to elect their general and his assistants.

The grim physicality of this account of the fraught relationship between Machiavelli and the politics of his hometown—whose citizens he wishes to show the road to hell—is palpable, in the truest sense of the word, from the very beginning. The cesspool Machiavelli had been sitting on to elaborate his ruse is evocative not only of
the infectious air at Carpi, but the smell of feces also lends an appropriate atmosphere for Machiavelli’s mediation on the political condition of his beloved Florence. The solitude of the cubicle, not to mention the lowly physical act of defecation, is an appropriately gritty backdrop for Machiavelli’s sublime meditation on the miserable political situation and, more particularly, of his own desolation.

Machiavelli continues by requesting Guicciardini’s presence for matters of counsel, adding that a personal appearance would increase his reputation in Santi’s household. A merely courteous, even ironic, request this would seem, given the futility of the matter. Yet one also has to take into consideration that during (and before) the Renaissance, letter writing was understood as a substitute for face-to-face communication. Machiavelli’s request for company, then, may be understood as the expression of a genuine wish to alleviate his gloomy mood by continuing a conversation with someone he obviously considers a friend.

In a crucial shift of tone, Machiavelli then asks Guicciardini if he could send more letters of advice—and on a daily basis; and he asks that these messages be delivered with great reverence. For already the arrival of Guicciardini’s first letter had caused quite a stir: “for another, you would make me more esteemed by those in the house, seeing the messages come thick. And I can tell you that on the arrival of this arbaletter with the letter, and making a bow down to the earth, and with his saying that he was sent specially and in haste, everybody rose up with so many signs of respect and such a noise that everything was turned upside down, and I was asked by several about the news.” Machiavelli reports that he immediately seized this opportunity to make inroads in convincing his host of his importance. He explains that, in order to enhance the (wrong) impression in Santi’s mind that he was involved in an urgent matter of state, he made some generic, insignificant remarks and indefinite allusions to affairs of high politics. Machiavelli next reports that as he is writing these lines, the entire household stands still: “So that they all stood with open mouths and with their caps in their hands; and while I write I have a circle of them around me, and seeing me write at length they are astonished, and look on me as inspired; and I, to make them wonder more, sometimes hold my pen still and swell up, and then they slaver at the mouth; but if they could see what I am writing, they would marvel at it more.”

Machiavelli’s comportment, of course, has the distinct attributes of the many forms of dissimulation, or sprezzatura (nonchalance), which are often associated with the Renaissance court and its cultural representations; with the novella; and with many Renaissance comedies, including Machiavelli’s own play, the Mandragola (The Mandrake). Moreover, the impression of spontaneity in one’s reply to a message is a hallmark of familiar or comic letter writing during the Renaissance.

As if this alertness to the occasion were not sufficient proof of Machiavelli’s dexterity, he feels it also expedient to reassure Guicciardini that he is not afraid of being infected by the bad air in Carpi, precisely because he himself has already caught the disease.
Machiavelli refers to himself as a “dottore di bugia,” or doctor of lies, who never says what he believes and never believes what he says and who, for some time, has always lied and has hidden the truth under so many other lies that it is difficult to retrieve what is real.35

Machiavelli’s letter appropriately concludes with a diplomatic formula that mocks the futility of his mission, as well as with a special request: “Still not a thing has happened, and I expect tomorrow some advice from you on my affairs, and that you will send one of the same arbalesters, and that he will hurry and get here all sweaty, so that the household will be amazed; for by so doing you will bring me honor, and at the same time your arbalesters will get a little exercise, which for the horses on these spring days is very wholesome.”36

Machiavelli signs his letter “oratore a Fra minori,” or “Ambassador to the Franciscans,”37 thereby acknowledging and accepting Guicciardini’s original comic salute. In this way, Machiavelli makes clear that he will continue to communicate with a facetious tone and in a mendacious vein. Yet he also introduces a new element, for he makes the very act of sending the letters a game in and of itself. That is, in this second letter, Machiavelli invites Guicciardini to play a game that reflects not only the local disease—lying—but also the desolate state of Italian politics in general. To that end, Machiavelli requests that Guicciardini send a messenger as often as possible to alleviate the boredom of the arbalesters and to rescue them from having to sleep in uncomfortable beds and eat bad food.

Thus, with Machiavelli’s reply, the letter game commences: his letter serves both as an invitation to Guicciardini to join in and as a promise that there is much more fun to be had. For in contrast to Guicciardini’s messenger, who is to arrive exhausted and sweaty, Machiavelli does not wish to exhaust his fantasy just yet, eager as he is to continue the game for some time.38 Moreover, the rules of the letter game are herein set: it is the physical act of letter writing, the materiality of the message, and the ways in which the letter is delivered that become the material basis for the game.39 The interaction between the players is driven by false pretensions, and the game feeds on the possibilities of how far the mere pretension of saying or doing something important may become socially relevant, albeit in a clearly defined and comparatively harmless matter—namely, respectful treatment, a few (proverbial) free lunches, and a clean bed.

What emerges here is not merely an exchange of lettere facete, but the record of a dense social interaction that encompasses a variety of reactions to these texts: face-to-face communication, with all its physicality, is employed in an asymmetrical game of tricking the spectators, unwitting participants in the game being played between Machiavelli and Guicciardini; whereas literary communication is reserved for the correspondents, the actual players of the game. As with the prior use of facetiousness in connection to politics, this is, of course, a probate literary strategy used to create a decidedly anti-metaphysical sense of immanence. It is the necessary precondition for the immersion of the players into their activity. The difference between facts and fiction and the joy of being able to deceive
others by ostensibly receiving, composing, and dispatching letters distinguish this letter game from the *lettera faceta*. The material basis of the letter game is, thus, clearly defined by the following: (a) performing the act of writing a message; (b) the ways in which the written messages are delivered by a messenger; (c) how they are received and read by the addressee; (d) the ways in which this act is perceived by others who (e) have to be, for as long and as much as possible, excluded from reading the messages.

When viewed from this perspective, the letter game is a playful enactment of the corruptness of contemporary Italian politics. For these would-be letters of state not merely refer to the stratagems that Machiavelli had recommended in his most notorious passages of *Il Principe*; they also—written in a decidedly mirthful mood and in the language of carnival—point to the futility of politics in general.

The Third Letter: Playing the Game, or Hurried Messengers and Bundles of Letters

On May 18, 1521, Guicciardini answers Machiavelli from Modena. Insofar as he, once again, addresses Machiavelli as “Ambassador,” it immediately becomes clear that Guicciardini will be no spoilsport. But he also writes that, unlike Machiavelli, he is too busy to reply with a long and witty letter; Guicciardini, thus, seems to express some hesitation about his level of involvement in the letter game. In the sentences that follow, however, it becomes quite clear that he will indeed support Machiavelli’s “ardua impresa,” or arduous task. For not only has he sent the present letter with an arbalester, who he expects will arrive in such a great hurry that his shirt will hang out of his trousers, but he has also sent a bundle of diplomatic dispatches from Zurich, which, he suggests, Machiavelli should show to his host, or at least hold in his hand.40

Sending another hurried messenger with bundles of letters to Carpi is not Guicciardini’s only move in the letter game; he writes that he has also sent yet another letter to Santi, informing him that Machiavelli is a “persona rarissima,” yet without specifying what exactly that “rarity” is. We also learn that Santi seems to have replied with that very question, which Guicciardini, in order to increase the suspense, has left unanswered (“non mi è parso replicarli, perchè sta più sospeso”).41 Once more, Guicciardini’s remark alerts us to the fact that the letter game involves not merely written messages between a couple of correspondents, but also so-called communication with other people—“so-called” because these exchanges do not convey any real information. Rather, these “empty messages,” as I shall call them, serve to enhance the (wrong) impression that something important is happening. Thus, the fun of the letter game consists in exploring what can be gained from the mere pretension of information; in this sense, it theorizes acts of communication as communication.
Guicciardini concludes his letter by urging Machiavelli to make as much of his mysterious reputation as he can—and quickly—because not all of the people surrounding him are stupid; hence his advice to proceed cautiously. Guicciardini’s warning—from one conspirator to another—is, of course, playfully exaggerated; it nonetheless echoes central passages in Machiavelli’s long chapter in the Discorsi on conspiracy: namely, that secrecy and swift, ruthless action are of crucial importance, as is total abstention from written communication.

What the readers of this game—lapwings, basically, who enjoy full access to the letters—are privy to is how the two players explore the potential of the letter medium with a cheerful tone that at the same time allows for the pronouncement of many bitter truths: there is, for example, Machiavelli’s disappointment with Florentine politics. In the present letter, Guicciardini responds to this—quite justified—resentment by expressing the hope that Machiavelli will be able to introduce as much strife among the Franciscans as he possibly can, or that he will at least be able to sow discord among the friars during their important meeting; and yet, Guicciardini believes, this will be very difficult because of the Franciscans’ ambitiousness and malignity. Guicciardini once more concludes his message with a cordial invitation to Machiavelli to come and meet him in Modena; this invitation functions as a confirmation of the playful spirit of the game insofar as it temporarily frames, or suggests a time limit on, their pastime.

The Fourth Letter: A One-and-Only Victory and the Game-as-Game

In his reply from Carpi of May 18, 1521, Machiavelli communicates the first (and only) victory in the letter game in hyperbolic terms. He describes the commotion in Santi’s household upon the arrival of Guicciardini’s exhausted messenger. Machiavelli reports that, in order to demonstrate his gratitude to the host, he showed him the bundle of letters from Switzerland and from the French King; he also told the visibly impressed Santi absolutely trivial stories about the troubles of the Emperor (Charles V) and his plans to conquer parts of France. Still, Machiavelli tells Guicciardini, he feels that his host remains reluctant to believe that his guest could actually be involved in secret politics. Machiavelli thus surmises that Santi probably fears having become the victim of a practical joke, not least because the mysterious visitor avoids answering any direct questions; rather, he either “sleeps or reads or keeps silent.” Furthermore, Machiavelli speculates that Santi suspects Guicciardini of trying to fool perhaps both host and guest. Yet in the absence of definitive proof, the host finds himself cautiously questioning his guest without ever making any headway. Indeed, Machiavelli writes that his answers to Santi’s questions consist of merely a few incoherent words—if any at all—about, for instance, the deluge which is about to come, or the Turks who will most certainly invade Italy, or if in these times crusade should be organized, and other “gossip that can be heard in the piazza.” Machiavelli believes that his host is already bored to death and will
probably start asking himself if it is even worthwhile to keep this guest in his house. In fact, Santi seems to be desperately looking for a chance to talk to Guicciardini in person in order to clarify this last matter.

As in the “empty messages” Guicciardini has sent to Santi, Machiavelli likewise provides no useful information to his host. This lack of content stands in stark contrast to the density of conversation that is communicated in the “full letters.” Santi’s boredom, on the one hand, and Machiavelli’s and Guicciardini’s excitement, on the other, reflect this contrast. The difference between Santi, who is a mere spectator, and Machiavelli, who is a player, becomes even more accentuated. For even though Machiavelli surmises that the ruse can only be kept up for a short period of time, he reports that, in the meantime, he is feasting enormously on Santi’s bill and is thus “earning” large sums of money in that “game.” It is interesting to note that Machiavelli here behaves like a parassita, a glutton, a stock persona from Roman comedy with a central role in the Mandragola as well as in many other Renaissance plays. Yet on the stage (and no matter how successful he may be), the glutton never really gets a free lunch at others’ tables. In the letter game, the stake is as real as the bundles of papers from which the messages are being read. While the text of the novella or the performance of a play tend to make the reader forget the material basis of the narration, the letter game is geared toward the physicality of the world: the materiality of the letters, the ways in which they are being delivered and read, and the sense that it may actually fill stomachs—either of individuals or of “hungry” states.

In an unexpected turn, Machiavelli then expresses not only his gratitude to Guicciardini for his support, but he also promises to reciprocate the hospitality received from Santi in the event that his host should come to Florence, and, to this end, he asks Guicciardini to intercede on his behalf. Just as Guicciardini repeatedly invites Machiavelli to come and visit him as soon as possible, Machiavelli’s declared intention to give back what he has taken from Santi sets a remarkable boundary to their ruse and marks it as a game with a certain time limit. It is not a rude carnivalesque beffa, but rather a pastime, one in which nobody will be put to shame or shall suffer material loss. This letter game, therefore, is remarkably fair: Machiavelli’s outright amazing innocuousness of intent highlights the jocular mood of the game. Moreover, such playfulness is in stark contrast to the acrimonious remarks made by both correspondents on the actual state of contemporary politics and religion. Aside from the dire political realities that are being satirized and played out in various ways throughout their correspondence, Machiavelli’s and Guicciardini’s letter game turns out to be harmless: it is neither about high-level espionage, as Santi and the members of his household suspect, nor will the host and his household ever fall victim to a practical joke.

These differences between the letter game and realpolitik are accentuated in the following lines of Machiavelli’s message, in which he makes very negative remarks about Il Rovaio, the preacher he had selected for his fellow Florentines. Il Rovaio, it turns out, has declined the invitation because he seems to be afraid of possible negative personal
consequences associated with the proposed stay in a city as notorious for its moral laxity as Florence; moreover, Il Rovaio suspects that his person will not be received with due honor. Machiavelli reports that he tried to console the preacher with various comments on the nature of big cities and the rapidity with which they change their laws, and he maintains that he had been so successful that he almost persuaded the friar to change his mind. Machiavelli adds that that very night he will have to appear before the Franciscans, who, he reports, have elected Paolo Soncino—not, he opines, a bad choice. In light of these events, Machiavelli expresses hope that on the following day he will finally be able to visit Guicciardini, whom he salutes with a Latin theological formula typically reserved for God: “with your Lordship, who I hope will live and reign for ages of ages.”

The Fifth Letter: Feasting while Keeping up Appearances

In his reply from Modena dated (probably erroneously) May 18, 1521, Guicciardini compares Machiavelli to Lysander, the brave Spartan officer who ends up with the lowly task of having to divvy up the meat among the soldiers he once commanded and led to victory. On the surface, Guicciardini seems here to have changed from the playful mood that characterizes the preceding letters to the genus grave. But this impression is quite deceptive in that the story is actually about the sharing of meat with soldiers. This inclusion, therefore, echoes the topics of food and of gluttony already introduced by Machiavelli. Keep in mind that sutlers are traditionally renowned for their corruption and for the distribution of bad food. The tone of Guicciardini’s reply, therefore, remains tied to the physical aspects of eating and to the materiality of food. Accordingly, the story of Lysander serves for Guicciardini as an example of how all things change on the surface but not necessarily in substance, and, thus, it elucidates the idea that those who are prudent will realize that history repeats itself under the ever-changing guise of different names and appearances.

Yet this central tenet of humanist historiography, to which Guicciardini was still an adherent during this period, contrasts starkly with his subsequent remark that it is, therefore, “un sillogismo fratesco,” a friar’s syllogism, that the writing of annals is a worthwhile task, one which Machiavelli should fulfill with the utmost diligence. It is clear, however, that this can only be a misleading conclusion: the writing of annals is not at all worthwhile because the practice only repeats the same histories over and over. Guicciardini, in fact, knew that Machiavelli had been commissioned by the Medici, in 1520, to write the Florentine histories, a task which Machiavelli knew to be as futile as the current mission, drafted by these very same patrons. Guicciardini’s letter concludes with the hope that during Machiavelli’s leisurely three-day diplomatic mission he will succeed in “sucking the entire [Franciscan] Republic of Wooden Slippers” (“succhiata tucta la Repubblica de’ Zoccholi”). He believes that Machiavelli will thus (prudently, one surmises) be able to compare it to a (presumably more important) historical pattern.
Obviously, the verb *succhiare* (to suck) is here used in a highly ambiguous tone. By subverting the heroic story of Lysander in such a carnivalesque vein, Guicciardini seems to refer less to Machiavelli's rich intellectual exploits in his dealings with the Franciscans and more to Machiavelli's will to be well fed at the expense of others. The carnivalesque exposition of the theory of writing history, therefore, ironically echoes the immediate object of the letter game: to secure as many free lunches for Machiavelli as possible.

Indeed, Guicciardini immediately returns from these purportedly lofty remarks on the methodology of writing history to the letter game itself. He once more urges Machiavelli not to lose time in this auspicious historical moment, when Fortune shows herself favorable. Guicciardini promises to send more letters to Machiavelli in the hope that this will at least help to win a savory special dish ("una torta") on the following evening.

Moreover, Guicciardini warns Machiavelli to be wary of slyness on the part of Santi, to whom he has sent another "empty message." We learn that this letter again has left unanswered Santi's request for detailed information about his guest and does not even disclose Machiavelli's family name. Guicciardini, therefore, surmises that the host will suspect his visitor to be an impostor and believe himself to be the victim of a ruse, even as Santi has no definitive proof of his hunch. Machiavelli must endure the embarrassment of the situation for as long as Santi continues to feed him well, thereby enabling him to act in his role as a *parassita*, or glutton.

The letter concludes with decidedly uncomplimentary comments about Il Rovaio: Guicciardini maintains that the friar is aware of Machiavelli's reputation for being irreligious and, thus, fears that the Florentine senators and everyone who knows about this mission are expecting Machiavelli to bring back an impossible choice. Again, Guicciardini frames the letter and the game by inviting Machiavelli to come to Modena as soon as possible, thereby re-introducing the playfulness of the letter game.

**The Sixth Letter: Finale Furioso**

The last extant letter, Machiavelli's reply of May 19, 1521, once more makes evident the carnivalesque tone of the entire correspondence: after again addressing Guicciardini in the most formal of terms—Magnifico d. Francisco de Guicciardinis etc.—the text commences with the exclamation *cazzus!* (prick, in maccheronic Latin); the first sentence reads as direct speech: "One needs to manage cleverly in dealing with that fellow, because he is as tricky as thirty thousand devils." Machiavelli then reports the obvious: Santi has finally realized the ruse. Machiavelli recounts how upon the most recent arrival of Guicciardini's messenger the suspicious host announced the following: "'Give it to me, this must be some big affair, with these frequent messengers.' Then, after reading the letter, he said, 'I believe the governor is making fools out of me and you.'" It is noteworthy that in this passage the physical
presence of the letter is evoked once more. For the first time in their correspondence, direct speech is used, obviously with the intent to dramatize the event and to describe the concluding episode in terms of a severe diplomatic crisis with potentially terrible consequences. On his retreat, Machiavelli seeks to appease Santi by explaining to his host that he did actually ask Guicciardini to oversee some affairs for him back in Florence and that this was the cause of the correspondence. In grotesque and hyperbolic terms that are reminiscent of the beginning of the second letter, Machiavelli reveals that he is “scared shitless” for fear that his host will “take a grenade and send me back to the hostel.”

With this truly maccheronic climax, a true “letters on the table,” Machiavelli declares the letter game to be over. He begs Guicciardini to stop sending messages, for otherwise the innocuous joke might cause much bitterness. Machiavelli then describes the prize that has been won in the letter game and states that whatever happens: “the good I have received cannot be taken from my body; splendid food, glorious beds, and such things, in which I have for three days now been rejuvenated.” He is thus mimicking the language of the *parassita* and echoing the Lysander episode from Guicciardini’s previous letter. Machiavelli then writes in diplomatic style that he will bring this matter to a close by the next day.

Machiavelli concludes by reporting that his actual mission, namely to find a preacher for the Lana, will not be successful “because this fellow holds off.” In a clearly ironic mood, Machiavelli worries about the disappointment that his failed mission will bring to his friends Francesco Vettori and Lorenzo di Filippo Strozzi. He therefore asks Guicciardini to send them a couple of verses to excuse his failure. Machiavelli reassures Guicciardini that he has learned many important lessons from his mission to the Republic of the Wooden Slippers.

**The Rules of the Letter Game**

In this letter game, the focus is on the physical act of writing; to play the game is to send real and very private letters that pretend to be official, even secret, messages about matters of state. When playing, one pretends to write highly important dispatches while making fun of one’s surroundings—and, having nothing better to do, of oneself. To play this game is to explore the nature and the potential of the letter medium through the highly conscious use of different literary registers in a decidedly jocular mood. What is at stake here is the medium itself and its power to fascinate audiences; in such ways, the letter game parallels metaleptic techniques often employed in Renaissance plays, such as the staging of a play within the play. Often in contemporary comedies, much to the amusement of the audience, someone is being made a fool of by some of the witty actors who deceive other personae (Machiavelli’s *Mandragola* is a case in point). In the letter game, the witnesses to Machiavelli’s act of writing are represented as though they are watching an act of secret statesmanship; they become spectators to an event that is...
fake, one that has been created solely for them. Deceived by appearances, the spectators become the subjects of the sly Principe.⁷⁰

The players of the letter game must have an accurate awareness of the meta-textual elements, or performative paratexts, that surround the physical reality of the individual letter: the circumstances under which the message is composed, the ways in which and by whom it is delivered, how and by whom it is read, and the ways in which the ruse is eventually deciphered, discovered, and thus concluded—“game over.”

The materiality of the letters and their function in a performative context are, therefore, at the center of the letter game: for the written messages are to be received by the hand of a messenger who reflects the high social status of the emissary as well as the urgency of the message. The answers are, ideally, to be written in front of other people who serve as an audience to the act of writing, without being privy to the actual communication. The correspondents have to act as though they are exchanging the gravest matters of state. Bundles of letters have to be shown to the audience. And, lastly, corroborative (false) information for the audience has to be generated by misleading letters of recommendation, and other “empty messages,” which stand in stark contrast to the “full letters” being exchanged between the players.

This letter game is to be played with amazingly innocuous intentions: for the objective is to make Machiavelli’s sojourn on a hopeless and insignificant mission a more agreeable experience. No actual serious harm is intended; after all, the loser of the game, Machiavelli’s suspecting host, will be compensated by a reciprocal invitation. Above all, a sense of self-irony about the futility of the mission to Carpi and a leisurely mood prevail.

These messages are not some disembodied basis for the transmission of texts. Rather, the material letter embodies some of the spatial and temporal constrictions, as well as a sense of urgency, that are inherent in carnivalesque performances. Yet, and aside from the direct communication essential to the carnival procession, the sense of elation caused by reading a hilarious letter is triggered, in the case of the letter game, from a distance—at least some of the amusement is still available to readers of posterity (even though they will not win a free lunch). The lettera faceta thus preserves some of the materiality of carnivalesque communication, for reading these messages still induces laughter, a somatic reaction. The letter game, then, may be viewed in the context of a contemporary process, by which the performance of physical rituals—a defining characteristic of medieval carnival culture—becomes transformed (or reduced) to silent texts. In other words, body language is translated into written text.⁷¹ Here, I would like to call up Horst Wenzel’s stimulating discussion of the metonymic relationship between the body of the letter and the body of the sender, whereby the latter becomes inscribed into the paper by means of handwriting. The text is thus residue, a trace of the body of the sender.⁷² In such ways, the letter game is parasitic to the fascination inherent in the production of signs in the most general sense, an element that also characterizes many contemporary—and illicit—magical practices.
Dispatches and Couriers

The messenger obviously plays a crucial role in the letter game. Recall that it was his specific physical appearance that gave Machiavelli the idea of setting up the game in the first place. Yet one must be careful to historicize this figure of the messenger, for the function of medieval and early modern couriers was then quite different. His credibility was an important issue in high medieval literature, and his authentication was usually brought about by signs that refer to the social position of the sender. In this period, for instance, papal messengers were to appear dressed almost like the pope himself, or at least bearing his coat of arms. It is, thus, no coincidence that in Santi’s household the appearance of a messenger from the governor is a closely observed event, especially because he carries letters not only for the padrone di casa, but also for a mysterious guest.

In our letter game, we see an intensive exchange between Machiavelli and Guicciardini about the courier. It is again interesting to note that already in high medieval literature the messenger himself sometimes becomes the subject of correspondence. The messenger is not only required to resemble the sender in comportment (he is absolutely forbidden, for instance, to idle or get drunk along the way), but the forms of delivery are also specified: in the fourteenth century, and beyond, a letter of state often merely served as a form of accreditation, much like a passport; it was a written testimony to the courier’s credibility. Especially so in important matters, the letter was purely a formality, whereas the text of the actual message was delivered orally by a messenger who served as a substitute for face-to-face communication between the correspondents (this practice is due, of course, to the belief that some messages were thereby best kept secret). In sum, these letters of accreditation were made part of the ceremonial communication, with the official letters being read aloud in order to communicate their contents to the court and to impart a sense of dialogue between sender and receiver. Yet, as Wenzel points out, with the shift from oral to literary communication and with the introduction of the early modern postal systems by the middle of the fifteenth century, many of these precepts became obsolete.

Viewed in this light, Guicciardini’s and Machiavelli’s letter game might seem a carnivalesque detour, a conscious misprision of some aspects of high medieval culture. Yet this is not quite the case. In his fascinating study of the correspondence between Guillaume Budé and Erasmus during the first decades of the sixteenth century, Guy Gueudet describes in great detail similar practices; very often amanuenses also worked as messengers. As apprentices to scholarly culture, they often themselves became the subject of humanist correspondence. The exchange of letters, especially those with confidential content, still depended on personal relationships. Often, especially in urgent matters, an answer was written while the courier waited, which is exactly what Machiavelli pretends to do in the course of his little performance when he pens—with the gravest face—his hilariously funny reply to Guicciardini’s first letter in front of Santi’s household.
Another important aspect of early modern correspondence with personal couriers is the fact that the messenger normally delivered more than just one letter. Guicciardini’s “empty messages”—his letters of recommendation and the messages of disinformation sent to Santi as well as to Pio—were in all probability delivered by one and the same person. In function, these “empty letters” of recommendation parallel the official letters that medieval court messengers carried with them and read to the entire court.

During Machiavelli’s own political career, communication by letter became more intricate, with the messenger carrying several letters to one person or to a group of persons. In his magisterial study of Machiavelli’s diplomatic dispatches, Jean Jacques Marchand explains that virtually every official letter was accompanied by private messages. Most of these unofficial texts were addressed to the colleagues working in the administration of the Florentine Republic, the Signoria; and they were often very humorous comments on the official reports. Unfortunately, these letters, for the most part, were not kept for posterity. Yet in the case of the present letter game, just the opposite has happened: the funny messages are the ones to have survived. These letters can be seen as carnivalesque echoes of Machiavelli’s diplomatic career insofar as Machiavelli and Guicciardini here play not only with the function and role of the messenger in high diplomacy, but also distance themselves from contemporary humanist culture and its lofty ambitions. The playful mode, it now almost goes without saying, allows the correspondents to make all kinds of acrimonious comments about religious and political matters, from the Repubblica dei Zoccholi to the Florentines.

The mistrust of Santi, which played such an important part in the letter game, is again to be seen as a marker of the low, comical, and satirical style that characterizes the correspondence of Machiavelli and Guicciardini. In a similar vein, as Marchand has observed, the comic mood in Machiavelli’s private letters is often employed as a literary strategy in order to envisage very serious topics from a new perspective—that is, from a point of view that allows for the critical questioning of one’s own peremptory conclusions on a given matter. The comic mood thus emerges as a “different mode to envisage reality, ... a nature which is more complex and contradictory than what can be grasped by one’s own individual judgment.”

Conclusion

In this letter game, the focus is on the physicality of written communication: the personae of the correspondents, “empty letters” versus “full letters,” the act of writing, the materiality of ink and paper, and the demeanor of the messenger.

The audience marvels with mouths agape as an audience should do during the performance of a successful play. They can only deduce the nature of these documents by observing the ways in which they are delivered, read, and answered, and by gathering information about Machiavelli’s background. Other than in Renaissance comedy, it is not...
the actors on stage who are being tricked, much to the delight of the audience; in the letter game, the immediate audience (Santi and his household) are the ones who are tricked, for as long as they are unable to decipher the content of the messages. These “full letters,” like playing cards or domino blocks, become tokens, which mean very different things to the people who are inside the game—those who are actually playing it—and those who are constrained to act as credulous audiences. Santi and his household thus mirror the blindness of those who witness political action as commoners, lacking the skill and/or information necessary to assess the importance of the people and events unfolding before them. When Santi finally—and literally—rips Guicciardini’s letter from Machiavelli’s hand, this gesture stands out as the sole act of force in the letter game. It is this infringement of conventions that ends the game, which again evidences the importance of the material letter; even when Santi transgresses the boundaries of decorum, his knowledge of what was actually going on remains fragmentary.

Even though clearly asymmetrical, the letter game is amazingly inoffensive, and, thus, the playing of the game is a true pastime. For all that is at stake is respectful treatment during a short holiday, some rich meals, and a comfortable bed—or, to put it differently, a few days off in a boring, remote village filled with hypocrites and despicable friars.

The carnivalesque mood of the “full letters” achieves at least two objectives: it alleviates boredom, and it serves as a comic reflection on the dire state of contemporary Italian politics, in the frame of a rather innocuous game. With their wild and, for the most part, completely irreverent remarks on the vicious friars, the liars, and Machiavelli’s personal situation, the correspondents never lose sight of the perverted political microcosm at Carpi, which truly reflects the state of European affairs in general and of Florence in particular. In such ways, the dire contemporary political situation becomes embodied in the materiality of the “full letters” of the game: from the outside, they appear as messages of state of the utmost importance, when in fact they are filled with petty gossip, low language, and blasphemy. Najemy, and many other authors before him, have posited the idea that the most innovative political thought of Machiavelli was “that social conflict was beneficial under certain circumstances.” In this context, then, it may perhaps be a worthwhile speculation that the letter game (and early modern gaming more generally)—with its implicit equality between the two players and its concomitant republican setting—was understood as a productive territory in which to exercise social conflict without causing serious damage.

NOTES

* I wish to thank Allison Levy for editing and Manfred Zollinger for commenting on an earlier draft of this essay.

1 On Renaissance letters and printed letter collections in general, see Henderson, “Introduction.” For an introduction to Machiavelli’s letters, see Doglio, L’arte delle lettere, 75–104.

On the use, development, and perception of this type of correspondence during the sixteenth century, see Ortner-Buchberger, *Briefe schreiben*, 69–71.


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For lexicographic data on these letters, see Larosa, *Una metamorfosi ridicola*, 21 and 265–68. On the exchange of letters, see also Grazzini, “Machiavelli, Guicciardini e le regole,” 651–65, for a useful and detailed commentary, especially for the historical figures mentioned. For a succinct presentation of these letters that emphasizes the carnivalesque aspects of Machiavelli’s text in general, see Celli, *Il carnevale*, 76–80, esp. 76–77. For very interesting remarks on the materiality of early modern humanist letters, see Gueudet, *L’art de la lettre humaniste*, 63–71.

5 On Santi, see Larosa, *Una metamorfosi ridicola*, 217–18.

6 Ridolfi, *Vita*, 280–92, gives the most detailed account of the circumstances of the letter game and reproduces the entire exchange; see also Rebhorn, *Foxes and Lions*, 1–2 and 228–49. For lexicographic data on these letters, see Larosa, *Una metamorfosi ridicola*, 21 and 265–68. On the exchange of letters, see also Grazzini, “Machiavelli, Guicciardini e le regole,” 651–65, for a useful and detailed commentary, especially for the historical figures mentioned. For a succinct presentation of these letters that emphasizes the carnivalesque aspects of Machiavelli’s text in general, see Celli, *Il carnevale*, 76–80, esp. 76–77. For very interesting remarks on the materiality of early modern humanist letters, see Gueudet, *L’art de la lettre humaniste*, 63–71.


8 For a detailed description of the historic background of these letters, see Ridolfi, *Vita*, 275–90; Larosa, *Una metamorfosi ridicola*, 35; and Celli, *Il carnevale*, 76–77. Machiavelli’s voyage to Carpi was one of the few commissions given to him by the Medici. The year before, Cardinal Giulio Medici, in his role as head of the Florentine studio, had given him the task of writing a history of Florence, an assignment that would occupy Machiavelli for the next five years. It perhaps goes without saying that Machiavelli, as a republican with a pronounced anti-Medici stance, was not overly enthusiastic about this particular commission, which he nevertheless had to accept for lack of other options. See Gilbert, *Machiavelli and Guicciardini*, 236–39, on the strategies Machiavelli employed to avoid compromising himself in his stance against the Medici; and, in the same work, 240, on Guicciardini, who was against the Medici, too, though he did not share Machiavelli’s republicanism.


10 On the terms orator/ambassador, see Queller, *The Office of Ambassador*, 61–63. Actually, the use of this term is less jocular than might be expected from a modern perspective. For medieval and Renaissance ambassadors were considered to be organs of communication, or “living letters,” 14, who were not only sent by rulers of states but also by individuals, city councils, or communities to negotiate in their interest; the office of the resident ambassador of state was only slowly developing from the mid fifteenth century in Italy, 71–78.


14 On carnivalesque letters, a sub-group of purely (for the most part) fictitious letters; the limits of decorum of the *lettera faceta*; and the negative example of the *lettera buffonea*, or jester’s letter, which employed a rustic style and was, therefore, considered inappropriate for a courtier,

15 On this, especially the well-known idea that, according to Mikhail Bakhtin, carnival is about regeneration and rebirth, and on the hypothesis that Machiavelli’s political agenda should be seen in the ambiance of the court jester rather than in the domain of the serious politician, see the interesting remarks by Celli, *Il carnevale*, 18–19.

16 Kodera, *Disreputable Bodies*, 168–70.

21 For a succinct introduction to the principles of Lullism, see Copenhagen and Schmitt, *Renaissance Philosophy*, 292–94, with many references.

22 Machiavelli, *Lettere*, 290. In all probability, Machiavelli is here alluding to Domenico da Ponzo, a Dominican preacher at Santa Maria del Fiore, who, with his apocalyptic visions, preached against the Medici and other powerful families; or, perhaps, to Simone da Gaeta, ambassador of Pope Alexander VI in Florence in 1495 and an enemy of Savonarola. It is possible, too, that Machiavelli points here to Frate Alberto from Boccaccio’s *Decameron* (IV, 2). See Larosa, *Una metamorfosi ridicola*, 215–17, for more detailed biographies.

23 And whom Ridolfi, *Vita*, 284, identifies as Giovanni Gualberto da Firenze.


25 On Machiavelli’s pessimism and its relationship to the carnivalesque see Celli, *Il carnevale*, 19; for a discussion of the auto-therapeutic function of the autobiographical hints in these carnivalesque letters, see Larosa, *Una metamorfosi ridicola*, 76.


30 Machiavelli, *Letters*, 199; Machiavelli, *Lettere*, 291: “in modo che tutti stavano a bocca aperta et con la berretta in mano; et mentre che io scrivo ne ho un cerchio d’intorno, et veggendomi scrivere a lunga si maravigliano, et guàrdommi per spiritato; et io, per farli maravigliare più, sto alle volte fermo su la penna, et gonfio, et allhotta egli sbavigliano; che se sapessino quel che io vi scrivo, se ne maraviglierebbero più.”

31 On *sprezzatura*, see, of course, Baldassare Castiglione’s *Il libro del cortegiano* (1986), bk. 1, ch. 26; and Berger, Jr., “Sprezzatura and the Absence of Grace,” esp. 297. For an account of dissimulation as a constitutive aspect of the construction of the public image in European courts at least from the twelfth century, with a focus on the visual representation of status as essential to the claim of power, see Wenzel, “Sehen und Hören,” esp. 205.

32 On Machiavelli’s relationship to Boccaccio, see Larosa, *Una metamorfosi ridicola*, 75–76.
For a succinct introduction to the intellectual and political context of the *Mandragola*, see Skinner, *Machiavelli*, 55; for a stimulating discussion of the literary dimension of the play, see Bernard, “Writing and the Paradox of the Self,” esp. 77–84, with many references.


Machiavelli, *Letters*, 200; Machiavelli, *Lettere*, 292: “Pure non è rotto nulla, et aspetto domani da voi qualche consiglio sopra questi mia casi et che voi mandiate un di codesti balestrieri, ma che corra et arrivi qua tutto sudato, acciò che la brigata strabilii; et, così faccendo, mi farete onore, et anche parte cestesi balestrieri faranno un poco di esercizio, che per i cavalli in questi mezzi tempi è molto sano.”


For a sophisticated introduction to the material aspects of letter writing in late medieval European culture (and well beyond), see Wenzel, “Briefe,” esp. 259–76. To modern readers, these terms and conditions will, of course, be tantalizingly similar to Marshall McLuhan’s maxim that the medium is the message.


Machiavelli, *Discorsi*, 476–79 (bk. 3, ch. 6).


Older editions put the following letter (here letter 5, Guicciardini to Machiavelli) first, in all probability because it was incorrectly dated; contentwise, the order adapted here is more meaningful. See also Larosa, *Una metamorfosi ridicola*, 220; on problems with the dating of early modern letters (either when the message was written or when it was sent), see Gueudet, *L’art de la lettre humaniste*, 71.

For a highly readable introduction to the uses and types of letters in Renaissance diplomatic missions, see Queller, *The Office of Ambassador*, 110–48.


Machiavelli, *Lettere*, 295: “novelle da pancaccie.” See also Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, 27 (act III, sc. 3), for a very similar (and, in this instance, obscene) account of the threat of a Turkish invasion of Italy. The account of high politics Machiavelli gives to Santi, his remarks about kings, emperors, the Swiss, and the Turk, are as schematic and stereotypical as a game of cards. Yet even the historical figures mentioned in these texts are so stereotypical that it is possible to play games with them, as though they were kings or other figures in a card game or on a chessboard.

Machiavelli, *Lettere*, 296: “pure io credo che si confidi assai che il giuoco habbia a durare poco, et però segue in far buona cera et fare i pasti golfo, et io pappo per 6 cani et 3 lupi, et dico quando io desino - Stamani guadagno io dua giulli; - et quando io ceno: Stasera io ne guadagno quattro.” Machiavelli seems to echo here Ligurio, the persona of the glutton in the *Mandragola*. Ligurio is a “parassita,” Machiavelli, *Mandragola*, 11 (prologo), a “pappatore ... senza fede” [*Mandragola*, 11 (act 1, sc. 1)], and, like Machiavelli in Carpi, Ligurio “s’è dato a mendicare cene e desinari” [*Mandragola*, 11 (act 1, sc. 1)]. Ligurio is not only the mastermind of the many ruses in that comedy: at least to a certain extent, he may be seen as an impersonation of Machiavelli’s ideas
on the power of fiction over human affairs, in general; for a sophisticated discussion of this topic, and the extant scholarly literature, see Bernard, “Writing and the Paradox of the Self,” 81–84.

51 Machiavelli, Lettere, 296.

52 Celli, Il carnevale, 80, is therefore quite right in describing the language used by Machiavelli in terms of Rabelais’s carnivalesque style, but he overlooks the fact that we are in the middle of a game.

53 Machiavelli, Letters, 201; Machiavelli, Lettere, 296: “con vostra Signoria, quae vivat et regnet in secula seculorum.”

54 For an eerie medical theory about corrupt sutlers serving soldiers human meat, which caused the outbreak of the French Disease during the siege of Naples 1494, see Eamon, “Cannibalism and Contagion,” esp. 10–12.

55 Machiavelli, Lettere, 298. In a more serious context, the fate of Lysander will become a frequent example in Guicciardini’s later writings, especially in the Consolatoria; see Celli, Il carnevale, 80.

56 On this change, see Gilbert, Machiavelli and Guicciardini, 288–91 and 300. For a recent discussion of that passage and the conflicting opinions of Machiavelli and Guicciardini on the role of patterns in history (the former strongly in favor of comparisons between Roman and Florentine politics, the latter against them), see Najemy, Between Friends, 1134. Najemy, however, does not discuss Gilbert.

57 For such a friars’ syllogism, see Machiavelli, Mandragola, 33–34 (act 3, sc. 11).

58 On this difficult task, which could bring Machiavelli into great personal difficulties due to his avowed republican political convictions, see Gilbert, Machiavelli and Guicciardini, 236–38. For Machiavelli’s and Guicciardini’s complex relationship to vernacular historiography, see Phillips, “Machiavelli, Guicciardini, and the Tradition of Vernacular Historiography,” esp. 86–99.

59 The Franciscans were called Zoccolati because they wore wooden slippers.

60 Machiavelli, Lettere, 298.

61 On the history, concept, and use of kairos/occasione in Renaissance political philosophy, see Paul, “The Use of Kairos in Renaissance Political Philosophy,” esp. 59–62 and passim.

62 Machiavelli, Lettere, 299.

63 Machiavelli, Letters, 203; Machiavelli, Lettere, 300: “Cazzus! E’ bisogna andar lesto con costui, perché egli è trincato come il trentamila diavoli.”

64 Machiavelli, Letters, 203 (modified); Machiavelli, Lettere, 300: “Togli, ci debbe essere qualche gran cosa; i messi spesseggiando; — poi, letta la vostra lettera disse: — Io credo che il governatore strazi me et voi.”

65 Machiavelli, Lettere, 300–301 (author’s translation): “in modo che il culo mi fa lappe lappe, ché io ho paura tuttavia che non pigli una granata et rimandimi alla hosteria.”

66 Machiavelli, Letters, 204; Machiavelli, Lettere, 301: “pure il bene che io ho havuto non mi fia tratto di corpo: pasti gagliardi, letti gloriosi, et simili cose, dove io mi sono già tre dì rinfantocciato.”

67 Machiavelli, Lettere, 301.

68 Machiavelli, Letters, 204; Machiavelli, Lettere, 301: “perche costui nicchia.”

69 On that term, see Pier, “Metalepsis,” passim.

70 On this aspect, see Rebhorn, Foxes and Lions, 1–10 and passim.

71 Ortner-Buchberger, Briefe schreiben, 77–78.

75 Wenzel, “Boten und Briefe,” 86–89 and 94.
77 Guedet, *L’art de la lettre humaniste*, 79–84 and 90.xx
78 Marchand, “I ‘gjochi’ di travestimento,” 635.
79 I am following here a suggestion made in a different context by Bachorski, “Lügende Wörter, versteckte Körper, falsche Schrift,” esp. 363–64, according to whom in medieval literature blind trust and faith is the constitutive element of high courtly literature; here, chivalric faith leads to forms of violence (*Gewaltförmigkeit*), whereas lies are a stratagem to subvert or to substitute that violence with laughter and thus to erode (or at least to temporarily eclipse) the social distinctions inherent in that violence.
80 Marchand, “I ‘gjochi’ di travestimento,” 640, quote at 648 (author’s translation) “un altro modo di vedere la realtà ... che permette di rendere ... in evidenza come la natura sia più complessa e più contraddittoria di quanto l’uomo possa immaginare.”
81 Najemy, *Between Friends*, 1156.
ON THE ONE HAND, THE “game of society” is fairly different from simple
games of chance, which, like roulette, create an image of an “imaginary universe
of perfect competition or perfect equality of opportunity,” as Pierre Bourdieu has stated.
On the other, the French sociologist has also pointed to the fact that the game of society
uses “real” games to create, put into work, and reinforce certain values and various
forms of capital—cultural, social, symbolic.1 While encoded meanings are ascribed to
different games in different ways—chess, for instance, allows for other “readings” than,
say, Ludo—less attention has been paid to the drivers in the process of determining a
game’s distinctive cultural features. Basically, the evaluation and perception of a game in
terms of prestige are forged by various media and institutions ranging from legislation
to art and literature through the very materiality of gaming paraphernalia. I will focus
on a late Renaissance poem dedicated to a particular game played by Dido and Aeneas,
interpreting it as a contribution to the framing of contemporary ludic culture. Beyond its
literary claim, the text provides the reader with practical advice for a game regarded to
be honest yet points no less to the importance of behavior in order to make the playing
of that game an acceptable practice. I shall discuss the destiny of both the poem and the
game against the background of shifting conditions in the relationship between texts and
gaming practices.

In 1570, the first edition of Lorzius aleae ludus descripsit by Karl Leuschner, until
recently unknown to scholars, was printed.2 The unique extant copy, now preserved in
the University Library at Bern, is incomplete, but thanks to two reprints, one from 1616
and the other from 1619, the entire text is known. All we know about the author is that
he was from Meissen in Saxony, became a student at the University of Wittenberg in
1565, and contributed to occasional poems printed in 1566, 1567, and 1568 in that
town.3 Lorzius is dedicated to Johannes Fritzsch, a lawyer and syndic to the cathedral of
Meissen.

By the time Karl Leuschner wrote the poem, virtually any subject could be, and
was, treated in metrical form, from venereal diseases in Gerolamo Fracastoro’s didactic
poem Syphilis (1530) to silk worms in Gerolamo Vida’s De Bombicum cura ac usu (1537).
In a satirical diagnosis of German literature, Johann Klaj, in 1645, puts Leuschner’s
Lortsch in a line with, for example, Cardan, Melanchthon, Majoragus, and Aldrovandus
and their eulogic poems on Nero, cheese, excrements, and the spider. Indeed, Vida is a close relative of Leutschner, since he is famous for his poem on chess. The *Scaccheide*, first printed in a pirated version in 1525 and reprinted several times, depicts a game of chess between Apollo and Mercury as a battle between “armies of box that sportively engage / and mimic real battles in their rage,” to quote Oliver Goldsmith’s translation. Vida informs the reader about the rules of chess (“certandi leges”), but it has been stated that the importance of the text derives from its literary rather than its technical value. The poem is itself a poetic game that uses chess as poetic material. Two plots are interwoven—the comic action of play and the more and more “autonomous” war of the chessmen. As a parody of epic literature, it intermingles comical scenes with verbal allusions to Virgil’s *Aeneid*. Vida’s impact, in the choice of the subject, its treatment, and the literary form, seems obvious. It is most improbable that Vida should not have been a source of inspiration for Leuschner. Yet, while Vida’s mock-heroic poem served as a model for other “game-poems,” backgammon-like games had, for different reasons, a far less developed literary tradition. In the lyrics of the Troubadours, backgammon-like games were said to represent vulgarity. Although Leuschner does not consider the game vulgar, he does speak of the representation of lurch in poem form to be playful yet a difficult subject with which to deal (“materiam quidem ludicram, sed tractatu difficilem, describere tentavi”). As late as 1710, Jacques Robbe, in his elegiac poem on Trictrac, conceded this game to be a subject hostile to poetry (“Cette matiere n’est pas amie de la Poësie”). Before Leuschner, Georgius Macropedius in 1539 and Hans Sachs in 1549 had integrated realistic *alea / lurtz*-scenes into their Everyman-dramas, but these scenes have little or no importance to the plot and therefore have little perceivable dramatic impact.

The poem by Leuschner describes the game of lurch, a board game akin to backgammon. The term is first documented as a verb. In the British Library manuscript Royal 13 A xviii from about the first third of the fourteenth century, which contains descriptions and problems for various board games, “lurching” designates a special kind of victory. However, due to the condition of the manuscript, it is not clear what it takes to achieve such a win. In sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Germany, the verb “to lurch” (*lurtschen*) designates a victory that pays the double stake. A player was lurched when seven of his men were hit, which made it impossible to re-enter them all (a precondition for moving the other pieces within the board). In this case, the winner needs not to have borne off his checkers from the board. According to other sources, this happens also if six men are hit. In his dictionary *A Worlde of Wорdes* (1598), John Florio translates the Italian *marcio* as “also a lurch or a maiden set at any game,” that is, a love game where the loser scores nothing. In Johann Fischart’s *Geschichtkitterung* (1575), the board game players’ “lurtsch” is tantamount both to “Martsch” at card games and checkmate. By that time, lurch was also the name of a game. The earliest evidence is from 1465. In that year, the case of a tailor and a shearer having played lurch (“im brett den lurtsch”) for money
was brought before a judge in Zurich. In the sixteenth century, texts as different as François Rabelais’s *Gargantua*, Hans Sachs’s poetry, a Flemish manual for conversation, and a chapter on Palamedes by Blaise de Vigenère refer to the game of lurch (*lourche* or “à l’ourche” in French). However, in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, most of the evidence for the game of lurch (*Lurtsch*, *Lurtz*, *Lortsch*) is from the German-speaking parts of Europe, particularly from the southeastern territories Saxony, Silesia, Moravia, and Bohemia.

Virtually nothing is known about the game’s mechanisms. Ulrich Schädler links the Germanic meanings of *lurtsch*—wrong, left-handed, and so on—to the game’s essence, and points to the Dutch game *Verkeeren*. In fact, as early as 1628, a German text equates *Lortschen* with that game. In both games, the gaming pieces are placed on the Ace-point on the opposite’s left hand at the beginning of the game and moved into one’s own bottom right quarter of the board. Similar to being “lurched,” one is “joined” (made *Jahn*), and loses double his stake, if more than six checkers are to be re-entered.

Lurch is played with dice. Traditionally, this could prove problematic because still in the thirteenth century the use of dice was the line of demarcation between permitted and illicit games. Moreover, the synonym for backgammon-like games (*ludi tabularum*) was—as is the case with the title of Leuschner’s poem—*alea*, which signified “dice” in classical Latin. For such games depending both on chance and skill, the term “*ludi mixti*” was coined by Giovanni d’Andrea in the early fourteenth century. Despite several prohibitions, they came to be tolerated, even regarded as legitimate. Combined chance and skill could even enhance a game’s prestige. King Alfonso X’s book of games (finished in 1283 or 1284) provides a good example. While chess is the most noble sedentary game, backgammon-like games represent the dialectical synthesis of skill or intelligence and luck, of Reason and Chance or Fatalism. Dice are not condemned but are necessary for the game, like feet for the body, because the checkers, unlike chessmen, have no intrinsic value to determine their moves. “Mixed” games might recommend themselves by their very nature and could be instrumentalized in the process of shaping a profane humanistic culture. Hans Sachs refers to Plato when he compares the vicissitudes of human life with such board games. Juan Luis Vives, in his discourse on “leges ludi,” asks which games should be played and states that the best games contain both luck and skill, because through the latter Chance could be checked (“in quo non omnia posit mera sors; insit etiam peritia, quae posit casum corrigere”). Levinius Lemnius—or, rather, his editor—an otherwise harsh opponent of board and card games, exempted *lortsch* as the only “honest” board game, suggesting that there was “almost more skill than luck.” The main purpose of playing such games, however, was to prove self-control and control of one’s affects—which could serve as another example for the *Process of Civilization* as analyzed by Norbert Elias. It could nevertheless prove critical to the status of a game that the above-mentioned synthesis could also mean ambiguity. In 1610, the physician Hyppolitus Guarinonius stated that dice, more than other game, turn gamblers angry
and make them fly into passion. Those practicing “Lurtschen auff dem Bretspil” were said to know this best. The game was referred to as “the passionate Lurtschspil,” because he who gets lurched twice or three times running and does not grow furious must be called a patient and gentle man. 27 To some extent, Leuschner’s poem exemplifies these sociopsychological assumptions.

The popularity of lurch and the like is evidenced by numerous representations in art and literature—realistic, metaphorical, or otherwise. For example, an early sixteenth-century wall painting on a house in Vienna shows a wolf (Protestant) playing against a cow (Catholic) (Figure 6.1). 28 More importantly, games of this kind yielded a high potential of sociability. In fact, they were practiced not only among craftsmen but also among the highest ranks of society. They were a diversion at the court of Brabant in the last third of the fourteenth century (“ad ales vel ‘t verkeerde”) as well as at the Russian court in the seventeenth century. 29 In 1551, an Imperial Court counselor recommended that the Abbot of Weingarten improve his “lurtschen” in order to play better when socializing. 30 By all evidence, it was played by men and women alike. There is also material evidence for the game’s prestige. From the sixteenth century, boards for backgammon-like games were often artfully manufactured and combined with boards for chess and morris.

Figure 6.1. Wolf (Protestant) Playing against a Cow (Catholic), exterior wall painting, early sixteenth century, Vienna. Photo: author.
Leuschner’s text is concerned with the ambiguities of play. In this regard, the dedicatory lines are problematic. The main concern is how to chase sorrow. “Cura fugare” appears three times in the dedication. As there are as many means of diversion and recreation as there are minds, “our” pleasure, says the author, is with the Muses. But even they need rest. Moreover, since the weather is inclement, the board game is proposed: “Quid si tesserulis rotisque pictam / Luderemus in aleam repostis?” To the rhetorical objection that it was an infamous game (“ludus turpis”), inconvenient for an honest man, the reply is that it requires moderation. It ought not be played each and every day, as did Caesar Augustus who, as was known from Suetonius’s Lives of the Caesars, was said to have “tossed the dice all day” and did not even care about his reputation as an outright gambler. Leuschner states that excess is bad in all things. Gaming should not become a kind of commerce or profession. There is a Senecan imperative of temperance and modesty that was applied to games by other contemporary authors, too. Taking into account these precautions, which fit into classical tradition, this game is recommended to any honest man—one is tempted to say, bourgeois—who wants to chase his sorrows.

What follows is a description of lorzius. It is said to be widespread in Germany, where the youth competitively and artfully practice it after their duties. Then Mercury, the god of merchants, gamblers, and eloquence, is invoked as a guide, and the scene opens with Dido and Aeneas leaving the cave into which, according to Virgil (Aeneid, IV, 165–72), they had fled from the storm. The hunting company returns to the palace and seeks to entertain themselves with games that are not supposed to stress the body, but are directed by mind (“mente regantur”). Anachronistically, some are playing cards, others the noble chess, while Dido asks for a game board, which Leuschner describes in detail. The gaming paraphernalia tell stories with a programmatic iconography. The outer side of the board is decorated with sculpted pictures representing the tragic myth of Thisbe and Pyramus as told by Ovid (Metamorphoses, 55–57). Their story is the exemplum of unconditional love and faithfulness, which somewhat diverges from Dido’s and Aeneas’s story. Love and faithfulness, however, are also represented in connection with Dido, as these two virtues are the themes of the two sets of illustrated tokens. There are golden tokens bearing the portrait of Dido’s husband, Sichaeus, on the one side, and Dido’s portrait on the other. A second set of jewelry-ornate checkers depict how Dido is burning with love (“pectus conflagrat amore”) on one side, and unites—probably with her husband—on the reverse.

As with this example, game history can also be told through the materiality of its objects. Both the board and the tokens in Leuschner’s poem are made of precious materials (while the noble chessmen are of boxwood). This not only fits with the protagonists’ princely quality but is also a materiality of prestige that should pertain to the game itself. In this respect, Leuschner did not need to invent much. Precious gaming paraphernalia decorated with iconographic programs were part of princely and noble collections. Roman emperors and empresses as well as living princes and princesses or rich merchants like Jakob Fugger are portrayed on medallion-like gaming pieces side by side.
side with allegoric and emblematic themes, while classical heroes and heroines represent *virtus* and point to the owners’ status and prestige. Mythological characters served as a model. Dido, Pyramus, and Thisbe pointed to the moral commandment of truth until death. One game board and its tokens made in Augsburg in 1537, probably for King Ferdinand I, are entirely based on Ovid and can be read as a humanistic program. Some of these games were representative playthings not to be played with, others instead were used for play.

After the description of the paraphernalia, Dido teaches Aeneas the rules of the game (“placet [...] peregrinus discere ludum, quas habeat leges”) and gives him practical hints about what to take care of and what to avoid. Then the “battle” begins. Like Vida, Leuschner describes the game as a combat between two armies. The ludic-military metaphor can be traced back to Roman authors (Ovid, Martial) who described agonistic and strategic board games like *ludus latrunculorum* as warlike maneuvers. The point is that neither chess nor the *ludus latrunculorum* contains any element of chance represented by dice. Seemingly, the game of tables had been compared to war only once before. In a fourteenth-century French translation of the so-called *Pseudo-Ovid*, it is called “un gieu de guerre partie.” Still, while the French poem somehow denies the role of Chance (“Le gieu ne se fait point par sort, / Mais par art assavoir plus fort”), Leuschner lays stress on the roll of dice (“T esserulis res tota agitur”) and of Fortune (“Cui bona praebebit iactus fortuna secundos”), leaving however space for tactical maneuvers and skill or “voluntas.”

The battle on the game board serves as a practical exemplification or illustration of the rules taught by Dido. But there is more. Although one could think of the game actually played between Dido and Aeneas as yet another instrumentalization of games in the tradition of Roman elegiac poets’ *militia amoris* (military service of love), there is something different in Leuschner’s text. Since every reader knew what happened with Dido and Aeneas (and maybe also with Pyramus and Thisbe), the question arises why Leuschner chose Dido and Aeneas for playing the game. Neither Virgil, nor Ovid, nor any other author mentions ludic practices when telling the story. The big issues in their tales are love, passion, and Reason. These, in turn, are the subject of a book on gambling published in Leuschner’s lifetime which, while lacking any literary ambition, was to become one of the most frequently quoted treatises: *Alea sive de curanda ludendi in pecuniam cupiditate* by the philospher and physician Pascasius Justus (whose full name was Pascasius Justus Turcq), himself a passionate gambler. Printed in 1561 in Basel, the book is a medical analysis of gambling addiction and provides methods to cure oneself. One of the central arguments is that there are two main evils in life: the exaggerated passions of *amor* and *alea* (which is any gambling for money)—“Amor & Alea duo vitae praecipua mala”—when linked with naïve and exaggerated hope.

Confronting Pascasius with Leuschner and reading, at least partly, the latter through the former offers the opportunity for insights into the culture of sixteenth-century gaming and its perceptions, even though there is no proof that Leuschner had
read the medical treatise. Clearly, there are parallels in some respects. The ultimate authority for Pascasius is no less a person than Virgil: the book opens and ends with references to his *Aeneid*. As Toon van Houdt has shown, Pascasius follows a long hermeneutical tradition as he focuses on the conflict between Passion and Reason, incarnated by Dido and Aeneas. Aeneas is the model to be followed. Although on the edge of forgetting his calling, he eventually follows the imperative rule of Reason (and the counsel of the gods) and leaves Dido, who, instead, is swept away by the floods of passion.⁴⁰ Although Giovanni Ceccarelli, discussing Pascasius’s treatise, has correctly stated that Virgil’s “tale is little gambling-specific,” the book also “stresses the relationship between love and passion.”⁴¹ Whereas Pascasius drew on Virgil as diagnostic authority, Leuschner chose Dido and Aeneas as a reference for humanistic culture in order to stress the game’s qualities. He puts the couple into a gaming scene and confronts them with a game, the very essence of which consists of the ambiguous synthesis, or competition, of Chance or Fortuna and skill, or *alea* and *agon* (to use Roger Caillois’s categories), or, in other words, of fatalism or Passion and Reason. The game board is made the battlefield for this competition.

Pascasius had judged his subject worthy of poetic treatment but had not found any piece of literature dealing with it. Thus, he saw himself in the position of delivering arguments for poetical and philosophical fields of exercise. Leuschner seems to accomplish this mission but does so in a quite twisted way. It is Dido who launches the game and instructs Aeneas how to play it. She appears as the “real” gambler, though not in Pascasius’s manner, who states that women with a passion for gambling expose in many respects “a certain virile force” (“virile quoddam robur”) and tend to behave like despotic heroines. At the same time they are said to be subject to violent love (“amore saevo”), as when Dido surrendered to her painful passions.⁴³ Leuschner seems to invert this argument. As will be shown, his couple has changed places. To do so, the author draws on a current topos related to the psychological potential of gambling, of which Pascasius was also aware. Referring to Ovid, Pascasius states that gambling clearly reveals human “ingenium & natura.”⁴⁴ The game played between Dido and Aeneas is a perfect illustration of these assumptions. Moreover, the dramatic composition offers insights on how a society’s degree of civilization can be measured by how it deals with particular games. The game becomes the touchstone of probity and moderation. Leuschner combines history and psychology as well as contemporary stereotypes of behavior at games and thus constructs a morality that could be easily understood.

The couple, submitted to the cast of the dice, wages war on the game board. The ongoing game appears as a dramatic staging where the psychological and biographical dispositions of the two protagonists are displayed within the framework of civic humanistic tradition. Fickle Fortune is confronted with the gamblers’ reactions. Their respective roles and emotions, however, not only are quite asymmetrically distributed, but Leuschner also profiles his heroes’ characters in a rather unexpected way.
Contrary both to Virgil’s tale and to Pascasius’s assumptions, he makes Dido sovereign and Aeneas, who emotionally and dramatically reacts to difficult situations, unbalanced. Leuschner illustrates this on several occasions.

Thus, after Dido has arranged her men in an advantageous position, Aeneas is full of hope that he will be fortunate. As his situation instead gets worse, he grows angry and is about to throw the game. Yet he curbs himself and blames bad luck (“sortem incusat iniquam”). Dido mildly smiles at him and explains that his anger makes sense, because, after all the strokes of fate he had experienced before, it would only be just if Fortune would now turn to his side. She gives the example of her husband who, despite being lucky in many other enterprises and of a mild character, oftentimes lost his patience and became furious when she luckily won at play against him. Dido takes this to be a common feature of noble minds and of those experienced at war. Interestingly, Pascasius, drawing on Virgil, Plato, Aristotle, and Galen, stresses the same correlation. Dido’s advice for Aeneas is pragmatic. She tells him not to surrender too headily to desperation because there will be sunshine after the rain.

Moments later, Aeneas fraudulently tries to compensate the lack of good luck by moving his pieces a different number from that thrown. Dido detects the cheat and concedes that such cheating can be let go now and then. Not all would have agreed. Pascasius, for example, draws a parallel between cheating at play and theft (“furtum”). Dido herself even admits to play this way if Fortune is against her (“Soleoque ita ludere saepe, si mihi fortuna non favet”). But having been deceived many times before, she declares to have been vigilant ever since and warns him not to play such tricks on women, because he who were to deceive them has not yet been born (“Qui nos decipat, nondum est has natus in auras”). Aeneas agrees and, seeking to avoid quarrels, promises to accept whatever the dice will impose.

The game goes on. Dido has blocked all the points Aeneas would need to re-enter the tokens hit off the field. He heaves a sigh and his eyes fill with tears. Asked for the secret cause of his pain, Aeneas makes the game a replica of reality and a mirror of his biography. As he perceives his checkers not being able to re-enter the playing field and stumbling around, he recalls how he and his people have been driven from their country, stumbling around with no place to set foot. Dido comforts him and recommends he resigns himself to his fate. After all, God will bring him a happy ending. To her, the course of the game contains small omens (“omina”) from which she deduces that the time to re-enter his men will come, as it will come for him to regain towns and kingdom. Although with a different turn, Pascasius, too, has pointed to the gamblers’ inclination for deducing omen (“omen fingunt”). However, Dido clears space; but as Chance again runs against Aeneas, he invokes his mother, Venus, and solicits her to grant him a lucky cast, as she had helped him before when he found himself in difficulties. And so she does, but Aeneas commits a tactical error. Dido refuses the correction because the laws of the game prescribe “Quod ponis, postium est.” Instead, she blames him for his fault, which to
her is incompatible with his quality as an experienced general of war. And she warns him that he might pay for his faults if Luck stays by her side.

This proves prophetical. After a final attempt at cheating and Dido conceding him another extraordinary cast of dice, Aeneas eventually is lurched (the term is not used in the text). Dido's emotional reaction is in sharp contrast to her former sometimes ironic, but basically reasoned empathetic and pragmatic attitude. She rises with triumphant and exulting gestures, scoffs at Aeneas defeated by a defenseless woman (“foemineis salibus”), and plumes herself ornately with the spoil, the collier put at stake. The material gain is transubstantiated in symbolic capital as she compares herself to Penthesilea, the Amazon queen who fought in the battle of Troy, and even to Creusa, Aeneas's wife. Aeneas, feeling both the ignominious defeat and the missed victory, grows angry again and prepares the game board for a return game. This time the victory is his, but Dido is not lurched. At stake was whatever the winner would ask. Told what it is he wants, Dido blushes with shame, but cannot refuse to concede—first, because the laws of the game forbid it (“pactâ lege vetatur”), but also because she had not denied him when they were in the cave. Not taking into account the aleatoric element (Dido's luck at play), one could conclude that the first victory goes to (female) Ratio, and the second to (male) Libido.

Dido teaches Aeneas a gaming lesson that turns into a civilizing lesson, in which the game serves as a vector. As Robert Muchembled puts it, sentiments, sensations, joy, and grief are forcefully brewed in games, making the ludic practice an extraordinary school of education and behavior in the face of the other.46 Dido’s reactions and commentaries make her a role model for the “ideal” player. The humanistic reader could appreciate the description of a game and the dramatic scenography for mythological heroes. Their biographies are part of the game and allegorically visible on the gaming paraphernalia. Thus, the membrane surrounding the “magic circle,” which is a vital component of any game according to Johan Huizinga's Homo ludens, proves precarious and permeable.47 Yet the game takes place in a space created by Leuschner alone. The game thus attains an autonomy, which, for the author and many contemporaries, was one of the prerequisites of an honest and morally licit game. The more or less obvious discourses on the conflict between Passion and Reason reinforce the impression that the story is far from being morally neutral. Its scenery, in which civilization, human nature, art, and history are at stake, conveys that very conflict duplicated by the game’s chance–skill duality. In view of gaming as a social and cultural practice, the mythological, martial, and psychological setting is part of the discourse on the validity of gaming as a pastime. In its subtext, the poem enhances the game of lurch’s cultural significance and prestige, if only for the minority who could read Latin.

As regards the technical aspects, Leuschner describes the main components and the basic concept and rules of lurch. The dramatic course of the game, the final purpose of which is to lurch Aeneas, is structured step by step according to the points of the dice cast (and once by Aeneas's poor playing). Anyone should be able to re-play the game
using the text. Still, in this regard, criticisms were leveled against the author. The poem was checked against reality by a group of lurch players, failed, and was then revised. In 1615, an anonymous German rendering was published under the title Theoria & Praxis des kunstlichen Lurtschspiels. Leuschner’s name did not appear. The book was printed in Linz (Upper Austria) by Hans Planck (Blanck), whom Johann Kepler had invited the same year to print his books.\textsuperscript{48} On the title page, the translator-redactor identifies himself as a “lover of all artful games.” A handwritten notice in one of the two extant copies of the Theoria & Praxis reveals his identity as Alban Venediger.\textsuperscript{49} Venediger, a Protestant “juris utriusque doctor” and “advocatus” from an Austrian family, had defended his Disputatio de attentatis in Basel, where it was printed in 1607. In the course of the Austrian Counter-Reformation, he was forced into exile in Regensburg, where he died in 1634.\textsuperscript{50} In the “Praefatio,” he calls himself the “rhymester” and declares to have been asked by good friends to do this work. Indeed, Venediger points to both the advantages and shortcomings of Leuschner’s poem. First, although the poet is said to have made the game ornate with beautiful verses, the use of Latin limits the reach of the text. Then Venediger praises the way Leuschner has treated the theory of the game. Still, as regards the practical content (the game actually played), Venediger finds it incomplete because the poet had prioritized artful writing. To combine art and practice, Venediger conserves the original text and revises the step-by-step description of the game as it is played. He inserts some technical terms and adds a final piece of advice for balanced work and diversion. Nonetheless, the original Latin poem was reprinted by Hans Planck the following year.

The troubles of the Counter-Reformation ravaging Upper Austria doubtless hampered a wide diffusion of Planck’s books. Two later editions had more luck. The first is part of Caspar Dornau’s Amphitheatum sapientiae Socratieae joco-seriae (Hannover, 1619), which includes also Vida’s and Giulio Ascanio Tuccio’s poems on chess as well as Konrad Rittershausen’s poem on playing cards. The second, together with Vida’s poem, appears in 1630 in the section “Paedeutica” (games) of Johann Heinrich Alsted’s Encyclopedia. According to Alsted, Lorzius is not the least laudable of “liberal games” appropriate for upright spirits. As early as 1628, some “noble and well-practised” players of lurch, probably from the Silesian town of Schurgast (today Polish Skorogoszcz) had honored the game in the “Law of lurch described” (Beschriebenes Lortsch-Recht), a small book printed in Breslau (Wrocław).\textsuperscript{51} It contains six German poems plus one Latin poem—Leuschner’s. Taken from Dornau, it is reduced to the theoretical explanations—that is, the general rules and advice Venediger had approved of in the original poem—and stripped of all the mythological context. Dido and Aeneas have disappeared, and some alterations have been made and a few technical terms added. Except for Leuschner’s text, the book is of little practical use. Despite some general moral issues of gaming, it seems to have been published for the amusement of a local group of players in view of the ritualized and codified transfer of property through that game.
Lortsch-Recht, like the 1609 Rümffens Ordnung dedicated to the card game Rümpfen, did not yet have the features of a “modern” game manual. However, about that time the market for this kind of book developed and there was the beginning of a boom in production. The bourgeois-shaped reluctance to fully accept the economic raison d’être of gaming was thwarted—“euphemized” in the words of Pierre Bourdieu—by a growing market for books that taught one how to play correctly and to one’s own advantage; in other words, to accumulate cultural capital without neglecting the quest of material profit. Although not always devoid of poetical clothing, these texts were conceived as practical instructions rather than for literary amusement. If didactic poems on games survived throughout the eighteenth century, poetry began to separate from the art of play. Obviously, there was a trend toward, and a need for, objectification. While chess, checkers, and some other games had earlier been treated “scientifically” and for practical use, lovers of backgammon-like board games had to wait until 1607 and the publication of the Italian manual for the game Sbaraglino. The first of a series of seventeenth-century editions of a French Trictrac manual followed in 1634. Lurch never made it into printed game manuals—with the unique, and curious, exception of handwritten rules in a copy of the 1678 edition of the German Palamedes redivivus. Yet, these rules mark the beginning of the end for lurch. Entitled “Lortschen, oder Verkehren,” there is not one single allusion to the terms specific to lurch. Instead, all the technical terms derive from the Dutch game of Vermeer. Lurch gave way to Verkeer, which was to be included in most of the subsequent German game manuals. Leuschner’s “awesome” poetical rules and their German version remained what they may have been intended as—a literary plaything in the hands of a few, which was eventually abandoned and forgotten like the name of the game—which is to say: left in the lurch.

NOTES

1 Bourdieu, “The Forms of Capital;” Bourdieu, Die feinen Unterschiede, Anhang IV.
2 When I published my Bibliographie der Spielbücher des 15. bis 18. Jahrhunderts, the 1570 print was unknown to me. The poem, in all its editions, went unnoticed by all scholars dealing with the tale of Dido and Aeneas.
3 Album Academiae Vitebergensis, 87.
6 Chicco and Rosino, Storia degli scacchi in Italia, 61.
9 Robbe, Trictracus, carminibus elegiacis illustratus.
11 For an explanation, see Schädler, “Das Spiel der Engländer,” esp. 120–21. For a different reading, see Murray, A History of Board-Games, 124.
12 Sagittarius [Schütz], Ad ludum scachium. See the French translation in and by Alliey, “Paul-Martin Sagittarius,” 124.
13 Florio, A Worlde of Wordes.
14 Staub et al., Schweizerisches Idiotikon, s.v. spal(l), spel(l), spil(l), spol(l), spul(l), 183. See also Caretta, Spielen und Konflikte ums Spielen, 21.
16 For an explanation, see Schädler, “Das Spiel der Engländer,” esp. 120–21. For a different reading, see Murray, A History of Board-Games, 124.
17 Schädler, “Das Spiel der Engländer,” 121.
18 Beschriebenes Lortsch-Recht / Von etlichen Vornehmen / und in dieser Sachen wolgeübten Lortschern einmütig aufgesetzt und an Tag gegeben.
19 Murray, A History of Board-Games, 127. Fiske, Chess in Iceland and in Icelandic Literature, 260.
20 Ceccarelli, Il gioco e il peccato, 69.
23 Alfons X. “der Weise”: das Buch der Spiele, 31 and 46. For an English translation, see Golladay, Los libros de acedrex, dados e tablas, 106–8. On Alfonso X’s Book of Chess, Dice, and Tables as social critique, see in the present volume “Visual Frames and Breaking the Rules of the Reconquista: Chess and Alfonso X, el Sabio’s Libro de ajedrez, dados, y tablas” by Nhora Lucía Serrano.
26 Lemnius, Occulta naturae miracula, 103.
28 Lazius [Latz], Rerum Viennensium Commentarii, 131. Karner, “Die gespaltene Seele,” esp. 120.
31 See, for example, Lorich, De institutione principum, 199v–200r: “Si quidem multi sunt, qui in ludus velit in rebus maxime seriis versantur, quod non est ludere, sed negociari potius.”
32 See, for example, the panegyric for Gnaeus Calpurnius Piso (d. 65 A.D.), a Roman senator and a good latrunculi player, who is depicted as a man who likes to artfully play a game when tired from the burden of work and wishing not to be idle (“Te si forte iuvat studiorum pondere fessum, non languere tamen, lususque movere per artem”). Quoted in Schädler, “Latrunculi,” esp. 64, note 32.
33 See Himmelheber, Spiele, 60. Mit Glück und Verstand, 234–46.
35 See, for example, Schädler, “Latrunculi.”
36 La Vieille ou les dernières amours d’Ovide, 66.
37 See Raucci, “Playing Board Games with Ovid.”
38 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], _Alea_. The best analysis is Van Houdt, “Healing Words.” Depaulis, “Cardan et Joostens;” Elaut, “Pascasius Iustus Turcq.” In the present volume, see the account by Andreas Hermann Fischer, “The Problem of Excessive Play: Renaissance Strategies of Ludic Governmentality.”

39 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], _Alea_, 17 and 33. For a German translation of the 1642 edition, see Kronegger, “Die zwei Bücher des Pascasius Iustus.” See the same title by Susan Kronegger-Roth (Kiel: Solivagus, 2015). For a French translation, see _Pascasius ou comment comprendre les addictions suivi du Traité sur le jeu_ (1561).


41 Arcangeli, _Recreation in the Renaissance_, 42.

42 Caillois, _Les jeux et les hommes_.

43 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], _Alea_, 12 and 47. I have considered the topic of gender and gaming in “Glueck, puelerey und spiel verkert sich oft und viel.”

44 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], _Alea_, 57.

45 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], _Alea_, 60.

46 Muchembled, “Jeux, cultures et sociétés,” esp. 104.


49 Wolfenbüttel, Herzog August Bibliothek, Xb 8994 (2).


51 See note 17.

52 See, for example, Roman’s _Les échecs, poème en quatre chants_.


54 Sagittarius, _Ad ludum scachium_, A3 vo.
“Sportes and Pastimes, done by Number”:
Mathematical Games in Early Modern England

Jessica Marie Otis

The ways English men and women apprehended numbers underwent a transformation during the last half of the sixteenth century and first decades of the seventeenth century. Until the beginning of the sixteenth century, most English men and women expressed numerical concepts through a combination of performative and object-based symbolic systems, such as tally sticks and counting boards. However, during the late sixteenth century, the advent of vernacular arithmetic textbooks combined with rising literacy rates to encourage the adoption of a single written system: Arabic numerals. In the seventeenth century, English men and women increasingly abandoned performative and material forms of calculation for mental and literate alternatives.

It was during this period of transition that mathematics emerged as a form of play, both in its own right and as an auxiliary to older games. Children of all ages appropriated the material objects associated with increasingly obsolete forms of calculation, turning them into toys, while the new genre of arithmetic textbooks encouraged their readers to hone their mathematical skills by mentally playing with numbers. These textbooks taught a variety of party tricks to show off one’s arithmetical skills, including variants of the familiar modern challenge: pick a number between one and a hundred. More advanced students also made games out of challenging one another to prove their facility with mathematical instruments, especially those associated with surveying.

At the same time, early modern men and women increasingly attempted to use mathematics as an aid in games of chance such as dice or card games. Particularly when money rode on the outcome of a game, men and women attempted to calculate the odds—a term which itself only emerged in the late sixteenth century—of a chance occurrence. The sophistication of these calculations ranged from the precise equations of the mathematician Girolamo Cardano to hasty estimates of professional gamblers, but all these calculations were used to assess the honesty of other players and the fairness of a game’s outcome. By the end of the seventeenth century, mathematics had become an enduring component of gaming as well as being acknowledged as itself a form of play.
“As Though You Coulde Divine”: Mathematical Games and Education

While it is not possible to determine the extent to which people played mathematical games in their daily lives, there is evidence that early modern children were particularly disposed toward playing as they learned arithmetic and other mathematical skills. John Hall of Richmond described children setting mathematical challenges to one another as they first mastered the elements of arithmetic: “We finde children, one with another, making it one of the first tryals of their abilities to pose each other in mental addition of numbers,” for example “having the question asked them how many two and three do make, or the like” small numbers.¹

Educational theorist John Aubrey argued that early exposure was the key to ensuring students took pleasure in arithmetic; boys “will joyfully imbibe such demonstrative, delightfull, and usefull Learning: and being learnt so young; it sticks by them as long as they live.”² In other words, as Aubrey scribbled in the margins of his treatise:

Boies will Adde, Mutiply & Diuide as
fast as a Dog will trot; will run up an account
Like a shop-keeper. A Barre-boy at an
Ale-house will reckon faster & readier than
a Master of Arts in a University, or a Justice of Peace³

At least one boy, the future mathematician John Wallis, took this to extremes by learning “to Write and Cypher, or Cast account” from his younger brother’s arithmetic textbook as a “pleasing Diversion, at spare hours” while on holiday.⁴

The line between learning arithmetic and mathematical games was especially blurred around a category of physical objects known as jetons, or counters. These metal discs were generally used in tandem with a counting board or reckoning table and together formed a type of abacus along similar lines to ancient Greek and Roman pebble abacuses.⁵ They could be used by people of all ages. A woodcut of 1615, for example, shows a father shaking hands to seal a deal with the merchant who is to teach his young son the use of jetons; the merchant’s other hand rests upon a prominently displayed reckoning table (Figure 7.1). But in addition to being objects of calculation, jetons were often appropriated by children as objects of play. Elizabethan sources talk of children playing with points, pins, cherry-stones, and jetons, all of which served the dual function of game tokens and a currency substitute to determine winners and losers.⁶ In 1617, when the engraver Nicholas Hilliard obtained a presumably lucrative twelve-year monopoly over jeton sets with images of members of the royal family, the monopoly specified their use was to be both “for reckoning and for play.”⁷ Although jetons were still used with counting boards in the seventeenth century, the adoption of Arabic numeral arithmetic made them increasingly obsolete as mathematical objects. They continued to be produced throughout the eighteenth century; however, the quality of their workmanship declined
as they were used less for their original purpose of calculating financial transactions and more as tokens for scoring children’s games. 8

Children were also explicitly taught mathematical games in their arithmetic textbooks, which became a foundational component of English mathematical education by the turn of the seventeenth century. England’s first vernacular textbook, the anonymously authored *An Introduction for to Learn to Reckon with the Pen & with the Counters*, was swiftly overtaken in popularity by Robert Recorde’s *The Ground of Artes*, first published in 1543. This second textbook proved so successful that it went through over forty-five editions, becoming the brand name for early modern arithmetic textbooks. It only went out of print in the eighteenth century, after being eclipsed by a new style of competitors that included sections on advanced subjects such as decimal fractions, logarithms, and algebra.

Part of the longevity of early modern arithmetic textbook titles such as *The Ground of Artes* was due to the fact that, after their first authors’ deaths, they continued to be published under the editorship of other mathematicians who constantly added to the textbooks’ content—and touted the most significant changes on their title pages—in hopes of attracting potential buyers through a combination of branding and originality. The first major addition to *The Ground of Artes*, a section on arithmetic with fractions, was
made by the infamous mathematician and astrologer John Dee in 1561, while a second was made by a Southwark schoolmaster named John Mellis, in 1582. Mellis’s addition included seventeen new chapters on a variety of practical, trade-related subjects as well as an eighteenth chapter that “entreateth of diuers Sportes and Pastimes, done by Number.” Later editors had no compunctions against adding, editing, or deleting old material that proved unpopular, such as Robert Norton’s short-lived attempt to add decimal arithmetic to the title in 1615. Thus, the fact that this chapter on mathematical games was included in every subsequent edition of The Ground of Artes, save one, indicates that the idea of mathematical games found a receptive audience among arithmetic students.

While The Ground of Artes was the most popular arithmetic textbook advocating for its readers to play games based on their mathematical studies, it was by no means unique. Edmund Wingate’s arithmetic textbook, Arithmetique made easie, first published in 1630, also eventually came to include sections on mathematical games. After his textbook failed to sell as rapidly as its competitors, Wingate solicited the mathematical teacher John Kersey to revise the work for the 1650 reprint. This included writing on—and using the title to advertise the addition of—more advanced topics such as “Recreative questions, exercising symbolicall arithmetique, and the rule of algebra.” However, his “recreative” algebra questions, with their difficult and extensive explanations, never gained much traction with early modern readers; they were reprinted in the 1652 edition then quietly dropped. While many early modern authors’ assertions must be viewed through the lens of advertising hyperbole, Wingate’s claims to entertain with advanced mathematics tended to be particularly far-fetched, as evidenced by his 1654 book on logarithm tables, entitled Ludus Mathematicus, or The mathematical game. It was reprinted once, in 1681; however, few people seemed to find using logarithm tables to extract square and cube roots entertaining.

Wingate’s success as an arithmetic textbook author only began after his death in 1656, which freed Kersey to make more substantive changes to the text. The 1658 edition, now rebranded as Mr. Wingate’s arithmetick, was “digested into a more familiar methode”—specifically, following The Ground of Artes, in separating whole number arithmetic from fractions—“and very much augmented.” Kersey’s additions also aped the contents of the more popular textbook, beginning with ten chapters on trade-related subjects followed by a chapter on “Sportes and Pastimes.” These changes all proved popular with Kersey’s late seventeenth-century audience and the revitalized Mr. Wingate’s arithmetick went through another twenty editions, staying in print until 1740.

The mathematical games that authors like John Mellis and John Kersey successfully brought before their early modern audiences fell into two rough categories: divination tricks and logistical puzzles. The former dominate Mellis’s chapter in The Ground of Artes, which began with a variant of the still-familiar mathematical challenge to pick a number: “If you would know the number that any man doth thinke, or imagine in hys
minde, as though you could divine.”¹³ Using the basic arithmetical operations of addition, subtraction, multiplication, and division, Mellis’s readers could then manipulate the number before eventually reproducing it to their audience’s surprise and delight.

Mellis provided several divination challenges, for variety’s sake, and made certain to work through examples of each challenge in action to ensure reader comprehension. For example, a “Diuination to tell youre frend, how many pence ... hee hath in his purse” requires the friend to multiply by 2, add 5 to the result, then multiply that number by 5. At that point the friend reports his or her number and the reader “divines” the friend’s original number by dropping the rightmost digit of the number and subtracting 2.¹⁴ After explaining this process in the abstract, Mellis provided a concrete example with an original number of 17, worked out in both words and Arabic numerals to ensure reader comprehension (Figure 7.2).

While Kersey began his own chapter on mathematical games with divination tricks, he also included three examples of a different type of game: logistical puzzles. His first was an abstract puzzle to which he immediately gave a concrete—and peculiarly early modern—form, as follows:

15 *Christians* and 15 *Turks* being at Sea in one and the same ship in a terrible storm, and the Pilot declaring a necessity of casting the one half of those persons into the Sea, that the rest might be saved; they all agreed that the persons to be cast away should be set out by lot after this manner, viz. the 30 persons should be placed in a round form like a *Ring*, and then beginning to count at one of the passengers, and proceeding circularly, every ninth person should be cast into the Sea, until of the 30 persons there remained only 15. The question is, how those 30 persons ought to be placed that the lot might infallibly fall upon the 15 *Turks*, and not upon any of the 15 *Christians*?¹⁵

The solution being complicated, Kersey provided a mnemonic so that his readers could put this impressive party trick into action—presumably without actually drowning anyone. The reader was to remember the ordering of Christians and Turks via the following

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phrase: “From numbers aid and art / Never will fame depart.” Each vowel was assigned a number: a = 1, e = 2, i = 3, o = 4, u = 5. The reader was to work their way through the phrase, placing alternating Christians and Turks in the numbers indicated by the vowels. So “from numbers aid” indicated the reader should place o = 4 Christians, followed by u = 5 Turks, then e = 2 Christians, a = 1 Turk, i = 3 Christians, and so forth until all the Christians and Turks were in place and the elimination game could begin.16

Kersey’s other two logistical puzzles were less spectacular as party tricks, but were still chosen to appeal to his audience. The first is now known as the Jealous Husbands Problem, a river-crossing puzzle that had already been circulating throughout Europe for several centuries. In this problem, three jealous husbands and their wives must cross a river in a two-person boat; however, no wife may ever be in the company of men unless her husband is also present. The other was a liquid-measuring puzzle in which two “merry Companions” must divide eight gallons of wine using three vessels of eight, five, and three gallons’ size. While not, strictly speaking, a drinking game, such puzzles would have been appealing to work out over jugs of beer or wine.17

Both Mellis and Kersey provided examples of their games in action; however, neither expected readers to concern themselves with the complicated mathematics that provided the foundation of each game. With rather more honesty than is found in many early modern texts, Kersey admitted to having “extracted the Contents of this Chapter” from a French book by “the most ingenious Gaspar Bachet” and directs readers to Bachet’s book for “infallible argumentation and discourse,” should they be interested in explanations.18 Given that Bachet’s book was never translated into English, it is unlikely that many of Kersey’s readers were so interested. The seventeenth century did see the translation of Jean Leurechon’s Récréation mathématique, a collection of mathematical and scientific exercises that ranged from the familiar divination puzzle, “finde a number thought upon,” to optical experiments in creating “divers sorts of Rainebowes.”19 However, Leurechon’s book never enjoyed the same level of commercial success as arithmetic textbooks.

While most early modern mathematical games took the form of arithmetical challenges and logistical puzzles, there was also a subset of mathematical challenges based on trigonometry and surveying. Adam Martindale, a mid seventeenth-century minister and schoolmaster, taught his students to become such “good Surveyors; they take a great delight in it: and on playdays make it their pastime.”20 They particularly enjoyed showing off their skills in public; Martindale once “took four or five of my Scholars to the Heath with me” on a measurement challenge “and to the admiration of the Spectators, and especially of a skilful Surveyor then living in the Town, they went about their work as regularly, and dispatched it with as much expedition and exactness, as if they had been old Land-meters.”21

Measurement challenges were not only the province of mathematical students. Edward Montagu, first Earl of Sandwich, was particularly fond of calculating the height of objects he encountered in his travels and recorded the results of his calculations in
his personal notebook. One particular incident was recounted at length by the diarist Samuel Pepys:

At last we came upon a very high Cliffe by the sea-side; and riding under it, we having laid great wagers—I and D. Mathews, that it was not so high as Pauls—my Lord and Mr. Hetly that it was. But we riding under it, my Lord made a pretty good measure of it with two sticks, and found it to be not above 35 yards high and Pauls now is reckoned to be about 90 ... Being returned on board, my Lord called for Mr. Sheplys book of Pauls, by which we were confirmed in our wager.

This adult version of a measurement challenge thus retained the essentially mathematical character of schoolboy games, while introducing monetary stakes to give the game more meaning than simply the pleasure of calculating itself. Indeed, it was during this same period that mathematics became inextricably intertwined with games of chance and gaming—or, in modern terms, gambling.

“Thou Art A Perjured Knave”: The Mathematics of Gaming

Gaming was a long-standing aspect of English culture by the sixteenth century. Although early Tudor Parliaments promulgated laws to restrict gaming, they were largely concerned with the socioeconomic consequences of gaming practices rather than gaming per se. Men, women, and children of all ages and social statuses played games of chance, betting on their outcomes with stakes that ranged from nuts and pins to shillings and pounds. It was through this casual gaming that people developed the term *odds*, which came to mean the quantified likelihood of a future event—a nascent form of probability.

During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, most English games of chance fell into one of three main categories. The oldest category consisted of dice games, which were almost purely dependent on chance. Evidence of dice games can be found in documents dating back to the Roman occupation of Britain. Tables, which included more skill-based games like backgammon and chess, only first appeared in England during the twelfth century. Lastly, card games were more of a mixed lot and could range from those based almost entirely on chance to those that required a great deal of skill. Card games were the relative newcomers. The first verifiable English reference to cards dates to the third year of the reign of Edward IV, whose Parliament banned the importation of foreign “dice, tenis-balls ... chessmen, [and] playing cards.”

Many of the late fifteenth- and early sixteenth-century references to games of chance came from statutes restricting the practice of gaming. These were not universal bans on games of chance, but rather limitations on where and when the more financially vulnerable segments of society could play. The text of 11 Hen. 7 c. 2 forbade artificers, laborers, and servants from playing cards outside of the Christmas holidays, and even during the holidays they could only play within their master’s house. Several statutes
against unlawful gaming were promulgated during the reign of Henry VIII, culminating in 33 Hen. 8 c. 9, which allowed the noble and rich to play games at will but banned the “Artificer or Craftsman of any handy-craft or occupation, husbandman, apprentice, labourer, servant at husbandry, journeyman or servant of Artificer, mariners, fishermen, watermen, or any serving-man ... [from playing] at the tables, tennis, dice, cards, bowls, clash, coyting, logating, or any other unlawful game, out of Christmas, under the pain of xx. s. to be forfeit for every time.” As with earlier laws, even this Christmas gaming was only allowed to occur within a master’s house or in the master’s presence.

The restriction of popular gaming to the Christmas season was an attempt to preserve social order by limiting the amount of gaming enjoyed by ordinary English men and women, while at the same time conceding to the reality that people would play games of chance in their leisure time, regardless of its legality. Charles Cotton—a seventeenth-century poet who wrote a treatise on the various types and rules of gaming—explained that the professional gamester, who had no occupation other than gaming, “loves Winter more than Summer, because it affords more Gamesters, and Christmas more than any other time, because there is more gaming then.” Cotton argued that gaming was more prevalent during the winter, when days were shorter and nights longer, which allowed more time for the generally nocturnal activity of gaming. Furthermore, the agricultural activities of the summer would keep men and women well occupied, whereas winter—and the Christmas holidays in particular—allowed people the time to play games of chance.

During the rest of the year, gaming came under much stricter regulation, but there were still ways for common people to play games of chance legally. Clergyman Thomas Gataker noted that laws against gaming allowed “any servuant to play at cards, dice or tables with his Master, or any Gentleman repairing to his house openly in his house and in his presence” at any point during the year. Furthermore, “any Nobleman or Gentleman of a hundreth pound lands per annum [could] licence his servuants at his discretion” to play games of chance even outside of his presence. Even those servants without such socially respectable backers could play games of chance, so long as the stakes were kept low enough: the law forbade a “servant or labourer [to] play at tables saue for meate and drinke.” However, those without any social ties could not play regardless of the stakes, a restriction which was aimed against professional gamesters, who comprised a portion of the worrisome vagrant population: “all wandring persons vsing vnlawfull games [are] to be punished as Rogues and Vagabonds.”

While the language of gaming laws was exclusively masculine and adult—referencing husbandmen, serving-men, gentlemen, and noblemen—women and children also played games of chance. Cotton denigrated the card game Bone-Ace, calling it “trivial and very inconsiderable, and so it is by reason of the little variety therein contein’d;” however, he admitted that both “Ladies and Persons of quality [play] at it for their diversion.” Gaming was also an acceptable activity for young girls. When James IV of Scotland went...
to meet his future bride, the fourteen-year-old daughter of Henry VII, he arrived at her residence and found her playing at cards.34 Children might not have as extensive a knowledge of gaming as adults; however, games such as “Honours (alias Slamm) and Whist, are Games so commonly Known in England in all parts thereof, that every Child almost of Eight years old hath a competent knowledge in that recreation.”35

Children did not often have the same financial resources as adults; however, they still bet on the outcome of their games. One Bristol child admitted engaging in a number of different entertainments on his way to school, including gaming: he “did slide upon the ice, cast snow, fought with his fists and balls of snow, scourged his top, [and] played for pennies, cherry stones, counters, dice, and cards.”36 More well-to-do children did play for money like adults. At age ten, Prince Arthur lost forty shillings playing at dice while two years later his younger brother, the future Henry VIII, had more luck and won six shillings eight pence.37

Adults actually encouraged children’s early forays into gaming. At age ten, Edward the Black Prince was supplied with money so that he could play dice with his mother, Sir John Chandos, and the boys of his household.38 One early sixteenth-century schoolbook, William Horman’s Vulgaria, devoted an entire section to teaching grammar school students how to discuss their gaming activities in Latin. This included translations for phrases such as “Men pley with .III. dice: and children with .iiij. dalies,” “A sengle ace is a losynge caste,” “Syeace wynneth all,” and “Let ws pley euen and odde.”39 For Horman, childhood gaming was not simply an activity to be tolerated but rather something he officially incorporated into his Latin curriculum, exposing boys to the concepts and methods of various games of chance.

This widespread familiarity with gaming, among people of all ages and social stations, facilitated an increasing understanding of chance. The repeated tossing of a six-sided die—an act with six equally possible outcomes—lent itself particularly well to studying the likelihood of future events and was often used as an example by mathematicians studying chance.40 As early as 960, Bishop Wibold of Cambrai created a list of all the possible outcomes that could result from throwing three such dice simultaneously, while a thirteenth-century Latin poem did the same for consecutive dice throws.41 Contemporaries both acknowledged and deplored the link between gaming and chance. As the royal tutor Roger Ascham, in his 1545 treatise Toxophilus, sarcastically explained, “Cardinge and dysinge, haue a sorte of good felowes also, goyng commonly in theyr companye, as blynde Fortune, stumbling chaunce, spittle lucke, false dealyng, crafty conueraunce, braynlesse brawlynge, [and] false forswerynge.”42

Understanding the vagaries of chance was particularly important for uncovering false dealing and other types of cheating.43 Variations in dice structure could negate the supposed equality of each potential outcome, and gamesters were often quick to notice when dice did not turn up all numbers with the expected frequency. Girolamo Cardano, a compulsive gambler and mathematician who spent several months traveling in England
and Scotland, calculated the odds of throwing the same number repeatedly and explained his own in-game mental processes as follows: “To throw in a fair game at Hazards only three spots, when something great is at stake, or some business is the hazard, is a natural occurrence and deserves to be so deemed; and even when they come up the same way for a second time, if the throw be repeated. If the third and fourth plays are the same, surely there is occasion for suspicion on the part of a prudent man.” Cardano might not have expected his readers to be able to calculate the likelihood of such a throw, but he was perfectly capable of doing so himself: “If three throws are necessary, we shall multiply 3 times; thus, 6 multiplied into itself and then again into itself gives 216.” Thus, throwing three spots in a row a fourth time was even more suspicious, being only one of 1296 possible dice combinations.

Sir Nicholas L’Estrange, an avid collector of anecdotes, related a similar mentality in a dice game that devolved into an argument over what numbers the dice had shown. One gentleman swore the numbers had been a four and a five, while the other said they had been a five and a six. “Sir William then replied, ‘Thou art a perjured knave; for, give me a sixpence, and if there be a four upon the dice, I will return you a thousand pounds’; at which the other was presently abashed, for, indeed, the dice were false, and of a high cut, without a four.” Sir William had made enough observations, throughout the course of their game, to believe it likely that his opponent was cheating. He thus wagered an outrageous sum on the outcome of a future event, namely his search of the dice for abnormalities. In particular, he assigned a quantitative value to the likelihood that he would find fours on the dice—he laid down 40,000 to 1 odds.

Both the word *odds* and its use to describe quantified chance, or the probability of a future event, first appeared during the sixteenth century. The word itself dates to the beginning of the century, when its primary definitions related to inequality and proportion, rather than probability: “the condition or fact of being unequal; disparity in number, amount, or quantity; dissimilarity, inequality.” For instance, George Best, in describing temporal differences across the globe, asked his readers to “looke what oddes and difference of proportion there is betwene the Sunnes abode aboue the Horizon in Paris, and the abode it hath vnder the Equinoctiall.” Best’s odds are thus the proportional difference between the sun’s position in Paris and at the equator, a number based on the mathematical operation of division.

This original definition was also the basis for the prevalent use of the term *odds* to indicate the difference in size between two groups of people, most commonly armies. John Foxe described one Anglo-Saxon battle, noting “that fight was great oddes of number, as 6. or 8. against one, yet Egbert … had the better and wan the field” despite the great disparity in the size of the armies. Fifty years later, Charles Aleyne wrote about the battles of Crécy and Poitiers and claimed that the English were not dismayed at the sight of their enemy, even though the French “had the odds of number sixe to one.” Other authors used the same language to write about the “odds of at least Thirty for One”
between those who did and did not conform to the Book of Common Prayer; the “odds of Ninety of their Ships against Fifty of ours;” and a vote in the House of Lords which threw out the Bill of Exclusion “with the odds of 63 against [sic] 31.”

While this use of the term *odds* was mathematical, in the sense of being expressed numerically, it was not probabilistic and made no attempt to predict the outcome of future events. The distinction between the initial formulation of odds and a probabilistic, gaming-based formulation can best be illustrated by Roger Castlemaine’s 1666 analysis of the Venetian navy. Though the Venetian “great ships” were only sixteen in number, “with this they so affright the Turk, that now, on purpose to engage, he dares not appear; and should he set to Sea 200 of the best Vessels he could get, they would not only attack him, but be all more assured of a Victory then the odds of two to one can give a sober Gamster.” The odds, or proportional difference, between the Turkish and Venetian fleets were technically 12.5 to 1. Yet, despite the Venetians being at a numerical disadvantage, the odds, or likelihood, of their victory were calculated to be greater than 2 to 1.

The use of the term *odds* became associated with gaming and calculating probabilities within a few decades of its first use. Its gaming definition was a logical outgrowth of its initial formulation: “the ratio between the amounts staked by the parties in a bet, based on the expected probability either way.” These odds were also based on the idea of a proportional difference, or inequality, between two or more stakes. This difference in stakes was then conflated with the predicted outcome of the wager. Unlike odds that specified the numerical difference between groups of men or ships or other physical objects, these new odds were based on the idea of prediction and the perceived likelihood of future events.

Thomas Churchyard used the predictive language of gaming odds as early as 1552: “I durst lay odds who trust you long, full false he shall you finde.” By the 1590s, the predictive definition of odds had become pervasive enough that it was utilized in nongaming contexts, and even turned up in tracts written by two clergymen. Bishop Gervase Babington alluded to the likelihood of God’s vengeance: “surely it is many to one, that neyther in the coole of the day the Lorde will visit vs, but euen cast vs away for euer.” George Abbot, Professor of Divinity and Master of University College, also used the language of odds to describe the likelihood of punishment for sin: “It is oddes of many to one, but that thy wantons, afterward will worke thee as much ioy, as Elies children did to their doting father, that is, bring a curse on thee or them.” Other clergymen were more explicit about the predictive nature of their odds, such as Donald Lupton, who in 1642 explained odds of 5 to 1 as “a mighty odds to all probability.”

While these predictive odds theoretically mathematized chance, early modern men and women often framed odds in a quantitative but non-numerical fashion. In 1659, Roman Catholic philosopher John Sergeant used the language of odds to mock Bible-reading Protestants, declaring that “it would puzzle any mans Arithmetick, to count how many to one it is, there is not one true word of Scripture in Scripture.” He understood the concept and rhetorical power of mathematically calculable odds, but lacked either the
skill or the inclination to be numerically specific. Eighteen years later, however, he had no
trouble using specific numbers when he similarly relied on the language of odds to assert
that “a Protestant may with a safe Conscience lay odds, and wager two to one at least, his
Faith is all a Falshood.”59

Even those who assigned quantitative values to their predictive odds may or may
not have done so via mathematical calculations. In 1610, Barnabe Rich wrote of his
surprise at discovering Saint Patrick had been born in England: “I would haue layed two
to one, that S. Patrick had bin an Irishman borne. But I will be better aduised hereafter,
both how I lay any wagers, & how I beleue any such authorities.”60 After his ill-informed
prediction proved false, Rich intended to become more careful about his research before
assigning quantitative values to any future predictions. John Wilkins, Bishop of Chester,
was more cautious in his own predictions. He explained to his readers that only “Such
kinds of things or events, whether Good or Evil, as will certainly come to pass, may
fall under computation, and be estimated as to their several degrees, as well as things
present.” He encouraged his readers to perform their own calculations by providing an
illustrative example: “for a man to be one amongst four or five equal Competitors ... in
such cases there be the odds of three or four to one.”61 It was through this and
similar games involving chance that the people of early modern England developed the
concept of predictive odds, which usually were conveyed by quantitative—if not always
mathematically calculated—means.

Conclusion

The sixteenth and seventeenth centuries thus saw changes in common forms of numer-
acy and arithmetical education, which in turn encouraged and enabled the people of
England to incorporate a mathematical element into their “Sportes and Pastimes.”62
Children appropriated the jetons of counting-board arithmetic for game tokens after the
adoption of Arabic numerals made them superfluous in trade, while the new genre of
arithmetic textbooks taught divination games and other party tricks to generations of
students. Those who had availed themselves of more advanced mathematical training also
entertained themselves with measuring challenges, even going so far as to place wagers on
their mathematical prowess.

At the same time that some mathematical activities became a form of play in their
own right, other calculations began to be employed to augment preexisting forms of play,
specifically betting on games of chance. Such gaming formed an integral part of early
modern culture, an activity that was taught to children across the social spectrum and
legally enshrined in Christmas festivities. Attempts to quantify the likelihood of chance
events during such games led to the development of new terms to describe the odds of any
event’s occurrence. These odds were not restricted to alehouses and back-alley gamesters
but formed a part of the everyday English language, indicating that a widespread and
probabilistic mode of thinking about games emerged in the late sixteenth century. Thus, by the seventeenth century, we see the expansion of English playfulness to encompass not only games played by words and objects, but also by numbers.

NOTES

1 Hall, Of government and obedience, 265–66.
2 Bodl., MS Aubrey 10, f. 8r.
3 Bodl., MS Aubrey 10, f. 29r.
6 Orme, Medieval Children, 177–78.
7 Hawkins, Medallic Illustrations, 1: 375–76.
8 Hawkins, Medallic Illustrations, 2: 413–15, 464, 483.
10 Edward Hatton, editor of the final edition of The Ground of Artes, almost completely re-wrote the book in a failed attempt to “reboot” the series. Recorde, Arithmetick.
11 Wingate, Arithmetique made easie, A1r. ODNB, “Kersey, John, the elder (bap. 1616, d. 1677), mathematician” by Ruth Wallis. Also including “John Kersey the younger (b. ca. 1660, d. in or after 1721).”
12 Wingate, Mr. Wingate’s arithmetick, A1r, A4r, A7v.
13 Recorde, The Grounde of Artes, Yy2r.
14 Recorde, The Grounde of Artes, Yy3r.
15 Wingate, Mr. Wingate’s arithmetick, 622–23.
16 Wingate, Mr. Wingate’s arithmetick, 623.
17 Wingate, Mr. Wingate’s arithmetick, 638–39.
18 Wingate, Mr. Wingate’s arithmetick, 640. Bachet, Problemes plaisans et delectables, qui se font par les nombres.
19 Leurechon, Mathematicall recreations, 33, 66–67. Leurechon’s book was reprinted twice, in 1653 and 1675.
20 Bodl., MS Aubrey 10, f. 8r.
24 Ashton, The History of Gambling, 12.
26 3 Ed. 4 c. 4. Keble, The Statutes at Large, 278–79.
27 Taylor, The History of Playing Cards, 103.
28 This statute, entitled “The Bill for the maintaining of Artillery, and the debarring of unlawful Games,” was particularly intended to encourage able-bodied men and boys to practice the useful skill of archery rather than “waste” their time playing games of chance. Keble, The Statutes at Large, 542–43.
The relationship between gaming and probability has long been acknowledged by historians of science, though they still debate how much influence popular gaming had on the development of a mathematized model of probability. Lorraine Daston, for example, argued that early probabilists theorized on equity and expectation more than chance and probability. While gaming was of interest to these probabilists, in general “the combination of skills and chance in many games, the irregular casting of dice and other gambling devices, belief in streaks of good and bad luck, and sharp dealing must have all conspired to obscure the idea of equiprobable outcomes” from ordinary gamesters. Daston, *Classical Probability in the Enlightenment*, 12–13, 124.


44 From Cardano’s *De Vita Propria Liber*, as quoted in David, *Games, Gods and Gambling*, 55.

45 Ore, *Cardano the Gambling Scholar*, 205.


47 *Oxford English Dictionary*, s.v. “odds, n.”


50 Ayclin, *The Battailes of Crescey*, D5r.


53 The phrase to lay odds was used solely in the sense of gaming odds, never with respect to the original definition. *OED*, s.v. “odds, n.”

54 Churchyard, *A playn and fyannah conflutation*, 3v.

55 Babington, *Certaine plaine, briefe, and comfortable notes*, D2v.


59 Sergeant, *Faith vindicated from possibility of falshood*, 104.


Predictive Play: Wheels of Fortune in the Early Modern Lottery Book

Jessen Kelly

In Early Modern Europe, the wheel of Fortune was frequently invoked across a remarkable range of literary, artistic, and religious contexts, for popular and erudite audiences alike. A late fourteenth-century miniature conveys the fundamental components of this familiar and long-standing iconography (Figure 8.1). Fortune stands, blindfolded and crowned, as the wheel's central axis and operating agent, exercising unseeing authority over her spinning domain. As is customary, four personages occupy her realm. Positioned at the perpendicular axes, these four figures plot the mutation of personal fate for those under Fortune's charge, moving spatially from apex to nadir and, socially, from a state of sovereign authority to one of base abjection. The wheel itself seems to fluctuate between physical contraption and schematic design: Fortune's subjects register a palpable violence as their bodies twist along the rim; yet the apparatus's simplified and unmodulated presentation creates a pleasing pattern that merges with the ornamentation of the red backdrop.

If the image of the wheel was routine, its implications were not. A figure for chance whose actions rendered the future unpredictable, Fortune was understood to preside over earthly matters most subject to contingency—money, love, power, health, and social relationships. Within Christian discourse, Fortune's alignment with the worldly over the spiritual often branded her as a temptress to sin. But she also conjured vexing questions about the nature of chance and future time. In his enormously influential treatise The Consolation of Philosophy (sixth century C.E.), for instance, Boethius employed and indeed popularized the wheel motif in a project that aimed, among other things, to reconcile chance, free will, and divine providence.

Fortune presented other epistemological complications regarding future events that were at once possible and not necessary. How, if at all, can one know or act in relation to such futures? Theologians such as Thomas Aquinas argued that, while necessary future occurrences could be “foreknown by human reason,” no legitimate form of knowledge could forecast contingent futures. Fortune and the events she governed were anathema to rational analysis and deduction; assertions about such futures possessed a problematic and unverifiable truth-value. For his part, Aquinas relegated statements about contingent future events to the province of divination, which he deemed suspicious and laden with deceit.
Figure 8.1. *The Wheel of Fortune*, late fourteenth century, The Bodleian Libraries, The University of Oxford, MS Douce 332, fol. 58r.
The wheel's efficacy and endurance stemmed from its ability to clarify some of these recondite issues in striking figurative fashion. Boethius, for example, developed some illuminating language around the image of the *rota fortunae*. In an evocative passage of *The Consolation of Philosophy*, Fortune describes the wheel and, by extension, her own nature in ludic terms: “Inconstancy is my very essence; it is the game I never cease to play as I bring the top to the bottom and the bottom to the top.”

In early modern Europe, this explanatory metaphor became a facet of actual ludic practice, one conjoined with and motivated by the epistemological difficulties of earthly future time. This essay examines the ludic elements of Fortune’s wheel in a particular form of divination: the illustrated lottery book (also known as “books of fate,” or by the German *Losbücher*). A species of bibliomancy, lottery books required the use of chance devices to navigate the volume’s pages. These instruments—usually turning dials (*volvelles*) or dice—helped direct readers to predictive verses about their personal future. Like the *rota fortunae*, this divinatory genre had a long history; but during the early modern period, these increasingly popular volumes began emphatically to assert their identities as games and, more specifically, as games of chance. Not only did the books entail the use of chance mechanisms, but images of dice and playing cards also began to populate their pages (Figure 8.2). Depictions of Fortune’s wheel were embedded in this visual context, encountered not simply as pictures but as components of the book as a divinatory object and game.

Among the few art historical studies that address premodern lottery books, Daniel Connolly and Suzanne Karr Schmidt have delineated the “interactive” character of the genre, crucially registered in acts of handling and physical involvement. This mode of engagement is important to understanding the wheel’s role in the predictive game. The wheel motif persisted in early modern lottery books even as Fortune’s iconography was undergoing an apparent makeover. Historians have argued for the dramatic transformation of Fortune’s Renaissance image, in which the “medieval” wheel was deposed by a classical nude perched precariously atop a globe. This new Fortune could be “seized” or “grasped,” like Opportunity—a haptic relationship understood as emblematic of growing individual mastery of chance over and above the wheel’s outmoded determinism. But Fortune’s Renaissance iconography was not so much transformed as diversified. This diversification signals an interest in the varied *forms* of inconstancy as well as their management. Lottery books participated in this process, underscoring that the encounter with Fortune and future time was not just pictorial but embodied in objects and ritualized social practices.

I consider how the visual, material, and ludic conditions of the lottery book inflected the experience and import of Fortune’s traditional iconography. These books provided a distinctive apparatus for future time and the *rota fortunae*, as the latter mediated the books’ status as games and tools for knowledge. I focus on two examples in which the wheel figures prominently: a heavily illuminated manuscript compendium of
Figure 8.2. *The Sign of the Dragon*, from Lorenzo Spirito, *Libro de la ventura* (Venice, 1547), Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Res/4 A.lat.a. 445, fol. 13r.
ten lottery books, composed from about 1450 to 1473 and attributed to the Augsburg scribe Konrad Bollstatter (ca. 1420–ca. 1482); and Lorenzo Spirito’s *Libro delle Sorti*, first published in 1482 and reprinted throughout Europe over the course of the sixteenth century.\textsuperscript{11}

Bollstatter and Spirito were at the forefront of the rapidly expanding market for lottery books in the fifteenth century. Spurred by the growth of lay manuscript patronage and the development of the print industry, this expansion fed the demand for vernacular and largely secular texts that could be consumed recreationally.\textsuperscript{12} As the history of Spirito’s *Libro* attests, interest in lottery books continued to grow in the 1500s, despite critiques of divination by moral and religious authorities: at least thirty-six editions of the text were published prior to 1560, in Italian, French, and Spanish. Dutch and English translations appeared in the early seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{13} Bollstatter’s manuscript compendium also hints at a burgeoning audience. Although the precise purpose of his *Losbücher* remains unclear, Karin Schneider has suggested that the author may have produced and retained them in part to serve as demonstration pieces for clients.\textsuperscript{14}

Spirito and Bollstatter’s works occupied the higher end of the lottery book market, due to their size and extensive illustrations. As games of pure chance without victors or monetary prizes, these predictive instruments lacked obvious opportunities for users to display their skill, virtue, or intellect. Yet, in addition to images of dice, both authors employ imagery and textual references that would have appealed to educated or sophisticated audiences, including courtly literature, history, astrology, and geography. Although expert learning was not required to discern one’s fate, the iconography ensured that knowledge and authority could be put in play.

Fortune’s wheel took its place among such allusions, and a privileged place at that. In these lottery books, the image of the wheel frequently constitutes the opening image of the text. For example, Bollstatter’s compendium is punctuated by multiple, full-page illuminations of Fortune at her emblematic device.\textsuperscript{15} Heavily populated with figures and surrounded by an array of banderoles, the wheel’s appearance invariably signals the beginning of a particular *Losbuch* within the collection. With few exceptions, Spirito’s *Libro* echoes this format, positioning the *rota* as the initial illustration that dominates the page (Figure 8.3).

The wheel thus serves as a visual threshold to divinatory play, defining the inquirer’s experience as it unfolds through the medium of the book.\textsuperscript{16} As a framing device, the image of the wheel helps seal the book as a discrete object, but it is also central to the book’s identity as a game. Instituting a certain boundary between the ludic space of the volume and the routine activities of everyday life, it marks what Johan Huizinga famously
called the “magic circle” of play—a spatial and temporal zone distinguished by certain rules and expectations as well as special aesthetic and sensory conditions.  

Clearly, this ludic space is Fortune’s domain; the visual position and prominence of the wheel identifies the apparatus with the book as game and divinatory device. Spirito’s wheel plainly articulates the provisions of this space for players. For instance, on the first leaf of a 1528 French edition of the Libro, Fortune stands framed by the wheel and four subjects. She is flanked by speech banners that specify the inconstant nature of her activity, which the stasis of the pictorial medium can only partially convey: “I am always in movement / incessantly without stopping.” At left, her words have been inverted as if to insist on this point. In the corners of the page, larger banderoles display the queries that the book promises to answer. Players can choose to inquire as to whether they should seek vengeance, whether conditions are good for a journey, and so forth. All of the questions pertain to worldly affairs that traditionally fall under Fortune’s purview. By asking about these matters, players enter the domain that Fortune so fickly governs.

In the Libro, the image of the wheel initiates a particularly elaborate itinerary through the volume. Bollstatter’s Losbücher often parallel this itinerary structurally and visually, though they do not match the scope of Spirito’s text. However, each example requires the use of dice to introduce the element of chance at some point during play. And, as is conventional for lottery books, both authors divide their books into distinct iconographic and compositional sections that define the successive stages of the game. Tracing the stages of predictive play in the Libro clarifies the basic contours of the lottery book and the roles of the rota fortunae within it.

The queries on the opening rota page are all accompanied by instructions directing players to the image of a particular king as the first “move” of the game. For example (to cite the French edition once again), to find out about your journey, go to King Arthur; or, to know whether you will be victorious in some venture, go to King Robert. Representations of the kings appear on the immediately ensuing pages, which constitute a veritable gallery of somewhat generic royal effigies. Each page displays four monarchs, framed individually and exhibiting signs of their sovereign office. Players must scan the array of royal portraits to locate their designated monarch, who guides them to a page with a creaturely “sign” in the next section of the book. Once players find the page for their appointed sign, they must cast three dice to discover their next destination, an action which introduces traditional instruments of games of chance into the proceedings (see Figure 8.2). All fifty-six possible dice combinations are duly depicted in pictorial rather than numerical form, arranged into a grid congested with pips and text. Every dice combination bears a caption steering the player to a particular river, whose name can be found on one of the so-called spheres in the subsequent section (Figure 8.4).

Having perused the proper sphere to pinpoint their river, inquirers encounter yet another directive, this time with the name of a specific biblical prophet and a number in the lottery book’s next (and final) section. Typically portrayed as small, almost
thumbnail-like figures in the upper left corner of the page, the prophets preside over a
list-like presentation of their various pronouncements. These pronouncements are num-
bered sequentially so that players can track down the fortune that the book, with the
aid of the dice, has assigned to them. Here, their uncertainties about the future are at
long last alleviated, albeit through a rather paltry two or three lines of rhymed verse. For
instance, among the oracles from an early sixteenth-century edition printed in Geneva:
“You will vanquish your enemies / through the betrayal of your friends;” or “In your life,
you will be wise and rich / but beware of being miserly.”

Iconographically, the wheel launches players through the provinces of political,
celestial, and sacred authorities. It serves as the book’s seminal instance of the various
determining forces to which players are subjected in daily life. But the subsequent
iconography of the book also enhances the sense that the volume constitutes a distinct
spatial-temporal unit, divided into different “zones” of passage. Additionally, as Connolly
has argued, the use of geographical and celestial place-names construes the encounter
with future time as a spatial “projection” or relocation for an embodied user. However,
the image of the wheel provides a kind of template for conceptualizing this spatialization
of time, one that the physical book at once adheres to and modifies. In the wheel’s
conventional depiction, the perimeter serves as a visible connective tissue, charting a
continuous, unidirectional path for its mobile denizens. With their consecutive sections,
lottery books such as the Libro evoke a similar sense of uniform movement through
successive posts. At the same time, however, players undertake a route into the book that
is markedly disjunctive rather than continuous, as multiple pages might be skipped in
a single “move.” Fortune’s game of inconstancy thus acquires a modulated form when
translated into the medium of the book, one that emerges in the interplay between motif
and material support.

But the game introduces multiple forms of inconstancy via Fortune’s characteristic
emblem. Fortune’s wheel appears more indirectly throughout the two divinatory devices
in question here. Each of Spirito’s “spheres,” for example, presents its navigational instruc-
tions within a large, circular configuration that frames a central pictorial motif—typi-
cally a zodiac sign or planetary deity (see Figure 8.4). Through such imagery, the spheres
exude an astrological import and, with it, the authority of a well-established tradition of
prognostication. In some editions, the spheres’ lattice-like divisions recall astrolabes and
celestial charts, granting them the veneer of a specialized instrument of calculation.

Such circular arrangements were hardly novel features of the lottery book; medieval examples contain them as well. But Spirito’s explicit prioritization of the rota
fortunae recasts their connotations. These radial forms, with their diagrammatic spokes,
patently evoke the opening image of Lady Fortune at the center of her wheel. Bollstatter,
Figure 8.4. *The Sphere of Cancer*, from Lorenzo Spirito, *Libro de la ventura* (Venice, 1547), Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Res/4 A.lat.a. 445, fol. 20r.
who consistently employs similar configurations, accentuates this correlation still further. In a section of so-called circles, each page presents a large central medallion divided into twelve radial segments, encompassed by a thin outer band suggestive of the wheel’s rim (Figure 8.5). While these structures maintain a schematic character, Bollstatter has also accorded them a material volume and presence. The contours of the diagram are rendered not as mere strokes, but as thick bars painted in light brown wash. Moreover, the diagram’s spindles conspicuously overlap the outer rim in the manner of a girded, mechanical wooden structure. Alternating red and black script effectively animates the radial slices of this structure and engages players with the wheel-like schema as a whole.

Unlike the spheres of his Italian successor, Bollstatter’s circles bear no astrological labels. Instead, textual inscriptions impose a striking array of identities on these forms—players might encounter a “circle of twelve prophets” or a “circle of twelve mountains,” or even a “circle of twelve birds” in play. In each case, however, the visual design suggests Fortune’s persistent authority. Whether planets or prophets, species or terrestrial spaces, all conform to Fortune’s image and are absorbed into her domain.

If the pictorial elements of the books imply Fortune’s omnipresence, references to the wheel also inflect the perceptual experience of the player and stage a somewhat different encounter with inconstancy. Like Bollstatter’s circles, the spheres of the Libro are densely packed with directives, pressed into the compartments of the radial diagram. The text rotates over and around the central motif, moving from an upright position at the apex to an inverted state at the sphere’s lowest point. This construction impedes the immediate apprehension of the inscriptions. In order to effectively locate and decipher their assigned instructions, players would do well to physically turn the volume, as this would permit them to trace the rather minute text from its proper orientation.

This action transforms the book into a wheel in both appearance and operation. As a predictive process, the game is thus tangibly linked to the modes of inconstancy that are expressly identified with Fortune’s wheel on the opening page. Images and ornamentations dramatize the impression of mutability, since the figures indicate the correct and decidedly vertical orientation of the spheres. Turning the book transposes the illustrations within and around the spheres. This motion, which is steadier and more continuous than the movement into the book, underscores the book’s material status even as it evocatively shifts its material identity. As players adopt a haptic relationship to the text, the spheres lose their schematic character and become palpable entities.

By grasping the book-as-wheel, however, players themselves also assume a dual and inconstant identity. On the one hand, the act of rotation aligns players with Fortune herself, as they take up the role of inducing the wheel’s animation. For Boethius’s Fortune, producing such inconstancy was fundamental to the ludic experience of the wheel; users of the lottery book therefore appropriate the pleasures of play that, in The Consolation of Philosophy, Fortune claimed for herself alone. However, by maintaining a hold on the revolving book, users also simultaneously enact the position of Fortune’s submissive
Figure 8.5. *The Circle of Prophets*, later fifteenth century, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Ms. Cgm 312, fol. 125v.
playthings—figures who resolutely grasp the wheel’s edge as it transports them toward their fate. Even if players do not physically move the volume, they would likely still need to contort or reposition themselves to read the text that encircles the sphere. Like Fortune’s subjects, then, players’ bodies bend in accordance with the kinetic demands of the wheel.

The haptic relationship to Fortune cannot be equated with individual mastery over her vicissitudes. Players indeed “seize” Fortune, as if following the exhortations of Renaissance humanistic discourse. But the act of touch does not cohere into an unproblematic experience of agency. The pictorial and material construction of the book solicits players’ active engagement, yet it also determines the nature and limits of that engagement. Fortune does not relinquish her authority. If the book purports to grant knowledge and thus control over contingent future events, players must acquiesce to its conditions in order to gain such knowledge.

Judging from the broad commercial success of the early modern lottery book, there was a considerable desire for this experience of Fortune as well as its divinatory payoff. What was the relationship between the ludic pleasures of inconstancy, embodied in the wheel’s image, and the authority of this predictive discourse? If Fortune’s inconstancy was long considered antagonistic to legitimate knowledge, then how could the lottery book continue to offer compelling representations of contingent future events? In order to explore the construction of the books’ authority, we need to shift our perspective.

Thus far, I have been treating the books by Bollstatter and Spirito in terms of a single player or inquirer. This is consistent with the genre’s conventional emphasis and mode of address, which construes the future as an individual rather than collective matter. However, although these games could easily accommodate the curiosity of a solitary user, they were also constructed for use in social gatherings. In these cases, the encounter with Fortune was not just an individual affair but performed before an audience, such that earthly, social futures would be on display. This mode of reception elucidates the interplay between the iconography of the rota fortunae and the books’ epistemological implications.

Despite the fact that lottery books were not packaged as competitive games, they appear to have maintained a strong appeal as occasions for sociability. Indeed, sometimes the books themselves encouraged their own communal reception. One German Losbuch, printed in 1528, helpfully suggests that it goes well with good wine and good company, where everyone can take their turn at the game.23

A 1557 Venetian edition of Spirito’s Libro depicts play as a social gathering on its title page (Figure 8.6). As the first image in the volume, this woodcut serves as an illustrated guideline for ideal use.24 But it also usurps the wheel’s standard pictorial
Figure 8.6. Frontispiece, from Lorenzo Spirito, *Libro de la Ventura* (Venice, 1557). Fondazione Giorgio Cini, Venice.
primacy in other editions of the text. Instead of Fortune and her spinning followers, we initially encounter nine figures—five women and four men—gathered around an elongated table where a copy of the Libro lies open, prominently displayed. The artist has not spared evidence of a well-to-do gathering: assembled in a loggia, the figures wear fashionable sixteenth-century attire whose various slashes and embellishments make for a busy composition. Similar attention has been bestowed on the representation of the Libro itself. The table frames and isolates the book, showcasing the particulars of the double-page spread, which clearly exhibits a “sign” page at left and a “sphere” page at right. Accoutrements flank and further emphasize the content of the pages: three dice compliment the grids of the sign page, while an armillary sphere (which has no role in the actual game) accompanies the circular form of the sphere page.

The presence of the armillary sphere seems to emphasize the sphere pages’ astrological associations over and above their visible connection to the wheel, thereby further unseating Fortune from her privileged position. However, aspects of the scene suggest the structuring presence of her inconstancy. Although the title page envisions communal play, the central female figure seems to be the chief operator of the book. She holds the lower edge of the volume as if preparing to turn the page. Yet the book does not conform to her point of view, or to that of any depicted player. Rather, the pages address our perspective as spectators outside of the frame, since, in the Libro, the sign pages invariably precede the spheres. The woman’s control over the book is only apparent; the orientation of the book unsettles her position.

The depiction of the open volume therefore introduces the game’s defining feature of inconstancy, in which players engage with the book as a site of mutability and transposed perspectives. Insofar as the title page adamantly affirms (and, indeed, depends on) the presence of external viewers, it immediately highlights the importance of players’ visual and physical relationship to the book itself. As viewers, we are kept at a certain distance from the space of the loggia. But the image of the Libro interpolates us into the gathering of players at the table; we complete and constitute a circular arrangement that has been left conspicuously open in the foreground. Thus, the rota fortunae has not been commandeered from its usual position by the scene on the frontispiece. The wheel persists here in oblique, displaced form, inscribed not only in the dynamics of inconstancy but also in the contours of the social gathering.

While this construction sustains the identity between game and wheel, it also reconfigures the emblem’s conventional reception. The title page shows the Libro portrayed horizontally, in the manner of a game board. Given that editions typically measured about 30 centimeters along the vertical edge, the scale of the volume would have facilitated the presence of multiple players and viewers in a social setting.

But the exhibition of the book as horizontal surface constitutes a key foundation of the books’ authority as divinatory devices, as both mediators and depictions of social life in time. This is especially apparent in parts of Bollstatter’s manuscript.
At approximately 30 × 20 centimeters, the compendium could have similarly addressed several users. Indeed, certain pages suggest that the manuscript anticipated and incited this implementation. For example, one of the most sumptuous lottery books in the collection presents its final predictions on pages bearing a single circular form, divided into four segments (Figure 8.7). Four figures or figural groupings occupy the four corners of these pages, serving as attendants or identifying labels for the predictions within each segment of the diagrammatic, wheel-like form. Since the four predictive texts pivot around the nucleus of this wheel, they solicit the perspectives of players who sit on all sides of the book-as-object.

More significantly, however, the composition establishes a certain resonance between the space of the manuscript and the social context that frames it. If the painted figures enclose the prophetic sphere within the manuscript, a group of players would comprise an additional figural frame around the manuscript, echoing the arrangement of the persons portrayed. When the manuscript is exhibited horizontally, the illustrated figures themselves also appear to encounter the circular diagram as a planar surface. “The Four Pairs of Lovers” sit around the diagram almost as if it were a table, their amorous interactions granting the pictorial arrangement the appearance of a social gathering.

But their placement around the illustrated wheel also alludes to the four stations of the traditional rota—in number, if not precise position. Strengthening the equation between diagram and wheel, these figures also assign players a similar status, since they, too, find themselves along this wheel’s circumference. Like the title page of the Venetian Libro, the image of the wheel in the lottery book is potentially manifested in the social configurations that surround it. The lottery book represents social life and social relationships in its predictive discourse—indeed, this is part and parcel of its alignment with Fortune’s domain of earthly affairs. And, through the reception of the illustrated wheel, the book generates social relationships in its own image, adding credence to its oracular declarations by producing a concrete correspondence between the dynamics of social life experienced in play and those that are depicted in its pages. This mimetic relationship compromises the boundary of the “magic circle.” Each book suggests that to play the game is to participate in a ludic performance of social life, configured in the shape of the wheel and oriented toward a future outcome.

Positioning the book horizontally rather than vertically, however, also effectively revises the wheel’s traditional design and, by extension, its mediation of social relationships. For this orientation deprives the wheel’s image of its conventional vertical orientation and thus its ability to organize (and undo) a hierarchy of top and bottom, high and low. In the Venetian title page, the orientation of the displayed Libro produces inconstancy without vertical transposition. The circular gathering of figures conveys gender differences but not the socioeconomic distinctions implied by the crowned and deposed figures of the rota. Transferred to a horizontal register, the wheel provokes a different understanding of inconstancy and future events.
Figure 8.7. The *Four Pairs of Lovers*, later fifteenth century, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Ms. Cgm 312, fol. 142v.
In these games, playful process eventually gives way to divinatory verdict; the books’ prophetic statements should be evaluated not only in terms of their content, but also for the ways in which this knowledge is visualized. In the *Libro*, the sphere pages comprise the last step prior to the final section of oracular utterances, where players attain knowledge of their futures. This last section is characterized by a marked reduction in accompanying imagery. The sacred prophets who purvey their insights typically appear as diminutive half-lengths, overshadowed by the text that dominates the page. Arranged in two columns of horizontal text, the predictions contrast sharply with the remarkable layouts that preceded them. The terminus of divinatory play thus entails the near cessation of images and the stabilization of the reader, who, it is implied, has passed from a state of inconstant uncertainty to wisdom.

If Spirito’s lottery book seems to suggest the incompatibility of knowledge and Fortune’s inconstancy, Bollstatter differs on this point. Predictive pages such as “The Four Pairs of Lovers” employ a curved text that encourages the rotation of the book or a variable point of view. The manuscript does not formally distinguish its verdicts from the prior stages of uncertainty; even as the book offers knowledge of the future, players are not exonerated from Fortune’s mutability. While the perpendicular axes of the circular diagram evoke the four traditional stations of the wheel, the oracles themselves fall between these points, such that players cannot arrive at a fixed or stable position.

This construction expresses the tensions between the forms of inconstancy materialized in the wheel and the lottery books’ divinatory function. With the aid of the dice, lottery books aim to convert ambiguity into a single prediction about the future. But the manuscript discloses its predictions in a manner that affirms the future as a site of contingency and multiple possibilities. Indeed, this is perhaps the most potent knowledge gleaned from the game, over and above any particular prognostication. In both examples, the chance that the future could turn out otherwise is plainly visible on the prophetic pages, manifested in the presence of adjacent oracles that proffer alternative outcomes.

This is especially vivid in the case of Bollstatter, since turning the book-as-wheel tempts one to visually pass from the space of one fortune to another. Even as Spirito’s pages abandon the design of the wheel, they nevertheless brim with numbered oracular verses. In the first edition of 1482, very little space separates the individual oracles, which appear almost as a single, continuous text. The presence of these alternatives encourages the curious or unsatisfied player to employ the divinatory game repeatedly. Just as Fortune turns her wheel incessantly, one can always inquire again to seek a different verdict. Despite their prophetic pronouncements, the books imply that one’s future is not yet “finished.”
If the layouts of the prediction pages work against the authority of the lottery books, textual qualifications produce a similar effect. Lottery books speak from multiple perspectives about their own truth-value, supporting and undermining their declarative divinatory statements in the prefatory and concluding remarks. As framing devices for play, these remarks are structurally and functionally aligned with the image of the wheel—they, too, demarcate a space for the game and articulate the conditions of play. Like the wheel, this conflicted commentary announces the game as a site of inconstancy.

By identifying themselves as “entertainments” or “pastimes,” the books use their ludic identity to gently refute their own claims to erudition. But more audacious statements are routine. In Bollstatter’s manuscript, individual lottery books are sometimes separated by pages that boldly condemn lottery books in general. This self-cancelling language remained standard practice in subsequent printed German *Losbücher*. One example begins by promising wisdom to those who play. But, shortly thereafter, the text urges readers not to trust the dice, as they are instruments of duplicity. At the conclusion of the lottery book, the publisher steps in to reassert that these predictions are nothing but falsehoods; faith should be invested in God instead.

In part, these disclaimers respond to moral and religious authorities, who denounced divinatory practices as sinful tools of deceit. Echoing these condemnations in their own pages might exculpate authors and publishers from reprimand. Yet such statements also betray the seductive force of the lottery books’ predictions and their ability to compel belief. Self-condemnation may have warded off critique, but promises of knowledge could fuel the allure of the lottery book for players. Taken together, both strategies ensured the books’ viability as a commercial good. At the same time, the contradictions are fraught with the epistemological complexities of future events under Fortune’s sway, which cannot be known rationally through causal necessity. The lottery book declares its predictions to be both true and false, expressly asserting that both divinatory process and product are subject to inconstancy.

Bollstatter’s manuscript uses the wheel to bring this inconstancy into view, pictorially and textually, on a single sheet in the interlude between individual *Losbücher* (Figure 8.8). Physically external and extraneous to actual play, the page visibly resembles the predictive discourse that immediately precedes it in the compendium: like “The Four Pairs of Lovers” and their ilk, this leaf displays a central disk attended by four figures, in this case four angels. The disk exhibits concentric divisions alone; it is riven, not by radial spokes, but rather by two thin rings that surround the larger, innermost circle.

The concentric arrangement also contains divergent textual conceptions. In the outer two rings, inscriptions wrap continuously around the central sphere, inciting the rotation of the open manuscript. This rotation does not disclose future events but rather casts doubt on the credibility of the *Losbuch* as a genre. Rhymed German verses advise players that the dice should only be cast for entertainment; no one should believe the
Figure 8.8. *Four Angels*, later fifteenth century, Bayerische Staatsbibliothek München, Ms. Cgm 312, fol. 143r.
book’s content. Moreover, the book is spiritually corrupt: God’s will is not inscribed in this predictive instrument, as it is “contrary to faith, and with seeing eyes [Augen] you are blinded.”

29 Given that the term Augen could connote both eyes and pips, “seeing eyes” seems a witty reference to the dice as instruments of prediction. If the inscription grants a certain authority or insight to the dice, this authority exists in an inverse relation to that of the blinded player.

The larger, interior circle contains a series of Latin and German adages. These inscriptions introduce a different mode of speech from that of the framing exhortations and disclaimers. The script clearly manifests this difference: the central text is composed horizontally, sharing the orientation of the four angels. These maxims describe, not the lottery book, but Fortune herself. Latin verses invoke the familiar notion of Fortune’s mutability—she is changeable, like the waxing and waning of the moon. Further, as the text goes on to declare, stasis is contrary to Fortune’s nature; once she stops moving she is no longer truly Fortune, a dictum adapted from Boethius’s *The Consolation of Philosophy*.

30 Succeeding German lines reiterate and expand on the conventional qualities of Fortune—she is round and inconstant, like the world itself.

Having firmly allied the lottery book with Fortune and her inconstancy throughout his compendium, Bollstatter here splits them apart. The stated truth of the lottery book—that is, its falsity—is apprehended by grasping and rotating the page, enacting the mutability of the wheel and the preceding game. Yet, in the central circle, the truth of Fortune’s nature is presented in a manner that contradicts this nature, arresting the mutability that it describes. As the Latin verses proclaim, once Fortune stops moving, she is no longer properly herself. Here, then, Fortune thus recedes in her delineation. One cannot simultaneously perceive the discourse on the lottery book and that on Fortune, as the legibility of one entails the illegibility of the other.

In the early modern lottery book, the *rota fortunae* shapes the encounter with Fortune and future events. Transmuted through the medium of the book-as-game, the wheel moves inconstantly between image and enactment, truth and fiction, agency and submission. In this way, the wheel mediates the books’ ludic and epistemological functions in an absorbing and sometimes uneasy fashion. Hardly outmoded, the wheel remains, in refurbished form, a compelling medium for the comprehension and experience of social vicissitudes, or the stuff of Fortune’s domain. Indeed, regardless of the truth of their discourse, these games encourage players to see the social world in terms of Fortune. The indeterminacy of the future and the lottery book’s inconstant predictive authority constitute sources of pleasure and insight. If Bollstatter’s lottery book conveys falsities, it does so in accordance with the mutable properties explicitly identified with Fortune’s wheel. As image and object, the lottery book remains true to the inconstant forms of falsehood. And this constitutes its own kind of veracity.
NOTES

1 For an overview of changing notions of Fortune, see Doren, “Fortuna im Mittelalter und in der Renaissance;” and Patch, The Goddess Fortuna.

2 This notion of Fortune’s jurisdiction derives in part from Aristotle’s notion of “external goods” or “goods of fortune,” as opposed to “goods of the soul.” See Nicomachean Ethics, I.8; and “Magna Moralia,” in Works of Aristotle, I.3.

3 Boethius, The Consolation of Philosophy.

4 Aquinas, Summa Theologica, IIa.IIae.95, 1.

5 The truth-value of future contingents was the subject of a complex, long-standing debate in philosophy and theology. For a general overview of the Christian theological discussion, see Normore, Future Contingents. As Heller-Roazen, Fortune’s Faces, has shown, medieval theological debates about future contingents also entered into literary production and concepts of Fortune.

6 Aquinas, Summa Theologica, IIa.IIae.95, 1.


8 The Sortes Sangallenses, a dice-driven Latin manuscript (St. Galle Palimpsest Codex 908), dates from the sixth century C.E. The most extensive overview of the lottery book as a genre remains Bolte, “Zur Geschichte der Losbücher.”

9 Connolly, “Imagined Pilgrimage;” Karr Schmidt, “Art—A User’s Guide,” esp. chs. 1 and 4; and Karr, “Constructions Both Sacred and Profane.” The term “interactive” is Karr Schmidt’s; her work has been important to the study of printed early modern lottery books in particular.

10 The iconic transformation of Fortune is discussed by Warburg, Francesco Sassetti’s Last Injunctions to His Sons; and Kiefer, “The Conflation of Fortuna and Occasio.”

11 Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich, Ms. Cgm 312; Lorenzo Spirito, Il Libro delle Sorti.

12 Buettner, “Profane Illuminations, Secular Illusions,” discusses the growth of secular manuscripts specifically in courtly contexts. For the growth of recreational reading and literature, see Pettegree, The Book in the Renaissance, 155–58.

13 For a catalogue of editions prior to 1560, see Zollinger, Bibliographie der Spielbücher des 15. bis 18. Jahrhunderts, 197–231. Spirito, ’t Boeck van den Avonturen; Spirito, The Book of Fortune.

14 Schneider, Ein Mittelalterliches Wahrsagespiel, 13–14.

15 See fols. 1v, 45v, 67v, 81r, 98r, 144r.

16 In this sense, the picture of the wheel takes the place of the volvelle, which was well established as an inaugural element in the lottery book genre. While the volvelle could allude to the wheel, it comprised a discrete entity, embedded in and detachable from the book rather than continuous with it. For a discussion of the volvelle, within and beyond the early modern lottery book, see Karr Schmidt, “Constructions Both Sacred and Profane.”


18 “Toujours suis en mouumêt / Sans arrester incessamêt,” Spirito, Le liure de passe te[m]ps de la fortune des dez, 1v.

19 Players of Bollstatter’s manuscripts could choose from questions about the prospect of becoming richer, winning at gambling, and paying debts, among others. See Cgm 312, fol. 120v. There are exceptions to the worldly orientation of the lottery book. See, for example, Heinrich Vogtherr’s Christliches Losbuch; and Karr Schmidt’s excellent analysis in “Art—A User’s Guide,” 78–86.
“Tu gaigneras tes ennemys / Par trayson de tes amys” (27v, oracle 56); “En ta vie seras sage et riche / Mais garde toy bien destre chiche” (29r, oracle 15). Spirito, *Le livre de passe temps de la fortune des dez.*


See, for example, the book of fate by Matthew Paris (Oxford, Bodleian Library, University of Oxford, Ms. Ashmole 304), discussed by Connolly, “Imagined Pilgrimage.”

*Ein neüw kunst eines yden Menschen Wesen Leben und Natur zu erfaren,* Aii.r. My thanks to Carolyn Hawkshaw for her help with the translation of this and related texts.

Brown, *Private Lives,* 136, notes the instructional element of this image.

See, for example, fols. 66v and 110v.

*Hort vnd mercket eben [Würfelbuch],* 1, 12.

For example, Schneider, *Ein Losbuch Konrad Bollstatters,* 12, cites a late fourteenth-century condemnation of divination and “lozpucher” by the German preacher Martin von Amberg.


*Cgm 312,* fol. 143r. “Du sоль mit losbüchen / gottes willen nit versůchen / und ist wider den gelauben / und würdest geblennt mit gesehenden ougen.”

Boethius, *The Consolation of Philosophy,* II.2, 24. In the text, Philosophy cautions the Prisoner, “if you are trying to stop [Fortune’s] wheel from turning, you are of all men the most obtuse. For once it begins to stop, it will no longer be the wheel of chance.”
IT IS WELL KNOWN THAT the medium of prints played a significant role in the visual culture of the Counter-Reformation in the Papal States; what is less discussed, however, is that some of these prints are in the form of popular game sheets. The Bolognese artist Giuseppe Maria Mitelli (1634–1718) created popular prints where social commentary, local culture, and Lombard naturalism all intersect. Although they have received little academic attention, Mitelli’s game sheets are a unique representation of the post-Tridentine city, a true *theatrum mundi* of Bologna. Certain examples of this imagery pay special attention to the subject of women’s virtue as part of religious propaganda since, in the eyes of the Church, the city’s well-being was directly tied to the virtue of its women. Other images are site-specific games, whose themes are inseparable from the cultural and historical context of early modern Bologna. This essay focuses on these didactic prints by examining the imagery in relation to the social history of gambling, including the possible origins of some of these games in the courtly treatises of the period, as well as the Church’s position on Counter-Reformatory discourses of gender. As equipment for a type of virtuous vice, Mitelli’s popular prints thus allow scholars to engage in the social mapping of both leisure and gender in post-Tridentine Bologna. As such, these images are a treasure trove of the panorama of local urban life, both reflecting and contributing to the social fabric of the city.

Gambling itself is part of the subject of these prints, despite the Church’s prohibition; some of the illustrations even include representations of people in the act of gambling and show that it usually leads to a tragic end. Ironically, in all of Mitelli’s game prints the morally correct position is arrived at through gambling; that is, by throwing the dice and using the print as a game board, the player arrives at the conclusion that gambling is a moral hazard. Before examining several key examples of these virtuous vices, in order to better understand how Mitelli’s prints functioned among their users, a closer look at gambling in Bologna and the Papal States during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries is needed.

Despite the city’s pious reputation, the Church was forced to engage in an aggressive prohibitionary campaign against the social evil of gambling, using a strategy
of surveillance and penalty. Surviving prints bear witness to, on the one hand, the papal bandi, or posters, that banned the use of dice and, on the other, a vast collection of Mitelli's engraving for printed game sheets. It is accepted that the games were meant to be played with dice, since the illustrations included both numerical equivalents for each scene and directions on how much to pay to or take from the pot depending on where the dice landed the player on the board. How did Mitelli's prints function as evidence for the encounter between the conflicting discourses of Catholic prohibition and the daily life of early modern Bologna? As will be shown, the artist created a hybrid form.

By the time of the first bando in 1588, certain forms of games had come to be seen by the Church as an evil habit. These printed edicts were posted to inform the public of restrictions and prohibitions on gambling in the Papal States of Rome, Bologna, and Perugia. Examples range in date from 1588 into the twentieth century.¹ Their proliferation throughout the centuries attests to the fact that gambling was actually alive and well in the Papal States, since there was a need to continually emphasize its prohibition. For instance, one bando uses words such as “scandalous” and “pernicious” to indicate the moral dangers of the game of dice: “essendosi gia per ordine della sanctica di N.S. prohibito il gioco tanto scandaloso e pernicioso de Dadi” (having been prohibited by the order of His Holiness, the game of dice, so scandalous and pernicious).²

During religious festivals such as Christmas and Holy Week, gambling was expressly forbidden, as it would interfere with religious devotion. The perils of gambling, in addition to distracting players from religious purpose, are stated as morally dangerous. Gambling is seen as a pernicious vice that will bring about the ruin of one’s family through the loss of one’s private possessions and thus lead to economic, moral, and social ruin.³ By contrast, in other cities such as Venice, some scholars believe that gambling was actually used by the noble classes as a way to retain a certain amount of the gentlemanly dignity associated with a class of society whose powers were dying out.⁴

Mitelli’s game prints are unique in many ways. Examples of historically well-known games include the giuoco dell'oca (game of the goose) and pela il chiu (pluck the owl), both of which were played with a traditional game board and dice. In these games, one would follow a circular path that led to the center by way of passes or setbacks. Mitelli, however, created a hybrid form of game sheet with a moralistic twist. Encoded in his games are proverbs and archetypes of folk wisdom that contain messages in concert with the Church’s position on, for example, women. Ironically, however, these messages must be arrived at through gambling, something the Church wished to eradicate. Mitelli’s choice of this hybrid perhaps reveals an ambiguous position. He may have been caught between his relationship to the Church and to his society, an artist who, in the words of Michel de Certeau, was using everyday tactics to counter religious strategies; in other words, he employed the game sheet as “la perruque,” or the wig, a tactic of resistance and evasion that the reader/player can appropriate for himself.⁵
The format of these games is usually a broadsheet, and all are played with a number of dice ranging from one to three. The artist uses “P” for pagare, or payment, and “T” for tirare, or take from the pot. In the games’ directions, Mitelli often suggests un quattrino as a forfeit, but then leaves the players the option of whatever they agree upon. If one rolls three of a kind, for example, one usually takes half the pot. Also significant is that many of Mitelli’s prints contain verses in Bolognese dialect, reinforcing the moralistic message of his games and creating a complex interweaving of image, text, and morality.

Regarding the diverse subject matter, female virtue was often an important topic in both games and proverbs. The first two games under consideration, the Game of Truth and the Game of Husbands and Wives, touch upon the city’s fear of loose women and the moral hazards of gambling by showing dire consequences for both the male and female characters on the game boards. These examples are specifically related to the city and the Church’s fight to restore women’s lost honor. The typical format is most evident in the Game of Truth (Figure 9.1). The game is divided into six squares, in two rows of three squares each. The squares are arranged from left to right, top to bottom, except

Figure 9.1. Giuseppe Maria Mitelli, Game of Truth, etching, 1688. Collezione d’Arte e di Storia della Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Bologna (CACRB).
for the top central square, the winning number. The numerical order mimics the gravity of the moral infraction until one reaches the winning number 6, which ironically is the most pious scene. Each square contains an illustration, a number, a direction, and a line of text. This game is closely related to the tradition of moralizing broadsheets such as the “miserable end of the courtesan,” a theme especially popular in Venice. The top center square, number 6, dominates the board with its illustration of the well-behaved family. This square is further emphasized by being depicted on a type of tapestry to distinguish it from the other squares and draw one’s eyes to it. The most ironic is square number 3 (lower left), in that it tells the player that “he who plays, loses, and he who doesn’t play, wins.” This is a clear message against gambling, reminding one of its possible dire consequences, and yet in order to play this game one must take up the dice and gamble. The sexual suggestiveness of the two players’ feet touching under the table refers to promiscuity as a vice that would accompany, or be a consequence of, gambling. That form of contact could also refer to cheating at cards, but sexual promiscuity is more in concert with the rest of the game’s moralistic message.

Square number 4 (lower center) tells us that “by dancing, you lose more than you believe,” perhaps implying once more a loss of virtue. It is interesting to note that as the number increases, so do the vice and its penalty. For example, one square says, “outside of the home, one always loses.” The illustration shows two female figures about to get into trouble with a strange male suitor outside, giving a very direct reminder that a woman’s place is in the home. The dog, usually a symbol of marital fidelity, is barking at the unknown suitor, signifying danger. Square number 2 (upper right) represents perhaps a lesser vice, but one that could lead to others: “talking on the doorstep, one loses.” Again this encounter is used to imply promiscuity. One can see a tradesman in the background, similar to the stock representations of tradesmen in the Arti di Bologna. Most of the admonitions to stay indoors seem to be addressed to women, although in square 1 the penalty is based on the vice of vanity, with both sexes preening themselves in that age-old trope of vanity, the mirror. The characters are dressed in fancy seventeenth-century costume with a background resembling an interior stage set, perhaps implying performance of identity through use of the mirror. Although literacy is implied, the family is depicted as being of modest means, and not in rich costume. One could even argue that there is a slight suggestion that the vices are associated with the upper classes. In square 2, the worker in the background who is simply doing his job in order to earn a living contrasts with the foppish suitor who represents infidelity.

The winning image is in the upper center, so as to be easily spotted, and the added use of the tapestry highlights the proper choice of behavior that one must perform with a theatrical flourish. The inclusion of the child implies family, as opposed to simply lovers. Note that the woman’s hair is neatly kept in and restrained, signifying a parallel with moral restraint. In addition, the woman is engaged in that most pious of activities for Christian women: embroidery.
Another game related to the moralizing broadsheet tradition is the Game of Husbands and Wives (Figure 9.2). This game has a narrative progression, composed of four rows with the top and bottom each containing six squares and images; it describes the slow decline of a married couple, similar to the “decline of the courtesan” broadsheets. (Mitelli also took up the theme of the fall of the meretrice, or prostitute, in his lunario, or calendar, to be discussed below, Figure 9.5.) The winning combination of 18, or three sixes, is symbolized by the handing over of the dowry to the husband by the wife in the first square. The first two rows are taking squares and the last two are paying squares. One might assume, then, that there is a positive implication to the images and actions in the first two rows, even though one of these images is reminiscent of the woman on top (number 9) and another is a man in women’s clothing (il mondo rovesciato, or the world upside down, number 6). These two squares echo themes that were already a part of life in seventeenth-century Bologna, as there were numerous prints of the “woman in breeches” circulating, and she was both a feared and celebrated figure. The man dressed as a woman is the inverse: having lost his masculinity, he becomes an unnatural image (connected to cross-dressing rituals that were part of carnival celebrations) and thus a reflection of the
world upside down, another widely circulating theme of the day. Bologna was especially familiar with these themes through the satiric yet empathetic verses of Giulio Cesare Croce, a sixteenth-century poet of the piazza.10

The husband going gambling can be seen as the beginning of the decline, or the turning point in the couple's story. It is interesting to note that when the wife complains, there is a penalty, but if the husband is angry, one takes from the pot. The implications of this system are quite clear, as gender roles give primacy to the man. It may also imply the idea of woman as lunatic and less emotionally stable than man, then a widespread notion: women were often represented as melancholy, though without the benefit of its creative fire.11 The number of the final square is nil: no penalty paid, no forfeit taken. The illustration in this final square depicts the couple's complete economic and spiritual ruin, shown, ironically, as a result of gambling. The other message in this game was that women's place was in the home or the convent; the Counter-Reformation continued.

Players are thus reminded in these two games (while in the very act of gambling) of the Church's position on gambling and women. To gamble was to put one's faith passively in Chance, and Chance was considered the opposite of Divine Providence, especially because Providence also operated through active good works on the part of the faithful. Therefore dice were to be completely eliminated: “più danosi e detestabili … interdetto e estinto” (more ruinous and detestable … forbidden and extinguished), whereas cards would be tolerated: “con qualche peso imposto ai giocatori” (with some burden imposed upon the players), that is, a tax.12 The Camera Apostolica still hoped to eliminate them eventually: “con la speranza di annihilare questo delle carte a suo tempo e luogo” [with the hope of annihilating this (vice) of cards in its own time and place].13 Thus, although they decided to ban dice, on a somewhat contradictory yet perhaps financially profitable note, cards would be tolerated with the minor penalty of an imposed tax. This was to be accomplished through the branding of card decks with a papal stamp, so that they might be identified as legal decks, and tax upon them for the stamp would be collected at the time of purchase. Could the more obvious reason that cards were tolerated be the fact that they were a tangible source of revenue? The papacy of Sixtus V apparently needed money for growing city expenses and to curb the towering debt left by the lavish personal spending of previous popes.14

A special commissioner was appointed to enforce the legal stamping of card decks and to collect fines on those who broke the law.15 The card tax was “un giulio di moneta Romana,” and if caught with cards that were unstamped or illegally stamped, one would pay a ducat per deck (including, naturally, the confiscation of the deck). If caught gambling with dice, one was fined the punitive sum of a gold scudo, and if the criminal were unable to pay, a prison sentence would be imposed. Anyone with illegal card decks was commanded to come forward and declare them in order to rectify the situation, no later than ten days from the posting of the bando.16 As previously mentioned, gambling in general was expressly forbidden during religious festivals. However, the idea of allowing
the specific game of card playing outside of religious festivals implies a temporal aspect to morality. For example, cards were morally tolerated, yet during a religious festival they were transformed into a greater social evil, a sign of papal and religious disrespect: “sara lecito giocare, purche si porti ... honore e reverenza alle santissime feste” (gambling will be accepted, so long as honor and reverence are shown to the holy feasts).\(^\text{17}\)

In this context they become a distraction, but perhaps in actuality gambling with cards during festivals represented more of a resistance to the total discipline of the Catholic regime, or a tactic of carving out personal space against the papal and religious order. In the case of card playing, the players were asked to come forward and declare their card decks so that they could be taxed. As in a Foucauldian world, the first step toward discipline and punishment is surveillance. Unfortunately, the taxes did not necessarily achieve their prohibitive function; more bandi were continually created to try to stop the proliferation of evasion of the card tax. Another interesting aspect to the tax is that it was destined for “charitable works,” to help support the “Ospizio dei poveri mendicanti di San Sisto” erected by Sixtus V in 1587. It had been started by the Bolognese pope, the Buoncompagni Gregory XIII, to “togliere i mendicanti dalla citta” (remove the beggars from the city)—perhaps also to visually order the city by ridding it of its more obvious socially marginalized groups.\(^\text{18}\)

Games of a Courtly Origin

But were games always considered to be such a social evil? A more positive view of the history of games can be found in courtly literature, as a pastime for the bored members of the nobility and the rich classes. From mentions in period literature to behavioral treatises such as Castiglione’s *Il libro del cortegiano* (The Book of the Courtier) and even more elaborate tracts written specifically on games, their pedigree is long and complex.\(^\text{20}\)

The next few examples of Mitelli’s games, such as the Game of Professions, the Game of the Beloved with her Lovers, and the Game of Eyes and Mouths, are directly descended from courtly prototypes. These games, discussed in detail below, involved various activities from the miming of professions to discussions of the true meaning of love. As such, their roots in courtly treatises on game playing merit further investigation. In the history of games before their prohibition in the early modern period, their most remote origins go back to antiquity, and due to this heritage they were seen as a respectable pastime. Bakhtin states that games still preserved this philosophical meaning reminiscent of antiquity during the time of Rabelais in 1542.\(^\text{21}\)

According to Peter Burke, associated with the courtly concept of leisure were the academies, such as the Academy of the Intronati of Siena, whose partial function was to create absorbing games to avoid boredom.\(^\text{22}\) Out of these institutions would come the
published parlor games of the Bargagli brothers of Siena, Girolamo’s *Dialogo de’ Giuochi* (1572) and Scipione’s *I trattenimenti* (1587); and the *Cento giuochi liberali, et d’ingegno* (1551) from their Bolognese counterpart, Innocentio Ringhieri. These institutions used leisure for intellectual games involving philosophy and knowledge. They also delineated the concept of *ozio onesto* vs. *ozio disonesto.* Ozio onesto, or honest leisure, was considered to consist of courtly parlor games associated with the academies, whereas ozio disonesto, or dishonest leisure, was represented by dice playing in the local taverns. Although these academies were mostly for elites, the flurry of how-to books published during the sixteenth century most probably pervaded other classes. This social crossing gives evidence for the lack of a “pure” popular culture; rather, these forms are all interpenetrated and thus transformed. Leisure developed an emphasis on agency through the publication of treatises such as these. Certain examples of Mitelli’s games thus serve as a reminder to the reader that although these game prints are considered part of so-called popular print culture, they are also partially derived from courtly parlor games and as such are hybrid high/low forms of visual imagery that transcend simple categorization.

Girolamo Bargagli’s *Dialogo de’ Giuochi* was published in Siena in 1572. He divides games into games of wit and ingegno, games of jest, and games of pleasure. A master of revels is elected and must wear a laurel upon his head to signify his status, and a mestola, or pestle, is used as a prop for the game. There is also a prescriptive section on the etiquette of playing these games. For example, the author clearly states that the Game of Weights is to be avoided, as it puts undue physical discomfort upon a player by piling heavy objects on the player’s back. Other games to be avoided included games where religion is treated as sport, as well as the Game of the Temple of Love. Time and place are also considered, with serious games destined for the hours before the evening meal, and lighter games being prescribed for after dinner. The author includes advice to the players on manners, dress, disposition, and a specific admonition always to praise women. Poetic verses are suggested as a mode to create this praise. There is even a Game of Proverbs included in the work. Other games include the Game of Love, in which the participants must answer philosophical questions regarding love, for example, “What would be the most appropriate gift to a lady love?”

Girolamo’s brother, Scipione, also wrote a treatise on games, *I trattenimenti,* which was published in Venice in 1587, as he belonged to both the Venetian and Sienese academies. The scene for his work is the siege of Siena by Florence in 1554; it is modeled on Bocaccio’s *Decameron,* in that the speakers in both tell various stories to avoid boredom during forced idleness. The games are similar to previously mentioned examples, including questions on the nature of love, as well as a paragone on which is superior, art or nature, the mind or the body? There is also a Game of Devices, a Game of the Gardener, and a pastoral play. Curiously, this particular group plays the Game of the Temple of Love, the very one that Scipione’s brother Girolamo so disapproved of; perhaps Girolamo was the more pious of the two.
Innocentio Ringhieri, a member of the Academy of the Ritrouvati, published his *Cento giuochi liberali, et d’ingegno* in Bologna in 1551. His book predates the Sienese versions, but no mention of his work is made by the others; in fact the Sienese volumes insist that these games were invented in Siena. However, if one were to take the dates as evidence, it could seem that some of these games may have been invented in Bologna. Ringhieri’s *Cento giuochi* was also translated into French, and he dedicated it to Catherine de’ Medici of France. The work is introduced by a didactic letter specifically addressed to the ladies, followed by questions. It is divided into ten books with ten games in each, such as the Game of Love and the Game of the Gods. The Game of Love includes blindfolding a player who must guess by whom he or she is touched. Upon failing, the blindfolded player must then answer questions such as “why is love blind?” If the player fails to answer the question, he or she must pay a forfeit. The second book contains encyclopedic games such as the Game of Fountains and Rivers and the Game of Cities. By the fifth book, the subject matter becomes more serious, such as the Game of Life and the Game of Death; the fifth book also deals with themes such as madness, jealousy, chastity, and beauty. Other games include the Game of the Philosopher and the Game of Poets. An example of one of Ringhieri’s games is the Game of Wild Beasts, where the company is divided and each is assigned an animal and a trait. When the name of the animal is called, the person must respond with its trait, and then to a question regarding, for example, the habits of the animal. This type of game falls into the category of educational games, through the teaching of scientific knowledge.

These parlor game books usually contained no images but were based instead on riddles, stories, charades, and philosophical questions, with the inclusion of token forfeits as the symbolic link to the aspect of gambling. Among most game prints of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, in contrast, one can find similar subject matter translated into visual images. Appropriating courtly themes for gambling, the prints became the gambler’s version of philosophical questions of love and beauty, a shared practice of “text, object, and act that grasps it,” or game, illustration, and the act of playing. Two examples of Mitelli’s games which most closely reveal their courtly origins regarding love and chivalry are the Game of the Beloved with Her Lovers and the Game of Eyes and Mouths.

The Game of the Beloved with Her Lovers is one single vignette played with the dice (Figure 9.3). The lady representing the beloved beauty is at the center of the game and is the winning combination that takes all. Her various lovers are arranged in three rows of figures across the page but without being framed in squares. The figures represent stock types already seen in Mitelli’s other engravings, such as the fool from his images of the land of Cockaigne. The subject of this game could easily be related to the various courtly parlor games surrounding the Game of Love, which came in many different formats, including questions regarding value judgments about what type of lover a lady would prefer: handsome, honest, brave, and so on. The highest numbers are given to the knowledgeable and rich lover, whereas the poor lover and the foolish one neither take nor pay.
Perhaps the hunchback is again a sign of good luck as his number allows the player to take four quattrini. This game seems to assert the pragmatic view that women always choose the lover with the most money. Other like-minded games include Women and Their Affairs, where the winning numbers illustrate women attending to their domestic chores. The iconography of this game neatly places women in the moral pigeonhole of good homemaker and virtuous wife.

The Game of Eyes and Mouths is once again in broadsheet format with four rows of five squares, and is played with three dice (Figure 9.4). This game brings to mind the prevalence in the sixteenth century of physiognomy treatises, which continued to be of interest in the seventeenth century although scholars were moving toward a more scientific system of classification. The top middle image is the winning combination, composed of two lovely eyes in an oval, which take all. This premise of the beautiful eyes also calls to mind the supremacy of sight and Domenico Bruni’s verses regarding beauty.32 The eyes are seen as the supreme expression of a woman’s beauty, with a beautiful mouth as second place. This game is not one of progression, and the numbers are not placed in order. As with some of Mitelli’s other games, this example also contains moralistic
messages encoded within its illustrations and text. In the last square to the right in the second row, the text indicates that a tight mouth is silent and will always win. This is another way of referring to one of Mitelli’s proverbs, which states the importance of not always speaking and of knowing when to be prudently silent, especially for women. The last illustration on the lower right also tells us that the ready eye guards itself against falling, a message that can easily be translated into Christian morality as not falling victim to sin, based on the sensuality of what the eye sees.

Vanity and Virtue: Mitelli’s Moralistic Prints of Women in Proverb and Calendar Format

In addition to courtly manuals and parlor games, other sources for Mitelli’s game imagery are local proverbs and didactic broadsheets, of which he himself created many. In this tradition, he translated the Fall of the Prostitute into the lunario format, a sort of moralizing calendar, which describes in detailed monthly installments the moral and physical disintegration of a young lady. The lunario is similar to the broadsheet
and offered a convenient visual format for the telling of a multi-vignette story, with a clear temporal beginning and end. Mitelli also created many collections of proverbs that draw on centuries of old local sayings and folk wisdom, combined with his own image of Bologna and its customs. Bologna was the home of the sixteenth-century reforming cleric, Cardinal Gabriele Paleotti, whose ideas on visual imagery were to influence artistic production in the city far into the seventeenth century. As can be expected in Paleotti’s Bologna, women’s virtue remains a key theme.

The Unhappy Life of the Prostitute in Twelve Months is a type of calendar with a different scene for each month (Figure 9.5). This image is akin to the broadsheet of the prostitute, which was a tradition already common in Venice and the North. However, Mitelli reinterprets it with a calendar, adding the important temporal aspect for a post-Tridentine sense of morality. The calendar expands time and shows how the decline of the meretrice, or prostitute, progresses over time, from one wrong decision to another, until it is too late to save her life, though perhaps still her soul, if she repents. The viewer is privy to the whole saga; he or she has the chance to meditate on the woman’s fall from
grace and to observe the point at which she might have saved herself, had she looked to faith for help and given up her sinful ways. In this example, one can witness the slow decline from a fair young maiden at the beginning to the pawn of an old procuress as the young lady falls prey to her first suitor. Then the inevitable fight erupts between rival suitors and one ends up in jail, after which the wronged suitor slashes her face in anger. No longer able to attract the best suitor as protector, she goes down a miserable and unholy path and ends up in a hospital run by nuns for diseases such as syphilis, which is represented by the marks on her diseased body. This is a realistic image; the archives reveal that Bologna had many such Christian houses of reform created to save, if not their bodies, then what was more important, the lost women’s souls. Mitelli’s moralizing messages seem to have existed in other media as well; a fresco attributed to him of the Conversion of the Meretrici of Todi by San Filippo still exists in the Archiginnasio. Mitelli also illustrated the nun, the inverse of the meretrice, as the example for women. This image is a visual catalogue of all the orders of nuns in Bologna, in which the figures of pious women are slotted into a chart of virtue.

Two images can represent Mitelli’s extensive collection of prints on proverbs regarding images of women. Like many others in his collections, these examples continue the city’s obsession with women’s lost virtue. In the first, the proverb reads, “le donne spesse volte hanno lunga la veste e corte l’intelletto” (women often have long dresses and short intellects). In this surreal example, a woman has had the top of her head removed, a symbolically lobotomized version of female gender (Figure 9.6). These proverbs are a type of memento mori, an established convention in seventeenth-century visual imagery, into which Mitelli inserts himself. Once again, the extra verses at the bottom of the image reinforce the negative stereotype of women:

Femina o tu, che vuoi di saggia il vanto,
Non affetar ne gli ornamenti il fasto,
Poco senno tal hor scopre un gran manto.

Woman, O you who want of wisdom to brag,
Do not put your faith in ornaments, for
Little wisdom at that hour is uncovered by a great cloak.

The second print example contains the image of woman as the embodiment of vanity and pride: the donna superba (Figure 9.7). Here is the allegorical image of woman as pride itself. The artist has included the peacock as a symbolic parody of the woman as she preens in front of the mirror in fancy costume. The mirror is a constant reminder of vanitas and the uselessness of attachment to temporal beauty as opposed to faith. Once again the verses that accompany the image reinforce the moralistic message, where Death itself responds to the woman’s vanity:
Figure 9.7. Giuseppe Maria Mitelli, 
*Donna Superba*, etching, 1675. 
Collezione d’Arte e di Storia della Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Bologna (CACRB).
“Donna Superba”
Quanto bella son io! Quanti consuma
Per me d’amor l’inestinguibil foco!
M’incensano i sospiri in ogni loco,
Onde non e stupor, se la mi fuma.

“Morte”
Vana: lo specchio tuo frangi che tanto
Nel consigliarti a la ragion prevale,
Meglio potrai di tua bellezza il frale
Espresso contemplar nel vetro infranto.

“Prideful Woman”
How beautiful I am! How much
Does love’s inextinguishable fire burn for me!
I am filled with sighs in every locale,
Therefore, be not surprised, if there is smoke there.

“Death”
Vain one: break your mirror,
In order that reason may prevail,
In counseling you,
For better will you be able to contemplate
Your beauty, its frail expression,
In a broken mirror.

Finally, the topos of the world upside down is also illustrated in terms of gender, as in Mitelli’s “Trista è quella casa dove la gallina canta e il gallo tace” (Sad is that home where the chicken crows and the cock is silent) (Figure 9.8).35 This image is a clear reversal of gender roles, a dangerous thing (as the verses below it emphasize), where the woman “wears the pants,” so to speak. These games display the artist’s unique grasp of the world around him, in visual terms.

Mitelli and the Imaginaire of Bologna in the Seventeenth Century

In addition to the intersection with religious prohibition and courtly origins, some of Mitelli’s games are very site specific and local in nature, insofar as he weaves in the cultural and historical fabric of the city.36 By additionally drawing on the popular literature of the day, including local poets of the piazza such as Giulio Cesare Croce, the artist truly maps the city’s intellectual history in visual game form.37 This section will examine three other games, including the Game of the Land of Cockaigne, Where One Never Loses but Always Earns. This game originates from a well-known topos in the early modern world, but with a new twist. The Game of Professions, for Whom They Go Well and for Whom
Figure 9.8. Giuseppe Maria Mitelli, *Sad is that Home Where the Chicken Crows and the Cock is Silent*, etching, 1678. Collezione d'Arte e di Storia della Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Bologna (CACRB).
They Go Badly is an almost autobiographical account of Bologna’s professions of the day, with the artist’s own profession added and commented upon rather critically. Finally, the New Game of the Turk, the German, and the Venetian shows contemporary politics as another source of inspiration for Mitelli; in this game, the Turk—being the infidel—always loses, of course, as the Church would wish.

A key concept in the imaginaire of early modern Bologna is the “world upside down,” or land of the Cuccagna, where all is not as it should be. The Game of the Land of Cockaigne, Where One Never Loses but Always Earns is part of the iconography of the world upside down, in which one does not work, but nonetheless has everything one needs (Figure 9.9). This theme was already suggested in the Game of Husbands and Wives, with their cross-dressing. This particular example creates an ingeniously site-specific game. The central figure is the winning combination set into a type of oval that is set on a pedestal within which the rules of the game are written. Each figure is labeled with the name of a food and the city of which it is representative. In these images, Mitelli has represented a

Figure 9.9. Giuseppe Maria Mitelli, Game of the Land of Cockaigne, Where One Never Loses but Always Earns, etching, 1691. Collezione d’Arte e di Storia della Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Bologna (CACRB).
vast selection of figure types of various classes (as indicated by costume), including both male and female figures, a panorama of humanity. Their gestures are emphatic, as each figure either points to his or her food or is in the process of eating or drinking it.

The translation of the theme of Cockaigne into a game of regional foods seems to be a creation of Mitelli’s, where the local flavor as the winning combination represents a bit of *campanilismo*, or rooting for your own town, regarding Bologna’s celebrated local sausage, *mortadella*. This would obviously be a theme of central importance to Mitelli’s audience. Looking closely at the print, one notices that staple foods such as bread and fish are represented by members of the lower classes, whereas a liquor from Torino is represented by the third figure in the top row, who is directed only to sniff his liquor. Perhaps this high-class fop is not in need of the sustenance of hearty food, but desires only the appearance of wealth, such as fancy liquor, to correspond with his fancy clothing. In a certain fashion, this game is still related to the encyclopedic types of parlor games, yet the theme and variety of illustrations point to a deeper meaning. It also seems that the figure holding the bread (second figure in the bottom row) is a bit larger in size than the others, perhaps a hint to the primacy of that staple food. The first figure also contains a comment that the food he carries is expensive for him. Perhaps, for those who could not afford these foods in reality, the game provided a means for them to appropriate them visually, thus offering some temporary respite from poverty.

The Game of Professions, for Whom They Go Well and for Whom They Go Badly is partly an autobiographical statement by Mitelli (Figure 9.10). The subject matter for this game also exists in courtly parlor games, such as the Game of Trades, where one is asked to mime a particular trade. This game is a combination of lower-ranking trades with high-ranking skilled professions, including the artist’s own profession in the final square on the lower right. The format is again his standard rectangular broadsheet with four rows, each with five squares. The winning combination is held by the first square of musicians and players. The illustrations are lively and active, including several figures displaying the actions of the profession. Graphically, this has a very different effect when compared with the iconic images of the trades in Brambilla’s game of *pela il chiu*. The artist has contrived to create a more engaging scene for each profession.

What is perhaps more interesting, and very site specific, is that in addition to labeling the profession above each illustration, the artist has included a phrase in local Bolognese dialect below the image that comments on how economically successful that particular profession is. The integration of this text would also serve to help the players memorize the numerical combinations, so as to eventually permit playing even without Mitelli’s sheet. Textuality, including visual text, and orality are intimately connected here; each reinforces the other. Each player can thus appropriate the “text” for himself. It seems that to Mitelli, musicians were earning the most, whereas painters, sculptors, and engravers were earning the least, perhaps a tantalizing autobiographical comment on the plight of the artist himself. Further research would be required to substantiate this,
since Mitelli was extremely prolific and thus may have had a good income. 40 Despite the prominence of women as artists in Mitelli’s milieu, there is no mention in these games of women artists and their plight or successes.

The New Game of the Turk, the German, and the Venetian is a political satire composed of a single vignette and is played with two dice (Figure 9.11). It is described as a new game, thus implying improvisation on the artist’s part. Caricatures of Turks were quite common, a result of the Catholic Church’s war against the infidels. When portrayed in games, the Turk was always the loser against the Christians, in a sort of hopeful sympathetic magic, where a victory over the Turk in print meant making it happen in reality (the Church desperately wished to believe this, even if it did not always work). 41 In this game in particular, the text at the top announces the intentions of the German and the Venetian to fleece the Turk as much as possible and divide the winnings, as well as to take back from him what he has usurped (referring to the Ottoman Empire’s
attempts to take over Christian lands, which were then reconquered by the Church). The combinations are listed at the bottom, with the German and Venetian having the best numbers and the Turk representing the loser. The artist made use of the tablecloth as a place for displaying the rules of the game. He also paid particular attention to physiognomic types and gestures, as seen in the Turk’s despairing gesture of loss, as compared with the aggressive Venetian and finely clothed German.

Gambling for Virtue and the Hand of Piety

Finally, one of the tantalizing questions that remain for further research concerns the audience for Mitelli’s games. There is very little evidence of who the readers might have been, apart from any visual clues in the illustrations themselves. One notes a variety of physiognomic types, ages, and classes of male and female characters, as well as various themes both high and low, implying a vast and diverse audience. However, it would most
likely have been male and Catholic, as it would have been unheard of to find women gambling in public taverns. The games would most probably have been played in local taverns, since taverns are depicted in some of the games themselves and were normally frequented by a certain class of male.\textsuperscript{42} The prints were portable and inexpensive, and thus they could be widely circulated. These hybrids also raise questions of authorship, as in Stallybrass and White’s discussion of the marketplace as an intersection of high and low, center and periphery.\textsuperscript{43} It is in this light that Mitelli’s games should be seen. If one takes them as text, they are an intersection of high and low, sacred and profane, an example of the constant resurfacing of that which is suppressed, and a recycling of appropriated themes in original ways that each reader/player can also make his or her own.

Although Bakhtin states that before Rabelais (apart from antiquity) games were essentially linked to the popular marketplace aspect of feasts, he finds that their more “noble” aspects survived in important episodes from literature, such as Gargantua and Pantagruel. For example, the philosopher’s riddle (related to the enigmatic sphinx) and the dice casting (as used to settle judicial disputes) are seen as noble remnants of practices from antiquity that often dealt with prophecy.\textsuperscript{44} Play and prophecy are thus intimately connected here, with games often seen as a condensed form of life’s historic process, and, according to Bakhtin, games also freed the players from the bounds of everyday life, liberating them from the laws of nature.\textsuperscript{45} Seen in this light, it is obvious why the Catholic Church would reject them. However, I would argue that this “noble” aspect also survives in the courtly origins of Mitelli’s didactic hybrid games, transformed by their encounter with religion and daily life. The intervention of the Church is partly responsible for Mitelli’s hybrid form. By prohibiting gambling, it thus became the abject that the Church desired to flush out of society, but which constantly returned (albeit transformed) in the form of Mitelli’s prints. Gambling was the socially peripheral which then became symbolically central, especially to the Church.\textsuperscript{46}

In conclusion, Mitelli created illustrations for playing with dice that were didactically moralistic, yet were arrived at through gambling. His Game of Truth clearly illustrates its Catholic moral by associating the winning number with the ideal Christian family. Not surprisingly, due to the city’s reputation as a Counter-Reformation stronghold and to Archbishop Gabriele Paleotti’s politics of visual reform, the struggle for women’s virtue was one of the most prominent themes in these virtuous vices.\textsuperscript{47} Mitelli’s other games, such as the Land of Cockaigne, are tied to his interests in naturalism and caricature, while still others, such as the Game of Professions, are closer to courtly parlor games. However, although some of the themes, such as in the Game of the Beloved with Her Lovers, are similar to those of Bargagli and Ringhieri, the majority of Mitelli’s games are involved in social commentary while playing dice, transcending their progenitor genre of courtly games and speaking to both high and low audiences. Thus, despite bandi constantly prohibiting the playing of dice games, the artist’s ironic solution is to create games that cross boundaries and end up in the interstices, a hybrid
place, a site of resistance which allows the artist to express the world of Bologna through his eyes, while responding to the didactic demands of the Church. In these images, print became practice, an ambiguous site of both compliance with and resistance to the Church’s disciplinary strategy, with Mitelli’s games as its tactics, mapping the city’s virtuous vices.48

NOTES

1 Editori Umbri, Costume e Società, 74.
2 Editori Umbri, Costume e Società, 74.
3 Editori Umbri, Costume e Società, 72.
6 Kunzle, History of the Comic Strip, 292.
7 Pradelli, Gli antichi mestieri di Bologna, 16.
8 Kunzle, History of the Comic Strip, 292. Kunzle mistakenly identified this print with the Venetian example, as simply another broadsheet with an arbitrary assignation of months.
9 Davis, Society and Culture, 130.
10 Casali, La festa del mondo Rovesciato, 9.
11 Jacobs, Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa, 49–53.
12 Editori Umbri, Costume e Società, 73.
13 Editori Umbri, Costume e Società, 73.
14 Editori Umbri, Costume e Società, 64. The materiality of card decks made them easier to brand and control compared with dice. In addition, since manufacture of cards involved use of the printing press, a major economic enterprise during this period, the Camera Apostolica was obviously more intimately involved. One cannot help but wonder how sincere was the actual desire to also eliminate playing cards eventually, if they presented such a source of revenue.
15 Editori Umbri, Costume e Società, 64.
16 Editori Umbri, Costume e Società, 140. For the record, Mitelli also designed decks of cards; one was specifically dedicated to Prospero Bentivoglio, with a treatise on card playing attached to it. These cards, however, contained iconographical images of virtues and vices, or astrological personifications. They were thus classified as tarot cards, and were excluded from the bando.
17 Editori Umbri, Costume e Società, 73.
18 Editori Umbri, Costume e Società, 64.
19 Editori Umbri, Costume e Società, 64. In a strategic countermove, the Pope then decided to dedicate not only the tax money, but also a part of the penalties paid for transgressing these laws, to his charitable cause. A quarter of the fines were to go to the ospizio, with the rest divided among the lawyer, the accuser, and the judge. These fines would also target the owners of houses or botteghe (storefronts/taverns) where illegal cards were played, as well as spacciatori, or vendors of the illegal cards, especially when another tactic of vendors became the invention of fake stamps.
20 Crane, Italian Social Customs, 263; see also Castiglione, Il libro del cortegiano. In the present volume, for an overview of parlor games in sixteenth-century Italy, including an account of the visual and sensory aspects of these games, see “Performing Pictures: Parlor Games and Visual Engagement in Ascanio de’ Mori’s Giuoco piacevole” by Kelli Wood.
21 Bakhtin, “The Role of Games in Rabelais,” 129.
22 Burke, “The Invention of Leisure,” 142.
23 Bargagli, Dialogo de’ Giuochi; Bargagli, I trattenimenti; and Ringhieri, Cento giuochi liberali, et d’ingegno.
24 Burke, “The Invention of Leisure,” 143.
26 Crane, Italian Social Customs, 263.
27 Crane, Italian Social Customs, 297.
28 Crane, Italian Social Customs, 297.
29 Crane, Italian Social Customs, 285.
30 Crane, Italian Social Customs, 290.
32 Jacobs, Defining the Renaissance Virtuosa, 84. Domenico Bruni wrote Defese delle donne (Milan, 1559), in which he mentions beautiful eyes as the ideal feature of feminine perfection.
33 Unfortunately, it is not in a good state of preservation. See Varignana, Le collezioni d’arte della cassa di risparmio in Bologna, 69.
34 This and the following proverbs are the author’s translation. For Figures 9.6 and 9.7, see Varignana, Le collezioni d’arte della cassa di risparmio in Bologna, 280 and 254, respectively.
35 “Sad is that home where the chicken crows and the cock is silent,” from I proverbi figurati; Varignana, Le collezioni d’arte della cassa di risparmio in Bologna, 268.
37 Cocchiara, Il paese della Cuccagna, 159.
38 Cocchiara, Il paese della Cuccagna, 159. The trope of the world upside down also existed in Northern prints of the period, as well as painting. See Kunzle, History of the Comic Strip.
40 Pevsner, Academies of Art, 69. In terms of intellectual prestige, however, painters in the city still belonged to the guild of calico (canvas makers) until 1598.
41 Sympathetic magic is a concept emanating from anthropological studies that attempts to explain how certain primitive religions create a virtual object or image in order to influence an actual object or ritual. This concept has been associated with several scholars, including Sir James George Frazer in The Golden Bough (1889). Later scholars such as Joseph Campbell have applied this to prehistoric cave painting wherein the images of the hunt on the cave walls were meant to ensure a successful hunt.
42 For more on the social discourse of gambling, see Burke, “The Invention of Leisure,” and Crane, Italian Social Customs. Some of these examples may include images of women gambling, but the implication is usually that they are of dubious moral character. This opinion is borne out by the rest of the scene, where the woman normally comes to a bad end.
43 Stallybrass and White, The Politics and Poetics of Transgression, 27.
44 Bakhtin, “The Role of Games in Rabelais,” 125.
45 Bakhtin, “The Role of Games in Rabelais,” 129.
47 For more on Palcotti see Prodi, Il Cardinale Gabriele Paleotti. See also Palcotti, Discorso intorno alle imagini sacre e profane.
48 de Certeau, The Practice of Everyday Life, 35.
Trading and Trick Taking
in the Dutch Republic:
Pasquin’s Wind Cards and the South Sea Bubble

Joyce Goggin

The history of playing cards is not only the record of the persistence of a 15th-century craft, practically unchanged in its essential aspects, but the story of the universal trait of human nature, the allure of chance, which is as characteristic of years ago as it is today. And for its gratification throughout the centuries it has employed the artists and craftsmen of all lands and times—painters and makers of missals and beautifully illuminated manuscript, workers in wood block and engravers of metal and stone and finally the printer and his press; so that its story embodies the romance of all of those, and makes them intimate and understandable things which bring the old past very, very near.1

Introduction

AT LEAST ONCE EVERY DAY most of us will see or come into contact with playing cards somewhere (a casino, a bridge club, an online poker site), on something (a T-shirt, a cookie tin, a greeting card), or in something (a film, an advertisement, a painting). For people who gamble, prestidigitate, or play cards professionally, this number will be considerably higher, but where virtually everyone else is concerned, cards—face cards, aces, hearts, spades, clubs, and diamonds—are a part of the fabric of their daily lives and, therefore, go largely unnoticed. The ubiquity and “negligibility of cards”2 aside, however, the point of this essay is to concur with Alexander Pope, who once on the topic of a game of cards exclaimed, “What mighty Contests rise from Trivial things!” This line, taken from The Rape of the Lock (1712), neatly summarizes both the seeming triviality of playing cards and their surprising, if largely overlooked, significance, hence the “mighty contests” that they are capable of inciting.

Indeed, cards must have seemed anything but trivial when they initially entered Europe via Italy and Spain in the thirteenth century, supposedly in the trappings of gypsies, Crusaders, and traders from various points in the East.3 Whatever the case may be, the elaborate double-faced images and the regal signs and symbols that playing cards still hold up to our attention today, bespeak a deep history and exotic provenance. If popular versions of cards’ history are correct, their images and designs connect cards
with the orient of long ago, which connection would account for the mystic significance that we continue to attribute to cards, however consciously or unconsciously. Moreover, the evocative names by which cards were known in early modern Europe— "The Devil's Almanac," "The Devil's Picture Book," "The Bible of the Gypsies," "The Encyclopedia of the Dead," "The Perpetual Almanac," "The Register of Souls"—are said to indicate how cards were perceived, namely as being both oriental and affiliated with death, ritual, and the occult.4

Such names also align the deck with the book and with textuality, and indeed early playing cards have been referred to as "The Great Book of Thoth Hermes." This name, like those previously mentioned, points very clearly to the form, or to what people have assumed was the original form, of a deck of cards. This is to say that, in at least one version of the history of cards, they arrived in Western Europe in the thirteenth century as a pack of loose or bound leaves that also functioned as a kind of book or register.5 And while all of the portentous names for cards quoted above serve as a colorful reminder of their long historic roots and quasi-religious function in Western early modernity, this last moniker stands out in particular insofar as referring to cards as "The Great Book of Thoth Hermes" also links them to Thoth, the ancient Egyptian god of death, "the inventor of language and the art of writing," numbers, games of chance, and parchment.6 In other words, if one believes that cards were invented by a god who also invented language, writing, and parchment, it requires no tremendous logical leap to connect cards with the book.7

Moreover, historical details, like the colorful appellation of "The Great Book of Thoth Hermes" for playing cards, and creative etymologies, such as one which links the old Italian and contemporary Spanish words for playing card (\textit{naibbe, naipe}) to "Nabû" and "Nebo," alternative names for Thoth, have been trotted out by historians of a particular stamp as evidence of cards' Egyptian origins.8 Antoine Court de Gébelin, being one such historian, was the first to argue, in his \textit{Le Tarot} of 1781, that the origin of the playing card should be sought in Egypt.9 Writing at the beginning of the twentieth century, Van Rensselaer further propagated Court de Gébelin's theories in \textit{Prophetical, Educational, and Playing Cards} (1912), from which others have followed or continued to follow suit.

As the theory goes, cards' origins are traceable to the occult practices of the ancient priests of Thoth who devised a system for transcribing signs that represented the chief gods (Thoth, Isis, Maut, Phthah, and Ammon), along with virtues and vices, which were painted on the interior walls of temples to Thoth. According to the historians just cited, Thoth's priests would cast rods or arrows on an altar at the center of these temples, which would point to the pictograms on the temple walls.10 "These rods or arrows were marked with four different tokens, dividing them up into four divisions or suits, which is now the number universally adopted."11 The signs indicated were then read as unities
and sentences and interpreted by the priests. As time passed, priests began transcribing Thoth's cosmic alphabet from the temple walls onto parchment tablets—also supposedly of Thoth's invention, along with language itself—making it possible to transport the signs and to consult them at will. Therefore, according to Court de Gébelin and later to Van Rensselaer, when these parchments began entering Western Europe in the thirteenth century, they were carried as a book or as "unbound leaves of the great book of Thoth," the god of death, which accounts for early sobriquets such as "The Tablets of Fate" and "The Register of Souls." Once the books of Thoth had become familiar curios in Europe, people began separating the parchments from their binding or sheath in order to play with them, and, with that same gesture, they also partially separated cards from what was supposedly their original sacred function as an augury. According to Van Rensselaer, then, modern playing cards are the descendants of "one of the most ancient books of the early Egyptians," which, as she put it so poetically, miraculously survived the "flames that consumed their superb libraries." "The leaves of this book," she continues, "were scattered over Europe," and one would scarce believe that what is "today regarded as a collection of extravagant pictures without any significance in the world" were the "scattered pages ... of Egyptian mysteries" containing "the fruit of exquisite wisdom." Employed in the service of gaming and severed from their deeper significance, the symbols on the parchments also gradually became secularized, Europeanized, and supplanted by images of regional monarchs, hence the kings, queens, and knaves now depicted on playing cards.

Although, as Van Rensselaer suggests, few people will be reminded of cards' ancient Egyptian, possibly apocryphal, history when they cut, shuffle, and deal, there is indeed a sense of gravitas that inheres in cards accompanied by an impression of their antiquity, even in their contemporary plastic-coated or digital forms. Our unconscious apprehension of cards' deep past is at least partially attributable to card makers who, in the sixteenth century, attempted to regionalize and standardize face-card designs in many European countries, while modeling cards on the thirteenth-century figures that had been handed down to them, which were themselves ostensibly adaptations of earlier Egyptian cards. In other words, even in the sixteenth century, a pack of cards would have had the look and feel of an antique or an historical artifact, so that, as Agamben has suggested, they always bring a sense of diachrony or history to a gaming situation in the present, with uncanny effect. The strange sense of time suspended that cards impart, and which is so typical of various forms of play, along with a sense of high ceremony tainted by the "trivial," are all part of playing cards' intriguing aura.

Likewise, although we no longer refer to cards as "The Encyclopedia of the Dead" or "The Bible of the Gypsies," at least a hint of the occult still lingers around cards in the imagination of contemporary players, informing gamblers' superstitions and the belief in cartomancy alike. Well founded or not, such beliefs and superstitions cling to cards
and have manifested themselves in interesting ways, such as in the game of “Ombre,” the central narrative device in Pope’s Rape of the Lock with which I began. Perfectly illustrating the kind of historical trajectory I have been tracing, the name of this game derives from Hombre (man), a game popular in Spain from the fifteenth century onwards, which spread over the European continent and reached England in the seventeenth century. The Spanish name—Hombre—was phonetically rendered as Ombre in English, and the game was seen both as a pastime and as “the game of man” (i.e. hombre), hence its prominence in Pope’s mock epic narrative poem. The action in the game, paralleled in the realm of the gods in The Rape of the Lock, is a non-trivial enterprise that plays with the young heroine Belinda’s future and with her as the object of play, oscillating between recreation and ceremony, frivolity and import, and all played with these curious, evocative cardboard signifiers.

To conclude this brief introduction to the history of playing cards with a further remark on their cosmic connections, it is noteworthy that cards’ role as randomizers in the game of life may also be read numerically: there are fifty-two cards in the deck and fifty-two weeks in a year; each suit has thirteen cards and there are thirteen weeks in a season; there are four suits and four seasons, each suit being the allegory of a season or of an element; there are twelve court cards and twelve months; and the value of the sum of the pack (364) plus one for the joker (365) equals the number of days in a year.

Double dealing

In this very selective summation of the long and strange history of cards and card games, my purpose has been to highlight the dual nature of playing cards, which arguably characterizes playthings more generally as well. Indeed, many scholars—from Schiller, in his eighteenth-century essay on play and education, to Huizinga, Caillois, and more recently Agamben—have pointed to the dead-seriousness of play when it is performed in ritual and to play’s capacity to slip rapidly from one register to the other—from seriousness to silliness—in the twinkling of an eye. “Playthings,” and I would argue cards in particular, may be understood as both objects and persons, much like Belinda, who loses her lock of hair in the game of Ombre, or later as embodied in the Queen of Hearts in Alice in Wonderland. Play is a pastime, a pivotal part of daily life, and a strategic psychosocial force; hence, in The Rape of the Lock, the game amounts to a highly charged sexual strategy played out on the card table. These facets of play coalesce compellingly in playing cards as diminutive signifiers carrying the suggestion of long roots and deep occult significance, imprinted with images of royal figures and strange symbols of old, with which we also play and gamble. Cards, therefore, straddle the line between ritual and divination on the one hand, and play and leisure on the other, all the time threatening to turn the player into the object of play as fortunes shift between winners and losers.
With these thoughts in mind, I would like now to focus on one particular deck of cards printed in the Dutch Republic in 1720, which very succinctly illustrates all of the qualities of cards that I have just elaborated, including their intimate relationship with play and reversals of fortune as well as with textuality. This uncut deck, entitled *Pasquins Windkaart op de Windnegotie* (Pasquin’s Wind Cards on the Wind Trade) (1720), commemorates the bursting of the South Sea Bubble, an enormous economic event that is often referred to as the very first market crash (Figure 10.1). This spectacular crisis, also known as the Mississippi Bubble in France where the consequences were particularly grave, was the first international market crash, on a scale that today would be felt globally. In spite of the serious consequences of the 1720 crash, and although it left many hundreds insolvent or trampled to death in urban centers where investors stormed banks in an effort to recuperate their losses, the crash was also the subject of a number of light-hearted, if moralizing, comedies. Such plays were performed in the year of the crisis in Paris, London, and Amsterdam, with one comedy even making its way into Germany where there had been almost no investment in the bubble.

In that same year, various artists, writers, and publishers assembled a collection of satirical prints about the crisis, along with the scripts of some of the “bubble comedies” that were performed during the speculation fever as well as the uncut sheets of the playing cards reproduced here, along with another deck known as the April Cards. *Het Grote Tafereel der Dwaasheid* (The Great Mirror of Folly), as the collection was entitled, lampooned John Law—the author of the scheme at the heart of the crisis—investors in the bubble, and market mania more generally. Like the other texts included in *The Great Mirror of Folly*, the “Wind Cards” or “Bubble Cards” commemorated the South Sea and Mississippi Bubbles that grew out of what the Dutch referred to as the “Wind Trade,” a metaphor that captures finance’s capacity to produce astronomical sums seemingly out of thin air. While the prints and the scripts from the plays invite various lines of inquiry, the inclusion of playing cards in the collection is striking because cards are, quite obviously, instruments for gambling. Given the grief and loss of life that these financial bubbles caused across Europe as the result of speculation, one wonders, for example, why someone would print a deck of cards narrating the catastrophe with which people could gamble, thereby engaging in speculation’s closest, and perhaps riskier, cousin.

In pondering this odd artifact, it is important to keep in mind that the Bubble Cards were printed and disseminated at a moment in early modern economics in which the line between speculation and gambling was vague, if not non-existent. Finance, and the speculation which drives it, only came into view with the financial revolution, which North and Weingast have placed in 1688, during the Glorious Revolution in England. Indeed, in that country, until the Gambling Act of 1774 came into effect, there was no perceptible difference between gambling and speculation, or between gambling and various forms of insurance. Hence, in 1892, when literary critic C. H. Ph. Meijer was
Figure 10.1. *Pasquin’s Wind Cards on the Wind Trade* (Amsterdam, 1720), Rijksmuseum, Amsterdam.
re-editing Pieter Langendyk’s comedy _The Wind Traders_, which was first published in _The Great Mirror of Folly_ in 1720 together with Pasquin’s Wind Cards, he wrote that, “in the playing cards [included in the volume] one could also read a play on the uncertain game of speculators.”\(^{25}\) In other words, when the cards were printed in 1720 the difference between gambling and speculation appears to have been murky at best, and, therefore, the contemporary reader might have been amused by the cards while seeing them as a sarcastic commentary on the bubble.

More recently, Jeroen Salman has devoted an article to this topic in which he argues that Pasquin’s Wind Cards, as well as the April Cards, were meant to communicate the “overall moral message … that the bubble trade was nothing more than compulsive gambling and playing a high-risk match.”\(^{26}\) On this score, then, the message behind the Wind Cards might have seemed as ambivalent and open to interpretation as it does to contemporary audiences. One might also conjecture that, for those who did not buy into the bubble and who nursed regrets for possible lost fortunes, or congratulated themselves for not having stayed in too long and lost a fortune, the cards served as fifty-two indulgences in _Schadenfreude_ because all of the figures represented on the cards have lost their fortunes or have committed themselves to folly. And again, although these Bubble Cards lampooned key figures in the Wind Trade and various forms of human vanity associated with the birth of finance, they are also randomizers and, therefore, essential to gambling and merry making, so that while the cards carry the message that speculation is folly, they also carry delightfully clever rhyming puns to amuse gamblers at play.

Whether or not the primary function of these cards was play and gaming is also open to speculation, given that those who bought them as printed in _The Great Mirror of Folly_ would have had to mount, dry, and cut them like a card maker would before they were play-ready. Indeed, some historians have suggested that these uncut decks were meant to be read and not played with, as they contain a good deal of text.\(^{27}\) However, as Salman has pointed out, the author of “The Parrot Text” (1720) included in _The Great Mirror of Folly_, which accompanied the April Deck, stated that “[i]t is obvious that if you can read, you can actually play with these cards, because every card has a name and a number.”\(^{28}\) Moreover, Salman also notes that, in 1720, it was suggested that playing with an April Deck would serve as a treatment for “Bubble Melancholy,” and the volume also included a “Toverkaart of geneesmiddelen der wind-breuken (Magic Card or Remedy for Wind Injuries).”\(^{29}\)

It would seem, therefore, that the Wind or Bubble Cards lent themselves to mixed applications: as instruments of gaming when activated by players, as the instruments of _Schadenfreude_, as a cure for melancholy, as an amusing quiz on the events of the bubble, or simply as a collector’s item. What is more, they were published in a tome that itself remains something of a puzzle for bibliographers and historians of the book, containing as it does a rare hodge-podge of prints, pamphlets, plays, and, of course, these playing cards, all of which could potentially occupy a place anywhere along a spectrum spanning
from jokes to sermons. Hence, as Frans de Bruyn has noted, the reader, collector, or gamer must draw on an “awareness of the interaction of ‘high’ and ‘low’ or ‘official’ and ‘popular’ culture in the eighteenth century” in order to make sense of this collection of “vulgar engravings alongside more sophisticated prints, or the insertion of popular broadsides, ballads, and doggerel verse alongside the more self-consciously literary productions of such writers as Pieter Langendyk and Gijsbert Tijsens” and “(among other peculiarities) the inclusion of a set of playing cards.”30 One might say, therefore, that the entire collection serves as an early modern plaything full of texts, puzzles, and games to be activated by readers and put to various applications, while demanding “an awareness of the interaction between the larger genre of the book as a whole and the different literary and artistic genres, especially satiric and didactic forms, of the book’s component works.”31

Moreover, while the South Sea Bubble Cards graphically illustrate the relationship between play and economy, and gambling and speculation, they also move across various spaces of play, from the social to the solipsistic. Hence, as randomizers in games of chance, the cards would have been right at home in a Dutch “brown café,” where one could gamble and jest within the confines of walls covered with a reassuring patina of nicotine. At the same time, reproduced as these cards were in The Great Mirror of Folly, they likewise lent themselves to being read quietly and enjoyed in domestic space, if one were so inclined. As material objects, then, these cards, and perhaps cards in general as I suggested in the introduction to this essay, function as signifiers in multiple contexts and diverse activities from gambling to ceremony, and from entertainment to ritual.

But where reading these cards for their narrative potential rather than, for example, reading them as an augury or playing with them is concerned, I would like to take up de Bruyn’s suggestion that “the prints [contained in The Great Mirror of Folly] function in a manner not entirely unlike television images in our own time, which capture momentary, often memorable, and certainly influential flashes of a passing reality, but are not by themselves historically authoritative.”32 So, what do the Bubble Cards reveal if we approach them as a sequence of present moments in a series of dissolving views that could be read like a comic book, or a collection of storyboard images?33 First, it is striking that, in its uncut and unmounted form, containing fifty-four cards arranged in six rows of nine cards, one can read the deck following very loose plot lines along suits, from hearts across the top row, through diamonds on the second row, with a spare card at the end of the row.34 This card would have served as a joker in play, but uncut it acts as a kind of intermezzo and an explanatory note to the reader. Depicting an avaricious cock holding an image of an ass in its beak, the caption reads, “These new wind cards were made and sold to no good purpose by ‘Little Law’ from Scotland, [for] the money-grubbing cock” (Deze nieuwe Windkaarten worden gemaakt en verkogt te Nullenstein bij, Lautje van Schotten in den geld, zoekenden Haan).35 Importantly, this card refers to the first card in the deck, the king of hearts suitably in the person of John Law, the author of all this folly who was also known for being something of a ladies’ man, holding back a curtain as
though to introduce a theatrical play. As the originator of the South Sea and Mississippi Schemes, he is pictured as saying, “I invented the shares, but bad luck in trade, smote all my glory down, and defiled my laurel wreath” (Ik heb de Acties eerst bedagt, maar een kwade Actiekans, Smijt al mijn lof omver, en schent mijn lauwer krans). In other words, the first two suits, depicting various anecdotes from the bubble, are presented as though they were the first act in a play about greed and folly.

The suit of clubs begins a new row with the king, who tells us I was “first happy, now troubled” (Eerst gelukkig, nu drukkig), because “I was the Director [of the company], but to my misfortune, the money fell through and left me nothing but printed [paper]” (‘k Ben Directeur geweest, maar tot my ongeluk, Het geld droop door de zak, en liet me niets als druk). As we read across the rest of the clubs and spades, we are introduced to various figures of folly, such as the young man pictured on the eight of clubs, who tells us that he is cutting the figure eight through the middle to yield two zeros, which are as good as the scrap paper produced by the bubble; the ace of spades, represented by a street sweeper, pushing paper shares into a gutter and proclaiming, “only in this way does one get rid of this garbage, it even stinks where it is suffered” (Alen maakt zig’t vullnis kwijt, Het stinkt zelf daar het leid). As he goes on to explain, “Away with this scrap paper, that is now a bother to everyone, Thrown on the street, as I aim to sweep it into Lethe’s pool” (Weg met dit kladpapier, ‘t geen ieder een verlegen, Op straat werpt, wijl ik ‘t meen in, lethes ‘poel te vegen). And finally, this sequence closes with a harlequin holding up a banner, which reads “Pasquin’s Wind Cards on the Wind Trade from the Year 1720” (Pasquins Windkaart op de Windnegotie, Van’t Iaar 1720), as though this were the final curtain.

Reading the cards in suits along the rows in which they are printed, then, suggests that there is a play in the play, so to speak, a sort of mise-en-scène of the kind of financial gaming that brought on the crisis; and a mise-en-abyme of the gaming situation if one thinks of the cards as playthings or randomizers, the mise-en-jeu in a gaming situation. Moreover, the verses printed on each card, which may be read as cautionary tales or humorous ditties, embody the mixed reception that finance received in the early modern period—as a magical source of wealth, and as an ill wind that carries disaster. It is also significant that the suits are united by a continuous backdrop or setting, peopled with characters of high birth, country bumpkins, and city laborers alike, which would seem to imply that the crisis and stark reversals of fortune are the great levelers of class and redistributors of wealth.

Conclusion

While I began this essay with a number of bogus theories and histories of playing cards that have been advanced, occasionally as fact, over the last three centuries, what I am most interested in is cards’ potential to generate stories and to act as signifiers in play
that come together to produce narrative and textuality. Given that storytelling is one of the most ludic uses to which language is put, it is no coincidence that playing cards are intimately linked to both narrative and play.

More importantly, finance is typically seen as a sort of sanctioned out-growth of gambling and an activity that grew up in coffee houses like Lloyds in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, where people would have placed the two on a continuum, rather than in separate categories, and engaged happily in both and with a great deal of excitement. As the story goes, gambling and speculation were gradually legally and discursively separated from one another over the course of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries in order to legitimate speculation as a valid economic activity and to vilify gambling as the activity of low-lifes too profligate to work and earn a living, or of degenerates who have no regard for anything that might be described as an underlying asset. What this suggests is that the economy began as a largely ludic activity, or, as Edward Castronova has suggested, that the economy is a form of entertainment, and that finance has learned everything from gambling, which it mimics. This, in turn, of course, suggests that speculation, the mainstay of the global financial market, is every bit as derelict as gambling. And all of this is to say that these seemingly trivial objects, these Bubble Cards, are worthy of closer attention than they have received until now because they straddle the boundaries of play and non-play in interesting ways while implicitly challenging the stability of various concepts and institutions that are foundational to the ways in which we view society and its functioning.

NOTES

1 Hargrave, A History of Playing Cards (1966), 1.
2 Connor, Paraphernalia, 57.
3 According to Beal, Playing Cards, 8, the theory that playing cards were brought into Europe from the East by “returning Crusaders, or by roving bands of gypsies” is purely speculative although widespread. In the first case, the last Crusade ended in 1291, preceding by almost one hundred years any recorded mention of playing cards. In the latter case, Beal cites and critiques Taylor’s The History of Playing Cards based on the observation that the “first Romanies appeared in Europe in 1398, by which time … playing cards were well known.” That said, however, Beal’s objections do not necessarily disprove either theory.
4 See, for example, Singer, History of Playing Cards; Chatto, Facts and Speculations; Taylor, The History of Playing Cards; and Van Rensselaer, The Devil’s Picture Books and her Prophetical, Educational, and Playing Cards, in which all of these expressions are cited.
5 The first recorded mention of playing cards in Europe occurred in 1380 in an inventory taken of the household of Nicolás Sarmona of Calleón San Daniel in which “unum ludum de naypes qui sunt quadraginta quatuor pecie” is registered. See Etienvre, Figures du jeu, 18. More solid critiques of the gypsy and Crusader theories have been leveled by Depaulis in “The Tarot de Marseille – Facts and Fallacies;” Dummett, The Game of Tarot; and, more recently, Sosteric,
“A Sociology of Tarot.” While these scholars offer more logical explanations, I have chosen to write about the earlier authors who speculated on the origins of playing cards because their story is one that cards have generated, however untrue it may be.


7 There are numerous other reasons to read the history of the book and cards together, although these do not bear deep exploration here. However, it is worth mentioning that Chatto conjectured that Gutenberg printed cards before he printed the Bible; some of the oldest cards have been found in the bindings of old books, and at least two card historians (Hargrave, Chatto) come from families that have long been in book publishing.


9 *Le Tarot* was just one volume of Court de Gébelin’s nine-volume encyclopedic work in which he compared the modern world with the “primitive” world. Although it is beyond the scope of this essay to provide much detail here, it has been conjectured that playing cards derive from the tarot as a sort of streamlined version of the Italian deck, which lends itself more readily to less complex play and fortune telling, although the deck of fifty-two cards is also, of course, used in cartomancy. See note 5 above.


11 Morley, *Old and Curious Playing Cards*, 19. Cf. Hargrave, *A History of Playing Cards* (1966), 1: “cards are derived from the divinatory use of the arrow, and represent two principal methods of arrow divination. The basis of the divinatory systems from which games have arisen is the classification of all things according to the four Directions.”

12 Given Derrida’s obsession with writing and language, it is not surprising that he has also commented extensively on this topic in *Dissemination*. On the connections I am making here, see Derrida, chapter 3, “The Filial Inscription,” and Joyce Goggin, “The Big Deal,” 135–44.

13 Van Rensselaer, *Prophetical, Educational, and Playing Cards*, 34.


16 Early in the sixteenth century, Samuel Rowlands wrote four epic poems about playing cards: “A Merry Meetinge, or ‘tis Merry When Knaves mete,” published in 1600 and immediately burned “on account of scurrility;” “The Knave of Clubbs” (1609); “The Knave of Harts, Haile Fellow, Well Met” (1612 and 1613); and “More Knaves Yet? The Knaves of Spades and Diamonds” (1613). “The Knave of Harts” begins with a “Supplication to Card-Makers,” “wherein Rowlands … asks that the designs used for the Court Cards—or at any rate for the Knaves—may be improved and modernized.” Gurney, *Playing Cards*, 49–51. In that poem we read, for example, “To brave it out, and follow fashion still, In any cut according to the time: But we poore knaves (I know not for what crime), Are kept in pie-bald Suites, which we have worn, Hundreds of years, this hardly can be borne … Yet we (sith whom thus long they both have plaid), Must wear the suites in which we first were made … Good Card-makers, (if there be any goodness in you), Apparell us with more respected care.”

17 According to Agamben, *Infancy and History*, 80–81, collectors of toys and, in this case, a deck of cards, render, “tangible a relatively remote past […] dismembering and distorting the past or miniaturizing the present – playing as much on diachrony and synchrony [and] make present and render tangible human temporality in itself, the pure differential margin between the ‘once’
and the ‘no longer.’” This is, for Agamben, because toys belong at once to the sacred, coming from the distant past (“The toy is what belonged – once, no longer – to the realm of the sacred or of the practical economic”) and to the present when they are being played with, thereby extracting “the [ludic] object from its diachronic distance” and transplanting it into “synchronic proximity.”

18 On the suspension of time in play, see ch. 1 of Huizinga, Homo ludens (1955), 1–28; and Caillois, Man, Play and Games, 3–11.

19 Parlett, A Dictionary of Card Games, 124.

20 Although authors such as Dale, The First Crash, refer collectively to the South Sea and Mississippi Bubbles of 1720 as the first crash, the 1720 crises were preceded by the Tulip Bubble that burst in the Netherlands almost a century earlier in 1636. The Great Mirror of Folly, about which more below, also contains satirical prints dedicated to that earlier bout of speculative fever and Langendyk’s plays frequently reference the seventeenth-century Tulip Bubble.

21 On bubble plays in England in the year of the crash, see Paul, The South Sea Bubble, 92–94.

22 Pieter Langendyk’s Quincampoix or The Wind Traders, a Comedy (Quincampoix of de Wind-handelaars, blyspel) was translated into German by S. Hoyl of Johaniskirche and published in 1720 in Hamburg. Whether or not it was actually performed is unknown, but it does bear the epigraph “as it is performed at the Amsterdam national theatre” (Zo als het op den Amsterdmaschen Schouwburg vertoont wordt).

23 In their watershed article, which is often linked to the term “financial revolution,” North and Weingast, “Constitutions and Commitment,” esp. 803, studied “the evolution of the constitutional arrangements in seventeenth-century England following the Glorious Revolution of 1688,” its impact on property rights, the protection of wealth, and “the elimination of confiscatory government on capital markets.” The effects of the revolution are evidenced in the rise of taxation, the founding of borrowing and financial institutions like the issue of the kingdom’s first government bonds in 1693, the founding of the Bank of England in 1694, and the arrangements that made it possible for English joint-stock companies to go public.

24 On this point, see Clark, “Embracing Fatality,” 81.


26 Salman, “Playing Games with the Financial Crisis of 1720,” 239.

27 See, for example, Buijnsters and Buijnsters-Smets, Papertoys, 29.


29 Salman, “Playing Games with the Financial Crisis of 1720,” 239.

30 de Bruyn, “Reading Het groote tafereel der dwaasheid,” esp. 1.

31 de Bruyn, “Reading Het groote tafereel der dwaasheid,” 1.

32 de Bruyn, “Reading Het groote tafereel der dwaasheid,” 15.

33 Here I am following just one of George’s arguments as presented in her study of English political prints, English Political Caricature, 1.

34 Salman, “Playing Games with the Financial Crisis of 1720,” 239: “The order of the colors and the characters of the cards on the prints were placed there [...] according to the events of the bubble. Hearts tell the story of John Law and the Mississippi Company. Diamonds illustrate the stock trade of the West India Company. Clubs tell the story of Robert Knight, the corrupt treasurer of the South Sea Company” and Spades represent “the Dutch windhandel illustrated by the plan of the Utrecht Company to dig a canal between Utrecht and the Zuider Zee.”
35 The translations of the verses on Pasquin’s Wind Cards are all my own. Note that in some cases translations rely on paraphrase as the verses are written in eighteenth-century Dutch, and contain words and spellings that have fallen out of contemporary Dutch.

36 On John Law’s good looks and sexual escapades, see Gleeson, Millionaire, 13–24; Balen, The King, The Crook, & The Gambler, 12–22; or Murphy, “Introduction” to John Law’s “Essay on a Land Bank,” 4, wherein he quotes du Hautchamp’s description of “Beau Law,” as he was known, as being “tall and well built ... [with] an oval face, ... a tender look, an aquiline nose, a fine mouth. Without flattery one could classify him as one of the best built men.”

37 Zo ‘k de 8 door midden snij, zo hou, ik maar twee nullen, Die net zo goed zijn, als de Wind-negoties prullen.

38 Stories abounded at the time of the bubble of savvy servants who drove away with their master’s carriage. For example, Ellis, The Coffee House: A Cultural History, 175, quotes Ned Ward’s The London Spy (1703), wherein he wrote that the servant “makes himself a Domestick Merchant upon Change, by turning Stock Adventurer, led on by the mighty Hopes of advancing himself to a Coach and Horses, that he may Lord it over his Neighbouring Mechanicks.” Balen, The King, The Crook, & The Gambler, 62, also quotes the story of John Law’s own coachman who, “made wealthy by his speculation in the Mississippi stock, resigned from his master’s service and, as a final gesture of good will, presented him with two men who might serve as his successor. When Law protested, saying he needed only one coachman, his departing servant replied, ‘But I will engage the other myself.’” See also Letter 132 of Montesquieu’s Persian Letters (1721), 186: “The consequences of all this [stock jobbing] are frequently bizarre. Footmen ... are today boasting of their birth; they treat those who have just abandoned their livery ... with all the scorn they themselves experienced six months ago; they shout as loudly as they can ‘the upper classes are ruined; our country is in dreadful disorder; We’re always seeing nobodies making their fortunes.’”


40 “You see, the dismal science has not considered the possibility that the economy might usefully be considered as an entertainment product, even though on reflection that might be its core purpose.” Castronova, Synthetic Worlds, 176.
EXCESSIVE PLAY WAS A CONSTANT communal problem throughout the Middle Ages and during the early modern period, as attested by the excessive legislative efforts enacted by urban authorities to restrict or (more reluctantly) ban ludic practices. However, premodern definitions of “excessive” were fluid, with different cities setting different standards. Moreover, normative sources only reveal vague ideal conceptions, rather than actual playing practices. In fact, these texts only marginally mention discursive evaluations of excessive play, such as its connection to blasphemy or violence; they likewise hardly ever talk about the argumentative strategies of the preachers, philosophers, humanists, and politicians who tried to influence playing behavior beyond concrete legislation by changing everyday perceptions of play.

As these argumentative efforts to govern inordinate play operate in between the laws, they can deepen our understanding of the kinds of everyday discursive categorizations of play with which individuals were confronted. This essay will thus explore the writings of three Renaissance authors who tried to reduce their readers’ excessive ludic practices via modifying their evaluation of play. I will define the persuasive strategies developed in these attempts as strategies of ludic governmentality. Coined by Michel Foucault as a tool to analyze power relations, this term (if extended to play) best describes the central concern of this essay, namely: the techniques used to influence the individual’s perception of his/her own actions and thereby to govern his/her ludic behavior. It will be shown that all three authors discussed in this essay—Olivier Gouyn, a former gambler; Eustachius Schildo, a Lutheran preacher; and Pascasius Justus (Turcq), a Flemish physician and philosopher—understood their attempts at player micro-management as a contribution to governmental measures against excessive play, generating profit for the state by changing the most important plaything of all: the player.

Of course, these Renaissance conceptualizations of play were not without precedents; they were undoubtedly rooted in medieval traditions. A widely influential premodern schema for categorizing play was found in Aristotle’s *Nicomachean Ethics*, which had been taken up in the thirteenth century by Thomas Aquinas in his *Summa Theologica*, whose considerations of play are based upon a threefold structure. According to the *Doctor Angelicus*, play in general is allowed and even necessary to regenerate the
mind and restore consumed physical forces. However, taking from Aristotle the idea that virtue is a mean between deficiency and excess, Aquinas traces this virtuous via media between two potential deviations: one could suffer from a lack of human sociability by playing too little, or one could exceed a healthy regulation of play by playing too much. This excess could occur in two ways: by engaging in amoral forms of play, which include bad language or harming others (which constitutes a mortal sin), or in not considering the circumstances of play, such as the right time and place. In the latter instance, players could also commit a mortal sin if their strong passion for playing induced them to prefer play to God’s love.

Regarding Aquinas’s first definition of excessive play, communal authorities and preachers, such as the fifteenth-century Franciscan monk Bernardino of Siena, mostly agreed in considering gambling the most dangerous and amoral form of play. Hence, it was clear which forms of play to avoid and, unsurprisingly, the focus of our three authors was not on recreational play, but they uniformly discussed games involving money. Yet gamblers could not find any concrete advice or help in Aquinas’s considerations regarding the severity of the ludic affect. Only Pascasius Justus’s treatise on gambling (1561) is generally considered to be the first elaborated theory on how to eradicate the desire to play for money. But Pascasius’s contemporaries had already tried to discipline play that went “out of bounds” from different angles. In the following pages, I will compare Pascasius’s approach with the works of the Lutheran theologian Eustachius Schildo and the Parisian ex-gambler Olivier Gouyn, as these texts present a promising range of perspectives in close temporal connection: written in the middle of the sixteenth century within the scope of eleven years, they will show three different Renaissance ways of dealing with excessive play in three different cultures, languages, and systems of thinking, in the words of a preacher, a scientist, and a layman.

This essay will begin by presenting their approaches in general and will then proceed to analyze in detail their views on the causes of excessive play. It then discusses their therapies, before finally comparing and contrasting their different approaches. Or maybe “different” will not be an appropriate description: it will be argued that, despite their different perspectives, their works reveal a remarkable accordance in at least one fundamental method.

Three Antidotes against Excess

Eustachius Schildo’s Der Spielteufel (The Devil of Play) was printed in Frankfurt by Johann Eichorn in 1557. Having studied theology at the prestigious Lutheran University in Wittenberg, his works are clearly influenced by the language and style of the German Reformer, who often employed dramatic images to convey his messages. The title suggests a connection to Matthäus Friedrich’s work Wider den Saufteufel (Against the Devil of Drinking), which probably served as an inspiration for Schildo, but
Protestant books on devils connected with particular vices were hugely popular in sixteenth-century Germany. And unlike Friedrich, who mainly explains why alcohol should be avoided, Schildo’s approach is much more rhetorically sophisticated. His work commences with an *Ausschreiben*—a kind of invitation in the form of a letter—in which the brotherhood of players invites everyone to participate: an occasion for Schildo to indicate ironically all the negative consequences that arise from playing in the gambler’s own words. Schildo then comments on the order’s invitation, offering broad arguments against gambling and showing the disastrous effects of adhering to their devil’s congregation of play. His work not least praises the authorities of Kirchhain, the German city where he had served as a cantor, confirming that the steps taken against playing are eminently reasonable, demanding that other cities should likewise adopt these good measures. However, as the authorities are incapable of controlling law enforcement everywhere, he explicitly understands his work as an attempt to convince citizens of refraining from play.

Olivier Gouyn’s approach in his work *Le mespris & contennement de tous jeux de sort* (The Contempt and Containment of All Games of Chance) (Paris, 1550) is slightly different, particularly regarding the perspective adopted by the author. Unfortunately, biographical details on him are rather sparse. But Gouyn (who was probably born in Portier) informs us at the beginning of his book that he cannot speak any language besides French, which indicates that he had not attended a university, or a Latin school. As a former player, he states in the introductory part of his work that his reasons for composing his thoughts on excessive play were primarily to ease his conscience and to give advice to his former playing partners, who had asked him why he would no longer participate. He only considered publication after his friends assured him that a work of this kind could profit the state. After extensively defining *jeu* in all its various significations in a first chapter and discussing the causes of excessive play in a second chapter, Gouyn’s remaining seven chapters expound numerous negative sides of ludic practices that aim to convince gamblers of the destructive nature of their addiction.

In sharp contrast to Schildo and Gouyn, Pascasius Justus scientifically theorized about the gambler’s desire to play in his *Alea sive de curanda ludendi in pecuniam cupiditate* (1561). After eight years of service to a cardinal in Spain, his subsequent studies in medicine and philosophy at the universities of Rome, Padua, Bologna, and Pavia guaranteed him a solid knowledge of the Hippocratic–Galenic tradition in its most modern translations and interpretations, combined with a broad training in Aristotelian philosophy and an awareness of Stoic psychology. Writing in Latin and publishing with the famous publisher Johannes Oporinus in Basel, Pascasius certainly had a different audience for his work in mind than Schildo or Gouyn. His readership was confronted with his recourse to numerous Galenic works (sometimes cited in the original Greek), his use of Aristotelian methods, and the incorporation of numerous examples from classical Latinity. Nevertheless, the title page of his work promises that
by reading the book three times, everyone could become free of the desire to play games of chance. This advertisement already indicates that Pascasius’s ultimate goal is not to give a mere medical description of a psychological illness, but to provide an antidote for excessive gamblers. Consequently, his book is divided into two parts. The first discusses the physiological causes of gambling; for example, complexions, like a melancholic temper, could, according to Pascasius, particularly induce responsiveness for a gambling addiction. The second part of the book offers therapeutic strategies to remove the desire to play, taking as its basis the prescriptions of Stoic philosophy. Like Schildo and Gouyn, Pascasius also claims that many told him a work of this kind would yield general benefits to the state.

All three authors present their work as potentially beneficial for society, but they offer nonetheless a broad range of perspectives on excessive play during the mid sixteenth century. Their texts contain diverse descriptions of play and develop multi-layered analyses of ludic practices. In order to cope with this variety, I will concentrate on two central aspects of excessive play discussed in all three texts and compare their respective methods. I will certainly not do justice to the full intricacy of the texts; instead, the focus here will be on a comparison of their diverse strategies to change ludic behavior. These strategies are necessarily connected to the question of what exactly causes problematic ludic behavior and which consequences arise thereof; naturally, attempts to modify behavior have to state what they want to change and by what means. Thus, before analyzing these behavioral strategies, a brief comparison of the authors’ conceptions of exactly why people play too much will be explored.

The Origins of Excessive Play

Pascasius states at the beginning of his treatise that he will not follow Aristotle, who allegedly asserted that the desire to play is caused by greed. In the *Nicomachean Ethics*, the Stagirite had compared gamblers to thieves, and this line of argumentation was endorsed, for example, by Galeazzo Florimonte, the dedicatee of the famous Italian courtesy book, *Il Galateo*. Florimonte published a dialogue in 1554, wherein he supposedly reported comments by the celebrated Aristotelian Agostino Nifo on the *Nicomachean Ethics* and claimed that Nifo had defined gamblers as hidden thieves, in that they securely rob their friends while playing with them. But unlike his Italian contemporary, Pascasius identifies the reason for a gambling addiction as hope, rather than greed—this is immediately apparent by his definition of the disease that he calls Alea: “Alea is therefore an unbridled desire to play for money, which is fired with the ardour of a furious and credulous hope to win.” Desire for money is definitely seen as a contributing factor for Alea, but according to Pascasius the formal cause undoubtedly consists in hope considered as an erroneous judgment: “I say that the main and formal cause of Alea is a judgment, which the Greeks call ἐνελῶσις, and which we call a good and trusting hope.”
As Pascasius’s therapy is based mainly on Stoic doctrine, it is interesting to note that he appears to use a Stoic philosophy of emotions, in which judgments were seen as the basis of all affects. But Pascasius does not restrict himself to a Stoic explanation of hope, as he considered a strong innate corporal heat, which renders people hopeful in the same way wine does when it warms the body, the efficient cause of Alea. Some people, he asserted, are born with a natural disposition for this form of “heat” and become easily hot. This view certainly stems from the Galenic tradition, which asserted that bodily complexions shape a person’s character. Most easily inflammable, Pascasius holds, are the melancholics of the dry and cold type, but there are other physical dispositions that could lead to immoderate heat affecting our rational thinking and thereby inducing a false hope for profit in games of chance. Usually, Pascasius states, people act according to their natural dispositions, but sometimes philosophy, the imitator of nature, can change our acquired, and even innate, dispositions. This last statement is of particular importance, as an inborn and immutable desire for gambling would be incurable—this would thus make any philosophical therapy of Alea, as offered in the second half of Pascasius’s work, redundant.

It is vital to emphasize that Pascasius develops a comprehensive physiological explanation of Alea, which works entirely without theological references or moral condemnations, based upon medical and philosophical terms. Unsurprisingly, Schildo’s Spielteufel, which had been published four years earlier, offered an approach for explaining the desire to play that was diametrically opposed to that of Pascasius, who sought to extricate the issue of excessive play from moral discourse by identifying inordinate gambling as a disease, rather than as a vice. Schildo, in contrast, commences with an apocalyptic vision of history in his dedicatory letter to the mayor of Kirchhain: mores are deteriorating as the world nears its end. But fortunately, for Schildo, the Gospel had been recently revitalized via the Reformation. As the devil cannot extinguish the Church of Christ, he nonetheless tries constantly to weaken the strength and the effects of the Gospel. Consequently, Satan promotes what Schildo calls an “Epicurean” way of life that consists in enjoying as much as possible earthly pleasures, like eating, drinking, and playing, because “post mortem nulla voluptas”—no pleasures after death. This reference to epicurean doctrine sees the hedonistic rule to make pleasure the criterion of ethics in Epicurus’s Letter to Menoicetus as a satanic temptation to prevent people from leading a penitent life. For a brief life of lust, Schildo observes, many people are prepared to sacrifice an eternal peace in God.

A poisonous part of this Epicurean devil is the devil of play. He does no small damage to Christians, but, as Schildo remarks: “nobody considers him to be a harmful devil.” This is precisely the criticism of play from Schildo’s Lutheran perspective: people do not identify the devil’s cheating and therefore consider play to be innocent. The gamblers’ invitation at the beginning of Schildo’s work correspondingly encourages everyone to join their brotherhood, as there is supposedly no sin involved. Play, the gamblers tell us,
is not about money; it is a pastime, which even prevents drinking excesses. But Schildo warns his readers to ignore their deceptions and provides a definite proof of the evil nature of play: “Since play comes from the devil and is sinful, from which many other sins ... originate, and since our nature has an inclination to sins, we feel a strong desire to play, and Satan strengthens it in a way that, although God, authorities, parents and other people try to hinder us, we nevertheless ignore everything and play with delight, until temporal and eternal sadness follows.” Schildo maintained that people tend to play because of their evil natures, which is naturally a concept taken from Lutheran theology and stems from the Augustinian belief in original sin. The tradition of games having been invented by the devil to gain souls could already be found in the sermons of Bernardino of Siena. However, despite this clear theological filiation, it can be seen that the starting point of argumentation, although different in notions and theories used, is quite similar in Pascasius and Schildo. Both perceive excessive play as a consequence of nature, but in different perspectives: Schildo regards human nature as essentially corrupt and inclined to evil deeds via inclination to pleasure; whereas Pascasius understands our nature as a bodily disposition that may, or may not, be corrupted in a way that creates an excessive desire to play. For Pascasius, not everyone is in danger of becoming a gambler; for Schildo, the cause of excessive play is the universal corruption of humankind.

Gouyn, in contrast, devotes the first chapter of his work entirely to a description of the various significations of jeu, which he makes clear are various sorts of play, from conversation games to gladiatorial exercises; consequently, the word jeu, which entails a kind of hilarity convenient to our nature, can acquire positive or negative meanings. His work, however, focuses on a specific type of play that conceals wickedness and pain as well as the loss of time, goods, and honor under a sort of violent urge (rage) and furor called jeu. More precisely, this species of play, which according to Gouyn was first invented by the Lydians, is a kind of pleasure nourished by greed.

Consequently, Gouyn understands this ruinous play as caused by laziness and sustained by greed, insofar as the lovers of laziness, the mother of all evil deeds, consider it a possibility to gain money without working too hard. Driven by greed, the enemy of charity, sluggards thus continue to play and desire even the last penny of their companions, committing in particular the sin of idolatry by making play their center and sense of being, thereby supported by our permanent enemy who encourages us to engage in this kind of play. Deeply rooted in the gamblers’ hearts is an insatiable greed, which is linked with an obscuring kind of pleasure that prevents them from recognizing their own insanity.

It is interesting to note that Gouyn, although offering a secular view of excessive play, identifies greed as the main cause of the urge to play, whereas Schildo considers not a specific vice but universally corrupted human nature as causing our receptivity for satanic pleasures, such as play. Pascasius does not deny that greed plays a role in the formation of ludomania, but he views an inappropriate hope as the main cause for an unbridled
desire to play: overly hopeful people, who also possess a specific physical disposition, are particularly at risk of developing ludic disorders. Thus, these three thinkers present three very different accounts of what kind of people play too much: the hopeful; the lazy and greedy; and, in general, a fallen humanity, naturally inclined to sinful pleasures. Do these different types of origins demand different therapies? As will be shown: not quite.

The Therapy of Excessive Play

Let us begin with the most “scientific” medical and philosophical form of therapy. Taking up a famous comparison between medicine and philosophy from Cicero, Pascasius asserts that the mind must also be kept healthy through ensuring correct reasoning, which can be achieved through training in philosophy. But working on the mind means also affecting our physical condition: the body, heated by hope, can be cooled down by philosophical reasoning, by thinking and conversation, as analogously as a single thought can make our face flush and thus produce a physical effect. In Pascasius’s view, the eradication of erroneous judgments can therefore alter our physical condition: cultivated thinking could enable one to rest calm in the face of things that could, according to our natural disposition, lead to strong affects. In this way, philosophy bestows upon mankind its best possible character, whereas our innate character is rife with error.

Pascasius holds that typically nobody notices their own faults and everyone is a flatterer of themselves. Excessive gamblers can thus only be cured when confronted with their two main errors—inappropriate hope and asocial behavior. But he provides also two antidotes:

And one is as follows: to imagine an advantage and a benefit and feeling confident about them, driven by a greedy and credulous hope, in a matter governed by blind chance, is a major stupidity. To seek permanently the endangerment of one’s fortune and goods is insanity. And the other one: If a man wants to take advantage of another one’s damage, this is more against nature as death, poverty, pain and the other things that can happen to the body or affect external circumstances.

Hence, the antidotes consist in elaborating the stupidity and amorality of these two errors in reasoning, whereupon Pascasius proceeds to simulate the gamblers’ thoughts, ponderings, and desires. He recommends that they should learn his precepts by heart and repeat them constantly in order to eliminate their desire to play. It should be emphasized that the central strategy of this therapy is to show the gambler the falsity of his/her judgments and to remove his/her desire, which is based, as is every affect, on rational judgments. Thus, in Pascasius’s therapy, the subject’s evaluation of play is to be transformed; his aim is explicitly to instruct the individual’s mind so that it may develop a right mode of thinking about gambling. This means accepting that games of chance are neither an easy way to gain money, nor an innocent pastime. First, the natural hope
for profit is wrong, because the unpredictability of games of chance does not offer a safe prognosis. Second, our human nature prompts us to be sociable, but taking advantage of another person’s loss is asocial; Pascasius also validates his argument by giving it a classical origin via a long citation from Cicero’s De officiis. The subject as a player has to re-evaluate his/her views on games of luck: they are fickle and destroy society. How, Pascasius asks, could one possibly participate in this type of play?

Schildo’s therapy stems from a similar idea. He considers as the gambler’s main problem (as noted above) his/her inability to recognize the evil nature of play, as invented by the Epicurean devil to gain souls for eternal damnation—or, in the players’ own words: “To sum up, we don’t stop playing, for we consider it no sin.” Schildo thus categorically refutes, in his comment on the players’ call to join their order, every argument to legitimize play as an innocent pastime.

To this end, Schildo first discloses the deceitful nature of play via a comparison that directly addresses his readers: “When someone stands in front of you with a loaded shotgun, saying stand still, I want to shoot you and not to hurt you, but just joke with you and have some diversion, you would say no, joke with the devil in this way.” Analogous to this example, the players’ claim that they only play for fun, rather than profit, is a fallacy: money is always involved and Schildo claims that he has never met a rich player. Is it really a pastime, Schildo asks rhetorically, to play through the whole night, swearing and fighting over little amounts of money? Moreover, play is connected with vices, such as drunkenness and violence; the wife, in particular, is shown to be a victim of her husband’s play and suffers if she attempts to stop him. But the gamblers’ greatest insanity is to consider their play as no sin. Consequently, Schildo demonstrates that players violate all of the Ten Commandments.

These efforts to “pull the sheep’s clothing off the wolf” rely on the individual to realize the evil nature of play and encourage secular authorities and preachers to take actions against playing. Schildo’s appeal culminates in the claim that parents and landlords—after having ensured that they themselves will abstain from play—should compel their children and servants to act likewise, as they know best what happens in their homes. Schildo thus imagines a form of total ludic surveillance that would be administrated by the governors of households, who have been shown the actual satanic nature of play by his work. His vision of anti-ludic measures is thus decentralized and it trusts in the domestic exertion of power by changing the individual’s perceptions of play.

Gouyn’s approach is less ambitious. He does not aim to convince authorities, but instead works on the individual as a player, announcing (as noted above) in the introduction of his work that he will just note down some thoughts for his former playing partners, explaining why he no longer plays. However, his fundamental strategy is similar to Pascasius and Schildo, insofar as, according to Gouyn, gamblers do not realize the true nature of their actions and are misled by a voluptuous, greedy desire to play. Hence, he aims to disclose the actual mechanisms of play in seven chapters, starting with
an explanation of the many tricks and cheats in games “to induce and persuade those who feel a desire and are willing to play to flee and avoid it, seeing the wickedness that it contains.”62 Via directly addressing his readers, Gouyn makes clear that “you think that you go there playing, having the same advantage as your companion, and that it would be a game of chance, but it will not [be].”63 In all games of chance, he warns, there are a thousand ways of cheating, and “this should cause a desire in you to avoid them.”64

In the same way, gamblers do not realize that games cause the ruin of all their fortune: “Oh wretched and detestable play, causing such a blindness in a person that he loses completely the consciousness of his profit, his good and honor; oh thing worth to be detested by all good spirits, that causes the loss of awareness for oneself.”65 For this reason, many get lost in the labyrinth of play and try constantly to regain their money.66 But Gouyn wants them to bear in mind that they lose in every respect: their money, their time, and their honor.67 They will fight with their wives; their minds will be a slave to play; they will lead a life in anxiety and sadness, loved by nobody and useless for society.68

But their frivolous hope to win, Gouyn explains, in a remarkable accordance with Pascasius, makes gamblers enjoy themselves while playing; they thus continue to gamble, without using their reason, which is replaced by a greedy desire.69 Turned into cursing beasts, they do not recognize their crazed follies (fölles follies) and approve of evil things instead of good ones:70 “Oh extreme blindness … oh unfortunate player, consider a moment which path you have taken and open your eyes to recognize the danger on it.”71

**Strategies of Unveiling the Truth about Play**

By comparing these three approaches to regulate ludic excess, it is possible to identify at least one common strategy applied by all three authors. Despite obvious disagreements regarding the causes of an abnormal desire to play, their therapies reveal an unexpected accordance in working on the individual as a player in a specific way. For Pascasius, Schildo, and Gouyn concur that gamblers do not notice the actual nature and consequences of play; all three urge them to re-evaluate their playing behavior, based on their text’s detailed elaborations. It is therefore a revelation of play’s true nature that forms their basic line of argument for curing an inordinate desire to play. Gouyn, most tellingly, prompts players to open their eyes, since their blindness concerning the ruinous effects of play constitutes the core problem of their excesses. In this regard, one of the main characteristics of play, or more specifically, a main characteristic of playing for money, is its illusive power, creation of false hope, and unjustified beliefs about the recreational nature of play, as based upon a (at least temporal) factual pleasure un-denied by all writers.

To destroy play’s make-believe, all three authors attempt to expose the true mechanisms of play: Schildo reveals the pleasure in play to be a satanic temptation; Gouyn demonstrates that people do not recognize the dangers of play only by abstaining completely to use reason; whereas Pascasius presents the gambler’s credulous hope
as a stupidity and their playing as an asocial amorality. They each attempt to confront gamblers with “truth,” be it based on the gospel, experience, or on Galenic medicine and Stoic philosophy. Their truths are not uniform but multifaceted—expressed in different languages, levels of complexity, and systems of thinking. Yet the strategy to constitute a binding truth as a standard according to which the individual has to regulate his playing behavior is identical in all three therapies. Play has to be disclosed to the player by numerous negative examples and a demonstration of its irrationality, whereby the individual’s thinking about play is thought to be altered. The desired consequence is a subject who changes his/her ludic government of self and (at least for Schildo), having understood the evil nature of play, also the ludic government of others.

At the heart of this governmentality of play is the attempt to convince the individual that his/her play is not what it seems to be—but the enemies of excessive play seem to be discordant on what it actually is. Differences in explanation of its actual nature occur most apparently regarding the cause of excessive play, with greed, hope, and pleasure as possible candidates. Agreement is instead found in the effects of excessive play, with, for example, blasphemy or poverty as commonly assumed consequences of gambling. But also these enumerated consequences vary according to the writer’s background: for example, Gouyn’s detailed warnings that games of chance offer many possibilities to cheat seem to be based on his own experiences; an elaboration not found in Pascasius’s rather academic treatise. In light of these manifold perspectives on excessive play, it can therefore be concluded that there may be many truths about play in the mid sixteenth century, but the revelation of play as a core concept in the governmentality of play is endorsed by all three authors discussed here. To reduce excessive ludic practices, Pascasius, Schildo, and Gouyn each sought to unveil the true nature of play—whatever that is.72

NOTES

* I am grateful to Dr. James Lees for useful comments and invaluable corrections. Many thanks also to Prof. Sabrina Ebbersmeyer, Dr. Gabriele Sprigath, Leo Maier, Annika Willer, and Marie Schmidt for helpful discussion and comments.
1 On legislation in Italian communes, see the excellent collection edited by Rizzi, Statuta de ludo; on legislation in France, see Mehl, Les jeux au royaume de France, 339–410, and Belmas, Jouer autrefois, 84–103 and 187–215.
2 On medieval and Renaissance perceptions of play, see Mehl, “Entre culture et réalité;” on philosophical approaches to play in the Middle Ages and the Renaissance, see Fischer, Spielen und Philosophieren; on the variety of Renaissance discourses on play, see Ariès and Margolin, Les jeux à la Renaissance and, more recently, Arcangeli, Recreation in the Renaissance.
3 For Foucault’s discussion of gouvernementalité, see Foucault, “La ‘gouvernementalité.’”
4 Aristotle discusses a virtue of play called eutrapelia in Nicomachean Ethics IV 14 (1127b33–1128b9) and the question of whether our happiness consists in play in Nicomachean Ethics X 6 (1176b6–1177a11). Aquinas takes up the discussion on whether there is a virtue

5 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–IIae, q.168 a.2cor.
6 Aquinas, *Summa Theologica*, II–IIae, q.168 a.3cor.
7 See, for example, Rizzi, *Ludus/ludere*, and Depaulis, “Breviarli del diavolo so’ le carte e naibi.”

8 Schildo, *Spielteufel*. For Schildo’s biography, see Roethe, “Schildo, Eustachius.” The treatise has been reprinted in *Homo ludens–Der spielende Mensch*, vol. 3, 247–78, with some preceding comments by Paus, “Vorwort zum Reprint ‘Spielteufel.’”

9 For example, Luther also used the image of a devil of drinking; see Luther, *Werke*, 257: “Our German devil will be a good wineskin and has to be named Swill ... [Unser Deutscher Teufel wird ein guter weinschlauch sein und mus Sauff heissen ...].”


11 As Roethe suspected, in “Schildo, Eustachius,” Schildo probably took the idea for an invitation from the second edition of Friedrich’s *Saufteufel*, which contains an epistle by Satan that encourages drinking.


15 For some remarks on his life, see du Radier, *Bibliothèque historique*, 291.
16 Gouyn, *Le mespris*, fol. 3v–4r.
17 Gouyn, *Le mespris*, fol. 3r–3v.
18 Gouyn, *Le mespris*, fol. 3v.


20 For an account of Pascasius’s life, see Elaut, “Pascasius Iustus Turcq.” See also Depaulis, “Cardan et Joostens.”

21 See the front page of Pascasius Justus [Turcq], *Alea*: “You’re inflamed with passion for games of chance? There are safe remedies that are able to cure you if you honestly read this book three times [Sortis amor tumes? Sunt certa piacula, qua te / Ter pure lecto poterunt recreare libello].”

22 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], *Alea*, 48–65.
23 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], *Alea*, 22.
24 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], *Alea*, 18.
26 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], *Alea*, 30: “Est igitur Alea, effrenata quaedam ludendi in pecuniam cupiditas, animosa credulaque spe luceri flagrans.”

27 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], *Alea*, 41: “Eius inquam, eius precipuam et formalem causam esse iudico, quam Graeci ἐυελϖιςίαμ, nos bonam et confidentem spem vocamus.” Pascasius mentions Aristotle’s account of young people’s character in *Rhetoric*, II 12 (1389a2–26); here Aristotle claims that young people are more hopeful and credulous, not having experienced many things and living mainly in hope, as hope refers to the future, and a young life has much future.

28 At least this holds true for the Chryseppean version of Stoicism, where judgments form the basis of affects; see Buddensiek, “Stoa und Epikur.” As a physician, Pascasius could have known versions of Stoicism from Galen’s *De placitis Hippocratis et Platonis*; see Galen, *On the Doctrines of Hippocrates and Plato*, books I–V, IV 1, 17; IV 2, 19–21 and IV 3, 1–5.

29 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], *Alea*, 43.

30 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], *Alea*, 44–45.

31 See Gill, “Die antike medizinische Tradition.”

32 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], *Alea*, 47–52, 54.

33 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], *Alea*, 67.


40 See S. Bernardinus Senensis, *Quadragesimale de Christiana Religione*, sermo XLII, 20–34, where Bernardino tells his audience that Satan invented games of chance to recruit members for his own church, which is diametrically opposed to the Church of Christ. On Bernardino, see also Rizzi, *Ludus/ludere*, 25–38.

41 Gouyn, *Le mespris*, fol. 6r–10v.

42 The narrative of the Lydians as inventors of various games goes back to Herodotus, *Hist.* I, 94. On medieval narratives about game inventions in general, see Mehl, “De l’origine des jeux.”


47 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], *Alea*, 102–3.

48 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], *Alea*, 97–98 and 104.

49 Pascasius Justus [Turcq], *Alea*, 99: “Atque hacqu quidem est ista: Qua in re sors proterua dominatur, avida credulaque spe commodum proponere sibi, atque animo suscipere, maxima est stulticia: facultatem vero et bonorum suorum periculo consecutari, insania. Altera: Hominem hominis incommodo suum augere commodum velle, magis est contra naturam, quam mors, quam paupertas, quam dolor, quam caeteraque possunt aut corporis accidere, aut rebus externis.”
See Pascasius Justus [Turcq], Alea, 104: “As up to now nobody has proposed a well-considered and thought-out method for how gamblers can develop their minds in this area (...), they all can only use their common and ordinary reason. [Nam cum nemo adhuc rationes, quibus erudire animum hac parte aleatores possint, consulto et cogitato proposuerit (...), non potuere nisi quadam vulgari et communi ratione omnes uti.]"

Pascasius Justus [Turcq], Alea, 104–11.

Pascasius Justus [Turcq], Alea, 111–14.

Schildo, Spieleufel, fol. Ciiiv: “Inn summa / wir lassen das spielen nicht / denn wir haltens fuer keine suende.”

Schildo, Spieleufel, fol. Ciiiv “Odder wenn einer mit geladener buechsen fuer dir stundende und sprech / halt still / ich will dich treffen / und nicht verwunden / sonder nur also mit dir scherzen und kuerzweil treiben / Du wuer dest sagen / nein / scherze mit dem Teulf also.”

Schildo, Spieleufel, fol. Dr–Diiir.

Schildo, Spieleufel, fol. Diiiv.

Schildo, Spieleufel, fol. Er–Eiiiv.

Schildo, Spieleufel, fol. Fiiv–Hiiiv.

Schildo, Spieleufel, fol. Iiiir.

Schildo, Spieleufel, fol. Iiv–Iiiiv.

Schildo, Spieleufel, fol. Iiiiv–Iiiiir.

Gouyn, Le mespris, fol. 20v: “afin d’induyre & persuader a ceulx qui ont envie & vouloir de iouer de plus tost les fuyr & eviter, voyant la meschanseté qui y est.”

Gouyn, Le mespris, fol. 26v: “tu penseras y aller iouer & avoir telle advantage que ton compagnon, & que ce soit ieu de hazard, mais non sera.”

Gouyn, Le mespris, fol. 31r: “cela te doit causer vne enuiue de les euter.”

Gouyn, Le mespris, fol. 33v–34r: “O malheureux & detestable ieu qui causes vn tel aueuglement en la personne, qu’il pert entierement la congnoissance de son profit, bien & honueur: o chose digne d’etre abhorrée de tous bons espritz, laquelle fait perdre le sentiuement de soymesme.”

Gouyn, Le mespris, fol. 34v.

Gouyn, Le mespris, fol. 38r–38v.

Gouyn, Le mespris, fol. 75r (fight with your wife), 79r (anxiety), 83v (loved by no one), 84r (sadness), 79r (anxiety), 85r–85v (of no value), and 88v (servitude).

Gouyn, Le mespris, fol. 44v–44r and 64v; on false hope (esperance), see also fol. 53r–53v.

Gouyn, Le mespris, fol. 69r–69v.

Gouyn, Le mespris, fol. 61r: “O cecité extreme, ... o malheureux iouer, considere un peu en quel chemin tu es entré, & ouure tes yeulx pour congnoistre le danger qui y est.”

And naturally, truth gained from games of chance could also be of a completely different, rather mathematical sort; see Ore, Cardano the Gambling Scholar.
Imaginary Cartographies and Commercial Commodities: Geography and Playing Cards in Early Modern England

Serina Patterson

This is the very point of the map, to present us not with the world we can see, but to point toward a world we might know.¹

GAME DESIGNERS HAVE A NOTABLE history of using maps in the creation of fictional worlds, whether based on a fantastical realm, like that of the Victorian board game *The Prince's Quest* (1890), or on our own world, as in the modern video game series *Port Royale* (2002–12), which takes place in the seventeenth-century Caribbean. Certainly by the 1950s, the use of geography, maps, and imagined worlds as primary spaces for cultivating engaging experiences based on narrative themes was a well-established phenomenon in the board game industry.² More than a background aesthetic, maps and geography in modern board games such as *The Wizard of Oz* (1921), *Diplomacy* (1959), and *Carcassonne* (2000) have become key components of gameplay; players must conquer a map, race to a finish line, or explore an unknown world. In *Ticket to Ride* (2004), for example, players attempt to connect their train routes to specific secret destinations on a large map of North America.³ Maps and cartography have also been essential components of a player’s experience in digital games. For early mass-market video games such as *The Legend of Zelda* (1986) and *The Secret of Monkey Island* (1990), the “function of maps,” writes Thomas Rowland, “revolutionized gameplay” since players could orient themselves visually, track progress, and explore imaginary worlds.⁴ These cartographic elements enable players to play through the game’s narrative at the same time they chart the player’s progress through the game. In immersive three-dimensional worlds such as the massive multiplayer online games *World of Warcraft* (2004–present) and *Lord of the Rings Online* (2007–present), maps not only designate a player’s location in the world, but also adhere to the cartographical principles of scale and proportion. Maps and other visual markings, whether on a board or screen, often concretely and unambiguously represent imaginary worlds in games, even if some of the gameplay takes place externally through the use of tokens or a player’s imagination. How did tabletop and digital games come to occupy a visual, imagined space represented and communicated by topography, maps, and physical spaces? For modern tabletop and digital games, geography and a sense of place continue
to play a key role in the design and play of the game, but, as we shall discover, this affinity with cartography and topography was not always present and has developed over time.

Historians of cartography have long understood the power of maps to convey stories, politics, propaganda, and cultural ideologies, and this projection is notably reflected in early modern games. As game historian Jon Peterson writes, in premodern Germany and elsewhere the “invention of war games depended on recent improvements to maps, which were ... only loosely anchored to the grid of longitude and latitude.” This essay examines how a progressively refined system of geography, changing ideas of spatiality, and the regulation of international trade in early modern England enabled tabletop games to shift from abstract structures enjoyed by players in the Middle Ages to ludic objects that incorporated real-life elements in their design of fictional worlds. The emergence of what Donald Smith calls the “cartographic imagination” in sixteenth-century Europe, coupled with a growing demand for novel entertainments, not only spurred new ways of crafting and visualizing topographical game worlds but also set the initial parameters of the now-familiar large-scale commercial production and distribution of games in later centuries. Since this cultural shift is too broad to render in detail here, I focus on how the rising prevalence of maps and geography in early modern England affected one enduringly popular game object in early England, which is still found as a common component of modern board games and video games: playing cards. By analyzing playing cards and their intersection with geography in Elizabethan and Stuart England, this essay charts the emergence of games as commercial commodities and precursors to representing real and fictional worlds on gaming objects.

Most gameplay is an intrinsically spatial activity. Whether a player moves pieces around a game board as in *Sorry!* (1929), manipulates pieces on a two-dimensional grid such as in the video game *Tetris* (1984), or catches someone in an outdoor game of hide-and-seek, the game must take place in a visible, defined space. Dutch medievalist and cultural historian Johan Huizinga observed this phenomenon in his seminal study of play, *Homo ludens: A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*. He defines play, in part, as an activity limited by locality that takes place within a confined space:

All play moves and has its being within a playground marked off beforehand either materially or ideally, deliberately or a matter of course. Just as there is no formal difference between play and ritual, so the “consecrated spot” cannot be formally distinguished from the play-ground. The arena, the card-table, the magic circle, the temple, the stage, the screen, the tennis court, the court of justice, etc., are all in form and function play-grounds, i.e. forbidden spots isolated, hedged round, hallowed, within which special rules obtain. All are temporary worlds within the ordinary world, dedicated to the performance of an act apart.

For Huizinga, these ordered spaces—also called “magic circles”—constitute imagined, ordered worlds set against the uncertainty of “ordinary life.” Yi-Fu Tuan attributes *place*
to locations created by human experiences, while space has no social connections whatsoever.9 Meaning ascribed to a given space yields a place; places signify human intent, much like the spaces found on a game board. In their Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals, game scholars Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman build upon Huizinga’s magic circle, reading it as “a special place in time and space created by a game ... To play a game means entering into a magic circle, or perhaps creating one when the game begins.”10 Tabletop and outdoor games fill physical spaces (e.g. a soccer field). Spaces and places in virtual games are understood through the game’s user interface and mechanics. “In sports or board games,” as game studies scholar Jesper Juul observes, “the game space is a subset of the space of the world: The space in which the game takes place is a subset of the larger world, and a magic circle delineates the bounds of the game.”11 Games spaces, which I have previously discussed elsewhere, are ways “in which to ascribe meaning to cultural objects and circumstances.”12 Huizinga’s game/life dichotomy is too rigid a definition to encapsulate the complexities of play, for it does not reflect negotiable consequences and effects that could arise from playing a game (e.g. losing money at gambling). Nonetheless, his definition highlights the need for physical spaces in order to play a game.

In order to examine how maps and geography influenced playing cards in early modern England, it is necessary first to discuss how players conceived the spatiality of tabletop games in the Middle Ages. Games in the Middle Ages were largely abstract affairs, wherein boards displayed simple shapes that represented relations between the pieces. The three most popular board games in the Middle Ages—chess; tabula (an early form of backgammon); and merels (also known as Nine Men’s Morris)—were not medieval inventions, but rather entered Europe sometime between 900 C.E. and 1100 C.E.13 While all three games underwent experimentation and change as players tested new rules and modes of material representation, the boards themselves remained relatively unchanged, save for the specific colors and materials used in their design and construction. Chess, arguably the most popular board game in medieval Europe, underwent developments of representation by modifying the simple, abstract Islamic pieces to gaming pieces that reflected social roles in medieval society. Yet, despite changes to the gaming pieces, the board’s own developments remained conservative in nature. The Indian game chaturanga shares the same 8 × 8 board (a rectangular board subdivided into sixty-four checkered or uncheckered squares) as its descendant, chess. A number of games created in the Middle Ages, such as checkers (English draughts) and Les Jeu de Dames (the game of Ladies), use the chessboard, likely due to its familiarity and availability. The creators of Courier Chess, a strategy board game developed in twelfth-century Germany, extended the chessboard to twelve rows in order to increase the number of playing pieces on each side: twelve pawns, a king, a man (counselor), a queen, a schleich (a smuggler or fool), two couriers, two bishops, two knights, and two rooks.14 Tafel (table or board) games—one of the most popular families of games in Europe before chess—were also played on checkered or latticed boards and consisted of two armies of unequal power (a ratio of 2:1).
The size of the board varied depending on the game [e.g. *Hnefatafl* (the king’s table) was played on an 11 × 11 or 13 × 13 board], and later games adapted the checkered board. Fox and Geese, a variant of the game *Halatafl* (the [fox’s] tail), adapted the board to form a cross-shaped board comprising five squares and nine positions for a total of thirty-three positions. Whether board games entered medieval Europe from elsewhere or were invented by medieval players, and whether they had dozens or hundreds of places, they all share a similar abstract representation of the game space.

Indeed, the game boards themselves do not reveal the rules, play, or strategy of the game, and without documented rules it is otherwise impossible to discern how such games might have been played, as in the unknown game board found in Cambridge, Trinity College, MS O.2.45, fol. 1v—a possible early version of the Danish game *daldos*. As a result of these abstract game spaces, medieval writers could project various allegorizations of morality and hierarchies of medieval society onto the game board, such as in the Genoese Dominican friar Jacobus de Cessolis’s late thirteenth-century socio-political chess allegory, *Liber de moribus hominum et officiis nobilium super ludo scacchorum* (Book of the morals of men and the duties of nobles—or, the Book of Chess). However, medieval game objects do not display any visual geographic markers and rarely ascribe different meanings to physical spaces, other than in allegories like the game of chess depicted in Évrart de Conty’s *Les Eschéz d’Amours* (ca. 1400), where each square represents the personal traits of each player. Clearly, abstract medieval games like chess, which depend on the strategic combination and position of pieces on the board, differ from later commercial games where the game board acts as a discernable fictional, physical place [e.g. the visualized mansion floor plan in Parker Brothers’ *Clue* (1949)].

Game historian David Parlett also observes a distinction between abstract games and proprietary games, noting that two understandings of the term “board game” exist: “positional” (games that rely on the positions of the pieces relative to one another on a surface) and “thematic” (commercial games that are representational, thematic, and performative in their subject matter and often reflect real-life places and activities). Nevertheless, clear differences between positional and thematic games are difficult to discern; as Parlett remarks, “no hard and fast distinction can be drawn between abstract and representational as a classifications of games. How representational a game is depends on the level at which it is being played and the extent of its players’ imagination.” Board games like *Ticket to Ride* and *Clue* would likely fall under Parlett’s “thematic” category, for their objectives are recognizable as real-world motivations and settings (i.e. determine who murdered the owner of the mansion, Mr. Boddy, in *Clue*), while chess, *Pachisi*, *Go*, and backgammon all sit unequivocally in the “positional” game camp. Yet, while not always the case, geography often plays a key role in the formation of a game world, one with which players can engage on the board or playing cards. While some game scholars and designers contend that board games are fundamentally about rules with a thematic layer added [e.g. pleasing aesthetics added to a modest linear race game
like Milton Bradley’s *Candy Land* (1949)], this thematic layering nevertheless adds to a
player’s experience and feeling of engagement. In many cases, the game’s rules and fiction
are so intertwined that one cannot be prioritized or teased out from the other, such as in
Chaosium’s cooperative adventure game *Arkham Horror* (1987), wherein players assume
the role of investigators to defeat alien creatures and save the world in H. P. Lovecraft’s
fictional city Arkham, Massachusetts. Yet a player need not necessarily agree with a game
author’s intended rendering of the fictional world represented in the game: “the player,”
notes Juul, “is aware that it is optional to imagine the fictional world of the game.”

Parlett notes that proprietary games first appeared in the eighteenth century and
gained sway in the nineteenth century under commercial producers such as McLoughlin
Brothers, Milton Bradley, Parker Brothers, and Ravensburger, but this observation—and
other histories of tabletop games—does not account for the circumstances that gave rise
to this popularity in the development, enjoyment, and commercialization of games.

What cultural movements and moments influenced the invention and production of
“thematic” games? In early modern Europe—long before the so-called “Golden Age” of
tabletop games in America (1880–1913)—there is evidence to suggest that games begin
to shift from abstract, positional game boards, in which worlds are imagined through
allegories and other narratives outside the game like Cessolis’s *Liber*, to commercially
produced games that included representations of real-world places and activities and,
later, entirely fictional “thematic” worlds. It is my contention that games in the early
modern period did not simply shift to exhibit thematic, visual imaginary worlds, however;
instead, the very notion of a “thematic” game arose due to the changing ideas of spatiality
and geography in the sixteenth century—and, in particular, the nascent “discovery” of
our own world.

Discovering the World

If games are spatially oriented, then an intermingling of games with geography would seem
to be a natural fit. Indeed, the ubiquity of our own modern maps, which represent actual
scaled and proportioned places using digital technology and scientific measurements,
presents to us an ordered, structured way with which to orient ourselves in the world.
But this understanding of space, born in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries with the
rise of cartography as the prevailing form of geographic representation and Western
Europe’s rediscovery and translation of Ptolemy’s *Geographia* into Latin, is certainly
not the only way to represent the world. For mapmakers in the Middle Ages, the idea
of the map was largely a narrative rather than navigational endeavor; the function of
medieval maps was varied, but *mappaemundi* overwhelmingly focused on relaying a
narrative of Christian history and the harmonious order of creation. As Robert Rouse
reminds, the “medieval spatial imagination was primarily noncartographic:” not only
were medieval maps unknown objects to the general populace, but their purpose was
also primarily ideological in nature, with no conception of scale, proportion, orientation, or geographic representation. In his study of cartography in medieval Europe, P. D. A. Harvey notes that the "idea of drawing a casual sketch map to show some topographical relationship—the way from one place to another, the layout of fields, the sequence of houses in a street—was one that seldom occurred to people in the Middle Ages." Medieval ideas of spatiality depended on textual, rather than spatial, information: the medieval world, as Rouse observes, "is textually represented as a series of sequentially related individual places, with little or no interest in establishing a sense of realistic distance between them." With the exception of maps made by a few mapmakers such as Matthew Paris (ca. 1200–1259), knowledge of the physical world in the Middle Ages was almost exclusively local and regional: individuals could not easily visualize their town, landscape, or nation beyond their own first-hand experience. Medieval games, as we have seen, thus exhibited a similar relationship toward the idea of space as a porous, abstract, and narratological concept.

Geography in the later Middle Ages underwent drastic changes, due in large part to improvements on Ptolemy’s principles, the development of meridians and parallels, the invention of better tools for naval navigation, and a reduction in the production cost of printed maps. Ptolemy’s *Geographia* likely reached the British Isles by 1482 and was continuously revised to include “new projections, new maps, [and] new ways of looking at the world.” While early editions were primarily text based, printings after 1508 included maps and became the definite guide for mapping discoveries in the New World. Sixteenth-century Europe fashioned a new spatial awareness of the world such that, in the words of Monica Matei-Chesnoiu: “the new possibility of imaginatively inserting the viewer into a representation of space offered a perspective that allowed people on the ground a holistic approach to the world that would not otherwise be possible. It allowed them to conceive of their surroundings, the world, the town, and the landscape, in wide-ranging ways, which may have gone beyond the possibilities of physical reality, but which stayed well within the *bounds of imagination.*” While Harvey contends that sixteenth-century cartographers developed a sense of “mapmindedness,” Smith goes further to argue that “the new techniques of surveying and mapping produced a fundamental shift in the way space was imagined,” suggesting that this new spatial thinking had broader epistemological effects than previously thought. With the adoption of new ways to imagine and reason about physical space, cartographical maps and techniques became a key social and cultural construction that could not only scientifically help navigate the world, but also make “statements about the world” through the selection and exclusion of cartographical features. Maps, which were once a rare phenomenon, began appearing in plays, books, political pamphlets, poetry, and elsewhere as authors, playwrights, cartographers, and surveyors gained an interest in discourses that combined human intent and the natural world. For perhaps the first time, maps and geographical texts could arrest a new awareness of one’s surroundings and new ways of viewing one’s world—both local
and abroad. As Donald Smith remarks, “cartographic accuracy began to carry with it a concomitant sense of perceived space, a sense of an implicitly physical volume that could be imaginatively inhabited.”

Cartographers in England continued to produce maps in manuscript form during the sixteenth century, though printed maps were predominantly imported from the Continent. Foreign lands were discovered, explored, and mapped thanks to expeditions like those conducted by Sir Walter Raleigh and Sir Francis Drake, yet the most significant developments in English mapmaking remained local and within England’s borders. George Lily produced one of the earliest engraved maps of England in 1546, but it was Christopher Saxton—a mapmaker and surveyor—who established a methodology for cartographic practices through instrumental surveys of the land, which remained influential well into the eighteenth century. While he began as an estate surveyor, mapping local and regional land boundaries on commission, Saxton was approached in 1573 by Elizabeth I’s Secretary of State, William Cecil (later named the First Baron Lord Burghley), to survey and map the counties of England and Wales. Saxton completed the first English county map in 1574 (the county of Norfolk), and thirty-four county maps were successively surveyed and printed on copper plates until completion in 1578. In 1579, the individual county maps were collected into the first national atlas, entitled *Atlas of the Counties of England and Wales*, which created a cultural awareness of England as a nation. As John Short notes, “Saxton’s work was not just a technical accomplishment. The mapping was uniquely connected to political ends.” Like Henry VIII’s interest in maps for planning national defense in the 1530s, Saxton’s county maps “reflect[ed] turbulent times” as tensions rose between Elizabeth I and Philip II, the King of Spain; the maps outline and affirm England’s borders, presenting each county in a similar visual style, though, as Catherine Delano-Smith and Roger Kain point out, there was “an underlying lack of uniformity from map to map.” Saxton’s atlas was revised, updated, and reprinted frequently throughout Elizabethan and Stuart England, and cartographers such as William Smith and John Norden later sought to correct some of the shortcomings in Saxton’s work. As Thrower observes, “Saxton’s maps, which were derived from instrumental surveys, were soon emulated and became the basis of such cartography for a century and a half.” Saxton’s maps created a new national consciousness, a political identity that was informed not only by England’s contours and topography, but also England’s identity as the head of a burgeoning empire.

This profound cultural shift from medieval notions of geography and spatiality to early modern mapmaking paved the way for introducing geography into games, and one of the first examples of this shift appears in a seemingly unlikely place: playing cards. With the rise of printing and engraving playing cards became more widely accessible and portable, thereby assuming a new level of popularity rivaling that of the older chess, merels, and tables in Elizabethan England. A pack of fifty-two geographical playing cards (and eight introduction cards)—the first known example of its kind in early modern
Europe—appears in 1590 at the same time that demand for national and regional maps was increasing and making maps a marketable commodity. \(^{38}\) The geographical cards, which feature a general map of every English and Welsh county, reveal a direct link to Saxton’s atlas. Likely designed by William Bowes, \(^{39}\) the geographical cards were produced by Augustine Ryther, a map engraver, printer, and prominent figure in the rise of mapping, engraving, and printing in Elizabethan England. \(^{40}\) Ryther was one of at least six engravers—and the only Englishman—employed by Saxton to work on the atlas, and

he was responsible for engraving at least four of Saxton’s county maps. His work with Saxton’s maps and the Agas London map (1588) may have influenced his visual depiction of the fifty-two counties each displayed on a card in the set, plus the map of London on introductory card 4 (Figure 12.1), and may have even been copied from Saxton’s general map of England and Wales. Departing from the court card design originating in Rouen, France, which became the archetype used for producing playing card sets in England and remains the most prominent set design today by featuring figures at court in addition to suited numbered cards, Bowes instead split English counties into four directions (North, South, East, and West) based on their geographical orientation. In this way, the four cardinal points not only represented four card suits, but also created a set design that was distinctly English and separate from all other card designs circulating on the Continent. Bowes’s deck collectively reveals a single theme at work that influenced its design: geography. Each county card is numbered I to XIII in each suit (arranged from the smallest to largest regions), with a brief description and image of the county and letters signifying important buildings and locations in the area (discussed below). Ryther was also an instrument maker, and three instruments cartographers used to create their maps—a pair of calipers, a ruler, and a compass—appear in the bottom left and top right of the inner frame on every county card, underlining the skills and technologies required to produce accurate measurements, dimensions, and representational images of each county. Icons such as the spades, clubs, hearts, and diamonds characteristic of the Rouen design are omitted in favor of distinguishing suits using abstract patterns framing the county, the region of England and Wales described, and the colored borders around the inner frame and county image: East (yellow inner border/green county border); South (red inner border/yellow county border); West (green inner border/yellow county border); and North (yellow inner border/red county border). Bowes’s geographical playing cards go beyond a mere depiction of counties, however. The top text on each card lists quantifiable measurements of each county, while the bottom text presents a short chorographical description and orientation to other adjacent counties. The card featuring Middlesex (Figure 12.2), for instance, reads as:

MIDDLESEX the 2 of th[e] East hath Miles
In Quantitie superficall 125. In Circuite 81.
In Length from Barkeshire to Essex 21.
In Bredth from Kent to Hartfordshire 14.

[Inner panel with image of the county]

MIDDLESEX a very sweete & fine ayer:
Fertile soile, & full of statelye buildinges.
Hauinge Essex East, Buckinghamshire West
Hartfordshire North, the Thames and Sur[rey] South.
The collocation of cartographical information, visual image of the county, and chorographical description for each county provides both a quick flashcard-like overview and, in Wood’s words, “a reality that exceeds our vision.” The maps displayed on each playing card are too small and impractical as a navigational tool, and there are few visual topographical features, such as rivers, lakes, mountains, hills, and forests, displayed on the small maps. As mentioned earlier, buildings are represented via a letter symbol, but no images of roadways or other human structures appear on the maps. With limited
information portrayed on the landscape, the minimal maps thus highlight the most significant distinguishing features that each county has to offer through an intermingling of both natural and manufactured regions.

The text reflects this effort to showcase the best aspects of each county: the surveying measurements quantify the contours and shapes of each county, imparting a numeric order on the landscape, while the pastoral descriptions portray an idyllic narrative of an abundant, productive England, stressing key topographical features and commercial commodities. Middlesex’s “very sweete & fine ayer” complements its “fertile soile,” for instance, just as Flint’s “plesaunt hills” and fertile soil create “great plenty of barley.” Likewise, Hartfordshire enjoys “plesante meadows and pastures,” Oxfordshire is “plesaunt for hawking,” with “plenty of fowle and fishe,” and Pembrokeshire in the southwest of Wales contains “plenty of wheat, seafishe, and wine to sell.”46 The chorographical descriptions occasionally mention more densely populated areas, which are also keyed on the maps with a letter. Norfolk boasts a “large, welthy, and very populous” landscape “full of corn, sheep, and worsted commodities,” while Cheshire is “full of nobilitye and gent[ry].”47 Lincolnshire claims to have “plenty of corne, fruite, and cattel: / Numbers of townes, rivers, with store of fishe.”48 A number of the descriptions of the counties on Bowes’s cards may have been adapted from William Camden’s widely influential <i>Britannia</i> (1586), a Latin prose chorographical description on England that, as Lesley Cormack remarks, “defined and stabilized the genre of local history” by bringing “together the study of all aspects of human habitation: history, locale, linguistics, genealogy, and etymology.”49 Bowes’s geographical playing cards offer instead a chorographical <i>Britannia</i> in miniature: Camden’s depiction of Middlesex includes the sentence “[s]umma coeli temperie et soli indulgentia, aedibus et vicis magnificis undique nitida, plurimaque sunt ubique memoranda [for aire passing temprat, and for soile fertile, with sumpteous houses and prety townes on all sides pleasantly beautified, and every where offereth to the view many things memorable],”50 forming a part of the introduction to a larger chorographical account of the county—and most likely the sentence truncated and translated for Bowes’s card. While Camden continues to expand the histories and descriptions of each county, publishing his third edition in 1590 and seventh edition in 1607, the playing cards, with limited physical space on the card, had to encapsulate the highlights of a locale. Middlesex’s entry in <i>Britannia</i>, like the other county descriptions, reads as a collection of local histories, commercial exports, topographical survey data, poetry, depictions of cities, and other collected information. For Bowes’s playing cards, the choices of abridged phrases are telling: the summation of features for each county showcases an idealized England, a nation poised for greatness.

Other Elizabethan maps and chorographies similarly provide localized descriptions of “contemporary places, things, and cultural practices accurately,” which also propagated a growing national awareness.51 Contemporaneous projects in England were already in development at the time of the publication of Bowes’s geographical cards,
including Norden’s own unfinished pocket-sized account of England’s counties in his chorographical *Speculum Britanniae* (Mirror of Britain) (1593), which was also inspired by William Camden’s *Britannia* (1586) and devised as a series of surveyed county maps accompanied by textual descriptions. This mélange of cartographic skills, natural history, and genre, of mapping the English and Welsh landscape onto the spaces of the playing cards, captures the porous relationship between politics, commerce, and game spaces. Similar to chess, where a player dominates the physical board strategically to seize the king or an author uses the game for socio-political aims such as in Cessolis’s *Liber*, here the dominion over topographical space, a wholly cultural, commercial, and political enterprise, is rendered onto a playful, and indeed controversial, playing card object. The sense of order and organization displayed on each county card, in terms of the numerical distances, images of surveying tools, and descriptions, “giv[es] a new measurable dimension to the visible world ... and opens great potential for the development of readers’ imaginative capacity.” But at the same time these collections of facts, together with chorographical descriptions, reflect an imaginary place to inhabit: they point the player not to a world he or she can see, but rather, as the epigraph at the beginning of this essay states, “a world we might know.”

While the geographical and chorographical information displayed on the cards does not influence gameplay itself, they nevertheless become a precursor to later thematic games by highlighting a visual aesthetic that teaches players about their own country and place within it—a view of the nation that moves from the familiar to the conceptual. Later geographical games in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries would move beyond representations of the world to include the maps as actors in gameplay. *Le Jeu de France* (Game of France), an educational spiral race game devised by Pierre Duval in Paris (1659), for instance, depicts each of the sixty-three circles as mini-mapped areas around France, many of which contain special rules for the unwitting player who lands on them (Figure 12.3). Another spiral game designed by Pierre Duval in 1662, *Le Jeu des Princes de l’Europe* (Game of the Princes of Europe), similarly places France in the winning square on the board. In these instances, gameplay intersects with geography: a player landing on circle 23 (Tourraine) in *Le Jeu de France*, for example, must miss two turns while he or she enjoys a lovely promenade on the avenues in Tours.

In early modern Europe, games—through their use of maps and geography—acted as another vehicle in which to fashion a “national and local patriotism” among players at the same time they encourage learning, recreation, and gameplay. Indeed, Bowes’s eight introductory cards further attest to this form of overt nation building, including cards outlining key rulers who shaped the land (Card 1), the English court at Parliament (Card 5), England’s history of conquerors (Card 6), and London’s status as an emerging metropolis “for store of welth, of people, and of power” (Cards 4 and 8). Like Camden’s *Britannia*, Bowes’s playing cards provide a collective image “of the antiquity of Britain and the inevitability of its development as an autonomous nation” and re-orient readers
and players spatially by producing—and indeed contributing to—a new topographical awareness and relation to the world. The third introductory card, much like the layout of the county cards, displays numeric sums of England’s widths and lengths: “THVS much in Miles whole Engla[n]d it contain[n]es . 34866 / Thus much in Miles will reach about in rounde : 1890 / Hir Length from Lisard point to Barwick strai[n]s . 334 / Twixt Douer Holyhead the breadth is founde . 250.” The subsequent text ties the features of each county together, placing England as a formidable nation “AMO[N]GST good neighbors.” Bowes’s cards are as much a reflection of England’s real physical boundaries as its fiction, creating an idealized image of Elizabethan England that is not only characterized by idyllic landscapes and an abundance of resources, but also reaps the fruits of its land for trade, vanquishes enemies, and explores new frontiers—a narrative Michael Drayton would later downplay in his chorographical magnum opus Poly-Olbion (1612). Richard Helgerson, in his Forms of Nationhood: The Elizabethan Writing of England, examines the political exigencies of map patronage and production, arguing that Elizabethan cartography and chorography “had an inescapable part in creating
the cultural entity they pretended only to represent ... They thus made themselves. They are the prototypes of what might be called the *novus homo chorographicus*—new chorographical man." In Bowes's pack of geographical cards, all counties are presented as a collective whole, a unification of the land. The wielder of the cards could not only hold in his or her hand a visual representation of the entire country, but also identify—and quickly by flipping through the deck—their own sense of place in England. Maps “raised questions about the earth and its inhabitants ... On a more practical plane they promoted commerce in every sense of the word.” But even as the cards represent real, physical space, they also, by virtue of their imaginative proliferation of England's abundance and supremacy, present a manifestation of an envisioned world, a realm of “possibility, a mix of familiar and unfamiliar, permutations of wish, dread, and dream, and other kinds of existence that can make us more aware of the circumstances and conditions of the actual world we inhabit”—or, what Mark Wolf would call an “imaginary world.”

**Selling Playing Cards in England**

The amalgamation of the political, the pedagogical, and the playful on Bowes’s geographical playing cards—which appear at least eighty-six years before bookseller and mapmaker Robert Morden's highly detailed pack of geographical playing cards (1676), the second extant set of geographical cards in Europe—epitomizes England's national identity within (and as) an imaginary space. However, I would like to briefly highlight another, more subtle display of English patriotism latent in Bowes’s playing cards, one that not only reflected the increasing commercialism of games, but also helped set a precedent for the regulation and trade of games and other goods in general: the domestic production of playing cards.

Playing cards were controversial material objects in premodern Europe: on the one hand, gentry and nobility enjoyed them as a sophisticated pastime; on the other hand, they encouraged gambling and lewd behavior. But the controversy surrounding playing cards was not only ethical in nature. Since the introduction of playing cards into England in the early fifteenth century, a great deal of the playing cards purchased in England were imported from elsewhere. As the production and distribution of cards increased, English card makers and merchants competed with foreign importers. The situation reached a critical breaking point in 1463 when Edward IV enacted the first statute that prohibited the importation of foreign playing cards at the request of English card makers. Viewed with suspicion born of both moral and mercantile anxieties, playing cards were objects perceived to be in need of containment and control.

Despite attempts to regulate the exchange and use of playing cards, cards continued to be imported to England throughout the sixteenth century, most often sporting the Rouen design. In her study of playing cards, game historian Catherine Hargrave remarks that “it is curious to see how from the very first cards made for export have conformed
with the accepted idea of the country for which they were made.” Playing cards, in their card and suit design, were fundamentally connected to their countries of origin (e.g. playing cards originating in Spain, France, and Italy all display different suit icons and designs). By Elizabethan and Stuart England, local artificers still struggled to compete with playing cards imported from France and elsewhere. On June 13, 1571, Elizabeth I granted a twelve-year patent license to Ralph Bowes (notably, the brother of William Bowes) and Thomas Beddingfield Esquires to import, manufacture, and supply playing cards in England and license others to sell them (both fifty-two card “French” decks and seventy-eight card Tarot decks), essentially creating a state-sanctioned monopoly on the product. The queen extended the patent license in 1588 and 1589, believing that limiting the production, trade, and distribution of playing cards in England to the control of one person would regulate the pastime. In the patent license released in 1588, the queen states explicitly that Ralph Bowes and his affiliates are the only legal artificers of cards: “no other shall haue the making of playing Cards within this our Realme and other our Dominions ... vpon paine of imprisonment.” On January 12, 1590, Bowes entered the playing card patent into the Stationer’s Hall as a way of establishing copyright on cards: “to print these markes folowing, which are to bind up cards in, viz., a dozen m’ke. Item, a Sizian m’ke. Item, a Jew m’ke.” The patent and Bowes’s sets of printing blocks then passed to Edward Darcy (a Groom of the Chamber to Elizabeth I), and the patent was renewed for another twenty-one years in return for paying the queen an annual sum of 100 marks. On August 11, 1598, Thomas Allein, a haberdasher who operated in London, sold 180 gross of playing cards but refused to pay Darcy. Darcy sued Allein for violating his patent license and the matter went to court. On January 1, 1599, the King’s Bench ruled that the grant on the monopoly of playing cards was void because it prevented those who were skilled in a trade from completing a job and, as a result, “leadeth to the impoverishing of divers Artificers.” The monopoly also harmed the buyer because the monopolist could raise the price of the product for self-gain with no intention of maintaining quality control on the product. Playing cards, argued the plaintiff, were vanity items that wasted time. The queen thus had the right to regulate the recreation of her people as a public good. The Bench determined that the queen was deceived and allowing a monopoly on playing would set a dangerous precedent on the trade of other goods. The case, famously called “The Cases of Monopolies,” was the first statement that ruled monopolies harmful and became a landmark model for establishing the beginnings of antitrust, patent, and competition law. As the Bench states, as reported by Edward Coke, “That the Queen could not suppress the making of Cards within the Realm, no more than the making of Dice, Bowls, Balls, Hawks-hoods, Bells, Lewers, Dog-couples, and other like, which are works of labor and art, although they shall be for pleasure, recreation and pastime, and they cannot be suppressed if not by Parliament, nor a man restrained to use any trade but by Parliament.” Other products designated for recreation are not regulated through patent monopolies, so artificers should be free to produce playing cards as well. No one should regulate play.
While the *Darcy v. Allein* case opened up the market to enable multiple artificers to manufacture and sell English-made playing cards, that did not end the competition between domestic and foreign cards. In 1615, a group of English tradespeople petitioned James I to place limits on the importation of foreign cards because they were severely impacting their ability to sustain a living wage. Based on their pleas, the king required all foreign cards to be licensed, inspected, and paid tariffs for importation. While these new procedures attempted to limit the competition of playing cards from the Continent, they did not fully alleviate these issues. Gerard Malynes, in his economic treatise *Consuetudo, vel lex mercatoria, or The ancient law-merchant* (1622), notes that playing cards imported from France comprise a monopoly he deems “reasonable” due to its appeal among buyers as a trifling pleasure, together with starch, lute-strings, and tobacco. In 1628, another group of playing card producers in London rallied together and, with Charles I’s support, founded the “Worshipful Company of Makers of Playing Cards” by royal charter in an effort to curb the importation of foreign cards and establish card making as a legitimate trade in England. Lews Roberts argues in *The Treasure of Traffike* (1641) that the importation of playing cards should be prohibited because England already manufactured the primary materials. The numbers of card makers in England began to increase, though the Rouen court style remained a staple in English card design. A report on the rate of English imports and exports by ship in 1650 includes playing cards at four pounds and another report published in 1657 summarizes valuations for imported goods, including playing cards at two pounds, and new efforts were made by Charles I in 1638 and Charles II in 1684 to place further restraints on trade by prohibiting the importation of all foreign-made playing cards on behalf of the Company. The effort by English artificers was not only to add another profitable skill to their trade, but to produce quality English-made cards. The need to create a local market was economical as much as it was nationalistic in supporting English citizens, merchants, and tradespeople.

From the petitions, grants, and licenses we see that playing cards were clearly a highly commoditized object, and the political and mercantile conflict that surrounded the regional production of playing cards, set against foreign imports, ushered in new models for the manufacture of cards and other commodities in England. If we return to William Bowes’s geographical cards, his design was the first extant set of cards to display a completely distinct design set apart from the Rouen court style in England (the design granted in his brother’s patent license), and his deck was produced domestically in England by Ryther independently of his brother’s control. In the manufacture and circulation of playing cards both brothers attempted to dominate the cultural (and in some cases economic) “game board”—a means of creating and securing national identities and foreign relations in fiction and in real life. While the 1590 pocket-atlas themed geographical cards remained a novelty item in Elizabethan England, Bowes’s intermingling of geography and game created a national narrative through play, an intermixing of game and spatiality that had never appeared before. Representations of
the world through maps, geography, and iconic markers on game boards and playing cards, coupled with the rise and regulation of domestically produced games, eventually gave way to the design of interactive geographical game worlds, such as John Jefferys’s *A Journey through Europe* (1759) and John Wallis’s *New Geographical Game Exhibiting a Tour Through Europe* (1794). This interactive “mapmindedness”—the desire to playfully and visually engage with the world—continued well into the “Golden Age” of games with games such as McLoughlin Brothers’ *Round the World with Nellie Bly* (1890), and geographical playing cards remained a staple pedagogical tool for learning about the world and its inhabitants. Geography was not simply an addition to early modern games, but rather a catalyst for changing the idea of game altogether.

NOTES

2 Other contemporaneous games, including *Tactics* (1954) and *Stratego* (1961), deploy political and military game spaces through the use of geography and topological terrain, and influenced later board games, such as *Axis and Allies* (1981) and *The Settlers of Catan* (1995), and video games, such as *Europa Universalis* (2000) and Sid Meier’s series *Civilization* (1991–2014).
4 Rowland, “We Will Travel by Map,” esp. 190. Rowland argues that modern video game maps often function like medieval *mappaemundi*, depicting maps as narrative spaces that do not always correspond to proper measurements. For video game maps, traveling through the map “tracks our progress through the narrative … [t]he map, then, serves as a space in which narrative experience is organized and undertaken, the space and action inseparably and intrinsically tied,” 199.
8 Huizinga, *Homo ludens* (1955), 11–12. As Huizinga argues, “[i]nside the circle of the game the laws and customs of ordinary life no longer count. We are different and do things differently,” 12.
9 Tuan, *Space and Place*. For a similar argument, see also Seamon and Sowers, “Place and Placelessness, Edward Relph.”
12 Patterson, “Introduction: Setting Up the Board,” 10.
15 Michaelsen, “Daldøs.”
17 Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games*, 5.
20 Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games*, 345. For an example of the significance of thematic games and their makers, see, for instance, Orbanes, *The Game Makers*.

21 Prolific tabletop game collector Alex G. Malloy, *American Games*, 12, notes that the “Golden Age” of American games began in the 1870s with the rise of Parker Brothers and the McLoughlin Brothers and ended in 1920 when McLoughlin Brothers, once the leading American game manufacturer, was strapped for cash and sold its entire game line to Milton Bradley.

22 Juul provides an alternative classification of games based on the levels of meaning and fiction applied to the game: abstract games, iconic games, incoherent world games, coherent world games, and staged games. See Juul, *Half-Real*, 131–32.

23 While Ptolemy’s *Almagest* circulated widely in twelfth-century Europe and had early theories regarding cartography, *Geographia*, which most likely reached England in the latter half of the fifteenth century, was among the most influential texts for ushering in new ways of thinking about the world. *Geographia*, written in Alexandria in the second century C.E., was first translated by the Greek monk Planudes from a copy found in Constantinople in 1295 and later translated into Latin in Florence (ca. 1409), which quickly circulated to other areas of Europe. See Delano-Smith and Kain, *English Maps*, 30–48.


29 Matei-Chesnoiu, *Re-imagining Western European Geography*, 14, emphasis mine.


34 Short, *The World through Maps*, 112.


39 The identity of the author has been long debated among scholars. The imprint on the first card reads, “W. B. inuent, 1590.” In their study of the playing cards, Mann and Kingsley, “Playing Cards Depicting Maps,” found that a certain “William Bowes” was connected to another set of playing cards produced in 1605.

40 Ryther was the first map engraver to be recognized internationally. A member of the Grocers’ Company, Ryther had founded a distinguished school of instrument makers. He also worked on engravings in the Wagghenaer atlas and had published his own atlas, *Expeditionis Hispanorum in Angliam vera description* (1590), which focused on the successes of the Armada victory. He was also likely the engraver of Saxton’s 1583 wall map, the Ralph Agas wall map at Oxford (1588), and the John Hamond map at Cambridge (1592). McKenzie and Barbard, *The Book in Britain*, 234. See also, Baigent, “Ryther, Augustine (d. 1593).”

41 Delano-Smith and Kain, *English Maps*, 66–69. Ryther may have also accepted an editing


43 This color scheme is based on the cards acquired by the British Museum in 1938. Another set of this deck, acquired by the British Museum in 2014, displays different color patterns, but a similar pattern scheme.

44 Bowes, [Middlesex]. The transcription of the 1590 playing cards is my own.


46 Bowes, [Middlesex], [Hartfordshire], [Oxfordshire], and [Pembrokeshire].

47 Bowes, [Norfolk], [Cheshire].

48 Bowes, [Lincolnshire].

49 Cormack, *Charting an Empire*, 177.


51 Shapiro, *A Culture of Fact*, 64.


55 Seville, “The Geographical Jeux de l’Oie of Europe.”


58 Bowes, [Map of London].

59 Cormack, *Charting an Empire*, 177.

60 Bowes, [England].

61 Bowes, [England].

62 Helgerson, *Forms of Nationhood*, 147.


64 Wolf, *Building Imaginary Worlds*, 17.

65 Hargrave, *A History of Playing Cards* (1930), 169. Rulers and lawmakers have long attempted to regulate the play of games, especially for gambling purposes. Edward IV’s ban on the importation of cards constitutes the earliest extant prohibition of importing foreign gaming objects into England. For more information on the regulation of games, see Bubczyk, “Ludus inhonestus et illicitus?” and McIntosh, *Controlling Misbehavior in England*, 95–107.


68 Dodge, “Playing Cards,” esp. 121.

69 Coke, *Selected Writings*, 395.

70 Coke, *Selected Writings*, 400.

71 Coke, *Selected Writings*, 402.

72 James I, *Treatise for the Makers of Playing Cards*.

73 Malynes, *Consuetudo, vel lex mercatoria*.

74 Roberts, *The Treasure of Traffike*.

75 *An act for the redemption of captives* (1650).

76 *A book of values of merchandize imported*.

Land of Elusion: 
Portuguese Perceptions and the Matter of Play and Gaming in Vijayanagara

Elke Rogersdotter

... and to try and tell of all I saw is hopeless ...
—Domingos Paes, 1520–22

ANCHORED IN THEMES LIKE LONG-DISTANCE trade and the building of great overseas empires, the history of European maritime expansionism is traditionally portrayed in grand terms—spatially, temporally, and mentally. In the traditional trajectory, the Portuguese, the Dutch, the British, and the French appear as key players in a game of high stakes regulated by the establishment and control of important trade routes in strategically located parts of the world, while the non-European lands appear as passive, anonymous backdrops. In turn, European explorers and traders, mostly apprehended as driven by conquering intentions and by rational, forward-directed thoughts, tend to act in accordance with history, in constant awareness of their role in the ongoing game as well as its irrevocable end.

A problem arises, however, if one considers that a game primarily based on the future or on purposes other than its own continuation ceases to function as a game and thus quickly comes to an end. In order for the game to be successful, the participants would have to let go of any individual, non-game-related goals and become fully engaged with the here and now of gameplay. They would not, while playing, be able to view the process from a distant “there” or be aware of their own participation in the game. Nor could they have knowledge about the outcome, as that would make it meaningless to play, an implication that contradicts established assumptions of simultaneity and foresight and, for the historical players described above, questions the validity of determining historical events based on a future ending. In this essay, I explore a less predictable way of interpreting the early modern maritime game, contrasting a written account authored by one of the players—a Portuguese visitor to a foreign city, Vijayanagara—with archaeological evidence of gameplay found in the same locality.
Incongruous Sources

With the discovery by Vasco da Gama of a direct sea route to Asia in 1498, the Portuguese expanded their maritime enterprise and soon managed to seize a number of key ports along India’s west coast. In 1510, the port of Goa was captured and became the flourishing center of their maritime realm. A crucial source for the growing wealth of Goa was the establishment of trade with a city some 350 kilometers to the east, Vijayanagara. Since about 1350, this city had been the capital of a large, South Indian Hindu empire, also known as Vijayanagara. Situated near the northern frontier on the Tungabhadra River, in a steep, rocky landscape in today’s Karnataka, the city of Vijayanagara was a bustling hub for trade and commerce, the seat of royal manifestations, and a military stronghold. At the time of the arrival of the Portuguese, the population had reached more than a quarter of a million inhabitants, and the city had become the center of an empire that covered the whole of South India. The role of the Portuguese was mainly to supply and maintain Arabic horses, as these were crucial for upholding the army and, therefore, constituted the bulk of trade between Goa and the city. Vijayanagara, furthermore, not only attracted tradesmen but also travelers and foreign visitors. One of these was the Portuguese horse trader Domingos Paes, who left a written testimony of his visit around 1520. Translated into English by Robert Sewell in 1900, Paes’s account has traditionally been seen as a vital source for historic research. Indeed, this early sixteenth-century text has largely contributed to the reinforcement of the formal and grandiose character of the city as well as its cosmopolitan aspects and the economic-political involvement of the Portuguese, while stressing its own legitimacy as a trustworthy source.

Yet Paes’s text can also be read in and against a different kind of remnant, namely the material traces of game boards found in the hundreds among its ruins. A variety of board types in the shape of non-portable, often well-preserved engravings appear in different kinds of structural foundations, including solid rock. Save for a few remarks on the existence and function of these boards (boards in gateways, for instance, may have been used by guardians biding their time while on watch), this archaeological evidence has largely been unattended to in the scholarship on Vijayanagara. This may be due to the priority traditionally given to historical sources, such as texts, rather than archaeological artifacts. Another reason may be in the “ordinary” character of the artifacts themselves—a bias within the field of archaeology. Moreover, this disciplinary inattention also points to a general disregard for play and gaming. Ancient game-related materials, for example, have frequently been seen as insignificant, disordered, and haphazardly distributed. They tend to be treated as culture-bearing artifacts or as status-related possessions, with little concern for their play- and game-related significance. This particular neglect might be ascribed to traditional understandings of play, where play for the sole sake of play, or “useless” play without a need-fulfilling aspect, has surfaced as an irrational appendage, harmless yet uncontrollable, a threat toward formal order, and an inevitable opposition
to science. The character of make-believe in play and its virtual dimension may further lead to the perception of play as less real than “reality,” or that which is physically manifested and fulfilled. The guardians posted in the gateways, for example, play while (primarily) on duty. Thus, the game-related remains become bracketed as sympathetic curiosities, rendering them static and non-influential.

I propose that the difference in treatment of these two types of evidence—the written document and the material traces of game boards—is the consequence of an “outside stance,” an all-encompassing, grand way of thinking about history, whereby what is playful is engulfed in and isolated from that which is deemed serious. Such a position cannot but produce a history—in this case, of the city of Vijayanagara—that is one-sided and stagnant. Similarly, the interpretive possibilities of these two types of remains become limited. In this essay, I strive to reduce this methodological gap and to pinpoint a more interactive play of the sources themselves by shifting the starting position from the surroundings to the play-world itself. I will use examples of game boards found in palatial and military foundations in Vijayanagara as a springboard for locating perceptions of play in the early sixteenth-century depiction of the city by Paes. In so doing, I aim to modify the view both of the city as seen through European eyes and of the European explorer encountering foreign lands.

A Theoretical Framework

The game boards that form the basis of this study will be approached as past spaces for gaming. This allows a focus on relational dimensions and on the extraordinary forms of relationships found in gameplay. The game boards will be studied as spaces for social formations, as spaces for creativity and amusement, and as spaces for spatial and temporal alterations. The state of joy and excitement in play and its spatial implications will be of specific interest.

Regarding gameplay as social formation, the concept of natural areas will be used to describe certain features of the distribution of the game boards in relation to the city’s formal architecture. The term refers to spaces within urban environments that appear naturally, or without design, and perform a function, albeit one that may be formally non-existent. The dimensions of creativity and amusement are significant in play, yet tend to be set aside in line with traditional, functional interpretations of play. Consequently, terms like fun or joy become passive and descriptive in shape. Creativity in this context is defined as the bringing of joy and enthusiasm into one’s work and activities. For these reasons, the more suitable terms exuberance and flow will be used, as they indicate a transparency between creativity and amusement as well as accentuate the dynamics of the latter. Exuberance describes an abounding and overwhelming emotion, difficult to pin down and yet a fundamental biological principle. It can be portrayed as a combination of two states of mind, a highly positive feeling and high energy. It cannot therefore be
equated with happiness, since being happy is to be content with what is and, thus, is a state without power; while exuberance is continuously forward driven, fueled by enthusiasm and dedication. The term will be used to emphasize the power in joy. The theory of flow has been central to the theorizing on creativity. In short, it highlights play, or the obtaining of joy, as a state of balance whereby one’s abilities match the requirements of the surrounding world (“play” is hereby referred to in a broad sense). However, an essential condition for this balance is that one can manage to partake whole-heartedly. The idea of flow thereby demonstrates the need for a play action to become separated from everyday routines.

Elaborating on this theme leads to an overlap between this dimension and the dimension of spatial and temporal alteration in play, for which the distinction between finite and infinite games will be relevant. While a certain game can be finite in character, that is, played for specific reasons (e.g. the aim of winning) and consequently coming to an end, the game needs at the same time to be infinite while being played to ensure its continuation as play. The infinite game, therefore, can never end or be engulfed into the finite game but only momentarily interrupted. By this reasoning, and in line with game-theoretical perspectives, gameplay will be stressed as operating by its own rationality. Finally, sociologist Georg Simmel’s emphasis on form will contribute to a distinction between two ways of reading Paes’s chronicle. Basically, it concerns the analytical separation of what can be considered “form” from what can be seen as “content” (material) and follows from his assertion of the impossibility in sociology to simply reflect reality as in natural science insofar as it always involves interpretation.

This theoretical framework is meant to accentuate gameplay as a distinct, spatial entity rather than as a passive appendage, and traces of past gaming can be discussed as being as present and as real as other, non-game-related phenomena. Thereby, my analysis of the game boards will not be conducted for the purpose of confirming or denying the veracity of the chronicle, but for the purpose of constructing a theoretical lens through which to re-read it.

The Chronicle: Context and Interpretations

Probably between 1520 and 1522, Paes wrote about his travel to the city of Vijayanagara, which he visited in the company of other Portuguese. At the time of his visit, the city was experiencing its peak under the rule of King Krishnadevaraya (1509–1529), the most renowned of the Vijayanagara kings, and Paes’s detailed account of the city pays particular attention to the royal household.

The reader follows Paes’s successive travel eastwards into the city and thereafter further into its royal center. While passing through the open land, Paes reports on a variety of issues pertaining to the empire. He describes the king as being fair in appearance and “the most feared and perfect king that could possibly be.” The city, surrounded by
stone walls and strange, rocky hills, can only be entered through a series of well-guarded gateways. Paes depicts Vijayanagara as a vast city with wide streets, along which he guides the reader past temples and markets and clearly separated neighborhoods. The inhabitants come from many nations and “are countless in number.” There are rows of a thousand houses, orchards full of fruit, and an abundance of pearls, diamonds, cloth, “and every other sort of thing there is on earth.” Further toward the center are more enclosing walls that protect the king’s palace, which occupies “a greater space ... than all the castle of Lisbon.” The more one closes in on the center, the more beautiful the houses become and the more heavily guarded the gates, with doorkeepers armed with sticks and leather scourges.

Next, Paes describes a nine-day feast held annually at the king’s palace, to which the Portuguese were honorably invited. Paes’s portrayal of this event, the Mahanavami festival, outshines all others in his account. He describes an open arena accessed by gates and the surrounding buildings and temporary scaffoldings, the hanging of colorful cloths, and the arrangement of a dais in an open house, the House of Victory, where the king is seated on a cushioned support. The festival components are then recounted in the order in which they unfold, starting with ritual and regal ceremonies such as the sacrifice of many animals and the veneration of the king by his captains. Later in the day, people gather to watch a performance by the female dancers of the palace and an exhibition of wrestling. The spectators are admitted in great order and according to rank. There are the nobility, the Brahmans, the captains, and others, but no one who has not been invited. Paes also describes the king’s entry, with special attention to the richness of his clothes. When the sun goes down, torches are lit, and a variety of amusements follow: Paes witnesses plays and fake battles, fireworks, and parades of all sorts; of triumphal carts, horses in trappings, female musicians, the heavily jeweled maids of the queen, and elephants greeting the king. Following these festivities, the king reviews his forces, which are said to amount to a million troops. Paes carefully notes the immensity of scale and the orderliness of the ceremony, the discipline of the soldiers, the sumptuous decorations of weapons and clothes, and the adornments of horses and elephants. He also discusses the gift exchange that takes place, with the captains paying large sums of money in tribute to their king. The chronicle ends with a description of the palace interior, which contained many marvels, among them chambers lined with gold, a room of ivory, and a dancing hall with bewildering images of sculptured, colored, and gilded figures carved everywhere on pillars and panels, with one image found to be holding a yet smaller one, and so on. Nowhere in his account, though, does Paes mention anything on board games, despite the probably quite noticeable prevalence of engraved game boards that would have existed and been in use at this time in Vijayanagara.

In 1565, not long after Paes’s visit, the city of Vijayanagara, having lost a battle against an alliance of the Deccan sultans, was captured, burnt down, and subsequently abandoned. After Vijayanagara had been re-discovered by Europeans at the end of the
eighteenth century, and when scholarly work had begun, Paes’s text became renowned for its “bejeweled” portrayal of the city and its royal grandeur. Indeed, there was a strong tendency to interpret literally the chronicler’s grandiose descriptions, particularly his notes on the affluence of goods, majestic events, and exquisite buildings. Moreover, as clearance- and excavation work progressed, his writings were frequently used for the identification of structures, particularly large temples and royal buildings that became venerated for their architectural splendor. A legendary example of the latter is a well-preserved pavilion, traditionally known as the Lotus Mahal, today suggested as having served as a reception hall and still admired for its blend of South Indian temple architecture and Islamic, northern sultanate elements, a characteristic feature of the Vijayanagara courtly style (Figure 13.1).22

Among recent research, a large-scale mapping of the twenty-five square kilometer core of the city has been undertaken to systematize all kinds of visible remains. Irregularly laid out between hill ranges, with parts of the fortifications still visible, the core area has been divided into broad zones corresponding to the city’s former, functional divisions.

Figure 13.1. Pavilion popularly known as the Lotus Mahal, Vijayanagara, fifteenth or sixteenth century. Photo: author.
The sacred center of the city, with its large temple complexes, can be found in the north, bordering the river; and the urban core is located in the south, where the “main” city was supposedly located. A third zone, the royal center, in the western part of the urban core, was originally surrounded by an extra wall for protection; this area contained the residence of the king and his court, including secluded houses for the female members of the royal family and the royal ceremonial and administrative center of the city. Major thoroughfares passed into and through the city, some in the shape of ring roads and others radially laid out and leading into the royal center. This mapping has opened up a range of new perspectives on the site, which make use of a broad variety of material and textual sources. Among these are ideological aspects, such as the ancient city’s role as a pilgrimage site and its function for local cults; political issues, including the notion of “Islamicization;” literary studies, with translations of local contemporary texts on the city; and environmental concerns, ranging from the extended mapping of the city’s large hinterland to the management of the site as a cultural heritage.

Use of Paes’s chronicle by modern scholars has changed accordingly. Not only is the text today considered Eurocentric, exaggerated, and unreliable, but its structural notes are regarded with some skepticism insofar as only some of the buildings Paes describes correspond with archaeological evidence. However, such attempts to identify and link ruins of actual buildings to Paes’s descriptions also suggest a continued reliance upon the chronicle as an important historical source. Additionally, there remains a tendency to equate Paes’s tone of admiration with the greatness of the city. Contemporary references to the chronicle tend to highlight passages related to courtly architecture, gate and control systems, and commercial structure and royal functions, including an emphasis on grand ceremonies as important occasions for the staging and reinforcement of royal power. The Mahanavami festival, for example, is thought to have been the most essential one, and Paes’s description of it has come to be appreciated mainly as a portrayal of royal display. Depictions of the feast can still be seen on relief panels from a temple complex that served as the royal chapel, the Ramachandra temple; long processions depicted here include both dancing and military parading (Figure 13.2). In sum, in earlier research Paes’s chronicle was used as a testament to the magnificence of the city and its warlike king. Thus, the chronicle can be said to have contributed to the portrayal of the city as an oriental contrast to the West. This glorifying image may also have worked as a contrasting prelude to its devastating end, whereby the future would already have been built into the depiction of the city in its prime. Today, a more careful approach to the document can contribute to our understanding of the city as a whole and in respect to its structural ordering rather than grandeur. And yet there remains a strong interest in Paes’s account for its formal, royal, commercial, and military insights, and thus his narrative continues to drive home the image of the city as a place of well-marked off and ordered architecture.
Spatial Patterns of Game Boards in Vijayanagara

Systematic field documentation of the engraved game boards, which was first undertaken during a general mapping of the structural features of Vijayanagara and then more methodically by the author, has revealed 965 boards within the core area of the city. The majority of boards are in situ, though a few incised stone slabs seem to have been moved from their original locations. With one or two exceptions, the boards are found in places where it would have been possible to sit. The engravings, in the form of either lines or pits, represent a large variety of board types, of which several are still used in gameplay. Depending upon the manner of classification, about sixteen types can be distinguished. While individual game boards cannot be given exact dates, the majority of boards probably belong to the Vijayanagara period, an assessment based on points of correspondence in such things as board type, manner of engraving, and degree of weathering, as well as on consistency in distribution (in accordance with the ancient structural layout of the city).

The incised boards appear in various locations: on the rock of the craggy surroundings; on the cliffs and boulders between neighborhoods; on the foundations of structures such as temples, palatial buildings, and gateways; and on the slabs that
make up paved roads and stairways. The boards are not evenly distributed but tend to be concentrated in clusters. These groups vary in size, from two or three boards to as many as fifteen and occasionally even more. Considering the spatial pattern of boards in relation to zonal or structural contexts, it can be observed that the number of boards successively increases toward the nucleus of the city, with relatively few boards being distributed on the outskirts. However, notably few other differential patterns can be seen. Regarding types of boards, there is little locational variation in their distribution. Apart from some rare layouts appearing only in a few places, boards of various designs can be found in all of the defined zones and in all kinds of functional environments. In addition, the various assemblages of boards do not display any particular spatial connection to specific zones or contexts, although they are especially common in certain types of structural
surroundings, such as in or near gateways along major thoroughfares, in entryways and passages, and in temple compounds and other large (public) building complexes.

Turning toward the internal spatial arrangement of these assemblages, both irregular and repetitive features can be distinguished. I will illustrate some of these by focusing on three concentrations of boards, chosen for their structural context as well as their connection to the royal center. The first group of boards is in the vicinity of one of the large gateways in the western part of the fortification wall surrounding the urban core, just outside the royal center (the wall enclosing the royal center can no longer be seen in this part of the area); the second group is located in a passageway in the royal center; and the third group can be found in a nearby public building (groups A, B, and C, respectively) (Figure 13.3). As can be noted, these represent some of the typical environments in which to find concentrations of boards.

The area of group A is dominated by the gateway and, on the eastern side of that structure, some steeply rising cliffs. Through this gate passed one of the major north–south roads (Figure 13.4), while another road may have passed on the other side of

Figure 13.4. The gateway of group A, seen from the south, unknown date of origin—possibly before the mid fifteenth century. Photo: author.
the cliffs. There are thirteen boards in this area. Most are found among the cliffs in between the roads. Others appear in the gateway, as well as on the other side of the easternmost road. The area of group B is located at the core of the royal center. This zone consists of separately walled enclosures, which may have been divided between a residential area in the west and a public, ceremonial area in the east. The line of division seems to have been in alignment with a centrally located temple, the above-mentioned Ramachandra temple.²⁶ On the eastern side of the temple is an open space where different roads once converged. The passage in question leads from that space southwards to a large enclosure containing ceremonial/ritual buildings. Two gateways of rectangular stone platforms flank the passage. This area contains twenty-one boards, which are found on both sides of the passage and mainly on the platforms of the northern gate. The area of group C is placed south of the passageway in the foundation of one of the building complexes in the enclosure (Figure 13.5). Termed the audience hall, this structure, with its elevated floor, columns numbering one hundred (now lost), and two-tiered basement, may possibly correspond with the House of Victory mentioned by Paes in his account of the Mahanavami festival; indeed, this audience hall also faces another significant building in the east-southeast that has been associated with the celebration.²⁷ Twenty-two boards
are found in the structure. They are concentrated on the northern and eastern sides of the basement, while one board is found on the northern edge of the floor.

Typically, these boards are placed such that the players would have had clear views toward the roads and passages. That is, the boards are centrally located rather than in the background: on the southward-looking rock ledges (group A), along the inner edges of the platforms (group B), and on the sides of the basement facing the passageway in the northeast (group C). A small section of the passageway of group B, for example, contains three game boards engraved noticeably close to the inner edge of one of the platforms of the northern gate (Figure 13.6). These three boards are typical in layout and can be found in all of the groups. At the top is an alquerque-type board, used for the playing of war games and hunting games.28 In northern Karnataka today, this particular board type is used for hunt games like Tiger and Cows (similar in structure to Fox and Geese).29 The board consists of a 4 × 4 grid, within which each of the four sub-squares is diagonally bisected. On each side of the board, horizontally and vertically bisected triangles are attached. Somewhat irregular in shape, this board measures 27 × 25 × 26.5 × 26.5 centimeters in size. By contrast, the board on the lower left is a larger merels board, used primarily to play Nine Men’s Morris, or Sett ata/Paggada ata as it is known in Karnataka,30 a game of alignment and configuration. The board has a pattern of three concentric squares with lines intersecting the first two squares on each side of the board. This example, measuring about 20 × 20 centimeters in size, has a small pit in its center. Rounding out this set, the board seen on the lower right and laid out lengthwise along the edge of the slab is of a layout uncommon today. Among others referred to as a single-track board, it appears to have been used for the playing of race games. The board takes the form of a meandering track of squares and measures 56.5 centimeters in length.

Figure 13.6. An alquerque-type board, a larger merels board, and a board for the playing of race games, seen along the inner edge of one of the platforms of the northern gate of group B. These boards cannot be individually dated but are understood as having been engraved during the period under consideration. Photo: author.
Groups A, B, and C differ in both size and variety of boards, yet they display some notable similarities in terms of internal spatial composition. For example, all of the groups, regardless of whether they are dispersed (group A) or more crowded in appearance (groups B and C), display an internally uneven distribution, whereby some boards are placed relatively far from each other and others appear clustered or even, occasionally, partly superimposed. It can also be observed that five different types of boards predominate within the groups, accounting for fifty boards in total, while other variants are much more rare. Among these five board types are the already noted alquerque-type board, the larger merels board and the single-track board. A fourth, triangular type is vertically bisected and, mostly, twice horizontally intersected. This board is a simple, today less common variant of triangular boards used all over South Asia for hunt games, for example in the variant known in Karnataka as *Ane-nayi ata.* The fifth type consists of yet another board used for race games, this one made up of a meandering single row of pits. The similarity in layout between the two race game boards is evident in some well-preserved examples, of which the first, from group A, also illustrates some of the internal variations that occur in these two types. This board is of considerable length (129 centimeters) and represents the type made up of lines (Figure 13.7). The second one is from group B and constitutes the type exhibiting pits (51 centimeters in length) (Figure 13.8).

Figure 13.7. A race game board of meandering shape and made up of lines, found on a boulder of group A. Photo: author.
Furthermore, in each group there are certain correlations between types of board and manners of internal distribution. Among solitarily located boards, for instance, the most common are the triangular board, a race game board of oblong shape consisting of three rows and twelve to thirteen columns, and a mancala type of board with $2 \times 7$ holes; whereas among clustered or even superimposed boards, the alquerque-type boards and larger merels boards constitute the most common combination. Such a group is found on the eastern side of the basement of the audience hall. A partly broken and rather small alquerque-type board measuring approximately $20 \times 20$ centimeters appears near the faint lines of a now half-destroyed larger merels board (Figure 13.9). Correspondences such as these, along with internally irregular distributions and a marked prevalence of the above-mentioned types, are common features of numerous varied board assemblages.

**Imprints of Playfulness: The Outsider**

The spatial distribution shows that the game boards are found irrespective of zone or surroundings, that they display a variety of types that cannot be tied to specific parts of the city, and that they present, when appearing in groups, irregular outlines. The successively growing number of boards toward the center is also noteworthy, as is the manifest appearance of groups of boards in gate areas. Furthermore, when studying the internal
layout of board groups, commonalities appear repeatedly, regardless of the boards’ shape or context. This spatial layout, then, contradicts the structured, well-organized city portrayed by Paes or by traditional readings of his text. The game boards physically interfere, insofar as they are found in places supposedly meant for functions other than gameplay. They do not exhibit any consequential spatial distinctions, notwithstanding the differentiated structure of the city and its partitioning into separate neighborhoods. And they are found in the solemn and ceremonial center of the city, an orderly, organized, and highly controlled area. Further, in contrast to their surroundings, the boards themselves appear strikingly unarranged, seemingly dispersed in a higgledy-piggledy manner when viewed together. At the same time, there are hints of a common internal structure, regardless of locality, indicating a sort of independency of context.

The overall distribution of game boards in Vijayanagara makes it difficult to know what groups of people may have used them for playing. Their presence in contexts clearly designed for other functions and their irregular outlook make them seem unplanned. Yet their frequent appearance and occasional superimposition indicate a repeated use of the boards. If viewing the localities of the boards as traces of spaces for social interactions that may have been rather unorganized in character, the noted contradictions become socially disruptive as well. Their disordered appearance and un-connectedness
to context may be interpreted as signifying “natural” areas of gameplay. According to urban sociologist Robert E. Park, natural areas arise on the sole basis of people’s coming together for specific purposes, by which action these areas may not necessarily fall in line with official intentions or formal context. Thus, the localities can be suggested to have become “naturally” created in people’s repeated gathering to play games, regardless of what formal occupation or intention they may have had, or where the locations were situated in relation to functional architecture. Precisely the “natural” character of these areas, reading them as socially self-supporting, implies that there must have existed room for social spaces other than the sanctioned ones, whether they were welcomed or not. Based on Park’s reasoning, then, the city can be regarded as having never been in any (utopian) state of equilibrium, in which case the areas would have been superfluous, but must always have been subjected to continuous contradictions and divergences, in great contrast to the perfect and stable image provided by Paes’s chronicle.

A further unsettling of Paes’s depiction of Vijayanagara can be inferred from the dimension of creativity and amusement in gameplay, indicating mental contradictions. These contradictions can be made more distinct when understanding creativity and amusement in terms of feelings of exuberance. In line with psychologist Kay Redfield Jamison’s emphasis on exuberance as an elementary and sovereignly working power, existing on its own accord and according to its own fluctuating rhythm, creativity and amusement can be accentuated not simply as supplements, the outcome of successful social gatherings of gameplay, but rather as conditional driving forces themselves, providing for such social spaces to come into existence and be prosperous. Thus, the assemblages of boards not only appear as traces of physical places for gameplay, but they also embody these kinds of “exuberant spaces” and the power generated by them.

Accordingly, in addition to interpreting the game localities as having functioned as socially independent, natural areas, they can also be understood as having been propelled forwards by being fun, maintained by delighted and devoted states of mind. In order to attain these states, however, and to keep the dimension of fun going, the partakers must be in a play mood or experience flow, which in the theory developed by psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi is the same as becoming unified with the process of play. This in turn comes with certain requirements, as the play action needs to be effectively separated from the surrounding everyday world in order to function. First, it needs to be materially or physically distinguished, for example by using specific game utensils or by marking out a specific area for play. As for the board concentrations, their dispersal in different kinds of surroundings as well as their irregular layout may initially seem not to imply any such attempts of separation. However, with gameplay being at the same time improvisatory in character, the game spaces may have become separated in other ways: signs of separation are evident in the very irregularity of layout, along with the noted features of internal repetitiveness. Second, a mental separation is required in that the partakers, voluntarily
and conscious of their behavior, merge with the play action, by which they let go of their awareness of the surrounding “real” world as well as of their own self while directing their full attention toward the play process. As to the game boards found in the vicinity of the gateway and in the passageway in the royal center, it may logically be assumed that they have been engraved and used by guardians. The required mental separation, however, would mean that the guards could not have been playing games and watching over their specific domains at the same time, even if, as is indicated by the central placement of the game boards, they would have been officially on duty. The devotion required for the gameplay would have been absolute. Hence, the doorkeepers of Paes’s account, stern and heavily armed, may either have been playing (without awareness of their surroundings) or have been guarding the passage. Third, with mental separation follows the need for separation in time insofar as attention to the ongoing play action requires a constant focus on a here and now that cannot be limited by a future there and then.

Admittedly, as traces of specific games terminated long ago, the presence of the boards could be explained by finite models of clarification—the guards would have played games as a pastime and as a welcome distraction—or by similar psychological reasoning. That explanation, however, would make the boards conformable to functional purposes. Following the reasoning by historian James P. Carse on finite and infinite games, on the grounds of the infinite dimension in gameplay, demonstrated by separation, ancient gaming would escape any such attempts to secondary reduction, since, as a phenomenon, it would never have survived in subjugated form (and thus would never have left any material traces in rocks and stone). The game boards accordingly become the material traces of spatial and temporal interruptions in the city’s serious environs. This interrupting constitution and the confusing, simultaneous disarray and order could alternatively be described—rather than contextually interpreted—as a consistent pattern in itself that becomes rational on the basis of its own freestanding logic. This, in turn, indicates a type of logical disruption of the well-guarded milieu provided by Paes, since this milieu is built upon a hierarchical structure of thinking, therefore both excluding and enclosing in shape. Driven by its own success rather than by any reason or conscious resistance, the infinite game accordingly opposes the formal depiction of the city offered by Paes’s chronicle, not by competing with other non-formal environments, but by its own existence and continuous re-emergence. Hence, the playing of games in the ancient city can itself be described as a game, with not yet elucidated outcomes since it does not follow the laws of reality. The game spaces, coherent in shape and therefore also always separating, imply a continuous demand for space and an opening of further not yet realized but imagined space, pointing at an endlessly subdividing city. The European and his rectilinear description are being played with; for here is a foreigner incapable of fully covering the city. Indeed, from what can be inferred from the document, Paes apparently did not notice any gameplay taking place in the gates. May this oversight of his be so peculiar,
then, considering the way in which his chronicle has been read? After all, it may seem possible that such a mention would have invited a certain degree of unsteadiness to the alleged structure and formality of the city.

Imprints of Playfulness: The Player

It is, however, exactly in the contradictions that a different kind of reading of the chronicle may be glimpsed. Making use of Simmel’s reasoning, the exposure of game spaces, which are unable to simply reflect reality, can provide a focus on the document as form rather than (informational) content. Different kinds of questions can then be asked, revolving around how it is written. First, turning to the centerpiece of the account, and to the centrally located, ceremonial structures in the royal area, it would be tempting to ask if it is mere coincidence that such a number of boards appear on the basement of possibly the same building (the audience hall/the House of Victory) described by Paes in connection with the nine-day feast? There may, of course, be no link at all (although to dwell on it may be rather entertaining). No, the point is a different one, namely that the physical coincidence can make visible different facets of playfulness. On the one hand, through their simplicity and irregularity, the game boards jest with the depiction of the ceremonial splendor of the royal feast (who would have dared to play on graffiti boards beneath the seat of the king?). On the other hand, they can complement the playful aspect of the feast and emphasize it as yet another, more formal mark of joy and pleasure in the ancient city. The game boards can shed light on all the entertaining features of the feast: the dancing, the music, fireworks and plays, wrestling, animal parading, and so on. Hence, apparently created and maintained on the basis of enjoyment, the feast must have been subjected to, and itself demanded, the separating requirements of play.

Signs of separation may in fact be discerned in the physical markings of the area by scaffoldings and the use of colorful cloth, and through the turning upside down of the ordinary, circadian rhythm, with the events being mainly played out at night. This in turn somewhat destabilizes the traditional apprehension of the depiction of the feast by Paes as mainly featuring a royal display, or, differently formulated, as an event primarily steered by non-play-related, there-and-then directed purposes. For according to the mental separation needed in play, it would not be possible to indulge in play and amusements and to stage royal wealth and power at the same time. The aspect of enjoyment would thus become as valid as other, non-play-related aspects of the festivities, or the interpretation of the feast would become irrational since enjoyment cannot function in diminished form. Thereby, the feasting would have become itself a play that, with its turning upside down of habitual routines, would have played with the surrounding daily world.

Accordingly, the releasing of game spaces also allows for a playing with the conventional reading of the chronicle while elucidating various elements of play between the lines. Recall that Paes was invited to the feast and obviously participated in its events,
which may explain his lengthy description of the feast and the strong sense of fascination accompanying his words. His participation becomes rather notorious since, in order to have been able to participate, Paes must necessarily have been in a play mood himself, that is, he must have managed to become absorbed by the events. Hence, if having voluntarily submitted to the special requirements of play, there would have been no possibility for him to obtain a full overview of the festivities, and there would also have been awareness from his side of this impossibility. By this, then, his awe-stricken tone, rather than being turned down as a curiosity or be subordinated to factual details or be taken as yet further proof of the city’s grandness, can be foregrounded as an operating power. With it, an ambition can be sensed of the author to convey his captivation and formulate in words something about the atmosphere that he experienced, rather than providing a thorough statement of the occurrences (which he in any way could not do): “[t]he elephants in the same way are covered ... with bells so that the earth resounds;” and “[t]ruly, I was so carried out with myself that it seemed as if what I saw was a vision.”

The chronicle, rather than functioning as a matrix for historical information, attains for itself a value not unlike a form of play. The noted biases caused by the spirit of the time can thereby be looked upon from a different light. Instead of viewing the denominations typical of the period as obstacles to the gaining of proper historical knowledge, the terminology can emphasize the literary aspect of the chronicle—a play with words in order to create excitement and textual beauty. The frequent superlatives would hence appear as building stones for a well-thought-out structure of writing. Upon closer inspection, they can in fact be noted to successively increase, until a crescendo is reached with the gilt-edged description of the palace. Studying the chronicle as form may indicate a significance of infiniteness also for its own emergence as well as for the subsequent reading of it. It presents a traveler and writer who may not have been driven simply by “calculated” reason, but also by fascination, awakened by the city’s foreign, intangible character. Paes plays with the city, and his accounting of it becomes manifold, constantly offering new entryways. He also plays with the reader, who can never be sure what aspects of the city are the “real” ones. Might Paes actually have known about any games being played on sheets of rock and slabs of stone? It might not seem impossible, after all.

Imagined Space, Imagined World

By starting with archaeological evidence of gameplay, I have attempted a more flexible reading of a sixteenth-century travel companion written by a Portuguese visitor to a foreign land during the era of European maritime exploration and expansionism. The game boards under consideration have been placed at the center of this work with the aim of making room for game space and searching for imprints of playfulness in the written words of the account. In so doing, I have explored alternatives to one-sided partitioning between the fun and the serious, the harmless and the harmful, the minute and the grand,
suggesting a way in which the seemingly incongruous written and material sources can be complementarily used for studying other processes of disconnectedness in line with the principles of play and gaming and with both joyous and severe implications.

By re-reading Paes’s chronicle from these perspectives, a different way of “reading” the ancient city of Vijayanagara has been outlined, in which the formal, royal, and military order that is traditionally assigned to the city has been playfully broken up. In a sense, the city emerges unbounded and impossible to control. Thus multiplied, the city is made to play with the observer, both past and present, and so can be visited through the incomprehensible air that it may have emitted to a sixteenth-century European mind—an unfamiliar air, yet one that thereby arouses enthusiasm. Accordingly, the reading of the chronicle has shifted from a searching through of its content in pursuit of historical information to an accentuation of its awe-stricken form, by which Paes’s text has gained importance in itself and by which the author has stepped forward as an individual being. Rather than seen as an automatic response to the grandeur of the city, the fascination expressed by Paes can thereby appear as a vital driving force, sprung from the fact that he cannot encase the total outline of the city nor recapitulate it in full to his readers.

Hence, by extension, the chronicle captures a little of the sense of enthusiasm and exuberance of the voyages of exploration of the time. While the era as a whole is commonly explained as powered by functional expansionist thoughts, the account left by Paes implies that the process of discovery as such may have had significant meaning and provided plenty of drive for individual partakers, nourished by a continuous interplay between familiar physical space and not-yet-realized imagined space, thus contributing to the successive dividing and diversification of the geography of the non-European world. Similar to the practice of play, then, this drive to discover would not have stopped until there were no areas left to expose, or until the finite rules of politics and war interrupted its course. It would also have worked—if comparing it further with the process of play—only on the condition that the individual participants were willing to acknowledge the world as unknown and unending and at least temporarily would let go of any future non-game-related purposes that would have limited its infinite dimension and damaged the fun. The surviving document thus testifies to the importance of avoiding attempts to render historical events through the lens of their future outcomes, insofar as the world has always only been here and now and impossible to map in full.

NOTES

* Special thanks to Dr. John M. Fritz of the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, Co-director of the Vijayanagara Research Project, for his generous help and support during my field documentation of the engraved game boards at the site of Vijayanagara.

1 Domingos Paes in Sewell, *A Forgotten Empire (Vijayanagar)*, 149.
2 See, for example, Hofmann, Richard, and Vagnon, The Golden Age of Maritime Maps; and Miller, The East Indiamen.

3 Carse, Finite and Infinite Games.

4 Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett, “An Exploratory Model of Play;” and Fritz, Das Spiel verstehen.

5 See, for example, Asher and Talbot, India before Europe; Löschhorn, “Vijayanagara – As Seen by European Visitors;” and Mack, Spiritual Journey, Imperial City.

6 Sewell, A Forgotten Empire (Vijayanagar).

7 For exceptions, see, for example, Fritz and Gibson, “Game Boards at Vijayanagara;” Rogersdotter, “Restoring Ruins;” Rogersdotter, “What’s Left of Games are Boards Alone;” and Vasantha, “Board Games from the City of Vijayanagara (Hampi), 1336–1565.”

8 Finkel, “Board Games in Perspective;” and Schädler, “Vorwort.”


10 Park, “The City as a Social Laboratory.”

11 Jamison, Exuberance.

12 Csikszentmihalyi, Creativity; and Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett, “An Exploratory Model of Play.”

13 Carse, Finite and Infinite Games.

14 Simmel, “Vom Wesen des Historischen Verstehens.”

15 In a covering letter that accompanied Paes’s chronicle when it was sent from Goa (it is not known by whom) to Portugal around 1537, it is said that Paes began to write his account during his first visit to Vijayanagara. The letter is translated into English and commented upon by Sewell, who believes that Paes probably wrote his document between 1520 and 1522. Sewell, A Forgotten Empire (Vijayanagar), Preface and 128.

16 The following summary is based on the English translation by Sewell, A Forgotten Empire (Vijayanagar), 128–55.

17 Sewell, A Forgotten Empire (Vijayanagar), 134.

18 Sewell, A Forgotten Empire (Vijayanagar), 138.

19 Sewell, A Forgotten Empire (Vijayanagar), 138.

20 Sewell, A Forgotten Empire (Vijayanagar), 137.

21 See, for example, Heras, Beginnings of Vijayanagara History; and Longhurst, Hampi Ruins.

22 Sinopoli, “Echoes of Empire.”

23 See, for example, Fritz, Michell, and Nagaraja Rao, The Royal Centre at Vijayanagara; and Michell, Vijayanagara.

24 See Dallapiccola, King, Court and Capital; Mack, Spiritual Journey, Imperial City; Sinopoli and Morrison, The Vijayanagara Metropolitan Survey; Verghese, Archaeology, Art and Religion; and Wagoner, “Sultan among Hindu Kings.” For an overview of recent research, see Verghese and Dallapiccola, South India under Vijayanagara.

25 For examples of contemporary references to Paes’s chronicle, see Asher and Talbot, India before Europe; Fritz, Michell, and Nagaraja Rao, The Royal Centre at Vijayanagara; Michell, “Man in Nature – Town Planning (Part II) The Site;” Michell, “The Mahanavami Festival at Vijayanagara;” and Stein, The New Cambridge History of India I.
Fritz, Michell, and Nagaraja Rao, *The Royal Centre at Vijayanagara*; and Fritz, “Vijayanagara.”

See, for example, Fritz, Michell, and Nagaraja Rao, *The Royal Centre at Vijayanagara*; and Michell, “The Mahanavami Festival at Vijayanagara.”

The terminology rests on the classification of board games by Murray, *A History of Board-Games Other Than Chess*. The classification is among others based on differences in moves and captures. The board classes—games of alignment and configuration, war games, hunt games, race games, and mancala games—are widely accepted, albeit also criticized for being inadequate and inconsequent, for example Parlett, *The Oxford History of Board Games*; and Voogt, “A Classification of Board Games.”

Kulirani and Vijayendra, “A Report on the Board Games of Karnataka.”

Kulirani and Vijayendra, “A Report on the Board Games of Karnataka.”

Kulirani and Vijayendra, “A Report on the Board Games of Karnataka.”

Park, “The City as a Social Laboratory.”

Jamison, *Exuberance*.

Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett, “An Exploratory Model of Play.”

Csikszentmihalyi and Bennett, “An Exploratory Model of Play.”

Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*.

See, for example, Binmore, *Playing for Real – A Text on Game Theory*.

Carse, *Finite and Infinite Games*.

Simmel, “Vom Wesen des Historischen Verstehens.”

Visual Frames and Breaking the Rules of the *Reconquista*: Chess and Alfonso X, el Sabio’s *Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas*

Nhora Lucía Serrano

Show not what has been done, but what can be.
How beautiful the world would be if there were a procedure for moving through labyrinths.

—Umberto Eco, *The Name of the Rose*

Summing up the formal characteristic of play, we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside “ordinary” life as being “not serious” but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly ... It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings that tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress the difference from the common world by disguise or other means.

—Johan Huizinga, *Homo ludens*

A S EMBLEMATIC OF ANCIENT AND medieval warfare tactics—wherein male soldiers battled the enemy on foot and later on horse—chess in the European medieval and Renaissance periods is a representational, “playful,” and intellectual game of strategy between two players of noble standing, whose rules echo the life of a warrior noble in a feudal society and set the stage for their real-life comportment. For example, much like several medieval, political battles over kingdoms and legitimacy, the objective of chess is to gain control of the checkered game board (sixty-four squares in an $8 \times 8$ grid) and “checkmate” the opponent’s “king,” that is, attack the opponent’s “army,” capture their “sovereign,” and claim supremacy of the playing field. Aiding in this “playful” charge are pieces able to attack the opponent as well as protect their own “king:” the queen (who always stands next to her king), bishop, knight, castle, and foot soldier (i.e. pawn).
Yet this noble pastime was not always a mirror of Western feudal structures, much less one whose objective was to reflect cosmopolitan, societal paradigms; evermore a militaristic game, chess was and is originally rooted in ancient and non-Western logic and argumentation, that is, a valid reasoning and discursive resolution of a disagreement between two people possessing diverse viewpoints.¹ According to H. J. R. Murray in *A History of Chess*, the game’s origins can be traced back to no later than sixth-century India with its game of *chaturanga* (i.e. six pieces meant to symbolize the four parts of the army plus the general and king).² After the game had traveled from India to Persia in the 600s, one of the earliest references to chess can be found in the Persian romance *Kārnamāk*, indicating its non-Western cultural beginnings and manifestation. Once Caliph Omari invades Persia in 638, the game enters the lexicon of Muslim culture, and the chess pieces become more abstract so as not to appear idolatrous in defiance of the Qur’an.³ According to Marilyn Yalom, from the seventh to the eighth centuries the game of chess infamously voyages “across the Mediterranean into Spain and Sicily” as the Arabs continue to conquer lands near and far.⁴ However, it is once chess is introduced to the West, after the Islamic conquest of the Iberian Peninsula in 711, that this royal pastime becomes more representational, while still retaining its ability for discourse and to reason with a multi-ethnic, warmongering Iberian society through seven centuries. In a word, chess in the Iberian Peninsula was symbolic of cosmopolitan “play” because it engages with the Iberian world as it actually was then: a composite and labyrinth of three diverse cultures and religions (Christianity, Judaism, and Islam). Because of this, from the thirteenth century up to the fifteenth century, chess in the Iberian Peninsula serves as a meta-narrative device in its cultural and literary (textual and visual) iterations, one that is embedded within the form of historical discourse. It is in this light that the scriptorium of Alfonso X, el Sabio (The Learned King) and the opening pages to the *Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas* (Book of Chess, Dice, and Tables) (1283) must be understood and read, as fashioning historical discourse and inscribing cosmopolitan dualities of play that refuse to checkmate.

The Chess Conundrum: Navigating the Cosmopolitan Labyrinth

It is no mere coincidence that during the reign of Ferdinand II of Aragon and Isabella I of Castile, the Catholic Monarchs (1474–1504), the queen piece in chess evolves fittingly from her stance as a weaker figure than the king to the most powerful and lethal piece on the European game board.⁵ According to Barbara F. Weissberger, “the transformation of the Queen’s power in chess sometime between 1475 and 1496 [is related to] … the unprecedented strengthening of royal authority simultaneously being effected by a historical queen who was decidedly a queen regnant and not a queen consort.”⁶ Much like her earlier influential medieval counterparts—Eleanor of Aquitaine (1124–1204)
and Blanche of Castile (1188–1252)—Isabella I was an authoritative queen regnant and a force to be reckoned with. After all, during the Catholic Monarchs’ reign there was a modern reorganization of government that brought about many legal reforms and changes to the Royal Council as well as many historical initiatives in which Isabella herself was directly involved: the establishment of the Tribunal del Santo Oficio de la Inquisición (Spanish Inquisition) in 1478, and the authorization of Columbus’s voyages and the completion of the Reconquista in 1492. Yet with all of the measures and ventures to bring about prosperity and stability to their kingdoms, the Catholic Monarchs’ rule was also typified by their insatiable desire to purify the body politic of “threatening aliens” and to re-design “Spanish identity as exclusively Christian.” On the one hand, the royal enterprise for “Spanish identity” was myopic for its overtly short-sighted interpretation of ancestral mandates and treatises. On the other hand, it was volatile for its egregious (mis)handling of the Iberian Peninsula’s richly multifaceted community of more than seven centuries, the convivencia, that is, the coexistence of three dominant cultures (Christian, Jewish, and Muslim).

With the queen concurrently becoming the strongest piece on the chessboard as the success of the Reconquista grew to be a possibility, the game of chess in the Iberian Peninsula had once again been clearly and intricately interwoven with the reigning monarch’s attitude toward the convivencia. For example, as a court of law, the Spanish Inquisition’s objective was twofold: to uphold Catholic orthodoxy and to bolster the Catholic Monarchs’ political hold in the southern region of the kingdom of Castile. Essentially, the tribunal’s intention was to put the Iberian Moors and Jews into checkmate by accentuating the clash of cultures as opposed to yielding to the convivencia. Not only did this quest for re-designing Spanish citizenry play out on the battlefields or in the Castilian tribunals, but it also manifested itself literally on the chessboard. From the transformation of certain chess pieces from an Arab world of diplomacy and warfare into a European chivalrous context (i.e. the vizier becomes the queen, the chariot is changed into a castle, and the elephant morphs into the bishop) to the European artistry of the pieces themselves—representation in lieu of abstraction—the game’s quintessential Arabic attributes were erased and re-inscribed as exclusively European by the end of the late fifteenth century. In other words, just as the Iberian Jews and Muslims were coerced into converting to Christianity, so too was this non-Western game and its pieces forcibly appropriated by Western notions of representation and models of monarchy.

In spite of the fact that during the late fifteenth century the Iberian socio-political climate spilled over into the game and affected how to “play,” this intermingling of socio-political agenda and royal pastime is not, however, unique to this time period. In fact, the historical legacy of chess in the Iberian Peninsula can be traced further back to the thirteenth century, the era of the cosmopolitan court and Alfonso X, el Sabio, and his scriptorium’s creation of chronicles and the Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas.
During the Learned King’s reign all of the religious factions—Christians, Jews, and Muslims alike—were dispersed throughout his court in a variety of appointed, prominent roles. In particular, the Escuela de traductores de Toledo (Toledo School of Translators), an important medieval epicenter for translation, employed along with Christians and Muslims many Sephardic Jewish scientists and translators who became indispensable participants in the scriptorium’s productivity. For example, seeking to be truly a cosmopolitan king on the European world stage, Alfonso X mandated that instead of Latin being the target language, the scriptorium translate Arabic, Hebraic, and Greek works (i.e. medical, scientific, religious, classical, literary, and philosophical texts) into the Castilian vernacular. Because Castilian was easily read throughout the Iberian kingdoms and Europe, the Toledo School promoted the vernacular language as well as endorsing its own translators and scientists, Christians and non-Christians. Moreover, since the Toledo School excelled in how to invent empire in language through translatio imperii and studii, the scriptorium’s methodologies behind the discovery and translation of ancient texts, the Castilian language was intrinsically tied to notions of building mosaic, political identities. Put simply, in the Iberian Peninsula, during the reign of Alfonso X, the Castilian vernacular became a political banner that was fashioned by both Christians and non-Christians, and the cosmopolitan courtly milieu came to be synonymous with the convivencia.

Due to the inherent cosmopolitan make-up of courtly life and the Toledo School, the commingling of politics with scholarly pursuits took on an interesting pictorial development when it came to the portrayals of Alfonso X in illuminated manuscripts, and especially their visual re-presentation along with the game of chess in the Libro de ajedrez. To elaborate, instead of being so one dimensionally swayed by the reigning monarch as the game’s rules and representation were by the rise of the queen regnant in the fifteenth century, the Alfonsine scriptorium promoted an inverse, subtle trajectory that favored the game itself: “play” and the game’s non-Western origins informed how Alfonso and the convivencia were to be mutually represented in the Libro de ajedrez. In other words, as opposed to chess being the entertaining, microcosmic tableau that reflected the cultural milieu of the Catholic Monarchs, during the thirteenth century the treatise on chess was a politically as well as socially astute discursive plea in visual terms for the convivencia. Furthermore, with Christians and non-Christians translating side by side and oftentimes together, the portrayals of Alfonso and chess in the Libro de ajedrez can be seen as an especially apt, pluralistic metaphor for Alfonso X’s notion of a Platonic cosmopolitanism because it visually inscribes antithetical outlooks, that is, Reconquista and convivencia. Put simply, the non-Western game of chess was the macrocosmic lens through which the Learned King’s translators and scribes interpreted his father’s legacy, tackled Alfonso’s visual representation, and considered the political ramifications of the cultural multiplicity of peoples residing in his kingdoms; chess advocated and called attention to what was naturally already in place in the Iberian cosmopolitan court.
Ultimately, the *Libro de ajedrez* visually documents how Alfonso X and his scriptorium navigated the cosmopolitan labyrinth of the *Reconquista* and *convivencia* through the playing of chess. From refusing to represent a checkmate to depicting players of both genders and all three religions playing against each other, the *Libro de ajedrez* “played” the role of visual, social commentator of the *Reconquista* through its narrative frames and visual display. Moreover, to split hairs so to speak, the illuminated manuscript does not literally represent how to attack or capture the opponent’s king piece; nor does it stereotype the opponent as a non-Christian enemy. Instead it shows the winning moves and sportsmanship *in spite* of seeming cultural and religious differences. Therefore, more so than the fifteenth-century version, the *Libro de ajedrez* illustrates Johan Huizinga’s notion of “play” as a “free activity” because it shows how to “play” well with Christians, Jews, and Muslims in the Iberian cosmopolitan court of the thirteenth century.16

**Historical Discourses and Visual Narratives of “Playing” Chess**

Hayden White posits in *Figural Realism*, “narrative has always been and continues to be the predominant mode of historical writing.” So too must the creative productivity from the Alfonsine scriptorium be seen as historical discourse because the translators concerned themselves with narrativizing Iberian chronological accounts.17 More importantly, though, the Alfonsine scriptorium specialized in historical discourse because the text and image relationship of its illuminated manuscripts was a special language “like metaphoric speech, symbolic language, and representation,” crucial for the writing of history.18 It is this very figural aspect to writing history with its inherent multiplicity of meanings and gazes upon which the *Libro de ajedrez* relies. To elaborate, in the context of medieval Spanish literature the ideas of portraiture and history are especially pertinent because in the Iberian tradition of historical discourse, the etymology of the vernacular *historia* also connotes the idea of an image as well as the study of past events. History is perceivable and thus a rhetorical picture. This etymological investigation also recalls Hayden White’s other analysis of historical discourse in *The Content of the Form*, where he compares it with the “making of a verbal image” in the vein of E. H. Gombrich’s account of Western pictorial realism.19 These approaches obviously underscore the significance of the visual aspect to writing history by endowing the narrative (i.e. the story of chess) with a crucial lens (i.e. cosmopolitanism) through which the past and present are seen, recorded, and conveyed—the call for the *Reconquista* is considered by the king within the context of the *convivencia*. Consequently, when White claims that the facts of past events are not necessarily altered, it is their arrangement and the audience’s understanding of them that make them into discourse, this is most certainly applicable to the opening pages of the *Libro de ajedrez*. Put simply, this Alfonsine treatise on the game of chess is an example of White’s notion of historical discourse because a depicted king witnesses the narrative unfolding, and because it visually and textually buttresses the Iberian cosmopolis by...
entwining the duality of its socio-political milieu through the story and representation of the game itself.

In order to understand the subtle brilliance and figural nature of writing history via a cosmopolitan lens in the *Libro de ajedrez*, it is important to look comparatively and briefly at one of the first extended history books on the Iberian Peninsula in the vernacular emanating from the Alfonsine scriptorium that takes on a more singular, overtly political approach: *Estoria de Espanna o Primera Crónica de España* (1260–74 and 1282–84). As an official chronicle of the history of Spain from biblical times up to the reign of Fernando III, first and foremost the *Primera Crónica* attests to Alfonso’s preoccupation with historical discourse, the documentation of events and said narration of them, and his own place in history. For example, at the end of the *Primera Crónica* a significant paternal missive appears:

“[My] son, you are rich in lands and many good vassals, more so than any other king in Christendom; strive to do well and be good, for you have the wherewithal to do so.” And he [the king] further told him: “The Lord left you all the land from the sea to here, which the Moors had won from Rodrigo, king of Spain. All of it is in your dominion, part of it conquered, the other part tributary. If you know how to guard [maintain] the land in the state in which I leave it to you, you will be as good a king as I; and if you win more [land] for yourself, you will be better than I; but if you diminish it, you will not be as good as I.”20

This passage narrates that during the lifetime of Fernando III, Alfonso’s father was distinguished for recapturing most of the southern Iberian regions of Murcia and Andalusia from the Moors. With these great campaigns, Fernando valiantly augmented the dominion of his kingdoms, thus leaving his son, Alfonso X, with land and vassals belonging to an ancestral legacy that requires their safekeeping. In addition, Fernando bequeathed to Alfonso the tasks of recapturing those lands still under Moorish control and of retrieving a long lost exalted and patriarchal title, the imperial title of the Hispanic Empire that was lost in 1157 with the death of Alfonso VII.21

It is important to keep in mind that his political mandate is set against the narrative background of a dying father, an urgent deathbed request that informs Alfonso of his patrimonial birthright (i.e. *Imperator Hispaniae*) and the rich legacy that Fernando is bequeathing to him (i.e. the *Reconquista*). Equally significant is that this paternal decree was written by the Alfonsine scriptorium in the late thirteenth century, underscoring the tempestuous gravitas to the Iberian political climate as seen by other Christian Monarchs as well as the scriptorium’s own talent for historical discourse. For example, the allusion to the title of *Imperator Hispaniae* acknowledges a significant past political event: the Leonese kingdom’s independence from the Carolingian and Holy Roman Empires.22 Yet it also gestures to the “hegemonial pretention” of the thirteenth century, that the *Imperator Hispaniae* is equal to his counterparts, the Byzantine Emperor and the Holy...
Roman Emperor, the latter of which was Alfonso’s main obsession. Furthermore, the scriptorium inlays the Reconquista as the overarching, critical lens in which past and present imperial motivations are understood. Thus, the Primera Crónica employs a narrative political modus operandi, establishing itself as undoubtedly an exemplary model of Hayden White’s historical discourse, one that seeks to accredit Alfonso’s political pursuits on the European stage. However, it is but a singular, deliberate, and propagandistic portrait of the Iberian Peninsula’s political identity within Western Europe during the thirteenth century. Or, to phrase it differently, this historical narrative, a clever inscription of the Reconquista, is what Jean-François Lyotard in The Postmodern Condition would call a “grand or master narrative,” in which large-scale knowledge and human existence are put forth not as an explanation but as a legitimation. And in this case, in the Primera Crónica, the Reconquista establishes the norms of Christian society as the sanctioned master narrative for the purposes of Alfonso’s imperial quest for Holy Roman Emperor among fellow Christian Monarchs and the Pope in Rome. However, while this pursuit is amenable to the concept of Western European kingship, it is incidentally contrary to the convivencia, the other master narrative of the late thirteenth century, the one that was overlooked in the Primera Crónica. Hence, although this is a political invitation and a patrimonial obligation to write a new chapter of history, the Primera Crónica is equally a discursive exercise on how to become a king worthy of the title Imperator Hispaniae in spite of the convivencia.

Yet are these two seemingly contradictory master narratives, Reconquista and convivencia, the only ones with which the Alfonsine scriptorium concerned itself? No. There is a third and superseding master narrative, that of Holy Roman Emperor. In all cases where there are illuminations, the Alfonsine manuscripts begin with a portrait of Alfonso X, whether sitting on his throne or standing, surrounded by his people. These regal and authoritative portraits endorse and etch Alfonso as a bona fide king worthy of imitation and, thus, of being elected as Holy Roman Emperor. Because the images issuing forth from the Alfonsine scriptorium seek to bolster Alfonso, a manuscript like the Libro de ajedrez is quite similar to its contemporaneous and later early modern counterparts within the genre of a “mirror of princes” in which a written portrait of an exemplary king is held up as the model from which future monarchs can learn and imitate proper conduct and behavior. In fact, in the Libro de ajedrez, games and the act of “playing” board games become the site for the legitimization of kingship because a portrait of Alfonso X headlines this manuscript and establishes a monarchical frame of reference. The portrait, in a word, elevates the Libro de ajedrez from being a mere guidebook on how to play games to a visually playful “mirror of princes.” In the Libro de ajedrez, Alfonso’s portrait and the grand narrative of Holy Roman Emperor, thus adjudicate and mollify the seeming contradiction of leading the militaristic Reconquista and socially accepting the convivencia by turning the gaze back on the king and kingship.
In the act of restructuring a new “master” narrative, one present in all of the Alfonsine manuscripts including the *Libro de ajedrez*, it is imperative to keep in mind what Jacques Derrida has mentioned about frames in his *The Truth about Painting*, in which his idea of overlooked frames is crucial to understanding the coexistence of contradictory narratives as well as the images that are needed to support them all. According to Derrida, a truth in painting is an impossibility much like a truth in language. For him, there are inherent contradictions and oppositions—inside and outside, the framer and the framed—that make any so-called truth unstable, complex, and impossible. In other words, the desired narrative of Holy Roman Emperor points out the seeming contradiction and acceptance of the two primary narratives, and ultimately sheds light on the fact that Alfonso’s quest is as elusive as meaning itself. To go a step further, the narrative of Holy Roman Emperor is stuck vacillating between the framer and that which is framed, between *Reconquista* and *convivencia*, between so-called truth and history, and between Alfonso the son and Alfonso the king of his people. The master narrative of Holy Roman Emperor is thus a displaced narrative that is equally as important but not more important than the others. It is stuck vacillating between these contradictions, and for this reason the narrative of Holy Roman Emperor, as represented by its illuminating portrait, is left not in a state of limbo, but as the true overarching narrative that is at once visual reporter and skeptic of thirteenth-century *Reconquista*. Or, to rephrase it slightly, Derrida’s idea of frames suggests that in the *Primera Crónica* and the *Libro de ajedrez*, what resides outside the frame (e.g. the non-Christians and the *convivencia*) is as important as what is depicted within the frame (e.g. Christians and the *Reconquista*) and even the frame itself (e.g. Alfonso as Holy Roman Emperor). In a manner of speaking, while in the *Primera Crónica* there is a rigid frame obscuring the *convivencia*, in the *Libro de ajedrez* the frame is more fluid, thereby welcoming the three master narratives to coexist and breaking the rules of discursive “play.”

**Book of Games**

The *Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas* is an interesting example of this “framing” approach and its relationship to “play” because it is not only one of the most important sources for researching board games, but it is also the first known catalogue of rules for the seven depicted games in the treatise. Written in the Castilian vernacular, and commissioned between 1251 and 1282, the *Libro de ajedrez* consists of ninety-eight vellum pages bound in sheepskin with many illuminated letters and an astonishing 151 color illustrations dispersed throughout, about ten of these taking up an entire page. As one of the first masterpieces of European literature written in a colloquial language, the *Libro de ajedrez* is further subdivided into seven treatises for each of the seven games, where each part details the game pieces and the didactic “how to play” rules. Yet this is not a mere “how to play” catalogue of seven games, it is a socio-political mirror of princes
in which the *convivencia* is interwoven into the literary fabric of the *Libro de ajedrez*. From the statutory code *Las Siete Partidas* compiled during Alfonso’s reign to the days of the week and the known planets (i.e. the scriptorium’s focus on astrology and astronomy), “seven” is clearly a preferred number for Alfonso. To elaborate further, the number “seven” is also symbolic for a Christian king because it serves as the unity between the perfect terrestrial number “four” and the perfect heavenly number “three.” However, “seven” is also a transcultural number rich in symbolism because it is a holy number for the Moors and the practice of Islam before, during, and after the *convivencia*. Thus, on an organizational front, with the inclusion of the seven games, the number “seven” is encompassed within the *Libro de ajedrez* structure. In other words, the entire treatise buttresses, that is, does not exclude, the *convivencia* as a master narrative.

Within the ninety-eight vellum pages dedicated to the seven games, chess (*ajedrez*) is the first game introduced, and the treatise’s primary focus because it occupies sixty-four folios, a clever feat that echoes structurally the sixty-four squares on the chessboard. While in the *Libro de ajedrez* is the very first mention of the pawn’s double step on its first move, the majority of the chess section deals with the actual commentaries on the moves of all the pieces. Overall, since people from all walks of life in the *convivencia* are represented, there seems to have been no race, creed, or gender discrimination, nor restrictions on where chess was played, that is, chess is depicted as being played in the court, a tent, pharmacy, and also a cavern. Yet, visually, the *Libro de ajedrez* also welcomes the *Reconquista* into the mix. For instance, the *Libro de ajedrez* employs two perspectives simultaneously with the game boards being seen straight on while the players are viewed from the side, privileging both the game and its diverse players. Within each individual illumination, this visual technique juxtaposes and amalgamates the *Reconquista* (i.e. chessboard) with the *convivencia* (i.e. chess players), carefully blending frames within the process of learning how to excel at chess.
Before turning to the actual game of chess, the Libro de ajedrez begins with a medieval exemplum, taken from Arabic literary tradition, to explain the origins of all the games, in which the king depicted is Alfonso himself on folio 1R (Figure 14.1). Much like a fairytale, it starts with the idea of “once upon a time” there was a king of India who had three counselors. In this medieval fable, the king poses a simple but profound question: which is better—intelligence or fortune? More precisely, he asks them to compare the virtues of wisdom (seso), chance (ventura), and prudence (cordura) in order to determine which guarantees living well. Each one is to respond not just with an answer but also with a board game that illustrates his methodology. As folio 1V conveys, since a learned king made the request, these three advisors went directly to do their research, that is, read texts, before returning with their answers (Figure 14.2). In a clever meta-reference to the actual organization of the treatise itself, each man returns in the same order that the games appear in the Libro de ajedrez. For example, the first counselor declares that intelligence and strategy (seso) are better and displays a chessboard on folio 2V (Figure 14.3). However, the second counselor responds in this same folio, with a board game...
that has dice on it, that it is better to have luck (ventura) because no amount of intelligence could aid in the event that fortune turns a blind eye. Taking a more moderate view, the third counselor combines the first two tenets by stating unequivocally in folio 2V that the best option is to have chance (ventura), the intelligence to know how to play no matter if luck is on your side; his game is, of course, backgammon.

What are we to make of this exemplum? It is not a conventional European allegory, but rather it is a symbolic query that “frames” the treatise, as well as the narratives of Reconquista and convivencia. First, the exemplum underscores the idea that this is a “royal game” for worthy, learned, exemplary kings. Second, it privileges the Alfonsine scriptorium by favoring research, knowledge, and translation. Third, it subtly underscores that Alfonso, as the depicted king, is seeking laws, rules, and support from his scribes and artisans in order to establish a new Spanish state under his rule, one that will most definitely win him the title of Holy Roman Emperor. In other words, this exemplum permits Alfonso to play “games” with the two predominant master narratives.

To elaborate this idea further, in the opening pages, on folio 1V where the three counselors consult books in order to answer the king’s query, they are dressed and styled in a manner becoming a medieval Christian Castilian (Figure 14.2). Since the location of this illustration is clearly a scriptorium, these men are the scribes. And, although these counselors may have consulted Arabic and Greek antecedents, the Alfonsine scriptorium is visually presented as Castilian, echoing meta-textually and -visually the vernacular language of the treatise and the Reconquista. In comparison, on folio 3R, which immediately follows the exemplum, the artisans who are creating the chessboards and carving the indistinguishable chess figurines are dressed in Muslim garb (Figure 14.4). This portrait astutely acknowledges that chess was originally fashioned in the non-Western world. Moreover, throughout the Libro de ajedrez, there is no clear link between the religion of the depicted players and the strategy of the game described within the text. In fact, much like the exemplum, religions and cultures do not clash, but coexist.
during a pastime, a game of leisure. Together these opening folios thus offer a convincing and cosmopolitan portrait of Alfonso’s court and kingdoms, and an example of how the Alfonsine scriptorium is able to “play” well amidst the Reconquista.

While the Reconquista and the convivencia are intertwined in the opening folio pages as well as the treatise’s structure, they are also portrayed via the chess problems that follow this opening exemplum. In total, the Libro de ajedrez describes 103 chess problems in which the reader is informed on how many pieces are still in play for each problem; it also indicates which side, white (blanco) or black (prieto), will move first, and who is poised to capture the “king” piece and win. An example from one of the problems would be, “on its first move ... the fers or the promoted pawn may opt to leap to any vacant square two steps forward on its file or the diagonals on which it stands, even if the intermediate squares are occupied, instead of its usual move.” In most cases, however, the illustration offers the last or crucial move that highlights the winner, but it never shows the actual checkmate. Yet there is more to this simplistic and formulaic description of moves. Scholars like H. J. R. Murray and Sonja Musser Golladay have pointed out that the majority of these “problems” are Muslim in origin, while the others are Christian regarding their mode of aggression and protection. Put simply, the two styles of warfare of the Reconquista are depicted. For Murray, in particular, eighty-nine of these “problems” are strategically “Muslim” in style while fourteen follow a more “European” approach to chess playing. Moreover, with the illustration on folio 64R that closes this first section on the game of chess, where two men in a tent are playing chess, the battlefield and warfare are the final symbolic visual cues that the reader sees before moving to the next game, dice (Figure 14.5).

In the Libro de ajedrez, via the game of chess, the Reconquista is reinforced and acknowledged as the political background to Alfonso’s world that takes the back seat to the cosmopolitan milieu of courtly pursuits and pastimes. If anything, the Reconquista is put into checkmate so that the convivencia can be carefully illustrated. With the inclusion of portraits of Alfonso X throughout the first three parts of the Libro de ajedrez, the visual
narrative of Holy Roman Emperor frames the chess problems along with the Reconquista and convivencia. Moreover, through these portraits and interweaving of master narratives, the Libro de ajedrez clearly pays homage to the game’s non-Western origins of discourse and reason. Equally, through the visual narratives, the Alfonsine scriptorium and Alfonso reveal their hands as the ultimate game players who are not necessarily arguing for multiplicity (convivencia) or for singularity (Reconquista), but rather for a new grand, all-encompassing narrative that will be persuasive in text and image, that is, how to “play” well and be politically legitimate, the makings of a supreme king and kingdom. After all, if the Alfonsine scriptorium reveals the entertaining value to playing games of non-Western origin, while still adhering to the militaristic campaigns mandated by the Primera Crónica, then perhaps Alfonso will recapture his patrimonial birthright, the title of Imperator Hispaniae, and place the rest of Western Europe into a political checkmate. In other words, the Alfonsine scriptorium navigated the cosmopolitan labyrinth not by showing how to checkmate fellow Iberian Christians, Jews, or Muslims; instead it turned the game on its head by focusing on the act of “play” as a political maneuver that did not admonish the cultural legacy of Alfonso’s kingdoms and scriptorium. It is for this reason that the game of chess in the Iberian Peninsula has always been the socio-political porthole that mimics the reigning monarch’s attitude toward the Reconquista and convivencia.

NOTES

1 The link between “play,” games, and logic can be traced back to Plato and Aristotle in ancient Greece, Medhatithi in ancient India, Mozi “Master Mo” in ancient China, Muslim logicians such as Avicenna and Averroes, and Boethius in medieval Europe. For more information, see Kneale, The Development of Logic; Bochenski, A History of Formal Logic; and Feldman, “Rescher on Arabic Logic.”

2 Murray, A History of Chess (1986), 149.

3 Central to the Qur’an is the revelation of Tawhid, the transcendent nature of God. For devout Muslims, to regard anything as equal to or associate anything with Allah is to commit shirk, a fundamental sin, that is, idolatry. In the Qur’an, thus, the worship of images is prohibited. Volf, Ghazi bin Muhammad and Yarrington, A Common Word, 46, states, “And verily. We have raised in every nation a messenger, [proclaiming]: Worship God and shun false gods.” 16.36. In fact, since Western-style form of image-based expression is not open to the artists of the Muslim world, in Islamic art calligraphy develops as the method of expression and devotion without being labeled idolatrous. See Hawting, The Idea of Idolatry and the Emergence of Islam; and Hillenbrand, Islamic Art and Architecture.

4 Yalom, Birth of the Chess Queen, xix.

5 According to Yalom, the queen piece was not originally part of the game. In fact, at the beginning of the game’s history, chess did not have any female chess figures. For more on Isabella’s reign, see Guardiola-Griffiths, Legitimizing the Queen; and Boruchodd, Isabel la Católica, Queen of Castile.
Instead of the traditional Medieval Inquisition tribunal that the Papacy would control, the Catholic Monarchs themselves sought to diminish the power of the *conversos*, their political adversaries, as well as oversee the means by which these converted Jews and Muslims were deemed legitimate Christians and *not* false converts, that is, whether or not they ceased to practice Jewish or Muslim rites in secret. To this end, Ferdinand pressured Pope Sixtus IV to issue the *Exigit Sinceras Devotionis Affectus* (November 1, 1478), a Papal Bull that authorized the Spanish Inquisition Tribunal as a legal body under the direct control of the Spanish monarchy. In addition, this Papal Bull yielded exclusive rights in naming the inquisitors to the Catholic Monarchs. While the first *auto-da-fé* took place in Seville in 1481, and the *Sephardim* (i.e. the Spanish Jews) were expelled from Andalusia in 1483, the Catholic Monarchs were far from recapturing those lands still under Moorish hold. In 1491, after the Catholic Monarchs had raged war for ten years against the Emirate of Granada in Al-Ándalus, Granada surrendered, signaling the end of Muslim rule in the Iberian Peninsula and the completion of the *Reconquista*. See Kamen, *The Spanish Inquisition*.

With “cosmopolitan” I am using the Greek term κοσμοπόλιτης, *kosmopolites*, which means “citizen of the world.” For my purposes, the ancient Greek idea of cosmopolitanism aligns itself nicely with the concept of *convivencia* because, before 1492 in the Iberian Peninsula, all human beings, regardless of their political and religious affiliations, may have been and were citizens. In particular, Alfonso X, advocate of learning and admirer of ancient texts, embraced a more Platonic sense of cosmopolitanism. For example, in Plato’s *Protagoras* (337c7–d3), the Sophist Hippias addresses the Athenians and foreigners by stating, “I regard you all as kinsmen, familiars, and fellow-citizens—by nature and not by convention; for like is by nature akin to like, while convention, which is a tyrant over human beings, forces many things contrary to nature.” Thus, much like cosmopolitanism, the *convivencia* is a natural state of the community. In contrast, the Catholic Monarchs embraced a more divine sense of cosmopolitanism where citizenship is defined as being “fellow-citizens with the saints” (Ephesians 2:20). See García Morencos, *Libro de Ajedrez*; Snow, *Alfonso as Troubadour*; and Pérez Algar, *Alfonso X, el Sabio*.

Hernando de Larramendi, *Pensamiento y circulación*, 34. For more on the Alfonsine scriptorium, see Burns, *Emperor of Culture*.


It should be noted that the Alfonsine scriptorium emphasized the transfer and translation nuances to *translatio*. See O’Callaghan, *The Learned King*.

See note 11.


White, *Figural Realism*, 5.

White, *Figural Realism*, 4.

See White, *The Content of the Form*, in particular chapter 1 on “The Value of Narrativity in the Representation of Reality,” 1–25. For a complete understanding of Western pictorial realism, see also Gombrich, *The Story of Art; Art and Illusion*; and *Meditations on a Hobby Horse*.

Translations are my own throughout this essay unless noted otherwise.

The title in question is *Imperator Hispaniae*, which was used by Alfonso VI and Alfonso VII. See O’Callaghan, “Image and Reality,” 15: “The Hispanic imperial tradition considered the
kings of León as heirs of the Visigoths and, as such, responsible for reconstituting their kingdom by the reconquest of the whole of Spain and also of North Africa, regarded as having once been part of the Visigothic realm.” See also O’Callaghan, The Learned King, 147–62, where he provides the history of the Hispanic imperial tradition. The vernacular title of “emperador d’Espanna” was used to refer to Alfonso VII in Cantigas de Santa Maria.

22 García Gallo, “El imperio medieval español.”

23 Collins, “Visigothic Spain, 409–711,” 58, states, “the intermittent use of the title imperator, ‘emperor,’ by the rulers of Asturias and León from the tenth century onward seems to have indicated their hegemonial pretentions.”


25 For more on European notions of kingship, see Bertelli, The King’s Body.

26 This idea of the convivencia being an ironic social and political state of being as well as a master narrative was first noted by Cooley. “Games for the Nation,” 143, states, “convivencia must be seen as a heterogeneous mass of policies geared toward legislating tolerance, but also toward sustaining discrimination in a palatable and functional manner. These seemingly incongruent projects may actually have served as a means to attain a higher plateau: Alfonso X sought to create a new Spanish nation and ultimately an empire.”

27 Noteworthy examples include Vincent de Beauvais’s De Eruditione Filorum Nobilium (1250), Thomas Aquinas’s De Regno (1260), Brunetto Latini’s Li Livres dou Tresor (1266), Don Juan Manuel’s Libro de los ejemplos del conde Lucanor y de Patronio (1335), and Machiavelli’s Il Principe (1513).

28 Drawing upon Derrida’s idea of frames and painting is facilitated by the fact that the Alfonsine scriptorium is literally producing works of art, that is, illuminated manuscripts. See Clemens and Graham, Introduction to Manuscript Studies; and De Hamel, Scribes and Illuminators.


30 The Libro de ajedrez is housed in the monastery library of St. Lorenze del Escorial (manuscript T.I.6), and measures 29 × 42 centimeters bound in leather.

31 While the title is manufactured, and given after the fact, Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas (Book of Chess, Dice and Tables) may misleadingly suggest that only three games are discussed—chess, dice, and tables (the forerunner of modern-day backgammon). However, seven games in total are presented in this treatise: (1) chess, (2) dice, (3) tables, (4) Decimal Chess (Large Games), (5) Fours Season Chess (Four-players chess), (6) Morris (also known as Mill or Merels-Alquerque), and (7) Astrological Games.

32 Golladay, Los libros de acedrex, dados e tablas, 1048–93.

33 Golladay, Los libros de acedrex, dados e tablas, 174–368, where she describes each move.


35 Golladay, Los libros de acedrex, dados e tablas, 114.

36 Murray, A History of Chess (1986), 181 and 571–79. Essentially, Murray explains that a Muslim approach to conflict and chess playing is to chase, that is, to force the other player’s king into danger with every turn, preventing any potential shift from defensive to offensive. In contrast, the European style is a different type of aggression, to trap and corner the king piece into a deliberate checkmate.
The Prisoners’ Dilemma: Strategies and Ruses in the Inquisitorial Jails of Early Modern Cuenca

Patrick J. O’Banion

Historians have long felt conflicted about the mountains of rich documentary evidence in inquisitorial archives. They offer unparalleled detail of the fabric of early modern life, but they raise a suite of profound, if by now familiar, methodological problems. Among them is the nagging concern that trial records reveal only part of a larger drama. This essay seeks to address that issue by examining what life was like in inquisitorial Spain’s secret jails, approaching them as dynamic and adaptable micro-societies rather than inflexible worlds of isolation. Recently, some scholarship that explores the inner workings of the Holy Office has done so from a social, rather than primarily legal or judicial, perspective, and that approach helps frame the experience of inquisitorial incarceration. Life in the secret jails exhibited traits characteristic of an intensely social game of strategy—albeit not a very amusing one—with rules that could be followed, bent, or broken and which involved feints and gambits by inquisitors and turnkeys as well as by the prisoners.

Much has been written about the cárcel secretas, but like Edgar Allen Poe’s depiction in The Pit and the Pendulum much of it is sensationalized and fictive. It was certainly not an easy life. Prisoners themselves complained about mistreatment, poor conditions, and irregularity of procedures. Still, historians now tend to offer more sanguine appraisals than in previous generations. For, although one would be hard pressed to find any prisoners in early modern Europe speaking well of their situation, inquisitorial jails were frequently less onerous than the alternatives. Hence the anecdotes of prisoners in secular legal systems who blasphemed on purpose or claimed to be Protestants so their cases would be remanded to the jurisdiction of the Holy Office. Its jails were regularly inspected, the ill received care, and those with means could keep servants and choose their own menu. Even the poor were provided with basic necessities and fed “a diet of seasonal foods.”

Secrecy was of the essence, to judge from the procedural rules laid out in 1561 by Inquisitor General Fernando de Valdés. As John Edwards comments, “In theory at least, a prisoner accused of heresy was separated after arrest from the rest of humanity. He or she was confined in a secret cell, without verbal communication with gaolers, other prisoners, or the outside world, including relatives.” Exceptions were made for
authorized persons to speak to prisoners, but only if they avoided trial-related matters, and such conversations were always to occur in the presence of a notary. In 1606 wardens were further restricted from entering cells unless accompanied by an assistant. When lack of space made solitary confinement impossible, detainees shared cells. But once mixed, those prisoners were to remain together for the duration of their trials, lest with frequent shuffling they communicate to other prisoners sensitive information gleaned from conversations with former cellmates.

The reality, however, proved quite different, for communication did occur and the rules of the secret jails were only as rigid as the men who enforced them. Thus, what seemed “easy to achieve in theory encountered many roadblocks when it came time to put it into practice.” Regional tribunals, for example, frequently interpreted or implemented instructions in different ways, none of which necessarily corresponded to the expectations of the Council of the Supreme and General Inquisition (Suprema). Some tribunals were more punctilious about maintaining secrecy; others less. This is clear both from the correspondence between center and locale as well as from snatches of information preserved in inquisitorial trial records. In 1570, for instance, Isabel Reyner informed inquisitors at Toledo that when “passing through the prison she saw a prisoner who informed her that her husband and Estevan Carrier were also prisoners, and who asked her why she was imprisoned.” In 1577, Francisca de los Apóstoles contracted a marriage and carried on an amorous correspondence with a fellow detainee. These are tantalizing glimpses of life in the cárcel secretas—but merely glimpses.

A clutch of early seventeenth-century trials conducted by Cuenca’s tribunal against a group of moriscos (i.e. baptized Muslims and their descendants) from the small Castilian town of Deza allows for a richer analysis of the institution’s inner workings. In the summer of 1607, Ana Guerrera, a twelve-year-old morisca who had already been married—not yet in the Church but after the Moorish fashion—was arrested on evidence supplied by neighbors who heard her reciting prayers in Arabic. Soon thereafter, her parents and other relatives were confined to the secret jails. Eventually, over forty of Deza’s moriscos were arrested and held at Cuenca under suspicion of having reverted to Islam.

The first man arrested was fifty-two-year-old Juan Guerrero, a sandal maker, farmer, muleteer, and Ana Guerrera’s father. The warden of the secret jails received him on the night of November 12, 1607, and the following afternoon Guerrero had his First Audience with Inquisitor Dr. Claudio de la Cueva. Two days later, on the morning of the fifteenth, de la Cueva received an unexpected request for an audience from Gabriel de León, an erstwhile friar who may or may not have been irregularly ordained in France and may or may not have married a woman in Alcazar de Consuegra. He had been languishing in the jails for about sixteen months. De León informed the Holy Office that he had identified Guerrero as a morisco as soon as he entered the jails. When by chance the two men became cellmates, de León contrived to convince Guerrero that he was a morisco too.
The rest, perhaps, went as expected. De León offered to act as an informant. He was provided with writing material and gained the morisco’s confidence. Over the next fourteen months, on forty-one different days, he made reports to the inquisitors about Guerrero, his other cellmates, and anyone whom they discussed. De León gained access to information transmitted on the sly between cells via windows and the building’s pipes. Only in January of 1609 did the game come to an end, when Madrid’s Suprema ordered Cuenca to end “that fiction” in which “the cellmate of the four moriscos pretends to follow their sect in order to get them to open up to him, for such behavior does not seem worthy of the truth or the reputation of the Holy Office.” De León was to be separated from his former cellmates.

Like inquisitorial sources generally, interpretive problems and questions of reliability abound for these behind-the-scenes reports of an informant who clearly hoped to gain preferment by his actions. Yet, whatever the concerns, his accounts offer certain advantages. De León made his reports frequently, allowing him to recall specific names, events, complex relationships, and even precise phrasing. The inquisitors collected his written accounts, which have since disappeared, but he clearly relied upon these notes during his audiences. Furthermore, although de León was a detainee of the Holy Office, he viewed himself as a deputized familiar. This differentiates his testimony from that drawn out of prisoners by coercion—through admonitions, threats, probing questions, or torture.

Verifying the accuracy of his information is difficult, but some of it, especially regarding events that took place in Deza before the moriscos arrived in Cuenca’s jails, can be independently confirmed. During their time under lock and key, de León’s compañeros told stories and reminisced about their homes, neighbors, and friends. His reports on these matters are remarkably accurate. When recounting a story told to him by Juan Guerrero, for example, Gabriel de León correctly described—down to the number of fanegas of wheat and barley—the endowments and bequests established by two brothers upon their deaths in 1578 and 1599.

Still, he made mistakes. Sometimes he caught them and corrected himself in a later audience, as when he confused two cousins who shared the same name. At other times he recorded statements that he heard second or third hand with a claim to precision that makes one wary, quoting word for word a prayer uttered by one morisco that was then later recounted to de León by another. Yet even here, the prayer references specific events and people from the past about whom Gabriel de León could not have had knowledge apart from information provided by the Dezanos themselves.

A larger concern than his accuracy as a reporter, which was generally excellent, is the informant’s tendency to impose a narrative structure upon his reports. As far as de León was concerned, the moriscos started bad and ended bad. None of them could be trusted, and the only internal transformation they experienced was a creeping anxiety about
being left Shouldering the blame when, inevitably, they were denounced by neighbors and kin. In fact, de León’s reports indicate his growing sense of the threat posed by the moriscos. Most of his early audiencias focused on the Islamic activities and deceptions that he witnessed among his cellmates, but soon he began to emphasize the Dezanos’ illicit interactions in the secret jails and their heretical activities as a community back home. Finally, he revealed his cellmates’ ties to a great network of powerful and wealthy moriscos crisscrossing Iberia. Principally, he asserted that the men and women held in the cárcceles secretas were dangerous and deceitful, a point emphasized in his final audience in December 1608, when he exposed a plot to kill the warden.19

Furthermore, de León’s own role in the drama became a key element in the narrative he spun. Typically, he was the one who discovered ruses, plots, and secret agreements; he defended the purity of the Church while playing a dangerous game of deception. Memorably, he did this by rescuing a pair of rosaries from the desecrating clutches of moriscos. He gained control of the objects, delivered them from the secret jails, and gave them over to the inquisitors’ care, all without tipping his hand to their former owners.20 So too, he presented himself as the instrument by which moriscos were brought to confess their guilt—out of self-preservation if not godly sorrow. He endured their threats and repeatedly outsmarted them. In short, he cast himself as the hero of the story.

Nevertheless, Gabriel de León’s reports, in concert with the testimony and confessions offered by the moriscos themselves, paint an unusually sharp picture of life in the secret jails of the Tribunal at Cuenca early in the seventeenth century. Critical optimism about his statements’ reliability is appropriate, especially when they can be confirmed by other archival evidence or pertain to events about which the inquisitors had corroborating knowledge. Still, a word of caution is in order: even if the information he provided was true in the sense of being an accurate account of what he heard and saw, this does not prove that his reports always described what actually happened in the past. Furthermore, the individuals about whom he testified could conceivably have been playing games of their own, deceiving him in ways that cannot now be discerned. Like the inquisitors themselves, he could not peer into the moriscos’ hearts. He could but describe what others told him about the past and what he believed to be true.

Gabriel de León’s testimony strongly evidences both the social nature of inquisitorial incarceration and the motivations behind decisions that otherwise appear obscure or inconsequential. Without his reports, for example, Francisco de Cebea’s decision to denounce his mother on April 21, 1608 and then incriminate the remainder of his family on the following day lacks context. The informant’s testimony, however, reveals that Cebea confided to de León that he faced an impossible choice. Having already confessed his own guilt, he had to tell the inquisitors who had taught him about Islam.
But the Holy Office had reconciled his father to the Church in 1570, and his mother and grandfather had availed themselves of an Edict of Grace promulgated the following year. Any of these would be tried as relapsed heretics if he named them; so he denounced his mother “because he couldn’t do anything else.”

Cebea’s precise motivation to denounce the rest of his family the next day remains obscure, but Gabriel de León saw it as a result of his own influence. He claimed to use “various methods and means” to elicit confessions, but the “principal” one was to emphasize the dire consequences of withholding information or being caught in a lie. Covering up the guilt of others, he warned, was dangerous, for if anyone else—one of the women perhaps—confessed a matter that de León’s cellmates denied, then they would be discovered and their deception made manifest. He described several cases in which he convinced moriscos that a good end to their drama could not be realized without a full confession.

Many guilty prisoners no doubt arrived at the secret jails intending to deny everything, or, at least, to withhold key information and protect specific individuals. De León’s testimony depicts prisoners’ inner struggle to follow through with their plans. Several Dezanos, for example, arrived determined to “shut their mouths” and say nothing about anyone, even if they were tortured. Hope of reward kept lips sealed about those with goods or money back home. Some detainees entered into pacts of silence, hoping to gain acquittals for lack of evidence. Several sought to avoid a replay of what had happened to morisco neighborhoods in other towns, where one or two arrests had escalated into a general depopulation once detainees began denouncing neighbors to protect themselves. Yet others reasoned that they were “lost one way or another” and determined to stay the course even if tortured. Francisco de Cebea lamented that he and his companions had lost nearly everything since being inducted into the world of Iberian crypto-Islam as boys. Antón Guerrero responded, “Well, what’s the solution? Let’s act like men, all of us, and die in the attempt.”

Initially at least, the group of perhaps twenty Dezanos who arrived at Cuenca in May 1608 were determined to “stay tough” (tener tieso) and not “let up” (aflojarse). They intended to deny everything, a plan they called lo dicho dicho. For a time, most remained steadfast and encouraged one another. On June 1, the morisco Francisco el Romo in cell “N” told everyone “lo dicho dicho and that no one should let up … and that no one is letting up but rather lo dicho dicho and everyone should stay tough.” The women were in on it too. Those in cell “D” encouraged the men in “C:” “Be sure to deny that we are denying. Stay tough.” But their neighbors did not respond, and the initial conviction of some eventually began to waver. More than four months later, in October, when some of Gabriel de León’s cellmates were urged to “stay tough” because everyone was denying everything, Antón Guerrero, who had by then been incarcerated for nearly a year, responded that there was nothing for it but to go in and tell the truth. The depopulation of Deza’s morisco neighborhood, he lamented, had already occurred; no one remained “except the children.”
When Gabriel de Medina learned that his sister-in-law had been placed in the same cell as his wife, Catalina Zamorano, he despaired. He reasoned that she must have already denounced him. Now his wife would tell her sister, and then the Holy Office would have two witnesses against him. He was sure to burn. “Well, how would you counsel me?” he asked de León, who suggested that Medina should “confess the truth. This was the solution.” The morisco agreed and called for an audience with the inquisitors in which he denounced both himself and his wife. Thus, efforts to anticipate the actions of others drove some moriscos to adjust their strategies in order to account for variables. Sometimes they came to regret those actions.

Lope Guerrero, for example, who entered Cuenca’s secret jails on November 17, 1607, became one of the first to break. Within two weeks of arriving, he had implicated himself and much of his family. In a belated fit of self-loathing, he pronounced that he had considered calling the inquisitor “to tell him that I don’t remember the rest,” so that he would not have to confess anymore. He feared that he had already damned his soul, begging God to pardon him and relive his burden. When Antón Guerrero confessed to having fasted according to the Law of Mohammed, his cellmate, Juan de Hortubia, chastised him, for he had believed Guerrero to be the most courageous man in town. Shame-faced, the morisco slunk into a corner of the cell, where he prophesied that Hortubia would do the same thing in the end. As it turned out, Guerrero was wrong. His cellmate was one of the few who stayed tough, refusing to denounce anyone, despite torture.

Lope and Antón Guerrero might have been comforted by the fact that they were not the only ones who “let up.” Four days after arriving in Cuenca, their brother Juan had already determined that the only way forward was to confess. But what about his family? His wife, brothers, and mother-in-law—not to mention his daughter, Ana, whom he believed had already denounced her family—were all in custody. If he confessed and they did not, their fate would be sealed; the solution was for everyone to come clean at the same time. So he enlisted the aid of Gabriel de León, his cellmate, asking him to speak to the warden on his behalf. Guerrero would provide special “signs” so the recipients would know the message was bona fide. Tell them, he urged, to “confess in order to get out of here.” He did not want them “locked up for as long as [Gabriel de León] had been.” But, of course, Guerrero worried that other Dezanos might learn of the plan. In adopting this strategy, he sought to gain an advantage over the other players in the game, but he did so to the detriment of his neighbors and the potential endangerment of his family. The strategy made sense because he believed alternative approaches would prove even less satisfactory.

The warden (alcaide) whom Juan Guerrero referenced proved to be a rather significant figure in the lives of inquisitorial prisoners and the strategies they employed.
Early in the seventeenth century, Cuenca’s warden was Gil Martínez, who was assisted by Domingo de Mirabuena. Martínez was responsible for processing the prisoners upon arrival, seeing to their well-being, inspecting the facilities, and maintaining order. He also served as the conduit to virtually everything that happened beyond the walls of their cells. To judge from the records, however, he seems to have kept himself busy uncovering the ruses and deceptions attempted by detainees.

Soon after their arrival, Deza’s moriscos began communicating with one another at night via windows and pipes. Upon discovering this, Martínez tried to put the fear of God into them. One night in June 1608 as he walked the grounds he heard them talking. The warden called out and they quieted down immediately, but he still delivered a hundred blows with his stick to one unfortunate soul—to encourage the others. When he discovered Cecilia de Hortubia (the grandmother of Ana Guerrera) paralyzed and apoplectic in cell “Q” on the night of February 1, 1608, he and Mirabuena attempted to revive her by striking her feet with a rod and applying vinegar and pepper to her nose. Tough remedies, but necessary to determine she was not faking.

Yet Martínez was not implacable; he could be manipulated and sometimes showed mercy. Gabriel de Medina, for example, was caught pretending to be “very ill and lame in the legs” and “unable to walk without great difficulty.” He hoped to avoid being sent to the galleys or tortured. Even de León, his cellmate, was initially taken in by the ruse. When discovered by the warden, however, Medina threw himself upon his knees and begged for mercy. Martínez pronounced that he would not “make a case of it, that he ha[d] already forgotten it,” but urged Medina toward plain dealing in the future.

In yet another deception, several moriscos, professing pious intentions, asked the warden to purchase rosaries for them with their daily rations. Thereafter, whenever Martínez entered their cell, he found the objects in their hands; they even carried them to inquisitorial audiences. Their piety was false, however, for de León had heard them whispering Islamic prayers—both in Arabic and in Castilian—as they fingered the beads. So he stole the rosaries, presented them to the inquisitors, and convinced the moriscos they had misplaced them.

Indeed, the warden was sometimes even fooled by his prisoners’ deceptions. Antón Guerrero feigned insanity, which involved “shouting and other things,” and apparently convinced both Martínez and his assistant, who were frightened by the madman. Likewise, Gabriel de Medina fasted only during the first two days of Ramadan so that the warden would not figure out what he was doing. Nor, apparently, did Martínez realize that in the winter of 1608 several moriscos plotted to kill him, steal his keys, and escape to Algiers. The cabal collapsed when two members refused to go forward. Lope de Deza’s frail legs would have kept him from running, and he had no interest in taking the fall. Touchingly, Antón Guerrero refused to go to Africa without his children.
Although the information Gabriel de León provided pertained directly to a select group of prisoners confined by Cuenca’s tribunal early in the seventeenth century, their experiences speak to larger issues. The level of actual secrecy achieved in the secret jails, for example, clearly failed to reach the level prescribed by Inquisitor General Valdés in 1561. In fact, the years around 1600 were a period of heightened struggle between the centralizing efforts of the Suprema and the divergent practices of the regional tribunals. The Suprema had to remind tribunals of proper procedure repeatedly and labored to assert its authority on disputed issues, often to little avail. In the examples considered here, many of the central rules of secrecy were broken, both by the prisoners and by the representatives of the Holy Office. In Cuenca prisoners were moved from cell to cell and, in so doing, changed their cellmates. The warden communicated with detainees without either his assistant or a notary present, and he spoke to prisoners about issues directly related to ongoing trials. Prisoners in different cells frequently interacted, despite threats and capriciously administered punishments. Nor were their exchanges simply a function of a building unsuited to the purpose for which it was used. While many inquisitorial tribunals struggled to make the best of inadequate space, Cuenca had moved into a brand new purpose-built state-of-the-art facility only about twenty years previously. This structure represented the acme of inquisitorial control over the bodies and voices of those confined within, yet communication occurred from cell to cell through walls and barred windows. Prisoners signaled one another via the building’s pipes and sometimes contrived to speak face to face.

Furthermore, despite the fact that detainees were specifically prohibited from possessing writing implements, except with special permission (and even then pages were to be stamped, numbered, and accounted for), some of Deza’s moriscos broke that rule too. Shortly after arriving in spring 1608, the occupants of cells “C” and “M”—the latter located directly above the former—began to pass written notes back and forth through their windows by drawing them up and down along a string. They never explained how they acquired the papelejos on which they wrote, but they used charcoal mixed with oil for the ink. Perhaps they had followed Francisca de los Apóstoles’s example; she, in 1577, had written on “scraps of paper in which they gave her spices or other similar things.”

In the case of Deza’s moriscos, however, the breakdown of secrecy failed to provide a strategic advantage and instead undermined their determination to “stay tough.” The more the Dezanos knew about what other detainees were doing, the more pressure they felt to “let up,” for communication between prisoners did not materially improve their situation. Knowing where a loved one’s cell was located or the identity of his cellmates was, perhaps, immediately comforting, but eventually it fostered doubt because it increased the number of variables at play. It became more difficult to trust that everyone who could denounce would refrain from doing so. Thus, when an irate Juan de Hortubia
questioned Antón Guerrero’s courage for having confessed to Islamic fasts, Guerrero replied that eventually Hortubia would do the same. He would have to explain to the Holy Office how his wife, who knew virtually nothing about Islam before she married him, had become a Muslim. Any day now, she would tell the inquisitors that she had learned it all from her mother-in-law, “the best teacher in town.” “You,” he warned Hortubia, “will end up saying what I have said.”

This suggests that while the vaunted secrecy of inquisitorial jails was an ideal to be desired, it was not always pursued with vigor and nor was it essential to achieving the denunciations and confessions the Holy Office sought. Luis Miguel Sánchez Tostado, discussing Jaén’s tribunal, identified the absence of communication as the mechanism that “soften[ed] up the spirit of resistance” and caused “great uncertainty” during long periods of incarceration. In the case of Deza’s moriscos, rather the opposite proved to be true.

If the importance of secrecy—or more properly its absence—is one conclusion to be drawn from this depiction of life in the secret jails, a second bears on the role of deception. The Dezanos attempted to trick and deceive those around them to gain some advantage over the Holy Office. None of the schemes that were discovered proved successful; of those that actually fooled the inquisitors, the warden, and the informant, of course, nothing can be said. Yet, it was not the moriscos who perpetrated the biggest deception afoot in the secret jails of early seventeenth-century Cuenca.

Not only the inquisitors but the warden, too, knew Gabriel de León’s game and played along. Having been moved in August of 1608 into a new cell occupied by Antón Guerrero and Gabriel de Medina, de León found his new compañeros initially standoffish, but they nevertheless invited him to share their dinner that first night. De León turned down the offer. That evening, when the warden made his rounds, the moriscos reported that their new cellmate had refused their hospitality, which prompted the warden to suggest that de León must have thought their stew contained pork. At the same time, he indicated to de León—perhaps by winking or raising an eyebrow—that he knew the two moriscos avoided pork. The goal of the ruse was subtly to indicate to de León’s cellmates that he was a crypto-Muslim.

To be sure, the informant sometimes found himself in difficult situations. More than once, his fellow prisoners expressed doubts about his identity and loyalty. In order to maintain the deception, he had to perform actions that would have been unconscionable under normal circumstances. He made up Arabic-sounding prayers and taught them to the moriscos, glossing over in his report whether he joined the recitation when they taught him their prayers. On another day, having listened to his cellmates mock the Trinity and praise Mohammed, he not only had to resist dissenting but also to join in, “dissimulating with them and pretending to be a Moor like them.” Although he claimed to have avoided fasting during Ramadan by appealing to a weak stomach, de León remained a crypto-Christian pretending to be a Muslim among a group of crypto-Muslims.
pretending to be Christians. For fourteen months, he found himself part of early modern Spain’s most exclusive and marginalized sub-culture.

It did not last, of course. When, at the end of 1608, the Suprema learned of Gabriel de León’s activities it immediately demanded an end to the “fiction.” It was incommensurate with the truth and the Holy Office’s reputation. In other words, they found it incongruous to rely upon the same sort of deceptions that they believed the moriscos themselves employed. What gets lost in the laudable desire to avoid fraud is the fact that the informant’s methods seemed to be working. He brought to light information about wide-ranging networks of crypto-Muslims and Old Christian sympathizers that stretched from Barcelona to Seville and included the king’s greengrocer, a morisco friar, royal tax collectors, and an Old Christian publican who served meat on fast days and kept swine off the menu for his more discerning guests. None of this was otherwise revealed in the course of the trials.

Gabriel de León’s tactics struck at the heart of the notion that standard inquisitorial procedure was methodologically adequate to discern truth. By breaking the rules of the game, he showed that the rules themselves were merely conventional, not natural. Although historians have tended to depict Spain during its siglo de oro as self-confident in its baroque majesty, more recent appraisals suggest a Spain struggling (along with the rest of Europe) to discern true from seeming-true. In that light, Gabriel de León’s actions not only undermined the confidence of the Holy Office to do its work successfully but also reflected and contributed to a cultural epistemic crisis about the knowability of truth. A mere three months after Gabriel de León was relieved of his duties as an informant, and with many of the Dezanos still awaiting the conclusion of their trials, King Philip III resolved concerns about his moriscos’ trustworthiness by expelling them from their homeland. The Holy Office continued to function in Spain for more than two centuries, but Gabriel de León’s inadvertent challenge to the rules of inquisitorial procedure subtly shifted the game. For if the methods devised by the Inquisition to arrive at truth could not be trusted, then its decisions rested upon increasingly shaky foundations.

NOTES

1 Many of these are helpfully considered in “The Inquisitor as Anthropologist,” in Ginzburg, *Clues, Myths, and the Historical Method*, 156–64.
2 See, for example, the recent work of Lynn, *Between Court and Confessional* and Álvarez Délgado, “Juegos de estrategia en los tribunales.”
6 See the complete transcription of Valdés’s *Instrucciones* in Jiménez Montserín, *Introducción a la inquisición española*, 198–240.
7 Edwards, *The Spanish Inquisition*, 75.
8 Galván Rodríguez, *El secreto*, 33.
13 See Archivo Diocesano de Cuenca [henceforth, ADC], legajo [leg]. 361, 5131 (contra Ana Guerrera, testimony of María Hernández, May 14, 1604).
14 Ana first appeared before the inquisitors on July 19, 1607. She refrained from denouncing her parents until October 2 of that year. ADC, leg. 361, 5131 (contra Ana Guerrera, confession of the defendant, October 2, 1607).
15 No trial record exists for Gabriel de León in the Cuencan archives. Yet it is clear from his statements, which were included in the case files of other prisoners, that the testimony of witnesses was gathered against him, that he had been processed into the secret jails, and that he had participated in multiple audiences before the inquisitors. His case file could have been lost, damaged over time, destroyed accidentally, or removed by the inquisitors in exchange for his help.
16 ADC, libro 227, fol. 10r (Letter from the Suprema to the Tribunal at Cuenca, January 26, 1609). “Estando advertidos de que no se use mas de aquella ficcion de que el compañero de carçel de los quatro moriscos se finja seguir su seta para que se descubran a el porque no paresçen esos tratos desçentes a la verdad y reputacion del santo officio, i assi se lo advertireis al dicho preso y le apartareis de los dichos moriscos.”
18 ADC, leg. 364, 5159 (contra Antón Guerrero el Viejo, testimony of Gabriel de León, October 19, 1608).
19 ADC, leg. 364, 5159 (contra Antón Guerrero el Viejo; testimony of Gabriel de León; December 17, 1608).
20 ADC, leg. 364, 5159 (contra Antón Guerrero el Viejo; testimony of Gabriel de León; October 10, 1608).
21 ADC, leg. 249, 3369 (contra Luis de Cebea el Viejo, testimony of Gabriel de León, May 10, 1608). The bulk of Francisco de Cebea’s own trial record has disappeared (but see ADC, leg. 374, 5299). The denunciations made by Francisco against his family are recorded in his father’s trial records: ADC, leg. 250, 3383 (contra Luis de Cebea el Menor, testimony of Francisco de Cebea, April 21 and 22, 1608).
22 ADC, leg. 364, 5159 (contra Antón Guerrero el Viejo, testimony of Gabriel de León, October 8, 1608). “[Gabriel de León] uso de diversos medios y maneras para que lo dixesen y la principal era que encaminasen sus negocios al buen fin que les conbenia para salir de aqui y que entendiesen que el negar y encubrir a otras personas les avia de ser muy dañoso por que las demas personas que estavan pressos y particularmente sus mugeres y las demas personas que les tocaban que sabian lo que ellos lo avian dicho y confessado donde resultaria en cojerlos a ellos en mentira.”
23 ADC, leg. 364, 5159 (contra Antón Guerrero el Viejo, testimony of Gabriel de León, May 10 and August 21, 1608).
ADC, leg. 369, 5216 (contra Román el Romo, testimony of Gabriel de León, June 20, 1608). “A todos les avia dicho lo dicho dicho y que no aflojase nadie ... y que todo el mundo no aflojase sino lo dicho dicho y que todo el mundo tubiese tiesso.”

ADC, leg. 369, 5159 (contra Antón Guerrero el Viejo, testimony of Gabriel de León, October 11, 1608). “mirad que negueis que negamos nosotras y tened tiesso.”

ADC, leg. 364, 5159 (contra Antón Guerrero el Viejo, testimony of Gabriel de León, October 11, 1608). “A bisto y oyo que desde la carcel que esta encima de la suya an dicho a bozes por la bentana haziendo primero señas para que oyesen en su carcel deste, que todo el mundo tubiese tiesso por que todas negaban y el dicho Anton guerrero respondio una vez no ay sino entrar llanos por que no queda nadie en el corrillo.”

ADC, leg. 358, 5103 (contra Catalina Zamorano, testimony of Gabriel de León, October 11, 1608).

ADC, leg. 250, 3373 (contra Lope el Guerrero, testimony of Gabriel de León, November 28, 1607). “He pensado que des pues [sic] que me llame el Inquisitor decirle que no me acuerdo demas, para que entienda que pues he dicho de mis hermanos y de mi que no se de mas; que he infenando mi alma por descubrillos—y despues desto dixo, Juro a dios que si esotros dicen lo que saben o de otros tantos como yo he dicho que no ha de quedar cajon dellos en deza. Perdoneme Dios que me pessa de averlos descubierto.”

Miguel Ramírez, another of the original conspirators, also held fast to lo dicho dicho.

Presumably, the reason why so many members of the Guerrero clan quickly cracked was that they believed (correctly) that Ana Guerrera, the young morisca whose arrest had precipitated their troubles, had already denounced them. This placed them at a sharp disadvantage and drove them to confess their own guilt as well as to denounce friends and neighbors more quickly than some of the other detainees.

No information exists about whether the warden actually delivered these messages. ADC, leg. 250, 3373 (contra Lope el Guerrero, testimony of Gabriel de León, November 28, 1607). “Quisiera que este q[ue] pues tenia conocimiento con el Alcaide deste sancto officio le hablara para que diera abiso de su parte a Anton guerrero su hermano preso en las carceles que confessara para salir de aqui y no estar presoss tanto tiempo como este q[ue] lo avia estado y que lo mismo que avisara a lope guerrero su hermano y lope su sobrino y a francisca de Hortubia su muger y a cicilia montera su suegra y que para que los suso dichos creyesen que era verdad que les embiava aquel recado daria señas para todos ellos.”

ADC, leg. 250, 3373 (contra Lope el Guerrero, testimony of Gabriel de León, November 28, 1607).

ADC, leg. 369, 5216 (contra Román el Romo, testimony of Gabriel de León, June 21, 1608).

A physician and barber-surgeon examined Hortubia the next day, but she was pronounced dead of natural causes on February 3. ADC, leg. 368, 5196 (contra Cecilia de Hortubia, testimony of Gil Martinez, February 4, 1608).

Once de León learned of the deception, Gabriel de Medina asked him for advice on making his legs appear swollen and covered with sores. De León suggested that a mixture of quicklime and eggs would do the trick. ADC, leg. 365, 5165 (contra Gabriel de Medina, testimony of Gabriel de León, October 10, 1608).
37 ADC, leg. 365, 5165 (contra Gabriel de Medina, testimony of Gabriel de León, October 10, 1608).
38 ADC, leg. 364, 5159 (contra Antón Guerrero el Viejo, testimony of Gabriel de León, October 10, 1608). De León was able to provide the inquisitors with (imperfectly reproduced) lines from three Arabic prayers taught to him by his cellmates. These were among the prayers that Ana Guerrera had memorized and that Juan Guerrero had on his person when he was arrested. See ADC, leg. 367, 5180 (contra Juan Guerrero).
39 ADC, leg. 364, 5159 (contra Antón Guerrero el Viejo, testimony of Gabriel de León, October 10, 1608).
40 ADC, leg. 364, 5159 (contra Antón Guerrero el Viejo, testimony of Gabriel de León, October 11, 1608).
41 ADC, leg. 364, 5159 (contra Antón Guerrero el Viejo, testimony of Gabriel de León, October 13, 1608).
42 ADC, leg. 364, 5159 (contra Antón Guerrero el Viejo, testimony of Gabriel de León, December 17, 1608).
43 Galván Rodríguez, El secreto, 35–37.
44 García-Arenal, Inquisición y moriscos, 20.
45 It is likely that Gabriel de León’s relocation from cell “P” to “C” was prompted by the discovery of the communication device and that it precipitated the removal of two of the occupants in cell “C”: Lope de Deza el Mayor and Juan de Hortubia. In any case, the ploy appears to have come to an end before the informant arrived, for de León gave no indication that he knew about it. See ADC, leg. 362, 5142 (contra Miguel Ramírez, testimony of Román el Romo, March 20, 1610; testimony of Luis de Hortubia el Jarqinero, April 26, 1610; and Antón Guerrero el Viejo, June 6, 1610).
46 Apóstoles, The Inquisition of Francisca, 53.
47 ADC, leg. 364, 5159 (contra Antón Guerrero el Viejo, testimony of Gabriel de León, October 11, 1608). “Soldado, tu me diçes que soy de poco animo por aver confessado los ayunos. beras que tienes aqui a tu muger y que quando vino a tu poder sabia poco y tu madre la ha impuesto. y puesta aquí ha de decir lo que sabe que bien sabes que tu madre era la mejor maestra que avia en el pueblo. y la que mas sabia. y tu has de venir a decir lo que yo e dicho.”
48 Sánchez Tostado, Historia de las prisiones, 86.
49 ADC, leg. 365, 5165 (contra Gabriel de Medina, testimony of Gabriel de León, October 8, 1608).
50 ADC, leg. 364, 5159 (contra Antón Guerrero el Viejo, testimony of Gabriel de León, October 11, 1608) and ADC, leg. 362, 5142 (contra Miguel Ramírez, testimony of Gabriel de León, June 20, 1608).
51 ADC, leg. 364, 5159 (contra Antón Guerrero el Viejo, testimony of Gabriel de León, October 10, 1608).
52 ADC, leg. 364, 5159 (contra Antón Guerrero el Viejo, testimony of Gabriel de León, October 13, 1608).
53 See, among other recent works, Keitt, Inventing the Sacred; Sluvosky, Believe Not Every Spirit; and Shuger, Don Quixote in the Archives.
54 See Schreiner, Are You Alone Wise?
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Notes on Contributors

ANTONELLA FENECH KROKE is Researcher at the CNRS (Centre National de la Recherche scientifique)/Centre André Chastel in Paris. She is the editor of *L’histoire de Florence par la peinture* (2012)/The History of Florence in Painting (2013) and author of *Giorgio Vasari. La fabrique de l’allégorie. Culture et fonction de la personnification au Cinquecento* (2011). Current research interests, in addition to Vasari and allegorical language in Renaissance Italy, include painted and *sgraffito* facades in Renaissance Italy and the representation of games in early modern European visual culture.

ANDREAS HERMANN FISCHER recently completed his PhD at the Institute for Renaissance Intellectual History and Renaissance Philosophy at the University of Munich. He received a three-year scholarship from the German National Academic Foundation for his dissertation on the philosophical theories of play during the Renaissance, which was published in 2016 under the title “Spielen und Philosophieren zwischen Spätmittelalter und Früher Neuzeit.” In addition to his ongoing research on the history and philosophy of play, Fischer has published on the connections between early modern play and video games.

JOYCE GOGGIN is Senior Associate Professor of Literature, Film, and New Media at the University of Amsterdam. She has published widely on gambling and finance in literature, painting, film, television, and computer games. Her most recent work includes the forthcoming co-edited volume *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* and an article on Las Vegas in film entitled “Opening Shots and Loose Slots” for *Screen*. Her current research focuses on casino culture, Las Vegasization and public debt, gamification, toys and games, and the entertainment industries.

CHRISCINDA HENRY is Assistant Professor of Art History at McGill University, Montreal. She is currently completing her first book, *Playful Pictures: Art, Leisure, and Entertainment in the Venetian Renaissance Home*, which examines the role played by secular art, and painting in particular, in domestic sociability and recreation at the turn of the sixteenth century. Her work has been supported by fellowships from the Villa I Tatti, American Council of Learned Societies, Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, and Gladys Krieble Delmas Foundation, among others. She has published articles in the *Journal of the History of Collections* and *Italian Studies* and has a forthcoming article in *Renaissance Studies*. 
JESSEN KELLY is Assistant Professor of Art History at the University of Utah, where she specializes in early modern Northern European visual and material culture. She is currently preparing a book manuscript on the material culture of games of chance in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Her research has been funded by the Deutscher Akademischer Austauschdienst (DAAD) and the Samuel H. Kress Foundation, among others. Recent publications include essays on card games, jewelry, and costume in early modern Northern European art.

SERGIUS KODERA is Head of the Department of Cultural Studies at the New Design University in St Pölten, Austria and is Professor of Philosophy at the University of Vienna, where he received his doctorate in Renaissance philosophy. He has held fellowships at the Warburg Institute of the University of London and at the Italian Academy for Advanced Studies in America at Columbia University. Kodera has published on and/or translated works by Leone Ebreo, Giordano Bruno, Marsilio Ficino, and Giambattista della Porta, among others. His is the author, most recently, of Disreputable Bodies: Magic, Medicine, and Gender in Renaissance Natural Philosophy (2010).

ALLISON LEVY is an art historian with a specialization in the visual culture of early modern Italy. Her research focuses on representations of the body and performances of identity as well as the relationship between bodies and buildings. She has written and/or edited three books, on widowhood, masculinity, and sexuality. Current projects include cultural biographies of Palazzo Rucellai and the Medici Villa Ambrogiana. Her work has been funded by the Getty Research Institute, the National Endowment for the Humanities, and the American Association of University Women, among others.

PATRICK J. O’BANION is Associate Professor of History at Lindenwood University in St. Charles, Missouri. His research explores the role of religion in history, especially in early modern Spain. He is the author of numerous articles and The Sacrament of Penance and Religious Life in Early Modern Spain (2012), and editor of This Happened in My Presence: Moriscos, Old Christians, and the Spanish Inquisition in the Town of Deza, 1569–1611 (2017).

JESSICA MARIE OTIS is a Digital Humanities Specialist and Adjunct Professor of History at Carnegie Mellon University, Pittsburgh, where she works on Six Degrees of Francis Bacon—a digital humanities project that uses statistical inference to reconstruct the social network of early modern Britain. She obtained both her PhD in History and her MS in Mathematics from the University of Virginia. Her current research focuses on popular experiences of mathematics and cryptography in early modern England.

SERINA PATTERSON is a PhD candidate in the Department of English at the University of British Columbia. She has published on early modern monsters, games in the Middle Ages, participatory culture, and medievalism in video games, and is editor of Games and Gaming in Medieval Literature (2015). She is currently working on a book-length study on games and play culture in medieval England and France.
PATRICIA ROCCO is Adjunct Professor of Art History at Hunter College, New York and received her PhD from The Graduate Center, CUNY. She has published several articles on women artists, gender, and material culture, especially women’s work with textiles. In addition to her current research on popular prints, piety, and gaming in early modern Italy, she is completing a book manuscript on the visual culture of women’s virtue in early modern Bologna.

ELKE ROGERSDOTTER is a Postdoctoral Fellow in the Department of Archaeology and Ancient History at Uppsala University, Sweden. She has published widely on ancient play and gaming, social archaeology, and creativity studies, among other topics in connection with the Bronze Age Indus Valley/Classical Harappan realm. Her current research project is funded by the Swedish Research Council and focuses on urbanity and masculinity, as traced through material remains of game boards, in the late medieval city of Vijayanagara.

NHORA LUCÍA SERRANO is Visiting Assistant Professor of Literature at Hamilton College, Clinton, New York, and serves as an Executive Member of the MLA Forum on Comics and Graphic Narratives as well as an Elected Board Member and Treasurer of the newly founded Comics Studies Society. She was previously Visiting Scholar of Comparative Literature at Harvard University. Serrano has authored numerous articles on medieval visual culture and is co-editor of Curious Collectors, Collected Curiosities: An Interdisciplinary Study (2011). She is currently finishing her monograph on modernism and the myth of Arachne in the artworks of Remedios Varo.

EMILY F. WINEROCK is Visiting Assistant Professor of History at the University of Pittsburgh. Her publications include essays and articles on dance in early modern Europe, and she is currently at work on Reformation and Revelry, a book-length manuscript on the religious politics of dance. A scholar-practitioner, she also teaches Renaissance dance workshops, choreographs for theatrical productions, and is a co-founder of the Shakespeare and Dance Project (www.shakespeareanddance.com).

KELLI WOOD is Assistant Professor in the Department of the History of Art at the University of Michigan and a Postdoctoral Scholar with the Michigan Society of Fellows. She has recently conducted research on the relationship between art and games in the sixteenth century as a Fulbright Fellow at the Kunsthistorisches Institut in Florenz – Max-Planck-Institut and as a Samuel H. Kress Fellow at the Center for Advanced Study in the Visual Arts at the National Gallery of Art in Washington D.C. She is currently preparing a book manuscript entitled The Art of Play: Games in Early Modern Italy.

Index

References to illustrations are in **bold**.

Abbot, George 141
academies, and leisure concept 174–5
Academy of the Intronati (Siena) 174
Aertsen, Piet, *The Egg Dance* 32, **33**
Agamben, Giorgio 193
*alea* see *dice*
*Alea*
  - basis of 208–9
  - as disease 208
  - physiological explanation for 209
Aley, Charles 140
Alfonso X, El Sabio, *Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas* 7, 262, 263
  - chess in 269, 272
  - content 268
  - *convivencia* in 264, 268, 269, 272
  - cosmopolitanism 264, 266
  - as "mirror of princes" 267, 268–9
*Muslim Artisans Create Chessboards* **271**
  - perspectives [spell out] 269–70
  - play in 265
  - *Reconquista* in 269, 272–3
  - number seven in 269
*Two Men in a Tent Playing Chess* **272**
*Allegory of the Plague* (unknown artist) **50**
Alein, Thomas 233
Almeni, Sforza 68
Alsted, Johann Heinrich, *Encyclopedia* 126
Ancona
  - Trajan’s Arch 16, **17**, 21, 24
  - *View of Ancona* (Danti) 16, **18**
Andrews, Richard 87
Antinori, Lodovico 16
April Cards 195, 197
Aquinas, Thomas, St 145
  - on excessive play 206

*Summa Theologica* 205
Arbeau, Thoinor, *Orchésographie* 30, 36, 37, 39
Arcangeli, Alessandro, *Recreation in the Renaissance* 2
Ariès, Philippe & Jean-Claude Margolin, *Les jeux les jeux à la Renaissance* 2
Aristotle
  - and Phyllis **74**, **79**
  - works
    - *Economics* (attrib) 77
    - *Nicomachean Ethics* 205, 208
    - *Poetics* 73, 85
arithmetic
  - Aubrey on 132
  - textbooks 133–4
Ascham, Roger, *Toxophilus* 139
astrology, in lottery books 152, **153**, **157**
Aubrey, John, on arithmetic 132
Azzolini, Monica 86
Babington, Gervase, Bishop 141
Bachet, Gasper 136
backgammon
  - man and woman playing **61**
  - vulgarity, associations of 118
  - *see also* lurch
Bakhtin, Mikhail 173, 188
Baldini, Baccio
  - *Death and the Lovers* 80–81, **82**
  - *Garden of Love* **83**
  - *Phyllis and Aristotle* 79–80, **79**
Bargagli, Girolamo, *Dialogo de’Giuochi* 10, 20
etiquette 174
Game of Love 174
Game of Proverbs 174
Game of the Temple of Love 174
Game of Weights 174
Bargagli, Scipione, *I trattenimenti* 15, 174
Game of Devices 174
Game of the Gardener 174
Baxandall, Michael 12
Beddingfield, Thomas 233
*beffa* comic narrative 87
Bentivoglio, Lorenzo 20
Bentivoglio, Margarita 67, 68
Bernardino of Siena 50, 206, 210
Best, George 140
*biribisi* 9
Blanche of Castile, Queen 263
board games
  positional 222
  thematic 222
  use of maps 219
Bocaccio, Giovanni, *Decameron* 174
Boethius
  *The Consolation of Philosophy* 145, 154, 164
  on the Wheel of Fortune 147
Bollstatter, Konrad, lottery books (*Losbücher*)
  149, 151, 154
  textual arrangement 161
Bolzoni, Lina 16
Bone-Ace card game 138
Bosch, Hieronymous 74
Bourdieu, Pierre 117, 127
Bowes, Ralph 233
Bowes, William, *London* playing card 226
Bracciolini, Poggio
  Leonardo da Vinci, connection 77–8
  *Liber Facetiarium* 78
branles dances 39
  “Branle de la Montarde” 39
  “The Branle of Poitou” 39
  “The Candlestick Branle” (“Torch Branle”) 40, 42
  “The Hermits’ Branle” 40
  “The Horses Branle” 39
  “The Maltese Branle” 39
  “The Scottish Branle” 39
  “The Washerwomen’s Branle” 40
  see also gavotte
Brant, Sebastian, *Das Narrenschiff*, woodcut 54
Brescia 13

Brueghel the Younger, Pieter, *The Egg Dance* 34
Brunelleschi, Filippo 87
Bruni, Domenico 176
Bubble Cards 195, 196
  ambivalence 197
  applications 197–8
  narratives 198–9, 202n34
Burke, Peter 173

Caillois, Roger, *Les jeux et les hommes* 2
Calina, Barbara 11–12, 13, 15, 16, 22, 24
Camden, William, *Britannia* 229, 230
Camera Apostolica 172
canary (canario) dance 29, 37
Caravaggio, *The Cardsharps* 63
card games
  cheating at 63, 64, 65, 66, 68
  condemnation of 50–51
  earliest English reference 137
  images 50, 51, 52, 62
  popularity 49
  see also female card players
Cardano, Girolamo 131, 139–40
  cards see playing cards
cardsharps 63
Caroso, Fabritio 30, 37
  *Nobiltà di Dame* 40, 42
Carse, James P. 255
Castiglione, Baldassare, *Il Cortegiano* 10–11, 13, 23
gaming in 173
Castlemaine, Roger 141
Castronova, Edward 200
Ceccarelli, Giovanni 123
Cessolis, Jacobus de, *Liber de moribus hominum* 222, 223, 230
Chance
  vs Divine Providence 172
  and Fortune 145
  and gaming 139–40
  see also odds
chaturanga 221, 262
  see also chess
cheating see card games, cheating at
checkers (draughts) 121, 124, 127, 221
chess
  development 221
  early references 262
  in Iberian Peninsula 262–3
  in Islamic culture 262, 273n3
  in Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas 269, 272
  medieval representations 261–2
  see also chaturanga
chess game
  as poetic material 118
  Reconquista as 7
children, and gaming 139
choreographies, dancing 30
Churcyard, Thomas 141
Clayton, Martin 77, 80, 84, 87, 89–90
Cokayne, Karen 90
Coke, Edward 233
comedy 79
  Aristotle on 93n19
  Machiavelli on 93n22
Connolly, Daniel 147, 152
  convivencia
  and cosmopolitanism 263, 274n11
  function 275n26
  in Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas 264, 268, 269, 272–3
  as master narrative 267, 269, 275n26
  meaning 7, 263
  and Reconquista 264, 265, 267, 268, 269, 271, 272–3
  Spain 263, 264, 274n11
coranto dance game 37–9, 40, 42, 46
Cormack, Lesley 229
convivencia
  cosmopolitanism
  Alfonso X 264
  and convivencia 263, 274n11
Costa, Lorenzo 19, 21, 25
Cotton, Charles, on gaming 138
Court de Gébelin, Antoine, Le Tarot 192
courtship games 3, 29, 46
Croce, Giulio Cesare 172
Csikszentmihalyi, Mihaly 254
culture, and games 117
cushion dance 36, 42, 44
  description 43–4, 44–5
  status 45, 46
dance, meanings 29
dance games 3
  and behavior management 29
coranto 37–9, 40, 42, 46
  and sex 36
  types of 29
  and women's agency 45
  see also courtship games; pantomime dance games; social mixer dances
dance steps, pedalogue 37
dancing
  choreographies 30
  and drinking 31–2
  improvisations 29–30
  instruction manuals 30
  occasions for 31
  and play 2–3, 29
  single-sex groups 31
  on Sundays 31
  venues 31
  see also branles dances; Morris Dancing
d’Andrea, Giovanni 119
danti, Ignazio, View of Ancona 16, 18
darcy, Edward 233
de Brunes, Johannis, Emblem IV, cushion dance 44
de Bruyn, Frans 198
de Certeau, Michel 168
dee, John 134
delano-Smith, Catherine & Roger Kain 225
della Casa, Giovanni, Il Galateo 208
dell’Abate, Niccolò, Tarot Card Players 65
d’e’Mori, Ascanio see Giuoco piacevole
derrida, Jacques, The Truth about Painting 268
d’Este of Ferrara, Alfonso II 67
dice (alea) 119
  Church’s attempt to eliminate 172
  loaded 140
  in lottery books 148, 151
dice games 137
  dogs, images 56
  Dolce, Lodovico 23
dornau, Caspar, Amphitheatrum sapientiae Socraticae joco-seriae 126
  draughts see checkers
drinking, and dancing 31–2
Duval, Pierre, *Game of France* 230, 231

education, and mathematical games 132–7
egg dance 32, 33–4, 34
Eleanor of Aquitaine, Queen 263
Eleonora of Toledo, Duchess 9, 68
Elias, Norbert, *The Civilising Process* 119
Epicurus, *Letter to Menoicus* 209
Erasmus
  *Colloquies* 53
  on women 59–60

Fasolo, Giovanni Antonio, *Card Players* 66
Feigenbaum, Gail 63
female card players 3, 49, 138–9
  condemnation of 53, 57
  images 54, 56, 58, 59, 60, 64, 65, 66
*femina ludens* 3, 49, 52, 68
Fenech Kroke, Antonella 3
Ferdinand II of Aragon, King 7, 262
Fernando III, King 266
Fetherston, Christopher 31
finance, and gambling, connection 200
Fischart, Johann, *Geschichtklitterung* 118
Fischer, Andreas Hermann 6
Florimonte, Galeazzo 208
Florio, John, *A Worlde of Wordes* 118
flow concept, and play 242, 254
Fortune
  and chance 145
  and lottery books 156, 164
  Renaissance image 147
  see also Wheel of Fortune
Foucault, Michel 205
Foxe, John 140
Fracastoro, Gerolamo, *Syphilis* 117

Gabriel de Léon 7
galliard 29, 43
gambling
  addiction 122
  excessive 6
  and finance, connection 200
Pascasius Justus on 123
prohibition
  during religious festivals 172–3
  in Papal States 168
  and promiscuity 5
speculation, difference 5, 195, 200
as theft 208
see also gambling
Gambling Act (UK, 1774) 195
game boards
  abstract space representation 222
  materials 121–2
  size 222
  theoretical framework 241–2
  Vijayanagara 240–41, 246–52
  locations 247, 248–50, 252–4
  types 250–51, 250, 251–2, 252, 253
game sheets 5
“game of society” 117
games
  approved 174
  as aristocratic activity 9–10
  commercialization of 223
  of courtly origin 173–7
  and culture 117
  early modern discourse on 66–7
  epistolary 4
  finite/infinite 242, 255
  jail 7
list
*Arkham Horror* 223
*Candy Land* 223
*Carcassonne* 219
*Clue* 222
*Diplomacy* 219
*Game of Devices* 174
*Game of the Gardener* 174
*Game of Love* 174
*Game of Proverbs* 174
*Game of the Temple of Love* 174
*Game of Weights* 174
*Halatafl* 222
*Le Jeu de France* 230, 231
*The Legend of Zelda* 219
*Les Jeu de Dames* 221
*Lord of the Rings Online* 219
*Nine Men’s Morris* 221, 250
*Port Royale* 219
*The Prince’s Quest* 219
*The Secret of Monkey Island* 219
INDEX 329

Sorry! 220
Tetris 220
Ticket to Ride 219, 222
Tiger and Cows 250
The Wizard of Oz 219
World of Warcraft 219
see also entries beginning with: giuoco
in Middle Ages 221
and prophecy 188
of wit (giuochi inginosi) 13
see also board games; card games; letter game; parlor games
gaming
and chance 139
and children 139
Cotton on 138
and exuberance 241–2, 254
Gataker on 138
historical, approach to 242
in Il Libro del cortegiano (Castiglione) 173
legal limitations on 137–8
and mathematics 131, 137–42
odds, association 141
and probability 137, 144n40
and social formation 241
and social order 138
see also gambling
Garden of Love, imagery 80, 81, 83
Gataker, Thomas, on gaming 138
gavotte 43
geography, on playing cards see playing cards, geography on
Giovanna of Austria, Grand Duchess 68
Giovanni da Capistrano 50
preaching against games 52
gioco de rovesci 20, 21, 25
gioco del pellegrinaio 20
gioco del ritratto della vera bellezza 21–2
gioco della pittura 23, 24, 25
gioco della vera bellezza 25
gioco dell’hoste 12, 15–16, 24, 25
gioco dell’oca 9, 14
Giuoco piacevole (de’ Mori) 2, 10, 11–12, 24
alphabet feature 15
gioco dell’hoste borrowings 15–16
memory in 19
as paradigm 24
performing pictures in 15–16, 19–22, 25
setting 15
tavel features 15–16
Goa, trade with Vijayanagara 240
Goggin, Joyce 5
Goldsmith, Oliver 118
Golladay, Sonja Musser 272
Gombrich, Ernst 75
Gonzaga, Elisabetta 10, 19
salon 13
Gonzaga, Ferrante 9
Gonzaga, Vincenzo 11, 15
Gouyn, Olivier 6
Le mespris & contennement de tous jeux de sort 207
on play 207, 210, 212–13
Granada, Treaty (1491) 7
The Great Mirror of Folly 195, 197, 198
greed, and play 210
Gregory XIII, Pope 173
Grifoni, Ugolino 68
Guaninonius, Hyppolitus 119–20
Guazzo, Stefano, Dell’onor delle donne 53
Gueudet, Guy 109
Guicciardini, Francesco 4
see also letter game
Hall, John 132
Hargrave, Catherine 232–3
Harvey, P.D.A. 224
Henry, Chriscinda 3
Hilliard, Nicholas 132
history writing, and narrative 265
Holbein, Hans, Death and the Devil Strike a Player 51
Holy Roman Emperor, master narrative 267, 268
Horman, William, Vulgaria 139
Housebook Master 74
Huizinga, Johan 87, 149, 151, 265
Homo Ludens 2, 125
on play 261
on play and space 220
Iberian Peninsula
chess in 262–3
Estoria de Espanna o Primera Crónica de España 266, 267
identity, English
   and playing cards 232
   and Saxton’s Atlas 225

illusion, derivation 87

Imperator Hispaniae 266, 267, 273, 274n21

imprese (emblems), in parlor games 19–20

Isabella I of Castile, Queen 262

istoria concept 73, 78, 86

jail games 7

James IV, King of Scotland 139–40

Jamison, Kay Redfield 254

jetons (counters)
   image 133
   as play objects 132, 142

Juan de Esquivel Navarro, Discursos sobre el
   arte del danzado 30

Juan de Maona 9

Justus, Pascasius 6

Juul, Jesper 221

Karnataka 250

Karr Schmidt, Suzanne 147

Kelly, Jessen 5

Kemp, Martin 75, 84, 88

Kepler, Johann 126

Kersey, John 134

logistical puzzles 135–6

kissing dances 36, 43, 48n63
   see also cushion dance; gavotte

Klaj, Johann 117

Kodera, Sergius 4

Kwakkelstein, Michael 75

Langendyk, Pieter 198
    The Wind Traders 197

Law, John 195, 198–9

leisure concept, and academies 174–5

Leonardo da Vinci

Bracciolini, connection 77–8

comic narratives 3, 73, 91

A Man Tricked by Gypsies (Five
   Grotesque Heads) 73, 75, 76, 77,
   86–7, 87–90

A Satire on Aged Lovers (Grotesque
   Couple) 73, 75, 80–81, 85

Phyllis (or Campaspe) Riding Aristotle
   73, 74, 77–80, 88

on depiction of old women 90

palm reading, interest in 89

L’Estrange, Nicholas, Sir 140

letter game, Guicciardini/Machiavelli
   97–111

1st Letter 98–9

2nd Letter 99–102

3rd Letter 102–3

4th Letter 103–5

5th Letter 105–6

6th Letter 106–7

basis of 102

carnivalesque tone 98, 102, 106, 108, 111

couriers, significance 109–10

Lysander story 105–6

meta-textual elements 108

as political microcosm 111

purpose 97, 111

rules of the game 107–8

as social conflict 111

Leurechon, Jean, Récération mathématique
   136

Leuschner, Carl, Lorzius aleae ludus descriptus
   4, 117

dedicatory lines 121

Dido vs Aeneas game 121, 122, 123–5

see also lurch

Lily, George, map of England (1546) 225

London, on playing card 226

lottery books

astrology in 152, 153, 157

dice in 148, 151

disclaimers in 162

expanding market for 149

and Fortune 156, 164

images 148, 150, 153, 155, 157, 160,
   163

multiple perspectives 162

as playthings 5, 147

and sociability 156, 159

image 157

Wheel of Fortune in 149, 150

Lupron, Donald 141

lurch (lorzius) 4

etymology 118, 119

images 120

literary references 119
mechanisms 119
Passion/Reason contest 123–4, 125
popularity of 120
rule books 126–7
socializing role 120
virtues of 121
see also backgammon
Lyotard, Jean-François, The Postmodern Condition 267

McClure, George 12, 66
Machiavelli, Niccolò 4
Carpi mission (1521) 97–8
on comedy 93n22
Guicciardini, letter game 97–111
writings
I Discorsi 98, 103
Il Principe 98, 102
La Mandragola 100, 104
Macropedius, Georgius 118
Maerten de Vos, The Egg Dance 32, 34
Malynes, Gerard 234
Manetti, Antonio, Grasso Legnaiuolo 87
maps
in board games 219
and imaginary worlds 219
medieval 223–4
as narratives 223
as political statements 225
as potential places to know 219, 230
Marchand, Jean Jacques 110
marriage box (Tuscan) 84, 84
Martindale, Adam 136
masculinity, and primiera game 67
Massys, Quentin, The Ill-Matched Lovers 57, 58, 59–60, 60
Master of the Amsterdam Cabinet, Card Players 58
Matei-Chesnoiu, Monica 224
Matham, Jacob
A Man and Woman Playing Backgammon 61
Two Men Argue and Fight over a Game of Cards 62
mathematical games, and education 132–7
mathematics
and gaming 131, 137–42
as play 4–5, 131
see also arithmetic
Matthäus, Friedrich, Wider den Saufteufel 206
Medici, Catherine de’ 10, 23, 175
Medici, Cosimo I de’, Duke 68
Medici, Francesco I de’ 16
Medici, Isabella de’ 23
Medici, Lorenzo de’ 75
Medici, Pietro de’ 68
Mehl, Jean-Michel, Des jeux et des hommes dans la société médiévale 2
Meijer, C.H. Ph. 195, 197
Mellis, John, divination challenges 134–5, 135
merels game 221
Middlesex, on playing card 228
mind and body, Pascasius on 211
misogyny 3, 49, 53, 59, 90
Mitelli, Giuseppe Maria 5
Donna Superba 179, 181, 182, 183
Game of the Beloved with Her Lovers 175, 176, 176, 188
Game of Eyes and Mouths 176, 177, 177
Game of Husbands and Wives 169, 171–2, 171, 184
Game of the Land of Cockaigne 184, 184, 185, 188
Game of Professions 185, 186, 188
Game of Trades 185
Game of Truth 169, 169, 170, 188
gioco del blasone 20, 21
gioco dell’oca 168
New Game of the Turk, the German, and the Venetian 186, 187
pela il chiu 168, 185
Sad is that Home Where the Chicken Crows and the Cock is Silent 182, 183
The Unhappy Life of the Prostitute 178–9, 178
Women Often Have Long Dresses and Short Intellects 179, 180
Montagu, Edward, Earl of Sandwich 136–7
Morden, Robert 232
Morris Dancing 34–5, 35, 36
Muchembled, Robert 125
Murray, H.J.R. 272
A History of Chess 262
Nagel, Alexander 74
narrative, and history writing 265
Negri, Cesare 30
Norden, John 225
Speculum Britanniae 230
North, Douglass & Barry Weingast 195
Norton, Robert 134

O’Banion, Patrick J. 7
occultism, and playing cards 193–4
odds
and difference 140–41
gaming, association 141
origins of term 140
predictive use 141–2
probability, distinction 141
Ombre card game, in Rape of the Lock 194
Otis, Jessica Marie 4

Pacioli, Luca, De viribus quantitatis 89
Paes, Domingos, account of visit to
Vijayanagara 6, 240, 242–3, 245
form/content reading 242, 256
see also Vijayanagara
Paleotti, Gabriele, Cardinal 178, 188
palm reading, Leonardo’s interest in 89
pantomime dance games 37–40
see also branles dances; coranto dance game
Papal States, prohibition of gambling 168
Paris, Matthew 224
Park, Robert E. 254
Parlett, David 222, 223
parlor games (giochi d’ingegno)
collections 174–5
didactic function 22–3
imprese in 19–20
linguistic aspects 12, 24
in the salon 13–15
terminology 13
texts 10–11
women’s participation 23
see also giuoco piacevole
Pascasius Justus 60, 206
Alea sive de curanda ludendi in pecuniam cupiditate 122–3, 207–8
on excessive play 208
on gambling 123
on mind and body 211
Pasquin’s Wind Cards see Bubble Cards
Patterson, Serina 6
Pepys, Samuel 137
Peterson, Jon 220
Petrarch, Triumph of Love 78
Pino, Paolo, Dialogo di pittura 23
place, and space 220–21
Planck, Hans 126
play
books on 2, 206–8
and daily life 194
and violation of the Ten Commandments 212
and dancing 2–3, 29
Epicurean attitude to 209
evils of 210
excessive 6, 205, 206–13
Aquinas on 206
Gouyn on 207
origins 208–11, 214
Pascasius on 208
therapy 209, 211–13
and flow concept 242, 254–5
Gouyn on 210, 212–13
governmentality of 205, 206, 214
and greed 210
Huizinga on 261
and human nature 210
in Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas 265
mathematics as 4–5
need for 205–6
Paes’s account of visit to Vijayanagara as 256–7, 258
and space, Huizinga on 220
truth about 213–14
virtues of 209–10
see also gaming
Playford, John, The English Dancing Master 41, 42
playing cards
Alexander Pope on 191
Book of Thoth, connection 192, 193
as commodity 234
and English identity 232
English and Welsh counties on 226–9, 230–32
ethical issues 232

games
A Journey through Europe 235
New Geographical Game 235
Round the World with Nellie Bly 235

geography on 6, 226–32, 234–5
images 226, 228
text 229

import of, controversy 232
London on 226
Middlesex on 228
monopoly on production of 233
national characteristics 233
numerical significance 194
and occultism 193–4
origins 191–3
papal tax on 6, 172
state licensing of 233
ubiquity of images 191

plaything, meaning 1
playthings, lottery books as 5, 147
Pliny the Elder, Historia Naturalis 88
Pope, Alexander
Ombre card game, in Rape of the Lock 194
on playing cards 191
primiera game
and masculinity 67
winning tactics 68
probability
and gaming 137, 144n40
odds, distinction 141
prophecy, and games 188
Providence, vs Chance 172
Ptolemy, Geographia 223, 224, 236n23

queen, evolution of, in chess 262–3

Rabelais, François, Gargantua 119
Ravelhofer, Barbara 30

Reconquista
as chess game 7, 265
and convivencia 264, 265, 267, 268, 269, 271, 272, 272–3
in Libro de ajedrez, dados y tablas 269, 272–3
master narrative 267

Recorde, Robert, The Ground of Artes 133–4, 135

Riccio, Pier Francesco 68
Rich, Barnabe 142

Ringhieri, Innocenzio 15, 16
Cento giuochi liberali, et d’ingegno 10, 19–20, 174, 175
Game of Cities 175
Game of Death 175
Game of Fountains and Rivers 175
Game of the Gods 175
Game of Life 175
Game of Love 175
Game of the Philosopher 175
Game of Poets 175
Game of Wild Beasts 175

gioco della pittura 23
gioco dell’hoste 12, 15–16, 24, 25

Ritterhausen, Konrad 126
Robbe, Jacques 118
Roberts, Lewis, The Treasure of Traffike 234
Rocco, Patricia 5
Rogersdotter, Elke 6
Romanino, Girolamo, Tarot Card Players 64
Rouse, Robert 223–4
Rowland, Thomas 219
Rümpfen card game 127
Ryther, Augustine 226–7

Sachs, Hans 118, 119
Welcher en schon weyb pulen zvil 55, 56

Salen, Katie & Eric Zimmerman, Rules of Play: Game Design Fundamentals 221
Salman, Jeroen 197

salons
Elisabetta Gonzaga’s 13
furnishings 13
games in 14, 15

Santi, Sigismundo 4, 97, 100, 103, 104, 106–7, 109, 110
 Saxton, Christopher, Atlas, and English identity 225
Scaino da Salò, Antonio, Trattato del giuoco della palla 67
Schädler, Ulrich 119
Schiff, Jonathan 22
Schildo, Eustachius 6
on evils of play 210
The Devil of Play (Der Spielteufel) 206–7, 209
Schneider, Karin 149
Sergeant, John 141–2
Serguidi, Antonio 16
Serlio, Sebastiano, Libro d’architettura 16
Serrano, Nhora Lucía 7
sex, and dance games 36
Sforza, Ludovico, Duke of Milan 75, 80, 86
Short, John 225
Simmel, Georg 242, 256
Sixtus V, Pope 172, 173
Smith, Donald 220, 224, 225
Smith, William 225
sociability, and lottery books 156, 159
image 157
social mixer dances 36–7, 40–43
“Ballo del Fiore” 40–41, 42, 46
social order, and gaming 138
South Sea Bubble
dock of cards 5
plays about 195
see also Bubble Cards
space
medieval notion of 223–4
and place 220–21
Spanish Inquisition 263
speculation, gambling, difference 5, 195, 200
Spirito, Lorenzo
 Libro de la Ventura, frontispiece 157
 Libro delle Sorti 149
textual arrangement 161
Wheel of Fortune image 150
sprezzatura 9, 100
Stallybrass, Peter & Allison White 188
Stermole, Krystina 77
Stör, Niklas, Couple Playing Cards 56
Striker, Cecil L. 23
Stubbes, Philip 31, 36

 *tabula* game 221
Tasso, Torquato
 Discorso della virtù feminine e donnasce 67
 Il Gonzaga secondo overo del giuoco 67, 68
 Il Romeo overo del giuoco 66–7
Tempesta, Antonio 25
 January 9, 10–11
theft, gambling as 208

Thrower, Norman 225
Tijssens, Gijsbert 198
Titian, *Helle* 22, 23, 25
Toledo School of Translators 264
Trajan’s Arch, Ancona 16, 17, 21, 24
Tuan, Yi-Fu 220–21
Tuccio, Giulio Ascanio 126

van Houdt, Toon 123
van Leyden, Lucas, *The Card Players* 59
van Meckenem, Israhel 74
van Rensselaer, Mrs John King, *Prophetical, Educational, and Playing Cards* 192, 193
Vasco da Gama 240
Venediger, Alban
 Disputatio de attentatis 126
 Theoria & Praxis 126
Veneziano, Agostino, *A Grotesque Seduction* 85–6, 85
Vida, Gerolamo
 De Bombicum cura ac usu 117
 Seaccheide, Aeneid allusions 118
Vijayanagara
destruction 243
game play in 6, 239
Goa, trade with 240
Lotus Mahal Pavilion 244, 244
Mahanavami festival 243, 245, 246, 249
Paes’s account of visit 240, 242–3, 257–8
form/content reading of 242, 256, 257
as play 256–7, 258
zones 244–5
see also under game boards
Vinckenboom, Daniel, *The Thames at Richmond, with the Old Royal Palace* (attrib) 35
Vinta, Belisario 16
Vives, Juan Luis 119
volvelle 147, 165n16

Wallis, John 132
Weissberger, Barbara F. 262
Wenzel, Horst 108, 109
Wheel of Fortune 5, 145
Boethius on 147
image 146
in lottery books 149, **150**
ludic space 151
White, Hayden
  *Figural Realism* 265
  *The Content of the Form* 265
Wilkins, John, Bishop of Chester 142
Wilmot, John 43, 44, 45, 46
Winerock, Emily F. 3
Wingate, Edmund
  *Arithmetique made easie* 134
  *Ludus Mathematicus* 134
Wolf, Mark 232

women
  agency in dance games 45
  Erasmus on 59–60
  old, Leonardo on depiction of 90
  participation in parlor games 23
  playing cards see female card players
  see also misogyny
Wood, Kelli 2, 4

Yalom, Marilyn 262

Zollinger, Manfred 4