How did Renaissance Italians understand the future? This simple yet striking question is at the heart of Nicholas Scott Baker’s intriguing new book, *In Fortune’s Theater: Financial Risk and the Future in Renaissance Italy*. While the emergence of a new historical conception of the past and methods for studying that past is integral to definitions of the Renaissance, scholars know far less about the Renaissance relationship to the future. Baker argues that the idea of “an unknown and unknowable time-yet-to-come” cohered around the turn of the sixteenth century in the Italian peninsula (p. 1). This new Renaissance future was secular and rational, unpredictable, and yet responsive to human needs and demands, permitting those with the right skills and ingenuity and an appetite for risk taking to grasp opportunities (compare this to notions of a cyclical sense of time or the known future of Judgment Day). Not only did this understanding lay the foundations for modernist temporality, but it also shaped everyday possibilities for a wide variety of people. Baker builds his case through examples that claim to prioritize experience over meaning and cut across spheres of life to include humanist reflections, commercial practices, and even the everyday experiences of gamblers, showing that the way people think about the future matters precisely because it changes the way they act in the world and vice versa. While the book at times treads familiar ground, it ultimately creates a fresh synthesis by making connections between phenomena not often pictured together.

Baker asserts that the new sense and experience of the future was integral to commercial developments and laid the foundations for modern conceptions of time while being careful to maintain that multiple understandings of time and timing—both secular and divine—coexisted and intermingled. This multiplicity of time is one of the ways he separates his work from that of others (for instance, see Reinhart Koselleck) and is part of an attempt, he later argues, to decenter the Renaissance from progressivist narratives of European history. Not only is Baker uninterested in simple binary understandings of time (e.g., church vs. merchant time), but he also studiously avoids positing direct causation or comprehensive explanation. Instead, he prefers measured language to describe a “process of crystallization” (p. 4), an “increasing receptivity” (p. 14), “slow germination” (p. 14), or a “cumulative portrait” (p. 115). He locates a palpable shift in the cultural permeation of “time-yet-to-come” (*avenir* as opposed to *futura*) at around 1500, which coincides with three major historical developments: the European encounter with the New World, the outbreak of the Italian Wars, and the revelations of...
Epicurean physics. The first two series of events are given cursory mention, while the dissemination of Lucretius and a genealogy of humanists influenced by his work (including Bartolomeo Scala, Giovanni Pontano, Marcellio Adriani, Niccolò Machiavelli, and Francesco Guicciardini) are examined more carefully.

Baker’s trick of decentering the reader from traditional narratives plays out in the structure of the book, which begins by situating the reader in mid- to late sixteenth-century gaming and commercial contexts, foregrounding experience, before tracing changes in meaning to humanist, mercantile, and artistic developments starting as early as the fifteenth century (notably, Baker finds the earliest expressions of a new attitude toward the future in iconographic portrayals of Fortuna). While chapter 1 explores the emergence of a new print genre about play and games of chance and the author as self-styled expert in calculating risk and uncertainty, chapter 2 examines the everyday experiences of gambling and lotteries through legislation in Florence, Milan, Genoa, and Venice. Chapters 3 and 4 cover merchant correspondence and the issue of trust as a “problem of futurity” (p. 73) as well as the “vocabulary of futurity” (p. 90); in both cases, merchants encountering the problems of a vastly larger trading network developed expertise in managing uncertain futures alongside older understandings of soteriological and anticipatory time.

While the first four chapters examined understandings of the future derived from experience, chapters 5 through 8 focus more exclusively on the world of meaning, especially the ways humanists (chapter 5), merchants (chapter 6), and artists (chapter 7) thought about secular Fortuna and ultimately unraveled Fortuna from divine Providence (Boethius had integrated Fortuna into a Christian framework during the medieval period but the alliance proved uncomfortable). In chapter 8, Baker’s interest in wider cultural permeation prompts him to place figures like Alberti, Bracciolini, Machiavelli, and Guicciardini alongside Laura Cereta, who entertained her own musings on time and Epicurean physics in her letters. This commendable approach offers a glimpse of the ways historians can include women—who did not usually publish but who wrote many letters—in studies of intellectual change.

Most intriguing of all is the integration of gaming into a narrative about time and risk—whether or not one fully accepts the statement that “a modern, secular notion of the future—removed from ideas of Providence or fate—first manifested itself on the gaming table” (p. 35). Not only does Baker’s interest in gaming speak to our current cultural fascination with it, but his approach provides a window into experiences across social strata since Renaissance gamblers came from all walks of life. Perhaps unsurprisingly, gamblers were viewed differently according to their social status and gender: for elite males, gambling might have been seen as an effective test of character and a space to demonstrate honor, credit, and status while women or men of low social standing who gambled were more likely to be perceived as social menaces. Regardless, gambling was on the rise and, Baker asserts, provided Renaissance men and women with key experience in managing unknown outcomes.

The brief mention of the Italian Wars is a bit disappointing because one could make more of the connection between the increase in gambling and the massive influx of soldiers (notorious gamblers) into the Italian peninsula. Furthermore, the experience of decades of near-continuous warfare and regime change deserves more analysis simply because it must have played such a major role in shaping conceptions of risk and uncertainty and driving new behaviors. Much like the authors on gaming, military officers wrote treatises in which they proclaimed themselves to be experts and in which they discussed the invariability and unpredictability of human existence, the influence of Fortuna and/or Providence, and how to seize op-
opportunities in battle. The way new print genres—not only on gaming and war but surely on other topics as well—interacted and shaped conceptions of the future also deserves attention. Perhaps these comments ultimately serve as an endorsement of Baker’s work because they indicate how readers will be able to cultivate connections to other phenomena. Cultural change is difficult to pin down, but Baker’s example of turning ambiguity into argument and examining questions through new combinations of evidence reminds us that we still have a lot to learn from the Renaissance.

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