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Nicholas Scott Baker
In Fortune's Theater

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The modern concept of the past began in Italy during the Renaissance. Whether by periodizing earlier centuries as unlit and their own time as luminous or by narrating recent history by means of classical metaphors, Renaissance Italians thought deeply about time long ago. Certainly, the scholarly notion of the Renaissance as cultural rebirth rests on novel ideas about the classical past. However, as Nicholas Scott Baker's new book shows, Renaissance Italian artists, merchants, thinkers, and gamblers cared as equally about time-yet-to-come. Meticulously researched and wonderfully written, In *Fortune's Theater* reveals how Renaissance Italians added to an older, medieval understanding of impending time as prudential and soteriological a new concept of the future as unknown time-yet-to-come.

Everyone in Renaissance Italy had the future on their minds. Authorities in Genoa, Venice, Florence, and elsewhere legislated against overzealous betting on the future. Merchants filled their commercial correspondence with a lexicon of futurity and left behind diaries advising their heirs on the perils and potentials of future, speculative profits. Famed painters such as Caravaggio, Giorgio Vasari, Paolo Veronese, Parmigianino, and others manipulated the existing iconography of the figure of *Fortuna* into a moral allegory about unseized opportunity while an even larger group of anonymous petty artisans etched similar themes upon scores of everyday objects – *cassone* (marriage chests), woodcuts, medals, and engravings. And seemingly every Renaissance Italian intellectual fussed about the future. Petrarch, Dante, Christine de Pizan, Poggio Bracciolini, Leon Battista Alberti, Bartolomeo Scala, Laura Cereta, Giovanni Pontano,

Marcello Adriani, Bernardo Rucellai, Niccolò Machiavelli, Francesco Guicciardini, Luigi da Porto, Girolamo Rorario, Antonio Fregoso, Pietro Aretino, Giolamo Cardano, Baldassare Castiglione, Francesco Berni, and Torquato Tasso – all of them cared as deeply about time-yet-to-come as times they did about long gone.

Yet rather than supplant an older, eschatological sense of time, the new, Renaissance temporality coexisted with its medieval forebears, giving birth to a truly heterochronological age. It is precisely this messy view of Italian Renaissance futurities that Baker draws out so wonderfully over the book's eight body chapters.

The first half of *In Fortune's Theater* drops the reader into the emergent world of the future as unknown time-yet-to-come by focusing on individuals whom Baker cleverly labels «experts in futurity»: gamblers and merchants. As made clear in gambling advice books (chapter 1), civic gambling legislation (chapter 2), and merchant correspondences (chapters 3 and 4), gamblers and merchants by the mid-sixteenth century drew on their familiarity with games of chance and long-distance trade to claim expertise in the unknown future. Merchants, for example, developed a rich, varied vocabulary drawn from earlier, providential notions of the passage of time alongside novel ideas about the future as calculatable and commodifiable. «Ventura» (roughly chance, destiny, or good fortune), «occasione» (less opportunity, more occasion), and «rischio» (the unclear consequences of commerce) sat side-by-side with a language of divine omnipresence, a temporal mixture best captured in one of the most common statements found in merchant correspondences: «may God send ventura».

Such experts were themselves products of a far longer shift in thinking about the future that began a century earlier, a change that can best be observed through the transformation of the figure of *Fortuna*, the subject of the last four chapters of the book. Before the mid-fifteenth century, the figure of *Fortuna* existed within a Christian moral framework (chapter 5). Merged with the figure of Providence, the late medieval image of *Fortuna* lectured humanity on the futility of worldly goods and status, an edification best exemplified in the turning wheel of fortune. *Fortuna* asserted that the future was laid bare by divine revelation, time creaking forward towards one endpoint: the Last Judgment.

Yet from 1450 onward, the figure of *Fortuna* underwent a profound transformation in both text (chapter 6) and image (chapter 7). *Fortuna* lost her attachment to divine providence and fused instead with the language and imagery of the classical Greek *Kairós* (occasion or opportunity). While still a moral allegory, *Fortuna* now also cautioned against missed commercial or political opportunity in a future time unknown and unknowable. This layering of a new futurity and temporality with an older, soteriological understanding of the future culminated in the first decades of the sixteenth century (chapter 8) when multiple political and cultural events – the re-emergence of Epicurean atomism, the destruction of the Italian Wars (1494-1559), and the increasing knowledge of the Americas – catalyzed pre-existing concepts about the unknowability of the future into a coherent vision of *Fortuna* as understandable on a human scale.

That such new concepts of futurity cohered most succinctly in none other than Florence may strike some readers as overly convenient or even Baronian – e.g. just as Florence's fight for survival against the Milanese a century earlier spurred a revival of the Roman past so too did the city's struggle in the Italian Wars inspire a new generation to think fresh about the future. Yet Baker wisely avoids any tight teleology, making clear throughout that Renaissance Italians maintained multiple images of *Fortuna* in their minds simultaneously. Therefore, despite Florentines like Niccolò Machiavelli and Francesco Guicciardini both responding to the horrors of war by reconceptualizing the future in human terms – as determined by personal action – their contemporaries elsewhere on the peninsula such as Luigi da Porta, Girolamo Rorario, and Antonio Fregoso nevertheless continued to imagine the time-yet-to-come on an eternal, not human, scale. Baker's final chapter thus suggests the richness of further research on the diffusion of new notions of futurity across the peninsula and the wider Mediterranean in the second half of the sixteenth century. When it comes to the study of early modern ideas of time-yet-to-come, the future is bright.