

Divertimenti of the Italian Renaissance: Games of Wit and Ingenuity

JOSEPH C. ENGLISH

ELEANOR B. ENGLISH

St. Bonaventure University

Alfred University

During their leisure time, the people of the Italian Renaissance participated in varied divertimenti - the Italian term for diversions and pastimes. Although athletic sports occupied much of society's free time away from work, males and females were also engaged in other types of pleasing divertimenti such as dance, theatricals, choral and instrumental performances and "pleasing and amusing games." Four types of games were popular during this period: games of skill/ strategy - chess; games of chance - dice and knucklebones; games of skill and chance - backgammon and cards; and the games of wit and ingenuity - the forerunners of today's social and intellectual games of Twenty Questions, Trivial Pursuit and Charades.

Although discourse-type activities such as proverb capping had existed from a very early period, it was in the social academies of sixteenth century Italy that the basic construct of this genre of game was developed, refined and played mostly by the educated upper class. The social academies of Siena and Bologna appear to be the sites for the eventual evolution of the games. The first books written about these pastimes were authorized by three academy members. Girolamo Bargagli's **Dialogue On The Games That Are Played In The Evening Companies Of Siena** (1572) defined and classified games as games of jest, which awakened pleasure and amusement, played with a Leader or Master and no forfeits, and games of knowledge and invention that were played with a Leader or Master, a Judge and forfeits. The three parts of any game of this type were delineated as the Proposition which included a concise description of game play, the Action, and the Satisfaction which consisted of rewards and punishments.

Bargagli also detailed the responsibilities of the Leader, Judge and players. The Leader, who was given the sceptre or the garland of laurel as the symbol of authority, was to propose the most seemly game, teach it with a concise, clear proem and keep the game as entertaining as possible. The judge's function was to be a severe rather than a lenient official when adjudicating the play. Players should exhibit knowledge, wit, style and creativity as well as a lively interest while participating in the activity.

The games of wit and ingenuity were popular because they helped people forget their problems, albeit for a short time, during a period of almost constant warfare. One could also attain honor and fame on one's scholarship, inventiveness, and wit while playing the games which could facilitate admittance to the highest circles of society. While playing, the participants experienced pleasure, satisfaction and joy, ". . . they made them laugh and pass the time joyfully."