

**6th Gaetano Cozzi Prize for studies on the history of games, 2022**

GEORGE BROCKLEHURST

*Convivial Humanism:**Giovanni Pontano on Scholarship as Virtuous Play*

5th November 2022

**Citation**

George Brocklehurst's work focuses attention on one of the central cultural aspects of Italian humanism: games – recently brought to the public's attention by Peter Burke's monograph on play in Renaissance times. His starting point is a writer who is often overlooked by historiography, not least because he wrote in Latin: Giovanni Pontano.

The two key focuses of the author's analysis are, firstly, the concept of conviviality (*conviventia*), as developed by the Italian humanist in his works on moral virtues and published in the late 1400s; second is the notion of pleasure that can be experienced from social relations (*facetudo*) which, despite a certain difficulty in finding the right name for this, dominates the dissertation of the posthumously published *De sermone*. Pontano's vision is influenced by the discursive traditions of classical rhetoric and Aristotelian ethics, which he constantly strives to measure up to but which he wishes to distance himself from, putting forward the concept of conversational entertainment in a social setting among people who share a civil set of values and lifestyles.

Elaborating a detailed description of his sources and thanks to his familiarity with the extensive critical bibliography – which the author is undoubtedly familiar with, having undertaken his doctoral research at an institution such as the Warburg Institute – Brocklehurst places Pontano's concept within the framework of his biography and the crisis of the years of the Kingdom of Naples. He then digs deeper, interpreting it in light of the importance he detects in the author and the environment which witnesses his intellectual growth and which he, in turn, will strongly influence, for the pleasure he experienced from the company of his peers, from spending time virtuously and playfully together. In a setting like that of the Renaissance academies, marked by their distinctive anti-institutional informality. It is precisely for a 'société de gens de lettres', paraphrasing the recipient-aim of the *Encyclopédie*, that Pontano expounds on the apparently lesser Aristotelian virtue of eutrapelia, namely enjoying the delights of conversation with peers, a practice which values convivial friendship and gives space, and a remarkable margin of tolerance, to laughter.



For his analytical and philological skills and the clarity with which he examines Pontano's work, reiterating the importance of games in the lifestyle and beliefs of the Italian humanists, the Commission of the Gaetano Cozzi Prize has unanimously voted to award one of the two 2022 prizes to George Brocklehurst.

The Commission, consisting of the members of the Scientific Committee  
of *Ludica. Annali di storia e civiltà del gioco*:  
*Gherardo Ortalli* (Chairman), *Alessandro Arcangeli*, *Maurice Aymard*,  
*Élisabeth Belmas*, *Peter Burke*, *Piero Del Negro*, *Thierry Depaulis*, *John McClelland*,  
*Alessandra Rizzi*, *Bernd Roeck*, *Laurent Turcot*, *Manfred Zollinger*.

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ELEONORA GAMBA

*Il compleanno di un patrizio veneziano alla fine del xv secolo  
fra divertimento ed erudizione: la testimonianza  
del De ludo talario di Leonico Tomeo*

5th November 2022

**Citation**

The dialogue of the Venetian humanist Niccolò Leonico Tomeo, *Sannutus, sive de ludo talario*, is central to Eleonora Gamba's essay. Part of the *Dialogi*, which were published in 1524, was actually written between 1498 and 1505 and is set in a Venice on the verge of consolidating its new position both home and abroad. The work describes the birthday party of Marco Sanudo – senator, advisor and inquisitor of the Republic (as well as cousin of the famous diarist, Marino) –, organised for a group of friends in his aristocratic residence. After enjoying a lavish banquet, entertainment is provided for the guests to meet their different tastes. The 'scene' revolves around a learned dissertation on the origin of ancient games and, in particular, of the game of knucklebones given by Leonico, one of the guests, to satisfy the curiosity of the host who is celebrating his birthday. Making precise references to the Greek and Latin sources (and dwelling in particular on the names of the individual faces of the knucklebones and their scores), the author of the dialogue takes the opportunity to make a number of philological changes to a passage by Aristotle (from *Historia animalium*) on the subject but, more importantly (as Gamba points out) to disagree with the *nugae* of some translators and commentators who were all the rage at the time (from Teodoro Gaza to Domizio Calderini and Giorgio Merula).

The text is, first and foremost, an 'early example' of the interest scholars have always nurtured for ancient games, but also (it would appear) of civil conversation which, in those times, saw the involvement of distinguished contemporaries (such as Ariosto, Bembo, Castiglione...). Eleonora Gamba's study of the dialogue is comprehensive and to the point. First she devotes her attention to the guests, members of Venice's elite who were gaining recognition for their social standing, service to the Republic and scholarly fame. While the group spent most of its time between the University of Padua and the centre of Venice, it was nonetheless committed to humanism and transalpine politics (it is interesting to note that *Dialogi* is dedicated to Reginald Pole, future Archbishop of Canterbury and private secretary to Henry VIII).



Eleonora Gamba takes great pains to point out the philological expertise and philosophical interests of the author (which he would demonstrate in those same years in Venice during his Greek lectorship, a position which was supported, amongst others, by no other than Marco Sanudo). Her attention also extends to the references to games in the dialogue: from the common opinions of the partying group on the tolerance or disapproval of certain practices, to the pastimes enjoyed in private by noble Venetian men of the day (chess, dice, reading and even role-playing), and the evolution of the game of knucklebones in modern-day Venice (which is back in fashion, albeit as a children's game).

Lastly, Eleonora Gamba stresses how the dialogue shows the need to give games (and in particular knucklebones) the “dignity they deserve as a topic for study” to be conducted with methodological rigour: games (even though the author considered them a “frivolous subject”) and his reflection on them could become ‘acceptable’ as a pastime, a form of “stimulating entertainment” if they were “useful for something”. Scholarly dissertation (on games) could finally be included among the “divertissement of Venetian noblemen” in the 15th century.

For her analytical and philological skills and the elegance with which the work of Tomeo and the opinions of ancient games of some of the great Renaissance humanists are put forward, the Commission of the Gaetano Cozzi Prize has unanimously voted to award one of the two 2022 prizes to Dr Eleonora Gamba.

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of *Ludica. Annali di storia e civiltà del gioco*:  
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