to again request help to have her *Paternal Tyranny* published in France. Despite the difficulties she had in placing her work and her physical isolation in the convent, Tarabotti was clearly a full participant in the cultural life of Venice. In a letter to an unnamed correspondent, Tarabotti sends him some *bozzoladi* (a type of sweet) and accompanies her gift with excuses because she is unable to provide him with a copy of *Il corriero svaligiato*, a controversial work by Ferrante Pallavicino. As the editors observe, “given the nature of the work, it is notable that he should have turned to her, a nun, to obtain a work whose circulation was prohibited in Venice” (207). This raises the interesting question of how effectively nuns were isolated from the broader secular world following Trent.

The English edition of Tarabotti’s letters under review is of great interest not only because it sheds light on the author and her works, but on the cultural world of post-Tridentine Venice and Italy. Ray and Westwater do not limit themselves to what is in itself a precise and clear translation. Almost every letter is given an explicative note on the difficult archival work necessary to understand their deeper historical context, the interlocutors involved, and the many obscure references. *Letters Familiar and Formal* is a wonderful addition to the Toronto Series of “The Other Voice” and a rich and profitable resource for scholars and teachers of early modern history and women and gender studies.

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*Parlour Games and the Public Life of Women in Renaissance Italy.*

How long has it been since you exercised your mind with a good Game of the Amorous Senate? Or played the Game of Customs, in which participants “each had to say what good custom they would introduce and what bad one they would eliminate” (26)? These are only a few examples of the plethora of games popular in the salons of sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Siena and central to George McClure’s *Parlour Games and*
the Public Life of Women in Renaissance Italy. These and other contests of wit, described in several texts unearthed from that city’s Biblioteca Communale, allowed elite women the opportunity not only to act as arbiters, as Elisabetta Gonzaga had in Castiglione’s Book of the Courtier, but also to participate in debates, and in so doing showcase their erudition and sometimes surpass that of men. According to McClure, these playful battles of the sexes paved the way for Italy’s first female academy, the Assicurate (The Assured), which flourished from 1654 to 1704. Parlour Games will be of interest to scholars of vernacular literature, women and literary defenses of them, and early modern Siena, among others.

In the first chapter the author contextualizes his subject—several treatises written on gaming by Sienese authors—by broadly considering Renaissance theories of play, whose authors often sought to situate play as an intellectual rather than a base (and often sexualized) pastime, and one in which both men and women might succeed. As recent scholarship has shown, courtly women in cities such as Torquato Tasso’s Ferrara regularly exercised agency. In subsequent chapters, McClure narrows his focus to the dissemination and adaptation of courtly traditions of entertainment in Siena, where according to treatises by the brothers Girolamo and Scipione Bargagli on the gaming practices at the Academy of the Intronati, opportunities expanded for women of the urban elite. In this context, ladies from elite families such as the Piccolomini, Tolomei, and Cerretani could, according to Girolamo Bargagli, demonstrate “a certain boldness of mind” (23). Participation in contests of wit required not only boldness, but knowledge, both of romance works (whose focus on amatory themes some considered particularly relevant to women) and the classical canon. Other competitions, particularly fortune telling and emblem games, provided men a tableau for composing elaborate praises of women, complete with images and mottos. In his treatise, Scipione Bargagli allowed that women might also compose emblems to demonstrate “something of their singular thoughts” (105). After considering the various ways that gaming provided venues for the praise of women in general, and specific Sienese ladies in particular, McClure ends with the foundation in 1654 of the female Academy of the Assured, brought about thanks to women’s boldness and success at a game called “Governance of the Kingdom of Love.” After the
Assured’s brief reign, its members’ intellectual heirs contributed to the Arcadian Academy in eighteenth-century Rome.

A leitmotif to McClure’s discussion of play in Siena is its relation to the central political event of the sixteenth century: the 1552–55 siege of the city, which ultimately resulted in the city’s cession to their Florentine archrivals in 1557. According to various accounts, in the winter of 1553, Siena’s women joined the city’s men in readying fortifications. The alleged leadership of three ladies who carried flags with mottos described in one account of the siege prompts McClure to accept the conclusion of eighteenth-century Intronato and author Girolamo Gigli that “our Amazons” each carried “her own conceived device, explicated in amorous parties” (51). While it’s not clear (but certainly intriguing) that these women learned to be militant because of their practice at gaming, it is evident that the women’s participation in the siege became a favored motif in future play.

Borrowing inventively from the Decameron, Scipione Bargagli framed his Trattamenti in a time of catastrophe. Rather than telling stories in response to crisis, as did Boccaccio’s ladies, Bargagli recounts the story of three women who during the siege lifted the spirits of Sienese through the orchestration of martially themed parlor games. Tellingly, one siege game was the design of insignia, and McClure notes that the tradition of composing militaristic mottos and emblems for women continued. Later, Gigli would characterize this festive defiance by the women and the Intronati as “defense of the liberty of the mind” against the tyranny of the Florentines (160). Sienese resistance during the siege, combined with post-Trent anxieties over moral turpitude, may have prompted the Florentines to shutter Sienese academies in the aftermath of the war, but they could not stem the culture of play, which continued more or less unfettered, according to McClure, in organizations that called themselves courts, and perhaps attracted less ire because they were led by women.

The author situates his work as another answer to Joan Kelly’s oft-cited query about women and the Renaissance and refashions the cultural Renaissance as a longue durée in which the theories of play established in the sixteenth century reach their fruition for women only in the eighteenth century with women’s academies and women’s admission to male academies. As others have suggested before, traditional periodization often
does not function when considering developments in women’s and gender history. In his preface, McClure makes a compelling case for seeing the Intronati members such as the Bargagli as “feminist” champions of female virtue. Their texts on the theory and practice of gaming thus become a unique genre for considering the querelle des femmes, and ought to take their place in the context of other defenses of women from other Italian locales, courtly and republican. Clearly the male authors discussed here advocated a voice for women. However, as always, treatises on the nature of women are slippery as evidence. Did the men of the Intronati wholeheartedly champion female intellect, or did they seek to flatter female patrons who were the dedicatees of their works? Do these authors recount real instances of play, or fictionalized ones? In the Intronati’s competitions, did women exercise agency by formulating or selecting the games at hand, or merely respond to those created by men? Other than those who founded the Assured, did the women praised in these works deploy their voices beyond the liminal public/private space of the salon, as did their compatriots and contemporaries, a group of Sienese female poets brought to life in Konrad Eisenbichler’s recent *The Sword and the Pen: Women, Politics, and Poetry in Sixteenth-Century Siena* (University of Notre Dame Press, 2012)?

For this reader, the importance of this material lies less in what it can demonstrate about women and public life, as McClure’s title suggests, and more in what “these games tell us about the interactions of men and women,” as the author repeatedly observes (ix). In contrast to the oft-articulated but over-simplified picture of Renaissance elite life as completely divided into separate spheres, McClure’s material reveals the possibility of rich interplay, and perhaps intellectual friendship, between men and women. Even the book’s dust jacket, which features an illustration from an anonymous sixteenth-century work, shows exchanged glances and interactions between two women and a man that might suggest amorous play, verbal sparring in the midst of a parlor game, or both. *Parlour Games* advances our knowledge of the culture of literary entertainment in Siena and of both genders’ contributions to it.

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