1. Last year, when I was living in Toronto, I happened to visit the brand-new branch of the luxury food retailer Eataly. Once there, I discovered the three rules of Eataly's policy. The first says that the customer is not always right, and the second that Eataly is not always right. The last one affirms: "through our differences we create harmony". The Italian version places instead more emphasis – and more agency – on doubt: "From doubt our harmony is born". We could wonder why in the Italian version doubt plays such a central role, and where does the importance of doubt come from. I will argue that it was in the Renaissance that doubt became in Italy a fascinating cultural object, the catalyst for a series of discourses as well as a privileged tool to act in a growingly intricate reality.

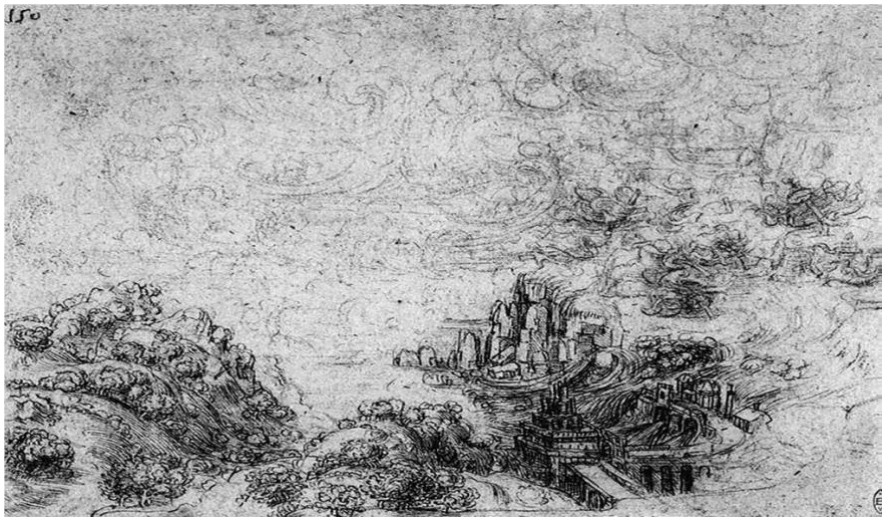
2. The inspiration for this research project originated from my encounter with numerous references to doubt in a variety of early sixteenth-century sources: dialogues, letters, poems, novellas, inquisitorial trials, manuals for confessors, religious pamphlets, visual sources. This elicited the question of whether the events that took place at the end of the fifteenth century and in the first decades of the sixteenth century affected Italians in a particular way that fostered reflection on doubt. While existential uncertainty and intellectual unrest in general were certainly not unique to the Renaissance, the unprecedented changes in the political, religious, and cultural order happening from the late fifteenth century onwards may have produced a specific response, possibly accelerating already ongoing processes. The French invasion of 1494, the travels of exploration, the outbreak of the Reformation, affected the whole Europe but Italy in particular. Italy began to lose its prestige and its role as wars ravaged its territory. These events caused a general sense of puzzlement, as we can gather from a letter the writer Anton Francesco Doni (1513–74) sent to the bishop and humanist Paolo Giovio (1483 or 1486–1552):

S'io mi ricordo bene, e' son pure assai pochi anni che venni in questo mondo [...], e ho veduto cose così stupende! Io ho memoria come se fosse stato ier sera, tanta negligenza in soccorrere Rodi che si perdé, veduto le ferite che ha ricevute la cristianità nella rotta e morte di tanti cristiani sotto Pavia, con l'esser prigione un sì fatto re di Francia; non fu ancora un sacco di Roma sì orribile, e si stette tanto rinchiuso il pontefice: parvi che queste due fussero onorate? La peste che seguì poi e la fame; non ho io veduto l'assedio d'una Fiorenza e un essercito sì grosso e un dominio sì rovinato; poi (che aviene di rado) una incoronazione dell'imperatore a Bologna, con tanta maestà per mano d'un sì gran Papa? Ma torniamo a' danni: il diluvio che venne a Roma per il Tebro, non fu egli un altro sacco? Certo se noi diamo fede alle Scritture Sante, noi siamo vicini alla fine di questa macchina, che saran guerre, pestilenze, fame, terremuoti e gran segni.

If I recall well, it is only a few years ago that I came into this world […], and I have witnessed such amazing things. I remember as it was yesterday evening the remarkable negligence in helping Rhodes and its loss, I have seen the wounds suffered by Christianity in the defeat and death of so many Christians under the walls of Pavia, when the king of France was made prisoner; was not the sack of Rome so horrible, when the pontiff remained captive for so long: don't you think that these two events were extraordinary? And the ensuing plague and famine; haven't I seen the siege of Florence and the ruin of such a large army and state; then, which seldom happens, the crowning of the emperor in Bologna with such majesty, at the hands of such a great pontiff. But let us return to the disgraces. The deluge that came in Rome because of the Tiber, wasn't it another sack? Sure enough, if we are to trust

the Holy Scripture, we are close to the end of this world machine, which will be wars, plague, famine, earthquakes and mighty signs.

Doni then lists then all the astounding political events that shook Italy, Europe, and the Mediterranean, recalling also natural catastrophes such as earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, and the troubles and divisions of the Roman Catholic Church. The last section of the letter is a long description of a flood that hit Florence and the countryside, causing damages to the crops, the houses, the mills, leading peasants and merchants to their ruin. One is tempted to compare this passage to Leonardo da Vinci's drawings of natural catastrophes now in the Royal Collection at Windsor, those visions of "homicidal forces meant to perpetually erase the very concept of life." **[fig. 1]**



Leonardo da Vinci, *Deluge*, Windsor, Royal Collection

Doni interrupts his description of the flood to observe that "Così noi di mano in mano n'abbiamo delle bastonate dal cielo e non ce n'accorgiamo." It is almost a blasphemous statement that seems to convey the inability of making sense of a reality too complex to handle, affecting us with unforeseen disgraces and blows. The historian Francesco Guicciardini had voiced a similar anxiety in an August 1525 letter to Machiavelli, in which he wrote, possibly referring to the political context, that he had nothing of importance to report. He added,

however: “et credo che ambuliamo tutti in tenebris, ma con le mani legate di dietro per non potere schifare le percosse.” This sense of being sleepwalkers in an unpredictable reality and the sense of looming danger was probably more than a metaphor to early modern Italians. Besides, we should recall in fact that what we call ‘reality’, the object of our visual perception, was in the early modern time a highly problematic entity. While physical and psychological factors could hinder sight and therefore the perception of reality, a number of other factors, ranging from magic to visions, prodigies, miracles, enchantments, apparitions of spirits and demonic delusions contributed to making the boundaries between reality and illusion at best shadowy and porous. Those were the ‘vanities of the eye’, in the words of Stuart Clark, which made the distinction between real and illusory, or if you like between wake and dreams, a hard and at times seemingly impossible task.

3. The context that I tried to sketch, to which one should certainly add several other factors and circumstances, allows us to better understand the appearance of a series of discourses on doubt. When we talk of early modern doubt it is hard not to think of Descartes’s *Meditations on First Philosophy* (1641). This work describes doubt as a quintessentially solipsistic experience, a sort of mental experiment carried out in the secret of one’s chamber. The opening gesture of the *Meditations* is in fact one of retirement: “I have withdrawn into seclusion.” From within the boundaries of his seclusion, Descartes will accomplish his purpose to “attack the very principles that form the basis of all my former beliefs,” so that the “whole structure” of knowledge can be “utterly demolished.” Descartes’s exercise leads him to his famous and uncanny hypothesis that “some evil spirit, supremely powerful and cunning, has devoted all his efforts to deceiving me.” Because of this evil spirit “there is nothing […] of which it is not legitimate to doubt.” In fact – I am of course oversimplifying

here – this preliminary moment of hyperbolic doubt leads to the construction of Descartes' new epistemology and to a new metaphysics.

I would like to stress instead the "social" dimension that doubt had in Renaissance Italy. Doubt became a cultural object in itself, rather than a state of mind or a solipsistic emotional or intellectual experience, when it entered the public sphere. One of the questions that drove my research was whether early modern Italians were especially exposed to doubt. I believe this was indeed the case, and that this could happen through discourses but also via visual experiences. Doubt could in fact be represented in public spaces, either civic or devotional, in the form of allegories or of stories of doubt. Around the end of the 1520s or the beginning of the 1530s, for example, Michelangelo Buonarroti wrote an allegorical poem in which he provided an allegorical description of doubt. According to Michelangelo:

Doubt is depicted armed and crippled,

and moves around by jumping, like the locust,

quivering all the time by his very nature,

just as a marsh reed will do in the wind.

"Doubt is depicted" (*si figura*): there is no mistaking that Michelangelo is talking of how doubt is or should be represented in painting. The fact that it is described as lame and armed alludes to its nature, which is both destructive and unstable. I was not able to find any examples of this kind of representation, but it is certainly interesting that Michelangelo's description of doubt is quite negative – a sort of unstable character that goes around carrying weapons, an outlaw of sort.

This seems to be at odds with a certain Florentine tradition that connected doubt and justice. I am referring to the episode of the so-called doubt or incredulity of Thomas, the moment when Thomas voices the desire to touch the body of the resurrected Christ to ascertain its reality. From the late fourteenth-century in Tuscany Thomas's "inquisitorial touch" came to be perceived as a positive attitude. As such, it was often depicted "near the entrances of Tuscan courthouses," reminding "jurors of the necessity for evidence." Franco Sacchetti (1332/ 1334–1400) wrote in 1377 a series of tercets for a lost fresco of *Doubting Thomas* in the Sala dell'Udienza (where public hearings were held) in Palazzo Vecchio in Florence.

The text reads:

Primi. Toccate il vero com'io e crederete

ne la somma Iustizia in tre persone,

che sempre essalta ognun che fa ragione.

Secondi. La mano al vero e gli occhi al sommo cielo,

la lingua intera, ed ogni vostro effetto

raguardi al ben comun*e* sanza diffetto.

Terzi. Cercate il vero, iustizia conseguendo

al ben comune, la mente intera e franca

perch'ogni regno sanza questo manca.

Touch the Truth as I do, and you will believe

in the absolute Justice of the Trinity

which always exalts each person who sits in judgment.

Direct your hand to the Truth and your eyes to heaven,

and all your speech and your every deed

to the common good without exception.

Search for Truth, Justice will result;

Direct your whole and free mind to the

Common good,

Because without this, a government is deficient.

As it has been observed, these lines represent a precise commentary on the now-lost image of doubting Thomas; in doing so, they turn the original religious meaning of the episode into an entirely civic one. In this context, the experience of doubt is a crucial moment in civic life, the moment that must precede judgment and assent to truth. In addition, one should recall that the Tribunal of the Mercanzia had commissioned to Andrea del Verrocchio a bronze version of the *Incredulity of Thomas* to be placed on an external niche of Orsanmichele in Florence.

Andrea del Verrocchio, *Incredulity of Thomas*, Florence, Museo di Orsanmichele; Florence, Church of Orsanmichele, exterior

As Glenn Most suggests, Thomas "functioned as the patron saint of the mercantile courts, justifying the importance of the principle that one must test carefully before pronouncing judgment." Thomas was thus a central figure in Florentine civic and public devotion: his incredulity was less a moment of skepticism than a reminder of the importance of fair decisions in justice and trade.

4. These examples suggest that in the Renaissance doubt was neither an experience pertaining entirely to one's interiority nor purely a result of philosophical speculation. Rather, it had often a public dimension. Displayed in frescoes in sacred and civic buildings it reminded beholders of the importance of fair judgment and of the complex dialectic between faith and believing, certainty and incredulity.

Nonetheless, public spaces were connected with doubt also in a more troubling way. In a time of expansion of the printing press, and of accelerated circulation of news, especially in the city of Venice, the manipulation of information was becoming a pressing issue. Between the piazza and the palace there lies a space packed with false information either stemming from or directed against the prince or the government. Scholars such as Sandro Landi in his *Naissance de l'opinion publique dans l'Italie moderne* or Filippo De Vivo in his *Information and Communication in Venice* have reconstructed the intricacies of the circulation of early modern information, especially in the second half of the sixteenth century and in the seventeenth century. This is a time of passage in which forms of more or less democratic power give way to forms of absolutistic control, with the prince exerting a stronger grip on the public sphere. That the information coming from the palace was not trustworthy – and that newsletters and newspapers were not reliable – was part of the rise of the skeptical crisis of the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as Brendan Dooley has argued in his *Social History of Skepticism*. The historian Marc Bloch, analyzing the role of fake news in the First World War in a series of short articles written in 1921, suggested that because of the pervasiveness of censorship, soldiers in trenches deemed each piece of news untrustworthy, even when it happened to report the truth. This gave way to forms of communication belonging to the pre-printing press world: oral communication produced cycles of legends, myths, fake news. In some ways, this holds true also for the early modern age: one could compare Bloch's reflections to Montaigne's essay *Des boiteux*.

The Florentine Giovan Francesco Lottini, in one of his *Avvedimenti civili* (1574) wrote:

Le cose finte et non vere le quali si spargono tra i popoli prendono forza per due cagioni: et per colui che finge et per gli altri che le ascoltano. Colui che le finge per poter meglio essere creduto fugge di dire cose che possono essere

ritrovate in un subito. De gli altri a' quali son finte, una parte le crede et credendo le ridice et fa credere a molti, un'altra parte mostra di crederle et se ben gli torna con queste muove contro chi regge et le va con nuove ragioni accrescendo et perciò coloro che governano, tutto che sappiano che ciò che si dice sia falso, bisogna nondimeno che pongan mente se coloro che le hanno finte et quelli altri che hanno mostrato di crederle ne possin ricever utile et quando sia così tener quel conto della finzione et provedervi come fosse cosa ben vera.

Invented and fake things which are spread among people find the cause of their force in both the person who builds the lie and in those who listen to it. In order to be more easily believed, he who builds the lie avoids saying things that can be swiftly found out. Among those to whom lies are told, some believe them and because they believe them, they repeat them and contribute to have them believed by a large number of people. Others just pretend to believe them and if they see an advantage in them, they turn them against the rulers and add to them new reasons. Because of this, rulers, although they are aware that what is said is false, nonetheless should reflect whether those who invented these lies and those who showed to believe them can get something useful out of them. If this is the case, they should give thought to this fiction and act as if it were true.

In this complex game of appearances reality disappears from sight altogether. Already in the mid-sixteenth century, I found the signs of a rising consciousness of manipulated information and of fake news, something that must have contributed to increase suspicion and doubt. A poem on fake news by the writer Mattia Francesi lampoons those who, in the piazza, "discorron Turchi, Italie, e Spagne e France / Armate, libertà, guerre, unioni", making fun of "Nuove che non le sa chi le racconta", noting that "Perché la cosa mai non si

ridice / Com'ella sta". These inventors of news, Francesi adds, never mention "chi portò, chi le scrisse, o l'autore" and not only they circulate them orally, but they put them down in writing. News, Francesi concludes, "cose son da Imbasciadore" and for those who occupy prominent places in the government, not for commoners.

Also at the beginning of the 1550s, Anton Francesco Doni, mused on false information in his work *I marmi*. In this work Doni stages conversations on a number of topics between private citizens, including historical characters. In one of these dialogues, he has his characters reflect on the political use of distorted information. After recalling recent extraordinary events, such as the appearance of a new isle, or that of a monster in Germany, the characters talk about the truthfulness of newsletters, which are often counterfeited. At this point, one of them claims that if he were a ruler, and his people were in dire straits for some reasons, he would have newsletters circulating giving hope to the people. These lies should not come directly from him, however but from unnamed "other people". In case of a famine, for example, the ruler should circulate newsletters saying that somewhere it is raining corn. Also, one of Doni's characters remarks that "newsletters from far-away lands are the delight of commoners". In these early texts we see the dawning consciousness of the possibility of manipulating information, as well as a reflection on the political use of distorted news. We may assume that such consciousness was not confined to restricted circles of humanists but originated from widespread assumptions. Certainly, voicing such concerns in literary works in the vernacular contributed, somewhat circularly, to reinforce them. Therefore, when painting the landscape of doubt in early modern Italy, we should keep in mind also this crucial issue, assuming that doubt could play a defensive role. If people, commoners in particular, delighted themselves in newsletters, predictions, and letters carrying stories from remote lands, they could also be aware that rulers could, and often did tamper with them.

7. If doubt permeated to such an extent the public sphere, it is no surprise to find forms of sociability centered on, and revolving around, doubt. Sometimes this sociability was real, sometimes largely fictional. In all cases, however, it pointed to gatherings of men and women who met to discuss their doubts in different subjects. The term 'doubt' is certainly ambiguous, for it can be a synonym of 'curiosity, question' but also point to more radical ways of questioning official narratives. Sometimes these meanings are conflated and seemingly innocent curiosities usher in more serious questions. In all the examples that I will discuss, however, doubt is the object of works in the vernacular that address a potentially large readership. None of them is technically a philosophical treatise, none of them requires a humanistic background. In one case, as we will see, doubt emerges from a divination game designed to entertain men and women with questions on everyday matters.

Around 1550 a gentleman from Brescia, Fortunato Martinengo (1512–52), founded an academy which he called *dei Dubbiosi* (the Doubtful). The academy was short-lived, as was Martinengo himself: he died two years later and so did the academy. Martinengo was born into one of the most prominent families in all the Venetian Republic and one of the most steadily involved in religious dissent. He was himself a man deeply engaged in the religious debates of his time. This portrait by Moretto reveals a good deal of Martinengo's psychology.

Despite the opulent setting and the antiques displayed around him, the count shows a melancholic attitude, reinforced by the gesture of resting his cheek on the palm of his hand.

Moretto da Brescia, *Portrait of Fortunato Martinengo*, London, National Gallery

Scholars hypothesized that Martinengo was mourning the loss of his beloved wife, Livia D'Arco. His poems reveal much of this same melancholic attitude. The Accademia dei Dubbiosi gathered intellectuals active in Padua and Venice, although it had strong ties with the kingdom of Naples. Only two works can be connected to the academy with certainty. Of particular interest is the first, a *Lettura* (A reading) by the polygraph Girolamo Ruscelli on a love sonnet in praise of the noblewoman Maria d'Aragona (1552). The work aims to prove women's perfection while also explaining the "Platonic ladder" for ascending from earthly love to spiritual contemplation. The work is seemingly an exercise in Neoplatonic philosophy. Yet, its opening declares that it will deal with the "Alto veramente, et sopra ogni altro importantissimo dubbio" concerning the crooked nature of mankind. We know that the academicians discussed about love, Petrarch's poetry, and the *querelle des femmes*. Whether they took their discussions to a deeper level, addressing more pressing religious issues, as the inclinations of some of them could suggest, remains unknown to us. It is sure, though, that Martinengo's intellectual background was rooted in a culture

wherein doubt played a central role, as testified to by the works by his friends Sperone Speroni and Daniele Barbaro. Fortunato Martinengo's relationships included a long-lasting friendship with Ortensio Lando, a master of mid-Cinquecento doubt and an intriguing and utterly elusive figure. Martinengo features in many of Lando's works, as do many of the people gravitating around Martinengo and the Dubbiosi. For this reason, it is not too far-fetched to consider some of Lando's works as virtual academies ideally complementing the real Academy of the Doubtful. I would like to single out two of Lando's works in particular. The first is the *Lettere di molte valorose donne* (Letters of many valorous women, 1548, and 1549) and the second is the *Quattro libri de dubbi* (Four books of doubts, 1552, lacking the fourth book, and 1556, complete).


QVATTRO
LIBRI DE DVBBI
CON LE SOLVTIONI
A CIASCVN DVBBIO
ACCOMMODATE.
LA MATERIA DEL PRIMO
E' NATVRALE, DEL SECONDO
è mista (benche per lo piu sia Morale)
del Terzo è Amorosa, & del
Quarto Religiosa.
CON PRIVILEGIO.
IN VINEGIA APPRESSO GABRIEL
GIOLITO DE FERRARI,
ET FRATELLI.
MDLII.

Ortensio Lando, *Quattro libri de dubbi*, Venice, Giolito, 1552

Scholars are divided as to the real authorship of the *Lettere*, which are exchanged by 181 women of generally high social standing. Although the most plausible hypothesis is that the letters are Lando's invention, he may have drawn on original material. While the historical identity of many of the women

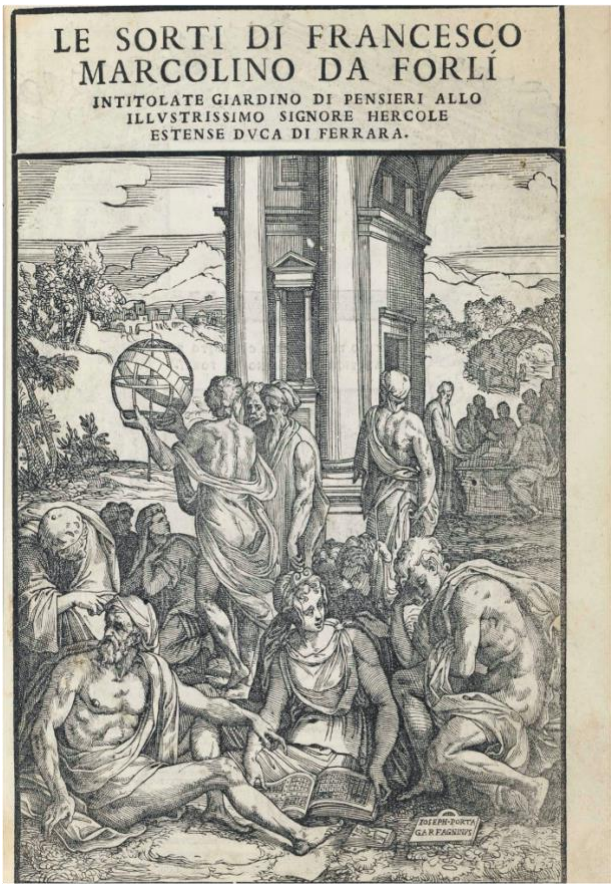
involved in these literary exchanges is beyond dispute, that of others is less sure. Lando seems here to endorse conflicting ideas, resorting to his style based on doubt and paradox to cover the traces of his beliefs. Meredith Ray, building on Paul Grendler's intuition, has stressed that Lando's insistence on arguing in the text from both sides of the same issue serves a double purpose: to ridicule humanistic rhetoric, and eventually "to cast doubt on the importance of the question." Lando capitalized on the growing importance of the *querelle des femmes*; on the role that women assumed in reformed circles; and on the appetite of the print market for collections of letters. Lando's collection of letters revolves around real, partially real, or imagined networks of women which often coincide with Lando's own networks. The exhibition of sociability is key in Lando's works. Even if most letters are not followed by an answer, they are nevertheless parts of an on-going dialogue. The result is that of a kaleidoscopic conversation touching upon doubts in several matters, from love to married life, from art to religion, from the superiority of women over men to ancient history and erudition.

Whatever we make of Lando's fiction, we cannot but notice the importance that he gives to a form of sociability revolving around doubt. Doubt serves several functions, denoting curiosity towards love or matters of erudition; the state of mind of those who are facing dramatic personal choices such as conversion; and, of course, the oblique attack on official narratives.

In the case of the *Four books of doubts*, Lando is cleverly using a new and catchy title for a work rooted in an old genre, the so-called book of problems. He is the first one to use "doubts" instead of "questions" or "problems" on the frontispiece. The word "doubt" contains layers of intriguing intricacy that competing words do not possess. The book of problems as a genre traditionally goes back to the (pseudo)-Aristotelian tradition of the *Problemata* and the *Secreta secretorum*. The contents usually considered medical and scientific matters traditionally overlooked in lofty treatises. Lando extended the realm of

problems covered by these works to ethics and religion. A gifted writer, Lando introduced some novelties in the genre pointing to a form of sociability revolving around doubt. In the 1556 edition, the printer Giolito addresses the reader with a short letter in which he claims that the four books are a sort of spiritual journey, moving from love and sensuous things to arrive "Contemplatione di cose alte e divine". It is the same trajectory followed by Ruscelli's *Lettura*, but in the case of Lando's work the philosophical content is more apparent than real. Certainly, the answers to the doubts contain "grandissimi secreti e bellissimi avvertimenti," but these are "possibili a far parere un huomo savio et accorto ancor che non fusse molto pratico ne gli studi di filosofia o di Scrittura." The ideal reader is less interested in achieving inner wisdom or solid knowledge than in finding a shortcut to brilliant social conversation. In fact, things are more complex than Giolito believed or wanted us to believe. Lando creates a labyrinth where different characters often ask the same question, receiving different, if not opposite answers. In doing so, Lando plays with a corpus of received knowledge, showing its contradictions and its weaknesses. Second, he is presenting the reader with a *mise-en-abyme* of his work: in a work of doubts, the reader is often in a situation of doubt, unable to choose among two equivalent options. What we read are, however, not disembodied answers and questions, but (allegedly) real questions asked by real people, identified by their name and (often) their social rank by the author, Lando himself, who often intervenes in the text as "I." There are dozens of people asking hundreds of questions, and to all of them Lando seems to have an answer. Readers must have probably been under the impression of taking part in some academic gathering, sitting among the public of a virtual assembly of doubters. If the speakers of Lando's works belonged to the elites, his readers could potentially come from all social classes, provided that they had some education. Democratizing a quintessentially elitist institution such as an academy was probably a by-product of Lando's strategy that transformed doubt, even when potentially disruptive, into a social game.

Doubt is central also to another game, a proper one this time. Francesco Marcolini's *Le sorti, o sia giardino di pensieri* (The chances, or a garden of thoughts, 1540; reprinted with variations in 1550) is one of the best known *libri di ventura* or *libri di sorti*, divination games.



Francesco Marcolini, *Le sorti […] intitolate giardino di pensieri*, Venice, Marcolini, 1540

These games allowed players to delight in the different paths of fortune, providing them with the thrill of its inconstancy and with the illusion of controlling it, thanks to the combinatory rules of the game. The book of *Sorti* is a game of fortune in which a series of images are matched with oracles written by Ludovico Dolce.

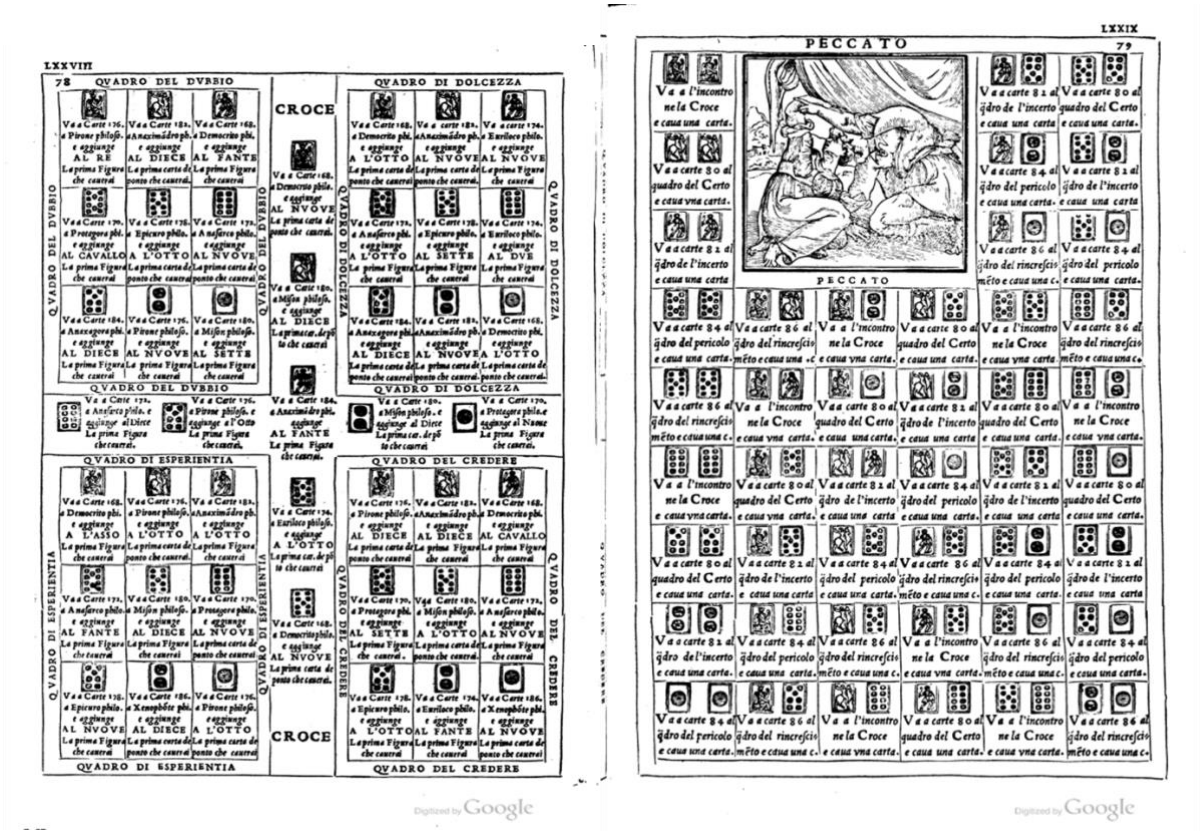
The *Sorti* displays a lavish frontispiece by Giuseppe Porta showing philosophers and astronomers disputing among ruins. In the foreground, we

see a young man represented according to the iconography of melancholy while a smiling young woman is sitting next to him and holding a half-open book, the *Sorti* itself, inviting the young man to look at it.

Entering the symbolic "garden" of Marcolini and playing his game of chance will help the young man to exorcise his own melancholy, taking delight in the cultural project underlying the work. In fact, in front of the two young people we see a deck of cards. This detail breaks the barrier between the image and the reader, who is invited to glance through the book and take part in the conversation and in the game.

Games of chance are based on a series of crossroads from which different stories originate. The main mechanism of these works aims to show that from the same point one can reach different answers, and the same answers can apply to different questions. We can thus say that doubt is brought directly into the structure of the work, as its very essence. On a more exterior level, doubt is ubiquitous in the responses to the questions asked by players.

The *Sorti* contains a series of fifty allegorical images of virtues and vices, and fifty images of ancient philosophers. Each allegory is displayed on a page associated with four moral categories, or *quadri*, shown on the facing page and divided by a "cross".



In the 1540 edition, doubt is one of the four categories associated with the allegory of Sin, together with experience, sweetness, and belief. In both editions the player could reach the *quadro* of doubt only from the allegory of Fear (*Timore*). Doubt was thus associated with sin and fear. The allegory of Sin has a prominent sexual connotation, as it shows an old man who seems to reach for a woman's genitalia, as if doubt were somehow connected with a form of violation. If so, doubt could be identified, as is often the case in the mid-sixteenth century, with an excessive will of knowledge, a violation of the boundaries set to our understanding. The *Sorti* displays a pessimistic view of existence, in which appearance and reality only rarely and randomly match. There seems to be no divine or providential plan guiding our actions, and if there is one, it remains unfathomable to us. Things are not as they seem and neither are people while faith and justice seem to have abandoned this earth and peace lies in a remote and most uncertain future. Doubt is not only an intellectual practice but a pragmatic habit of self-defense against the blows of Fortune and the delusional nature of reality, as many of the responses suggest.

Among those attributed to Anaxarchus, for example, we find the following two (implausible as the first is):

A me piace quel credo di Margute,

Ch'era utile e sano; e spesse volte

Il non creder ad altri è gran virtute. (XXXIII, 30)

Il creder, figlio, spesse volte nuoce.

Se vuoi viver secur, *non creder nulla*,

Io te 'l dico gridando ad alta voce. (XXXIII, 33)

I like that Margutte's creed

Which was useful and healthy: and oftentimes

It is a great virtue not to believe to others. (XXXIII, 30)

Belief, my son, is oftentimes harmful.

If you want to live safely, *do not believe in anything*,

I tell you this shouting it out loud. (XXXIII, 33)

Two further answers, attributed respectively to Eurilochus and to Anaximander explicitly lay out a program of radical doubt wherein incredulity becomes a form of self-defense against the pitfalls of existence:

Anchor che a *sacra Dei* ti sia giurato,

Dubita sempre, e vivi cautamente,

E a questo modo non sarai ingannato. (XXXIV, 16)

Il prestar fede altrui pericoloso

Fu sempre giudicato; e tu se m'ami

Mostrati sempre incredulo e dubbioso. (XXXVIII, 19)

Even if someone swears on the sacred God

be always doubtful and live cautiously,

And, in this way, you shall never be fooled. (XXXIV, 16)

To trust people was always judged

Dangerous: and if you love me

Be always incredulous and doubtful. (XXXVIII, 19)

8. Crucially, then, my claim is that a history of doubt in Renaissance Italy should not simply be conflated with an intellectual history of skepticism. In sixteenth-century Italy doubt appears to be a flexible and effective tool with which one can intervene on a complex and rapidly evolving reality. In the first decades of the sixteenth century doubt becomes the object of a number of discourses and descriptions per se. No longer exclusively connected to individuals experiencing it, doubt turns into a cultural object in its own right. Such a new object must be dissected and examined in all its aspects in order to

make the most of it and, at the same time, to prevent some of its dangerous consequences. Can early modern doubt still teach us lessons?

Compared to our early-modern ancestors, we are more advanced in the political use of doubt. Raising doubts toward intellectual authority, against political opponents, against science has become crucial in the new populist politics. In Italy in the last decades we have witnessed the systematic use of doubt to delegitimize teachers, researchers, intellectuals, and prepare the coming to power of certain political groups. On the other hand, we tend to respond by opposing 'facts' and 'certainties' to manipulated knowledge. Doubt, however, more than facts, requires one to be active, to be creative, to make experiments in critical thinking. If there is something that our early-modern ancestors can teach us is that doubt, and not certainty, is an instrument of self-defense. Acquiescence to facts, or to their non-existence is probably the major risk of contemporary society. I would like to recall an article titled *Kompromat and the Danger of Doubt and Confusion in a Democracy* that came out in 2017 on the *New York Times* on the leaked dossier concerning the alleged ties between former President Trump and Russia. Its author, Amanda Taub wrote:

By eroding the very idea of a shared reality, and by spreading apathy and confusion among a public that learns to distrust leaders and institutions alike, kompromat undermines a society's ability to hold the powerful to account and ensure the proper functioning of government.

Kompromat, the uncontrolled spread of compromising information fosters doubt, and doubt erodes the spaces of democracy. On the other hand, opposing 'facts' to 'doubts' is simplistic –if not dangerous – and if this pandemic has taught us one thing, it is the weak nature of 'facts.' Doubt can be the sign of a problem, but also the means to engage with the problem. Like the early moderns, we could probably re-build a form of sociability based on doubt. After

all, if disinformation is a “fog” as Taub put it, early moderns teach us that doubt is a young man who walks in the night holding a lantern **[fig. 8]**.

‘Dubbio’, in *Iconologie ou la science des emblemes, devises, etc. […] par J.[ean] B.[audoin]*, t. I, Amsterdam, Adrian Baakman, 1698, nº 43

It is not for me to say where this lantern can lead us, and how: I am sure, however, that early modern doubt has much to tell us about our current condition.