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Barbaro, Francesco. *The Wealth of Wives: A Fifteenth-Century Marriage Manual*. Ed. and trans. Margaret L. King

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An extra round of English-language editing would have addressed the occasional lapses of spelling and phrasing, but the writing is generally clear and effective and a pleasure to read.

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Barbaro, Francesco.

The Wealth of Wives: A Fifteenth-Century Marriage Manual. Ed. and trans. Margaret L. King.

The Other Voice in Early Modern Europe: The Toronto Series 42. Toronto: Iter Academic Press / Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, 2015. Pp. xv, 146. ISBN 978-0-8669-8540-6 (paperback) US\$31.95.

The Venetian nobleman Francesco Barbaro wrote *The Wealth of Wives* for his friend Lorenzo de' Medici in 1415, on the eve of Lorenzo's wedding. Barbaro's book was neither the first nor the last treatise of the age that sought to lay out the characteristics of the ideal wife for a well-born young man in Renaissance Italy. The most widely-known discussion of the Renaissance family today is Leon Battista Alberti's *Della Famiglia* (1430s). That may change with the publication of this new edition of Barbaro's work by Margaret L. King. Her translation of the original Latin text, with careful attention to earlier translations into Italian and English, gives a new generation of scholars access to Barbaro's incisive mind as well as his acute rendering of his world and its values. His achievement is enhanced here by King's excellent introduction, in which she demonstrates how *The Wealth of Wives* both reflected and challenged ideas about women and their role both as wives and mothers in Renaissance society.

Born in 1390 to a prominent Venetian family, Barbaro was only twenty-five and unmarried when he wrote *The Wealth of Wives*. Though Barbaro dedicated his treatise to Lorenzo de' Medici, he wrote the work with a broader audience in mind: his social and cultural contemporaries, and their wives. His connections to a group of prominent young men—Florentine and Venetian, versed in humanist thought—helped to frame his discussion of women's roles in the context of both ancient and Christian values, as well as the need of his contemporaries for a true partner in the domestic economy. The result is a series of descriptions and prescriptions that both reflect and push forward Renaissance

notions of wives and mothers. Particularly significant is his portrayal of women as active partners, which, King argues, is one of Barbaro's most original contributions to a broader discussion of a woman's role within the family and, by extension, society at large.

Barbaro's work is divided into two sections: the first treats a young man's selection of a wife; the second concerns that wife's duties and ideal qualities. In the first section, Barbaro's main concern is that his audience of young men fully grasp the significance and consequences of their choice of wife, not just for their marriage or even their family but for the good of their class and, by extension, their social and political world. Marriage is the cornerstone of society, so a young man must choose a spouse wisely. But what is a wise choice for Barbaro? Not the focus on a bride's wealth, which prevailed at the time and which Barbaro condemns reservedly. He acknowledges the importance of a good dowry, but lays emphasis on a prospective wife's virtue. Better a virtuous wife than one "laden with gold but devoid of probity" (74). King argues that it is this virtue that Barbaro considers to be the true wealth of wives (24).

One of the most original and surprising aspects of Barbaro's argument—promoting female virtue as the most critical aspect of a prospective wife's appeal—is that he defends this position by assigning the most influential role in a child's life to the mother, rather than the father. Barbaro asserts that children will draw from their mother's character, and be formed by it in a variety of ways: by her heritage (the nobility of her birth), and by her moral strength, as she first nurtures and then raises them. Further, he again privileges personal character and comportment over lineage: noble blood is important, but can be easily squandered by immoral behaviour: "if this innate virtue is not realized in action, they will be judged harshly by all, and know that they have degenerated from the ancestral standard" (79).

This emphasis on a woman's character remains a central theme for Barbaro in his second section, which addresses women's duties as wife and especially mother. Barbaro asserts that a wife should be both a companion and an obedient helpmate to her husband. However, it is as a mother that she is fully realized, as she takes on the responsibility of transmitting all manner of virtue into her child. Nourishing her children first with her blood and then with her milk, the well-chosen wife will go on to nourish them both intellectually and spiritually as they grow. Thus, "once their children have grown past infancy, mothers will need to commit much thought, care and energy to guide them to

excel in qualities of mind and body” (122). To be sure, Barbaro’s work reflects the values of his class and the richness of his humanist education and circle. But King also highlights the significance of Barbaro’s emphasis on a woman’s character, rather than merely her wealth and/or lineage, and of his elevation of mothers to the centre of the business of child-rearing.

King’s introduction is a superb companion to her lucid translation of Barbaro’s text. Of nearly equal length to the treatise itself, the introduction provides an essential context for understanding the importance of Barbaro’s achievement on multiple levels: as a humanist text, as a contemporary account of Venetian patrician values and marriage practices, and as an aspirational portrait of an ideal wife and mother. Any student of humanism or Renaissance society will find this volume an excellent companion to, or substitute for, Alberti’s treatise.

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Britton, Dennis Austin.

Becoming Christian: Race, Reformation, and Early Modern English Romance.

New York: Fordham University Press, 2014. Pp. xi, 259 + 2 ill. ISBN 978-0-8232-5714-0 (hardcover) US\$55.

In this fascinating exploration of early modern representations of non-European conversions to Christianity in poetry and drama, Dennis Austin Britton provides an innovative and insightful discussion of the role the Church of England’s baptismal theology played in linking notions of race with those of religion. *Becoming Christian* examines the way Protestant authors and translators adapted the motif of “infidel conversion” within romance—a motif that traditionally supported the erasure of difference within Christian society and that originated in an erotic attachment between a racialized other and a Christian. This study thus offers an important contribution to discussions by Daniel Vitkus and Jane Hwang Degenhardt concerning European anxieties over conversion and its role in identity formation in Renaissance England. According to Britton, this linkage between religion and race in Anglican discussions of baptism is rooted in their comparison of the sacrament to circumcision—God’s covenant with Abraham and his nation, the Israelites. This analogy between the two rites of initiation,