

## AN EARLY PRAISE OF ITALIAN TAROT IN THE 16TH CENTURY

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For the many players who for centuries considered the tarot pack only as a game tool, the representations on the cards had probably a rather indifferent meaning. However, both the figurative arts and the rhetoric/literary ones have enriched them, sometimes in a favourable way, mostly in a fearsome one. In particular, starting from the 18th century, the tarot, which until then had remained essentially unmodified, began to assume the strangest features and meanings. Subsequently, many different cultures and religions from ancient Egypt to mediaeval Europe were taken into account in order to interpret each card and the whole sequence of triumphs, resulting in several pseudo-scientific or pseudo-historical descriptions. This whole process has been recently treated in remarkable detail in the fundamental treatise *The Game of Tarot* by M. Dummett, (London 1980) so that it is not necessary to review here the known facts and documentations. In particular, it has been rightly stated that the aspect of most modern tarot cards does not correspond to the initial situation, which, as the fresco on the cover of the above mentioned book demonstrates, was compatible with more agreeable environments.

Nevertheless, the very first literary source, i.e. the often quoted manuscript of the 15th century described by Steele, has a wholly negative approach, merely confirming the existence of a possible interpretation in critical terms right from the beginning of the game. However, that contribution is very important, not only due to its antiquity, but also since it provides an order for the triumphs (type B, according to Dummett's classification), an interpretation for each card, and moreover an attempt to interpret the whole sequence too, as a progress toward Hell, the adequate destination for every inveterate player. This progress is indeed not logical enough, since Death and Devil are inserted in the middle of the sequence, as remarked, for example, by Rosenfeld in *Archiv für Kulturgeschichte* 52 (1970) 65-94. Unfortunately, the other old literary sources known to represent the same type B order of the triumphs are only ordered lists of the cards for different aims and without any explicit interpretation either of the cards or of their sequence.

I have recently found a much more detailed and systematic ancient account of the tarot cards, and their meanings in a reasonable sequence, which is instead based on a positive approach to the tarot. The cards are described as useful indicators of what is to follow, and, in cases when the single image cannot be directly commended, the card is useful all the same for reminding us what to avoid in our life. Of this text I have already found two different manuscript copies, without unfortunately any indications of author or date. In both cases they appear as separate chapters in codices containing historical and political documents of the second half of the 16th century. The whole subject matter refers mainly to Rome, but also to Vencie. The two manuscripts appear both of the 17th century, on the basis of the handwriting and paper, and, concerning tarot, they report practically the same text, which occupies about 20 leaves in folio.

One is preserved in the University Library in Bologna and the content of the codex, Nr. 1072 (in which the treatise on tarot is part F), is listed in A. Sorbelli *Inventario dei Manoscritti delle Biblioteche d'Italia Vol. XIX*, Forlì 1911, pp. 116-7. The second is the last treatise in codex G. Capponi 24, to be found in the National Central Library in Florence. This codex, and its contents, had also been indicated in a printed book: C. Milanesi *Catalogo dei Manoscritti posseduti dal Marchese Gino Caponi* Firenze 1845, p. 244. In both cases, we are in the presence of copies written by amanuenses, and the first assumption that we can suggest on the date of the original draft is the second half of the 16th century, in agreement with the rest of the reported matter. The provenances of the codices are, respectively, from the library of cardinal Filippo Monti – which

was moved from Rome to Bologna in 1754, soon after the death of the cardinal – and from the Nani library of Venice.

The content of the treatise on tarot is explicitly indicated in the lengthy heading of the Bolognese copy, “*Discorso perché fosse trova/to il Giuoco, e particolarmente/quello del Tarocco, dove/si dichiara a pieno/il Significato di tutte/le figure di esso/Giuoco*”. Thus, a veritable speech, recited by some authoritative literary man in some public ceremony or gathering and preserved due to its appreciation by listeners.

Among several speeches and court documents the treatise on tarot may appear out of place (and in the Florentine codex it is indeed the last one). However, it is a veritable treatise of the late Renaissance, full of examples taken from the classical literature and history. As a matter of fact, about three-fourths of the text are of erudite matter, compatible with a scholarly level and probably as required at the time in order to obtain any approval and/or diffusion. It may be mentioned that one of the first treatises on Minchiate, that due to Brunetti, two centuries later, is of a similar kind, with many “Allegorical Notes for the studious youth” inserted among the technical parts. Here, the quoted personages are mainly of ancient Rome and known episodes of their lives are reported in order better to illustrate the meaning of the cards or the bad effects of excess in passions, luxury, greed, and so on. In particular, there are described such exact details of several Roman banquets that one should not find great difficulty in detecting the source, due to the exceptional kinds of foods offered in unexpected quantities: red mullets’ livers, peacocks’ brains, parrots’ tongues, six thousand morays, and so on. Another recurrent object symbolising luxury or power is the pearl, used for adornment but also, by Cleopatra and by other personages, dissolved in vinegar and simply drunk.

From the very beginning, the text is presented as an original contribution. It is at once stated that three games are the most adequate for man: chess, tarot and ball. The game of tarot may be considered as the best of them all since it is most similar to everyday life. It is thus all the more surprising that it has not been taken into account by scholars and poets, unlike the two other games, so that no commendable description of it exists.

The author gives also an answer to the problem of the etymology of the word itself. It may be recalled that, the *Invettiva* by Lollo stated explicitly that Tarocco had no etymology. The actual proposal is an original one, as far as I know, among the many suggested, considering a derivation from Greek with the meaning of savoury and piquant food. Of the whole text we are taking into account here only the technical parts, without examining the many historical anecdotes.

Obviously, the main interest for us lies with the 22 triumphs, their order, name, and their interpretation. However, all that is here strongly connected with the interpretation of the ordinary 56 cards, so that we have first to consider these latter. According to the author, their interpretation (which is only in part original, in other aspects recalling other writers of the time) should be as follows. The four kings are each the leader of a whole family where very social class is represented down to the number 1, which is the least important element belonging to the group. By the way, it may be worth noting that no inversion of the order of the numeral cards, as traditionally occurred in Coins and Cups, is here indicated. The division of the cards into four suits may be related to the four elements, to the four humours of the body, to the four ages of life, to the four seasons of the year, and so on. Of all these fourfold properties, the author mainly uses in the following the four fundamental instincts or inclinations of the human mind.

From the practical point of view of the card player, another interesting observation is the note that the cards were also devised for four players although the play was preferentially carried out by three at the time. Other extremely interesting information on the play, due to the earlier date with respect to similar documentations, can be derived from different passages of the text and are added here. Thus, it is explicitly stated that the Matto cannot be lost, unless no trick is taken.

Recent introductions into the game, in order to “increase it”, are: to give the Matto around (? , il dar il Matto attorno), to declare the Berzigole, to carry out a hunt to the Bagattello, as well as to have it counted more if led to the last trick (and we are in the 16th century!).

The order of the suits is here Coins, Swords, Staves and Cups. And this is already something unusual since the author divides the two round to feminine suits of the traditional interpretations, inserting the two long or masculine ones between them. The obvious interpretation of the Coins’ king and family is of any activity aimed at accumulating money and wealth in general. There follows Swords, which is naturally connected to war, military occupations and careers. The interpretation of Staves is perhaps more interesting since it appears strictly correlated with the ancient shape of this Italian suit, and neither with the Spanish nor with the majority of the modern Italian Bastoni. Here the symbol is a Mazza, a Baton, indicating the power of magistrates and public officials up to the kings. In other words, something analogous to those Fasces of ancient Rome which the author mentions without obviously knowing their later unhappy utilisation. Cups mean generally pleasure and with this suit the four human instincts are exhausted, but only for the moment. In fact, the originality of this particular allegory is that no sharp division exists between cards and triumphs.

The triumphs, according to the author, were added in order to remind us, with their beautiful images, of existing dangers and threats so that we can learn to avoid them. The triumphs are then examined in order and we obtain an interpretation for each one, often accompanied by examples from classical history and literature. A consequent interpretation of the whole sequence is also provided. A sharp division certainly occurs between the group up to the Devil and the following seven triumphs. The 15 inferior triumphs are connected with the four instincts already examined and represent in a sense their continuation and/or description in more detail. All of them actually refer to active life. After the Devil, the whole meaning changes: we have seven triumphs which are now directly helping us to understand God. All of these refer to contemplative life. The 15 inferior triumphs are further subdivided into subgroups, although not as regularly as some modern author would have wished to find. It is not completely clear whether these subgroups have a significant meaning or are only instrumental to the description.

The MATTO is examined alone. It is considered as the captain of all the 15 active triumphs. Its interpretation, connected with its role in playing, is that, contrary to every other defect, our Madness is with us during our entire life and cannot be avoided or transferred.

BAGATTELLO is seen as a Juggler: this card lets us see things in a favourable light, whereas they may be not so at all.

Then follow the four “popes”. I admit I was very curious to know how the author would solve the Popess problem in a convincing and favourable manner. It is not clear to me how this card originated, but I am persuaded that it is hard to admit its presence in a pack of which one is trying precisely to demonstrate the pedagogical if not the theological value. That may be due to the fact that I am not sufficiently acquainted with the popular culture of that period, since, for instance, Rosenfeld in the quoted article indicates that the Popess was considered a common personage among people. In any case, I must acknowledge that here the problem is well solved, although I have some doubt about the actual historical value of such a favourable interpretation. The four connected personages have become here CARDINALE, PAPA, RE and IMPERATORE. There is an uncertainty in the order (in any case the two church leaders preceding the two temporal ones) since the first time they are mentioned the order is actually Pope, Cardinal, Emperor and King, probably due, inside the pairs, to the initial idea of a descending sequence, whose general captain was the Matto. Soon after the four personages are listed again, in the sequence I gave before. The Cardinal is mentioned at first as one of the two Popes, namely that without the Regno. The Triregno or Pope’s tiara is clearly meant here,

symbolising with its three crowns the whole of the papal power. Nowhere is a sex difference indicated. The usual interpretation of these cards is that by observing them one can avoid the natural temptations to obtain the greatest possible power, both in the spiritual and the temporal domains.

There follow a pair of virtues, PRUDENZA (instead of the usually present Temperance) and FORZA. Such cards are usually more distant in the familiar tarot packs. Here they are near in the sequence and their interpretation is that the first represents the quality of the soul corresponding to the second one for the body. Often one seeks to excel among other people, either in intellectual or in physical qualities; corresponding excesses are again to be avoided, as these cards remind us.

The following group is composed of three cards in the order: AMORE, CARRO and FORTUNA, the last under the conventional symbol of the Wheel. They are explained with several examples, of which only the Chariot may require a short comment since it is interpreted as the magnificence of building palaces, using expensive decorations, silverware, garments, and so on.

Finally we have the last group of this series of active passions, which appears to be the most traditional of them all: GOBBO, TRADITORE, MORTE and DIAVOLO. The Hunchback, which is explicitly stated to symbolise Time, is followed as usual by Traitor, Death and Devil. These cards with apparently obvious meaning acquire, too, a rather unusual interpretation when the whole sequence is considered: Time is there to remind us that previous pleasures come necessarily to an end; the Traitor is something like a double of the Bagattello: now the illusions of pleasure are shown to be in vain and the truth appears in its uncomfortable aspect; Death is precisely the result awaiting us, and the Devil is there to take our souls if we are not watchful enough to avoid all the previous illusions and temptations, This represents the final point for this part of the sequence.

After the sequence of the “active” triumphs, seven further possibilities are provided in order better to understand ourselves, the world and finally reach the contemplation of God. The aim is evidently to summarise and unify the aspects of knowledge obtained from theology, ending in the contemplation of God, from philosophy (one would say now psychology) in order better to understand ourselves, and from physics/astronomy in order to realise the action of God on the world. No wonder then if the following cards are considered as one group in the order: DELI, STELLA, LUNA, SOLE, ANGELO, GIUSTIZIA and MONDO. Although these cards appear rather traditional and follow the type B order, as defined by Dummett, several peculiarities may be noted.

A first comment must be devoted to the card corresponding to the Tower. Often this card is simply considered as Hell, due partly to its position in the sequence soon after the Devil. In several Italian tarots, and particularly in the Tarocchino Bolognese, it is called Saetta or Thunderbolt. We are asked to consider the celestial phenomenon rather than its terrible effects. Unfortunately this card is not preserved among the Visconti tarots and it is difficult to ascertain whether its early meaning was more, or less, fearsome. Here it is completely removed from the Devil sequence and it becomes directly the Heavens or Sky, i.e. the first of the contemplative images, in agreement with the common indication (although not with the corresponding images) of Maison Dieu. If the Thunderbolt remains, its function is simply to provide a visible indication of the sky, which is difficult to represent, objectively. A greater change in meaning of a single card, practically passing from Hell to Heaven, is indeed difficult to imagine. Nevertheless a change in meaning of the cards in the sequence may not be extended, since for the previous and the following cards there is no alternative interpretation.

The further two cards, Angel and Justice, again require comment. The Angel is here meant as

the engine of God; it is owing to his action that God's will can be transferred to the movements of the celestial bodies in the universe. In this interpretation, the Angel has nothing to do with the Judgment, as found in many preserved cards and interpretations. On the contrary, the Judgment appears as a characteristic of God himself in the penultimate card, which, however, represents not directly the Judgment but God under the shape of the virtue of Justice.

The last card is the World, and one may appreciate the reported reason why it is indeed the last card; the world can connect God and man; the pack is a true image and picture of everything contained in the human mind, which is in itself a little world. And thus the labyrinth has finally come to an end.

It is a pleasure to propose for the attention of the specialists the above mentioned interpretation. It is above any suspicion of false Egyptology (although the added 22 triumphs are immediately called "hieroglifice" in the Florentine copy and "geroglifice" in the Bolognese one.) It found certainly a remarkable diffusion in Italy between the 16th and 17th centuries, as indicated by these two copies inserted in court documents, but was later forgotten, now for several centuries. Probably it cannot be relied upon entirely, being too favourable a version of the matter. The preserved cards of those and of previous years show unambiguously that two of the four "popes" are represented as women. Plausibly the author has modified this feature toward a more acceptable version (unless he refers to even older cases). There may have been felt the need to praise these "beautiful cards" in order to combat those seeing in them only the expression of the Devil. Much worse were later falsifications which transmitted the images and the uses that are now in vogue. I hope the fundamental treatise by Dummett may equally serve as a valid counteraction in our time.

With the existing data it is impossible to derive a complete understanding of the initial "discovery" of the tarot pack, and the exact meaning (if any, see Dummett's treatise) of the triumphs' sequence. Several of the more recent interpretations appear unreliable. Therefore, every new piece of information concerning the early history of the pack, such as that here reported, must be taken into account. By documentations of this kind one may gain a better understanding of the ancient Italian tarot. If, on the other hand, one seeks to find a reasonable interpretation of the many modern packs (such as one can appreciate by simply leafing through Kaplan's *Encyclopedia*) it is certainly not history or literature to be invoked, but rather mass psychology.

As far as the order of the triumphs is concerned, there are here only slight deviations from the type B order defined by Dummett. That was already the most ancient and the most documented by literary sources. Some ambiguity still exists as its exact site of origin, at least in my opinion. Since we have probably no means of finding where the manuscript described by Steele originated, it would be interesting to ascertain at least the source of the treatise reported here.

I am perfectly aware that if one could apply to this treatise a date and a town of provenance, even if not the same author, it would gain much more relevance for the history of tarot. Such a document would acquire, for instance, rather different meanings depending on whether it originated from Venice or from Rome. I am again mentioning those two cities, as I did for the two manuscript copies, since there is some slight evidence pointing to them. Thus, the author speaks of the Roman Pantheon stating that it is now called "la Rotonda"; this indication is more convincing if directed to Roman people. The most useful hint is, however, the reference to the money currently used in the city. Speaking of several expensive matters of ancient Rome, the author gives their prices in old Roman currency (sesterces or nummes) but provides us with the equivalent present value, expressed in "ducats" or in "soldi" (with precisely a rate, for example, of 1 sesterce to 10 ducats). Hearing of ducats, we immediately think of Venice, their first source, several centuries before. This clue however, is not unambiguous. It is true that the ducat is the

typical Venetian gold coin for many centuries, but in the time of the treatise it was locally named Zecchino and in the meantime the original name of ducats had also been transferred to the corresponding gold coins of several, mostly Northern, Italian towns – Rome not excluded. It is only to be hoped that other investigators can find in the text, or in other documents, further hints which completely solve the problem of its provenance.

Concerning the date of origin of the text, I cannot exclude the possibility that it is more recent than affirmed in the title, since in principle it may have been inserted in the manuscript copies only a few years after its writing, thus belonging to the 17th century. What can be excluded, is that it could originate before the 16th century. In fact, at the beginning of the treatise, Vida Cremonese is mentioned as a writer on chess. Now, the most renowned Latin poem on chess ever written was composed about 1513 and published by that author in 1527, after a first unauthorised edition had appeared two years before. Many manuscript copies had spread rapidly before and after the printing of the text, so appreciated was the poem, which underwent many reprints and translations. As a consequence, an exact terminus a quo is difficult to evaluate even in this case since the diffusion probably depended on the particular town considered.

We have thus encountered several difficulties in suggesting precise chronological and local data for the present treatise. Nevertheless, it remains an evident product of the culture of the late Renaissance and, with its profuse erudite product of the culture of the late Renaissance and, with its profuse erudite arguments, it finally reached the aim of providing literary relevance – for the first time, as explicitly stated by the author – to such a negligible matter, as tarot was commonly considered until then.