

TAROT IN PIEDMONT IN THE 16TH CENTURY: THE OLDEST BOOK ON THE SUBJECT

Franco Pratesi

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It is well known that very few documents have been preserved concerning the first two or three centuries following the introduction of Tarocchi. Some evidence derives from poems or other literary sources, which were very seldom fully dedicated to Tarot. There is, however, some hope that our richest libraries may still contain useful documentation, since the scholars of the past two centuries have practically neglected this field, evidently considering it not worthy of any specific investigation. A partial explanation for this behaviour may be found in the fact that Tarots have been for centuries everyday objects, too common to stimulate any detailed description, whereas lately they have, more or less suddenly, completely disappeared from most towns and regions of Italy.

One exception, however, is known to exist which, moreover, is not a manuscript codex or a document forgotten in some archive. It is, on the contrary, a veritable printed book which has already been recorded in several bibliographies and catalogues. However, since finding it has not been too easy, a short introduction will be devoted to the sources and the information gained before the book itself is studied.

For Italian books on cards there exists a useful, although rare, bibliography by A. Lensi, published in Florence in 1892 and reprinted in 1985 (*Bibliografia Italiana di Giuochi di Carte*, Longo Editore, Ravenna) in a limited edition, with some additions by Silvestroni and Dossena. This bibliography has also been cited by Dummett in his treatise on page 270 (and seemingly used in several other passages of the same work). In it we find on page 32 the following: Piscina Francesco. *Discorso sopra la significazione de' tarocchi. Mondovì 1570. Citato nel Mare Magnum del Marucelli che si conserva manoscritto a Firenze*. A check on the manuscript bibliography showed that Lensi had not only correctly derived his information therefrom, but also that a second entry was initially included on a different page with a slightly different title but later deleted as soon as it was realised that it was already listed. This occurrence of a double entry is not common, but far from unique.

Moreover, the book is cited in several catalogues of Piedmontese writers, which also give some information on the author and his life. His town was at the time a flourishing cultural centre: in Monte Regale (now Mondovì, near Cuneo) the Duke of Savoy, Emanuele Filiberto, had established in 1560 a university attended by students from both sides of the Alps. This little town already possessed printing-houses, from the previous century, and a certain number of incunabula are known from that unexpected provenance. We have obtained a good deal of information from a *Dissertazione*, published in 1801 in Turin and in 1804 in Mondovì, by the priest Gioachino Grassi di Santa Cristina on the printing-houses of that town. Two booklets by Piscina would appear to have been published in 1570, that is after the beautiful editions by Lorenzo Torrentino and his sons, together with Arnolfo Arlenio. These printers came probably from Flanders and Germany respectively but had practised their art for some time in Florence whence they were summoned to Mondovì by the above-mentioned Duke of Savoy. What escaped this local expert – due to the fact that no copy of the edition here discussed has been preserved in the libraries of the town – is that the edition is in fact five years older, and thus can be included among the Torrentino editions, actually bearing the name of the son Lionardo on the title-page.

From the *Syllabus Scriptorum Piedemontii*, by D. Andrea Rossotti, published in Mondovì in 1667, we obtain on pp. 216-7 information not only about Francesco Piscina but also about his father. The latter had been so brave in the battle of Cerasole that the King of France, Francis I, allowed him to display the Royal fleur-de-lis on his coat of arms. The Doctor Utriusque Juris Francesco Piscina had been a student of law under Menochio, a well-known professor and writer,

who estimated highly Piscina's talent. Since it is here stated that Piscina wrote his second book, *An Statuta Foeminarum exclusiva porrigantur ad bona forenses*, at the age of 24, we can guess confidently that he was only about 20 years old when he recited and published his work on Tarot. Still as a law student his name appears on the title-page of the printed text. The same or similar information is repeated in the other histories of Piedmontese writers (Derossi 1790, Vallauri 1841, which also quote previous works, and so on).

In every case that could be examined, no distinction in date appears between the two printed works of Piscina, nor is more detailed information on the printer, number of pages and similar bibliographical data provided for the extremely rare Italian work on Tarot. I was informed that in the copy of the Latin work, *An Statuta...*, preserved in the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris, there is no part written in Italian.

The investigation was extended and continued until a copy was indicated to exist in the Biblioteca Fondazione Marazza in Borgomanero, again in Piedmont but in this case much more to the north, near to the Lago d'Orta. Several offices, library directors and others were of essential help in searching and finding the book and finally in allowing its examination and study. Owing to their kindness, we have now gained the knowledge of a short text which represents, however, unique evidence for this whole region in these early times, appearing worthy of a detailed analysis and description. Even more so, since printed books which have as subject matter uniquely the Tarot pack are, if I remember correctly, only known two centuries later. Another fortunate circumstance here is that both date and location are precisely indicated, as well as the author's name – and that is not as usual as we should like to find in this period of the mid-16th century.

As may be seen on the title-page (Fig. 1), the book is dedicated to the Rector of the University of Monte Regale, Rinaldo Ressano da Pinerolo, a town which still maintains some interest in the playing of a form of tarocco (see Dummett's treatise, pp. 276-8). In the dedication, which occupies pages 3 and 4, the author begs the Rector to accept this book instead of the public oration in his praise which he intended to prepare but was not able to do, due to misfortunes. The author also quotes two of his friends and schoolfellows of renowned families, Daniele Malabaila and Francesco Belli, who insisted on the publication of his *Discorso*. From the same dedication we become aware that the whole *Discorso* had been publicly recited in the famous Academy of Monte Regale on Whit Sunday, 1565.

On page 5 there begins the veritable *Discorso*, now called by the other similar name of *Ragionamento*, which continues until the end, on page 27, without any subdivision into parts or even a clear distinction between one topic and the next. The main and practically sole subject of the whole discourse concerns the meaning of the trionfi and of their sequence. The latter is indeed intended to be pre-eminent, since the title on page 5 reads: *Ragionamento/dil Signor Francesco Piscina/da Carmagnola/scuolar di leggi/fatto sopra/l'ordine/delle figure/de Tarocchi* (Fig. 2). The very fact of dedicating a full discourse to the order of the Triumphs in the 16th century appears now worthy of a detailed analysis since we have a complete introduction to the topic in Chapter 20 of Dummett's treatise. It is well known that we have only a few similar indications from the same period and nothing from that region of Piedmont, although it has always been a very relevant one for Tarot playing. Thus we get the fortunate opportunity to judge whether the order and the meaning of the Triumphs is type B or C (according to Dummett's classification) that is, similar to that documented for Italian regions more to the East at the same period or, instead, related to that of the Piedmontese region, known for the succeeding centuries, and suspected to originate from Milan, through France. From the very beginning, Piscina states that an order and a logical thread have to be there and he attempts to understand the reasoning followed by the Discoverer/Author of the sequence.

The sequence is examined starting from the bottom, that is from the MATTO. This card may invite several interpretations. The first is in analogy with many comedies, in which a jester or a madman introduces the play. But this card, as well as the following twenty-one, must have a meaning, useful to induce the catholic truth to be followed, and to teach good morals. Thus, the

most plausible meaning is to indicate the two ages of man, and, in particular, extreme youth and extreme old age, in which man appears to be mad. There is a further interpretation, in itself not as reliable but having the advantage better of introducing the following card. Piscina states that a madman was a well-known inn sign. Now, in a famous comedy by the Intronati, the renowned Academics from Siena, an inn with this sign was shown to be presently less fashionable than simply one indicated by a mirror. This fact is also used to explain why so often the madman is represented looking into a mirror. It thus becomes clear why, after the sign of an inn, there follows the BAGATO, that is, precisely, the inn-keeper. This interpretation of the card may be supported by the costume and the whole appearance of the card. There follows here a digression, again concerning the madman, much appreciated by the players. A comment is made about the useful role the madman plays in the game, since he can replace any high card in the *Brezigole*. (May I here add a comment of my own on this term which, like several others of similar spelling, indicated possible declarations or counting cards whereas later it unexpectedly and abruptly changed its meaning to the present *briscole* or trumps.) Incidentally we obtain an interpretation of the meaning of the high cards too: Kings and Queens indicating Lords and Princes; Knights representing men of less noble condition, and Jacks the rest of the people. The fact that the madman can substitute for any of these corresponds to the presence among those people of a certain amount of madness. A further meaning of the madman can be to remind us that excess in playing and gambling may only be due to madness.



Fig. 1.

Figure 1 – Title page of Piscina's book.

After this digression, which Piscina acknowledges as such, stating that others will inevitably be present in what follows, he discusses the four IMPERATORI and PAPI. They should be located here as needing the proximity of jesters and clowns for refreshing their spirits from the usual mental fatigue connected with their role. As in other texts which have been preserved, it is not completely clear which the exact order really was inside this group. The most plausible interpretation of the text is in agreement with the C order, which we know from other sources; that is, Popess, Empress, Emperor, Pope. It must be stressed, however, that no female personage is here actually mentioned. Piscina says that the Pope is the highest authority but that sometimes he may be defeated by the Emperor, quoting the two examples of Boniface VIII and Clement VII. Therefore, if we try to understand this sequence only on the basis of the present text it would be best to state that before the usual pair Emperor/Pope, a preliminary pair Pope/ Emperor occurs for exceptional cases.

After the four "*Papi*" or Popes, we find the portrait of Cupido, the god of Love, which is explained in different ways, but always connected with GIUSTITIA or Justice, the following card. One of the meanings is that the leaders of the world, symbolised in the previous cards, must constantly avoid the passions. It can also represent advice directed to magistrates, to remind them that the following virtue must be cultivated without yielding to passion. For common people too it is true that Justice has to prevail over Love, whatever is the exact meaning of that symbol, more or less spiritual. As expected from its position, in agreement with the Dummett C order, no meaning connected with the Last Judgment is here suggested.

The three succeeding cards are again treated practically together and to each is explicitly assigned an order number (the only other card to which a number is assigned here is, later, Death as number 13, as usual), i.e. CARRO (No. 8), FORTEZZA (No. 9) and FORTUNA (No. 10). One may venture to suggest that only those cards had numbers which did not change position in the sequence, from town to town. Returning to Piscina, if one still refers to the "Popes" the Chariot is a common symbol for their triumphs. Force (or Strength or Fortitude) may for its part be related to Justice and with two opposite meanings. Since Justice is in itself weak and needs help from Force or Strength, the latter may either let Justice function correctly or prevail over it and ultimately prove itself decisive. The Fortune card is there to remind us that power, honours, and so on, are actually subject to the ups and downs of Fortune, which evidently prevails over the previous symbols and virtues. The fact that Fortune can prevail over Justice is worth a further comment: it is well known that Justice is administered in different ways by different magistrates.

The VECCHIO GOBBO corresponds to the classical image of the Hermit. However, no direct allegory of Time is proposed here. The old Hunchback means essentially a wise counsellor, with whose advice we can defeat Fortune. In particular, Piscina recalls the advice given by his professor, G. B. Giraldi, that in order to do something well, one has to do it twice. Therefore, even if one is not usually able to do exactly that, at least the long experience of the old men has to be taken into account.

The IMPICCATO (Hanged man) is thus the exemplification of the logical conclusion of not following wise advice and the virtues. For such people, the result is the same as if they had not been born at all, and, therefore, this card is followed by Death which completely effaces any memory of them. MORTE (No. 13) has the rôle of reminding us that every previous card is subject to it. It happens to be a threshold card, after which come other symbols independent of it. TEMPERANZA follows, which is so beautiful and powerful that, by its practice, we can gain immortal life.

Here the author of the sequence stops and changes direction in order to show us directly the celestial figures. However, since an abrupt variation is not acceptable to Nature, according to the philosophers, two cards are inserted which represent in a sense some intermediate features. In the first there are examples of DEMONI or Devils. They are considered, particularly according to the Platonic school, to be intermediate between God and Man and to exist in the air above us. After the Devils we have the FUOCO (Fire) which is exactly intermediate between celestial and earthly features, again in agreement with the theories of the philosophers. The card is thus seen here as an image of the element Fire and not, as traditionally interpreted, Hell or similar.

The actual celestial images then follow. With them the Discoverer has used a remarkable order: STELLA, LUNA and SOLE in that sequence, since night is not so important as day, and whereas the Moon is sometimes absent, even in a clear sky, the Sun is really present every day. The series follows, however, not only the increase in intensity of light but takes into account that the Moon is in the lowest sky, whereas the Sun is in the fourth. Piscina adds that the argument is so evident to everybody that it requires no further comment. To present-day astronomers it seems more complicated.

There remain two cards which are here introduced in reverse order, and it is well known that the order of these cards was indeed not firmly established everywhere. Piscina describes first the last card, which closes the sequence, and then the penultimate one (which indeed would be the very last elsewhere).

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Signori Daniele Malabaila e Francesco Belli, e d'altri mei amici e padroni à quali non hò voluto ne possuto oppormi e particolarmente à questi due Nobilissimi e Ualorosi Cauaglieri, l'ho voluto de dicar qual egli si sia à. V. S. pregandola che con amore uol faccia lo vogli accettare, che oltre che fara cosa degna dell' humanità sua, dara etiamdio animo à qualche geniale spiruo, e pellegrino ingegno di ragione uolmente magnificarla de scriuendo questo suo viaggio fatto alla Corte del Serenissimo Principe tanto ad essa honorato, quanto all'uniuersità de Scuolari uile, col che facendo fine porche gl'hauo baciato le generose e liberalissime mani, prego. N. S. Dio per cõpimento d'ogni sua felicità. Data nella famosa Academia del Monte Regale il Celebratissimo giorno della Festa del Spiruo Santo M D L X U.

RAGIONAMENTO

DIL S. FRAN. PISCINA
 DA CARMAGNOLEA
 SCVOLAR DI LEGGI

FATTO SOPRA
 l'ordine

DELLE FIGVRE
 DE TAROCCHI.



AVENDO IO Honorati Lettori breuamente a fauellare del ordine delle figure de Tarocchi non voglio per hora altamente dimo dirmi in dimo strare, quanto eccellente e diuina cosa sia l'ordine in questo Vniuerso, percioche chi non fa che doue non è ordine, iui è confusione e doue questa è, nulla di buono si può fare, e perche ciò insegna l'esperienza Mac
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Figure 2 – End of the dedication and beginning of the *Ragionamento*.

The last image is the PARADISO CELESTE or Heaven, where holy souls are triumphing, and the Discoverer lets an Angel be represented there to connect the whole scene. However, it is not possible to reach it directly, without following the teachings of the Holy Evangelists; before the image of Heaven, therefore, comes the portrait of the EVANGELISTI, symbolised conventionally by their four emblems: Angel, Ox, Eagle and Lion. Moreover, the author has placed the image of the World among these Saints to remind us that the world itself cannot survive without the principles of religion, which represent the basis of peace, of the happiness of peoples and of the preservation of states. These are also required to save our individual souls, as already stated.

After examining the 22 Triumphs, Piscina also provided a short outline of the remaining cards. Acknowledging that the four suits are often said, although without proof, to correspond to the four seasons of the year, to the four ages of man, to the four parts of the world, Piscina prefers to relate them to war and peace. Thus Bastoni represent ancient wars, whereas Spade are a symbol of modern wars, fought precisely with these weapons. Here again the term “modern” has obviously a meaning rather distant from the present day; now, more than four centuries later, a monstrously huge pack, composed of many suits, would be needed to illustrate the same correspondence. On the

other hand, Coppe and Dinari represent the state of peace. In particular, Cups are for wine which renders people happy, and Coins are so useful that with them one can do everything one likes. A further interpretation is again connected with the Princes of the previous cards, who would prefer to rule using only Clubs but are sometimes compelled to use Swords as the result of enemy wickedness. It holds further that the aim of any war is peace and quietness, so that again Cups and Coins have to be there. In any case we find the whole devised in four parts, which corresponds to a well-known argument, concerning which Ficino and his commentaries on Plato are also quoted.

The last two pages of the text consist of a farewell address, in which Piscina begins apologising for this kind of work. He states that its origin was sudden and quite unexpected; he conceived the speech when he saw, on a feast day, a Lady of Mondovi gracefully occupied in playing tarocco. We have to remind ourselves that for several decades card-playing was, in Savoy, forbidden to men. It was, however, allowed for women to play (also the men playing with them), precisely as we can see in several pictures surviving from that time.

Piscina expects no praise for this work; on the contrary he is quite certain that people will censure him, but he advises them rather to think of their own defects, and brings the discourse to its end by pleading for a fulfilment of his wishes.

Having thus summarised the text by Piscina, without intentionally neglecting anything of possible relevance, we may now try to extract a final balance from it. Obviously Piscina tried to imagine what really was the line of thought of the “Discoverer” of the Tarot, although he generally speaks as if he knew that reasoning. However, there are several points in the text where Piscina explicitly expresses his opinion on the possible intentions of the “Discoverer”, such as found in the parentheses on page 11 (*al mio parere*) and on page 15 (*cred’io*). Probably, for us, the corresponding interpretations would have been still more useful if less original: based, for instance, on some popular tradition or earlier literary documents. As a matter of fact, although very interesting as a witness of the diffusion of the game, the region and especially the time of the work appear both too far from the very origin of the game to bring to us really new and true evidence concerning its initial history. Also, the learning of the writer, although greater than average, does not appear equal to the task. The need is felt, therefore, for some fortunate discovery of evidence still nearer to the local and temporal origin of the Tarot. In any event, it can be stated that findings of the kind reported here certainly represent a remarkable progress over the “stories” written about Tarot from the 18th century on. However, my aim here is not of discussing in detail this discovery, since I believe that several card-historians can and, I hope, will do so in more depth and/or extension.

I will only touch on some points which need a short comment. None of them appears as essential as the order of this sequence and its consequences. It is without any doubt a true C order, as defined by Dummett, although the order of the two highest cards is in agreement with type A, as traditionally used in following centuries in Piedmont – notwithstanding the contrary order of the numbers printed on those two cards. I have no idea whether Piedmont actually received that order (or even the Tarot pack itself) from Milan, as one would deduce from the basis of Dummett’s treatise.

A comment may be reserved for the “atmosphere” of the speech. Piscina recites his *Discorso* as a young law student in a time and in a region where it is possible to maintain a certain equidistance between the teachings of the philosophers (mentioned several times in the text) and those of the Catholic Church. Thus, for instance, the consideration of the Devils as celestial creatures, intermediate between Man and God, and thus somehow “flying” over our heads, could probably sound anachronistic only a few decades later, as well as it should have been some centuries before. Together with the small dimensions of the text, it may be just this tendency – not unrelated to the very images of the tarot to cause the loss of most copies, so that the book did not appear even in such comprehensive catalogues as those by Brunet and Graesse.

In conclusion, it appears to be a remarkable progress in the history of tarot to acquire concrete and reliable evidence that it enjoyed such popularity in Piedmont in the 16th century, i.e. more than

two centuries before the previously known detailed descriptions of the game from that provenance. That is the more interesting since several Piedmontese valleys have been known as active centres of tarot play up to the present day. No wonder that Piedmontese tarot is the one mostly manufactured in this country, at least since the disappearance of Minchiate (for Florence, Rome and Genoa) and the demise of the different pattern characteristics of Tarocchino Milanese. Moreover, the whole territory of the Duchy of Savoy, as well as the neighbouring region more to the north, was indeed among the few countries where tarot was not just an aristocratic – or a forgotten – game, but it gained there for centuries diffusion among every social class.

Thus, even admitting for the moment a Milanese origin, I cannot imagine that Piedmont was not to some extent responsible for the spread of tarot in the 16th century to the neighbouring French and Swiss regions. On the contrary, I prefer to consider that it played a significant role even in that early history of the game, since in the text here described it already appears, among other things, as an established traditional game.

May I finally gratefully acknowledge the encouragement and the forbearance shown by Miss Sylvia Mann in revising my text.