

TAROT IN FLORENCE IN THE 16TH CENTURY: ITS DIFFUSION FROM LITERARY SOURCES

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I have recently undertaken an investigation of the history of tarot, and particularly of the Florentine form, called Germini or Minchiate. I find rather surprising that such a clever pastime has left so few traces here around after flourishing for more than three centuries (or four, see later). This investigation has recently gained in strength after studying such fundamental works as those by Dummett, Kaplan, Mann, and so on, to which all I apologise for not referring here in every possible detail. For the same reason of avoiding too long a discussion, I will not provide full bibliographical references for the several works cited in the following.

After examining many ancient books and other literary documents, I considered necessary to carry out what should indeed have been the preliminary step, that is to control the references given by the dictionaries, following the example of several recent histories of draughts, other boardgames, cards, and so on. Such a procedure is not appealing, but it may nevertheless provide useful information with not too great an effort, as it will be possible to verify in this particular case.

Thus, the aim here is to add new documentary evidence, already known to the scholars of Italian literature, but not yet correlated to the facts firmly established in the current histories of cards, and particularly of Florentine tarot.

This evidence will not be enough to elucidate the many questions existing on the very beginning of the game, but it allows some further steps to be taken in that direction.

Before the present investigation, we were left with two literary texts providing the first documentary evidence on the initial period of Minchiate: Aretino's *Le Carte Parlanti*, and *I Germini*. Both cases present a rather complex chronology, so that some comment may be useful.

Aretino finishes his book apparently in 1543. I have not been able to see the first edition of the book, but that published two years later is preserved in the National Library in Florence and still bears the dedication dated 1543. I verified that the most current of the subsequent editions, that of 1914, is in very good textual agreement with the 1545 one. As well known, the speaking cards of this work are precisely Minchiate. Here and there in the text useful hints can be found concerning the meaning, the nomenclature, the habits of the game, and so on. In particular, Florence is quoted as a true capital of card playing.

Although the speaking cards themselves are Minchiate, the text is mainly concerned with different – usually gambling – games, and nowhere can direct indications be found on the age of the Minchiate cards and/or game. Some deductions may be put forth pointing to either a recent or an old tradition. For instance, when the same author wrote the renowned *Pasquinata* for the 1522 conclave, usual tarot was taken into account. Had Minchiate not yet reached Rome? Were they not yet discovered? Since, if they were in current use in Rome, their consideration in the poem would even have helped the number of cards to get nearer to the actual number of cardinals.

On the other hand, it is said that the whole pack is becoming more and more slim, leaving superfluous cards out of the common use. And one obviously thinks to an ancient tradition of tarot or Minchiate games superseded by 'modern' ones, such as Prime, Bassetta, or Trappola.

The chronology of the other basic work is even more controversial. If I may suggest a simplified view, I would say that a first printing did not contain card-and-courtesan No. 3. A second improved printing filled that blank. A third printing showed further improvements in adding to the text not other cards (which fact would indeed have been rather difficult) but other courtesans, which were not satisfied to remain cut off. A fourth printing was similar to the third – and their order may well be interchanged – but contained several more woodprints. The work is published in the typical 4-

folios format of many ancient popular prints. Fortunately the 'second' printing bears the date of 1553 and not too big differences in date must be expected for the other impressions, particularly if one duly considers the feminine subjects.

The very fact that we are faced with a forthright comparison between cards and courtesans leaves unanswered the question which of them was used to explain which. Renowned courtesans could in principle be 'used' to illustrate in order new, or anyhow little known, cards. Conversely, traditional images could be used to select the best courtesans and increase their fame. From the examination of the sequence of the successive editions, already mentioned, the latter argument should probably be preferred, even if the anonymous author in the introductory part of the poem is explicitly stated to be a shepherd and as such incapable of manufacturing a pack of Germini or to play the game either.

Let us now consider the contribution by the references quoted by the dictionary which in this case is S.Battaglia, *Grande Dizionario della Lingua Italiana*, Torino (1970 for Germini, 1978 for Minchiate). Some further contribution was indeed desirable, since the usual sources, and the two above mentioned, did not provide any evidence either on the previous duration of the game or on its specific rules. I will here examine only contributions which are early enough, generally contemporary or even earlier than the mentioned sources.

A first very partial and late contribution derives from the *Rime* by Alessandro Allegri (ca.1560-1629). In the introduction to a poem – first published in 1613, but which could have been written earlier – the poet compares himself to an ox, very quiet, but which in given conditions, 'runs away in spite of the world..., trumpets, fool, devil, and of the whole pack of Germini'. From that we obtain four names of the Germini cards: Mondo, Trombe, Matto, and Diavolo; something unusual since it is known that the cards were currently referred to by their order number.

A second contribution is from the *Capitolo in lode delle zanzare*, by the poet Bronzino (1503-72), by far better known as a painter, dedicated to Benedetto Varchi. Again animals, but now mosquitos, are the subject of this burlesque poem which provides us with further names: Imperatore, Papa, Fede, Speranza, Zodiaco (plausibly meaning here the whole of the corresponding twelve cards), Mondo, Sole, Fuoco, Aria, Terra, Trombe or Fama. If applied to a single card Papa would be puzzling. It may have been used, however, also due to poetical requirements, to mean the category of personages, one of which is precisely the Emperor, mentioned together. Even later it was common to indicate with Papi the lower triumphs. From the correspondence Trombe-Mosquitos we obtain some information about the fact that Emperor and Pope are of no practical value in the game, even if of such considerable power in actual life; a similar contrast – although perhaps in lower degree – exists for the virtues. The Trombe or trumpets represent the image of Fame and correspond to the best card in the game.

If the 'new' evidence on Minchiate is not yet very great, it is more than one could expect from any poem on mosquitos. I do not exclude that an examination of the poem in greater detail may provide further information, since the meaning is often not very clear. I examined an autograph copy by Bronzino, preserved in Florence National Library; the writing is extremely clear and the *Capitolo* is indicated as one of the very few pieces already printed. I would venture the 1530s as the years of that composition, even if I have not yet ascertained it. Unfortunately for this subject, it is much easier to find detailed information on Bronzino painter than on Bronzino poet.

A third contribution derives from a novella by Agnolo Firenzuola(1493-1543): *Sopra un caso accaduto in Prato*, devoted to G.Buonamici. In describing the habits of a peaceful and simpleton fellow, an example among others is precisely concerned with the game of Germini . There are only few lines of prose reporting an imaginary dialogue with his game partner. He suggests to the partner to play a card of low value and then he says, 'well' when the partner plays the 32. The same occurs when he recommends to play one of the Arie (the unnumbered best cards) and the partner plays a

Salamandra instead. That is all, and at first sight the contribution seems of very low weight, but several points must be emphasised of a certain value.

The exact date of the *Novella* is not known but, taking the life of the author into account, it should be settled in 1538 with only a two-three years uncertainty. I do not maintain that the few years thus 'gained' with respect to both Aretino and *I Germini* are a great advance; such argument I leave for the moment. Nevertheless it must be noted that: 1) the environment is now Prato, which had certainly a lower social and cultural level with respect to Florence; evidently the game from Florence had already reached the small neighbouring towns; 2) the game had also reached common people, being not or no longer an exclusive court pastime; 3) the usual kind of game played appears to be a four-handed partnership game, i.e. the same kind as preferred still three centuries later; 4) advice on the card to be chosen could be interchanged between partners; 5) the nomenclature of cards, which we know from later works, was already well established even in those cases of peculiar terms, such as the Arie and the Salamanders. No wonder then if a plausible conclusion may be that the game was already firmly established everywhere in the Florentine environments and that its origin, development, and diffusion until this point could not be a matter of a few years.

How much time was reasonably needed in order to obtain those 'standard' Minchiate packs and games? I have no idea, since the cultural, fashion, and pastime exchanges were very rapid, even in those times, particularly among the court environments. But for a standardisation of rules and such a capillary diffusion to take place as indicated in the aforementioned sources, some decades would be expected to be necessary. On the other hand, this is not an uncommon situation in the history of games; we have usually evidence only from an 'initial' date which may be, and by far, more recent than the very beginning of the game. This way it happens for chess, for draughts, for *hombre*, and I dare say for every ancient game, since nobody cared to record such events. And only some fortunate circumstance may give light to those questions of chronology.

I consider that such a fortunate circumstance may be represented for Minchiate by the letter of Luigi Pulci (1432-84) to Lorenzo il Magnifico, dated 23 August 1466, and also referred to in the cited dictionary. Due to the much earlier date, I decided to treat it apart from the other evidence, already described.

In this case, there are very few, if any, problems of interpretation of the text. Pulci is passing the summer in the country and writes to Lorenzo that he is craving to see him again to the point that, had he only a horse, he would come there to play together at different games and win by large. The exact text of the relevant sentence is, *Pure, se havessi cavallo, ho sì gran voglia di rivedertich'io verrei costì per isvisarti alle Minchiate, a passadieci, asbaraglino, come tu sai ch'io ti concio*. The only difficult term, from a language point of view, is the verb *isvisare* for *svisare*, meaning not only to win a match but to disfigure the face with punches. The sense is obviously metaphoric, stressing the higher level of Pulci as a player. The three mentioned games are Minchiate, which needs no comment for the moment; Passadieci, a common name for different games played with dice only (with the aim to or not to surpass ten), with dice and board (with the peculiarity of counting doubles twice), and perhaps even with cards; Sbaraglino, a favourite boardgame of the backgammon family whose popularity lasted for several centuries. In the same letter some common programmes to compose verses are also recalled.

Evidently, Pulci exploited his supremacy in poetry and in games over the young Lorenzo (17 years old at the time, compared to 34 for Pulci) to continue his friendly relationships with the Medici family. As known, he was an appreciated friend of Lorenzo's mother, to whom he devoted his masterpiece *Il Morgante Maggiore*, as well as, later, of Lorenzo's wife. During his difficult life, he was often compelled to ask support from the Medici family. Further details maybe found in the general literature concerned with those renowned personages. After all, the only matter which is of essential interest here is the presence of the word Minchiate in the letter, thus proving that the well-known Florentine game already existed at such an early date.

As a matter of fact, it cannot be asserted with absolute certainty that actual Minchiate are intended here. Among the different etymologies suggested for the word, that supported by Nigra explains those cards as *miniculatae*, or miniated. In principle, the same word could be applied to common cards as well, prior to the actual invention of the Minchiate pack. Thus, a name for common cards (which were called Naibi in Florence longer than elsewhere) was perhaps later reserved to the pack that more than others maintained a similar appearance with respect to ancient illuminated cards. In my opinion, however, this alternative explanation – the only one which occurred to me – is not simpler than the more obvious one of considering Minchiate already in existence by the middle of the 15th century, so that I would have resort to it only if the “obvious” one could indeed be shown to be wrong (as most historians will probably maintain, on the basis of the absence of preserved specimens or documentary records).

In any case, that evidence appears interesting enough to require a verification of the text in the printed editions and, if possible, on the autograph manuscript. The letter was first published – as most of Pulci’s letters – only in 1868 in a limited edition for a wedding by Bongi, who again published it in 1882 in a more complete and common book. The following edition was in *Morgante e Lettere* by De Robertis, in 1962, reprinted with some slight revisions (which do not concern either the letter or the notes to it) in 1984. The mentioned letter appears unchanged through the different editions.

If the text has to be checked on the autograph of the letter, as the importance of the document would require, the task happens to be difficult since the letter is not among those still preserved in Florence (42 out of a total of 52). Bongi states it was in the collection of Succi in Bologna, wherefrom it passed to Santarelli, who probably (according to a suggestion by De Robertis) showed the text again to the same Bongi for his edition. Of the two letters with that provenance we have completely lost trace of one, and also the second – of interest here – has disappeared for some decades. After the information from the 19th century, De Robertis (unaltered in 1984) records that it was pointed out in a Hoepli auction, Geneve 1956, and from there it reached New York antique dealer W.Schab.

I hope some reader will be able to communicate something on the more recent destiny of that fundamental letter. Personally, I will fully believe in that evidence only once I read the relevant sentence in the original writing. I am not far from reaching that belief, however, since I could already check the autograph of the letter immediately following it in the remaining series – written again to Lorenzo about two months later. A check, in the Biblioteca Moreniana, Florence, showed that Pulci’s writing is easily readable (except for some abbreviations which, although usual, would require an expert eye) so that it is strongly unlikely that the word Minchiate should be the consequence of a misspelling in the transcription.

Let us therefore assume that the reference is true, as it plausibly is. The consequences are many and needing a full analysis by the specialists of tarot history. I will only emphasise a few points. Not only does the year 1466 happen to be much earlier than expected for Minchiate, but it approaches the very origin of tarot and also the introduction of Naibi. If the tarot pack required a few decades to diffuse southward from the suggested birthplaces in northern Italy, it could reach Florence when Germini were already established; or else, contrary to the opinions of every recent historian of cards, Germini did actually originate the common tarot pack. It may now be supposed that even earlier dates should be taken into consideration; for instance, the supremacy of Pulci over Lorenzo would probably have been less remarkable if it were a new game.

On the other hand, the initial appearance itself of any cards here is approached by Pulci’s letter. And the Florentine evidence cannot be considered late, since the renowned *Provvigione* of 1376/77 is still generally considered as the first European document on cards. Ninety years after that may appear a long time; not too long, however, to avoid transmission of knowledge among the components of a social group or of a family. At that time, someone could remember the reports of his grandfather describing the personal experience of seeing the very first Naibi. Thus, the role of

Florence in the ancient history of European cards may acquire even more importance than already acknowledged.