

# Ludus Triumphorum.

## A Ludological Introduction to Tarot

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### ABSTRACT

In this article, I analyze tarot through the theories and concepts developed in the field of game studies. In the contemporary collective imagination, tarot cards are linked to divination and the esoteric symbolism of their figures, but like other packs of cards they originated as ludic objects. Through the study of historical sources from the 15th and 16th centuries, I investigate the ludic rhetoric generated by the games played with tarot deck and the reflections on the tarot made by various authors. The use of theoretical frameworks developed in game studies is extremely useful to better understand a fascinating and still largely misunderstood game such as the tarot deck.

### Keywords

tarot, tarocchi, rhetorics of play, card game, alea, mimicry, magic circle.

### INTRODUCTION

Tarot cards continue to fascinate. These ancient images wink at our psyche, foreshadowing mysteries and treasures. The numerous decks in circulation today are mainly used as a means of divination or to explore depth psychology through symbolic language. The tarot lends itself to these purposes but was originally used similarly to other card decks: for playing. The earliest written evidence we have on the *ludus triumphorum* likens tarot to traditional cards and dice. A number of documentary sources show us that from their invention - presumably around 1410-1420 - until the end of the 18th century, tarot cards were used as ludic objects (Dummett 1993). During the Age of Enlightenment, numerous esoteric theories arose regarding the origin and purpose of these cards. From these fanciful reconstructions, unsupported by any documentary evidence, the divinatory mode of use took hold. For about four centuries, ludic activity was the practice by which people interacted with the cards. It is therefore singular that, among the numerous studies conducted on this cultural object, only a few address it from a ludological perspective. An author who has considered the ludic aspect

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of the matter is Michael Dummett, eminent professor of logic who has studied tarot in depth (Dummett and Mann 1980; Dummett 1993). Other authors have investigated various games and ludic theories that developed in the 16th century, the historical period in which tarot also began to spread (Fassone and Huber 2017). There is, however, no text that addresses the subject of tarot as a ludic object from the theoretical framework offered by game studies. The objective of the present research is precisely this: to provide a ludological introduction to tarot based on historical sources read through concepts deriving from the field of game studies.

Game studies aim to study the activity of playing and the games that humans play or have played throughout time. Our analysis will mainly refer to two classic scholarly texts that have analyzed games and play. Roger Caillois (2001) examined various ludic practices, distinguishing among them four fundamental kinds: competition (*agon*), chance (*alea*), mask (*mimicry*), and vertigo (*ilinx*). These four categories summarize fundamental elements of the field of play, without exhausting the universe of play. Brian Sutton-Smith (2001) investigated the ambiguities that characterize play and the activity of playing, which are elements of human culture that are as widespread as they are elusive. To bring order to this large set of experiences, he systematized seven rhetorics through which play is theorized within broader value systems. Four rhetorics can be traced back to antiquity: play as fate, play as demonstration of power, play as identity (and community) and play as frivolity. Three others have been developed in modern times: play as progress, play as individuality and play as imaginary. As stated by Sutton-Smith: “the rhetorics of play express the way play is placed in context within broader value systems, which are assumed by the theorists of play rather than studied directly by them” (2001, 8). In my investigation of tarot-related documents, I analyze which elements can be traced back to Caillois's categorisation and which of the rhetorics defined by Sutton-Smith are activated.

## DECK, GAME AND ORIGIN OF CARDS

A tarot deck is composed of 78 cards divided into two types: 22 triumphs, known as Major Arcana, and 56 traditional cards divided into 4 Italian suits; each suit has 10 number cards and 4 figures namely, jack, knight, queen and king. Traditional playing cards arrived in Europe in the last decades of the 14th century at the end of a trajectory that, starting from China, passed through Persia to the Arab world and finally landed in Italy (Dummett 1993, 94-98). In a 14th-century ‘Chronicle of Viterbo’, now lost but quoted in other 15th-century documents, we read:

Year 1379. The card game was brought to Viterbo, which in Saracen parlance is called Nayb. (my translation)<sup>1</sup>

Indeed, the birth and realization of the triumph cards can be traced back to an author linked to one of the noble courts of Renaissance Italy. There is still no conclusive evidence on the details of the origin of the tarot; scholars continue to debate<sup>2</sup> but the leading experts agree on the temporal location of the invention - the first decades of

the 15th century - and on the spatial coordinates: any important center in central and northern Italy can contend for primogeniture, with Bologna, Ferrara and Milan as the most likely options.

The tarot deck was born as a reworking of the traditional deck to which the 22 triumphs were added and an original game was also developed. The tarot game - which, like the decks themselves, soon evolved into multifaceted experiences forming a true family of games - is a trick-taking game in which each card is captured by a major card of the same suit, with the triumphs taking on the function of trumps or *atout*. Particular attention is paid to the calculation of the score: this varies according to the type of game (Pratesi 1987b) but it tends to be the case that suit tricks and some triumphs are worth many points; victory is therefore awarded not on the basis of the quantity of tricks but their quality. These elements indicate that it is a complex game that entails a component of luck - the random element in the distribution of cards - but also requires a considerable amount of ingenuity and strategy: ancient documents already attest to this categorization, distinguishing it from games of chance (Trotti 1456). The term *trionfi*, which derives from the Latin *triumphi*, was used in 15th-century Italy to describe the 22 cards of the Major Arcana. The Italian term *tarocchi*, from which the French word *tarot* derives, came into use in the early 16th-century to denote first the 22 cards of the Major Arcana and later the entire deck, which also includes 56 Minor Arcana (Kaplan 1985). The etymology of these two words remains uncertain: theories have been formulated on the subject but, for reasons of space and expediency, we shall not discuss the issue here and just provide a few useful bibliographical references for those interested of delving further into the matter (Moakley 1966; Pratesi 1980).



**Figure 1:** Maestro dei Giochi Borromeo, *Giocatori di Tarocchi*, c. mid-15th century, fresco in a room of the Borromeo Palace, Milan.

## PLAY AND RELIGION: DEVILS, ANGELS AND THE MYSTICAL LADDER

In this section we will examine how the tarot deck was conceived as a means of conveying knowledge extrinsic to the play experience. This idea is linked to the rhetoric of *play as progress* that Sutton-Smith identifies in those experiences that consider play and ludic activity as opportunities to learn knowledge and develop skills that produce effects outside the magic circle (Huizinga 1970, 10). The idea of triumphs ordered according to a numerical scale can indeed convey at a structural level the idea of progression (or regression, as we shall see). Before analyzing this aspect, it is necessary to clarify the different types of ordering of triumphs encountered in ancient decks. Dummett has identified three different types of orders that can be traced back to three cities in central northern Italy. The scholar conventionally calls these three different types of orders A, B and C, referring respectively to the orders used by the players of Bologna, Ferrara and Milan (Dummett 1993, 171-239).

Bologna (A)	Ferrara (B)	Milan (C)
Il Bagattino o il Begato	Il Bagatto	Il Bagatto
. I 4 Mori (same value)	L'Imperatrice	La Papessa
. I 4 Mori	L'Imperatore	L'Imperatrice
. I 4 Mori	La Papessa	L'Imperatore
. I 4 Mori	Il Papa	Il Papa
L'Amore	La Temperanza	Gli Amanti
Il Carro	Il Carro	Il Carro
La Temperanza	L'Amore	La Giustizia
La Giusta (la Giustizia)	La Fortezza	L'Eremita
La Forza (la Fortezza)	La Ruota	La Ruota di Fortuna
La Roda (la Ruota)	L'Eremita	La Forza
Il Vecchio (l'Eremita)	L'Impiccato	L'Appeso
Il Traditore (l'impiccato)	La Morte	La Morte
La Morte	Il Diavolo	La Temperanza
Il Diavolo	La Torre	Il Diavolo
La Saetta (la Torre)	La Stella	La Torre
La Stella	La Luna	La Stella
Luna	Il Sole	La Luna
Sole	L'Angelo (Giudizio)	Il Sole

Mondo	La Giustizia	Il Giudizio
Angelo (Giudizio)	Il Mondo	Il Mondo
Matto	Il Matto	Il Matto

**Table 1:** Order of Triumphs according to the city of origin (Elaborated by Michael Dummett).

The hierarchization of the triumphs is immediately explainable on a ludic level - the greater triumph wins out over the lesser - but some authors argue that the order of the cards can convey teachings related to the Christian religion. According to this thesis, tarot games are not completely autotelic activities but have ethical and religious implications: for some they possess educational potential according to the principle of *ludendo intelligo*<sup>3</sup>, for others they constitute a danger to the Christian religion by perverting its faith.

To expose the ways in which the tarot game expresses this rhetoric of progress (or regress) we will mainly analyze two texts dating back to the 15th and 16th centuries. The first is the so-called *Sermo perutilis de ludo* (Steele 1900, 185-200)<sup>4</sup>, which has come down to us anonymously and is presumably taken from a sermon by a preacher from the second half of the 15th-century, as well as being the first document to provide an order of triumphs (referable to type B). Instead, the second text is the first printed book devoted entirely to triumphs: *Discorso sopra l'ordine delle figure de Tarocchi* by Francesco Piscina da Carmagnola, printed in 1565 (type C order). These texts deal with the sequence of triumphs by articulating, in relation to the Christian religion, very different rhetorics of the game: the first gives a totally negative view of it - in fact it is rather a rhetoric of *regress* - whereas the second offers instead a more constructive view, allowing us to refer to it as a rhetoric of *progress*.

The monk in the *Sermo perutilis de ludo cum aliis* states that there are three types of games of chance: dice, cards and triumphs; all were invented by the devil to deceive souls and lead them to hell. He then proceeds to narrate how in the early Church all the faithful praised God and went to church, to the point the devils fled to hell where there was a meeting between Lucifer and the various devils. One of them, Azarus, had an idea to deceive the souls of the faithful: to build 'gambling bishoprics' in towns and villages, to the effect that the religion of gambling would replace Christianity (Steele 1900, 185-6).



**Figure 2:** *Judgement* of the Visconti-Sforza bundle, Milan, Italy, ca. 1450-1480; preserved at the Morgan Library.

The image of gambling dens as satanic cathedrals and of devils associated with gambling is already present in the sermon of St. Bernardine of Siena (S. Bernardini Senensis 1635, 267-271). A comprehensive overview of the relationship between church and gambling in the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance has been reconstructed from documentary sources (Ortalli 2012). The anonymous preacher then expounds on the various card games of the time, drawing parallels between the names of the games and the names of certain devils, after which he analyzes the symbolism of the card suits: the denarii flee from the hands of the players, the cups show the misery of the players who are left with only a cup to drink from, the barren wood of the clubs represents the lack of divine grace, and the swords are instruments for killing that point to the brevity of the players' lives. The preacher then deals with triumphs and here we come to our topic: play as regress.

The game of triumph is considered the most harmful from the Christian perspective: the elements of faith are present but perverted in order to deceive souls and lead them to perdition. The metaphor of the ladder is used, not to ascend to heaven but rather to descend to hell: "There are in fact 21<sup>5</sup> triumphs, which represent the 21 steps of another ladder that leads to the depths of hell" (Steele 1900, 187).<sup>6</sup> The game of triumphs causes the fall of the player's soul: playful activity shapes life as a whole and unleashes extremely negative extrinsic consequences.



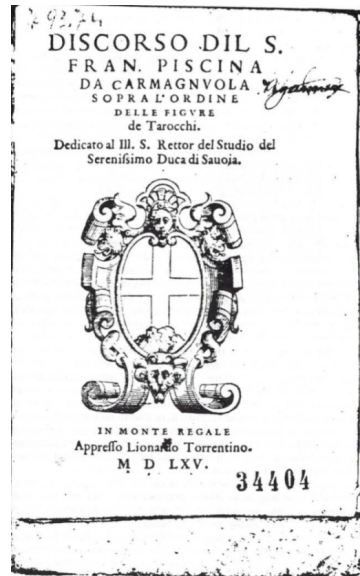
**Figure 3:** Left: *Stultitia* fresco by Giotto, part of the cycle in the Scrovegni Chapel in Padua - Right: *The Fool* from the Visconti-Sforza deck, Milan, Italy, ca. 1450-1480; preserved at the Morgan Library.

Regarding the ambiguous and conflicting relationship between play and religion, it is worth quoting a reflection by Sutton-Smith:

[...] modern chance games and modern festivals have fallen away from religion and become secularized. Yet one can see that, along with all forms of play, they both still provide experiences of "otherness," "alterity," or "altered states of consciousness." And these or similar states of mind are as essential to religious ritual and prayer as they are to game involvement. In both cases one becomes "lost" in the experience and thus transcends everyday cares and concerns. It is worth considering that because the two (religion and play) are in modern times so separate, they are in effect rivals for the promotion of such altered states of consciousness. Which means they are rivals for the positive qualities that such alterity provides. One can say of both religion and play that they make life worth living and make everyday activities meaningful, because of the transcendence that they propose, one eternal and one mundane. (2001, 66-7)

Although play and religion are at the antipodes in the worldview of the Christian preacher of the *Sermo perutilis de ludo*, these two elements can find a constructive synthesis: this is the case of Francesco Piscina. The latter was a law student at the University of Monte Regale, present-day Mondovì<sup>7</sup>, when he conceived the *Discorso Sopra l'Ordine delle Figure dei Tarocchi* that was publicly recited by the author on Pentecost Sunday 1565. The author already uses the newer word 'tarocchi' (tarot) instead of 'trionfi' (triumphs). The topic of the text is the interpretation of the meaning of the tarot images and their sequence (Pratesi 1987c). Piscina imagines what the original meaning might have been in the mind of the inventor of the cards and argues that there is a logical order in the arrangement of the sequence.





**Figure 4:** Frontispiece of Francesco Piscina's *Discorso* , 1565.

He also claims that the inventor of the game must have been a 'good and faithful follower of the Catholic and Christian faith'<sup>8</sup> (Piscina 1565, 7). According to Piscina, the figures of the 22 triumphs have educational and instructive characteristics in both a moral and religious sense. He analyzes each figure starting with the Fool, who is placed in the first position as if the author of the game - wanting to represent a 'fable' or a 'comedy' - has a fool in strange and motley clothes come out first in order to move men to laughter and put them in a good disposition for the continuation of the tale (Piscina 1565, 6-7).

The author describes the various meanings of the triumph cards, pointing out the links with the Christian religion and highlighting the educational significance embedded in their figures; for example: after *Cupid* (The Lovers) comes *Justice*, meaning that it 'conquers the passions, and does not let itself be ruled by them'. After the Temperance card we move on from earthly figures to celestial ones, but before arriving at them there are two images that act as intermediaries: the *Demons* (The Devil), considered by Platonic philosophy as intermediaries between heaven and earth, and *Fire* (The Tower) - 'between heavenly and mundane things to be so as the Natural or Philosophers affirm'. Then there are indeed the celestial images: *Stars*, *Moon* and *Sun*; to this series correspond both an intensification of luminosity - bringing us closer to the divine - and an ascent across the various levels of the celestial spheres in line with the ancient astronomical conception that is reworked by religious cosmology. The last image is that of the *Celestial Paradise* (Judgement) 'in which the blessed souls triumph and there he has painted a Lamb who singing and playing rejoices in those blessed spirits who, by the grace of God first and his good works, have made them worthy of that most happy eternal stillness' (Piscina 1565, 23).



In order to attain the glory of paradise, one must live according to the teachings of the Gospel and for this reason the penultimate image is the canonical one of the *World* surrounded by the symbols of the evangelists: Angel, Ox, Eagle and Lion. On this card, Piscina concludes his explanation of triumphs by emphasizing the deep faith of the inventor of the game:

Now the Author has placed the figure of the world in the midst of these four Holy Evangelists, to teach us that the world cannot exist without religion, the precepts of which these Holy Evangelists have written, since religion is the principal foundation of the tranquility and preservation of states and the happiness of peoples, and without which (as we have already mentioned in many places) we could not save our soul, born only to serve the Most High Lord our God.<sup>9</sup> (my translation)

The two texts analyzed consider the tarot game as capable of interacting with broad ideological, cultural and psychological systems such as religion and morality. In the *Sermo perutilis de ludo* we find a purely negative conception, in line with the preachers of the same era who condemned the game for its subversion and aspects of perversion of civil life and Christian ethics. In Piscina's text, on the other hand, the game of tarot is described as the brainchild of a Catholic author conveying moral and religious teachings. For both authors, the game contributes to a change in human consciousness that is not limited to the playful sphere: now in the form of a *regress* towards the depths of hell, now with a *progress* towards Christian truth and heavenly paradise.

## POETRY, GAMBLING AND PLAYER COMMUNITY

Among the tarot-related documents that have come down to us over the centuries, one of the most evocative is *Invettiva contra il gioco del Tarocco* (Lollio 1550), a poetic text composed by the Ferrarese humanist Flavio Alberto Lollio and first printed in 1550. After suffering a bitter defeat and a considerable monetary loss, the man of letters reconsidered the goodness of the much-loved pastime, even going so far as to curse it as the source of many evils that afflict mankind. The poem lists the damage caused by the game and especially by tarot cards, then goes on to describe a game and finally concludes with a second part of the invective in which the author calls for the total destruction of the cards and the erasure of their memory. Already from the first lines, the theme of the poem and its tone are clearly highlighted:

Of the Game then I intend to speak,/ The wicked inventor of all evils:/ Born from idleness, and human avarice,/ Only to steal from others the goods, and time,/ Of which there is no treasure dearer to the World.<sup>10</sup> (my translation)

The game of tarot is given a special place: for better or for worse; the poet states that in the past he had held it in great esteem:

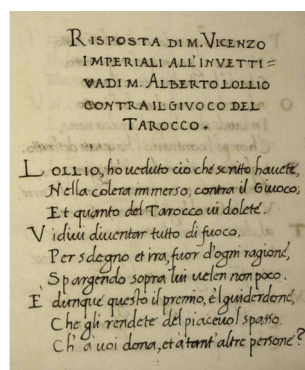
I was once of the opinion that the most beautiful game/ that can be played at cards was/  
That of the Tarot: so sometimes for fun,/ To recreate the afflicted and tired spirits/ I  
amuse myself with it: passing/ Those hours, which are less suitable for studies.<sup>11</sup> (my  
translation)

We then come to a description which is presumably the first literary testimony of a game of tarot, specifically in a three-player version called *terziglio*.<sup>12</sup> The description of the game consists first of all in the distribution of the cards: 5 by 5 they are distributed to the players who can make bets based on particular combinations or simply on the overall quality of the cards received. The first hand is good for Lollio who bets and raises the stake, but then he is handed some exceptionally bad cards to the point that the poet gives up on betting and feels worse than a captain who, having tasted victory, then sees his soldiers fall apart and break the lines thus losing the battle. After the distribution and the bets, the real game begins: the author worries about protecting the King and the face cards from the opponents' tricks since they are the most valuable cards for calculating the score. But his attempt is useless: the poet sees all his precious cards being taken away, now by one player, now by the other, and he compares himself first to a "urinal" and then to a "crow", to indicate his humiliation and painful monetary loss.<sup>13</sup> At this point the description of the game is concluded and the final phase of the invective begins where Lollio hopes for the destruction of the tarot game, harshly criticizing its inventor.<sup>14</sup> The poet curses the game, insults its inventor and denounces the senselessness of the structure of the triumphs and the whole game system. Criticizing the game as senseless and the work of a madman, Lollio supports the rhetoric that Sutton-Smith defines as frivolity: "The essences of play from this viewpoint are nonsense and inversion" (Sutton-Smith 2001, 201). From a purely ludic point of view, the poet takes on the role of a "spoil-sport": a disastrous figure for the health of the game. Huizinga in *Homo Ludens* compares him to the figure of the "cheater":

The player who trespasses against the rules or ignores them is a "spoil-sport". 'The spoil-sport is not the same as the false player, the cheat; for the latter pretends to be playing the game and, on the face of it, still acknowledges the magic circle. It is curious to note how much more lenient society is to the cheat than to the spoil-sport. This is because the spoil-sport shatters the play-world itself. By withdrawing from the game he reveals the relativity and fragility of the play-world in which he had temporarily shut himself with others. He robs play of its *illusion* - a pregnant word which means literally "in-play" (from *inlusio*, *illudere* or *inludere*). Therefore he must be cast out, for he threatens the existence of the play-community. (1970, 11)

Denouncing the idiocy of the game means throwing the group of players out of the ludic illusion. Lollio's invective - an intellectual active in various academic circles<sup>15</sup> - must have had caustic effects on the local gaming community.

Indeed, one of the local players will respond to the *Invective* by trying to "defend" the game. A manuscript has been found which, in addition to the full text of the *Invective* - with some corrections – contains also a *Risposta*<sup>16</sup> signed by Vincenzo Imperiali. No information has been found about this author, the hypothesis has been advanced that it could be a pseudonym of Lollio himself.<sup>17</sup>



**Figure 5:** First page of Vincenzo Imperiali's *Risposta*, the manuscript is held at the Biblioteca Comunale Ariostea of Ferrara, CL I, 257.

Imperiali shows that he knows Lollio well and states that, on the same day he composed his invective, he played tarot "With the Podestà, and with Giulio Cardinale".

Imperiali is worried about the attacks of the "spoil-sport" Lollio. In numerous places he sings the praises of the game, considering it among the noblest: compared to the *Bassetta*<sup>18</sup>, a game of chance based on the extraction of the card, the tarot is worthy of elevated individuals:

Because it is a game only for swindlers,/ Thief, cruel, lying, impious, and profane./ But the game of Tarot is for Lords,/ Princes, Kings, Barons, and Knights,/ For this reason it is called the game of honors.<sup>19</sup> (my translation)

After a recollection of the series of triumphs, the *Risposta* concludes with the hope that the *Invettiva* will be put away so that no one will ever read it again.

The documents we have analyzed have many fascinating elements. As also indicated in the previous section, the game was associated with betting on money and this could cause disorder and discord. There is a focus on the element of chance that powerfully enters into play and upsets player Lollio's mood: he does not accept the verdict of fortune and repudiates tarot altogether. Finally, the poetic clash: the *Invettiva* defames the reputation of the game by appealing to the rhetoric of the game as frivolity and seeks to erase its memory, thereby threatening the community of present and future players; the *Risposta* defends the game and seeks to restore its magic circle to preserve tarot for posterity.

## **TAROCCHI APPROPRIATI: PARTY GAMES BETWEEN MASK AND SATIRE**

Among the various games played with tarot cards, there is one that diverges from the traditional card game: it is the so-called genre of *tarocchi appropriati* ("appropriate tarot cards") that consists in associating the triumph cards to a group of people so that each individual corresponds to a figure. The numerous documents that illustrate this practice also make *tarocchi appropriati* a literary subgenre. The game is mentioned in a work by Girolamo Bargagli, a treatise that catalogues many games of the time played in the environment of the Accademia degli Intronati in Siena: "And I also (added Mansueto) have seen the game of tarot played, giving everyone around a tarot name, and someone then declaring, calling out, for what reason he thought, that to this and that the name of a certain tarot had been given" (my translation).<sup>20</sup>

The games found in the texts collected in this section are united by their common affinity with the playful element defined as *mimicry* by Roger Caillois which is related to the sphere of performance, and the mask: "In one way or another, one escapes the real world and creates another. One can also escape himself and become another. This is *mimicry*" (2001, 19, italics in the original).

This type of game also emphasizes a type of play that can be traced back to the rhetoric of play as identity.

In these identity rhetorics [...] play is a metaphoric sphere that can conjoin what is otherwise apart and divide what is otherwise together, and in a malleable way use these pretended identities to create a feeling of belonging. (Sutton-Smith 2001, 93)

These experiences trespass into the territory of theater. Studies have been conducted on the connections between theater and play, highlighting how commercial theater emerged by modeling itself on gaming, framing spectatorship as a form of "play" (Bloom 2018).

Games that fall under the appropriate tarot consist in assigning fictional roles to people in order to create social dynamics in imaginary play spaces.

The first purely literary example that we know of is the work by Pietro Aretino, *Pasquinate sopra il Conclave del 1521* in which the author paints a paradoxical situation. Since no cardinal gains the necessary majority to ascend to the papal throne, they decide to solve the issue with tarots: the one who draws the homonymous card will become Pope; yet no one can find it.

Another anonymous composition found among the cards of the humanist Paolo Giovio (1550) is imbued with the same satirical tone. It refers to the conclave of 1549-50 and relates a situation similar to that of Aretino's composition: the cardinals decide to settle the election with a game of tarot cards; whoever found the Pope card would be worthy of ascending to the throne of Peter. However, even in this case, the card was not found. On the other hand, those compositions that associate tarot cards with various ladies have a laudatory purpose. The oldest document of this type is the anonymous

manuscript *Motti alle signore di Pavia sotto il titolo dei Tarocchi*, attributed to the poet Giovan Battista Susio and dated to around 1525-40. The work *Triumphs of Troilo Pomeran* by the poet Troilo Pomeran, which praises some Venetian noblewomen, also dates back to the same period. The *Trionfo Tridentino* composed by the notary Leonardo Colombino dates back to 1547 on the occasion of the celebrations organized by the prince-bishop Cristoforo Madruzzo for the victory of Charles V at Mühlberg over the Protestants. The text narrates the victory celebrations which were held in Trento and were an opportunity for the Trentino nobility to show their status as a ruling class. During the festival, a parade of noblewomen who impersonated the tarot figures was organized, with one notable exception: the figure of the Fool-Wise Man was the only one to be paired with a man, Mr. Francesco Giardiniero.

Standing out for its scathing satirical charge is *I Germini, sopra quaranta meritotrice della Città di Fiorenza*, an anonymous text printed in Florence in 1553 that pairs forty prostitutes of the city with the Germini cards<sup>21</sup>, a variant of the traditional tarot deck born in Florence. The most interesting appropriate tarot text in this context is *Lotto Festevole fatto in villa*, dedicated to the Bolognese Count Rodolfo Campeggi and the work by the writer, storyteller and playwright Giulio Cesare della Croce. The author recounts that during a stay in the villa, on hot August days, a group of ladies and knights gather to take part in games and entertainment.

Eventually, one of the knights proposes a game consisting in taking a deck of tarot cards and removing all the triumphs, then he suggests writing the name of each lady on a slip of paper and placing each slip inside a container, finally each triumph would be distributed to each lady.

Since the ludic invention is immediately appreciated, the game soon begins: a boy draws from the vase the name of the lady, who is in turn given the corresponding triumph card and a small gift, finally the relative octave is read. Note that neither the Pope nor the Popess are feature in this list; they were probably taken out (of the deck) of respect for the ecclesiastical institution.

The “negative” cards such as the Devil and Death have an educational value here and do not represent an insult to the ladies who receive them, as can be seen, for instance, from the eighth of the Devil:

The sky and all the elements were amazed,/ when with a vague and pilgrim face/ this one, among the rarest and most excellent,/ appeared to make sweet rapine of the heart./ She bears the evil Spirit with burning eyes,/ not to follow him, nor his doctrine,/ but to show us that our salvation/ is to flee vice and embrace virtue.<sup>22</sup> (my translation)



**Figure 6:** Frontispiece of *Lotto Festevole fatto in Villa*, by Giulio Cesare della Croce, printed edition of 1602.

The game was a success, the ladies were happy and the knights were amused: the party ended with toasts and musical arias. The *Lotto Festevole* seems interesting for two reasons: because it tells of a real party game played by a group of people with a tarot deck and is not just a literary composition that matches triumphs to individuals. Furthermore, the pairing here is the result of chance and not the work of the author who, like a modern “casting director”, matches the figures of the triumphs to people according to some symbolic and aesthetic correspondence.

The genre of *tarocchi appropriati* show us that in addition to trick-taking games, players used tarot cards to satirize and portray identities, assigning specific royal courtiers to specific cards during court feasts. One thinks of the *pasquinate* that ridiculed public figures. Here *mimicry* is intertwined with social commentary: the deck becomes a stage for satire and celebration

## CONCLUSIONS

In this text we have analyzed some historical documents related the tarot that illustrate various rhetorics and game modes. The playful prism of the tarot enables us to investigate concepts and theories that are prominent in the field of game studies: the rhetorics of play as progress (or regression), of play as frivolity connected to the figure of the spoilsport, and finally the mimetic element linked in turn to the rhetoric of play as identity. On the other hand, the theories and concepts that we have mentioned is instrumental in better understanding the history of the tarot as a playing deck.

However the playful world of tarot does not end here: in the history of tarot, we find other elements worthy of analysis. Regarding the element of agon and the rhetoric of play as power, it would be interesting to conduct an investigation into the use of decks – and games and celebrations more generally – used by noble families as tools of

legitimation. This research could start with an investigation into the heraldic symbols on the figures of the oldest decks, such as the Visconti-Sforza.

A field of study on this topic is also that of divination, which in recent centuries, has monopolized the tarot's fame in the social imaginary. Always operating within the perimeter of game studies, we can start from an assumption: to consider cartomancy *sub specie ludi*, probing the correspondences between this set of techniques, the world of ritual, the horizons of archetypal psychology and the rhetoric of play as imaginary. We close this introductory study in the hope of having provided food for thought for the debate on these fascinating cards and games, and trusting that we will be able to expand the research later to develop ideas only hinted at here.



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<sup>1</sup> “Anno 1379. Fu recato in Viterbo il gioco delle carte, che in saracino parlare si chiama Nayb”. (Bussi 1742)

<sup>2</sup> The medievalist and iconologist Andrea Vitali points to Prince Francesco Antelminelli Castracani Fibbia as the inventor of the game and the deck. (Vitali 2013)

<sup>3</sup> Among the modern supporters of this thesis is the medievalist and president of the cultural association *Le Tarot* Andrea Vitali. *LE TAROT Associazione culturale*. <http://www.letarot.it/page.aspx?id=780>. Accessed 24 April 2025.

<sup>4</sup> The original manuscript, written in a Latin altered by popular linguistic interference, was in Robert Steele's possession and is currently held at Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee.

<sup>5</sup> The numbering of the text indicates 21 triumphs as the Fool is associated with the number 0, with the words: “El matto sie nulla (nisi velint)”, which means “The fool is nothing (unless they want to)”.

<sup>6</sup> The original Latin quote is as follows: “Sunt enim 21 triamphi qui 21 gradus alterius scale in profundum inferi mintis”.

<sup>7</sup> Mondovì is an Italian municipality in the province of Cuneo in Piedmont, Italy.

<sup>8</sup> The original quote in Italian is the following: “Buono e fedele seguace della Catholica e Cristiana fede”. *LE TAROT Associazione culturale*. <http://www.letarot.it/page.aspx?id=874>. Accessed 24 April 2025.

<sup>9</sup> The original quote in Italian is the following: “Hora la figura del mondo in mezo questi quattro Santi Evangelisti l’Autore ha posto, per insegnarci che il mondo non può star senza religione i precetti della quale hanno scritto questi Santissimi Evangelisti, essendo ella il principal fondamento della quiete e conservazione de stati e della felicità de popoli, e senza la quale (si come già habbiamo in molti luoghi accenato) noi non potremmo salvar l’anima nostra, nata solo per servir al Grandissimo Signor Dio Nostro.” (Piscina 1565, 22)

<sup>10</sup> The original quote in Italian is the following: “Del Giuoco adunque ragionare intendo,/ Scelerato inventor di tutti e mali:/ Nato dall'otio, et d'avaritia humana,/ Sol per furare altrui la robba, e'l tempo,/ Di cui non è tesor più caro al Mondo”. (Lollo, 1550, 236)

<sup>11</sup> The original quote in Italian is the following: “Io fui già di parer, che il più bel giuoco,/ che si possa giocare à carte, fosse/ Quel del Taroco: onde tal hor per spasso,/ Per ricrear li spiriti afflitti, e stanchi/ Con lui mi trastulaua: trapassando/ Quelle hore, che son men’atte a’ studi:”. (Lollo, 1550, 236)

<sup>12</sup> For an in-depth analysis of this variant of the three-player tarot, see: [TreTre: Il Terziglio coi tarocchi di Alberto Lollo](https://web.archive.org/web/20170212143233/http://www.tretre.it/menu/accademia-del-tre/documenti-e-articoli/il-terziglio-coi-tarocchi-di-alberto-lollo/). 12 febbraio 2017, <https://web.archive.org/web/20170212143233/http://www.tretre.it/menu/accademia-del-tre/documenti-e-articoli/il-terziglio-coi-tarocchi-di-alberto-lollo/>. Accessed 24 April 2025.

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<sup>13</sup> “Quello è lo isfinimento, e'l creppacuore,/che sei sforzato à tener per tuo specchio,/Certe Cartaccie, che ti fan languire:/Et (come se tu fussi un'Orinale)/Servir convienti gli altri due compagni,/Rispondendo a ciascun giuoco, per giuoco./[...]Quante volte non puoi coprire il Matto,/Tal, che mal grado tuo, spogliar ti vedi/Del buon c'havevi; et sembri la Cornacchia/Che restò spennacchiata infra gli uccelli?” (Lollio 1550, 238-9); “That is the exhaustion, and the heartbreak,/that you are forced to hold up as your mirror,/Certain playing cards, that make you languish:/And (as if you were a urinal)/ it falls to you to serve your fellow players,/Answering each game, for game./[...] How many times can you not cover the Fool,/So that, against your will, you see yourself stripped/Of the good you had; and you resemble the Crow/Who remained plucked among the birds?” (my translation).

<sup>14</sup> “Creder si dè, ch'ei fosse un dipintore/Ignobil, scioperato, et senza soldi,/Che per buscarsi il pan, si mise à fare/Cotali filostroccole da putti./Che vuol dir altro il Bagatella, e'l Matto,/Se non ch'ei fusse un ciurmatore, e un barro?/Che significan altro la Papessa,/Il Carro, il Traditor, la Ruota, il Gobbo:/Là Fortezza, la Stella, il Sol, la Luna,/E la Morte, e l'Inferno: e tutto'l resto/Di questa bizzarria girandolesca,/Senon che questi havea il capo sventato,/Pien di fumo, pancucchi, et fanfaluche?/Et che sia ver, colei che versa i fiaschi/Ci mostra chiar, ch'ei fusse un ebbriaco/E quel nome fantastico e bizzarro/Di Tarocco, senz'etimologia,/Fa palese a ciascun, che i ghiribizzi/Gli havesser guasto e storpiato il cervello” (Lollio 1550, 238-9); “It is believed that he was a painter/Ignoble, idle, and without money,/Who to earn his bread, began to make/Such nursery rhymes./What else do the Bagatelle, and the Fool,/Save that he was a charlatan, and a cheat?/What else do the Popess,/The Chariot, the Traitor, the Wheel, the Hunchback mean:/There is Strength, the Star, the Sun, the Moon,/And Death, and Hell: and all the rest/Of this whimsical whimsy,/Save that this one had a head that was out of proportion,/Full of smoke, buns, and nonsense?/And that it is true, she who pours the bottles/Shows us clearly, that he was a drunkard/And that fantastic and bizarre name/Of Tarocco, without etymology,/Makes it clear to everyone, that the whims/Have ruined and crippled his brain” (my translation).

<sup>15</sup> In the text of the *Invettiva* he mentions the Accademia dei Filareti, and the Siena-based Accademia degli Intronati. In addition to these, Lollio was active in the Accademia degli Elevati and the Accademia degli Occulti. «LOLLIO, Alberto - Enciclopedia». *Treccani*, [https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/alberto-lollio\\_\(Dizionario-Biografico\)/](https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/alberto-lollio_(Dizionario-Biografico)/). Accessed 24 April 2025.

<sup>16</sup> The manuscript is held at the Biblioteca Comunale Ariostea in Ferrara, CL I, 257. It was discovered by Franco Pratesi, “Ferrarese Tarot in the 16th Century: Invective and Answer”, *The Playing-Card*, 15 No. 4 (1987) 123-131.

A complete transcription of the manuscript by Girolamo Zorli is available at: *Wayback Machine*. 13 settembre 2015, [https://web.archive.org/web/20150913052538/http://www.trete.it/uploads/media/LOLLIO\\_IMPERIALI\\_-\\_INVETTIVA\\_e\\_RISPOSTA\\_-\\_FE1554.pdf](https://web.archive.org/web/20150913052538/http://www.trete.it/uploads/media/LOLLIO_IMPERIALI_-_INVETTIVA_e_RISPOSTA_-_FE1554.pdf).

<sup>17</sup> This hypothesis was formulated by Enrica Domenicali. *Ferrara - Voci di una Città - Alberto Lollio*. [https://rivista.fondazioneestense.it/num-29/num-28/item/519-alberto-](https://rivista.fondazioneestense.it/num-29/num-28/item/519-alberto-17)

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[lollio](#). Accessed 24 April 2025.

<sup>18</sup> Bassetta is a card game of chance played by five in which one holds the bank by taking the bets of the others. Bassetta was invented in the 15th century in Venice. (Angiolino et al. 2022, 109).

<sup>19</sup> The original quote in Italian is the following: “Perch’egli è un giuoco sol da truffatori,/ Ladro, crudel, mendace, empio, e profano./ Ma il giuco del Tarocco è da Signori,/ Principi, Re, Baroni, et Cavalieri,/ Per questo è detto il giuoco degli honori”. (Imperiali, verses number 215-9)

<sup>20</sup> The original quote in Italian is the following: “Et io ancora (soggiunse il Mansueto) ho veduto fare il giuoco de’ Tarocchi, ponendo a tutti li circostanti un nome di tarocco, et qualcun di poi dichiarar chiamando, per quale cagione stimasse, che à questo et à quello il nome d’un tal tarocco fosse stato posto”. (Bargagli 1575, 101-2)

<sup>21</sup> The Germini, or Minchiate, are a particular tarot deck created in Florence in the mid-15th century and expanded to a total of 97 cards with 41 triumphs.

<sup>22</sup> The original quote in Italian is the following: “Stupissi il cielo e tutti gli elementi,/ quando con faccia vaga e pellegrina/ costei, fra le più rare ed eccellenti,/ comparve a far de’ cor dolce rapina./ Porta lo Spirto rio con occhi ardenti,/ non per lui seguitar, né sua dottrina,/ ma per mostrarci che nostra salute/ è fuggir vitio e abbracciar virtute”. (della Croce 1602, 8)

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