

WHIST AGAINST MINCHIATE IN FLORENCE DURING THE 19th CENTURY

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The starting point of this study may be considered a quotation from one of the many Complete Hoyle books (Forster's edition of 1916, New York): "So popular did whist become in Italy that we find the boxes at the opera in Florence provided with card tables in 1790. The music of the opera was considered of value chiefly as, 'increasing the joy of good fortune, and soothing the affliction of bad'." Although the book appears as an excellent treatise on indoor games, when I read the above reported quotation, several years ago, I did not then know that Forster was indeed one of the few genuine experts of the history of card games. Thus, I wondered whether that indication could be checked, since I had found neither the source nor any precise confirmation.

It is true that at the time the best Club in Florence (and maybe the only one active in the city and not at a popular level) was already that located in Via del Cocomero. Cocomero or watermelon was the familiar name of a theatre, which still exists under the name of Niccolini, less than 100 metres from the Duomo. Now, the known Club for billiards, dice and card-playing was indeed in the same building as the theatre, as can be found confirmed, for instance, in Fantozzi's *Guide* : (2) "*Al disotto del Teatro, ossia al pian terreno, si trovano varie stanze, nelle quali si raduna giornalmente e seralmente una scelta Società di nobili e cittadini, alla quale sono ammessi ancora que' forestieri di civil condizione, che si sono premuniti di un biglietto di nomina da uno de' componenti la rispettiva Accademia.*" Of these Academies, there existed many in Italy since about the 16th century. Although Florence had already lost, at that time, much of its artistic and economical leadership, it was still a city much beloved by the European intellectuals.

That in this, to a given extent cosmopolitan, society whist should have been played appears quite likely, together with local games, for which indications can be found of the kind: (3) "*Non ha molto che fu introdotto nelle stanze di ricreazione del Cittadini situate in Firenze in Via del Cocomeroun Giuoco che suol chiamarsi 'Ombre Calabresellate'. Questo giuoco non é che la promiscuità dell'Ombre e della Calabresella.*" In the whole, it appears of particular interest to obtain information on a more quantitative level of the games there played.

A recent bibliographical research in the Riccardi Library of Florence has provided new documents which can actually give some answers to the question above. The main result derives from a file containing seven annual balances of the above mentioned Club. Every incoming and outgoing is registered with care and the balances contain many interesting details concerning the whole administration of the Club. It might be useful to examine in some detail every item of the balances. However, we are here concerned only with one of them, whose importance, almost negligible in the overall balance, appears nevertheless of great interest for the history of cards and card-gaming. That item concerns packs of cards, separately recorded, so that one can follow the life of no less than 3,667 packs in the course of about 10 years (see Table 1). The fact that we are in the presence of true and regular balances provides us not only with the number of the cards but also with the corresponding prices (see Table 2). We have thus gained a lot of information which is worth reporting and discussing.

It is first of all tempting to find out how much did the different packs actually cost in the middle of the 19th century. An exact evaluation from the reported data, however, is not easy, if any is indeed possible. One has in fact to put forward several assumptions: maintenance of exactly the same prices for different years, an unlikely lack of any discount or rounding-up in the totals, and so on. At first inspection, I verified that different ways of collecting systems of

possible equations between amounts and prices gave slightly different results, so that it may be best to be satisfied with the following rough prices: L. 1 for the 40-card pack, L. 1½ for the 52 one, L. 2¼ for the Minchiate pack. These were then reduced to about a half (again following a very rough evaluation) in order to sell out the second-hand packs.

Another comment should be reserved to the total number of packs registered. It may be indeed surprising that it is so low. We know from other sources and other places (4) of a much larger consumption of cards. Moreover, we Italians are said (5) to be the most violent users of the cards. Two possible explanations may be tentatively suggested: these cards were of very high quality and/or they only represented a fraction of those actually used. Indications exist for both cases. The fact that the used cards were regularly sold out seems a preferred indication in favour of a very good quality of the same packs. On the other hand, that the balance did not probably contain all the packs used may be deduced from the facts that the registered packs show a strongly decreasing trend, that in 1848 all the existing packs are sold out and that in the two last balances of the file, for the years 1850 and 1851, the packs are no longer taken into consideration (as if all card gaming ceased in the Club). Owing to the above mentioned uncertainties, the obtained data will be discussed in the following no more on an absolute scale, but only on a relative one, on the basis of the ratio among the different kinds of packs: this, in any case, maintains a high documentary value.

TABLE 1

Packs used for the years indicated in the Florentine Club

Year	40 cards	52 cards	Minchiate	Total
1840	166	497	167	830
1841	66	603	142	811
1844	30	356	104	490
1845	74	50	42	166
1846	36	246	90	372
1847	21	320	74	415
1848	13	234	41	288
1849	50	178	67	295
Total	456	2484	727	3667
Mean value	57	310	91	458
Percent ca.	12	68	20	100

TABLE 2

Numbers and corresponding prices of cards packs purchased and sold out in the Florentine Club in the years indicated

Pack numbers			Year	Overall price
40 cards	52 cards	Minchiate		£. s. d.
Purchased				
72	564	132	1841	1072.6.8
84	-	36	1844	181.13.4

48	210	96	1845	559.-.-
-	240	48	1847	466.-.-
-	156	24	1848	288.10.-

Sold out:				
68	603	143	1841	566.10.-
74	50	42	1844	117.13.4
36	246	90	1845	263.-.-
13	234	41	1847	198.16.8
50	178	67	1848	176.6.8

In particular, the fact that appears most promising for our investigation is that these cards are separately registered as far as 40-, 52-card and Minchiate packs are concerned. Unfortunately, we have no detailed documentation on which game was actually played with which pack. But several plausible guesses are not difficult to put forward.

Let us begin with the 40-card pack. In my opinion, it was practically the only one used in the town and its surroundings by common people, for centuries. It is unlikely that whist ever had any broad diffusion or that Minchiate was still played among the working classes. Only recently with the family of Rummy games has the 52-card pack acquired a broad diffusion here. Up to my generation, the popular games were exclusively played with the 40 cards pack: the broad family of Tressette, Scopa, Briscola, Primera, Bestia, and a few others. Also, the ruling classes used the same pack for centuries, as a result of the fashion of Hombre.

A rather complete insight of the games played may be derived from the whole series of booklets on cardgames which were sold at Scalere di Badia in the first half of the 19th century. (6) In the middle of the century the long fashion for Hombre was probably finished (one has to remember that it has been played together with Calabresella for several years; (3) games for four players become more usual and it seems that Quadrigliati, belonging to the Tressette family, remained the best loved for many years.

As far as the 52 cards pack is concerned, it is easy to guess that its main use was whist or boston-whist. It is true that the same pack could in principle be used for several gambling games (out of which some had precisely a Florentine origin). However, whist seems by far more adequate to that rather exclusive society of ruling classes and foreign visitors. Still at the end of the century we have indications of the continuing vogue of that society game. (7) Therefore, the high number of packs of cards used for the game of whist extends for several decades the quoted evidence of Forster's.

The main result of this investigation, however, is not the confirmation, on a quantitative basis, of the predominance of whist among the card games in the Florentine society, but it derives from the recorded number of the Minchiate packs. These data require further discussion in some detail. Although much is known about the Minchiate game, as played mainly in Florence and Rome from the beginning of the 16th to the end of the 19th century, there remain several doubts particularly as far as the initial and the final dates are concerned.⁸ The exact origin, the choice of the sequence itself of triumphs, of the "Portuguese" suitmarks, and so on, all require further information.

Certainly knowledge of the end period is very unsatisfactory, beginning with the Ganellini variation which is said to have been played in Genoa until about 1940, without anybody remembering it! (8,9) Let us briefly consider information from several Italian booklets on games, which are not mentioned in the Dummett's treatise. In Naples (one of the few centres, together

with Florence and especially Milan, in which an appreciable number of books on games have been published in this century) several editions of Chitarrella rules go on to be printed one after the other, often including the rules of card games other than Tressette and Scopone. Among them, Minchiate is still to be found, under the name of Tarocchi, to the present day. (10) Obviously this does not mean that the game is now played in Naples or elsewhere. The source of that description of the game may be found in a book which originated in Florence at the end of the 19th century and which underwent many successive impressions both in the original and in a reduced form. (12) For several boardgames, the first edition was accurately checked by Fiske (13) who ascertained that it represented an original compilation which, differently from other similar books, was quite independent on the current sources, mainly of French origin. It is not possible to ascertain now at what stage of the recurrent editions these books began to record an already forgotten game. In a compilation of games with some literary pretensions printed in Florence in 1940, (14) Tarocchi is already meant as the 78-card game, which perhaps nobody ever played here, at least for several centuries. But also in the second half of the 19th century entire books or even chapters in game booklets dedicated to Minchiate are very few, so that one could well suspect that the game went toward extinction by the first half of the 19th century, when the only residual game was among four players (either each for himself or, better, two against two). (15)

Having now gained the exact number of card packs used in the main Club of Florence in the middle of the 19th century, one can get an important indication of how much Minchiate was still played at the time. The conclusion which may be gained from the examination of the reported Tables is rather surprising: Minchiate packs, with the single game, are still on a same quantitative level, at least in this social environment, as the 40-card pack which, on the contrary, could be used for nearly a dozen highly popular games. Only the vogue of whist could surpass the popularity of that old local game! And that at a time in which the great Florentine civilisation was since long in crisis and the times were ripe for a further loss of the peculiar civic characteristics.

References

1. *Forster's Complete Hoyle*, Stokes, New York 1916, p. XVIII.
2. F. Fantozzi, *Nuova Guida...*, Ducci, Firenze 1842, p. 368.
3. *Trattato del giuoco calabresella e ombre calabresellate*, Firenze 1822, p. 49.
4. See for instance: P. Boiteau D'Ambly, *Les Cartes à jouer*, Hachette, Paris 1854, p. 297.
5. S. Mann, quoted in D. Parlett, *The Penguin Book of Card Games*, Harmondsworth 1983, p. 181.
6. A. Lensi, *Bibliografia italiana di giuochi di carte*, Landi, Firenze 1892.
7. *Il libro del giuochi*, Salani, Firenze 1894.
8. M. Dummett, *The Game of Tarot*, Duckworth, London 1980.
9. A. Chicco, Personal communication.
10. See for instance: *Regole di Chitarella*, Pironti, Napoli 1960, p. 46.
11. *I giuochi nobili*, Salani, Firenze 1894.
12. A. Chicco, "Scacchi minori" in *L'Italia Scacchistica*, 58 (1968) 101.
13. W. Fiske, *Chess in Iceland*, Florence 1905.
14. *La Matta*, Firenze 1940.
15. See for instance: *Regole generali del giuoco delle minchiate. Seconda edizione*, Firenze 1820.

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