

FERRARESE TAROT IN THE 16TH CENTURY: INVECTIVE AND ANSWER

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As the starting point for this article one must take into account the long analysis by Prof. Dummett of Lollo's *Invettiva*, which takes more than 10 pages of his fundamental treatise. And, as everybody knows, they are large two-columns pages. This length is mainly motivated by the fact that similar documentation from the 16th century is lacking, particularly as the actual rules of play are concerned. Moreover, there are several difficult points in the text which do not allow an unambiguous interpretation.

Here I am describing a new text from a manuscript, written by Lollo himself, which contains an improved version of his *Invettiva* and, joined to it, an unpublished copy, still by the hand of Lollo, of a *Risposta* to his own work by Vincenzo Imperiali. Since this reply analyses the arguments proposed by Lollo point by point, before answering them, we have here three successive stages of new information on the same topic: a text written by the Author with several revisions, a paraphrase of it inserted piece by piece into the reply, and the corresponding contrary arguments or examples from the same reply.

Before examining this information, let me summarize how the material was found. In recent years, I had the pleasant and instructive opportunity to correspond on several topics of the ancient history of games with Dr. Chicco, one of the greatest historians of chess and boardgames, who encouraged me to pursue my investigations into these topics. In particular, this study of the *Invettiva* and the *Risposta* derives from a hint of his.

In 1946 he obtained a transcription of a passage of the *Risposta* quoting chess, but the results were of practically no interest for the history of chess. Recently he remembered this and suggested to me that the rest of the poem might contain something of interest for the history of card games.

Unfortunately I could not find the indication of the codex in the catalogues (more than one hundred books) of the manuscripts preserved in the Italian libraries. Finally I found it indicated in G. Antonelli, *Indice del Manoscritti della Civica Biblioteca di Ferrara*, Ferrara 1884, p. 148, n. 257: The whole text is, in my opinion, worth reporting.

Invettiva di M. Alberto Lollo accademico Philareto contro il giuoco del Tarocco (Componimento in versi sciolti. E Risposta di Vincenzo Imperiali in terza rima). Cart. in 4°, del sec. XVI, ben conservato. Di carte scritte 30.

“Questi versi sciolti, coi quali Alberto Lollo inveisce contro il giuoco del Tarocco, sono autografi e più volte editi. La prima edizione rarissima è stampata a Venezia presso Giolito 1550. Il nostro Alberto dopo la sua composizione ha trascritto in codesto codicetto, di propria mano, la *Risposta* inedita, che alla sua *Invettiva* fece in terza rima Vincenzo Imperiali. Di questo autore non ho saputo trovare notizia alcuna.”

If nothing is known on V. Imperiali, for the life of Lollo he refers to G. Barotti, *Memorie di Scrittori Emiliani*, T.1°, p. 365.

These few lines were more than enough to induce me to ask for a microfilm copy, which I have recently studied. Thus, we have both the *Invettiva* and the *Risposta* written by the hand of Lollo. The first was printed many times (I guess one could list about a dozen editions, usually inserted among other poems, but that is not of great interest here). The *Risposta* is on the contrary unpublished and, since it contains a paraphrase of the Lollo text together with the rebuttal of his arguments, it is remarkably longer than the *Invettiva* itself, containing precisely 459 verses in terza rima. Due to this length, it is impossible to report it here and I will only extract, those which are, in my opinion, the most significant points.

The first kind of information to be discussed is that originating from the “new” version of the *Invettiva*. There are several changes in respect to the text reported in the Dummett’s treatise, which already eliminate several ambiguities present in that text. This one is generally in better agreement with the alternative reported in parentheses from the “second” edition. In a few cases, the manuscript text has been further revised, directly on to the previously written text, although I do not consider the extent of these last changes of any relevance here.

Let us consider now the *Risposta* by V. Imperiali. If I understand well, there are four main reproaches by Imperiali to Lollo, which emerge in several passages.

The first is toward the state of rage which is essentially responsible for the whole invective. Lollo is said to get in that state during play, although he never used to blaspheme, which has always been a habit of gamblers, currently deprecated.

The second, on which I will comment later in more detail, is that an appraisal rather than an invective was to be expected by such a keen and skilful player, so that the poem appears a fruit of ingratitude, too.

The third approach is against avarice. Although from the data we have on the life of Lollo we can at most speak of wisdom in administering his properties, no other specific reason can justify his anger, according to Imperiali, than regret for losing a few coins, “tre paia di scudi”.

The fourth is not explicitly stated but Imperiali means that several statements in Lollo’s negative attitude are totally gratuitous. Thus, sometimes the contrary affirmation also can be supported. And, even if some imperfection of tarot’s use indeed exists, it may usually be traced back to the evil of the players and to human nature, rather than to the game itself.

One of the most revealing passages is the following. Lollo had in particular inserted some examples, similar to the many found in the moralities on games, of people becoming totally ruined, of wives and daughters sold out, and so on. To that traditional list, Imperiali answers, repeating for a full page a question which appears to originate from a very modern and pragmatic frame of mind, as if it were asked today: to let him know the names of these people and of these unfortunate women, since he knew many players and none had become so wretched.

There are several points to note also concerning the favourable qualities of the game. It is ancient but it is so agreeable that it will last for ever. The game is not a wild one, it is mainly practised by persons of ripe age, and many Ladies are also known to appreciate it. The order of the cards and the manner of play are in themselves a defence against any detractor. Lollo himself is set in to the scene; he, who is so expert in shuffling the cards; he, who played with such high-ranking fellows as “col Podestà e con Giulio Cardinale” on the same day he wrote the poem; he, who proposed, being in luck, changes to the usual invitations.

In my opinion, it is worth commenting on this attitude of men of letters toward playing, rather common, to say the least, in those days. With this aim, I would like to compare this *Invettiva* with other works on a similar subject. That will help us to understand that most of what we find in the preserved texts does not correspond to a true feeling of the author but rather to a conventional (or else to an unorthodox, but all the same insincere) point of view.

I can begin with Berni, i.e. his *Capitolo sulla Primiera* and his comments on the same poem. Evidently, the author intends to present a game which is usually considered unworthy of any attention of intellectuals as worthy of poetry (first) and worthy of scholastic literary comment (secondly). Now the question is, was Berni so fond of Primiera as to insure it against eventual oblivion? The answer must be: Certainly not. We have proof from other poems that he got tired and angry at the game, regretting that he was obliged to go to sleep too late, and so on.

A fundamental text on card-playing in the same century is the well-known *Carte Parlanti* by Pietro Aretino. He observes the world and its different people from everyday life and not from books. Moreover, he has often something to say against the academic milieu. The picture he

provides of the gamblers, and of the playing customs of the time appears as a true description, due also to the vivacity of his style. Maybe these are thus genuine records of a gambler? Not at all. If one examines the text in some detail, and if his letters are taken into account, one understands well, indeed with some astonishment, that he writes this whole *Dialogo* to reward the Cartaro Padovano, who is sending him from Florence several presents. We can go farther: while he thanks many times the Cartaro for the exquisite foods he sent him – otherwise very difficult to obtain so far from his native country – he also avows that the beautiful cards sent at the same time were not used by himself (being not accustomed to play) but given to some pretty girls.

In the last work there is a reference to a man who was contemporaneously a famous man of letters (in particular his tragedy *Canace* divided the literary milieu into two stubborn factions) and was such a skilful and self-possessed player that Aretino says “Chi vuol sentire veder Platone in colloquio, miri e ascolti lo Sperone nel gioco”. Since Sperone Speroni has left some pages on games, I trusted I had found, finally, somebody praising them. However, in this case also I found mentions which were at most neutral but usually against the games, as in the advice he gives to a young relative going abroad.

Other examples could be cited in addition, and for several games. The fact remains that, before the corresponding technical treatises – which in some cases were only printed after a couple of centuries – we must be satisfied with the observations continued in these “literary” texts. Lollio is no exception as the answer by Imperiali clearly demonstrates. His spare moments are devoted to tarot, and not just many years before, but on the very day he wrote the poem. Only a few days before he joked with Imperiali, a less expert player, inviting him to count his own points on an occasion when Imperiali won no trick at all.

It is commonly stated that Lollio was only born in Florence, but lived from his infancy in Ferrara and in several properties he had around that town. To me, the *Invettiva* appears as a fruit of another “maledetto toscano”. There are several reasons, in particular of style, which make me think so; a typical liking for hyperbole, a temperament tending to rage and avarice, a mixing of academic and everyday topics, and so on. Maybe he derived from his birthplace much more than is usually acknowledged. In any case we obtain from the text not only a general view on 16th century attitudes of men of letters towards games and gambling but also several specific descriptions of the cards and their use.

Part of the most useful information we can derive from the *Risposta* concerns the order of the triumphs. Both the date and the place of origin of the text render it extremely interesting as documentation, to be considered together with the few others of similar provenance. The sequence is here scanned from the top and corresponds to the order B, as defined in Dummett’s treatise: Mondo, Giustizia, Angelo, Sole, Luna, Stella, Inferno, Demonio, Morte, Impiccato, Vecchio Saggio, Fortuna, Forza, Carro, Amore, Temperanza, Papa, Papessa, Imperatore, Imperatrice, Giocolaro, Pazzo. In this case I consider the whole text worth reporting, since it is concise enough, without any digression, if one excludes the Devil.

Il primo è il Mondo, che di se il governo
Ha dato alla Giustizia: e incontanente
L’Angel de Ciel la segue, e state, e verno
E vi ‘1 Sol, che da luce a tutta gente,
Et mena il giorno, e accenn’alla sorella,
Che le notturne tenebre sgomente.
Per ordine dappoi se ne vien quella,
Ch’a naviganti da non poca spene,
D’indurli al porto, e trarli di procella’

Qui d'un estremo all'altro a un tratto viene
 Dal chiaro Ciel, scende nel scuro centro,
 Et ritrova l'Inferno, e le su pene.
 Quivi il Demonio di rado sta dentro,
 Anzi fra l'human seme avvilluppato
 Sempre dimora; et io in un gran mare entro
 S'io voglio di costui haver narrato,
 Come nel mondo ognihor fa nuova preda,
 Onde di quello è Prencipe chiamato:
 Tal, che convien qua giù, ch'ognun li ceda,
 D'ingegno, di malitia, et di possanza,
 Benché la sciocca turba ciò non creda.
 Vien poi la Morte, et mena un'altra danza,
 Et la prudenza, e la malitia atterra,
 Et pareggia ciascuno alla bilanza.
 Ma, 'l vecchio saggio la Fortun'afferra,
 Et fa di lei, et di sua ruota un fasso,
 Quantunque essa la forza vinca in guerra.
 Quest'altr'Amor col suo carro in fraccasso
 A terra getta; et da spavento e horrore
 A quella, c'ha due vasi, un'alto, e un basso.
 Vien poi il Pap, con l'Imperatore,
 Et ciascun d'essi ha la sua donn'a canto,
 Che senza donne star, lor non da il core.
 Chiamato vien l'un Sacro, e l'altro Santo,
 Pur vogliono buffoni, et giocolari,
 Et pazzi in tutto, con risibil manto.

A particular reason why the whole text may be useful is that, although the 22 triumphs are deducible with relative ease from the verses, I think that a different pack would be derived if one were to judge only from this documentation. Thus, after Death, it would be difficult to insert the Hanged Man as "another dance" and, on the contrary, to avoid the insertion of Prudence, Malice, and maybe a further kind of Justice. In particular, while most cards are explicitly named, several are only indicated by paraphrases. In the latter group, there is no difficulty in associating the Moon to the sun's sorella or the Star to "that, which gives great hope to sailors to bring them to the port" or even Temperance to "that with two vases, one high, one low". Love and Chariot are introduced in exchanged order, due to poetic requirements, but the sense appears clearly to support the traditional order. Similarly it happens for the Popess and Empress, who are needed by the corresponding male personages "daring not remain without women". Of the possible orders inside the four "popes" several are compatible with the text, merely stating that each male personage has his favourite partner near to him. In correspondence with our usual triumphs number 1 and 0, there are indeed mentioned three different personages: buffoni, giocolari and pazzi. If we must gather two of them together, there is more than one possibility to do it plausibly, since they are not very different in the traditional representations.

The B order, which was already the most documented, acquires more and more support from different dates and places of Renaissance Italy.

The actual rules of play receive also new light from the examined manuscript. Not only can several question marks, remaining in the discussion by Dummett, now plausibly be eliminated,

but some further indications can also be extracted from the text.

Let us begin with the two question marks that remained, in the translation of the *Invettiva*, in the Dummett treatise, on p. 43. In both cases there are technical terms involved, that complicate the text. The first “di vada” should be read “dici :-Vada” “you say, ‘Go’ “. Di for dici is usual and not only in poetry; vada is here a technical term corresponding, usually, to “chip” in poker. Our player now wishes to lose as little as possible. The second question mark is for “*avendola invitata ormai del resto*”, as I quote directly from the manuscript text. Here too one has to understand *resto* with the technical meaning table-stakes, which can be found in many old texts (some being quoted also by Prof. Dummett, if I am right). Thus, all the money he has in front of him is now in play, in the hope that the two last partial distributions will be favourable. The *Risposta* confirms this and brings further clarifications.

Thus, a single triplet gives two significant answers,
Se quel ch’ammazza un Re, più punti avanza,
E’ ben dritto; perciocché a tale effetto
Scarta due Carte, per far questa danza.

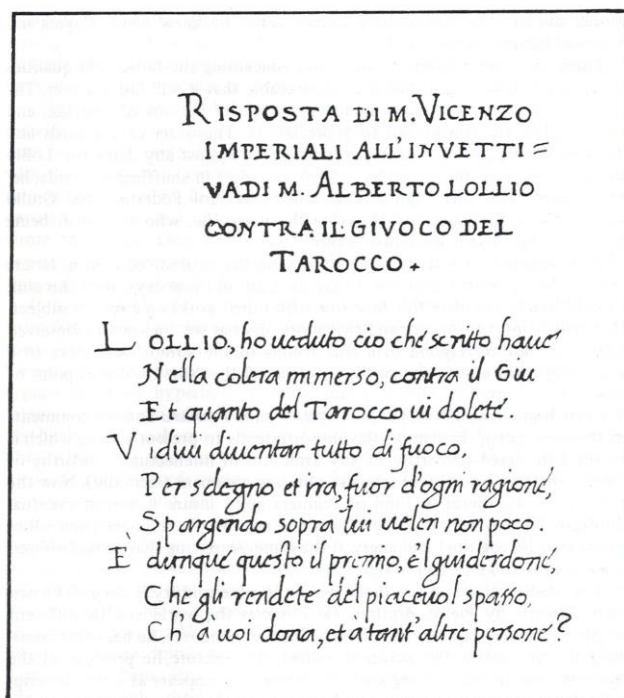


Figure 1 – Initial page of the handwritten *Risposta*.

We become acquainted with the fact that the capture of a King was among the objects of play and, as in Minchiate, specific points were awarded for that in the final count. That is justified since the winning player had to discard two cards – and we find proof that this traditional custom was already present – in order to obtain the capture.

The total number of cards, dealt in the four distributions, is 20. From the *Invettiva* it also seemed the most likely number but 25 was also in some agreement with the text. It is still not explicitly stated whether all the players could discard and if they took an equal number of cards

from the stock, before beginning to play with the same number of cards.

Another puzzling condition from the *Invettiva* sees the player going a monte (or to drop) and, soon after, to play again the same hand: this is wisely revised in the paraphrase of Imperiali to mean; the other player seeing you in difficulty invites table stakes in order that you drop but you stay, in hoping for the best in the last distributions.

Other indications may be found of different ways of playing. Thus Lollo is told to praise his wins in two variants of the game; alla Toscana, which I trust needs no translation; – but rather a comment on the interchanges! – and alla Villotta, a technical term known from music and meaning something like rustic. Unfortunately, no indication is given for the details of these games.

More indications can be obtained on the variants existing in the ordinary game, particularly as far as the different stakes are concerned. On the whole, one has the impression that the game was already fully standardized, with only some detail on the different awards submitted to preliminary agreement among the players.

A common feature here is the presence of several awards for the same hand. This is rather an unusual feature in games of the Tarot type, although it was known in many other old games. It is so essential that Imperiali can use it to derive a “new” etymology of Tarocco, thus answering Lollo’s affirmation that none could be found: he likens teroco to terjocor or “three games”. To us this forced etymology seems more useful in evaluating the way of play than as an actual answer to Lollo.

The first invitation is offered by the dealer and this award goes to whom “*ch ‘ha maggior Ronfa, coi trionfi insieme*”. Here, too, one has to stop in front of this technical term meaning different things in the course of time. Something like “the highest Sequence, in the same suit” and maybe with Triumphs replacing lacking cards; however, the most likely interpretation is of Ronfa as the Point in the – somehow correlated – piquet games: namely, the highest sum of card values in any suit, here with the numbers of any Triumph card taken in addition.

The second award, whose amount requires preliminary agreements, is for “*gli honori accoppiati*”, pairs of honours. We are told that Lollo occasionally modified the common invitations. Here we become acquainted with the existence of a significant freedom in the stakes. It is not to be excluded that, by such means, one could escape the existing prohibitions, precisely for the games that are here are only played preliminarily. Imagine you are with inveterate gamblers and you can only play tarots, the only card game then allowed in most towns. By simply multiplying more and more the stakes for these two first awards you can gradually pass from the innocent tarot game to a wild gambling one.

It seems rather likely that the two mentioned awards were attributed on the basis of one distribution, either the first or maybe the best group of five cards for each player or else using separately the two first partial distributions in order to assign the wins. However, the third objective of the game is the usual one: at the end of play, the payments occur according to the final counting of the differences in points corresponding to Honours (and counting tarots cards). No detail is given, but one may assume that the system was not too different from what we know from the sources of the following centuries.

In the *Risposta* we find also mentions of other card games. In particular Imperiali understands that the authors of praises for Primera had neglected Tarot, since “it is a different thing”, but he does not agree that it can be considered of inferior quality, a sort of Gilè “*ch ‘inver non vale un fico*” or Bassetta, which last never found anybody praising it, since it simply goes on rapidly until one of the two players has completely exhausted his money. Maybe for these games some kind of *Invettiva* could have been justified,

Ma ‘1 giuoco del Tarocco è da Signori, Principi, Re, Baroni, et Cavalieri,

and therefore it does not merit such negative considerations.

In particular, the cards cannot reply; it is Imperiali who does it instead. Moreover, they are also defenceless and unarmed. There is no need to ask for more power, such as becoming an Emperor and promulgating specific laws against them. Even so they are often maltreated and mutilated. Near the end of the *Risposta* there is an image which, in my opinion, emerges over the rather low artistic level of this poetry. With these three triplets in which the tarot cards are imagined to answer with facts, not words, to Lollo, we are brought in an atmosphere deserving of Hitchcock's *Birds*; the Tarot cards, thrown away, begin to fly against the author and to attack him tearing his clothes, breaking his watch (remember we are in the 16th century), and unexpectedly also his favourite foot-warmer.

Maybe it is the only place where the *Invettiva* is countered at the same declamatory level. Usually, Imperiali keeps better balance, as would be expected for any true peaceful Emilian.

Anzi parmi veder tutto quel stuolo
De' Tarocchi, per ordine levarsi
Et de' suoi danni far pagarvi il nolo.
Forse ancho vederessimo affrettarsi,
Per stracciarvi dintorno quella vesta,
Et quel vostro horologio in pezzi andarsi.
Et forse anchor per far piü bella festa,
Mille scheggie farian del scaldapiedi,
Ch'usate quando il freddo vi molesta.

With this description of the correct punishment as imagined in the *Risposta*, I am also ending this outline and discussion with only one further remark; all these invectives remain, nevertheless, in the domain of the correct use of tarot in playing. I dare not imagine what these ancestors could have written in observing how their Tarots are used to-day, which fact is however far from the proposed theme.