

VENETIAN TAROT IN THE 16TH CENTURY – EVIDENCE FROM SPECIFIC LITERATURE

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The aim of this article is to discuss some documentary evidence about the historical relevance of Venice with respect to tarot. It may be recalled that Venice is often traditionally considered as the very source of tarot, if not even of any playing-card in Europe. Thus, tarot is often called Venetian; Trappola, the derivative game, had certainly a Venetian origin; cards could in principle have easily reached Italy through Venice, if indeed they came from the East, as is now generally acknowledged. No documentary proof does yet exist, however, which can support such popular beliefs; maybe the booklets to be described here will stimulate further research of ancient documents of same provenance.

In the following, two literary documents are discussed: a booklet of *tarocchi appropriati* and another one containing the complaints of an inveterate gambler.

As known, *tarocchi appropriati* were compositions in verses or even simply lists of names in which tarot cards were each attributed to one of a series of different personages. The aim was to evidenciate their characters, or to criticise their habits, or to comment on their beauties, and so on. The few of them which strictly follow the order of the triumphs in the selection of the personages are obviously more useful to the history of tarot. From these sources, not only can information be obtained on the early diffusion of tarot, but also on the different orders among tarot cards prevailing in different towns. A thorough discussion of that topic can be found in Dummett's treatise. (1) Unfortunately, the documentary sources of this kind which have survived are few: except for some examples of various provenance, the only preserved printed booklet known on that subject seems to be *I Germini*, whereof several editions occurred in Florence in the 1540s, probably due to the correspondence of the cards with the 40 most renowned courtesans of the town.

I was able recently to study a further source of this kind, which seemingly escaped attention by the few Italian scholars – particularly of the end of the previous century or of the first decades of this one – who considered the whole topic worth investigating. The main reason for that must be found in the rarity of the book, which was, however, mentioned in the known catalogues by Brunet and Graesse. (2)

The very title of the book is, *Triumpho / de Troilo Pomeran da / Cittadela composti sopra li Terrochi in Laude / delle famose Gentildonne di Vinegia*, and at the end of the text is found, *Stampato in Vinegia per Zuan Antonio di Nicolino da Sabio. Nel MDXXXIII*.

The copy now preserved in Florence National Library, coming from the Landau Family collection, is singly bound in red morocco super extra, with a gold garland printed on the plates, decorated flyleaves, gilt edges, and so on, thus evidenciating the value attributed by the owner to that work.

It consists in 12 folios, generally containing three octaves of the poem on each side. Two pages are occupied by full-page woodcuts, the former at the beginning, under the title, the latter representing Paris' judgement. The poem is composed on the whole by 59 octaves and it ends with a sonnet, thus reaching almost five hundred verses.

The artistic level of the poem may be considered not to reach best quality, particularly since it was written in a time of high accomplishments of Italian poetry. In particular, I have not found information on that author in the common treatises of Italian literature. The quality of the text is, however, by far better than average for similar cases of occasional poems in which cards or tarot are considered. The very provenance of the poet is Cittadella, in the Venetian republic; the ladies are chosen from the Venetian aristocracy; therefore, Venice is here implied not only as an active

printing centre preserving traditions from elsewhere. That the booklet has to be inserted in some local tradition, or at least that it obtained general acknowledgements, is also indicated by the fact that a second edition, by same family of Venetian printers, was published a few years later, in 1541.

(3)

The main parts of the poem are three. Initially the poet, after a short praise of Venice, and some references to the planets, mythological personages, and so on, describes in great detail – extolling them – the different living beings of the wood, animals and especially many different trees, until he illustrates the vision of a fantastic group of ladies which appear walking in that same wood. They are covered with flowers and crowned with wreaths on their blond hair; each of them is holding a triumph card. The whole scene appears like a slow dance movement, or a triumphal procession, in which each lady in turn comes onto the scene raising her own card, as if it were a placard. Here begins what may be considered as the second part of the poem, that of *Tarocchi Appropriati*, the most interesting to us.

Precisely an octave of the poem is devoted to each lady and, correspondingly, to each of the 22 cards of the triumphs sequence. In each octave, several short comments may be found either on the main qualities of the lady or of the card, or both.

A certain redundance can be noted in the printing pattern. In fact, the name of the triumph – as well as that of the lady – is always inserted in the text of the corresponding octave; moreover, the part of the poem consisting in *Tarocchi Appropriati* is characterised by bearing again, over each octave, the name of the corresponding triumph, thus emphasising the *Tarocchi Appropriati* character of the composition.

The first lady is Andriana Cornera, for whose fame the whole poem is written, because the poet had fallen in love with her. Thus, the first card is the highest triumph, and the pack is then scanned in descending order. The order which is followed here is the ‘usual’ Dummett’s B order, and therefore no remarkably new information is provided in that respect. In the table, the cards and the names of the Venetian ladies praised by Troilo Pomeran are reported in order.

Sequence of cards and corresponding ladies to which the octaves of the poem are singly devoted.

MONDO	Andriana	Cornera
GIUSTITIA		Barbariga
ANGELO	Isabella	Grimani
SOLE	Laureta	Tron
LUNA		Grazimana
STELLA	Isabetta	Sanuta
FOCO	Bianca	Contarina
DIABOLO	Laura	Bollani
MORTE	Paula	Capello
TRADITORE		Moceniga
TEMPO	Maria	Leone
ROTA	Paula	mora
FORTEZZA	Paula	Quirini
AMORE	Orsina	Foscholeta
CARRO TRIOMPHALE	Maria	Lauredana
TEMPERANZA	Bianca	Zena
PAPA	Albertha	
IMPERATORE	Benedetta	Pisani
PAPESSA	Marieta	Zanni
IMPERATRICE		Paschaliga
BAGATTELA	Paula	Valier
MATTO	Nicolosa	Cornera

Maybe someone will go deeper in searching further information, from different sources, on the Venetian ladies mentioned; much the same as Bolzoni did for the Ferrarese ladies of the *Tarocchi Appropriati* manuscript. Most of the names indeed correspond to noble families of Venice, recorded in every text dealing with its great history.

The description of the ladies and of the cards ends with their sudden disappearance and the poet, after a very short interlude, begins the final part which represents a poetic exercise – rather common at the time – in which the physical beauty of the lady is praised, so to say, piece by piece.

The three above mentioned parts are roughly of same extent. The impression is of a rather rhetoric construction in which nothing is really original; neither in the first part the description of the pieces ‘composing’ the wood, nor – in the third one – the description of those ‘composing’ Andriana. We may therefore suspect that also the central part, by far the most interesting one for us, is not so original as its provenance and date would let us imagine, at least on the basis of preserved literary documents. Witness is thus provided to a local tradition, for which we had not, to my knowledge, any evidence from such early times.

Even earlier is the second evidence, deriving from an anonymous publication from Venice. It is a little known popular booklet containing a composition in verses devoted to the complaints of a gambler.

Also in this case the work underwent more editions; thereof, I have already examined three, although all of them must be considered as scarce. The use of the printed work is supposedly of a rather common kind for such four-folios booklets; namely, it was plausibly used – and/or sold to listeners – by those poets and singers who frequently carried out their performances on market places or during festivals. Many of similar printed works have been preserved; the stratagem here of matching the usual complaints with a true list of games is, however, original and it certainly contributed to the success of the work.

The first edition, *Barzeletta / nova qual tratta del gioco / del qual ne viene insuportabili vitii / a chi seguita ditto stile gionge / a irreparabile morte*. is without date and place; nevertheless, since at the end of the text one finds *Per Paulo Danza*, there can be little doubt on its Venetian origin. The language is Italian with some Venetian graphical characteristics.

The date which may be suggested is about 1528, since the engraving on the frontispiece seems to be copied from a book of 1525. (4) On the other hand, we have some general information about the printer; for instance: ‘Danza was an author of popular tracts, a bookseller, and apparently an occasional printer. Few books printed by him have survived; they are nearly all vernacular works of a popular or practical character. The earliest recorded dated work is 1511 *Pronosticatione...* (5) Most of his works were printed in the 1520s and a few ones later, up to 1534 or 1536.

A copy, again from the Landau Finaly collection, is now preserved, as N.A.U. 468, in Biblioteca Riccardiana, Florence. The second edition is still from Venice, (6) whereas the third is from Bologna. (7) Thus, both the number of editions – even more could have existed, beginning with the Veronese one, mentioned in the title of the last work – and their dates, covering several decades, confirm the interest of the composition, which probably was read and listened by a large number of people. I could check the text in the three cases; apart from many slight differences in spelling – rather poor in any case, also due to the mentioned popular character of the works – a relevant difference for the present discussion may be considered the substitution of *Frati e Preti*, as common players of *trionfeti de la ventura*, with *giovenetti* in the third edition: Trent council had not passed in vain. Further changes will be outlined below, after reporting as an example the most relevant parts.

From the “Barzeletta nova”:

.....

Hor intendi staltra parte

Se intender te diletta

Se iocar i voglio a carte

Dico a raus o alla bassetta
Chiamo re me vien luneta
Per ben farmi desperar
 Maledetto sia il giocar.
Si a tarocho ho gia iocato
Mai me vien el bagatella
Mai el mondo, mancho el mato
Ne giustitia mischinella
Langiol mai con soa favella
Non mi viene a visitar
 Maledetto sia el giocar.

.....

Se a ronfa ho gia iocato
Rare volte mi vien asso
E sia trapola ho gia fato
Le lunete me hanno casso
Ruinato son al basso
Non mi giova lamentar
 Maledetto sia il giocar.

.....

Ho giocato a trionfeti
Dicho a quelli de la ventura
Dove iocha frati e preti
Senza haver nissun paura
Io meschin per mia sciagura
Al iudeo me han fatto andar
 Maledetto sia il giocar.
Iho iocato al trenta uno
A primiera non te dico
Cosi ne fusse io degiuno
Che romasto son mendico
Non mi trovo piu un cricho
Per volermi sustentar
 Maledetto sia il giocar.

.....

A crichetta ho gia giocato
Crica granda e la mezana
Ogni gioco i haggio fatto
E a sequentia soprana
Tal che io lasciai la lana
Per sto gioco seguitar
 Maledetto sia il giocar.

....

The work has remarkable interest for the general history of cards since it quotes tarot and other games, earlier than most of the known Italian lists of card games. It contains an introductory sonnet followed by the sextets of the *Barzeletta*; an invective-refrain is inserted between the sextets and repeated each time. As usual in literary texts, the author regrets his bad luck and his losses in gambling as well as the consequent poverty. The quoted card games are: Raus, Bassetta, Taroch, Ronfa, Trapola, Trionfeti, Trentauno, Primiera, Crichetta, Crica Grande, Crica Mezana, and

Sequentia Soprana. Then board and other games are mentioned. In the Bolognese edition Raus is substituted by Trenta. Evidently, the former game was there out of place, or else meanwhile forgotten. From the comments on the games some peculiar information can be derived. Let us limit ourselves to *tarocho* and *trionfeti*: a whole sextet is devoted to common tarot; another to the interesting *trionfeti de la ventura*, see below.

As far as tarot is concerned, its very name may be of interest and how its spelling changes in the successive editions: it is first Tarocho, then Terocho, and finally Tarocco in the Bolognese edition. From the text, we again obtain the mention of a few triumphs, in this case, the most useful for the game, since the gambler regrets never to have obtained them while playing. Namely, we find the highest triumphs, Mondo, Giustitia, Angiol and the low ones which count, Bagatella, Mato, as in the play typical of other places and of following centuries. As expected, Justice is inserted among the highest triumphs, being Venice the location; however, Justice is no more mentioned in the Bolognese edition: apparently, because its location in Bolognese tarot was not so high, as compatible with the order which is known to have been followed there in later times.

Maybe the most useful indication among the many ones which every historian of cards may derive from the text is the denomination of the game *trionfeti de la ventura*. The association of the known name of *trionfetti* with the known name of *ventura* – something as luck or chance – is indeed an unknown and new evidence, reversing the situation known from the sonnets of Teofilo Folengo. Let us briefly examine what happened in the latter case: a whole pack of 22 triumphs *carte lusorie de trionfi* is dealt to four players, so that two of them obtain 5 cards and the remaining two 6 cards each; (the word most used to describe the dealing and the hand is *sorte*, something like lot or chance, recalling several *libri di sorte* or *libri di ventura*, among which that by Lorenzo Spirito may be considered the first to have acquired general diffusion, already in the 15th century.) The poet is then invited to consider the cards dealt to each ‘player’, and to compose a sonnet about them. This is not entirely a cartomantic operation, but it objectively looks similar to it, in apparent contrast with the very name of the used deck of *carte lusorie de trionfi* or ‘triumph playing-cards’. (8)

On the other hand, the name of *trionfeti* often occurs in ancient lists of card games; the diminutive may agree with the limited number of cards left, with respect to the whole ‘common’ pack, as in Tarocchino Bolognese or Siciliano. Nobody knows how the game, mentioned by Cardano, Garzoni, and so on, was exactly played. We know something on games played under that name in North-East Italy mainly during the 19th century but they were probably very different from those of the 16th century to be considered here. (9)

An hypothesis may be that *trionfeti* were played with a short pack. In that case, the *Barzeletta*, published in Venice toward the end of the 1520s, appears to connect the two mentioned uses for a short tarot pack. The poet regrets he has lost much money even at the game of *trionfeti*, those of the *ventura*, as harmless as to justify the fact that even priests and friars used to play at it. Thus an easy game, in which great losses are unusual, apparently played with the same cards used for lots and/or divination, in agreement with Folengo’s description. In the *Barzeletta*, however, the reverse occurs: the cards are named after their divination use, but are explicitly mentioned owing to their use in a common card game.

In conclusion, the last reference may be considered as a further evidence for the common use of tarot in play, and indirectly in divination, but it is here first of all useful as a confirmation of the paramount role of Venice in tarot history. As for previous hints, may I recall two facts: i - the 1441 law forbidding importation of playing cards, thereby proving that the local production was already significant; ii - the large number of books there printed by the end of the 15th century. (10) Due also to the high level of the Venetian civilization, further findings can actually be expected from that provenance; particularly now since these booklets appear to provide some support to the diffuse tradition considering Venice as the most plausible candidate – among a few Italian towns – for the origin of tarot. One has indeed to remember that both mentioned role and candidature, although not yet documented, agree with a popular belief, which has been lasting for centuries.

Notes

1. M. Dummett, *The Game of Tarot*. London 1980, particularly pp. 389-390, and references there quoted.
2. After my study was finished and was awaiting for publication, I have seen this work was being quoted and summarily described in vol. II of Kaplan's *Encyclopedia of Tarot*. and later in the catalogue of the Ferrara 1988 exhibition. Although, in this case, I must acknowledge that the work has already entered the history of cards, I consider that the reported short description may still be useful to the historians of tarot.
3. M. Sander, *Le livre a figures italien Vol.II*. Milan 1942 describes both editions as n. 5832 and 5833, respectively. I was not yet able to see a copy of the second one.
4. M. Sander, *op.cit*, n. 3156, p.549.
5. F.J. Norton, *Italian Printers 1501-1520*. London 1958
6. *Barceletta Nova qual tratta dil gioco, dil qual ne viene insuportabili vitii, & chi seguita ditto stile, gionge a inreparabile, e tristissima morte In Venetia per Matthio Pagan, in Frezaria, all'insegna della Fede*. MDLIII. A copy is preserved in Florence National Central Library, as Palat. E.6.6.154.I/7.
7. *Barzeletta sopra del giuoco Nella quale si narrano tutti i vitii che nascono del giuocare*. Stampato in Verona, ristampata in Bologna per Vittorio Benacci. A copy is preserved in Bologna University Library, in (3878) Caps. LI tomo IX. No date appears in the booklet, which probably already belongs to the 17th century.
8. The first edition of the work is of 1527, the second one of 1547 with one of the sonnets first completely written (a copy of both exists in the National Library in Florence).
9. Same as (1), p. 183-4. Several Italian books about Trionfetti or Gilé alla Greca printed in Venice during the 19th century are listed in: A.Lensi, *Bibliografia Italiana di Giuochi di Carte*. Firenze 1892.
10. The number of books printed in the main Italian towns were: Venice 1491 and 536, Rome 460 and 41, Milan 228 and 99, Florence 179 and 47 during the last decade of the 15th century and the first decade of the 16th one, respectively (after E.Müntz, *L'età aurea dell'arte italiana*. Milano 1895, p. 236.)