**The concept of Fortune in the birth of the tarot**

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**Background**

The pack of cards now known as the *tarot* or *tarocchi* emerged in Northern Italy around the mid-fifteenth century. There is little scholarship on the early iconographical development or origins of the images, most studies take a cursory glance over individual cards rather than engaging in sustained and focussed hermeneutic explication. In this paper I will focus on one particular card and, through comparative analysis, locate it in medieval cultural history and thought.

The tarot consists of twenty-one *trump* cards appended to a 56 card version of an ordinary Latin-suited pack, along with the wildcard known in Italian as *matto* (‘Madman’). Fifteenth century sources refer to the game as *trionfi* or ‘triumphs’, rather than ‘tarot’. The trump cards are important for the ‘trick taking’ gambling games that were played with the pack. The additional trump suit serves to triumph over or ‘trump’ those of the suit cards in order to win the trick.

The trump cards include many allegorical personifications such as Love, Death, and the cardinal virtues. Some make astrological references such as the Star, Moon and Sun cards. The image of Fortune, which tends to appear somewhere in the centre of the sequence, stands out as it represents a principle that presides over both uses of the cards; as a game of fortune; and later, in the telling of fortunes.

**The Fortune card**

The earliest known representations of the Fortune card; also known as ‘The Wheel of Fortune’, or ‘The Wheel’; appear in two closely related packs; the ‘Brambilla Tarocco’ **[Slide]** in the collection of the Pinacoteca di Brera in Milan and the ‘Visconti-Sforza’ pack **[Slide]** partly held in the Piermont Morgan Library, New York. It is generally accepted that these cards were made in the Cremonese family workshop of the High-Gothic artist Bonifacio Bembo, around 1440-1450.

Both the Brambilla and Visconti-Sforza cards depict a blindfolded and winged goddess Fortuna at the centre of a wheel, around which are arrayed four figures. In both cards the ragged figure at the bottom bears the wheel on his back. Ascending on the left is a figure in green with ass’s ears. At the top sits an enthroned figure, also with ass’s ears. A figure on the right descends on the wheel. Of the two, the Brambilla pack looks to be the earlier. Along with some heraldic indications, the Visconti-Sforza card seems a more developed and mature design by the same hand. The figures on the Visconti-Sforza card are larger: they inhabit the pictorial space in a more confident manner. The image of Fortuna has a more defined costume with carefully rendered folds around her waist and sleeves, whereas the figure of the Brambilla Fortuna is naïve and schematic. In the Visconti-Sforza card the figures clinging to the left and right of the wheel tuck their left feet around the back of it in an effort not to fall off. The figure descending on the right has an animal tail, barely distinguishable in the burnished gilding and not present in the Brambilla card. Important additions to the Visconti-Sforza card are inscriptions issuing from the mouth of each figure. The ascending figure utters *Regnabo*, ‘I will reign’; enthroned at the summit, *Regno*, ‘I reign’; descending, *Regnavi*, ‘I have reigned’; and at the bottom *Sum Sine Regno*, ‘I reign not’.

**Sermon**

The earliest known text to refer unmistakably to the tarot, is an anti-gaming sermon by an anonymous Franciscan friar, dated somewhere between 1450 and 1470. It is directed against three types of game; dice, playing cards, and the *ludus triumphorum* the game of triumphs; all inventions of the devil Azarus or ‘Hazard’. The sermon is directed at the populace, therefore at the more cheaply produced printed packs of cards. This friar responds to the cards in the most hostile fashion but also with remarkable familiarity and precision as if, perhaps, he had been a well-seasoned player himself. The trump cards are referred to as the twenty-one steps down to Hell and are listed individually. Every one is recognisable, including Fortune. The author annotates his mention of ‘*La Rotta’*, the Wheel, with ‘*id est regno, regnavi, sum sine regno*’. He may have been familiar with cards bearing this inscription, or may have been contextualising the image within a well-known tradition of representation.

**Carmina Burana**

The iconography of the Fortune card design draws upon the familiar representation of the Latin goddess Fortuna found in the medieval manuscript tradition. In a verse illustration in the 13th century Carmina Burana **[Slide]** we see the same type of image including the inscriptions, though the figures lack bestial characteristics. Unlike the tarot images, Fortuna is neither blindfolded nor winged, although those were her traditional attributes. This suggests that both Carmina Burana illustration and tarot image were from a common tradition, rather than one being a direct copy of the other.

Below the illustration are verses that decry the cruelty of the goddess.

*O Fortuna, velut luna statu variabilis, semper crescis aut decrescis*…

O Fortune, like the moon you are changeable, ever waxing and waning…

Though compiled by Goliard monks two centuries before the appearance of the first documented tarot cards, the verse anticipates the main motifs in the cards: Fortune, the moon, poverty and wealth, game play and the struggle between virtue and vice. Elsewhere in the manuscript are songs of love, drinking songs, celebrations of tavern life, and satirical works such as the gambler’s mass. This late medieval culture seems to be the world from which the tarot is born; it is a world where the high culture of scholastic learning is mingled with the crudeness of the tavern.

Traditionally Fortune is blind because she makes no distinction of merit or status, effort or worth. She is winged because her gifts are fleeting and opportunities are quickly lost. These attributes are also found on another card in the Visconti-Sforza pack; Love **[Slide]** is represented by a winged and blindfolded Cupid for the same reasons. The same pack has an unusual image of Death **[Slide]** holding a bow and arrow but with a blindfold worn like a bandana, above his sightless sockets. It is fitting that Love, Fortune and Death should be iconographically connected. All three allegorical personifications strike without warning, in a seemingly arbitrary manner. Fortuna gives great gifts; the dignities of honour, fame, and riches; but then takes them back again. In the Carmina Burana verses the goddess Fortuna is not indifferently blind, but actually malevolent, monstrous and treacherous. Perhaps this is why she has no blindfold. She plays a game with mankind. Like a ruthless gambler she will strip the shirt from her victim’s back. Her cruelty is in proportion to her former kindness; the higher exalted, the further there is to fall. It is both Fortune and Death who remove these worldly achievements.

**[Slide]**

Fortune’s gifts are temporal, particularly the gifts of power and royal favours of kingship and empire (represented by the Emperor and Empress trumps). Thus her particular concern is with the fickle world of the court. Such connotations would have had a strong resonance with the dukes of Milan who commissioned these packs. Filippo Maria Visconti, whose insignia dominate the Brambilla pack, came to power after his brother Giovanni Maria had been assassinated. Francesco Sforza was a *condotierre*, a soldier of fortune, who fought for and against Visconti and who married Filippo’s daughter Bianca Maria. His political and military manoeuvres were mixed with a good deal of luck in wrestling the dukedom from the Ambrosian Republic after the Filippo’s death. Sforza’s devices are included in the Visconti-Sforza pack and may have been commissioned by him or by Bianca Maria. Like the figures on the circumference of the wheel, dukes and dynasties fall and soldiers rise from nothing to become powerful despots.

**Bien-advise Mal-advise**

The four figures on the wheel were a familiar form in medieval visual culture. Mechanical wheels of Fortune were constructed for morality plays touring the monasteries. The play *Bien-advise Mal-advise,* performed at Rennes in Brittany in 1439, included the four characters as well as personifications of ‘Good Advice’ and Bad Advice’. When the wheel turned and they assumed the position of Regno each would give a speech. Once the wheel had turned full circle they all disembarked for confession. The characters of Bad Advice, Regno and Regnabo (depicted in the tarot with the asses’ ears of a fool) were cast into hell. Whereas those of Good Advice, Regnavi (of the tail) and Sum Sine Regno were given salvation.

Here mankind is an active agent; invited to ascend and voluntary submitting to the rules of Fortune. In Sum Sine Regno’s speech he clearly has a choice about whether to mount the wheel or not:

I am, as you see, without reign, down low in wretchedness. Fortune has disclaimed me. If I should mount on this wheel, every man would be friendly to me. Let each take warning who considers me...

In the Visconti-Sforza image this aged figure has white ragged clothes a little like the ‘Fool’ or ‘Madman’ in the same pack and he bears the wheel like a burden. The position of Sum Sine Regno might also remind us of the traditional images of vice crushed by virtue, although the implication is quite different.

The struggle between virtue and Fortuna, and presumably the vices attendant to her, is present elsewhere in the early tarot cards. Faith, Hope and Charity **[Slide]** trampling the vices are seen only in the incomplete pack, held at Yale University and known as the Visconti di Modrone (likely earlier than the Brambilla pack). Three out of the four cardinal virtues; Justice, Fortitude and Temperance **[Slide]**; are present in the Visconti-Sforza and all other traditional packs to the present day.

The usual remedy for Fortune given in medieval texts is to seek God and virtue, but to take care not to covert the gifts of virtue too much; as Regnabo does in this passage from *Bien-advise Mal-advise*:

I shall reign if Fortune pleases and the wheel turns to the fourth place. I shall be above and rule all the world. How great is my pleasure then! Virtue moves me to speak such words, because I plan to do justice and punish those who have maliciously robbed the men of good estate. What joy shall I have to be able to punish them.

The notion that virtue was a remedy, triumphant over the caprices of Fortune, was transmitted to the renaissance by Petrarch. who employed the metaphor: ‘Fortune raises up and throws down and rotates on a wheel’ (*De remediis utriusque fortunae*).

Petrarch was a resident at Pavia at the pleasure of the Milanese Duke Galeazzo II. So, it is highly likely that his later successor Filippo Maria Visconti would be aware of Petrarch’s work. The notion of trumps in game play may have been influenced by his popular poem ‘*I trionfi*’ where one principle triumphs over another i.e. Fame triumphs over Death.

**Boethius**

Similar illustrations of Fortune’s wheel appear accompanying manuscript texts of Boethius’ *Consolation of Philosophy* **[Slide].** The text features the personification of Fortune as a central character with which the character of Boethius struggles. In life, Boethius had experienced the exaltation and then scorn of Fortuna. A former Roman senator of the sixth century, he was imprisoned and then executed by King Theodoric the Great for suspected treason. It was in confinement in Pavia, awaiting execution, that Boethius wrote this meditation on fortune, reason and faith*.* Presumably there was little else to think about other than how he had arrived at this predicament, ruined by fortune.

In the narrative Fortuna reveals to Boethius her true nature in a speech which may have influenced the medieval morality plays and the Carmina Burana verses:

Inconstancy is my very essence; it is the game I never cease to play as I turn my wheel in its ever changing circle, filled with joy as I bring the top to the bottom and the bottom to the top. Yes, rise up on my wheel if you like, but don’t count it an injury when by the same token you begin to fall, as the rules of the game will require.

Given that fortune is at work in game play, it is fitting that Fortuna herself plays a game with mankind; if we choose to follow her rules. It is the personification of Philosophy however, who informs Boethius that even Fortuna is still subject to divine reason. The seemingly blind mechanics of Fortuna only hide the intentions of divine Providence. The ‘changing faces of the random goddess’ are in fact a kind of constancy. Furthermore, Philosophy tells Boethius that Fortuna has her own justice and usefulness whether pleasant or adverse. Ultimately Fortuna rewards or disciplines the good, and punishes or corrects the bad.

It is likely that a copy of the *Consolation of Philosophy* was held in the vast Visconti library at Pavia and known to those commissioning the courtly tarot packs. Furthermore, Boethius was entombed in there, where he had been imprisoned.

The key influences in the creation of the tarot revolve around the intellectual culture of Pavia in particular. It was an important residence for the dukes of Milan, a centre of learning due to its University and renowned library, where Petrarch worked. It is also where Bonifacio Bembo of Cremona, the creator of tarot for the Visconti and Sforza, was employed to restore the Visconti frescos.

As well as being connected to this intellectual culture, the Fortune card reflects popular visual culture connected to theatre, pageantry and the tavern-fuelled literature of the wandering Goliards; as we have seen.

Although the gilded and hand painted tarot of the Milanese court are considered the earliest in existence we cannot say for certain whether the tarot originated as a courtly pastime or as a popular tavern game with printed packs. The iconography could support either hypothesis; card gaming was known in both contexts.

**Uncut printed sheets**

There are a small number of uncut sheets of printed cards surviving from the fifteenth century. There are no finished packs from the period: presumably they suffered such heavy wear and tear through play that they have perished.

The sheet held in the Metropolitan Museum**,** New York **[Slide]**, shows the four familiar characters with their traditional Latin inscriptions. Regno and Regnabo, the two characters damned to hell in the medieval play, are fully transformed into animals here. Sum Sine Regno does not bear the wheel on his back but reclines in a relaxed manner on the ground. Also, Fortuna herself is absent. Such divergences from medieval tradition suggest that humankind is entirely responsible for its fate. We choose to ascend the wheel and then exist as nothing but animals and fools; inevitably we descend again.

Something of the image can be discerned in the damaged sheet in the Rosenwald Collection, Washington **[Slide]**. It is not clear whether Fortuna is present but it is difficult to see how she could be incorporated given the limited space remaining. A crowned figure at the top must be Regno, and there are indications of Regnavi and Regnabo. At the bottom is a dog-like animal depicted upside down as if the card can be reversed to transform the king into a beast.

The small surviving fragment on a fifteenth century Milanese sheet in the Cary Collection at Yale **[Slide]** shows human figures, but the wheel has a handle instead of the Goddess Fortuna and no inscriptions. Sum Sine Regno can be seen clinging to the bottom of the wheel. It is this pack that, in many details, appears to be the origin of the traditional tarot pattern standardised in the eighteenth century in France and now known as the Tarot de Marseille. Seventeenth century variations on this pack saw a progressive bestialisation of the characters **[Slide]**.

**Conclusion**

So there is a progressive transformation from figures with animal attributes into fully-fledged beasts; from a wheel controlled by a blind goddess to a mechanised wheel controlled by an unseen force. Some of the changes are probably accidental, the result of the copying and recopying from one card maker to another. Some changes may be practical; five different figures makes for quite a complex design in simple woodcut, three is much easier to accommodate on a small scale. But they also seem to reflect broader patterns of thought since the renaissance. The law of chance has not disappeared, but the controlling factor is no longer a goddess but an abstract principle. The rule of fortune makes mankind into nothing but an instinctive animal, disconnected from reason.

The mechanical inevitability of Fortune’s wheel expresses an understanding of probability – what is up will come down, given time. A run of seeming good luck is bound to turn bad, and bad luck is bound to turn good. In fact, as card makers seemed to grasp intuitively, in the dawning ‘age of reason’ the goddess is not needed at all; the wheel turns itself in a predictable manner.

During the Christian middle ages it seemed that the Latin goddess Fortuna could not be supplanted. There was no theological equivalent or replacement for ‘chance’, a force that appeared to be active and present in the world. The idea that the principle of Fortune overshadows faith is just as relevant in today’s casinos as it was in the taverns and courts of fifteenth century Italy.