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“In the Cards”: The Material Textuality of Tarotological Reading

Cover Page Footnote

I would like to thank the organizers and participants of the Columbia University's Material Texts Seminar for their feedback on the initial draft of this essay.

“IN THE CARDS”: THE MATERIAL TEXTUALITY OF TAROTOLOGICAL READING

Jesse R. Erickson

Cards signify and perform so much in our daily lives. The identification card, the business card, the library card, the greeting card, it is easy to view these objects with such a measure of either utility or insignificance, with such an acceptance of their mundane ubiquity, that it is easy to ignore them until they are lost. We often forget that cards are textual objects that can engage us with the practice of literacy. The dissociative quality of the relationship is perplexing considering that objects like alphabet cards for toddlers and flash cards for students situate “the card” at the center of both literacy acquisition and the development of vocabulary. There is one kind of card, however, that is implicitly associated with a more personal form of reading: the tarot. Intimately connected to playing cards, the materiality of tarot cards as divinatory card decks is inextricably bound with sortilege—a process of divination characterized by interpreting randomly pulled cards or other objects designated for fortune-telling. I argue here that reading these cards in this way necessitates a reconsideration of previously held divisions between East and West, linearity and randomness, oral culture and print culture, and text and image. As will be shown throughout this study, the idea that there is a fixed nexus of cultural origination and, hence, material and hermeneutic causality in tarot and the literacy of sortilege from which all other instantiations of its diverse manifestations is challenged by the medium’s messiness and multiplicity. Yet the connective thread that ties the interpretation of symbols across cultures lies in a shared set of meanings that have been attached to these cards over many generations of readers.

Medium as Messenger

From the *Mulūk wa-nuwwāb* (i.e., Mamluk cards) to the Rider-Waite-Smith deck, how did these playing cards, as objects, become the tarot cards that today we so often take for granted?¹ Certainly, their emergence cannot be attributed to a single major figure. We can speculate, for example, that future historians will attempt to single out the “inventor(s)” of social media. Would Sean Parker of the once popular Napster or Mark Zuckerberg of Facebook be seen as the key innovators behind this technological revolution to the exclusion of all others? Perhaps not; contemporary internet and social media histories offer more nuanced accounts of the development of these technologies by citing multiple pioneering contributors, including engineers, coders, entrepreneurs, and marketers as having been responsible for both the establishment and the proliferation of these innovations.² Social media as it is understood today could not have been possible without the preexisting technological infrastructures of computing, networked computing, personal computing, and the World Wide Web.

Similarly, contemporary histories of the book have offered more nuanced approaches to the introduction of printing technology in the West. McKitterick’s *Print, Manuscript and the Search for Order, 1450–1830* (2003), for example, persuades readers to reconsider strict divisions between print and manuscript cultures by presenting a far more gradual shift than previously accepted.³ Looking at Johannes Gutenberg as the solitary genius who singlehandedly invented the printing press by some divine inspiration is no longer fashionable in current discourses concerning this history. It is now understood that this technology, much like the above social media analogy, could not have been introduced to the West without preexisting technological infrastructures—in this case, those of scribal cultures, metallurgy, papermaking, and bookbinding. The rhetoric of exaltation, however, is precisely the kind of language that the “invention” of printing was traditionally framed in, with laudations like the following excerpt from William Hamilton’s *The History of Medicine, Surgery and Anatomy* (1831) being far from the exception:

But in the very infancy of this new-born day, a portentous eclipse once more involved the world in its blackest shade of ignorance chained anew to the earth of the celestial mind of man, that Divinae particular aerae—till, at length, the discovery of the art of Printing unbarred afresh the gates of Heaven, and let in that flood of light, of knowledge, and

of wisdom . . . as the Almighty himself originally formed them—inferior only to the Angels.⁴

The loftiness of the rhetoric is not without harm, regardless of the intentionality behind such claims. They set the stage for premising European textual civilization and print culture over non-Western literacy practices. The implication, then, is that this historical perspective was not accidental but the result of a misguided effort to divorce the invention of printing from the technological contributions of other parts of the globe, namely Asia and North Africa. Western historical scholarship, with its emphasis on origins, causality, and racial homogeneity, has had a record of recasting its technological adoptions and cultural appropriations into the mythology of its own exceptionalism, attempting to justify notions of its intellectual supremacy regarding ingenuity. Samuel Weller Singer's *Researches into the History of Playing Cards* (1816), for example, offers a more or less revisionist and Eurocentric account of the development of xylography in the West, stating that it was “not therefore impossible that Chinese and other Asiatic nations may have known and practiced the Art of Engraving on Blocks of Wood, and making impressions from them, and yet that Europe may not have derived this art thence, but owe it to the inventive skill of some master genius of her own.”⁵ Singer astutely touched on a somewhat radical understanding of technological distribution and advancement that is in some ways evocative of Deleuze and Guattari's “rhizomatic” model of epistemological representation.⁶ Yet his motivations for positing this “cumulative culture” hypothesis seem rooted in a manifest desire to add the invention of xylography to the list of European accomplishments.⁷

Despite these attempts to posit European origins, it is clear that playing cards as objects, their paper substrate, the xylographic printing technology used for their manufacture, and even some of the games played with them all have ancestral ties to global cultures and technologies. It is important to note that their emergence in Europe closely aligns with the spread of papermaking and printing in this region.⁸ Nevertheless, it may not be productive to adopt a deterministic view of the impact of print technology in the development of tarot reading in the way that Elizabeth Eisenstein in *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* argued that the introduction of papermaking and printing in the West was greatly responsible for a revolution that resulted in a shift to humanistic and, later, scientific dominance in Western thought.⁹ In other words, it is conceivable that the practice could have emerged in the absence of the development of such technologies.

With that in mind, it is difficult to refute the idea that the practice of tarot reading has had a symbiotic relationship with these technologies, particularly because in terms of their materiality, the form follows the function. In other words, the very tactility of the card format is conducive to a form of narrative bricolage that is created through the sortilegic process. Not unlike the manner in which one finds the large medieval antiphonal, in folio, once intended for use by many singers at once, a giant in comparison with the modern church hymnbook meant for an individual parishioner's eyes and sized accordingly, a gradual reduction in the size of tarot cards from the mid-fifteenth century Pierpont Morgan-Bergamo Visconti-Sforza Tarocchi to the early twentieth-century Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot occurred over the span of several generations of tarot production.¹⁰ The reduction in the size of these cards to one that could easily accommodate handling with one's hands enabled new adaptations to the sortilegic process. The simple act of changing the "spread," for example, will generate numerous different ways of reading the cards, most often in connection to a querist's sense of temporality and their inner psychology. Hence, the transformation of tarot decks from illuminated artifacts of aristocratic status to the printed objects of exotified fortune telling required a democratization that was, on many levels, accelerated by the advance of printing technologies from the xylographic to the offset lithographic.

Reading against the Grain

Conventionally, Western literacy practices are compulsorily if not artificially linear. Conversely, acts of randomness can form patterns organized by an underlying, internalized lexicon of symbolic meanings. That ability to draw meaning from the randomness is the essence of sortilege. The experience of textual catharsis, or feeling and grappling with hidden or repressed emotions through direct engagement with a text, connects the affective dimensions of a person's lived interiority to a narrative through the tactility of reading. The senses—visual, aural, oral, and tactile—operate in accord with one another as the words and images of a text are taken in and processed through the reader's interaction.

This is not just limited to tarot. A similar example of sortilege is encountered in the Japanese tradition of *omikuji*. In Japan, *omikuji* is a form of public divination where individuals can draw their fortunes at local temples and shrines for a small price. Upon payment, a temple-goer is allowed access to a box filled with numbered sticks. A person gently shakes the

box full of sticks while quietly praying for a particular wish. After shaking the box a few times, a stick marked with a "fortune number" emerges at random. The number on the stick corresponds to a drawer containing a paper strip with a fortune printed on it. The fortune one pulls is "intended" for them. The fortunes are often read with an air of frivolity, but the messages they convey fall on a spectrum that ranges from a "great blessing" to a "great curse." Traditionally, if the fortune is bad, tying it around a pine tree branch or specially designated poles/wires is the recommended method of nullifying it. If the fortune is good, however, another popular practice encourages participants to keep it close or preserve it in some way. One method of preservation involves fastening these fortunes to the pages of a bound journal, much like a scrapbook, manufactured specifically for that purpose. These fortunes, which are printed on paper and purchased at an affordable price and attached to the pages of a book, are examples of the subtle complexities of everyday objects. They demonstrate how different bibliographic objects tied to print culture and paper-making can combine to create an alternative textual modality.

There is a counterhegemonic positionality to sortilege as a literacy practice. The counterhegemonic nature of the sortilege entailed in tarotological interpretation stems from a multicultural rootedness that breeds itself through its proneness toward memetic adaptation.¹¹ The hegemony that sortilege complicates resides in a perception of linearity as a primary mode of textual consumption. Nonlinear forms of reading appear as culturally outside the norm, and a text that does not start from the beginning and progress toward a conclusion in a narrative arc falls outside the temporal construct. Moreover, the same memetic adaptation that affords the possibility for tarot's singularity as an "exotic" object also leads to its recursive reversion to mundanity, in terms of the proliferation of contemporary popular tarot. In grappling with the full spectrum of tarot's adaptation, however, one is confronted with the question as to the extent to which cultural misrepresentation and appropriation become driving forces in the proliferation of the form's various physical manifestations. Returning to the Japanese example, one need not only consider more traditional, analogous forms of fortune-telling such as *omikuji* when thinking about the ways in which tarot reading has developed over time. Japan has seen an array of different tarot card decks, rituals, games, and tarot-reading venues rise in popularity among its youth, particularly with young women and girls—effectively reinforcing the already gendered nature of the practice.¹² Contemporary Japanese tarot decks vary from those based on more traditional, European iconography to those fully steeped in Japanese pop cultural themes, like the Hello Kitty Tarot and

the Kirakira Tarot of Love.¹³ Considering that European playing card decks were not introduced in Japan until around the mid-fifteenth century and divinatory tarot decks would not enter into Japanese occult discourses until at least the early twentieth century, the idea that their use in this country constitutes an innocuous instantiation of cultural appropriation seems plausible. Laura Miller, however, challenges this assumption when she argues that it “would be a mistake to view these changes to tarot imagery, some of them quite radical, as a process of ‘cultural degradation’ or ill-informed appropriation.”¹⁴ Miller’s articulation of tarot symbolism as being part of a “global visual culture” is an alternative understanding that situates tarot in Japan as a compelling example of the form’s propensity for transchronological and cross-cultural memetic adaptation.¹⁵

Images: Symbolism and History

The tarot deck, seen as a bibliographic object, poses serious challenges to dichotomies that have been debated in both art historical and occult scholarship for decades. Most notably, it underscores the difficulties of our attempts to separate, definitively, image from text. Much scholarship has worked to address the question of how to understand this division, particularly when thinking about the paramount role iconographic imagery had played in the profusion of early modern European print cultures and the development of the humanist intellectual movements typically associated with the Renaissance. Print culture scholars from Elizabeth Eisenstein to Carl Goldstein have contended with the diverse ways that images and illustrations have been purposed in early modern editions of all genres.¹⁶ Botanical illustrations in early modern herbals, for example, clearly served in an informational capacity, whereas something like royal portraiture could operate as an instrument of indoctrination in support of royal authority. In each case, there are questions concerning how closely an image is representative of its corresponding alphabetical textuality.¹⁷ Instead of looking at this divide in terms of its proximity to a directly correlative relationship, tarot can be seen as a process by which didactic readings of images become mediated through “spiritual” ekphrasis where an oral and/or textual description of the image serves as a guide for understanding a person’s relationship to their sense of being in relation to the divine (e.g., fate, divine order, life’s journey, etc.). In this sense, it is less the case of “image and text” as it is “image as text.” Tarot provides one of those paradoxical examples of how image can at once be inseparable from and free from a textual correlate. The inseparability lies in the manner in

which the sortilegic literacy is acquired (i.e., through vernacular or other forms of linguistic instructions printed in divinatory guidebooks and manuals) and the concomitant decoupling in the actual *orature* of “reading” tarot imagery. In other words, an individual can learn how to “read” tarot by studying printed textual instructions that provide a shared basis for interpretation. Once these instructions are internalized, one can verbally improvise their interpretation of the image through a combination of memory and interpersonal analysis shared between the reader and the querent.

As Helen Farley outlined in a historiography of tarot symbolism, several theories have been posited as to the origins of tarot card images and their meaning.¹⁸ The earliest tarot decks were developed in Italy among the leisure class. Factoring in its formative period as a branch of gaming, the idea that leisure was a motivating factor in the coalescence of tarot symbolism is not at all radical. The mid-fifteenth century Visconti-Sforza packs are known to be the earliest extant sets, albeit incomplete, of what were then called *trionfi* (triumphs). Members of the Visconti family formed the ruling class of Milan until the middle of the fifteenth century when their dominance in the Milanese duchy was eventually succeeded by the Sforza family. The wealth and political power of these families provided incentives for commissioning these decks as art objects and status symbols. Manuscript *tarocchi* (i.e., tarot packs), such as the Brera-Brambilla set commissioned to Bonfacio Bembo by Francesco Sforza in 1463, exhibit the aesthetic characteristics of aristocratic books of hours while visually referencing the allegorical textuality of medieval and Renaissance literature.¹⁹ Gertrude Moakley, for instance, attempted to link the Visconti-Sforza trump sequence to Petrarch’s *I Trionfi*; Paul Hanson connects them to medieval theater and the *Danse macabre* sequence; and William Martson Seabury traces them to Dante’s *La divina commedia*, *La vita nuova*, and other works. Each of these theories, taken individually, offers compelling aspects to their arguments, and each contains inconsistencies, anachronisms, and unsubstantiated claims that can be challenged or refuted.²⁰ However, in looking at the connection of tarot symbolism to Dante’s literary corpus, Farley astutely points out that Renaissance literature and the tarot “were informed by the same cultural currents and therefore utilized a similar pool of imagery.”²¹ Despite the fact “none of the schemes so far posited can convincingly explain the source of Renaissance tarot symbolism,” Farley concludes, “collectively they infer that imagery displayed upon the tarot trumps was common in medieval and early modern literature, theater, and art.”²² Farley’s larger argument, then, rests on the assertion that looking at the cards with a microhistorical lens in order to

understand the genesis of specific aspects of their symbols by situating them in the particulars of their historicity is a more productive exercise than searching for a firm, esoteric basis for these symbols within the Age of Antiquity (ca. 3000 BCE to 450 CE).²³ She demonstrates, for instance, the ways in which the Visconti family's power struggles with the papacy, which waxed and waned between the thirteenth century and the beginning of the fifteenth century, contributed to distinct visual aspects of their commissioned decks and no less in their rankings for the trumps themselves.²⁴

Farley's "alternative explanation of tarot symbolism" contributes much to the discussion. However, just as tying the symbolism to ancient esoterica can stimulate one's disposition toward the amorphousness of historical credulity, focusing too narrowly on the earliest extant decks runs the risk of situating the development of tarot symbolism in a chronologically bound vacuum. Tarot can be understood, too, as part of a broader continuum having various streams of influence over the course of its evolution. And one cannot fully divorce from tarot symbolism the playing card decks that preceded its conversion from the aristocratic to the esoteric nor the modalities that it reinforced once this transformation had reached its esoteric heights.

Looking at tarot this way, it is impossible to understand how tarot reading currently operates without a consideration of its manifestly proximal relation to the development of the liberal arts in early modern philosophy. Tarot's path toward developing a modern visual lexicon with regard to its philosophical significance has had direct ties to both the rising humanism of early modernism and the Hermetic tradition that would eventually be subsumed by and then perpetuated within it.²⁵ One could argue that the clearest example of the evolutionary nature of this lexicon is found in the Ferrarese Master of E-series and Master of the S-series Tarocchi. The *tarocchi* are dated from around 1465 and 1470, respectively.²⁶ The packs are not technically tarot according to the purest definitions, but they are certainly not peripheral to the gradual maturation of tarotological literacy either. This claim is bolstered by the fact that both series share motifs with some of the cards found in the Visconti-Sforza packs.²⁷ The hierarchies structured in these decks are reflective of the vestiges of late medieval cosmology just as their relation to the liberal arts and the intellectual discourses of humanist thought are emblemized in the figures represented therein. Jay A. Levenson, Konrad Oberhuber, and Jacquelyn L. Sheehan's catalog *Early Italian Prints from the National Gallery of Art* has each series of fifty cards divided into the following five groups (lettered in the reverse to their numerical sequence):

- E (cards 1 to 10)—Conditions of Man
- D (cards 11 to 20)—Apollo and the Muses
- C (cards 21 to 30)—Liberal Arts
- B (cards 31 to 40)—Cosmic Principles
- A (cards 41 to 50)—Firmaments of the Universe (or the Spheres)²⁸

The scheme of division is illustrative of the very connections this study is attempting to draw out. Figures in the “Conditions of Man” section proceed hierarchically through the various echelons of society—servant, artisan, gentleman, knight, king, and so on—in accordance with the medieval system of “divine order.”²⁹ The cards representing the liberal arts (*Artes liberales*) consist of the *trivium* (*Grammatica*, *Rhetorica*, and *Loica*), the *quadrivium* (*Musica*, *Geometria*, *Aritmetica*, and *Astrologia*), and some added disciplines (*Philosophia*, *Theologia*, and *Poesia*). Combined with the Cosmic Principles (*Genii* and *Virtutes*), these groups essentially anthropomorphize the intellectual universe of Renaissance learning, especially the period’s renewed attention to geometry, the Ciceronian dialogic tradition, civic humanism, and the revived prominence of discourses on the four cardinal virtues among a line of thinkers beginning with Petrarch and culminating in the scholarship of Leonardo Bruni.

Two examples of these cards are indicative of the link to Renaissance learning. For one, the *Astrologia* card (also signifying astronomy) positions these series in the context of not only Renaissance humanism, in its civic, artistic, and intellectual functions, but also in terms of its growing mysticism. It speaks to the importance of horoscopic branches of learning that prevailed among the ruling classes of the period. The popularity of astrological inquiry, as represented in the *Astrologia* card can be paired with other Hermetic fields of study that were fully embraced in the courts of the Italian Renaissance. The Master of E-series *Mercurio* card is another case in point. Based on a late fourteenth-/early fifteenth-century mythographical guidebook called *De deorum imaginibus libellus*, the image of Mercury included in the “Spheres” division of the Master of E-series pack bears strong ties to the budding Hermeticism of the period.³⁰ From the caduceus and the winged boots and helmet on his person to the consecrated rooster and the severed head of Argus at his feet, the details of the image reveal a deep reservoir of symbolic meanings. An analysis from Fritz Saxl published in 1922 posits that the exactitude of the print’s details can be attributed not only to the textual description found in the *Libellus* but also to a relief image of Hermes, which was first copied by Cyriacus of Ancona and which circulated in the humanistic circles of fifteenth-century Italy.³¹

Such granular details are important in the understanding of the visual genealogies of tarot's imagery.

Knowledge of the specific details in this line of symbolic inheritance does not wholly discredit the supposition that there was in fact a larger philosophical milieu within which such images had flourished.³² The iconography encountered in these tarot decks are richly conversant in the allegorical imagery that is found in early modern alchemical studies. There is a direct line that connects the fifteenth century pseudo-Aquinian *Aurora consurgens* manuscript to the late sixteenth-century *Splendor solis*. Pastoral scenes, streams or other bodies of water, solar disks and globes, winged figures, nude and robed men and women, chariots and swords, birds, serpents, and dogs all work together to create a shared visual lexicon on the basis of symbolic as opposed to literal interpretation—an interpretation that moved further in the direction of narrative construction in the place of strict hermeneutics and exegesis. Consequently, even the lines between the scholastic and the humanistic knowledge-making traditions were blurred when entangled in the mysticism of the period. Perhaps one of the most compelling examples of the depth of saturation for the allegorical modality can be found in Albrecht Dürer's *Melencolia I* print, published as part of his 1513 and 1514 Meisterstiche (master engravings). This print, like that of the Master of E-series and S-series, features that combination of the liberal arts and the occult arts signified most notably in the divinatory magic square set in relief on the front-facing side of the image's rear wall. The presence of the divinatory magic square in the image evidences the pervasiveness of mysticism that continued to persist alongside the ascendancy of humanistic thought. There is a feeling, then, that the blending of text and image into a cohesive whole represents a form of alchemical amalgamation, particularly in the mystical way that such documents were "read." This allegorical textual modality lies at the heart of the esoterica that would later come to define the divinatory art of tarot.

Counterarguments to the claim that there was an esoteric aspect to the cards dating to this earlier period in tarot's history fail to account for the prevalence of an allegorical textual modality that was shared across borders. Strict periodization of the form risks losing sight of evolving streams of development involved with the coalescence of tarot symbolism prior to the eighteenth century. Such thinking would insist that tarot's transformation from secular gaming to sortilege would not occur until the 1700s. However, evidence suggests that there was in fact an earlier precedent for internalizing Platonic and Neoplatonic philosophy through fortune-telling. Bridging Neoplatonism and Western

esotericism was a hallmark of early modern occultism.³³ Certain aspects of *Le sorti di Francesco Marcolino da Forli* can be viewed as being consistent with this trend. Written and published by Francesco Marcolini da Forli and Lodovico Dolce in 1540, *Le sorti* describes a sortilegic process by which the leisurely activity of gaming is combined with the gravitas of philosophical introspection. The book’s frontispiece and one hundred small wood-engraved illustrations were engraved by the Florentine artist Giuseppe Porta Garfagninus, who adopted the surname of his mentor, the painter Francesco Salviati, after relocating to Venice one year prior to its publication.³⁴ The frontispiece is a copy of an engraving by Marco Dente, but the alterations Porta made for *Le sorti* are noteworthy in that they reference the distinctive pedagogical aims of the work. In Porta’s rendition, natural historians and philosophers are replaced by fortune-tellers, and the exposed pages of the open volume rest on the ground self-referentially exhibiting the work’s own pages. Three women, most likely representing the three Fates of Greco-Roman mythology, lead a group of participants. A pack of cards resting next to the open volume references the intimate relationship between tarotological literacy acquisition and sortilegic literacy practice.³⁵ This important relationship, it appears, is gendered by the woman in the center of the image demonstratively holding up a globe with her back turned from the viewer in a pose that suggests that she is instructing her male peers.

The text of the *Le sorti* elucidates a collaborative effort between the authors and the engraver to produce a game that would fuse philosophical pedagogy with an individualized course to prefigurement and prediction, not unlike the astrology of the period. In terms of the modern tarot scholarship, the idea that *tarocchi* had been used by the lettered classes as an educational game was first introduced in Heinrich Brockhaus’s “Ein edles Geduldspiel: ‘Die Leitung der Welt oder die Himmelsleiter’ die sogenannten Taroks Mantegnas vom Jahre 1459– 60,” in the 1933 publication *Miscellanea di storia dell’atre in onore di I.B. Supino*, and it is an argument that, while not entirely convincing with respect to the evidence, is not completely without merit.³⁶ Brockhaus maintained that in 1459 during a sparsely attended council in Mantua, Pope Pius II (b. Enea Silvio Bartolomeo Piccolomini), Besilios Bessarion, and Nicholas of Cusa created a *tarocchi*-style game that was intended to reinforce philosophical learning.³⁷ The depth of veracity to Brockhaus’s account notwithstanding, Marcolini da Forli’s *Le sorti* performs an identical function less than a century later. The scheme of sortilegic practice detailed in *Le sorti* requires practitioners to pair passages attributed to classical philosophers to specific card patterns drawn from a deck of playing cards. The

book's wood-engraved illustrations are, likewise, noticeably conversant with the visual culture of the tarot. The illustration for Virilita (strength), for instance, shows a woman riding on the back of a lion with a club in hand and the sun shining down on her while the illustration depicting Disgratia (disgrace) features a woman falling helplessly from a tower.³⁸

Consequently, by the time tarot reaches into its eighteenth-century period of transformation, works from renowned practitioners such as Antoine Court de Gébelin and Etteilla (b. Jean-Baptiste Alliette) can be situated not only in the occult milieu of the 1700s but also in the centuries long progression of esotericism in the early modern period.³⁹ The prefatory note that introduces Etteilla's *Manière de se récréer avec le jeu de cartes nommées tarots* (1783) speaks to the continuity of esotericism in late eighteenth-century occultism:

It takes nine notebooks, in four volumes, to complete this work, which the curious must follow intellectually, theoretically, and practically, if they want to conceive it at its essence and even to perform wonders in divination, alchemy, the science of science, numbers, genies, talismans, dreams, and this work being a translation of a book, which, as the late M. de Gébelin has said, contains the knowledge of the entire universe, chiefly of the higher sciences.⁴⁰

The distinction here lies in the degree to which the esoteric imagination consciously aligns with its exotified precursors through a process that begins to foreground its cultural hybridity.

It is the unique balance between the cultural hybridity of tarot's materiality and its ability to foster a shared set of symbolic meanings across different periods and regions that has allowed for its effectiveness as a sortilegic tool of cathartic interpretation. Proximal elements of both *orature* and print culture have worked interactively to fashion the functionality of sortilegic literacy in all its complexity. More directly, it bears repeating that where sortilegic literacy acquisition can be facilitated through the reading of printed instruction manuals, the reading itself often occurs in the context of an active interpreter who orally communicates their sortilegic readings to a passive listener who, in turn, has the option of internalizing those interpretations and acting upon them accordingly. There is no room in this process for the notion of a clean divide between oral, written, and print culture. Similarly, the convention of ascribing a primitive status to these sortilegic practices, explicitly because of their multiculturalism, is a vestige of a Eurocentric mythologizing that imagines racial purity

in the same technological innovations that have supported tarot’s global proliferation.⁴¹

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NOTES

I would like to thank the organizers and participants of the Columbia University’s Material Texts Seminar for their feedback on the initial draft of this article.

1. A commonly accepted theory is that playing cards came to Europe from the East through North Africa and western Asia, similar to the introduction of papermaking in southern Europe around the fourteenth century. See, for example, Michael A. Conrad, “Randomization in Paper: Shuffling as a Material Practice with Moral Implications in the Late Middle Ages and Early Modern World,” in *Pleasure and Leisure in the Middle Ages and Early Modern Age: Cultural-Historical Perspectives on Toys, Games, and Entertainment*, ed. Albrecht Classen (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2019), 569; although Catherine Perry Hargrave’s *A History of Playing Cards and a Bibliography of Cards and Gaming* (New York: Dover, 1966) situates France as a locus of European development.
2. Daniel Miller, Elisabetta Costa, Nell Haynes, Tom McDonald, Razvan Nicolescu, Jolynna Sinanan, et al., “Academic Studies of Social Media,” in *How the World Changed Social Media*, (London: UCL Press, 2016), 9–24, <https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1g69z35.9>.
3. Presuppositions of McKitterick’s argument can be found in Curt F. Bühler, *The Fifteenth-Century Book: The Scribes, the Printers, the Decorators* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1960).
4. William Hamilton, *The History of Medicine, Surgery, and Anatomy: From the Creation to the Commencement of the Nineteenth Century*, vol. 1 (London: H. Colburn and R. Bentley, 1831), vii; https://books.google.com/books?id=ajBFAQAAMAAJ&dq=The+History+of+Medicine,+Surgery,+and+Anatomy,+from+the+Creation+of+the+World,+to+the+Commencement+of+the+Nineteenth+Century.+by+William+Hamilton+M.+B.+in+Two+Volumes.&source=gbs_navlinks_s. For more examples of this rhetoric, see Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1979).
5. Samuel Weller Singer, *Researches into the History of Playing Cards with Illustrations of the Origin of Printing and Engraving on Wood* (London: T. Bensley & Son, 1816), 74.
6. In *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1980), Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari introduced the idea of the rhizome, or the idea of nonhierarchical relations of knowledge production to

- challenge the tree/root (i.e., arborescent) model of epistemology informed primarily by the Kantian view of metaphysics, which argues for an objective “cause and effect” relationship to the idea of “being” and causality.
7. Cumulative culture theory describes a form of “social learning” where technological evolution can occur through effective modifications to techniques occurring at the level of a population and over a substantial period of development. The theory is discussed at length in a range of studies from Michael Tomasello, Robert Boyd, Peter J. Richerson, and others in this field.
 8. One theory suggests that the Master of the Playing Cards was either known by or had been in working correspondence with Johannes Gutenberg around the time he was working to develop the technology of movable type for the printing press. At least one of the miniatures attributed to this artist has been identified in an illuminated copy of the Gutenberg Bible and other visual references to the playing cards can be found in the Giant Bible of Mainz of 1452–53. See Hellmut Lehman-Haupt, *Gutenberg and the Master of the Playing Cards* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press 1966).
 9. Eisenstein, *Printing Press*.
 10. The Visconti-Sforza deck falls on the larger side at 173 × 87 mm, while the Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot is measured at 120 × 69 mm. The relation between size and function in manuscript formats is discussed in Ralph Hanna and Thorlac Turville-Petre, *The Wollaton Medieval Manuscripts: Texts, Owners and Readers*, Manuscript Culture in the British Isles, 3 (Woodbridge, Suffolk: York Medieval Press, 2010), 31.
 11. See Richard Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene*, new ed. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1989), which describes memes as a “unit of cultural transmission, or a unit of imitation” (192).
 12. Laura Miller, “Tantalizing Tarot and Cute Cartomancy in Japan,” *Japanese Studies* 31, no. 1 (2011): 73–91, quotation on 74, <https://doi.org/10.1080/10371397.2011.560659>.
 13. Miller, 81.
 14. Miller, 83.
 15. Miller, 77–79.
 16. Eisenstein, *Printing Press*; Carl Goldstein, *Print Culture in Early Modern France: Abraham Bosse and the Purposes of Print* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).
 17. A popular subject of analysis, which is centered in such works as Fernando González Moreno and Beatriz González Moreno, *Painting Words: Aesthetics and the Relationship between Image and Text* (New York: Routledge, 2020); and Gilles Deleuze, *Image and Text* (London: Continuum, 2009).
 18. Helen Farley, *A Cultural History of Tarot: From Entertainment to Esotericism* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 45–49.
 19. Medieval and Renaissance works such as *La roman de la rose* (ca. 1230–80), Dante’s *Divina commedia* (ca. 1308), Petrarch’s *I Trionfi* (1351–74) are emblematic of this textual modality, although none can be thought as a direct match from the literature to the imagery, the nature of the allegorical writing undergirds the hermeneutic processes involved in the interpretation of tarot imagery and how it has developed throughout its history. The established sequence of the trump cards begins taking shape in the sixteenth century, most notably with the publication of the *Triumph de Troilo Pomeran da Cittadela composti sopra li terrocchi in laude delle famose gentil donne di Vinegia* in 1534,

at a time when new parlor games for the tarot were being developed that involved poetic improvisation and recitation.

20. Farley, *Cultural History*, 45–49.
21. Farley, 49.
22. Farley, 49.
23. The term “esoteric” used here and throughout this study refers to “Western esotericism,” or the loosely defined combination of spiritual, alchemical, and occult practices by which one understands, processes, and interacts with the natural world.
24. Farley, *Cultural History*, 52–53.
25. Jay A. Levenson, Konrad Oberhuber, and Jacquelyn L. Sheehan, *Early Italian Prints from the National Gallery of Art* (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art, 1973), 81.
26. The name *tarocchi*, plural of *tarocco*, was in use as an Italian name for tarot cards by the early sixteenth century. Prior to this, the tarot trumps were called the *trionfi*. “Tarot,” itself, is a French term. See Stuart R. Kaplan, *The Encyclopedia of Tarot*, vol. 1 (New York: US Games Systems, 1983), 1.
27. The Bonifacio Bembo Page of Cups, for example, is the pictorial model for the Fameio (i.e., Servant) card in the E-Series, as is the Temperance card. See Levenson, Oberhuber, and Sheehan, *Early Italian Prints*, 91.
28. Levenson et al., 81.
29. Levenson et al., 81.
30. Levenson et al., 142–43.
31. Levenson et al., 143. See also Beth Cohen, “The ‘Rinascimento Dell’ Antichità’ in the Art of Painting: Pausanias and Raphael’s ‘Parnassus,’” *Notes in the History of Art* 3, no. 4 (Summer 1984): 29–44, quotation on 31, <https://doi.org/10.1086/sou.3.4.23202235>.
32. See Eva Skopalová’s thorough analysis on the subject, “The Mantegna Tarocchi and the View of the World in Northern Italy in the 15th Century,” in *Články Articles Umění Art* 6, no. 62 (2014): 502–15, https://www.academia.edu/14516670/The_Mantegna_Tarocchi_and_the_View_of_the_World_in_Northern_Italy_in_the_15th_Century.
33. Such as in Marsilio Ficino’s edition of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (1471), *De triplici vita* (1489), and *Platonica theologia de immortalitate animo* (1482) and the writings of Giordano Bruno that would follow; the term “Hermeticism” here, deriving from “Hermes Trismegistus” (literally, Thrice Great Hermes) and connecting the Greek Hermes and the Roman Mercury with the Egyptian god Thoth as an incarnation of the three, is another example of how North African and southern European esoterica had been intermixed since the period of Antiquity. For more on this topic, see Ronal Decker, Thierry Depaulis, and Michael Dummett, *A Wicked Pack of Cards: The Origins of Occult Tarot* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1996), 2–29.
34. Christopher L. C. E. Witcombe, *Copyright in the Renaissance: Prints and the Privilegio in Sixteenth-Century Venice and Rome* (Boston: Brill, 2004), 214.
35. Francesco Marcolini, *Le sorti di Francesco Marcolino da Forlì Intitolate Giardino di pensieri allo illustrissimo Signore Hercole Estense Duca di Ferrara* (Venice: Lodovico Dolce, 1540).
36. Levenson et al., *Early Italian Prints*, 82–83.
37. Levenson et al., 82.

38. Marcolino, *Le sorti*, 29, 95.
39. The two figures are frequently credited as the founders of modern tarot card divination, but this designation denies major streams of development that preceded their contributions.
40. “N.B. Il faut neuf Cahiers, en quatre volumes, pour compléter cet Ouvrage, que les Curieux doivent suivre intellectuellement, théoriquement & pratiquement, s'ils veulent concevoir à fond, & même opérer des merveilles dans la Divination, l'Alchimie, la science des Nombres, des Génies, des Talismans, des Songes, & Cet Ouvrage étant une traduction d'un livre, qui, comme l'a dit feu M. de Gébelin, renferme la science de l'Unovers entire, & principalement des huates sciences . . .” from Jean-Baptiste Alliette, *Manière de se récréer avec le jeu de cartes nommées tarots. Pour servir de quatrième Cahier à cet Ouvrage. Par Etteilla* (Amsterdam: L'auteur, 1783–85), n.p., https://books.google.com/books?id=7YcGCXstyDwC&printsec=frontcover&source=gbs_ge_summary_r&cad=0#v=onepage&q&f=false.
41. An uncut sheet of fifteenth-century northern Italian tarot cards, for example, currently held at the Metropolitan Museum of Art (credited to the National Gallery of Art, Washington, DC, Rosenwald Collection) shows a woodcut on paper (28.7–29.8 × 43.4–44 cm) with twenty-four cards on a single sheet, usually printed in two colors. The print demonstrates that xylography was used to increase the volume of card production in as early as the incunable period of tarot history. This early example of tarot card production, which includes the suits of Swords, Batons, Cups, and Coins, illustrates the close connection between the early tarot and other types of playing card sets. The digital facsimile “Uncut Sheet of Tarot Cards” can be found on the website of the Metropolitan Museum of Art, accessed August 30, 2018, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/698658>.