

Peter Mark Adams

The Game of Saturn: Decoding the Sola-Busca Tarocchi, London: Scarlet Imprint
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The most practical sort of knowledge lies in dissimulation. The person who shows his cards risks losing.¹

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The *Game of Saturn* by Peter Mark Adams is a fascinating read. The author calls it “a literary detective story”, but this may well be an understatement. Adams’ main thesis is that the Sola-Busca tarocchi, a gaming deck like no other in the world (in fact the oldest, finest and most enigmatic complete tarocchi in existence, which was created in Ferrara in the late 15th century) is carrier of an encoded neopagan worldview that may well be connected to Georgios Gemistos Plethon’s sojourn in Italy during the Council of Ferrara-Florence (1438/9). But it is a crooked version of Plethon’s Hellenism that we have here, one that places Saturn (the lord of all mundane things, time and destruction) at its centre, thus acquiring dark—very dark, to be accurate—associations. The move from an intellectual pursuit of Zeus to a magical manipulation of mundane affairs suited well the rather Machiavellian priorities of elite Venetian and Ferrarese groups striving to consolidate political and economical power at all costs. In the author’s words: “The cultural, institutional and educational divide between Byzantium and Renaissance Italy was bound to cause Plethon’s ideas to be altered, if not mangled, in their adoption. What he could not have dreamt of is just how dark that adoption would render them in the light of the Latin West’s predilection for demonic magic” (239). Thus, Adams suggests that the deck was at once a system of meaning conveying a worldview incompatible with Christianity, and a grimoire of attack sorcery.

The Sola-Busca deck was commissioned for a Venetian patrician by Duke Ercole d’Este (1431–1505) and was probably part of the complex Ferrarese-

¹ Balthazar Gracián, *The Art of Worldly Wisdom*, trans. C. Maurer, New York: Doubleday 1992, 54.

Venetian negotiations for reconciliation. Adams argues that its conceptual architect might well have been the court astrologer Pellegrino Prisciani (1435–1518), who also designed the astrologically-themed frescos in the Palazzo Schifanoia. To be sure, the Sola-Busca deck is an uncanny artefact. Christian iconography is completely absent. The complex and grotesque artwork draws on pagan Neoplatonism, the *Chaldean Oracles*, and the *Picatrix*, as well as on marginal, disreputable or even unidentifiable figures of Roman history, and on malefic fixed stars and constellations. Adams decodes astral, alchemical, and sexual associations that are plausible, and shows how they may have been re-deployed into visual format. Still, the deck was made to conceal things and resist interpretation; part of its function consists in hiding what it really is, and in this regard it is a great success. What is plausible here, is also ambiguous and allusive, or, as Adams repeatedly notes, polysemous. This is an important caveat to keep in mind.

We can safely conclude that the wealthy patrons who commissioned this bizarre deck, as well as its conceptual architect and its charismatic engraver, had more than gaming purposes in mind. The depictions are often awkward and grotesque. Clearly, the deck was intended for a small elite circle of men of a rather eccentric literary taste, who were at least able to appreciate a variety of rare non-Christian associations. But given all the unique skill, time, and financial resources involved to produce such an artefact, it is only natural to assume that its target audience was beyond the average Renaissance polymath. Is it then nothing but a curiosum? This does not sound convincing. Adams sees in the dark neopagan symbolism of the Sola-Busca *tarocchi* a case of Nicodemism *avant la lettre* (“A Nicodemite is someone who whilst outwardly conforming to the dominant religion, conceals their true beliefs and practices”, 210), and shows that a Renaissance circle around the Duke Ercole d’Este, as well as members of “a clergy underworld,” were inclined to experiment with things that today we would label as “occult”. In other words, a genuine interest in the heterodox worldview conveyed by this deck conformed with the ruthless political and economical power game of the time. Adams suggests that the deck may well hide a potential ritualistic aspect. Though it is impossible to speculate on the extent of the deck’s real ritual operation, the mere existence of the deck implies a vivid interest and possibly an active involvement in a worldview with theurgic and pagan points of reference.

This is a particularly significant point, given the current tendency in Byzantine and Renaissance studies to play down the possibility of a distinctively “pagan” outlook, or existential stance, in both Byzantium and the Renaissance. Following the anachronistic projection by modern scholars of an anodyne, irenic, and fluid Christian discourse onto the fourteenth and fifteenth cen-

turies, all evidence of a distinctively non-Christian outlook is dismissed as the literary game of polymaths—some scholars have gone as far as even depaganizing the notorious “Book of Laws” by Georgios Gemistos Plethon (1355–1452), something that would probably come as a surprise to Plethon himself. On the contrary, Adams is right in taking the Sola-Busca seriously, that is, as evidence of an intellectual activity extending beyond literary show-off. Incidentally or not, one card (the Ten of Cups) depicts a figure that marks an uncanny resemblance to the bearded face often taken to be Plethon in Benozzo Gozzoli’s *The Procession of the Magi*. Is this a coded depiction of Plethon? The positioning of the eyes and the Neopythagorean symbolism involved is tantalising, to be sure. We know that Plethon participated in the Ferrara-Florence Synod and that he was in touch with Renaissance circles outside the context of the Synod. Privately circulated material may have well reached the Ferrarese court through a man like Guarino da Verona: “From 1436, Leonello d’Este’s tutor, Guarino da Verona, was appointed professor of Greek at the University of Ferrara. Having studied Greek in Constantinople, where he was both housed and tutored by the prominent humanist scholars Manuel and John Chrysoloras, he was a natural choice to assist the Greek delegation at the great Council, in which context he undoubtedly met Plethon” (138). The positioning of Kronos-Saturn as the ruler of the world conforms with Plethon’s hierarchy of gods in the *Laws*. The motto “trahor fatis” (*I am driven by fate*) that appears in the deck fully resonates with Plethon’s notion of *heimarmene*, which is a distinctive feature of the *Laws* (in fact, the relevant chapters were privately circulated by Plethon to test the waters). The theurgical ritual depicted in one of the cards (xv Metelo) involves a “Hekate’s top”, a spherical form of iunx described by Psellos in his commentary on the *Chaldean Oracles*, and brings to mind Plethon’s commentary on the *Oracles*. And the awkward kneeling posture on trump viii accords with a ritual gesture described in the *Laws* (160). The conceptual architect behind the Sola-Busca deck may well have consulted Plethon’s texts, or the same Neoplatonic sources also employed by Plethon (Proclus, Porphyry, the *Chaldean Oracles*). Directly or not, Hellenic ideas appear to have outlived the pressure exercised by the dominant religious and intellectual establishment, even if in this context the overall aim of theurgic ascent was closer to opportunist malefic ritualism than to the union with the One/Zeus. In this sense, it is worth noting propositions 3 and 11 from Plethon’s *Summary of the Doctrines of Zoroaster and Plato*, which is aptly reproduced as an Appendix: “the gods are not responsible for evil, but only for good things”; “because of our ties with the gods we are naturally inclined towards the good” (257).

The Game of Saturn is a stimulating read, and it is difficult to put it down. It will appeal to all scholars of Renaissance intellectual history, esotericism, and

Plethon. Published by Scarlet Imprint, the book is a rare example of fine print-making, featuring beautiful reproductions of the Sola-Busca deck. It is only after finishing the book that one reflects on its motto: “There is no document of civilisation that is not at the same time a document of barbarism” (Walter Benjamin).

Niketas Siniosoglou

National Hellenic Research Foundation, Athens

nsinios@gmail.com