The Sola-Busca Tarocchi

The Alchemical Symbolism of a Renaissance Masterwork

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(This is a greatly revised version of an earlier work of this name)

The Sola-Busca tarocchi is the oldest complete deck of gaming cards in existence. It is also one of the first to be produced using copperplate engraving, a fact that accounts for its high quality and fine detail. Dating from the late fifteenth century, it has the outward form of a tarocchi but there all resemblance to any other tarocchi, before or since, ends. The deck's imagery is utterly unique and needs to be interpreted on its own merits rather than by comparison with other

historical tarocchi. The deck received its designation from the surnames of its last private owners, the Marquise Antoinette Busca and her husband Count Andrea Sola-Cabiati. Purchased by the Italian Ministry of Culture and Heritage in 2009, it is now held at the Pinacoteca di Brera art gallery in Milan. The images used in this article are from a limited edition reproduction of the historical deck made by Wolfgang Mayer in 1998.

Alchemy was never just one sort of operation, but rather a spectrum of activities that ranged from hard chemical science, through magical and theurgical operations to efforts directed purely to realizing profound spiritual transformation. For most of its history it was all of these things at once. With its roots in the pre-literate cultures of the remotest past, alchemy is thought to have emerged in parallel with the first attempts to extract metals from the substance of the Earth[1]. Early metalworker's learned to 'draw' metal from the earth and through successive processes of firing and cooling, purify and refine it until it reached its fullest potential.

These processes involved a 'desecration' of Earth and therefore needed to be surrounded by rites and rituals designed to protect the operator from the consequences of his actions, to placate the Earth and to summon the help of the fiery smith gods. There is an old Yakut saying to the effect that, "*smiths and shaman come from the same nest*"[2] since they both work with a great heat. In the case of the smith this heat is external, but the shaman's heat is an inner one and therefore closer to the true source of the power that drives inner-transformation.

Six of Disks

The shaman's great inner heat results from the awakening of the *kundalini* fire serpent, the 'serpent or dragon power', a reservoir of life-energy that provides access to greatly expanded states of awareness and empowers the practice of magic and healing. One little mentioned aspect of ritual is its ability to awaken this power. Successful ritual creates a field that interacts with the ritualists own energy serving to raise and expand the range and depth of awareness. In mythology the old smith gods, Hephaestus or Vulcan, and their bands of magical followers, whether known as the Kabeiroi, Telechines or Dactyli, set the grass alight when they performed their sacred dance. The Six of Disks (*below*) introduces the blacksmith who is also an agent of transformation.

Two major developments during the fifteenth century served to change the way alchemy was viewed and practiced. Firstly, the translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, a body of philosophical, magical and alchemical texts from late antiquity, provided a new and rich intellectual foundation for spiritual and theurgic practice. As one of the hermetic arts, alchemy became increasingly focused on the psycho-physical transformation of the theurgist rather than chemical substances. Secondly, the emergence of chemistry as a scientific discipline in its own right. This separation allowed the assimilation of alchemy's physical operations within the context of the newly emergent scientific paradigm.

Today alchemical symbolism is popularly viewed as an externalization of deep seated psychological processes, a view first proposed by Herbert Silberer[3] in the early twentieth century and greatly expanded upon by Carl Jung[4]. From this 'alchemy-as-individuation' perspective a further distillation, 'literary alchemy', treats it as a tool for the deconstruction of texts and images. Whether or not we agree with Jung's views, they were not shared by any alchemist in the many millennia up until the eighteenth century, by which point alchemical operations could no longer be reconciled with the worldview of an emergent modernism. But if we are to begin to understand the deck's symbolism, and the place of alchemy within it, we need to return to a far rawer, more direct, mystical and magical mindset than is usual today.

We can easily accept that the four classical stages of the alchemical opus – Nigredo (blackening / decomposing), Albedo (whitening / purifying), Citrinitas (yellowing / emerging) and Rubedo (reddening / realizing) – match the stages of any profound process of personal and spiritual transformation. But these processes depend in turn upon a series of transformations within the psycho-energetic being of the practitioner. Alchemy, despite its century's long incubation of the science of Chemistry, had always combined inner cultivation and magical praxis with physical

operations. The impenetrability of the classical alchemical texts and the obscurity of their imagery derive as much from the difficulty of translating profound, psycho-spiritual experiences into the language of everyday life as from any need to ensure their secrecy. The deck's alchemical theme manifests itself in two ways: explicit alchemical imagery and implicit references to alchemical processes.

The explicit imagery takes the form of depictions of the suit symbols being heated inside furnaces or cauldrons. These operations lack the variety that characterizes most illustrated alchemical texts. In addition, their fragmentary, disjointed nature fails to suggest any sense of a larger process of which they are part. This lack of 'narrative' movement is deliberate, these isolated images were never intended to represent a continuous sequence of operations.

The Five of Disks

(above) Alexandro, the King of Swords

This is not the case with most contemporary illustrated alchemical texts – for example the early fifteenth century '*Book of the Holy Trinity*'[5]. Their rich, though obscure, nature retains that sense of narrative movement characteristic of some definite process possessing a discreet beginning, middle and end. For all of these reasons there is a distinct possibility that some portion of the deck's 'alchemical' imagery was included to act as a deliberate – but highly suggestive – blind.

Work on the deck's alchemical imagery was originally undertaken by Sofia Di Vincenzo[6] but the example that we will explore was articulated by art historian Laura Paola Gnacollini[7]. In order to introduce an alchemical theme the deck's designer made clever use of the ancient literary genre known as the Alexander Romance literature; collections of tall tales and fantastic exploits that grew up around the historical Alexander while he was still alive in the 4th century BCE.

Various recensions of this literature were translated into most European languages and provided a popular source of literature and illustrations well into the 16th century. The card representing Alexander, the King of Swords, is named 'Alexandro' (*above*).The choice of Alexander the Great to introduce the theme of alchemy may appear a little obscure, but the idea was supported in the Renaissance imagination by the popularity of the pseudonymous *Secretum Secretorum* or *Secret of Secrets*. From the 12th through to the 16th century this text was believed to contain the secret teachings Aristotle imparted to his pupil, Alexander the Great. Alexander receives advice on a wide range of subjects including Alchemy. In fact, the text is a late 6th to 7th century middle-eastern compilation of disparate information on hygiene, herbalism, astrology and alchemy.

We can be certain of this identification because of the imagery surrounding the figure. Alexander is depicted standing in front of a stylized chariot drawn by mythical birds known as Griffons (or Gryphons). Griffons are dual-natured, a mixture of eagle and lion symbolizing mastery over both land and air. In Dante's *Purgatorio* the Griffon is used to represent humanity's 'dual nature', one that is constituted of both a divine and an earthly element,

"A thousand desires hotter than any flame
bound my eyes to those shining eyes,
which still stayed fixed upon the griffin.
Even as the sun in a mirror, not otherwise
the twofold beast shone forth in them,
now with the one, now with its other nature."[8]

The imagery on the card illustrates a story from the Alexander Romance literature relating how Alexander was able to visit the upper atmosphere and survey the planet in a chariot drawn by these mythical creatures. The depiction of this and other feats, as well as the cycle of myths around his conception, were popular subjects for illustration from the ninth to seventeenth centuries[9].

Viewed from an alchemical perspective, Alexander's adventure with the Griffons is also an allegory of 'immortalization', the experience of realizing one's essential 'dual-naturedness', that

(above) Tenth century relief of Alexander the Great in his Griffon drawn chariot, Basilica of St. Mark Venice.

lay at the core of the practice of 'theurgic ascent', the ritually induced ascent and merging of awareness with that of a deity. We find this practice extolled in Neoplatonic texts, such as Iamblichus' 4th century CE '*On the Mysteries*', a popular work amongst Renaissance Platonists

which had been translated into Latin by Marsilio Ficino as early as the 1480s. Having established that the card's imagery is being used to point us towards specific narratives embedded within the Alexander Romance literature, can we find other instances of this approach amongst the cards?

Trump XVI Olivo (*below*) also depicts an alchemical creature, the deadly Basilisk. The glance of a Basilisk was deemed sufficient to cause death. Upon searching through the Alexander Romance literature we find the tale of how Alexander killed the Basilisk by having it perceive its own reflection in a mirror. XVI Olivo illustrates this story. A kingly figure looks away as he holds some kind of reflective surface in front of a Basilisk. The Basilisk is also one of the hermetic creatures that feature as an agent of change and transformation in alchemical operations.

Trump XVI Olivo

The Basilisk must die, as indicated by the black cloth worn at Alexander's waist. Its decomposition quickens the onset of the alchemical process of renewal. The card depicts an emergent Sun that can be interpreted as signaling the onset of the fourth and final phase of the alchemical opus, the Rubedo or 'reddening'. Alexander's bright red clothing also reinforces this interpretation. But in coming to this point we are, once more, in danger of being drawn by the ambiguity of the imagery into the psychologizing frame provided by Carl Jung. Rather than pursuing this psycho-literary model, we need to explore the meaning of the symbolism in a context that would have been relevant to a Renaissance scholar.

We can, instead, identify a context in the classical texts upon which the Renaissance was founded. In Pliny's first century CE '*Natural History*' we learn,

"... the basilisk, a creature from which even serpents flee, can kill just with its odor, merely to look at it would also prove fatal, its blood is much extolled by magicians. The blood is thick and sticky like tar, which it also resembles; dissolved in water ... it becomes a brighter shade of red than cinnabar. They attribute to it the properties of success with petitions and prayers and regard it as a remedy to various diseases and as an amulet against spells. Some call it 'Saturn's Blood'."[10]

Some of the claims concerning the impossible properties of fantastic substances – such as the blood of a basilisk or the non-existent fat from between a lion's eyes – mentioned by classical writers such as Pliny, can be interpreted as coded references to other, more mundane substances. In this case the sticky, tar like substance that turns red in water can be seen as a reference to menstrual blood – a substance familiar in the context of ritual operations. Early Christian

accounts of the many Gnostic sects, for example the Alexandrian Gnostic sect known as Phibionites, condemns their ritualized use of both semen and menses,

"... after having made love ... they take the man's semen on their hands and pray... and say, "We offer thee this gift, the body of Christ." And then they eat it ... when (a woman) happens to be having her period – they ... take the ... menstrual blood ... and eat it in common. And say "This is the blood of Christ." They interpret the passage, "I saw a tree bearing twelve types of fruit every year, and he said to me, "This is the tree of life," ... as an allegory of menstrual cycle."[11]

Given a broader interpretation of alchemy as ritual, and given the longevity of these traditions, it comes as no surprise to find similar themes encoded in the deck's imagery. We also find a re-statement of Pliny's comments concerning the blood of the basilisk in Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa's '*Three Books Concerning Occult Philosophy*' published in the early decades of the sixteenth century, just forty years after the deck was finalized,

"They say, also, that the blood of a basilisk, which they call the blood of Saturn, hath such great force in sorcery that it procures for him that carries it about him good success of his petitions from great men in power, and of his prayers from God, and also remedies of diseases, and grant of any privilege."[12]

The context of Agrippa's work is, unmistakably, one of ritual magic – and it is to this frame of reference that we must turn in order to better understand the deck's hidden meanings.

Notes

[1] Eliade, M. (1979). The Forge and the Crucible: the Origins and Structure of Alchemy.

[2] *ibid*. p.81.

[3] Silberer, H. (1949). Alchemy and Symbolism.

[4] Jung. CG. (1959). Psychology and Alchemy.

[5] Images available, as of May 2015, at:
http://www.alchemywebsite.com/imagery_buch_der_heiligen_dreifaltigkeit.html

[6] Di Vicenzo, S. (1998). Sola Busca Tarot.

[7] Gnaccolini, LP. (2012). The Secret of Secrets: The Sola-Busca Tarot & the Hermetic-Alchemical Culture between Marche and Venice at the end of the fifteenth Century. Exhibition Catalogue. The Pinacoteca di Brera, Milan. http://www.localidautore.com/evento/paese/milan-28/the-secret-of-secrets-sola-busca-tarot-and-the-hermetic-alchemical-culture-between-marche-and-veneto-1882.aspx. (Accessed: November 2014).

[8] Dante. Purgatorio. Canto XXXI. li.118-123 translated by Jean & Robert Hollander.

[9] Ross, DJA. (1963). Olympias and the Serpent: The Interpretation of a Baalbek Mosaic and the Date of the Illustrated Pseudo-Callisthenes. Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes. Vol. 26, No. 1/2, pp.1-21.

[10] Pliny. Natural History. 29.19.

[11] Epiphanius of Salamis. The Panarion. Volume I. Section 2. Para.4-5.

[12] Cornelius Agrippa. Three Books of Occult Philosophy. Book I: Chapter XLII.