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# Onomastics and the occult: names of tarot cards

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**Abstract:** The paper explores names of tarot cards from the viewpoint of referential semantics, semiotics and philosophy of language. The aforementioned onyms are analysed with respect to the levels on which reference is achieved, ranging from abstract to concrete, depending on the semantic content of the names, i.e., the set of values associated with the names of tarot cards generically and upon their use. The study also looks at the non-proprial constituents making up the names, so as to identify and describe the semiotic nature of the lexemes before and after their onymisation.
**Keywords:** tarot cards, proper names, onymisation, reference, semiotics.

## Introduction

By purporting to reveal people's future, tarot, as any form of divination, is currently considered an esoteric device that psychologically and philosophically answers individuals' wish to be in control of their fate and eliminate the element of surprise that underlies human existence. The employment of tarot is a manifestation of humans' curiosity, equally concerned with breaking the physical, science-subsumed limits of knowledge and with the possibility (or absence thereof) of establishing a connection with the divinity, thereby simultaneously proving the divinity's existence and turning it from hypothesis into fact. Thus, due to its promise to grant access to the aforementioned "forbidden fruit", tarot is traditionally and moralistically associated with vices and even with dark forces (see Compagnone and Danesi 2012: 128).

Nevertheless, beyond this narrow, reductionist construal, tarot is also a tool for discovering the past, historically speaking. By looking at the numerous decks that have resulted in the present-day variants and deciphering the symbolism they contain against the corresponding historical background, one can gain insight into the sociocultural particularities of those ages. Put differently, from its original deck (created in Northern Italy in the Renaissance for members of noble families and used as the basis for a game of cards – Italian *tarocchi*; Farley 2009: 2, 4) to its numerous modern and contemporary derivatives (e.g., the Metrosexual Tarot, cf. Farley 2009: 1, or the 112 types of decks[1] listed by the website *Aeclectic Tarot*, such as Alien & UFO, Anime,

[1] According to *Aeclectic Tarot*, Celtic tarot decks, for instance, include the following subdecks: Arthurian Tarot, Avalon Tarot, Camelot Oracle, Celtic Dragon Tarot, Celtic Shaman's

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Books and Literature, Celtic, Eastern European, Feminine/Masculine, Norse, Qabalah [sic!], Rune and Shakespeare among others), tarot is a repository of the changes that have fuelled the development of Western European space since the Late Medieval Period. Its evolution from a game of cards into an esoteric element as a result of the revival of occult beliefs along with the Renaissance accounts for the mystification of tarot imagery and card names implicitly. It is this semantic-semiotic aspect that the present paper aims at exploring, along with explaining how names of tarot cards are used to achieve reference and how motivated the link between the names, their denotata and the graphic representations on the cards is. The approach is multidisciplinary, as the study will look at names of tarot cards from the perspective of onomastics, referential semantics, semiotics and philosophy of language. To illustrate the application of the theoretical framework of analysis, this paper will look at the names of cards in the major arcana comparatively, across four tarot decks (Visconti di Modrone, Visconti-Sforza, Court de Gébelin and Rider-Waite), chosen due to the fame they have enjoyed since their appearance.

## Renaissant Europe: sociocultural remarks for a history of tarot

It is difficult to pinpoint the date and place of birth of tarot, as it is problematic to establish beyond doubt its paternity (or maternity) and the reason underlying its creation. Despite the scientific disadvantage of this ambiguity, a beneficial outcome can be underlined. The obscurity is illustrative of the naturalness with which tarot became a part of society, growing along with it and spreading across socio-geographical borders.

The tarot deck developed from a card-playing deck that was common to most Western countries (Farley 2009: 6). It consisted of fifty-two cards grouped into four suits and numbered from 1 (the ace) to 10, completed by three court cards (Farley 2009: 6). According to extant evidence (see Depaulis 1984: 9; Farley 2009: 8), the first documented mentions of the regular deck dates back to the Late Medieval period, in "prohibitions against gambling and sermons at least fifty years before the first documented appearance of tarot", and later in "correspondence and record books of the courts of Northern Italy" (Farley 2009: 32), where the *cartes de trionfi* are recorded. Although fairly many other mentions can be noted throughout Western Europe subsequently to this moment, the origin of the regular deck is not European, but Near Eastern. The deck permeated European social life mediated by trade-based relations, along with

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Pack (reissued as Celtic Oracle), Celtic Tarot (three instances, with card art inspired by Celtic knotwork and mythology, or by Irish mythology "in misty, pretty watercolour style"; the third pack is illustrated in the manner of comic books), Celtic Tarot Mini, Celtic Tree Oracle, Druid Plant Oracle, Fairy Ring Oracle, Greenwood Tarot, Runic Tarot, Tarocchi Celtici ("Italian tarot deck based on Celtic mythology") and so on. The large number of subdecks is proof of the paradoxical process undergone by tarot in the modern age: the thematic diversification of tarot decks, which mirrors the revival of non-Christian beliefs or informal reinterpretation of Christian ones, is indirectly proportional to the decline in prestige and credibility of this type of art of divination.

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other Arabic commodities deemed "exotic" (Court de Gébelin 2007 (1781); Farley 2009: 18). It was adapted into the standard tarot deck, which in addition to the four suits (marked by different symbols: cups, batons/wands, coins/pentacles/rings and swords) and court cards (four per suit: Knave, Knight, Queen and King), comprised "twenty-one ordered trumps, [...] often counted with an unnumbered 'wild' or *Fou* (Fool) card" (Farley 2009: 6) – in other words, the minor arcana and the major arcana.

The earliest surviving decks are known as the *Visconti di Modrone* and the *Visconti-Sforza* decks, after the noble families who ruled Milan in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries and for whom they were commissioned. At the time when they were created, both decks were still used for card-playing. In fact, no evidence has been found to indicate that tarot had fulfilled a fortune-telling purpose before the end of the eighteenth century (Farley 2009: 43). Thus, the rich depictions on both Visconti decks are not meant to encode any occult meaning; they are allegories of social and political attitudes of the Duke of Milan in relation to neighbouring cities, the papacy and the church, religion, Christian values, humane values, and Milanese ethos. From this viewpoint, the cards can be considered to make up a pictorial chronicle of the life of Filippo Maria Visconti, Duke of Milan in the first half of the fifteenth century. The esoteric interpretation of card symbolism appears to have occurred along with the dissemination of the tarot trumps in Western Europe, especially in France and later on in the United Kingdom[2], along with the curiosity for foreign cultures that was rekindled by the development of transport and various sciences, such as anthropology and archaeology (Farley 2009: 122).

The standard tarot pack designed by French and Swiss card-makers from the beginning of the eighteenth century was called *Tarot de Marseille* (Farley 2009: 93). It was the foundation of the deck reinterpreted by Antoine Court de Gébelin, Protestant pastor and Freemason (Farley 2009: 101), supporter of many esoteric currents that influenced French culture in the 1700s, including Rosicrucianism, Hermeticism, kabbalism and esoteric Freemasonry among others (Farley 2009: 101). From France, tarot migrated to the north, to the British isles, where one pack was created by Arthur Edward Waite, a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, a well-known Rosicrucian society: "Embedded in its teachings were most of the currents that informed the occult worldview including Freemasonry, Egyptian Magic, Hermeticism, the Celtic Revival and Christian mysticism. All of these traditions found expression in tarot symbolism" (Farley 2009: 121).

## Names of tarot cards: semantic and semiotic analysis

Recorded by current lexicographical sources as a definite noun phrase (*the Tarot*) and defined as a set of cards used in games (mainly in Europe) (*Oxford Dictionaries*), a system of predicting the future (*Collins English Dictionary*) and an "alternative belief system" (*The Free Dictionary*), modern tarot consists of 78 cards divided into the minor

[2] This path of dissemination is also supported etymologically: in English, the noun *tarot* was borrowed from French towards the end of the sixteenth century (*Online Etymology Dictionary*, s.v. *tarot*).

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and major arcana, as was already mentioned. The latter makes up the permanent trump and comprises twenty-two cards identified by means of unique designations. In the Visconti di Modrone and Visconti-Sforza decks, the cards in the major arcana did not originally bear names, which emphasises the fact that they were used in card-play, rather than as a device for divination. Nevertheless, they received names in the centuries to come, some of which were preserved in the esoteric tarot of the Romantic, Symbolist, Modern and Contemporary world as well.

Grammatically, regardless of the deck that one may take into consideration, the names of cards in the major arcana are definite noun phrases[3] whose head is represented by an appellative, preceded by the definite article: e.g., *The Magician*[4]. Semantically, these appellatives[5] originally denote socio-professional categories (*The Empress*, *The Emperor*, *The Fool* – the court jester, *The Hermit*[6], *The Hierophant*[7], *The High Priestess*, *The Magician*)[8], relationships (*The Lovers*[9]), conditions of individuals (*The Hanged Man*), mythological/biblical figures (*The Devil*[10]), celestial bodies (*The Moon*, *The Star*[11], *The Sun*), means of transport (*The Chariot*[12]), buildings (*The Tower*[13]), and man-

[3] This paper takes into consideration the names of the cards in English. For illustration purposes, references to French and Romanian will also be made, whenever necessary.

Names of cards in the minor arcana are not explicit definite noun phrases, as the definite article does not appear on the cards in English (nor on the cards in French, contrary to the situation in Romanian), but one may imply the designating construction to have a definite meaning, especially in the case of court cards. This statement can be accounted for by the contextual onymisation that the names undergo.

The structure of card names in the minor arcana is slightly different due to the organisation of the cards into suits and the hierarchy strictly observed within each suit. Thus, in English, for example, the configuration of names of cards in the minor arcana is [numeral or court-card name – appellative denoting rank: *queen*, *king*, *page*, *knight*] + [*of*, preposition denoting relation] + [suit name: *cups*, *coins*, *wands*, *swords*, indicating class appurtenance]: e.g., *Ace of Spades*, *Queen of Pentacles*, *King of Swords* etc.

[4] The same situation occurs in French (*le Bateleur*) and in Romanian (with the enclitic form of the definite article: *Magicianul*).

[5] The names analysed here are taken from the Rider-Waite deck (Waite 1911), due to its worldwide renown.

[6] Known as *Old Man*, *The Hunchback* or *Time* in Renaissant tarot (Farley 2009: 68), and as *The Sage, or the Seeker of Truth and Justice* in the Court de Gébelin deck (2007 (1781)).

[7] Called *The High Priest* in the Court de Gébelin deck (2007 (1781)).

[8] In addition, the Visconti din Modrone and the Visconti-Sforza decks included the cards called *The Pope* and *The Popess* (Farley 2009: 54–55), but they do not appear in the other decks explored in this paper.

[9] The card occurs as *Love* in the Visconti di Modrone and the Visconti-Sforza decks (Farley 2009: 58), and as *The Marriage* in the Court de Gébelin deck (2007 (1781)).

[10] *Typhon* in the Court de Gébelin deck (2007 (1781)).

[11] *The Dog Star* in the Court de Gébelin deck (2007 (1781)).

[12] Appearing as *Osiris Triumphant* in the Court de Gébelin deck (2007 (1781)).

[13] Absent or lost from the early tarot decks (Farley 2009: 84), but identified as *The House of God, or Castle of Plutus* in the Court de Gébelin deck (2007 (1781)).

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kind in general (*The World*[14]). Nevertheless, one also comes across names in which the appellatives occur with zero determination. In these cases, the nominal constructions denote virtues (*Strength/Fortitude*[15], *Justice*, *Temperance*), personified states (*Death*), biblical events (*Judgement*[16]) or mythical/philosophical objects (*Wheel of Fortune*).

From the viewpoint of onomastics, the nouns on which the names of major-arcana cards are based are categorial terms that are contextually onymised through their actualisation, on the level of language use, of several semantic associations that deviate more or less significantly from the meaning fixed on the level of linguistic convention (see Van Langendonck 2007: 21). In other words, for example, the meaning of the lexeme *empress* is not the same with the meaning of the proper name *the Empress*, due to a two-stage process that the former undergoes before becoming an onym. First, the common noun becomes a definite phrase through the use of the definite article, thereby reducing the set of possible referents to one (i.e., a unique entity in a given world, which nevertheless displays the distinctive features of its category: [+woman], [+sovereign ruler], [± wife of an emperor]). Second, the definite expression becomes a proper name, which may or may not continue to bear any semantic connection with the underlying appellative – usually, only some associative meaning can be identified. The proprial status is most saliently emphasised graphically through the use of capital initials. However, the names "seem to be normal descriptive referring expressions" and while "they denote an individual uniquely" (as a result of specialisation), they also "appear capable of referring to more than one individual" (Coates 2006: 32), according to time and space. Overall, the same definiteness is construable in the case of card names consisting of nouns or noun phrases that do not occur with the definite article. The nouns *justice*, *strength* and *temperance* shift from indefiniteness to specificity through their particular use in the context delineated.

The fact that there still is a possibility for name users to access the lexical content of the constructions underlying the names does not endanger the proprial status of the designations. This partial transparency is supported by the depictions on the cards, which are representative of the concepts indicated by the names of the cards. On this level, one can notice two types of names resulting from the metonymic name coinage:

a) *symbolic names* (see Smith 2006: 19–20; 2015: 990). In this case, there exists a set of qualities shared by the original denotatum of the appellative turned into a card name and the concept for which the card stands: e.g., *the empress*, [+woman], [+sovereign ruler], [± wife of an emperor] > *The Empress* [+woman] [+motherhood]

[14] Know as *Time* in the Court de Gébelin deck (2007 (1781)).

[15] Called *Fortitude* in the Visconti din Modrone and the Visconti-Sforza decks (Farley 2009: 63–64) as well as in the Court de Gébelin deck (2007 (1781)), which also includes *Prudence* among the cards representing virtues, as opposed to all the other three decks analysed in this paper.

[16] *Angel* in the early decks (Farley 2009: 79) and *The Last Judgement* in the Court de Gébelin deck (2007 (1781)).

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[+fecundity]. As the card art and interpretation reveal, the name is only *conventionally* linked to the concept (Figure 1):




Figure 1. *The Empress* (Waite 1911)

A stately figure, seated, having rich vestments and royal aspect, as of a daughter of heaven and earth. Her diadem is of twelve stars, gathered in a cluster. The symbol of Venus is on the shield which rests near her. A field of corn is ripening in front of her, and beyond there is a fall of water. The sceptre which she bears is surmounted by the globe of this world. She is the inferior Garden of Eden, the Earthly Paradise, all that is symbolized by the visible house of man. She is not *Regina coeli*, but she is still *refugium peccatorum*, the fruitful mother of thousands. There are also certain aspects in which she has been correctly described as desire and the wings thereof, as the woman clothed with the sun, as *Gloria Mundi* and the veil of the *Sanctum Sanctorum*; but she is not, I may add, the soul that has attained wings, unless all the symbolism is counted up another and unusual way. She is above all things universal fecundity and the outer sense of the Word. This is obvious, because there is no direct message which has been given to man like that which is borne by woman; but she does not herself carry its interpretation.

In another order of ideas, the card of the Empress signifies the door or gate by which an entrance is obtained into this life, as into the Garden of Venus; and then the way which leads out therefrom, into that which is beyond, is the secret known to the High Priestess: it is communicated by her to the elect. Most old attributions of this card are completely wrong on the symbolism – as, for example, its identification with the Word, Divine Nature, the Triad, and so forth. (Waite 1911)

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Other names in the major arcana that follow this pattern are *The Chariot*, *The Devil*, *The Emperor*, *The Fool*, *The Hanged Man*, *The Hermit*, *The Hierophant*, *The High Priestess*, *The Lovers*, *The Magician*, *The Moon*, *The Star*, *The Sun*, *The Tower* and *The World*.

b) *indexical names* (see Smith 2006: 19; 2015: 989–990). The set of qualities associated with the name of the card are entirely recognisable in the conceptual configuration of the underlying appellative: e.g., *Strength* [+emotional resistance] [+mental resistance] – *strength* [+ physical strength] [+potency/intensity] [+emotional strength] [+mental strength]: "It connects also with *innocentia inviolata*, and with the strength which resides in contemplation. [...] The card has nothing to do with self-confidence in the ordinary sense, though this has been suggested – but it concerns the confidence of those whose strength is God, who have found their refuge in Him" (Waite 1911). Put differently, the notional content of the card name is a strict subset of the notional content of the original appellative.

Three subsequent frameworks or stages of referring can be identified in relation to names of tarot cards:

*1. Lexical reference* (dictionary-level, with zero connotations), when one focuses on the appellative construction underlying the name accessing its lexical meaning. This is the first cognitive filter that needs to be activated in order to properly decode the associative meanings triggered by the name. For instance, one needs to understand what the noun *magician* means to be able to fathom the complexity of the semantic network behind the name of the tarot card consisting of this appellative.

*2. Onymic reference* (first-level connotation), when common nouns in names of tarot cards are understood to function as proper names in the context of use. The lexical meaning moves to the background, as the semantic associations encoded in the names and suggested by the imagery on the cards are evoked in the mind of the name users. The attempt to gather a set of qualities within a single concept is why naming occurs in the first place. In other words there is a *need* to name (Jeshion 2009: 373): "We issue names in just those circumstances in which a circle of communicators needs to make identifying reference to a certain particular", and "there is an interest in the continuing identity of the particular across time" (Jeshion 2009: 372). As regards tarot, this "continuing identity" was lost in the case of many of the cards, due to its evolution from card game to esoteric device. For example, in the Visconti-Sforza deck, *The Magician* was the first card, but this hierarchical prominence did not imply its qualitative superiority. On the contrary, whereas in modern esoteric decks the Magician "is depicted as the magus, a keeper of esoteric knowledge" (Farley 2009: 51), in the Visconti-Sforza deck the card represented a petty conjuror, "as evidenced by its early entry into the trump sequence" (Farley 2009: 52). The low status was reinforced by "the red garb which distinguished him from all other figures in the deck. Red was only deemed appropriate for disreputable members of society such as foot soldiers, executioners, gamblers and dandies" (Farley 2009: 52). Moreover, the card could have also "been an

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indictment on the cards that immediately followed it: the Popess, Emperor, Empress and Pope" (Farley 2009: 52), which were to be understood as being only slightly better than a mere trickster (this view is accounted for by the Viscontis' "uneasy relationship" with the Papacy and the Holy Roman Empire – see Farley 2009: 52). The semantic link seems long faded, as in the case of toponyms which originated in semantic bleaching (see Van Langendonck 2007: 92).

*3. Personalised reference*, when the set of associative meanings introduced by a name is adjusted to every individual for whom a tarot reading is performed, depending on individuals' peculiarities. The semantic content triggered by the name also shifts depending on whether the card appears in a normal position or upside-down: e.g., The Magician, when reversed, stands for weakness, powerlessness, lack of self-discipline, lack of self-knowledge, proneness to action without thought etc.

## Conclusion

Due to their constituency and the particular context in which they are used, names of tarot cards prove to be atypical referring expressions. The appellative elements underlying the names act as mediators between the name user and the concept identified through the card name; from this viewpoint, card names in the major arcana may be symbolic or indexical. Nevertheless, the context of use – i.e., divination – allows for the existence of three stages of reference, which occur successively, as shown above. Naturally, sociocultural, religious, political, linguistic knowledge and experience will act as filters for the associative meanings elicited by the card names before an actual tarot reading is provided, based on the names themselves and the card art.

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