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Tarot in the French Enlightenment

The original paper on this topic was written as an Independent Project for the Bachelor of Arts in Historical Studies (a copy of which is available at the Grenfell Library) but has been condensed for the purposes of publishing in this journal. The focus of this paper is the evolution of Tarot in Late-Enlightenment France (*circa* 1750-89). Modern Tarot is thought to be a tool for divination, a method of fortune-telling to gain insight into personal events that may be otherwise hidden. But was it always? To understand its progression, the origins of Tarot must be unearthed and its evolution examined from the fifteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Its origins, however, are uncertain and have been debated in both the occult community and in the academic sphere.

The Enlightenment is often referred to as the Age of Reason, where supernatural beliefs were replaced with science and logical reasoning.¹ Although the Enlightenment spread throughout eighteenth-century Europe,² it differed in each country in many respects, with France often being seen as its centre.³ While attempting to define the Enlightenment limits a historians' understanding of the eighteenth century,⁴ for the purposes of this paper, the Enlightenment will be defined in the traditional sense, chronologically (i.e., a time frame of a hundred-year span from the English Revolution to the French Revolution). From this perspective, the Enlightenment can be seen in three overlapping parts: the Early-Enlightenment with Montesquieu and Voltaire, the Mid-Enlightenment with Rousseau and Diderot, and the Late-Enlightenment with Lessing and Kant.⁵

While the Enlightenment embraced philosophical discourse, which emphasized science over superstition, the path to knowledge was not always a linear one and often branched into the pseudosciences and the occult. Many historians have researched the Enlightenment, along with the occult movement in France, and academic material in this area can be found in abundance.⁶

Occult in the Enlightenment is evidenced by Mesmerism, Egyptomania, Hermeticism and the esoteric. Research done by Robert Darnton and Ronald Fitze provide insight into the social and cultural environment that provided for the cultivation of occultism which endeavoured to reconcile the supernatural with science and religion.⁷ Paradoxically, while continuing to advance science and reason, the search for knowledge in Late-Enlightenment France created an idyllic environment for the occult to flourish and the search for esoteric knowledge brought about Tarot's transformation from an ordinary card game to a tool for occultism and cartomancy.

While work done by Wallace Kirsop and Richard Jasnow establishes a framework in which to understand the evolution of Tarot, it has yet to find its niche under the historical study of esotericism.⁸ The leading authority on Tarot's history, Michael Dummett, is a retired philosophy professor from Oxford University who has a life long, well respected career as a contemporary philosopher,⁹ mostly focusing on electoral theories and political issues.¹⁰ Dummett was the first to contribute to the discussion of Tarot's origins by differentiating between fantasy and fact through the examination of historical documents.¹¹ Other note worthy authors include Helen Farley, a professor of criminal justice at the University of Canterbury, whose work provides an in-depth history of Tarot and its evolution in eighteenth-century France;¹² and Patrick Maille, a professor of History, whose work centers around modern Tarot in pop culture and its arrival in North America.¹³

The Origins of Tarot

It is believed that card games were introduced to Europe from Islamic states in the fourteenth century and spread across Europe.¹⁴ It is speculated that playing cards were likely invented in China before spreading to Islamic countries.¹⁵ Dummett suggests that cards were introduced to Europe from Islam around 1377.¹⁶ These playing cards consisted of fifty-two cards with four suit-signs (Swords, Polo Sticks, Cups and Coins) and were comprised of ten numbered cards and three court cards. Once they arrived in Europe, the suits were changed from Polo Sticks

to Batons, as Polo was an Islamic game and was unfamiliar to the Christian world.¹⁷ Although initially considered an elite pass time, playing cards quickly became popular in less privileged groups.¹⁸

The creation of Tarot is believed to have occurred during the Renaissance in the fifteenth century, likely between 1414 and 1418¹⁹ and is a European invention. The deck was initially called *cartes de trionfi* (cards with triumphs). By the sixteenth century, however, the name was replaced with *tarocchi* (Tarot).²⁰ It is believed that Tarot was created in aristocratic circles, possibly in Bologna, however Milan is the most likely origin.²¹ The individual who created Tarot is plausibly Duke Filippo Maria Visconti of Milan²² with the earliest surviving Tarot deck (*circa* 1441) from that court.²³

The historical evidence shows that Tarot evolved from regular playing cards which still share similar features such as suits and numbered cards.²⁴ The suits that are common today (Spades, Clubs, Hearts, Diamonds) originated in France and are referred to as the French suit system. However, there are other suit systems, including the German, Swiss, and Latin systems.²⁵ The Italian system is a subset of the Latin system which the Tarot cards are based on and is now only used in Tarot.²⁶ The three (3) oldest and most complete Tarot decks all come from northern Italy, the most famous of the three (3) is the Visconti-Sforza deck which was lavishly painted with gold and silver gilding by Bonifacio Bembo for Francesco Sforza and his wife Bianca Maria Visconti, the daughter of the former Duke Filippo Maria Visconti.²⁷

As shown in Figures 1 through 4, cards from the Visconti-Sforza deck utilized the Italian subset of the Latin system which consists of Cups, Coins, Swords and Batons. This system was favoured in Italy, France, Spain, and Portugal.²⁸



Fig. 1: The Three of Cups



Fig. 2: The 7 of Coins



Fig. 3: The 10 of Staves (Baton)



Fig. 4: The 9 of Swords

(Sources: "Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards," *The Morgan Library & Museum*, March 10, 2023, <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/tarot-cards/thumbs>).

From 1420, Tarot's popularity as a game grew and migrated to France in approximately 1534, after Milan was invaded by French and Swiss forces.²⁹ From France, Tarot spread towards Germany and Switzerland.³⁰ The French deck, known as *Tarot de Marseilles*, became the standard Tarot deck in Europe from about 1700.³¹

The difference between regular playing cards and Tarot is the addition of triumphs, or trumps.³² Most of the triumphs depicted female characters and the cards were popular with women not only for game play but as extravagant gifts.³³ The triumphs, as set out in Figures 5 through 26, were unnumbered cards that may have been called triumphs as a homage to the processions of masked individuals representing symbolic figures (or *trionfi*) during festivals popular with Italian Renaissance courts, a throwback to triumphs (the ancient and medieval victory parades), but it is more likely because they were designed to 'trump' other cards in the deck during play.³⁴



Fig. 5: The Emperor



Fig. 6: The Devil



Fig. 7: The Tower



Fig. 8: The Star



Fig. 9: The Moon



Fig. 10: The World



Fig. 11: Justice

(Sources: "Tarot Game with Italian Signs Called "from Marseilles",
[National Library of France](https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b105373511.r=Tarot?rk=364808;4), April 8, 2023,
<https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b105373511.r=Tarot?rk=364808;4>)



Fig. 12: The Fool



Fig. 13: The Juggler (Magician)



Fig. 14: The Popess (The High Priestess)



Fig. 15: The Empress



Fig. 16: The Pope (The Hierophant)

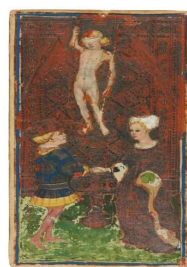


Fig. 17: Love (The Lovers)



Fig. 18: The Chariot



Fig. 19: Time (The Hermit)



Fig. 20: Wheel of Fortune



Fig. 21: Fortitude
(Strength)



Fig. 22: The Hanged Man



Fig. 23: Death



Fig. 24: Temperance



Fig. 25: The Sun



Fig. 26: Judgment

(Sources: "Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards," *The Morgan Library & Museum*, March 10, 2023, <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/tarot-cards/thumbs>)

Tarot continued to thrive as a popular card game and it was not until the Enlightenment that we see a shift in how Tarot was perceived and used.

Occult in the Enlightenment

In the Late-Enlightenment, philosophes theorized that one could ascertain truth through scientific **mythology** (rational, deductive reasoning) and through materialist metaphysics (empirical observation of the natural world).³⁵ Many philosophes concerned themselves with natural law (the argument that human nature was essentially the same in all times and in all places) and believed that an understanding of natural law would result in men becoming wise, happy, and free.³⁶ While the philosophes utilized the word science, it was not exactly the methodology utilized by science as it is understood today and they did not always approach science, history, or the social sciences with a neutrally moral or political slant.³⁷

The quest for scientific knowledge started, in some cases, with the belief in the supernatural. The popular pursuit of knowledge all but erased the line between science and pseudoscience³⁸ leading to a clash between science and religion which allowed occultism to

establish a foothold.³⁹ In the Late-Enlightenment, the deduction and proof purported by Descartes was seemingly left behind for a concept of truth through the pursuit of 'natural science'⁴⁰ and French occultists looked to establish a supernatural science to reconcile natural science and religion.⁴¹ This resulted in a revival of esotericism. Western esotericism combines natural philosophy with astrology and alchemy and was found in living nature, the practice of concordance, the experience of transmutation and transmission and prioritized knowledge obtained through internal illumination and secret meaning; these were the philosophical roots of occultism in the Enlightenment.⁴²

Many Renaissance humanists believed in the concept of *prisca theologia*, the existence of a single pure theology, the original religion that united all systems of belief, which had deteriorated over time resulting in lost knowledge.⁴³ This theory that human beings in early stages of history shared a singular culture, religion, and language was referred to as the Golden Age by the philosophes.⁴⁴ It was this theory of a Golden Age that led many to seek out lost truth and it was believed that, if found, this ancient wisdom would allow a restoration of this age resulting in a unified and harmonious society.⁴⁵ During the Late-Enlightenment, there was an affinity towards antiquity and classical thought,⁴⁶ and ancient doctrine shaped how the philosophes perceived the sciences and historiography.⁴⁷

Egyptomania & the Freemasons

Forgotten for centuries, the interest in Egypt was revitalized in the Middle Ages as a result of exploration and missionaries.⁴⁸ By the fifteenth century, Egyptian architecture and symbolism was not only popular but considered exotic.⁴⁹ During the Renaissance, Egypt was romanticized as a source of magic and science resulting in depictions in art and architecture as well as a resurgence of Hermeticism. This is what we refer to as Egyptomania,⁵⁰ a wide-spread phenomenon during the Enlightenment. It is distinctly different from Egyptology, as the first revolves around antiquity, exoticism and esoteric knowledge⁵¹ and the second is a scientific study

of Egyptian antiquities.⁵² Because hieroglyphs were undeciphered, any forward movement in Egyptology was stalled⁵³ until 1799 when the Rosetta Stone was discovered, and it was not until 1822 that the hieroglyphs were deciphered.⁵⁴ This left room for Egyptomania to flourish where ancient Egypt was not seen as a distant place that was alien to the present but seen as a place housing secret knowledge that needed to be uncovered in order to restore the Golden Age.⁵⁵

Enlightenment occultists looked to Egyptian lore in the hopes that it could help them recreate the lost Golden Age.⁵⁶ Egypt, secret societies, and the occult are closely intertwined. Many secret societies adopt occult rituals, symbols, and origin stories, inspired by Egyptomania.⁵⁷ Although the Freemasons have their roots in the Enlightenment, they adopted an origin story starting with the building of King Solomon's temple through to the building of the pyramids, which is pure myth; although it assisted in their promotion of individual liberty and equality.⁵⁸ By the Late-Enlightenment, Hermes Trismegistus became a fundamental element of Freemasonry⁵⁹ and was discussed in Masonic lodges which were social centers revolving around the deliberations of science, politics, and philosophy.⁶⁰ Hermetic knowledge and Freemasonry are closely related with the belief that Hermes Trismegistus led the scientific movement in Egypt resulting in the creation of secret societies which Freemasons are a descendent from. It was believed that Hermes Trismegistus invented hieroglyphs to contain his knowledge and that only members of these societies would be able to access this wisdom.⁶¹

Antiquity & Hermeticism

Hermeticism is an occult philosophy which stems from the most famous texts studied, believed to be authored by an individual named Hermes Trismegistus.⁶² During the Renaissance, magical ancient doctrine and science became intertwined in a manner that created one intellectual system.⁶³ Many Renaissance thinkers studied alchemy, astrology, and other magical or esoteric topics referred to as 'occult philosophy' and ancient texts were studied in search of lost esoteric knowledge. Renaissance thinkers saw Hermeticism, or *prisca magia*,⁶⁴ as part of pure theology.

Ostensibly the writings of Hermes Trismegistus, purported to be originally written in Egyptian hieroglyphs and then translated into Greek, are referred to as either the *Books of Hermes*⁶⁵ or the *Book of Thoth* which was thought to contain Egyptian theology.⁶⁶ The *Corpus Hermeticum* is a collection of dialogues that purport to be conversations between Hermes Trismegistus and his son⁶⁷ and are believed to be authored by Hermes Trismegistus as a series of esoteric texts.⁶⁸ The lost *Book of Thoth* is thought to be an encyclopedia of sorts used to pass priestly knowledge from master to apprentice. Fragments of the ancient text have been uncovered⁶⁹ which are shown in Figure 27 below.



Fig. 27: The Book of Thoth

(Sources: Fragments of the Book of Thoth, "Egyptosophy," *Yale Peabody Museum of Natural History*, March 12, 2023, <https://echoesofegypt.peabody.yale.edu/egyptosophy/fragments-book-thoth>.)

These works are thought to contain Egyptian theology and have been linked to the *Corpus Hermeticum*.⁷⁰

It was a pagan theory that Hermes Trismegistus was one of the prophets thought to have predicted the coming of Christ.⁷¹ In an effort to dispel this ideology and restore biblical doctrine, Issac Casaubon (1559-1614) argued that the hermetic writings could not have been written by one individual and were not as ancient as once claimed. Casaubon applied the latest techniques of textual analysis to determine that it was a composite work from no earlier than the first century.⁷² He speculated that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was a combination of over a dozen treatises with

unknown authors which dated from the Roman Empire⁷³ and the writings falsely attributed to Hermes Trismegistus were pseudepigrapha as he was not the true author.⁷⁴

It was accepted that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was authored by Hermes Trismegistus until the work done by Isaac Casaubon.⁷⁵ By the beginning of the Enlightenment, it was generally accepted that the *Corpus Hermeticum* was not divine and discussions around Hermes Trismegistus trailed off.⁷⁶ However, reverence for antiquity spilled over from the Renaissance and into the Enlightenment and although many philosophes no longer accepted that Egypt held ancient wisdom, they still believed it was the oldest civilization and that other civilizations diffused from Egypt around the world.⁷⁷ Though the mythology around Hermes Trismegistus dissipated, it did not completely die out⁷⁸ and remnants of Hermeticism survived amongst the philosophes. Despite the *Corpus Hermeticum* being disputed in the seventeenth century, the legend continued into the eighteenth.⁷⁹

In the Enlightenment, remnants of Hermeticism resulted in a scientific examination of the Hermetic texts. New works were written about Hermeticism in the Late-Enlightenment discussing alchemy. While acknowledging many of the works attributed to the author were likely false, the existence of Hermes Trismegistus was held to be true.⁸⁰ In 1781, a German translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*, in agreement with its critics concerning the age of the text, used the text to promote Enlightenment thinking and replaced words such as 'spirit' with 'reason' or 'intellect'.⁸¹ Although many works were thought to belong to Hermeticism, it was also believed that there were still a great many works yet to be discovered.⁸²

The Evolution of Tarot

Throughout the Renaissance, magical doctrine, history and science were intertwined; however, Tarot or playing cards had no role in these practices and cartomancy, a method of divination with playing cards, was not practiced in Europe until the eighteenth century.⁸³ The term cartomancy comes from the French word *cartomancie* which was purportedly first used by

Jean-Baptiste Alliette in 1782⁸⁴ and it was not part of Hermeticism or under the purview of occult philosophers prior to the eighteenth century.⁸⁵ However, symbology and numerology have always played a part in the occult and there has been speculation around playing cards due to the similarities between them and the calendar (i.e., 52 cards in a regular deck—52 weeks in a year; 4 suits—4 seasons; 13 cards per suit—13 lunar cycles per year).⁸⁶

In the Late Enlightenment, cartomancy in Paris was in vogue⁸⁷ and was practiced for at least twenty years prior to Tarot being used for divination.⁸⁸ Like playing cards, Tarot was used as an instrument of play from the Renaissance until the Late-Enlightenment. It was only after regular playing cards were utilized for cartomancy that Tarot began to be utilized in a similar fashion.⁸⁹ With any cultural meaning regarding the depictions in Tarot all but forgotten by the Late Enlightenment, the imagery was left open to interpretation⁹⁰ and considered increasingly alien.⁹¹ The evolution of Tarot to an occult item occurred in stages through select written works in the Late-Enlightenment, beginning with *Le Monde Primitif, Analyzé et Comparé avec le Monde Moderne*.

Le Monde Primitif

*Le Monde Primitif, Analyzé et Comparé avec le Monde Moderne*⁹² (*The Primitive World, Analyzed and Compared with the Modern World*⁹³) is a nine-volume composition published between 1773 and 1782⁹⁴ based on the ideology of the Golden Age. It was authored by Antoine Court de Gébelin (1719-1784) and professed to cover the entirety of the intellectual and cultural world in the style of an encyclopedia, revolving around the supposition that ancient Egypt held a superior understanding of the world.⁹⁵ *Le Monde Primitif* was a well circulated collection of essays which had over 1000 subscribers.⁹⁶ Gébelin was well regarded by his peers and his readership spanned France, England, Prussia, and the New World.⁹⁷ His subscribers included individuals such as Benjamin Franklin, who also frequented the same Masonic lodge as Gébelin.⁹⁸ Gébelin, a Protestant and Freemason, was the first to claim Tarot contained esoteric knowledge.⁹⁹

Gébelin was a self-promoting writer who was not isolated in his occultist beliefs.¹⁰⁰ He actively advocated for the pseudosciences and associated with other occultists such as Dr. Franz Anton Mesmer¹⁰¹ and Gébelin trumpeted Mesmerism as one of the supernatural sciences.¹⁰² Unfortunately for Gébelin, he died attached to one of the magnetic tubs¹⁰³ at Mesmer's residence on May 12, 1784.¹⁰⁴ Gébelin was a loyal supporter of Mesmer but the circumstances surrounding his death caused increased doubt in and mockery of Mesmer's work, despite the autopsy stating that Gébelin was beyond saving when he entered Mesmer's care.¹⁰⁵

Gébelin wrote about linguistics and symbology as well as the historical enigma that was the Golden Age.¹⁰⁶ The search for a universal language was a common pursuit. Like others, he believed that all languages had a common source.¹⁰⁷ It was believed to be the language spoken in the Garden of Eden and some alleged that Hermes Trismegistus had put it into written form when he invented hieroglyphs. This led to many occultists attempting to and/or declaring that they had deciphered hieroglyphs.¹⁰⁸ Gébelin's historical premise was that everything had been imitated, that the primitive world lies hidden within the modern so one only needed to understand the present day in order to uncover the past.¹⁰⁹ Regrettably, although not entirely unreasonable given the context, his process lacked scientific validity and his deductions were based on personal intuition and guess work.¹¹⁰

Gébelin believed that he could reconstruct the ancient, unified civilization from the Golden Age through etymological study and by interpreting myths.¹¹¹ In volume VIII of *Le Monde Primitif* (1781),¹¹² he wrote an article entitled *Du jeu des Tarots, Où l'on traite de son orgine, où on explique ses Allégories, & où l'on fait voir qu'il est la source de nos Cartes modernes à jouer, etc. etc.* (From the Tarot Game, where we Deal with its Origin, where we Explain its Allegories & where we Show that it is the Source of our Modern Playing Cards, etc. etc.¹¹³). Gébelin claimed to have discovered esoteric knowledge hidden in Tarot while attending a gathering hosted by Madame la C. d'H in Paris.¹¹⁴ He associated the triumphs in Tarot with the Egyptian alphabet which he

believed was similar to the Hebrew alphabet.¹¹⁵ In a pre-Rosetta Stone era, it is indicative of his methods that he would claim to know or understand the Egyptian alphabet.¹¹⁶

Egyptomania led occultists like G belin to seek out esoteric knowledge everywhere; he even claimed that the name Paris had Egyptian origins and meant *Ship of Isis*.¹¹⁷ G belin speculated that Tarot contained Egyptian symbolism and concluded that the cards originated from there¹¹⁸ and were brought to Rome by ancient Egyptians.¹¹⁹ He connected Hermeticism with Tarot stating it held hidden esoteric knowledge¹²⁰ and that this knowledge managed to survive hidden through the ages because no one recognized it for what it was and only someone capable of deciphering such esoteric knowledge, like himself (a Freemason), would know.¹²¹

G belin linked Tarot to the occult based on the images found on the *Tarot de Marseilles* deck.¹²² He completely disregarded any Christian symbolism found in the triumphs and claimed that the card makers had misinterpreted the images. Further, in his effort to correct these misinterpretations, G belin changed the name of some of the triumphs: the Pope became the High Priest or Hierophant; the Popess the High Priestess; Love became Marriage; the Chariot became Osiris Triumphant; the Hermit became the Wise man; the Tower became the Castle of Plutus; and lastly the Hanged Man became Prudence. G belin also stated that the Hanged Man should be shown upright as a man standing on one foot or as a figure dancing. The other triumphs were renamed as such: the Devil became Typhon; the Star became Sirius or the Dog-Star; the World card became Time; and Judgment became Creation. G belin also reordered the triumphs in descending order, the way in which he believed the ancient Egyptians counted.¹²³

In addition to his own work, G belin attached a dissertation on a similar topic written by M. le C. de M.*** — believed to be Louis-Rapha l-Lucr ce de Fayolle comte de Mellett (1727-1804) — titled *Recherches sur les Tarots, et sur la Divination par les Cartes des Tarots*¹²⁴ (*Research on the Tarots, and on Divination by Tarot Cards*¹²⁵). Mellett was a military commander and court noble and was not a known occultist or Freemason so his essay on Tarot is somewhat surprising, if in fact he is the author. It is Mellett who first refers to Tarot as the *Book of Thoth*,

making the claim that Thoth and Hermes Trismegistus were one and the same individual, whom Mellett stated was the first historian.¹²⁶ Moreover, it was Mellett who asserted that Tarot could be used for divination, a method that he believed was brought to Europe from Egypt by *gypsies*.¹²⁷

Mellett believed that the triumphs, in descending order, narrated the history of the world beginning with Creation (Judgment) and were chaptered by the Golden, Silver, and Iron Ages. Unlike Gébelin, he contended that the Hanged Man was correctly printed, however, he believed that the Chariot was in fact the Chariot of War and that Love represented a choice between vice and virtue. Gébelin only saw esoteric and ancient knowledge, it was Mellett who associated Tarot with fortune-telling which he believed was practiced by the ancient Egyptians, the method for which he laid out.¹²⁸ Mellett, on the premise that regular playing cards evolved from Tarot, explained that ancient Egyptians used Tarot for divination and that modern cartomancers simply removed the Egyptian hieroglyphs (the triumphs) from the deck because they did not know how to read them.¹²⁹

Although both men believed that Tarot was an ancient Egyptian book, they differed in how it arrived in Europe and the meaning of the cards. While Gébelin was using the *Tarot de Marseilles* deck being produced in France, Mellett was utilizing the *Tarot de Besançon* deck which was produced by German card makers.¹³⁰ While Gébelin argued Tarot in its entirety contained esoteric knowledge, Mellett believed that it was only contained in the triumphs.¹³¹ It is interesting that Mellett does not in any way reference Gébelin's essay in his own work while Gébelin references Mellett's repeatedly.¹³² While both works were printed together in *Le Monde Primitif*, it has been suggested that despite Gébelin's claims of being the first to discover Tarot's Egyptian origins, Mellett's essay may have been written independently and perhaps even prior to Gébelin's work.¹³³ Gébelin may have simply expounded on Mellett's essay with a focus on esoteric knowledge while bolstering his claim of discovery.

Cartomancy and Divination

Within two (2) years after the printing of volume VIII of *Le Monde Primitif*, Tarot was catapulted to occult status.¹³⁴ Jean-Baptiste Alliette (1738-1791), with the *plum de nom* Etteilla (a reversal of the spelling of his name),¹³⁵ was a famed French fortune-teller who began as a merchant selling seeds and prints¹³⁶ and went on to publish works on cartomancy and Tarot.¹³⁷ His critics referred to him as a hairdresser¹³⁸ or wig maker,¹³⁹ meant to be an insult. Etteilla was never a hairdresser or wig maker and described himself as a teacher of algebra. However, it is not clear that he ever held that position either.¹⁴⁰ Etteilla's business as a fortune-teller in Paris, however, prospered from 1770 until his death in 1791.¹⁴¹

By 1770 Etteilla was renowned and professed to be the first individual to have practised cartomancy by laying out a number of cards for interpretation rather than drawing a single card at a time.¹⁴² He published a book in 1770 titled *Etteilla, ou manière de se récréer avec un jeu de cartes* (*Etteilla, a Way to Entertain Oneself with a Pack of Cards*)¹⁴³ which was the first evidence of cartomancy in France.¹⁴⁴ Etteilla described using playing cards to tell one's future by removing the twos (2s) to sixes (6s) from each suit leaving a thirty-two (32) card deck and then adding a thirty-third (33rd) card that he referred to as the 'Etteilla' which is displayed below in Figure 28.¹⁴⁵ Each of the thirty-two (32) cards held a double meaning (whether they were right side up or upside down when placed) and the 'Etteilla' represented the person whose fortune was being told.¹⁴⁶ In addition, he listed other methods of fortune-telling in his book including coffee grounds, egg whites, and Taroux (Tarot).¹⁴⁷



Fig. 28: The Etteilla



Fig. 29: The 10 of Hearts



Fig. 30: The 7 of Diamonds

(Sources: "Cartomancy Game Called "Petit Etteilla", *National Library of France*, April 8, 2023, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10529586n.r=Etteilla?rk=278971;2>.)

Etteilla published other works, including *Le zodiaque mysterieux, ou les oracles d'Etteilla* (*The mysterious zodiac, or Etteilla's oracles*¹⁴⁸) in 1772 which was a collection of astrological predictions. In 1773, he published a new edition of his first book and retitled it *Etteilla, ou la seule maniere de tirer les cartes; revue, corrigee et augmentee par l'auteur sur son premier manuscrit* (*Etteilla, or the only way to read cards; revised, corrected and augmented by the author from his first manuscript*).¹⁴⁹ In addition, Etteilla published two leaflets in 1782: *Instruction sur le loto des Indiens que nous a donne en 1772 Mr Etteilla, professeur d'algebre* (*Instruction upon the Indian Lotto given to us in 1772 by Mr Etteilla, professor of Algebra*¹⁵⁰) and *Instruction sur la combinaison hislerique, extraite du Loto des Indiens* (*Instruction on the Hisleric combination, taken from the Indian Lotto*¹⁵¹).¹⁵² Figure 31 is an exert on how to perform cartomancy to try one's fortune with the Royal Lottery of France from *Instruction sur le loto des Indiens*. The inscription stating the need to recreate this exert as earlier versions had been sold out is a clear indication of the profitability of his popularity.¹⁵³

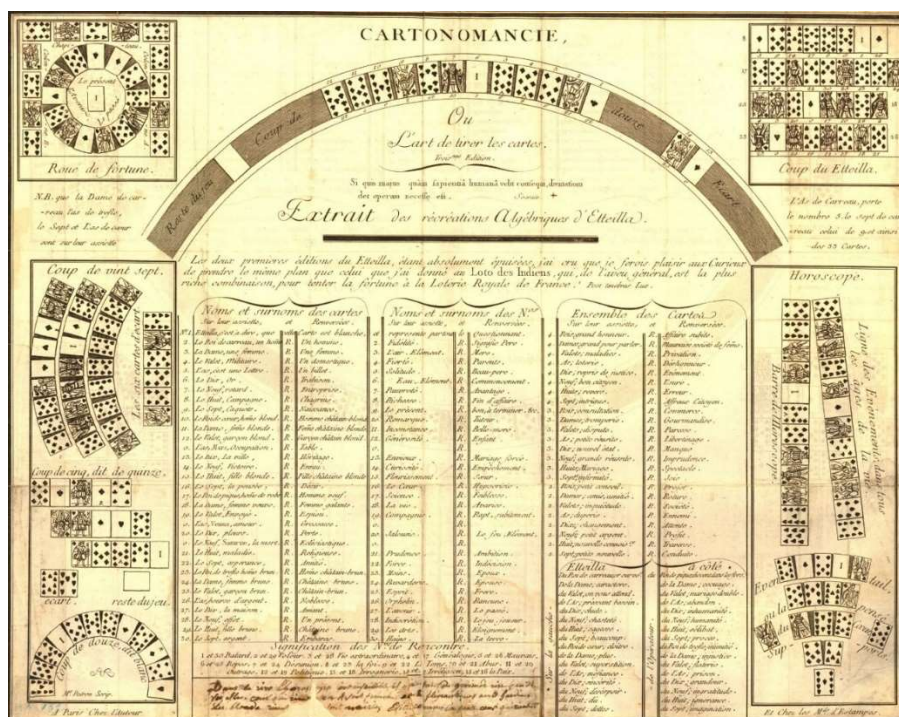


Fig. 31: Cartomancie, Ou L'art de tirer les cartes

(Sources: *Cartomancie, Ou L'art de tirer les cartes*, 3rd ed., *The British Museum*, April 8, 2023, https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1896-0501-1302.)

In 1783, after volume VIII of *Le Monde Primitif* was published, Etteilla revised his first book again¹⁵⁴ with the revisions exhibiting a heavy reliance on G ebelin's and Mellett's work.¹⁵⁵ In fact, he revised it several more times focussing on Tarot, the spelling of which he adopted from G ebelin.¹⁵⁶ He retitled his work *Maniere de se recreer avec le jeu de cartes nommees tarots (A way to entertain oneself with the pack of cards called Tarots*¹⁵⁷). While Etteilla paid homage to G ebelin, his understanding of Tarot differed significantly.¹⁵⁸ In July of 1783, Etteilla invented a new method of cartomancy using Tarot¹⁵⁹ which he published in a supplement to his book titled *Supplement au premier cahier de la maniere de se recreer avec le jeu de cartes nommees tarots (Supplement to the first book on how to recreate yourself with the card game called Tarot*¹⁶⁰). In 1784, Etteilla published an additional supplement titled *Supplement au troisieme cahier (Supplement to the third book*¹⁶¹).¹⁶²

Etteilla made changes to the alterations G ebelin made to Tarot, claiming that five of the cards were completely incorrect. He too stated these were errors by the card makers and claimed that the Pope, Popess, Emperor and Empress were false hieroglyphs and changed the Pope to *light dispelling chaos* and the Popess to *a superb garden*. Etteilla agreed with G ebelin and Mellett that Tarot were pages of a book and stated that every card should be numbered, not just the triumphs, and insisted that Arabic numerals should be used which he claimed derived from Egypt. He also associated cards one (1) through twelve (12) with Zodiac signs; while cards one (1) through seven (7) represented the Creation story, an adaption of Mellett's work, and every card following card eight (8) represented post Creation history. Etteilla relied on Creationism and astrology in his divination with Tarot, something that neither G ebelin nor Mellett did.¹⁶³

Etteilla claimed to have learned the art of cartomancy from an Italian around 1750¹⁶⁴ and was instructed on Tarot as the *Book of Thoth* as early as 1757, prior to the assertions in *Le Monde Primitif*.¹⁶⁵ By Etteilla's account, the *Book of Thoth* (Tarot), was compiled by a committee of 17 magi which was overseen by Hermes Trismegistus in the 171st year following the Flood and was originally inscribed on gold leaves that perished in a temple fire.¹⁶⁶ He repeatedly claimed that he

studied Tarot from 1757 to 1765 however, there is no way in which to prove or disprove these claims.¹⁶⁷

From 1785 until 1791 Etteilla produced many books and pamphlets on numerology, alchemy, chiromancy, astrology and Tarot cartomancy.¹⁶⁸ In 1788, he designed his own Tarot deck that was a combination of Tarot and his particular form of cartomancy. He also changed the names of the triumphs (i.e., the Popess became Etteilla/questioner, the Hermit became Traitor, the Sun became Enlightenment, and the Fool became Folly) as shown in the Figures 32 to 35.¹⁶⁹



Fig. 32: The Etteilla/Questioner



Fig. 33: The Traitor



Fig. 34: Enlightenment



Fig. 35: Folly

(Sources: Divine Tarot Game Called “Grand Etteilla,” *National Library of France*, April 8, 2023, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/btv1b10543181f?rk=64378;0>.)

In Etteilla’s system of cartomancy with Tarot, in concordance with Mellet’s work, the suits absorbed the meanings he had assigned to the regular playing cards so that Cups represented Hearts, Batons represented Diamonds, Coins represented Clubs, and Swords represented Spades.¹⁷⁰ He also changed the imagery of the cards so that they were vastly different from other Tarot; though his iconographical sources are not known.¹⁷¹ From 1783 forward, he sold his own *corrected* version of Tarot designed for cartomancy. Unfortunately, none of these original decks have survived.¹⁷² Although Etteilla based his form of Tarot divination from G ebelin and Mellet’s work, his version of Tarot barely resembled the common Tarot decks of the day.

Conclusion

The reverence for antiquity in the Enlightenment had spilled over from the Renaissance and the prevalence of Egyptomania formed the basis for occultism during the Late-Enlightenment in France. Instead of dispelling the old myths from the Renaissance, the search for science and

reason created an idyllic environment for occult tradition which developed parallel to rationalism and peaked in the late-eighteenth century.¹⁷³ The dogma of the Golden Age paved the way for occult ideologies, the Hermes Trismegistus mythology, and organizations such as the Freemasons.¹⁷⁴ The revival of the *Corpus Hermeticum* became an important occult resource.¹⁷⁵ While some Enlightenment thinkers rejected Hermeticism and allocated Hermes Trismegistus into the category of myth,¹⁷⁶ it was common for Freemasons to believe in Egyptian esoteric lore.¹⁷⁷ Like the traditions of the Freemasons, claims that Tarot had an ancient Egyptian origin stem from ideologies and rituals which are relatively new.¹⁷⁸

For Gébelin, and others like him, one only needed a logical method of approach¹⁷⁹ and, through observation, the true knowledge of something could be ascertained. He believed that there was a universal truth to human society that could be found in symbols and the myths of distant antiquity.¹⁸⁰ French Enlightenment ideologies reinvigorated esoteric philosophies and although there is no historical evidence that Tarot was anything more than a card game prior to the eighteenth century,¹⁸¹ the search for esoteric knowledge catapulted Tarot from a common card game to an occult icon with the belief that it was, at least in part, the mysterious *Book of Thoth*.

There is sufficient evidence to infer that regular playing cards arrived in Europe approximately fifty years prior to Tarot's creation¹⁸² with no historical evidence of Tarot originating in Egypt, Persia, India or China.¹⁸³ Due to the close structural similarities, it is almost certain that Tarot evolved from the regular playing deck¹⁸⁴ and not the other way around. Tarot was a trick-taking game with permanent trumps added to regular playing cards.¹⁸⁵ There appears to be no historical evidence that Tarot was utilized for anything other than a game¹⁸⁶ or that regular playing cards were used for divination prior to the eighteenth century.¹⁸⁷ The images on the triumphs may have had a hermetic influence but it is more likely that the imagery stems from common themes found throughout Renaissance Italy. While the cultural significance of the imagery in Tarot was forgotten by the Late Enlightenment, the symbolism would have been easily recognizable to most

educated Renaissance Italians.¹⁸⁸ Although there is evidence that playing cards were used for cartomancy for at least two decades prior to Tarot being utilized for divination,¹⁸⁹ it was only after fortune-telling with playing cards was well established that divination with Tarot was recorded and it was exclusive to France until the end of the nineteenth century.¹⁹⁰

In 1799, a French expedition discovered the Rosetta Stone which was ultimately used to decipher Egyptian hieroglyphs which occultists had been *translating* for years.¹⁹¹ The study of the stone and the actual translation of ancient Egyptian took many years and was not available until the early nineteenth century. Even though this discovery disproved G ebelin's theories, the occultist belief in an Egyptian origin remains popular to this day,¹⁹² despite historical evidence that Tarot contains no esoteric knowledge and had no divinatory purpose during its early use.¹⁹³ Tarot has a rich history intertwined with Renaissance aristocracy and art, Enlightenment religion and reason, and occultism from both eras. Although academic study in this area is on the rise, it is still lacking and further in-depth study of Tarot is worthy of historical scrutiny.

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- ¹⁵⁷ Title translated from French to English using "Google Translate," accessed February 17, 2023, <https://translate.google.ca/>.

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