

# Bodies that Speak:

## Narratives in the Visconti Tarot Cards

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### Abstract

*The paper offers a close reading of two fifteenth century Italian tarot decks attributed to the patronage of the Visconti family. The cards emerge as important texts to investigate the 'woman question' in fifteenth century Europe and how women's bodies were inscribed with contemporary notions of male honour through allegory and careful visual referencing. My paper situates the cards within a broader network of connections in early modern Europe and my interdisciplinary approach integrates socio-historical contextualisation with art history, material studies, and poetry.*

**Keywords:** *tarot cards, Visconti, early modern Europe, allegory, sovereignty, courtly love, women's bodies*

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### Introduction

In *The Castle of Crossed Destinies*, Calvino's protagonists mysteriously lose the power of speech and use the tarot to tell stories to one another. Calvino's formulation of the tarot as a 'machine for constructing stories' (1998, 126) reveals that as visual representations tarot cards have their own pictorial language, system of signs and symbols. The endeavor of this paper will be to 'read' the earliest surviving tarot cards from fifteenth century Italy as visualizations of emergent social and racial categories in the context of their contemporary political and economic developments.

The choice to work with tarot cards was informed by a close reading of Leon Battista Alberti's concept of *historia*. Anthony Grafton examines the various meanings of the word 'istoria' while also analyzing Alberti's rhetoric in deliberately using an unstable word. *Historia* in classical Latin refers to 'events (*res gestae*)' and to 'narrative accounts of them (*narrationes*)' (Grafton 1999, 48). Through Grafton's examination of Alberti's varied use of the term in his writings, it becomes clear that the central concept behind each use of the term was 'narrative'—narrative of historical events or Biblical events or mythological events. While Cicero 'applied the term, "historia" to true events, not to myth' (55), Alberti deliberately broke from this rigid definition of the term. Grafton argues that Alberti deliberately posited different understandings of the word to de-stabilize the Renaissance conception of history to point out that history had an aspect of narrative that could be used morally as well.

With aristocrats commissioning artists to immortalize family members in paintings and sculptures, it is clear that fifteenth century Italy was aware of the power of the image. Furthermore, in a largely preliterate world, where print circulation of images and text was limited, the image was nothing short of a spectacle, it was magic. The one who controlled the image also controlled the extent and nature of the spell cast on the viewers. The materiality of the images was imbued within significations of the class and wealth of the commissioning patrons, while the images themselves became the new dominant mode of telling stories, constructing histories. Alberti's discussion of history as narrative in a text devoted to painting echoes a contemporary intellectual and artistic engagement with the polemics of image production. Even though tarot cards are not ideal *historiae* in terms of Alberti's discussion of large-scale works of art, the cards definitely utilize his conception of *historia*. The Visconti cards are *historiae* of historical, Biblical, and mythological events with each card emerging as a pictorial narrative. Thus, tarot cards allow me to juxtapose literary and visual texts of fifteenth

century Italy to discuss issues of gender, race, and pre-nationalist formations. Existing scholarly literature on the primary texts of this paper focus largely on the world of the Visconti and will provide an important starting point for my paper. However, my temporal distance from that work and the cards themselves, provides me the privilege of seeing connections that have not yet been documented. While I begin by sifting through earlier research, my paper situates the cards within a broader network of connections in early modern Europe and my interdisciplinary approach integrates socio-historical contextualization with art history, material studies, and poetry.

The two primary texts of this paper the Cary-Yale or *Visconti di Modrone* (forthwith VM) deck and Pierpont-Bergamo or *Visconti-Sforza* (forthwith VS) deck were commissioned in the fifteenth century by and for members of the Duchy of Milan—the Viscontis and the Sforzas. Both decks have been illustrated by Visconti court painter Bonifacio Bembo, with exception of six trump cards from the VS deck illustrated by artist Antonio Cicognara (di Bargellesi 1981). Both decks show strong influences of Mamlūk playing cards as well as Petrarch's poem *Trionfi, or Triumphs*, which depicts a triumphal procession of allegorical figures. Based on references in trade rosters and a study of prohibition on playing cards, researchers conclude that playing cards entered Europe in the fourteenth century (Farley 2009, 9). Documentary and epistolary evidence suggest that Filippo Maria Visconti invented the tarot for his personal playing pleasure (35-36), which eventually went on to become a fashionable object for the acquisition of courtiers. The cards attributed to Filippo Maria Visconti were named *trionfi* or 'trumps' and were characterized by the addition of a twenty-two card 'trump sequence' to the regular playing card sequence and the presence of four court cards (instead of three) in each of the four suit sequences. The inception of a trump sequence is specific to the Italian tarot, which differentiates it from both

European and Islamic playing cards. This unique new trump sequence was characterized by the depiction of human figures on the cards. These were largely allegorical figures, but also served to chronicle family members through miniature portraits.

A major visual influence was the illuminated Book of Hours—*The Visconti Hours* (forthwith VH)—commissioned by Filippo's father, Giangaleazzo Visconti during 1388-95. The form of the illuminated book was one for solitary prayer but the tarot cards served as a form of entertainment. One served its ideological purpose through piety, the other served through play. The representation of the Cardinal Virtues, the extravagant use of materials such as gold/silver leaf, ultramarine paint and the repetition of family insignia present in the cards show the influence of the Gothic illuminated manuscripts even as, hints of early experimentation with portraiture in *quattrocento* Italy are also present. However, the tarot by virtue of its size could be more easily handled, as it did not require the paraphernalia surrounding the transportation of portraits or tapestries. It retained the 'aura' (Benjamin) surrounding these larger works of art, while simultaneously enjoying ease in circulation, display due to its size and use in card games. These characteristics locate the tarot within the emergent 'fine art trade' (Hauser 1990, 37) of the Renaissance. Hauser notes that these new forms of art were 'creations of the new upper middle-class domiciliary culture which, in contrast to the old imposing court style, are based on comfort and intimacy' (ibid.). These new art objects were characterized by their potential to easily circulate within the everyday life of moneyed classes. The tarot embodied the legacies of Gothic style, Classical influence, Christian allegory, while simultaneously embodying an emergent Renaissance consciousness of art as a marketable object and an object circulating in both the court and the marketplace.



Even as the cards are forms of visual storytelling and history writing specific to the Visconti family, they need to be viewed within the context of the visual modes by which 'Europe' was not only viewing itself but slowly visualizing, imag(e)ining itself. The early modern period of Europe was characterized by religious turmoil, early colonial movements and Europe's emergence as 'Occident', the transition from feudalism to nascent capitalism and new formations of *imperium* in the shape of the emergent modern nation state. In this intense social churning 'identity' became fraught. Rooted in late fifteenth century Renaissance Italy, these cards reveal that the visual performance of identity was used to both to construct, alter, redefine identities as the case required. This visual exercise in 'aristocratic self-fashioning' (Starn 2007, 47) becomes symptomatic of a much larger attempt at constructing an incipient 'European' identity. Having introduced the cards, I will now discuss the means by which women's bodies circulate within this form of 'cultural capital' (Bourdieu 1986) from fifteenth century Milan.

The fact that tarot was a popular form of entertainment for the nobility and wealthy members of the merchant class, has been documented in some frescoes dated to fifteenth century Italy. The first fresco (see Fig. 1) is part of a series detailing a variety of games played for leisure acquainting us with the 'private habits and customs in what might be called society of that period' (Cust 1918, 8). The Borromeo family was a wealthy family in fifteenth century Milan (ibid.) and closely associated with the Viscontis. The next fresco (see Fig. 2) shows us a group of women playing with tarot cards as they sail across Lake Varese. The final fresco (Fig. 3) depicts family and friends playing with the cards at the wedding of one of the dukes of Milan. These frescoes reveal that tarot began as a leisure time activity of a particular class and that the people handling the decks are primarily women of the nobility, the court. Interestingly, most of the trump cards and court cards depict women, whether as allegorical

representations or classical figures or just as members of the court. While we cannot know exactly how this female audience/readership responded to these cards, it becomes clear that the world of the tarot is an important gateway to interrogate the 'woman question' in fifteenth century Europe.

**Fig. 1. The Tarocchi Players in Casa Borromeo, Milan.<sup>1</sup>**



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<sup>1</sup>“The Tarocchi Players,” in *The Game of Tarot: from Ferrara to Salt Lake City*, by Michael A. E. Dummett with Sylvia Mann (London: Duckworth Publishers, 1980).

**Fig. 2. Fresco at Castello di Masagno, Varese.<sup>2</sup>**



**Fig. 3. Fresco at Castello Sforzesco, Milan.<sup>3</sup>**



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<sup>2</sup>Fresco. Castello di Masagno, Varese. Ando, Arnell. 2013. E-mail message to author, November 15.

<sup>3</sup>Fresco. Castello Sforzesco, Milan. Ando, Arnell. 2013. E-mail message to author, November 15.



King and Rabil Jr. observe the Renaissance concept of 'woman' was informed by various traditions- humanist philosophy, Christian doctrine, the chivalric tradition and feudal patriarchal codes of honour (1999, ix). The Aristotelian conception of the womb as the source of female weakness clearly influenced the medieval Biblical rejection of Eve's sexuality and subsequent aggrandizement of Mary's virginal state. The story of Eve's creation from Adam furthered patriarchal notion of woman as property of man, which was realized primarily in legal negation of women's rights to property. The French courtly love tradition further constituted women as 'objects', subordinating them even as it idealized/idolized them. It was in this intellectual milieu that Leon Battista Alberti wrote 'On the family'- 'The spirit of a man is much more robust than that of a woman, and it better withstands the onslaught of enemies; men are stronger and better suited to labor' (qtd. in Weaver 2007, 191). The selective elevation of women here bases itself on a gendered division of space and a naturalized inferiority to men, which thereby relegates them to the realm of virtue. The Renaissance model of the family drew upon Roman Law - 'In the early Republic, the *paterfamilias*, "father of the family," possessed *patriapotestas*, "paternal power." The term *pater*, "father," in both these cases does not necessarily mean biological father, but householder. The father was the person who owned the household's property and, indeed, its human members' (op. cit., x). While male children would grow up and inherit the power and property of the *pater*, female children would remain property of the householder they were born to or the householder they would marry. Through dowries or bride prices marriage alliances emerged as the means by which property circulated between men. Above beauty and family lineage a woman's virtue -virginity- became the commodity by which successful alliances could be established. Women's bodies thus became invested with notions of male honour and

power. These complexities of gender and power were reflected in Renaissance portrayal of women in art and poetry.

Discussing Renaissance portraiture, Patricia Simons identifies the presence of a 'display culture. . .the outward display of honour, magnificence and wealth was vital to one's social prestige and definition, so that visual language was a crucial mode of discourse' (1988, 8). She carefully interrogates how male gaze constituted the representation of women in portraiture of the time with regard to virtue. The heraldic symbols, family motifs, jewellery, clothes, and the environment in these portraits fashioned the 'display culture' of the Lady's family by simultaneously visualizing her virtue. She observes that the Florentine profile portrait systematically denies female subjectivity so that 'face and body are as emblematic as coats of arms' (16). By using Simons' arguments as a starting point, this essay will discuss how women's bodies circulate within the visual economy of Visconti 'display culture'.

## **The World of Allegory**

The medieval and classical trend of anthropomorphizing ideas by allegorical representations had a very strong influence on the Renaissance. Johan Huizinga observes, 'Having attributed a real existence to an idea, the mind wants to see this idea alive, and can only effect this by personifying it. In this way allegory is born' (1990, 197). Allegorical representations of the Cardinal and Theological Virtues, the Liberal Arts, images of Greek and Roman gods became increasingly popular. In the tarot cards, we will see how allegory dominates and women's bodies become central to the artistic realization of ideas.

One of the stories about the famous Visconti *Biscione*, or viper is that it was initially the emblem of a Saracen lord who was defeated by one of the Visconti ancestors. During the Crusades, nobles and knights were keen to fight on two pretexts– to defend Christianity by taking up arms against the Saracen



'barbarians' and to shape mediaeval 'Christendom' in accordance to nascent nationalistic impulses. Therefore, it is not surprising that the Visconti family also participated in the Crusades. While analyzing this peculiar choice of adopting the symbol of one's 'enemy', we need to think about why the Visconti adopted the image of the serpent despite its satanic connotations. In a society at religious war, the symbolism of defeating a Saracen clearly gained precedence over any symbolism attached to Lucifer. By making the *biscione* their own, they not only ideologically decimate the already vanquished enemy, but also initiate a process of 'self-fashioning' (Greenblatt 1980) – the unstoppable Visconti family consuming the religious and racial other, just as the *biscione* consumes the red infant (see Fig.4). The story is a testament to the integration of the Crusades in the Visconti imagination and their consistent use of visual myth-making that can be seen in the card depicting the Theological Virtue of 'Hope' (see Fig. 5). The card shows a woman kneeling in prayer as she faces the sun, which illustrated through the relief pattern in the gold background of the card, is symbolic for Christ. From her hands a rope emerges which is attached to an anchor. The woman wearing the ducal crown kneels on a man who is illustrated to be crouching in a serpentine pose. The noose around his neck also trails away on his body in a snake-like form. As the anchor represented faith in medieval art, it suggests that the figure is the allegorical representation of Hope (Farley 2009, 67). Traditionally, the virtues are shown in triumph over their corresponding vice and the figure that Hope triumphs over is then the personification of despair perhaps represented by the figure of Judas (Vince 1989, 373), who committed the ultimate act of despair- suicide (The Holy Bible, Matt. 27. 5). However, even while all these correct signifiers are present, the image also resists this simplistic reading. The man is made deliberately distinguishable by his black eyes and swarthy complexion. He is glancing at the woman kneeling triumphantly over him. The

anchor appears large and almost occupies more space than the crouched figure, symbolizing the power of the Christian faith. Within the light of the story of the Visconti family crest adopted from a Saracenic foe they defeated, the predominance of the serpentine imagery immediately evokes the image of the viper eating a dark young boy (as depicted on the crest). The victory of the woman over the man thus becomes reminiscent of family history. The Visconti triumph over the Saracen, who is their religious and racial other thus comes to be represented in the visual realization of Hope.

**Fig. 4. Visconti *Biscione*<sup>4</sup>**



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<sup>4</sup>The coat of arms of the House of Visconti, 6 June 2013, Wikimedia Commons, accessed January 27, 2017. [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arms\\_of\\_the\\_House\\_of\\_Visconti\\_\(1277\).svg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Arms_of_the_House_of_Visconti_(1277).svg)

Fig. 5: Hope, VM deck<sup>5</sup>



Fig. 6: Fortitude, VM deck<sup>6</sup>



The Cardinal Virtue of Fortitude as represented in the VM deck (see Fig. 6) depicts a woman overpowering a lion by holding his jaw apart. The image draws on the apparent antithetical nature (following patriarchal gender binaries) of the two protagonists—a woman and a lion. Unlike other depictions of Fortitude, she does not possess armour or any weapon, which symbolizes that she subdues the lion purely with her inner strength. Both these

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<sup>5</sup>Bonifacio Bembo. Visconti Tarot/Cary-Yale Deck. c.1445. card, 19 x 9 cm, Cary Playing Card Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, accessed 25 August, 2013. [https://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Search/Results?filter\[\]=digital\\_collection%3AVisconti+Tarot](https://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Search/Results?filter[]=digital_collection%3AVisconti+Tarot)

<sup>6</sup>Ibid

cards draw on the apparent antithetical nature of the protagonists— woman/Saracen and woman/Lion respectively. The female protagonists are shown without any weapons and instead use their virtue and faith to subdue their foes. The power of these virtues is shown by showing 'weak' femininity defeat 'strong' masculinity. Maintaining an inherent sexist binary, it shows once again how women's bodies are specifically used in allegorical depictions of virtue. In the depiction of Hope, the moment of empowerment for the woman leaves no sympathy for the vanquished Saracen that the image alludes to and unproblematically showcases the subjugation of non-White peoples. The women wear ducal crowns, which links the allegorical figures to duchy of Milan. Through this repeated representational choice, we see the coming together of the sovereignty of Milan and the Church in these allegorical figures. The ducal crown becomes the signifier suffusing the world of allegory with *realpolitik*.

### **'Face so fair'**

All the allegorical representations depict female figures with blond hair, light eyes, fair skin, rosy cheeks, and pink lips. While the blonde maidens who are portrayed on the deck pay homage to the Visconti family trait of blonde hair (Muir 1924, 90), they also perpetuate the iconography created by Petrarch. Petrarch's association with the Visconti family began in 1353, where he served as court poet and attempted to broker peace between the Visconti and the other families of northern Italy (Campbell 1879, xc). He was known to be a close friend and confidant of Galeazzo Visconti II and his son Giangaleazzo Visconti (ibid.). His idealized portrayal of Laura deeply influenced standards and depiction of beauty in painting. The very first portraits, which emerged in fifteenth century Italy, revealed a tension between realistic depiction and stylistic types depicting beauty and virtue (Hatfield 1965). Studying portraiture of women in the Renaissance, Maria Loh suggests that 'While Renaissance



portraits did not reproduce realistic records of unique individuals per se, they did contribute to the production of iconic types of “normative stereotypes”<sup>7</sup> (2009, 348). Reading 'faciality' through Deleuze and Guattari<sup>7</sup>, she suggests that 'Renaissance faciality' (341) was constituted not by likeness but by the idea of what the face came to represent. Petrarch's typification of beauty in a fixed set of physical qualities produced a “normative stereotype” of virtue – 'locks of gold' (1879, 122-123), 'face so fair' (ibid.), 'her neck than ivory whiter far' (ibid.), cheeks as 'on fresh snow like roses thrown' (144), 'Her brows with ebon arch'd' (152) and 'The fair angelic mouth, where pearl and rose, Contrast each other' (180). Physical beauty becomes a manifestation of unparalleled virtue (Petrarch 1879, 149):

The very air illumed by her sweet beams  
Breathes purest excellence; and such delight  
That all expression far beneath it gleams.  
No base desire lives in that heavenly light,  
Honour alone and virtue! – fancy's dreams-e  
Never saw passion rise refined by rays so bright.

In his sonnets about Laura, one is struck by his particular imaging of her, especially her eyes– 'Lady, in your bright eyes/  
Soft glancing round, I mark a holy light, / Pointing the arduous way that heavenward lies' (Petrarch 1879, 174). The eyes with the potential to disarm the poet are also the site of virtue – 'No base desire lives in that heavenly light, Honour alone and virtue!' (149-50) – inspiring the poet to overcome his clutch to the corporeal world. It must be noted that Petrarch often compared

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<sup>7</sup>The white wall is the surface upon which meaning is organised and the black holes are the sites where meaning' (345 Loh). She recalls the concept of 'white wall/black hole system', see Deleuze and Guattari.



Laura to the laurel, thereby invoking the myth of Daphne and Apollo. In addition to this, he compares himself to a pilgrim seeking Christ (13) to express his 'pious love' (ibid.) towards Laura, who thus became an embodiment of Christ. Through Classical and Christian references, Petrarch constructed Laura as the embodiment of chastity, who guides him. Unable to consummate his love, Petrarch casts Laura as the human embodiment of virtue itself— her chastity never wavering in the face of his great proclamations of love. Extending the chivalric tradition, he immortalizes her both as ideal and as an idol.

The transformation of love and sexual tension into a renewed emphasis on chastity, objectification of the female body can be seen in the tarot as well. Both decks feature cards depicting 'Love' with cupid flying over a couple holding hands as they are joined in matrimony. Love from the VM deck however, features family insignia in the canopy under which the union takes place (see Fig. 7). The insignia has led to much speculation about the identity of the couple. However, this is secondary to the nature of the marital relationship that these cards reveal. In early modern Europe, marriages had long been solidified as a means of social-financial mobility, cementing political alliances and controlling the transfer of property. King of France 'sold' his daughter Isabelle of Valois to Giangaleazzo Visconti for a bride price of 600,000 florins to stabilize his exchequer, as he got ready for war with England (Tuchman 2011, 191). After her death, Giangaleazzo married his uncle Bernabò's daughter Caterina Visconti as his first step to seize reign from Bernabò. Filippo Maria's marriages were similarly means to secure military and financial strength. Filippo married his daughter to Francesco Sforza to prevent him from attacking Milan. As the list continues, it becomes apparent that marriage was a business transaction and this can be seen in the dry handshake between bride and groom. No languid gazes are exchanged by the couple, in fact the groom in the VS deck appears distracted as he looks away from his bride (see Fig. 8). Additionally, even

though Cupid is present in both cards, he is wearing a blindfold. Is this literal explication of 'Love is blind'? I would argue that it suggests that this union, though blessed by Cupid, has been created by earthly and monetary forces.

**Fig. 7. Love, VM deck<sup>8</sup>**



**Fig. 8: Love, VS deck<sup>9</sup>**



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<sup>8</sup>Bonifacio Bembo. Visconti Tarot/Cary-Yale Deck. c.1445. card, 19 x 9 cm, Cary Playing Card Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, accessed 25 August, 2013. [https://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Search/Results?filter\[\]=digital\\_collection%3AVisconti+Tarot](https://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Search/Results?filter[]=digital_collection%3AVisconti+Tarot)

<sup>9</sup>Bonifacio Bembo and Antonio Cicognara. Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards/Pierpont Morgan Bergamo Deck. c.1451, card, 173 x 87 mm, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, accessed 25 August, 2013. <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/tarot-cards/thumbs>

**Fig. 9: Chariot, VM deck<sup>10</sup>**



**Fig. 10: Chariot, VS deck<sup>11</sup>**



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<sup>10</sup>op. cit.  
<sup>11</sup>op. cit.



Fig. 11. The Sun, VS deck<sup>12</sup>



Fig. 12. The Moon, VS deck<sup>13</sup>



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<sup>12</sup>Bonifacio Bembo and Antonio Cicognara. Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards/Pierpont Morgan Bergamo Deck. c.1451, card, 173 x 87 mm, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, accessed 25 August, 2013. [https:// www.themorgan .org / collection/tarot-cards/thumbs](https://www.themorgan.org/collection/tarot-cards/thumbs)

<sup>13</sup>ibid.

**Fig. 13. The Star, VS deck<sup>14</sup>**



If marriage was a social and biological imperative to ensure the protection and continuity of one's name, what was the place of love? It has been argued that the Chariot card represents the visual realization of the courtly love tradition (Farley 2009, 61). I would suggest that this card combines a variety of traditions – the courtly love idealization of the beloved, the triumphal procession (Moakley 1966) and Plato's representation of charioteer with the horses (Leavitt 2007, 9) – creating a composite image articulating gendered politics. Though the woman is riding the chariot, she does not possess the reins of the horses. Instead, she carries a baton and the family insignia of the

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<sup>14</sup>ibid.



dove with the motto *a bon droyt*.<sup>15</sup> In the VM deck (Fig. 9), a man looks to the female figure as he rides one of the horses. While the other horse rises up in dissent (much like Plato's horse symbolizing unfettered passions), it is the man who reins in both horses and ensures that the chariot is not upturned. The woman though elevated becomes purely ornamental. In the VS deck (Fig. 10), the horses appear to be moving in harmony with each other, even in the absence of male rider. The woman is once again devoid of any reins. The winged horses are slightly raised as if about to take flight and elevate the woman even further – turning her into an ornament of the heavens. This is exactly what transpires in the remainder of the VS deck trumps.

In the politically fraught atmosphere of northern Italy, rulers attempted to usher in some stability through astrological predictions. Filippo Maria had a reputation of being extremely superstitious and under the patronage of his daughter Bianca Maria Visconti and her husband Francesco Sforza astrology became paramount in matters political, medical and matrimonial (Azzolini 2013, 65-98). The importance of astrology is reflected in the cards by the introduction of heavenly bodies into the trump sequence. While the Sun (see Fig. 11) is depicted by a muscular *putto*, the Moon (see Fig. 12) and the Star (see Fig. 13) are depicted by two female protagonists. The fact that the moon's light draws from the light of the sun, becomes symptomatic of the perceived relations between men and women. The moon becomes a realization of chastity due to the connections to Diana. Ascent is made literal when women become objects of the night sky in the visualization of this high chivalric tradition. The legacy of Petrarchan idealization can be seen in the visual metaphors of ascent featuring in the tarot cards.

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<sup>15</sup>At the wedding of Giangaleazzo Visconti and Isabelle of Valois, Petrarch created an emblem and a motto– ‘a white turtle dove within a sun emanating golden rays, and the French motto “*a bon droyt*” (with good reason; by right)’ (Gallo 1995, 57).

## 'Sovereign' Ladies

Petrarch like Boccaccio, Dante, and other literary minds of the time observed that the lack of political unity was destroying Italy. Petrarch implored the leaders of various Italian city-states to stop fighting against each other and unite against their common foe- the Muslims (Bisaha 2001, 299-300). His impassioned plea in a letter to the German Emperor read- 'Come with haste to restore peace to Italy. Behold Rome, once the empress of the world, now pale, with scattered locks and torn garments, at your feet, imploring your presence and support!' (Petrarch qtd. in Campbell 1879, lxxv). In his poetry, Rome waits for the Emperor as a wife 'who longs once more her spouse to see' (Petrarch 1879, 26). He uses deliberately feminized images of Italy to implore warring families to reunite against the undoing of *Italia*- 'You, whose rash feuds despoil/ Of all the beauteous earth the fairest realm!' (125).

For Petrarch, the contemporary corruption of Rome had caused it to fall from virtue. Turned into an 'Impudent harlot!' (1879, 137), only a ruler worthy enough can restore her virtue. In these images, the ideal virtuous woman and the political ideal in Petrarch's mind come together. In the violent world of the *trecento* Petrarch produced the image of nation as woman's body, virtue needing protection. The vision of benevolent patriarchy aimed at rousing a benevolent leader. Much to the distaste of his friends (Campbell 1879, xci) Petrarch remained at the Visconti court and continued to exert considerable influence. Ironically, the project of unification espoused by the impassioned 'Canzone XVI' written after the popular uprising in Rome and spread of Visconti despotism to Parma (Brose 2007, 4) would be realized by none other than Giangaleazzo. When he came to power he deliberately used Petrarch's vision for a united Italy to craft himself as 'the "national" hero ready to take the sword in the fight for Italian independence and "unity" . . . the new "King of Italy"' (Ilardi 1964, 165).

Margaret Brose notes that Petrarch was not the first to personify a city or state as a woman but the first to figure 'poetical and political subjectivity' in a woman's body (2007, 3). The image of an early sovereign state as woman espouses loyalty from its subjects, protection from its subjects in the face of invasion or revolution that ravages it, while also upholding the notions of virtue, honour and tradition. The VM deck was unique in having six court cards instead of four, with Maid and Lady balancing their male counter parts of Page and Knight. In these cards, the Maid, the Lady and Queen of the sword suit proudly wield swords (see Figs. 14-16). While the Maid and Lady bear the sword superficially, the Queen wields it with intent to bestow honour upon a loyal subject (see Fig. 16). Andy Pollet observes that the word painted on the figure is '*lialmente* . . . a corruption of *lealmente* ('loyally, faithfully')' ("The families and the cards"). The queen then confers honour upon her subject with her sword. The queen's direct gaze to the cardholders commands their loyalty as well. In the VS deck, the Queen (see Fig. 17) now in profile wields her sword and raises her arm in blessing. The most significant addition is the armour she now wears. The gown evokes her femininity and places her firmly in the court, while the armour signifies her role as warrior as well. These court cards and the earlier allegorical representations create a complex visual simulacrum where the woman's body becomes the locus of moral, social, and martial values.

We are already familiar with the representation of empire in the body of a woman in Spenser's Britomart from *The Faerie Queen*. Spenser participated in the Petrarchan revival in the English Renaissance of the sixteenth century. It is thus not surprising that this method of locating the body politic within the body of a woman would be successfully transposed across linguistic, temporal, and spatial differences. The heroine of the 'Book of Chastity' is a female Knight who is the ancestress of Queen Elizabeth. As an embodiment of perfect honour and virtue, she is able to pass through the flames of the Busirane's castle

unharmful and rescue Amoret from his clutches. She is imaged as the ideal of femininity— beauty, chastity, honour and (implied) motherhood.

Fig. 14. Maid of Swords, VM deck<sup>16</sup> Fig. 15. Lady of Swords, VM deck<sup>17</sup>



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<sup>16</sup>Bonifacio Bembo. Visconti Tarot/Cary-Yale Deck. c.1445. card, 19 x 9 cm, Cary Playing Card Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, accessed 25 August, 2013. [https://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Search/Results?filter\[\]=digital\\_collection%3AVisconti+Tarot](https://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Search/Results?filter[]=digital_collection%3AVisconti+Tarot)

<sup>17</sup>ibid.



Fig. 16. Queen of Swords, VM deck<sup>18</sup> Fig. 17. Queen of Swords, VS deck<sup>19</sup>



The presence of female monarchs like Mary Queen of Scots, Mary Tudor and Elizabeth Tudor produced anxiety in men regarding the roles of women. While Elizabeth acknowledged and attempted to circumvent this tension, Spenser cultivated the image of Gloriana. Susanne Woods writes, 'in the literalization of courtly-love metaphor, poetic tradition

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<sup>18</sup>ibid.

<sup>19</sup>Bonifacio Bembo and Antonio Cicognara. Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards/Pierpont Morgan Bergamo Deck. c.1451, card, 173 x 87 mm, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, accessed 25 August, 2013. <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/tarot-cards/thumbs>



legitimizes the rule of a woman, without threatening the patriarchal structure' (1985, 150). As in the tarot cards, the portrait of a woman though the chivalric tradition evokes loyalty of a subject needed by any ruler, while ultimately subordinating the woman's body. The contemporary fear of women rulers surfaces even in Spenser's most feminist heroine Britomart. Though Britomart seeks adventure, travels the world and resists the role of the damsel in distress, yet the narrator assures readers of a future of domesticity. Furthermore, she becomes the main agent in re-inscribing patriarchal values. As she rescues Artegall by defeating the Amazons and Malecasta (Spenser, V.vii.42):

...she there as Princess rained,  
And changing all that forme of common weale,  
The liberty of women did repeale,  
Which they had long usurpt; and them restoring  
To men's subiection, did true Iustice deale

Even though Spenser confers great power upon his female protagonists and provides them with more agency than real women of the English court, he uses those very agents to justify female subservience to men. Even though he also imagines the English Empire in the bodies of Gloriana and Britomart, they are riddled with contradictions—being the symbols of early 'nationalism,' while simultaneously evoking high femininity thus alleviating male fears of women.

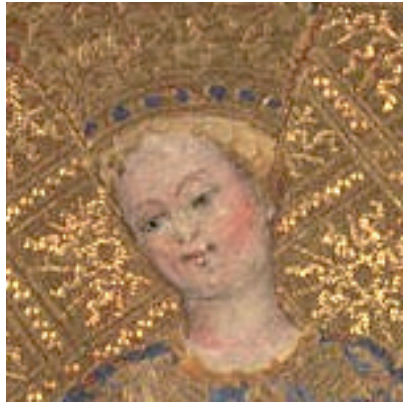
### **Bodies that speak**

Though we have seen the use of women's bodies in the construction of Milan's sovereignty, the figures themselves also find small ways to resist. While the women have the Petrarchan highbrow, blonde hair, and virtuous eyes, yet they are also shown to be at times smiling, pursing their lips in anger, or sulking (see Figs. 18-19). The Empress is shown to be ageing

with fine wrinkles appearing around her eyes and neck (see Fig. 20). The emphasis on rendering expressions signifying virtue ultimately enabled the artist to capture real expressions—revealing a sitter's irritation at sitting for a portrait, or simply chronicling individual eccentricities that the family could joke about as they played cards.

Secondly, the role of women in the consumption, use and patronage of these cards complicated their passive portraiture in the cards. Bianca Maria Sforza was not only recipient of cards as gifts but also a patron of the arts. She participated in and spearheaded the revival of the cult of St. Guglielma through her patronage of churches and monasteries (Newman 2005, 30). An old Visconti relative— Sister Maifreda da Pirovano (cousin to Matteo Visconti) – was considered the spiritual successor by Guglielma's followers. However, because of the increasing power of the sect—especially amidst the nobility of Milan—she was tried as a heretic and burnt at the stake (4). Due to the public trial and punishment of Maifreda, the family had attempted to distance itself from her. Bianca Maria's privileging of personal loyalty to both St. Guglielma and Maifreda over filial loyalty to a particular version of history drove her to rescue the figures from obscurity (see Fig. 21). Though she did not possess the artistic skill of an Artemisia Gentileschi to produce a self-portrait, she took a stance and fashioned herself by ensuring Maifreda's redemption through the tarot. The success of these small acts of resistance seems to have ensured a slight change in approach while illustrating the later VS deck. We have already seen the literalization of the chivalric tradition in cards like *The Chariot*, *The Moon* and *The Star*. We can further observe that in the VS deck the frontal, or three quarter female portrait gives way to the profile. Consequentially, female figures no longer gaze directly at the viewer. Going back to

**Fig. 18. Detail from  
Queen of Wands, VM deck<sup>20</sup>**



**Fig. 19. Detail from  
Charity, VM deck<sup>21</sup>**



**Fig. 20. Detail from  
The Empress, VM deck<sup>22</sup>**



**Fig. 21. The Popess, VS deck<sup>23</sup>**



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<sup>20</sup>Bonifacio Bembo. Visconti Tarot/Cary-Yale Deck. c.1445. card, 19 x 9 cm, Cary Playing Card Collection, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, New Haven, accessed 25 August, 2013. [https://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Search/Results?filter\[\]=digital\\_collection%3AVisconti+Tarot](https://brbl-dl.library.yale.edu/vufind/Search/Results?filter[]=digital_collection%3AVisconti+Tarot)

<sup>21</sup>Ibid.

<sup>22</sup>Ibid.

<sup>23</sup>Bonifacio Bembo and Antonio Cicognara. Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards/Pierpont Morgan Bergamo Deck. c.1451, card, 173 x 87 mm, Pierpont Morgan Library, New York, accessed 25 August, 2013. <https://www.themorgan.org/collection/tarot-cards/thumbs>

Petrarch's conception of Laura's eyes and 'love's fatal glance' Patricia Simons argues that in painting there was a deliberate move to obfuscate the 'deadly' gaze of women subjects and also a real life practice to tell women to avert their glances from men to show their virtue (1988, 21). This, she suggests is the reason for the shift to the profile form in portraiture- 'The de-eroticised portrayal of women in profile meant female eyes no longer threaten the seeing man with castration' (22). Her study yields that through the politics of representation 'the female eye was disempowered and her body an emblem for the display of rank, honour and chastity' (24). In the context of these observations, it becomes clear that the VS deck reflects specific changes in visual modes to curtail power of female figures, which could challenge the roles they were expected to portray within the Visconti display culture.

Discussing Giangaleazzo's daughter Valentina - 'She spoke Latin, French, and German fluently, and brought her own books and harp with her to France' (Tuchman 2011, 455) - Tuchman makes clear that the noble women of the Visconti family were highly educated. The knowledge of multiple languages was probably in preparation of being married off into a distant alliance in another part of Europe. This systematic education to prepare young Visconti women for marriage ultimately enabled them to transcend the static roles they were expected to fulfil. Caterina Visconti, Bianca Maria Visconti both served as regent mothers for their respective sons. Bianca Maria Visconti was a woman of letters who served as diplomat by becoming a link between her husband and Pope Pius II (Newman 2005, 31). Her mother, the mistress of Filippo- Agnese del Maino- communicated with Lady Gonzaga of Mantua to prevent a diplomatic incident when Galeazzo's (Bianca's son) philandering ways began to endanger his marriage alliance and Milan's ties with Mantua (89-91). The fact that these women simultaneously occupied positions of power and lived under intellectual and spiritual servitude is represented in the iconography of the tarot.



Robert Browning's 'My Last Duchess' set in Renaissance Italy portrays the relationship between art, gender and containment, which is personified in the Visconti tarot cards as well. The possessive Duke commissions and owns great works of art and treats his last Duchess and his Duchess-to-be as art objects he has acquired. Even though he contains the duchess by means of implied death and hiding her portrait, the portrait resists this containment. 'Looking as if she were alive' and proudly bearing her 'spot of joy' (Browning) the Duchess though her painting resists the framing of the Duke posthumously. While we outline hierarchies of power, I think that as readers of texts we must be sensitive to the dissenting 'spot of joy', however small.

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