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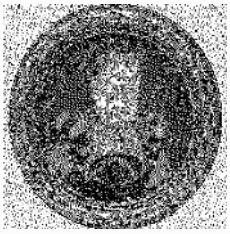
Game of Thrones: Early Modern Playing Cards and Portrait Miniature Painting



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Abstract
In Tudor England, portrait miniatures were frequently painted on playing cards. Precise instructions are provided by Edward Norgate: "Take an ordinary playing card, polish it, and make it so smooth as possibly you can (the white side of it); make it everywhere even and clean from spots, then choose the best abortive parchment, and cutting out a piece equal to your card, with fine and clean starch paste it on the card."[1] But is the playing card only an arbitrary picture support that was selected by painters mainly for its specific material qualities? The present study is devoted to the relationship between playing cards and miniature painting in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, as well as the question of whether there is more behind the choice of "ordinary" playing cards than first meets the eye. It suggests that it is: especially in the early phase of portrait miniature painting, there appear to be clear relationships between the four suits as well as the face cards and contemporary social and gender roles. Thus, if it is true that in many cases the playing card backing a portrait miniature conveys coded information about the sitter, we are dealing with a medium that employs courtly imagery to express social affiliations, political loyalties, and ties of affection.

The Making of Portrait Miniatures

Anyone taking up the study of portrait miniature painting in England in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries is immediately struck by the ubiquitous appearance of playing cards as painting support. It is all the more striking that these are barely mentioned in the literature and that there are almost no illustrations of such playing-card backings. This may be because for a long time the reason for their use was supposedly mainly a practical one. For example, we read that playing cards were made of a pasteboard composed of several sheets of paper glued together. They were rather inexpensive, frequently thrown away after use, and therefore served as a handy material for artists and craftsmen in search of extra support for small paintings on paper or parchment. We know that the earliest portrait miniatures were routinely painted in watercolour and bodycolour on vellum, the vellum having been pasted onto the unprinted side of a playing card. This practice is mentioned in even the earliest treatises and recommended to painters of miniatures, as in the well-known passages by Nicholas Hilliard and Edward Norgate:

> *Take an ordinary playing card, polish it, and make it so smooth as possibly you can (the white side of it); make it everywhere even and clean from spots, then choose the best abortive parchment, and cutting out a piece equal to your card, with fine and clean starch paste it on the card. Which done, let it dry; then making your grindstone as clean as may be, lay the card on the stone, the parchment side downward, and then polish it well on the back side; it will make it much the smoother. You must paste your parchment so that the outside of the skin may be outward, it being the smoothest and best side to work on.*[2]

The fine portrait features of Jane Small, née Pemberton, for example, were reproduced on the back of just such an ordinary printed playing card, yet Holbein's delicate painting was placed in an elaborately crafted medallion frame decorated with enamels and pearls and displaying the Pemberton coat of arms on the back (fig. 1).[3] The Latin inscription reveals that at the time the portrait was painted, around 1536, Jane was 23 years old. It was presumably commissioned on the occasion of her marriage to Nicholas Small. Small was a neighbour of Holbein's, a successful merchant, not an aristocrat, so such a simple support as a playing card is not especially surprising at first, despite the exquisite painting and framing. But what are we to make of the fact that the first portrait miniature Nicholas Hilliard painted of Queen Elizabeth I, dated 1572 and thus her earliest known miniature portrait, was also executed on a playing card, and that a lady is pictured on the back of the card, namely, a playing-card Queen (figs. 2–3)? The playing card was not intended to be visible, just as in other examples where the back remains covered, but the correspondence between the portrait miniature and the imagery on the support medium invites reflection. In the case of the portrait miniature of Elizabeth I, the fact that it was painted on a Queen card would appear to have been a deliberate joke—perhaps even more than that. In order to explore possible correlations between the front and back sides, portrait and card, we will now turn to playing-card scholarship to discover the functions and traditions of the medium and will then come back to portrait miniature painting and attempt to connect the two fields of study.

Figure 1

Hans Holbein, *Mrs Jane Small, formerly Mrs Pemberton*, circa 1536, portrait miniature and playing card, 5.2 cm diameter. Victoria & Albert Museum, London (P.40&A-1935). Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Figure 2

Nicholas Hilliard, *Queen Elizabeth I*, 1572, watercolour on vellum, 5.1 × 4.8 cm. National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 108). Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London (All rights reserved).

Figure 3

Nicholas Hilliard, *Queen Elizabeth I*, with playing card ('Queen of Diamonds') used as painting support, 1572, watercolour on vellum, 5.1 × 4.8 cm. National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 108). Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London (all rights reserved).

The Introduction of Playing Cards in Europe

It is uncertain when playing cards were introduced into Europe, but the first prohibitions on card playing from 1367 in Bern and 1377 in Florence and contemporary theological treatises like that of the Dominican Johannes von Rheinfelden, probably written in Basel, suggest that they appeared in the fourteenth century, first in Italy, Switzerland, and south-western Germany.[4] Even in these early mentions, card playing is interpreted allegorically, as a metaphor for fate, life, society, and so on. For example, in his foreword, Von Rheinfelden explains the aims of his treatise: for one, he proposes to derive from card games, with reference to their different "courts" (suits), moral directives for noblemen (he explains that the four suits represent the successive empires of the Babylonians, Persians, Macedonian-Greeks, and Romans), and for another, to derive with reference to the numbered cards similar directives for common people. Again, in the 1432 treatise *The Golden Game* by the so-called Master Ingold, a Dominican monk, an analogy is established in which the blank card resembles a naked man, who is then "painted" with his role in society. Over several pages, Ingold compares the dress of individual classes with the naked natural body and the "painted paper" of playing cards, and finally concludes with respect to the King and Queen: "It is all only paper."[5]

Thus, it can be established that playing cards reflect social and gender hierarchies. One thinks, for example, of the Ambras Court Playing Cards from the 1450s. The figures on the cards represent the hierarchy of feudal society as numbered one to ten in Roman numerals, plus a Queen and King. The suits depict various social classes or professions of the time, and the number of each card represents the rank of their roles at the king's court—the suits representing the coats of arms of four kingdoms: France, Germany, Bohemia, and Hungary. In addition to playing for world domination, genealogical relationships could also be simulated. This occurs,

for example, in early Italian Tarot decks, which were probably produced to mark dynastic marriages and which bore family coats of arms, such as those of the Milanese Visconti. On early South German cards, in turn, the iconography of the often amorous hunt plays a major role as a source of both courtly and gender-based motifs. We again encounter all these features—the hierarchy of sexes and classes in relation to dynastic-political ties and the pictorial rhetoric of heraldry and courtly love—in the context of the portrait miniature (fig. 4). The earliest surviving examples of playing cards, such as the so-called Stuttgart Deck from the 1430s, were elaborately *painted* by illuminators, not serially printed.[6] Ulrike Wörner was stimulated by the uninterrupted provenance of this oldest painted deck to look more closely at the intertwined family relationships between the Visconti-Sforza, Wittelsbach, Valois, and Habsburg courts. She plausibly concludes that early decks of cards were given to young brides as wedding gifts, within the broader scope of celebratory culture, so that when such women moved to the homes of their new husbands, the decks might function as agents of cultural transfer by way of card games.[7]

Figure 4

"Queen of Stags", from the earliest known deck of cards, the "Stuttgart Playing Cards", circa 1430, 19.1 × 12.1 cm. Landesmuseum Württemberg, Stuttgart
Digital image courtesy of Landesmuseum Württemberg, Stuttgart (CC BY).

The Genesis of the English Pack and its Derivation from Rouen Cards

Over the course of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the medium's inherent mobility led to an explosive production and distribution of printed examples along with a transformation of their motifs. There is evidence that foreign playing cards were imported into England early in the fifteenth century. These probably came from France and included cards of the Italian-Spanish pattern as well as the French variety. According to some sources, they were a favourite pastime during the reign of Henry VII (r. 1497–1509), and in fact there are court records of the debt Elizabeth of York incurred while playing cards. Henry's marriage with Elizabeth ended the so-

called Wars of the Roses, the decades-long feud between the houses of Lancaster and York. But already under his predecessor, Edward IV (1442–1483), while the warring was at its height, card playing had become permanently established in the realm. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that Edward was born in Rouen, which at that time was a centre for the manufacture and trade in playing cards. Already in the third year of Edward IV's reign, a statute was issued prohibiting, as from the following Michaelmas Day (20 September 1464 [?]), the import into England and Wales of various "'chaffares, wares, or things written below'. These were numerous and miscellaneous, including dripping pans, tennis balls, daggers, woodknives, bodkins, tailor's shears, razors, and 'Cards a Juer', otherwise playing cards".[8] William Benham wrote:

> *The Statute […] is evidence that all these wares had been manufactured in England, and that the English card-makers had suffered from foreign competition. Accordingly, we may assume that English cards were probably manufactured in England from about 1450 onwards.*[9]

In ordinary decks, the suits underwent a major change at this time and were simplified. It is commonly believed that the four suits in a modern English deck (clubs, spades, hearts, and diamonds) were derived from those of French decks (trèfle, pique, coeur, and carreau), which evolved in turn from the Germanic suits (hearts, bells, acorns, and leaves) in around 1480. The Germans adopted their suits from the Latin ones (cups, coins, clubs, and swords). One legend has it that the French suits represent the four social classes: spades the nobility, hearts the clergy, diamonds vassals or merchants, and clubs peasants. In the German tradition, however, bells (which became the French diamonds) stood for the nobility, and leaves (which became the French clubs) stood for the merchant middle class. As French cards were exported to England at around that time, the English carried over their names for clubs and spades from the older Latin suits. Only when imports of foreign playing cards were banned in England in 1628 did the English begin to produce their own pack, adopting Pierre Maréchal's Rouen pack of circa 1567 as its prototype (fig. 5).[10]

Figure 5

English playing cards from the pack issued about 1675 with the name C. Hewson, all cards follow patterns of the Pierre Maréchal Rouen cards circa 1567. The British Library, Sloane Collection 1044. Digital image courtesy of The British Library Board (all rights reserved).

Repeated playing bans attest to the popularity and the symbol-laden significance of card games. According to Edward Hall, in *The Triumphant Reigne of King Henry the VIII* (1548?), a proclamation was issued in England, in May 1526, against "all unlawfull games, accordying to the statues made in his behalf, and Commissions awarded into every shire for the execuseon of the same", so that in all places "Tables, Dice, Cards and Bowles were taken and burnt".[11] In about this period, Christmastide was the only season of the year when it was lawful for the "working classes" to play cards. In 1541, a statute was passed, on the petition of bow-makers, fletchers, and others interested in archery, forbidding husbandmen, artificers, craftsmen, serving men, apprentices, and labourers of all kinds from playing cards, bowls, quoits, and various other games "out of Christmas".[12] One result of the 1541 statute was that, up to a comparatively recent period, cards were regarded as an almost essential part of Christmas revelry. This is what George Wither, in his lines on Christmas (circa 1620), meant when he wrote:

Now Kings and Queens poor sheepcotes have,
And mate with everybody;
The honest now may play the Knave,
And wise men play the noddy.[13]

Here it is apparent that in England, up into the early seventeenth century, card playing was still considered privileged leisure-time amusement, first restricted to the nobility and its courts and only later to merchants and tradesmen: during Queen Elizabeth's reign, however, card-playing was already a favourite pastime with all classes in England, even in remote country parishes. The records of Archdeacons' visitations throughout England are full of references to cases of card playing on Sunday in practically all parts of England. This again spurred a last resistance. John

Northbrooke of Bristol, for example, who preached and wrote against plays and dramatic performances, was vehement in his vituperations against card playing. His *Spiritus est Vicarius Christi* was published in the year 1573.[14] It is, as the subtitle indicates, a treatise attacking "vaine Playes or Enterludes, with other idle Pastimes, etc., commonly used on the Sabboth Day". It is important to note that Northbrooke's attacks went hand in hand with anti-theatre movements of the time, and that he equated card playing with a stage play, with the "deceit" of acting:[15]

> *I say with good Father Saint Cyprian: the playe at Cardes is an invention of the Deuill, which he founde out that he might the easier bring in Ydolatrie amongst men. For the Kings and Coate cards that we use nowe were in olde tie the ymages of Idols and false gods: which since they that would seeme Christjans have changed intu Charlemagne, Launcelot, Hector, and such like names, because they could not seeme to imitate their ydolatrie herein, and yet maintable the playe it self, the very inuention of Satan, the Deuill, and would disguise this mischief under the cloake of suche gaye names.*[16]

The most interesting thing about Northbrooke's invective is his assertion that the cards used in England in about the year 1575, bore "gaye names", including Charlemagne (King of Hearts), Hector (Knave of Diamonds), and Lancelot (Knave of Clubs). His polemic was thus directed mainly at the deck's "Kings and Court cards", thereby indicating that the French names were already used by English card makers.

"Under the Cloake of Suche Gaye Names": The Meaning of Playing Cards

In the sixteenth century, French card makers started to assign mythological or biblical names to the face cards. In his rich compilation of materials on playing cards, Benham determined that:

> *the habit of giving names to the Court cards appears to have been a continuation or outgrowth of the names given to the Tarot "atouts". Some of the earliest French "court" cards had names inscribed; other were taken as "portraits". […] Almost from the first the King of Hearts was Charles—no ordinary, commonplace Charles, but Charlemagne, the Great Charles, the super-monarch […]. He was, as a rule, the "Emperor" in the Tarot packs.*[17]

Such designations of the face cards were known in England as well. A very rare political tract, for instance, issued during the Civil War, probably in 1642, describes the mutiny of the "City-Clubs" against the King of Hearts, meaning Charles I:

> *The bloody Game at Cards*
> *As it was played betwixt the*
> *KING*
> *of*
> *HEARTS*
> *And the rest of His Suite, against the*
> *Residue of the packe of cards.*[18]

In the text, the King of Clubs is said to have been "indeede a brave and noble Earle whose title is exprest by two of the last Letters", the Knave of Clubs "a kinde of broken merchant, having a Roundhead", and as for the "Spade-men", they are "Country fellows of all Suites, red and blew and tawnie", while the "Diamond-men" were the rich citizens. Although it cannot be explained with certainty who is meant by "the brave and noble Earle", Benham has convincingly argued that it was probably Robert Devereux, 3rd Earl of Essex, a general in the Parliamentary army and the son of Queen Elizabeth's favourite: "His title was 'Earl of Essex and Ewe'—and the allusion

might be either to 'S. X.' or 'X. and U' (two of the last letters)."[19] But even if his identity is uncertain, this document clearly shows the extent to which the face cards were associated with political events and personalities of the day. In the time of James I, for example, the pamphleteer Samuel Rowlands (circa 1575–1630) wrote verses about playing cards and their makers: *A Merry Meetinge, or 'tis Mery When Knaves Mete* was publicly burnt by order in 1600 but was re-issued (expurgated) as *The Knave of Clubbs* in 1609. That publication was followed in 1612 by *The Knave of Harts* and in 1613 *More Knaves Yet? The Knaves of Spades and Diamonds*. These pamphlets were satirical in nature and intended as mirrors of society. The 1613 edition was even illustrated with images of the four knaves, probably made from printing blocks actually used by the card makers of his day.[20] It is also of interest that in his introduction, Rowlands critically unmasks the addiction to pleasure and passion for gaming in his time, but at the same time asks in a "Supplication to Card-Makers" that the designs used for court cards might be improved and modernised.[21] Again and again, the attention of contemporaries was drawn to the face cards in the deck and the possibility of understanding them as representatives of social hierarchies and embodiments of virtues and vices.

Many of the identifications changed over time, whereas others remained fixed. The Queen of Hearts, for instance, was already regularly identified in the French deck as "Judith", "because she was looked upon as one of the most courageous women on record".[22] In the English deck, however, at least for a certain period of time, the Queen of Hearts represented Elizabeth of York, the mother of Henry VIII. The Knave of Hearts, in the traditional deck, was commonly called "La Hire"—which was the nickname or surname of the historic figure Etienne (Stephen) de Vignoles, known to be hot-blooded and excitable.[23] The King of Spades, in turn, was regularly called "David", as "Spades" means "Swords" (*spade* in Italian), denoting the military or warrior class. His consort, the Queen of Spades, was correspondingly associated with Pallas Athene (Minerva), the Goddess of War, whereas from an early period "Hogier" was a favourite name for the Knave of Spades. The King of Diamonds had been thought of as Julius Caesar since a very remote period. He is the King of Money, as the paving tiles in the French pack were thought well suited to denote the wealthy class.[24] At the king's side stood "Rachel", the Queen of Diamonds, who was "beautiful and well favoured and a keen business woman", the ideal and model woman "who built the house of Israel".[25] That leaves the Knave of Diamonds, who represented "Hector", half-brother to Lancelot of the Lake and one of the Knights of the Round Table (fig. 6). Appropriately, the Knave of Clubs was associated with Lancelot himself, and the King of Clubs with King Arthur. In this, it was generally recognised that Hector was a worthless sort and betokened misfortune, whereas Lancelot, as the embodiment of chivalry, was considered an extremely good omen. Interestingly, the Queen of Clubs was called "Argine", an altogether imaginary figure and at the same time an anagram of "Regina", thus the epitome of queenliness.[26] Benham mentions that in England the Queen of Clubs seems to have been a popular card. "She used to be known as Queen Bess, which was a big compliment."[27]

Figure 6

Three court playing cards with French suit marks (the cards are the knave and queen of hearts and the king of clubs), circa 1425–1450, hand-coloured woodcut, 10 × 6.5 cm. The British Museum (1956,0608.2-4). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

The Meaning of Playing Cards as Painting Supports

It is only recently that the re-use of playing cards as the backing for portrait miniatures has been accorded the least attention, for example, in a technical research project initiated by the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, on the materials employed in the oeuvre of Isaac Oliver (figs. 7–8).[28] Such investigations raise questions about the possible correspondences between the portrait miniature and the imagery on its support medium. Let us begin with the earliest examples to see whether the secondary use of playing cards at the beginning of portrait miniature painting had any special significance.

Figure 7

Isaac Oliver, *Portrait of a Girl with Carnation*, circa 1590, watercolour on vellum stuck onto a playing card and set in an ivory frame, 24.2 × 26.3 cm estimate. Victoria & Albert Museum, London (P.146-1910). Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

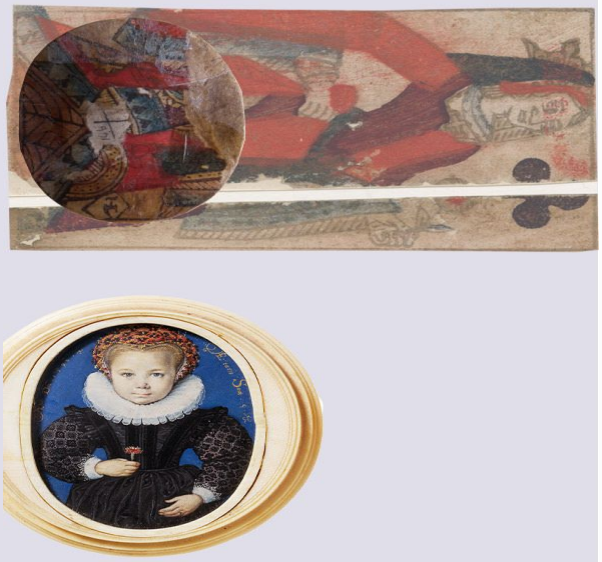

Figure 8

Isaac Oliver, *Portrait of a Girl with Carnation*, circa 1590, with playing card ('Queen of Clubs') used as painting support (detail). Reconstruction of the cut out from a playing card, Rouen, late fifteenth century, hand-colour woodcut, 9.3 × 5.5 cm. The British Museum (1897,1117.9-11). Digital image courtesy of The Trustees of the British Museum (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Lucas Horenbout, Jean Clouet, and Hans Holbein: 1525–1540

Portrait miniatures first appeared in the 1520s, at the French and English courts, with two Netherlandish miniaturists, Jean Clouet working in France and Lucas Horenbout in England. Of the seven Lucas Horenbout miniatures about which I was able to obtain more detailed information, all were painted on playing cards. Three are portraits of Henry VIII, and an Ace of Diamonds is found on the back of each of them. The portrait of Henry in the Heuvel Family Collection has a pendant picturing Henry's grandmother, Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby, and it too was painted on an Ace of Diamonds. The famous depiction of Catherine of Aragon, in turn, Henry VIII's first wife and mother of the later Queen Mary I Tudor, was painted on a Queen card, though it is unclear of which suit (figs. 9–11).[29] Here, it is of interest to compare miniatures by Jean Clouet, as both the portraits of Elizabeth of Valois, later Queen of France, and Charles IX, King of France, as a boy, were also painted on Aces of Diamonds.[30] According to Karl van Mander, it was Lucas Horenbout who taught Hans Holbein the art of miniature painting. Yet, it is possible that Holbein came in contact with Clouet in Tours as early as roughly 1524, if, as is thought, Holbein visited the French court at this period hoping to secure the patronage of Francis I. In any case, Holbein's use of playing cards as supports for his miniatures is repeatedly mentioned, though scarcely documented in photographs (figs. 12–14). We know that he used more elaborate face cards, for example, for the portrait miniatures of

Anne of Cleves, Margaret More, the wife of William Roper, and Henry Brandon, 2nd Duke of Suffolk. On the back of the latter, a portion of a King card is visible as the boy's father, Charles Brandon, 1st Duke of Suffolk, enjoyed quasi royal status, whereas this miniature's companion piece, the portrait of his younger brother Charles was at least executed on a noble Ace of Clubs (fig. 15).[31] Holbein's use of a face card for his portrait of Margaret Roper, on the other hand, cannot be explained by any royal connection—quite the contrary. Margaret was Thomas More's oldest daughter and his favourite child. It is believed that the work was created shortly after her father's beheading at the hands of King Henry VIII in 1535. Margaret courageously stood up to her father's enemies and incurred charges herself when she rescued his head from London Bridge to give it a decent burial. Since we do not know what face card the miniature was painted on, we can only speculate that there was a possible semantic link; it is conceivable that the back somehow alluded to her virtue.

Figure 9

Lucas Horenbout, *Henry VIII*, watercolour on vellum, 4 cm diameter. Royal Collection (RCIN 420010). Digital image courtesy of Royal Collection Trust and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020 (all rights reserved).

Figure 10

Lucas Horenbout, *Margaret Beaufort, Countess of Richmond and Derby*, circa 1530, vellum stuck on to a playing card, 3 cm diameter. Private Collection. Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (all rights reserved).

Figure 11

Lucas Horenbout, *Katherine of Aragon*, circa 1526-7, watercolour on vellum, 3.9 cm diameter. National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG L244). Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London (all rights reserved).

Figure 12

Hans Holbein, *Anne of Cleves*, 1539, watercolour on vellum stuck to a playing card with part of a court card on the back, set in ivory box, 24.2 × 26.3 cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London (P.153:1, 2-1910). Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Figure 13

Hans Holbein, *Margaret More, wife of William Roper*, 1535–1536, vellum laid on playing card, 4.5 cm diameter. The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (50.69.2). Digital image courtesy of The Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York (Public domain).

Figure 14

Hans Holbein, *Henry Brandon, 2nd Duke of Suffolk*, circa 1541, vellum laid on playing card, 5.6 diameter. The Royal Collection (RCIN 422294). Digital image courtesy of Royal Collection Trust and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020 (all rights reserved).

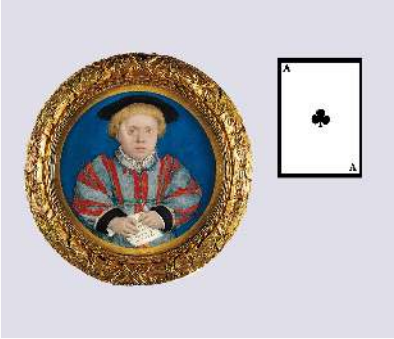

Figure 15

Hans Holbein, *Charles Brandon, 3rd Duke of Suffolk*, 1541, vellum laid on playing card, 5.5 cm diameter. The Royal Collection (RCIN 422295). Digital image courtesy of Royal Collection Trust and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020 (all rights reserved).

Besides Holbein's use of face cards as painting support, four other miniatures were painted on Aces. In the case of the portrait of Charles Brandon, it is an Ace of Clubs. In addition, there are the portraits of Sir George Neville, a courtier first accused of treason, then acquitted in 1521, and from 1530 again risen into royal favour, and of Lady Elizabeth Grey (figs. 16–17); both of these were painted on an Ace of Hearts. For the latter, the information in the collection catalogue is apt: Lady Grey's miniature may have been commissioned in celebration of her marriage, sometime between 1538 and 1540, to Thomas, Lord Audley of Walden, Lord Chancellor. Holbein associated another Ace with the powerful Thomas Cromwell, whose portrait may have been one of the first miniatures Holbein painted. It was made during his second visit to England in 1532, at a time when Cromwell was advancing as a trusted counsellor to the king. The mount has been cut from a Spade card, as it happens the Ace of Spades (also known as the *spadille*), traditionally, at least in English-speaking countries, the highest and most valuable card of the entire deck (figs. 18–19). This is of interest inasmuch as there is a later copy of this miniature on which, in a seemingly arbitrary cut-out, six of ten Spades are visible. By comparison, the considered choice of the earlier version is particularly striking, while the suit remains the same. Among the remaining miniatures, there are two female portraits—the aforementioned depiction of Mrs Jane Small, née Pemberton, in the Victoria and Albert Museum, and the portrait of a lady, presumably Katherine Howard, in the Royal Collection. On their backs are the Five and Four of Diamonds. Happily, in the case of Jane Small, there is a photograph showing how carefully the cut-out was chosen so as to produce a symmetrical pattern (cf. Fig 1).

Figure 16

Hans Holbein, *Lady Elizabeth Grey, Lady Audley*, circa 1538, 5.6 cm diameter. The Royal Collection (Inv.-Nr. RCIN 422292). Digital image courtesy of Royal Collection Trust and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020 (all rights reserved).

Figure 17

Hans Holbein, *Sir George Neville, 3rd Baron of Abergavenny*, circa 1535, oil on panel, 36.5 × 29 cm. Collection of the Duke of Buccleuch, Buccleuch Living Heritage Trust. Digital image courtesy of Collection of the Duke of Buccleuch, Buccleuch Living Heritage Trust (all rights reserved).

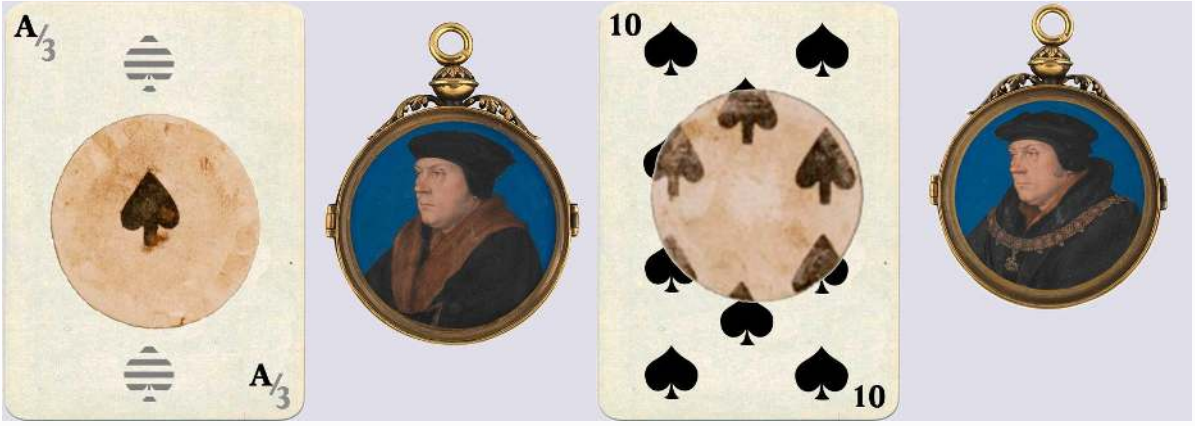

Figure 18

Hans Holbein, *Thomas Cromwell, Earl of Essex*, circa 1532–1533, portrait miniature and playing card, 4.4 cm diameter. National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 6310). Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London (all rights reserved).

Figure 19

Hans Holbein (workshop), *Thomas Cromwell, Earl of Essex*, circa 1537, portrait miniature and playing card, 4.4 cm diameter. National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 6311). Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London (all rights reserved).

What do these first findings tell us? Perhaps at least this: in Horenbout, Clouet, and Holbein, there are obvious consistencies in the use of cards for backing—consistencies extending even beyond the individual artist. The Ace of Diamonds appears to have been reserved for royalty, and is expressly associated with the ruling house. Face cards, in turn, were used for distinguished figures at court—the queen's portrait, especially, was repeatedly painted on a Queen card. Also probably the portrait of More's daughter Margaret, which makes sense, for at least in the

Continental playing-card tradition, as shown above, Queen cards were considered personifications of virtue. Further, we have seen that Aces predominate as supports in the early portrait miniatures. Also, it is striking that the different suits were not used with equal frequency. Diamonds and Hearts are much more common than Spades and Clubs; Diamonds predominate in the earliest examples, and it is possible that Hearts were preferred for marriage portraits. As far as I can see, Horenbout, Holbein, and perhaps Clouet as well shared a common code that is still the professed meaning of cards today: "Court cards are taken as indicating people; numeral cards relate to events. Hearts are construed as referring to the affections; Diamonds to money and worldly affairs; Clubs to business; Spades to the 'serious affairs of life'", especially military ranks.[32]

Nicholas Hilliard, Isaac Oliver, and Peter Oliver: 1580–1625

One now has to ask whether such a code was continued in the portrait miniatures of Nicholas Hilliard and his circle. Let me first consider Hilliard's miniatures themselves, on which I have so far managed to identify roughly twenty playing cards. Of them, one is first struck by that portrait of Elizabeth I in the National Portrait Gallery.[33] This painting support was photographed for the first time for the exhibition *Elizabethan Treasures: Miniatures by Hilliard and Oliver* at the National Portrait Gallery in 2019. We now know that the famous miniature has a Queen of Diamonds glued to the back that comes from a deck that resembles the French (Rouen) type of card (see (figs. 2](#kleonhard-fig2)–3) (fig. 20). And can it be only coincidence that of all people Robert Dudley, 1st Earl of Leicester, is as yet the only other known example of the use of a face card in Hilliard's work?[34] These are the only three instances of the use of face cards that I have, so far, been able to find among Hilliard's works. In him, there also is a striking reduction in the use of Aces of Diamonds for supports, with a corresponding increase in the use of number cards and a more uniform distribution of suits. How to explain this? Perhaps from the fact that after Hilliard's return from France, he was provided with much-needed income by sitters who—though prosperous—were not of the highest social rank. For the first time, portrait miniatures were no longer reserved for the exclusive court clientele of previous decades. One can trace this particularly clearly in the Victoria and Albert Museum's collection of his miniatures, in which the portraits of (as yet unidentified sitters) are backed by a Four and Six of Diamonds; a Two (fig. 21), a Three (fig. 22), and a Six of Hearts; a Three (fig. 23) and a Five of Spades; and a Four of Clubs. It is only the depiction of James I in the Royal Collection that is found, as one might suspect, on an Ace of Diamonds. The backing card on Hilliard's portrait of Princess Elizabeth, later Queen of Bohemia, in the Victoria and Albert Collection, however, is puzzling; its four of Diamonds were not left red, as was customary, but overpainted in black.

Figure 20

Nicholas Hilliard, *Queen Elizabeth I*, 1572, watercolour on vellum, 5.1 × 4.8 cm. National Portrait Gallery, London (NPG 108); Robert Dudley, *Earl of Leicester*, 1576, watercolour on vellum, 4.4 cm diameter. Digital image courtesy of National Portrait Gallery, London (all rights reserved).

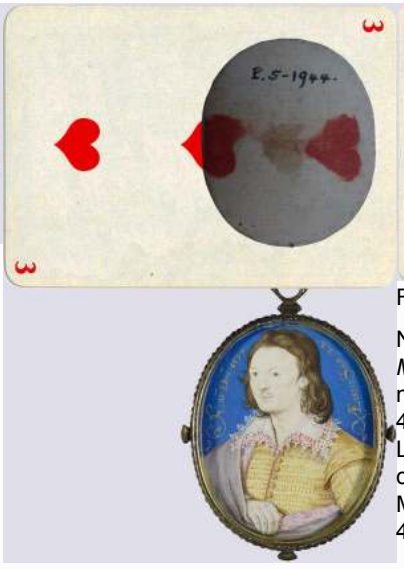

Figure 21

Nicholas Hilliard, *An Unknown Man*, 1597, portrait miniature and playing card, 5 × 4 cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London (P.5-1944). Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Figure 22

Nicholas Hilliard, *An Unknown Man, aged 24*, 1572, portrait miniature and playing card, 6 × 4.8 cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London (P.1-1942). Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

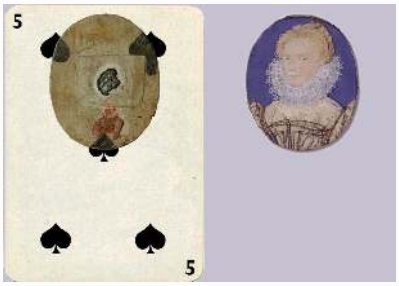

Figure 23

Nicholas Hilliard, *An Unknown Woman*, 1575–1580, portrait miniature and playing card, 3.9 × 3.2 cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London (P.8-1947). Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

In the roughly twenty-five miniatures I have researched by Rouen-born Isaac Oliver and his son Peter, the situation is similarly diverse, though here Aces are met with more frequently than in Hilliard (fig. 24). These become the norm once one turns to the miniatures in the Royal Collection—most of the portraits of Anne of Denmark; Henry Frederick, Prince of Wales; Frederick, Prince Palatine; and Elizabeth, Queen of Bohemia, were painted on Aces (fig. 25). Interestingly, in the miniatures of Peter Oliver, Charles I appears on a number card while still Prince of Wales, and ascends to an Ace of Clubs only after becoming king.[35] Here, to be sure, I

note only tendencies, which are not always adhered to. For example, Charles was no longer associated with the traditional Ace of Diamonds, but rather painted on an Ace of Clubs. Altogether, there is an increasing use of Clubs cards, which is interesting because the suit "refers to business" rather than to a royal or noble rank. Is there some consistent reason for this, or are we simply witnessing the gradual dissolution of a system? Can the increasing irregularity in suit assignment be explained by the dynastic shift from Tudor to Stuart? For it is striking, after all, that the tendency towards a consistent code, as I have called it, coincided precisely with the final reigns of the House of Tudor. Or is the greater diversity a reflection of the sitters' social standing, now that the miniature was no longer restricted to narrower court circles but rather taken up by the broader aristocracy? One has to think of Edward Norgate's statement that Hilliard and Oliver chose from pre-prepared carnations, already mixed and painted on vellum laid onto card, on the basis of their sitters' skin colour as observed when they arrived at the studio. This must mean that at least for some miniatures—perhaps those of less important sitters—the card cannot have been chosen specifically for the individual sitter, unless all the different carnation colours were painted onto supports of the same card. Royal sitters, however, presumably did not come to the artists' studios for sittings but were painted in their palaces.

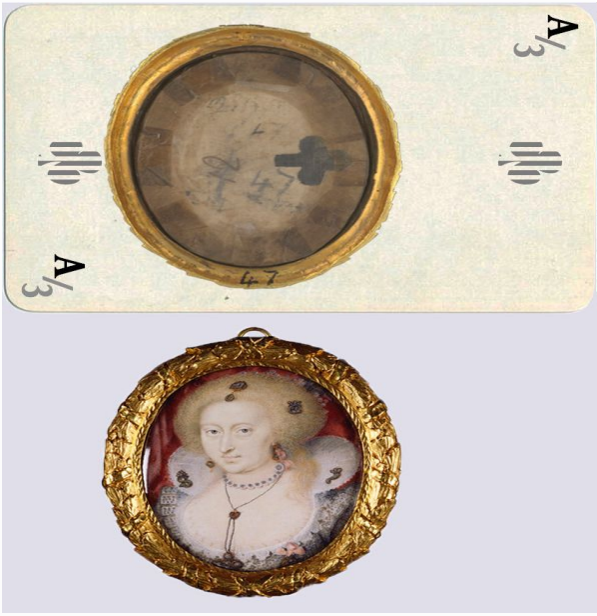

Figure 24

Isaac Oliver, *Anne of Denmark*, circa 1611–1612, portrait miniature and playing card, 5.3 × 4.2 cm. Royal Collection (RCIN 420041). Digital image courtesy of Royal Collection Trust and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020 (all rights reserved).

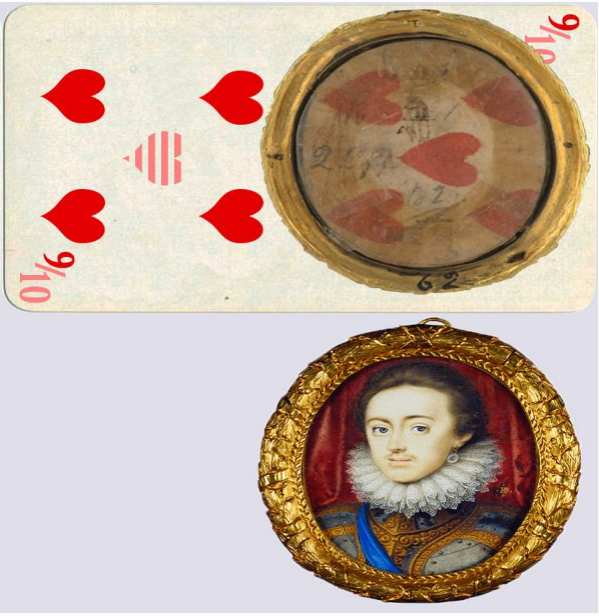

Figure 25

Peter Oliver, *Charles I when Prince of Wales*, circa 1620, portrait miniature and playing card, 5.1 × 3.9 cm. Royal Collection (RCIN 420049). Digital image courtesy of Digital image courtesy of Royal Collection Trust and Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II 2020 (all rights reserved).

Basically, it can be said that with the second generation of miniature painters all four of the playing-card suits are now equally employed. Yet, it is striking that the appearance of Hearts is greater than in earlier examples, as if the element of courtly display in the portrait miniature had not been altogether neglected in Hilliard and Oliver, but rather expanded to include the more intimate function of a token of affection (fig. 26). One example possibly worth presenting here is

the half-length miniature of a man wearing a black doublet, known as the portrait of a certain Arundel Talbot from 1596, where an inverted heart is visible on the reverse of the support (fig. 27).[36] Another example is an Oliver miniature in the Koninklijk Huisarchief in The Hague, the back of which, showing three Spades, is deliberately exposed in the historical frame. Thus, if it is true that in many cases the playing card backing a portrait miniature conveys coded information about the sitter, we are dealing with a medium that employs (courtly) imagery to express social affiliations, political loyalties, and ties of affection. Is the use of playing cards in portrait miniature painting of significance beyond their simple practicality? The present study suggests that it is; especially in the early phase of portrait miniature painting, there appear to be clear relationships between the four suits as well as the face cards and contemporary social and gender roles.

Figure 26

Isaac Oliver, *A Man, called Sir Arundel Talbot*, portrait miniature and playing card, 6.9 × 5.4 cm. Victoria & Albert Museum, London (P.4-1917). Digital image courtesy of Victoria & Albert Museum, London (CC BY-NC-SA 4.0).

Figure 27

Isaac Oliver, *reverse displaying the playing card of a portrait miniature*, 1614. Koninklijk Huisarchief, The Hague (cat. 1991, nr. 500). Digital image courtesy of Koninklijk Huisarchief, The Hague (all rights reserved).

In figure 28, I therefore once again summarise the assignment of mythological or biblical names to early modern playing cards, and in figure 29, provide an initial overview of the cut-outs and orientation of the suit symbols. The fact that, apart from Diamonds, the suit symbols in early modern playing cards have a distinct orientation makes assignment easier. There are few alternative possibilities. Again, I find consistencies; for example, the cut-out is almost always centred, though perpendicular to the card's height. Almost always, the orientation of the suit symbol matches that of the portrait. Once we understand playing cards as a medium in which ruling hierarchies are literally "replayed"—in a veritable Game of Thrones—a glance at the backs of portrait miniatures can provide us with a fascinating glimpse into the formation of early modern groupings, identities, and codes of behaviour.

Figure 28

List of mythological or biblical names assigned to early modern playing cards. Digital image courtesy of Karin Leonhard (all rights reserved).

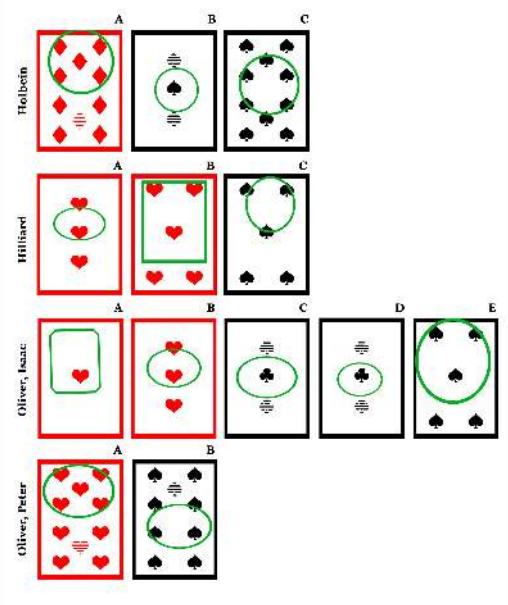

Figure 29

Cut-outs and orientation of the suit symbols: This overview is a schematic representation only, and the sizes may vary slightly. Digital image courtesy of Karin Leonhard (all rights reserved).

Key of Illustrations for Figure 29

Hans Holbein

A) Mrs Jane Small, formerly Mrs Pemberton, circa 1536, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Inv.-Nr. P.40&A-1935 (compare fig. 1);

B) Thomas Cromwell, Earl of Essex, circa 1532–1533, portrait miniature and playing card, National Portrait Gallery, London, Inv.-Nr. NPG 6310 (compare fig. 18);

C) Hans Holbein (workshop): Thomas Cromwell, Earl of Essex, circa 1537, portrait miniature and playing card, National Portrait Gallery, London, Inv.-Nr. NPG 6311 (compare fig. 19).

Nicholas Hilliard

A) An Unknown Man, portrait miniature and playing card, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, P.5-1944 (compare fig. 21);

B) An Unknown Man, aged 24, portrait miniature and playing card, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, P.1-1942 (compare fig. 22);

C) An Unknown Woman, portrait miniature and playing card, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, P.8-1947 (compare fig. 23).

Isaac Oliver

A) A Man, called Sir Arundel Talbot, portrait miniature and playing card, Victoria and Albert Museum, London, Inv.-Nr. P.4-1917 (compare fig. 26);

B) Charles I when Duke of York, Royal Collection, London, Inv.-Nr. RCIN 420050;

C) Anne of Denmark, portrait miniature and playing card, The Royal Collection, Windsor Castle, Inv.-Nr. RCIN 420041 (compare fig. 24);

D) Elizabeth, Queen of Bohemia, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, New Haven, Inv.-Nr. B1974.2.74;

E) Koninklijk Huisarchief, The Hague, cat. 1991, nr. 500 (compare fig. 27).

Peter Oliver

A) Charles I when Prince of Wales, portrait miniature and playing card, The Royal Collection, Windsor Castle, Inv.-Nr. RCIN 420049 (compare fig. 25);

B) Charles I when Prince of Wales, Yale Center for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, Inv.-Nr. B1974.2.77.

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About the author

Karin Leonhard is Professor for Art History at Konstanz University, Germany, with a focus on Dutch and British Art History and Theory. Previously, she was Professor for Art History at Bonn University, Senior Fellow at the Max Planck Institute for the History of Science, Berlin, as a member of the research group "Art and Knowledge in Pre-Modern Europe", and Assistant Professor at the Department of Art History, KU Eichstätt-Ingolstadt, Germany. She received her doctorate in Munich with a dissertation on optics and perspective in Vermeer's interior paintings, and since then she has specialised in the history of science and art of the early modern period. A main focus of her research lies in the history and theory of space and perspective and of light and colour. She has also studied the history of concepts of creativity, and, more generally, the interrelationship between art theory and natural philosophy.

Footnotes

1. Edward Norgate, *Miniatura, or the Art of Limning*, edited by Martin Hardie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1919), 19–20.
2. Edward Norgate, *Miniatura, or the Art of Limning*, edited by Martin Hardie (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1919), 19–20.
3. I am following the most recent interpretation of the sitter's identity, though this could still be questioned, cf. Susan Foister, with contributions by Tim Batchelor, *Holbein in England* (London: Tate Publishing, 2006); and Lorne Campbell, 'Holbein's Miniature of 'Mrs Pemberton': The Identity of the Sitter", *Burlington Magazine* 129 (1987): 366–371.
4. Scholarship has meanwhile managed to identify the distinctly international Basel as the centre of early painted playing-card production—here Italian, German, and French formal idioms were combined as well as the techniques and materials of book illumination and panel painting. For Rheinfelden, cf. Arne Jönsson, "Der Ludus cartularum moralisatus des Johannes von Rheinfelden", in Detlef Hoffmann (ed.), *Schweizer Spielkarten*, Vol. 1: Die Anfänge im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert (Schaffhausen: Museum zu Allerheiligen, 1998), 120–134.
5. Erward Schröder (ed.), *Das goldene Spiel von Meister Ingold* (Straßburg: Karl J. Trübner, 1882).
6. The variety of techniques used for these early playing cards is astonishing and attests to the high quality of execution. In the case of some early fifteenth-century luxury hand-painted decks (Stuttgarter Kartenspiel, circa 1430), the cards were made from pasteboard consisting of up to six sheets of paper glued together, over which, on the front side, a layer of gesso was applied. Outlines of the designs were scratched into the surface, while some details were drawn in with pen and ink. The entire surface was gilded and the designs were then painted over the gold using a variety of colours and metal applications. The backs were painted a plain colour, cf. Heribert Meurer, *Das Stuttgarter Kartenspiel* (*The Stuttgart Playing Cards*) (Stuttgart: Konrad Theiss Verlag, 1991). For a historical survey with focus on early playing cards, cf. Timothy B. Husband (ed.), *The World in Play: Luxury Cards 1430–1540* (New York: Metropolitan Museum of Art, 2015); Michael Dummett, *The Visconti-Sforza Tarot Cards* (New York: George Braziller, 1986); David Parlett, *The Oxford Guide to Card Games: A Historical Survey* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990); and Christian Zangs and Hans

Holländer (eds), *Mit Glück und Verstand: Zur Kunst- und Kulturgeschichte der Brett- und Kartenspiele. 15. bis 17. Jahrhundert* (Aachen: Thouet, 1994).

7. Ulrike Wörner, *Die Dame im Spiel: Spielkarten als Indikatoren des Wandels von Geschlechterbildern und Geschlechterverhältnissen an der Schwelle zur Frühen Neuzeit* (Münster: Waxmann, 2010); and Ulrike Wörner, "Das Stuttgarter Kartenspiel (um 1429)—ein Abbild der 'Jagd nach Liebe'. Ikonologische Betrachtungen zu einem Kartenspiel aus dem Hause Wittelsbach", *Bayerisches Jahrbuch für Volkskunde* (2011), 27–39, 283–284. Cf. Detlef Hoffmann (ed.), *Schweizer Spielkarten*, Vol. 1 Die Anfänge im 15. und 16. Jahrhundert (Schaffhausen: Museum zu Allerheiligen, 1998); and 26–30, Jana Lucas, *Europa in Basel: Das Konzil von Basel (1431–1449) als Laboratorium der Kunst* (Basel: Schwabe Verlag, 2017).
8. William Gurney Benham, *Playing Cards: History and Secrets of the Pack* (London: Spring Books, 1969), 26.
9. Benham, *Playing Cards*, 26.
10. Earliest English playing cards are very scarce. Few specimens have survived and little is known about the manufacturers; the best known are those of Hewson of the seventeenth century (circa 1675). The cards exhibit that geometric construction which characterises the English pattern and which has survived to the contemporary double-ended cards used today. Cf. Catherine Perry Hargrave, *A History of Playing Cards and a Bibliography of Cards and Gaming* (New York: Dover, 1960), 180.
11. Benham, *Playing Cards*, 27.
12. Benham, *Playing Cards*, 26: "Even at Christmas time they must only play such games in their masters' houses or in their masters' presence. The main purpose of the Statute was to concentrate men's energies on archery, but there was a long preamble about the dire results of gambling and its devastating effects on morals and religion and domestic happiness. Henry VIII was himself a confirmed gambler and often lost more money at cards than was convenient."
13. George Wither, "For Christmas: Lo, Now is Come Our Joyful'st Feast!", in *Juvenilia: Poems by George Wither*, contained in the collections of his Juvenilia which appeared in 1626 and 1633, Part III (Manchester: Printed for the Spencer Society, 1871), 915–919.
14. John Northbrooke, *Spiritus Est Vicarius Christi in Terra: The Poore Mans Garden* (London: W. Williamson, 1573).
15. See Michael O'Connell, *The Idolatrous Eye: Iconoclasm and Theater in Early-Modern England* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000); and Mary Morrissey, *Politics and the Paul's Cross Sermons, 1558–1642* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).
16. Northbrooke, *Spiritus Est Vicarius Christi in Terra*. This relates here to a pamphlet wrongly ascribed to St. Cyprian, *De aleatoribus*, in which gaming was linked to the devil. This text served as an indirect source for early modern writers.
17. Benham, *Playing Cards*, 78.
18. From the pamphlet: *The bloody game at cards, as it was played betwixt the King of Hearts. And the rest of his suite, against the residue of the packe of cards. Wherein is discovered where faire play; was plaid and where was fowle. [London]: Shuffled at London, cut at Westminster, dealt at Yorke, and plaid in the open field. by the citty-club, the country spade-men, rich-diamond men and loyall hearted men.*, [1643].
19. Benham, *Playing Cards*, 79.

20. "Only the four Knaves are shown by Rowlands […]; it will be seen […] that these derive from the French (Rouen) type of card and are closely related to the English playing cards of the 18th and 19th centuries." These two pictures are in fact the only representations we possess of English playing cards earlier than the reign of Charles II, with the exception of the picture of the King of Hearts, published circa 1642. "The letterpress is of interest in various ways. It tells us distinctly that the 'idle-headed French' devised the pattern adopted for English playing cards. It also tells us that card-makers had an established trade in London at the end of Queen Elizabeth's reign." Benham, *Playing Cards*, 45.
21. Samuel Rowlands, *A Merry Meeting, or 'Tis Merry When Knaves Meet* (London, 1600). No copy of the first edition is known to exist, but a second edition was republished as *The Knave of Clubbes* (1609), with further reprints as: *The Knave of Harts* (London, 1612); *The Knave of Harts: Haile Fellow, Well Met* (London, 1613), reprinted in 1615; and *More Knaves Yet? The Knaves of Spades and Diamonds* (London, 1613).
22. Benham, *Playing Cards*, 80.
23. "In our English pack the Knave of Hearts has always been shown with his face in profile. There is no subtle significance in this. There are two 'red' knaves and in order to distinguish them more completely the Knave of Hearts turns to his right in profile, whilst the Knave of Diamonds is shown nearly full-face. The French distinguish in like manner, but they make La Hire full face and the Knave of Diamonds (Hector) side-face"; Benham, *Playing Cards*, 94.
24. That the identification of a face card as "Caesar" was also known in England is attested by a reference in Shakespeare's *Antony and Cleopatra*, Act iv, Scene 14: "… the queen, Whose heart I thought I had, for she had mine, Which, whilst it was mine, had annexed to it A million more, now lost,—she, Eros, has Packed cards with Caesars, and false-played my glory Unto an enemy's triumph."
25. Benham, *Playing Cards*, 109.
26. "There is some reason to suppose that this disguised 'Argine' may have been intended from time to time, to represent various Queens—perhaps sometimes ladies who were the rivals of Queens." Cf. Benham, *Playing Cards*, 118.
27. Benham, *Playing Cards*, 119.
28. Cf. Ken Lodge and Christine Slottved Kimbriel, "An Early Secondary Use for Playing Cards from Rouen, *The Playing Card: Journal of the International Playing-Card Society* 47, no. 3 (2019), 152–155. See also the contribution by Christine Slottved Kimbriel and Paola Ricciardi, "Secrets of a Silent Miniaturist: Findings from a Technical Study of Miniatures Attributed to Isaac Oliver", in this volume, DOI:10.17658/issn.2058-5462/issue-17/kimbrielricciardi.
29. Tellingly, Horenbout's portrait in Sudeley Castle of Henry's third wife, Jane Seymour, was painted on a Three of Hearts.
30. The Royal Collection, Windsor Castle, inv.-nos. RCIN 420046 and 420931.
31. According to information in the collection catalogue, Charles' "marriage in 1515 to Princess Mary, younger sister of Henry VIII, gave him an elevated position at court which endured even after Princess Mary's death in 1533. Henry and Charles Brandon, Suffolk's two sons by his fourth wife, Katherine Willoughby, were jointly educated at an early age with the young Edward VI." They were renowned scholars and studied at St. John's College, Cambridge, but died of the sweating sickness within half an hour of each other in 1551, Henry aged 16 and Charles aged 14 or 15. Both miniatures are late products of Holbein's second extended stay in

England from 1532 to 1543. The miniature of Charles Brandon is dated 1541, and it is likely that both were painted at about the same date.

32. Benham, *Playing Cards*, 161.
33. There is an undated typed report in the portrait's file, which states that the Queen visible on the back is precisely the pattern followed in the case of a *Unknown Lady* in the V&A (V&A, P.2-1974).
34. Sadly, it is unclear which card it is, and any investigation should be encouraged.
35. I have found one example where he covers an Ace when still as a prince, but this is an Ace of Hearts.
36. Together with an inscription in a first hand: "adi. 13. Magio. 1596. / In Venetia / Fecit m. Isacq oliuierao / Francese IO [monogram] V.14. / da £8." "The 13th day of May 1596 / at Venice / done by Mr. Isaac Oliver / Frenchman I.O. May 14th / for £8" In a second hand: "Viva et vera effigies / Arundelli talbot / Equitis Aurati." "Living and true effigy / of Arundel talbot / 'gilded' knight."

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