

AN APPROACH TO TAROT HISTORY

by Christine Payne-Towler

This work began in 1970 when I purchased a used deck of the 20th Century Tarot in a book shop in Salem, Oregon. I was a freshman in college. With parents who were both therapists, I instantly recognized that Tarot was a tool with great potential for helping people grapple with the changing circumstances in their lives.

Soon I returned to the book shop to buy Volume 6 of the Brotherhood of Light Encyclopedia, entitled *The Sacred Tarot*. From there I learned about the connections the cards have with letters, numbers, astrology and a host of other symbol systems from antiquity. Naturally, I sent for C.C. Zain's deck and began memorizing all the correspondences.

Finding others who were using different Tarot decks made me conscious of the need not to put all my eggs in one basket, so I started searching for other decks that were constructed with these correspondences in mind. Soon the Thoth Tarot and the New Tarot for the Aquarian Age joined the first decks on my table, and I was plunged into a twenty year passion that continues to this day.

When I discovered that I could buy Tarot decks directly through U. S. Games Systems, I became a collector. I also employed all the decks I could make sense of in my private practice with clients, students and study groups. Playing with them in terms of real-life situations as I conducted readings gave me the opportunity to see how their similarities and

differences operated with different psyches and psychologies.

Collecting decks only multiplied my questions about which versions were traditional and which were innovative. Since my first exposure to Tarot reflected the Hermetic influence of the Brotherhood of Light, which is closely associated with the ancient self-initiation paradigm of the Mysteries, I could see that many decks were diverging from or just plain ignorant of Tarot's history.

Thus, I found myself somewhat isolated from beloved colleagues who were for the most part satisfied with what they found in American book-



THE SUN
IBIS TAROT

stores. Over time I managed to collect the books cited by the authors of the decks as well as the books *those* authors cited, ad infinitum. After all these years of study and practice, I have emerged from the confusion with confidence and would like to share with you the themes I have discovered.

The Difficulties of Tarot History

Studying the history of Tarot is no easy task. For one thing, because it first appeared in Europe in the early 1400s in the form of cards, the early evidence is understandably altered



and fragmented. Political and religious forces in the 1400 and 1500's forced Tarot into a situation where it had to be camouflaged to obscure its radical content. Generations of students and scholars have had to join secret lodges and take binding oaths to earn the right to have information that we in the twentieth century can access on the Internet and buy outright. As we shall see, some of Tarot's brightest lights have had to accept anonymity or damage to their reputations as the price of entry into the Arcane Teachings.

We latecomers to the scene have little understanding of or appreciation for the extreme sacrifices behind the preservation of our seventy eight card Tarot deck. To make matters more confusing, over the last three centuries, the gradual easing of cultural pressures to maintain secrecy led to distortions in the Tarot tradition and some wildly creative but revisionist "innovations".



THE DEVIL
ESOTERICO TAROT

Many different versions of Tarot's origins were postulated and evangelized, often with political or commercial gain in mind. What competing claims from differing viewpoints can we credit? How can we know which "expert" to trust? Is there a way to separate the truly historical part of the Tarot mythos from the oft-repeated but never documented "received wisdom"?

If I had fallen in line with most modern Tarot historians, there would have been no great insights coming from me on any of these

topics. Commercial emphasis in the last several decades has been upon collecting documentable minutiae that can be proven about the charismatic personalities who have left a bit of themselves in the public record. While I am grateful to those who make it their mission to dig up the facts on these people, I cannot pursue that tack. Not with the cream of Europe's Tarot bounty sitting in my lap!

For years I found myself back at my Tarot table in the middle of the night, looking at the cards. While sorting them and laying them out, I have been imagining the conversations between their makers about the details they contested or held in common. Ultimately attracted to their Mystery School content, it is with the cards themselves that I have wrestled.

The Context In Which Tarot Appeared

The cards themselves have shown me an ongoing intergenerational and international dialogue between highly educated mystics and occultists whose earliest members we no longer can name. The teachings enshrined in the Tarot, most especially the Hebrew alphabet mysteries, astrology and the core concept of self-initiation itself, draw from ancient sources. These teachings were driven underground during the era following the Christian victory over the Mysteries in the fourth century AD.

During the repression, people who wanted to preserve those ancient teachings had to be very secretive. The Church forbade the common folk the right to read and write, hoping that these teachings could be wiped out if the majority were illiterate. That very strategy, however, drove the teachings into visual form—painting, sculpture, architecture and



needlework. By the end of the Dark Ages, Europe was filled with the imagery that would eventually appear on the cards. Over time, private clubs formed, like invisible churches, to allow interested parties to pursue these studies with peers who were trustworthy. In this way the Church's policies forced its enemies to get together within what became known as the Secret Societies.

Because of the persecutions, the Tarot had to be promoted as a game for social amusement and distraction. That way, teachings could be revealed in the imagery that if spoken would seriously jeopardize a person's reputation as a Christian. Secret, a dangerous proposition in superstitious times. Society members, using pseudonyms, produced occult and philosophical works that hinted at the teachings contained in the Tarot, but veiled them in confusing terms or contradictory details to throw non-lodge members off the track. So although these strategies were necessary at the time, historians are left with a confusing maze of false leads and exaggerations to unwind. As well, if the historian or researcher does not think like an occultist and lodge member of the fifteenth to eighteenth centuries, they are simply lost at sea. It was not until I committed myself to a thorough study of the Secret Societies and their histories that I began to understand the inner dimensions of the Tarot.

Luckily for all, the faces of the cards never lie, testifying to their origins if ever so quietly. In the earliest decks, discernibly Hebrew elements appear, commingled with classical Hermetic themes, spiced with Cathar and Gugliemite heresies, and unified by an overlay of Renaissance detail. In just a few generations, the cards became so rich with associations that it was impossible to reference them

all in one deck, so Tarot decks had to proliferate. This led to different "schools" or families of related Tarots based on the emphases favored over others by any given deck's creator.

The paradox is that Tarot, our seventy eight card deck of distinct and definable Arcana (twenty two of which have their own names, along with their ifty six suit cards in four divisions), appeared in Europe nearly overnight, like Venus emerging from the foam, apparently with no antecedents. It emerged from the European

psyche at the beginning of the 1400s, and although there were a few experimental exceptions (the Mantegna Arcana, for example), and a few variants (decks with shortened suits, or extra royalty, or an extra set of planetary gods, graces, or zodiac signs), Tarot decks today are essentially the same in internal structure as they

were when they first appeared. Better minds than mine have asked, "How is this possible? Where did it come from?"



PRUDENCE
MANTEGNA

An Archetype Revival Theory

I feel certain that the astro-alphanumeric archetypes tied to the Greek alphabet through the Greek alphabet reforms (approx. 600 bc) survived the Dark Ages, most especially in Southern Europe. This body of correspondences would have detailed the numerical links uniting the Greek alphabet to the older alphabet of the Hebrews, along with the astrological values that the Alexandrian



Hermeticists assigned to those letter/numbers. Those values became the basis for the medieval magical alphabets which we find scattered through the folios of the alchemists, Kabbalists, astrologers, and Magi of the Renaissance.

This body of astro-alphanumeric archetypes, with or without images to accompany them, became property of the Secret Societies before the appearance of the earliest woodblock and handmade Tarots of the early 1400s. These archetypes, likely elaborated from the Mystery School teachings attributed to Pythagoras (again, 600 BC), later became disseminated around the Mediterranean through the spread of Alexandrian culture. These correspond-



THE POPESS
VISCONTE-SVORTZA

ed as controversial and spiritually dangerous in Europe during the Dark Ages, but were never entirely lost to scholars of the Mysteries. Tantalizing clues point to multiple ways this body of astro-alphanumeric codes could have survived. Dr. Lewis Keizer notes the presence of Roman-Hellenistic Serapis temples in Italy, relics of the Isis cult, one of which was excavated by the tenth century and reputedly contained images that could double as illustrations of the Major Arcana in “Egyptified” form (see “The Esoteric Origins of Tarot”). He also details the contribution made by the Gypsies in keeping these correspondences alive during the Church persecutions. Assertions abound in the writings of the Tarot masters of the 1700s that the

Jews used these alphabetically keyed archetypes in their Mysteries, and that these archetypes found their way into the Secret Societies through this avenue as well. We can also expect that the Moslem libraries in Spain, and the Orthodox monestaries in Eastern Europe possessed similar tables of correspondence as well, as these communities never experienced the orgy of book-burning inspired by the Roman Christians.

A preexisting body of codes and correspondences, coming to us from late antiquity, is the skeletal structure upon which Tarot is formed, as I hope these essays begin to demonstrate. Based on the Hebrew alphabet, Kaballah, Pythagorean number and harmonic theory, and the signs and planets of Astrology, this structure is as old as Western civilization. Before there were Tarot cards, these astro-alphanumeric correspondences of related systems were firmly in place.

No doubt the first Tarot cards were a reflection of these early archetypes, but for safety’s sake they were stripped of the letters, numbers and other pagan symbols offensive to the Church. Unfortunately, even in this humbler form, they were considered incendiary because of the Cathar-influenced images they contained, and two centuries of bans and persecutions followed.

In addition to variations on some Major Arcana imposed by Papal order, the trivializing effect of formatting Tarot as a game diluted the pointedness of the earliest images. Nevertheless the interior, divinatory body of correspondences kept growing through the Gypsy usage cited by Dr. Keizer in his excellent chapter. After the appearance of the Marseilles Tarot in the late 1600s, new



versions of several Major Arcana marked a fresh restatement of the old Arcana. It still was not safe to blatantly put Hebrew letters and astrology on the faces of the cards, but the especially loaded changes that appeared at this time revealed more detail about Tarot's internal structures and relationships.

I cannot prove my theory with manuscript evidence, but the decks of the 1660s themselves demonstrate that the primal Arcana archetypes re-emerged at that time, and every contemporary stream of Tarot was impacted. This includes the Marseilles-style decks, the de Gebelin school and the Etteilla variants (see booklet entitled *The Continental Tarot Decks*).

At the end of the 1800s another emergence of that inner-school material spurred the reforms of the French school and the breakout of the English and Spanish lodges. We have more documentation (and more opinions) about this wave of Tarot "reforms" than any previous emergence. But there is little consensus on which of the competing versions of Tarot's history to believe. Dissension among different "schools" or "lineages" has become more public as Tarot has grown more popular. A little study makes clear that the images we now generally associate with Tarot are relative latecomers to the earlier astro-alphanumeric archetypes inherited from Alexandrian culture.

The Arcana images, no matter who their earliest illustrator, are hung on a preexisting structure that dictates their intrinsic order. Even if a Tarot artist later decides to change the names, the ordering or the imagery, it makes no difference because the fact that Tarot is structured as a $22+(10 \times 4)+(4 \times 4)$ system gives it away as an ancient artifact.

Tarot is the set of flash cards for the astro-alphanumeric Mysteries of late antiquity, and it is those Mysteries which are the *Prima Causa* of the deck itself and all its images, names, numbers and other correspondences.

The Situation in America

Since the turn of the twentieth century, received wisdom in the English-speaking world about Tarot is that the Waite-Smith deck is the definitive pack against which all others should be measured. It has stood like a monument in the history of Tarot, supposedly representative of the best of the tradition but newly revealed for the modern age, summing up the past but pointing to a brave new future for Tarot. America took this well-documented and beautiful pack to its heart, and to this day those images remain the common denominators people generally refer to when they think of Tarot.

This has not been a bad way for Tarot to be introduced to America, but it has caused a problem for the Tarot historian. The problem is that Tarot did not originate in England or America, but in Italy, Germany, France, and later Spain. The Waite-Smith Tarot, for all its popularity and attractiveness, cannot truly be considered as "traditional" when compared to the older and original Tarots.

The people and circumstances that originally shaped the Arcana were centuries older than those whose names we know and whose



THE MAGUS
WAITE TAROT



images and symbols on the faces of the cards as secondary evidence, and learn to follow the protocols of the Art Historian when we investigate the Tarot. Insisting on text evidence for proofs of our theories is illogical given the underground status of its originators and the persecutions that it engendered.

Toward that goal, students and fans of Tarot would benefit from having full-color volumes at their disposal that would be filled with each and every Arcana from the earliest centuries. For example, researchers deserve to see every card from works like the Lazzarelli Codices (from 1471) which are in the Vatican Library. These are an exquisite set of tarocchi images, artistically resembling and named after the Mantegna cards, but confined to twenty two prints like the Major Arcana of the Visconti-Sforza (see Kaplan's *Encyclopedia*, p. 27). Between 1496 and 1506, Albrecht Durer, a German painter and engraver, made a set of 21 tarocchi images patterned after the E-series tarocchi of Mantegna cards. These images are exquisite and would make a very fruitful study (*Encyclopedia*, p. 47). As well, we need to see the remarkably beautiful circular pack of seventy two cards in five suits engraved at Cologne in 1470, a few of which are shown in the Fournier *Playing Cards* encyclopedia (Volume 1, p. 165).

Along those lines, it would also be beneficial if researchers could access a pack of cards reproduced from the Rosenwald Tarot cards as well as the related 15th century Italian Tarocchi whose cards are split between the Metropolitan Museum of Art and the budapest Museum of Fine Arts (see Vol. II of Kaplan's *Encyclopedia of Tarot*, p 291.). The oldest deck employed in this CD, the Pierpont Morgan-Bergamo Visconti-Sforza Tarocchi

deck, is just the beginning of the collection we need to scrutinize once we come to understand what we are looking at. (See *Overview of the Decks* for the complete listing of decks on this CD.)

We can also make better use of those creditable historical sources whose writings have proved to contain a high proportion of accu-



From Levi's *Transcendental Magic*.
BAPHOMET. THE GOAT OF MENDES.

LEVI'S BAPHOMET IMAGE

rate information, according to the hindsight of modern scholarship. Bearing in mind that we in the late twentieth century have more information available to us on the Internet than



kings and popes could amass in bygone days, we can understand even more what the old masters were trying to tell us in the Tarot Arcana. Especially interesting are the chain of esotericists from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, grouped in this CD under the heading *The Continental Tarot Decks*, who reformed the folk-style Tarots of their day, reinvigorating Tarot's ancient linkages with the teachings of Hermeticism, Kaballah and theurgy.

A Plea for Objectivity About Eliphas Levi

In this context I have to highlight Eliphas Levi, a French esoteric scholar of the 1800s whose voluminous writings have fueled this century's Tarot revival. Because he did not write in English, we in America have been dependent upon translators if we want to follow Levi's ideas. Levi's primary translator is A. E. Waite, a well-known British occultist from the early 1900s who positioned himself as an expert in all matters esoteric, especially Tarot.

To give credit where credit is due, Waite and his compatriots Wescott and Crowley have, between them, translated much of Levi's occult catalog. There is no way to deny the great benefit which the English-speaking world has received from the dedication of these three translators. In the meantime, however, they made sure to load Levi's work with enough mean-spirited forewords, footnotes and afterwords that we struggle to see Levi through the thicket of discounts. I urge everyone who loves Tarot to study Levi and the Continental esoteric masters who followed him, ignoring all inserted material from translators, and *take these authors seriously*.. Inaccuracies and distortions can be found in

the works of every Tarot author, but we cannot discourse rationally about Tarot history until we can see through the smoke screen put up by the English occultists from the turn of this century.

I do not make these statements lightly, and dear friends in the Tarot community may wince at my bluntness. Nevertheless I simply differ with much of the received wisdom on Tarot lineages. The "party line" is that the English school was sincere in attempting to "correct" what they thought were ambiguities in Levi's works. My response is that those ambiguities were created by Levi's translators as part of the ongoing feud between the French (traditional) and English (upstart) branches of the European Secret Societies. (see accompanying essay "Esoteric Origins of the Tarot" by Dr. Lewis Keizer).

Let me state for the record that I do not fault any modern proponents of the English schools for this problem. I trace the origin of this issue to Levi's translators, who knew their actions would destroy Levi's credibility in the New World. It was necessary for them to do so because their version of Tarot was so radically different from its historical, Continental roots. To promote the Order of the Golden Dawn and its offshoots, they could not avoid casting doubt upon those who had gone before. Unfortunately, in trivializing Levi, they have deprived many sincere Tarot students of the readily available scholarship of Levi, reknowned French magus of the 1800s.

Even despite the cruel misrepresentations of his translators, Levi's works contain a treasure trove of hints, clues and historical facts of interest to any who claim to love the Tarot (see Bibliography). His style is old-fashioned,



