

The Great Symbols of the Tarot

by Arthur Edward Waite

Published in The Occult Review January 1926

pp11-19

On the hypothesis that there is or may be a deeper meaning in the chief Tarot Symbols than attaches thereto on the surface, it becomes necessary to establish certain preliminary points as an initial clearance of issues, and I will premise in the first place that by chief Symbols I mean those found only which I have been in the habit of denominating Trumps Major in other writings on the subject. First among the preliminary points there is the simple fact that we know nothing certainly concerning the origin of Tarot cards.

As usual, however, in matters belonging to occult arts and so-called science, the place of knowledge has been occupied by uncritical reveries and invention which is not less fraudulent because the fraud may be frequently unconscious. When the artist Gringonneur, in or about the year 1393, is affirmed to have produced a set of picture-cards for the amusement of King Charles VI of France, it has been affirmed that some of their designs were identical with Tarot Trumps Major. The evidence is the fact of certain beautiful and antique card-specimens - in all about twenty-six - which are scattered through different continental museums and were attributed in the past to Gringonneur. They are now held to be of Italian origin, more or less in the early years of the fifteenth century, and there are no extant examples prior to that period. But to establish this point on expert authority at its value is not to fix the origin of Tarot cards in respect to date or place. It is idle, I mean, to affirm that Venetian, Bolognese and Florentine vestiges of sets allocated to 1400-1418 are the first that were ever designed.

In view, however, of the generations of nonsense which we have heard testifying on the subject, it must be said that it is equally idle and mischievous to affirm that they are not. When, towards the close of the eighteenth century, Court de Gebelin first drew attention, as a man of learning and an antiquary, to the fact of Tarot cards, he produced sketches of the Trumps Major in the eighth volume of *Le Monde Primitif*. In the form that he had met with they were not priceless works of art like those in the *Bibliothèque Nationale*, but rough, primitive and barbarous, or precisely of

that kind which might be expected to circulate in country places, among lower classes of players and gamblers, or among gipsies for purposes of fortune-telling. Supposing that they had been designed and invented originally about the period mentioned, nearly four centuries had elapsed, which were more than ample time for them to get into general circulation throughout the countries in which they were traced by Court de Gebelin - namely, Southern France, Spain, Italy and Germany. If the Trumps Major were originally distinct from the minor emblems, there was also full opportunity for them to be joined together. But alternatively the designs, perhaps even in several styles, may have been old already in the year 1400 - I am speaking of the Trumps Major - in which case they were married much later to the fifteenth century prototypes of our modern playing-cards. It will be seen that the field is open, but that no one is entitled in reason to maintain either view unless evidence should be found to warrant it in the design themselves, apart from the real or presumptive age of the oldest extant copies.

Having done something in this summary manner to define the historical position, the next point is to estimate the validity of those speculations to which I have referred already. It is not possible on this occasion, nor do I find that it would serve a purpose, to do more than recapitulate my own previous decisions, reached as a result of researches made prior to 1910. The first and most favoured hypothesis concerning Tarot cards is that they are of Egyptian origin, and it was put forward by him who to all intents and purposes may be called their discoverer, namely, Court de Gebelin. It has been set aside long since by authorities apart from predispositions and ulterior purposes in view. De Gebelin was an Egyptologist of his day, when Egyptology was in its cradle, if indeed it can be said to have been born, and that which he did was to excogitate impressions and formulate them in terms of certitude. They have not been borne out, and their doom from the standpoint of sane scholarship may be said to have been sealed when they fell into the hands of French occult dreamers and were espoused zealously by them. The most salient and amazing elaborations were those of Eliphas Lévi in 1856 and onward. The designs were for him not only Egyptian in the sense of the earliest dynasties, but referable to the mythical Hermes and to the prediluvian wisdom of Enoch. They formed otherwise the traditional Book of Adam which was brought to him in Paradise by an angel, was removed from him at the Fall, but was restored subsequently in response to his earnest supplications.

Eliphas Lévi did more, however, than theorize on the subject. He gave pictorial illustrations of the cards restored to their proper primeval forms, in which they appeared as pseudo-Egyptian designs, the work of an amateur hand. The same practice prevailed after Lévi had ceased to publish. It was developed further by Christian, while long after him, under the auspices of Oswald Wirth and others, the Trumps Major appear in all the panoply of imitative Delta art. These things are to all intents and purposes of dishonest device, but very characteristic unfortunately after their own manner, for the marriage of speculative occultism and intellectual sincerity has hardly ever been made in France and seldom enough elsewhere.

These are the preliminary points which are placed here for consideration - as I have said, to clear the issues. In the complete absence of all evidence on the subject, we must be content to carry an open mind as to where Tarot originated, remembering that the earliest designs with which we are acquainted do not connote antiquity, unless possibly in one case, and unless the early fifteenth century may be regarded as old enough in the absence of a *parti-pris*. The statement obtains also respecting cards of any kind, including the Baldini emblems, which are neither Tarot nor counters for divination, or games of chance.

I satisfied myself some years ago, and do not stand alone, the Trumps Major existed originally independently of the other arcana and that they were combined for gambling purposes at a date which it is possible to fix roughly. I am concerned only on the present occasion with what may be called the Great Symbols. They are twenty-two in number, and there is no doubt that some of them correspond to estates and types. The Emperor and Empress, the Pope and Juggler belong obviously to this order, but if we put them back speculatively even to mediæval times we cannot account in this manner for the so-called Pope Joan or High Priestess. She must be allocated to another sequence of conditions, another scheme of human community at large. It is to be noted that though Venetian, Florentine and French packs differ somewhat clearly, between narrow limits of course, Pope Joan has never been called the Abbess in any, nor can I recall that she has been so depicted that such a denomination could apply and thus include the design among ecclesiastical estates in Christendom. She comes, therefore, as I have intimated, from another region and another order of things. This is the one Tarot Trump Major which suggests a derivation from antiquity, not however in the sense of Court de Gebelin, who referred it to Isis, but to an obscure

perpetuation of Pagan faith and rite in Italy which the inquiries of Leland seem to have established as a matter of fact. In this case, and at the value of his researches, on which I have commented elsewhere, Pope Joan represents not improbably a vestige of the old Astarte cultus. I do not pretend to be satisfied with the explanation, but it may be accepted tentatively perhaps and does not necessarily carry the question of antiquity behind mediæval times. In the midst of all the obscurity, one only point emerges in all certainty: whatever the card may have stood for originally, it was not the mythical female pope, an ascription which arose as a leap in the dark of ignorance on the part of the people - whether in France or in Italy - who knew the Pope Joan legend but had never heard of Astarte and much less of Isis. I should regard it as a rather old leap.

I have spoken of classification under types, estates or classes, but it obtains only in respect of a few designs, seeing that the majority of the Trumps Major are occasionally allegorical and in several cases can be understood only as belonging to a world of symbols, while a few are doctrinal in character - in the sense of crude Christian doctrine. The Resurrection card and the Devil belong to this last class. Death, on the other hand, is a very simple allegorical picture-emblem, like the Lovers, Justice and Strength. The symbolical cards, which must be so termed because certainly they do not correspond to the admitted notions of allegory, are the Hanged Man, Chariot, the so-called card of Temperance, the Tower, the Star, the Sun and Moon, and that which passes under several names, one of which is the World. The Wheel of Fortune is seemingly of composite character, partaking of both allegory and symbolism, while the Fool is very difficult to class. On the surface he may be referable to that estate which inhabits the lowlife deeps - the mendicant and vagabond type. He suggests the Italian lazzaroni, except that he carries a wallet, as if he were on his way through the world. He recalls, therefore, the indescribable rabble which followed the armies in crusading and later times. He is the antithesis of the Juggler, who flourishes at the expense of others by following a knavish trade, or who profits alternatively by the lower kind of skill.

When Court de Gebelin described the Trumps Major in connection with the rest of the Tarot pack, he gave an account of their use in games of hazard, but he had heard also of their divinatory value and was at some pains to ascertain the process by which they were adapted to this purpose, in which way he is our first authority for the traditional meanings of the cards as

counters in the telling of fortune. He represents in this manner another landmark in the obscure history of the subject. It is to be assumed that his knowledge was confined to the practice in France, and there are no means of knowing whether Spain, Italy and Germany followed other methods at that time. I believe that Alliette or Eteilla varied the divinatory meanings on the threshold of the nineteenth century in accordance with his own predilections, as he altered the Trumps Major themselves in respect of their arrangement and changed the original names in certain cases. In the year 1856, as we have seen, Eliphas Lévi began to issue his occult revelations, based largely on the Trumps Major, developing their philosophical meanings in a most elaborate manner. They are at times exceedingly suggestive and always curious, but it must be understood that in occult matters he depended solely on personal intuitions and invention. There was a time, over twenty years since, when I was led to think otherwise, in view of evidence which has proved worthless on further and fuller investigation. Lévi said on his own part that he owed his "initiation" only to God and his personal researches, but some of his French admirers have not hesitated, this notwithstanding, to affirm his direct connection with Masonic Rites and Orders. The question does not signify, for initiations of this kind would not have communicated occult knowledge. It follows that his Tarot system - if such it can be called - is at best a work of ingenuity but often a medley of notions, and it owes, so far as can be ascertained, nothing whatever to the past which extends behind Court de Gebelin. The point is not without importance, because he speaks with an accent of great authority and certitude. When P. Christian went still further in L'HOMME ROUGE DES TUILERIES and in his HISTOIRE DE LA MAGIE, the same criticism applies, as there is no need to say that it does in the laboured excogitations of Papus, Stanislas de Guaita and others of the French school.

Now, there are twenty-two Trumps Major arranged more or less in a sequence but subject to certain variations as the packs differ respecting time and place of origin. There are also twenty-two letters in the Hebrew alphabet, and it occurred to Eliphas Lévi that it was desirable to effect a marriage between the letters and the cards. It seems impossible to make a combination of this kind, however arbitrary, and not find some accidents in its favour, and there is better authority in Kabalism than Eliphas Lévi ever produced in writing to connect the Hebrew letter Beth with the so-called Pope Joan or Sovereign Priestess of the Tarot. But he was concerned very little with any root in analogy, or he might have redistributed the Trumps

Major, seeing that their sequence is - as I have said - subject to variation in different sets and that there seems no particular reason to suppose that any arrangement of the past had a conscious purpose in view. In this manner he might have found some curious points by taking the old Yetziratic classification of the Hebrew letters and placing those cards against them which corresponded to their conventional allocations. It was sufficient, however, for his purpose that there are twenty-two letters and twenty-two palmary symbols, and if he remembered, he cared nothing apparently for the fact that the numerical significance of Hebrew letters belies his artificial combination after the letter Yod. We can say if we choose that the eleventh Trump is that which is called Strength, though it depends on the arrangement adopted in the particular pack; but the letter Caph is not eleven in the alphabet, for it corresponds to the number 20. Death is the thirteenth card and seems placed well in the Tarot sequence because thirteen is the number of mortality; but the letter Nun is 40 and has no such fatal connection. The folly of the whole comparison is best illustrated by the card which is called the Fool and is not numbered in the series, the cipher Nought being usually placed against it. In Lévi's arrangement it corresponds to the letter Shin, the number of which is 300. But wherever it is placed in the series the correspondence between Trumps Major and the Hebrew alphabet is ipso facto destroyed.

It is to be noticed further that Lévi allocated meanings to each letter individually of the Hebrew alphabet, but they are his own irresponsible invention, except in two or three very obvious cases - e.g., that Beth, the second letter, corresponds to the duad, Ghimel to the triad, and Daleth to the tetrad. It may be interesting to note that his number 15, which answers to the Tarot symbol of the Devil, is explained to be so-called occult science, an eloquent tribute to his own fantastic claims in respect of the subject which he followed. As an explanation unawares it is otherwise of some value, for there is of course no ordered occult science, though there are certain forms of practice which bring into operation those psychic powers of which we know darkly in the way of their manifestation only, and it is a matter of experience that they are more likely to open the abyss rather than the Path of Heaven.

Lévi's instituted connection between Tarot cards and the Hebrew alphabet has proved convincing to later occultism in France and elsewhere. He is also the originator of another scheme which creates a correspondence of an

equally artificial kind between the four suits, namely, Clubs, Cups, Swords and Pantacles, which make up the Lesser Arcana of the Tarot, and the Ten Sephiroth of Kabalistic theosophy. Because of the number four it was inevitable that in a mind like his they should be referred to the four letters of the Sacred Tetragram - Jod, He, Vau, He - which are commonly pronounced Jehovah. It is the uttermost fantasy as usual, as exhibited by his attempted identification of Jod with Clubs, while Cups and Pantacles or Deniers are both coerced into correspondence with the letter He. As regards the constituent cards of the four suits, even his ingenuity failed to discover a ground of comparison between the Sephiroth and the Court-cards, so he offers the following couplet as a commentary on the King, Queen, Knight and Knave or Squire:

The married pair, the youth, the child, the race: Thy path by these to unity retrace.

But this comes to nothing, for the Knight is not necessarily a youth, nor does the ancient or modern Jack correspond to the idea of a child. Had Lévi understood Sephirotic Kabbalism better, again he could have done better by affirming - as it would have been easy for him - that the French damoiseau had replaced a primitive damoiselle, the Squire Court-card being really feminine. He could then have allocated correctly as follows: the King to Chokmah, the Queen to Binah, the Knight to the six lower Sephiroth from Chesed to Yesod inclusive, governed by the semi-Sephira Daath, and the Damoiselle to Malkuth. He would have found also in this manner a complete correspondence between these Trumps Minor and the four letters of the Tetragram. Finally, he would have established the operation of the Sacred Name in the four Kabalistic worlds and would have exhibited the distinctions and analogies between Shekinah in transcendence and the Shekinah manifested in life and time.

But Lévi was the magus of a world of fancy and not of a world of knowledge.

He found his opportunity, however, with the so-called pips, points or numbered cards, for he had the clear and talismanic fact that there are ten numbered cards in each suit, while the Sephiroth are also ten. But because there is no other correspondence in the nature of things he did badly enough in the development and produced the following nonsense rhymes, which are borrowed from the literal translation that I have made elsewhere.

Four signs present the Name of every name. Four brilliant beams adorn His crown of flame. Four rivers ever from His wisdom flow. Four proofs of His intelligence we know. Four benefactions from His mercy come.

Four times four sins avenged His justice sum. Four rays unclouded make His beauty known. Four times His conquest shall in song be shown. Four times He triumphs on the timeless plane. Foundations four His great white throne maintain. One fourfold kingdom owns His endless sway, As from His crown there streams a fourfold ray.

In this manner the four Aces correspond to Kether because it is the first Sephira in the mystery of coming forth from Ain Soph Aour, the Limitless Light; the four twos to Chokmah, four threes to Binah and so forward till the denary is completed. But what is to be understood by the four proofs of Divine Understanding, the four Divine Benefactions and the sixteen sins which are avenged by Geburah or Justice we know as little as of the reason for believing that the Divine Victories shall be celebrated only four times in song, or how in the philosophy of things it is possible to triumph four times on a plane where no time exists. If Eliphas Lévi could have furnished the omitted explanations, it is certain that Zoharic Kabbalism knows nothing about them.

At the back of all these reveries is the well-known fact that the Ten Sephiroth are inter-connected in the Kabbalistic Tree of Life by means of twenty-two paths, to which the Hebrew letters are attributed, Kether communicating with Chokmah by the Path of Aleph, with Binah by that of Beth, and so downward. A diagram showing these allocations was published by Athanasius Kircher in OEDIPUS OEGYPTIACUS. The allocation of the Tarot Trumps Major to the Paths of the Tree of Life is obviously the next step, and attempts have been made in this direction by blundering symbolists, but they have forgotten that in the Mystical Tree the Sephiroth are also Paths, making thirty-two Paths of Wisdom, from which it follows that in the logic of things there ought to be thirty-two Trumps.

The study of the Tarot has been pursued since the days of Lévi in France, England and America, the developments being sometimes along lines established by him and sometimes the result of independent departure. Speaking generally, he has been followed more or less. I have shown that his allocations are for the most part without any roots in the real things of analogy, while as to later students of the subject all that they have to offer

is ingenuities of their own excogitation. We have to recognize, in a word, that there is no canon of authority in the interpretation of Tarot symbolism. The field is open therefore: it is indeed so open that any one of my readers is free to produce an entirely new explanation, making no appeal to past speculations: but the adventure will be at his or her own risk and peril as to whether they can make it work and thus produce a harmony of interpretation throughout. The sentence to be pronounced on previous attempts is either that they do not work, because of their false analogies, or that the scheme of evolved significance is of no real consequence. There is an explanation of the Trumps Major which obtains throughout the whole series and belongs to the highest order of spiritual truth: it is not occult but mystical; it is not of public communication and belongs to its own Sanctuary. I can say only concerning it that some of the symbols have suffered a pregnant change. Here is the only answer to the question whether there is a deeper meaning in the Trumps Major than is found on their surface.

And this leads up to my final point. If anyone feels drawn in these days to the consideration of Tarot symbolism they will do well to select the Trumps Major produced under my supervision by Miss Pamela Coleman Smith. I am at liberty to mention these as I have no interest in their sale. If they seek to place upon each individually the highest meaning that may dawn upon them in a mood of reflection, then to combine the messages, modifying their formulation until the whole series moves together in harmony, the result may be something of living value to themselves and therefore true for them.

It should be understood in conclusion that I have been dealing with pictured images; but the way of the mystics ultimately leaves behind it the figured representations of the mind, for it is behind the kaleidoscope of external things that the still light shines in and from within the mind, in that state of pure being which is the life of the soul in God.

It symbolizes a new source of strength formed with the Great Mother. This new person formed himself through a continuous process of alchemy so something could probably be created from that platform. Horus wholeheartedly lays in the five-pointed of the Pentagon of a larger five-pointed star, which symbolizes how the smallest things affect the greatest things "and contrast. 3. Surrounding things(the extra symbols). Four Little Angels. The Hierophant Thoth Tarot describes the birth of the divine baby Horus. It denotes the process of finding the consciousness of mankind (the symbol of a human reflects on the child itself, it is the path which the child must face and the world). And then consider the religious symbolism on Tarot cards: there are symbols from Kabbalah, Christianity, Judaism, Paganism and also the golden Dawn and Astrology. And there's numerology to add to the mix. And that's just the Rider Waite! There are whole new set of symbols on each Tarot deck you read from. But believe it or not, it can be really easy for you to translate the symbols in the Tarot cards. So, I'm going to show you how to decode the symbols in the Tarot cards without going batty. >>Download the free PDF: Symbolism in Tarot. Collective Wisdom vs. Personal Wisdom. If that means relying on the traditional interpretation, that's great. If it means making up your own, that's fine too. I personally believe the best approach is to incorporate a balance of both.