

SECRETS OF THE TAROT  
by  
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Though there are no written records, it is thought that tarot cards were first carried into Europe by gypsies, who came originally from northern India and began migrating westward about the ninth century C.E. They were illiterate, and used picture cards instead of written records to teach their children about the world and the deities. The cards could be used for games also, which were never considered incompatible with learning or reverence in the Far East. The cards were stacked together in decks, and referred to as "books." Their pictures were like those in old Hindu temples, where paintings or tableaux were arranged in passages, representing stages of enlightenment, very much like the later "stations of the cross."

Holy processions followed the same pattern, as in the Roman "triumphs," in which a pageant of costumed characters revealed a sacred story, ending with the Triumphator's cry of *Triumpe*, meaning triumph, accomplishment, victory, ultimate enlightenment. Here we see the origin of the revelatory "trump" cards, which are called the *Major Arcana* or Greater Secrets. These are 22 extra picture cards, which still exist in tarot decks, even though the medieval church condemned them and forced their removal from playing card decks. Since trump cards are no longer included, some games have to declare one of the other suits a "trump" suit, investing it with more trick-taking power.

What the trump cards used to reveal in their sequence was a spiritual revelation in the old style, bringing a species of "enlightenment" quite different from Christian dogma. Theologians were terrified of alternative beliefs of any kind, which is why the church condemned cards as demonic, "rungs of a ladder leading to hell," and sometimes demanded the burning of hundreds of card decks along with so-called witches and heretics in the Inquisition's *auto-da-fe*.

One card from the trump suit still remains, however, and is now called the Joker. Few card players have any idea as to why the Joker is there, as he seems to have no particular purpose. He is dressed as a jester, and is the "Fool" of the tarot, who comes first in the trump suit because he represents the know-nothing who has yet to be enlightened. The church

allowed him to remain because in his innocent foolishness, he was presumed ignorant of what the other cards were teaching.

The church insisted on the removal of four other face cards, the Knights, which formerly accompanied the King, Queen, and Page (or Jack) of each suit. The Knights seem to have been associated with the Knights Templar, who were disbanded and condemned in the 14th century because they had become very rich and refused to give their earnings to the church. Many of their leaders were sufficiently tortured to confess heresy, then killed, enabling the church to take over all of the Templars' property.

It is clear, however, that tarot cards did have a connotation of holiness, for the very reason that they were used as divinatory tools. Anything "divine" could be used for divination. Christians and Jews made similar use of the bible, to foretell the future by opening the book at random and pointing to any sentence. Gypsies certainly used their cards for similar purposes, and they found that Europeans were deeply impressed by their abilities. Their very name "Gypties" came from their claim to be descended from Egyptian pharaohs, because they knew Europeans regarded anything Egyptian as mysterious and magical. This concept even gave rise to a card game, which is still called Faro, otherwise known as the Game of Kings.

The gypsies soon found that Europeans were willing to part with money in return for their fortune-telling, so they developed many methods and techniques in this particular skill. For example, a common gypsy pronouncement was a solemn "You have been three times in danger of death," which sounded very profound, but was a common enough experience in most people's lives, and could be believed even if it was not remembered. A gypsy repertoire of fortune-telling tricks became known as *hakkni panki*, which became the English "hanky-panky." A gypsy term for a European, *ganje*, became a synonym for "sucker."

When Christian artists first began to paint crucifixion scenes with a single nail uniting Jesus's feet, the gypsies developed a legend that a gypsy stole the fourth nail, relieving some of Jesus's pain, so in gratitude from the cross he gave all gypsies the right to steal from Europeans.

Things have changed since then. There are many levels on which tarot cards can be appreciated, and many ways of using them. Most of the several thousand decks available today are essentially art collections, with

pictures on every card, instead of suit symbols alone on the cards numbered ace through ten. These pictures are created by many different artists and deal with very different themes, yet their symbolism remains quite consistent, and can be traced back to some general ideas that may date from the earliest of human concepts. Nowadays, nearly every tarot deck is accompanied by a book or booklet giving the significance of each card and various means of meditation or interpretation.

Tarot cards were especially popularized by the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, founded in England in the 19th century. The pictures on their deck were created by Pamela Colman Smith, though as a woman she didn't receive title credit for her work. The deck was named Rider-Waite, after its (male) publisher and editor. It is still one of the most widely used decks today, serving as a model for many later designs.

The four suits, known as the *Minor Arcana* or Lesser Secrets, along with the trump cards bring the total to 78, a peculiarly significant numerological number.  $1 + 2 + 3 + 4 + 5$  and so on up to 12, make 78, a zodiacal sum. But 56, the total of the Lesser Secrets themselves, is revered in Indian lore as the original cross of four directions, paced out by Buddha soon after his birth. He took seven steps forward and back each way, four 14s or 56, the number of possible throws with three dice, which, like cards, were used for both gaming and divination. Interestingly, a similar total of possible throws with two dice is 21, bringing the total to 77, or seven elevens, the prime magic number of dice games. The 78th card of the tarot is the Fool, whose number is zero, so he doesn't count.

Why four suits? Throughout the world, all ancient cultures seem to have had the notion that everything in the universe is made of four basic elements: earth, air, fire, and water. The tarot suits were clearly identified with them, and shuffling the cards represented random mixing of elements to produce real beings and real events. On the last card of the *Major Arcana*, the ultimate revelation is always a naked female figure, the pagan Goddess Mother, origin of all life, with her four element symbols, just as in India the primal Tantric Goddess Kali is shown naked, with her four arms holding element symbols like those of the tarot suits.

The four elements were delineated very early in human history, apparently derived from the only four possible ways of disposing of the dead, excluding cannibalism: burial in earth, cremation in fire, disposal into rivers or seas as in the famous Norse ocean funeral, or relegation to the

vultures of the air as in the Persian "towers of silence" and Native American tree funerals. Thus were the dead returned to an "element" for suitable rebirth. This suggests the ancient Tantric view, shared by gypsies, that life is not a linear progression toward a heaven or hell, but a cyclic reabsorption into the eternal flux, and possibly later reincarnation.

Even the Hebrew bible offers the original ancient view that life had its origin in the water element ("the Deep"), represented by the tarot suit of cups, which stands for creation, birth, childhood, motherhood, love, and emotions in general. Cups became hearts, since from earliest times humans believed that women created children from their heart's blood, the red "salt water" closely associated with the sea and with phases of the moon, a traditional Goddess symbol. Our language still retains the primal idea that blood is the basis for all family relationships. The suit of cups stood for very much the same things as the heart icon, and this kind of suit imagery is common to nearly all tarot decks available today, whatever their thematic material..

The fire element is symbolized by the suit of wands, now slender but originally displayed on early tarot cards as thick wooden clubs. The explanation for this also comes from ancient Asia, where wood was considered the source of fire. How did a "club" become a trefoil cloverleaf? The answer lies in alchemy, where the symbol of wood was a thin triangular tree topped by three circles representing foliage. Here we see the modern "club" that looks nothing like its name. The suit of fire stood for heat, the passions of youth, striving, doing, effort, activity in general, and so the suit of wands is often associated with such matters.

The suit of pentacles -- now diamonds -- has always had to do with money, ownership, and the period of middle age, when life's goals have been largely achieved. Wealth meant property to the gypsies, who seldom owned any kind of real estate but lived in constant movement in their wagons. The gypsy term for money was "earth," the universal source of all, the element that gives forth sustenance, precious gems and metals, and possessions of all kinds. The five-pointed star called a pentacle was often used as a charm of ownership and protection, since it was claimed that no evil spirit could enter through its interlocked pattern.

The suit of swords is traditionally the fateful one, having to do with strife, old age, and preparation for death, also wisdom, completion, resolution of life's problems, and occult matters. Nowadays the sword is

called a spade, but this didn't mean a shovel. It came from the Spanish word for a sword, *espada*, Italian *spade*. The spade is actually a black upside-down heart, with a sword spike entering it from below, as if the heart that emerged from the earth into life is now returning into death.

On the whole, the Minor Arcana point to a very Tantric view of life cycles, beginnings turning into endings turning into beginnings again, rather like the old Celtic religion of the sacred cauldron that recycled all things in its ever-changing depths. Certainly it was not a traditional Christian view, although some of the early Gnostic Christian sects did have views very similar to this. Tarot cards are not seen as any sort of alternate religion, however. People who collect them may use them for parlor-trick fortune-telling, or meditation, or just for their esthetic value. Some decks are very beautiful, some are clever or cute, some are simply bizarre and therefore interesting.

Most professional card readers don't really read the cards at all; they read the client, having little or no idea of the complicated historic symbolism behind tarot decks. They rely on the booklets that come with the cards, or simply on their own intuition, to interpret each card as it comes along. You don't have to be a professional in order to do this. Responses to the tarot card pictures can be extremely varied. As in any other form of "divination," there is never a single "right" answer, but rather a cloud of impressions to choose from.

Take your pick, or pick a card.