

THE OCCULT TAROT AND MYTHOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Divination and fortune telling are the first things that most people think of when they see Tarot cards. However, a number of individuals use them as a meditation tool and for spiritual understanding. Within this context a number of narratives have become associated with images on the cards. The presence of the stories and their cultural influence on users leads one to ask whether the stories could be considered mythic in nature, and, if so, how the Tarot acquired its mythic associations. To answer these questions, the historic and contemporary cultural contexts of the cards are examined, as are the images of the cards and the stories associated with them.

INTRODUCTION

The Tarot cards, since their first appearance during the early Renaissance, have changed dramatically in form and function. Most people unfamiliar with the cards associate them with such activities as fortune telling. Many individuals who actually use the cards, however, consider fortune telling their lowest use. These individuals, primarily (although not exclusively) New Age practitioners, Neopagans, occultists, and members similar groups, value the Tarot as an important spiritual tool. Since its adoption as such by French occultists in the eighteenth century, the Tarot became associated with a number of other spiritual, magical, divinatory, and philosophic systems. The imagery of the cards reflects for some users a number of stories, stories used as a guide for behavior and spiritual understanding, and for understanding the individual's place in the universe. These characteristics are often associated with myth. The question is whether or not the stories associated with the imagery of the Tarot have acquired the characteristics and functions of myth.

In order to investigate this question, I examined the historical context of the cards. Various ethnographies about the different spiritual movements involved also helped in determining the contexts in which people use Tarot. I also looked at the literature created by Tarot users themselves, in order to gain a better idea of how people use the cards today. This body of literature ranges from a vast array of popular books to a few personal websites and it can indicate exactly what ideas are commonly associated with the decks and the possibilities for their use. Observing and posting questions to posting board groups devoted to the discussion of tarot and various contemporary spiritual movements helped to place the use of Tarot within its larger context as a spiritual tool. The data gathered from the posting boards indicated how widespread certain practices and ideas were, as well as what literature on the Tarot is most popular currently. Most importantly, I analyzed the stories associated with the Tarot in order to determine if they could be considered myth.

Alternative spiritual movements have become far more popular and widespread in the last thirty years, as have Tarot cards.¹ Only recently have these movements become the subject of in depth scholarly study, and the Tarot within its modern context has not received a great deal of attention from people outside of the spiritual movements themselves. Examination of the Tarot in general and those aspects of it that might be considered mythic can give insight on the popular ideals and beliefs of those individuals who participate in these various movements, and how these individuals view the world. If the stories associated with the imagery can be considered mythic, then examination of those stories, their adoption, and their changes through time, can give insight into how myths form and change through time.

LITERATURE REVIEW

What is Myth?

Definitions of myth are somewhat subjective. Researchers typically define myth according to the qualities most useful for their research. Each academic discipline emphasizes different characteristics of myth, defining it according to the focus of that discipline. It is difficult to settle on a particular definition even within disciplines (Segal 1996:VII-VIII). Most theorists look at myth as a story meant to fulfill a need. They may debate which needs a myth fulfills, and even the subject matter that one should consider myth. It should be kept in mind that the ideas influencing theories of myth at any point in history also often impacted spiritual and occult thinking of the same time period. A number of well-known individuals have written on the subject of myth, including Bronislaw Malinowski, Franz Boas, William Bascom, and Claude Lévi-Strauss. The views of Carl G. Jung are also important, because members of many current alternative spiritual movements adapted a number of his ideas to their movements.

As early as the eighteenth century, people held different and sometimes opposing views about myth (von Hendy 2002:6-7). Fontanelle, whose ideas date to around 1725, viewed myth as an error of the mind. He felt that allegoric interpretations of myth were simply products of modern thought. Other thinkers, such as Manuel, promoted the “Two Religion” theory. This theory proposed that ancient people of a hidden monotheistic religion used myth to preserve their traditions. Promoters of a third view advanced the idea that myths and folktales were the fragmentary remains of an earlier monotheistic religion that degenerated to its present state. These views not only impacted later theories of myth, but also shared common strands of thought with popular and occult thinking of the time.

Many people of the eighteenth century and beyond felt that humanity developed in a series of stages over time (von Hendy 2002:9-12). Generally this view stated that humans went through three stages of mental development, and that myth developed in one of the two earlier stages. Vico considered people of the earliest stage to be irrational thinkers. He felt that their speculations about natural phenomena were highly creative. According to Vico, people of this earliest age “spoke in fables and wrote in hieroglyphs (11-12).” This in part stemmed from the popularly held idea of the time that ancient Egyptian hieroglyphs reflected the language of the

gods, and that the images directly connected to sacred ideas (von Hendy 2002:12).

In 1800 many people, including Schlegel, felt that myth referred to a set of traditional sacred narratives believed by an entire community (von Hendy 2002:59). Myth referred to a type of sacred narrative that influenced culture. In the early nineteenth century, the Grimm brothers first made the distinctions between myth, legends, and fairy tales. These appear in their 1844 edition of *Deutsche Mythologie* (Von Hendy 2002:62). Later anthropologists and folklorists modified their distinctions.

Many anthropologists and folklorists of the later nineteenth century considered myth to be a narrative that primitive people view as sacred (von Hendy 2002:77). Tyler considered myth a basic category of primitive culture (85-86). It was to him also a form of mental error, a process of “personifying and animating nature, the formation of legend by exaggeration and perversion of fact... (85).” Myth consisted of an error of logic, a mistaken speculation of some natural event.

Many scholars through time have debated how to classify various forms of narrative. They use various schemes to make distinctions between the different types. Bascom (1984:7-13) offers one system. Forms of prose narrative include myths, legends, and folktales in his scheme. Characteristics of a folktale include the following. The people who tell the story consider it fiction, it may be set in any time or place, and most often a folktale involves humans or animals as main characters. If a prose narrative describes events of the remote past, or events that happen in a different world, perhaps the underworld, and the people who tell it consider it a true account of events, then it is a myth. Myths communicate dogma, are closely connected with theology and ritual, and are sacred in the group that tells them. When people consider a story that takes place in the recent past to be true, Bascom defines the story as legend. Humans are usually the main characters and the stories describe secular rather than spiritual events and ideals. Often different groups may tell the same stories. People of one group may consider a story to be true, while those in another tell it as fiction. Thus the same story can be myth or a folktale depending upon the context.

Boas (1996:69-71) also noted the difficulty in deciding when a particular tale is myth or folktale. Personification of various forces and the interpretation of natural events occur in many types of stories. Because of this, according to Boas, one cannot define myth by just these characteristics. It is easier to define and recognize mythological concepts than mythological tales. They typically involve ideas about the fundamental nature of the world and its origin. These mythological concepts appear not only in myth itself, but also folktales and legends. Boas finds the question of whether a tale is myth or folktale irrelevant. The extent to which these concepts form the main subject of the narrative is most important. Folktales and myth usually describe events that occur in human society, although sometimes they include fantastic and implausible events. They seem in some cases to be a form of wish fulfillment. Boas interprets stories of the dead returning to life in full health, believing they may originate in the wish that someone was still alive. Often myth simply exaggerates experiences, causing them to transcend everyday reality.

While myth can often result from speculation about “origins and structures of the world

and human life,” one must also understand it as an artistic expression (Boas 1996:71). Individuals can affect myth in any given society. Small groups sometimes decide to systemize the myths of the culture and this results in a more connected body of myth (78-81). Occasionally a group uses the results of this to construct a body of esoteric knowledge, guarded by a few high ranking individuals. The resurgence of occult practices in eighteenth and nineteenth century Europe illustrates this process (81). This systemized esoteric mythology is often based on current exoteric myth. Exoteric myth consists of the various stories accepted by a society as a whole. Accepted mythologies of a given group often reflect current cultural concerns or interests, with exceptions occurring in times of rapid cultural change.

Malinowski (1954:100-108), among others, considered myth a story perceived as real to the people who tell it. To these it described primeval events that shaped the world and that continue to affect the world even in the present. Myth is not symbolic, but a literal story of an earlier reality. It expresses codes and beliefs about how one should behave, and it supports ritual. The primary function of myth is to support and give prestige to tradition, to give it history and link it to a higher reality (146).

Lévi-Strauss (1963:208-211) looked at myth another way. One should study its underlying structure in order to understand its meaning. Myths throughout the world possess certain similar qualities. Because of this, people often recognize myth no matter how much or little they know about the culture it originated from. While myth often refers to an event that happened far in the past, it also explains timeless concepts. Myth is based in language. The story consists of units. These units also form part of a higher order of organization, like language. All variations of a myth should be considered in its analysis. Lévi-Strauss does this in his analysis of the myth of Oedipus (217).² Not only should the Greek versions of the myth be used in analysis, but also Freud’s modern variation of the story. Myth, according to Lévi-Strauss (229) provides a “logical model for overcoming a contradiction.” Thus to him myth is inherently logical in structure. This view departs strongly from many conceptions of myth.

Jung’s perspectives on myth and psychology are also important. Followers of many contemporary spiritual movements integrated his ideas with their belief systems. Scholars sometimes debate the legitimacy of some of Jung’s ideas, however a wide-ranging audience still considers his ideas very important. According to Jungian psychology, myth making is an inherent part of the unconscious psyche (Jung 1963:72). The manifestations of the unconscious psyche are components of myths, identical with Jung’s conception of archetypes. Archetypes consist of the mental representations of certain motifs “that may vary a great deal in detail without losing their basic pattern (Jung et al 1964:58).” Archetypes manifest themselves in the form of symbolic images, images that appear throughout the world. Archetypes perpetually change throughout time, depending on the collective state of humanity (Jung 1963:98). Mythology commonly depicts archetypal forces. Modern psychology to Jung is simply a “more abstract kind of myth (98).” Images in dreams, myth, and ritual are often archetypal in nature (Jung et al 1964:32). People do not invent myth. They experience it (Jung 1963:73). Myths stem from the psyche. They are involuntary, describing processes of the unconscious mind rather than physical reality

(73-74). Jung's theories of psychology and myth connect closely with his idea of the collective unconscious. Jung maintains that all people share certain structural elements of the psyche, and a common symbolic or psychic language (74). Many individuals use Jung's theories to analyze the myths of various cultures. His ideas have also profoundly influenced the thought of modern spiritual movements. His most influential ideas within these movements include his conception of archetypes and the collective unconscious.

Doty (2000), in his book *Mythography*, explores various theories of myth. He synthesizes them into one definition or theory useful in the study and analysis of myth. Myth is "multilayered and multifunctional." In order to understand any culture's mythology one must also look at its ritual and iconography (xv). His definition of myth is as follows:

A mythological corpus consists of (1) a usually complex network of myths that are (2) culturally important (3) imaginal (4) stories, conveying by means of (5) metaphoric and symbolic diction, (6) graphic imagery, and (7) emotional conviction and participation, (8) the primal, foundational accounts (9) of aspects of the real, experienced world and (10) humankind's roles and relative statuses within it.

Mythologies may (11) convey the political and moral values of a culture and (12) provide systems of interpreting (13) individual experience within a universal perspective, which may include (14) the intervention of suprahuman entities as well as (15) aspects of the natural and cultural orders. Myths may be enacted or reflected in (16) rituals, ceremonies, and dramas, and (17) they may provide materials for secondary elaboration, the constituent mythemes having become merely images or reference points for a subsequent story, such as a folktale, historical legend, novella, or prophecy.

(33-34)

This definition considers both cultural attitudes towards narratives and the formal characteristics of those narratives. It also includes the ways in which myths can function in any given culture. It brings together aspects of many previous theories. The section of this paper that analyzes stories related to tarot uses an adapted version of this definition consisting of five primary characteristics.

Spiritual Movements from the Eighteenth Century to the Present

In the eighteenth century French occultists transformed Tarot from a secular game to a spiritual tool. Modern spiritual movements, such as the New Age movement, Neopaganism and Wicca, and various occult groups grew at least in part from the French and British movements of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. A look at both the recent history and current trends of the Western occult tradition helps to put the use of Tarot by these groups into perspective.

A number of ancient and medieval ideas influenced modern esoteric and occult movements. "Modern" here refers to the Renaissance and beyond. Modern movements developed in part from Hermeticism (Faivre 1992:3-6). The earliest writings of Hermeticism date back to approximately AD 100-200. The surviving body of ancient Hermetic literature consists of

seventeen works written in Greek. Later occultists believed that Hermes Trismegistus wrote them. A number of occultists contributed to this body of text by commenting on the documents. One idea that traces at least as far back as Hermeticism states that by understanding the world one develops an understanding of God. Alchemy also played a role in Hermetic thought. Many people believed that alchemical processes held the key to changing a metal such as lead into other pure metals, such as gold. Alternatively a number of people believed that alchemical writings consisted of metaphors for the transformation of the soul. The Cabala also profoundly influenced the Western occult tradition (22). It originated in Jewish traditions, but over time Christian and occult groups adapted it to meet their own needs. The Cabala is based on the twenty-two sacred letters of the Hebrew alphabet. It relates them to ten spheres, called sephiroth, and twenty-two paths. The paths and spheres represent manifestations of the energies of God. A diagram ([Image 1](#)) maps the relationships of the paths and spheres. Various Jewish, Christian, and occult documents reproduce this diagram. Hermeticism, alchemy, and the Cabala powerfully impacted the thought of various occult and spiritual groups. People continue to explore Cabalistic ideas today.

[Place [Image 1](#) here]

From the seventeenth century to the present, Rosicrucianism influenced occult thought. The Rosicrucian order probably dates only as far back as 1614 or so, when a series of documents were published, including the *Fama Fraternitatis*. This document traced the life of the supposed founder, Christian Rosenkreuz. It outlined the basic ideas of Rosicrucian doctrine (Edighoffer 1992:187-208). It stressed the idea of harmony between self (or the microcosm) and cosmos (or the macrocosm), and that God could be understood through nature. The document also predicted an immanent reformation of humanity and the divine. Little, if any, evidence exists supporting the idea that Rosicrucianism existed before the *Fama Fraternitatis* and other documents appeared. People at the time thought, however, that these writings expressed the ideas of a much older secret order (Edighoffer 1992:202-203). Regardless of their origins, the documents apparently caused an explosion of secret societies based on their ideas. These societies appeared throughout the seventeenth century and even into the twentieth century throughout Europe and the United States.

People practiced magic in the eighteenth and nineteenth in order to achieve a number of goals (Hutton 1999:82-83). Occultists at this time tried to use ritual magic not so much to alter specific events, but to develop spiritual and mental abilities latent within them. Furthermore, they believed that magical practices developed the spark of the divine they thought existed in all people. These ideas were basic to the magical practices of the Hermetic order of the Golden Dawn, among other groups.

The practices of the Golden Dawn profoundly influenced most of the alternative spiritual movements that followed it (Luhmann 1989:38, Hutton 1999:81, Berger 1999:21). A group of former Freemasons created the new order. They based it on what they claimed was a translated Rosicrucian text (Hutton 1999:81). One of the founders, S. L. MacGregor Mathers, brought together a large number of previous magical traditions to provide a ceremonial basis for the Order. He took John Dee's system of Enochian magic and combined aspects of it with the

Cabala, Hermeticism, Masonic thought, Tantra, and the Tarot (77). The practice of combining various magical systems was not new. Earlier occultists often did the same. The act of combining of various traditions perhaps stemmed from the idea of an original religion that all other spiritual practices came from (von Hendy 2002:7). In fact Theosophic thought of the time, which strongly influenced the Golden Dawn, taught that all mystical traditions “reflected the same primal wisdom.” Theosophists believed that the combination of these traditions served to increase knowledge and magical ability (Hutton 1999:79). The Golden Dawn was based a great deal in Christian thought, and many of its members were devout Christians (78). Some well known members included W. B. Yeats, Aleister Crowley, and A. E. Waite. The original Order split apart in 1903. Crowley and Waite, among others, founded new groups based on the teachings of the original, and it is possible to trace many of today’s occult groups back to the Golden Dawn.

T. M. Luhrmann (1989) researched and participated in ritual magic groups of contemporary England. Several thousand people in England alone considered themselves members of organized ritual magic groups at the time of her research. Many had been involved for over 25 years (5). Occult stores and mail order catalogs provided many resources for these groups. One mail-order company reported that over 25,000 customers made more than one order with them in the past thirteen years. Magical practitioners came from a wide range of spiritual movements, including Wicca, Neopaganism, and New Age groups, among others. Most people of these people, regardless of their background, shared the belief that all religious or spiritual paths led to some higher truth or reality (7). Most magical practitioners were members of the middle class and well educated. The groups formed primarily in cities because of the larger population and access to resources (7, 29). People used various mediums to spread information and ideas, from word of mouth and published literature to mail order catalogs and various Pagan and New Age festivals (5, 30).

While all of the various movements share many characteristics, some also differ in key ways (Luhrmann 1982:32). Luhrmann placed the various movements in four groups—witchcraft, Western Mysteries, ad hoc ritual magic, and non-initiated paganism—although many groups easily fit into two or more categories. Witchcraft, or Wicca, typically centers around goddess worship, groups are called covens, and a high priestess often heads the groups. Members of Western Mystery groups often view their groups as fraternities. They meet more formally, and typically one participates in a period of study or training before members allow them to join. Ad hoc ritual magic groups generally either mix traditions, or organize their rituals and beliefs around a specific cultural or mythological theme. Non-initiated pagan groups often revolve around nature worship, and members tend to participate in various spiritual study groups. Greenwood (2000:10) notes that one of the greatest differences between Neopagan practice and the New Age Movement is that Neopaganism emphasizes connections with and traditions of the past, while New Age groups look forward in time. Neopagans typically structure their groups and rituals in a more egalitarian manner, while many New Age groups tend to believe in a more hierarchical organization of spiritual realms.

Luhmann seeks to answer the question of how well educated people, who typically already use science to explain nature, come to accept magic. Two predominant social theories already exist to explain why people practice magic (Luhmann 1989:8-9). One view states that people think that magical theory is correct either because they never face the contradictions of it or because they possess no other explanation for the way the world works. The other states that the rituals serve some function other than magic. Structuralists might say that it gives a sense of order to an incoherent reality, while Symbolist anthropologists state that they may practice magic for aesthetic or devotional purposes. Luhmann also suggests that in very limited circumstances mental states might affect physical reality, but does not elaborate greatly. She proposes a third theory (10-13). Perhaps people participate in magical practices at first because they believe that magical theory offers an alternate “science-like theory” that provides an explanation of reality. After their initial involvement they come to value the spiritual and emotional experiences associated with the rituals. The theory gradually becomes irrelevant except to legitimize their experiences. Greenwood (2000:17) also noted the intense emotional experience associated with ritual. One other important aspect of ritual magic is that the rituals allow the practitioners opportunities to play with ideas and belief and “to act out various fantasies of another world (Luhmann 1989:13).

Susan Greenwood (2000), in her study of British pagans, explores the relationship between contemporary spiritual movements and the concept of an otherworldly reality with which they communicate. Pagan groups all share the belief in an alternate reality or otherworld (1-24). It exists alongside this one, and deities and spirits act within it. Most societies share some notion of an alternate reality of spiritual forces, but modern magical thought revolves around it. Modern practitioners believe they can see and experience the otherworld in altered states of consciousness. They also believe that communications with this other reality hold the potential to transform the individual and the universe as a whole. Within current magical practice, the Hermetic and Rosicrucian idea of balance and relationship between microcosm and macrocosm is still very important. Modern magical practices see the individual as exchanging energies with the cosmos or otherworld. Modern magic emphasizes the manipulation of otherworldly energies in order to transform self or universe. Thus it can be said to fit Cavendish’s definition of magic (Greenwood 2000:23, Cavendish 1990:1). He defines magic as “an attempt to exert power through actions which are believed to have direct and automatic influence on man, nature, and the divine (1). Magical practitioners today most often strive for self-transformation (Greenwood 2000:29). Modern magicians consider imagination central to their ability to access this otherworld and to the practice of magic. This emphasis on imagination and the otherworld offers an alternative to rationalism as a means for understanding the world. Members of many of these movements feel that rationalism denies intuition and creativity, which are often of central importance in these movements (26). Different magical practitioners view the otherworld in different ways. Some believe it is a world beyond, though not separate from the self. Others view it as an internal world created by the individual. Most see it as both of these things (27).

Western spiritual movements possess a rich history and a complex relationship with

western society as a whole. Most anthropological or sociological accounts of modern spiritual movements emphasize their magical aspects and try to understand why members adopt particular beliefs. Historical and contemporary accounts illustrate their complexity and help to set the context for a description of the Tarot.

The Tarot: Modern Research

Academic research on Tarot is limited. Research so far primarily examines its function as a divinatory tool. Very little research directly examines the symbolism of the cards or their other esoteric uses, although some researchers do touch upon these subjects tangentially.

Jorgensen (1984:136-146) examines Tarot divination. When used for divination, the cards, the diviner, and the querent come together to create a symbolic construction of reality. The diviner, or reader, interacts with the querent, and together they create a shared body of knowledge during a reading. Readers build a divinatory story about the querent using a variety of forms of information. This information comes from the querents themselves, the traditional meanings of the cards, and the positions they take in the spread for any reading. The reader acquires information about the querent sometimes by asking questions, other times by making general statements meant to generate a response from the querent. Divination offers readers and querents a way to connect apparently unrelated events of the past, present, and future into a cohesive whole. This gives meaning to events and makes them seem to be part of a greater whole.

Greenwood examines Tarot briefly in her studies of Paganism. She describes her own experience with meditation and pathworking using the Tarot. Her experiences are examined in greater detail in the section on ritual use of Tarot in this paper.

THE ESOTERIC TAROT: CONTEXT, RITUALS, AND STORIES

Methods Used/Types of Data

Various books, both popular and scholarly provided valuable information. Previous scholarly works gave the historical background of the Tarot. Popular books offer a more recent perspective. They illustrate the views of popular authors on the meanings and purposes of the cards, views often adopted by Tarot users. They also typically describe possible ritual uses of the Tarot. A few popular books on the spiritual movements that make use of Tarot are examined. The authors of these books occasionally use the Tarot or stories associated with it to illustrate certain ideas.

In order to determine the most widespread uses and ideas surrounding the cards, one must turn to the wider population that uses the cards. A number of websites and three online posting-board communities provided information. About thirty members of the posting board communities responded to a number of questions, and offered valuable information. One board discussed Tarot exclusively. The other two discussed alternate spiritualities in general and each contained a forum devoted to either the Tarot or divination. While not all people who use the Tarot use the Internet, thousands of Tarot users and members of various spiritual movements use

it to communicate with one another.³

The data is organized chronologically. It begins with a section on the historical development of Tarot, followed by sections on perceptions of Tarot today, Tarot structure and types of decks used today, activities and rituals, and a section describing stories associated with the cards. The divisions are somewhat arbitrary, because each category strongly interrelates with the rest. The sources consulted consist primarily of those that either describe the stories related to the cards or place them in a larger esoteric context. Books that refer to Tarot only as a tool for divination or fortune-telling form the majority of literature available on Tarot, but these are not used extensively

Tarot: Historical Developments⁴

Today people use tarot in three primary ways. Tarot most likely began as a card game, and people still play it today in some parts of Europe. Today people most commonly use the cards for divination. A number of individuals also meditate on the cards or use them for magic. Examination of its development over time provides insight into how it acquired its associations with myth and why people use it today.

The earliest surviving decks and written documentation of the cards trace back to the Renaissance (Kaplan 1978:12, Decker et al 1996:ix). They may date as early as the late 1300s, but many historians place the earliest decks in the fifteenth century (Giles 1992:12). Most of these early decks, called *tarocchi* packs, were created in Italy, and the Visconti and Sforza families commissioned a number of the decks ([Image 2](#)) that survive to the present (Kaplan 1978: 60). The Visconti-Sforza family most likely commissioned the artist Bonifacio Bembo to create the deck (Giles 1992:13).

[Insert [Image 2](#) here]

The structure of these early Tarot decks varied (Giles 1992:13). Decks consisted of a series of important cards, known as trumps, and a section nearly identical to today's standard playing cards. The Italian decks, and indeed many later French and German decks varied in the number of trumps and court cards. The first records of Tarot decks do not show up until after standard playing cards were common in Italy, so most likely they developed from standard decks with four suits (Decker et al 1996:ix). The symbolism of the early decks appears to have been exoteric, the characters seen on the trumps recognizable to anyone who saw them (Giles 1992:16-17). In fact, many of the cards seem to correspond with figures representing virtues and vices of Renaissance Italy—Love, Death, and the World all featured figures paralleling these virtues and vices.

Tarot as a game spread throughout Europe, especially into France, Germany, Austria, and Switzerland, during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. The most well known decks to develop during this time were the French Marseilles Tarot decks (Giles 1992:14-15). These decks were the most widely used by the eighteenth century. By this time, however, fewer people played the game or knew of its Italian origins (Decker et al 1996:xi). The Tarot became associated with the occult at this time in France. Lack of knowledge of the origins of the cards probably caused some

of the occult speculations.

The first recorded instances of occult use of the Tarot cards appear during the eighteenth century in France (Decker et al 1996:52). Antoine Court de Gébelin, a Freemason, believed he saw Egyptian iconography in the cards. Fortune telling also appears around or just prior to this time, and they may have already suggested Egyptian origins. Gébelin, however, wrote of the idea first, and took full credit for the idea (Decker et al 1996:57-58). The idea appears in volume VIII of his *Monde Primitif*. He believed that the cards reflected Ancient Egyptian knowledge hidden by priests within the cards. They disguised this knowledge as a game so that it would not be destroyed. Not knowing that the word “Tarot” stemmed from the Italian words *tarocco* or *tarocchi*, he broke the word into “tar” and “rho” and claimed that the words were Egyptian for “royal road.” However, Egyptian hieroglyphs had not been deciphered in the period that he wrote his theories.

The Comte de Mellet, a contemporary of the Court de Gébelin, also promoted the idea of Egyptian origins (68-69). He was the first to call the Tarot the *Book of Thoth*. He claimed the word “tarot” broke down to “t’a” and “rosh,” and claimed that this meant “doctrine of Thoth,” or “doctrine of the beginning.” He felt that the cards represented a cosmogony, and that the original Tarot originally consisted of only the first 22 cards.

Jean Baptiste Alliette, more commonly known as Etteilla, also influenced the Tarot (Decker et al 1996:87-99). This French occultist believed, like the Comte de Mellet, that the Tarot was the *Book of Thoth*. He proposed that the esoteric meanings of the cards reflected Hermetic teachings, in particular those of the *Pimander*. Most of Etteilla’s works, however, described Tarot as a fortune-telling device. In fact the word “*cartonomancie*,” which became “cartomancy” in English use, first appears in his books. Although people used the cards for fortune telling before Etteilla wrote about it, he popularized this use of the cards.

During the early nineteenth century the discovery of the Rosetta stone and the gradual translation of Egyptian hieroglyphs provided proof for many that the Tarot was not of Egyptian origin. Some people continued to believe, and indeed some still believe today that the cards originated in Egypt. Many, however, now doubted this theory and began to look for a new theory explaining the origins of the Tarot (Giles 1992:28).

Alphonse Louis Constant, who wrote under the pen name of Eliphas Lévi, shaped the occult perception of Tarot in the most profound way. During the mid nineteenth century, when the occult sciences began to die out, his books and ideas reignited interest in them (Giles 1992:29, Decker et al 1996:167). Lévi took many magical traditions of the Renaissance and beyond and synthesized them into one system. He firmly intertwined Tarot into this magical system. He also popularized a new theory of the origins of the cards (Decker et al 1996:185, 172). While he believed in the previously proposed idea that the cards were of Egyptian origin, he also tried to prove that the twenty-two trumps corresponded with the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet and the paths of the Cabala ([Image 1](#)). He wrote that the cards were also related to the tetragrammation, the four-letter name of God –YHWH. Many occultists accepted the general theory of Cabalistic associations. They debated the specific correspondences, though, and

continue to do so today (173). One debate revolves around the issue of whether the letters correspond with the cards in ascending or descending order. People also debate what letter they believe corresponds with the Fool card, whose number is zero. Many of the Western Magical traditions that developed after Lévi wrote about his system of magic drew heavily on his ideas (174).

A contemporary of Lévi's, Paul Christian, introduced a number of ideas about the Tarot in his book *L'homme Rouge*, written in 1863 (Decker et al 1996:200-206). The cards in this book illustrate an initiation procedure. Here the initiate descends a ladder with 78 steps and enters a room beneath the Egyptian pyramids. He sees twenty-two images between statues. Each image is said to express three realities—divine, intellectual, and physical. Christian also combined Tarot with his system of astrology, in which he divided the sky into 78 houses corresponding with the 78 cards (200-201).

The occult Tarot traveled from France to Britain around 1880 by a British student of Lévi's, Kenneth Mackenzie (Decker and Dummett 2002:46). In 1886, A. E. Waite translated and published some of Lévi's writings, among them a large portion of an essay dealing with the Tarot (Decker and Dummett 2002:48). This was the first book available in England on the occult Tarot (48). S.L MacGregor-Mathers wrote the first British book on Tarot, entitled *The Tarot: It's Occult Signification, Use in Fortune-Telling and Method of Play*, published in 1888 (Decker and Dummett 2002:57). Interestingly, publications on the Tarot appeared in the United States before they appeared in Britain, around 1880 (62).

The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn made use of the cabalistic and Hermetic correspondences with the Tarot, and MacGregor-Mathers, created a deck for members of the group to copy (97). Members copied this deck in order to learn the principles of magic and the Tarot. The Golden Dawn broke apart in 1903, but it still influences various groups even today. Members swore an oath of secrecy. In the early twentieth century, however, Aleister Crowley, one of the more infamous members, published many of the doctrines and rituals, causing a scandal among other former members (147). *Liber 777* outlined the Golden Dawn's version of the cabalistic Tarot, while other rituals appeared in various occult periodicals.

In 1909 the Rider company published the Rider-Waite Tarot pack([Image 3](#)). Today people often call it the Waite-Smith pack in order to give credit to the artist. Commissioned by Arthur Edward Waite and created by Pamela Coleman-Smith, this deck became the most widely used and influential deck of the twentieth century. A large body of literature exists commenting upon this deck. Waite's deck was the first esoteric deck to illustrate the numbered suit cards with actual figures and scenes, rather than just the symbols of the suits—cups, wands, swords, and pentacles (Giles 1992:46).⁵

[Place [Image 3](#) here]

Aleister Crowley's and Lady Frieda Harris' *Book of Thoth* Tarot ([Image 4](#)), originally published in 1944, is also widely used today (Decker and Dummett 2002:153). Crowley based his deck on both Egyptian and cabalistic symbolism (153). The deck and companion book by the same title were both reprinted in the 1960s, and publishing companies continue to reissue it today

(Kaplan 1990:156).

[Place [Image 4](#) here]

In the 1960s and 1970s, the number of new spiritual movements increased dramatically, and likewise more people began creating and publishing new Tarot decks. New decks continue to be produced today (Pollack 1990:9). These range from purely art decks, to decks based on the symbolism of the Waite-Smith cards, to decks with specific cultural, spiritual, or psychological themes. Some decks break entirely away from the Cabala and ancient Egyptian themes, while others emphasize them. Members of the various spiritual movements today have a wide variety of decks from which to choose. The Waite-Smith decks and their variants remain the most popular, but they are no longer the only ones available to people who wish to explore the Tarot.

Tarot Today: Its Structure and Types of Decks

The structure of the esoteric or occult Tarot today consists of two sections. The 22 Major Arcana, or trumps, form the most important section. The second section consists of the 56 Minor Arcana, equivalent to a standard pack of playing cards with an extra court card in each suit. The word “arcana” means “mysteries.”

Different authors associate various meanings with the Major Arcana (Greer 1988:42-45, Huets 1996:9-10). On one level they might represent major events in one’s life. They may represent cosmic forces in the universe to other authors. Still other authors associate them with Jung’s archetypes. At yet another level they are thought to illustrate the spiritual stages one passes through in life. Different authors emphasize or reject some of these interpretations, or come up with new ones all together. The Major Arcana are typically numbered with Roman numeral. Occultists assigned the Magician card the number I, and the World, or sometimes the Universe, number XXI. The Fool card is numbered 0. The debate surrounding the position of the Fool and the Hebrew letter assigned to it continues today. Some deck creators and authors, such as Guiley and Fronteras place him at the beginning of the deck, preceding the Magician (Fronteras 1996:30, Guiley 1991:84). Others, such as Waite, follow Leví’s tradition, placing the Fool between card XX, Judgment, and card XXI, The World (Decker et al 1996:173, Waite 1992:152). Still others, such as Morag and Gardner, place him at the end of the major arcana, after the World, XXI (Gardner 1970:86, Morag 1998:53). While this debate began as a result of the combination of tarot with Cabalistic doctrine, it probably impacts perceptions on the symbolism of the Fool (Junjulas 1985:10, Pollack 1997:13-14, Knight 1991:23-25). Many contemporary popular authors view him as both part of the Major Arcana, and standing apart it. He stands separate from it, or perhaps he encompasses it. Ideas about the position of the Fool may influence the story of the Journey of the Fool, described later in this paper.

Most systems of interpretation give the Minor Arcana a lower status. In divinatory systems the numbered cards typically represent the smaller, everyday events in one’s life, and the court cards the people one interacts with (Pollack 1997:163). In cabalistic interpretations, the numbered cards of each suit reflect the ten spheres of the cabalistic Tree of Life (Kliegmann 1997:35). Today the suits are generally Wands or Batons, Cups, Swords, and Pentacles or Disks.

Each of these suits corresponds with one of the four elements and with certain states of being. The correspondences vary, but the most widely accepted system correlates wands with fire and creativity, swords with air and intellect, cups with emotion and water, and pentacles with earth and material states (Greer 1988:168, Huets 1996:71-72). Court cards also vary. Traditionally people label them King, Queen, Knight, and Page, but modern authors and artists sometimes reinterpret them. Associations with family structure are becoming popular. Hermann Haindl changed them to Father, Mother, Son, and Daughter respectively in his deck ([Image 10](#)).

[Place [Image 10](#) here]

Today people frequently reinterpret the Tarot. Artists and authors constantly draw parallels between Tarot and other spiritual systems, mythologies, and doctrines from around the world. One can find decks based in almost any spiritual system, from Mayan cosmology to the Finnish Kalevela to Santeria. Currently Celtic and Arthurian themes are extremely popular, with at least eight or nine Celtic decks currently in print and widely available. Other popular themes include feminism, animals in general, Native American traditions, and the environment. Many modern spiritual traditions find world cosmologies and cultures, the sacred feminine, the environment, and other themes important to varying degrees. Members of these movements often consider all spiritual paths as equally valid ways to higher truths, and thus individuals often examine a wide array of spiritual traditions (Luhrmann 1989:7). The variation of available Tarot decks is probably related in part to this outlook.

Activities and Rituals

Activities associated with Tarot can be as fundamental as the act of choosing a deck and learning to use it. Rituals typically include such activities as divination, meditation and pathworking, and other closely related activities. People often use the cards as a focus for performing magic, as well. Ritual use of Tarot and the perceived purposes of those rituals tell a great deal about the meaning and functions of the Tarot. Ritual is sometimes closely intertwined with the stories associated with the cards.

It may on the surface seem like a simple task to choose a Tarot deck for personal use, but in reality a number of factors often come into play. Often the issue of availability factors into this decision. Many card users noted that in small communities there were few, if any decks to choose from. Online sites, such as Amazon.com and various publisher's websites are popular. When card users first start out, however, they may not be aware of the resources or number of decks available. When people have access to a wide selection of decks and possess some previous knowledge of Tarot, they typically base their decision on at least two main factors. Some authors, and a number of posting board members recommend traditional decks. Traditional here refers either to the Rider-Waite deck or in some cases a Marseilles style Tarot deck (Hamaker-Zondag 1997:5, 34). Some people consider one or the other to be the most pure or true form of Tarot. At the other end of the spectrum some state that the choice of a deck should be made purely based on

what feels right to the individual. They feel that choosing a deck is a deeply personal choice, and that the imagery of a given deck should immediately spark some deeply intense spiritual or emotional response. Many people fall somewhere between these two ideas. They often feel that traditional decks (the Rider Waite or the Marseilles) and decks based on these designs are better, but that within this range of traditionally inspired decks, one should choose what feels right. Beyond these factors, the intended purpose of the deck may be an issue. Some people feel that certain decks are better for divination than meditation, or vice-versa.

The methods people use to learn and understand the cards depend on a variety of factors. These include the level of previous knowledge, access to information, and the particular purpose a person intends to put the cards to. The methods range from simply memorizing divinatory meanings from a book to in depth meditation and writing about the cards. Purposes can range from simple divination and fortune telling to magic to path working and meditation for spiritual insight. They may also include such pursuits as the creation of art or as a starting point and inspiration for creative writing. People might use the cards for only one of these purposes, or perhaps all of them.

Whatever the eventual purpose a person intends for the cards, many popular books and a number of people on the posting boards recommend keeping a Tarot journal. What a person puts in the journal is up to him or her. Entries might range from brief notes on what each card means to detailed accounts of meditations and any insights gained from them. Popular books often recommend other activities one can include in a journal or do independently of it. This can include, for example, taking notes on readings done, the cards that appeared in them, and how they were interpreted (Greer 1984:27-46). Some authors (Giles 1992:229, Greer 1984:188-198) suggest either using the cards as a starting point for creative writing activities, or to use creative writing as a means for learning the cards. Suggestions here include writing poetry based on the cards or drawing cards at random and imagining a story that goes with the imagery. If a person plans to eventually use the cards for divinatory readings, then telling stories through the cards to learn them is considered a valuable way to learn how to relate the cards within the readings to one another and the querent. Other activities might include drawing or painting pictures of the cards, or even creating one's own deck.⁶ Posting board members suggested another activity in which one picks a card at random in the morning, either as part of a reading suggesting what one needs to learn that day or to carry around for the day. If the latter, one draws parallels between the events of the day and the meaning and imagery of the card. A final activity often suggested is to use the Tarot for dreamwork. People use the term dreamwork in this context to refer to the act of placing the card near the bed or under their pillow in order to gain insights about the card or from the card in their dreams (Giles 1992:228). In general, in contemporary spiritual movements, dreamwork refers to any act that either manipulates or interprets dreams in such a way as to improve the self or gain spiritual insight.

Different books suggest different methods and activities to help individuals learn the Tarot, far more activities than those listed here. Posting board members and popular authors often recommend that new users simply do the activities that feel right to them at the time, the ones that

work best for them. The activities are by no means limited to people just beginning to learn the Tarot. People who have used the cards for years may do any of the activities to further their knowledge of Tarot, themselves, or the underlying patterns of the universe or spirit.

The term divination is often defined as the practice of finding out future events or other unknown information by supernatural means (Moore 1999:312). In the Tarot, it most often refers to the act of giving a reading, either for telling fortunes or to find the underlying spiritual or physical patterns of events or causes of a problem. However, for the people who use Tarot, the term can refer to a far wider array of activities. About a third of the individuals who responded to a question posted on the posting boards, included such activities as pathworking and meditation in their definition of divination. In fact, a small number of people defined divination as any kind of contact with an alternate spiritual reality. It must be kept in mind that not all individuals who use the Tarot mean the same thing when they talk about divination. Almost all people who use Tarot do readings with it, regardless of whether or not they use it for additional purposes. Only three people, out of around thirty respondents who replied to the posted questions used Tarot exclusively for nondivinitory purposes. Interestingly, the majority of respondents felt that the Tarot did not foretell specific events, but only probabilities and possibilities. Some felt that the Tarot could not tell the future at all, but acted as a guide to actions or as a problem-solving tool.

Divinitory readings range from the very simple to the very complex. Simple readings may involve asking a question about a problem or a future event and then drawing a card at random. The card either answers or gives some kind of insight into the question asked. A more complex reading might use most of the cards in the deck. One used by the Golden Dawn involved five different steps and used most of the cards in the deck (Regardie 2002:566-587). The Celtic Cross spread is by far the most commonly described spread, appearing in various books on Tarot. Card users believe this spread provides a description of the present situation of the querent, the past events that led to this situation, and what may come of it in the future. The reader interprets the spread in terms of health, relationships, and money in some versions. In others it describes the influence of self and others, the querent's hopes and fears, and how the situation actually is in relation to how it appears (Giles 1992:129). In this respect it may be that the popular literature is slightly deceiving—almost all books on Tarot describe the spread, and yet many people on the posting boards felt it to be too complex. According to some of them, one weakness of the spread is that it takes into account too many factors and can be rather imprecise. They often suggested that using a one card or three card spread would be sufficient for most purposes in general divination. Interestingly, in what appears to be a fairly recent development in Tarot divination, card users promote and encourage the creation of new spreads. In fact some recent books about tarot focus entirely on Tarot spreads.

Two activities often associated with the cards are meditation and what many members of these alternative movements call pathworking. Meditation, in conjunction with Tarot, generally involves an individual looking at the imagery of the card while in a relaxed state. The person allows the imagery to “speak to them,” thus gaining insight from the card, whether psychological, spiritual, or otherwise (Pollack 1997:331). Variations on this exist. Some people memorize the

card and picture it in their minds. Others focus on a specific meaning of the card, which they hold in their mind. Most of the time a person's goal is to "understand" the card or how the card relates to a particular situation. Often individuals practice guided meditations. In this activity people are told what to picture in their mind. Sometimes this involves acting out a particular story in one's mind or picturing a particular scene (Pollack 19997:331). People also practice guided meditations in contexts completely separate from the Tarot. People often view pathworking as a more structured form of meditation. Most often refers to a type of visualization activity related to the Cabala, and in this context it refers to the paths on the cabalistic tree of life ([Image 1](#)). Some people on the posting boards felt that the term referred to any meditation that involves picturing oneself entering the card and interacting with the scenery and the figures portrayed. Many modern spiritual groups view pathworking a way to explore the inner world of the mind, to discipline the mind, and as a method of healing or even entertainment to some (Ashcroft-Norwicki 1987:21, Greenwood 2000:71). Greenwood (53-57), who participated in the activities of many of the groups she studied, described her own experience with pathworking in conjunction with Tarot. In one group, members meditated on a particular card in relation to a path on the Cabala. She described the meditations on card V, the Hierophant. The group believed him to represent a force that guarded a threshold between lower and higher parts of the tree of life. People meditating on the card in this case were supposed to let the visualization proceed without consciously guiding it. They then described their experiences afterwards. Throughout this time period, in which people met and meditated on the card repeatedly over a few weeks, members also studied the Cabala extensively.

A growing number of people use the tarot for magical practices. Recently a number of popular books have become available on the use of Tarot in magical ritual and spells. Generally, according to posting board users, the magical practitioner uses the card as a focus for their own powers. Some people believe the card represents the particular kind of energy or power being invoked or channeled. The use of Tarot for magic or spellwork is becoming fairly popular among users of Tarot.

VI. Stories and Narratives Associated With the Imagery

A number of stories have become associated with the imagery and structure of the Tarot over time. This process of association continues today. Stories became attached to the cards in a number of different ways. Card users often draw parallels between the imagery and meaning of the cards and myth and narrative from around the world. The number of thematic Tarot decks today illustrates this, as do many books written by Tarot users. A few authors and artists do not directly associate Tarot with a system of myth or narrative deriving from a particular culture, but do use the cards to illustrate a kind of otherworld. The two most widely known narratives stem from the Western magical traditions themselves. These include the Journey of the Fool and narratives that describe a process of initiation.

Soon after their association with occult traditions, people associated Tarot cards with Egyptian cosmology and myth (Decker et al 1996:206). Many believed that the Major Arcana

reflected a process of initiation into Egyptian mysteries. Other theories of Tarot origins have become more popular, but not all tarot users dismiss the idea of Egyptian origins. Many decks today in fact still have an Egyptian theme ([Image 8](#)). More recent artists and authors have drawn connections with Celtic and Greek. Cards in these thematic decks are often illustrated with scenes from particular myths and legends, connecting them directly to an already existing mythology, as can be seen in images from the Mythic Tarot ([Image 11](#)). The suit of cups in the Mythic Tarot reflects the myth of Eros and Psyche, while in other decks, such as the Haindl and Ancestral Path, cups are illustrated with events from the legends of King Arthur. Some popular authors and some members of the posting board communities observed discuss parallels between Tarot and various world mythologies (Pollack 1997).

[Place [Image 8](#) and [Image 11](#) Here]

As Greenwood (1) mentioned in her study, the concept of the otherworld is important in magical thought in modern spiritual movements. A number of Tarot decks have been created with the concept of an otherworld in mind without explicitly connecting it to any other mythic system or culture. These might include the Shapeshifter Tarot or the Dreampower Tarot. The latter deck focuses on a kind of mythic underworld, which the creator of the deck believes to exist both within the self and also externally, parallel to everyday existence (Stewart 1993:13-15).

Most important here are the narratives associated with the imagery of Tarot in general, regardless of whether or not the deck follows a particular theme. These include the Journey of the Fool, Initiation stories, and variations thereof.

The Journey of the Fool is today the most well-known of these narratives. A number of authors describe this story, and others briefly mention it. One version, found in Junjalas' book *Psychic Tarot* (1985:38-40), can be paraphrased as follows. The story begins with a young person, represented by the Fool card ([Image 2](#) and [Image 9](#)). He leaves home to travel in search of spiritual truth, and the people he meets see him as rather a naïve dreamer. Eventually he comes to an occult school, studies there, and becomes a Magician ([Image 2](#)). Before he leaves the school, he talks to the High Priestess ([Image 2](#)) and asks for spiritual guidance. He then leaves the school and eventually arrives at a great city and meets its rulers, the Emperor and Empress ([Image 3](#)). They instruct him in the ways he should act in life. The subjects of these lessons include creativity and how to use the mind to control emotions. He also talks with the Hierophant, who guides him in traditional and orthodox values ([Image 3](#)). He returns home briefly where he speaks with a girl he loves. They discuss his plans to continue with his journey ([Image 4](#)). Throughout this time he has been learning to control the conflicting forces within himself. Card VII, the Chariot ([Image 4](#)), represents this struggle. The young man uses and gains mental Strength ([Image 5](#)) as he travels and overcomes many obstacles. At the top of a mountain he meets the Hermit ([Image 5](#)), who suggests that he withdraw from the world for a period of time to meditate. During this period of retreat he learns about the cycles of life and change illustrated by

card X, the Wheel of Fortune ([Image 5](#)). Then, knowing that he has trials ahead of him, he sits before the scales of Justice and accepts responsibility for all that he has done and will continue to do ([Image 4](#)). Like the Hanged Man of card XII ([Image 6](#)), he realizes he must release old patterns of thought and living that no longer serve him. He then becomes very ill physically, and knows he must allow for the Death ([Image 6](#)) of his old self in order to be reborn. He then learns the qualities of Temperance ([Image 6](#))—moderation and self-control. Becoming ill again, he has a vision of the Devil ([Image 7](#)), who tempts him. He struggles with all of the bad habits and fears that tie him down, but they overcome him. In the vision he falls from the balcony of a Tower ([Image 7](#)). After his fall, he sees the Star ([Image 7](#)), and is inspired and spiritually enlightened, but the forces of the Moon ([Image 8](#)) bring to the surface hidden fears and past memories. Eventually he wakes up to the light of the Sun ([Image 8](#)), and is happy with his growth and achievements. He realizes that he possesses a greater awareness of cosmic forces and his own role in life, and calls for Judgment ([Image 8](#)). At peace with himself and the world, he eventually returns home, traveling throughout the World ([Image 9](#)) and sharing his insight. After returning home, he describes his experiences, and people feel hope and inspiration from him, but people continue to call him the Fool because that is how they remember him. Junjulas created this particular version of the story primarily as a method to learn the divinatory meanings of the cards, but it summarizes the basic meanings of the journey in its other contexts, as well.

[Place [Image 5](#), [Image 6](#), [Image 7](#), and [Image 9](#) here]

A number of other books combine elements of the story in descriptions of the cards, without explicitly telling the entire story. Sharman-Burke (1985:22-26) does this in her guidebook to the Waite-Smith Tarot. She often draws parallels between the Journey of the Fool and other myths, primarily Greek and Roman. She provides a brief description of the Journey as it is told in some other versions. The Magician educates the Fool. The Fool eventually meets his mortal parents, represented by the Emperor and Empress, and his spiritual parents, the High Priestess and Hierophant. Various worldly trials take place until the Wheel of Fortune, which represents the halfway point in the life of the Fool, after which he experiences a crisis and then journeys into the Underworld to better understand why the crisis happens. He is then reborn, having overcome darker forces.

One version found on the Internet, and popular on one of the posting boards, is renamed the Bateleur's Tale (Diana 2002). The individual making the journey is the Bateleur, another name for the Magician in the Tarot. It parallels the Journey of the Fool almost directly, with some subtle differences stemming from a slightly different tradition of interpretation of the cards. Here the story begins with the Bateleur, who did tricks for a living at various fairs. He grows bored and decides to go on a journey. He asks for advice from the Popess (another title for the High Priestess) on where to go, and she says he must follow his heart. He wanders to a city where the Emperor and Empress rule. In this version he travels and becomes lost, and is guided by the

Pope (or Hierophant). He buys a chariot from a man, but loses control and damages a house, the owner of which cried for Justice. He goes through a variety of other experiences, which teach him the lessons illustrated by the various cards. Eventually, he has a crisis of thought, and feels as if he has fallen from a high Tower. As in the other version, the Star inspires him to continue on his way after his crisis. In this version, the Moon reminds him of mystery, but in a positive way, and like the Star, it inspires him. Eventually he realizes his part in the world, and with that realization comes a sense of freedom, understanding, and joy.

People interpret the Journey of the Fool in various ways. It represents the process of the life cycle—childhood to middle age to old age, to some members of the posting board community. More often it is used to illustrate the process of spiritual development of the individual. People begin in a state of innocent ignorance represented by the Fool as he begins the journey, and pass into a state of enlightenment reflected by the World. After the World, perhaps paradoxically, comes the Fool again, as in many versions one is thought to be beginning the journey again, simply at another stage of knowledge. The journey has also occasionally been used in general books on alternative spiritual paths, to illustrate ideas or concepts. In one guide to the practice of Wicca, the author uses the idea Fool at the beginning of the journey to illustrate a leap of faith into the magical tradition, where one leaves the mundane everyday world in order to travel a new path (Telesco 2000:9). The same author uses the concept of the Magician to illustrate how an adept in the Wiccan tradition should be viewed (Telesco 2000:7).

The idea of the Major Arcana of the Tarot narrating an ancient process of initiation is still somewhat popular today. People still occasionally refer to a description of a meditation or vision experienced by P. D. Ouspensky (1972:21-63). He describes himself as the initiate. He meets each figure represented in the cards and sees each object in the Major Arcana. He describes it as if in a visionary or dreamlike state, and tells of a process of learning the Mysteries from each figure or object represented. Some versions of this narrative go through the story according to the most widely accepted order of the major arcana. Ouspensky's does not. He begins the story with the Magician, who he meets and communicates with through supernatural means. From there he is shown the Fool, then meets the High Priestess, and then experiences ideas related to the World card in a vision. Eventually he experiences the mysteries related to every card in the major arcana of the Tarot (Ouspensky 1972:21-63).

The minor arcana do not typically have an overall story or narrative to connect them that is specific to the Tarot alone. However, various reinterpretations of the Tarot have been made in the context of other mythologies, associating particular stories with the cards. Numerological interpretations of the suit cards sometimes say that they illustrate a progression of states of being, an interpretation emphasized in the Pythagorean Tarot ([Image 9](#)) (Opsopaus 2001:295-353). Aces represent forces of energy or states of mind in their primal, purest state. As one proceeds through the cards one sees a process of division and reuniting. While these descriptions cannot necessarily be considered stories, occasionally people combine stories with them, as in the Mythic Tarot, which uses a different Greek myth to illustrate the processes reflected in each suit.

Various narratives have associated with Tarot at different points in time. The most widely

known is the Journey of the Fool, other stories have a more limited acceptance or influence. Most of the people on the posting boards expressed awareness of the Fool's Journey. A few reported using it in meditation and pathworking activities. Others reported associating other stories from various traditions with the cards. They most often cited Arthurian or Grail legends, followed by Biblical stories. Two or three people mentioned meditating on initiation narratives at some point.

TAROT AS MYTH

The stories associated with the Tarot could be analyzed according to a number of definitions of myth; here they are analyzed according to an adapted version of Doty's definition of a mythological corpus. Five major aspects of the definition are important here. First, myth is a story that is culturally important, and second, the story is imaginal. Third, myths provide a metaphoric account of people's place in the world, and this can include such ideas as individual roles, and political and ethical ideals. A fourth characteristic of myth is that it is emotionally significant. Finally, myth typically has a number of rituals associated with it and secondary elaborations such as legends, songs, or music. The Journey of the Fool and stories of tarot representing an initiation process are analyzed.

Many members of contemporary alternative spiritual movements or subcultures consider Tarot in general an important tool. This has been especially true in the last thirty or so years. This can be seen in the sheer number of decks and books popularly available, as well as in the many websites and Internet communities devoted to the exploration and discussion of the cards. When asked, more than three quarters of the respondents from the posting boards knew of the story of the Fool's Journey. About a quarter of these individuals reported that they had meditated on the story. A number of these said that they had meditated on it from a cabalistic perspective. In cabalistic studies the events and the cards in general reflect the energy or aspect of the universe reflected on the paths of the Cabala. The Journey of the Fool, then, seems to be important to the spiritual communities which use Tarot. Fewer people today know the narratives that describe a process of initiation. Only a few respondents mentioned it, although initiation stories are still mentioned from time to time by popular authors. The reprint of Ouspensky's account generated some new interest in the aspect of Tarot.

The imaginal is in Doty's view a "heightened dimension of the real world" or a "metaphor for reality" (Doty 2000:41-42). Card users perceive the Tarot in general as a metaphor for reality. In the context of divination people view it as a reflection of the real world, or perhaps what the real world has the possibility of becoming for a querent. To a card reader each card, the position it falls in within a spread, and its relation to the other cards in the spread reflect some aspect of the querent's experience in the real world. The Journey of the fool is also imaginal in nature. It reflects the stages of life for an individual, and the trials people may face in life (Sharman-Burke 1985:22-24). Initiation stories are also imaginal. They give accounts of the individual meeting the various figures on the cards and learning the Mysteries represented in the imagery. The mysteries, or lessons, as communicated by Ouspensky (20-73), often serve as metaphors for the real world. The metaphors stem so much from the story of as they do from

meanings and metaphors of the cards themselves. An example is empress, who represents and is perhaps believed to be an actual entity responsible for the fertility and abundance of the earth. This is a traditional esoteric meaning of the card. Ouspensky, among others, uses the initiation story to convey this concept.

Related to the idea of the imaginal is the concept of suprahuman entities (Doty 2000:74). These figures go beyond ordinary humanity, but they do not quite become something other than human. They fall short of becoming a deity. The figures of the Major Arcana, which appear in initiation stories and in the Journey of the Fool can be considered suprahuman entities. The figures are usually portrayed as human, but they also reflect ideals of human behavior and abilities. In some versions the stories may convey the opposites of those ideals. Some early definitions of myth view it as having the quality of personifying natural forces, and while Doty does not make this a requirement in his definition, he considers personifications type of suprahuman entity (74). In one version of the Fool's Journey the Magician and the High Priestess are viewed as opposite but balancing forces (Bunting 1995). The Magician personifies the masculine, active, logical force in the universe, and the High Priestess represents the feminine, passive, intuitive force in the universe.

Both initiation stories and the Journey of the Fool provide accounts of people's place in the world. These accounts are firmly intertwined with the meanings of the cards themselves. The Journey of the Fool presents the individual going through the journey of life, and life is a constant process of learning. The cyclical nature of the story implies that this learning process never stops, but constantly builds on itself. Both the stories and the meanings of the cards communicate a constant reminder to strive towards certain ideals. An example of this is the idea of control over natural and supernatural forces, represented when the Fool either meets or becomes the Magician. Although many versions of the Fool's Journey do not discuss the issue of choice in how to use a particular power or ability, some do (Bunting 1995). Likewise, many books describing the meanings of the card discuss issues of choice. At each stage of the journey the Fool must make a choice of how to behave in certain situations. The Empress can again be used as an example here. In the guidebook for the Cosmic Tarot, people who are in control of natural resources are one type of person represented by the Empress, and the author points out that they can either use the resources wisely, taking care of the land, or they can exploit it and destroy it (Huets 1996:20). In the Journey of the Fool, and in Ouspensky's (29-30) narrative of Tarot as an initiation, the Empress is characterized as a positive and nurturing force.

As implied by the previous description of meanings of the Empress, people sometimes use the Tarot and stories associated with it to convey moral or political ideals. In the case of the Empress, the ideals involve taking care of natural resources and using them wisely. Often with regards to the empress ideals of motherhood and nurturing are also implied (Huets 1996:20, Ouspensky 1976:29-30). The events represented by the Devil and the Tower most often express the process of facing bad habits or powerful desires and either giving them up or resisting them (Bunting 1995). In the Journey of the Fool, sometimes the Fool actually meets an individual who tempts him or her with material wealth or power, or he battles with his or her own habits (Junjulas

1985:40). In many popular books the idea of material wealth as a binding and sometimes negative force is associated with the Devil (Huets 1996:53; Junjulas 1985:40). In Ouspensky's (51-52) narrative of initiation, the Devil states that he is the master of falsehood and he is both the cause and the excuse humankind makes for he worst of lies and illusion. From these examples it can be seen that the stories do convey ethical ideals, ideals also often communicated by the meanings of the cards themselves. Often the creators of specific decks will include in their explanations of the cards (or simply imply in the imagery) additional ethical or political ideals. One example might be the Motherpeace Tarot ([Image 6](#)). It emphasizes ideals that many modern alternative spiritual movements associate with the feminine—the ability to nurture oneself and others, intuition, and emphasizes ideals of equality and freedom as opposed to structure and hierarchy (Noble 1983:1-14).

The idea that myth provides a framework within which one can place personal experience within a larger perspective is related to the idea that it provides an account of people's place in the world. Tarot fulfills this purpose as a divination tool, and the narratives associated with the cards do the same. In the Fool's Journey, the Fool represents the individual. People identify themselves with the fool and his journey. Thus they interpret the world and their experience through the lens of the events in the story, or simply through the traditional meanings of the cards. Most often this interpretation happens at the level of the individual and their personal life experiences. One recent event, however, stands out because Tarot users have collectively interpreted it through their knowledge of the cards. This was the September 11th attack on the World Trade Center. The Tower card in the Tarot often shows a tower being struck by lightning and crumbling to the ground ([Image 7](#)). Because actual events so strongly resembled the image portrayed, people immediately made an association between September 11th and the Tower card. People viewed the event as being significant in the same manner as the card itself. The Tower, and the event in the Fool's Journey, represent a metaphor for some belief system or paradigm one has built up over time. A bolt of lightning topples the building in the image, representing some event that takes place and completely overturns or destroys this belief system, sometimes violently (Junjulas 1985:40, 57; Pollack 1997:118). In Junjulas' interpretation the tower itself may represent "false security and false pride(40)." The lightning strikes it down, forcing the individual to rethink their position, sometimes to rebuild the very foundations of their beliefs. While the destruction of the WTC forced many people to do exactly this without ever having knowledge of the Tarot, this event has added significance for users of Tarot who can see direct parallels between the event and the card.

The emotional significance of the stories of the Tarot is somewhat difficult to establish. Posting board discussions expressed a definite emotional investment in the cards and the interpretations and rituals associated with them. Few people, however, seems to connect a great deal of emotional significance to the story of the Fool's Journey. The number of popular books and websites that mention the story, however, indicate that it holds at least some importance to people. Pathworking rituals, which sometimes use of the Fool's Journey, do seem to have a powerful emotional impact on those who participate, as can be seen in Greenwood's account of

her participation in the activity, noted previously (17). Because people seldom mentioned the Major Arcana as reflecting stages of initiation, it can probably be assumed that it holds very little emotional significance to people today.

People do a huge number of rituals in association with the Tarot. The most significant ritual associated with both the Journey of the Fool and Initiation stories is meditation and, in particular, guided visualizations and pathworking. These activities involve either looking at or actively visualizing oneself within particular cards. Thus the person participating in the activity reinforces the meanings and interpretations of the card throughout that time. If the Journey of the Fool or other stories associated with the Tarot are significant to a given individual, other rituals involving Tarot, such as divinatory readings may be colored by that knowledge or may serve to reinforce or enhance associations with the story.

A significant number of secondary elaborations have been created involving the Tarot and stories associated with it. Most significant here are those directly related to the stories. Carl Sherrell's novel *Arcane* is a directly inspired by the Journey of the Fool, which begins with a mysterious individual, mute, wanders into the small, isolated village of Arcane, where he is considered to be a fool by the other villagers. As the story progresses the man actually becomes many of the figures of the Major Arcana and meets the rest of them (Sherrell 1978). Other elaborations of the Fool's Journey include some of the poems found on the Internet such as the one entitled Journey of the Fool, by Donna Kerr (2002).

The Fool's Journey is presently a culturally important story, and the initiation stories seem to have been important during Ouspensky's time and before. The stories are imaginal and metaphoric, and they communicate ideals about the place of people and their experiences within a larger universal order. Emotional significance of the stories themselves was harder to establish. Given the time and energy some people expended to learn the story and do the rituals associated with it, one can probably assume some emotional significance. People associate many rituals with the Tarot and its stories alike, and secondary elaborations have been created, in response to the Journey of the Fool. It appears from this analysis that overall these two stories have the characteristics outlined in this definition of myth.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Though the cards apparently began their history as a game, the Tarot has for many people evolved into a complex spiritual tool. Over time stories have become attached to the symbolism of the cards, particularly the major arcana. In particular, the Fool's Journey and stories related to initiation into Mysteries have held widespread appeal at various times, and the first continues to today. The stories seem to communicate various behavioral ideals and values and to offer spiritual guidance or direction, stemming from the symbolism of the cards themselves. These stories seemed to have some of the qualities associated with myth, and thus were examined here according to an adapted definition from Doty. The various characteristics of the two stories analyzed fulfill the requirements of this definition of myth.

Mythmaking appears to be a feature of most, if not all, societies throughout the world.

There are extensive studies of the existing mythology of many cultures. Few of these, however, analyze the processes by which myth is made, by which stories are formed and become a part of the body of symbolism and knowledge of a given group. In the example described in this paper, there is a documented history of Tarot as it developed from the eighteenth century to the present. At a very general level, then, looking at these developments more closely can shed light on the processes of mythmaking as a whole, leading to a greater understanding of those processes. More specifically, the esoteric Tarot stems from a fairly well educated, literate section of Western society. Anthropological studies have only relatively recently begun to focus on Western traditions and culture. The examination of the stories associated with Tarot allows for the opportunity to study myth as it has developed in a cross section of European and American society.

Tarot and Western esoteric movements as a whole also illustrate Boas' observation that a series of individuals can bring together many diverse aspects of exoteric ideas and myths and assemble them into a system of esoteric belief (Boas 1996:79-82). Tarot itself began as a game, with exoteric symbolism that was probably recognized by most who saw it. Beginning around the eighteenth century it was transformed into an esoteric tool and eventually merged into a much larger system of magical and spiritual doctrine. Tarot myth emerged in part as one result of this process, which is still going on today.

Many new spiritual movements form in response to dissatisfaction with those already in place. Many members of contemporary movements mentioned distaste for the hierarchical nature and what they viewed as rigid doctrine of the predominant Christian religion. In light of this, it is interesting that one choice of a spiritual tool is the Tarot deck. Although the Tarot does have a certain amount of structure and hierarchy in the order and importance of the cards, randomness and chance also play a large role in its use. This is today of primary importance in the use of the cards as a divination tool, but it also plays a role in spiritual pursuits. One can examine the cards randomly or in specific orders, such as the order of the cards as they appear in the Fool's Journey. Further examination of this interplay of ideas of chaos and order within these spiritual movements and the Tarot, and in particular the structures people impose on the cards or reject through ritual and story, could prove to be interesting.

On the surface, Tarot cards appear to people who are not closely familiar with them to be used simply for divination and particularly fortune telling. Card users read the cards and create decks in part in order to better understand the forces at work within their own lives, and the universe as a whole. The cards can also be "read" by various researchers and provide a wealth of information about the traditions from which the esoteric Tarot stems.

ENDNOTES

¹ "Spiritual path" or "spiritual movement" is used throughout this paper in place of the term religion for two primary reasons. The first is that there is some debate among anthropologists and sociologists on whether or not the movements in question—Wicca, Neopaganism, the New Age movement, and various occult practices—can actually

be considered by definition to be a religion (Berger 1999:4-8). The second, and perhaps in some respects more important reason is that many members of these movements avoid the use of the term in describing their beliefs, as to them it implies hierarchical structures and restrictions on spiritual choice. A number of individuals on the posting boards are offended when people apply the term “religion” to describe their spiritual practices.

² Interestingly, Rachel Pollack, a very popular author among Tarot users, also mentions Levi-Strauss and his analysis of the Oedipus myth in her most recent book, *The Forest of Souls* (Pollack 2002:69). She uses it in support of her argument that as there is no one version of myth, there is also no one version of any image in the Tarot (Pollack 2002:69). She is referring to the hundreds of decks that are available that reinterpret the image of each card both stylistically and symbolically.

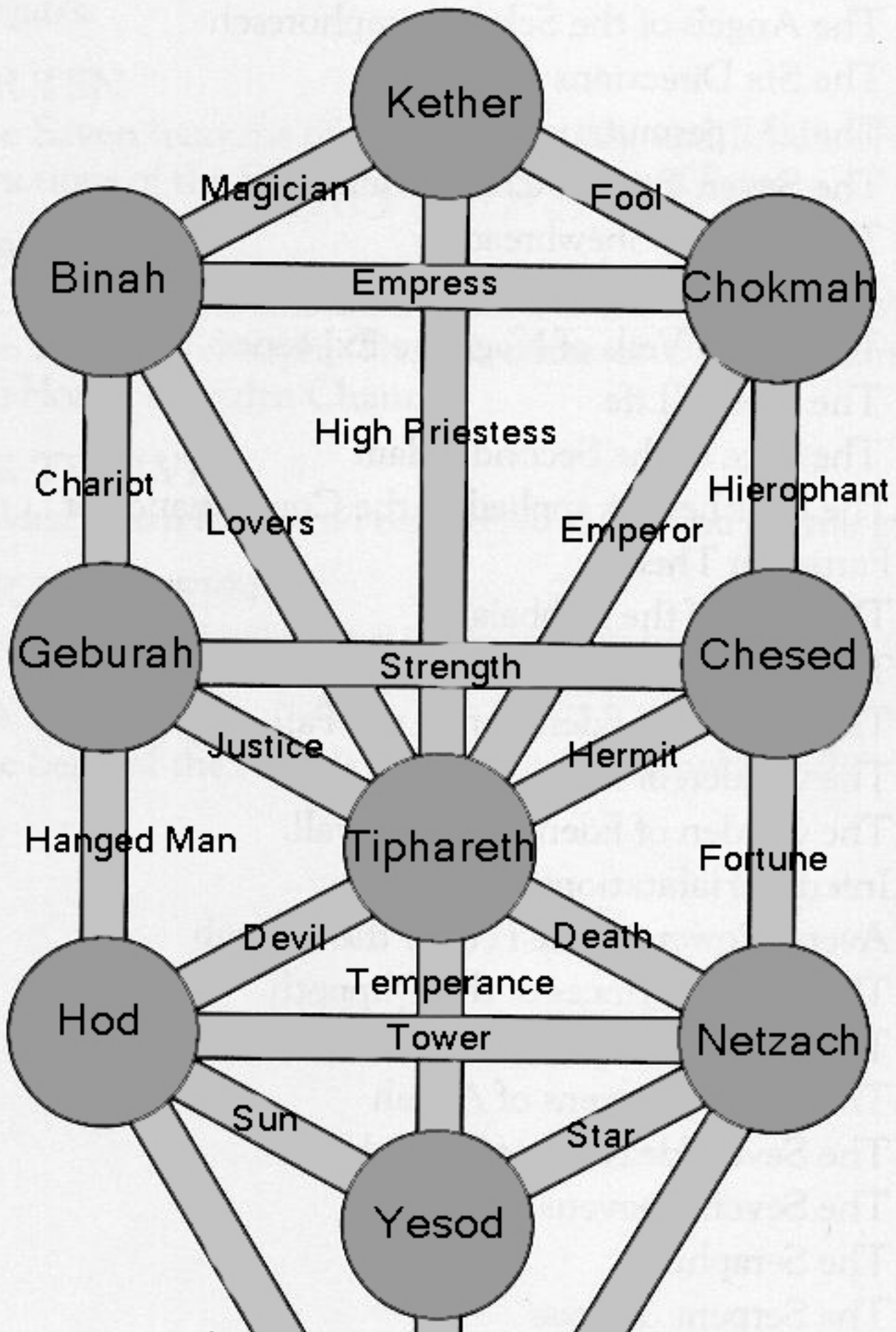
³ Statistics of Internet use are relevant here. It is interesting to note that while in general the majority of Internet users are male, about 66.4% according to one survey done in 1999, a survey conducted by a pagan group in 2000 indicated that about 55% of pagan Internet users are female (Kenoe et al. 1999, Thompson 2000). The average age of Internet users in general was about 37 years, while respondents to the pagan survey averaged at about 33 years (Kenoe et al. 1999, Thompson 2000). The study of overall Internet use indicated that about 84.7% of Internet users were from the United States, compared with 65 % in the pagan study (Kenoe et al. 1999, Thompson 2000). The pagan study did not indicate education level, but educational levels of Internet Users as a whole were high, with 87% having had some college experience and 59% having a degree (Kenoe et al. 1999).

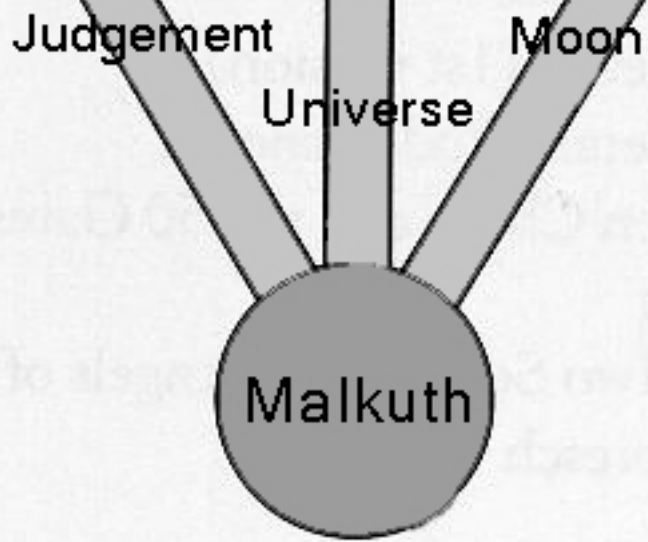
⁴ It should be noted that the history traced here is the one most widely accepted by scholars, but that some of the same scholars are not entirely satisfied with it. Decker stated in an interview that he feels that the cards may have been used in an esoteric context before the eighteenth century (Puissegur 2001). In the absence of enough supporting historical documentation however, this remains only a speculation.

⁵ Before the creation of the Rider Waite deck, the numbered suit cards of any deck showed only the suit objects, the same way a standard deck of playing cards does today. The one exception is the Sola Busca deck (Decker and Dummett 2002:132). Though the deck was obscure in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it appears that either Waite or Smith were aware of it, as some of the images in their deck are similar.

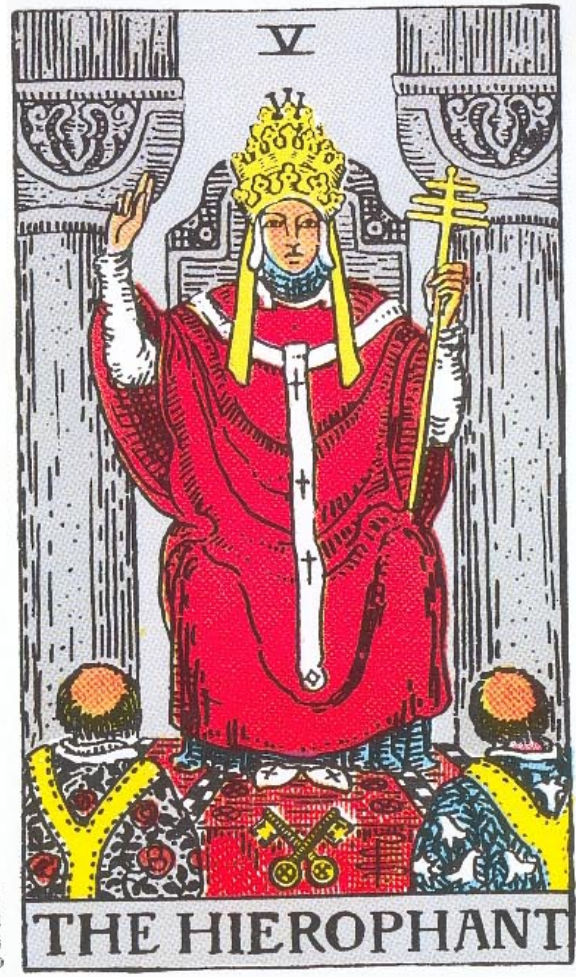
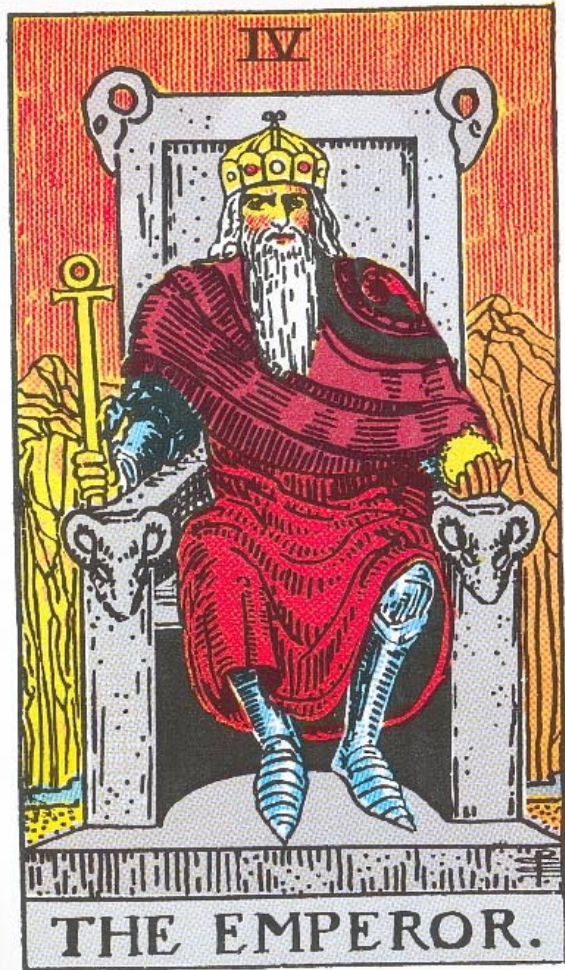
⁶ Related to the idea of creating one’s own deck is the idea of coloring a pre-made deck. A number of black and white decks have been created for people to color. The idea here is usually either to personalize the deck for individual use or to color the cards in a specific way to better learn the symbolism of the deck. The Builders of the Adytum (B. O. T. A.), a contemporary esoteric group, created the most well known example of this type of deck (Tannler 2003).

[REFERENCES CITED](#)

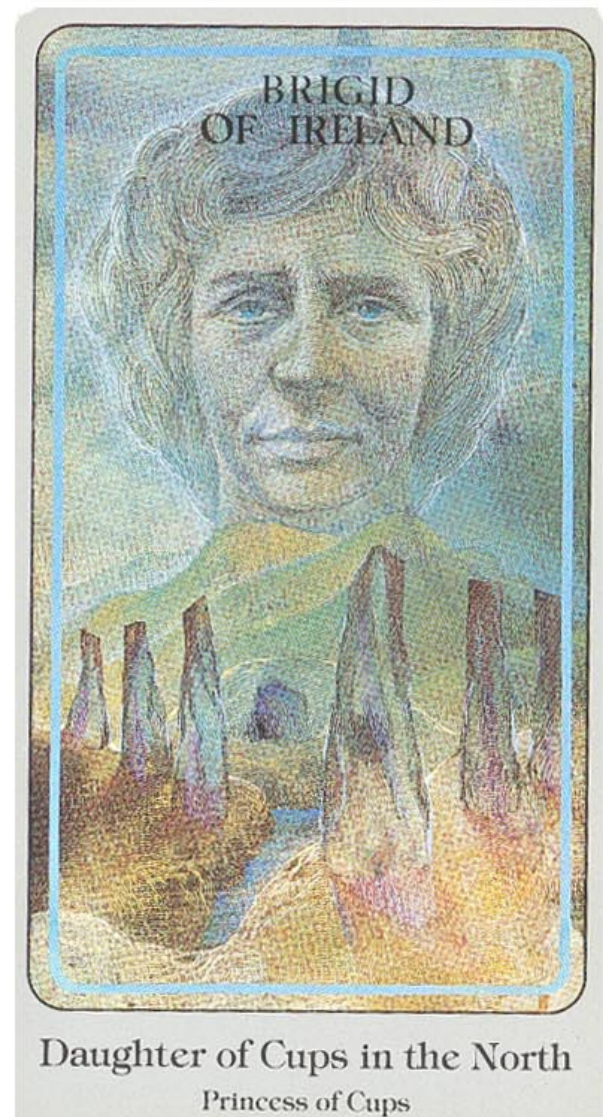
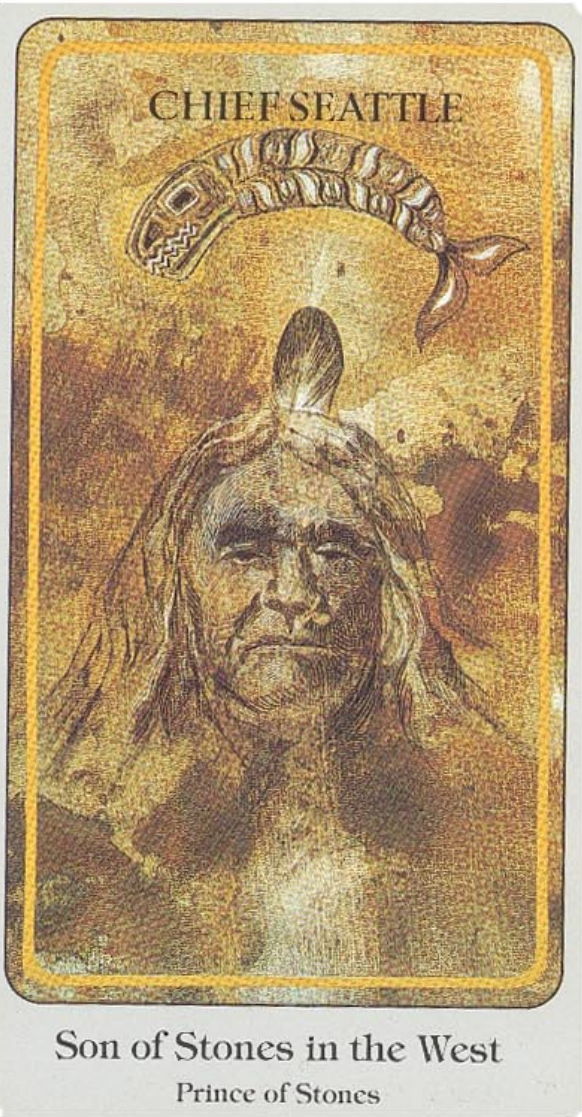


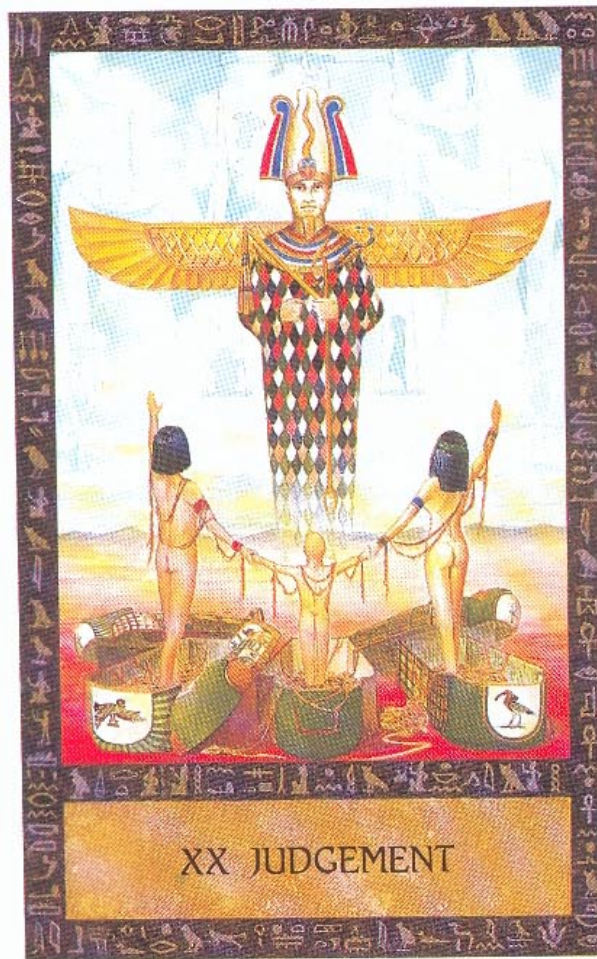
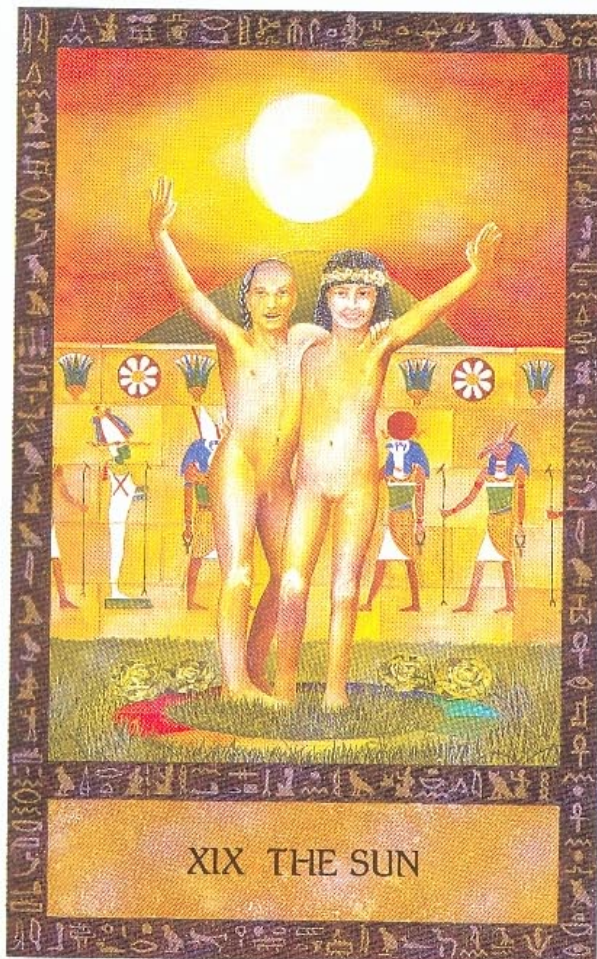
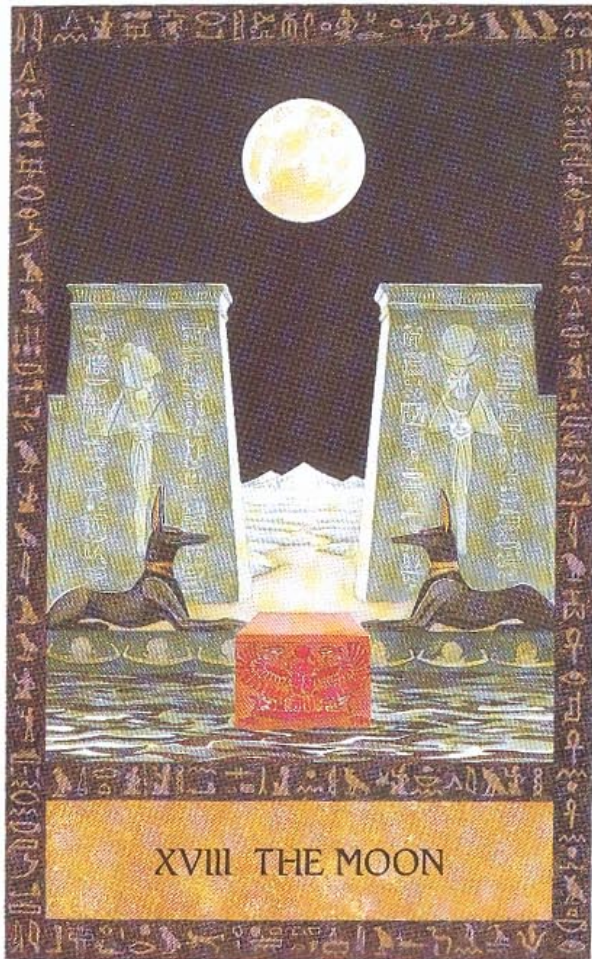




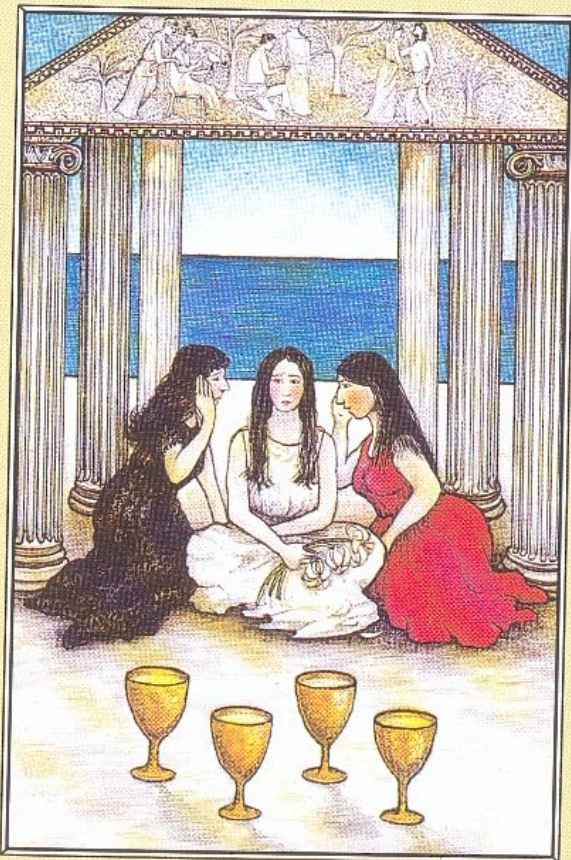




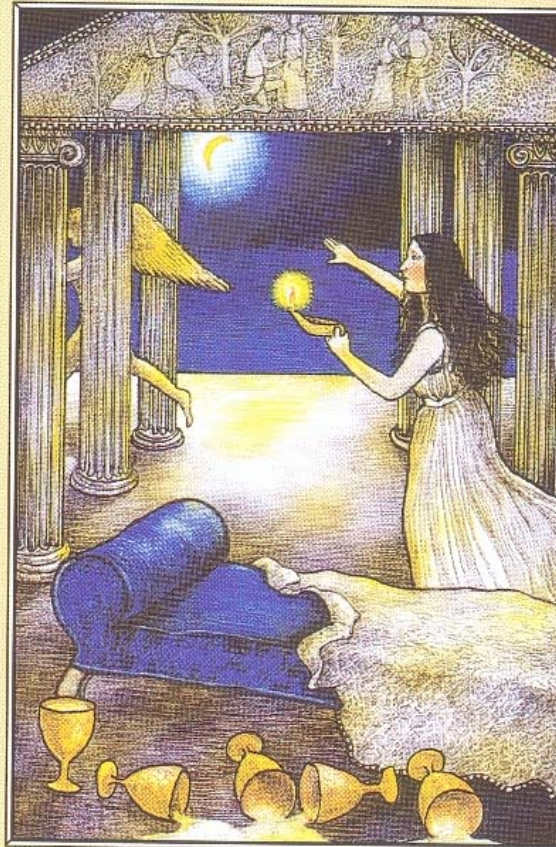




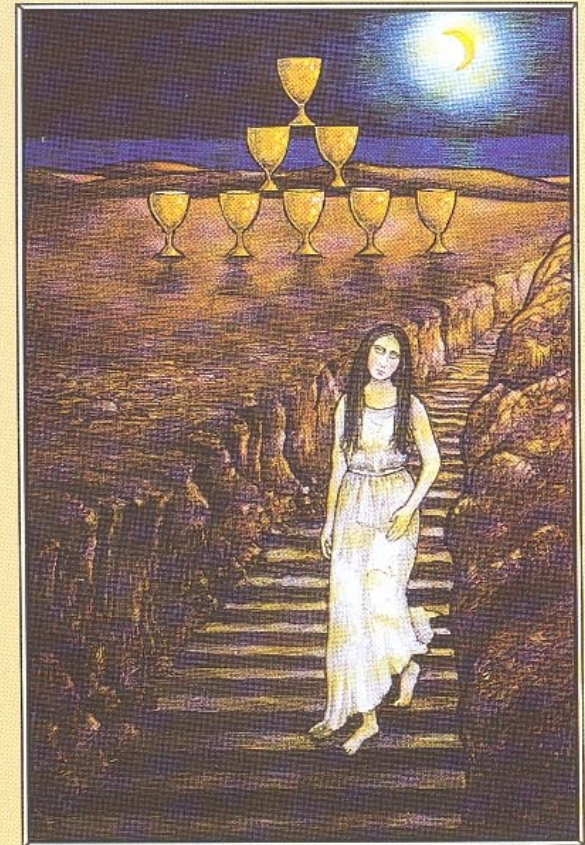
FOUR OF CUPS



FIVE OF CUPS



EIGHT OF CUPS





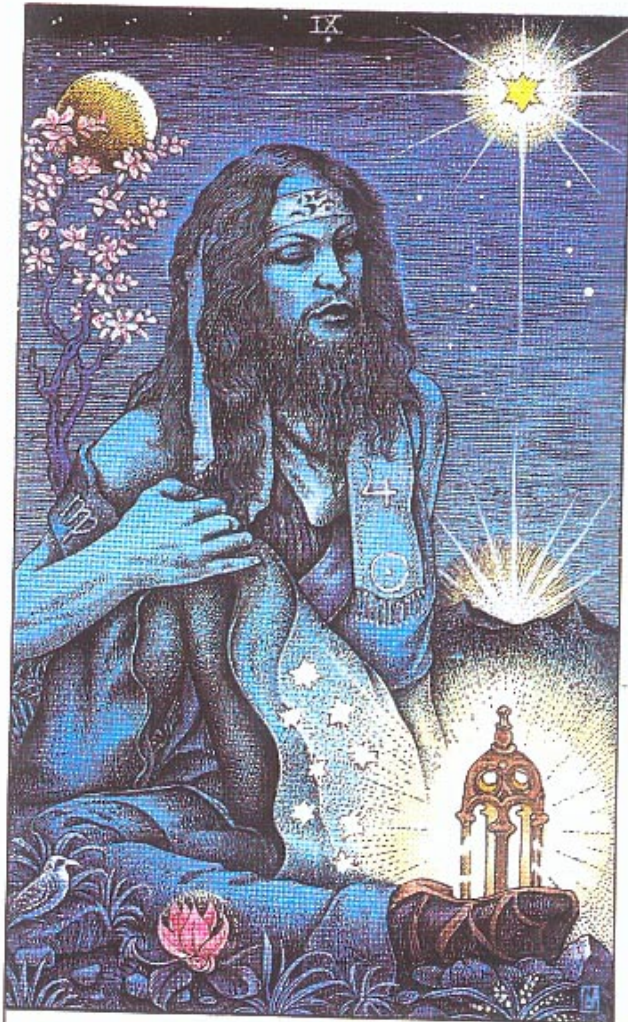
VVI Cosmos



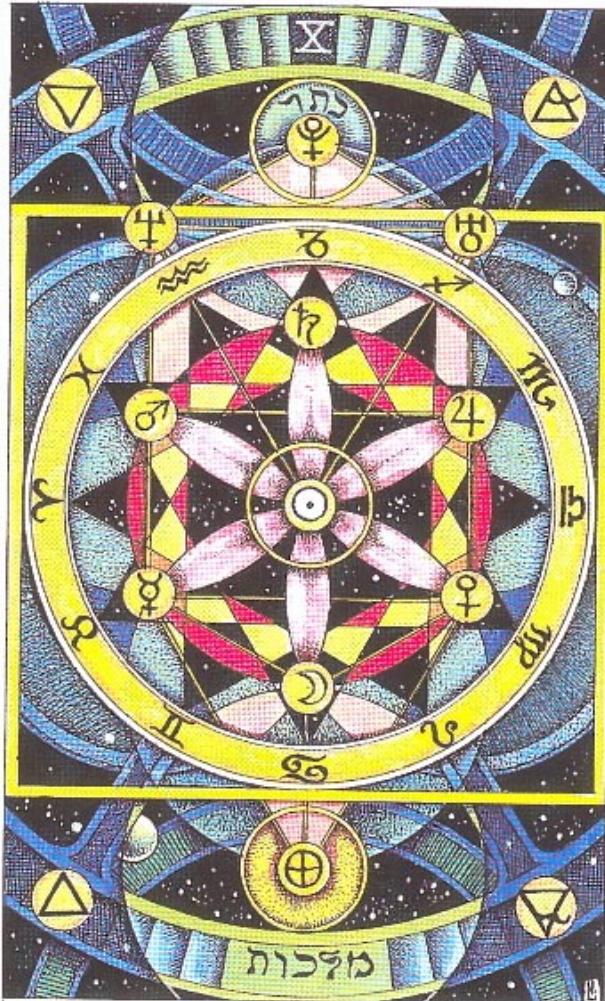
A Idiotēs

ΔΔΔ. COSMOS

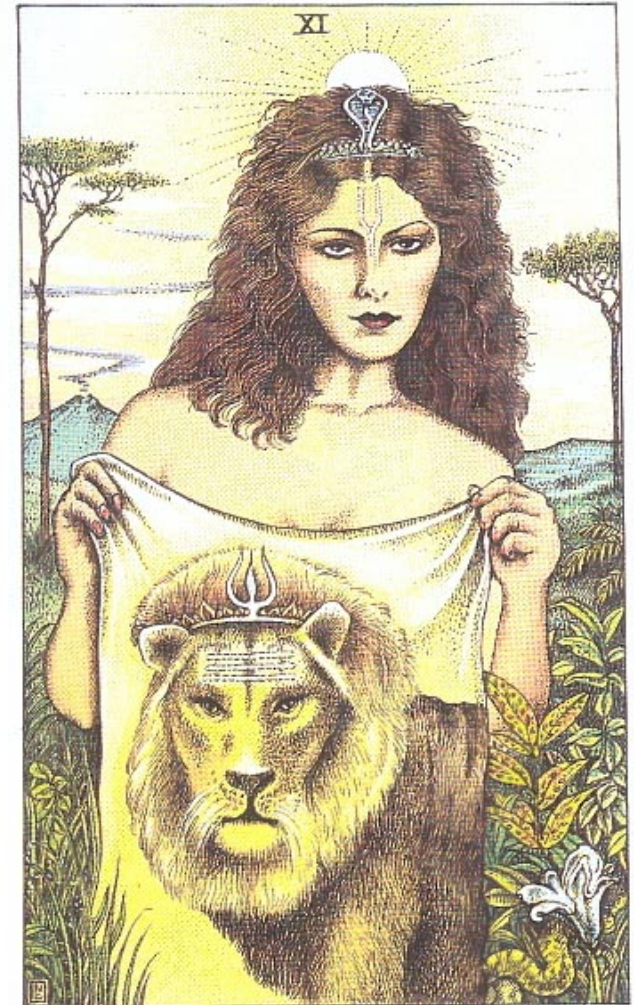
Θ. IDIOT



THE HERMIT



WHEEL OF FORTUNE



STRENGTH

XII



Hanged Ont

XIII



Death

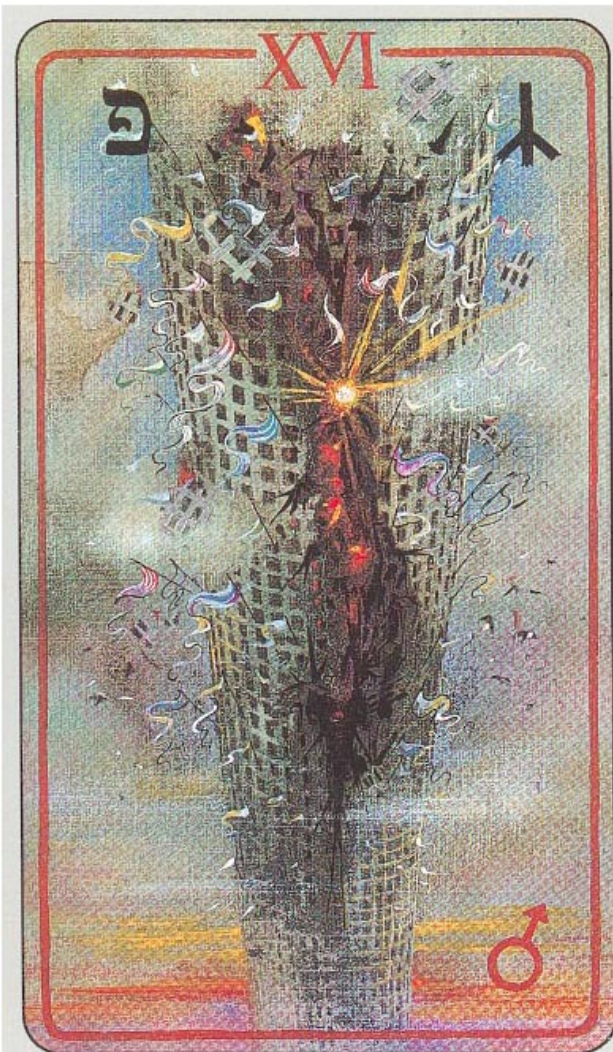
XIV



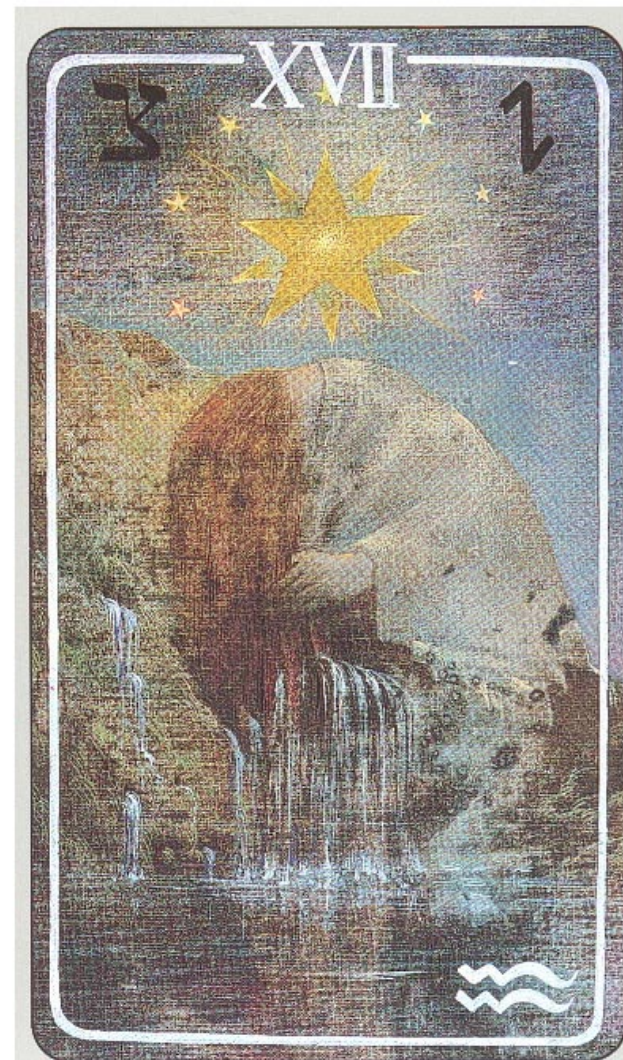
Temperanc



The Devil



The Tower



The Star

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