

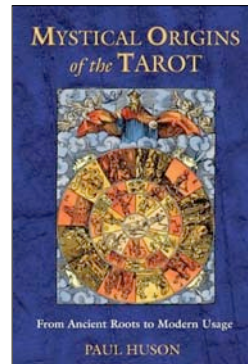
Tarot Reviews

Eric K. Lerner

**The Mystical Origins of the Tarot:
From Ancient Roots to Modern usage**, Paul Huson
(Destiny Books, 2004, 352pp, \$18.95)

The title of Paul Huson's *Mystical Origins of the Tarot* is misleading. It implies that the author advocates that tarot is a transmittal of esoteric knowledge. This notion has long been popular in the tarot community going back to the 1700's when Court de Gebelin and Alliette stated that Tarot represented the secret occult wisdom of the ancient Egyptians. Huson eschews such interpretations about tarot's origin. Instead, he identifies precise sources for the cards. He describes influences that were being brought to bear in the late Middle Ages when the first Tarots were painted for noble Italian families.

One notable departure Huson makes from how others have tried to explain Tarot origins is that he begins his study with the 56 small cards, rather than the 22 major arcana. Historical evidence suggests that



the pips were created first. The most complete example of an early 56-card deck is the fifteenth century Malmuk playing cards. However, there are examples of individual cards that date back more than three centuries earlier to the Arab world. He persuasively argues that Malmuk's four suits are derived from ancient Persia's caste system that included Magi, Kings and warriors, farmers and artisans, and those who would serve the rest. These can be likened to both the four cardinal virtues and the four card suits: Cups, Coins, Polo sticks and Swords. His analysis takes the reader through Medieval Arabic trading routes to Southern Europe. The cross-cultural designations of class systems, values and religious beliefs were reflected in the card games people played. The playing card suits evolved as documentation of Persian, Arabic and eventually European economic and moral norms.

Huson then explores how the trumps correspond to aspects of Medieval Theatre. Early drama consisted of morality, mystery, danse macabre and miracle plays. The plays provided the Church (the governing power body) with a means of indoctrinating the largely illiterate public. Early tarot artists depicted actors and scenes from these familiar entertainments. For instance, Huson shows how the sixth trump, the lovers, depicts the Youth and Maiden from the Danse Macabre plays. The Maiden and the Youth were akin to popular movie and television stars of our day. They were faces that the public would instantly recognize. Huson traces similar sources for each of the major arcana to the old spectacles. His argument is persuasive. The major arcana documented familiar cultural icons, and could have been construed to have the same edifying value as the plays in which they appeared.

Next Huson looks at the history of card divination. He illustrates the use of cards as prognostication tools developed from sortilege and oracular books in the 15th century. These were precursors to tarots first being used in fortune telling around 1750. He provides us with a succinct portrait of Alliette. Also known as Etteilla, Alliette linked his tarots to

initiatory wisdom of ancient Egypt. This helped popularize belief that tarots were powerful oracles. Huson steers clear of validating Alliette's mystical claims. Rather he focuses on Alliette's very real contribution of cartomantic meanings that endure today and chronicles how tarot meanings have evolved. He includes the contributions of Alliette, Papus (Gerard Encausse), Eliphas Levi (and the introduction of qabalistic symbolism), the Golden Dawn, and A.E. Waite. Huson also brings to light the important role that the Picatrix, an Arabic grimoire with its descriptions of the 36 astrological decans, played in how the Golden Dawn applied decan attributes to the pip cards.

One omission on Huson's part seems to be the contribution of Oswald Wirth. Even though Wirth did not publish his study, *Tarot of the Magicians*, until 1926, his rectified Tarot first appeared in the 1880's. It was cited by Papus in *Tarot of the Bohemians* and exhibited an important influence on the creation of the Waite-Smith Tarot. Wirth synthesized alchemical, qabalistic and astrological meanings into Tarot and lucidly developed the theories of both Papus and Levi. (Please note: one of the characters in J.K. Huysmans *La Bas*, which is sampled elsewhere in this issue, is either based on Wirth or is a synthesis of Wirth and his dear friend Stanislaus de Gautia.) That omission seemed unusual to me. Perhaps it is because the majority of Wirth's theories relate to only the Major Arcana.

In spite of that, *The Mystical Origins of the Tarot* stands out as a supremely useful reference book. Huson presents the evolution of meanings for each card in a straight forward manner and includes his own suggested interpretations. By presenting the different interpretations side by side, the reader is encouraged to compare and contrast the interpretations and make his own call.

Huson also offers solid advice on reading technique. Of particular value is that he explains how to develop sentence strings from tarots. To develop a coherent narrative or logical argument from a spread or

sequence of cards is critical to a valid and accessible reading. I appreciated seeing someone with a sharp intellect explain how to do this and provide examples.

As many of you know, I made my living for most of the past five years reading tarot for people. I believe my reaction to this book may be useful to others who might consider reading it. There are points on which I differ with Huson. I prefer to read the Thoth deck, and I tend to closely follow Crowley's interpretations. These do not employ reversals (a concept that Huson does use) and instead rely on elemental harmonies to determine the orientation of a card. In addition, the Thoth deck synthesizes Golden Dawn interpretations with other occult beliefs in framing a card's basic statement. That deck has worked for me. However, I enjoyed having some of my fundamental views challenged by Huson. His approach to actual meaning is a lot more down to earth than many of the "new age" texts on tarot. That helped open me to the possibility of meanings for the cards that have stood the test of history, yet seemed new to me in context of meanings I've long used.

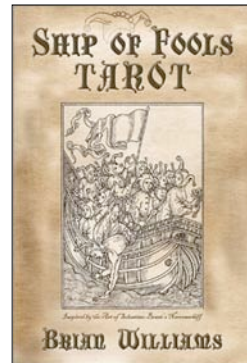
The bottom line is that any technician stands to improve his work by having his conceptions challenged. It simply keeps you on your toes. The fact that Huson looks for lucid interpretations based on historical precedent goes a long way to bringing tarot down to earth. That stands to make it useful. Any form of occultism, spirituality or magick is beyond useless if it does not provide its practitioners and clients a true means of enhancement. Most shamans and dedicated occult practitioners are very good technicians. Even though the purpose of their exercises may be spiritual, their approaches to work are very practical and matter of fact. It is this type of pragmatism that provides a solid platform for mystical evolution. You cannot begin a journey unless your feet are on terra firma on some level. Huson by being clear eyed in his approach to tarot provides a worthy foundation from which one can begin a journey toward higher truth. Ironically, his lucid scholarship in *The Mystical Origins*

of Tarot may truly provide a mechanism for mystical levels of attainment for his readers.

Deck Roundup

The past thirty years has seen an explosion in the number of tarot decks available. They seem as numerous as comic books, and like that genre they embody pearls and scum. I hate to waste my time in muck. Plus, since I've been known to create the odd deck myself, my sense of fair play dictates that I limit myself to those decks I like, or at least those for which I can offer what I hope is constructive criticism.

I wish to start with a deck/book set that was published posthumously: *Ship of Fools Tarot* by Brian Williams from Llewellyn. Williams was one of the few true American Taroists. He died in early 2002 after a long battle with cancer. Starting in 1987, with the Renaissance Tarot, Williams created five deck/book sets. (He also wrote the text for the book accompanying the *Light and Shadow Tarot*.) His *Po Mo Tarot* is a send up of both tarots and Modern art that's well worth scoring on EBay since it is sadly out of print. Even though he would emerge as a very serious tarot scholar, that deck best exhibited his sharp wit and love of art. In it he steered clear of lofty pretensions. However, Williams was a serious scholar of the Renaissance and Italy. He resurrected interest in the 97 card Minchiate style decks. This type of deck includes the horoscope signs, four virtues, four elements and a "Fame" card in addition to the traditional 78 cards. In his research on the Minchiate, Williams developed



the theory that the traditional elemental associations and meanings for suits Swords and Staves (Wands) should be reversed. In other words, Swords are traditionally associated with Air (Sanguine Temperament) and Staves with Fire (Choleric Temperament.) His argument that appears in Destiny Books' *Minchiate Tarot* is worth reading.

The inversion of elemental affinities between the two suits is something Williams continues to advocate in *The Ship of Fools Tarot*. God forbid we have evidence of someone consistently sticking by his intellectual convictions! Let's look at his last creative endeavor. *The Ship of Fools Tarot* is based on early Renaissance literary classic *Das Narrenschiff* (Ship of Fools) by Sebastian Brant. The work is a poetic satire surveying human folly. The fact that many of the woodcuts illustrating his tome were created by a young Albrecht Durer didn't exactly hurt the integrity of the text. *The Ship of Fools* fulfills many of the criteria Huson ascribes to the twenty-two major arcana in reflecting iconography familiar to Renaissance audiences through contemporary morality plays. Williams himself notes in the introduction to the accompanying book that he had cited *Das Narrenschiff* in some of his examinations of imagery that contributed to early tarot.

The deck's concept is that each card features at least one fool. Given the popularity of the contemporary notion that the twenty-two arcana represent an archetypal fool's journey, executing a deck in such a manner seems like an obvious approach. The cards' images are based on illustrations appearing in *Das Narrenschiff*. Some are clones of the original woodcuts, although Williams's signature clean linear style of pen work is obvious to the trained eye. Others combine elements from the *Narrenschiff* illustrations with design elements from the Marseilles and Waite-Smith tarots. Williams's text carefully explains all of his visual sources. To a tarot nut like yours' truly I really find that quite fascinating.

I really enjoy this deck and accompanying book. Face it: *The Ship of Fools Tarot* introduces many readers to a literary classic and provides

thoughtful insights about consistent archetypes of the human imagination. Plus, it's tongue in cheek. Williams obviously had fun with this and didn't mind including the audience in the banter. What makes this credible is that he does so while strictly adhering to Tarot convention. He does not create new suits or introduce new fangle arcana. He understands the conventions of tarot as genre and fits his observations as well as winks and nods within its established structure.

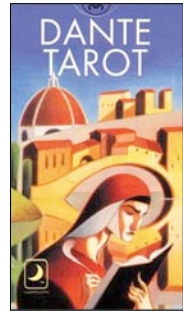
Because of its value as literary criticism and education and its adherence to tarot standards, I'm reluctant to say this is not a good choice for a first deck. An aspiring reader can do a lot worse than to develop a perspective on divination based on the work of Brant and Williams. Developing a sense of humor doesn't hurt either. The cards fit well in my hand. The monochrome sepia ink works for me. It lends the images warmth and helps convey a sense of history and thus the timelessness of human folly and existence. I also appreciate it when an American artist and publisher take a risk on a tarot deck that assumes its audience is intelligent and capable of expanding its knowledge base. Examining this deck has been a worthwhile investment of time. *The Ship of Fools Tarot* may indeed prove to be a source to which I return for inspiration.

Tarot has emerged as a unique artistic and literary genre, but it should not be thought of purely as an intellectual exercise. Its primary application is divination. It is not meant to be an art appreciation primer. I've been very kind to Williams' *Ship of Fools Tarot* because that deck meets a very difficult test. It succeeds in being intellectually stimulating while rigorously obeying the tenants of tarot. However, there are experiments that are much farther flung than that. Many of these appear as Art Tarot—that is a tarot presented as a unique statement of an artist creator. The best known of these is probably Dali's Tarot due to the prestige of the artist himself. I must confess that for a long time I would

not touch that deck with a ten-foot pole. It was not because I have anything against Dali per se, but we have been deluged with endless imitations of that deck in the form of collage decks created by anyone who got hold of a pair of scissors, old magazines and card stock. Many of these efforts were not the result of an understanding of tarot. They were onanistic exercises in self-congratulation. Recently, I broke down and acquired a copy of Dali's deck, and was shocked to discover that it's a quite fine deck. I guess when you think of the atrocities committed in the names of Jesus Christ and Allah, you can forgive an artist if his inspiration has been imitated by a bunch of idiots.

That still leaves us with challenge levied by this whole art tarot genre. How should they be judged? I have yet to develop a consistent answer. Any artistic genre has to be open to experimentation in order to expand its horizons. However, tarot is first a practical tool. I admit I'd rather see a bad art tarot than another flowery recreation of the Waite-Smith deck.

As "art" tarot offerings, let us examine *Tarot of the Imagination* by Pietro Alligo (author) and Ferenc Pinter (artist) and the *Dante Tarot* by Giordano Bertis (author) and Andrea Serio (artist), both from the Italian publisher LoScarbeo and available stateside through Llewellyn. Over the years LoScarbeo has produced tarots of both innovation and idiocy. It has taken some chances. If you as a publisher, or artist for that matter, are going to hit pay dirt in art, caution to the wind is not the worst course. Lo Scarbeo has kept some good artists in Chianti and pasta. And it has provided many valuable reprints of historical decks too.



The first for discussion is *Tarot of the Imagination*, which is based on the notion that history has provided mankind with common visual references. Hence, each individual will have a reaction to seeing an image of a Nazi soldier. The knee-jerk associations with Nazism may be

challenged if that soldier is seen innocently flirting with a pretty girl in front of the Eiffel tower. What do you think that means? Is it danger? Could the girl be a partisan with a stiletto strapped to her garter belt? Or maybe they're just two young people independent of their historical associations doing what comes naturally on a beautiful spring day? If this type of ratiocination intrigues you, you will probably enjoy *Tarot of the Imagination*.

I believe that it is the visual stimulation of the card that ultimately triggers visionary experience. A tarot image that yields new details upon successive viewing has a great deal of use as an oracle. Ferenc's artwork is realistic in physical detail with occasional forays into surrealism. The colors are muted and there are few hard lines in any of the paintings. This gives the iconography a hazy dreamlike quality consistent with the stated intention of the deck to reflect imaginative faculty.

How does this deck stand up to the criteria I applied to *Tarot of Fools*? This is where the going gets difficult. In the major arcana, Pinter stays within the bounds of standard iconography. Albeit he mixes historical epochs, but any who has ever read a Marseilles deck should be able to figure out what's going on.

The minor arcana are more troubling. Now, the purpose of the deck seems to be to provoke visceral response that require thought and insight to analyze and hence draw valid conclusions about the questions at hand. Over the years consistent meanings for minor arcana have been established through keys provided by sources such as Alliette (Ettiella), the Golden Dawn, qabalah, Waite (and Crowley.) I have some difficulty in identifying which if any of those keys Pinter consistently uses. To test this, I arbitrarily pulled the Four of Swords. The image shows the back of a Solider, probably a nazi, brandishing a machine gun with six people lined up against what appears to be a broken wall. There is a blaze of white on either side of the soldiers' head that may be smoke. Something ominous is going on here. A few of the lined up figures are very casual in

their physical attitudes. What are the common divinatory meanings for the Four of Swords? Let's turn to Huson's very useful reference book. He cites Etteilla leaning toward interpretations in line with either solitude or wise administration or circumspection; Mathers similarly with Solitude, abandonment, precaution or retreat; Golden Dawn Lord of Rest from Strife, Peace from and after war, possible abundance; Waite: vigilance, retreat, possibly tomb and exile, although possibly salvaged by wise administration. That leaves the Picatrix and its assignations for the planetary decans that are often correlated to the tarot pips. The applicable meaning of the 21st to 30th degree of Libra ruled by Jupiter according to Huson is ill deeds (traditional vices). That seems the closest of traditional sources, albeit a stretch, to what is suggested by the image. However, the supporting key word sheet provided by Lo Scarbeo says, "Massacre. Nobody looked them in the face or asked their names." That statement is certainly consistent with the impact the image had on me, but where does that emerge from the common understandings of tarot? Perhaps that can be construed as ill dignified interpretation of Crowley-Harris Four of Swords, Truce. However, the creators do not consistently adhere to Crowley's logic elsewhere.

Of course, such an image is consistent with common human experience. But I have to wonder why the artist did not more precisely correlate his iconography to traditional tarot meanings. Certainly, such an image of capricious cruelty could fit with many other of the pips in the suit of swords. Certainly the Eight of Swords readily comes to mind. In case of that card the Imagination image is more consistent with the traditional dread associated with it. It displays the image of a partisan carrying what appears to be a fallen comrade (or victim) slung over his shoulder. The meaning described in the key is Sacrifice. Misfortune is rife in the interpretations of the Eight of Swords. However, I believe that sacrifice is en-nobling. It means to make sacred. And I have not typically

encountered anything noble in other interpretations of the Eight of Swords.

Now where does this lack of a proven system of cartomantic meaning place *Tarot of the Imagination*? Ferenc uses visceral images. Many defy simple black and white explanations. It takes courage to do that. Obviously, the artist committed himself to doing a series of paintings that stimulate us to think based on our understanding of history and common experience. I wish he had studied his divinatory meanings of the pips more closely. That could have seriously enhanced the enduring value of this deck.

Still, I responded to this deck. The way it comes packaged seems willy-nilly. It is not organized by number, suit or division of minor arcana from major arcana. Typically decks come organized numerically by suit with the major arcana separate from the minor arcana. In *Tarot of the Imagination*, pips of different suits and Major arcana were intermixed. That made me immediately question whether or not the artist was making a significant statement through the ordering of the cards, as they appear fresh out of the box. At this point, I feel that the purpose of the arbitrary arrangement is a statement about human perception itself. We analyze data in a collage manner. Hence, many artists argue that collage is the logical medium for this epoch. We watch news reports about tsunamis one moment and flipping through sports programs and old movies the next. We experience our world in little chunks. That is also one of the significant underlying statements of *Tarot of the Imagination*. The deck did make me think about perception. Some of the images are especially strong. Certainly, one can gain a deeper appreciation for life and art through looking at the deck.

The Dante Tarot is both more troubling and delightful than *Tarot of the Imagination*. The deck was developed to reflect the worldview of Dante whose writing predates Tarot. Dante passed away in 1321. It was not

until the next century that there is evidence that the 22 major arcana were added to the Malmuk playing cards, giving birth to a 78-card tarot. Using more ancient historical sources as inspiration for tarot art is a very old practice. Early Tarots included images of Greek gods and Mesopotamian Kings. And of course ancient Egypt has continued to be a visual reference for a large number of Tarots. Dante's work was far-reaching, cosmic and iconographic in nature. It makes a good source of inspiration for Tarot. Giordano Berti states that he wanted to base the deck's Trumps on Dante's work *Convivio*, an encyclopedia of medieval knowledge. Only Trumps 11 and 13 through 15 retain the names of the traditional arcana. For instance the trump occupying the role and place of The Fool is called Necessity and the Empress Knowledge. However, the artist Andrea Serio retains visual keys for the trumps based on established Tarot conventions. The Figure in Necessity is obviously a vagabond with a dog at his heels as Fool is most often depicted. Knowledge is a powerful woman obviously adept in the mysteries of sexual knowledge and morality, an Empress.

Serio's artwork is what made me want to acquire this deck. He uses pastels for the work that evoke the exaggerated geometric style seen in much PostModern Italian art. The choice of pastels imparts a sensual flowing quality to the contours. His background according to the deck's liner notes is in comics. That serves him very well, because he is able to convey a dynamic narrative in his compositions. Like the best comic art, the images talk and communicate essential information elegantly. In light of the quality of the art, I am a bit reluctant to give the deck anything but praise. The artwork can be contrasted with that in *Tarot of the Imagination*. Serio clearly defines what is going on in his compositions. Even though Ferenc is more realistic in drawing style, there is a lot more ambiguity in his compositions. It seems ironic that Serio with a more abstract manner of characterization should be more lucid. But his images are more strictly composed in their manipulation of space. Consistently, he centers his

principle actors. Frequently the figures occupying the first or third sections of the composition relate to the key actor in a chronological manner. For instance in the Necessity (Fool) image, the central figure is walking away from a group of three men (one is pointing at him). One gets the clear impression that these represent rational forces in Society. They stand against pillars, buildings that echo ancient Greek architecture. The figure's head, hand and the front half of his dog appear in the final third of the composition. This indicates that he is departing for a less structured feral environment. It is interesting that Serio chooses to distort the human form so that the head is not centered over the body. He uses the composition to make the statement that the traveler is leaving behind logic to such an extreme that his own mind is not centered, as it should be physically. It is the consistent use of dramatic composition that makes the images talk.

The relationship to traditional tarot *The Dante Tarot* is further strained by the creation of new suits: Bricks, Flames, Clouds and Lights. Bricks seem to correspond to pentacles or disks since they deal with material situations in Dante Alighieri's life. Interestingly, he writes that Flames fulfill the function of Swords and Clouds of Wands. This is similar to Williams's interpretation of the elemental affinities of these suits. Lights take the place of water. There is no consistent rationale for what the pips mean in relationship to popular tarot interpretations. A simple example is the Two of lights. Virtually every interpretation of the Two of Cups deals with the realization of Love. Generally, it's one of the happier cards you can draw unless ill dignified. In the Dante Tarot, the cheat sheet states: "Heavens of the Moon. Changes underway. Futile Hopes. Unthinkable results." The image depicts two women in a dreamy moonlit grove. A handmaid is delivering a message to her Queen. The Queen's sense of anticipation and dignity are both indicated by the subtle prayer-like position of her hands. Again, Serio does an excellent job of conveying the author's intended meaning and managed to take it a level

deeper through the grace of his execution. However, does the intellectual vigor of this endeavor really match what Williams does with his medieval source in *Tarot of Fools*?

The bottom line is that if you like art tarot at all, you are going to buy this deck. I realize that the author's intention is to pay tribute to one of the world's great authors, and he may have felt at odds trying to fit Dante's precepts into the constructs of cartomantic meanings generally attributed to Tarot. If they had called this *The Dante Oracle* rather than the *Dante Tarot*, I'd probably be a lot more comfortable.

If Tarot is going to get the respect I believe it richly deserves as an artistic genre, there must be a consistent litmus. Both these tarots from Lo Scarbeo challenge this litmus. I wish the authors had done a little more to convince me that they had paid attention to what boundaries they were pushing though demonstrating more attention to what they were stating in regard to the divinatory meanings of the pips. Finally, I sincerely hope that Serio does more tarots. His ability to create images that are both aesthetically pleasing and meaningful is quite welcome. He possesses an outstanding narrative feel that he expresses in his tarots. I have not really seen that in a tarot artist since Elisabetta Cassari had her heyday with the bracing series of tarots she created for Solleone in the late Eighties. (Her work provides an excellent example of an artist who could turn traditional tarot meanings on their ears and spin them around a few times. Yet, you knew this lady had done her homework and was using her effrontery to fashion a cynical and dark worldview. Recent history has done a good job of proving her correct. Visionary potential is part of the tarot experience, right?) I'd like to see in what direction Serio goes.

The Tarot of the Elements by Isha Lerner and Amy Ericksen struck an immediate chord with me through the immediate "primitive" quality of its artwork. (I admit that it also caught my eye that my full name is

spelled out on the box Isha LERNER AmyERICKsen.) The deck's imagery is based on the visual expressions of shamanistic cultures, ranging from cave paintings to Afrikan and Native American art. I believe that this type of iconography is closest to both the conscious and subconscious expression of man. The visionaries responsible for those fundamental creations expressed themselves in a most immediate manner, not defined or constrained by a need for the logic of language. Therefore, work that incorporates these primary sources may well strike an immediate response with most viewers. Given that I myself have looked to these sources in particular for my own understanding of existence and inspiration, I perceive immediate correspondences between Eriksen's artwork and my own.

I needed to get that out of the way before reviewing *Tarot of the Elements*. In *Tarot of the Elements*, Lerner and Eriksen aspire to create a tarot based on primordial archetypes. Its symbolism is developed from shamanistic art to express the unconscious forces at work in human consciousness. In the introduction, Lerner analyzes overall numerical and color symbolism. From that I formed the impression that she might steer clear of traditional cartomantic meanings in her meanings of the pip cards. However, I was pleasantly surprised to find that she was respectful of traditional meanings in both her text and the resulting images. In keeping with the decks titles, she names the suit: Fire (in place of Wands); Water (in place of Cups); Air (in place of Swords); and Earth (in place of pentacles or disks.) Artist Ericksen employs icons from the traditional suit names in her illustrations. The writer and artist do balance the focus of the cards on the transformative and subtle energies of the cards, as opposed to pragmatic divinatory meanings, but that works.

Lerner demonstrates knowledge of disciplines, such as astrology, High magick's mathematical formulae and classicism, as well as tarot. That indicates that she has done her homework. Thus, she establishes credentials for herself and her insights. Although she is fond of words

like “soul” and “transformation,” she develops her rationale from materials known to most serious “mystery” students. However, she can be down to earth. For instance, she writes that Death card can really mean somebody dies, and that it often appears in readings for one who has someone dying in his inner circle. Frankness about that topic (and others) is often missing from more philosophical examinations of tarot. Taken in sum, this makes her come across creditably.

Lerner and Ericksen apply a radical notion to the major arcana that are called Mythical Images. Each of theirs is balanced in all four elements as opposed to one dominant element! The tendency in most tarots is for the later approach. This is by far the most unique quality of *Tarot of the Element*. Their underlying assumption appears to be that since each of these “mythic figures” represents important aspects of human endeavor they should be balanced between all four elements of existence.

Honestly, I’ve never looked at the major arcana in quite that way before. Let me use the Hanged Man as an example. He is traditionally represented as a figure hanging by his foot with one leg crossed over his knee. I believe that he is most akin to water, as his Golden Dawn moniker “Spirit of Might Waters” indicates. However, I’ve seen effective representations of that figure with a different elemental association. For instance, Dovilio Brero’s Hanged Man in his eponymous deck makes a powerful statement that the slain god is essentially an agricultural artifact by showing a beautiful dead youth bound and strangled amidst sheafs of wheat. Thus Brero’s Hanged Man corresponds to an earth rather than water. The hanged man’s slaying corresponds to myths of Kings given to feed and thus be reborn through harvests. I can understand that a student might understand earth as being the conduit for regeneration rather than water.⁶

⁶ Traditionally the Hanged man figure is an inversion of the Emperor. The Emperor’s pose is that of the glyph for sulfur (fire.) Water is opposite of fire. As a glyph the upside

Compare these notions to how the Hanged Man in *Tarot of the Four Elements* is depicted. First off, he is called “Shaman.” That designation is consistent with other cartomantic interpretations of the card. For instance, Wirth describes him as a Mystic and Initiate whose pure religious feeling is common to all epochs and nations. (Crowley too describes him as an initiate, but that the card itself is essentially a glyph for water.) The Element’s Shaman is obviously balanced between Air and Earth. Flame like contours outline his bone structure. His head connects to his penis through his spine is rendered in watery cool blues, indicating the sustaining water of life. His testes are bright red indicating fiery male energy. The figure is obviously animated. One of the frequent attributions of the hanged man is that his body is constricted but his mind is free. The four elements are combined again in the earth in which the figure seems to be plated. There is a pair of watery blue eyes streaming tears of blood (the union of water and fire) in the earth itself yet amidst a field of stars (air elements.)

By integrating all four elements into the major arcana, Lerner and Ericksen do not incorporate elemental dignity into the methodology of *The Tarot of the Four Elements*. For the uninitiated, elemental dignity employs the notion that certain elements harmonize and others do not. Simply put fire and water don’t get along; neither does air and earth. So if a card in the suit of Wands comes before one in Cups, the meaning of the Cups card is not in balance. It is a bit more subtle than just flipping the meaning of the card as one does in reversals, since a card that implies a challenge will often become more challenged rather than given a makeover if it is not in elemental harmony. Also, dignity demands the reader look at the overall harmony of energies in the spread. Now, by not having the Major arcana associated with unique elements, the authors

down sulfur sigil also represents perfection of the Great Work, reiterating the meaning of sacrifice “to make sacred.”

imply that all elements can be brought into harmony. However, I do imagine from that logic, that a balance of elements would be desirable among the pips in a spread.

The belief that all four elements harmonize, tending to be balanced in a natural state, is optimistic. It implies that things can work out. The primary purpose of divination is to enable the person being read with a strategy for evolution. Starting a reading with the supposition the world is well integrated (and is portrayed in such a state through a number of mythic archetypes) lays groundwork for success in life's journey. All too often tarot readers and other diviners seem to cast their clients' lives in stone. Obviously, this is not what they are supposed to do. The open quality of *Tarot of the Elements* appears designed to encourage individual interpretation and development.

The author is wise enough to know that she and her partner make a departure in their harmonizing of the elements. It's one thing to do something like that because you do not realize that the trumps often have had specific correspondences, it is quite another when you consciously universalize them in hope of liberating people.

The final publication for consideration in this review is the *Toltec Oracle* by Victor Sanchez. Guess what? Someone actually has had the inspiration to create a series of pictographs on card stock, not call it a Tarot, and give us a lucid means of divination. Drop me with a feather or feathered serpent as the case may be! I was a little apprehensive about reviewing this one. I put off looking at it for a long time. I feared that it could be bad on the assumption that this was going to be a tarot based on MesoAmerican culture. Mixing non-European cultural systems with tarot has usually produced pretty disastrous results. Witness all the Orisha tarots. It's a delicate line the creator must walk when drawing correspondences between two systems of meaning. Ideally, the comparisons illuminate each by synthesizing points of resemblance and

contrasting differences. Fortunately, Sanchez steers clear of any such pratfall by fashioning an Oracle based on a system of values he well understands. He does not fit that in the girdle of 22 arcana and 56 pips.

Sanchez is an anthropologist and teacher who has devoted his life to the study of the indigenous peoples of Mexico. His Oracle has 33 cards that reflect Toltec spiritual concepts. There are 20 “Tonalpohualli” cards that correspond to archetypal forces embodied by the twenty days of the Toltec Calendar. The other 13 cards are “Rulers” representing “Poderios” or Toltec elemental deities. Each of the two sets is employed separately before a synthesized interpretation is developed. Sanchez has designed a four-quadrant figure termed the Cross of Ketznelcoatl upon which the cards are thrown in a mandala. A complete reading consists of 4 Tonalpohualli cards with unique meanings derived according to which quadrant they are placed and a ruler card that provides a means of synthesizing the disparate forces.

The technique is solid. It reminds me of Stanislaus de Gautia’s technique for interpreting the 22 arcana described in *Tarot of Magicians* that also uses 5 cards in a mandala. However, Sanchez’s construction also evokes a technique of throwing Diloggun that divides the divination mat into the four cardinal quadrants. It has a universal appeal. Oracles reverberate with echoes from many cultures, because in matters of spirit mankind more often than not finds him running to and away from the same center.

Sanchez carefully explains the matrix on which his oracle cards are based. In doing so he reveals many similarities between Toltec beliefs and those of other cultures. For instance, I was struck by how much his Toltec belief system corresponded to Yoruba religion. If you changed a few nouns, about 90 percent of the text could have been used to accurately describe Yoruba principles. Its interesting that the Spanish moniker applied to the Toltec deities, Poderios, is virtually the same as

what they call Orisha (the deities of Yoruba religion), Poders. The Mesoamerican beliefs described by Sanchez paralleling Yoruba religion include:

One god who manifests through multiple natural forces.

Nature as the visible “face of God”

Personal evolution through actions.

Liberation through development of consciousness

Respect of Elders’ wisdom

Worship of the Earth

Sanchez does describe some other beliefs that could be tweaked to fit a Yoruba paradigm. For instance the concept of Ketzelscoatl, a tripartite deity, whose appearance as a feathered serpent embodies the esoteric maxim “as above so below” (a snake crawls on earth, a bird soars the heavens) is close to universal. That concept occurs one way or another in virtually every wisdom path I’ve encountered. The fact that Sanchez understands it as tri-fold rather than simply dualistic is consistent with finer points of initiatic knowledge in Yoruba spirituality, although in the later case, it is not directly stated. You should just read the Sanchez book for a full explanation of this. As an iguano, there are some points on which I’m supposed to keep my mouth shut.

My point here is that Sanchez describes a system of understanding that reverberates universally. A vast ocean separates the origin points of the two belief systems I am discussing, yet they are remarkably consistent. I believe that someone whose area of expertise was Asian and not West African spirituality could probably draw some similar parallels. (In the limited readings I’ve done on Hindu astrology, many points of

similarity also struck me. I have recognized correspondences between geomancy and I Ching with Diloggun divination.)

The Toltec Oracle reverberates with many cross-cultural values. At the same time is based on its own coherent worldview. Also, Sanchez has the great good sense to divorce his oracle from fortune telling in its more vulgar sense. An oracle is understood to be a means for divine communication with mankind. Do you really think that Miklantekutli, Yanzan Yeku-Yeku, or even Jesus Christ would want to waste their time explaining that the piece of trade who maxed out your credit cards before going ass and elbows on you really is not coming back? Or do you think that they would perhaps be a shade more in character if they explained why you are alone?

The gap in reality between what value divination should fulfill and what clients expect daunts many a reader. The purpose of a reading is to help a client evolve to a higher level of consciousness. A lot of people just don't see their life journey that way. Tarot can be very useful because it does lend itself to mundane prognostication. (And if we truly adhere to the maxim "as above, so below," Ifa teaches us an asshole is at least as essential if not more so than a mouth.) However, Sanchez has developed a divinatory tool that goes a long way to resisting mundane interrogation. A lot of aspiring diviners would do very, very well to learn this tool. It encourages ethical behavior on the part of a diviner. It does set limits for the client in the types of questions he should ask, and Sanchez clearly explains these in the text. As a reading tool, it is designed to encourage self-reflection and evolution. Sanchez includes specific exercises and behaviors that are consistent with the divinatory meanings of his cards. He also suggests the reader make written record of the readings and suggested behaviors as well as asks questions of himself. The types of things he suggests seem a lot less sappy than a lot of self-improvement rhetoric.

I'm very happy with *The Toltec Oracle*. Sanchez realizes that good sense is also part of divination. Rational and thorough examination of the oracular cards and the individual for whom they are cast encourages deeper understanding. The ultimate goal of such scrutiny is to help reveal that spark of divinity that exists in every person. That brings *Toltec Oracle* in line with the most poignant meaning of Divination.

It is ultimately going to be up to those who read Tarot, rather than those who collect it, to be the ultimate testers of the efficacy of any deck. Obviously you should throw away the cheat sheets at some point. Even Crowley said that the reading of his text *Book of Thoth* could be omitted with profit to the diviner. *Tarot of Fools* is a rollicking account of the history of both tarot and human folly through the lens provided by a classic work of literature. Williams keeps both his viewer's and his own eyes open to what is going on every step of the way. *Tarot of the Imagination* leaves a lot more open to the subjective interpretation of the reader. However, that creates the potential for confusion. A reader needs to be able to create relevant word pictures from the images to link them to the querent's life. Its ambiguousness can cut two ways in enhancing that process. It also presupposes that the reader has a knowledge of European history. (That is probably not a real strong selling point in the U.S.A.) *The Dante Tarot* is a lot more specific in its visual statements. It gains a spiritual richness through the pleasure created by lively harmonies of color and composition. There is enough subtlety in the images that a reader may pick up on idiosyncratic details that lend themselves to specific links of consciousness. However, I cannot truly call it a Tarot. Traditional tarot education may be more of a hindrance than a help with that deck. My overall impression is that *Tarot of the Four Elements* is that it is a useful deck. It should be fairly easy to read for both the novice and experienced reader. Even though I am uncomfortable with the democratization of elements in the major arcana, the approach to that is

consistent and justified by sharp artistic execution. Finally, we leave the tarot genre altogether in *The Toltec Oracle*. By developing it as its own means of divination, Sanchez aspires to introduce the voices of the godhead to many. As a tool of enlightenment, Sanchez's Oracle well exceeds the vast majority of contemporary tarots in being an evolutionary experience and force.