

Book Reviews

Review Essay: Tarot Studies as Scholarship – The Problem of Placement

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Works Discussed

- Decker, Ronald, Thierry Depaulis, and Michael Dummett. *A Wicked Pack of Cards*. New York: St. Martin's, 1996.
- Ferguson, Anna-Marie. *A Keeper of Words: Legend: The Arthurian Tarot*. St. Paul: Llewellyn, 2003.
- Greer, Mary K. *The Complete Book of Tarot Reversals*. St. Paul: Llewellyn, 2002.
- Hanegraaff, Wouter J., Antoine Faivre, Roelof van den Broek, and Jean-Pierre Brach, eds. *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*. Leiden: E.J. Brill, 2005.
- Hind, Arthur M. *Early Italian Engraving*. Mansfield Centre, CT: Martino, 2006 (1938).
- Irwin, Lee. *Gnostic Tarot: Mandalas for Spiritual Transformation*. York Beach, ME: Weiser, 1998; US Games Systems, 2005.
- Kaplan, Stuart, and Jean Huets, eds. *Encyclopedia of Tarot: Volume II*. New York: US Games Systems, 1986.
- Louis, Anthony. *Tarot: Plain and Simple*. St. Paul: Llewellyn, 2002.
- Nichols, Sallie. *Jung and Tarot: An Archetypal Journey*. York Beach, ME: Weiser, 1982.
- Place, Robert M. *The Tarot: History, Symbolism, and Divination*. New York: Tarcher, 2005.
- Pollack, Rachel. *The Big Little Book of Tarot*. Boston: Element, 2004.
- . *Seeker: The Tarot Unveiled*. St. Paul: Llewellyn, 2005.
- . *Seventy-Eight Degrees of Wisdom*. York Beach, ME: Weiser, 2007 (1986).

The stimulus that has triggered this review essay is Dr. Lee Irwin's *Gnostic Tarot: Mandalas for Spiritual Transformation*. Written by a scholar of Native American spirituality, demographics, and traditions, it mixes historical detail, systematic analysis of the major and minor arcana of the Tarot, the relatively unexplored relationship between gnosis and the Tarot, and a fascinating concluding section on various mandalas that assist in personal and private spiritual development. Differing from works of writers who, through either choice or ignorance, omit acknowledging the undeniable influence of Eastern spirituality on present-day Tarot use and interpretation, *Gnostic Tarot* acknowledges the Tarot's debt to both Eastern and Western esoteric influences. Irwin chairs the Religious Studies department at the College of Charleston, and his research reflects the ease by means of which an experienced writer and thinker can combine a scholarly approach to esotericism with a practical interpretation of the cards, their images, and their specific (as well as collective) symbolism. Those interested in comparative studies of Tarot decks will find his contrasts between the Rider-Waite images and the little-known but intriguing Ravenswood Tarot to be original and

entertaining. The bibliography is particularly extensive and useful; equally valuable is the sound overview of Tarot history he provides in the first chapter. Readers of more popular works on the Tarot will find this survey less daunting than Stuart Kaplan's magnificent, but intimidating, historical material (especially that which is presented in Volume II of Kaplan's formidable *Encyclopedia of Tarot* series), and far more satisfying than the sketchier approaches of Rachel Pollack's *Seventy-Eight Degrees of Wisdom*, for example.

This is not to say that Pollack's book is not useful or informative. On the contrary, the fact that it has held considerable sway over Tarot markets since its initial publication in the mid-1980s, and has been followed by the author's *Seeker: The Tarot Unveiled* and her quaintly titled "guidebook" *The Big Little Book of Tarot*, testifies to her undeniable success as an expert on contemporary and popular perspectives on Tarot. Rather, my observations on Irwin's text serve to underscore the dearth of fine *scholarly* work on the cards, as opposed to pedagogically accessible interpretive works on Tarot and divination. Certainly the engrossing and well-researched *A Wicked Pack of Cards* by Michael Dummett, Ronald Decker, and Thierry DePaulis illustrates the importance of analyzing the rich and unique history of Tarot, with respect paid to its development (especially from the 1800s onwards) as a divination tool. Robert Place's *The Tarot: History, Symbolism, and Divination* presents a much-needed, and well-written, basic introductory-level account of the Tarot's links with kabbalah and Neo-Platonism. Readers who find the works of Eliphas Lévi and Arthur Edward Waite to be chaotic, tiresomely pedantic, or both, will welcome books such as those of Place and Irwin—although, objectively speaking, Irwin's interpretations of the individual cards are far more extensive and carefully delineated than Place's, thereby enhancing the quality and academic value of *Gnostic Tarot* as a whole. The point remains, however, that academic works on the Tarot are shamefully few and far between, a fact that is surprising to the point of being deplorable, given the Tarot's immense impact on culture in general and Western esotericism in particular.

This leads to a question: how useful then is much of the available scholarship on the Tarot (especially that which is written in English), and can it be considered scholarship at all? The answer is that it depends on whether one views the issue from the perspective of cultural studies or from that of other disciplines. Art history has consistently regarded the development of Tarot as a fascinating sub-field, and Arthur Hind's classic work published in the early 1900s titled *Early Italian Engraving* testifies to this in no small degree, as indeed do Kaplan's above-mentioned encyclopedias. Oddly enough, Western esotericism (formerly a sub-discipline of religious studies and now widely regarded as a field in its own right) has yet to give more attention to this topic, although Irwin's text provides a definite starting point for the scholar and layperson alike. One reason for this might be that most Western esotericism scholarship that centers on the Tarot is in French, and, fine and informative though it may be, that naturally limits its reception in the English-speaking world. However, Wouter J. Hanegraaff's *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism* does provide a readable English section on the Tarot (by expert Jean-Pierre Laurant) with a useful list of sources. If one regards humanities as a broad and overarching discipline in itself, there certainly is a niche for Tarot scholarship under the rubric of it.

However, the future of Tarot scholarship, from the specific perspective of interpretation, symbolism, and meditation (as opposed to empirical historical analysis) lies, I believe, within the area of cultural studies. It is in this type of space that texts such as

talented artist Anna-Marie Ferguson's *A Keeper of Words* can be given the academic attention they deserve. A companion text to her superbly illustrated "Legend Tarot" (presented as a set of watercolour images), this book examines both popular as well as little-known Arthurian legends (for example, those concerning the Cauldron of Annwn, the Eachtra, La Cote Male Tail and Maledisant, and Evalach's Shield, among others). Not only is Ferguson undisputedly one of the finest present-day Tarot artists, her command over, and knowledge of, obscure Arthurian legends is nothing short of impressive. Psychosocial aspects of the Tarot can be viewed through the lens of Anthony Louis's *Tarot: Plain and Simple*—a book that gains no small measure of importance from the fact that Louis is a trained clinical psychiatrist. While there is, somewhat surprisingly, nothing ostensibly Jungian about Louis's work (unlike Sallie Nichols's *Jung and Tarot: An Archetypal Journey*), it definitely displays a thorough sensitivity to links between the human psyche and present-day Tarot analysis. I personally find Mary K. Greer's *The Complete Book of Tarot Reversals* to be the type of text that satisfies one's demands for original approaches to Tarot interpretation and examination, especially since, as far as divination is concerned, there are far too few works that deal with the topic of reversed (ill-dignified) cards. Irwin himself is careful about cautioning his readers that one can easily miss out on a variety of interpretive meditations if one ignores this aspect of the Tarot. Greer's book is part of Llewellyn's "Special Topics in Tarot" series, and gives considerable focus to facets of the field that have hitherto been left relatively unexplored. Were cultural studies to emphasize, actively and persistently, the growing need for academic analyses of Tarot decks and motifs, Irwin's text could acquire the well-established niche it deserves and not be placed in the humorous, but uncomfortable, position of an academic Gulliver among Lilliputians.

Joshua Gunn, *Modern Occult Rhetoric: Mass Media and the Drama of Secrecy in the Twentieth Century* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 2005), xxix + 340 pp., \$49.75 (cloth)

Gunn's book opens with four paragraphs of the most impenetrable, jargon-laden and infuriating prose any reader is likely to meet irrespective of their particular disciplinary affiliation. This mish-mash of postmodern neologism, rampant citation, bravura interdisciplinary erudition, and esoteric intertextual rhizome-farming is, the reader thankfully learns, "intentionally tortuous" (p. xix) and designed to display the link between contemporary academic writing in the humanities and the use of language in texts often referred to as dealing with the *occult*. Yet, as we quickly learn, Gunn's purpose is not to ridicule the use of "strange, mysterious or difficult language" in either of these areas of discourse, but rather to account for their formal similarity by examining the "generative contradiction" or "rhetorical antinomy" (p. 50) that drives them both. Indeed, Gunn's central thesis is that the occult "tradition" died with the birth of the twentieth century (and its mass media) and that the discourses of the "posts" (as Gunn refers to them) represent the best example of what the occult has transformed into, namely, the *occultic*.

The strength of Gunn's work lies in its confident and often elegant use of a hermeneutic paradigm mostly unfamiliar to researchers in religious studies, anthropology, and sociology. Rhetorical analysis currently tends to be the preserve of communication, composition, or (rather less frequently) literature scholars, and little is known of its