

Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia

from the Librarian-General's desk

Recommended Reading List No.6:

Books on the Tarot

The Tarot is commonly seen by the public as nothing more than one means among many for divination, providing guidance to solve personal problems, or as a means of analysing character. But the pictorial symbols of the Tarot comprise an epitome of the various strands of the Western Hermetic Tradition, and like the imagery of alchemy, they can be interpreted in a variety of ways. For the Rosicrucian they are, perhaps, best treated as keys to the spiritual philosophy that is the Secret Tradition of the West, although the following list is not confined to books that approach the Tarot solely from this point of view. Many of these books are to be found in the High Council Library (see Ordinance VI Para 5 for rules on borrowing these books). The Librarian-General will be happy to provide fratres with any further information that they may require. It should also be noted that the choice of books on this list, and all comments upon them, reflect the personal opinions of the Librarian-General and do not necessarily reflect those of other members of High Council.

General Works on the Tarot

KAPLAN, Stuart The Encyclopaedia of Tarot

(New York, 1978-1989) 3 volumes

A detailed description of almost every recorded Tarot pack, with commentaries on the cards and a very extensive bibliography. It does not contain interpretations of the cards - either philosophical or divinatory.

JENSEN, K. Frank (Ed.) Manteia. A newsletter of the mantric arts (Roskilde, Denmark, 1989 to date)

The only journal of its kind, and although not concerned exclusively with the Tarot, by far the greater part of the text - which is profusely illustrated - is devoted to describing and evaluating new Tarot packs and books on the Tarot.

Descriptive and Historical Studies

CAVENDISH, Richard The Tarot 1975

One of the most accessible and readable of modern popular studies, it also contains fewer errors of fact than do most comparable works.

DUMMETT, Michael The Game of Tarot from Ferrara to Salt Lake City 1980

A comprehensive, well-illustrated history of the Tarot pack, but the author sees the Tarot primarily as a game and vigorously rejects the idea that its prime function is either esoteric or divinatory.

MARTEAU, Paul Le Tarot de Marseille Paris, 1949

A valuable work but concerned only with the traditional designs. It contains a set of the cards pasted on to the text.

MOAKLEY, Gertrude The Tarot Cards painted by Bonifazio Bembo for the Visconti-Sforza Family An Iconographic and Historical Study New York, 1966

A detailed study of the most important of the early Tarot packs.

VAN RIJNBERK, Gerald Le Tarot - Histoire, Iconographie, Esoterisme Lyon, 1947

An important work with a degree of objectivity rarely found in works sympathetic to occultism. There is, alas, no English translation.

Interpretations of the Tarot

The number of books claiming to explain and interpret the Tarot is legion - and the vast majority of them have little or no value. Those listed here are representative of the wide range of possible approaches to the subject.

BLAKELEY, John D. The Mystical Tower of the Tarot 1974

A scholarly but sympathetic study that argues for an eastern, and specifically Sufi, origin for the cards.

BUTLER, Bill The Definitive Tarot 1975

A compendium of the designs and interpretations of both major and minor arcana from the best-known and most widely used Tarot packs.

CASE, Paul Foster The Tarot. A Key to the Wisdom of the Ages New York, 1947

The most popular work of the most influential of American writers on the Tarot. Case derived his interpretations from the Golden Dawn tradition.

CASE, Paul Foster The Book of Tokens. 22
Meditations on the Ageless Wisdom Washington 1934

A more intuitive and reflective work than the preceding title. Later reprints exist of both works, issued by B.C.T.A. (Brotherhood of the Adytum).

CROWLEY, Aleister The Book of Thoth. A Short
Essay on the Tarot of the Egyptians

1944 frequently reprinted
The Tarot designs for this book (by Lady Frieda Harris) have been extremely popular and have helped to ensure that Crowley's unhealthy vision of the Tarot has influenced many modern 'occult' interpretations. It is useful as a guide to what to avoid.

DOUGLAS, Alfred The Tarot, The Origins, Meaning and Uses of the Cards New York 1972

Concerned largely with the Tarot as a divinatory tool

LEVI, Eliphas The Magical Ritual of the Sanctum Regnum interpreted by the Tarot Trumps.

Translated from mss. & edited by W Wynn Westcott, 1896.

A modern reprint exists

A key work for understanding attitudes to the Tarot at the time of the 'Occult Revival'.

MATHERS, S.L.M. The Sorcerer and his Apprentice. Unknown Hermetic Writings of S.L. MacGregor Mathers and J.W. Brodie-Innes.

Edited and Introduced by R.A. Gilbert, 1983

Includes papers by both men that reflect views on the Tarot held within the Golden Dawn.

MAXWELL, Joseph The Tarot 1975

A translation from the French and valuable as an indication of the European approach to Tarot divination.

NICHOLS, Sallie Jung and Tarot. An Archetypal Journey York Beach, Maine, USA, 1980 and reprints.

An examination of Jung's psychological approach to the major arcana.

OUSPENSKY, P.D. The Symbolism of the Tarot. Philosophy of Occultism in Pictures and Numbers.

St. Petersburg, 1913

The Tarot as interpreted by the Ouspensky/Gurdjieff tradition. There is a modern reprint with illustrations from the Waite Tarot (1985), and the text is also reproduced in Ouspensky's 'New Model of the Universe'.

PAPUS (Gerard ENCAUSSE) Absolute Key to Occult Science. The tarot of the Bohemians. The most ancient Book in the World, for the use of Initiates. Translated by A.P.Morton. Second edition revised, with Preface by A.E.Waite (1910) Later reprints exist.

The French occult tradition par excellence.

REGARDIE, Israel The Golden Dawn. An account of the Teachings, Rites and Ceremonies of the Order of the Golden Dawn Chicago 1937-1940 / volumes. Reprinted.

The role of the Tarot in the workings of the Golden Dawn is described in detail and the texts of the ceremonies - which include a great deal of Tarot interpretation - are given in full.

SADHU, Mouni The Tarot. A Contemporary course of the Quintessence of Hermetic Occultism 1962
A comprehensive study and analysis of western occultism through the Tarot.

SHEPARD, John The Tarot Trumps. Cosmos in Minature. The Structure and Symbolism of the Twenty-Two Tarot Trump Cards 1985
An excellent, scholarly work that sets the Tarot in its Renaissance context.

THIERENS, A.E. The General Book of the Tarot, containing the Astrological Key to the Tarot-System, published for the first time. With an Introduction by A.E.Waite 1928.
A slight work but important, in Waite's opinion, for the interpretation of the card of the Hanged Man.

WAITE, Arthur Edward The Pictorial Key to the Tarot, being Fragments of a Secret Tradition under the Veil of Divination. 1911. Later reprints exist.
The most influential of English esoteric works on the Tarot and the analysis most in harmony with the Rosicrucian tradition.

WIRTH, Oswald Le Tarot, des Imagiers du Moyen Age
Paris 1927 Later reprints exist.

A history and interpretation that acts as a counterpoint to the ideas of Papus. It is to be regretted that no English translation has yet been published.

ANONYMOUS Meditations on the Tarot. A Journey into Christian Hermeticism. Amity, New York 1985.

A remarkable work of spiritual philosophy that bridges the artificial gap between the Western Hermetic Tradition and orthodox Christian spirituality.

A Note on Tarot Packs

The Tarot pack consists of 78 cards, divided between the 22 Trumps of the Major Arcana and the 56 cards of the four suits of Wands, Cups, Swords and Pentacles, but there is no accepted or definitive set of designs and many new packs are designed each year (details of new packs are given in the journal 'Manteia'). It is desirable that anyone seeking to study or use the Tarot should select the pack that appeals most to himself - bearing in mind that some packs depart from traditional symbolism more than others. The most commonly used packs today are the traditional Marseilles Tarot (and derivatives of the Oswald Wirth school); the Waite Tarot (designed by Waite and drawn by Pamela Coleman Smith; Paul Foster Case based his pack on Waite's designs), and the Crowley Tarot (designed by Frieda Harris).

The Tarot in Literature

References to the Tarot in T.S. Eliot's 'The Wasteland' are well-known, as is its influence on the work of W.B. Yeats (for which see Kathleen RAINE, 'Yeats, the Tarot and the Golden Dawn', Dublin 1972). But the Tarot has also inspired prose works, ranging from classics such as Charles WILLIAMS 'The Greater Trumps' (1932) to the less inspired fantasies of Piers ANTHONY's 'Tarot' series (1979 onwards). It is a useful exercise to compare ideas on the Tarot in fiction and in poetry with those of the generally received tradition.

Occasional papers on the Tarot will be found in the **Transactions** of the Metropolitan College and in publications of other Colleges of the Society.

No.4 in the 'Booklets' series, **The Position of the Tarot in the Cabalistic System** (price 1.50) finds frater Cecil Potter placing the Trumps on the 'Tree of Life', using and interpreting certain of the Waite designs.