

Little, Big: Tarot decks

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 04 May 2000

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Adam Stephanides — 04 May 2000, 23:03

mantis wrote:

Which is why I brought up Tarot before. As alga mentioned long time past,

When was this posted? I'd like to read it.

the tarot deck varies in number of cards (there isn't really a "standard" except by more or less arbitrary), but it is always much more than 52. The 52 deck, aka the deck of standard playing cards, forms the basis for the JCdeck (not to be confused with "the Crowley Tarot"!!) as it appears in THE DEEP and LITTLE, BIG.

So you see where I'm heading with this: the old "real" Tarot reflects the old order of fairies. The shifting of numbers, arranged from high to low as if a sequence across time, reflects their real dying off. Through the history of the real Tarot deck, from many cards to fewer, we see reflected the hidden history of the fairies.

(Over-reading? Who, me?)

The Alice family was given their freakishly short deck (only 52 cards) a few generations prior to the big transition. The fairies, their plan; the humans, "learn it, live it, love it."

After my earlier post, I went looking for the passage where Sophie first guesses that the fairies now number only fifty-two. I found it, unsurprisingly, in the section entitled "Fifty-Two" (VI, 1), although the evidence that the fairies' original numbers were in the hundreds or more is more inconclusive than I had remembered. But I also found the following passage, where Sophie is trying to number the fairies by putting them in correspondence with the cards of her deck:

"Fifty-two?

"Or was it only that at that number (with only the Least Trumps, the plot which they acted out, left uncounted) her deck ran out?"

The clear meaning of this is that fifty-two is not the total number of cards in the deck, but the number of suit cards in the deck (usually referred to as the Minor Arcana, as opposed to the Trumps, or Major Arcana). This is confirmed by the fact that there are four suits (the two suits not mentioned in this section are mentioned in "A Geography," III, 4) and thirteen cards per suit.

This isn't quite the same as the deck most generally used, which has fourteen cards per suit (four court cards instead of three), but it's very close. So on mantis's theory, only four fairies would have been lost, which seems much too small. Moreover, while my slight researches did not turn up any mention of a tarot deck with fifty-two Minor Arcana (alga?), there were decks with fewer than fifty-two, obtained by dropping some of the numbered cards. In the light of this evidence, I'm afraid mantis's theory reduces to (in the immortal Walt Kelly's words) "a miserabobble absurdity."

As to why Crowley made the change from fifty-six to fifty-two suit cards, I have a couple of guesses. One likely possibility is that Crowley wanted to bring the cards in line with Edgewood, which has four floors, seven chimneys, fifty-two doors and 365 stairs (the last section in the book). He may also have wanted to show that the fairies did keep up-to-date to some extent, since the dropping of the fourth court card is a fairly modern innovation. Incidentally, Crowley's deck has twenty-one Trumps instead of the more usual twenty-two, for those inclined to numerological investigations.

--Adam