

Tarot deck

The Urth list — 1 messages, 1 voices, 06 May 2000

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Alice Turner — 06 May 2000, 15:56

Adam asked

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

It was part of my essay on "The Deep." I put it in at the last moment, as I had just found a good book on the Tarot, and I notice it's not in the version I sent to two or three of you; it's probably in a final draft at my office. So I'll type it out from the published version:

"Similarly [I had been nattering on about how cleverly JC uses late medieval conventions to his own ends], the Neither-nor's pack of cards is both accurate and adapted. Playing cards (all with greater trumps) first came to Europe at the end of the 14th century, very likely from the Islamic world, and became common in the 15th. Today's Tarot pack is standardized at 78 cards, but there was no standard at that time: the largest pack that we know of comprised 93 cards, but another had only 62. Crowley's has 59 [52 plus 7 greater trumps, as noted earlier], and he has also changed the pack by giving each ordinary card a separate face and identity rather than putting them in four numbered suits."

Mantis is quoted (but he got it from me):

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.

See above on TD. And I think you're dead right about the house. It's the kind of thinking that put TD together. A very different book, but the same mind when it comes to games. LB isn't quite so compulsive about it.

-alga