

THE Gnostic TAROT

by Christine Payne-Towler

The subject of Gnosticism is entirely too large to be dealt with in an essay such as this one. This spiritual path has a history longer than that of Christianity and covers a territory that includes most of western and eastern Europe, the Middle East, North Africa, India, China and the Russian territories.

With so many different cultures and languages involved and the inevitable proliferation, demise and revival of countless versions and variants over two thousand years, there is no one thing called “Gnosticism.” We must content ourselves with using this word as an umbrella concept, holding within its broad description myriad offshoots, competing ideas and exotic forms of practice.

In the remarkable history of this faith, an extensive chapter could be written just on the interactions of Gnosticism and the Catholic Church. The establishment of the Church of Rome in the fourth century AD allowed for three centuries of Christian development before the regulating authority of Rome arose to assert the “party line.” Initially, each bishop was free to study, teach and write what he believed, and many were deeply influenced by Gnostic thought. But once the canonical standard for Christianity was set, the Church felt it necessary to posthumously excommunicate several of its most well-respected and influential early bishops for being Gnostic heretics! With an identity crisis like that defining its birth, it is no wonder the Church

remained on guard and actively hostile to any traces of Gnostic thought appearing in “Christian Europe.”

For those Gnostics who considered themselves followers of the Master Jesus, this exercise in internal censorship illuminated the true character of this new institution called Roman Catholicism. The paramilitary approach of the corporate Church toward its “irregular” members never softened, even though both Christians and Gnostics sometimes used the same scriptures and could be found worshipping together at the same altar.

The difference between Gnostic Christians (only a small group within the larger Gnostic field) and formal Catholics was in some ways a matter of interpretation of the meaning of a human life, the spiritual forces at work in this world, and the place of the feminine in the panoply of Higher Powers. Suffice it to say that this essay only touches a corner of the extensive mosaic that is Gnosticism.



POPESS

VISCONTI SFORZA DECK





“PAPAL TRIUMPH” BY GIORGIO
VASSARI MID 1500’S

Gnosticism & Tarot

In order to be clear about the relationship between Gnosticism and Tarot, it should be stated at the outset that there

are no specifically “Gnostic” Tarots. It would be equally true to say, however, that every Tarot is a Gnostic Tarot. This paradox exists because, as with the difference between the Gnostic reading of Genesis and the Catholic reading of Genesis, the difference lies in interpretation. Tarot artists used this ambiguity to their advantage in the early centuries of Tarot. So, for example, the High Priestess image could be seen as an allegory for “Mother Church” in the eyes of a believing Christian, while a Gnostic might see in the very same image the female pope, a truly heretical concept! In this manner, the Gnosticism of Tarot is “hidden in plain sight,” like much of the esoteric content implied in the art of the earliest handmade Tarots.

The situation gets a bit easier to untangle in modern Tarots because through the centuries, the tensions between the Church and its heretics took on more of the character of a stalemate: the Church came to understand that it could not kill every heretic in Europe and still have a constituency to call its own. As a result less anonymity was required on the part

of the philosophers and artists who were working with Tarot, so we are more easily able to learn about the Secret Society affiliations of those who have contributed most to the development of the Tarot.

Therefore, for purposes of this CD, we will assume that there is a Gnostic undertone to every Tarot deck to which we refer. Certainly since the time of Etteilla in the mid-1700s, almost every luminary in the field of Tarot has belonged to either the Rosicrucians, Masons, Martinists or some other Secret Society group. Among the older Tarots, a good indicator of Gnostic affiliation, aside from subtle clues hidden in the artwork, would be the relative vigor of the Church’s reaction to that deck, or to its artist, the person who commissioned it or to the region in which it was produced.

We must remember that great variety existed in Gnostic thought. There were Arabic, pre-Islamic Gnostics, Gnostics who remained culturally Jewish, Egyptian Gnostics, Zoroastrian Gnostics and Hermetic Gnostics. They didn’t all believe the same things, although all these ancient cultures based their collective histories upon these first five books of Moses.

These were not merely Hebrew scriptures. All of Western civilization believed in this as history. Many of the stories that Moses codified can be traced back to Babylonian, Akkadian and Sumerian oral tradition. Yet, not every spiritual seeker using the Mosaic texts agreed with his slant on the story. So from the time of Alexander right up to the French Revolution, the Gnostic “underground” has been preserving competing origin stories rejected by “orthodox” Judaism, Islam and Christianity, keeping alive an alternative vision of human nature and destiny.



It is probable that the expulsion of the Moslems, Gypsies and Jews from Spain helped bring Tarot into form as a deck of cards in other parts of Europe. Those expelled minorities flooded Europe with literate, spiritually inclined seekers. The European Secret Societies were providing a place for a meeting of the minds among those who were being marginalized and forced underground by the controversies of the times. I am convinced, and the evidence implies, that the Secret Societies participated in enabling the Hebrew/Hermetic/Gnostic synthesis to see the light of day, albeit in card form.

Gnosticism And The Goddess

One of the things Gnosticism represents is a rebellion within the Old Testament-based (Mosaic) religions against those who used the myth of Genesis to stamp out the ancient Goddess-based mysteries of antiquity. Even as early as the second century BC there were those who felt Moses had distorted the ancient creation stories to eliminate the participation of the feminine side of Deity. The Goddess as co-creator had in earliest times been revered by all Semitic peoples and those memories have never been entirely wiped out despite the Hebrew focus on Jehova (JHVH) as the One True God.

As just one example of the preservation of the Goddess in Gnostic thought, let us look back to the Hebrew tradition about the “daughter of God,” called the Matronit of the Kabbalah. Her roots were planted in Talmudic times in the first through fifth centuries AD. They called her by several names in their mystical literature: the Shekhina, Malkuth, the Supernal Woman and the Discarded Cornerstone, among other titles.

In this ancient conception, the FatherGod and his consort exist in such a rarified state compared to humanity that there is no way human consciousness can reach to them and experience their reality. The son and daughter of the Holy Pair, however, extend like shadows of their parents into this fallen world, linking humanity and the “fallen” creation to higher realities. (As this mythic theme came forward in time from Judaism, through Gnosticism and into Christianity, this pair would be renamed Christ and the Sophia.)

In *The Hebrew Goddess* (p. 135), Raphael Patai says “there is a detailed similarity between the life history, character, deeds and feelings attributed by Jewish mysticism to the Matronit, and what ancient Near Eastern mythologies have to say about their goddesses who

occupy positions in their pantheons” (for example Solomon’s Asherah or Ashtoreth, Ishtar in Addad and most ancient, Astarte in Byblos). Her cardinal attributes, according to Patai, are chastity, promiscuity, motherliness and bloodthirstiness. She is the archetype of ancient women’s four roles in traditional relationship to men: sister, lover, mother, mercy killer. He goes on to equate the Matronit who “at times tastes the other, bitter side, and then her face is dark” with the Hindu Kali, who is also black and also feasts upon the dead.



XXXVIII.
MISTRESS OF CUPS
QUEEN OF CUPS
IBIS DECK



If one were looking for clues to this ancient Hebrew form of the goddess on the Tarot, one could look for images that show qualities of the Matronit on the cards. Taking up the list of her qualities, we could easily see the four



WORLD CARD
ANONYMOUS PARISIAN DECK

Queens having the attributes of virginity (Wands, sister), promiscuity (Coins, lover), motherliness (cups, nursemaid) and blood-thirstiness

(Swords, the mercy killer).

We could also look for the quality of blackness, which appears on the Queen of Cups in the Alexandrian/Hermetic imagery of the Ibis Tarot and others that follow the old Falconnier model from the Fratres Lucis document (see “The Continental Tarots”). In these Tarots, her cup is covered with pomegranate seeds, another reference to the combined Hebrew Goddess mysteries and the Egyptian Isis cult.

We would also notice those Tarots that crown the coin on the Ace of Coins, a detail in the Tarot by Augustus Knapp and Manly P. Hall. This crowned coin is representative of Malkuth, one of the titles of Shekhina/Matronit, and a symbol for the Goddess in the World among the Merkabah Mystics who

were practicing Jewish Gnosticism before the Kabbalists. For that matter, the World card itself represents the Goddess enthroned in matter, with the four elements doing her bidding and the earth turning under her feet.

I might add that the Knapp-Hall Tarot is an especially interesting deck in this context. Hall was an occult scholar of the 1920s and 1930s who in the process of cataloging the world’s great Mystery Schools and their teachings, assembled a wonderful library of images from which to draw when making his own Tarot. Upon close analysis, it is obvious that he is, like the Ibis Tarot and all the others in this stream, reproducing the Falconnier or Fratres Lucis model. The only deviation of the Knapp-Hall from these older, Egyptian-style Tarots is that Knapp-Hall shows the characters in European clothing and situations.

On the Knapp-Hall suit of Cups, Hall shows the royalty in possession of a magical cup, the Holy Grail. The Queen is not black, and the cup is now in European form, but it boils and bubbles with potency in the King and Queen’s hands, referring, I am sure, to the theme of the excellent book *Holy Blood, Holy Grail*. This blockbuster details the Gnostic heresy that Jesus of Nazareth was the husband of Mary Magdalen, from which union there were children (see also “The Esoteric Origins of Tarot”). After the crucifixion, she and the family were smuggled across the Mediterranean to Marseilles, and she lived out her last thirty years in Europe.

Susan Haskins’s encyclopedic *Mary Magdalen* fleshes out the details drawn from scripture, myth and legend. But it is clearly a traditional theme or else Hall would not so explicitly reference this Gnostic heresy on his



Tarot. Nor is his slant a part of the modern rewriting of Tarot's history, since his deck was published in 1929, while all of the above-cited scholarly tomes have only appeared in the last thirty years!

As Gnostic artists and mystics retrieved and revived the feminine aspects of Deity in the imagery of Tarot, we see glimpses again of her many variations coming to us through the ages. It would not be amiss to say that any historical Tarot that has a preponderance of female images in the Major Arcana, and/or adds female images where one would more usually find a male image, could qualify as having a Gnostic slant. Later in this essay I will make direct reference to examples in various Tarot decks.

Gnosis Means Direct Knowledge

Likewise, according to the Old Testament-based religions, direct mystical or spiritual experience was not accessible to ordinary humans. The Gnostics' credo was to achieve direct experience of the Mystery whenever possible; each group was looking for intimate, personal experiences with godhead, much like those available through the traditional older Mystery Schools.

Drawing upon ancient Hermetic and Jewish gospels rejected by the canonizers of the Old and New Testaments, they challenged the official Judeo-Christian explanations of a monotheistic FatherGod, human origins, and the destiny of the soul. They felt that a straighter route could be found to reunite humanity and godhead without the interference of clergy or priestly hierarchies. In particular they worshipped and championed Sophia, the Wisdom of God (as mentioned in Genesis) who in the beginning co-created the

world with the Father. In their societies, women's roles reflected this greater respect for the feminine. As Dr. Lewis Keizer and Stuart Kaplan remind us, the earliest Tarots show a woman dressed in ecclesiastical garb and named "The Popess." In the Mantegna tarocchi, this image is the person at the top of their "stations of man" series, the person who is closest to God, representative of humanity's highest development, and clearly a woman! In the mid-1400s, that is a powerful statement.

Pessimist vs. Optimist Gnostics

Another of Gnosticism's basic beliefs was internally disputed for centuries and is an ongoing philosophical and spiritual debate to this day. This split is well defined in the following quote from *In Search of the Primordial Tradition and the Cosmic Christ* by Father John Rossner, Ph.D., beginning on page 112:

"There is an essential distinction which must be made between 'optimistic' and 'pessimistic' forms of pre-Christian esotericism. The 'optimistic' gnosis views the whole world as good, as a divine and living world because it is animated by the divine effluvia, and capable of being activated by man as a co-Creator with God and as a priest of Nature. In this world, man's function is not to 'escape the world' but to awaken and activate persons, places, and things in Nature to become 'temples of the Divine Spirit.' Man himself develops gnosis in order to 'become or re-become a god,' in order to 'know God' in the existential sense. Like the 'magician' or 'theurgist' in the iconography of the Egyptian tarot card, man is to 'bring down' the divine power and light in order to impregnate and fill the objects of the physical world with their appropriate form of divinity.



The ‘optimistic’ form of gnosis may be identified with the ancient Egyptian ‘religion of the world,’ according to Frances Yates [see her book *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* pp. 20-38]. It was such a positive ‘Hermetic’ conception of a good, God-given creation (which is to be redeemed and divinized rather than discarded) which indeed may have provided the Egyptian background of both the Hebraic and Mosaic concepts of the creation in Genesis, and a source for the classical Greek metaphysics of Pythagoras and Plato. This earlier Egyptian understanding of gnosis pre-dated the later Hellenistic, world-denying ‘religion of Gnosticism’ in the early Christian era.”

A few paragraphs later, on page 113, Rossner writes that “during the Renaissance, Ficino and Giordano Bruno believed that this ‘optimistic’ variety of an earlier Egyptian ‘protognosticism’ had found its way into original Mosaic tradition, and into the works of the New Testament, in the positive metaphysical philosophies of Jesus, John (the author of the



FOOL CARD
ECOLE D'ESTE DECK

4th Gospel) and Paul. It also found its way into the Neo-Platonic Hermeticists of the early Christian centuries.”

When we remember that the Tarots of Etteilla are designed to represent this very same strain of optimistic Hermetic Gnosis expressed in *The Divine*

Pymander, we have to again give respect

where it is due and return to studying this amazing Tarot in a new and deeper light.

In contrast to the optimist Gnostics of various stripes, a spectrum of negative thinkers felt that this world of matter and time/space is a prison instead of an Eden. Those Gnostics viewed incarnation as “the fall,” believing it to be a punishment. Others saw our immersion in matter as the result of a war between good and evil in heaven.

Some of these groups refused to reproduce, believing that in being fertile they would be playing into the hands of our captors, the fallen angels. The practice of sexual union has the effect of enticing other souls to leave heaven for this captivity below, an undesirable outcome for these world-denying Gnostics. Among the groups of pessimist Gnostics there were some who were entirely ascetic, choosing to stay maximally detached from the Fallen God’s temptations, which would include the entire roster of earthly delights.

Other strains of Gnostics believed the soul would not be allowed to leave this plane of existence until it had been through every experience available to humans. This belief encouraged all forms of license and excess, the unhealthy effects of which get this group more often classed with the pessimists than the optimists. Their motto was “eat, drink and be merry, for tomorrow you may die.”

The Penetration of Gnostic Concepts into European Culture

Prior to examining the visual evidence of three significant Gnostic themes embedded in European imagery and the Tarot, let us first investigate how these ideas managed to penetrate and indeed eventually saturate pagan



Europe and become so popular that they survived the turbulent transition to Roman Christianity, the Crusades and the fires of the Inquisition.

Astrological and magical teachings were first carried west by the Jews liberated from slavery by the fall of Babylon. We have to give most of the credit to the Hebrew people for the saving of much of this early knowledge, because they were the one ancient nation who encouraged the literacy of every adult male in their tribe. The Jews carried their knowledge into Europe around the 900s AD.

The Moors from North Africa moving into Spain and France around 650 AD increased the redistribution of Alexandrian scholarship into Europe and led to the building of libraries and universities in Madrid, Toledo, Seville and Aragon. They brought thousands of manuscripts, reflecting nearly a thousand years of scholarship, out of Egypt and onto the European continent.

As the Roman Church was plunging Europe into the Dark Ages with its book burnings and prohibitions against reading and writing for all but the clergy, most of Europe's cultural memory was either destroyed or collected in the clergy's secret libraries. Pagan, Egyptian, Jewish and Arabic families who had found niches for themselves in Christian Europe were hounded from pillar to post as the Christians destroyed the Mystery sites and practices.

The Jews, and later the Arabs, translated and studied the manuscripts, diagrams and technologies bequeathed to them by history. In them, they rediscovered their own esoteric roots. The discipline of alchemy, originally

explored by the Egyptians to satisfy humanity's need for medicines of a physical, emotional and spiritual nature, became a repository of proto-scientific experimentation. In the process, the imagery and symbolism of the ancient Mysteries formed the vocabulary and graphics for the alchemists' journals. The Arabic scholars omnivorously assimilated Egyptian, Hebrew, Hermetic, Gnostic and pre-Nicean Christian gospels, including it all in their experiments and theories.

This helps explain the enthusiasm that gripped the Roman Church to mount the Crusades and try to recapture the Holy Land for Christianity. An educated clergy that had either sequestered or destroyed the cream of European Classical civilization was getting restless and inquisitive. The Arabs had become famous for their revival of the secret knowledge, and the Hebrews had never left it behind in the first place. Both civilizations co-occupied the Holy Land. How could the pope resist the urge to seize it all, if it could be done?

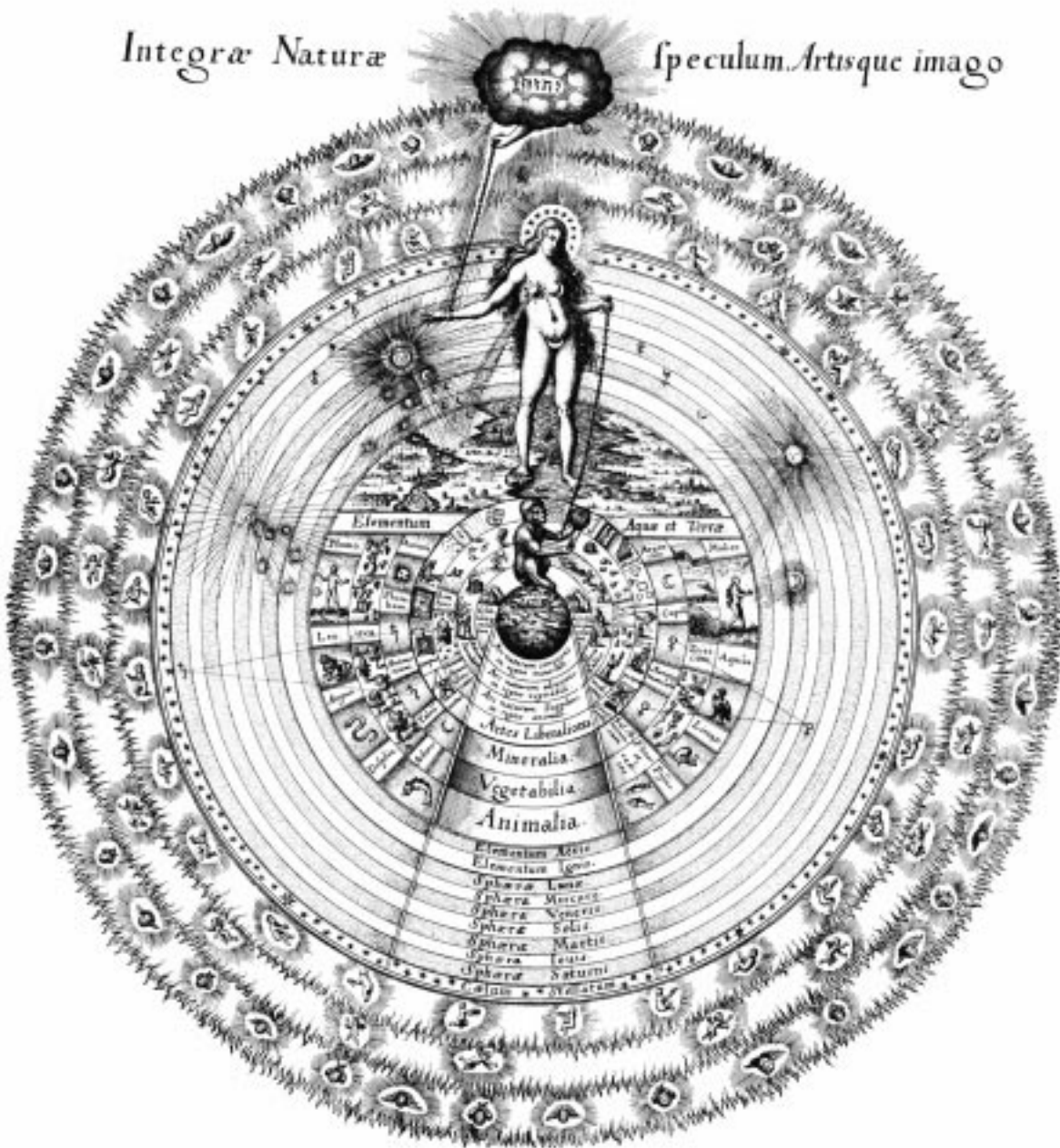
Of course, the Church didn't succeed. Not only were the Crusades a disaster, but by the time it was over, Europe had been reinflamed with the very Gnostic, Kabbalistic and Hermetic heresies that Rome had been trying to squelch the entire previous millennium! Among other things, the Crusades awakened Christians to an alternative reading of their cherished gospels, restimulated suppressed heresies about the life, family, and travels of Jesus and the nature of the Grail Mysteries, and provided the impetus for the reawakening of the Gnosis in the underground Secret Societies.

Gnostic Concepts Embedded in European Imagery and Tarot: Three



Integræ Naturæ

Speculum Artisque imago



EARTH AND WORLD SOUL
BY ROBERT FLUDD



Themes

1. Evolution: The Path and the Journey of the World Soul

Reincarnation was part of the belief system of the ancient world. In a very general sense, the Gnostic gospels assert that when the Creator fashioned the material plane, it was set up in solar system form with seven planets. At that time people thought the planets all revolved around Earth and that Earth was protected and guarded by the rings of the other planets.



ASTROLOGIA
MANTEGNA DECK

What you see illustrated here is Earth and the World Soul surrounded by the circles of the four elements (earth, water, air, fire), in turn encircled by the planetary rings, embraced in their turn by the octaves of angels who make it all go round. This is the exact same concept illustrated by Mantegna's Prima Causa card (No. 50). The two cards that precede it in sequence, called the Eighth and Ninth Spheres, represent the Milky Way (No. 48) and the Vault of the Heavens (No. 49) invisibly turning all the inner wheels like a cosmic perpetual-motion machine. All this wheels-within-wheels creation makes up the Body of God. This conception is not exclusive to Gnostic beliefs. Earliest Kabbalists used the image of a circular reation before they developed the Tree format (see "Kabbalah/Cabbalah" essay).

Those who agreed that humanity is "made in the image of God" would then see this cosmic map as the Gnostic model of the soul's chal-

lenge to "grow into" its full potential as a spark of the Divine. A soul that wanted to take incarnation in this world had to cross each planet's orbit and make an agreement with that planet's "soul" or intelligent principle (its genius). Each soul would pick up some of the qualities pertaining to that planet, forming its personality for this incarnation out of these different "planetary metals" in their raw state. And that soul's assignment in the course of a lifetime was to extract the pure metal from the raw materials of planetary qualities, purifying these elements so they could be minted into the "coinage" of each planetary realm. When it was time to leave the body and cross those planets' orbits again on the way back off this "mortal coil," one paid the toll owed to each planet and became liberated from further incarnations.

This is the source of the original idea of the planetary alchemical metals. Each planet provides a certain amount of its fundamental substance out of which to build a personality. It is humanity's job to evolve and purify those qualities in the course of a lifetime.

Mantegna card No. 39, Astrologia, illustrates the governing intelligence of this spiritual map of the cosmos. She teaches us the math and science of time and orbital motion, leading us into the understanding of our "cosmic clock" and the process of preparing the soul in this life for the adventure of the next. Remember, the ultimate goal of the soul on this journey up the "Ladder of Lights" is to grow in consciousness and comprehension until it can fully identify and join with the great World Soul, the Sophia or Shekhina, who bridges the gap between humanity and Divinity (revealed so well in the Fabricius illustration). We are to become conscious, individuated cells in the



body of the primordial Goddess, spouse of God and mother of this world.

2. *The Female and Unfallen Creation*
 The Gnostics brought the ancient, pre-monotheistic Hebrew idea of the Shekhina, the feminine consort of God, into Gentile vocabulary, although among the Gnostics she was called Sophia, the Wisdom



ADAM AND EVE
 LABYRINTH GAME

principle. Gnostics fostered the belief that Sophia, the Wisdom element of God, was feminine and represented the mind, meaning the actual conscious thinking that was vested in the making of Creation by the Creator. It is she who takes the creative juices of God and ferments them into the tangible world, the ecology of life. She creates what is actual out of the infinity of creative possibilities inherent in God, the undifferentiated Power.

Because of this important role of the Shekinah in Gnosticism, Gnostic Tarot decks place an especially strong emphasis on female figures, with goddesses appearing where the Christian patriarchy would use male images. My main exemplar of a Gnostic Tarot is a fairly recent deck, the Etteilla Tarot, which actually was published in the years just before the French Revolution. As mentioned above, recent scholarship has determined that Etteilla was using as his creation model the Hermetic document called *The Divine Pymander*, one of the Hebrew-inflected Hermetic gospels preserved by the Arabs through the Dark Ages to re-emerge in the late 1400s.

Etteilla's illustrated Major Arcana make it clear that this is a Gnostic revelation being illustrated in Tarot cards. The High Priestess whom you see in the Etteilla Tarot (called the Lady Consultant, No. 8), is the Snake and Bird Goddess, the Great Mother of all the Middle Eastern Goddess traditions including the Hebrew and Gnostic Shekhina/Sophia. The Goddess is portrayed as Eve in Eden, with the serpent depicted as a vortex, a circular coil of energy, like a strong tellurgic aura around her. The tree she stands next to is another symbol of bridging Earth and heaven to draw down consciousness into creation. This goddess figure is psychologically and spiritually attuned with every molecule of creation, and all the creatures in Nature are her children.

Although few images of The Priestess as Eve survived the shift of the Arcana from verbal descriptions in ancient documents to European cards, the El Gran Tarot Esoterico uses this same Eve image, this time holding a pomegranate and highlighted by the moon. There is also another Renaissance card game from 1616 (not a Tarot) called Labyrinth, devised by Andrea Ghisi, that shows Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden with the snake climbing the Tree of Life between them.

Only in Gnostic thought do we find a positive interpretation of the snake in the garden. The card that substitutes for the



EVE
 GRIMAUD ETTEILLA DECK



Hanged Man in the Eteilla deck has left behind the Judeo-Christian idea of human guilt for the “fall of man” and its expiation in



PRUDENCE
GRIMAUD ETEILLA DECK

sacrifice. The replacement card is called Prudence, No. 12, and pictured is the Goddess again, holding a wand in the shape of a “T” with a snake at her feet. In this image, she is lifting her skirts to the snake as if in

invitation, with an enigmatic smile on her lips. The “T” cross refers to the last letter of the Greek or Hebrew alphabet, assigned to the path leading to Malkuth, bottom station of the Kabbalah Tree, and another name for the Hebrew “Earthly Goddess.” Manly P. Hall, in his tome *The Secret Teachings*, links the Tav, the Tetractys, the caduceus and the Kabbalah!

We know from the history of symbolism that the snake is a longtime symbol of life force, vitality or what the Chinese call “chi.” It has not always been used as a symbol of evil or deception. The Gnostics held that the snake in the garden was a teacher of humanity, educating Eve and opening her eyes to the sexual mysteries. This same theme was explored in the older Mantegna Tarot image of Prudence, but in this one the snake is wrapping itself around the mirror into which Prudence gazes.

The mirror is another symbol for Wisdom as are the two faces looking forward and back-

ward, so we are back with the Gnostic idea of Eve/Shekhina/Sophia as the initiator of humanity into the Mysteries, the Wisdom tradition, through her curiosity, mental reflection and natural magnetism.

Another clue to Gnostic influences in Tarot is the use of a female figure on the Pope card. This would be considered heretical in any Christian context, yet we see it from the earliest Tarots, the Mantegna tarocchi and the Visconti-Sforza pack, right up to that of modern scholar Manly P. Hall. In more modern Tarots, we have diluted her name down to the non-threatening “High Priestess,” but her original title and form is that of the Female Pope. It is safe to say that a female Heirophant or Popess is a glaring clue to the spiritual beliefs of a Renaissance Tarot deck’s author!

We also find female Chariot cards in three or four deeply Gnostic-influenced Tarots, suggesting that this is the ancient “Triumphant Chariot of Venus,” an old mythological and alchemical theme highlighted by the fourteenth century poet Petrarch in his poem *I Triumphi*. The power of Venus lies in harmony, magnetism and the art of raising consciousness through the power of attraction and pleasure. Left alone, Nature rewards right action with joy and fulfillment, implying a trust in instinct and intuition which the Judeo-Christian tradition has rejected.



PRUDENCE
MANTEGNA DECK



The optimist Gnostics believed that Eve was *supposed* to bite the apple. This strain of Gnostics (and there were others who disagreed) felt that without the biting of the apple, literal time and space would not have precipitated out of eternity. Hence, in the



BIRDS AND FISHES FROM GRAND
ORACLE DES DAMES DECK

Eteilla Arcana, we see the Great Mother on the Eve card and then we have her whole creation on the Empress card, teeming with life and creative possibilities. There is no hint that this creation is flawed or less than an expression of Divine Will.

Yet in both the Jewish and the Christian concept, without the approval of God, the whole creation is fallen, in need of redemption, a problem waiting to be solved (see “Kabbalah/Cabbalah”). It’s only the optimist Gnostics who felt that the spontaneous creation had virtue of its own because it is an expression of the Sophia force.

3. Sexuality’s Place in the Creation

The theme of the androgyne or double-sexed magical entity is a subset of Gnostic speculation which harks back to the old Greek idea that before the soul’s “fall from heaven” into a physical body, it had to split into halves, one male and one female, to accommodate the

duality of the material plane. These two halves of the same soul then have to search for each other through the rounds of time, to complete each other before they can reascend into the divine realms as one.

Within this story is hidden a teaching about the power of sexuality, the attraction of the male hidden within the female to the female hidden within the male, and the state of divine union which can transform animal sexuality into a source of magical and spiritual power. Given that the ancient Middle Eastern nations considered human intercourse as a microcosmic expression of the Great Union on high of God and his Consort, it would be remiss for a Gnostic Tarot to fail to cite the sexual mysteries in at least one Arcanum.

But different schools of Gnosticism had different opinions about this idea of opposites uniting. Some thought of the sexual urges as part of the conspiracy of the elements to bind human souls to Earth and the limitations of the flesh, therefore something to be avoided. Some felt that as long as the cycle of reproduction is being carried on, drawing more souls to this planet for reincarnation and polarizing human souls, fixating them on their gender differences, the creation would not return to its original innocence and divine order.

Others felt that only through the sex act could the opposites be united and the soul prepared for growth and evolution. The style apparent on any given Devil card of the Gnostic type will show whether the author was of the “sex is the problem” crowd or the “sex is the solution” crowd.

In either case, the Esoteric Devil (called



Typhon in the 1700s, Baphomet by the time of Eliphas Levi in the late 1800s) has a body with womanly characteristics from shoulders to hips, although the head and legs are those of a goat. The goat-like characteristics make a reference to the Gnostic Demiurge, a figure cited by some Gnostics as the force in opposition to the ascension of humanity, whose influence on the world's conception spoiled the intended perfection of the creation and enforced the dualities riddling this world—good/evil, rich/poor, dominant/ submissive, and so forth.

In this sense, when there is an emphasis on masculine characteristics in the Devil card, it highlights how the unified feminine is divided, split, parted, made from one into two upon the emergence of the Demiurge, also known as the Satan, the “tester,” by the Jews. His job is to tempt souls to sin by creating chaos and disorder, then just sit back and see how we behave under stress.

Meanwhile, the Shekhina, whose female breasts the Typhon/Baphomet exposes, is here being assimilated to the seductive force which attracts us into incarnation and makes it so devilishly hard to leave this plane. Not just the violated Bride of the Underworld, dragged down by her immersion in the elements, she is shown as fully merged with the Demiurge, animal and Divine fused together. The Venus Triumphant ideal of the Gnostic Chariot card is now showing its flip side, as a dangerous sensuality which steals immortality even as the soul aspires to sacred union. This is an idea from the pessimistic Gnosis, a sex-negative teaching that infiltrated Judaism and Christianity in the Alexandrian centuries, encouraging all the Old Testament believers to reject pleasure and sensual expressions from

their spiritual practices. And by thus demonizing the sensuality associated with the Goddess, which is one of the forces bringing the creation from unconsciousness to consciousness, the entire material world is demonized as well!

The Tarots that are more optimistically Gnostic emphasize the sensuous breasts and wasp waist, sometimes giving her angel wings rather than bat wings, and referencing her body parts to the elements of Nature (fire in the head, air in the breast, water in the bowels, and earth in the legs). Any Tarot that places a caduceus upon the belly of an obviously female Devil card, whether the caduceus is



From Levi's *Transcendental Magic*.
BAPHOMET. THE GOAT OF MENDES.

BAPHOMET BY
LEVI



pointed upward or downward, is revealing the sex-positive Gnostic beliefs of its maker (as in the Esoterico, Papus, Tavaglione group).

The Devil image from the Alchemical Tarot reconciles the opposites in a novel way, using an image of a two-headed, two-sided man/woman balancing upon the winged eye of the Mystery. This image is an adaptation from a German alchemical manuscript by Basil Valentinus, published in 1604, and is cleansed entirely of any pejorative overlay from either Jewish or Christian sources. This image managed to escape the notice of the Church censors only because it was buried in an esoteric tome which never came into mass circulation.

The Tarot, by the 1600s being printed in “catchpenny” versions for mass consumption, had to be more energetically veiled to survive the burning times. Artists became adept at creating ambiguous images which on their surface expressed the evils of fleshly pleasures, while revealing for initiates the inner teachings of the Primordial Goddess, not sacrificed or eliminated, but veiled to protect her essential purity from the misunderstandings of the uninitiated.

One very interesting clue to the complexity of this tricky imagery, wherein ancient mythologems are distorted in their historical transmission and made to serve entirely other meanings, can be found on page 143 of Raphael Patai’s exceptionally detailed *The Hebrew Goddess*, in the chapter on the Matronit, an early understanding of the Consort of the King. In this ancient conception, the happiness of the whole creation depends upon the blissful sexual union between God and the Matronit, and each week every He-

brew couple was required to replicate this happy union in their own home in honor of the Sacred Marriage, and to restore happiness to the creation.

In Patai’s own words:

“Yet another version, still preoccupied with the times of divine copulation, speaks not of a weekly, but of an annual cycle. Every year, we are told, the people of Israel sin with tragic inevitability which enables Samael, the satan (or Azazel) [our sex-negative Devil], to bend the Matronit to his will. Samael, in the form of a serpent, or riding a serpent, lurks at all times near the privy parts of the Matronit, in the hope of being able to penetrate her. Whether or not he succeeds in thus gratifying his desire depends on the conduct of Israel. As long as Israel remains virtuous, Samael’s lustful design is frustrated. But as soon as Israel sins, as they, alas, are bound to do year after year, their sins add to Samael’s power, he glues himself to the Matronit’s body ‘with the adhesive force of resin,’ and defiles her. Once this happens, the Matronit’s husband, the King, departs from her and withdraws into the solitude of his heavenly abode. This unhappy state of affairs continues until, on the Day of Atonement, the scapegoat, which is destined to Azazel, is hurled to its death down a cliff in the Judaeen desert. Samael, attracted by the animal offered to him, lets go of the Matronit, who thereupon can ascend to heaven and reunite with her husband, the King.”

What happens to this myth if we recognize that the Serpent is not evil or a tempter, but the educator of the optimist Gnostics? As a symbol of the life force, the Kundalini or serpent-fire of primal vitality, we might be looking at a perversion of the old Snake and



Bird Goddess, who takes great joy in her creation teeming with rich possibilities. The King comes off as punitive and abandoning, discarding his wife just as she is getting initiated into the wild, passionate, uninhibited expression of her natural vitality. The snake heads for the bull's-eye, the sacred site of the original Blood Mysteries, which later degenerated into animal sacrifice and a distorted understanding of the Eucharistic Mysteries.

I suspect that Eteilla is showing us a positive interpretation of the Matronit's experience in his "Prudence" image, with her shy smile and skirts lifted for the serpent! Perhaps he is trying to communicate to us through imagery that it is prudent to study this serpent-force in its various manifestations, to be receptive to these wild, earthy, untamed and vitalizing forces usually demonized in the Judeo-Christian paradigm.



ALCHEMICAL DEVIL
FROM VALENTINUS' OCCULTA
PHILOSOPHIA

In Summary

This essay merely hints at the great Gnostic riches which lie hidden in the deeper layers of Tarot imagery and philosophy. It is my hope that scholars of the future will begin to take the Tarot seriously as a spiritual and initiatory testament, equal to any of our written Gospels, and embark upon the work of reconnecting the Holy Word to these pictures worth a thousand. For those who are interested in following these Gnostic themes further in their Tarot studies, there will soon be a book version of these Tarot Magic essays, complete with extra chapters further illuminating the mysticism of the esoteric Magi whose ruminations produced Tarot.

This chapter is excerpted from Christine Payne-Towler's forthcoming book, *The Underground Stream: Esoteric Tarot Revealed*. To order copies of her book, or to reach Christine for private consultation call 1-800-981-3582.

