

Origins of the Tarot Cards from Medieval Mystery Plays



The present article is an elaboration of the rough lines of a presentation and workshop given in the 2010 summer Gathering in Greece called "Tarot Drama Theater".

I think I am not the only one intrigued by the picturesque of early Tarot cards. What do they *really* represent? Who drew them? Who put all these icons together?

Then I saw Dario Fo, the great Italian comedian of Comedia dell'Arte, play writer and Nobel Prize winner, acting on stage playing the hilarious figure of a barbarous Pope (I cannot recall who). and I thought that something of the medieval feasts, mysteries and banquets were radiating from the stage...

Indeed, returning to the Tarot Thematic we see various medieval figures such as the Pope, the Emperor, the Devil, also the religious virtues like Temperance, and other religious matters like the Judgement day etc. Let us see what the Medieval Theater was comprised of.

Medieval Theater

1 **miracle plays** or saint's play – the lives of saints real or fictitious life, miracles, martyrdom of a saint

- A genre evolved from liturgical offices developed during the 900s and 1000s for calendar festivals
- By the 1200s were in vernacular, with unecclesiastical elements, no longer in church; now at public festivals
- Most surviving miracle plays concern either the Virgin Mary or St. Nicholas, 300's bishop of Myra, Asia Minor. Both had active cults during the Middle Ages.
- Mary is usually *deus ex machina*, saving eg

"a priest who has sold his soul to the devil, a woman falsely accused of murdering her own child, a pregnant abbess."

- A typical example: *St. John the Hairy*. "He seduces and murders a princess. Upon capture, he is proclaimed a saint by an infant. He confesses his crime, whereupon God and Mary appear and aid John in reviving the princess, then the murdered saint is made a bishop." (!)
- Nicholas plays like Mary plays. An example: Jean Bodel's *Le Jeu de Saint Nicolas* (circa 1200): the deliverance of a crusader and the conversion of a Saracen king.
- Most English miracle plays are extant; banned by Henry VIII in mid-1500s, most subsequently destroyed or lost.

2 **mystery plays** or *cycles* (from guilds) - biblical dramas, dramatized scripture

- Developed from plays presented in Latin by churchmen at church depicting eg the Creation, Adam and Eve, the murder of Abel, the Last Judgment
- Not a large, communal religious experience as with Greek drama, but instead many intimate dramatizations
- 1200s, craft guilds began producing the plays in the vernacular outside church



- The Bible divided into many short plays, each played on its own stage
- Religious nature of the plays changed; alterations, entertaining enhancements made
- New satire mocking physicians, soldiers, judges, monks, priests
- In England over decades, groups of 25 to 50 plays were organized into cycles; timespan is all of biblical history, from Creation, to the Fall (apple in the Garden of Eden), Noah's Flood, the Incarnation of Christ, the Passion and Resurrection, to the Last Judgment
- Example: *The Wakefield Cycle*, the history of the world from Creation to Judgment Day in 32 short plays
- In France: *The Acts of the Apostles* by Arnoul and Simon Gréban; 494 speaking parts; 61908 lines of rhymed verse; 40 days to perform.
- **By the end of the 1500s, the church support dropped; uninterested in the Renaissance; considered too Catholic in England**

3 morality plays 1400s and 1500s, dramatized allegory, spiritual lessons, anonymous *Everyman* (1500) best known

- Conflict between Vice and Virtue (represented by actors) for a human soul, struggle called *psychomachia* (Greek, “war over [or in] the soul”); the central figure is Man
- Performed by small quasi-professional companies in banquet halls, etc., relying on public support
- Intermediate/combined step between earlier religious/liturgical drama and professional secular drama of the Renaissance
- Plays were usually short; serious themes with some farce
- They spoke to medieval man’s anxiety about preparing for death, “dying well”; offer *ars moriendi* (Latin, “the art of dying”)
- TS Eliot: "*Everyman* is on the one hand the human soul in extremity, and on the other any man in any dangerous position from which we wonder how he is going to escape with as keen interest as that with which we wait for the escape of the film hero, bound and helpless in a hut to which his enemies are about to set fire."

Performance:

In England, performed on a wheeled platform, a **pageant wagon**. A hut on top contained scenery backdrop, acting space, a kind of dressing room. Pageant wagons moved through town and stopped for performances at designated places.

In France and Italy, 100-foot-wide stages were used, with paradise and hell at either end and Earth in between.

Special effects: Mechanical devices, trapdoors, flying angels, fire-breathing beasts, miraculous transformation, violently graphic martyrdom

Other, non-religious plays of the day were farces, funny, with fairy tales.

Performers:

For the Mystery plays, definitely, the Priests themselves

Deductions

The line of banishing of the Medieval Dramas in England was made intentionally bold because here we have the key to the «Mystery» of the ignorance concerning the origins of the Tarot figures after 1500- .

In protestant countries every Medieval-Catholic-Pagan nuance was banned. So was theater.

In counter-reformed Catholic countries we have the same attitude a conservative and anti-popular behaviour of the church: the shock of the religious wars in Europe was enormous.

(Although in the more liberal Elizabethan England we have information of mystery plays. The young teenager Shakespeare was begging his parents to go to a near town to Stratford-Upon-Avon, to be able to watch The Mystery Plays in the Cathedral)



But, the real medieval imagery was forgotten. Some, however, as early as the 14th century were already painting the Mystery Play heroes on cards. We have the first tarot of Marseilles, also the Visconti-Sforza tarot and later the 50 card Mantegna tarot (copied also by the great Albrecht Durer).

The purposes may have been educational but we do not know who and in what purpose chose the specific sequence of the most significant Marseilles tarot.

Conclusions

The imagery of the Tarot is definitely based in the Middle Ages. But we must not believe that this is totally cut from the earliest European substratum. The ancient gods were pictured in saintly-like images and beautiful woodcuts so that the icon of the Pope may enclose the image of Zeus...

In the last decades we saw an enormous interest on the meanings of each card, Theosophical explanations, other explanations etc. Everything is helpful when we know how to put things together and not overestimate each individual explanation as *the definitive* one.

The Golden Dawn and BOTA exegesis on the Tarot is some of the best we have. Maybe to be able to deduct and know more on the meanings of the cards we have to «return to the roots». This will be again most helpful.

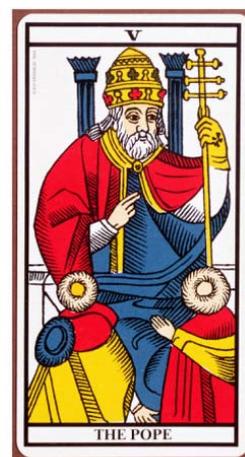
Returning to the roots is, besides, one of the chief concepts of our Order concerning the European Esoteric Traditions.

We'll see here an individual effort to use the Tarot trumps as portals within the Medieval tradition made in the 2010 Gathering of our Order where experiencing the cards was combined with fun and banqueting!!!

H. Frater D.D.S.



Zeus as Bishop



The Pope



Celtic Cernunos



The Emperor

Sources

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mantegna_Tarocchi

<http://kebnekajse.tripod.com/timelinenotes.pdf>

Paul Huson – The Devil's Picturebook

Paul Huson – Mystical origins of Tarot

TAROT DRAMA THEATER (brochure)

	Card (1)	Character to be acted or, aspired(2)	Qualities (3)	Latin/Barbaric Vibration (4)	Greek-Roman gods-heroes invoked (5)
	Le Mat	The young Percival	Multus Sanguinis/ Festivitas	Liberator	Dionysus
1	Le Bateleur	The Trickster (Iago-Pantalone)	Sanguinis/ Garrulus	Significator	Hermes/Mercurius
2	La Papesse	The mysterious female pope-Jean	Pituitosus/ Abstrusus	Abductor	Hecate
3	L'Empereur	Charlemagne/Alexander/ Caesar	Multus Choleriosus/ Pertinax	Dominator	Jupiter/Zeus
4	L'Imperatrice	A great lady (Eleonore of Aquitane etc)	Sanguinis/ Plumbeus	Vanuus	Venus/Aphrodite
5	Le Pape	A Pope	Melancholicus/ Accipiens	Inspirator	Uranus
6	L'Amoureux	An incensed lover/charmer – Casanova/Mata Hari	Sanguinis/ Calidus	Amorator	Eros/Amor
7	Le Chariot	Artemis/Diana/Astarte & in Heavenly Chariot of Stags	Pituitosus	Dedicator	Theseus
8/11	La Justice	Moirra/An Old wise lady	Sanguinis	Justificator	Themis
9	L'Hermite	A wise - Merlin	Melancholicus	Purificator	Asclepius
10	La Rue de Fortune	Dame Fortune/Moirra	Multus Sanguinis	Revolutor	Moirra
11/8	La Force	A worthy warrior/maid	Choleriosus	Fortior	Minerva/Athena
12	Le Pendu	A traitor/disgraced	Pituitosus/Tristis	Atonementor	Oedipus
13	(Mort)	Death	Multus Pituitosus	Transmutator	Thanatos
14	Temperance	A wise warrior man/woman counseling (Sir Hector)	Choleriosus	Conciliator	Hercules
15	Le Diable	The Devil/Modred	Multus Melancholicus	Rivalator	Draco (son of Mars)
16	La Maison Dieu	The Babel Tower	Multus Choleriosus/ Formidolosus per actionem-verbum	Destructor	Mars/Ares
17	L'Etoile	A young adolescent of good intentions but ill manners/ a nature's boy/ Perceval	Multus Sanguinis/ Fastus sed cum consilio	Sperator	Juno/Hera
18	La Lune	A Queen/King of the night	Pituitosus	Occultor	Artemis/Dianna
19	Le Soleil	A Solar King/Queen French King Louis XIV	Multus Sanguinis	Lucidus	Apollo
20	Judgment	A knight exterminator	Multus Choleriosus	Judgeous	Pluto
21	Le monde	A dancer – actor confined in the fetters of matter (King Lear – Prince Hamlet)	Multus Melancholicus	Confinmentor	Saturn