

# TAROT NEWSLETTER

## Nº 74

### 2009 APRIL

2009 Convention in Castlemaine (Vic.)

Association for Tarot Studies 2009 Convention Programme Subject to change without notice	Friday 3rd July Evening only	Saturday 4th July all day	Sunday 5th July morning and afternoon only
Keynote speeches	9:00   10:30	9:00   10:30 <i>note that these are concurrent sessions</i> The Art of Tarot	9:00   10:30 <i>to be confirmed</i> The Art of Reading
Morning workshops & presentations	11:00   12:30	<i>note that these are concurrent sessions</i> Tarot Art Pacific Style Alternative approaches to traditional imagery	<i>note that these are concurrent sessions</i> Golden Tarot & Touchstone Tarot: how I work & (de)construct the cards Meditation on the Tarot: The Devil's teachings: From Intellect to Intuition
Afternoon workshops & presentations	2:00   3:30	<i>note that these are concurrent sessions</i> Painting your personal Tarot with symbols of colour Make your own Italian styled Tarot Box	Panel Questions and Answers Closing: 3:30
Registration package: download pdf: (forthcoming)	4:00   5:30	<i>note that these are concurrent sessions</i> Tarot and the Wheel From Poetic Image to Poem	4:00   5:30
Location: Buda House 42 Hunter Street Castlemaine Victoria, Australia	Registration & Diving Address: Tarot: its interfaith and cross-cultural artistic expression 5:30 (speaker 6:00 - 7:00)	Optional Conventual Dinner: at 7:00	

Let's briefly look at how the 2009 Convention which is (very) quickly approaching! the weekend of the 3rd-5th July seems like around the corner. Location? At the Buda House in Castlemaine (Victoria, Australia).

If you haven't already, then please do begin to make your bookings. The workshop details are still developing, with more on offer than is currently advertised on the site: I am awaiting details and confirmations to add to an already very exciting programme.

Of note, presenters include: **Alex Ukolov** from Prague (co-creator of the *Tarot of Prague* and numerous other tarot projects!); **Ma Deva Padma** (creator of the *Osbo Zen Tarot* and tarot inspired projects); **Kat Black** (*Golden and Touchstone Tarots*); from New Zealand **Fern Mercier** and **Lyn Olds** (co-ordinators the *Pacific Literatarot* project); **Jeni Bethell** (foundation member of the TGA and well known tarot teacher); **Shane Kendal**; **Anne Folleta** and **Nicholas Romas**; **Zach Wong** (*Revelations - Adflatus - Tarot*)... and a couple more surprises that I hope to announce soon.

Space is limited, so once numbers fill, it's not that we would not like you there, but rather that, unlike the major International event in 2005, we simply won't have space to accommodate more... so please book as early as you can to secure a spot. Visit our site for details!

Looking forward to seeing you there

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# TAROT TRUMPS AND HEBREW LETTERS

*variety and divergence*

In looking through various decks and reading across a reasonably broad variety of books on tarot, divergent claims are made for trumps and various correlations. One of the most persistent is the claim that somehow trump cards and letters of the alphabet have correlations.

If the earliest extent tarot cards have any such letter attributions intended by the artists, woodcarvers or publishers, then these have not come down to us, and correlations or attributions have become well masked. The strongest case I have seen to suggest that trump design may have been influenced by letters is Mark Filipas's *Alphabetic Masquerade*. Therein, Mark shows how woodcut decks from the 17th and 18th centuries bear some resemblance, and what could be some evidence, for deck design to have been modified as an *abecederium* – basically, the images have been influenced by considerations that continue to be popular in children's picture-books (A is for Apple, B for Bear, etc.), though in tarot's case, the letters are suggested as Hebrew letters, and their associated words often somewhat removed from the obviousness of the apparent image (see Newsletter #4 for an example from Mark).

For those amongst us who normally attribute Hebrew letters to the trumps of the tarot, it is apparent that whatever preference we have is not shared by others who prefer attributions at variance with our own. And then, we also at times come across attributions which seem so far at odds with the more common ones. If there are numerous variations that are in existence, three dominate. On the next page is a minor modification of a page originally prepared in order to discuss with Sitsky his attributions (to which I shall return shortly). As can be seen from the table, there is no unified view on the matter.

Let's briefly go through these columns in the order presented.

## Filipas

This is one of the three most common or popular version. It appears in the late 19th century with the works (and deck) of Falconnier. If I 'head' that column with Filipas's name who wrote his work in 2001, it is only because *if* his idea of an alphabetic *abecederium* is correct, then it indicates the earliest likely influence

on tarot design: the 17th century decks commonly referred to as 'Tarot de Marseille' (irrespective as to whether they originate from Marseille or other regions).

The ordering is quite simple and to the point: the numbers on the cards are taken as ordinal (1st, 2nd, 3rd, etc, with the last un-numbered), and the alef-bet (Hebrew alphabet) is similarly taken in its ordinal value. What emerges is a very straightforward relation between, for example, card XVII and the seventeenth letter.

## de Mellet

De Mellet's essay is the first historical instance in which some kind of direct relation is made between letters and trumps. The essay, available (in part) in a previous ATS Newsletter (#56), was originally published in De Gebelin's *Monde Primitif*, vol VIII, 1781. Therein, he lists the trumps in *descending* order from XXI through to I, after which he places the un-numbered Fool. This implies that in his view, as later authors and card designers have similarly done, that this card is 'numbered' zero.

He also mentions:

These twenty-two first cards are not only hieroglyphs, that placed in their natural order retrace the story of the earliest times, but they are also as much letters [footnote: the Hebrew alphabet is composed of 22 letters], that combined differently, can form many sentences; as well their name (A-tout) is only the literal translation of their general use and general.

So here there is a clear implication that the ordering that he had just enumerated reflects in some manner the Hebrew letters as presented in the second column.

## Levi

Alphonse Louis Constant, better known through his Hebraised name as Eliphaz Levi (Zahed), is undoubtedly the individual most influential in bringing Hebrew letter attributions to tarot. His works span a few decades with a locus around the 1850s. It is also from his view that the ensuing column (of the G.D.) indirectly stems, as he showed his correlations to Mackenzie, one of the founders of the GD, over twenty years prior to the latter's establishment.

The difference between the Filipas attributions and his own is that the Fool is placed *between* cards XX and XXI, thereby attributing it *Shin*. No 'obvious' reason is given for this, but it is interesting that in the *game* of tarot, gamblers establish specific orderings that are likely passed on from generation to generation: if one holds the Fool in one's hand, it is placed next to last in the sequence of trumps in one's hand,

<i>Letters</i>	<i>Filipas</i>	<i>de Mellet</i>	<i>Levi</i>	<i>G.D.</i>	<i>Crowley</i>	<i>Sitsky</i>	<i>Gray</i>
) alef	Bateleur	World	Bateleur	Fool	Fool	Bateleur	Pope
b bet	Popess	Judgement	Popess	Bateleur	Bateleur	Popess	Hermit
g gimel	Empress	Sun	Empress	Popess	Popess	Empress	Star
d dalet	Emperor	Moon	Emperor	Empress	Empress	Emperor	Judgement
h heh	Pope	Star	Pope	Emperor	Star	Pope	Temperance
w vav	Lovers	Tower	Lovers	Pope	Pope	Lovers	Emperor
z zain	Chariot	Devil	Chariot	Lovers	Lovers	Chariot	Hanged Man
x heth	Justice	Temperance	Justice	Chariot	Chariot	Strength	Death
+ tet	Hermit	Death	Magician	Strength	Strength	Hermit	Justice
y yod	Fortune	Hanged Man	Fortune	Hermit	Hermit	Fortune	Strength
k kaf	Strength	Strength	Strength	Fortune	Fortune	Justice	Empress
l lamed	Hanged Man	Wheel	Hanged Man	Justice	Justice	Hanged Man	Tower
m mem	Death	Hermit	Death	Hanged Man	Hanged Man	Death	Devil
n nun	Temperance	Justice	Temperance	Death	Death	Temperance	Lovers
s samek	Devil	Chariot	Devil	Temperance	Temperance	Devil	Sun
( ayin	Tower	Lovers	Tower	Devil	Devil	Tower	Chariot
p peh	Star	Jupiter	Star	Tower	Tower	Star	Wheel
c tzaddi	Moon	Emperor	Moon	Star	Emperor	Moon	Popess
q kof	Sun	Empress	Sun	Moon	Moon	Sun	World
r resh	Judgement	Junon	Judgement	Sun	Sun	Judgement	Bateleur
# shin	World	Bateleur	Fool	Judgement	Judgement	World	Fool
t tav	Fool	Fool	World	World	World	Fool	Moon

as a simple mnemonic to preclude it being played last (the *only* play which loses the Fool for the player, it being deemed as one of three singularly important cards for scoring purposes). This attribution of *Shin* remains important even on decks that otherwise attribute it as does the GD. For example, a *Shin* is still found on the Waite-Smith and BOTA Fools, despite their GD influence.

### G.D.

With the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn [G.D.] formed in 1888, numerous decks incorporate their preference at times without, it seems, understanding how the attributions were derived.

In the first place, the proposal by Levi became a preliminary working model by the GD's founders. In addition, the early Kabbalistic *Sefer Yetzirah*, in which is given elemental, planetary and zodiacal correlations to the letters, is considered. To make attributions in a manner they considered more apt, not only was the Fool placed as heading the sequence (for them numbered zero), but the two cards that appeared to be 'out' of what then follows as astrological sequence were interchanged (so VIII Justice and XI Strength become 8 - Justice and 11- Strength).

In addition, though this does not affect the letter attributions, the *planetary* attributions to the letters differ to the various versions of the *Sefer Yetzirah*. It should be noted, however, that these do differ in various versions of the book, unlike the consistency found for the elemental and zodiacal attributions.

In looking at the list in the fourth column, what should be apparent is that reading down the list the trumps are simply listed in (revised) order, as they are for each of the previous three columns (with obvious differences).

### Crowley

Aleister Crowley's attributions takes its basis that of the GD, save that he had to reconcile an insight during a working whilst in Egypt that 'Tzaddi is not the Star'. After a number of years, he found a method that satisfied his general acceptance of the GD attributions together with that lingering 'problem': by placing the cards in a double lemniscatory form, not only was the interchange from the longer established ordering of Justice and Strength 'justified', but, interestingly, the Emperor and the Star now also 'interchanged'.

The difference between Crowley and the Golden Dawn is that he generally maintains (apart from adding zero to the Fool) the *numbering* of the more traditional order (ie., VIII is Justice), but allocates Hebrew letters according to the GD with the further addition of the interchange of the Emperor and the

Star.

### Sitsky

Since 2005 when I mentioned his *Twenty-Two Paths of the Tarot* Piano Concertos during an interview on national radio, Larry Sitsky's attributions had remained a 'bother'. Of course I could 'rationalise' the differences by any number of possibilities, but it was not until this year (2009) that I finally contacted Larry to simply ask him.

In final analysis, his rationale is quite as straightforward as any of the others so far mentioned: he begins from a tarot ordering, and following these attributes the letters in order. Amongst his more detailed communication, he summarises it thus:

The order of the Tarot in my piece came from Ouspensky's little book on the tarot, and the music was the result of meditating on each of the cards.

Ouspensky's little book, *Symbolism of the Tarot*, in general follows the ordering of the GD, except that he positions the Fool last (strictly, Ouspensky also interchanges the Pope [or Hierophant] and the Chariot, but Sitsky follows the normal numbering for these).

### Gray

I've included Gray's attributions more as an example of something that at first hand appears far more complex and even, at mere listing, apparently irrational.

Strictly speaking, William Gray prefers his own version of 'Anglo-Saxon' letters. Still, he does make suggestions for card placements on the Kircher version of the Tree of Life with, importantly, Hebrew letters there allocated. These, though obviously taken from the GD attributions, are thereby 'mismatched' in a manner that nonetheless 'makes sense' (though I personally consider it rather contrived).

The overall rendition, taken from combing his *Concepts of Qabalah* (Cf esp. pp 146 & 223), gives rise to the listing given.

### Conclusion

In writing about Hebrew letter attributions to tarot trumps, it should not be forgotten that many amongst us also see that none are intrinsic to the cards, but rather extraneous 'intrusions' into a deck that may originally bear no rapport with any kind of alphabetic or Kabbalistic thought.

Yet, I am personally lead to consider that that even if the earliest created decks had no such direct influence, it is possible the Hebrew letters were 'incorporated' very early as the deck settled to the canon with which we have become familiar. Later still, further reflections on cards and letters have certainly, and repeatedly, made their mark on various developments.