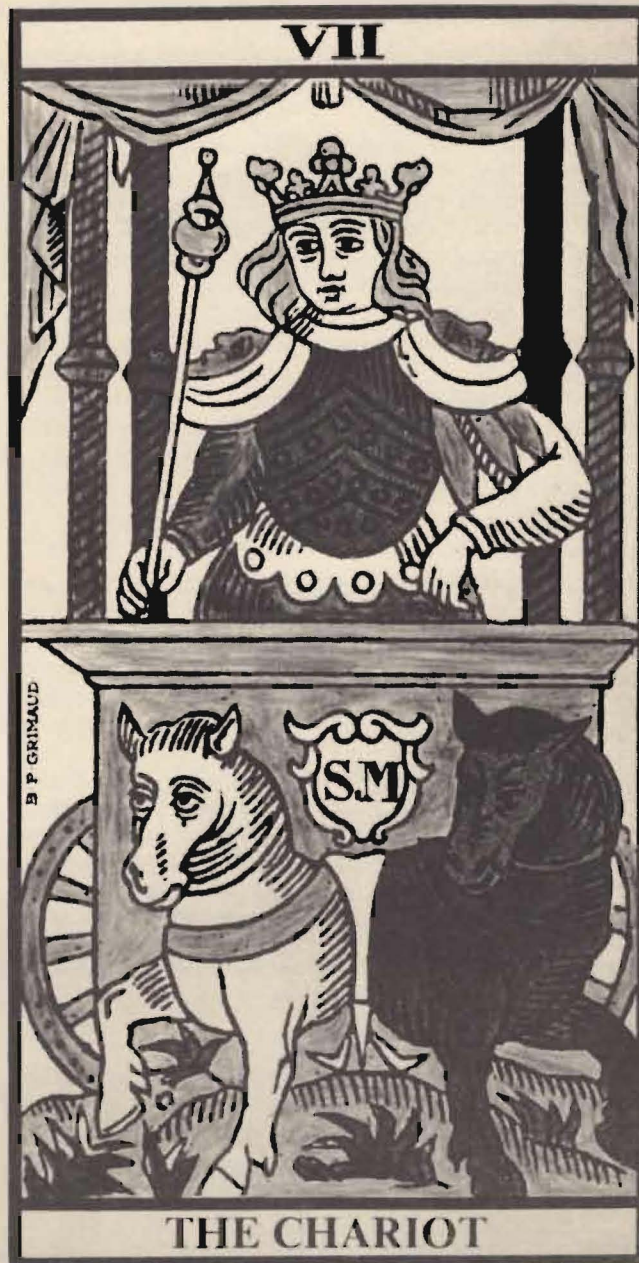


# G · B · B



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# ARTICLES

## URANIAN LOVE IN THE TAROT

John Lauritsen

The tarot has fascinated me for years. I have collected many packs, read a few worthwhile books and a lot of foolishness, and personally examined historic packs in the collection of the British Museum. So I have followed with interest a controversy recently provoked by the eminent British philosopher, Michael Dummett, who has published — not one, but two — books on the game of tarot. Professor Dummett argues thus: it was for gaming pure and simple that the tarot cards were invented in northern Italy in the fifteenth century — and it was for gaming alone that the cards were employed until their use was sullied by the eighteenth century French occultist, Court de Gébelin, who "propounded the preposterous theory" that the tarot embodied hidden doctrines of ancient Egypt.

Gébelin's essay on the tarot, *Du jeu des tarots*, (vol. 8 of his magnum opus, *Le monde primitif analysé et compare avec le monde moderne*, 1781), which contained his own tarot drawings (closely following the tarot of Marseilles), soon inspired contributions from the less erudite: notably, an "Ettella, Priest of the Mysteries" (in real life, Monsieur Alliette, the wig-maker), began a fortune-telling enterprise by means of his own pack, greatly altered, which he called "The Book of Thoth." Close on his heels, a renegade Abbé of the Roman Church, Alphonse-Louis Constant (a.k.a. Eliphas Lévi) further "rectified" the cards, linking them to the Kabbalah and ritual magic. Nonsense burgeoned. In subsequent accretions, the tarot cards became linked to the Hebrew alphabet, the Celtic tree alphabet, astrology, alchemy, numerology, theosophy, gnostics, heretics, Rosicrucians, the Knights Templar, and much else. At the present time, the tarot cards are popularly thought of as devices for fortune-telling, fraught with deep occult signification.

Dummett is indignant over this abuse of the tarot game. Properly so. Most books on the tarot — and there are hundreds — merit contempt at best, as their "interpretations" consist of little more than the free association of shallow and untrained minds.

However, Dummett may be overzealous in his rationalism when he attempts to reduce the symbolism of the trump cards to "just what someone of the time [fifteenth century] would be likely to pick if he were asked to select a series of subjects for a set of twenty-one picture cards." It is true that some trumps portray familiar symbols: Death (as the Grim Reaper), the Hermit (Father Time), the Wheel of Fortune, etc. But others — such as the Star, the Moon, the Hanged Man, the Female Pope — are decidedly strange and puzzling. Although I am sympathetic to Dummett's thesis, I would maintain that some of the tarot trumps illustrate myths or literature from classical antiquity, while others may depict heretical doctrines or aspects of pagan ritual. I also propose to demonstrate that at least a few of the cards are gay.

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### Trump VII: THE CHARIOT

Although none of the tarot "interpreters" have noted the fact, it is obvious in the Marseilles pack that this card illustrates one of the most famous symbols in all literature: the Charioteer in Plato's dialogue, *Phaedrus* (253d-254e). Clearly depicted both through coloring and expression are the noble light horse of modesty and reason on the right of the charioteer, the unruly dark horse of passion and sensuality on the left, with both commanded by Love as the charioteer of souls. Thus, the symbol is ancient (nearly two millennia older than the first tarot pack); and it is profound, as only a philosopher knows who has himself experienced the divine madness and the willing constraints of love. It is also gay, as the love discussed in *Phaedrus* is specifically the love between man and youth.

It must be acknowledged that some early decks may be interpreted differently: in a late fifteenth century Tarrochi of Mantegna deck, the card is titled "Marte" (Mars), while in the exquisite hand-painted Pierpoint Morgan-Bergamo Visconti-Sforza deck, the horses are both snow-white and winged. The general belief, which I share, is that the most authentic and coherent symbolism is to be found in the Marseilles pack, despite the fact that the oldest surviving decks with the Marseilles designs are early eighteenth century. Basil Rakoczi offers a way out of this apparent contradiction:

"Undoubtedly many packs had preceded these highly artistic and sophisticated designs. Time has taken its toll of such perishable works and we have only the Gypsy's word for it that the symbols in our surviving, mutilated, sentimentalised or otherwise travestied cards derive directly from those he carried into Western Europe, a hundred years or more before Mantegna or any other fine artist took a hand in re-creating new pictures from the more practical, if

less refined, originals. The Tarot of Marseilles gives a good impression of what the primitive designs were like, even though these have suffered at the hands of the woodblock engraver and the printing press. However, they retain most, if not all, of the chief symbols...." (The Painted Caravan, pp. 16, 17)

The "Spanish Tarot," based on an original 1736 deck in the collection of the Fournier Museum in Vitoria, Spain, has designs closely following those of the Marseilles pack. Although the two horses are differentiated only slightly by color, the "dark" horse on the left has a most unruly — indeed ornery — expression, while the horse on the right looks demurely virtuous. As in all decks with the Marseilles design, the horses seem to be pulling in opposite directions.

In the heyday of Victorian and Edwardian occultism, many new tarot decks were published, the most notable being: 1) the Rider-Waite deck (designed by Miss Pamela Colman Smith, a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn, under the direction of the Rosicrucian Master, Arthur Edward Waite); and 2) the Oswald Wirth Tarot Deck (Wirth was a Swiss Kabbalist). In these "rectified" decks, the traditional symbols tend to be attenuated, displaced, or at least overlaid with the occult trappings and baggage of the time. Both Wirth and Waite, following Eliphas Lévi, replaced the horses with sphinxes! (Wirth even gives Negroid features to the dark sphinx.) Although a poor rationalist like myself cannot easily imagine sphinxes pulling a chariot, I suppose that the three occultists felt that putting in sphinxes made the card ever so much more mystical. Waite makes the further blunder of placing the black sphinx on the right side of the chariot, thus demonstrating he never had an inkling of what the card represented. Apparently the vast learning of this savant of fin-de-siècle occultism did not extend to the works of Plato.

#### Trump VI: THE LOVERS or THE TWO PATHS

A comely young man stands in doubt, forced to choose between two characters who have their hands on him. On his right (the side of virtue), is a somewhat older gentleman who in some decks is a prince (with a crown) and in others, a scholar; on his left (the side of vice), a young woman. The young man's face is turned curiously or even yearningly to the other man, but his body inclines to the woman. Hovering above in a small cloud is a Cupid with arrow drawn.

Traditionally this card is known as either The Lovers or The Two Paths. I think a better title would be: Uranian versus Pandemic Love — the choice between Heavenly Eros and Vulgar Eros.

It was a belief of some ancient Greeks that there was not just one Eros, but two. The true Eros, the older and higher love, was the son of the Uranian, or the Heavenly Aphrodite, who was "sprung from no mother's womb, but from the heavens themselves." (Speech of Pausanias, Plato's Symposium 180e) The Heavenly Eros had no female attributes — he was a male god, for men; usually portrayed as a youth in the first bloom of adolescence, his statue presided in the Greek gymnasium (from which females were categorically banned, under pain of death). His love was considered a sacred and noble passion; a love inseparable from philosophy and the imparting of wisdom; a love bound up with friendship, comradeship, athletics, valor, beauty, and all virtue — the highest, as well as the most human love. Heavenly Eros — the Higher Love — required that both partners be capable of reason, and was therefore necessarily the love of male for male.

The other Eros was the son of the Pandemic, or the Earthly Aphrodite, whose nature partook of both male and female, as she was the product of a heterosexual coupling (Zeus and Dione). The earthly Eros governed the passions of the vulgar, and did his work entirely at random — since only a shallow pleasure was sought, of the body rather than the soul, the love-object could just as well be a woman as a young man. (Speech of Pausanias, Plato's Symposium 180e et seq. — see also works listed below under References.)

To pull the argument together: I think trump VI is a card of choice, from the standpoint of the central figure: Will the young man choose Uranian Love (the older man), in which he may develop in wisdom and manliness? Or will he succumb to Pandemic Love (the woman), which will lead to vice and effemination? (The option of marriage, to fulfill his civic obligation of producing children, is not yet open to him; the Greeks thought the ideal ages for marriage were 30 to 40 years for the man, about 18 for the woman.)

Of course, the ancient Greek views expressed above are quite different from the received ideology of present-day gay liberation, and some may find them thoroughly reprehensible. And yet they are, or ought to be, a part of the heritage of every gay man. Literary debates over the relative merits of Male Love versus the common heterosexual variety extend for the better part of two millennia, from those of Plato and his contemporaries, to works of the late Roman Empire, to underground verse of the High Middle Ages. I have listed some of these works below, under References.

Trump VI, The Lovers or The Two Paths, has undergone drastic heterosexualist censorship. In some later decks, the older male is simply replaced by a female — in the Wirth deck, the young man's choice is reduced to that between two women: a blonde (virtue) on his right and a brunette (vice) on his left. In the Waite deck, he is not even permitted a choice — instead, Adam

and Eve figures stand lugubriously beneath an angel who seems to be blessing them. Even when presented with an authentic design, commentators on this card have strained for a straight interpretation: for example, that a young couple are exchanging vows before a priest!

Rákoczi's comments are provocative, though everything in *The Painted Caravan* ought to be taken with a grain of salt — Rákoczi himself cautions that much of what he says will be "but 'lying gypsy prattle'", and he invites the reader to "read between the lines." He writes:

"The practices, abhorred by those who sit in judgment, of the Knights Templar, as well as certain Platonic or oriental erotic rites are covered by this card and by card 19, the Sun. This was one of the many reasons why some of these forbidden sects that travelled from the East into Europe were condemned by the moralists of that day. Heresy seems to have rung the changes upon free love, asceticism and what, for want of a better term, is called unnatural vice, these being signified, oddly enough, by the figures upon this card who have been called Truth, Honour and Love." (*The Painted Caravan*, pp. 38-39)

### Trump XIX: THE SUN

This card is usually interpreted as representing Gemini, Castor and Pollux, Friendship. Since the trump, the Chariot, has already demonstrated the presence of Platonism in the tarot, it is tempting to relate the Sun to the speech of Aristophanes in Plato's *Symposium*.

Aristophanes' speech is brilliant, both ridiculously funny and profound. He relates a fable: In the beginning there were three sexes: an all-male sex, an all-female sex, and a hermaphrodite sex that was half male/half female. Each sex was globular in form, with four arms, four legs, two faces, etc.

"The three sexes, I may say, arose as follows. The males were descended from the Sun, the females from the Earth, and the hermaphrodites from the Moon..." (Symposium 190b, emphasis added.)

Then Zeus in anger splits each of the creatures in half, and Apollo stitches them up, resulting in the human beings of today. Each person is then left with a desperate yearning for his/her other half. The man who is a slice of the original hermaphrodite sex will be a womanizer, while his female equivalent will be a man-chaser. The woman who is a slice of the original female sex will be a Lesbian. And the male who is a slice of the original male sex will practise Male Love.

It is noteworthy that the ancient Greeks considered effeminacy an attribute of the woman-chasing male, while masculinity was associated with the lover of males. This is, of course, the opposite of the viewpoint that now prevails. Aristophanes reinforces this point incisively:

"Men who are slices of the male are followers of the male, and show their masculinity throughout their boyhood by the way they make friends with men, and the delight they take in lying beside them and being taken in their arms. And these are the most hopeful of the nation's youth, for theirs is the most virile constitution.

"I know there are some people who call them shameless, but they are wrong. It is not immodesty that leads them to such pleasures, but daring, fortitude, and masculinity — the very virtues that they recognize and welcome in their lovers — which is proved by the fact that in after years they are the only men who show any real manliness in public life. And so, when they themselves have come to manhood, their love in turn is lavished upon boys." (Symposium 191e, 192b)

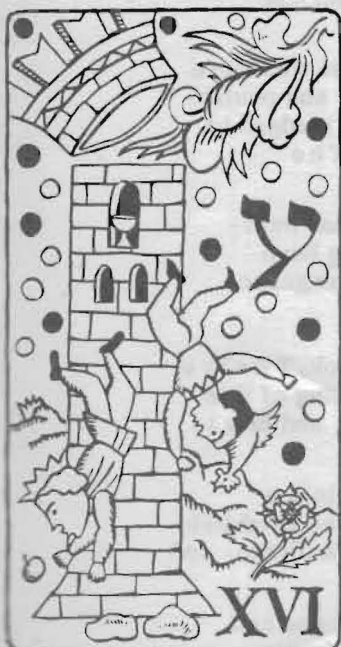
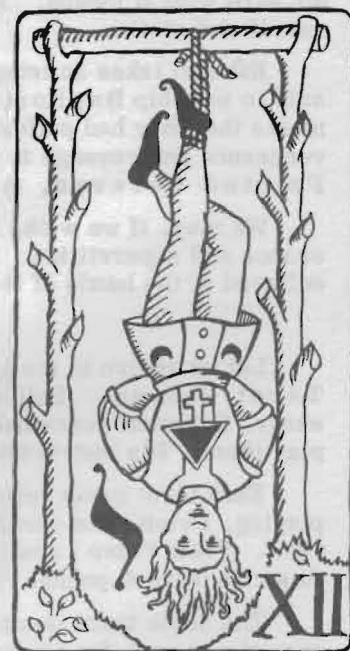
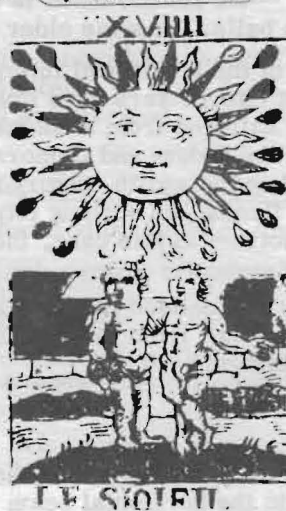
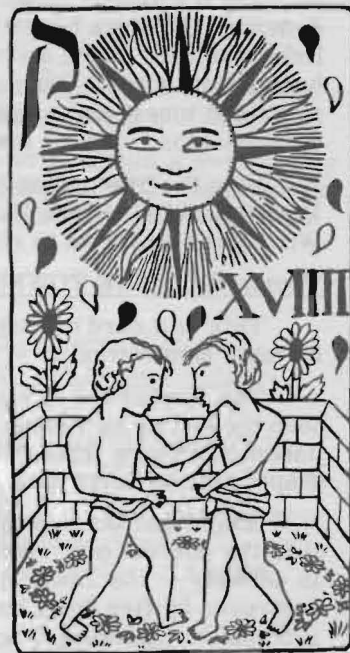
Aristophanes describes the ecstatic reunion with the soul-mate:

"When this boy lover — or any lover, for that matter — is fortunate enough to meet his other half, they are both so intoxicated with affection, with friendship, and with love, that they cannot bear to let each other out of sight for a single instant. It is such reunions as these that impel men to spend their lives together, although they may be hard put to it to say what they really want with one another..." (Symposium 192c)

And so it can be seen that the following elements in Aristophanes' speech pertain to Trump XIX: the Sun — two male soul-mates, both being halves of the original all-male sex that was descended from the Sun. I do not insist on this interpretation, though I find it more convincing than most to be found in the literature on the tarot.

This trump, like the preceding, has suffered greatly at the hands of censorious heterosexualism. In the older decks, the two children, however crudely drawn, are always unambiguously boys. It would seem that an all-male couple, even two little boys, is threatening to the prurient heterosexual mentality; designers of more recent decks have felt obliged to straighten out this card by substituting a girl for one of the boys (e.g., the Swiss Mueller deck and the Wirth deck). If there were no other reason to believe that the Sun represents Male Love, then heterosexual alterations would incline one towards this interpretation.





Basil Rákóczi's designs are in the four corners, unnumbered. No. 5: Swiss pack by Joannes Pelagius Mayer, ca. 1680. Nos. 3, 6, and 11: Tarot Classic — from woodcuts by Claude Burdel, ca. 1751. No. 2: Tarot Arista (note phrase "entre le vice et la vertu."). No. 1: Grand Tarot Belline, 19th century design by Magus Edmond (note amusing, but correct, portrayal of Vice and Virtue.). Nos. 8, 9: 1JJ Swiss Tarot, date unknown (How sweetly Le Soleil has been heterosexualized! But what about the dirty old man in L'Amoureux?). Nos. 4, 7: the Wirth deck. No. 10: 12th century mosaic in Monreale, depicting the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah. See Back Cover for the most important Tarot of Marseilles cards, along with their travesties from the Waite deck.

## Trump XV: THE DEVIL

The traditional rendering of this card is an androgynous Devil, with two male or androgynous demons in bondage beneath him. I have no particular interpretation to offer, though Basil Rákoczi links this card to the androgynous Baphomet allegedly worshipped by the Knights Templar in their homosexual rites. Rákoczi comments: "Some followers of cult-ideas such as these deliberately practised incest and sought queer libidinal satisfactions as physical counterparts of heavenly relationships, arguing that the Pagan Gods had done likewise." (Painted Caravan, p. 16)

Like the preceding two cards, this card has also been altered by censorious heterosexualism. Both the Waite and the Wirth decks make the Devil's two little demons a male/female couple. Wirth goes so far as to color his female demon green, with bright red nipples!

## Trump XVI: THE TOWER OF DESTRUCTION

This is a card of catastrophe: the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah — the Hebraic taboo on male homosexuality — the downfall of Male Love.

The symbolism is marvellously rich. Two men are plunging headlong from a tower that has been blasted by lightning. The very phallic tower obviously represents a cock in orgasm: bits of jissom are flying through the air — the phallic motif is recapitulated by three windows in the tower shaped like an erect cock and two balls. In some older decks, the two men are shown naked.

Sodom and Gomorrah is one of the traditional interpretations of this card, and I am convinced it is the correct one. Some tarot interpreters have linked this card to the Tower of Babel, but this is unlikely — the Tower of Babel suffered from a confusion of tongues, but was certainly not destroyed by fire from heaven. The Sodom and Gomorrah interpretation is reinforced by a striking resemblance between Trump XVI and a twelfth century mosaic in Monreale, herein reproduced, which depicts Lot and his family fleeing the burning city of Sodom. (Like the tarot card, the Monreale mosaic has a phallic motif — in this case, the figure of Lot's wife, who is in the process of changing into a pillar of salt.)

This card has also been heterosexualized in some decks by intruding the female sex. In the Waite deck, a man and a woman fall from the Tower. It is a sad state of affairs when even sodomy is thus compelled to go straight!

## Trump XII: THE HANGED MAN

This fascinating card portrays a youth suspended head downwards, hanging from a rope tied around his left heel and attached to the horizontal beam of a wooden scaffold. His hands are tied behind his back and his free right leg crosses almost nonchalantly behind the left knee.

All interpreters are affected by the mysterious power of this card, yet no-one seems to know for sure what it means. Traditional interpretations describe it as a card of martyrdom, the sacrificial victim.

Rákoczi takes an interesting tack: "The youth and the stake served to remind those who were said to worship Baphomet with strange rites and oriental practices, of the tortures and punishments that they had suffered, or might suffer for their alleged crimes. That they are pledged to vengeance and revenge is an interpretation that the Gypsy often gives to this card." (The Painted Caravan, p. 50)

We may, if we wish, imagine that the youth was a sexual heretic, a victim of sexual intolerance and superstition. Let this card therefore remind gay men of the martyrdom we have suffered at the hands of the Church and Synagogue, and renew our pledge for rightful vengeance.

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Let us return to the game aspect of the tarot, with Michael Dummett's smaller book, *Twelve Tarot Games*. Following the Introduction, which I have summarized in the beginning of this essay, Dummett describes a dozen surviving tarot games: their fascinating histories, and how to play them. His instructions are clear and comprehensive.

Each tarot game requires an appropriate deck. Believing that the proof would be in the playing, I visited an occult bookshop, a gaming supplies store, and a "warlock" supplies establishment. From these I acquired the Tarocco Piemontese, Tarocco Bolognese, Tarocco Siciliano, and Austrian Tarock packs. I then recruited players. And we played.

The basic tarot is a trick-taking game for three players — sometimes two against one and sometimes each for himself. Everything proceeds (like witch dances) in a counterclockwise direction. Dummett's enthusiasm is justified. The tarot games are fun to play, challenging, and unspoiled by the overanalysis, systematization, and conventions of modern card games.

There may be a diabolical power in the cards after all, for they have several times kept my other half, George, and myself up most of the night playing a two-handed version of Austrian Tarock.

John Lauritsen

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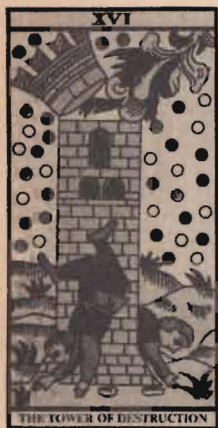
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Back Cover: The Rákoczi Devil is surrounded by the best and most authentic tarots on the top half (the Tarot of Marseilles) and late Victorian travesties on the bottom half (the Waite deck).