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## *The Cards: The Evolution and Power of Tarot* by Patrick Maille

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February 4-5, 2022 (Friday evening, Saturday all day)

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## Online Winter Seminar



### Online Winter Seminar

The Inklings and Horror: Fantasy's Dark Corners

February 4-5, 2022 (Friday evening, Saturday all day)

Via Zoom and Discord

## Mythcon 52: The Mythic, the Fantastic, and the Alien

Albuquerque, New Mexico; July 29 - August 1, 2022

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### Additional Keywords

Mythlore; The Cards: The Evolution and Power of Tarot by Patrick Maille; Emily E. Auger; Tarot; Popular Culture

for anyone interested in MacDonald's work, ideas, and approach to fantasy. The various uses of the imagination by MacDonald, as seen in his fantasies for children, offer more insight to the stories and also room for further study and broader application.

—Tiffany Brooke Martin



**THE CARDS: THE EVOLUTION AND POWER OF TAROT.** Patrick Maille. Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2021. 260 pp, including 44 b/w illustrations, a suggested reading list, lists of works cited by chapter, and index. Hardcover ISBN 9781496832993 \$99.00 Paperback ISBN 9781496833006 \$25.00

PATRICK MAILLE IS A PROFESSOR OF HISTORY at the Oklahoma Panhandle State University, the Associate Dean of the College of Arts and Education, and the Department Chair of Social and Behavioral Sciences (University website accessed July 2021). *The Cards* is his first book and the only publication credit identified in his university biography. I found no claims to any interest in Tarot apart from mentions in his book connecting it with his wife, his daughter's sideline business as a Tarot reader, and a class he teaches on magic. He tells his readers that a colleague "introduced him" to the Southwest Popular/American Culture Association (SWPACA) conference, a regional version of the national Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association (PCA/ACA) conference where I established Tarot as an area in 2004. I have never attended the SWPACA and do not remember ever meeting Patrick Maille or receiving a submission from him for the PCA/ACA conference, so it took some digging to find out what his involvement at the SWPACA conference has been. It appears that the first paper he presented there was "Tarot Cards in American Popular Culture" (2016), followed by "What Do Don Draper, Lisa Simpson, and Xena Have in Common?: The Use of Tarot Cards in Popular Television" (2017), "James Bond and Sherlock Holmes Take Tarot Cards to the Movies" (2018), and "Comics and Tarot" (2019). Like many individuals who present at the SWPACA conferences and have faculty positions or other professional credits, Maille also moderated some of the sessions he presented in, including those in 2018 (Film and History area) and 2019 (Esotericism and Occultism, chaired by George Sieg). In 2020, he moderated a session in the Film and History area, where he also presented on *Nacho Libre*. In 2021 he moderated two round-tables in the area of Esotericism, Occultism, and Magic, one on "Plagues and Magic" and another on "The Ir/Rationality of War."

The SWPACA conferences always host a publishers' area, where publishing representatives are available to answer questions from prospective authors and to encourage submissions on subjects they are interested in. They also have copies of their latest and more popular volumes available for discounted purchasing, such as my own books on Tarot from McFarland (2004) and Intellect/University of Chicago Press (2016). Maille says that the University Press of Mississippi representative contacted him about writing a book on Tarot (7). That is an astounding turn of events as there are a good number of scholars writing and publishing about Tarot who have had no luck at all breaking the UP publication barrier. I've been quite happy with McFarland and Intellect/U of Chicago, so this particular glass ceiling is not a concern for me; still, when the UP of Mississippi contacted ME about the availability of Maille's book for review, my curiosity was definitely piqued.

The good news is that this is a book about Tarot and it has been published by a University Press. That counts for something in terms of the general credibility of Tarot Studies in academia. Also of potential interest are the chapters related to the papers Maille presented at the SWPACA conference on Tarot in television and comic books. The down side is that, while this book may help pave the way for more books on Tarot from University Presses (or just more publishers and presses in general), many Tarot scholars reading *The Cards* may be left wondering if that is a good thing.

Academic publishing is supposed to offer greater respectability because the authors who contribute to it are supposedly better trained in the methodologies, forms, and ethics of scholarship: books from University Presses are supposed to be better than those from run-of-the-mill popular presses. The most visible and obvious indication of (at least potentially) good research and scholarship is thorough documentation. While a lot of footnotes, endnotes, or other citations are no guarantee of quality research and are not needed for original analyses of films, books, or art (or, if you prefer, works of art, but definitely not "pieces" of art, see Maille 109), they are most certainly required when an author is summarizing or restating someone else's research. *The Cards* has no footnotes, no bibliography, and very few in-text citations, and these stand out so much that I started counting the number of times one particular author (Helen Farley) was referenced by full name and book title. There is a suggested reading list and a works cited list for each chapter—the sort of thing one might expect to find in a book intended for a general and uncritical audience—not one from a university press. Yes, there are scholars out there who have been presenting and writing articles and books on their chosen topic for years and even decades, and sparse citations tend to be overlooked in their work. Maille, however, having presented a few papers on Tarot and given a class or two on

the subject as part of another course (he does not say how many classes or at what level), still owes his readers (and his sources) a proper number of citations.

Maille's book does not have any sort of central thesis or argument, so it is also disappointing simply because it doesn't say anything in particular. Chapters One and Two, for example, traverse the high points of Tarot history familiar to Tarot scholars. Much, if not all, of the accurate information in chapter one, which is titled "The Origins of the Tarot Cards," may be found, complete with documentation, in Ronald Decker, Thierry Depaulis, and Michael Dummett's *A Wicked Pack of Cards: The Origins of Occult Tarot* (St. Martin's Press, 1996) and Decker and Dummett's *A History of the Occult Tarot 1870–1970* (Duckworth, 2002). A more detailed background on the history of the *Visconti-Sforza* Cards is available in Dummett's book of the same title (George Braziller 1986), which Maille does not mention anywhere. Those who have less time on their hands or who want a shorter framework to start with, might want to turn to Dummett's contribution to Volume One of *Tarot in Culture* (Valleyhome Books, 2014) and Helen Farley's chapters "Origins and Antecedents" and "Renaissance Italy and the Emergence of Tarot" in her *A Cultural History of Tarot: From Entertainment to Esotericism* (I.B. Tauris, 2009).

With the exception of Dummett's study of the *Visconti-Sforza* deck, these books are included in Maille's chapter by chapter list of works cited. Why is that not enough? First, authors who don't document become sloppy, as when he credits the Muslims with having playing cards in the late twelfth century (14). As usual, Maille does not cite his sources, but in her debate about the origins of Tarot cards, Farley discusses the Mamlüks as "rulers of Egypt, Syria, and Palestine from 1250 until 1517" (17). Surely, Maille knows that the 1200s are the thirteenth century not the twelfth century? A few pages later, Maille dates a particular fresco in the Palazzo Borromeo Milan to the fourteenth century (17) and Farley, who includes an illustration of that same fresco provides its usual fifteenth-century date of the 1440s (Farley 34-35). Everyone with a book out there has at least one (or two or more) cringeworthy typos or errors that managed to slip past the proofreaders into print. Reviewers learn to overlook a lot of these sorts of mistakes, but Maille (or the Press's proofreaders) just keep slipping.

In chapter one (20-21), Maille quotes Farley, even giving us a page number, and then goes on to chat about other topics that add up to Farley's published ideas about the Devil, Tower, and Hermit cards without mentioning her again. Readers will find Farley's discussion of the Devil in her book on pages 84-88, that of the Tower on pages 88-92, and that of the Hermit on pages 68-9 respectively. I haven't checked them all, but it does appear that Maille has restated many of Farley's interpretations of the Renaissance cards without credit. You would be better off reading Farley's book; she didn't come up with all of these interpretations either, but at least she includes a few notes.

Another more complicated example of how far things can go wrong when an author doesn't keep track of what exactly it was a particular author wrote and where they wrote it, involves Farley's discussion of the Tower as possibly referencing the Hellmouth; she is careful to cite Gertrude Moakley, author of *The Tarot Cards Painted by Bonifacio Bembo for the Visconti-Sforza Family* (1966), as the source of this possible identification (Farley 85). Maille, on the other hand, simply states "'The Tower' represents 'the Hellmouth' or entrance to Hell" (21). Not only that, he elsewhere in the space of a few sentences (16) mentions Moakley's thesis about the possible relationship between the Tarot trumps and the works of Petrarch and Dante; references a recent Tarot deck redesigned to follow Dante's *Divine Comedy*; states, "I would argue that the symbols and their meanings had a widespread presence in fourteenth- and fifteenth-century Italy"; and derides the modern Tarot deck in a way that confuses it with Moakley's well-thought out and scholarly research. If that weren't befuddling enough, the argument about the widespread presence of Tarot motifs and images in Renaissance Italy is such a given in Tarot history, that Maille's claim to it as the product of his own research is disingenuous to say the least. He further complicates his position later on when he states that he noted "that the sequence and symbols of part of the deck is aligned with the journey that Dante takes with Vergil in *The Divine Comedy*" (136).

Maille does a similar dis-service to Mary K. Greer, who was kind enough to write a supportive blurb for the book jacket, presumably on the basis of one of those pdf copies labelled "uncorrected proofs" on every page. He cites Greer's blog, specifically her "Origins of Cartomancy," and how she establishes the connection between divination with cards and the drawing of lots. Nowhere in this article does Greer credit the cards themselves with magical powers. Maille, however, asserts his opinion that the cards do not have magical powers in a manner suggesting that he is arguing with Greer (on a point she does not make): "In spite of my skepticism, Greer's argument cannot be dismissed out of hand. I simply offer a different interpretation, not a refutation" (19).

Something similar happens in connection with Arthur Rosengarten, a psychologist who is well-known to students of Tarot for having completed one of the first dissertations on Tarot in psychology (1985). Maille tells us something about Rosengarten's research (95-98) and then goes on to talk about how "Tarotists with an interest in psychology and a desire to develop archetypes have linked these sixteen cards [the courts] to what psychologists call the Myers-Briggs personality types" (99). I can understand how he missed Rosengarten's work on Tarot and the Myers-Briggs personality types, but why doesn't he reference Mary K. Greer's discussion of that subject? He had at least one telephone interview with her, refers to her as "one of the most widely known contemporary figures in American Tarot" (18), "an eminent name in the tarot

community" (59), and so forth, but he seems to be familiar with only one of her books, that being *Tarot For Your Self*, first published in 1984, and that by title only. Closer consultation with her books might have served him rather well. Not only would he have found her discussion of the Myers-Briggs to Tarot correlation, a few minutes consulting her *Women of the Golden Dawn* (Park Street Press, 1995) might have made him a little more cautious about giving credit to MacGregor Mathers for the Golden Dawn deck his wife Moina (Bergson) almost certainly created (40-1). There are other publications available on this subject that further support Moina Mathers's primary role as artist, just as there is considerable research confirming Pamela Colman Smith's importance as the artist of the *Rider-Waite* or *Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot* (1909) (see, for example, Marcus Katz and Tali Goodwin's *Secrets of the Waite-Smith Tarot*, Llewellyn, 2015). Maille seems to be unaware of or uninterested in any of these readily available and modestly-priced books.

On a more personal front, Maille did find my books *Tarot and Other Meditation Decks* (McFarland 2004) and *Cartomancy and Tarot in Film 1940–2010* (Intellect 2016), probably on the publishers' tables at the SWPACA conference. In fact, one of my first reactions upon receiving *The Cards* was to wonder if that University Press representative had the first of my books on Tarot in hand while contemplating its counterpart under their logo or if Maille saw it and decided that he could remake it somehow as his own "scholarly niche" (as he calls Tarot p. 7). I guess I'll never know for sure and those thoughts would be forgotten already except that Maille doesn't mention the extensive filmography that I self-published or include the related Intellect title in his works cited for his chapter on film. I gathered and wrote about Tarot as it is used in almost 200 films, all of which I watched at least twice and many of them more often than that. I spent years on that research and writing those books. Maille tosses off a chapter referencing about a dozen films, the only one of which I didn't address is *Sherlock Holmes: A Game of Shadows* (and that was because it came out in 2011 and I set 2010 as my cut-off date). He certainly knew of my book because it is on his reading list. Maybe he found it after he drafted his own chapter. Such things happen, though that is just a little hard to believe in this case given that he presented his first SWPACA paper on Tarot in the year *Cartomancy and Tarot in Film* was published. Even so, if you find a major source on your topic in the last breath before going to press, the scholarly thing to do is to acknowledge the fact somewhere: in a preface, in a note at the end of the chapter, something.

Maille also cherry-picks a few authors represented in the *Tarot in Culture* anthology I edited and published (2014), notably Ed Buryn, Danny Jorgenson, and Marcus Katz. Oddly, he seems to work entirely with the excerpt from Jorgenson's book that I collected for this anthology, but his list of works cited for that chapter does not include *Tarot in Culture* and does include

Jorgenson's book. Did he even bother getting a copy of it? Having spent so much time on the *Tarot in Culture* collection, I can't help seeing other authors' papers restated or reinvented as Maille's with far less background work (hours or days perhaps as opposed to years), far less content, and without citations. Incidentally, I also wrote a chapter on "Tarot and Art" in my first book (2004) and Maille's counterpart read like a hasty lecture-prep amalgam of my points and those of some of the *Tarot in Culture* authors. Perhaps that is exactly what I was reading.

If lack of citations and fabricated arguments don't bother you, here are just three examples of factual errors about Tarot that Maille either perpetuates or invents.

Tarot as two games: Maille asserts that the trumps were not added to the fifty-six-card playing deck until centuries after they were invented (14) and further argues this point as if it were something he himself has proven in reference to the Sola Busca cards: "While all the cards represent a set, I would contend that they are, in fact two games. This would be something like having checkers and chess pieces in a matching set and sharing the same board. There is no decisive evidence that I am aware of that would indicate both decks being used in a single game or for a single purpose in which the cards are all mixed" (110-111). Maille may possibly have picked up the long-discredited two-game theory from Moakley's wording (see, for example, Moakley p. 46), who researched and wrote about Tarot in the 1950s and 1960s, or Robert Steele ("A Notice of the Ludus Triumphorum and some Early Italian Card Games; with some remarks on the origin of the game of cards," *Archaeologia* 57.1 (Jan. 1900): 185-200, Plates 21 and 22), although Steele isn't on his reading lists. No one who has made even a peripheral study of Kaplan's four volume *Encyclopedia of Tarot* or the Dummett, Decker, and Depaulis books cited above could possibly support it. Further to this point, see Michael Dummett's *Game of Tarot* which establishes that there are no surviving trumps-only decks (81-83). On the invention of the very idea of trumps, see *Tractus De Deificatione Sexdecim Heroum Per Martianum De Sancto Alosio / A Treatise on the Deification of Sixteen Heroes by Marziano Da Sant' Alosio* with text, translation, introduction, and notes by Ross G.R. Caldwell and Marco Ponzi (Scholion Press, 2019) and Christina Olsen's PhD dissertation (U of Pennsylvania, 1994) *Carte da trionfi: The Development of Tarot in Fifteenth-Century Italy*, neither of which leaves any room for doubt that the trumps were designed as additions to a regular playing deck. If doubts do remain, Gherardo Ortalli's "The Prince and the playing cards: The Este family and the role of courts at the time of the *Kartenspiel-Invasion*," *Ludica*, 2 (1996): 175-205 is the best source detailing the references to *carte da trionfi* in the fifteenth century and then *tarocchi* in the sixteenth century in the Este archives in Modena. These references clearly establish that the trump cards were a fifth suit added to



the pre-existing four-suited deck. From its first appearance, Tarot, as it eventually came to be called, was a single deck, including all five suits. As Ross Caldwell pointed out to me, the only updates Ortalli's article needs are the revision of the attribution of some cards from decks such as the Charles VI (aka Gringonneur), Catania, etc., all of which are listed in the second full paragraph on page 194 of the article, from Ferrara to Florence, and the identification of the "torchiolo" as a paper press, rather than a playing card press.<sup>1</sup>

The Gringonneur Tarot: Maille asserts that this historical deck includes both the Devil and Tower cards (21). The naming, history, and misdating of this deck could easily be the subject of a book chapter all on its own. Suffice to say here that only seventeen of the original cards survive and the Devil is not one of them. For one of many sources on this subject, see Stuart Kaplan, *Encyclopedia of Tarot* Vol. I (111-16).

The Sola Busca Tarot: Maille asserts that the copper plates with which this deck was printed have survived (109). The fifteenth-century Sola Busca Tarot is discussed and illustrated in all four volumes of Stuart Kaplan's *Encyclopedia of Tarot*: there are individual cards, there are photographs of cards, but there are no extant printing plates for this deck. If the printing plates have been found, Maille should most certainly be telling us how that came about and where they are.

This book has so many more problematic issues and inaccuracies, it is hard to believe it is in print. If your library wants to build its Tarot studies collection with some more or less readily available titles, try those by Cynthia Giles (1992), Paul Huson (2004), Stuart Kaplan's multi-volume *Encyclopedia of Tarot* (1978 ff) and Pamela Colman Smith: *The Untold Story* (2018), Robert Place (2005), Arthur Rosengarten (2000), and the others mentioned above, including, if it isn't too immodest to say, my own books. Check the bibliographies of all of those titles for more possibilities. Skip Maille's book, it sets the bar far too low for just about everybody.

—Emily E. Auger



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<sup>1</sup> My particular thanks to Ross Caldwell for this latter source and associated information. Caldwell also lent me his list of the historical errors in this book, but space limitations prevent me from including them all here.