

Book Review

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T. Susan Chang. *36 Secrets: A Decanic Journey through the Minor Arcana of the Tarot*. Anima Mundi Press, 2021. xix + 281 pp. ISBN: 978-1-716-32509-0. \$29.95 (Softcover).

T. Susan Chang and M. M. Meleen. *Tarot Deciphered: Decoding Esoteric Symbolism in Modern Tarot*. Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn, 2021. xxii + 650 pp. ISBN 9780738764474. \$34.99 (Softcover).

T. Susan Chang. *Tarot Correspondences: Ancient Secrets for Everyday Readers*. Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn, 2018. Fifth printing 2021. viii + 384 pp. Softcover ISBN: 0-7387-5512-0 pending. \$29.99. / \$29.83 (e-book).

T. Susan Chang's *Tarot Correspondences* (2018), *Tarot Deciphered* (2021), and *36 Secrets* (2021) are all dedicated to re-presenting and explaining the tangled maze of Tarot correspondences and interpretations associated with the English esoteric tradition so that they are more accessible to modern readers. Given the increasing mainstream popularity of Tarot, and acknowledgement of Tarot-related discourse of all kinds in academia, these volumes will be welcome additions to many personal, public, and university libraries. While there are more and more books, websites, and courses addressing Tarot, all too many are based on wildly outdated or fanciful sources, such that students, lecturers, and faculty advisors alike may be hard-pressed to find their way through the dross. Chang is among the few authors in this field who has not shirked the demands of either text-based or practice-associated research in gathering and sharing relevant materials and her knowledge about them.

It was Court de Gébelin (1728–1784) who first declared Tarot to be a repository of esoteric wisdom. He and M. Le C. de M**** [Comte de Mellet] published papers in Gébelin's twenty-two-volume *Le Monde primitif* suggesting that Tarot had originated in Egypt, and proposing correspondences between the trumps and the twenty-two letters of the Hebrew alphabet. Tarot had been invented

long before Gébelin, in fifteenth-century Italy, with the addition of trumps to the older playing deck in order to diversify the number and kinds of games that could be played. Eventually, the number of trumps was conventionalized to twenty-two (including the Fool, Magician, High Priestess or Papess, Emperor, Empress, Hierophant or Pope, Lovers, Chariot, Strength, Hermit, Wheel of Fortune, Justice, Hanged Man, Death, Temperance, Devil, Tower, Star, Moon, Sun, Judgement, and World). While the Egyptian origin of Tarot was soon proven false, the notion that Tarot embodied ancient esoteric wisdom gained popularity in certain circles, notably that of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

The Golden Dawn is the primary source of the English esoteric tradition discussed and presented by Chang. The Golden Dawn was founded in London in 1888 by William Robert Woodman, William Wynn Westcott, and Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers: these three and other men and women set up the rituals and knowledge-based initiatory grades marking each member's familiarity with various esoteric systems, including Tarot. The Golden Dawn was short-lived, but variations of it and its emphasis on Tarot were carried on by its offshoots and the individuals it inspired. Several Tarot decks are directly associated with the Golden Dawn, including the original deck created by Mathers and his wife Moina (Mina Bergson); Arthur E. Waite and artist Pamela Colman Smith's *Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot* (1909), now the most popular Tarot deck in the world; Aleister Crowley and artist Frieda Lady Harris's *Thoth Tarot* (pub. as a deck 1969); and a few others. Correspondences are important to the imagery, design, interpretation, and potential uses of all of these decks. As such, they also remain central to many of the re-envisioned decks of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries: plant-based Tarot decks that variously align the cards with flowers, fruits, grains, herbs, trees, and vegetables; mythological decks that align them with one or multiple mythologies; and so forth.

Prior to Chang's work, the primary Tarot-related Golden Dawn documents were published by Israel Regardie (1907-1985), a member of one of the Golden

Dawn offshoots, in *The Golden Dawn: A Complete Course in Practical Ceremonial Magic Four Volumes in One* (1971 with numerous revised and expanded editions). Among these documents are those addressing divination methods, the trumps, and “Book ‘T’—The Tarot.” “Book ‘T’—The Tarot” includes titles for the aces and court cards and their corresponding elements of fire, water, air, and earth; correspondences between the pips or number cards and astrological signs, planets, astrological decans, and key words; and longer descriptions of the images associated with each of these cards and their correspondences. (A decan is a 10-degree unit of the zodiac. There are 3 decans in each zodiac sign.) However, while the information is all there in the original papers, the language and obscurity of these and other Golden Dawn documents are not likely to foster interest in modern readers, and many contemporary Tarot authors and artists may not even know that they are working with Golden Dawn-derived correspondences. Chang’s books not only chart and elucidate Golden Dawn correspondences, they provide information about the continental system (primarily French) for purposes of clarification and distinguishing the English tradition.

Tarot Correspondences presents the correspondences of the English esoteric tradition in over one hundred easy-to-read charts and tables, all clearly identified in the table of contents. It also includes an excellent section on how to actually use elemental, astrological, numeric, and Kabbalistic correspondences, and provides explanations, commentary, and sources throughout. Chang provides notes, a bibliography of well-chosen books and resources divided by Tarot, General, Thoth, Kabbalah, and Magic, and an art credit list. While such features may be standard for most academic reference books, they are not so for books intended for Tarot users and their presence here is most welcome.

Tarot Deciphered was co-authored with Mel Meleen, artist of the *Tabula Mundi Tarot* and Chang’s co-creator and co-host of the weekly *Fortune’s Wheelhouse* podcast. Each of the first seventy-eight episodes (June 12, 2017 through January 23, 2019) are focused on a single Tarot card (from 0 The Fool to 77 Page of Pentacles).

Subsequent episodes address the planets, card readings, numerology, astrological signs, and the elements. The series finale was a reading for Mel on September 22, 2021. Clearly, the podcast was the inspiration behind *Tarot Deciphered*, as Chang and Meleen's book is a card-by-card exegesis of the esoteric correspondences of Tarot with attention to both *Thoth* and *Rider-Waite-Smith* decks.

Beginning with the Fool and trumps, each card is introduced with a listing of number, element, Hebrew letter, Hebrew letter meaning, path on the Tree of Life, color scales, and themes and keywords, and then follows up with a discussion under the headings of astrology/element, mythology/alchemy, Tree of Life path, *Rider-Waite-Smith* symbolism, *Thoth* symbolism, and related cards, ending with a bullet list of "advanced concepts for further exploration." As in *Tarot Correspondences*, Golden Dawn materials are at the center of the book content. But again, the value of that content is all in the delivery. The charts and black-and-white illustrations from the *Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot*, Meleen's *Tabula Mundi Tarot*, and a few other decks, are invariably useful and relevant to the text, as are the notes included throughout; the suggested reading lists for Tarot, astrology, magic and symbolism, Qabalah, the Tree of Life, and mythology; the bibliography; and the art credit list.

36 Secrets: A Decanic Journey through the Minor Arcana of the Tarot is a card-by-card exploration of each decan and its associated court cards and trumps. Chang did the initial work for this project over a full year while taking what is called a "decan walk"; that is, she studied and wrote about the cards associated with each decan over its ten-day period. Each decan-based chapter is thoughtfully subtitled and thoroughly illustrated with black-and-white *Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot* illustrations of the decanic pip, as well as other cards connected to it by astrological sign and planetary rulers, and additional images from other decks and sources. Each section concludes with a song's lyrics, a poem, or an excerpt from a book or play. A source list is provided for these epigraphs at the back, along with an index, and other sources used are named at the beginning and, as needed, throughout the text.

Across all three volumes, Chang writes with a strong personal voice, calling up frames of reference that will be familiar to more advanced Tarot readers and historians—both those with and those without a particular interest in applying all the esoteric trimmings to their own practice or exploring them as part of their research and writing. She also uses familiar, often witty, and concise language that will appeal to those new to Tarot-related practices and/or academic research. What all three books lack in superficial gloss and color, they more than make up for in quality content and presentation. Of the three, *36 Secrets* offers the most in that it includes more of Chang’s own work on building card meanings and real-world correspondences. The decanic walk has not received a lot of attention in Tarot circles, but *36 Secrets* is very likely to make it a popular practice that has close readings of Chang’s commentaries at the center of the trend.

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