

## 2.8 Why You Can't Read the Court Cards

### Introduction

As many students and professionals will testify, the Court Cards are the most troublesome to learn and interpret in a reading. It seems that everyone asks the same question – do I read this card as a person, an event, an energy, or part of the personality of the Querent?

There are whole books written on the subject; Kate Warwick-Smith's *The Tarot Court Cards* (Destiny Books, 2003) and Mary K. Greer and Tom Little's *Understanding the Tarot Court* (Llewellyn, 2004). The popular beginner books devote sections to the Court cards, noting they may be read in as many as seven different ways, even as a time of the year (see Anthony Louis, *Tarot Plain and Simple* (Llewellyn, 2003)) without giving much indication of how the Reader is to know which of those seven ways to choose.<sup>1</sup>

In Joan Bunning's *Learning the Tarot* (Weiser, 1998), an example is provided where the Queen of Pentacles may be the environment of a house, another person in that house group, or yourself. Bunning calls this the "subtle play of the Tarot" but offers no real conclusion to which interpretation to follow in this example or any other reading where a Court Card appears.<sup>2</sup>

The Court cards are also certainly an area where we may project our own opinions of our fellow creatures. In Sally Gearhart and Susan Rennie's *A Feminist Tarot* (Persephone Press, 1977), we see the Knight of Swords as "heavy police or military action repressing minority elements".<sup>3</sup>

They are also particularly time-fixed, both in their hierarchical nature and their possible interpretations as roles and relationships; in a 1930's cartomancy book by Zodiastar, *30 Different Ways of Card Fortune-Telling* (Universal, 1936), we read that the advice for a Queen of Hearts person-type is "you ought to marry a strong-willed person, since you need guidance".<sup>4</sup>

### People are Strange

As Jim Morrison sang, "people are strange". When we are presented with the Court Cards, we immediately see a person, and more so, a person in a role. These are not just anybody – they are people in positions of power or service. Here we see an immediate issue; how do you personally relate to hierarchy? The rigid structure of the Court is defined by notions of control, rulership, and in many cultures, divine right. You cannot look at the King without having to access your own unconscious associations with kingship. So you may wish to take a moment to think of what comes to mind when you think of a King (or Queen). To which periods of time do you travel?

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<sup>1</sup> Louis, p. 247

<sup>2</sup> Bunning, p. 42

<sup>3</sup> Gearhart, p. 56

<sup>4</sup> Zodiastar, p. 71

If you were a King or Queen, how would you feel? What would you feel about your role in society? How would it influence your actions as a person? These are some of the many immediate yet consequential thoughts that arise when we are presented with this apparently simple and straight-forward image.

But people are strange. We know that from our section on the Major cards, these cards, such as the High Priestess and the Hermit, are not people, are not **the** archetypes, but **arising images** constellating from an unknowable archetypal field. Thus they remain ultimately indefinable and it is in this that resides their power to offer multiple interpretations within a reading. This is essential for Tarot to work.

The same goes for the Court Cards. They are **not** the pictures that are depicted. They are **not** roles and they are **not** people. They are symbolic place-holders for energies in relationship. They are examples – or more specifically – **exemplars**, of how the Universe holds together and reflects itself through our perceptions and awareness. However, because they are easily depicted as people in roles, our attention is held by this presentation, and remains at that level. We must learn to look deeper – this is what Tarosophy teaches us.

When we look at a person, especially ourselves, we access the whole realm of the archetypal. We function in the *mundus imaginalis* of Henri Corbin, the imaginal world. It is here that true divination originates, if such could be said. The whole spectrum of experience is accessible to us – and anyone else. So when we look at a Court Card depicting another human being, we cannot help but wonder what the Knight of Wands does on his day off – whether he lays down his wand and takes up his cups, perhaps? We cannot and do not see them fixed in their role. This is why we cannot read the Court cards. We try to fix them and they cannot be so fixed whilst we maintain them as people in roles.

At least the Minors depict tableaux which we take as applying universally and the Majors as images of archetypal patterns that cascade into our reality in any manner of different fashions. With the Court Cards, we immediately get locked into seeing them as personages, roles, even personality-types. And given that people are strange and infinite, we bounce between simple limitations; the King of Swords “is personified in successful investors or business persons ...” (Paul Quinn, *Tarot for Life* (Theosophical Publishing House, 2009)) and their infinite possibilities as people within the archetypal realms.

### Infinite Strains of the Loom

If we go to the highest and most universal reading of these set of sixteen cards, arrayed in a four-by-four loom, we can see that they are composed of a warp and weft created by four levels in four worlds. This is particularly appropriate to a Kabbalistic correspondence of four elements in four worlds as used by the Golden Dawn and subsequent esoteric groups such as the Ancient Mystical Order of Seekers (AMOS), whose Path of Light teachings, vol. VII cover the Tarot. The Rosicrucian teachings of AMORC and BOTA also make this correspondence between the Court Cards and the Kabbalistic model.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Pamphlets and Teaching material in private collection.

So we should perhaps consider the nature of these sixteen cards as primarily an elemental nexus – a knotting of raw energy in a particular form, held in a tapestry of sixteen squares. As this energy is in motion, it strains against the other knots, pulling our array out of shape. We might think of this like gravity – a number of objects in space all invisibly shaping what passes between their influences. When a court card or two turn up, they are gravity wells in your reading, bending the other cards around it!

As the four levels of energy also have their elemental correspondences, we can further follow the Golden Dawn (and Crowley) in creating a matrix of elemental mixtures. The Suits have their standard elemental correspondences, such as Earth corresponding to Pentacles, and the four levels have their correspondences of Fire (King), Water (Queen), Air (Knight) and Earth (Page). Thus we start with the Page of Pentacles being the Earthy part of Earth, all the way to the King of Wands being the Fiery part of Fire. You might like to fill in the gaps below with your own analysis, reflections and keywords for these elemental nodes:

	EARTH (Pentacles)	AIR (Swords)	WATER (Cups)	FIRE (Wands)
EARTHY LEVEL OF (PAGE)				
AIRY LEVEL OF (KNIGHT)		Bright, clear, empty ...		
WATERY LEVEL OF (QUEEN)				
FIERY LEVEL OF (KING)			Steam, pressure, extinguisher ...	

These will give you the elemental essence of these sixteen cards, whether they manifest that essence through a person, event or characteristic. You may also now be able to make sense of the Golden Dawn titles of these cards, such as the Knave of Pentacles (Page of Pentacles) being entitled “The Princess of the Echoing Hills: Rose of the Palace of Earth” as she is the Earth of Earth. The Knave of Cups (Page of Cups) is called “The Princess of the Waters: The Lotus of the Palace of the Floods”, being the Earthy part of Water.

#### What would we see in the Elemental Courts?



(Ace) The Root of the Powers of Earth

I would personally redesign the Court cards as more ethereal or abstract images to reflect those elemental essences. In a sense, the work of Ithell Colquhoun on her Tarot deck mirrors perfectly how I would cast the Court. The card illustrated here is the Ace of Pentacles. The colours and shapes would refer to the correspondences of the elements, for example, a simple key of Red for Fire and Blue for Water would give us a King of Cups card merging those two colours.

Illus. Limited edition Artwork Tarots No 19. Taro by Ithell Colquhoun<sup>6</sup>

<sup>6</sup> [http://www.alchemywebsite.com/tarot/art\\_tarot19.html](http://www.alchemywebsite.com/tarot/art_tarot19.html)

Working within the colour correspondences of the Golden Dawn, I would have the Air suit of Swords drawn as blue/yellow rays, in patterns according to their level:

Page: Unformed blue/yellow swirls, as unmixed gases, layered  
Knight: Directed rays as if sunlight through clouds  
Queen: Long uniform curves of curling shapes and morasses  
King: Stable lines and shapes, fixed in position like lasers (“coherent light”)

This would then avoid me reading the cards as people or being stuck with outdated notions of courtly hierarchy. However, I would still be interested to know if I should read this energy as coming through into manifestation as a person, a part of myself or my Querent, or as a general summary of a particular process or complex situation.

### Knowing How to Read a Court Card

If we accept the sixteen Court cards as dictating the nature of forces and their levels in a reading, we can use experience to determine how they are most likely making themselves manifest. A *single* Court card in a spread would indicate that energy taking centre stage, bending the cards around it, influencing and impacting upon them. Likely a **particular individual** then! A *large* number of Court Cards for me signify a tension of energies, particularly if they are varying suits, indicating the levels are also widely variant. This more often than not signifies **aspects of the Querent’s personality** at conflict.

*Just two or three* Court cards in a typical spread tend to indicate **the environmental forces** for me – the levels and energies at work in a project, relationship or ambition taken as a whole. This system makes it far easier and more accurate (in my experience) to read the Court Cards – if it is just one card, you will be seeking to identify a person who fits that nature, if two or three, it is a summary of the events taking place, and if more – they are aspects of the person involved, making it more practical to explore with the person present.

### Court Cards Old Style

Another older method of interpreting the Court Cards may give you an interesting variation in your spread reading. This is from the time of Papus and Etteilla. Whilst they certainly confused the origins of the Tarot, making links to ancient Egypt and beyond, they were adroit at making systems of divination based on correspondences. More so, they were fond of systems that “weary not the memory”, something I am also keen to attain in my own teaching! They therefore built up from simple principles, as we have seen in the section, **Papus Pimps the Majors** and the same goes for the Court Cards.

In Papus, we read that the Court Cards stand for Man, Woman, Young Man and Child.<sup>7</sup> These correspond to the nature of – and here I have rephrased slightly for contemporary usage – **Creativity, Union, Conflict** and **Transition**. We can then apply these correspondences in the World (Element/Suit) in which they find themselves expressed.

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<sup>7</sup> Papus, *The Tarot of the Bohemians*, ed. A. E. Waite (North Hollywood:Wilshire,1973) p. 308

Thus a Page of Swords would simply represent Transition in the world of finances and material matters – a very uncertain position! A Queen of Swords would be union in the world of intellect and knowledge – perhaps a sudden insight, new item of information, or agreeing to learn. The Knight of Wands a conflict in ambitions and lifestyle choices – perhaps even a sudden overturning of values. You may like to complete the table below with your own interpretation and experience of these keys.

	Material, Career, Health, Wealth (Pentacles)	Intellect, Learning, Education, Ideas (Swords)	Emotions, Feelings, Desires, Needs (Cups)	Values, Spirit, Ambition, Lifestyle (Wands)
Transition in ... (PAGE)				A new outlook in life, unsettled.
Conflict in ... (KNIGHT)				
Union in ... (QUEEN)	An agreement of practical terms.			
Creativity in ... (KING)				

### Are You Lookin' at Me?

Finally, buried in Etteilla, there is an interesting idea which I have used successfully myself for many readings and seems to work very well. This is a simple rule – the Kings and Queens are other people, and the Knights and Pages how those other people see (or respond to and project onto) the Querent. A nice simple idea loaded with psychological implication when used in a reading! If you have a few Court cards in a spread, this is a fascinating exercise, as you identify the people involved, and then divine how they are responding to the Querent from their own positions in the situation, represented by the spread itself.

Thus you may have a Queen of Pentacles and a Knight of Swords in a reading for a male Querent. The former is in the “crossing” position of a Celtic Cross reading, and the latter is in the “resources” position (see section of the **Celtic Cross Unpacked** for these terms). The Queen would represent a real person, obstructing the Querent in some way, and the Knight would show how she was viewing the Querent – as being too ruthless or quick to make decision perhaps – not as a “resource” then, but as a threat.

### Ex33. Reading Methods Using Only the Court Cards.

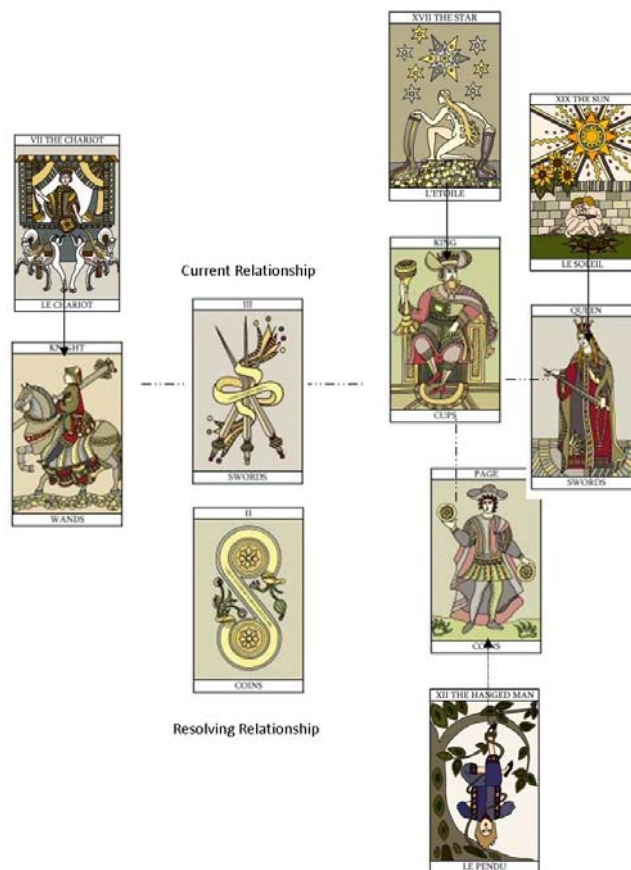
Sometimes the question may be about a family situation or complex workplace environment and hence the Court Cards may all represent actors in that dynamic. In this case, I would be tempted to do a reading with the Court Cards alone, to place them in relationship to each other and explore how they relate.

You could also perform an interactive reading where the cards are split into Majors, Minors and Court Cards. The Querent selects out the Court Cards to represent the people involved, and lays them out in the most appropriate pattern.

You then shuffle the Majors and place a Major card against each Court card on the table, to divine which archetypal force that player is working through (or being worked through). You can then shuffle and place from the pile of Minors cards to divine what the relationship is between each player – and even better, another card for how to resolve that relationship.

The following illustration is an example free-form spread using this method, which I call “All The World’s a Stage”. You may wish to explore it and determine your own interpretation.

### All the Worlds A Stage Reading



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In this reading, the Querent selected the Court Cards and placed them in those positions. The Knight of Wands was riding away! The Majors were placed above and below the Court Cards, and then two cards selected from the Minors also, to divine the relationship and its resolution between the King of Cups and the Knight of Wands. These cards were the Three of Swords, showing the current relationship, and the Two of Pentacles showing a means of resolution. What do you think those two cards suggest together? Whilst there are many interesting aspects of this reading, what might you also make of the Hanged Man working through the Page of Coins?

<sup>8</sup> <http://www.paranormality.com>

## Conclusion

The Court Cards are a powerful and elemental set in themselves, and should not be taken as troublesome, but rather as powerful signifiers and portents of elemental energy at work across different levels. The nature of the Universe to allow such patterns to manifest in an infinite variety of ways is complex for sure, but we should – as Francis Bacon remarked - endeavour to expand our awareness to comprehend the mysteries, not narrow the mysteries to the limits of our mind.