

The Image of The Devil in the Tarot

by *Frater Diavaloa*

Most modern Tarot packs base their image of The Devil on the drawing made by the French occultist Eliphas Levi in the 19th century, called "The Goat of Mendes." [Figure 1] It represented the idol Baphomet, allegedly worshipped by the Knights Templar.

Sad to say, no Devil card has survived from the 15th century hand-painted packs, perhaps because it was sometimes discarded as unlucky to use in play. Early printed Tarots of the 15th century established a pattern perpetuated in the packs generally called 'Minchiate', in which The Devil is a horned figure with female breasts and leathery wings, animal feet and a girdle of hissing snakes, carrying a trident and striding across a landscape. [Figure 2]

The Traditional Image of The Devil

However, there was another quite early image of The Devil that now survives in those Tarot packs generally called 'traditional,' such as the Marseilles and New Zion packs. [Figure 3]

In the traditional image, the horns are shaped more like the antlers of a stag than the horns of a goat. The figure holds in one hand an elongated object, of which more later. The wing on that side is tattered and torn. It has female breasts and exposed male genitalia. Sometimes a face is drawn on its belly.

It is standing on some kind of pedestal before what looks like ploughed earth. A pair of horned male and female devils stand before the pedestal and are tied to it by ropes around their necks.

The Hermaphrodite

The Devil of the Tarot is an hermaphrodite, exhibiting both male and female characteristics, although this is prudishly obscured in the



Figure 1. Baphomet, or The Goat of Mendes, drawn by Eliphas Levi [1856.]



Figure 2: The Devil, from a 17th century Minchiate Tarocchi pack.

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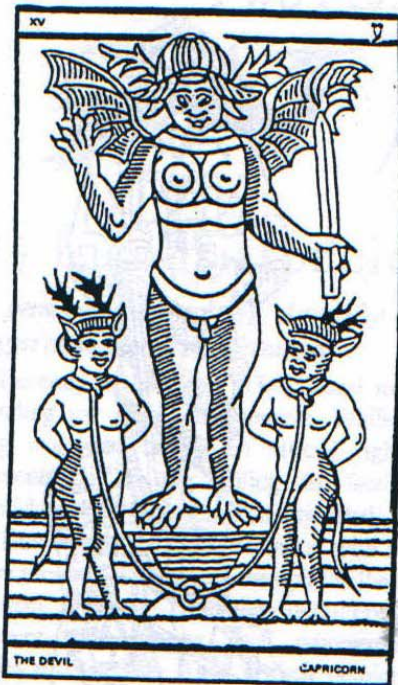


Figure 3: Triumph XV, the Devil, New Zion pack



Figure 4: The Devil from the Rider-Waite pack

Rider-Waite card [Figure 4]. What a pity the mass-produced inaccurate and mealy-mouthed Rider-Waite Tarot has become the most widely used and well known pack, simply because it has usually been the cheapest one available.

The image of The Devil, like the central figure in The World card, is meant to convey some idea of oneness or unity.

In The World card, the single figure at the centre is androgynous, although the male genitalia are concealed by the scarf worn by the otherwise naked figure.

The Androgyne

The Androgyne [from *Ανδρoς*, *andros*, male, and *Γυνή*, *gyné*, female] represents the One Spirit, from which emanate the polarities of Male and Female. They are symbolised by the figure's androgyny, and by the Rod [male] and Pouch [female] which it holds. The polarities of the elements of Air, Water, Fire and Earth are symbolised by the four beasts in the corners.

In The Devil card, the four elements are symbolised thus: Air by the wings of the figure; Water and Fire by the female and male figures; and Earth by the ploughed field.

The unity represented in The Devil is the One Earth manifesting the Active and Receptive polarities. It is convenient to call the central figure of the Devil card 'The Hermaphrodite' [from *Ἑρμης*, *Hermes*; and *Αφροδιτη*, *Aphrodité*] to distinguish it from the World card's Androgyne. According to the Dictionary of Synonyms, the word *hermaphroditic* implies that a single organism has organs properly belonging to separate sexes; while *androgynous* stresses the union of the characters or qualities of both sexes in the one organism.

Thus, the Androgyne in the World card symbolises that which moves from Manyness towards union, while the Hermaphrodite in The Devil card symbolises that which moves from Unity towards separateness and manyness.

What is in the Left Hand of the Devil?

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The very ambiguous object held by The Devil has quite a lot to say about the katabolic, i.e., the falling or breaking apart, destructive side of existence.

The object might be a lighted Candle; its flame can be seen in black and white versions of the traditional cards [for example, see Figure 3] and it would then seem that it has set fire to one of the Devil's wings. It might be a Sword. If so, it has no handle and not only is its sharp blade cutting the hand that holds it but it has also shredded the Devil's wing. Truly, it is said, "The destructive destroy themselves."

However, some say that the object in the left hand of The Devil is a sceptre, signifying his rulership as the Lord of this World.

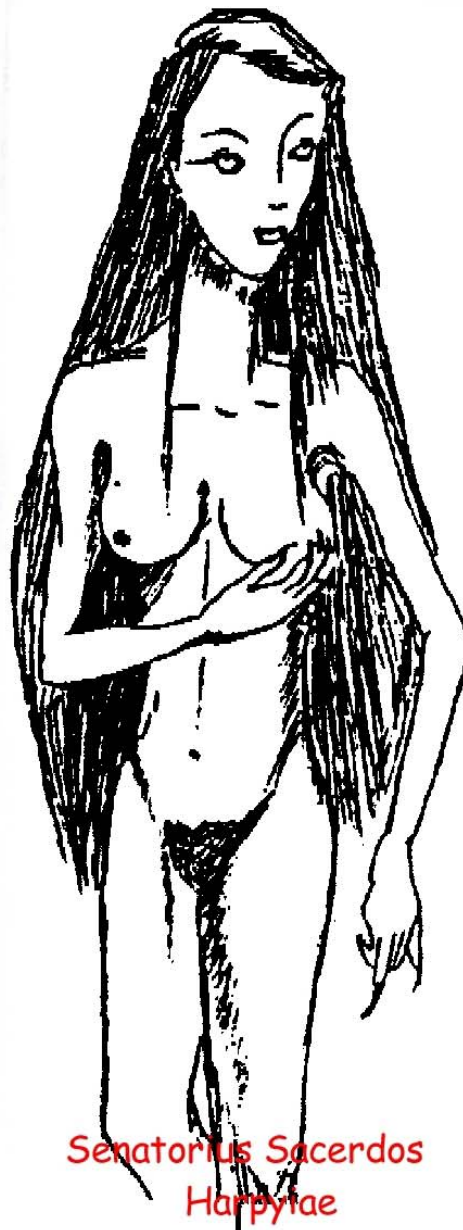
The Roman Warrior Mysteries

Other commentators point to its remarkable resemblance in some designs to the branch of the mystery plant *Haoma* that is held in the left hand of statues of Zervan, the Supreme Being of Mithraism, the Roman Warrior Mysteries.

Zervan was said to be the esoteric name used in the Warrior Mysteries to represent the exoteric Roman god Saturn or the Greek god Kronos, who is the God of Time and of this Material World.

The classical representations of Zervan resembled The Devil of the Tarot in several ways. He usually had wings and the head of a lion, and carried a key in his right hand and a branch of *Haoma* and a staff in his left hand. He was often shown with claw-like or cloven feet. There was always a serpent twined about his body, and sometimes the lion's head was engraved on his belly. Like Mithra, Zervan was often represented standing between or beyond two smaller figures, one carrying a torch the right way up, the other carrying it inverted.

When you contemplate The Devil card, remember that it is far more than a symbol of evil. In fact, it might not symbolise evil at all, but the fruitful multiplicity of the physical world. ■



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