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Matters of Grave Import: To Go Gentle

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Matters of Grave Import: To Go Gentle

Abstract
Applies the archetypes of the Waite-Colman tarot deck to the characters and situations of the Star Wars movies.

Additional Keywords
Star Wars: The Empire Strikes Back (film)—Relation to Tarot; Tarot in film; Williams, Charles. Arthuriad—Third Heaven; Edith Crowe

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MATTERS OF GRAVE IMPORT

GRACIA FAY ELLWOOD

Having doffed my editorial hat (it's pleasant to feel wind in one's hair again!) and still having the option of a column in Mythlore, there loomed before me the task of choosing a name for it. I settled on the above as a counterbalance to Lee Soeth's irresponsible "Cavalier Treatment." In contrast to my friend and colleague, whose otherwise excellent mind is a positive hotbed of joy, fun, humor, etc., I am temperamentally inclined to contemplate matters of grave import. With this in mind, The Empire Strikes Back, both of the definition of the truest host of outer space; both have associations, for the bold and the Force, and flight, both part of the definition of the Falcon; but the two very sedentary sphinxes do not sit in here as well as the two horses on the card Williams used. (The sphinxes might possibly suggest the dark and bright side of the Force with which Luke must deal.)

The name also seemed suitable in view of the fact that the columns are quite likely to touch on—ever elaborate on—my favorite subject, Death-and-Rebirth, the theme that draws together everything that interests me ('cept maybe embroidery). * * *

TO GO GENTLE

The Empire Strikes Back is a powerful work of the imagination which can be carried on under repeated viewing and close analysis, and continue to yield wealth (along with a little chemo). While it is interesting to compare Lucas' use of archetypal figures and patterns with Tolkien's, the set of images in the Tarot deck, as Williams in The Greater Trumps, provide parallels of no less interest. (Interest, that is, for those of us who never tire of archetypes; for the loyal opposition, there are forty-seven other pages in this issue.)

Williams employed a deck which names the first card the Juggler, but the Arthur Waite-Pamela Colman deck of course has as No. I the Magician. This magus-figure possesses supernatural control over the four elements, symbolized by the pentacle, sword and cup before him and the wand held aloft. Both Obi-Wan and Yoda, with their command of the Force, have something of the Magician about them; they are also magus-figures in their guidance of Luke. The symbol of eternity over the Magician's head means that he is not limited by time and space; again we are reminded of Obi-Wan after his death.

These parallels are a little tenuous. Those with the Hermit, IX, are harder to miss. Both characters, when we meet them, are living as hermits in desolate landscapes. The Hermit's lamp in the darkness can well mean hope (at the beginning Leia calls Ben "my only hope"); the staff is an instrument of power a little like the lighthouses.

No. VIII, The Chariot, quickly calls to mind the Millenium Falcon, which has been called "that trusty hotrod of outer space"; both have associations with drive, technical virtuosity, the extension of human power in the person of its driver. The castles in the background and the wings on the front of Waite-Colman's Chariot suggest warfare and flight, both part of the definition of the Falcon; but the two very sedentary sphinxes do not sit in here as well as the two horses on the card Williams used. (The sphinxes might possibly suggest the dark and bright side of the Force with which Luke must deal.)

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The Waite-Colman Emperor (IV) more closely resembles Lucas' Emperor than does Williams' neutral seated figure. In Waite's the background is barren rock, the sky is red, the throne is decorated with the skulls of animals. Armored under his robes, the Emperor (in contrast to the Empress) is interested in making war not love.

The Lovers (VI) suggest Han and Leia, without development; they do not reach the point of being blessed by a serene angelic figure under a bright sun as do the Waite-Colman pair. In fact Han and Leia are more like the unfortunate lovers of No. XV, chained prisoners of the Devil, the male about to be put to the flame of his torch.

No. XIII, Death, in the Waite-Colman deck bears even stronger resemblance to Darth Vader (the resemblance in names can hardly be accidental) than does the Devil. Death even wears black armor and helmet (no breath-mask!), and has human figures fallen or falling around him.

Waite-Colman's Four of Swords has three swords mounted on a cathedral wall above a tomb with a death-mask (the fourth sword is on the side of the tomb). The stone figure even has his hands extended upward in uncanny resemblance to Han, calling attention to the significance of Han's suspended animation as a symbolic death.

The Hanged Man (XII) has probably the strongest parallel of all with a theme in the Empire. No one can fail to notice Luke's tendency to get suspended upside-down throughout the story; first in the Wampa Ice Creature's lair, then during his training with Yoda, and finally, wounded, in his extremity on the inverted cross of the Cloud City's weathervane. The serenity in the face of Waite-Colman's Hanged Man, and the nimbus surrounding his head, indicate that some suspension of power has been taken. Something similar is taking place here, for in inverted he becomes a channel of the Force—though in none of them does he achieve the complete suspension above human frailty and pain that the Hanged Man does. He is not yet complete.

Finally, but not least, we have the Fool, who has no number -- 0. Waite-Colman's Fool is a...
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serene young man gazing up into space as he steps toward the edge of a cliff. A flower in one hand, a torn purse hanging from a stick in the other hand, he is clearly living in the immediate moment, which is by ordinary expectations very likely to be his last. A furry dog beside him is in the same dangerous position. Williams' Fool is deliberately kept a figure of mystery. "There are no writings which speak of the Fool." Somehow this figure is both in motion and at rest, in the center and everywhere else. As represented by Sybil, we know that the Fool has gone through a fearsome ordeal and emerged totally balanced, sovereign.

The chief characteristic Williams' Fool has in common with other conceptions is that her (Sybil's) actions and perceptions can be incomprehensible by ordinary prudential standards. But she succeeds. The old bromide "It's so crazy it just might work" applies to the Fool.

In the first story Luke is sometimes a fool in the Parsifal-like sense of a naive, unripe youth, brought up in the midst of nowhere, ignorant of his identity, who sets out to discover himself. As he begins to use the Force he has to do foolish things such as practice with his lightsaber while blindfolded, and later turn off his computer when zoning in on the Deathstar.

From the perspective of the magi Ben and Yoda, Luke is a fool when he interrupts his training to go off to rescue Han and Leia. "Reckless is he! Now things are worse." Yet in following his heart, Luke turns out to be wiser than they. Though he does not succeed in freeing Han, he had not come to have might have been tortured to death; and the distraction created by his presence enables Leia and the others to escape, so that they in turn can rescue him, still uncorrupted by the Dark Side.

Han is even more obviously the Fool; he does not understand himself, acts recklessly on impulse, and often plunges into extreme danger from which he emerges unhurt because the very wildness of his actions upsets others' calculations. (He also has a furry companion; and their personalities are not completely unlike.) Han charges down a corridor in the Deathstar after twenty stormtroopers, who flee on the assumption that he has a good reason for what he is doing. He courts a princess with insufferable arrogance. He goes out into the arctic night of Hoth on a doomed beast. He plunges into an asteroid field. He speeds down an unknown asteroid tunnel which turns out to be the belly of a monster. He attacks Darth Vader's destroyer with his gnat of a ship. And he wins out. It is ironic that when his actions seem to him completely prudent—flying to Bespin—he is unknowingly going into the greatest danger of all, to the place where he will finally fall.

When we meet Han he believes his own bluster; he thinks of himself as mercenary and self-seeking, and only learns that he is really loyal and caring when he finds himself doing loyal and caring things. At the verge of the pit he reaches a new stage in his life. Out of love for his friend he weighs the odds, refuses reckless action, does the prudent thing: he goes gentle into that good night. So when he is undergoing the ultimate descent of the Fool, motionless in the central position of the Fool, he is for the first time not acting like a fool at all