

Demystifying Elemental Dignities

I recently gave a presentation on Elemental Dignities (ED) at a regional tarot meeting. I went over each of the Golden Dawn (GD) rules (as presented in Liber T and further elucidated by Jim Eshelman in Liber Theta), and added my own commentary. One thing that stood out while preparing the material is that the GD took what is a straightforward concept (two friendly, two neutral and two unfriendly expressions of dignity) and substantially complicated it by adding two innocent-sounding but profound phrases: "according to their nature, for good or evil." The gospel on ED assumes that little attention is paid to the divinatory meaning of the cards, but I don't see how that can be avoided when considering their "nature," since the elements are more an archetypal overlay than a "nuts-and-bolts" input (more "seasoning" than core ingredient); similarly, the elements are neither good nor evil, so that distinction has to come from the nature of the cards themselves, whether encouraging or discouraging within the context of the reading.

Take the 5 of Wands, generally seen as a challenging card (although I'm beginning to prefer the idea of "striving" to that of "conflict"). As a card of difficult nature, it portrays disruptive antagonism. Its more encouraging side can be interpreted as showing the aggressiveness needed to stand up for oneself in a confrontation .

Surrounding it with friendly cards enhances its potency and ease of expression ("well-dignified"). If its nature in the reading is determined to be beneficial or "good" - as in assuming a forceful stance - the comparative nature of the modifying cards would have a say in just how much it is influenced for "good" (empowered for its purpose) or "evil" (compromised in its effectiveness). The elementally friendly and fairly benign 4 of Wands and 6 of Wands on either side could tone down the angst a bit, conveying a spirited sense of purpose to engagement in the fray. The fortunate dignity coupled with the mild "neighbors" could be construed as "strengthening for good." On the other hand, the more problematic 3 of Swords and 5 of Swords on either side - while still providing positive dignity - would militate against using the "Five" energy constructively, thereby strengthening it "for evil;" its potency and ease of expression could be put to less productive ends, and might be frittered away due to anxiety.

Surrounding it with unfriendly cards diminishes its potency and ease of expression ("ill-dignified"). If its nature in the reading is determined to be disruptive or "evil" - as in becoming embroiled in a belligerent controversy - the nature of the modifying cards would have a say in just how much it is influenced for "good" (weakened in its harsher implications) or "evil" (exacerbated in its severity). The elementally unfriendly but benign 6 of Cups and 9 of Cups on either side could relieve some of the intense animosity in the situation, weakening the antagonism of the 5 of Wands "for good." The unsympathetic 5 of Cups and 8 of Cups on either side could largely neutralize any tactical advantage that might have come from mounting a powerful offense, placing the querent at a further disadvantage by weakening the 5 of Wands "for evil."

Elements of indifferent dignity – those the Golden Dawn called “neutral and supportive” and I term “complementary opposites” (an “arm's length” relationship in which one element provides something the other lacks even though they don't cooperate fully) – don't exert an especially strong influence on the target card. Even though the GD used them somewhat interchangeably with the “friendly” sub-set, I see them as providing more of a “modest opportunity” than a “fairly strong” statement of positive dignity. This reinforces the idea of three discrete categories, unlike the blurring the GD introduced.

These waters can get very deep and very murky very quickly. I'm not sure the GD architects of the Elemental Dignities fully appreciated the complexities they visited upon their descendants by

muddying the well with considerations of "nature" and "for good or evil." On the other hand, it does provide enormous food for thought when applying the dignities in practical reading.

Liber T includes a number of example readings by S.L. "MacGregor" Mathers (Frater S.M.R.D), head of the Order. They do take card nature into account to some extent, along the lines described above, although how he did it isn't specifically described in the rules. He also worked out the dignities per the established guidelines for the most part, but he reached some conclusions regarding strength that I wouldn't have. It seems to come from his blending of the card meanings with the elemental combinations, "according to their nature, for good or evil," showing that he understood the implications of the confusing wording. It would have been useful if the process for determining this were clearly defined. There is considerable ambiguity in the actual rules.

Jim Eshelman says that knowledge of the divinatory meanings of the individual cards isn't necessary, and that the permutations of the four elements are more important than the divinatory meanings. This is true up to a point, and at a superficial level, but he doesn't say how he reconciles this with the "good or evil" wording or Mathers' examples. A lot has been left to the imagination, creating uncertainty and frustration in coming to grips with these intricacies. In talking to other students of the GD method, I find that isn't an uncommon experience.