

The Transitory Tarot: An Examination of Tarot Cards, the 21st Century New Age and Theosophical Thought

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Since the eighteenth century, tarot cards have been favoured by occult practitioners for the purpose of divination. One fundamental feature of modern tarot cards is their use of abstract and esoteric symbolism, which imbues each card with its own specific meaning(s). The earliest commercially available, purpose-designed divinatory tarot deck - the Waite-Smith - drew from Arthur Edward Waite's theosophical background to form the initial symbolic template upon which these cards were designed. As the Waite-Smith tarot was disseminated and utilised by the wider occult community, this deck became a passive carrier of theosophical thought. In this way, occult practitioners, and eventually the general community, absorbed many theosophical concepts without conscious knowledge of their origins. Therefore, it is important to examine the theosophical beginnings of the Waite-Smith tarot as these philosophies hitchhiked upon the deck into the community outside of the Theosophical Society. This article will firstly explore Waite's involvement with various occult societies to provide a context of the following analysis, and will then examine the pictorial symbolism within the Waite-Smith tarot. Using common esoteric interpretations of this symbolism, the analysis will correlate these symbols with the various theosophical philosophies, thus demonstrating the ways in which Waite used theosophical philosophy to inform the symbolic pictures used on his tarot deck, transforming these cards into subtle carriers of these philosophies into the wider public.

Structurally, the tarot deck is set up like a deck of conventional playing cards, with four suits corresponding to the suits of conventional cards. However, the names of the tarot suits differ from conventional card suits. The suits in a tarot deck are Coins (also called Discs or Pentacles), Cups (also called Grails or Chalices), Swords (also called Athamé) and Wands (also called Rods, Staves or Sceptres).¹ These are respectively equivalent to the ordinary playing card suits; Diamonds, Hearts, Spades and Clubs. Each of these suits has numbered or 'pip' cards, progressing from Ace (one) to Ten as well as four

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¹ Mary K. Greer, *21 Ways to Read a Tarot Card* (Woodbury, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2006), p. 295.

court cards (king, queen, knight and page), making a total of fourteen cards in each suit. In addition, the tarot features a separate twenty-two card trump suit, known as the major trumps or Major Arcana. Twenty-one of these major trump cards are numbered and a single card, known as the Fool, is left unnumbered or numbered as zero. In current geographical terms, tarot cards are used throughout much of Europe to play card games,² but in English-speaking countries, these games are largely unknown and tarot cards are used primarily for the purpose of divination.

The History of the Tarot

Historically, the tarot was used from the mid-fifteenth century in various parts of Europe to play card games such as *tarocchini*.³ However, this function altered from the late eighteenth century to the present, as tarot cards began to be used, first by occultists and later by members of the counter-culture and New Age practitioners, as a tool for divination. However, despite their use for over two hundred years, the etymology of the word 'tarot' has never been successfully identified. Many attempted explanations exist, the one thing that is verifiable being the fact that the English and French word 'tarot' is derived from the medieval Italian word *tarocchi*.⁴ Unfortunately, the origins of the term *tarocchi* have never been satisfactorily explained or identified. One suggested origin proposes that the word *tarocchi* is derived from the name of the River Taro,⁵ a tributary of the Po, which flows through Parma, near to the supposed origin of the first tarot decks.⁶

A number of folk-histories and fanciful origins have been ascribed to the tarot deck, including many which attempt to link the tarot with the religion of ancient Egypt,⁷ the Kabbalah,⁸ the Knights Templar⁹ or the beliefs and

² David Parlett, *Oxford Dictionary of Card Games* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996), p. 300.

³ Parlett, *Oxford Dictionary of Card Games*, p. 300.

⁴ Samuel Weller Singer, *Researches into the History of Playing Cards: With Illustrations of the Origin of Printing and Engraving on Wood* (London: Robert Triphook, 1816), p. 29.

⁵ Cassandra Eason, *Complete Guide to Tarot* (Sydney: Crossing Press, 2000), p. 3.

⁶ Eason, *Complete Guide*, p. 3.

⁷ Mary Greer, *Mary. K. Greer's Tarot Blog*, at <http://marygreer.wordpress.com/events/egypt-tarot-and-mystery-school-initiations>. Accessed 28/05/2010.

⁸ Samuel Aun Weor, *Tarot and Kabbalah: The Most Comprehensive and Authoritative Guide to the Esoteric Sciences Within All Religions* (Brooklyn: New York, Glorian Publishing, 2010).

practices of Freemasonry.¹⁰ This kind of popular history was first put into print in 1781 when Antoine Court, who styled himself ‘Comte de Gébelin,’ published *Le Monde Primitif*,¹¹ which looked at claimed ancient Christian and Pagan survivals in the modern world. In this work, de Gébelin claimed, without any evidence to support his assertions, that the symbolism found in the tarot de Marseille contained relics of the ancient mystery cults of Isis and Thoth. De Gébelin also asserted, once again with no evidence to support his claims, that the name ‘tarot’ came from the Egyptian words *tar*, meaning ‘royal,’ and *ro*, meaning ‘road’, thus signifying the ‘royal road’ of initiation into the ancient Egyptian priesthood.

De Gébelin also claimed that the Rom, who were using playing cards as divination tools at the time, were lineal descendants of the ancient Egyptians (hence their common name of Gypsies) and had introduced the cards to Europe. It should come as no surprise that Jean-Francois Champillion, when he made the breakthrough that allowed the deciphering of Egyptian hieroglyphics, found no evidence for any of de Gébelin’s theories about the Rom, the ancient Egyptian priesthood or the etymology of the word ‘tarot’.¹²

In 1790, ‘Etteilla’, the pseudonym of Jean-Baptiste Alliette, published *Manière de se récréer avec le jeu de cartes nommées Tarots*¹³ (‘How to Re-Create the Card Game Called Tarot’), in which he backed up de Gébelin’s claims that the tarot was derived from the Book of Thoth, a legendary book of wisdom written by the Egyptian god of knowledge Himself. Popular folklore, particularly among pop-occultists and conspiracy theorists, still asserts a link between tarot cards and ancient Egypt.¹⁴ Indeed, a belief in this connection continues in contemporary legend and ‘general knowledge’ to the present day.

⁹ Anonymous, ‘Knights Templar Secret Code 11258 found on Card X of the Tarot’, *Reconciliation of Science and Religion* at <http://kachina2012.wordpress.com/2009/03/02/knights-templar-secret-code-11258-found-on-card-x-of-the-tarot>. Accessed 28/05/2010.

¹⁰ Anonymous, *Freemasonry Proved to be Occultic!!* at <http://www.cuttingedge.org/n1084.html>. Accessed 30/04/2010.

¹¹ Comte de Gébelin, (Antoine Court), *Le Monde Primitif* (New York: Elibron Classics, 2006).

¹² Jean-Francois Champillion, *The Code-breaker’s Secret Diaries: Rediscovering Ancient Egypt* (London: Gibson Square Books Ltd, 2007).

¹³ Ronald Decker, Thierry Depaulis and Michael Dummett, *A Wicked Pack of Cards: The Origins of the Occult Tarot* (London: Gerald Duckworth and Co. Ltd, 1996), p. 77.

¹⁴ For a typical example see Anonymous, *Ancient Egypt and Tarot: Symbolic Language* at <http://ancientegyptandtarot.blogspot.com>. Accessed 25/03/2011.

Despite this popular connection, no genuine evidence exists of any association between the tarot and Egypt, Thoth, the Rom, nor any other such origin. The only known evidence points to origins in Northern Italy, where tarot decks were originally used as playing cards.

Arthur Edward Waite (1857-1942)

Arthur Edward Waite was an occult scholar and esoteric author, known both for his part in the design and publication of the Waite-Smith tarot deck and for his authorship of many occult and esoteric works, many of which are still in print. These include an edited translation of Eliphas Levi's *Transcendental Magic, its Doctrine and Ritual* (1896),¹⁵ *The Book of Ceremonial Magic* (1911),¹⁶ *A New Encyclopedia of Freemasonry* (1921)¹⁷ and *The Holy Kabbalah* (1929).¹⁸

Waite was born in the United States of America, but was raised in England, after his father, a Merchant Navy captain, died at sea.¹⁹ His mother converted to Catholicism after coming to England and her children were schooled in that faith.²⁰ After his sister's death in 1874, Waite turned away from the Catholic Church,²¹ but retained a great love for its ritual and ceremony. Waite then began to explore alternate paths of spirituality. He became a Spiritualist for a time,²² but moved on to Theosophy soon after.²³ He was fascinated by Theosophy, though he disapproved of what he perceived to be an anti-Christian bias in the works of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky.

At this time, Waite began personal researches into esoteric and occult subjects, by reading in the esoteric section of the British Library.²⁴ In this place

¹⁵ Eliphas Levi, *Transcendental Magic: Its Doctrine and Ritual* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 1942 [1910]).

¹⁶ Arthur Edward Waite, *The Book of Ceremonial Magic* (New York: Cosimo Classics, 2007).

¹⁷ Arthur Edward Waite, *A New Encyclopaedia of Freemasonry (Ars Magna Latomorum) and of Cognate Instituted Mysteries: Their Rites, Literature and History* (Vernon Hills, IL: Wings, 1994).

¹⁸ Arthur Edward Waite, *The Holy Kabbalah* (New York: Dover Publications, 2003).

¹⁹ R.A. Gilbert, *Waite: Magician of Many Parts* (Wellingborough: Aquarian Press, 1987), pp. 15-17.

²⁰ Gilbert, *Waite*, pp. 20-25.

²¹ Gilbert, *Waite*, p. 25.

²² Gilbert, *Waite*, pp. 48-49.

²³ Gilbert, *Waite*, pp. 76, 89-96.

²⁴ Gilbert, *Waite*, p. 109.

he met a number of esoterically-minded people, such as Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers and Edward William Berridge. He joined the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1891,²⁵ only three years after the Isis-Urania Temple was founded. His sponsor was Berridge, who, like Waite, soon became an opponent of Aleister Crowley and was viciously satirised in Crowley's novel *Moonchild*.²⁶ Waite was also recorded as having been inducted as an Apprentice Mason in the roles of the Grand Lodge in 1901,²⁷ being initiated into Runnymede Lodge No. 2430 at Wraysbury. He went on in 1902 to join the esoteric Christian Masonic order of Knights Templar, being installed at the Consecration of the King Edward VII Preceptory.

His experience with lodge-based esoteric activity, such as the Golden Dawn and Freemasonry, appeared to be positive as he went on to join Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia,²⁸ an esoteric Christian Masonic lodge, in 1902. After the Golden Dawn was riven by vicious political squabbles and split into various factions, Waite formed a faction within the Golden Dawn, which successfully split off from its parent group in 1903 and was renamed the Independent and Rectified Rite of the Golden Dawn.²⁹ However in 1914, after a bitter dispute over the origins of the original Golden Dawn, Waite disbanded the Independent and Rectified Rite. At this time however, evidence suggests that Waite was still interested in pursuing esoteric activities in a lodge setting.³⁰ In pursuit of this goal he set about forming yet another new incarnation of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn in 1916.³¹ This organisation, the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross, was a Masonic-Christian order dedicated to spiritual, rather than occult, research and claiming antecedents from the medieval period.

Apart from being a prolific author, Waite also served as editor of an esoteric magazine, *Unknown World*,³² which was dedicated to occultism, magick, mysticism and what would now be referred to as 'Fortean' (unexplained phenomena). Additionally, Waite is perhaps best known as the co-creator of the Waite-Smith tarot deck. He was also the author of its

²⁵ Gilbert, *Waite*, p. 66.

²⁶ Aleister Crowley, *Moonchild* (London: Mandrake Press, 1929).

²⁷ Gilbert, *Waite*, p. 128

²⁸ Gilbert, *Waite*, pp. 105-107.

²⁹ Gilbert, *Waite*, pp. 116-123.

³⁰ Gilbert, *Waite*, p. 131.

³¹ Gilbert, *Waite*, pp. 142-150.

³² Gilbert, *Waite*, p. 81. See also Arthur Edward Waite, *Unknown World 1894-1895* (Whitefish Montana: Kessinger Rare Reprints, 2003).

companion volume, *The Key to the Tarot*,³³ which was expanded and republished in 1911 as *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot*.³⁴

The Waite-Smith Tarot

Waite was greatly influenced by Theosophy and the Theosophical Society, albeit his own somewhat Christianised version of theosophical philosophy. It was this personal version of the Theosophical Society's cosmology, theology and symbolism that Waite used when helping design the cards of the Waite-Smith tarot. When the Waite-Smith tarot was first published by Rider in 1909, it was entitled *Tarot Cards*, and it was accompanied by Waite's *The Key to the Tarot*. The following year, Waite re-published the booklet as *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot*. In 1971, US Games bought the right to publish the cards and published it under the title *The Rider Tarot Deck*.³⁵ In later editions they changed the name to *Rider Tarot* and then *Rider Waite Tarot*. For a long time, the deck was known as the *Waite-Rider Tarot* deck. Today most scholars, in order to acknowledge Smith's contribution, refer to the deck as the Waite-Smith Tarot. The Waite-Smith tarot was drawn and painted by an American artist named Pamela Coleman Smith. She was a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, as well as being a talented illustrator and author.

In 1909, Waite commissioned Smith to produce a tarot deck especially for occult purposes. Waite's tarot designs were inspired partly by Eliphas Lévi (Alphonse Louis Constant), partly by Papus (Gérard Encausse), and partly by his own view of theosophical mysticism. Unlike earlier tarot decks, the cards depict full scenes with figures and symbols on all of the cards including the pip cards. With Smith's distinctive designs they have become the basis for the designs of many subsequent packs. Although Waite was the *designer* of the Waite-Smith tarot, he was not an artist, and commissioned Smith to design the deck because she was a published illustrator, as well as being an initiate of the Golden Dawn and a member of Waite's faction within that Order. Waite kept some control of the cards' creative process. According to Waite,

[i]n those days, there was a most imaginative and abnormally psychic artist, named Pamela Coleman Smith, who had drifted into the Golden Dawn and loved its Ceremonies - as transformed by myself - without pretending or indeed attempting to understand their sub-surface consequence. It seemed to some of us in the circle that

³³ Arthur Edward Waite, *The Key to the Tarot* (New York: Random House, 1999).

³⁴ Arthur Edward Waite, *The Pictorial Key to Tarot: Being Fragments of a Secret Tradition under the Veil of Divination*, CreateSpace e-store, 2009 [1911].

³⁵ Arthur Edward Waite and Pamela Smith, *The Waite-Smith Tarot* (Stamford, Connecticut: US Games Systems Inc, 1971).

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there was a draughtswoman among us who, under proper guidance, could produce a Tarot with an appeal in the world of art and a suggestion of significance behind the Symbols which would put them on another construction than had ever been dreamed by those who through many generations had produced and used them for mere divinatory purposes. My province was to see that the designs - especially those of the important Trumps Major - kept that in the hiddenness which belonged to certain Greater Mysteries in the Paths of which I was travelling. Pamela Coleman Smith... had to be spoon-fed carefully over the Priestess Card, over that which is called the Fool and over the Hanged Man.³⁶

From the above passage two inferences can be drawn. Firstly, Waite was the conceptual designer of the deck; he seems to have designed the symbolism for each of the Major Arcana, and supervised Smith as she worked. Secondly, Waite seems to have had little faith in Smith's occult knowledge; the term 'spoon-fed' is as derogatory statement as can be imagined, in relation to a colleague's work. From the above, it can also be inferred that Waite cared less about the Minor Arcana than about the Major Arcana; it is likely that for these cards, Waite merely provided Smith with the meanings of each card and let her create them as she would.

The Theosophical Symbolism of the Tarot

As can be seen, A. E. Waite has been a very influential figure, both within modern Western esotericism and in the history and development of the modern tarot deck. In order to analyse the theosophical underpinnings of the Waite-Smith tarot, it is necessary to examine the beliefs and philosophies of theosophy and the Theosophical Society itself. The concepts of reincarnation, the teachings and existence of the Ascended Masters, gender equality, the inner journey into secret knowledge, the cycles of the Universe and the operation of *karma*, are all important planks in theosophical teaching and all are portrayed in the symbolic language of the Waite-Smith tarot deck.

Reincarnation

The concept of reincarnation appears to be frequently represented in the symbolism of the Waite-Smith tarot deck and therefore the theosophical view of reincarnation must be examined. To a Theosophist, reincarnation involves every human soul being part of a greater, meta-soul, a Universal human soul, which all human beings share. However, to a human being there is the illusion of separation. Theosophists believe that these apparently separate

³⁶ Arthur Edward Waite, *Shadows of Life and Thought* (London: Selwyn and Blount, 1938), pp. 184-185.

individualities gain experience and learn lessons through their lives, thus increasing their spiritual perfection and becoming more self-conscious and closer to a perceived Universal Divine,³⁷ whilst lending their experience and spiritual attainments to the greater Universal Soul.

Reincarnation is symbolised in a number of cards within the Waite-Smith tarot deck. The primary symbols of reincarnation used are the infinity symbol or lemniscate, the wheel and the circle. These symbols are traditional in esoteric studies to represent everlasting cycles. As one example of this, the lemniscate is seen in the Magician (card I) hanging over the main figure's head like a halo, indicating this figure's capacity, over many lives to generate power, skill and occult wisdom. The fact that the Magician holds the symbols of all four suits, suggests that his power is drawn from all spheres of existence.

Similarly, the lemniscate symbol appears in Strength (card VIII) again hanging over the main character's head as she grasps and forces open a lion's jaws, representing that strength which derives from faith in the eternal life force. Alternatively, the Wheel of Fortune (card X) symbolises reincarnation by showing a great wheel in the centre of the card, instead of a lemniscate. Below this great wheel, images of the Egyptian god Set and a serpent represent possible misfortune, and the image of a sphinx holding a sword perched on the top of the wheel represents good fortune. Thus, this card indicates destiny and good fortune (if the card is not reversed) in this life or the next.³⁸ This use of circles and wheels to represent the cycle of reincarnation is continued in card XXI, the World, showing a circular wreath, adorned with lemniscate-shaped ribbons, surrounding a woman who represents the world (likened to a 'Christ in Majesty' or 'Christ in Glory' figure).³⁹ This symbolism indicates the constant cycle of reincarnation of the souls in the world and the doorway from one life to the next, ideas which are reflected in the card's meaning of successful conclusion followed by change.

The Ascended Masters

Another important plank of theosophical philosophy is the concept of the Ascended Masters. This notion was originally introduced by Madame

³⁷ Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine: The Synthesis of Science, Religion, and Philosophy* (Adyar: Theosophical University Press, 1999 [1888]), p. 424.

³⁸ Eden Gray, *The Tarot Revealed* (Stroudsburg, PA: Inspiration House, 1960), p. 170; see also Alfred Douglas, *The Tarot* (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books), pp. 113-115.

³⁹ 'Christ in Glory', illuminated manuscript, *Psalter of Westminster Abbey*, circa 1200 CE, British Museum, London.

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Blavatsky in *The Secret Doctrine* (1888).⁴⁰ Blavatsky's concept of the Ascended Masters is somewhat confusing, but overall examination would seem to suggest that Blavatsky saw the Ascended Masters as human agents, who dwelt in the "trans-Himalayan fastness of Tibet."⁴¹ This concept of these "Masters of Wisdom," "Mahatmas" or "*Elder Brothers*" was further developed by other theosophical authors, such as 'Bishop' Charles Webster Leadbeater⁴² and A. D. K Luk (Alice B. Schutz).⁴³ The concept was taken and reshaped by other theosophical writers into many varied alternative theories on the Ascended Masters. Some writers agree with Blavatsky and postulate that the Ascended Masters are spiritually gifted sages; ordinary human beings who dwell in lamaseries in the Himalayas. Others have claimed that the Ascended Masters are spirit beings who exist in a parallel dimension. The Ascended Masters are said to be teachers of humankind, who form a council or committee of spirit guides often referred to as the Great Brotherhood of Light, Great White Lodge, Great White Brotherhood or Universal White Brotherhood.⁴⁴ The task of this group is to steer humankind towards spiritual perfection and transformation into the ultimate true self, called by theosophists *ātman*,⁴⁵ a Sanskrit word, used within the sub-continental religious traditions to mean 'soul' or 'self'. Many religious and philosophical figures throughout history have been thought to be semi-divine beings who are tasked with guiding the spiritual development of humankind. These beings include Confucius, the Biblical Enoch, Siddhārtha Gautama Buddha, the Comte de Saint-Germain, an eighteenth century adventurer and alchemist, Joshua bar Joseph, and Kwan Yin, the Chinese goddess of mercy. This belief is a major plank of belief in theosophical philosophy

In the Waite-Smith tarot deck the Ascended Masters and their

⁴⁰ Blavatsky, *Secret Doctrine*, vol. I, p. xxxviii.

⁴¹ Charles Ferguson, *The New Books of Revelations: The Inside Story of America's Astounding Religious Cults* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing Co, 2004, [1929]) p. 134.

⁴² Charles Webster Leadbeater, *The Masters and the Path* (Adyar: Theosophical Publishing House, 1929).

⁴³ A.D.K. Luk (Alice B. Schutz), *Law of Life and Teachings by Divine Beings*, Book I (Pueblo, CO: A.D.K. Luk Publications, 1989).

⁴⁴ Luk, *Law of Life*, pp. 23-27.

⁴⁵ Anonymous, *Religion Facts: Just the Facts on Religion at <http://www.religionfacts.com/hinduism/glossary.htm>*. Accessed 16/07/2011. See also Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *New Age Religion and Western Culture: Esotericism in the Mirror of Secular Thought* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 1998), p. 257.

enlightened teachings may be symbolised by mountains. Earlier tarot decks did not show mountains on any of the major arcana, yet the Waite-Smith has repeated mountain imagery across many cards. It appears that these mountains were not simply randomly inserted but rather held some meaning, and this meaning can be argued to be that of the Ascended Masters and their wisdom. This interpretation is based on the idea that the Ascended Masters are reputed to dwell in the Himalayas, and that human interaction with mountains tends to require a progressive journey upwards. This journey can be interpreted as the progressive journey towards wisdom and the Masters that hold it. Furthermore, correlation between the meaning of the card and the relationship between the main figure and the mountains usually indicates the symbolised degree of enlightened knowledge and wisdom.

Firstly, the Fool (card 0) shows a youth walking dangerously near a cliff edge with high mountains in the background and a dog barking at his feet. As the mountains represent the knowledge and wisdom of the Ascended Masters, here the youth is blissfully unaware of the fact that he strolls amongst potential wisdom, as well as being ignorant of the dangers that knowledge brings. He represents the utterly unaware, the unenlightened individual who stands at the beginning of his personal journey, taking his very first step into knowledge and wisdom, unaware of the beauty and dangers that it may bring. In contrast, the Emperor (card IV) shows his throne supported by these mountains, his throne practically growing out of the mountain rock. It is not, therefore, surprising that this card represents a man who is supported by knowledge and wisdom, a man who can achieve power and his ambitions due to this application of this wisdom.⁴⁶ The Emperor also stands for knowledge, when it is applied wisely. Alternatively, the Hermit (card IX) shows an old man standing at the top of snow-capped peaks shining his lantern's light downwards, thus representing the journey towards spiritual enlightenment and the shedding of light into the shadow-self. Several cards show a different aspect of these mountains, and therefore of the Ascended Masters' wisdom, and the transference of esoteric knowledge. Temperance (card XVI), The Star (card XVII) and The Moon (card XVIII) all show a river running from the same mountain, indicating the flow of esoteric knowledge from the realm of the sages. In Temperance this mountain water is being poured from one cup into another, indicating the blending of information and the management of differing opinions, while the Star shows a woman gazing into the depths of a mountain pool, indicating insight. However the Star figure also pours some of this water onto the ground where it runs in many rivulets, indicating wise influence over others and the dissemination of

⁴⁶ Gray, *The Tarot Revealed*, pp. 158-159. See also Douglas, *The Tarot*, pp. 60-62.

esoteric wisdom.

Finally, the Moon displays a mountain river running to a pool in which a lobster, representing Scorpio sinisterly awaits, indicating deception and information that has ended up in the wrong hands. From these examples it can be seen that the mountains depicted in the Waite-Smith tarot cards symbolise the theosophical concept of the Ascended Masters, who represent wisdom, enlightened knowledge and teachings.

Gender Equality

When the Theosophical Society was formed in New York in 1875, its stated objective was to be the “study and elucidation of occultism, the Cabala, etc.”⁴⁷ Later, when the Society had moved to Adyar, it evolved three new objectives to aim for. The first of these was “[t]o form a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste/status or colour.”⁴⁸ From this assertion it can be seen that gender equality has long been an important part of theosophical belief and practice. Indeed, the Society has consistently struggled for and affirmed gender equality,⁴⁹ and has had a number of female leaders, such as Blavatsky and Annie Besant, as well as some important female members, such as Alice Ann Bailey. Thus, it can be said that gender equality would be an experiential, procedural feature of the Theosophical Society, even if it were not a spiritual concept at the core of its teachings.

This specific feature of the Theosophical Society, that men and women are equally important from both a political and spiritual viewpoint, is expressed in the juxtaposition of male and female figures shown on the Waite-Smith tarot cards. Additionally, this gender equality can be seen in the equal representation of both sexes in the Major Arcana. Male figures are represented in the following seven cards; the Fool (card 0), the Magician (card I), the Emperor (card IV), the Hierophant (card V), the Chariot (card VII), the Hermit (card IX) and the Hanged Man (card XII). Female figures are represented in the following seven cards; the High Priestess (card II), the Empress (card III),

⁴⁷ For a photographic reproduction of the ‘Notes of meeting proposing the formation of the Theosophical Society, New York City, 8 September 1875’, see <http://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a8/St-1ata.jpg>. Accessed 27/09/2010.

⁴⁸ Katinka Hesselink, ‘The Objects of the Theosophical Society’, at http://www.katinkahesselink.net/kh/ts_objec.htm. Accessed 27/06/2011.

⁴⁹ Catherine Wessinger, *Women’s Leadership in Marginal Religions: Explorations Outside The Mainstream* (Champaign, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1993), pp. 82-83.

Strength (card VIII), Justice (card XI), Temperance (card XIV), the Star (card XVII) and the World (card XXI). Often a specific attribute or quality has a paired male and female aspect. For example, the male aspect of spiritual power is embodied in the Magician, who represents power, skill and wisdom, whereas the High Priestess represents the female aspects including secrets, flux and the unconscious. Likewise, the attributes of material and earthly success are shown in their male forms in the figure of the Emperor, which represents stability, power, ambition and control, whereas, the female forms of earthly success, as expressed through the Empress are beauty, pleasure, luxury and material success.

Interestingly, a few cards have male and female pairs combined on the same card. This can be seen in the Lovers, where the naked man and woman stand side-by-side, indicating harmony, physical love and attraction between the male and female aspects of life. The Devil also shows the same man and woman, however in this card they are in chains, showing disharmony in the natural order, including that between male and female aspects. Lastly, the Chariot shows both a male and female sphinx drawing the chariot, suggesting that both masculine and feminine qualities are required to guard and bring about victory. These equally balanced cards are perhaps even better examples of gender equality than those examples drawn between two, opposing cards.

The Minor Arcana do not show the same balancing of gender, as their role within the tarot is significantly different to that of the Major Arcana. It is true that the court cards of the Minor Arcana are gendered, however it should be noted that their gender interpretation is secondary to their greater spiritual meaning. However, the gender equality expressed in the Waite-Smith is shown by employing the gender of the Minor Arcana cards themselves, where Cups and Wands are considered to be 'female' suits, and Pentacles and Swords are considered to be 'male'. The fact that the four suits of the Minor Arcana are gendered in this way seems to demonstrate that the Waite-Smith tarot deck, both Major and Minor Arcana, attempts to express the theosophical ideal of male and female equality through its symbolic language.

The Spiritual Journey

One of the main objectives of a 'theosophical life' is the journey, both within and without, to find and develop secret knowledge. Indeed, the name of the philosophy itself suggests the importance of the search for divine knowledge, as the word 'theosophy' means 'knowledge of God'. It may be considered that someone who embarks on this journey is a 'true seeker', one who lived their life in order that they may come to esoteric understanding of divine wisdom.

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Indeed, Blavatsky herself wrote about the ‘true seeker’,⁵⁰ and modern theosophical authorities continue to expound the same core philosophy; that the purpose of any life is the inner journey, in which one attempts to reach an enlightened state through the development of secret knowledge.⁵¹ A common esoteric symbol of the progression along this spiritual journey towards enlightenment is the movement from darkness to light, darkness representing ignorance and light representing knowledge or wisdom.

Analysis of the symbolism in the Waite-Smith tarot deck shows that some cards represent positive movement in the inner spiritual journey, whereas other cards represent being stuck in the destructive, material world. Positive movement appears to be indicated in the cards by light, particularly rayed light. The Hermit (card IX) shows an old man standing in darkness holding a lantern from which star-shaped light shines downwards. This indicates the luminescence of knowledge and wisdom being shone into the internal darkness, revealing the secrets of enlightenment. This theme of light representing positive movement on one’s spiritual journey is repeated in the Hanged Man (card XII). The eponymous hanged man’s head is surrounded by a rayed halo of light, suggesting that he willingly suffers in his quest for enlightened knowledge. Not surprisingly this card represents wisdom in spiritual matters, particularly wisdom gained through sacrifice. Again this symbolism is used in the Temperance card (card XIV) showing the figure of temperance with rayed light emitting from her head, meaning one who has reached equanimity and harmony within oneself, along their inner journey. Additionally, in the Lovers (card VI), a rayed sun shines down upon the lovers, suggesting that they are well on their journey towards enlightenment. This is reflected in this card’s divinatory meaning of balance between internal and external harmony, that one has developed one’s inner wisdom and spiritual self to the degree that one can be in harmony. In contrast, cards such as the Devil (card XV) and the Tower (XVI) both have black backgrounds, suggesting a darkness of the soul, where the only source of light is destructive fire. The meanings of these cards are bondage to the material and conflict/destruction respectively, reflecting a lack of internal wisdom and an impediment in the journey towards enlightenment. It is interesting to note that the Tower shows both a king and a commoner being struck and thrown from the tower, suggesting that the base conflicts that interfere with one’s spiritual journey can

⁵⁰ Helena Blavatsky, ‘Is Theosophy A Religion?’ *Theosophy*, vol. 85, no. 2, (December, 1996).

⁵¹ Robert Crosbie, *Occult Knowledge, The Theosophy Trust Memorial Library*, at <http://theosophytrust.org/tlodocs/articlesRC.php?d=The Occult Side Of Nature.htm&p=35>. Accessed 22/04/2010.

afflict all levels of society, that no-one is spared.

Within the philosophical underpinnings of Theosophy, the concept of cycles of perfection is of the highest importance. This principle encompasses a variety of ideas including spiritual journeying, layers of reality of ascending value, and the image of a cosmic value scale, running from the gross material to the refined spiritual. The Waite-Smith tarot deck contains an illustration of spiritual progress, from a state of gross materialism to one of spiritual perfection, which is closely in keeping with theosophical ideals. This is expressed in many ways, from the individual suits to the cards within the suits, to the cards of the progression of cards within the Major Arcana.

To begin with, the most obvious manifestation of this progression, the suits, within a tarot deck are arranged in order of this journey to spiritual perfection. Alchemical theories differ so violently, one from the other that no single order can be considered 'correct'.⁵² However, it can be seen that, if arranged in order from most 'ethereal' to most 'material', the suits of the tarot illustrate the kind of spiritual journey, set forth by theosophical philosophy. To begin at the top, the first suit, Wands or Cudgels, is emblematic of ideals, ideas, human endeavour, spirit and intellectual powers. This suit, being the highest, is associated with the alchemical element of Air. The next suit, Cups, is associated with creativity, emotional, natural creation and the powers of the soul. Its alchemical element is Water, which is not always laid next in the order of the elements. However, the tarot does not, in all things, follow classic occult themes. The next suit, Swords, emblematic of the alchemical element of Fire, is symbolic of power, conquest, destruction and action. Lastly, the suit of Pentacles or Coins is symbolic of material things. These include money and wealth, the physical world and the alchemical element of Earth. This alchemical element is seen as the most 'solid' and physical of the four elements. Thus, the order of the suits seems to follow a spiritual progression, starting with the most enlightened elements and slowly moving towards the most physical.

⁵² Anonymous, *Elemental Magic: Fire - Water - Earth - Air/Wind: Correspondences Chart* at <http://occult-advances.org/elements.shtml>. Accessed 02/03/2011. See also Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* (St Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 2000), pp. 16-17, 23-24, 26-27. For a view of modern alchemical theory see John Reid, *John Reid's Course on Practical Alchemy*, chapter 3 at <http://www.levity.com/alchemy/reid1-3.html>. Accessed 22/06/2011. See also Nicholas Clulee, *John Dee's Natural Philosophy* (London: Routledge, 1988), p. 97, for an explanation of Renaissance alchemical theory. For a Wiccan view of alchemical elements, see Scott Cunningham, *Earth, Air, Fire & Water* (St Paul, MN: Llewellyn Publications, 1997).

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This progression or spiritual journey is also illustrated in miniature within each suit. Within the court cards the progression moves from page to king, representing the journey from the material to the spiritual. Within this progression from page to king, the King represents the spirit, the queen represents the soul, the knight stands for personal energies and the page represents the idea of the body. Therefore, it can be seen that there is the same progression of material up to spiritual, from Page to King, the most spiritual, down to the most gross and material.

Another set of illustrations relating to the spiritual journey to perfection can be seen in the ten minor trumps, which run from Ace to Ten. This idea is of the greatest importance in theosophical philosophy, which holds that the spiritual journey of reincarnation moves from the most material and gross through the various levels of life, steered always by the forces of Karma, and also holds that existence consists of a series of cycles. This illustration of the cycle of existence in the Minor Arcana begins at the Ace, which represents the beginning or birth. After birth, comes balance and harmony, or dominion of one over another, which is represented by the card Two. This card also refers to the relationship of one thing to another, or to lovers and the querent's love-life. Card Three represents the natural outcome of card Two and builds from this. This card can refer to a child or to a family (Child, Father and Mother). After the birth of a child and the setting up of a new family comes a state of inactivity and rest associated with stability and balance. This state is represented by card Four. Card Five represents a lack of balance or entropy. It can also signify a disruption to the querent's family. After this state of imbalance comes a period in which balance is regained or where a journey will be undertaken. This state is represented by card Six. Card Seven represents an illusionary balance or stability, which can come after a period of imbalance. This card also symbolises a fundamental instability or other problems, or betrayal of trust, by one close to the querent. Card Eight represents movement or energy expenditure, which can be propelling the querent either up or down, or can even represent energy that is being wasted, by pushing the querent around in an endless circle. Card Nine symbolises that pause which comes before the great work reaches its true fruition, while card Ten represents the fulfilled and final outcome. Clearly, there is a natural progression here across the life span, across the course of spiritual growth towards overall fulfilment.

The Fool (Card 0) is one of the most enigmatic cards of the Major Arcana. It represents the beginnings of a journey, a 'fool' setting out without awareness of the dangers around him. It can be superficially interpreted as a negative card, in that it may represent foolish blindness to the dangers of a situation, where the focus of the reading is considered to be unaware of the complexities of a situation. In this way, it can also be read to mean a lack of

wisdom and being oblivious to the knowledge that surrounds one. However, The Fool also holds a more subtle meaning, as it represents the idea of the novice. This includes the attitude of approaching a situation as though one were a novice, without the constraints of ego that come with believing that one already ‘knows’. This idea is important within the Theosophical Society, as is captured by the statement that “recognising that our present level of understanding is quite finite, our level of ignorance nearly infinite.”⁵³ The idea that our current knowledge and belief in our own wisdom can actually get in the way of true enlightenment is a complex and subtle plank within Theosophy, often referred to as ‘humility’, although it is more complex than the usual understanding of this word. It is the awareness that in holding one’s own wisdom too rigidly and tightly one can become blind to new ideas and a deeper understanding. The Fool does not suffer this problem; he steps into life with openness, free from the belief in his own knowledge. Thus, Waite has emphasised the importance of this theosophical idea when he set the Fool apart from all other Major Arcana, making him either unnumbered or numbered as 0. It can be seen that Waite invited the tarot user to consider that the place to start all journeys of knowledge, including divinatory knowledge, is from the mind-set of a novice.

Karma

The concept of *karma* is also central to the Theosophical Society. The word ‘karma’ appears to come from the Sanskrit *karman*, from the root *kri* which means ‘to do’ or ‘to make’, thus *doing*, or *making*, *action*, which can best be translated into the English word ‘consequence’.⁵⁴ A person acts as a response to their external and internal situation, and this action then impacts upon nature, which then responds as a consequence. This flow of action and reaction is karma. “Karma is, in other words, essentially a chain of causation, stretching back into the infinity of the past and therefore necessarily destined to stretch into the infinity of the future.”⁵⁵ Thus, theosophical philosophy proposes that karma is a natural law through which one can recognise the consequence of one’s actions and act accordingly, and in this way can create the world one wishes for.⁵⁶

⁵³ Anonymous, ‘Teaching with Humility’, *The American Theosophist* (Wheaton, IL: The Theosophical Society in America, May, 2009).

⁵⁴ Catherine Soanes and Angus Stevenson (eds), *Oxford Dictionary of English* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁵⁵ Gottfried de Purucker, *The Occult Glossary* (Pasadena, CA: Theosophical University Press, 1996).

⁵⁶ Annie Besant, *Karma* (London: Theosophical Publishing Society, 2005).

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Analysis of the process in which Waite directed his tarot deck to be used appears to replicate the process of *karma*. There are many ways to use tarot as a divinatory tool, including simply pulling a single card out as ‘an answer’ to a question. Using his suggested method for divination, the reader has cards that represent the past of the issue, those that represent the current influence on the issue and those that represent possible futures. When read within Waite’s suggested style, the reader connects these with a level of action-reaction, of causality or karma, to make sense of the flow of consequence. Thus, Waite subtly worked the theosophical concept of *karma* into the general understanding of how tarot cards ‘work’, allowing this concept to hitchhike into the minds of tarot users, whether they believe in Theosophy or not.

Conclusion

It can be seen that A. E. Waite was crucial to the development of the tarot as a divination tool; developing the first purpose-built tarot deck, organising for mass publication of the deck, and writing a manual for its users. Indeed, this deck and its manual are still available in most stores that sell tarot today. Naturally, Waite brought his own experiences as a member of various esoteric groups to this project. Perhaps the most influential experience was his membership of the Theosophical Society, which he had embraced in combination with his own flavour of Christian spirituality. Not surprisingly, Waite’s choice of symbols, repeating themes and images, gender choices, structure and method of reading, all reflect theosophical ideas. These ideas are deeply embedded within the various elements of the Waite-Smith tarot deck and in the way an individual uses the cards for divination. Thus, these cards have become a subtle carrier of theosophical thought, passively transporting theosophical ideas into the minds and consciousness of those that use it, be they followers of Theosophy or not. In this way, Theosophy has possibly influenced the wider circle of New Age occult groups as the tarot is adopted into other systems of belief, unconsciously being absorbed into the fabric of the new mystical framework. It is interesting that while some tarot decks have started to drift away from Waite’s original symbolic format, a large majority of new decks still follow his specific symbolism and imagery, and almost all follow his karmic reading of the cards. In this way, Waite can be considered to be, even if accidentally, hugely influential in propagating theosophical thought into the greater New Age community and possibly even into mainstream Western thought.