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THE PICTORIAL KEY TO THE TAROT

Arthur Edward Waite

78 plates from designs by Pamela Colman Smith

MODERN ENGLISH ANNOTATED EDITION

First published in London, 1910

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Modern English Annotated Edition Note

This edition presents a modern-English reading layer for Arthur Edward Waite's *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot*, based on the 1910 text and preserving Pamela Colman Smith's complete plate sequence. Waite's arguments, card descriptions, symbolic vocabulary, quotations, and historical judgments remain his own, while Smith's designs remain integral to the work rather than illustrative additions.

Modernization reduces unnecessary friction in spelling, punctuation, syntax, and ordinary wording without flattening Waite's technical distinctions or occult vocabulary. The sequence and relationship of text and images are preserved, and historical claims or period assumptions are not silently converted into modern editorial conclusions.

Fox & Webb notes are used where source history, terminology, chronology, textual questions, or later scholarship materially improves the reading. Editorial context remains visibly distinct from Waite's text and Smith's images.

We modernize the language, not the ideas.

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Chronology

A brief path from Renaissance playing cards to Waite and Smith

1377	<p>EARLY PLAYING CARDS</p> <p>Playing cards are documented in Europe.</p> <p>A Basel treatise describes card play already established in European social life.</p>
1440	<p>RENAISSANCE ITALY</p> <p>Tarot, or trionfi, enters the record.</p> <p>The earliest tarot references cluster through the 1440s and 1450s in northern Italy.</p>
1465	<p>HUMANIST PRINT CULTURE</p> <p>The so-called “Mantegna Tarot” appears.</p> <p>Created around this year, the emblem sequence is now treated as neither Mantegna’s work nor a true tarot deck.</p>
1491	<p>PICTORIAL PRECEDENT</p> <p>The Sola Busca tarot is dated.</p> <p>A complete 78-card deck survives with pictorial numbered suit cards.</p>
1781	<p>THE OCCULT TURN</p> <p>Court de Gébelin and de Mellet recast the cards.</p> <p>Tarot is presented as Egyptian wisdom, the “Book of Thoth,” and a vehicle of divination.</p>
1783	<p>CARTOMANCY</p> <p>Etteilla begins publishing his tarot system.</p> <p>A sustained printed program of tarot divination follows the late-eighteenth-century occult reinterpretation.</p>
1854	<p>OCCULT SYNTHESIS</p> <p>Éliphas Lévi joins tarot to occult correspondences.</p> <p>His occult synthesis helps establish Kabbalistic frameworks later associated with the cards.</p>
1909	<p>WAITE + SMITH</p> <p>Pamela Colman Smith designs Waite’s tarot deck.</p> <p>Waite’s symbolic program and Smith’s visual invention meet.</p>
1910	<p>THE BOOK</p> <p>The Pictorial Key is first published.</p> <p>Waite pairs history, symbolism, divination, and Smith’s designs.</p>

A DECK WITH MORE THAN ONE HISTORY

Preface

Tarot began as a Renaissance card game. Centuries later, occult writers recast the deck as a symbolic book, a vehicle of divination, and a map of hidden correspondences.

Waite stands inside that later occult history while also criticizing many of its historical myths. His book therefore does two things at once: it argues against fanciful origins and proposes a “higher” symbolic meaning of its own.

Keep those layers distinct: documentary history explains where the cards came from, while Waite’s text shows the symbolic and spiritual argument he chose to make.

Preface

It seems necessary, rather than merely a matter of choice, that I begin by stating my position plainly. I offer this by way of explanation and defence. For many years of my literary life, within my spiritual and other limitations, I have been an exponent of the higher schools of mysticism. It may therefore seem strange that I should now concern myself with something that appears so ordinary. At first sight, it is simply a familiar method of fortune-telling.

Of course, the opinions of Mr. Smith—even when printed in literary reviews—are of no importance unless they happen to agree with our own. But if we are to sanctify that comfortable doctrine, we must at least take care that our own opinions concern only the highest things. The same must be true of the subjects from which those opinions arise. And that is exactly what may seem doubtful here. It may seem so not only to Mr. Smith, whom I respect with the proper degree of detachment, but also to people of greater consequence. After all, they share my own spiritual commitments.

To them, and to anyone else, I would say this. The most illuminated Frater Christian Rosy Cross beheld the Chemical Marriage in the Secret Palace of Transmutation. Yet his story ends abruptly with the suggestion that he expected to become doorkeeper the next morning. The same pattern appears more often than one might suppose. Those who have seen the King of Heaven through the clearest veils of the sacraments are often the very people who afterwards take up the humblest duties in the House of God. By such simple signs, too, the Adepts and Great Masters of the secret orders are distinguished from the ranks of Neophytes as *servi servorum mysteriorum*.

✦ NOTE

Waite is invoking the Rosicrucian figure Christian Rosenkreuz and the allegorical *Chymical Wedding*. His point here is the mystical contrast between visionary attainment and the willingness to accept a humble office.

✦ NOTE

Literally, “servants of the servants of the mystery.” Waite uses the phrase to characterize advanced initiates by humility rather than display.

In much the same way, we encounter the Tarot cards at the outermost gates, among the scraps and debris of the so-called occult arts. No sensible person should have the slightest illusion about such things. Yet the cards themselves belong to another region. They contain a very high symbolism. It is to be interpreted according to the Laws of Grace rather than by the pretences and intuitions of what passes for divination.

Divine wisdom may appear foolish to human judgement. That does not mean that the foolishness of this world therefore leads to Divine Wisdom. So neither ordinary scholars nor teachers who occupy seats of authority are likely to see at once what I am proposing. They may doubt its plausibility, or even its possibility.

Tarot has long been in the hands of cartomancists as part of their professional stock-in-trade. I do not intend to persuade anyone outside my own circles that this is especially important, or unimportant. But Tarot has fared no better on the historical and interpretive sides. There it has been handled by writers who have brought the subject into complete contempt among people capable of philosophical insight or serious attention to evidence. It is time to rescue it. I propose to do so once and for all, so that I can be done with the side issues that distract from the subject itself.

Poetry is the most beautiful expression of the most beautiful things. In the same way, symbolism is the most universal form of expression in concealment. It gives form to the deepest things of the Sanctuary, things that have never been declared outside it with the same fullness in spoken words. The justification for this rule of silence is not my present concern. Elsewhere, and quite recently, I have put on record what I believe can be said about it.

The short treatise that follows is divided into three parts. In the first I deal with the early history and antiquities of the subject, together with several related questions. It should be understood that this is not offered as a contribution to the history of playing cards. About that subject I know and care nothing. Rather, this part is directed at a particular school of occultism, especially in France. That school has been the source and centre of the phantasmagoria that has found expression during the last fifty years under the pretence of treating Tarot cards historically.

In the second part, I consider the symbolism in some of its higher aspects. This also introduces the complete and rectified Tarot, which is available

separately as coloured cards. The designs are reproduced here in black and white. They were prepared under my supervision, as regards their attributions and meanings, by a woman of considerable standing as an artist.

The divinatory section concludes my argument. I regard it personally as a fact in the history of the Tarot. I have therefore drawn on all published sources to bring together the meanings assigned to the various cards. I have also given special prominence to one method of working that has not previously been published. It has the merit of simplicity and is universally applicable. It may therefore be taken as a replacement for the cumbersome and complicated systems found in the larger handbooks.

FROM GAME TO OCCULT SYMBOL

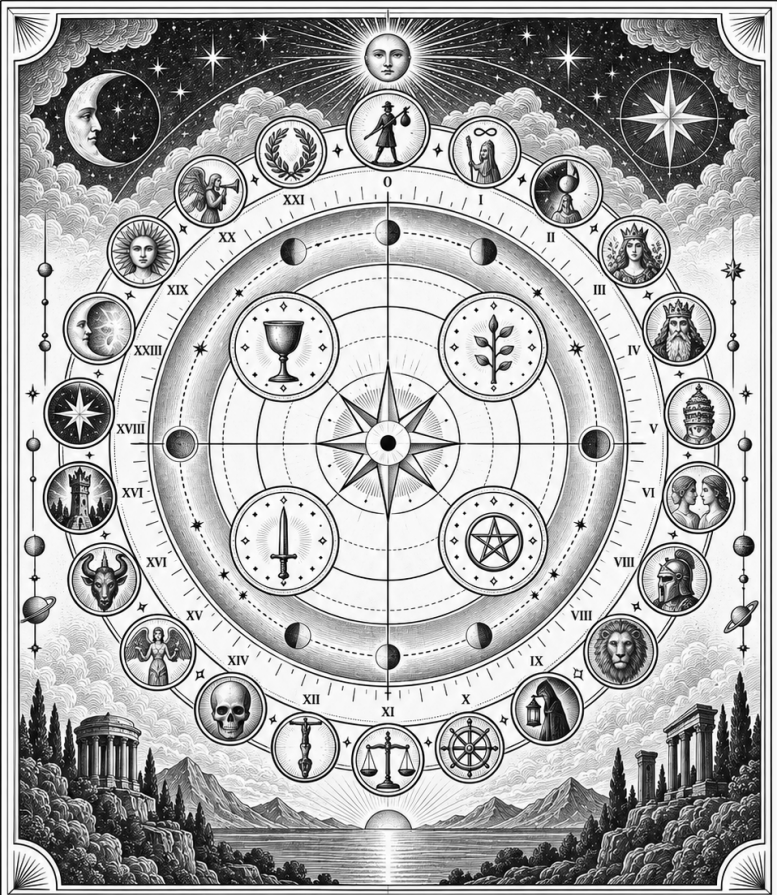
Part I

Part I is Waite's clearing of the ground. He inventories the deck, reviews older interpretations, and attacks claims that tarot is an Egyptian, Indian, Chinese, or Romani survival from remote antiquity.

Waite gives the part its controlling proposition in plain words: "the true Tarot is symbolism." Keep that claim distinct from the historical question of where the cards came from; the book deliberately argues on both levels.

Later card history strengthens the broad direction of that critique while making the chronology more precise: ordinary playing cards are documented in medieval Europe, and tarot proper emerges in fifteenth-century northern Italy.

The useful tension is already present. Waite rejects bad history, yet he still believes the deck carries a secret symbolic tradition. Keep historical provenance and esoteric interpretation separate as you read.



A Fox & Webb visual interpretation of the seventy-eight-card structure.

Part I — The Veil and its Symbols

§ I — Introductory and General

The poet's diagnosis says that "the undevout astronomer is mad"; the very plain man's diagnosis says that genius is mad. Between these extremes—which stand for ten thousand excesses of the same kind—sovereign reason tries to act as moderator and does what it can. I do not think there is a distinct pathology of occult pursuits. But no one can question their extravagances, and trying to moderate them is both difficult and thankless. Even if such a pathology existed, it would probably amount to empirical observation rather than diagnosis, and it would give us no reliable standard.

✦ SOURCE NOTE · "THE UNDEVOUT ASTRONOMER IS MAD."

Waite is quoting Edward Young's *Night Thoughts*, Night IX. The line comes from a passage in which contemplation of the heavens is presented as naturally leading to religious devotion.

Occultism is not the same thing as mystical faculty. It very seldom goes together either with practical competence in ordinary life or with a sound knowledge of the rules of evidence, even within its own field. I know that, in the high art of ridicule, few things are duller than criticism that merely insists a thesis is false. Such criticism cannot see that the thesis may at least be decorative. I also know the relief that can follow long dealings with doubtful doctrine or difficult research. In that comic sense, it can be refreshing to meet something plainly fraudulent, or at least wholly unreasonable. But history seen through the lens of occultism is not usually decorative, and it offers little refreshment after the wounds it inflicts on the logical understanding.

To keep one's patience amid clouds of folly almost requires a *Frater Sapiens dominabitur astris* in the Fellowship of the Rosy Cross. That is especially true when Tarot is considered according to the higher law of symbolism. The true Tarot is symbolism. It speaks no other language and offers no other signs.

✦ NOTE

A traditional Latin astrological maxim, commonly rendered “the wise man will rule the stars.” Waite turns the phrase into the mock name of a Rosicrucian “brother,” sharpening the joke about the patience needed to sort occult speculation from symbolism.

Once the inward meaning of its emblems is grasped, they become a kind of alphabet. They are capable of indefinite combinations, and in every combination they can make true sense. On the highest plane, Tarot offers a key to the Mysteries in a manner that is neither arbitrary nor merely read into the cards.

But false symbolic stories have been told about Tarot, and every published work that has dealt with the subject so far has given it a false history. Two or three writers have suggested that, at least where the meanings are concerned, this is unavoidable. Few people, they say, know those meanings, and the few who do have received them by transmission under pledges and cannot betray their trust.

The suggestion is fantastic on its face. There is a certain anticlimax in the idea. We are asked to suppose that one particular interpretation of fortune-telling—*l’art de tirer les cartes*, the art of reading cards—could be reserved for Sons of the Doctrine. Nevertheless, the fact remains that a Secret Tradition concerning Tarot does exist. There is always a possibility that some minor arcana of the Mysteries may be made public with a flourish of trumpets. It is therefore as well to speak before the event. Those who are curious about such matters should be warned in advance. Any revelation will contain only a third part of the earth and sea, and a third part of the stars of heaven, so far as the symbolism is concerned.

✦ SOURCE NOTE · “A THIRD PART.”

The trumpet imagery and repeated thirds allude to the judgments in Revelation 8, where successive trumpet blasts affect a third of the earth, sea, and heavenly lights. Waite uses the biblical language ironically while discussing a possible occult “revelation.”

The reason is simple: no more than that has ever been put into writing, either at the root or in later development. Much will therefore remain to be

said after any pretended unveiling. The guardians of certain temples of initiation who keep watch over mysteries of this order have no cause for alarm.

In my preface to *The Tarot of the Bohemians*, I said what was then possible, or what seemed most necessary. By an accident of circumstances, that work has recently been reissued after a long interval. The present work has a more particular purpose, as I have already indicated. It introduces a rectified set of the cards themselves and tells the unadorned truth about them, so far as this is possible in the outer circles.

As for the sequence of greater symbols, their ultimate and highest meaning lies deeper than the ordinary language of picture or hieroglyph. Those who have received some part of the Secret Tradition will understand this. The verbal meanings assigned here to the more important Trump Cards have a related purpose. They are intended to set aside the follies and impostures of earlier attributions and to put those who have the gift of insight on the right track. Within the limits of what I can do, I also mean to ensure that these meanings are true as far as they go.

I regret in several respects that I must admit to certain reservations, but a question of honour is involved. On one side are those who know nothing of the tradition yet imagine themselves exponents of something called occult science and philosophy. On the other is the make-believe of a few writers who have received part of the tradition. They think this gives them a legal title to throw dust in the eyes of the outside world. Between these follies, I feel that the time has come to say what can be said. My purpose is to reduce the effects of current charlatanism and stupidity to a minimum.

We shall see in due course that the history of Tarot cards is largely negative. Once the ground is cleared of reveries and gratuitous speculations stated as certainties, there is in fact no history before the fourteenth century. Deception and self-deception about origins in Egypt, India, or China put a lying spirit into the mouths of the first expositors. Later occult writers have done little more than repeat the first false testimony, in the good faith of minds not yet awakened to the requirements of research.

As it happens, all these expositions have worked within a very narrow range and, comparatively speaking, have shown little invention. One brilliant opportunity, at least, has been missed. No one seems yet to have

suggested that Tarot might have served—and even originated—as a secret symbolic language of the Albigensian sects.

I commend this suggestion to the spiritual descendants of Gabriele Rossetti and Eugène Aroux. I commend it also to Mr. Harold Bayley, as material for another *New Light on the Renaissance*. And, with great respect, it may serve as at least a taper in the darkness for the zealous and all-searching mind of Mrs. Cooper-Oakley.

Think what the supposed testimony of paper watermarks might gain from the Tarot card of the Pope, or Hierophant. One need only connect it with the idea of a secret Albigensian patriarch. Mr. Bayley found abundant material for that idea in those same watermarks. Think for a moment of the High Priestess as representing the Albigensian Church itself. Then think of the Tower struck by Lightning as symbolizing the desired destruction of Papal Rome, the city on seven hills. The pontiff and his temporal power are thrown down from the spiritual structure when it is split by the wrath of God.

The possibilities are so numerous and persuasive that, once expressed, they almost deceive even one of the elect who invented them. But there is more, though I scarcely dare to cite it.

✦ HISTORICAL NOTE · WAITE'S ALBIGENSIAN SATIRE

“Albigensian” was a historical label applied to medieval religious dissidents in southern France, especially those now commonly called Cathars. Waite is not proposing an Albigensian origin for Tarot here. He invents the theory as a parody of writers who built sweeping esoteric histories from suggestive symbols, secret-society claims, and watermarks.

When Tarot cards first became the subject of a formal explanation, the archaeologist Court de Gebelin reproduced some of their most important emblems. The “codex,” if I may call it that, became a basis of reference for many decks published afterwards. This happened through his engraved plates. His figures are very primitive, and in that respect they differ from the cards of Etteilla, the Marseilles Tarot, and other decks still current in France.

I am not a good judge in such matters. But the examples I have just given show that every one of the Trumps Major might have served perfectly well as

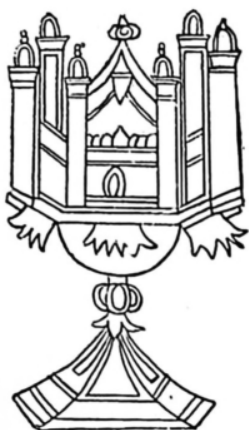
a watermark design. There is also one especially remarkable example: the Ace of Cups.

★ HISTORICAL NOTE · COURT DE GEBELIN

Antoine Court de Gebelin's 1781 *Monde primitif* included an influential essay on Tarot and reproduced a sequence of card images. He argued that the deck preserved ancient Egyptian wisdom, a theory that became foundational for later occult Tarot even though its historical claims were unsupported.

I would call the Ace a eucharistic emblem, resembling a ciborium—a covered vessel used for consecrated hosts—but that does not matter at the moment. The point is that Mr. Harold Bayley gives six similar devices in his *New Light on the Renaissance*. They are seventeenth-century paper watermarks which he claims are Albigenian in origin and represent sacramental and Graal emblems.

If only he had heard of Tarot. If only he had known that these cards of divination, cards of fortune, cards of every vagrant art, may have been current at the period in southern France. I think his enchanting but all-too-fantastic hypothesis might then have expanded still further in the atmosphere of his dream. We should no doubt have had a vision of Christian Gnosticism, Manichaeism, and everything he understands by the pure primitive Gospel shining behind the pictures.



Historical emblem reproduced from the source.