

## Secret Traditions in the Modern Tarot: Folklore and the Occult Revival

I first encountered the evocative images of the tarot, as no doubt many others have done, in T. S. Eliot's *The Waste Land*. This led to Pamela Coleman Smith's tarot deck, and from there to the idiosyncratic writings of A.E. Waite with its musings on the Grail, on 'secret doctrines' and on the nature of mystical experience. Revival of interest in the tarot and the proliferation of tarot decks attests to the vibrancy of this phenomenon which appeared in the context of the eighteenth century occult revival. The subject is extensive, but my topic for now is the development of the tarot cards as a secret tradition legend in Britain from the late 1880's to the 1930's. (1) During this period, ideas about the nature of culture drawn from folklore and anthropological theory combined with ideas about the origins of Arthurian literature and with speculations about the occult nature of the tarot. These factors working together created an esoteric and pseudo-academic legend about the tarot as secret tradition.

The most recent scholarly work indicates that tarot cards first appeared in Italy in the fifteenth century, while speculations about their occult meaning formed part of the French occult revival in the late eighteenth century. (Dummett 1980, 1996 ) The most authoritative historian of tarot cards, the philosopher Michael Dummett, is dismissive of occult and divinatory interpretations. Undoubtedly, as this excellent work points out, ideas about the antiquity of tarot cards are dependent on assumptions made at a later period, and there is a tendency among popular books to repeat each other rather than use primary sources. While, this is hardly surprising from a professional philosopher having to confront the rather cavalier use of philosophical principles which characterise this material. Popular culture is the arena in which tarot cards have had their greatest influence. Whatever the origins of the tarot per se, the main impetus in a popular context lies in Enlightenment and Victorian notions of culture filtered through a widespread revival of interest in the occult. Such ideas affected the development of the tarot in Britain at the beginning of the last century and transformed it into a vibrant manifestation of popular culture.

At the end of the eighteenth century, writers associated with the French occult revival began to link the tarot first with Egyptian hieroglyphs then with the Cabala (Howe 1972,40-4; Cavendish 1975.11-59; McIntosh 1987,101-8; Dummett 1988, 10-19). However, it is in the writings of Arthur Edward Waite that assumptions about the nature of culture which were important in other contexts, such as the new discipline of folklore studies, began to overlap with earlier esoteric ideas. To call Waite's prose style verbose is an understatement, and he manages to reason himself in and out of positions with dizzying regularity. Nevertheless, his was an interesting and original mind. He brought together a number of key ideas associated with modern occultism. In particular he popularised the existence of a 'secret doctrine' running throughout a western esoteric tradition and the availability of that tradition to the individual through mystical experience (Waite, 1911a, 59-71:1911b, vol. ii, 379). Despite his interest in esoteric orders such as Freemasons and Rosicrucians and his involvement with the Order of the Golden Dawn, there is a strong vein of populism in Waite. For

him, the secret tradition was ultimately more mysticism than occultism (Gilbert 1987a, 59-71). Ultimately he seems to suggest that the esoteric orders were only preparatory and that mystical experience is a personal matter. His idea of the availability of mystical experience to all is close to the spirit of New Age religion, and at odds with the elitism which lies at the heart of many of these secret tradition theories. I suspect that it is only the length and opacity of his writings that keep him from being republished more often.

Waite's interest in the Arthurian legend was encouraged by his friendship with the Anglo-Welsh writer, Arthur Machen. (Gilbert 1976,7-8; 1987b, 6-10; Dobson 1988, 34-47) They collaborated in a verse 'mystery play' on the Grail (Waite 1906,140ff), although ultimately Machen saw the Grail in terms of the Eucharist and possible early Celtic Christian relics (Dobson 1988,34-47, Machen 1995, 1-39). Ideas current in folklore and cultural studies were another important influence. In particular Waite took note of Alfred Nutt and Jessie Weston's work on the supposed dependence of the Arthurian grail literature on earlier Celtic myth (Waite 1933,607). His interest in assessing historical evidence marks him off from many writers on the tarot. Court de Gébelin (1773-82), Eliphas Levi (1896), Papus(1872), MacGregor Mathers (1888) and Aleister Crowley (1944), all present cabalistic and/or hermetic interpretations. Their 'history' is a series of free associations, often based on a personal revelation which tends to confuse resemblance among the symbolic functions of esoteric forms with actual historical origins (Dummett 1980 xxv-xxx, 114-15,130-35). This results in a marked circularity in the argument in which any resemblance validates the original assumption, and any difference is dismissed as corrupt transmission or deliberate suppression. However interesting these attitudes as part of the modern phenomenon of tarot, it is inescapable that very little is anchored in historical reality. Not that Waite was a reliable historian. While he introduced Celtic material into tarot writing, he himself opted for a mystical interpretation (Waite, 1909a viii.). Nevertheless Waite encapsulates the fascinating and frustrating mixture of historical analysis and esotericism which give the modern tarot both its vigour and its lack of historical coherence.

### **Waite's Tarot Imagery**

The images for Waite's tarot pack were realised by Pamela Coleman Smith, a fellow member of The Golden Dawn, and first published by Rider Press in 1910. It is often referred to as 'The Rider Pack', and, unlike earlier packs in which only the court cards and the trumps had pictures, every card is lavishly illustrated. The 'rectified' tarot Waite produced was created from magpie collection of influences, and the ways in which he departs from his sources are both interesting and revealing. Some of the imagery was modelled on earlier cards such as those in both the Victoria and Albert and Guildhall collections (Dummett 1980,76). Waite refers to the twenty-two trumps as the '*Major Arcana*', a term adopted from nineteenth-century French occultism when mystical interpretations of what had been a card game became popular.

The occult revival in Britain challenged what it perceived as the stultifying effects of social conventions, and tarot imagery was a way of reflecting this challenge. If the ideas seem a little naïve and quaint by twenty-first century standards, the commitment to what they believed was vital work in the spiritual and intellectual

redemption of mankind cannot be doubted. The Rider pack reflects Waite's close association with the Order of the Golden Dawn. S.L. MacGregor Mathers, one of its founders, incorporated Egyptian and cabalistic ideas from the French occultists Eliphas Levi (Alphonse Louis Constant) and Papus (Gerard Encausse). The tarot was interpreted as a secret cipher made by the priests of Isis (Waite 1910, 59,66; Cavendish, 1976, 26,29-30), and the cards were linked to the Hebrew alphabet as a way of ascending the Sephira Yetsirah, the cabalistic tree of life (McIntosh, 1987, 104-6,111-15; Howe 1972, 41-4).

Eliphas Levi's views on the relationship between his rediscovered tarot meanings and Christianity influenced Waite who translated several works by this French occultist (Dummett 1980, 114-20; Constant 1894,1896,1913). One of Levi's illustrations (probably based on Goya) is of the, now famous, ennobled devil-figure who looks like a classical statue with a goat's head and holds a flaming Dionysian torch. This shift reflected the move away from portraying the Devil as the monstrous creature of medieval iconography (Robbins 1959, 130-5). The Devil trump from a pack printed in Marseilles (c1500) owes much to the figure of Acteon and the iconography of Renaissance monsters (Niccoli 1990, 35-39). In the eighteenth century, Antoine Court de Gébelin, using this as a model, depicted his Devil trump as a hermaphrodite with stag antlers (Cavendish 1975,118-20). It was left to Levi to complete the transformation of devil into the prototype of the horned god, so important in modern neo-paganism. He also suggests that the assemblies at which this figure presided were the 'rites of the old world' driven underground by Christianity and condemned as the witches sabbath (Constant 1896,375-9, 381-3; 1980, 75-7). Waite added elements from Levi's figure to the Devil trump (Waite 1911a, 128-31) although he rejected the historical explanation (Constant 1896,383 n.1). Aleister Crowley, Margaret Murray and eventually Lady Raglan adopted the idea of a surviving fertility cult and developed this figure into a pan-European fertility god with names like Cernunnos and 'the Green Man' (Crowley 1944,56; Murray 1953; Judge 1990,51-55; Oates and Wood 1998, 18-20) The image is now so familiar, and so endlessly recycled (Huson 19071, 140-2; Matthews 1990, 63-65; Ferguson 1995, 88-91) that its comparatively recent appearance can come as a surprise.

The figure turns up again as Levi's five-pointed pentagram talisman. The five-pointed star with a single point upright constituted its positive aspect, while reversed, with two points upright, it signified the devil's horns (Constant 1896,291-96,377; 1980,67-71,83,126). While this follows in the tradition of practical magic which characterised the *grimoires*, the distinction between upright and reversed figures was probably Levi's own idea. In a further complication, Waite may have introduced the terms 'pentacle' and 'pentangles' as a mistranslation of Levi's pentagram (Dummett 1989,152). Waite then substituted the 'pentacle/pentangle' for the suit of coins/spades in his tarot deck, and claimed that the pentangle was actually the ancient source of the modern coin suit. Crowley used this pentagram talisman as a symbol for mankind. For example he composed a poem entitled 'Pentagram' for distribution to the troops during World War II. Crowley's version has seven points with two points upward looking very definitely like a pair of horns (Crowley 1944, illus., 1724 and dedication; pamphlet n.d. 1). Personal ritual books kept by members of the Golden Dawn illustrate the idiosyncratic, but incredibly imaginative, nature of the imagery that went into Waite's tarot. Such sources also illustrate how little continuity there is between earlier symbolic meaning and those suggested by later occultism (Raine

1972, illus. 59ff.), and it can be difficult to sort out the chicken from the egg in this process where mutual influence was so common. For example, according to Waite, the Hanged Man was one of the most important cards (Waite 1909a, 600-14, 1911a, 81-3) and esoteric explanations associated it with Odin and the Dying God (Huson 1971, 200-2; Levi 1980 102, Ferguson 1995,77-8). In the context of J.G. Frazer's reconstruction of the myth of the dying god, this suggests that the figure is very ancient (Raine 1972,40-4; Cavendish 1975,106,Weston 1993, xx1-xxviii). However, it may have entered the tarot pack by accident as a misprint of an image of Prudence (Dummett 1980,124, or be derived from a renaissance image linked to public shaming for criminal behaviour (Edgerton 1985, 86-7).

### **The Celtic Tarot and the Holy Grail**

Other sources for imagery are Harold Bayley's ideas about hidden Cathar symbolism in emblems and watermarks. His book *New Light on the Renaissance* appeared in the same year as Waite's *The Hidden Church of the Holy Grail*, and there is marked similarity in their approach, even when their conclusions differ (Bayley 1909,262-3). Bayley claimed that certain early watermarks provided a cogent chain of emblems which enshrined the mystic traditions of the Cathars, and believed that these symbols were references to the Holy Grail (ibid., 232; 1951,247-50). Some cards in Waite's suit of cups, such as the Ace and the Queen, resemble early watermarks which Bayley linked to a supposed 'Cathar Grail' (Bayley 1909, 65-78; 1951, 245-58; Waite 1911a, 10-11). The degree to which this kind of approach was accepted, or at least tolerated, in academic circles is well illustrated in Steven Runciman's *The Medieval Manichee* which suggested that the Trumps contained symbolic references to dualist heresies (Runciman 1947,Appendix).

Waite provided a 'Celtic' interpretation by associating the four suits of the tarot with what he called the 'Four Grail Hollows' (his phrase which together with the Grail itself were held in trust by a secret fellowship) (Waite 1901a, 600-14; 1911a, 299-305; 1933, 572-4). He rejected the Celts as the ultimate source for tarot meaning, but insisted that true Christianity (i.e. not distorted by later institutions) existed in connection with the Celtic Church. For the first time, mystical interpretations of tarot cards were linked to speculations about Irish mythology and medieval romance. These speculations are intriguing and give a new slant to tarot card meanings, but they fail to establish a compelling connection with Celtic culture. Not surprisingly this has not prevented such speculation from becoming popular. The most likely source for this idea is the suggestion that four supernatural objects belonging to the Tuatha Dé Danann resembled the objects in the grail procession in medieval romance (Nutt 1888, 124,209). The credit for linking Irish myth with the tarot is often given to W.B. Yeats (Matthews 1990b,128; Weston 1993, 79 n.20), and Waite was somewhat resentful that others received credit for his suggestion (Waite 1933,574).

Two explanatory volumes accompany this 'rectified' tarot. A short volume entitled a *Key to the tarot* with the subtitle 'Being Fragments of a Secret Tradition under the Veil of Divination' appeared in 1910. It is the same size as the original Rider pack and may have accompanied the cards. A year later *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* appeared which included illustrations of all the cards and an expanded text. In the 1910 booklet, Waite described a card layout which he said was 'used privately in England, Scotland and Ireland' (Waite 1910,158). However, in the *Pictorial Key*,

this layout is called the 'Celtic Cross' spread. The reason for the change is not clear. Perhaps it is due to Yeats' influence, although Waite had plenty of his own opinions about Celtic tradition. In any case, this 'Celtic Spread' had in its turn become part of Tarot mythology (Huson 1971, 251; Matthews 1990a, 106; Ferguson 1995,16-19)

G.R.S. Mead, theosophist and one time member of the Golden Dawn, provides another link to the esoteric development between tarot and Arthurian literature. Mead hoped to encourage the academic study of esoteric subjects, and Waite lectured to Mead's Quest Society on 'The Romance of the Grail' in 1909 (Waite 1909b,90-107). Mead in turn influenced the Arthurian scholar, Jessie Weston. Her study *From Ritual to Romance* (1920) linked the ultimate meaning of grail romances with ancient fertility rituals. She too took up the idea that the four treasures of the Tuatha Dé Danann resemble the group of symbols found in the grail romances and equated them with the tarot suits. It is interesting that she gives Waite no credit for this observation. In any case, this apparent link overlooks the fact that the number of objects varies in both the grail romances and the Welsh or Irish lists of supernatural treasure (Weston 1993, 77-79). Although Weston acknowledged the lack of direct connection between the supernatural treasures, the grail story, the tarot cards and fertility rituals, she looked to 'fragmentary survivals which would give evidence of the fertility ritual'. She sought, and found, such evidence in descriptions of the sword dance which depend almost wholly on Jane Harrison and G.K. Chambers. She asked coyly in a footnote whether the pentangle could have been a sword dance figure (Weston 1993, 94). A few pages she simply takes this as the answer, and the pentangle tarot suit created by Waite in 1910 has become identified with the device on Gawain's shield in the 14th century poem, *Gawain and the Green Knight*. Having 'proved' that tarot suits, grail objects and ritual dances are derived from fertility rituals, the Green Knight is identified as a fertility spirit analogous to the figure which Levi created. Basically this creates a sense of antiquity by altering the symbolism in the desired direction and then citing the alterations as proof. Since the subject under discussion is a deck of cards, it is tempting to make comments about 'sleight of hand', but it is equally true that Weston was convinced by her own scholarship and in the 1920's such ideas were still in vogue.

Many of the ideas which rattle around in Waite's opaque prose resonate widely. Certainly the esoteric philosophy of the Order of the Golden Dawn was a formative influence on W.B. Yeats' perceptions of Celtic mythology (Raine 1972,17-22) and he incorporated tarot images into *Red Hanrahan* (Yeats 1913). Lewis Spence, (1940, 99-102) hoped the revival of the mystical mystery religion of the Celts would provide a buffer against the evils of fascism. Arthur Machen used the image of the Grail in his short story *The Holy Things* (Machen 1946), Charles Williams' novel *The Greater Trumps* uses specifically tarot imagery (2) Eliot used the tarot images of the Waite/Coleman pack, although not their esoteric meaning, in *The Waste Land* (Gibbons 1972,560-5). These ideas which weave in and out of occult, academic, and fictional writings present a very attractive imaginative vision. However they also assume that material of differing periods and contexts automatically presupposes a link, and that one can be used to explain the other without concern for external validation. As a result such speculation also illustrates the process by which a cultural theory and its methodology can be transformed into belief.

The dominant view in cultural studies at the end of the nineteenth century, was evolutionary. This suggested that customs, beliefs and tales were the survivals of earlier, more primitive, levels of culture. Primitive men had looked to non-rational forces to explain certain aspects of life, such as human fertility and the repetition of the seasonal cycles. Increasing rationality brought about changes in outlook as culture evolved. Earlier beliefs which were once part of a coherent world-view became quaint 'survivals' J.G. Frazer re-focused this evolutionary view somewhat by placing particular emphasis on descriptions of so-called agricultural rituals in classical contexts. Folklore was still seen as a survival of earlier cultural forms, but the link with an agricultural world was strengthened, and there was an increased emphasis on narrative. A group of scholars, largely based in Cambridge, emphasised the role of myth as the narrative reflex of ritual, and this shifted the emphasis from myth as a primitive explanation of natural phenomena to a magical maintenance of world-view. The emergence of modern anthropological theories and literary criticism from these early roots has been well documented, but there is I suggest a hybrid of the two, namely, an esoteric interpretation of culture. What folklorists regarded as the fossils of long dead primitive rituals involved with agriculture, others came to regard as evidence for the continued existence of a mystery cult (i.e. a secret tradition) associated with seasonal renewal. The theory of cultural evolution, which used contemporary folklore as evidence for past cultural forms, was transferred to the context of a secret tradition where it provided evidence for the existence of that tradition. Where folklorists and anthropologists saw the results of an inevitable evolution of culture, other writers asserted the continued existence of an agricultural fertility cult driven underground by a rival belief system (namely Christianity) which sought actively to suppress it. Cultural theory had become mystic belief.

Alfred Nutt's influential work on the Holy Grail, published in 1888, was subtitled 'with Especial Reference to the Hypothesis of its Celtic origin'. It proposed that the grail motif derived from ancient Celtic mythic tradition and that the similarities of christianised grail romance and existing Celtic folktales and fairy lore were evidence for the evolutionary character of tradition. He neatly moderated the universalism of evolutionary theory to a more diffusionist perspective by suggesting that a pan-European, Dionysian agricultural ritual was present with special vividness in Celtic folklore. This linked Celtic tradition with the highly esteemed classical texts that formed the centre-piece of Frazerian theory. While not downplaying other influences, Nutt synthesised the arguments for Celtic origin for the first time and put the idea of a mystery cult at the root of Celtic belief on a firm academic footing ( Nutt 1897, 29-53, 1888, 1902). This influenced Arthurian scholars like Jessie Weston, Celtic revivalists such as Lewis Spence, and occultists such as A.E. Waite, W.B Yeats and G.R.S. Mead. Even Margaret Murray used substantial amounts of Scottish evidence and published on the Grail (Murray 1916,1-14).

Nutt helped establish the parameters of the pagan Celtic versus Christian debate by focusing on what he considered the central condition, viz. the opposition and harmonising of the Celtic agricultural ritualism and mythology with alien Christian rituals and romance. He incorporated David MacRitchie's suggestion, (long before Margaret Murray) that witchcraft might be a by-product of this clash in which the fairy tradition (which preserved pre-Christian practices) continued underneath Christian practice. It would be a mistake to consider Nutt the main source

of these ideas, any more than Waite was the source of all the esoteric speculation. Ultimately, Nutt changed his mind about the agricultural cult, although not about the connection between fairy beliefs and Celtic tradition or about the use of contemporary folklore to reconstruct past beliefs. For him, the agricultural mystery cult encoded in Celtic tradition remained an academic problem which could be, and was, developed in the context of Celtic and Arthurian scholarship. However his ideas could also be developed in the direction of esoteric theory. For writers such as Jessie Weston and Margaret Murray, and to a lesser extent A.E. Waite, the rituals of the primitive agricultural world were not merely survivals, but a continuing secret reality. Weston saw these rituals as the esoteric explanation for the grail, while for Murray, they were the real basis for witchcraft beliefs, but they find their most imaginative synthesis in Waite's writings on the tarot.

## **Conclusion**

The tarot as an esoteric or divinatory system has been back projected onto the Renaissance where categories identifiable at a philosophical level have been redefined as pseudo-history. Unarguably the re-creation of self through various techniques such as rational apprehension, meditation, mystical contemplation and even ritual activity was an important concept of Renaissance neo-platonic philosophy. Cultural historians such as Frances Yates suggested that the implications of this world-view became progressively more concrete during the seventeenth century. Various movements sought, through esoteric knowledge, to achieve an ultimate integration of human culture, one which would resolve religious differences and better the lot of mankind (Yates, 1972). Perhaps this kind of hermetic thinking was not as influential as Yates suggests, but it helps our understanding and evaluation of the nineteenth-century occult revival, and the development of the modern tarot. The idea of occult procedures as practical embodiments of esoteric ideas gains prominence along with the increasing popularity of Rosicrucian and Masonic orders. Along with an increased interest in ritual techniques, complex systems of symbol and metaphor, cipher languages, and the increased allegorization of alchemy, one finds a transformation of chivalric orders from military into esoteric ones. With this one sees the emergence of an idea that a coterie of individuals, rather than single thinkers, possessed secret knowledge whose esoteric wisdom could transform society. This is I suggest the process which underlies the esoteric tarot. Many writers during the occult revival viewed the secret meanings of the tarot as a lost tradition that could only be rediscovered once the code was understood. A. E. Waite proposed, or at least helped to popularise, the idea that a continuous (not lost) esoteric tradition had been handed on in secret by a coterie of initiates. For Waite tarot cards were the channel by which the secret tradition was transmitted, and his writings are important in popularising the idea of a secret tradition within this kind of esoteric thinking.

It is all too easy to compile a list of favourite historical solecisms from the current crop of tarotmania publications, and to see them in terms of P.T. Barnum's dictum 'there's one born every minute'. I sympathise with writers who feel that there is a qualitative difference between the historical/rational model and occult/esoteric thinking. There remains a fundamental difficulty in arguments that assign meanings to aspects of tarot cards and their history where these things are exactly the things that require independent proof. However current interest in tarot cards continues unabated,

and people find metaphysical, spiritual or psychological realities in them. I have suggested elsewhere that models of ritual will prove more useful than models of history in understanding the tarot as a living cultural phenomenon rather than a quaint historical anachronism (Wood 1998,15-24). In any case Madame Sosostri's 'wicked pack of cards' now have a history within the tradition of modern occultism. It may not be an entirely respectable history, but then no occultist worth his brimstone ever aspired to that.

## Footnotes and Bibliography

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2) My thanks to John Heath-Stubbs for pointing out that Williams' papers included one of Waite's pamphlets on the tarot.

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