The Tarot

Reflections on the Cards of the Major Arcana

by

Greg Hill





Introduction

"A wicked pack of cards", so T.S Eliot in 'The Waste Land' where the cards are wielded by "Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante". This implicitly disreputable use of the cards for fortune telling is what most people know of them, though they were also used as ordinary playing cards for the game of 'Tarocco' in France and Italy. There have been many designs for many purposes, not least today as multiple packs have been designed to accompany particular New Age identities and so adapted to fit the schema of each particular group or practitioner. Theories about their origins are numerous, most commonly that they were brought to Europe by gypsies and that the source lies far back in India or Ancient Egypt and that the pictures illustrate symbols of arcane lore or represent hidden knowledge from Gnosticism or Cabalistic doctrine or contain some other occult significance.

This uncertainty is not a modern phenomena. Earlier commentators were equally divided. Writing in Rome in 1526 Pietro da San Chirico tells us "We have but little certainty who was the inventor, ….. [he considers a range of possible sources] ….. If asked, I should say that they ever were, and ever will be: and I am of the opinion that none of these found the cards, but that the cards found them." [*]

I found the cards - or they found me - many years ago when I acquired the pack illustrated by Pamela Coleman Smith to the specifications of A.E. Waite. Waite was a member of the Order of the Golden Dawn and the specifications and interpretations of his so-called "rectified Tarot" have their source in the teachings of that order, though Waite himself often seems sceptical of occultist interpretations, particularly those of Eliphas Levi whom he follows for the design of some cards - particularly in the inclusion of Egyptian symbolism - but is dismissive of him elsewhere calling his occult explanations "of a singularly fatuous kind". I also later acquired a pack of Aleister Crowley's cards with stunning illustrations to his specification by Frieda Harris. Crowley had also been a member of The Golden Dawn, but split to found his own order. Both Waite and Crowley also wrote books to accompany their packs and I have drawn on both of these and have indicated particular influences of their comments (rather more from Waite than Crowley) in the notes to the cards.

I have also drawn upon the comments of Alfred Douglas in his book on The Tarot which probably guided my interpretations of the cards more than any other when I bought it to go with my cards in the 1970's, though re-visiting it now I note that he sees them primarily in terms of a personal spiritual quest defined by Jungian psychology. Though I have used the Crowley and Waite packs in making these poems, I have sought to go back to the earlier cards for my primary inspiration. To this end I acquired a modern enhanced re-print of the Marseille pack as illustrated by Jean Dodal early in the Eighteenth Century. These cards are also available on the Internet in their original form and have been used as illustrations for the poems. Where what I have written is directly influenced by another pack I have acknowledged this in the notes. Dodal's pack is particularly useful in that it preserves the traditional symbolism of the cards as many early packs printed for use as playing cards do not, but is also untainted by later occultist symbolism found in the Waite and Crowley packs and the many more recent packs where this takes a number of diverse forms.

The poems which follow are based only on the 22 'Trump' cards, also known as the 'Major Arcana'. The "Minor Arcana' or 56 'Court' cards are not included here.

All illustrations in the Public Domain:

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tarot_of_Marseilles

<u>Bibliography</u>

A.E. Waite **The Pictorial Key to the Tarot** (London, 1910)

Aleister Crowley **The Book of Thoth** (London, 1944)

Alfred Douglas **The Tarot** (Penguin, 1974)

[*] Quotation taken from Alfred Douglas (pp.37-38) who quotes it from : Samuel Weller Singer, **Researches into the History of Playing Cards** (London, 1816).



THE FOOL

The Fool steps out - sely - on a quest
From ground zero, circling empty space
Always returning to the point of departure.

Or is it a joker - what a card! -
Who tricks us into thinking
There is somewhere to get to

Other than HERE, somewhere else to be?
Always a new game, a fresh adventure,
Perhaps to wed a giant's daughter.

Who is the Keeper of the Gate?
On the first day of the year, the gate is mine
To open and to step through into the World.

The Magician

∞



Known by many names, crowned by infinity
I am the trickster, the juggler, the magician
Mercurial in my transformations
Conjuring the elements laid out before me.

What will I make of the World?
Such knowledge I have, but to know
How to wield it is what I must learn:
So say those who would teach me

If I would heed them. But for now
I say: Listen to Me! I hold
The sceptre of power to blaze the way
Into a future of my own devising.



HIGH PRIESTESS

'Papess' she is called - Pontifica -
Bridging the pillars of the worlds
She sits guarding the Portal
Holding the Book of the Worlds' Tales

Which is the anima mundi written
For she who can read it and those
Who hear her tell it; no secrets
For those who see through the Veil.

What is it awaits there
To be discovered? If the curtain falls
From your eyes she will know
And so will guide you along the way.



The Empress

She is the Queen of all she surveys
Empress not of an empire but of Earth
She is the nurturing force of Nature
Resplendent as the stars which are her crown.

She is Love in full flow running like the river
Through the World, the vibrant life of things
Blatant in its luxurious indulgence; she is
Careless of consequence and confident

As one who holds a sceptre of power
Wielded not for advantage but for delight
In pleasure and bringing forth life
Into the World which is her sovereign space.

She it is who speaks the names we have
By which we know who we are;
She it is who gifts us with desire
So that we serve her in our lust for life.



The Emperor

The badges of office he holds not by right
But by the exercise of power, which is absolute
In his domain and in his will to control.

Beyond these mountains may rise, seas swell,
Awesome in their majesty, naked in their strength,
Needing no crown or sceptre to command respect.

He is unmoved, his throne a rock
From which he commands allegiance.
There are no other powers in the world

In his view, he recognises none,
Seeing, instead, the fact of his status
As confirmation of his right to rule.



THE HIEROPHANT

It is not in himself that the numen resides,
But in what he represents, making the holy sign
As the Priestess does not - so it is observed.

'Pope' he is called, 'High Priest', 'Hierophant',
As the cards record. Behind him are the pillars
Of the Temple, the outward facade of the Portal

But not the Portal itself. Who do they worship,
Those who kneel before him? Is it the symbols
Of his power or what they represent?

He maintains them, treading the straight path,
Holding the gatehouse against those who stray
But yet may find other ways through to the truth

He guards so assiduously. Otherness is not here
Until his sign beckons it and none may come to it
Except that he guides them. So he does say.

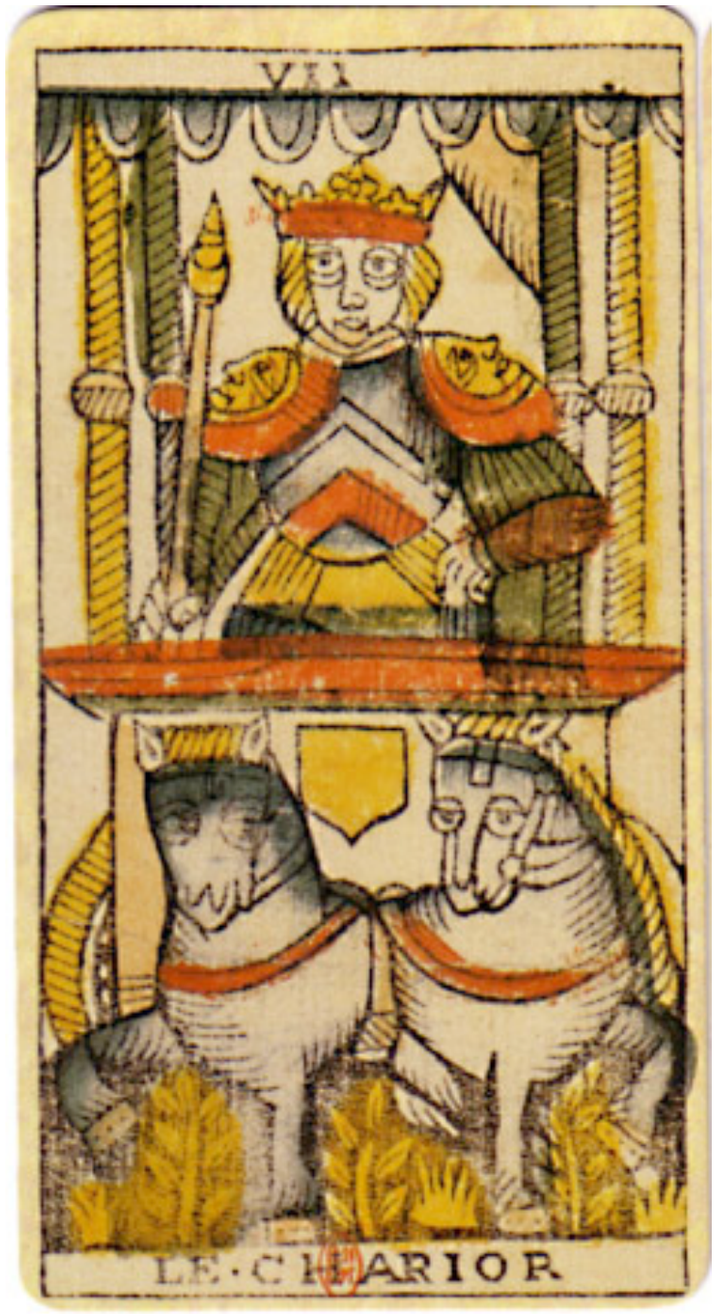


The Lovers

They stand together as one
Intent on a future
They would make present,
Blessed by a woman standing aside
Or hovering above like a guardian angel.

Mercurial, the meeting of minds,
The singular meeting of bodies
Fluidly bound like
The binding snakes of the caduceus
Around a winged staff.

There may be trees, echoing
The tale of Eden; or Eros
Kindling the fires of passion.
This is a story with many beginnings
But only one ending.



The Chariot

He rides, resplendent, encased in finery
His identity certain, his steeds reined
Ready to take him on his journey.

His carriage is steady, a support for his bearing
As he looks out on the World from under his helm:
This is safety, status, surety, leading

Through the ways that are maps of his life.
Do his trappings become him, or he them?
Will he loose the reins when the time is right?

JUSTICE



The balance of the scales outweighed
By the uplifted sword? Unflinching
She sits, wielding both without favour.

There is no contradiction to offer
If the scales tip, the balance tilts,
Equilibrium shifts like equinoctial light -

A quickening step past a half-way point
As life's pen is dipped in different ink;
Another story begun, as priorities weigh

Differently in the scales and her sword
Falls to trim new pages upon which
The words of your verdict may be written.

Or perhaps there is no movement,
Only stasis, the predictable poise
Of a life contained by fixed horizons?

The HERMIT



It is not a lonely path he walks
For he wants no company save for
The light that shines to show the way.

There is no companion that could succour him,
No comfort to be gained from a spoken word,
Only that which is his sole purpose now:

To turn away from all the World can give
To the path within that is a mirror image
Of the path without reflected darkly.

So he holds his lamp aloft, guided
By its light on the way; for now
His staff holds him firmly to the path

But soon he will no longer need it
Knowing that any way he goes
Will bring him safely to his journey's end.



Wheel of Fortune

Metamorphic, those bodies and faces
Half human, animal, other,
Dissolving identities in the flowing stream
Which turns the wheel, shaping
Moments out of the flow

Like markings on a clock face
Each one eternally present
While the fingers of fate move imperceptibly
Meeting at the apex of the dial
Then parting; so Ego
Climbs to become king for a day,
Falls again to swim in the stream
As Now once more becomes Eternity.

Fortitude



Here she opens, but on some packs closes,
the lion's mouth; and so interpretations:
Quelling ferocity, the passions, the world's powers
or releasing dark forces under her control.

Fortitude, after all, is a virtue
which she embodies, her heavy clothes
and floppy hat enclosing her power
like some governess ruling an unruly child.

Or virtuous strength with a floral crown
and a hat that has become Infinity
Subduing with a wreath of flowers
Wildness which she constrains to yield.

She it is who can teach us to conquer fear,
take hold of life with both hands;
To shape a destiny out of resisting clay
as she shapes the jaws of her rampant beast.



Hanged Man

Looped by one foot to a garret
Or a tree? His wry look
Of apparent unconcern seems to say
'I choose this' or 'This is my destiny'.
At any time the loop could let him fall
So it seems not so much to hold him
As to be a badge of office of his hanging there

Head down and haloed, hands
Out of play behind him as if
He renounces control, gives himself over
To a god who might slip the knot
Or not. Either way he is free.



DEATH

Thirteen swings of a scythe
And bones are scattered : skeletal
Too the one who wields it - strange
That the breaker of bones is also
A house of bones, bringing it off
With a grin or a grimace? No groans
From those who go, they are not leaving
So much as achieving new ways of being,

New ways of becoming out of the litter
Of bones left behind them.
Still the scythe sweeps the field of bones
Over and over, levelling the plain
On which the dance of death
Delivers over and over bones on bones.



Temperance

She pours from one cup to another
With one foot in water and the other
On the Earth. Her wings make her
One with the Air while her radiant diadem
- like the Sun - is a quiet intensity of Fire.

She contains the elements, slipping
Between them as she slips between
Worlds: her mix is not balance but continual
Flux, yet her poise is perfect stillness.

She is an enigma made apparent;
Like all cup-bearers she holds a mirror
To mystery which, reflected, reveals itself
So that what appears on the surface
And what is within are one.



The Devil

Standing - or squatting - like a statue
On his plinth, wings bat-like
Spread out behind him : grotesque
But somehow comic in his portrayal
He holds one hand aloft as if waving
To us, the other carries a flaming torch.

Are those two his acolytes, horned as he is,
Or captives with bonds they could easily shake off?
Their eyes look to each other as if wondering
What they are doing there; his stare out
At the world, challenging any question
Of his presence. He is two-faced -
Head and belly - his tongue protruding,
Poked out in mischief or choked out in chagrin?



The Tower

To climb this is to reach out and to be repulsed.
We know the history : Babel being the prime case,
A step too near The House of God and down it comes:
Jupiter's bolt of lightning, Zeus' thunderclap, Jehova's
Jealous guarding of the gateway to his sanctuary.
Our hubris or divine paranoia? One God's defence

Against the many who throng the common world.
There are otherworlds around us too, islands
Over the sea, under the waves, below the earth
And right alongside us, a half-step away from here.
So why ascend? True, the ways are perilous, paths
May wind endlessly and then turn back nearly
To where they began; but never end in disillusion.
Never tip us like this tower through empty air.



The Star

A star refracted for a moment of Time
Which is the blaze of a life,
A cache of starlight fallen
To Earth and caught to quicken:
Refractary in its stubborness to live.

As elements push - one into another -
So Earthbound bodies live containing Fire;
Seeking the light from which it came
Each separately kindled flame
The object of another's desire.

Yet we live alone, the light enclosed
In each and glimpsed darkly in the other
By those who walk a path together,
A destiny which seems forever
Quenched by the light of that eternal Star

To which all light deflects
As refractions seek their element:
The gleaming water poured through Air
To Earth that holds the liquid there
But lets the light leak out so soon.



The Moon

The tides here flow through moonlight
From the pool below : Water & Air

A crayfish crawls towards the land
But remains in the pool : Water and Earth

Two towers combine to frame the moonrise
Unmoving as she climbs : Earth & Fire

A path leads from the pool between them
Where no foot treads : Earth & Air

Two hounds howl at the Moon above them
As she stares down : Air and Fire

Her gaze incites what is under to emerge
From darkness to light : Fire and Water



The Sun

Child's play in a sunlit space -
unheeding
Of the world's hurrying pace;

An endless summer of memory -
becoming
For each life a history.

Judgement



So they rise again, this couple, out of the sea
Looking to the the skies with their child.
The angel blows a trumpet, shows a sign
Of crossroads: a meeting or a parting
Of the ways, an end or a beginning -
Depending on your point of view -
From fires of release to air of eternity or
Waters of containment to earth of belonging.
Do they claim a new life on the land,
Ask a blessing for all who come,
Or is it only some who gain it
And the rest must sink or swim?

Judgement Day - we think Apocalypse, pay-back time
When debts are due and all history becomes apparent
But here they seem relaxed, that couple now with a child
Who rise to the occasion hands clasped to pray
As if attending church on an ordinary sunday.

The angel's trumpet calls them out of the waters
Like some evolutionary spur to inhabit the land.
The banner shows a crossroads as if to say
All roads lead to here, judge and be judged
By your judgement; you can continue or turn away.



The World

The World is, of course, what it is.
So this figure bearing two wands within a wreath
Of protection, guarded at the four corners,
Is BEING - positively and negatively charged -
Watched over by what is beyond, Guardians
Of Existence, the end point of all that was,
And now is. And what will be?

And what will be, which is always what is.
There is no end which is not also a beginning,
No history that did not contain a prophecy
To be fulfilled. So the Loop of Time
Catches past, present and future
In the eternal moment of what is : The World.

Notes

The Fool

The Fool may be numbered '0' or 'I'. Sometimes though still numbered '0' - this card is placed before the final card 'The World' rather than at the beginning, sometimes both at the beginning and the end of the sequence. This ambiguity is inherent in the significance of the card.

In the medieval Welsh tale of Culhwch and Olwen, Culhwch sets out to wed Olwen who is daughter of a giant. This is apparently an impossible task both because he doesn't know where to find her and because the giant routinely kills all such suitors. There are multiple 'gatekeepers' on such a mythic quest as indeed in Culhwch's story.

The Magician

The illustration in the Rider-Waite pack has the mathematical sign for Infinity: ∞ over The Magician's head. The figure 8 - whether on its side or not - also traditionally indicates Eternity.

Dodal's image seems to suggest this sign in the shape of the floppy hat which is a characteristic of the traditional cards. Such a hat is often worn by in portrayals of the Norse god Odinn.

On some cards, as here, the objects on the table are shoemaker's tools. On others the suit signs of the Minor Arcana are displayed, i.e. Batons, Cups, Swords, Coins, seen to represent, respectively, Fire, Water, Air and Earth.

The High Priestess

The name of this card varies across different packs. **The High Priestess** seems the best title, though its interpretation as a feminine pope has both historical and etymological resonances, not least the meaning of pontifex (here with a supposed feminine ending): Pontifex ='Bridge Builder', Pons = 'Way'.

There was a medieval legend of a female pope which may have given rise to the Papess title. She is said to have reigned between 854 and 856 as John VIII but became pregnant and died in childbirth. But there is no historical evidence for this.

The Empress

This poem is particularly influenced by Pamela Colman Smith's image in the Rider-Waite pack of a woman in a luxurious flowing robe set among woodlands and cornfields :

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rider-Waite_tarot_deck#/media/File:RWS_Tarot_03_Empress.jpg

The origins of her image seem to be in the Mother Goddesses of antiquity. The eagle on her shield has been interpreted as "the soul enthroned in Nature" (Douglas), but Waite's card has the sign of Venus on the shield and he asserts that "most old attributes of this card are completely wrong in symbolism".

The Emperor

This figure is exemplified in mythical history by the Mycenaean king Agamemnon, leader of the Greek warriors who attacked Troy characterised by his pride and unquestioned sense of his own superiority.

The conflict between him and his co-warrior the great hero Achilles is one of the narrative threads of the story of the assault on Troy.

The older (and wiser) king Nestor, in trying to mediate between them, tells Achilles:"…don't be so stubborn as to clash with a king who holds a sceptre, a king to whom Zeus has granted glory. You are strong, your mother was a goddess; but he is stronger because he commands more men." (Iliad I. 324 ->)

Needless to say, Achilles does not heed this advice.

The Hierophant

This card is also variously entitled 'The High Priest' and 'The Pope'. A. E. Waite notes, in respect of the holy sign made by the Hierophant: "It is notable in this connexion that the High Priestess makes no sign." He also asserts that he does not represent Religion but "a mode of its expression".

The Lovers

Commentators often see the card as, in Crowley's words, "a glyph of duality", or take it as face value as a marriage and a new beginning. Douglas sees it entirely from the male lover's point of view as a choice between his mother and his lover. But it seems best to focus on duality as a unity here. Waite simply calls it "a card of human love".

For Crowley this and its twin card XIV [usually 'Temperance', but called by Crowley 'ART'] "are the most obscure and difficult" of the Major Arcana. The Temperance card portrays a cup bearer and has, according to Crowley, cauldron symbolism. He notes that these two cards "are so complementary that they cannot be studied separately, for full interpretation."

The deeper symbolism of the 'Hermetic Marriage', and the representation of Hermes /Mercury with a caduceus is a common theme of interpreters of the card and in this context I found myself drawn to the image of the so-called 'Gaulish Mercury', generally distinguished from the Roman Mercury as being the Celtic deity Lugus. In much of the iconography of Mercury, both from Roman Gaul and Roman Britain, Mercury is portrayed in company with Rosmerta. Rosmerta's iconography most often represents her with a vat and a straining spoon, though on the more Romanised reliefs she is also shown with a cornucopia. There is a relief from Gloucester where she appears with a horned Mercury who is holding a caduceus while Rosmerta holds a double-axe sceptre.

The Chariot

Both Waite and Crowley replace the horses drawing the chariot with sphinxes (following Eliphas Levi). But the horse is too strong an expression of elemental life for me to follow them in this interpretation of arcane cabalistic lore.

Justice

A.E. Waite re-assigns this card to number Eleven in the sequence, interchanging it with **Fortitude** which he places here.

He says "The pillars of Justice open into one world and the pillars of the High priestess into another." Between the stepping out of The Fool on his journey and The World, which completes the sequence (if only to return to The Fool again), different versions of The World are presented. Waite's comment here is indicative of two of them, but each of these have their own distinct and different worlds too.

The Hermit

"This is a card of attainment rather than a card of quest." - A. E Waite

" ……. I'll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than ever did plummet sound
I'll drown my book."
Shakespeare's Prospero, The Tempest (V.i.54-57)

The Hermit is a figure who often features in medieval tales as one living alone in a forest, There is also often a sense of the renunciation of power. At the end of Malory's Morte D'Arthur, Bedivere comes across a hermit who was once Archbishop of Canterbury.

Myrddin too, in the early Welsh tale, retires to the forest and becomes a wild man. The particular narrative of this withdrawal involves madness after a battle, but the archetype of The Hermit, one who has withdrawn from the madness of the World, renouncing power, wealth or influence, but attaining wisdom, is also present here.

The Wheel of Fortune

Which way should the wheel turn? Some cards show it turning clockwise, others anti-clockwise.

Waite loads his card with Egyptian symbolism, following Eliphas Levi, though he is dismissive of him elsewhere and he calls his occult explanations of the card "of a singularly fatuous kind".

The Hanged Man

This card is called 'Traitor' in some old packs.

Dodal's numbering suggestively reverses the XII.

Death

Waite's 'rectified Tarot' replaces the traditional skeleton with one of the horsemen of the Apocalypse.

Temperance

"Mingling or combining in due proportion" is the definition in the Oxford English Dictionary which best fits this card.

Crowley calls this card ART and represents it in alchemical terms, showing "the mingling of the contradictory elements in a cauldron".

Douglas finds an apt quotation to indicate the significance here:

"I am the mediator of the elements, making one agree with another; that which is warm I make cold and the reverse, that which is dry I make moist and the reverse, and that which is hard I soften …"

Aurora Consurgens I

The Devil

Waite suggests the Devil here is the 'dweller on the threshold' when Adam and Eve are driven out of the Garden of Eden.

These two characters appear on several cards with different connotations and more generically simply represent two human beings.

The Tower

This card has a wide variety of different names in old packs, including 'The House of God', 'The House of the Devil' and 'The House of the Damned'.

Judgement

In some old packs this card is called 'Angel' or 'Trumpets'. Waite calls it 'The Last Judgement' and characterises it as a "card of eternal life" also suggesting a comparison with the card 'Temperance' in this context.

The World

Waite rejects the view that this card represents "the highest degree of initiation" but rather "the law of manifestation carried to the highest degree of perfection".