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Paull Blakeman

The Moon & the Priestess

Accessing the Creative Unconscious with Tarot's Archetypes

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Introduction

As practitioners of the Tarot know well, there are not only hundreds of imprints and designs of the Tarot deck available around the world, but also hundreds of different methods for reading, sequencing, and interpreting the cards. For me, there is no single right or wrong way of working with the Tarot to divine the future. A significant part of becoming a Cartomancer is in developing your own system, while still acknowledging the tradition and history of the deck. Some study is always recommended to understand and interpret what the cards represent and how they impact each other when placed in sequence, and there is a further reading list at the end of this book. Ultimately, what you are doing is providing a narrative for the Querent – the individual asking the question of the cards – to find a meaningful answer as the Reader about their future.

In this book, I have prioritised the classic Rider-Waite-Smith deck, itself loosely based on the designs of the Tarot de Marseille, which was created in the 17th century. Both designs have sympathies with some of the earliest known Tarot from Milan where it originated, making them rich with allusion and symbolism that is centuries old. The present deck was created in 1909 by A. E. Waite – a scholar of the Occult – and illustrator Pamela Colman Smith. It has become the dominant Tarot deck in use today. What I like about the R-W-S pack is that its allegorical imagery resonates with the Medieval period from which we know the Tarot to have evolved, even if those images were created in the 19th century. They resonate with texts as diverse as the Bible to Geoffrey of Monmouth's *The History of the Kings of Britain* and the poetic works of Dante and Chaucer.

One long running debate about the Tarot centres on its early provenance. Many scholars from the Victorian period onwards claimed that the Tarot originated in ancient Egypt, and perhaps even further back into pre-history. We now know of course that it was created in Italy around the 15th century and used as playing cards for a game called *tarocchi* or *tarock*. It was much later – around the 18th century – that the deck came to be associated with divination and prophecy. It is a rather prosaic origin story, when many would like to believe that the cards are steeped in antiquity and timeless mystery.

Does it matter when the cards first emerged? Not really, given the purposes of this book, because nearly all the cards in the Tarot deck represent an archetype, and these archetypes are not dependent on time. They are timeless and universal, coming from our Collective Unconscious and dating back to primitive man. These archetypes are passed down the generations and have become essential to the way we recognise the world. In this way of interpreting the cards through a method grounded in Jungian psychology, we can interpret each card as symbolizing a specific archetype. Therefore, we have no need for unfounded stories about the deck being used in Egyptian initiation rites, as the cards are born out of the minds of man from our earliest beginnings.

Using Jungian psychology is certainly not a novel way of reading the Tarot. There are two crucial studies that have been hugely influential when writing this book. The first and most comprehensive is *Tarot and the Archetypal Journey*, written by Sallie Nichols and published in 1980. It contains a detailed Jungian reading of the Major Arcana and is a fascinating account for anyone starting out with the Tarot. A somewhat more recent and esoteric read is Robert Wang's *The Jungian Tarot and its Archetypal Imagery* from 2017. It is a study of the Major Arcana taking into consideration archetypal symbolism, history, and comparative religion, with particular emphasis on Kabbalah. Wang also created his own designs for the Tarot deck to bring them closer to other visual aspects of Jung's theory.

Both books only account for the Major Arcana, as the decks they analyse – the Marseille Tarot in Nichols' work, Wang's newly created deck in his – feature suit cards that are mostly decorative in design. The Rider-Waite-Smith deck is unique in that it features pictorial representations on all seventy-eight cards, which is what makes them so rich for the purposes of this book. For the first time, each card in both the Major and Minor Arcana are given individual focus to better understand the archetypes presented throughout the deck and how they collectively add up to a powerful narrative of personal and creative development.

Other books that have been useful for the purposes of this study are A. E. Waite's *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot* (1911) which offers brief interpretations of each card in the deck, while Papus' *The Tarot of the Bohemians* (1914) interprets the Major Arcana through a complex system of numerology, mysticism, astrology, and religion. Finally, Italo Calvino's *The Castle of Crossed Destinies* (1969) is a wildly creative take on the Tarot and highlights the sheer possibilities for narrative and story that can be assembled when reading and interpreting the cards. The latter is well worth a look as Calvino is an engaging writer and wrote his book over many years, adding to and subtracting from his ideas to create an intricate and fascinating discourse.

Lastly, it is worth stating that the Rider-Waite-Smith deck is entirely lacking in diversity. They feature figures who are distinctly European and situated in a Medieval historical tradition, and this is true of the Marseille deck and other earlier forms of the Tarot. This lack of representation is very much a shortcoming of the R-W-S deck, but one I believe is not entirely insurmountable for readers of different backgrounds. The archetypes described here transcend ethnicity and colour because they are grounded in psychological concepts both universal and recognisable to all nations and tribes, having evolved out of the minds of our common ancestors.

We can put to one side the culture of the cards, isolate the archetype, and present it unbounded by its context (which the archetype is not entirely dependent on). The luxury of living in the 21st Century means that there is a huge proliferation of Tarot designs that have rectified the problematic aspects of a too-European approach to representation. It is my contention that the archetypes will stand true on any Tarot deck that is faithful to the signifying elements of the originals, so anyone anywhere should be able to apply them to the deck they use.