

**Symbolism within the Tarot and Comparative Visual Analysis:
A Proposed Methodology for the Study of the Tarot as Applied to the
Rider Waite Smith Deck**

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Purpose

This paper introduces a structured methodology of studying the Tarot using a procedure, which I developed, focusing on a comprehensive comparative visual analysis of the cards. First I will provide a brief overview of the Tarot as well as a more detailed explanation of the intentions of this paper, and then my methodology will be described. The process begins with several different kinds of analysis of the cards themselves, followed by the analysis of other subjects, texts and outside data. The final step is the synthesis of all this information, and the formation of conclusions. The method will be applied to a sample selection of cards from the classic Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot deck for the purpose of demonstrating it.

Introduction to the Tarot

Tarot decks are usually comprised of 78 cards featuring unique allegorical illustrations. There are two categories of cards in the deck: the two “Arcana”. The word comes from the Latin word “arcanus”, which can mean “secret” as either an adjective or a noun depending on its conjugation and the context in which it is used (Whitaker).

There are 22 cards in the first category, the “Major Arcana”, numbered 0-21 and bearing unique titles. There are 56 cards in the “Minor Arcana”, the second category, which are further divided into 4 suits of 14 cards apiece, much like the suits of a normal deck of cards.

There are a handful of similarities between the Tarot and ordinary playing cards, which stem from their shared origins (Hansen). One of these similarities is the division of the deck into four suits. In ordinary playing card decks, these suits are Spades, Diamonds, Hearts and Clubs. While, the names for each suit in the Tarot vary from deck to deck, the most common names for them are Swords (aka Blades, sometimes Crystals), Wands (aka Staves, Rods), Cups, and Pentacles (aka Coins, Disks) (Fig. 1). These suits are also similar to normal decks of playing cards in that they have 10 numbered cards,

or “pips,” of which the first is called the “Ace” and the rest are numbered 2-10. These are followed by 4 court cards: The Page (or Princess), the Knight (or Prince), the Queen, and the King.

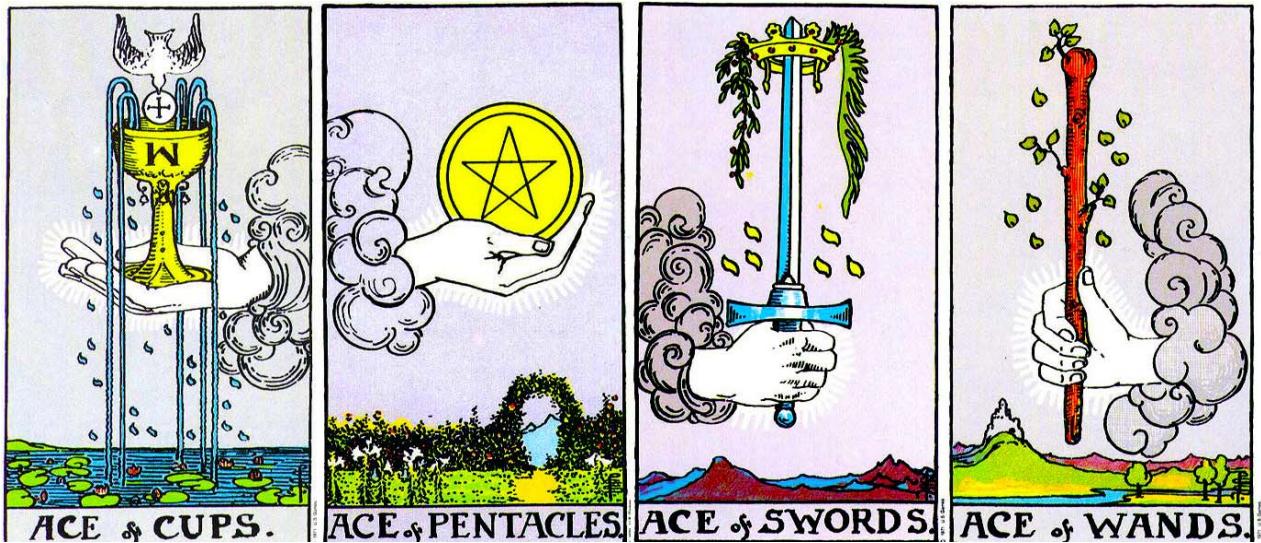


Fig. 1. The four Ace cards from the Rider Waite Smith Tarot, each prominently displaying the item after which their suit is named.

The Tarot cards are conventionally known to be used for divination, which is performed through a process called a “reading”. Readings are normally performed by Tarot readers for clients in order to answer a question, to give advice or guidance, etc. A reading begins by shuffling a deck of Tarot cards, and then randomly dealing them out into an arrangement called a “spread,” in which the placement of any card has a meaning. It is the job of a Tarot reader to interpret the symbolic imagery of the cards in the context of a spread. However, the Tarot is not just a tool for divination but can be used for meditation, reflection, and creative brainstorming. Before the 20th century it was even widely used for playing card games, (Hansen).

The Tarot can also be studied and analyzed much like any other work of art, though such an analysis is more complicated, because the Tarot consists of not one, but 78 different pieces of art that are all interrelated. Each can be analyzed individually, but they can also be grouped together in a

variety of ways, and the deck itself can be examined as a whole. There are also many decks that are adaptations of, or draw inspiration from, decks that came before them. Many of them also reference or incorporate elements or symbolism from various other subjects, such as religion, mythology, historical figures and events, astrology, alchemy or numerology, just to name a few. Knowledgeably interpreting the symbolism in the Tarot depends partly on having some understanding of such subjects.

The Tarot is rich and complex, full of layers of symbolism, with interpretation depending on an enormous amount of variables and information from a number of different sources – the cards, their creators, their history, the personal knowledge and intuition, as well as a diverse assortment of interrelated topics. Studying the Tarot is a never-ending task; there is always something new to be learned or discovered. I personally have never found any subject of study to be quite as uniquely challenging, interesting and enjoyable as the Tarot.

Project Background and an Expanded Explanation of Its Purpose

I originally intended to analyze one particular deck: the classic “Rider Waite” or “Rider Waite Smith” deck, named for its creators (Arthur Edward Waite and Pamela Coleman Smith) and publisher (the Rider Company). I planned to catalogue all the different elements within the Rider Waite Smith deck, studying their origins and possible meanings, and exploring the different subjects that have had an influence on the deck and the imagery of its cards. I had not planned to interpret the cards but to provide as much objective data about them as I was able, so that others could better understand the deck as a whole. However, that is not the plan I finally determined to pursue.

Instead, I am focusing on the process of studying the Tarot to form a comprehensive understanding and appreciation of the cards. This change in my goals occurred because of something I noticed after I began doing research for this project. I found that many books and resources written on the subject of the Tarot simply presented their conclusions about the Tarot to the reader without

supporting them, properly citing their sources, or offering instructions on how to research the cards on one's own. Some resources provided exercises on how to meditate on or analyze the cards, but none attempted to comprehensively teach a method which a Tarot beginner could use to learn to read the cards and form their personal interpretations of them.

In fact, many of the resources I consulted did exactly the opposite. They often used language implying that all one has to do to learn everything there is to know about the Tarot is adopt the interpretations expressed by the creator of the resource and memorize them completely. Authors frequently present their personal interpretations about the Tarot using definite language, implying or stating that their conclusions are incontrovertibly true or correct. An example of this comes from *Tarot Journal Of Wisdom Study Course: Book 2: Major Arcana 11 – 21* by Velvet Angel, in which the card Justice from the Rider Waite Smith Tarot deck (Fig. 2) is described:

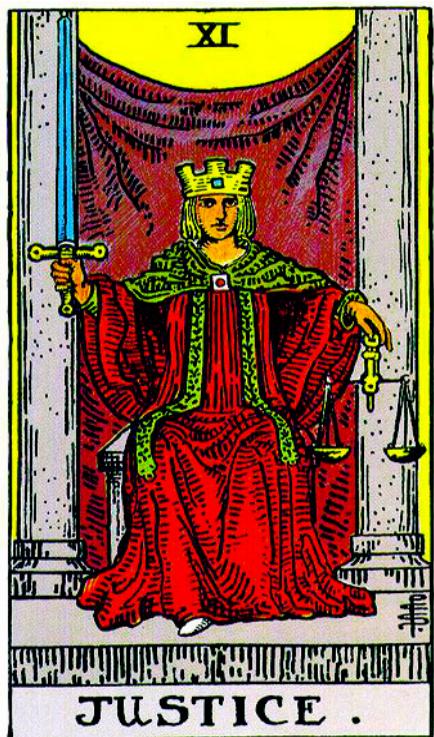


Fig. 2.

[The figure in the card] looks [the viewer] straight in the eyes to represent truth, honesty, and integrity. She wears a red gown which represents her passion for justice and

righting the wrongs of society to ensure peace, justice, and fairness for all concerned.

Her red gown also established the power base from which we grow and develop our truth seeking and discriminating skills. Her olive green cloak suggests that growth is an important element for the energy of Justice.

In her left hand, Justice holds the scales of equality and fairness used to weigh truth and justice. In her right hand, she holds a blue sword that points to higher truths. The sword represents protection and defense...

...The purple drape behind Justice supports the idea that higher qualities back up Justice. She wears the crown of authority with its imbedded square jewel of intelligence. The white slipper from her foot that sticks out below the bottom of her robe, telling us that purity of judgment is the basis of understanding true justice. The square brooch on the green cape is a symbol of wholeness and of the Self. (Angel, p. 11-12)

There are a number of questions that can be asked about the statements made in this description:

- How does the look in the figure's eyes communicate truth, honesty, or integrity? Couldn't it also communicate something else?
- How does the figure's red gown represent passion for justice, fairness, a base for the development of truth, etc.? Can't the color red be symbolic of many other things besides that?
- How and why does the green cloak suggest that growth is important in justice? Can't the color green also be symbolic of many other things?
- Angel calls the scales that Justice holds "the scales of equality and fairness used to weigh truth and justice." How does she know the function of the scales? What is she basing this interpretation on?
- How does Angel know that the sword the figure holds represents protection and defense, and

points “to higher truths?” How did she reach these conclusions, and what is the basis for them?

- How does the purple drape behind Justice support the idea that higher qualities back up Justice?
- Why does the crown that the figure wears symbolize authority, and why does the square jewel/stone embedded in it represent intelligence?
- How does the white slipper tell us that purity of judgment is the basis of understanding true justice?
- Why is the square brooch on the figure’s cape a symbol of wholeness and the Self?
- What is Angel basing her interpretations on? What sources did she use: personal intuition and experience? Research? How did she come to reach the conclusions she did?

The fact that so many of the assertions that Angel makes can be called into question, and that many of these questions fall somewhere along the line of “Upon what do you base this interpretation?” indicates that it is not a trustworthy resource for learning about the Tarot. If Angel did base most of her assertions solely on her own opinions about the card, she should have acknowledged this. If she had, for instance, created a disclaimer that informed the reader that the following passage consisted entirely of her own personal beliefs about the card, then I would have had no contest with her assertions or their lack of support. Subjective interpretation is an important part of Tarot reading, but by using definitive language Angel falsely presents as fact her own interpretation.

One example of the importance of clearly separating and labeling opinion from fact when it comes to the study of the Tarot is evident in Angel’s book, in which she labeled the passage provided earlier as being a “description” of the card. The use of that word is inaccurate, because it implies a certain level of objectivity – especially when it is compared to the word “interpretation” which could be used instead, which implies more subjectivity. A true analytical description of the card would involve listing at least the most evident details in the card in a purely objective manner, much as I have done for

the High Priestess card (Fig. 3) on pages 24-26 of this document. A large portion of the information provided in the passage from Angel's book was subjective, and therefore it should have more correctly been called an interpretation. This is one of the major problems that many Tarot resources, such as Angel's, have; the authors attempt to pass off their own subjective conclusions about the cards as objective and solid facts. This can prejudice the beliefs of beginners to the Tarot, which can be detrimental.

To explain why this can be harmful, I will make a comparison between interpreting the Tarot and writing an essay. In any essay or paper, the conclusion reached must be supported and explained using data, evidence and logical reasoning. If the writer does not give sufficient proof or logic to back up their claims, the conclusion can be called into question very easily. This is also true for the Tarot – if one draws a conclusion or makes an interpretation about a card, then one ought to be able to support that conclusion/interpretation with enough evidence – from the card, its symbolism, their personal judgment and other relevant information – to make the claim be valid. In the description of the Justice card that was provided earlier from Velvet Angel's book, none of these requirements were fulfilled. She made statements about the card without explaining why she made them, clarifying what sources she based them on, or giving any solid evidence to support them. She provided nothing outside of her own opinions to prove the validity of her statements. If I had to choose to believe one of two different interpretations of the Tarot card "Justice", the first of which was the one written by Angel from earlier, and the second of which was provided by a person who supported and explained their interpretation more thoroughly, I would definitely believe the assertions made by the latter interpreter more readily.

It is my belief that encouraging Tarot students to copy what others believe can inhibit their learning process. Resources which oversimplify the Tarot obscure its complexity, especially when they do this by promoting the unquestioning adoption of their own conclusions to their readers, denying readers the opportunity to investigate and unravel the intricacies of the Tarot for themselves. Those who

learn about the Tarot from resources like this do not get to know it directly or form their own conclusions about it first-hand, but are given conclusions about it that have been created, modified and/or simplified by someone else. It is fine to take someone else's perspective on the cards into consideration when forming one's own interpretations, but to be led to blindly accept another's take on the cards will lead to a shallow conception of the Tarot, and will diminish the rewards that come through developing a deeper and more personal understanding of the cards.

By presenting a method through which a reader can learn, grow and eventually form their own interpretations, I hope to help practitioners to form their own conclusions about the cards, learn to thoroughly support and explain those conclusions and achieve a deep understanding of the Tarot cards through their own power. It is my hope that this method can help to pave the way for the development of better methods in the future.

A Proposed Method for the Study of the Tarot

Step 1: Visual Analysis

Step 2: Comparative Visual Analysis

Step 3: Speculation and Brainstorming

Step 4: Expanded Research

Step 5: Synthesis

The Goals of this Method:

The purpose of this method is to provide a simple, structured process for those wishing to pursue an intense study of the Tarot that does not attempt to bias or influence their results in any way. The following text is not meant to provide any interpretations, but to instruct the practitioner in how they can build an interpretation for themselves. The ultimate goal of the process is for the practitioner

to achieve a thorough, comprehensive and personal understanding of the Tarot in order to better form their interpretations.

Step 1: A Thorough Visual Analysis of the Cards

What follows is a description of the process I have developed that will allow a beginner to develop and master a comprehensive understanding of the Tarot. The very first step is to pick a single deck to study, for the sake of focus and simplicity. If one eventually finds that the deck one has chosen seems insufficient, then simply find a deck that seems more suitable, and begin the process again.

After settling on a deck, it is best to begin the journey of studying the Tarot with the simplest and most intrinsic step: objectively examining each individual card. Look them over, one by one, and get to know them well. Just as an art historian might undertake a close examination of a certain painter's work in order to develop an understanding of it, so too is it important for the student of the Tarot to examine the art and illustrations that are inherent in the cards.

One can go about this examination of the cards any number of ways. One could, perhaps, study a single card every day over the course of a 78-day period, thereby covering the whole deck in a relatively short span of time. This study would involve observing the card and writing a thorough description of it that includes every single detail in its imagery, no matter how small or seemingly insignificant. For example, one ought to take note of the colors used in the card, what comprises its background, any animals, plants, buildings, objects, any figures and the actions they might be taking, their gestures, facial expressions and clothes, how these items are all arranged, etc. Leave nothing that can be observed out of the description. Later in this paper, in the section “An example of Step 1: A Thorough Visual Analysis of the Cards” (on pages 24-26) this analysis as applied to a card from the Rider-Waite-Smith deck.

At this point, the student should not attempt to subjectively interpret the card or look for any meaning inside its contents, but should keep the examination of each card as objective as possible. One

may notice patterns in the cards, or certain details that pique one's curiosity, but it is essential that objectivity is maintained until all the contents of each card in the deck have been reviewed in a purely analytical fashion. Even if one's mind begins to interpret what it sees, as may well happen, it would be wisest to tuck away such speculation and focus on the matter at hand. This is because it can be easy to get distracted by speculating on possible interpretations of a card, and in doing so one can become sidetracked from the process of objective analysis. Also, beginning to form interpretations about the Tarot, when one is only in the first stage of one's studies of it, is hasty. Any conclusions one reaches at this early stage are very likely to be changed drastically as one continues to learn more about the cards. There will be plenty of opportunity for interpretation further on. Indeed it will be a natural development over the course of this process.

Other exercises in the individual study of the cards can include writing all of the visible elements and details down in descriptions, lists, tables, spreadsheets, etc. For the visually inclined, drawing the contents of the cards could also prove to be useful. These replications do not have to be perfect copies of the cards or works of great artistic prowess, but will be sufficient no matter how they look so long as they include all of the details one observes in the original card. For instance, if a simple brown snail is depicted on a card, it does not matter if the snail in a copy of the image looks perfectly like the original, so long as it is a snail and it is brown, and it is in approximately the right place. One only needs to demonstrate that one has perceived the snail and its fundamental characteristics.

To some, this step may sound like a fairly simple and obvious one to take. However, I have not yet found any resources on the subject of the Tarot that bring it up, much less encourage it.

Possibly Symbolic Elements and the Visual Analysis of the Tarot

Something that I believe can help beginners in the beginning stages of their analysis and study of the Tarot is a concept that I have created, which I call the “Possibly Symbolic Element”. This term

refers to symbols or signifiers in a work of art which may possess at least some small measure of symbolic significance. Some aspects of an artistic piece, for instance, are very obviously meant to be symbolic, but there are usually many more elements which are indefinite, and which can be difficult to conclusively and firmly determine to be important and meaningful symbols or unimportant embellishment.

The idea of the Possibly Symbolic Element (PSE) acknowledges this uncertainty and ambiguity surrounding some of the symbolism in creative works, and therefore can be of use when that uncertainty emerges. For example, if one asked a student of the Tarot to list all of the elements in any one card that are definitely and unquestionably symbolic, they may be able to identify the most obvious ones with ease, but then end up puzzling for some time over the more ambiguous details.

However, if one asks them to make a list of all of the elements which may *potentially* be symbolic, then they need not expend too much time of effort determining if one particular element definitely has or does not have meaning, since they are only looking for the possibility of meaning. It leaves the determination of which elements are definitely symbolic, and what they mean or represent, for a later time, and lets them make an initial guess without having to stress out over being one hundred percent sure. They can look for and catalogue PSEs as they begin their studies, and then later confirm which of the PSEs they believe to be not just possibly, but *definitely* symbolically important.

Practices involving PSEs have a number of different uses. For instance, making list of the PSEs observed in various cards can help one get to know the cards better. Doing this also can serve as a fitting second step to cataloging all of the details in each card, since the first step provides the one who went through it with a list of all the details within a card, even the most insignificant. However, after cataloging a card's PSEs, one is left with a list of only the potentially significant or symbolic details found in that card. All the details that definitely seem too small, random, etc. to hold any symbolic importance will have been filtered out. When one later starts to research the Tarot outside of analyzing

one's chosen deck, if one does not otherwise have an idea of what to study first, one could potentially begin by researching the various PSEs one has catalogued.

Cataloguing the PSEs in the Tarot can also help one to determine the levels of symbolic complexity in different cards – for instance, a card that contains many PSEs may have much more depth and complexity to its interpretations, whereas a card with only a few PSEs will usually have fewer possible interpretations, making it simpler to read. However, sometimes the opposite is true, and a card with more PSEs is easier to read, because its symbolism narrows down and clarifies its meaning, and a card with less PSEs is more difficult to read because its symbolism is so open-ended it is hard to decide on any one interpretation for it.

Measuring PSEs across decks can, similarly, be a helpful factor in determining what kinds of decks one wants to work with. For instance, one could compare different decks' versions of the same card and catalog the number of PSEs in each. The decks with higher amounts of PSEs in their cards will most likely make for more in-depth and complex readings, which more advanced Tarot readers should appreciate, whereas decks with lower average levels of PSEs will give simpler to understand readings, and will probably be better for beginners to work with. Some decks may have such low levels of PSEs that reading or analyzing them at all is difficult, since there is so little material upon which to base interpretations.

How to determine what qualifies as a Possibly Symbolic Element:

Intuition: Which parts of the card feel as if they may hold meaning. This may be a subjective measure, but when one is dealing with the Tarot, whether studying or reading it, the use of at least some measure subjective judgment is unavoidable, and even necessary. However, subjective opinion and intuition should be used alongside objective analysis, solid data and information, in a balanced manner.

Prior Knowledge: Which parts of a card one already knows are symbolic, and do not have to be

guessed at. For instance, an illustration of a cross has obvious symbolic meaning in a Christian culture.

Observation: Sometimes, it is clear, just from looking at a card, which parts of it are probably meant to symbolize something. There are various factors that one can use to easily determine which elements might have meaning in this way. For instance, if something is prominently displayed in a card through its placement, coloring, size, etc., then it can be determined to be a PSE. If something seems odd about a part of a card – for example, if a figure in the card is wearing a different shoe on each foot when most figures in the deck wear normal matching footwear, then that can be an indication that this particular set of shoes is a PSE.

It should also be noted that sometimes it is not objects or figures depicted in images that are PSEs, but attributes of them. For instance, in some ancient Egyptian art a hierarchical scale was used, which means that the people in the picture who were the most important, such as gods or pharaohs, were made bigger. Those who were less important were smaller. Therefore, in anything that exhibits hierachal scale, not only figures that are depicted, but also their size in comparison to one another, would count as PSEs.

Step 2: A Comparative Analysis of the Cards in Context to One Another

Once one has thoroughly examined all the cards on an individual basis, it is time to examine them in comparison to each other. This is done in much the same way as the first step, but instead of taking note of all of the details in each card, one must take note of all of the similarities, differences and patterns that are shared among a group of associated cards. There are various categories of cards within the deck which can produce especially useful information when compared to each other.

Categories for Comparison:

- All of the cards that share the same number or title across all of the suits in the minor Arcana

(for instance, all four Aces, all four Twos, all four Kings, etc.).

- All of the “pip” cards from one particular suit (where the Page, Knight, Queen and King make up the court cards of a suit, everything that does not fall into that category – the Aces and the cards numbered 2 to 10 – is considered a pip card)
- All of the Court Cards (the Page, Knight, Queen, and King) in one suit.
- Any card with its preceding and subsequent cards (for example, examine a Four card in the context of its preceding Three card and subsequent Five card).
- All of the cards within one suit.
- Any cards that have notable similarities in appearance, regardless of arcana, suit, etc.

When comparing these cards, details that one can look out for are largely the same as those one sought out during the first step, but this process involves examining them across several cards. One should take note if certain elements in any category are present or not, if they are changed or not, etc. One can also compare and contrast specific recurring elements (e.g. all of the crowns, mountains, thrones, etc., that appear in multiple cards in one's deck) against each other.

The participant in this process can use whatever technique works best to record these differences and similarities: writing descriptions, lists, spreadsheets, etc. A demonstration of one method of going about this comparison will be provided later on, in the section “An example of Step 2: comparison of cards” on pages 27-29.

Practicing a thorough comparative analysis of the cards is an important step to carry out for several reasons. First, when Tarot readers perform their services they rarely interpret only one card for a reading, but rather read many cards in conjunction with one another in a spread. The patterns of similarities and differences that can be observed can convey more comprehensive and complex

meanings than any one card could on its own. For instance, if many cards from one suit appear in a reading, then the interpreter can take that as an indication that the reading will have much to do with what that particular suit represents. In this way, repetition can help reinforce certain interpretations.

The observations of similarities and differences between certain cards can be similarly helpful in understanding the cards in the deck that is being studied. By comparing all of the cards in a certain category, one can better understand and interpret each card in that category. For instance, if one is having trouble interpreting the Knight cards, then by comparing and contrasting all of the Knights one can then draw on the observable similarities and differences in them to help form an interpretation.

This step can also be very helpful in terms of simply learning and memorizing the contents of the cards in one's deck. When one examines them each individually, it can be easy to forget the details discovered in a card after one studies the twenty that come after it. Looking for patterns or peculiarities across multiple cards can help one remember the information by putting it context. For instance, one might not be able to easily remember the exact color of the background of the card in the Rider Waite Smith deck called "The Emperor," even after conducting a thorough examination of it, because it is only one minor detail about one card. However, through comparative analysis one might discover that The Emperor is the only card in the entire deck with a red background. This context can make that information easier to recall.

Step 3: Speculation Brainstorming and Query Generation

Once one has completed the steps outlined above to the best of their abilities, the work of analysis can be halted in favor of speculation. It is not yet the time to completely form one's interpretations, but it is the time to consider what those interpretations could be. This step involves taking the data one has compiled thus far and think about what it could mean, as well as what one wants to research and what questions one has about the cards. To put it simply, this is a stage in the

process which involves a lot of brainstorming. Take some time to find out which cards, elements, symbols, suits, etc., are fascinating, which are puzzling, and in general think of what to investigate about them as one continues studying the Tarot.

No definite conclusions should be created at this point, for one has not yet begun researching the Tarot outside of one's deck. There is much that has to do with the Tarot that requires more information, in order to be fully understood, than can be learned from the cards themselves. If one begins to form interpretations of the Tarot without having done any outside research, then those interpretations will be based solely on one's personal observations of and opinions about the cards. That is not to say that forming personal beliefs about the cards is a bad thing - on the contrary, it is an essential and inevitable part of the process - but they should not be the only thing that one bases one's conclusions on. The more material and information used to support an interpretation of the cards, the more solid and credible it becomes. One can come up with temporary or possible conclusions at this stage, but with an understanding that they are not yet fully-formed, and will more than likely change over the course of one's research.

The following step is optional, but it can be beneficial to record any and all questions, ideas and speculations before beginning the task of searching for answers. This is so that they will not be forgotten, and so that the directions in which one wants to go when researching can be better known.

Examples of things that may be helpful to speculate on and record:

- Which cards seem the simplest, and which seem the most complex.
- Which symbols one already knows about, and which seem important but are yet unknown.
- Where various symbols or visual elements in the cards might come from.
- What one thinks any particular card, element symbol could potentially mean.
- What particular subjects one thinks worthy of investigation.

Step 4: Expanded Research

After a solid understanding of one's chosen deck has been established, and a number of questions and speculations generated about it, it is finally time to continue one's studies away from the deck itself. To begin, one should think up and seek out relevant material. This can include any resource that seems relevant to one's chosen deck, as well as the Tarot in general: books, videos, websites, etc. There are a number of different ways to go about this, and I will leave the particulars of the method one uses to research and records information up to individual preference. I can however, give some recommendations and tips for going about it.

One important thing to remember to do is to approach every resource with a critical eye. There are many resources about the Tarot that all have different things to say, and they can range from exceedingly informative and trustworthy to exactly the opposite. Hopefully, the participant in this process will have acquired a solid foundation of knowledge and experience with the contents of their Tarot deck and should be able to critically and objectively analyze the information provided by various resources to ascertain the validity of it. Beware sources that do not explain or support their conclusions, leave out or grossly oversimplify important concepts and information, or do not acknowledge that other conclusions about the Tarot can be valid. Do not forget to question what they say, and do not hesitate to double or triple-check the legitimacy of any information they provide or assertions they make that seem even remotely questionable.

The subjects and sources that one should research will vary depending on the deck that one has chosen to study and understand, but I can provide some examples of subjects that may be informative:

- Astrology, and the correspondences between cards and astrological signs and bodies
- Numerology, and the significance and meaning of certain numbers, and how they appear in and apply to various cards.

- Mythology, especially if one's deck incorporates mythological figures, creatures or symbols.
- Religions and belief systems, especially those from which one's chosen deck draws imagery and symbolism.
- Art History, other decks with similar art, and which artistic movements may have influenced one's deck's imagery.
- Tarot History, not only the general history of the development of the cards, but also where one's chosen deck may have originated, and which deck(s) it may have drawn influence from.
- History and Culture, especially if one's chosen deck bases its imagery on a particular historical period or culture.
- Semiotics and Semiosis, and the function of symbols and signs, their representation and interpretation.
- The creators of, as well as the creation process and inspiration for, one's chosen deck.

To give an example of what subjects one may choose to research, in my own study of the Rider Waite Smith Tarot deck, I investigated Alchemy, various occult orders (such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which the creators of the deck were a part of), Rosicrucianism, Freemasonry, the Qabala; Greek, Roman, Christian, Egyptian and Babylonian mythology, art and culture; as well as general comparative mythology and comparative religions. I found that by studying these subjects, whether I did so in a very in-depth manner or did but a simple review of the parts of them I found relevant, I was able to better understand the deck and its history, origins and symbolism.

Without this outside research, many elements of that deck would remain incomprehensible to me. There are some symbols which can be interpreted based on one's own personal intuition and judgment alone, but there are also many that also require research and the consultation of outside

sources in order to be fully understood. For example, several cards in the Rider Waite deck have alchemical symbols in their imagery, which are made to only be understood by those with knowledge of alchemy. This research may be a time-consuming and complicated task, but it is necessary if one wants to build a solid and well-rounded understanding of one's chosen deck, as well as the Tarot as a whole.

Step 5: Synthesis

Following a period of research, it is time to return once again to one's deck, to merge the information that one has learned directly from the cards with all that one has learned outside of them. The specifics of how one achieves this are up to personal preference. This is the point at which one should work to synthesize the knowledge that has been acquired and begin the process of solidifying one's thoughts into conclusions. While there is always more to learn about the Tarot, a point of confidence in one's understanding can be reached, and one can finally begin to apply all of the information one has learned throughout this process to forming interpretations of the cards.

Conclusion of the Process

By this point, the person who has followed this process may decide whether to research topics related to the Tarot, or return to examining and analyzing the cards, or move on to research other decks or subjects, or learn how to create Tarot spreads and practice doing readings. Achieving a thorough understanding of the Tarot may inspire a number of different outcomes.

The Benefits of Using this Method

There are a number of benefits to following the method outlined here in one's study of the Tarot. This method allows its practitioner to develop a connection to and knowledge of the cards that is

personal, because they are essentially doing all of the learning themselves, building their understanding of the Tarot from the ground up. They should, by the end of this process, know their deck inside and out, and also have ample support to draw upon when reading or explaining any card in their chosen deck, describing what they think about it, and why, and how they came to their conclusions about it.

The use of this process should also help the practitioner to learn and be able to recall a large amount of information about the Tarot. For example, the person going through it has to study the cards and subjects related to them on their own, which means that any interesting details or patterns they notice will be all the more interesting and memorable because they discovered them. Their ability to remember what they learn over the course of this process should also be improved because of their practice in comparing, finding connections between, and synthesizing information about various aspects of the Tarot, which should further reinforce that information in their mind.

This process also gives the practitioner a basic grounding for performing readings of the Tarot. By requiring them to look at the cards comparatively, which is a very important component of the performance of a reading, they will gain experience in and preparation for reading the cards. The method will prepare them to explain their interpretations to their clients, and tie the imagery in the cards to information from all sorts of related subjects, which is important when one wants to be seen as a credible and knowledgeable Tarot reader.

This method also protects the practitioner from having their perceptions of the Tarot limited or negatively influenced by others' ideas about or teachings on the Tarot. This is because they start to learn about others' perspectives on the cards only after they have worked intensely with the cards themselves, and thereby have already begun forming their own perspective on them. Similarly, by allowing the practitioner to develop their own interpretations, without any influence beyond basic guidance in how they conduct their studies, this process promotes a direct and in-depth study of the Tarot, rather than preaching the adoption of a secondary perspective. It acknowledges the fact that, for any one card or

symbol in the Tarot, there is rarely only one interpretation; rather, there are many different interpretations that can be reached about them which are equally “correct,” if they can be explained and supported properly.

I unintentionally developed my understanding of the Tarot in a fashion similar to this method through what I felt to be a natural progression of learning. I began by closely examining the cards in the Rider Waite Smith deck, and compared the cards to one another, looking for patterns, similarities and differences. As I did, I took note of the symbols and elements that I had discovered but didn't understand, and I tried to find out what they could mean and where they came from. From there, I discovered many connections between various subjects and the symbolism contained within the Tarot cards. I started to go through cycles which began with intense research, followed by a return to the examination of the Rider Waite Smith deck in an attempt to find how everything connected, a process which generated new questions and speculations, and which lead me to conduct even more research.

Before this all began, I was interested in the Tarot, but I knew very little about it. I would perform casual Tarot readings for friends and family, but after I laid out the cards in a spread I would read their meanings out of one of my Tarot books, for I was unable to interpret the cards on my own, since I knew so little about them myself. I was not truly reading the Tarot cards themselves at that time – I was reading a book *about* the cards.

Now, after going through my learning process, I am able to speak at length about any one card from my deck, without having to so much as touch a book. I can describe the fundamental imagery of many of the cards acutely from memory. I can compare the cards to each other and speculate on what these differences and similarities might mean, and I can trace the origins of the deck and the symbolism contained within it. I still have a long way to go until I can consider myself an expert on the Tarot, for there are still many things about it which I am yet ignorant of. However I know I am miles ahead of where I began, when it comes to the understanding and comprehension of the Tarot cards, and I want to

continue to study and learn about them for many years to come, because they never cease to fascinate me.

Applying this Method to the Rider Waite Smith Tarot

In this final section, I will be demonstrating my method by applying it to cards from the Rider Waite Smith Tarot.

Why I chose the Rider Waite Smith Tarot

The Rider Waite Smith Tarot is one that I recommend to anyone, no matter how much or how little they know about the Tarot, because it is an amazing deck. It was created in the early 20th century by two members of a group called The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, Arthur Edward Waite, an occult scholar and Rosicrucian, and Pamela Coleman Smith, an artist, theatrical designer and illustrator. Waite commissioned her to make a series of seventy-eight allegorical paintings that were to become a Tarot deck.

After the completion and publication of the deck, as well as *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot: Being Fragments of a Secret Tradition under the Veil of Divination*, a book written by Waite detailing his unique new theories on the interpretation of the cards, the Tarot grew more and more in popularity as a tool for divination. At the present time, it is still one of the most well-known, popular and recognizable Tarot decks in existence. It has been recolored in several different editions, and it has influenced and inspired the creation of countless Tarot decks since then, some of which only draw on a portion of its imagery, and some of which are outright adaptations of it.

The Rider Waite Smith deck is also one that holds personal significance, as the deck that first piqued my interest about the Tarot. My parents owned a copy of it, and allowed me to keep and amuse myself with it. At the time I had a passionate interest in medieval Europe and Arthurian lore, so it was

no surprise that I took quickly to a deck of cards with illustrations featuring kings, queens, knights, castles, and various mythical creatures. I enjoyed finding books about the cards and pondering their meanings, but my understanding of the Tarot was not nearly as deep then as it would later become. Nonetheless, at the time I had quite a lot of fun with them, and for me the deck evokes fond memories of those days. If I had not acquired that early interest in this particular deck, I do not know if I would have developed the passion for the Tarot that I have today.

An example of Step 1: A Thorough Visual Analysis of the Cards

Below is an example of a thorough description of the High Priestess card from the Rider Waite Smith deck (Fig. 3), and all of the various elements in the card, in its entirety. I originally wrote it to assist in my own learning as I was studying the cards of the Major Arcana.



Fig. 3.

Elements	Description
<u>Diadem</u>	White with hints of very light blue. The shape of it is of two half crescents, merged together in a single piece at the base, curving up and outwards in quarter-circle shapes on either side. In the middle of them is set a completely circular piece, which may be either spherical or flat, in the same color. On the head of the figure.
<u>Figure</u>	The only parts showing are the face, neck and left hand. The skin is a medium brown color and the hair is pitch black. Seated, facing straight forward, as if looking out at the viewer. Face and hair both match those of the Magician. Expression is serious and unsmiling (half-lidded eyes, frowning slightly, eyebrows tilted slightly down). Is somewhat androgynous, having a face bearing no truly defining feminine or masculine qualities besides its almond shape, with no breasts apparent under the robes. The left hand, which is the only one visible, has three fingers that can be seen, is holding the scroll. Located in center of the card.
<u>Cross</u>	A white cross of which all the extruding parts are approximately the same length, with none shorter or longer than the others, at the center of the figure's chest. Does not appear to be held up by anything, but it could be attached like a pin to the robe, or held up by any one lines curving down to it, like a necklace. However, it could just as well be floating in the air in front of the figure's chest. Impossible to tell.
<u>Under-Robe</u>	White with blue shadows, a fabric which gives the impression of being shiny, light and thin, draping down from the shoulder, with many folds curving down from both shoulders approximately the same, and then flowing out from under the mantle and out over the knees, with less folds shown, but instead it has a smooth and then a rumpled texture, slightly resembling a waterfall. Worn by the figure, under its mantle/cloak.
<u>Mantle, over-robe</u>	Pure light blue, matching the blues used in the rest of the card. Unlike the under-robe, the mantle is not shiny and is not shaded. Coves the figure's shoulders, right arm, lap and left side. Gives an impression of being a sturdier, less flimsy fabric than the under-robe. Worn by the figure on shoulders and lap.
<u>Scroll</u>	A gray-colored scroll unrolled a little, held by the left hand of the figure. Disappears under the right side of the mantle. Four letters are written upon it – TORA. They are oriented away from the viewer so that the figure can read them. On the lap of the figure, held close.
<u>Cloth on Head</u>	Blue, the same color as the mantle, ruffled at the edge, and slanted so that it is drawn up near the face and lowers as it approaches the edge of the shoulders. Comes out from underneath the diadem, frames face of the figure and lowers down to its shoulders. On head of the figure, under the diadem, over her robes.
<u>Pillars</u>	One is gray with black lines and the other is black with gray lines. The black pillar has the uppercase letter “B” inscribed on it in solid gray, while the gray pillar has the uppercase letter “J” inscribed on it in solid black. The letters are placed about 2/3rds of the way up their respective pillars. Their bases are round and thick, and the pillars themselves rise up from the bases, getting slightly smaller going up, and then expanding out in a curved sort of cup-like shape on top. The cup-shape begins almost exactly at the top of the crown word by the figure. On the bottom of this cup-shaped part there is a pattern of overlapping shapes and lines, five triangle-like shapes on each with three of the five overlapping the

	last two, like the petals of a flower. The gray pillar is the only one with shading, indicated on the right side of the pillar with a series of short horizontal lines. On either side of the figure, in front of the throne but behind its legs. Rather short – they would most likely be only a little taller than the figure, if they were standing.
<u>Veil</u>	Light gray cloth with a pattern of black leaves and branches as the background, on which is a pattern of pomegranates and palms. Seems to attach to the tops of the pillars on the opposite side from the viewer, so it cannot be seen how they are held up. Only slightly wider than the block on which the figure sits. No folds can be seen in the fabric of it, if indeed it is fabric. In fact, there is nothing in its appearance to suggest that it is made of fabric, or that it might not be stone or some similar material.
<u>Pomegranates</u>	Seen as if cut open like a cross-section at the middle, with fat sides and thin stems in bright yellow, with little bumps at the bottom of them. Vibrantly red seeds and insides. Seven can be seen in total – three peeking out on either side of the figure, and one above their head. Depicted on the veil.
<u>Palms</u>	Seen with a thin long yellow inside surrounded by green leaves, spiky and splayed out on either side, with three little leaves on top. The stems/stalks/trunks from which the leaves emerge are yellow and dotted in black. From each palm, two bright red fruits, seeds or droplets hang down under the leaves, which come out from each side of the stem/stalk/trunk. Only four palms are fully visible, falling above and on either side of the figure, while two have leaves and or fruits peeking out from behind the sides of the figure near the bottom of the curtain. Depicted on the veil.
<u>Background</u>	The sky is clear, the water is relatively placid, and land, and possibly mountains, are hinted at in the distance. All are the same shade of light blue. The bottom of the card, the surface on which the figure sits, is bright yellow and smooth, suggesting a floor rather than a beach. The horizon line falls at approximately the bottom of the white cross on the figure's chest, and appears to be, by sight and without measuring, diving the card almost perfectly in half. Located behind figure, pillars and veil.
<u>Crescent Moon</u>	Yellow, thin and rather large, a very new moon sort of crescent. About 2/3 rd of a circle around. A small strand of the dress worn by the figure flows over it like water, and that part turns yellow as it goes over the crescent. The crescent itself stands up on its own accord, with nothing apparently holding it upright. Comes up almost to the knee of the figure. Placed at the feet of the figure.
<u>Seat</u>	Light gray, approximately the same as the “J” pillar, appears to be rectangular and plain – no visible carvings or decorations. The edge on the left part of the card is more visible than the right. Edge is overlapped by and therefore falls behind the black “B” pillar on the left side. In the bottom center of the card, being sat on by figure.

Possibly Symbolic Elements

The following is a list of many of the elements in the High Priestess card that I would classify as Possibly Symbolic Elements, provided here as an example, that I have determined to bear potential

symbolic value based on my own intuition, prior knowledge and objective judgment.

Possibly Symbolic Elements from the High Priestess Card:

The figure herself, and her appearance and expression. The diadem/crown she wears, its colors and shapes. The cross on her chest and its color, shape and placement. Her skirt and the way it flows. The scroll she holds, the manner in which it is partially concealed by her robe, and the word “TORA” written upon it. The fact that her entire body is hidden but her left hand. The crescent moon at her feet and its color, as well as the way her skirt changes color as it comes in contact with it. The block she sits upon, and the color and plain appearance of it. The pillars and their appearance, colors, shape, height, flower-like tops, as well as the letters “B” and “J” written upon them. The veil, its appearance and its lack of folds or wrinkles. The pomegranates and palms pictured on the veil, the number of them, their color and arrangement. The color and contents of the card’s background. The yellow floor or ground.

An example of Step 2: comparison of cards

In the Major Arcana, there are three cards which feature two pillars set on either side of a seated figure in the center of the card – the High Priestess, the Hierophant, and Justice (Fig. 4). Because of these strong similarities they are ripe for comparison, so I have decided to provide a number of observations that I have made about the similarities and differences between these cards here, as a demonstration of the second step in this process.

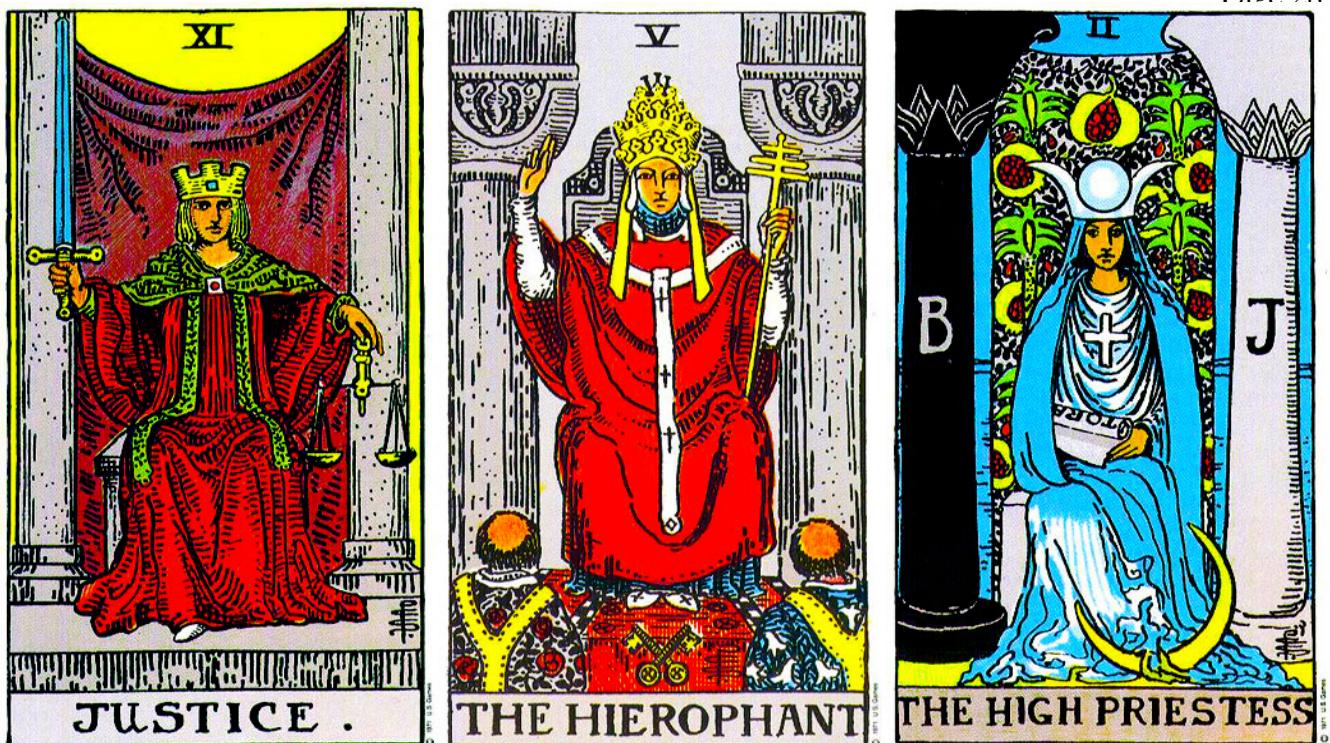


Fig. 4.

Here is a small sample of the fruits of a thorough and detailed comparison of these three cards:

Of the three figures, the High Priestess is the only one wearing light blue (with some white) while the other two are wearing primarily red. The Hierophant wears some white and light blue as well, but Justice's costume holds neither of those colors, save for one white-shod foot peeking out from under her robe, and a blue square on her crown. Of their crowns, those worn by the figures in Justice and the Hierophant are primarily gold, while the High Priestess's is white and light blue. Each of the cards incorporates yellow in some way, but not in any strikingly large amount. When it comes to the pillars in these cards, all of them are approximately the same shade of light gray, save for the black pillar in the High Priestess. The pillars in Justice are by far the plainest, but have more texture than those of the High Priestess, while the Hierophant's are the most heavily textured, and decorated besides. The pillars in the Hierophant are by far the thickest and most solid looking of all of them.

As for the backgrounds, the High Priestess is the only definitely located outside, while the

Hierophant is almost certainly indoors. Justice's location is ambiguous, since the stone floor and pillars in her card suggest her being indoors, but the bright yellow of the background suggests the sky (for in this deck, there are a number of instances of the natural sky being depicted as the color yellow).

There are only veils behind the figures and between the pillars in the High Priestess and Justice cards, while the Hierophant sits in front of nothing more than a blank wall. The veil behind Justice is clearly made of fabric, is reddish-purple in color and undecorated, and it hangs down between the pillars so that no gap remains between the two but the space above the veil. The High Priestess's veil is decorated but has no folds, and there is a gap between it and the sides of the pillars. It may be cloth, but it could also be made of stone. The only card that has more than one person in it is the Hierophant. The only two figures with visible feet are the Hierophant (who has both feet visible) and Justice (whose right foot is visible), and both have feet shod in white. The Hierophant's footwear is adorned with crosses.

I could continue on in this vein for some length, but I will refrain from doing so. Those who go through this method need not write down long descriptions such as I have done here. Putting the cards together, examining them closely and mentally taking note of their similarities and differences should prove to be a much easier, but just as effective, exercise. One can also, after doing this, work to determine which similarities and differences one has found in the cards may hold symbolic importance.

Example of Step 3: Speculation Brainstorming and Question Generation.

This step is about speculation and asking questions, so I shall give a sample of queries that could be made about the High Priestess card after it has been examined:

- What is the significance of the veil, and the palms and pomegranates on it?
- The Greek myth about the goddess Persephone involves pomegranates. How might this apply?

- What is the significance of the white cross on the Priestess's chest?
- What do the letters "B" and "J" on the pillars mean?
- Are the tops of the Pillars supposed to be papyrus plants or some sort of flower?
- Why are the pillars black and gray instead of black and white?
- Why do the High Priestess's head, face and hair resemble the Magician's so strongly?
- What does the "TORA" on the Priestess's scroll mean?
- Her crown looks like it is made of three moons – is that what it's supposed to be?
- Does this card greatly resemble any versions of the High Priestess cards that came before it?

Example of Step 4: Use of Outside Information to Answer Questions

Below is an example of some of the information that can be gathered from outside resources about the Tarot, specifically on the subject of the High Priestess card from the Rider Waite Smith deck. I shall simply provide the information here, without attempting to draw conclusions about it, or interpret it in any way.

From the pages dedicated to the High Priestess card in *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot: Being Fragments of a Secret Tradition under the Veil of Divination*, a book by Arthur Edward Waite, one of the creators of the Rider Waite Smith Tarot, come the following snippets of information about it: "[the High Priestess] is... the secret church, the House which is of God and Man. She represents also the Second Marriage of the Prince who is no longer of this World," She is "the spiritual Bride and Mother, the daughter of the stars and the Higher Garden of Eden." She is "the Queen of Borrowed Light... [that is actually] the light of all" and "the Moon nourished by the milk of the Supernal Mother", as well as "the Supernal Mother [herself]", and the "spiritual bride of the just man, when he reads the Law she gives the Divine Meaning" (p. 79).

According to *The Pictorial Key*, the word “TORA”, as shown on the scroll that the Priestess holds on her lap, refers to “the Greater Law, the Secret Law and the second sense of the Word,” while the scroll itself is partly covered by mantle “to shew that some things are implied and some spoken” (p. 76). Because of its name, it also has a strong connection to the Torah, an important Jewish religious text.

The book *The Secret Language of Tarot* by Wald and Ruth Amberstone also has a lot to say about the High Priestess. It asserts that she has a connection with the goddesses Isis and Hathor, both of whom gave birth to the sun in certain tellings of Egyptian mythology. It says, much like *The Pictorial Key to the Tarot*, that she is sister, mother and wife, Bright Mother and Dark Mother, and the one who guarantees the immortality of the pharaoh. Isis is associated with the Virgin Mary, for the imagery of Mary and the baby Jesus drew much inspiration from images of Isis and her son Horus. The card, the Amberstones assert, joins together Egyptian and Christian imagery (p. 15).

The Amberstones also have much to say on the subject of the crown the Priestess wears, for it is shaped much like the headgear of Hathor and Isis, with a round male sun disk placed inside the two protective, enclosing horns, which resemble a womb. The crown, according to them, also represents three phases of the moon, connecting it to Neo-Paganism, for these three phases (Waxing Moon, Waning Moon, Full Moon) correspond to the Pagan Triple Goddess, who is Maiden, Mother and Crone all in one (p. 15).

This is but a small sample of the type of information that one might find about this card in material related to the Tarot.

Step 5: Synthesis and the Formation of Interpretation.

The following section features a handful of conclusions that I have drawn from my own studies

of this card. These are only provided here as an example of this process, and are not intended to influence the perceptions or interpretations of the reader of this document.

From what I have learned in my analysis of the High Priestess card itself, as well as what I have learned about it from outside sources, I have a number of different ideas as to what meaning this card could contain. There is a strong suggestion of an association between this card and maiden/mother goddesses and the sacred feminine, such as Isis and Mary, in the books by Waite and the Amberstones. I have personally decided that there is enough evidence present in the card itself (in the Priestess's tri-moon-crown and blue robes, which resemble items worn by depictions of Isis and Mary respectively, as well as the womb-like pomegranates on the veil between the pillars) to support this connection, and it makes enough sense to me that I am happy to incorporate this information into my interpretation of the card.

From my own research into the subject of alchemy, I know it similarly associates the feminine with water, the moon and the colors white, silver and blue, in contrast to the masculine, which it associates with fire, the sun, and the colors yellow, gold and red (Campbell and Roberts). I have chosen to incorporate this information into my interpretation of the card, because the card itself features so many of those attributes. The High Priestess holds multiple depictions of the moon, a background featuring water, a skirt which has an appearance that suggests water, and a color scheme that incorporates a lot of blue and white.

Drawn from the information I have learned and my own personal convictions, I have interpreted this card as having strong associations with motherhood and mother goddesses, feminine intuition, the mystery of childbirth, the moon and water.

Conclusion

I believe it is important to establish a method of studying the Tarot that places the focus on an

analysis of the cards which is both visual and comparative, and guides the practitioner in such a way that they are able come to an informed and comprehensive understanding of the cards for themselves. The process I have explained and demonstrated in this document is one that I believe fits those requirements. I hope it will be of assistance in increasing the awareness and discussion of the symbolism in the Tarot, and the most effective and beneficial methods for teaching and learning about it.

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