



K. FRANK JENSEN

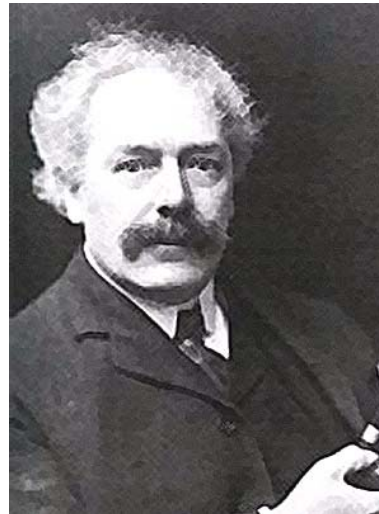
## The Early Waite-Smith Tarot Editions

Shortly before Christmas 1909 an esoteric tarot deck was published, which would completely change the concept of tarot decks. The new pack was the first edition of the tarot pack conceived by the esoteric author Arthur Edward Waite, illustrated by the artist Pamela Colman Smith and published by William Rider & Son, London, who specialized in esoteric literature. The deck appeared shortly after an article by Waite “*The Tarot - A Wheel of Fortune*” was published in vol 10, #12 of the magazine “*The Occult Review*”, also published by William Rider (illustration).

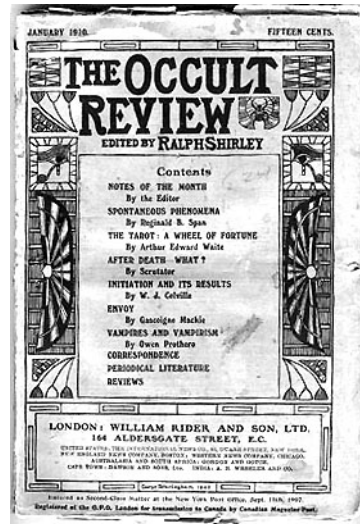
England had no tradition for playing the game of tarot and so tarot decks were not generally for sale. English occultists, who wanted to explore the esoteric secrets said to be inherent in a tarot deck had to make their own or - what was more common - to get hold of one from abroad, mainly from France, where the occult interest, which reached England in the later decades of the 19th Century, originated and where there also was a tradition for playing the tarot card game. In his pompous writing style, Waite points out in his article: *... “the Tarot is, as people say, in the air; but there is one difficulty with which we have all to contend in England. It is easy to read about the subject” ..... “but the cards themselves are not too easily obtainable”*. This need for tarot decks Waite had now solved: *“.... I have embraced an opportunity which has been somewhat of the unexpected kind and have interested a very skilful and original artist in the proposal to design a set, Miss Pamela Coleman(sic) Smith in addition to her obvious gifts, has some knowledge of Tarot values; she has lent a sympathetic ear to my proposal to rectify the symbolism by reference to channels of knowledge, which are not in the open day.....”*.

That December day in 1909 no one could imagine what a milestone the publication of the Waite-Smith Tarot deck was to be. Waite was probably pleased that, after several years, his ideas for a “rectified” tarot deck finally reached publication. Yet, at the same time he also realized that, with a tarot deck readily available, esoteric tarot would no longer be the secret that he otherwise had tried to maintain. Pamela Colman Smith was hopefully, despite her expressed doubts, not too dissatisfied about how her artwork survived the printing process. That the Waite-Smith tarot deck would completely change the concept of tarot for a whole century and reach the entire world in endless numbers and editions, neither of them could have foreseen nor never got to know.

Rider’s publishing company announced the deck rather plainly as “*A pack of 78 tarot cards*”. Through 6 decades the boxes for the deck were either neutral or had just “Tarot Cards” printed on them. Ironically, the first time we find the name “*Rider Tarot Deck*” printed



on the box is, when the decks were no longer published by Rider, but taken over in 1971 by U.S. Games Systems Inc. In his *“Encyclopedia of Tarot”*, vol. III, Stuart R. Kaplan of U. S. Games states that *“The Rider Deck as it was originally called was issued in December 1909 by William Rider & Son, London...”* (my underscore). There is, however, no evidence that it was ever called that before 1971. In order to pay proper credit to both its creators, since 1990, I have called the deck the *“Waite-Smith Tarot”*; a name that by and by has become generally accepted. That the Waite-Smith Tarot gained so great an importance and set a standard for most later tarot decks is, with all due respect to Arthur E. Waite’s scholarship, in this author’s opinion, more the merit of Pamela Colman Smith and her designs, than it is the merit of A.E. Waite.



### Arthur Edward Waite

Arthur Edward Waite was born on October 2nd 1857 in Brooklyn, New York. One year old when his father, who was a captain in the merchant navy, died at an accident at sea, his mother took him and his newborn sister to England, where they lived for the rest of their lives. Arthur grew up as a devout Catholic, serving and taking part in the rituals of the church as an altar boy. When, however, his sister Frederica Harriet died shortly before her 16th birthday, he fell into a depression, which caused him to lose his Catholic faith. Instead he turned to explore other paths of mystical experience, including spiritualism and occultism. Despite his interest and attraction to these paths he was, however, very sceptical towards them for his entire life.

Waite was destined to become a writer, a poet, a reviewer and a translator. While still young, he wrote adventure stories for a children’s magazine called *“Boys of England”* and eventually he became an expert in *“Penny Dreadfuls”* - pulp magazines - and wrote essays about this otherwise neglected genre. The fascination for this kind of literature stayed with Waite into old age, and he built up a large collection.

During his lifetime Arthur E. Waite not only wrote roughly 50 books and an endless number of articles but additionally translated just as many books into English, mainly from French. With his own works, and in the selection of the books he translated, his major aim was to stimulate his readers’ interest in themes such as Freemasonry, Rosicrucianism, Ceremonial Magic, The Holy Grail, Mysticism, Alchemy and Tarot that were important to himself and essential to his own quest. Waite had no academic education, but aspired to be recognized as a scholar by his readers; his research of *The Secret Tradition*, as he called it, was thus very careful, very critical and very sceptical against the *“endless lot of pseudo-esoteric nonsense”* which was published at that time as well as now.

When William Rider & Son with Philip Wellby - a friend of Waite’s - as managing director in 1905 started the monthly magazine *The Occult Review*, Waite was asked to help in its preparation and to contribute to it; an enterprise he would become involved with for many

years to come, writing articles on all sorts of esoteric themes. In periods he also functioned as an editor, besides that he anonymously over almost 20 years wrote a monthly critical column with reviews of new, relevant literature.

In 1899 Waite was offered a job by the London branch of an American food product manufacturer and for 10 years, until 1909, he earned a major part of his living as a business manager and public relations officer for “*Horlick’s Malted Milk*”. Part of Waite’s job was to advertise the product in provincial papers as a sort of universal remedy, good for all kinds of weakness and illness. He became also the editor - and wrote great parts himself - of the popular “*Horlick’s Magazine*”.

### **Pamela Colman Smith**

Pamela Colman Smith, baptized Corinne Pamela Colman Smith and called Pam or Pixie by her friends, was born February 16, 1878 in London by American parents. She spent her early years in England, where her father worked for a company of decorators, Nicholas, Colshaw and & Co. Later he accepted a job as an auditor for *The West India Improvement Company* which meant that the family came to travel around, spending time in London, in Kingston, Jamaica and in New York. Pamela Colman Smith stated that she lived in England until she was 10 years old and after that in New York from 1893 to 1899.



When she was 15 she started attending the *Pratt Institute*, an art school in New York, founded in 1887 and still in business. The Pratt Institute was the first art school which taught what nowadays would be called “commercial art”. The institute gave classes in composition, drawing and painting and whatever else at the time was relevant for a career in art. One important aspect was that the Pratt Institute taught the students to be aware of the limitations of the technical reproduction methods and how to accommodate them for a final print to come out properly.

Among Smith’s teachers at the Pratt was Arthur Wesley Dow, an important painter of the period. His teaching was strongly inspired by Japanese art. He emphasized the Japanese virtues: the use of harmonic colours, the lack of shadowing, giving equal attention to what happens in the foreground and in the background. He encouraged his students to study Japanese wood block prints with their bright colours which were already familiar to Pamela since her father had a large collection of them. Their significant influence can be seen in Pamela Colman Smith’s illustrations in general and also in the Waite-Smith Tarot.

When her mother died, she lived in New York with her father, earning an income by selling handcoloured books, illustrations and prints through a gallery on Fifth Avenue. This was also the period in which her interest for the theatre began; she built a miniature theatre, wrote plays and designed stage settings for it. Pamela’s father encouraged intensively her

artistic abilities and theatre endeavours by introducing her to people, who could advance her interests. When he unexpectedly died in 1899, she returned to England, joining the Lyceum Theatre Company, whose celebrated stars were Ellen Terry and Sir Henry Irving, touring with the group and working on set- and costume design and playing small parts.

Smith's success as a painter began with an exhibition in New York in 1907 which was followed by exhibitions in 1908 and 1909 in the well-known photographer Alfred Stieglitz's *Photo Secession Gallery* in New York. Her paintings were for the most what she herself described as "*music pictures*", intuitive, symbolistic paintings based on well-known musical pieces. The exhibitions were successful and had so good reviews that the 1907 exhibition, attended by 2200 visitors, had to be prolonged for eight days. Not less than 33 of the exhibited drawings and paintings were sold.

In 1901 she established a studio in London from where she hosted a weekly salon. It was an open house arrangement frequented by numerous well-known artists, authors and actors, who read from their works, played music and let themselves be entertained by the fairy tale readings and paper theatre performances by Pamela based upon the Jamaican stories that she had loved since her childhood. Among the frequent visitors were William Butler Yeats and his brother Jack. With the latter, Pamela came to edit and publish a magazine "*A Broad Sheet*", leading her in 1903 to start her own monthly handcoloured publication "*The Green Sheaf*" containing illustrations, songs, poetry and fairytales. It was William Butler Yeats who introduced Pamela to *The Order of the Golden Dawn*, where she met Waite. Yeats, who had a general interest in esoteric matters and in Irish folklore, had himself been a Golden Dawn member since 1890.

In 1909, at the time she worked on the Waite-Smith tarot, Pamela joined the "*London Suffrage Atelier*". The studio worked with cheap handprinting techniques, designing and producing propaganda material such as banners, posters, brochures and postcards to further the cause of the womens suffrage movement, which had gained growing support all over Great Britain. Pamela's knowledge of the media of visual communication and her experience with cheap printing techniques, such as wood engraving, stencils etc., made her an obvious teacher of the other volunteers and she devoted many working hours to this task. Undoubtedly, 1909 was a stressful year for Pamela Colman Smith engaged as she was in several tasks.

Pamela's last public exhibition was in 1914. After 1920, none of her artistic works seems to have reached the public. Maybe she felt disappointed by the lack of commercial success, maybe she just wanted to live a more quiet life after the hectic years in the big cities, New York and London. After the first World War, about 40 years old, she inherited some money from an uncle, which made it possible for her to buy a house in an artists' colony in Cornwall. In 1911 she had converted to the Catholic faith and the church now became part of her life and of her art. She collected religious cards and pictures for inspiration and in 1917, she illustrated a set of thirty cards, "*The Way of the Cross*" with verses by the French author, Paul Claudel. She engaged herself in local church work and became a sacristan for "*Our Lady of The Lizard Church*". As a means of income she established a vacation home for Catholic priests in a neighbouring house. She died penniless in 1951.



## The Tarot Scene at the Turn of the Century

The Waite-Smith Tarot grew out of the late Victorian age with its interest in esoteric and occult matters; an interest heavily influenced by the occult traditions in France. Secret societies and publicly accessible organisations, such as the *Theosophic Society*, flourished. In 1888 *The Order of The Golden Dawn* was established, partly based upon the French occultist Eliphas Lévi's teachings. Waite joined the order as early as 1891 and it came to play an important part in his life and work, even if not always a satisfying part. By entering and signing the *Order Roll*, Waite had accepted that by betraying the Order Secrets, he would submit himself to a penalty, "*a deadly and hostile current of will set in motion by the Chiefs of the Order, by which I should fall slain or paralysed without visible weapon, as if blasted by the Lightning-Flash*". This was an oath that Waite later would feel bound to maintain, with regard to his writings about the tarot and other works.

One early book dedicated to tarot and tarot divination, published in England was S. L. Mathers' "*The Tarot: Its Occult Signification, Use in Fortune-Telling and Method of Play*" (1888). Important to Mathers' correspondences between the Hebrew Kabbalah and the tarot major cards was his study of the Jewish mystic Rabbi Akiba Ben Joseph's "*The Book of Formation*" (Sepher Yetzirah), said to have been written in the 2nd century. The basic Hebrew/astrological correspondences given in "*The Book of Formation*" were the pattern upon which the symbolic systems were based, which came to form the body of the Golden Dawn teachings: ritual work, Enochian magic, geomancy, tattvas, astrology, metals, colours, precious stones, tarot. Mathers was the first to give special names in English to several of the tarot majors: "*The Magician*", "*The High Priestess*", "*The Hierophant*", "*The Lightning-struck Tower*", "*The Last Judgement*" and "*The Universe*" and did also introduce the name of "*Pentacles*" (instead of Coins) into the English tarot nomenclature.

Tarot was an important part of the doctrine of the Golden Dawn up through all of the grades of the Order. A thorough and documented knowledge of tarot and its Kabbalistic correspondences was needed to ascend the order grades. A profound instruction was given in a relatively short treatise, "*Book T*", which was accessible only to those order members, who had advanced to the Second (Inner) Order.

It had been Waite's goal for several years to create a "*rectified tarot*" and through his relationship with William Rider, this dream could finally be realized. When Waite recognized the fact that the existence of Tarot could no longer be kept a secret within esoteric orders, the time had come for him to create and publish his tarot deck. The paradox being, that he still wanted to consider himself a person in possession of that higher esoteric knowledge, which only but a small group of fellow-minded people could obtain. In his self-biography "*Shadows of Life and Thought*", Waite says: "*.....Now in those days there was a most imaginative artist and abnormally psychic artist, who had drifted into the Golden Dawn and loved its Ceremonies - as transformed by myself - without pretending and indeed attempting to understand their subsurface consequence. It seemed to some of us in the circle that there were a draughtswoman among us who, under proper guidance, could produce a tarot with an appeal in the world of Art and a suggestion of significance behind the Symbols, which would put on them another construction, than had ever been dreamed by those who, through many generations, had produced them and used them for mere*



divinatory purposes. My province was to see that the design - especially those of the important Trumps Major - kept that in the hiddenness which belong to certain Greater mysteries, in the Paths of which I was travelling....." (my underlining).

The "proper guidance" Waite writes about is, of course, his own. He appears not to have had great confidence in Pamela Colman Smith's work in *The Golden Dawn* - perhaps because she was 21 years younger than him - compared to how seriously dedicated he considered himself to be. None-the-less, he needed a competent artist to execute the "updated and rectified tarot" and for that task he found in Pamela the correct artistic qualifications. Waite's underestimation of Smith's seriousness could, however, have been a misjudgement since from her drawings and paintings it is quite obvious that her knowledge of mythological legends and religious symbols was well-founded.

Waite's main interest was the symbolism of the major arcana and it appears that he gave Pamela a more or less free hand in the design of the minors. Whether the idea of illustrating the minors, instead of using the classical tarot decks' arrangements of the appropriate number of suitmarks came from Waite, we can't be sure about, but Pamela Colman Smith certainly developed the idea.

Shortly before Pamela Colman Smith was commissioned to illustrate the deck, the British Museum had received a set of photographs of the so-called *Sola-Busca tarot deck* as a gift from the Sola family, which for years had been kept close within the family. Waite, who frequented the British Museum regularly may have mentioned this set of photos to Pamela, in any case it is evident, that part of her inspiration for the minor arcana came from them. Several details in Pamela's images were reworkings of her own earlier paintings and drawings; art historian Dr. Melinda Boyd Parsons supports the idea that many of the tarot characters are portraits of Pamela's friends. For example, the actress Ellen Terry be seen as the *Queen of Wands* and in the *Nine of Pentacles* and Florence Farr (a prominent Golden Dawn member) portrayed in *The World*.

In an "editor's note" in the very same 1909 issue of the "Occult Review", where Waite's article about his tarot deck appeared, the publisher announced the forthcoming event, a pack of tarot cards, which will be "... fully coloured. The lithographic process has been undertaken by Messrs. Sprague and Co., whose name is sufficient guarantee for the excellence of the work". In a letter, dated November 1909, now in the collection of Beineke Library at Yale University, to Alfred Stieglitz in New York, Pamela Colman Smith mentions her illustrations for the tarot deck, writing: "a big task of 80 illustrations for a very small payment; they will be printed in colour lithography, probably very bad", adding "I'll send you a pack". At the same time, Pamela offered Stieglitz the original artwork - or part of it - for sale in his gallery, which could indicate that she - and not Waite - had the originals in her possession and, maybe they actually belonged to her and not to Waite. Waite's interest was to see his rectified tarot deck in print, the original art was not of much interest to him. Whether any piece of the original artwork was sold or not is unknown, but in any case they have all disappeared; not even one single original illustration has apparently survived through the years. Nothing is known about them, not even what size they were. They could have been in a 1:1 ratio or they could have been larger and afterwards reduced to card size. If some of the 78 illustrations had been bought by Stieglitz' customers, a few would likely have been preserved.

However much we dislike the idea, we probably have to acknowledge, that to Pamela the 78 tarot cards of the Waite-Smith Tarot were a commissioned work, which she worked on during a relatively short period only in 1909 when she was also occupied with several other projects, including an exhibition in New York and involvement with the suffrage movement. Apparently Waite accepted her illustrations immediately since no drafts and redrawn cards have been found, as we know them from Frieda Harris' work on Crowley's "*Book of Thoth*" tarot, which was in progress over four years (1938-42).

What was Waite's part in the tarot deck that made it become a lasting success? First and foremost, he was the initiator. Without him there would not have been a similar influential tarot deck. He planned its "rectification" and publication, he persuaded and engaged the artist, Pamela Colman Smith to give visible expression to his ideas, he led it to print through his connexion to the publisher. He created the first 78 card tarot pack ever with a dedicated esoteric purpose apart from Etteilla's fortune-telling type decks. It was not the very first esoteric tarot deck, since Oswald Wirth's series of majors with Hebrew letters printed on the cards was published already in 1889, but Waite's was first full 78 card esoteric tarot deck.

Waite's concern was, as he himself stated it, to secure that the majors, which he called "*Trumps Majors*", reflected their - in his opinion - true esoteric meaning. He used about the same names for the majors as Mathers did in his 1888 book, but he simplified some of them: "The Lightning-struck Tower" became plain "*The Tower*", "The Last Judgement" became "*Judgement*". Waite did not use Mathers' "The Universe" but changed it to "*The World*". Also Mather's name "*Pentacles*" for the suit of coins was used by Waite.

What then made the Waite-Smith Tarot different from the French and Italian game tarot packs? Apart from the illustrated number cards of the Waite-Smith Tarot that were substituted for the usual rendition of the appropriate number of Italian suit signs: swords, wands, coins and cups. Waite's objective with his "rectified tarot" was to create a deck, which followed the Golden Dawn doctrines as they were given in the Order's papers and in the "*Book-T*". He rejected the French sequence of the majors and thus the assignments of the Hebrew letters and the Kabbalistic Tree's spheres and paths as they were defined by Lévi, Papus and Oswald Wirth. The French attributions were wrong in Waite's opinion and did not satisfy his demand for a well functioning esoteric system combining tarot with essential esoteric teachings. Waite changed the order of the majors, and their new sequence would become a standard in the Anglo-Saxon world..

The big problem was that Waite wanted to make this correction without revealing to the public that which he still considered to be a "secret teaching" which he, by oath, had sworn not to reveal; a knowledge he had gained through his membership of the Golden Dawn. He states about his new creation: "...*There is a secret tradition concerning the Tarot, as well as a secret doctrine contained therein; I have followed some part of it without exceeding the limits which are drawn about matters of this kind and belong to the laws of honour. This tradition has two parts, and as one of them has passed into writing it seems to follow that it may be betrayed at any moment, which will not signify, because the second... has not so passed at present and is held by very few indeed. I ask, therefore, to be distinguished from a few writers in recent times who have thought fit to hint that they could say a good deal more if they liked, for we do not speak the same language; but also from any one who... may say that she or he will tell all, because they have only the accidents and not the*

*essentials necessary for such disclosure... I have said as much as I can; it is the truth after its own manner; and as much as can be expected or required in those outer circles where the qualifications of special research cannot be expected.....”*

It is with like statements Waite’s “*The Key to the Tarot*” and “*The Pictorial Key to the Tarot...*” (see later) definitely fail. By continuously hinting that such secrets exists and that he (the author) is one of the few who knows and protects such secrets he distances himself from his audience. Particularly since they were no longer secrets at the time when “*The Key...*” was published.

### The Placement of The Fool

One important aspect in creating his “rectified tarot” was Waite’s concern for the placement of *The Fool*. To Waite the proper placement of *The Fool* was the very key to the sequence of the majors that made the entire puzzle form a synthesis. He states, that there is an inner circle of initiates, who are in possession of that key, and the circle is, of course *The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn*. The key is the positioning of the unnumbered *Fool* at the beginning of the series of majors, so that the first Hebrew letter, Aleph, is assigned to *The Fool*, while the last Hebrew letter, Tau, is assigned to *XXI-The World*. In Lévi’s French order, the first card was *The Magician* and thus the entire correspondence between the 22 Hebrew letters and the 22 tarot majors was quite different.



### Exchanging Justice with Strength

By paying attention to the 12 tarot majors which related to the 12 signs of the Zodiac, Waite found that if two majors were exchanged from their positions in the French tarot order, there would be complete agreement between the tarot picture image, the serial order of the Hebrew alphabet and the astrological attributes from Sepher Yetzirah. These two Tarot cards were VIII, *Justice*, and XI, *Strength*. Waite placed *Strength* as VIII and *Justice* as XI, a sequence that had never before appeared in a printed Tarot deck. Waite justified this switch in his commentary: “*For reasons which satisfy myself, this card has been interchanged with that of Justice, which is usually numbered eight. As the variation carries nothing with it which will signify to the reader, there is no cause for explanation*”(!) By substituting VIII with XI, the only tarot image depicting a set of scales, the traditional symbol for Libra, came to correspond to the zodiacal sign Libra, while the image with a lion came to correspond with Leo. Was this switching of the two cards now a result of Waite’s creative thoughts? No, it was not: the same card order can be found in the Golden Dawn Cipher manuscript, the basis on which the Order of The Golden Dawn was established.