

Guide to *The King in Yellow* Tarot

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Decks of pictorial playing cards known as tarot decks have been around since the fourteenth century, at least, and are believed to have originated in Europe. Traditionally comprised of seventy-eight cards, tarot decks are the forerunners of the modern playing-card deck or poker deck, but tarot cards are often ascribed loftier purposes than mere gamesmanship. They are used in fortune-telling, serving in a sort of symbolic psychoanalysis that attempts to identify the forces at work in a person's life across the past, present, and future. While not intended as a detailed predictor ("You will meet a tall man named Angus with a passion for pinball."), tarot prognostication can stimulate thought and insight in a person about their life that might not otherwise occur. Arguably, the real value of the tarot then is in the revelatory, not the divinatory — its ability to illuminate life and choices and consequences and possibilities.

This aspect of the tarot has assured its survival through the centuries, while the intriguing illustrations that vary greatly from deck to deck have drawn talented occultists and artists alike to leave us their own legacies of new and original decks. Today one can readily choose among hundreds of different commercially available designs representing nearly every mystical, folkloric, cultural, and aesthetic tradition in common currency.

The rarest of tarot decks, of course, are those that are not commercially available. These are decks that are either one-of-a-kind, hand-crafted works of art, or those printed in small, private editions for limited distribution among like-minded individuals. One of the rarest of rare decks is the *King in Yellow* tarot, a little-known deck that exists both in an original hand-crafted deck and in a limited-run printed reproduction. And now, thanks to our publishers at Arc Dream, in a modern edition produced for a large audience.

History

During the autumn of 1895, unknown publishers in numerous European cities produced short runs of slim books containing the script for a play named *The King in Yellow* translated into their various languages. Those few copies circulated rapidly among the *avant garde* of Europe but were more spoken of than seen. The reputation of the play was that anyone who read it went insane.

Governments swiftly suppressed the play and any mention of it in the press, attempting to eradicate its existence in the weeks after it was born. As scandals go, it was both highly unusual and only narrowly discussed, so few were the copies in circulation and so quickly were they seized and destroyed.

Most assumed its content to be conventionally salacious. Tales of depraved sexual debauchery in the lines of the text were common. Other rumors had to do with the play's anonymous author, or the unknown publishers who had produced the printed books that turned up mysteriously in bookstores. Still others concerned who might actually own a surviving copy, and who might have read it and either went mad or somehow survived.

Today, the play is believed lost. No extant copies verifiably exist, despite the occasional rumors. Scholars of the occult have documented what evidence they can find, primarily in surviving correspondence. From what they have been able to reconstruct, we can state the following.

The conventional rumors of the play's sexual content did not even begin to scratch at the surface of the truth. The script of the play was not concerned with ordinary scandal. It was instead a slow spiral, a widening gyre, from status and prosperity and decorum down to a fundamental disintegration of rationality and the extinction of an anthropocentric worldview. In short, there not only was no God, there was nothing in the universe that cared whether God existed or not. Humanity was irrelevant, and the cosmic clock would tick on with or without us. In the face of that existentially mechanistic worldview, even the modernists could only tremble. Or as Oscar Wilde wrote in *The Picture of Dorian Gray*: "There is only one thing in the world worse than being talked about, and that is not being talked about." For when you realize the universe itself has never and will never talk about you, you see the trapdoor open beneath your feet there upon the gallows and feel the noose constrict round your neck as your mouth forms a silent scream.

Set apart from this ruinous contagion of existential dread, one unusual rumor passed among another social circle, one altogether different from that of the poets and painters who pondered the play over absinthe or coffee. This circle was that of Europe's fortune-tellers, the penumbral network of mediums, palm readers, spirit writers, planchette manipulators, and other occult types who had found fortune with the spiritualist movement of the time. The rumor that passed among them regarded *The King in Yellow* not as the beginning of something new, but the culmination of something old. For the more dedicated of these folk had heard of the King before, mentioned in conjunction with a notorious tarot deck that bore His name.

Tales of this deck had been told since the early 1700s. They consisted of a simple story. Somewhere there was a fabulous deck of hand-crafted cards that numbered seventy-seven, rather than seventy-eight. The missing card was the Emperor and the story went that in readings done with this deck before times of great crisis the non-existent Emperor card would nevertheless appear, bringing with it an unmistakable warning of imminent disaster. (At times of truly dire consequence, all of the cards would come up Emperors.) The deck was known as the *King in Yellow* tarot, though where the name came from was not clear. This story would get trotted out sporadically, updated to the latest disaster, and the deck would retroactively be claimed to have predicted said disaster mere days before it transpired. The ownership of the deck was also a source of rumor but as with the publication of *The King in Yellow* play no one claimed to have personally seen the fabled deck. Instead there was much speculation as to how the rumored deck had surfaced unexpectedly in the form of a notorious play.

Madame Sosostriis

In the years following the play's publication, direct reports of the deck's existence began to circulate and this time with an owner attached. The owner was a fortune-teller who claimed to be from Iran and was known only as Madame Sosostriis. While she would not discuss the nature of the deck or its origins she did use it regularly in her readings, which were said to be of astonishing accuracy and insight.

As word spread, Madame Sosostriis became an in-demand mystic among the cognoscenti. She travelled across Europe, doing readings for the wealthy as she went. She did, however, manage to keep a low profile in terms of the public at large, using her clients' influence to keep her name out of the press and generally ensure that most would never hear of her. Those who observed her deck in action swore it was the true *King in Yellow* deck.

Who was Sosostris? She is more spoken of than written about and is scarcely documented outside a few mentions in obscure specialist publications from the Spiritualists and Theosophists of the early 20th Century. Curiously, however, she appears as a fictional character in two works written the same year: T.S. Eliot's poem *The Waste Land* and Aldous Huxley's novel *Crome Yellow*. Both were composed in 1921, completely independent of each other.

Eliot wrote about Sosostris in early 1921:

Madame Sosostris, famous clairvoyante,
Had a bad cold, nevertheless
Is known to be the wisest woman in Europe,
With a wicked pack of cards.

Huxley wrote about her that summer. His novel is a slight parody of literary and upper-class personalities he and Eliot both knew socially. In one chapter, a dyspeptic futurist named Scogan dresses as a female fortune-teller named Sesostris at a country fair. (Scogan was largely inspired by the mathematician and philosopher Bertrand Russell.) Sesostris gives doom-laden fortunes but proves very popular and no one seems to notice she is a man in woman's clothing:

Sesostris had a success of horror. People stood in a queue outside the witch's booth waiting for the privilege of hearing sentence pronounced upon them.

While Eliot and Huxley were in the same social circle and knew each other, they were not friends and had a low regard for each other's work. There is no evidence they were sharing manuscripts of their works in progress that year, and their concurrent usage of Sosostris/Sesostris appears to be an unusual coincidence.

The simplest explanation is that they both met the real Sosostris, possibly in July 1920 when they were guests at Lady Ottoline Morrell's Garsington Manor, which is parodied in Huxley's novel. We cannot definitively place Sosostris there, but Lady Morrell was just the sort of rich eccentric who formed Sosostris's primary clients. If indeed Sosostris was there, and Eliot and Huxley witnessed one of her tarot readings, then it is no surprise she made such an impression on them that they wrote her into their next major works.

Huxley's portrayal of Scogan-as-Sesostris is clearly a parody, interpolating Bertrand Russell's grim auguries of future society with Sosostris's own tarot readings which were generally said to be somewhat dire. Eliot, however, appeared quite struck by Sosostris's contradictions as seemingly yet another Spiritualist charlatan who nonetheless had a magnetic personality and was a shrewd judge of character — not to mention her wicked pack of cards, which can only be those of the King in Yellow deck.

Curiously, Eliot and Huxley were not the first to use this name in their works. The name Sesostris previously appears in the 4th Century BC in *Histories* by the Greek writer Herodotus. He describes a Pharaoh Sesostris of Egypt who conquered parts of what is now Eastern Europe.

In 1728, this historical Sesostris was the subject of a play by the British writer John Sturmy named *Sesostris, or Royalty in Disguise, a Tragedy*. In this play, Sesostris is the son of Queen Nitocris of Egypt who mourns the murder of her husband, Pharnazes, by the usurper Omar. Sesostris disguises himself as Omar's long-lost son Psamnites and finally kills Omar in revenge after much angst:

I'll straight to Omar, give him to understand
Th' Arrival of a Stranger here this Morn,
Charg'd with Affairs of Weight, which he declines,
But in his Royal Presence, to declare

This, of course, calls to mind the arrival of the Stranger in one of the few extant excerpts from *The King in Yellow* play which was published almost three centuries after Sturmy's:

Camilla: You, sir, should unmask.

Stranger: Indeed?

Cassilda: Indeed, it's time. We all have laid aside disguise but you.

Stranger: I wear no mask.

Camilla: (Terrified, aside to Cassilda) No mask? No mask!

Sesostris's mother Queen Nitocris of Egypt has her own bloody history in which she took revenge on a group of nobles for the murder of her brother by constructing a subterranean feast hall for them to dine in and then unleashing the waters of the Nile to drown them all. This tale likewise comes down to us from Herodotus and his *Histories*. Much later, the author Tennessee Williams retold this tale of watery revenge in his first published short story, "The Vengeance of Nitocris," in the August, 1928, issue of the pulp magazine *Weird Tales*:

When the hour had approached near to midnight, the queen, who had sat like one entranced, arose from the cushioned dais. One last intent survey she gave to the crowded room of banquet. It was a scene which she wished to imprint permanently upon her mind. Much pleasure might she derive in the future by recalling that picture, and then imagining what came afterward — stark, searing terror rushing in upon barbaric joy!

When considering this scene, it is hard not to think of the Major Arcana card known as The Judgement which depicts a similar scene in the King in Yellow tarot deck.

Whether we think of Sesostris in disguise as Psamnites, or Scogan in disguise as Sesostris, or Sosostris as the wisest woman in Europe with a wicked pack of cards, this character continually bedevils history and literature alike and defies definitive scholarship. Perhaps future scholars will make new discoveries to untangle this scarlet skein. At least we have her cards.

A Question of Gender

There is some ambiguity regarding Sosostris's sex at birth, even though her gender expression was consistently female in what few primary non-fiction sources we have. Huxley, in his work of fiction, clearly presents Sesostris as a man in woman's clothing. Eliot, in his poem, curiously describes Sosostris as having ". . . a bad cold, nevertheless is known to be the wisest woman . . ." Why the use of "nevertheless"? What is it about her having a bad cold that makes a contradiction of her womanhood? This could be read as a coded statement that she was a woman with a masculine voice, and indeed perhaps not a woman at all, much as Tiresias is described as intersex later in the poem.

Why would both Huxley and Eliot seemingly and independently question Sosostris's gender expression? Perhaps because she was exactly that: considered male at birth but now expressing as female. Our primary sources from the time do not deign to mention this issue, but

this could be either out of propriety or ignorance and our sources are very few. From an arcane perspective we note that disguising one's gender could protect you from various forms of sympathetic magic and therefore it could have been a practical choice by an occultist who may have had jealous rivals coveting her unique tarot deck. On the other hand, Sosostris may simply have been a transgendered person. Many cultures both ancient and modern include magical roles for nonbinary practitioners and this essential nature of her being could have been key to her abilities and reputation — or it could have been nothing more esoteric than her living as her most authentic self.

Because Sosostris publicly expressed herself as a woman, and used the honorific “Madame,” we use female pronouns in this text. But we believe this is a question worthy of further research to better position the enigmatic Sosostris in the cultural history of the occult.

After the War

From a scant few references in later occult publications, we know that Sosostris left Europe around 1914 and conveniently sat out the Great War in an unknown location. She returned in the fall of 1919 and resumed her work, and it was presumably during this time that she encountered both Huxley and Eliot. In 1923, a few months after *The Waste Land* was published, she decamped to Morocco, claiming she was tired of the clamor that had arisen for her services.

In 1928 she authorized a small publisher in London to produce a limited run of a hundred reproductions of her tarot deck, which were sold at truly exorbitant prices to her best clients under a shroud of secrecy. She contracted and supervised the master engravings herself with an unknown artisan and instructed him to alter numerous details throughout the printed deck; the handful of individuals who had a chance to compare a few of the original cards with the reproductions reported that while the basic subject matter was similar, the printed version dropped many unusual elements and replaced them with more conventional depictions from other tarot sets. Most strikingly, the printed edition included an Emperor card, which Sosostris apparently commissioned from scratch — or from memory, if indeed it had occasionally manifested in her divinations as was rumored.

Madame Sosostris retired from professional fortune-telling in 1930, living off the substantial fees she had earned from her work over the years and from the private sale of the printed edition of her deck. In 1934 she made a last tour of Europe, seeing friends but also visiting some of the great libraries of the continent on some sort of research which she refused to discuss. She was accompanied by a small dark-haired boy whom she identified as her nephew, Alex, though none of her acquaintances had ever met or heard of any other member of her family prior to the trip, and he seemed rather young to be a nephew given her age. The pair eventually made their way to London where they booked passage to New York. They were never seen again by anyone who spoke of it. Her original, hand-crafted deck disappeared with her.

A dozen of the hundred-copy printed editions of her deck are believed to survive to this day. Most of the rest were lost in the chaos of World War II and while they may survive somewhere, it is likely that their significance and value are not recognized by their present owners. Of the dozen suspected remaining copies, only two are said to still have the Emperor card; many of the original purchasers evidently destroyed the Emperor or stored it separately (leading to its eventual loss) to better emulate the original. The most recent sale of a surviving, intact deck occurred at a private Budapest auction in 1995 where it sold for \$243,000; both the buyer and the seller were anonymous and the deck has not been seen since.

The deck is mentioned in a few widely available books on the tarot, but only in its pre-Sosostris context as a piece of legend and usually as part of a laundry list of fabled “lost” decks. The stories of Sosostris and her deck were confined to a narrow stratum of wealthy individuals with occult interests, a stratum largely displaced or destroyed by the war. Today, perhaps only a few hundred people worldwide are aware of the deck and its history — and that figure may be an exaggeration.

Appearance

There are two known historical versions of the *King in Yellow* tarot. The first version is, as far as anyone knows, the original: a deck of seventy-seven cards measuring roughly 4"x7", illustrated by hand onto stiff paper boards a sixteenth of an inch thick and then varnished or lacquered, perhaps multiple times over the years. The corners are rounded. The backs are unadorned white, though age has turned the coating a dingy yellow. The fronts are ink illustrations with pale pigments providing color, and there are occasional instances of gold leaf. The cards are numbered with Roman numerals and the titles of the major arcana and the minor arcana face cards are written in French (the rest of the minor arcana are merely numbered within their suits). Sosostris carried the deck in a small leather-covered box but it is unknown if she supplied the box or if it originated with the deck. No one seems to have noticed any markings or inscriptions on the box.

The second version of the *King in Yellow* tarot is the privately printed edition prepared by Sosostris in 1928. One hundred decks were produced by Jacob Constantine, a small publisher in London who specialized in short-run titles on spiritualist topics. No expense was spared in their production and the decks were graced with vibrant color using the latest lithographic techniques. Gold leaf was applied to each deck by hand. These decks were slightly smaller than the original, about 3"x5 1/2", and were printed on fine linen paper which was then hand-glued to sturdy boards and lacquered. Unlike the original, the backs included a design: the printer's mark, with a scroll curling around it that read in small letters, “The King in Yellow Tarot of M. Sosostris, Printed Exclusive to Jacob Constantine, London, A.D. 1928.” A set of one hundred rosewood boxes were constructed with velvet lining and a surprisingly sturdy lock. Each box was etched at the time of purchase with the name of the buyer or the buyer's initials, as desired. Some sets were allegedly inscribed by Sosostris at the request of her favorite clients, but no such sets are known to survive.

The Arc Dream Edition

This present edition is a reconstruction of the original, hand-crafted deck based on a number of eyewitness testimonies. The creators of this edition have conducted extensive research into archives of spiritualist documents across Europe from which numerous private diaries and letters have been consulted. We located a number of first-hand reports of the deck from readings given by Sosostris and from those we first assembled a written guide to the deck's symbology and design which was published as an essay in an anthology (*Delta Green: Countdown*. Seattle: Pagan Publishing, 1999).

Further primary documents have appeared in the years since that initial research, but the real breakthrough came in the form of a cache of photographs taken at the Prague Society of Spiritualists' conclave in 1925 which the authors discovered in 2016. Many of the photographs in the archive are of séances complete with manifestations of ectoplasm, wax hand casts,

luminescent tambourines, and the like. One set of three photographs, however, shows the complete *King in Yellow* tarot laid out upon a table. In the shadows nearby, a woman in elaborate dress appears to recline in slumber upon a divan — we can only assume this is Sosostris herself and that the photographer may have taken advantage of her rest to document the deck for his own curiosity.

Exciting though this discovery was, the photographs were not everything one might hope for. The table was poorly lit and a reflective glare in the cards' varnish obscures many details. Still, enough could be perceived to give good guidance as to the art direction of the original set and the artist of our new edition has benefitted greatly from this discovery. This new edition of an immortal tarot deck is the closest we can yet come to Sosostris's original.

It should be noted that the photographs do not include the notorious Emperor card. Curiously, a diary entry by the society's chief archivist in 1941 discusses the photographs with excitement and notes the surprising presence of the Emperor card in the photos — a card which we do not at all find in the very same photographs today. The archivist died a few months later at Terezin but his description of the card makes it clear that when present, the Emperor card is in fact a depiction of the King in Yellow himself. This has guided our inclusion of the card in this present edition.

The Sosostris Method

For some clients, Sosostris used a novel reading method apparently of her own invention that is unique to this deck. (The method was later known as King and Staff owing to its suggestive form, but we have no evidence that Sosostris ever used this term herself.) Its most unusual aspect is that the governing metaphor is that of a theatrical play and its elements: the script, the stage, the actor, and so on. This suggests that Sosostris had a background in the theater, although there is no information or even rumor to that effect. It also thematically aligns with the *King in Yellow* play, which is doubly curious given that the deck was long rumored to exist before the play was ever published.

If you wish to perform a reading using this method and the Arc Dream edition of the *King in Yellow* deck, the following steps are the best reconstruction we can make from our limited sources.

First, remove the Emperor card from the deck and set it aside since it was not present in the original *King in Yellow* deck except under unusual circumstances. We encourage you to leave our version of the Emperor face up, right side up, off to the side, as a show of respect befitting such a revered monarch.

Second, the medium hands the deck to the querent. The querent looks at all the cards and chooses one as the Signifier, which is placed on the table at the top of the formation. The Signifier represents the querent's idea of the situation they are here to explore. It can be upright or inverted as the querent or the medium think best.

Third, the trickiest and most crucial part: the selection of *the ineffable* card. The medium shuffles the deck face down and then cuts it just as you would a deck of playing cards. The bottom card of the upper half of the cut deck is flipped so it now faces up — but retaining its normal or reversed orientation — and it is returned to its place. This manipulation must be conducted with neither the medium nor the querent seeing its face. You now have a deck comprising 76 face-down cards and one face-up card. This unusual card is known as *the ineffable* and its nature and meaning are not for the living to see or understand. Rather, it is meant for any unseen observers in attendance at the reading.

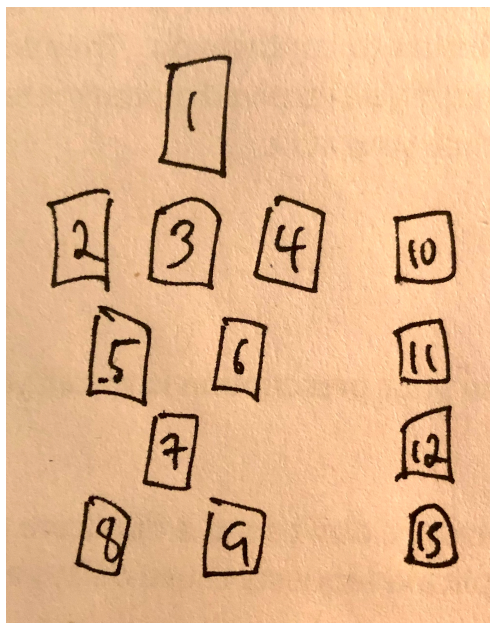
Fourth, the two halves of the deck are recombined and then flipped over and shuffled *face up*, so the ineffable card may migrate freely face down without its identity being revealed.

Fifth, the medium deals out twelve cards face up *from the bottom of the deck* into the depicted pattern beneath the Signifier. The cards should be laid out in order from 2–13. If the ineffable card is dealt, it will already be face down and it *must stay so* even when laid out for the reading. That card may not be seen by the living. When the reading is concluded, the card should be restored to its normal facing and shuffled into the deck, yet again without anyone seeing what it was.

Sixth, if the ineffable card is not among those drawn for the reading, the medium should find it in the deck and place it face down and unseen covering the Signifier card where it represents an unknowable influence upon the life of the querent.

Finally, the medium interprets the reading. The drawing order and roles of the cards are as follows:

- 1: Signifier.** The card chosen by the querent to suggest the situation.
- 2: Mask.** This is how the querent presents themselves to others.
- 3: Performance.** The events and other factors immediately around the situation.
- 4: Audience.** The people immediately surrounding the situation.
- 5: Unconscious.** The inner nature of the querent as it relates to the situation.
- 6: Actor.** How the querent perceives themselves as relates to the situation.
- 7: Script.** The factors that brought the situation to its present state.
- 8: Stage.** The backdrop of the situation. This concerns factors less visible than the Performance but sometimes more crucial.
- 9: Unexpected.** A surprise that lies in wait.
- 10: Rising Action.** The next phase of the situation.
- 11: Fate.** That which cannot be changed.
- 12: Revelation.** That which will be revealed.
- 13: Denouement.** The final outcome of the situation.



A Word of Caution

For those who have read this far, let us take one last moment to urge caution in the usage of this deck. The few accounts we have found of readings by Sosostris, and the consequences for the querents, have admittedly given us pause about this entire undertaking. While we would never imagine that human fates were dictated by the fall of these cards upon a table, their usage does seem to occur prior to tragedy unsettlingly often. We can not vouch for the origins of this deck or what agenda might have spurred its original creation. We do not know the stories of the mediums before Sosostris who wielded its powers. We have not seen the true Emperor card and with good fortune we never shall. In short, this does not seem to us like a deck the world needs — but it is perhaps the deck this world deserves.

Use it judiciously and respectfully. Or better yet, not at all.

Card Descriptions

Descriptions of every card follow for ease of reference. Interpretations, however, are left to the minds and sensitivities of the medium and the querent. Because the cards correspond directly to traditional tarot decks, one may choose to rely on existing card interpretations when using this deck for a reading. But for the initiate, the unusual and even gruesome designs on these cards may inspire more idiosyncratic interpretations. When Huxley wrote in *Crome Yellow* of his Sesostris providing particularly grim readings, it is not hard to imagine that outcome given the nature of these cards.

Major Arcana Descriptions

Le Mat (The Fool)

A small number of figures wearing cloaks the color of mist walking tightly together along the edge of a cliff. All their features are hidden, and it is impossible to determine exactly how many there are.

I: Le Bateleur (The Magician)

A proud-looking man with short, jet-black hair wearing a purple robe and holding a double-edged sword above his head.

II: Junon (The High Priestess)

A dark-haired, vacant-eyed woman in a white dress sitting chained between two pillars. A thick leather-bound book lies forgotten at her feet.

III: L'Impératrice (The Empress)

A young woman with platinum-blond hair. She wears a gold circlet and carries a scepter bejeweled with emeralds. She reclines on a low couch and is surrounded by threadbare, rotting tapestries.

IV: L'Empereur

A figure in tattered yellow robes, with a strange mask upon his face. He sits upon a throne of onyx, one hand clutching fiercely at the throne while the other rests upon his chin, perhaps holding the mask in place or preparing to remove it.

V: Jupiter (The Hierophant)

A sneering elderly man wearing ecclesiastical garb standing before two naked monks. Each of the pair carries a whip in his hand, and every part of their bodies is covered with red welts.

VI: L'Amoureux (The Lovers)

Two naked humans, one male and the other female, stand beneath a sunny sky. The two are flanked by a pair of stately trees whose drooping branches are laden with huge, rotting fruit. The woman, a curvaceous dark beauty, looks up at the sky, while the man, a thin individual with short blonde hair, gazes at her.

VII: Le Chariot (The Chariot)

An arrogant young man with Egyptian-looking features and clad in the garb of a Pharaoh. He stands in a chariot, holding the reins of two sphinxes who seem to growl menacingly at each other.

VIII: La Force (Strength)

A tall, blonde woman with an intimidating gaze grasps the jaws of a ferocious lion.

IX: L'Ermite (The Hermit)

A middle-aged, portly man with a jovial expression wearing a robe. He stands on a raft with water seeping through its cracks, and holds a lantern aloft. A fish has leapt from the water onto the raft, and its human-like face seems to be screaming up at the viewer.

X: La Roue De Fortune (Wheel of Fortune)

A dark spiral of stars and nebulae, centering on a single point of darkness, resembling modern conceptions of a black hole. The stars subtly form pictures of masks of various shapes and sizes.

XI: La Justice (Justice)

A young man dressed in a riding cloak who holds up one arm in greeting. The other arm is folded across his chest, and something glistens on his hand. His face is grim, matching the bleak, lifeless landscape behind him.

XII: Le Pendu (Hanged Man)

A tubby man with a slight moustache and thin, fine hands. He is dressed as a herald, though his trumpet has been dropped upon the ground. His feet are tied together with rope, and he has been suspended upside-down from a wooden scaffold that shows a good deal of weathering.

XIII: La Mort (Death)

A man dressed carelessly in the rags of a peasant. His youthful face would appear guileless under other circumstances, but in this case it conveys an uncanny menace. The man is walking aimlessly across a plowed field covered with corpses from a great conflict.

XIV: Temperance (Temperance)

A shining golden crown inlaid with silver leaves and incrustated with diamonds. Beneath it sits an illuminated piece of parchment; none of its lettering is readable except for an ornately-penned Gothic “W” below the document’s title.

XV: Le Diable (The Devil)

A rocky shore, behind which a frothing, bubbling lake stretches into the hazy distance. On the lake sits a gondola carrying a young man dressed as a knight ardently wooing a lady, who recoils from his advances in distaste. A dimly-defined bulk may be seen just below the water’s surface upon close inspection.

XVI: La Maison Dieu (The House of God [The Tower])

A city of enormous towers and crooked alleyways, most of which are lost in shadow. One mighty structure stabs toward the heavens far above its lesser brethren; the rising or setting moon, swollen to an unnatural size, floats between the viewer and the bulk of the spire. Many tiny, richly-dressed figures fall from its top.

XVII: L’Etoile (The Star)

A mist-like background, with a circle of ebony in its center.

XVIII: La Lune (The Moon)

A pair of jackals, each sitting on a low mound on either side of a stream, howl up at a Yellow Sign hanging in the night sky.

XIX: Le Soleil (The Sun)

A slim book bound in black leather with heavy, rusted metal hasps. The Yellow Sign appears upon the book’s cover.

XX: Le Jugement (Judgment)

A great banquet hall, with an overturned table at the center. A large number of guests have recoiled from the middle of the hall, seeming not to mind the food and drink that have been inadvertently been splashed upon their finery. Their faces are frozen in disbelief and terror, and each one stares at an open window at the room’s end. The content of the window is murky.

XXI: Le Monde (The World)

A shadowy planet rests in the center of a tableau of faint stars. Two lesser, lead-colored bodies are setting behind it.

Minor Arcana Descriptions: The Swords

Roi des Épées (The King of Swords)

A regal but stooped king swallows his own sword. The bloodied tip protrudes from the arch of his back.

Reine des Épées (The Queen of Swords)

A woman in finery works in a dingy blacksmith shop, sharpening her blade.

Chevalier des Épées (The Cavalier of Swords)

An armored knight drives his sword into his horse's side. The horse's eyes are closed.

Valet des Épées (The Page of Swords)

A young man beneath a proscenium arch, as on a stage, slashes savagely at the half-closed curtains around him.

X (Ten of Swords)

A man stands in a fiery desert. He is imprisoned within a circle of ten swords, driven into the sand.

IX (Nine of Swords)

Three urns rest on three pedestals beneath a radiant sun. Each pedestal bears a carving of three swords.

VIII (Eight of Swords)

A woman stands pierced by eight swords. They are arranged evenly around her sides and head, forming a sort of corona.

VII (Seven of Swords)

A line of six swords stand driven into the grassy earth. To the left, a boy has plucked a seventh, radiant sword from the ground.

VI (Six of Swords)

Six men with outstretched swords stand at the back of a sailing ship, as if saluting something they are leaving behind.

V (Five of Swords)

A row of five armored men stand with swords, each stabbing the man ahead in the back. The last man's sword appears to wrap around the edges of the card and re-enter to stab the first man.

IV (Four of Swords)

Four swords are driven into a rocky surface that resembles human vertebrae. A man lies on his back, balanced atop the pommels.

III (Three of Swords)

Three swords lie on a plane of black, arranged into a “Y” formation.

II (Two of Swords)

A man divided in twain stands, his two halves separated by the night sky. In each hand he holds a sword.

I (Ace of Swords)

A great sword pierces the moon.

Minor Arcana Descriptions: The Scepters

Roi de Bâton (The King of Scepters)

A king stands before his throne, scepter balanced on his crown and his hands in front, palms together, as if in prayer.

Reine de Bâton (The Queen of Scepters)

A heavyset queen reclines in a rowboat, lazily poling along with a great scepter.

Chevalier des Bâton (The Cavalier of Scepters)

A knight uses a scepter to dig a pit.

Valet de Bâton (The Page of Scepters)

A canny young man delays three travelers with his scepter, shaped like a shepherd’s crook.

X (Ten of Scepters)

An old man climbs slowly up a rocky hillside, a heavy bundle of ten scepters on his back.

IX (Nine of Scepters)

A young warrior stands sternly before a wall of nine scepters, through which can be seen numerous glowing eyes.

VIII (Eight of Scepters)

A girl juggles eight scepters before an azure sky. The scepters are impossibly large for her to be juggling.

VII (Seven of Scepters)

A funeral pyre, alight, on which lies a woman in robes. The seven scepters protrude from the pyre.

VI (Six of Scepters)

Six knights on six horses holding six scepters advance on a peasant, who falls before their hooves.

V (Five of Scepters)

A man lost in a dense wood. Five scepters are propped against trees, but all out of his sight.

IV (Four of Scepters)

A fat noble marches with four servants behind him, each of whom carries a scepter. The servants are conspiring.

III (Three of Scepters)

Three scepters lie on a plane of red, arranged into a “T” formation.

II (Two of Scepters)

A man stands proudly under a cloudy sky, a scepter in each hand.

I (Ace of Scepters)

A scepter hangs in the air, floating horizontally. An emaciated cherub—or perhaps a gargoyle—sits upon it like a trapeze.

Minor Arcana Descriptions: The Cups

Roi de Coupe (The King of Cups)

A king upon a throne, resting his chin on his hands with a bored expression. There is no cup on this card.

Reine des Coupe (The Queen of Cups)

A queen floats upon a river of wine, drinking from a golden cup.

Chevalier des Coupe (The Cavalier of Cups)

On the lip of a massive cup, a knight rides on horseback.

Valet de Coupe (The Page of Cups)

A cup brimming with drink sits unheeded, as a young man pores over a book in a darkened library.

X (Ten of Cups)

A prosperous noble family of ten—elders, parents, children, etc.—recline lazily in a sumptuous setting. Ten cups lie piled in a corner.

IX (Nine of Cups)

A man lies sick in bed, a skeletal figure of death crouched upon the headboard. Nine cups stand in a row upon a table, out of reach.

VIII (Eight of Cups)

A chessboard on which stand eight cups in gold and purple. Each cup has a chess piece carved on it, and a game is in progress. Gold appears to be near victory.

VII (Seven of Cups)

Seven cups arranged in stairstep fashion, wine flowing downstream from one to the next like a series of locks.

VI (Six of Cups)

Six cups in six niches, within a darkened chamber of stone.

V (Five of Cups)

A man with five arms, a cup in each hand, toasts the setting sun.

IV (Four of Cups)

A man drowns within a cup, which floats within another cup, and another cup, and another cup.

III (Three of Cups)

Three cups lie on a plane of purple, arranged in a horizontal line.

II (Two of Cups)

A man with two faces drinks from two cups.

I (Ace of Cups)

A boy balances a cup three times his size upon his head, straining under the weight.

Minor Arcana Descriptions: The Coins

Roi de Denier (The King of Coins)

A king sits cross-legged upon a graven dais of gold, hovering before a field of stars.

Reine de Denier (The Queen of Coins)

A queen stands smiling, a large coin held in one hand behind her head, as if faking a halo.

Chevalier des Denier (The Cavalier of Coins)

A knight rolls a massive coin up a steep hill.

Valet de Denier (The Page of Coins)

A young man juggles three coins with one hand for the amusement of a peasant family, but holds one more in the other hand behind his back.

X (Ten of Coins)

Five men in rags stare with coins for eyes.

IX (Nine of Coins)

A woman stands on a hill and hurls nine coins forward into the air. They are arranged in a “V” formation, like a flock of birds.

VIII (Eight of Coins)

Eight coins hang upon a wall, while a forger creates eight duplicates at a table.

VII (Seven of Coins)

A fortune-teller with a spread of (indistinct) tarot cards on a table, with seven coins in a pile from her last client; sometimes described as a gambler instead.

VI (Six of Coins)

A peasant with six coins in his hands smiles at a generous noble. The proud noble has his left hand on the peasant’s shoulder. Behind the noble stands a skeletal death figure, with his left hand on the noble’s shoulder.

V (Five of Coins)

A beggar sits cross-legged on the ground, face in his hands. Behind his head, five coins hang in the sky.

IV (Four of Coins)

A man stands with his arms folded, staring at the viewer. He smiles grimly. No coins are visible on this card.

III (Three of Coins)

Three coins lie on a plane of gold, arranged into a vertical line.

II (Two of Coins)

A man stands with a coin in each hand. Two men in robes, one on either side of him, each hold out a hand towards the coin.

I (Ace of Coins)

A severed head atop a golden disc.