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From Propaganda to Product

The Arthurian Legend in Modern Tarot Decks

In Britain and the United States, the legend of King Arthur has long served as a tool of political propaganda; however, in contemporary tarot decks focusing on Arthuriana, the initially Christian Arthurian legend is reappropriated for a predominantly pagan consumer base. This essay explores the employment of the legend in tarot cards marketed to a New Age and Neopagan audience steeped in the Celto-Arthuriana tradition. A survey of online reviews and discussions by pagan users suggests that using a pagan version of the Arthurian legend to appeal to a broad Neopagan consumer base has met with some success.

INITIALLY a tool of political propaganda for the newly established Norman monarchy in post-Conquest England, the King Arthur legend has proven a steady and reliable source of revenue for modern companies. Through board games, video games, music, film, and television, the entertainment industry boasts numerous popular items either loosely or deeply based in Arthurian

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tropes and figures, while other industries—including but by no means limited to baking, clothing, real estate, and investment banking—make extensive use of the names of people and places associated with the stories of King Arthur and his Knights of the Round Table.¹ This phenomenon which Elizabeth Sklar terms “Marketplace Arthuriana” is possible because of an idealization of the character of King Arthur, who from his appearance in Geoffrey of Monmouth’s *History of the Kings of Britain* through the present day has served in the cultural imagination first of England, and then of America, as an heroic figure worthy of emulation.² His basic *ethos* is that of a perfect Christian king in the medieval tradition,³ and the traits of nobility, courage, devotion, loyalty, and humility are hallmarks of these popular imaginings of Arthur, even as his status as “the once and future king” presents him as a figure of stability and longevity.⁴

While numerous literary texts are flatly critical of Arthur’s reign and of the behaviors of his knights, and while, as Edward Donald Kennedy notes

¹ For further study of the presence of Arthuriana in popular culture, Alan Lupack’s wide-ranging if slightly dated essay on the topic, “The Arthurian Tradition and American Popular Culture,” in Alan Lupack and Barbara Tapa Lupack, *King Arthur in America* (Cambridge: D.S. Brewer, 1999), 276–326, remains an excellent starting point. For more recent discussions, consult Elizabeth S. Sklar and Donald L. Hoffman, *King Arthur in Popular Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2002), especially the essays by Sklar (“Marketing Arthur: The Commodification of Arthurian Legend,” 9–23); Bert Olton (“Was That in the Vulgate? Arthurian Legend in TV Film and Series Episodes,” 87–100); Kristina Hildebrand (“Knights in Space: The Arthur of *Babylon 5* and *Doctor Who*,” 101–10); Dan Nastali (“Arthurian Pop: The Tradition in Twentieth-Century Popular Music,” 138–68) and Peter Corless (“Knights of Imagination: Arthurian Games and Entertainments,” 182–96). For the purposes of this essay, Sklar’s piece and Emily Auger’s “Arthurian Legend in Tarot,” 233–48, have provided important context. For the presence of King Arthur in popular film, Kevin J. Harty’s *Cinema Arthuriana: Twenty Essays*, rev. ed. (Jefferson: McFarland, 2002) remains the gold standard. More general discussion of the prevalence of medieval tropes and figures in popular Western culture can be found in David W. Marshall, *Mass Market Medieval: Essays on the Middle Ages in Popular Culture* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2007).

² Sklar, “Marketing Arthur,” 10.

³ For a discussion of the fundamental character of King Arthur as he appears in medieval texts, see Rosemary Morris, *The Character of King Arthur in Medieval Literature*, Arthurian Studies 4 (Woodbridge: D.S. Brewer, 1982), esp. 119–29. The characteristics presented by Morris in this chapter are those most commonly found in modern iterations of the King Arthur figure.

⁴ I wish to thank Tina Romanelli, Matt Carter, and Kristine Lee of UNC-Greensboro for generous and helpful critical feedback on earlier drafts of this essay, and Karolyn Kinane for editorial comments that substantially altered the original premise in favor of a more considered approach to the topic.

“in both medieval and modern literature there are many King Arthurs,” ultimately it is the idea of greatness tempered with faith and humanity set forth in his association with the Grail Quest and promulgated through the medievalism of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, that has appealed to the collective cultural imagination and rendered King Arthur eminently marketable, far beyond the merely literary or political realm.⁵

In an interesting turn of events brought about by the association of Arthur with Celtic mysticism first suggested by the scholarship of Roger S. Loomis and Jesse L. Weston in the middle of the twentieth century, Arthur has morphed in the New Age tradition from Christian political figurehead into a Neopagan tool of self-exploration and fulfillment. He is marketed as such in those tarot decks featuring Arthurian, Celtic, and Grail themes.⁶ Importantly and significantly, Arthurian tarot decks are not grounded in the actual literatures of Arthuriana—they are not, for example, based specifically on Malory’s *Le Morte d’Arthur*—but rather in twentieth-century discussion and analysis of the Arthurian tradition, particularly that which focused on the psychological implications of the Grail Quest as an individual path to enlightenment and which sought to place this historically Christian symbol in a tradition of paganism. In this essay, I expand on Emily Auger’s study of Arthurian decks as they figure in the overall tarot tradition with an exploration of how the Arthurian legend is appropriated and re-shaped in four Arthurian/Celtic/Grail-themed decks—the specifically Arthurian decks of Caitlin and John Matthews (1990; 2006) and Anna-Marie Ferguson (1995; 2010) and the Celtic deck by Helena Paterson (1990; 2009)—to meet the requirements set forth by the prototype Rider-Waite tarot deck and the exigencies of the marketplace.⁷ A survey of online reviews and comments of

⁵ Edward D. Kennedy, “Introduction,” *King Arthur: A Casebook*, Arthurian Characters and Themes 1 (New York: Routledge, 2002), xiv.

⁶ See especially Roger S. Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1927); *The Grail: From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1963); Jesse L. Weston, *From Ritual to Romance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1920).

⁷ Emily Auger, “Arthurian Legend.” It should be noted that in addition to the Arthurian Tarot discussed in this article, John Matthews also has created *The Grail Tarot: A Templar Vision* (London: Connections Book Publishing, 2007), which focuses on the Gnostic Christian tradition. I omit *The Grail Tarot* from this particular study both because of space limitations and because it departs so widely from the central focus of this article on Celtic Arthuriana. Matthews’s Grail deck is one that departs from mainstream Christian views, in favor of the Gnostic tradition. Matthews’s orientation is in keeping with the literary Grail tradition, which

these tarot sets strongly suggests that the appropriation of the Arthurian *ethos* in these products has found considerable success with New Age consumers predisposed to the concept of the personal quest. Reading these comments, it is clear that such consumers are willing to pay for items based in medievalism that speak to the notion of “Celtic Arthuriana” because of the associations with the notion of personal growth that have long been attached to the Grail quest. I argue that with the tarot tradition, the originally Christian Arthurian legend is re-appropriated for a largely non-Christian, Neopagan community invested in the notion of a shared human experience that can be discovered through divination and meditation on archetypal, universal symbols, such as those traditionally thought to be present in tarot.

Tarot decks are mainstreamed in the marketplace through their labeling as games, but it is certainly possible to argue, at least on the evidence of online reviews and discussions, that the majority of their purchasers intend to use them as tools of divination and psychological insight. This is their primary function as advertised by their creators and publishers.⁸ Serving as a method

has always been presented in nebulously mystical terms, but not with the traditional mainstream reception of the Grail as a Christian symbol, because many elements of the Gnostic tradition run contrary to some popular perceptions of modern Christian beliefs and practices. In this context, it is interesting to note that there is, in fact, a New Age path devoted to the union of Gnostic Christianity and paganism: “Christopaganism.” See Joyce and River Higginbotham, *ChristoPaganism: An Inclusive Path* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2009); Adelina St. Clair, *The Path of a Christian Witch* (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 2010).

⁸ See the back cover of the box for Anna-Marie Ferguson’s *Legend: The Arthurian Tarot*, which states that the deck: “draws on the wisdom and power of the greatest legend of all time to bring a new level of depth and magic to your readings. Every time you consult the *Legend* deck it awakens your deepest intuition and inspires rich, multi-leveled readings” (Woodbury: Llewellyn Publications, 1995). The accompanying book to Paterson’s Celtic tarot deck claims: “Esoterics believe the Tarot symbols form the unconscious link between the dual nature of man and his Creator ... the Tarot is a powerful source of inner wisdom and the means of acquiring relevant information” (New York: Sterling Publishing Company, 2009), 3–5. Both product descriptions highlight the purpose of tarot as being not one of entertainment, but instead of self-reflection and divination. This is not the language of games, but of a spiritual exercise. However, in the medieval era, tarot decks were used to play tarock, card games best known for introducing the practice of “triumphs,” or “trumps,” into card-playing; the association of tarot with divination first arose in the eighteenth century. The practice of using tarot decks for gaming is still present in continental Europe, but in America and the United Kingdom the focus today is on tarot primarily as a New Age spiritual tool, which makes sense as New Age spirituality originated in England and has been taken up primarily by UK and US practitioners. For a full history of tarot and its uses, see Michael Dummett and John McLeod, *A History of Games Played with the Tarot Deck*, 2 vols. (Lewiston: Edwin Mellen Press, 2004).

of focus and concentration through a system developed in and sustained since the fourteenth century,⁹ tarot decks permit their users to embroider personal meaning onto archetypal symbols and arrive at a more-or-less satisfactory conclusion regarding the question posed during any given reading. It stands to reason that tarot decks are produced for those interested in studying or actually engaged in such practices. While they are marketed as games, then, tarot decks are in actuality viewed by most modern users as tools and, as such, are closely aligned with the individually explorative tradition of New Age practitioners.

As Emily Auger points out, there are two primary types of modern tarot decks: annotative, those that incorporate readily-recognizable variations on the original modern Rider-Waite deck (1909), and discursive, which adhere to the organization of the deck into major and minor arcana but otherwise follow a particular mythological, cultural, or textual tradition. The Arthurian decks I am discussing in this essay can all be categorized as discursive.¹⁰ This is an important consideration because “purist” practitioners of Tarot generally eschew discursive decks in favor either of the Tarot de Marseille, the original Rider-Waite set, or another of the annotative decks, reasoning that the other decks are “not tarot.”¹¹ That leaves the obvious question: when these Arthurian decks have not only been published but have seen multiple reprints since their initial release—a sure sign in today’s marketplace of the economic success of a product—and when “tarot purists” appear to disdain the discursive decks in favor of the more traditional tarot, for whom are these Arthurian decks intended? It seems most likely that the Arthurian decks

⁹ The oldest surviving set of Tarot cards dates to 1392 and was created by artist Jacquemin Gringonneur for King Charles VI of France; mention of such decks made by clergy annoyed by their use among their congregations dates back to 1330 or so. See Joseph Campbell, “Symbolism of the Marseilles Deck,” in *Divine Revelations*, ed. Joseph Campbell and Richard Roberts (San Anselmo: Vernal Equinox Press, 1987), 9.

¹⁰ Emily E. Auger, *Tarot and Other Meditation Decks: History, Theory, Aesthetics, Typology* (Jefferson: McFarland, 2004), esp. chapter 3.

¹¹ There is no academically satisfactory way to qualify the term “purist” in this instance; it refers here to those who speak of themselves and are referred to by others as “purists.” For examples of this practice in context see David Colman, “When the Tarot Trumps All,” *New York Times*, November 11, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/13/fashion/alejandro-jodorowsky-and-his-tarot-de-marseille.html>; Tara Fae, “Pictorial Key Tarot Reviews,” *Aeclectic Tarot*, <http://www.aeclectic.net/tarot/cards/pictorial-key/review.shtml>; Jeanette Roth, “Tarot: From the Mind of Humankind,” *Timeless Spirit Magazine* 1 no. 5 (July 4, 2004), <http://www.timelessspirit.com/JULY04/tarot.shtml>; K. Mayberry, “Connolly Tarot,” <http://swordsqueen.tripod.com/reviews/connolly.html>.

as they are written and packaged are specifically targeted to appeal to New Age practitioners of forms of neo-Celtic spirituality grounded in medievalism. This essay examines that probability both from a market product-based stance and from the points of view of purchasers and users of the decks, at least those who engage in online reviews and discussions of these products.

The Influence of Joseph Campbell

The first evidence to this end is circumstantial, but both compelling and provocative: in the history of twentieth- and twenty-first century decks, what might aptly be labeled the first flowering of the Celto-Arthurian tarot tradition occurs in the decade following the PBS airing of Bill Moyers's six-part series of conversations with the popular and polarizing comparative mythologist Joseph Campbell, collectively entitled *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*.¹² This broadcast in turn followed the posthumous re-release of Campbell's 1979 monograph on the subject of the tarot.¹³ Campbell's interpretations of human mythological systems, not technically based on Jungian ideas of the collective consciousness but closely aligned with them due to their heavy emphasis on the role of archetypes, were instantly sensational and contentious; disdained by the world of academia, they were readily embraced by those seeking an elusive, universal psychological insight into human behavior.¹⁴ As was the case with his earlier work *The Hero With a Thousand Faces*, Campbell's *Power of Myth* was intended for a wide readership amongst the general public, but spoke in particular to people who felt disenfranchised by a modern American culture that valued money over individuals, immediate gratification over personal growth, and the new over the traditional. His syn-

¹² Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, produced by Joan Konner and Alvin H. Perlmutter, first aired on Public Broadcasting Service, June 21, 1988.

¹³ Joseph Campbell and Richard Roberts, *Tarot Revelations* (San Anselmo: Vernal Equinox Press, 1987).

¹⁴ In their comprehensive biography, Stephen and Robin Larsen point out that "Campbell never identified himself as a Jungian; when in Jungian circles, Campbell would remind them of the anthropological evidence of such processes as diffusion of mythological themes" (*A Fire in the Mind: The Life of Joseph Campbell* (New York: Doubleday, 1991), 450). The vast majority of Campbell's critics object to his idea of the monomyth; studies that specifically criticize his work in this vein include those of Lesley A. Northup, "Myth-Placed Priorities: Religion and the Study of Myth," *Religious Studies Review* 32 no. 1 (2006): 5–10 and Robert A. Segal, "Joseph Campbell's Theory of Myth," in *Sacred Narrative: Readings in the Theory of Myth*, ed. Alan Dundes (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), 256–69.

thesis of psychology and mythology, particularly as they centered around the concept of the Grail quest, presented such people with a template to work with as they sought their own *mythos*.¹⁵

It is likely no coincidence that the first tarot deck organized along Arthurian themes (R. J. Stewart's *Merlin Tarot* of 1988, published by Thorsons) and the first specifically Arthurian tarot deck (John and Caitlin Matthews's 1990 *Arthurian Tarot*, issued by Connections Book Publishing) both appeared within a few years of Campbell's death and the airing of *The Power of Myth*. This is a clear indication of the impact of Campbell's theories and of their perceived marketability to a public hungry for more of the same. Quite simply, prior to this watershed moment in myth studies, there was no Arthurian tarot deck. The renewed interest in myth studies generated by the success of *Power of Myth* was accompanied by a resurgence of interest in Celtic mysticism, the Grail quest, and Jungian archetypes brought about by Campbell's ideas of the monomyth and his championing of Weston's ideas of the "Goddess."¹⁶

¹⁵ See Joseph Campbell with Bill Moyers, *The Power of Myth* (New York: Doubleday, 1988), especially chapters one, five, and six; Joseph Campbell, *The Hero With a Thousand Faces* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1968), especially the Prologue.

¹⁶ According to Campbell, the two great mythological narratives that inform the spiritual, cultural, and moral evolution of Western society are the Goddess mysteries and the Hero's Journey; he combines the two into a monomyth by having the Hero encounter the Goddess (who he felt was incarnate in every woman) as a step in his formation. Jessie L. Weston, whose study of ritual informed Campbell's thinking on the subject, argued that the Grail was a medieval version of the Celtic goddess Ceridwen's magical cauldron of knowing, and this in turn was a continuation of ancient pagan fertility myth traditions (*From Ritual to Romance* [London: Cambridge University Press, 1920]). It is important to note that Weston's work echoed that of acclaimed Arthurian scholar Roger S. Loomis so far as the Grail's link to Celtic origins was concerned, although Loomis did not go so far as to discredit the Grail entirely as a Christian symbol, but rather sought to unify the two traditions by claiming the Grail quest as a seasonal myth of Celtic origin compatible with and informed by Christian overtones (Roger S. Loomis, *Celtic Myth and Arthurian Romance* [New York: Columbia University Press, 1926]; *The Grail From Celtic Myth to Christian Symbol* [Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1963]). Weston's pagan-centric view was in direct contradiction to the Christian belief in the Grail as the vessel containing the blood of Jesus and therefore man's salvation, and supported the vague but popular idea of Christian beliefs as having stemmed from those of earlier, pagan communities in which fertility rituals—and by association, goddess worship—were paramount. Weston's work, and that of Campbell, is highly controversial in academic circles (see note 14), but viewed as an important starting point for those interested in learning more about goddess worship, with the connection between Ceridwen's cauldron and the Holy Grail cited most often by self-proclaimed Wiccans; see Joann Keesey, "Celtic Cauldron," *Obsidian Magazine*, Issue 2 (1999) <http://www.obsidianmagazine.com/celticauldron.html>. This dichotomy between the critical and popular reception of Campbell's and Weston's works

This in turn seems a possible catalyst for the sudden and highly visible presence of Celto-Arthurian-themed tarot decks on the market. Since 1988, no fewer than a dozen decks specifically and generally linked with the Arthurian legend have been produced and reprinted.¹⁷ It appears that Campbell struck a cultural nerve with his ideas of the connected subconscious truths of human existence—the subconscious these tarot decks are intended to help their users access. At the very least, the creators of these decks—and, one must suppose in a competitive marketplace, their publishers—found the tenuous connections forged by Loomis, Weston, Campbell, and others between the Arthurian (Grail) tradition, Celtic pagan traditions, Jungian psychology, and New Age mysticism compelling and meaningful enough to be immortalized in deck after deck of tarot cards devoted to their exploration. Because scholarly critics have been so dismissive of Campbell's findings both during his lifetime and since, it is certain that they do not serve as the consumers to whom these products are marketed. It is the general public that finds Celtic traditions eternally fascinating; so much so, that anything labeled "Celtic" might well earn a second look from a buyer more concerned with how an object makes him or her feel in associative terms than with its authenticity as an item linked to real-world Celtic practices (ignoring for now the looseness of the term "Celtic"). Among the general public, it is New Age and Neopagan practitioners in search of guidance and assistance in their personal quests for growth and fulfillment as individuals who are most likely to find the Celtic Arthur of Loomis and Weston a compelling and meaningful figure.¹⁸

highlights important differences in scholarly and popular reception of the Arthurian legend, and especially the divide between popular scholarship (that written for a general audience) and the academic scholarship (produced by scholars primarily for other specialists). This divide remains largely underexplored in current Arthurian studies. Scott Cunningham, *Wicca: A Guide for the Solitary Practitioner* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1989.)

¹⁷ This number is also noted by Auger in "Arthurian Legend," 233. In addition to those discussed here, Arthurian-themed decks include John Matthews, *The Glastonbury Tarot* (Newburyport: Weiser Books, 1999); Julian de Burgh, *The Celtic Tarot* (New York: Thomas Dunne Books, 2000); Anna Franklin, *The Sacred Circle Tarot* (Woodbury: Llewellyn, 2002); Tracey Hoover, *The Ancestral Path Tarot* (Stamford: U.S. Games Systems, 2003); *The Tarot of the Holy Grail* by Lorenzo Tesio for Lo Scarabeo (Woodbury: Llewellyn, 2007); Colette Baron-Reid, *The Wisdom of Avalon Oracle Cards* (Carlsbad: Hay House, 2007); and *The Avalon Tarot* by Joseph Viglioga for Lo Scarabeo (Woodbury: Llewellyn, 2012).

¹⁸ Works by Loomis and Weston are specifically listed in the bibliography of the accompanying books for both Ferguson's and Matthews's tarot decks. One of the aspects of these decks most consistently praised by those of its users who post online reviews is how knowledgeable the creators are in Celtic Arthurian lore: Cory Underwood writes of the Matthews deck,

The overall organization of the Arthurian decks is similar to that of the original Rider-Waite prototype, but the cards themselves differ widely in their presentation, which underscores just how adaptable the legends really are and indicates that the contemporary market is open to (and is able to support) multiple products featuring Arthurian images and tropes. A full comparison of all of these decks is not possible in the scope of a single article, but a brief comparative analysis of the imagery found on representative cards from each deck, together with a general statement of each deck's *ethos*, suggests that the Arthurian decks appeal to a specifically Neopagan audience. A survey of comments and reviews made by users of these decks in online forums suggest that, while they remain revenue-generating products, they are received and valued by their consumers in a myriad of ways that fall quite outside of economic considerations.

The Archetype: The Rider-Waite Deck

The Rider-Waite deck of 1909 consists of 22 major arcana and 56 minor arcana cards, with the major arcana comprising a medieval hierarchy of authority and the minor arcana cards corresponding to the social estates (nobility, clergy, merchant, and peasant.) For its admirers, the most important attribute of the Rider Waite version is its role as the original modern tarot deck, as Katrina Black notes in her Amazon review: "I think that anyone who's interested in modern, intuitive tarot (as opposed to traditional, historical tarot buffs who follow the Marseilles path) MUST own a copy of the Rider-Waite-Smith deck, as it's the wellspring from which all the other modern decks have come."¹⁹ The Rider-Waite symbolism is also widely praised.

"I would recommend this boxed set to anyone with an interest in Tarot and the Arthurian legends, the creators of the book and deck certainly know their Celtic legends and it becomes amazingly clear when reading the book" ("Arthurian Tarot Reviews," *Aeclectic Tarot*, <http://www.aeclectic.net/tarot/cards/arthurian/review.shtml>); Donald M. Kraig specifically notes of Ferguson's accompanying book for the Legend deck that: "one thing I learned is that there are actually four sets of myths that make up the Arthurian legend: The Celtic legends, the early chroniclers, the medieval romances, and the Quest for the Holy Grail. This book unites the myths in a way that made the cycles of myths easy for me to follow and understand" ("Review of *Legend: The Arthurian Tarot*," *The Llewellyn Encyclopedia*, March 3, 2008, <http://www.llewellyn.com/encyclopedia/print.php?id=16143>). Loomis and Weston were the central figures in the early twentieth-century "Celtic Arthur" movement. The listing of their works in in the bibliography for both companion texts reflects this.

¹⁹ Katrina Black, "The modern classic, in it's [sic] original subtle beauty," "Customer Review," *Amazon*, March 25, 2004, <http://www.amazon.com/review/R3GJ3UOPWZ8ITB>.

All of the cards incorporate symbolism congruent with Arthur Waite's understanding of the hermetic and mystical elements in the Judeo-Christian tradition, which is explained in depth in Waite's *Pictorial Key to the Tarot*.²⁰ What is significant is that the Rider-Waite deck is comprised of archetypal figures loosely associated with gods and goddesses but generally open to wide interpretation. This is noted in many reviews, such as that of Richard K. Kostoff: "These images are the original archetypes that would cause such a dramatic interest in this rather obscure means of 'fortune telling' ... They have mystery and depth to them which must be experienced first hand."²¹ Joseph B. Mullen goes a step further, echoing the sentiment of many tarot users who prefer "intuitive" readings over being "told what to think" by an accompanying book: "I purposely ignore the canned interpretations. Most of the time they are too confusing and contradictory anyhow. Just stare at the pictures and let them reveal their own story. That's the beauty of this deck. It is rich in symbolism and detail—so much so that you can look at the same card again and again and come away with a very different meaning."²²

This concern that one not be influenced by outside factors, such as the accompanying book or the views of the company that produced the deck, is the source of what is by far the most common complaint about the (reissued) Rider-Waite tarot deck, which is that it is visibly stamped with the logo of the reissuing company (U.S. Gaming Systems). For some users, this modern corporate stamp is a violation of the original, individualist purpose and intent of the tarot; one anonymous reviewer assigning the deck a one-star (out of five) rating writes: "I thought I would try the Rider Waite deck. When I got them, imagine my surprise and disgust when "© US GAMES" is printed on the front of each card! Though in small print, it is quite legible and very much unwelcomed."²³ The sentiment is echoed many times over.²⁴ The complaints

²⁰ Arthur Waite, *Pictorial Key to the Tarot* (1911; repr., New York: Carol Publishing, 1993).

²¹ Richard K. Kostoff, "Truely [sic] ground zero for all!" "Customer Review," *Amazon*, October 5, 2005, <http://www.amazon.com/review/R3LS8T0JYS3T1N>. I have preserved the original spelling, grammar, and syntax of all reviewers' comments throughout this essay.

²² Joseph B. Mullen, "Forget those psychic hotlines!" "Customer Review," *Amazon*, October 21, 2001, <http://www.amazon.com/review/R3N6G7JN7CYIL6>.

²³ Anon., "So-so reproduction, bad trademarking," "Customer Review," *Amazon*, February 4, 2003, <http://www.amazon.com/review/RDY7WDHGA5K89>.

²⁴ A reviewer self-entitled "gofightlose" writes: "there is a small printed branding on the face of every card. Very intrusive when dealing with these. Otherwise it's a great pack" ("Good quality cards with a few problems," "Customer Review," *Amazon*, February 27, 2011, <http://www.amazon.com/review/R2QDDT7IK2RQ53>); Dusty White points out that this

about branding appearing on a deck of tarot cards are limited to its presence on this replica of the original Rider-Waite deck; in general, complaints about the Arthurian decks focus on the quality of the illustrations, the quality of the guidance offered by their creators in the accompanying books, and the quality and accuracy of the symbolism on the cards themselves. These users of Arthurian decks are apparently as committed to using the tarot for the purposes of gaining knowledge as are their Rider-Waite counterparts.

This is clear in how the cards are presented and how they are consulted. In each of the Arthurian decks, the archetypal major arcana figures are supplemented by association with an explicitly-stated Arthurian figure, object, or place. The minor arcana are by turns supplemented and supplanted by the Arthurian, sometimes with no discernible association with the original card's meaning. In each instance, the meaning of the card is restated to accommodate the Arthurian figure, sometimes drastically altering the card's original associations. For example, in the Rider-Waite deck, card one, that of The Magician, presents "a youthful figure in the robe of a magician, having the countenance of divine Apollo, with smile of confidence and shining eyes ... This card signifies the divine motive in man ... It is also the unity of indi-

is specifically a condition of modern, corporate marketplace activity: "On this deck you will find the copyright symbol for US Games on the face of every card. This may or may not bother you, but it is a fact of modern life. If you hunt down a pre-1971 PCSRW deck you may find one undefaced by such marks but that doesn't mean you can copy-right it" ("A new version of an old classic," "Customer Review," *Amazon* June 12, 2011, <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1TH2SHINW3FG1>.) Bookfreak takes to task those users evincing anti-marketplace attitudes: "There have been several comments regarding the US Games copyright mark on the cards. The type is an extremely small and thin font appearing in the lower right margin. It's probably 3 point type. I personally didn't even notice it or register an annoyance at first seeing it. In my opinion, not all corporations are 'beasts' and I think US Games, Inc. should be credited for keeping the art of tarot alive and readily accessible to us. If you are that offended by their corporate status, buy tarot card designs from another company so you don't feel that you are supporting 'the Beast.' Also, it may not have been mentioned by anyone that on the box it states 'Copyright 1993 The Estate of A.E. Waite,' so the original creators are still actively in ownership, which I am happy about. If anything bothers me, it's 'Printed in China' on the box" ("A soft, subtle palette that fits the era of Illustration," "Customer Review," *Amazon*, November 27, 2011, <http://www.amazon.com/review/R5ZO62VoDSP39>). Angelo Nasios initiated a petition on change.org demanding among other things that the company remove the copyright logo from the cards. Taken together, this all points to an ambivalence in traditional tarot users towards tarot decks being branded with company logos: the intrusion of the US Games logo on the traditional imagery is viewed by many users as anti-spiritual and contrary to the tarot *ethos*. They do not view tarot as a game, but as an integral aspect of their spiritual practice.

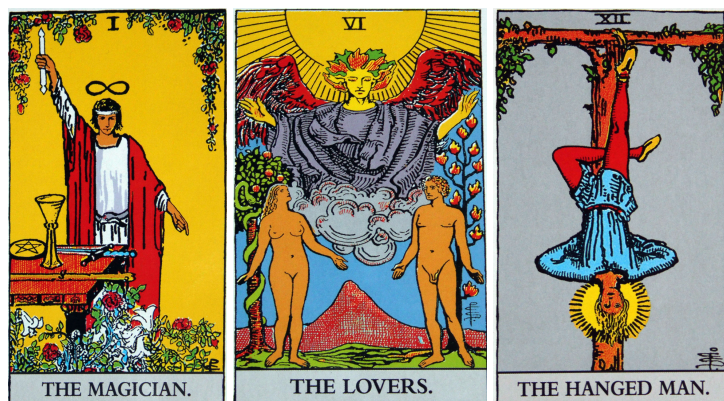


Figure 1. The Magician, the Lovers, and the Hanged Man (Rider-Waite)

vidual being on all planes.” Card six, The Lovers, shows “two human figures, male and female, unveiled before each other, as if Adam and Eve when they first occupied the paradise of the earthly body ... This is in all simplicity the card of human love ... in a very high sense, the card is a mystery of the Covenant and Sabbath.” And the Hanged Man of card twelve is described thus: “The gallows from which he is suspended forms a Tau cross, while the figure—from the position of the legs—forms a fylfot cross ... It is a card of profound significance, but all that significance is veiled ... it expresses the relation, in one of its aspects, between the Divine and the Universe.”²⁵ As these examples indicate, while the Rider-Waite cards are intended to convey multiple associations through images comprised of an amalgamation of Christian and esoteric symbolism, they present with singular and straightforward identifications. Rider-Waite is a traditional “working deck” that requires its user to interpret the reading according to his or her own understanding of tarot and personal association with the symbolism on a given card.

These cards have been rewritten in the Arthurian tarot tradition. This is in keeping with the nature of a discursive deck but is confusing in relation to the tarot tradition they seek to join. All four of the discursive Arthurian decks are separated into major and minor arcana, loosely arranged according to the Rider-Waite archetype, but each deck then realigns the archetypal and divinatory presentations in conjunction with its own *ethos*, which in turn

²⁵ Waite, *Pictorial Key to the Tarot*, 72, 92, 116.

is informed by the deck's target audience. It is impossible to divorce the creation of these decks from the fact that they are products marketed to consumers, and critics of New Age spirituality might focus on this marketplace aspect, emphasizing the mass-production and copycat aspects of these multiple Arthurian decks without considering how they are received and used by those who practice tarot reading. Why are there multiple decks seemingly based around the same subject? Is this simply an indication of a company's capitalizing on profitable products, or a rival company's trying to profit from its own version of a product? The views of users, at least those who choose to voice their opinions online, suggest that this is only part of the story. Such reviewers would perhaps take such market-centered criticisms to be a facile and dismissive view that neglects to take into account their own experiences and the needs that these decks help to serve. If we are to assume for the moment that the opinions expressed in such online reviews and comments are generally representative of those of serious tarot users, the differences between these decks are important, with each deck appealing to a slightly different demographic based on aesthetic preferences and the practicalities of use.

The Matthews Deck

The Arthurian deck by John and Caitlin Matthews is seen by its proponents as being most true to the Arthurian legend (as it has been transmitted through and associated with the Celtic/Grail quest line of thought pursued and promulgated by Loomis, Weston, and Campbell). Comments in user reviews of the deck show this to be the case: "Wysewomon," who has been using this deck for a decade, writes that "the scholarship is unrivaled. Whereas some recent decks leave out a lot of the ceremonial magick symbolism and replace it with nothing, the Matthews have developed an entirely new symbolism, just as rich and detailed, based on Arthurian legend."²⁶ Janet Boyer cites the Matthews as "Renowned experts in Celtic, Arthurian and shamanistic spirituality" and calls the deck particularly good for those "captivated by Arthurian legend and Celtic lore."²⁷ Richard Kostoff acknowledges the appropriative aspect of the originally Christian Arthurian legend, noting: "This

²⁶ Wysewomon, "For the Serious Worker," "Customer Reviews," *Amazon*, November 19, 2001, <http://www.amazon.com/review/R34X6A1ZNQDLAH>.

²⁷ Janet Boyer, "Review of the Updated 2007 Version," "Customer Reviews," *Amazon*, May 17, 2007, <http://www.amazon.com/review/R31O4XQU98oY76>.



Figure 2. The Magician, the Lovers, and the Hanged Man (Matthews)

is easily the best New Age spin on an old legend.”²⁸ His comment in particular points to an awareness among at least some consumers that this is not Arthur as he is commonly known, but rather filtered through a Neopagan lens and intended for a Neopagan audience.

A representative sample of cards shows this deck to be specifically aligned with the Celtic-grounded Arthurian Grail tradition promulgated by Loomis and Weston. The deck appears to be most popular with the Neopagan community that self-identifies as Celtic shamanist, in contrast to those simply interested in the practice of tarot, who might prefer the original Rider-Waite deck with its more straightforward symbolism. Taken in order, the Matthews’ deck presents card one as Merlin (the Magician), card six as the White Hart from the Tale of Enid and Geraint, and card twelve as the Wounded King from the Tale of the Dolorous Blow. In the *Hallowquest* accompanying volume to the deck, Merlin, who like the magician in the Rider-Waite deck is cloaked and accompanied by the *orobouros*, symbolic of rebirth and infinity, is described as “the inner herald of dreams, relaying the messages of the Otherworld in symbolic form. He is also prophet and seer. He enables the manifestation of events ... through his mastery of the four elements ... his real magic lies in his balanced mediation of inner and outer worlds.” This has clearly shifted in meaning from the original magician figure presented in

²⁸ Richard K. Kostoff, “The Pick of the Litter!” “Customer Reviews,” *Amazon*, September 21, 2005, <http://www.amazon.com/review/RPV46ZLF3GPGO>.

the Rider-Waite deck, with the Merlin figure presented far more explicitly in terms of his functions as a prophet, in keeping with the Merlin figure in the Arthurian tradition. As a divinatory figure, the Matthews write him as “the impulse of creation; imaginative insight; mastery through disciplined skill; initiative; self-confidence; perception on all levels; alignment to and free flow with one’s life patterns.”²⁹ While he is archetypally aligned with his character in the Arthurian legend, his divinatory function remains the same as that of the Rider-Waite magician—a figure of “the divine motive in man” or creativity, at one with his nature.

The White Hart (Lovers) card is described archetypally as “the Otherworldly messenger into spiritual adventure and the purity of love ... It also represents the silver chain of sexual desire which is between men and women, but it also enhances that desire into love that is strong as death.”³⁰ The keywords associated with its divinatory meaning are “Love, both sexual and spiritual; the vision of inner beauty; emotional ties; trust; the marriage of minds and hearts; platonic friendship; fulfillment of desire.”³¹ Again, rather than sticking to a general symbolism into which the querent might read his or her own meanings, the Matthews have developed the meaning of this card into a more specific set of keywords associated with the legend to which they have affixed the card, in this case the tested love of Edith and Gereint.

In the case of card twelve, the Matthews have abandoned the traditional Hanged Man entirely in favor of the Wounded King, who represents “the redemptive sacrifice of the Grail mysteries” and whose suffering brings “wisdom and insight, not only for himself but for his people.” In this deck, the card symbolizes the questions of the grail quest: “What is this about? How may I remedy this?” and its divinatory meaning is presented as “wisdom gained through hardship and experience; spiritual insight; commitment to inner principles ... self-sacrifice.”³² Any resemblance to the original Hanged Man of the Rider-Waite deck is obscured by the need to align this figure with the Grail quest in order to maintain the thematic unity of the deck. In turn, judging by the reviews, it is this theme of the quest for self-discovery as it is embedded in the Celtic Grail Arthurian legend that appeals to the deck’s users and ensures its place on the market as an item of continued interest for practitioners of Celtic Neopaganism in its various forms.

²⁹ Caitlin and John Matthews, *Hallowquest* (Hammersmith: Aquarian Press, 1990), 42.

³⁰ Ibid, 50. “Love that is strong as death” is a quotation from Song of Songs 8.6.

³¹ Ibid, 50, here referencing Shakespeare’s Sonnet 116.

³² Ibid, 59.



Figure 3. The Magician, the Lovers, and the Hanged Man (Ferguson)

The Ferguson *Legend* Deck

The Ferguson deck is even more of a deviation from the original Rider-Waite archetypes in its attempt to adhere to a version of the Arthurian legend that focuses more heavily on the user's relationships both with self and with the world at large; far from the relative simplicity of the Rider-Waite deck, the Legend deck presents brightly illustrated cards lush with detail, an aspect highly prized by its devotees. Card one is still a cloaked Merlin, as in the Matthews' deck, but in this instance the *orobouros* is jettisoned in favor of a wolf companion and Merlin is associated with the astrological sign of Mercury, symbols that place Merlin in relationship with the natural and astral worlds. Ferguson's Merlin is described as standing for "skill and wisdom. The noble use of one's talents. A state of harmony with one's environment. Possession of the power of influence. A wise counselor. Sensitivity to unseen powers. Independent thoughts. Awareness of one's role in the community."³³ All of this in addition to self-confidence, strength of will, and self-discipline. The general idea remains one of balance and authority, but the specific details both in the card's imagery and in the textual explanatory notes are greatly altered to fit the relationship-focused *schema* of the deck.

In the case of the lovers, Ferguson substitutes Gareth and Lyones, pairs them with the astrological sign of Gemini, and states that they symbolize

³³ Anna-Marie Ferguson, *A Keeper of Words* (St. Paul: Llewellyn Publications, 1995), 33.

“the blossoming of a valuable and balanced relationship, intimate though not necessarily sexual. A dance; a connection on a higher level. Infatuation. Mutual understanding and deep emotions. Harmonious flow of energy ... Trust and free will.”³⁴ Again, we see deviance from both the Rider-Waite and the Matthews’ decks in that Ferguson stresses the importance of intimate, though not specifically sexual, relationships. What is key with the lovers, as with all the cards in this deck, is the idea of close and meaningful connection.

Ferguson replaces the Hanged Man with the “Castle Perilous” and assigns this card to the astrological sign of Neptune.³⁵ Like the Matthews, she endows this altered version of the Hanged Man with the divinatory meaning of self-sacrifice and the gaining of wisdom through experience, but in Ferguson’s deck the Grail quest is not the central focus of this card; rather, it is the continuation of the story of Gareth and Lyones presented in the Lovers, suggesting that this deck generally corresponds to the divinatory meanings assigned to these cards in the contemporary Matthews’ deck. That said, it is far more concerned with the self than the earlier Rider-Waite tarot and even the Matthews set. This aspect of the deck branches into an exploration of the self in relation to others and to the greater world that is especially prized by its users; Nellie Levine, a longtime practitioner of tarot divination, remarks specifically upon this relational aspect of the deck, writing: “It is wonderfully ‘cooperative’—there is a true and potent interaction between myself and each card, and between the cards themselves.”³⁶ The other major aspect of Ferguson’s deck that appeals most to its users is the illustrations; nearly every review in the Amazon marketplace remarks upon the cards’ beauty. While like the Matthews’, the *Legend* deck clearly appeals to an audience interested in the Arthurian myth, reviews indicate that the cards appeal to individuals who are also interested in fostering relationships, making connections, and engaging with beautiful images, though not always at the expense of divination.

The Celtic tarot by Helena Paterson both deviates from and closely aligns with the Rider-Waite original in ways different both from the Matthews’ Arthurian deck and the *Legend* deck by Ferguson. She seeks to integrate more imagery from a wider range of mythological sources, appealing perhaps to a wider range of Neopagans interested in forging connections between mythological systems in an effort to arrive at a universal view of the world, or those

³⁴ Ibid, 53.

³⁵ Ibid, 77.

³⁶ Nellie Levine, “Legend: The Arthurian Tarot by Anna-Marie Ferguson,” *Illuminated Tarot*, <http://www.illuminationtarot.com/legend.php>.

who are interested in Campbell's monomyth. In her hands, the magician in card one becomes an Archdruid, associated with Mercury as in the Ferguson deck, but reinstating the infinity symbol present in the Rider-Waite deck and suggested by the *orobouros* in the Matthews' set. The divinatory meaning she assigns to this card, however, is that of a juggler: "it may appear at times that the querent is being manipulated in some strange way. The positive response is to rely on intuitive and meditative thought to determine right course of action. The surrounding cards hold the answers as to why this is happening, or perhaps what is more important, who is responsible." Paterson's view of this card as "testing the integrity of the soul and actions of the querent" is only circuitously related to the concept of unification on all levels of being and the divine in man presented as the meaning of this card in the Rider-Waite deck, even as its image continues to suggest the Rider-Waite meaning of unification.³⁷

Paterson presents Tristan and Iseult as the traditional Celtic Arthurian lovers in card six, aligning them as does Ferguson with the astrological sign of Gemini and identifying them as symbolic of bringing together "the best aspects of a partnership in both men and women" and signifying "great rapport and understanding" in the same vein as the Matthews' and Ferguson cards. In the Rider-Waite deck, the association of human (sexual) love is explicitly stated, and in Paterson's deck she specifically classifies this as love between a man and a woman along the Adam and Eve archetype: "not homosexual love, because the lovers are symbolic of the dual or polarity of energies."³⁸ This is in contrast to Ferguson's version in particular, with its emphasis on close relationships of any type between any pair of humans.

Finally, Paterson's card twelve, the Hanged Man, depicts a male figure, but in her explanatory notes she (perhaps oddly) associates the card directly with Arianrhod, a Celtic moon goddess commonly taken to represent the hidden undercurrents of magic and insight available through suspended animation and suffering.³⁹ While the underlying meaning of self-sacrifice presented by the Matthews' and Ferguson decks is preserved in this version of the card, Paterson also aligns it with the ideas of psychic and subconscious development presented in the Rider-Waite Hanged Man. Paterson's deck therefore is easily the most difficult in terms of discerning both the Rider-

³⁷ Helena Paterson, *The Celtic Tarot* (New York: Sterling Publishing, 1990), 30, 31.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 43–44.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 57–59.

Waite origins and what Paterson intends as the primary associations embroidered on the cards, probably because it lacks a true thematic unity in the vein of the Arthurian one present in both the decks of the Matthews and of Ferguson, yet seeks to impose a “Celtic” worldview that includes some Arthurian material onto the original, more general archetypes.

For some users, this deck is unsuccessful because of this attempt to integrate so many mythologies. One anonymous reviewer posted that “While the deck has the traditional Celtic interwoven knots and designs and mentions figures from Celtic mythology, I didn’t get much of a Celtic feel from it. There are almost no animals in it and no trees, not even in the Hanged Man card. Pagan Celtic mythology is strongly overlaid—to the point of being muffled and erased—with Christianity, Greek zodiacs, and the Olympic pantheon.”⁴⁰ On the other hand, this deck is praised by other users for its openness to a wide range of interpretations; as Levirgian notes: “You will find associations throughout this deck and book set that comprehensively associates the tarot with ash trees, oaks, mistletoe, blase-blase, and the four elements. It associates traditional tarot meanings with well-known figures of Celtic, mostly Arthurian, lore. You can’t do better than this deck for tying the tarot to Celtic lore. It also links many cards to astrological symbols that predate Arthurian legend.”⁴¹ The contradictory nature of these reviews at once speaks to how invested tarot users are in the tools of their practice, and also how difficult it is to satisfy the needs of a wide range of users with a single deck. The disparate reception of the Celtic tarot provides at least one plausible reason for the presence in the marketplace of the multiple, similar-yet-different Arthurian-themed tarot decks.

The Commoditized Arthurian Tarot

That Arthurian tarot decks are created and produced as much for turning a profit as for spiritual guidance is a provocative claim to make, but one that can be substantiated by the way in which these decks are packaged and sold. The Arthurian tarot of Caitlin and John Matthews presents itself straightforwardly as such (in comparison with Rider Waite or another more traditional tarot deck), with the Emperor/Arthur card illustrating the box. It is accom-

⁴⁰ Anon., “The not-really Celtic Tarot,” “Customer Reviews,” *Amazon*, February 9, 2000, <http://www.amazon.com/review/RZMSV7OZ2RQJJ>.

⁴¹ Levirgian, “Celtic to the Core,” “Customer Reviews,” *Amazon*, February 25, 2000, <http://www.amazon.com/review/RG93T50J68BT7>.

panied by an eighty-page booklet explaining the foundational ideas behind the deck and the meaning of the cards both upright and reversed. Mentioned seemingly in passing on the last page of the booklet is the meditation course available to accompany and expand upon the deck. This course is centered around an accompanying volume that explores the ideas and foundations of Celto-Arthuriana more deeply, along the lines of the materials first presented by Weston and Loomis and enlarged upon by Campbell.⁴² The implication is that serious practitioners will want to enroll in the course and purchase this book, while mere dabblers will be satisfied with the deck and its accompanying booklet. The embedded rhetorical appeal here is to a strong desire to know more, to be fluent with one's own psyche, and to be grounded in a longstanding and storied tradition such as that of Arthur and the Celts. In this instance, this appeal serves as a foundational marketing tool.

Likewise, the book, although sold separately, refers to itself as an accompanying volume for the tarot that serves as the basis for the text, suggesting that readers will want to purchase the deck in order to use the book's wisdom more fully.⁴³ Both centering around the Matthews' ideas of the hallows and the Grail quest as a path to spiritual enlightenment, the deck and accompanying book could be sold as a set, but that would mean fewer sales and less exposure. Selling the deck as a "game" and the book as the text for a course (also available separately for a registration fee) widens the possible general market for this product, while still appealing foundationally to the New Age, Neopagan culture that views itself as both mystical and interested in self-improvement through education in myth and spirituality. This multivalent blend of psychology and myth, coming on the heels of the success of the *Power of Myth*, should not be dismissed as merely circumstantial in a culture in which profit margins matter. Because, as noted earlier in this essay, so many users of this deck specifically comment on John and Caitlin Matthews' extensive knowledge and scholarship in Celtic and Arthurian legend as their primary impetus for purchasing this deck, it clearly succeeds in attracting a demographic interested in a fairly traditional, yet more intellectually oriented approach to using tarot divination in their spiritual practices.

In the case of Anna-Marie Ferguson's *Legend* deck, the probability of its being intended at least in part as a platform for the writer to expand her influence in the increasingly popular market niche of Celtic-Arthuriana myth is

⁴² Matthews and Matthews, *Hallowquest*.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 12.

even more pronounced. This deck is packaged in a box featuring a border of oak-leaf scroll reminiscent of the Celtic designs of illuminated manuscripts such as the *Book of Kells*, while the illustration in the center of the box cover is the Queen of Cups card, a representation of Britannia, according to Ferguson's interpretation of the Arthurian legend. This makes sense thematically, as Britannia is the country ruled by King Arthur, the most perfect Christian king, and the cups suit is historically linked to the clergy, represented by the chalice.⁴⁴ In this wise, the Britannia card can be seen as being the seat of the chalice associated with the Holy Grail; however, this is not what was meant by Ferguson, who writes in the booklet accompanying the card deck that in this deck, cups are related to emotion.⁴⁵ Further, the image on the cover of the box does not bear the label "Britannia" but appears as the Queen of Cups only; it is not until one opens the deck that her identity—according to Ferguson's ordering of the Arthurian legend—becomes fully apparent. What is evident to the buyer is that this is a card featuring a woman clad in flowing robes of purple decorated with vines and leaves, wearing a wreath of flowers, bordered by trees, standing before a waterfall, and accompanied by a cat. How this figures Britain is something I will not attempt to decipher, but what is certain is that the symbolism would appeal to those interested in medievalism and in Celtic art and culture, and to practitioners of Wicca, with its emphasis on the Goddess and nature. The reception of users, at least those whose views are visible through online comments, indicates that the particular choice not to have King Arthur on the cover of a deck devoted to his legend has made this deck more attractive to female Neopagan consumers, especially those who identify as practitioners of a Goddess-based spirituality, or at least those who focus on relationship and connection, two central aspects of this particular branch of Neopaganism.

The text on the back of the box states that the deck comes with a booklet including guidance for interpreting the cards. What is not specified until after the purchase is made and the sealed deck opened is that Ferguson more

⁴⁴ Campbell, "Symbolism," 9.

⁴⁵ Ferguson, "Legend," 5. The traditional distinction of the tarot suites—swords/nobility, cups/clergy, coins/merchants, and staves(clubs)/peasants (Campbell, "Symbolism," 9)—in the *Legend* deck is transformed, nearly unrecognizable: swords stand for action, cups for emotions; spears (which were staves in the original decks) for ideas; and shields, replacing coins, for the material world. This aligns the *Legend* deck more closely with the psychological (Jungian) approach to individuation through meditation on the cards, further distancing it from the annotative tradition.

explicitly than Caitlin and John Matthews intends for her deck to be used with the (sold separately, and more expensive) accompanying book. Ferguson writes in the enclosed booklet: “For practical reasons, the Arthurian aspect is only briefly addressed in this little booklet. One will find the stories associated with each card, the history, the symbolic imagery, and further card interpretation in *Legend’s* accompanying book *A Keeper of Words*.”⁴⁶ It is astonishing that the very aspect that renders this deck distinctive from other tarot decks—its grounding in Arthuriana—goes virtually unaddressed in the introductory booklet accompanying the deck. In order to understand Ferguson’s illustrations and thus to use the deck as it is intended to be used, the consumer must purchase the book as well—a fact discovered after the initial investment has been made. While there are a number of plausible practical reasons that the two items are sold separately, it is interesting that Ferguson essentially implies that the book holds the key to understanding and using the deck. She mentions its availability for purchase at several points in the text of the accompanying booklet. It is logical to conclude that the initial purchase of the deck, inspired for many consumers at least in part by an interest in Arthur, the Celtic, or in ideas of the Goddess/female divine, is also intended at least in part to create a market for the book, which is a blend of personal history, the history of tarot, Arthurian legend, and studies of mythology. Grounded as it is in the author’s own views, the book would otherwise not be likely to find such a wide audience. It is certainly not a book that would appeal on an academic level to scholars of the occult, the Celtic tradition, or the Arthurian legend, although general readers with an interest in the New Age might find a great deal to interest them.

Keeper of Words is marketed as a tool that “unlocks the archetypes within Arthurian legend to add another layer of interpretive context to the Tarot—and taps the power of both to open new doorways into your psyche and awaken the visionary in you.”⁴⁷ The language of this statement is grounded deeply in the Jungian ideals of the collective conscious that serve as the basis for many New Age psychological practices and in the language of myth as presented by Joseph Campbell. Some consumers might find it disingenuous of Ferguson to write in the Preface to *Keeper of Words* that “Embarrassing though it is, I must admit that for years the two subjects [tarot and Arthur] stood side-by-side upon my shelf without my recognizing their compatibility.

⁴⁶ Ferguson, “Legend,” 1.

⁴⁷ Text on the back cover of *Keeper of Words*.

Nor did I read of the connection, which has been pointed out by others in the past, most notably Jesse Weston ... The idea of combining the Tarot and the Arthurian legend eventually came to me while on a long, late drive.”⁴⁸ Ferguson protests too much, perhaps, here and it is evident that her research, which she claims is the product of many years of serious study, has been influenced by numerous outside sources, protestations to the contrary notwithstanding. For a general readership intending to practice divination and psychological exploration with the deck, however, this statement paints Ferguson as a true visionary, one who was inspired to pair Arthur and the tarot as if by a dream. Therefore, she is someone whose work can be construed as meaningful and informed in the field of Neopagan occult mysticism. This suggests at least an implicit attempt to establish Ferguson as a visionary in her own right, perhaps in order to attract a following that would then be available for later products. Though this is merely speculative, such an intent in turn implies that her target audience is others interested in such visionary work.

Arthur and/as Product

The mere presence of Arthur seems in many cases to be enough to generate interest in a product, however tenuous his connections to it may be; as Elizabeth Sklar notes, “the Arthurian legend is part of our cultural currency” and “the Arthurian legend and its icons are as securely entrenched in the public domain as McDonald’s golden arches.”⁴⁹ Helena Paterson’s Celtic tarot deck speaks to this phenomenon. Unlike the Matthews’ and Ferguson tarots, Paterson’s deck is not separated from the accompanying volume, but in this case that is not necessarily a benefit to its users, as both deck and book are a confused amalgam of pagan and Christian cultures loosely joined by the theme of “Celtic” and featuring Arthurian figures, seemingly intended to fit the deck for an audience consisting of nearly anyone.⁵⁰ Draw-

⁴⁸ Ferguson, *Keeper of Words*, xv–xvi.

⁴⁹ Sklar, “Marketing Arthur,” 10.

⁵⁰ The accompanying book is, in fact, the primary complaint of posters of user reviews on Amazon: “The book ... is fairly worthless. Too bad it only comes as a set” one reviewer notes (“Nice Major Arcana,” “Customer Reviews,” *Amazon*, March 5, 1999, <http://www.amazon.com/review/R1NBEANLSOKA99>) while for Richard K. Kostoff, “The accompanying book is terrible. There are many other books that can deliver historically accurate histories and meanings. There seems to be much misinformation on the authors behalf. The history of the Tarot is laughable by todays [sic] standard. The history of the Celts is summed up in a few pages. Very unfulfilling. Too much time is spent on picking a significator. I feel this book

ing from the pagan Celtic (largely Irish and specifically Druidic) pantheistic myth tradition explored by Neopagan/Wiccan devotees, Paterson seemingly at random also picks and chooses from the monotheistic Irish-Catholic and Celto-Arthurian traditions to supplement the deck, so that the High Priestess is an amalgamation of Ceridwen and the Lady of the Lake; the Empress card is the Earth goddess Tailltiu (Maeve), but the Emperor is Arthur Pendragon; the magician is Mercury/Mugher/an Archdruid, but pictured with the Grail; the lovers are Tristan and Iseult, while the Hierophant is at once the Pope (as in the Rider-Waite tradition) and the Willow tree and the chariot is the cart of Cú Chulainn; Judgment is both an Angel blowing the horn of Gabriel and the Alder tree; the hermit is Merlin, but the Wheel of Fortune is linked with the Morrigan. The minor arcana in this deck features a number of Arthurian personalities as well, claiming them all to be “Celtic,” clearly in generalized accordance with the Celto-Arthurian tradition espoused by Weston and Loomis and supported by Campbell.⁵¹

Of tarot decks featuring Arthurian themes and figures, this is by far the least cohesive and most clearly representative of my contention that Arthur is a commodity that broadens the deck’s appeal (It’s Celtic! It’s pagan! It’s Christian! It’s Arthurian!). In this deck more so than the others the tension between the pagan origins of modern tarot practices and the Christian origins of the Arthurian legend is readily apparent, as its users have noted.⁵² Further, in the accompanying book for the deck, Paterson claims to be reclaiming an ancient tradition by mapping Celtic associations (back) onto the tarot,

could use a second edition, by maybe a new author. My suggestion is to toss the book entirely and read the cards intuitively” (“Great Art ... Poor Book,” “Customer Reviews,” *Amazon*, September 6, 2005, <http://www.amazon.com/review/R18JI5NPN9MDSH>).

⁵¹ The Arthurian figures present in the minor arcana are Arthur, again (this time, the King of Wands), Percival (The Knight of Wands), Meliodas of Lyonesse (The King of Cups), Elizabeth of Lyonesse (The Queen of Cups), Galahad (The Knight of Cups), Tristan of Lyonesse (The page of cups), Uriens of Gore (The King of Swords), Morgan le Fay (The Queen of Swords), Balin (The Knight of Swords), Gawaine of Orkney (The Page of Swords), Lot of Orkney (The King of Coins), Margawse(Morgause) of Orkney (The Queen of Coins) and Bors (The Knight of Coins). Paterson seems to have chosen those characters tied to a geographic place associated with the Celts, but aside from this the associations between character and designation are generally more indicative of the adaptability of the Arthurian legends than of their overall suitability as Celtic figures. It is interesting that Guinevere does not appear; Arthur’s Queen of Wands instead is Boudicca. This suggests that at the time of the deck’s creation, Guinevere did not feature or was not considered a desirable element in the Celto-Arthurian tradition being explored by Paterson in this deck.

⁵² See note 40 above.

which is problematic, as Steve Winick points out in his review of the deck for *Aeclectic Tarot*:

Paterson begins by suggesting that Tarot's origins are shrouded in mystery and likely to be found in ancient Egypt—a proposition few experts would have supported when she wrote the book. She also says that the deck is intended to “re-establish a lost legacy of Celtic art and mythology within the ancient wisdom of the Tarot,” suggesting that Tarot cards historically had a Celtic component that has since been lost or suppressed. Needless to say, there is little evidence for this, if any. On the positive side, the book gives good descriptions of the standard meanings for most cards even when these meanings seem to be at odds with Davis's artwork.⁵³

All of this suggests that Paterson is aware of and catering to a base audience aware of and receptive to the Celtic-Arthurian tradition as it relates to the Grail quest, which, in turn, aligns with the Catholic/Christian tradition informed but not necessarily supplanted by the Celtic pagan culture that serves as the underlying conceptual imagery of this deck. In short, although still clearly slanted in favor of Neopagan leanings as evidenced by the incorporation of Celtic tree lore and druidic elements throughout, the ambitious target audience for this nonspecifically Arthurian deck is anyone interested in Celtic spirituality of any kind ... *and* anyone interested in the King Arthur legend, thus relegating Arthur to a supporting rather than a featured role. He is not the product, as he is in the Matthews and Ferguson decks, but a vehicle for the product (here, a vague Celtic spirituality), whose presence lends authority through its associations with the past. What matters most to users of this deck is that it calls forth connections with ancient Celtic figures and traditions that neopagans following the several Celtic spiritual paths believe belong to the lost Celtic spiritual material that forms the foundation of modern Celtic paganism.

While the specific focus shifts from one set to the next, in the end the presence of King Arthur in tarot decks tells us of two things with some certainty. Firstly, there is a ready-made market for such products. Secondly, these products are generally successful among a Neopagan audience familiar

⁵³ Steve Winick, “Celtic Tarot Reviews,” *Aeclectic Tarot*. <http://www.aeclectic.net/tarot/cards/celtic/review.shtml>.

with Joseph Campbell's monomyth (if not also the Arthurian scholarship of Jesse Weston and Roger Loomis) and eager to explore the human condition through familiar avenues, including the Grail quest and the hero's journey. In the literary tradition and the political realm, the legend of King Arthur has always proven a popular, profitable, and malleable tool that is useful in a variety of circumstances and objectives. Much the same can be said of Arthur in the eclectic marketplace of contemporary New Age practice. Even a brief survey of online reception of these tarot sets—marketed primarily (and ironically) to New Age and Neopagan devotees of Celto-Arthurian spirituality in search of a path that eschews modern capitalism, the cultural dominance of Christianity, and rationality, in favor of embracing what they feel constitutes a more historical, intuitive, and authentic way of human being—shows that such marketing strategies have been highly effective.⁵⁴

⁵⁴ The author and editors acknowledge with gratitude permission to reproduce the following images:

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Figure 2. Caitlin and John Matthews (writers) and Miranda Grey (artist). *The Arthurian Tarot*. London: Connections Book Publishing, 2007.

Figure 3. Images of the Magician, the Lovers, and the Hanged Man from the *Legend Tarot: The Arthurian Tarot* by Anna-Marie Ferguson © 1997 Llewellyn Worldwide, Ltd. 2143 Wooddale Drive, Woodbury, MN 55125. All rights reserved, used by permission.