

Sexism in Spiritual Divination: Tarot Cards

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What Are Tarot Cards?

The modern Tarot Deck originated in France and Italy during the 14th century, and is loosely based on the standard playing deck of cards. It carries a similar structure, yet contains a total of 78 cards, consisting of both face cards as well as numbered ones in 4 different suits. Historically, these were visually simple and initially utilized for playing games. It wasn't until noble Italian families began hiring artists to create personalized, hand-painted pictures to have in their own decks, and having artistic cards signified your wealth and status. These drawings were incredibly detailed, and soon became popularized as citizens began assigning their own meaning to each of the cards, and people on them. While Tarot was still kept among the privileged families at this time, its widespread use and connections to spirituality did not come until much later.

Benefits of Tarot Readings

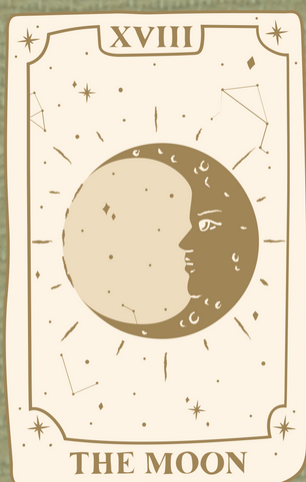
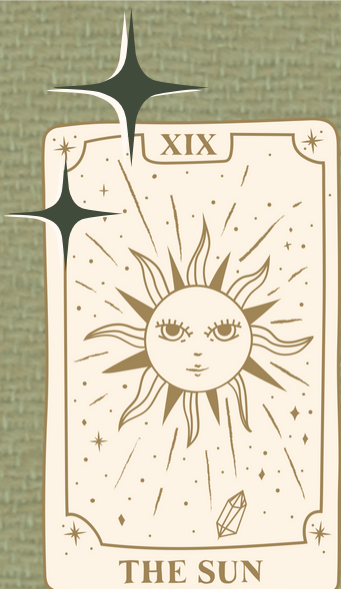
- Helps to analyze and reflect on life experiences
- Identifies opportunities/areas of growth
- Locates patters in relationships, career, emotions
- Affirms what is in/out of your control
- Offers guidance and solutions





The Rider-Waite Smith

The Rider-Waite Smith deck is essentially Tarot 101. It is the most standard, widespread tarot deck, and is used by many beginning readers to understand the basic meanings. This deck was first published in 1909, created by British mystic Arthur Waite, with the innovative illustrations from Pamela Colman Smith. Smith's depictions of the cards were the first to ever feature numbered cards with human characters. Their work is considered pivotal, with over 100 million copies sold worldwide.



Deck Breakdown

- **Major Arcana = Universal Life Lessons**
 - 22 cards, the “face cards”
 - Conveys broad issues, spiritual lessons
 - Follows a character’s journey from “The Fool” to “The World”
- **Minor Arcana = Everyday Experiences**
 - 56 cards, the numbered and suited cards
 - more detailed, short-term situations
- **Each suit has a different meaning for focus in life**
 - Swords / Wisdom
 - Wands / Creativity
 - Cups / Emotions
 - Pentacles / Possessions

Is Tarot Rooted in Feminism?

Tarot's associations to spirituality did not surface until the 18th century, when French occultist Jean-Baptiste Alliette pioneered its use for personal growth. Since then, spiritualists have practiced tarot readings as a means for self-help and guidance. Because tarot readings are associated with sensitivity and intuition, it has been commonly linked to femininity. In fact, the art of tarot gained the most traction due to women's significant contributions during the Second Wave Feminist Movement (1960's). Tarot opens a channel for women to explore religious autonomy, and “allowed women during Second Wave Train Feminism to reclaim spiritual separatism and directly react against masculine archetypes and expectations from traditional occult scholarship to create a new version of tarot that encompasses women's religious experiences and identities” (Haar 10). Ironically, despite tarot's connections to feminism, it seems to have depictions that are quite misogynistic and heteronormative.

Sexism in Tarot Masculine vs. Feminine Energies

(Masculine Interpretations)

Certain cards like “The Emperor” or “The Magician” have historically set gender depictions as male energies. Most of these cards feature men with crowns and tools, and thus they have the “tools” to problem-solve, or lead. Masculine cards are meant to symbolize strength, discipline, diplomacy, authority, and ambition.

(Feminine Interpretations)

Cards like “The Empress” or “The High Priestess” serve as divine feminine energies, and are often seen in gowns or dresses, to show regality and beauty. These women embody compassion, intuition, emotion, fertility, and abundance. Feminine archetypes can lead as well, though typically alongside her male counterpart. (King & Queen of Swords, The Sun & The Moon)



Gender Comparison



Masculine Cards



Feminine Cards

How can we change the Narratives of Gender through the Art in Tarot?

Deconstructing the “cis-het-white-thin-able paradigm” (Maiden).



Entries from Readers/Deck Authors

“Decks that show up for black and brown queer femme fat trans disabled folks. Decks that begin from the point of inclusion, where diversity is not an afterthought or throw away pacifier. I can’t say I’ve found a deck yet that manages to do all this” [Asali, cardslinger and healer, Asali Earthwork](#) (Maiden)

“I want decks that don’t buy into the gender binary and sexist attributions to what is ‘female’ and ‘male’ but instead presents a rich spectrum of genders. I also want decks that don’t exotify or tokenize trans people or attribute simplistic ideas of ‘this is what (a particular gender is) is’ to cards” [Leah Lakshmi Piepzna-Samarasinha, tarot reader, Brown Star Girl Tarot](#) (Maiden)

Benefits of Inclusivity in Tarot

Tarot is the story of life, and thus should be able to embody and resonate with all diverse groups of people who seek its wisdom. Non-binary tarot readers and lovers have grown to appreciate cards with non-traditional drawings, as it opens possibilities for potential messages while defying expected standards. In addition, the art of tarot and spiritualism has been predominantly marketed towards white, cis-gendered women. By having more inclusivity it broadens the scope towards a more heterogeneous audience, and helps to destigmatize the topic of mental health and self-help in minority communities.

Options for Less Heteronormative Decks

Nowadays, deck authors have been inclined to create more ambiguous gender depictions in tarot cards. These include drawings of animals, iconography, popular symbols, and everyday objects. Above is a less-gendered depiction of The Lovers card, which uses symbols instead of cis-gendered characters to convey that “These are not ‘opposites attract’ couplings but rather the two puzzle pieces that work together to form a more functional whole. As such, its complimentary energy extends to partnerships of all kinds” (Horvath)



Conclusion / Call to Action

Decks that challenge gender norms allow for more intimate understanding between non-binary readers, as Robin Gowe shares their approval “when the author refers to the king with she / her pronouns. Immediately, I feel a deeper connection to the card. I’m not someone who uses she / her pronouns, but I find the concept of a woman embodying this kind of intellectual power and truth so much more empowering than if it were presented to me as a man...Without such gendered terminology, I find myself able to see the values or attributes of the kings and queens more clearly under this framing, without the baggage of gender norms” (Gow)

“We as readers have our own work to do to strive for intersectional empowering readings for our clients that honor the multiplicity of their identities” – Asali, Asali Earthwork

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