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The tarot deck of Austin Osman Spare

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Cover image:

The tarot deck of Austin Osman Spare

by Jonathan Allen • 14.09.2022

This article anticipates the publication of a revised second edition of 'Lost Envoy: The Tarot Deck of Austin Osman Spare' by Strange Attractor Press in 2023, designed by Fraser Muggeridge Studio. It will be accompanied, for the first time, by a facsimile reproduction of the deck itself. Parts of the article have been abridged from Jonathan Allen's introduction to the first edition, published in 2016.

In the seven years since the publication of *Lost Envoy: The Tarot Deck of Austin Osman Spare* [FIG.1](#), the popular fascination with all forms of cartomancy has continued steadily, as has the production of countless new decks, many created by practitioners not usually associated with the genre, including architects, screenwriters and social activists to name just a few.¹ Any part played by *Lost Envoy* in this growing oracular ecology would be hard to determine, but it does seem clear that our book found a readership of sorts, certainly among scholars of the infamous English artist and mystic Austin Osman Spare (1886–1956), and one of sufficient magnitude to warrant the revised second edition that Strange Attractor Press aims to publish in 2023.

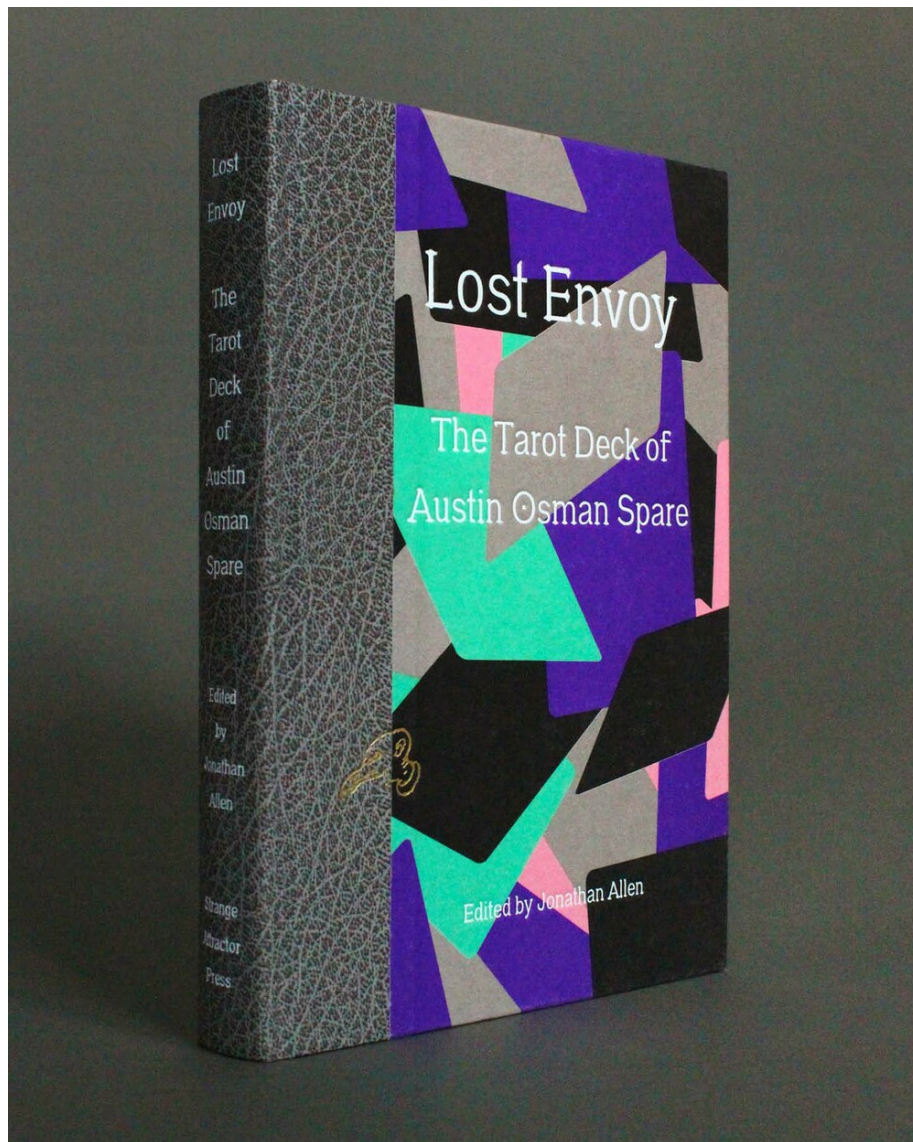


Fig. 1 *Lost Envoy: The Tarot Deck of Austin Osman Spare*, edited by Jonathan Allen. 2016. (Courtesy Strange Attractor Press, London).

We knew that a book about a lost tarot deck hand-painted by Spare **FIG.2** would generate interest, but we were taken by surprise to discover the book out of print within just eighteen months of its publication. That fact did at least suggest that our primary goal had been met. If Spare's fortune telling cards had 'gone underground' for more than seventy years in The Magic Circle Museum, London, then today the artist's cards are available to researchers worldwide, particularly through their subsequent widespread online dissemination. The deck's re-emergence had another consequence: a stream of requests for a facsimile reproduction from researchers and tarotists eager to physically experiment with the unique operation of Spare's creation. The artist's habit of writing and drawing across the vertical boundaries between individual cards **FIG.3** means that engaging with the deck to access that hidden marginal information is a fundamentally haptic experience.

The rediscovery of Spare's cartomancy deck owes an oblique debt to the Swiss artist and compulsive collector Dieter Roth. In the spring of 2013 I received an invitation from the curator Ben Roberts to contribute to a public lecture programme at Camden Arts Centre, London, in response to the act of collecting as a broad cultural impulse. The programme had been organised by Roberts in response to the gallery's exhibition *Dieter Roth Diaries*, and in my role as a museum curator at The Magic Circle, Roberts encouraged me to share some of the organisation's vast collections relating to the conjuring arts. That request turned out to be productive in a way that neither of us could have imagined, for it was during my subsequent research that I chanced upon a reference in the museum's records to the long-forgotten cartomancy deck made by Spare, which had lain virtually unnoticed since its accession in 1944.²



Fig. 2 Hand-painted tarot cards, by Austin Osman Spare. c.1906. (Courtesy The Magic Circle Museum, London, and Darren Martin).

Lost Envoy brought Spare's deck, hand-painted by the artist around 1906, into public view for the first time. The book traced the provenance of an artefact that is essentially a relic of the British occult revival through the related works of art and writing of its creator, and through the records of The Magic Circle Museum. The deck's invisibility was largely the result of Spare's decision to entrust his cards to one of The Magic Circle's founding members, the conjuror Herbert J. Collings, thus consigning them to over seventy years of cultural detachment within an organisation dedicated to the secretive art of theatrical magic. Since the deck appears not to have been documented in any way before this period, it could be said that from a critical perspective, Spare's cards 'missed' the twentieth century. *Lost Envoy* brought the deck into the open once more, reactivating its fortunes in a century very different from the one in which it was constructed.

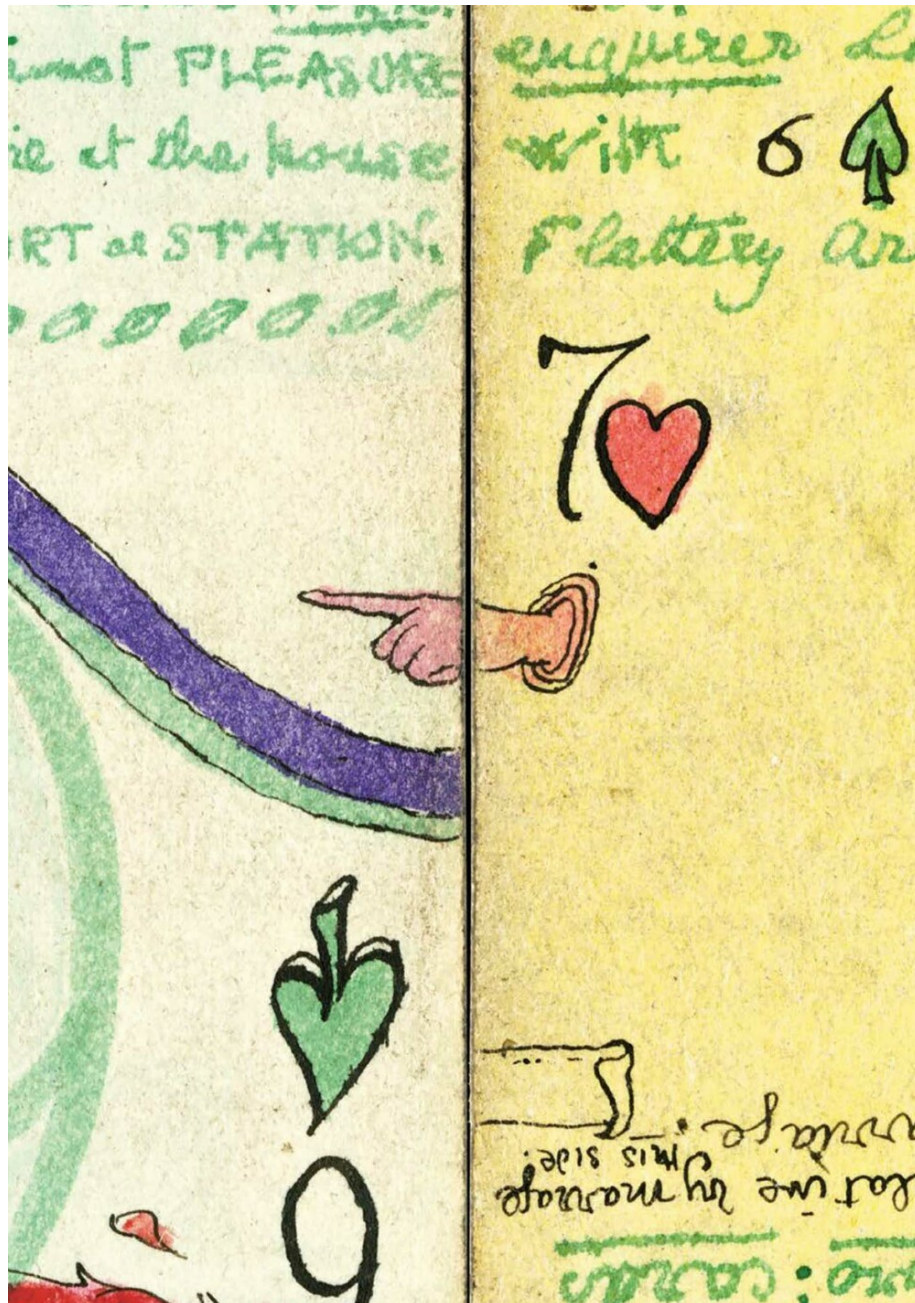


Fig. 3 Detail from hand-painted tarot cards, by Austin Osman Spare, showing the artist's use of marginal links between cards. c.1906. (Courtesy The Magic Circle Museum, London).

Even in the art world, Spare's name often passes unrecognised. The son of a policeman, Spare was born in London's working-class Smithfield neighbourhood in 1886. At a young age he was embraced by the art establishment and hailed a 'genius' by the popular press **FIG.4** due to his remarkable talent for drawing and his precocious inclusion in the Summer Exhibition at the Royal Academy, London, in 1904. Spare's biographer Phil Baker observes that, despite his early professional success, the artist 'had his career the wrong way round [...] he began as a controversial West End celebrity and went on to obscurity in a south London basement'.³ Baker cites the 'hidden injuries of class' as a factor in Spare's troubled professional trajectory, but an equally significant factor

during his lifetime may have been his claim that mystical practices lay behind the production of his work, as well as his association with influential occultists, which briefly included the notorious Aleister Crowley. As cultural historians have acknowledged the important influence of esoteric histories on the progress of twentieth-century modernity, Spare's work has been read more sympathetically and its significant, if interstitial, relationship to many of the art movements of the twentieth century increasingly recognised. Spare's work is now held in institutional collections around the world, with conspicuous examples in London at the Victoria & Albert Museum, the Imperial War Museum, the Wellcome Collection and, belatedly, at The Magic Circle Museum.

Cartomancy – that is the divining or 'reading' of contingent events using randomly selected playing cards, of which tarot cards are the most recognisable – can bring to mind images of fairground fortune tellers, New Age psychics and even the online 'tarot bots' that might soon replace both within today's diverse economies of leisure. Cartomancers working in the late nineteenth century would undoubtedly have constituted a current within the 'black tide of mud of occultism', concerning which Sigmund Freud famously counselled Carl Jung; had the psychoanalyst been aware of Spare's cards he might well have categorised them as another atavism in the same toxic stream.⁴ Contemporary researchers, however, have generally adopted a more historicising approach to card divination, most importantly challenging tarot's commonly assumed ancient origins, and highlighting instead the secular context of the first-known cards in the trick-taking, recreational games of the mid-fifteenth-century Italian court. Reproduced in Michael Dummett's mammoth survey, *The Game of Tarot: From Ferrara to Salt Lake City*, are numerous examples of the tarot-related gaming decks that stem from this non-divinatory lineage, including a deck of early twentieth-century Austrian 'tarock' cards identical to those still preserved in London in the top drawer of Freud's desk at Maresfield Gardens.⁵ The game enjoyed by the doctor on most Saturday evenings exemplifies one aspect of what Dummett described as tarot's 'double contribution to popular culture'.⁶ Its other contribution, of course, has been as a tool of divination.



Fig. 4 'A wonderful boy artist. Master A.O. Spare, the youngest artist in the present exhibition of the Royal Academy, is just seventeen years of age. He is the son of a policeman, and was discovered by Sir W. Richmond. At the age of fourteen he won a County Council scholarship which enabled him to study at South Kensington'. (From *The Tatler* 151, 18th May 1904, p.275; © Illustrated London News Group).

When the young Spare began work on his deck in the mid-1900s, playing card cartomancy (as distinct from tarot cartomancy) was a popular and mainly middle- to working-class convention with a long-established history, used sometimes for entertainment or by its more dedicated advocates as a guiding hand through life's practical and emotional dilemmas. Tarot cartomancy, on the other hand, was largely the preserve of an educated elite with esoteric interests, for whom it formed part of an integrated programme of theurgic training intended to draw its 'querents' or seekers into a closer union with divine principles. During the late nineteenth and

early twentieth centuries, the tarot deck itself had been undergoing a significant phase in its occult development, particularly in the context of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, the initiates of which were expected to study the cards' iconography and 'rectified' significance.

From within these ranks Arthur E. Waite later emerged to produce, in 1909, with the artist Pamela 'Pixie' Colman Smith, the period's undisputed cartomantic masterwork: the Rider-Waite-Smith tarot deck. One important possibility that emerged from the close analysis of Spare's deck in *Lost Envoy* was that the artist may have crafted his cards in the years between 1905 and 1906, a period that predates this important landmark in tarot's occult evolution. Of equal interest is the fact that the deck blurs the distinction between the two class-bound categories of cartomancy just described, conflating tarot's twenty-two familiar trump cards – its Major Arcana – with a Minor Arcana comprising ordinary playing cards. The resulting deck is a hybrid of unprecedented iconographic and operational complexity, one that offers trajectories, albeit in provisional forms, which might have significantly altered the historical course of both card reading lineages, had the deck not remained hidden from view.

The content of Spare's deck shows the artist immersed in London's esoteric subculture by the mid-1900s, drawing on sources that would have been available to him by visiting the recently opened Watkins bookshop in Cecil Court, or by mail order from the city's many Theosophical booksellers. It is tempting, of course, to speculate whether Spare encountered any of the historically recognised reinventors of the tarot deck during this period. Might Spare have met Arthur Waite? Smith may have been a more natural ally, and during our research we discovered that the two artists could well have had a mutual associate in Spare's close friend at the time, the suffragette Sylvia Pankhurst. These were also the years leading up to the artist's short-lived association with Crowley, which began around 1908, although Crowley did not bring his energies fully to bear on the subject of tarot until he began his collaboration with the artist Lady Frieda Harris.



Fig. 5 Two Aces from hand-painted tarot cards, by Austin Osman Spare. c.1906. (Courtesy The Magic Circle Museum, London).

Spare's cards take the form of what appears to be a self-instructive deck. In the hands of an artist as gifted as Spare, however, even a 'training' deck was an opportunity for his vision to roam more widely. The resulting cards seem to have become a portable studio-in-miniature in which the young artist processed the wide range of stylistic and philosophical influences shaping him during the period. The deck shows Spare pushing aside the visual and functional histories of both playing cards and tarot cards, sometimes adapting, and at other times almost entirely replacing, iconographic centuries-old conventions. One grouping of cards seems as though it might break away from the deck altogether, unified by the concentric patterns of colour that pulse from and swirl around their central motifs like electromagnetic waves **FIG.5**. Most remarkably, Spare activated the unfixed region formed between cards when two or more are placed contiguously alongside one another. Across these vertical borders Spare wrote, drew and painted freely, as if trying to fix the cards' oracular responses to age-old questions through a miscellany of fractured motifs.

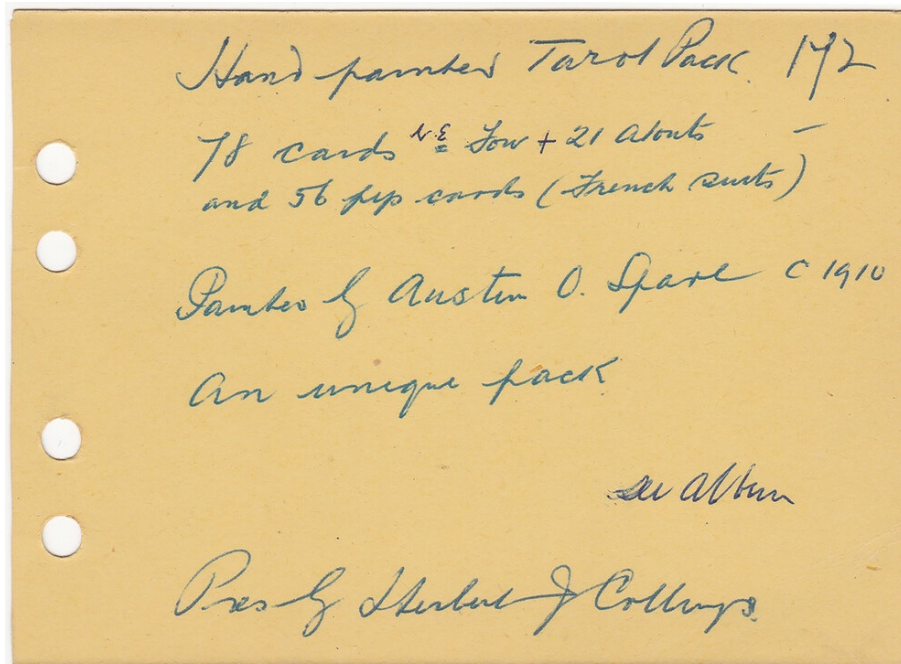


Fig. 6 The card catalogue entry by the curator Arthur Ivey for Austin Osman Spare's deck, in which he refers to it as 'an unique pack'. (Courtesy The Magic Circle Museum, London).

Bringing the cards alongside each other again today, those same motifs provide an uncanny montaged portrait of the artist, one that seems to reanimate, with each realignment, precisely those moments when Spare was undertaking particular readings. In 2013 the curator Massimiliano Gioni exhibited Harris's original paintings for Crowley's tarot cards at the 55th Venice Biennale, describing them as 'divinations [that] help illustrate a condition we all share: *we ourselves are media*, channeling images, or at times even finding ourselves possessed by images'.⁷ The same year, Spare's cards re-emerged at The Magic Circle, awakening their potential at a historical moment very distant from the Edwardian world in which they were made, channeling him eerily to us, and us back to him.

Lost Envoy did have one precedent. In November 1969 the longstanding curator of The Magic Circle Museum, Arthur Ivey (1891–1975), published a short article in the organisation's internally distributed periodical, *The Magic Circular*, briefly describing Spare's deck in the context of a general history of playing cards.⁸ In addition to the museum's accession records, the curator's article was at the time the only explicit source of information available to researchers regarding the deck's provenance **FIG. 6**. Due to the unique importance of Ivey's record, we reproduced his text in the book, followed by an extended commentary in which I followed the curator's tantalising clues, and shed some light on the clandestine organisation that had been the deck's inadvertent custodian for over seventy years.

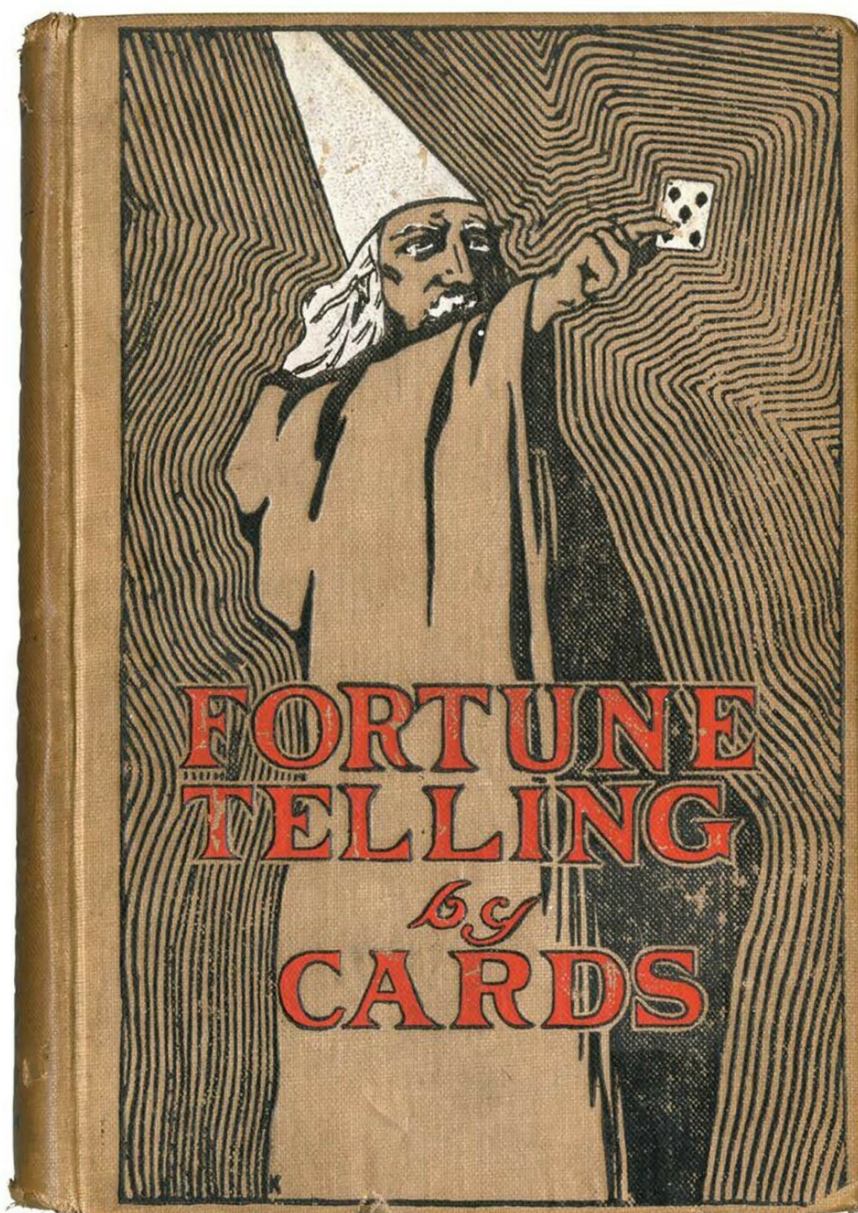
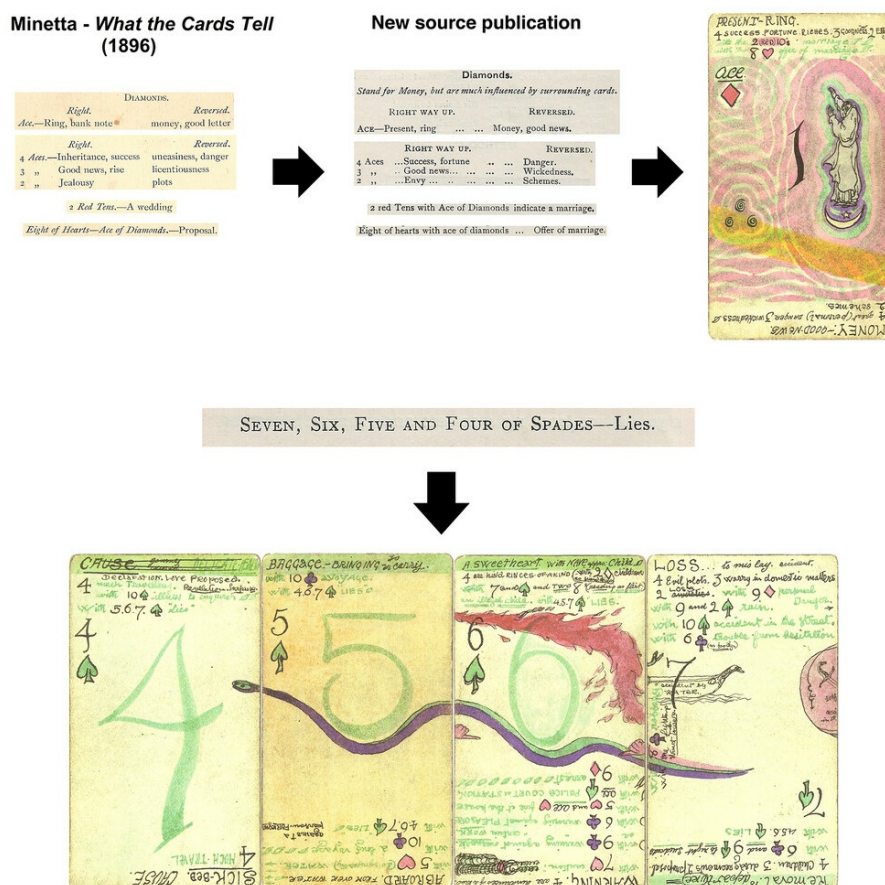


Fig. 7 Cover of *Fortune-Telling by Cards*, by Professor P. R. S. Foli. 1904. (Courtesy Jonathan Allen).

Near to the end of his life, Spare himself wrote a number of texts detailing his own card reading methodology. In *Lost Envoy* we reproduced a section of one significant example – ‘Mind to mind and how, by a sorcerer’ – originally intended for publication in the *London Mystery Magazine* in 1951. Scholarship relating to both playing-card and tarot history had moved on considerably since the time of Ivey’s article, and so we turned in the book to Helen Farley, the author of *A Cultural History of Tarot: From Entertainment to Esotericism*, to locate Spare’s deck within a four-phase developmental history now widely accepted among tarot historians.⁹ Given that Spare’s deck was recovered unexpectedly in a museum dedicated to theatrical conjuring, the historian’s focus on tarot’s ‘Magician’ – a figure whose representation evolves over time from that of a social outcast to

the holder of all occult power interceding between worlds – was particularly germane.

The artist was too young, notes Farley, to experience the first waves of the British occult revival, yet swam very much in its later currents. A writer ideally placed to position Spare within that milieu was Gavin W. Semple, whose *Two Tracts on Cartomancy by Austin Osman Spare* had recorded the artist's lifelong preoccupation with fortune telling cards while at the same time bearing witness to the scarcity of surviving physical examples.¹⁰ Rereading *Two Tracts*, in the light of Spare's rediscovered tarot, it is hard not to acknowledge the shadow presence of the deck prompting the intuitions of an author who knows that something is missing from the historical record, but cannot quite name it. Semple subsequently identified many, but not all, of the sources that Spare drew upon and synthesised as he constructed his deck. Importantly, he offered clear evidence that challenged the origination date for the cards as recorded by Ivey – c.1910 – instead pointing to a more likely production date of between 1905 and 1906. Had Spare's tarot deck appeared commercially, Semple observed, 'it would have stood as the first complete example of the form executed by an artist in the twentieth century'.¹¹



The period-inflected language used on the cards provided Spare's biographer Baker with a vocabulary through which to narrativise the Edwardian London of the artist's early life, complete with its 'detective[s]', 'strange bed[s]', 'scandal' and 'madhouse'.¹² Baker describes Spare's creation as 'an oddly instructional deck, like a self-contained game' – not necessarily then the production prototype that in some ways it resembles, but rather a captivating experiment undertaken by a fledgling practitioner during his formative years.¹³ For Baker, the expansiveness at the borders of the cards is emblematic more generally of Spare's disaffection with the hierarchic structures of 'old-school occultism' embedded within the conventional tarot, and led him to abandon the latter's formality in favour of his own idiosyncratic and modernising card designs.¹⁴



Fig. 9 Surviving photograph of Austin Osman Spare's lost Strength card, shown alongside its likely colouration. (Courtesy The Magic Circle Museum, London, and Jonathan Allen).

The literature associated with cartomancy has fallen broadly into three categories: esoteric writing, interpretation guidebooks and historical treatments. However, the tarot scholar Rachel Pollack has indicated a fourth category: tarot as represented in fiction 'whether as a plot device [...] or a larger structural device, such as a book designed as a reading in itself'.¹⁵ The writer Sally O'Reilly's contribution to *Lost Envoy* occupied this realm of speculative fiction, staging a historically plausible encounter between Spare and Pankhurst in which the two friends prognosticate using his deck following their studies together at the Royal College of Art, London. O'Reilly's fabrication reflects the tendency of fortune

telling cards to become narrative-generating devices capable of both reifying fiction and fictionalising fact. In her reading of events, the interaction between Spare and Pankhurst became an Edwardian conversation piece with decidedly subversive undercurrents.

Fictional 'Spares' have appeared previously in the writing of Alan Moore, most notably in the author's graphic novel series *Promethea* (1999–2005), in which the artist-magician manifests on several occasions as a time-travelling spirit guide. In *Lost Envoy*, Moore revived the artist's youthful encounter with his magical elder Crowley in the form of a card reading that employs his and Harris's Thoth Tarot as a tool to divine the significance of Spare's own cards. Moore's cunning use of one tarot deck to fathom the depths of another is reminiscent of Carl Jung's deployment of the *I Ching* to assess the cultural significance of the *I Ching* itself, as described by the psychologist in his introduction to Richard Wilhelm's German translation of the ancient Chinese divination text.¹⁶ Moore – or is it Crowley and Harris? – concluded that for Spare, the construction of his deck may have been 'the pivotal creative act that made him both artist and magician'.¹⁷ Moore's long-term collaborator, the graphic artist Kevin O'Neill, likewise acknowledged the deck's significance by reworking one of Spare's best-known early self-portraits, now depicting him as an aged and fate-furrowed visionary staring out from behind a desk upon which images of the cards that he had crafted near the beginning of his life could be clearly identified.

The remaining sections of *Lost Envoy* were dedicated to the task of making Spare's cards fully available to researchers for the first time. This included not just the colour reproduction of the deck's seventy-nine cards but also a detailed concordance providing a transcription of Spare's often hard-to-decipher handwriting, as well as identifying each of the marginal links that connect the individual cards to one another at their borders according to the artist's unique schema. As we considered the second edition of *Lost Envoy*, our intention had been to address some of the questions that we had received from readers in the intervening years, perhaps knowing that any answers we might offer would be unlikely to fundamentally change the book's historical positioning. That approach, however, was confounded when I received news earlier this year of a significant discovery on the West Coast of the United States, one that appeared to challenge a fundamental tenet within our account. If we had been on the presses at that point, we would surely have stopped them.

In *Lost Envoy*, we had been unable to identify the singular source that Spare – ever the cultural magpie – may have used as he assigned the primary meanings to his Minor Arcana cards. We had certainly tried, and having analysed over a hundred possible candidates among the countless cartomancy books, pamphlets,

magazines and newspaper columns published during the relevant time period, we offered two books that provided at least some degree of convergence with the deck, as well as being ones potentially available to Spare in London at the time: Minetta's *What the Card's Tell* (1896) and *Fortune-Telling by Cards* (1904) by Professor P.R.S. Foli [FIG.7](#). We knew, of course, that we had left the job undone, and that a definitive source might still be out there.

'I've got some exciting news to share' began an online post in March 2022 by the American oracle card scholar John Choma who, following a lecture that I had given during the COVID-19 lockdown, had managed to link the unusual wording found on Spare's cards to an obscure cartomancy manual published c.1908, one he had recently obtained from a London book dealer [FIG.8](#). Since *Lost Envoy* had established 1906 as the most likely year during which Spare had produced his cards, this information had significant implications. Had the artist created his deck a full two years later than our research had claimed? To our delight, Choma accepted our invitation to work closely with us as we explored the ramifications of his discovery, one that turned out to complicate dating matters even more interestingly than we had first anticipated. Among the many subsequent contributions that Choma has made to our revised work, *Lost Envoy's* updated concordance section will owe its greatly renewed content to his commitment and expertise.

Elsewhere in the new edition, I will explore the historical context for Spare's experimental use of marginal linking devices and, following Choma's findings, show how a process that may have begun for the artist simply as a series of tiny mnemonic cues appears to have become a contingent system that helped him translate the complex rote of cartomantic lore into a practicable visual language. Furthermore, I will offer some new thoughts on Spare's anomalous Inquirer card, the esoteric content and monochromatic palette of which clearly marks it apart from its associates. Finally, we provide an update on the deck's lost Strength card [FIG.9](#). The latter Major Arcana trump card was last seen in 1969, when it was photographed at The Magic Circle Museum, thus providing a vital black-and-white image that completes the deck from an iconographical perspective. Strength has since been placed on the Art Loss Register, requiring us to produce an imagined recto-verso colour version, one that we have based on the existing palette of its adjacent Major Arcana cards.

Much about this compelling trace of Spare's formative years remains inscrutable. The task of maintaining a discursive field around the artist's cards no longer now just falls to The Magic Circle curators, but also to a broader research community who will soon have access to the physical workings of the deck in the form of a facsimile reproduction. Our hope was that *Lost Envoy's* first in-depth reading of Spare's cards would provide the groundwork

for future scholars, cartomants and artists who might be prompted by the directives of this very particular example of the genre. ‘Just as each new dealing of divination cards appears to reveal previously untold insights’, wrote the reviewer Brian Sibley, ‘so [*Lost Envoy*] and the tarot deck it commemorates is likely to continue opening new doors onto many aspects of art, literature and cultural history – as well as those shadowlands where magic and occultism meet and conspire’.¹⁸

About this book



Lost Envoy: The Tarot Deck of Austin Osman Spare (Revised Edition)

Edited by Jonathan Allen
Strange Attractor Press, London,
forthcoming

Footnotes

- 1 See, for example, *The Architect's Tarot*, by Yousef Bushehri; *Writer Emergency Pack*, by John August; and *Barrow Tarot*, by Katie Anderson.
- 2 Following the launch of *Lost Envoy* at Camden Art Centre, London, on 11th May 2016, Spare's cards were exhibited publicly for the first time, in the centre's Artists' Studio, from 11th to 15th May.
- 3 P. Baker: 'Austin Osman Spare: cockney visionary', *The Guardian* (6th May 2011), available at www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2011/may/06/austin-osman-spare-ph-il-baker, accessed 26th August 2022. See also P. Baker: *Austin Osman Spare: The Life and Legend of London's Lost Artist*, London 2012.
- 4 In 1963 Jung wrote: 'I can still recall vividly how Freud said to me [in 1910], "My dear Jung, promise me never to abandon the sexual theory. That is the most essential thing of all. You see, we must make a dogma of it, an unshakable bulwark" [...] In some astonishment I asked him, "A bulwark – against what?" To which he replied, "Against the black tide of mud" – and here he hesitated for a moment, then added – "of occultism"'. C.G. Jung: *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*, London 1963, pp.147–48. According to Alex Owen, Freud's 'simultaneous fascination with the occult and vigorous attempts to distance himself from it are matters of record', yet Freud also feared that the occult 'would compromise the respectability of psychoanalysis'. A. Owen: *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern*, Chicago 2004, p.143.
- 5 See M. Dummett: *The Game of Tarot: From Ferrara to Salt Lake City*, London 1980.

- 6** M. Dummett: 'The double contribution of tarot to popular culture', in E.E. Auger, ed.: *Tarot in Culture I and II*, Clifford ON 2014, pp.3-16.
- 7** M. Gioni: 'Introduction', in *idem*, ed: exh. cat. *Il Palazzo Enciclopedico*, Venice (various locations) 2013, p.19.
- 8** See A. Ivey: 'Tarot cards and a pack in The Magic Circle Museum', *The Magic Circular* 64, no.707 (November 1969), pp.23-26.
- 9** See H. Farley: *A Cultural History of Tarot: From Entertainment to Esotericism*, London 2009.
- 10** See G.W. Semple: *Two Tracts on Cartomancy by Austin Osman Spare*, London 1997.
- 11** G.W. Semple: 'A work for artists', in J. Allen, ed.: *Lost Envoy – The Tarot Deck of Austin Osman Spare*, London 2016, pp.41-59, at p.42.
- 12** P. Baker: "'His own Arcana": Austin Osman Spare and the borders of tarot', in Allen, *op. cit.* (note 11), pp.66-83, at p.71.
- 13** *Ibid.*, p.73.
- 14** *Ibid.*, p.80.
- 15** R. Pollack: 'Foreword', in Auger, *op. cit.* (note 6), I, p.xxix. The category of tarot writing that Pollack describes is represented in Part 2 of *Tarot in Culture* vol. 2. The writer Italo Calvino's well-known structuralist experiment using tarot cards led him to describe the tarot deck as '*una macchina narrativa combinatoria*' or 'a combinatorial narrative machine'. See I. Calvino: *Il castello dei destini incrociati* (*The Castle of Crossed Destinies*), Turin 1973.
- 16** See C.G. Jung: 'Foreword', in *I Ching or book of changes*, translated from Old Chinese into German by R. Wilhelm, English transl. C.F. Baynes, London 1989, pp.33-61. I am indebted to the musician and tarotist Jamie McCarthy for bringing this information to my attention.
- 17** A. Moore: 'A cartomantic mirror', in Allen, *op. cit.* (note 11), pp.113-127, at p.126.
- 18** B. Sibley: 'Review of "Lost Envoy: The Tarot Deck of Austin Osman Spare"', *The Magic Circular* 110, no.1199 (July 2016), p.218.

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