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Tarot and Card Reading in Glastonbury

Abstract. This paper discusses and compares the use of Tarot and oracle cards in the town of Glastonbury (England), which is a focal point for New Age practitioners. The article is based on fieldwork conducted by the author in 2021. First, the article examines the general differences between the two types of cards and their history. Second, it describes the specific types of decks that can be found in Glastonbury, how they are presented in local shop displays, and how Glastonbury practitioners conduct different types of readings. Finally, the article presents and analyzes a number of interview materials which focus on how practitioners themselves see the requirements for working with different types of cards and how they see their relationship with related ideas such as spirits, having psychic powers, and psychic intuition. The author notes that oracle cards are generally considered to be more flexible and more positive and cheerful than Tarot cards, as well as far more varied in their symbolism.

Keywords: Tarot cards, Oracle cards, New Age, contemporary esotericism

1. Introduction

This paper will discuss how Tarot cards and oracle cards, both of which are used for card reading, are accepted in society, comparing the use of these types of cards. Tarot cards and oracle cards are sometimes displayed in the same places at shops in Glastonbury, and some readers use both types of cards, but oracle cards are underanalyzed by scholars in comparison to Tarot cards.

In addition, I will consider the relationship between card reading and concepts such as “psychic,” “intuition”, and “channeling.” Armand

Martiere Diaz, whose PhD dissertation was about psychic mediums who did divination, said that mediums thought about their work as a way to help people (Diaz, 2011). In her PhD dissertation, Joan Reese developed a practical model of intuitive-creativity for decision making and actualizing potentiality by using Tarot reading to achieve this purpose (Reese, 2010). Both authors think that there is a connection between psychic abilities or intuitions and divination. However, I would thus examine how the readers themselves see these special abilities, such as psychic abilities, intuition and channeling, and whether they believe to use these abilities or not when doing reading of Tarot and oracle cards.

This study was conducted in Glastonbury, a small country town in the southwest of England. It is known as a “weird,” “unusual,” or “unique” town because of what is called the “New Age” industry. Glastonbury’s center is filled with Witch and Pagan shops, herb shops, Indian clothing shops, healing centers and vegetarian cafes. There are many posters and flyers about lectures, activities, and workshops relating to the New Age.

Ryuji Kagami, a professional researcher of astrology, says Tarot becomes popular because of “the counter-culture movement that emerged in the United States in the 1960s and 1970s, and the New Age movement that derived from it. Both movements sought a culture that was ‘not’ modern rationalism” (Kagami, 2018, p. 118). Because of its connection with the New Age movement, Tarot reading is very popular in Glastonbury¹. Not only can you buy decks at shop, but there are also many opportunities to get a card reading, or to take a course and learn card reading by yourself.

Although I have been conducting research in this town since the autumn of 2005, primarily focusing on Paganism, New Age, and spirituality from the perspective of religion and that of tourism, this article is based on fieldwork conducted during three weeks in the summer of 2021, where I specifically examined Tarot and oracle cards.² I conducted observations of how cards are sold at shops and of card readings on the street, as well as interviewed three female card readers, all three of whom are my long-standing informants.

¹ Astrology and rune reading are also popular.

² Since the pandemic of Covid-19 still continued during the fieldwork, I followed all the guidelines of preventing the infection from the UK and Japanese governments.

2. Tarot Cards and Oracle Cards

Tarot reading and oracle cards reading are both classified as cartomancy. Both Tarot cards, oracle cards are sold by publishers and card game companies, and they are sold at large bookstores in the same sections. According to the American author Paul Huson, “The first literary allusion to divination by playing cards dates back to the fourteenth century” (Huson, 2004, p. 46). Much like the I Ching and rune reading, cartomancy is a form of divination based on chance, and it is often used to learn about the near future or to make a decision.

The history of the Tarot is generally well-described, so in this paper I will describe its history and structure briefly and primarily focus on the understudied history and structure of oracle cards³.

The Tarot has 78 cards: 22 Major Arcana and 56 Minor Arcana. Major Arcana cards serve as trump cards, with names and allegorical illustrations. Minor Arcana cards are suit cards, typically comprising four suits; cups (or chalices), coins (or pentacles), wands (or batons) and swords. While the illustrations of Minor Arcana are used to be simple, many of them are allegorical today. The symbols and images used are somewhat fixed, although there is some fluidity.

There are three main version of the Tarot. 1) The Visconti-Sforza version dates back to the 15th century in Italy. Surviving versions are all incomplete and without numbers and names. This version was mainly used by aristocrats at that time. 2) The Marseille version dates back to the 17th century in France. It comprises 78 cards complete with numbers and names. This version was printed and became popular among the general public in Europe. 3) The Rider-Waite-Smith version was published in 1909. Designed under the instruction of members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, this version’s imagery is influenced by the Western Magical tradition. Thoth Tarot is also well known, but this is one version of the Rider-Waite-Smith version, instructed by Aleister Crowley (1875–1947), a famous British Western Magician. Today, numerous variations of Tarot cards are available. Some are the adaptations of the Marseille version, but the majority are based on the Rider-Waite-Smith version.

When compared with the Tarot cards, there is a significant structural difference in oracle cards. The number of oracle cards varies from 20 to 60, depending on the deck, and the themes and designs of the cards vary, usually coming with a guidebook.

³ On the Tarot cards, I cite Huson (2004) and Inoue (2014). For oracle cards, see the website of the Visionary Company (2015), which publishes and sells Tarot cards and oracle cards in Japan.

The contemporary popular form of oracle cards is quite recent in origin. The oldest oracle card deck is the “Secret Dakini Oracle: A Tantric Divination Deck” published by U.S. Games Systems in 1977. The authors are the British amateur scholar of Tantra Nik Douglas (1944–2012) and British-born American artist Penny Slinger (1947–). Dakini is a Hindu goddess. Tantra is often used as a general term for the esoteric scriptures of India. However, in the context of the Western New Age movement, it was the sexual aspects of Tantra that were most focused on and spread. Participants in the New Age movement, especially young people, were reconsidering the values and lifestyles of the West, which were rooted in Judaism and Christianity. They were therefore interested in non-Western cultures, including Indian culture. The authors of the “Secret Dakini Oracle,” Douglas and Slinger, were both from the UK and of the right age to be involved in British youth culture, therefore making it likely that they were influenced by the time and created cards using the religious culture originating in India. The 1980s and 1990s saw the creation of even more oracle cards whose themes were very far away from Judaism and Christianity, such as Celtic-themed⁴, Maya-themed⁵ and ancient Egypt-themed⁶ decks.

A particularly notable deck, the “Healing With The Angels Oracle Cards,” was published with the USA-based publisher Hay House in 1999. Its author, Doreen Virtue, continued to publish angel-themed oracle cards until 2017, when she converted to Christianity, and in 2019, she denied a number of New Age practices, including oracle cards, on her website (Virtue 2019). This seemed to be a shocking event for her fans.

Today, there are many different types of oracle cards, including fairies, dragons, cats, flowers, goddesses and other similar themes. For artists, oracle cards may be easier to create because of the fluidity in card number and theme. For example, a Sufi artist in the UK created a oracle deck with Qur’an words and beautiful flowers. She sold the cards at events and through friends.

⁴ “The Celtic Tree Oracle: A System of Divination,” by Liz and Colin Murray, illustrated by Vanessa Card. Published by Rider & Co (UK) in 1988.

⁵ “The Mayan Oracle: Return Path to the Stars,” by Michael Bryner and Ariel Spilsbury, illustrated by Donna Kiddie. Published by Bear & Company (USA) in 1992.

⁶ “The Book of Doors Divination Deck: An Alchemical Oracle from Ancient Egypt,” by Athon Veggi and Alison Davidson. Published by Destiny Books (USA) in 1994.

Tarot cards and oracle cards also go beyond the realm of divination and are becoming a part of our broader culture. For example, Dior, a fashion brand, used the images of Motherpeace Tarot⁷ for 2018 Cruise Collection (Phelps, 2017) and Visconti-Sforza version for Spring/Summer 2021 Haute Couture collection (Mower, 2021). For an example closer to the readers, when I visited Kyiv, Ukraine in January 2020 to present my paper, the Ukrainian researchers took me to a “Witch” bar which offered cocktails based on one of 33 oracle cards, with themes such as the four elements, black cats, black magic, a Wiccan coven, et cetera. One could draw a card to pick, and then read a guidebook which also served as a menu. For example, I drew an elemental card, water. The cocktail had blue curacao, and tasted refreshing.

Tarot cards and oracle cards are both popularly used for cartomancy. However, compared to Tarot cards, oracle cards are new and flexible.

3. Decks at shops in Glastonbury and in London

In Glastonbury, you can buy ordinary books and clothing only at charity shops, but there are plenty of shops which sells Tarot and oracle cards because many tourists come to Glastonbury for the New Age scene. According to the survey I conducted in the summer of 2021, 18 shops in the town center sold Tarot and oracle cards. Two of these stores were owned by Tarot readers, which displayed only some Tarot and oracle cards in their windows, whereas broader shops featured broader displays of goods. The number of decks sold at shops ranges from a single one to more than 200 decks. Among those 18 shops, only two shops displayed Tarot and oracle cards separately inside the shops, while the others mixed them together.

Shop №	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11	12	13	14	15	16	17	18
Version																		
Visconti-Sforza						✓												
Marseilles							✓											
RWS	✓	✓	✓	✓	✓													
Thoth	✓	✓				✓												

Table 1. Which shops in Glastonbury sell four traditional and well-known Tarot decks (based on the author’s research in August 2021).

⁷ Under the influence of feminism, it was published by U.S. Games Systems in 1981 by Vicky Noble and Karen Vogel.

Most of the shops tended to display the decks with the box visible. The box usually shows the image of one card inside, so that you could imagine the designs of each card well. Tarot cards and oracle cards are arranged like beautiful art works rather than mysterious tools for divination. These styles of display may lead consumers to buy these cards. I am a good example. When I examined each deck to record the number of cards and their theme as researcher, little by little I became fascinated by the decks, and at the end, I bought several decks. I put them on my desk and am writing this essay while looking at them.

Tarot cards cost approximately 15-25 pounds, while oracle cards were slightly more expensive, about 20-30 pounds. The price of the same deck often varied from shop to shop. Most shops sell twice or three times as many oracle card decks as Tarot decks. The Visconti-Sforza version, the Marseilles version, the Rider-Waite-Smith version and Thoth Tarot are four long-used and well-known Tarot. However, eleven shops in Glastonbury did not even sell any of those four decks (Table 1). The Marseilles and Visconti-Sforza versions were sold at one shop each. Only five shops sell the most popular Rider-Waite-Smith version, and three shops sold the Thoth Tarots.

The shops in Glastonbury stand in stark contrast to the two occult bookshops in London I visited. Both of the London shops sell more than twice as many Tarot cards as oracle cards, and the two types of decks are displayed separately. They offer a large selection of the Rider-Waite-Smith versions and the Thoth Tarot decks, as well as the Marseilles versions and the Visconti versions.

From my study of the shops, I hypothesize that the two shops in London cater primarily to people who are interested in practicing Wicca, Witchcraft and occult, while the people who buy at the Glastonbury shops are rather New Age oriented. Although some visitors in Glastonbury are also interested in Wicca, Witchcraft and occult, many more are said to be Witches who are not Wiccans, Druids and New Agers.

An owner of a shop in Glastonbury that has already closed by now said that while her recommendation might have helped, but the best-selling card deck was the Rider-Waite-Smith version. As for oracle cards, she said that there were no particular decks that sold well. However many shops sell oracle cards with the theme of "Avalon," another name for Glastonbury. My observations at the shops and in accompanying my informants on their shopping trips, Tarot and oracle cards are not items which are sold one after another, probably because they are not consumable items like herbs and greeting cards, but rather

a tool. I only once saw somebody purchasing a deck, which was the Rider-Waite-Smith version. It is interesting that the standard decks sell well despite the plentiful non-standard alternatives. It may be that non-standard decks are bought by collectors or people who are already familiar with the Tarot.

Almost all the shop owners say that, even though it is more expensive than online, their customers buy the goods at their shops in “spiritual” Glastonbury, which makes the items a little bit special. This is true not only for the card decks, but for everything they sell. Every time a customer looks at something they bought in Glastonbury, they remember the process and the situation of getting it and feel a sense of uniqueness.

The New Age shops in town are divided into two categories: those that have a specific theme for their products, and those that sell a general array of New Age goods. The former tends to sell carefully selected cards in line with their theme. A Witch shop (*The Wonky Broomstick*) sells decks of Witches, moon, dark goddesses and fairies. A goddess art shop (*Goddess Temple Gifts*) sells decks themed around Goddesses, Gaia and yoni. A tantric-themed shop (*My Pleasure Tantric Shop*) sells decks themed around sexuality, gay, Kama Sutra and Kali. An herb shop (*Starchild*) sells decks themed around plants and medicinal herbs, but also Witches, Celts, shamans and Native Americans, because these figures are believed to have often used plants in their healing and rituals. In shops like these, the Tarot cards and oracle cards are not only merchandise, but also a part of the display, and help create a special atmosphere inside the shop.

The latter type of shops, on the other hand, sell a wide variety of cards, and sometimes even have the same deck in different sizes. *Happy Glastonbury* is a good example. This shop sells 66 different Tarot decks (with themes as varied as Angel, Animal Totem, Aquarian, the Book of Shadows, Egypt, the Elves, the Golden Dawn, Legends, Mermaids, the New Vision, Old English, Otherkin, the Psychic, Sea, the Sirian Starseed, Thoth, Vampire, Visconti, Witch, Wisdom et cetera) and 120 different oracle card decks (Angels, Animal, the Celtic Shaman, Chakra, Chakra Love, Crystals, Divine Abundance, Dreams, Earth Magic, the Enchanted Maps, Enlighten Up, Fairies, Gemstones, Goddess, Kuan Yin, Life Loves You, Money and the Law Attraction, My Mairy Affirmations, Postcards, Power Animal, Qabalah Magic, the Quantum, the Power of Love, the Sacred Creators, Shaman, the Power of Surrender, Vortex, Wicca, the Wisdom of Avalon, Witch et cetera).

The card displays at these shops are often crowded, as they are large and easy to find for customers.

The shops in Glastonbury, a town famous for its New Age scene, sell more oracle cards than Tarot cards and tend not to separate the areas for these two types of cards. Some shop sells a wide variety of cards, while others sell specific themed cards. Cards play a significant role in creating the particular atmosphere of the latter type of shops.

4. Card Reading Opportunities

In this chapter, I would like to show the opportunities for cartomancy in Glastonbury. Walking around the center of Glastonbury, you will frequently see advertisements for Tarot cards and oracle cards readings in the form of street signs and shop window flyers. They usually include the readers' photos, name and contact details. Such readings are one of the famous spiritual experiences that are offered to tourists visiting the town.

You may encounter the cards somewhere you simply happen to enter. For example, you can take an oracle card for free and can buy the cards at the Glastonbury Information Centre, which otherwise functions as a regular tourist information center. At the Temple of Avalon, a Pagan temple where visitors can meditate, four Tarot card decks and nine oracle card decks are on display and can be used freely. When I visited there in September 2021, I saw a newlywed couple using the cards. In addition, all participants are often asked to take one oracle card at the end of various kinds of spiritual workshops in the town.

Where professional readers are concerned, some have their own shops. Others work at pubs or in small rooms at the back of other people's shops, and you can ask for a reading on the spot, if they are available. It is also common to find them at spiritual events such as psychic fairs. The other possibility is you can book in advance by phone, email or through a form and then take the private reading at a pub, the reader's private home or other locale. However, it is difficult to make a living only by reading. Or as to make it sustainable, one has to do a large number of readings at a day, which would become exhausting quickly. Therefore, most readers do it as a side job.

During the holiday season, you can find several card readers on the middle of the High Street in front of the biggest church in Glastonbury. In addition to illustrate what I have summarized above, I will now describe a scene taking place on September 4, 2021, the first Saturday of the month.

Whether because it was the last weekend of summer school holidays or because the Abbey held a music festival, Glastonbury was crowded. Four readers worked in front of the church—the largest number in the period I observed. The first was an elderly man who looked like—and was known as—“Wizard.” He wore a blue hat with stars and a blue wizard’s costume, and stood with a staff. He placed a tray of small wooden coasters with rune characters on a cloth on the pavement. The payment was donation-only, and the reading was to take about 15 minutes. However, I did not see anyone getting their reading, although I saw many people talking with him. The cloth was held in place by an oracle card deck titled “Well-Being Cards,” an orgone pyramid which is supposed to detoxify electromagnetic fields, a metal cauldron for donations and a thick book. There were also leaflets on a conspiracy theory of Covid-19 tucked into the cloth.

The next Tarot reader, a woman wearing a skirt with several deep cuts underneath a slightly faded fluttery shawl, was sitting on the street next to a woman who gave hand, shoulder and arm massages. She placed five different Tarot decks on a purple cloth on the pavement. An elderly woman was kneeling on the pavement, her husband waiting nearby, and was having her reading. A young woman got a reading right after her.

The third reader was a man who uses oracle cards titled “Medicine Cards.” He had a bandanna around his head and was wearing a navy-blue T-shirt featuring a geometric pattern with khaki half trousers. He displayed a sign which read “Taurus Eagle Blue Cloud” on the top line and “Medicine Pathway Reading” on the bottom line under a sunflower umbrella. “Taurus Eagle Blue Cloud” probably meant his Native American style name, and “Medicine Pathway Reading” was what he called the divination, which he named after the deck. He prepared a desk with a small wand and crystals as well as cards and chairs for himself and for his clients. Under the desk, there was a carpet, incense and a horn. Several people often talked with him and occasionally someone got a reading.

The fourth person was a woman with long fluorescent pink hair, wearing a pink dress. She sat on the pavement, where she wrote “Angel Card Reading” with chalk, which implied that the deck on the cloth must be angel cards. Seven or eight crystals were stationed next to the cards. I saw a woman in her sixties having a reading. Next to her, a young artist was selling his geometric drawings.

While the above is the description of a typical holiday in Glastonbury, there were always some readers present. For example, in addition to the readers in front of the church, a woman with a black shopping cart was often around. She asked passers-by “Would you like to pick up my angel cards?”⁸ I have encountered her several times in the town. Sometimes she was in the center, and sometimes on the outskirts. After my observation of people in front of the church, I met her around the bottom of the High Street. She was wearing a cosmic pink T-shirt, a black skirt with a floral pattern on the hem, and a yellow-green bandanna with three or four artificial flowers around her forehead. After two days, I was stopped by her friendly voice on the outskirts of the town. She told me that the reading was for a donation and I did not have to pay by cash. I had nothing with me but three small apples which I found in front of a house⁹. I told her what I had, and she said, “Everybody needs apples.” Her pen case held about 30 cards with her original angel pictures on the front. The back of each card had a different word, and the one I picked said ‘arts and crafts.’ She asked “Are you doing arts and crafts? You need more.” I nodded vaguely. I gave her three apples and she took only one.

Private reading is a popular and well-known way for card reading. However, in this chapter, I showed there are also opportunities to see or experience card reading more easily.

5. Three Readers

Having established the background, I will now introduce the three readers whom I have interviewed and provide an account of their experiences.

5.1. Liz Williams¹⁰ (Interviewed 23rd August 2021)

One of the people I met on my first visit to Glastonbury in 2005 was Liz, a well-known science fiction writer. At the time, she and her part-

⁸ *Editor’s note*: “pick up a card” is the word-for-word phrasing, confirmed by the author to have been used by several readers in Glastonbury.

⁹ The area around Glastonbury produces many apples. Many houses have apple trees in their yards, and they often produce more apples than they can eat. During the harvest season, it is common to see people leaving apples in front of their houses with a note encouraging passers-by to take them freely so that they will not go to waste.

¹⁰ Liz’s detailed profile is on her website: <https://www.witchcraftshop.co.uk/store/index.php?CatID=0157> (accessed 20 December 2021).

ner were running a small Witchcraft shop in a narrow alley off the High Street. Later, they moved to a larger shop and expanded their business, but in 2020, they retired and closed the shop.

Liz has been reading Tarot cards for over 30 years. At the seaside town where she used to live, she had a Tarot reading booth. In Glastonbury, she put up a flyer in their shop and read Tarot cards and oracle cards at the back of the shop for anyone who asked. After the shop closed, she began to do readings online or at pubs to the people who contact her through the internet. She also runs courses on Witchcraft and Tarot.

Primarily, Liz uses the Rider-Waite-Smith version for her clients because it is full of symbols which are easy to understand for her clients. However, when she reads cards for herself, she sometimes uses other Tarot decks to get a second opinion, such as the Thoth Tarot or the Motherpeace Tarot. For oracle cards, she uses the Greenman deck and the Ogham deck. Both oracle decks are inspired by Celtic culture, so they make sense for Liz, who is a Druid.

When I asked for an interview, Liz suggested we could talk at *George & Pilgrims Hotel*, which has a pub located on the ground floor of a 15th century building and where she often does Tarot readings. The first and the second floors are used as a hotel, which is known to be haunted. The ceilings are low and the cobbled floor is sloped; the wooden tables are slightly tilted; the wallpaper, carpets and cushions of chairs are faded and seem ready to fall apart at the seams. Inside one such room, I found Liz, dressed completely in black, with her Tarot deck at hand. I felt as if I had travelled back to medieval England and met a reader at an inn where I would spend the night.

Liz explained that Tarot cards and oracle cards worked according to the same principle, but using different symbolisms and formats, and that oracle card decks had fewer cards than Tarot decks. I told her that I heard that Witches preferred Tarot cards to oracle cards. She replied,

A lot of Wiccans tend to use the Tarot. I think some of them use oracle cards. There is nothing that says you can't. It's kind of up to you. But I think a lot of people who are a bit more serious about, you can use Tarot because it's a little bit more detailed. And it's just bigger. It's more comprehensive, really. There is a sort of perception of oracle cards are a little bit fluffy. They're not really. It depends on the decks. Doreen Virtue is now withdrawn by cards because she's become a Christian. And I did look at a couple of those. They are very pretty. They are beautifully done. But they are very light. Some of the symbolism [of the Tarot], it's not very nice actually, like the 9 of swords, or 10 of swords, or Tower.

They are horrible images, certainly. They are quite scary. And, I guess, lots of people doing oracle decks do not want to frighten the audience. Wiccans and Witches take it on board.

While she noted that this was not true of all oracle cards, Liz nonetheless regarded them as gentler compared to Tarot, where some cards were associated with death. She also said Witches tended not to avoid looking at the dark side of the Tarot.

On the subject of psychic abilities and divination, Liz said the following.

I can just read the cards. I'm not psychic. But very occasionally I am. But I don't really use psychic powers when reading. I just look at the cards. And I think, actually, the cards will tell you what you need to know. So you don't need to be kind of psychic to use the Tarot. Also some people say they are psychic, just playing a role. Hahaha, you know. They tell you something, and it's not true.

She considered herself not psychic and she believed that psychic ability was not necessary for reading Tarot. However, she did not think the Tarot was free from supernatural power. Later she said, "Maybe there is something supernatural going on, I actually feel the Tarot has a spirit." She continued,

The cards, yes. Whole decks, not individual decks. But every deck, everywhere, perhaps into one kind of spirits. But that's just my personal belief. I think if you ask that spirit for help, it's very obliged. It's created by people, for people and it will try and help people. (...) I think it's sort of alive. It's like it's alive. But ask another person. They may feel completely differently. It's just my personal belief.

She thought that the decks possessed a kind of spirit, but she emphasized that this was her personal belief and might not be widely accepted.

To make sure, I confirmed with her that she said she hardly used psychic ability for reading.

Very rarely. I occasionally get a sort of feeling or an intuition that somebody. But that's not very often actually. Mostly I just rely on the cards. I know X (= her partner) is a bit more psychic than I

am but he is still not in 100%. And you got to be very careful with it, because it could be just your imagination. (...) You cannot be sure. Some people will say “Oh, I am always psychic. I’m always right.” Let be they are, actually. [Sic!] I do believe some people are genuinely psychic, but I think it’s a very small percentage of the population. And we don’t know how it works, or even if it works really. I think some people do have a genuine ability, but I wouldn’t describe myself as a psychic.

She admitted that there were few people who really had the psychic abilities, but considered many of people who claimed themselves as psychic were the people who were acting or just believing so.

Liz believed that she was not psychic and that the number of such people was very small. She also said that you did not need psychic abilities for Tarot readings. She just read the symbols of the cards. However, she considered that the whole decks of tarot cards themselves could have spirit and alive. In other words, she felt a certain supernatural power in the cards as a tool, not the person reading the Tarot. The source she relied on for her reading was external.

5.2. Georgina¹¹ (Interviewed 20th August 2021)

I met Georgina through the Glastonbury Goddess Temple, which I focused on studying when I was a graduate student. At that time, she was a volunteer coordinator and organized several meetings, so we met regularly. She practices and teaches Tarot reading, astrology, counselling and Hedge Witchcraft, as well as conducts ceremonies such as handfastings—a Pagan-style wedding.

She started learning to read Tarot when she was 21 years old. She has been using the same Thoth Tarot deck since then. She said the Rider-Waite-Smith version, the most popular deck, “doesn’t speak to me at all. I don’t understand why people rate the Rider higher.” Clients find her through her website and *the Oracle*, the monthly free paper in the town. Although she sometimes gives readings face-to-face, she also gives readings by phone and online.

The interview was conducted at her clinic, located at the back of an early 19th century stone building in the city center. The clinic was used as a surgery until the end of the Second World War, but now the rooms are rented out to individuals and groups. Georgina’s work room is a

¹¹ Georgina’s detailed profile is on her website: <https://sunflowerhealing.co.uk/> (accessed 20 December 2021).

warm and welcoming place with large windows, sunshine, aromas and herbal teas. I interviewed her over a cup of rose tea.

I asked her how she used her oracle cards.

I love using those for the card of the day. And if it's been a particularly difficult reading, and I want to leave them on something that's feeling lighter, then I'll get a pack and ask them to shuffle it for them to choose a card. And then I'll tell them about all the positivity around the card. You know, how good is. And the fact is, an oracle card, this could be given the right choices they make, this could be what their future is. But they equally tell you what they have to work on, but in a lighter way. I mean there are oracle cards, an oracle pack, looking at the dark side and the shadow side of things. But I tend to use them only for cards of the day or a card at the end of reading.

She used oracle cards as a supplement to Tarot. Therefore, she considered oracle card to be lighter than Tarot.

After the Tarot reading, Georgina chose a deck from her collection of oracle cards—flowers, the Maya, spells, Goddess, Viking, power animal, Native American, et cetera—that would be appropriate for her clients and asked them to pick one up. According to Georgina, the reason was that people usually remembered the last words that they were told. For example, she said, if you drew a card featuring the Norse Goddess Freya, who symbolized boldness, from the Goddess oracle card deck after your Tarot reading, you probably only remembered “being bold and taking risks,” which became a kind of call to take action based on the result of the Tarot reading.

I think the public will tend to use the oracle cards more for fun, and the pleasure than Tarot cards. I think oracle readers would say “No, they are just as important as Tarot cards,” but that's not what the public thinks. I mean they go and pass the Speaking Tree [=a bookshop in Glastonbury] and “Oh, they are pretty. Oh, I must have that!” They have been caught by the pack because “Oh, yes, they are pretty.” You know that pack is saying, “Hello, look at me. I'm pretty. You know you want me.” So they are going to buy them. But what are they going to do with them? They'll stuck to read the handbook and try to learn from the guidebook, but it is very hard to do that because you have to learn by using your intuition.

She used oracle cards more casually than the Tarot and thought that people saw the oracle cards like this in general.

The word “intuition” was mentioned here. Georgina considered that intuition or being psychic was very important in reading cards. Then I asked her how she confirmed her answer was correct by herself.

I get a buzz. It’s like the hairs come up on your arm. You get that tingle feeling. And I know I’m correct when I get back tingle feeling. Always. And when I read the Tarot, and also astrology, I open myself up to receive any messages from spirits. Now I do not claim to be a medium because I do not deliberately call spirits in. However, when I’m open to receive messages, I do get them, while I’m reading either astrology or the Tarot.

She gave me an example that while doing a Tarot reading, she heard a voice saying “I hate the wardrobe” and told her client, only to learn that the woman had left her late mother’s ashes in the wardrobe.

The very act of doing Tarot opens up your psychic senses. You’re opening up that part of your brain. Your urge. Your middle eye. Because you are opening up, I always say before reading to myself as a prayer to the Goddess because I ask Her for protection. And from the Goddess, my ancestors, my guides, and I ask them to, if it is needed for them to channel information to the clients through me without my ego. So that I do not put my interpretation to manipulate what they are saying. I literally say it as it is.

What Georgina said reminded me of healing. Therefore, I told her that it sounded similar to healing because healers were connecting to the Higher Spirit. She answered,

Well, because I am an esoteric healer, I am a qualified in soul healing, that exactly what does happen, Eriko. It comes down through you here and it comes out in your hands. And for me, it comes through me and it helps me interpret the cards.

Georgina said that psychic abilities were needed for reading.

To be honest, we can all open up to spiritual things whether it’s healing, Tarot, divination, whatever it is. They are old and ancient

skills that are in our DNA. And we've just forgotten how to do it. And what I'm teaching them is to re-remember it and to re-learn it. If they close that off and they don't do the work to open up their spirituality, and they are not going to read cards. Or what they are going to be able to look at is the two meanings of the textbook of the cards, and not using their psychic or intuition. (...) They can't just sit in here and meditate and open up to spirit while they're here. They have to go home and do it [=homework] every day, hold in a card. (...) But the idea is also to trust the first instinct that came to you. And never go back. Don't try to mess with it mentally. Just go with that feeling.

According to Georgina, everyone had psychic abilities, but they needed training to develop, and even though they were trained, the degree of development could vary if one was not willing to open up.

In contrast to Liz—who she is nonetheless good friends with—Georgina affirmed that psychic abilities and intuition were essential for Tarot reading. This ability was inherent in individuals, even though not everyone might develop it. Therefore, the source she relied on for her reading is internal.

5.3. Ria¹² (Interviewed 26th August 2021)¹³

Ria is from Israel, and we spent two months as roommates during my Glastonbury stay in 2014. She follows a shamanic path and travels all around Europe as a storyteller, staying at many places, collecting stories and telling them with her puppets.

The day before I interviewed with Ria, we had a walk and talked about the oracle cards.

She has been using the “Medicine Cards” deck since she was a high school student, when she first encountered the idea of shamans, especially the shamans associated with Native Americans. Therefore, the idea of the deck fits in with her, who is a shaman herself. She has done readings in many different places where she has stayed, for example at a Portuguese town market. In the summer of 2021, she rented a room

¹² Ria does not have her own website, but her details can be found on her Facebook page (<https://www.facebook.com/fairytale.m>) and she can be contacted via email at fairytale.m@gmail.com.

¹³ *Editor's note:* English is not Ria's first language, which the transcripts occasionally reflect.

in the Goddess House every Thursday afternoon. She put up flyers at several shops in town to advertise her work.

I wanted to find out more about her reading, so I made an appointment and visited the Goddess House the next day. The Goddess House is a therapy center run by the Glastonbury Goddess Temple. It was originally a convent for the nuns who used to teach at the Catholic girls' school when it used to exist. As I entered the front door of the building, Ria welcomed me and led me to a small room at the back of a large room. This small room is dedicated to Brighde¹⁴, a Goddess of healing, therefore there are several paintings and statues inside the room. Ria told me that before a client arrives, she places candles at the four directions and invokes the goddesses of each direction. A round cloth-covered table was in the middle of the room along the wall. It held two decks of cards: the "Medicine Cards" deck, which I mentioned before, and the "Crazy Sexy Love Notes" deck, which she liked because of the positive message on each card. She thinks the messages fit into the notion of her shamanic path which is, she thinks, positive. At the end of the reading, she sometimes told the client to pick one card. Although Ria mainly uses the Medicine Cards instead of Tarot, her way of using the Crazy Sexy Love Notes card is similar to Georgina's way of using oracle cards.

She does not use the Tarot, but instead reads the "Medicine Cards"—oracle cards with animals sacred for Native Americans. Her understanding of the difference between Tarot cards and oracle cards was as follows,

All the cards are basically Tarot cards or oracle cards. It [=oracle card] is just a general word. Word to describe cards that are on the basis of Tarot cards which is the lower [=Minor] Arcana or the higher [=Major] Arcana, specific cards, a case, specific symbols. And there are oracle cards that are also shamanic. (...) Different kinds of oracle cards. It can be millions. You can have oracle cards of fairies, of animals, of priestesses, of legends, of everything almost, of the Knights of King Arthur, whatever. Okay? So it's really broad and the subjects will be different. When it comes to Tarot reading, you will have the same subjects all the time, but only the illustrations will be different from pack to pack. So you can choose the pack that you like.

¹⁴ This Goddess is usually known as Brigit, Brigid, or Bridget.

She considered the symbolism of the oracle cards as more flexible and not bound by rules like Tarot.

According to Ria, she did not tell the client what was going to be in the future, but created the future instead, when she read the Medicine Cards.

[When I am reading the Medicine Cards,] I am usually taking this crystal in my hand and do channeling. I'm channeling the words of Mother Earth. And so many times, I'm doing a reading, but I need to get a bit extra, so I'm closing my eyes and opening the channel that I have always to Mother Earth. And I'm giving her words.

Later I asked her about that if channeling to Mother Earth was different from intuition or psychic ability. She answered,

Yes. It is different. Because there are things that are outside and there are things that are inside. Okay? So Mother Earth is a great entity that is out of me. Intuition is the big thing that comes from many things. But it's something. But mainly women have intuition. We feel it. We know it inside. So it's much lower ability, when it comes to intuition. I know. I feel. I sense it.

She clearly said channeling to Mother Earth and intuition were different. Although she thought that the card reading was a combinational thing between all of those things, and that she used both intuition and channeling, her process focused more on "channeling to Mother Earth."

When I asked about the cards, she said that cards were just paper, but that the animals were spirit animals and she connected to these spirits. I asked her again if she considered the cards to have a special power of their own.

Personally, I don't think that the card on its own has a power. I think the spirit that it represents has a power. Okay? A card is a card. Because when you're using the cards many times, they're starting to hold their own energy. Okay? But it's because I'm using them for so many years. I'm using the card more than 20 years. Because I use them for such a long time, so this package holds energy. But I wouldn't compare a card to a shamanic wand and to a powerful crystal.

The idea that a deck could build up energy when it has been used for many years is similar to Liz's belief. However as Ria regarded the cards, which were human-made, they were not considered as special as a wooden wand or a crystal, which were made directly from the natural ingredient. She considered card decks to be less special, compared to Liz.

The source she relied on for her reading was channeling to Mother Earth, which was not a tool like cards, but rather an external entity. In this sense, both Ria and Liz relied on an external entity. However, channeling occurred through one's body. From this perspective, both Ria and Georgina used something related to their own bodies for reading.

6. Discussion: the popularity of card reading and psychic abilities

In section 2, I introduced Tarot cards and oracle cards, both of which are widely used for card reading. Tarot cards are more traditional than oracle cards, but the rules for symbols and number of oracle cards are looser than those of Tarot cards. Section 3 clarified the features of both types of cards sold at shops in Glastonbury, a well-known New Age town, compared to those in London. Shops in Glastonbury sold more oracle cards than Tarot cards. In some shops, the cards display played a role in creating the shops' unique atmosphere. In section 4, I described several reading scenes in Glastonbury, especially on the street, and demonstrated there were many opportunities for card reading. Section 5 featured three card readers, focusing on their usages and views for Tarot cards and oracle cards, as well as their understanding of psychic, intuition or channeling. In the rest of this chapter, I will discuss the popularity of Tarot cards and oracle cards, and special abilities which some readers use.

First, I will examine the reason for the popularity of card reading, and compare how Tarot cards and oracle cards function in this regard. There is a marked difference in perceived ease of use. Georgina, who mainly uses the Tarot, sees oracle cards as a tool that is comparatively easier to use than Tarot cards, while Liz uses both but thinks that some people regard the oracle cards as easier to use because some cards frighten the clients. And Ria, who only uses oracle cards, sees them as more flexible than the Tarot.

Another point that impacts the popularity of cards is their relationship with Christianity. Liz mentioned Doreen Virtue, who frequently used the image of angels for her oracle cards but stopped using them

after her conversion. Angel symbolism is a favorite of New Age practitioners, but angels are also beloved by Christians, Muslims and Jews as messengers of God. For this reason, angel oracle cards may have been easy to accept for the people who are not ardent Christians but are brought up in the Christian countries and want to avoid non-Christian things.

After talking with people in Glastonbury every day about Tarot and oracle cards, I came to the conclusion that oracle cards as a whole, not only of the angel decks, may have increased the number of people who do card reading. The cards of the Devil and the Death in Tarot would be difficult to accept for some people brought up in Christian countries. The Tower and the Hanged Man are often depicted with frightening images. In popular culture, the Tarot has been often associated with darkness, such as in the film “Dr. Terror’s House of Horrors” (Amicus Production, 1965), where the Tarot is used as a tool to predict unfortunate destinies. Oracle cards, on the other hand, tend to be positive and cheerful, as Georgina and Liz said, although some decks contain negative cards. Because of this, people do not have to overcome mental resistance to buy and use oracle cards.

Furthermore, I found that oracle cards are not only used as a complement to the Tarot, but are also used independently for readings. The reason for this is that the currently popular Tarot decks are based in the traditions of the Western Magic and are therefore unfamiliar for people who are not deeply interested in the occult, but oracle cards have far more flexibility and offer those people an option.

Moreover, authors may find oracle decks to be easier to create, because they do not have to be bound to the Western tradition. And oracle cards decks have the potential to make cartomancy accessible to individuals who are not familiar with Western tradition. For example, the “Gods and Goddesses of Japan”¹⁵ are 49 oracle cards, written by Yuriko Ohno, a therapist and a qualified Sect Shinto lecturer, and supervised by Takeshi Mitsuhashi, a professor majoring Shinto. The decks are about Japanese deities in *Kojiki*, one of the two primary texts for Shin-

¹⁵ “Gods and Goddesses of Japan” (「日本の神様カード」) was first published by the Visionary Company (Japan) in 2008. In the same year, its English version was published by the same publisher. In 2012, “Oracles Cards of Japanese Spirits” (「日本の神託カード」) was published by the same authors. The information of this paragraph is based on the “Gods and Goddesses of Japan portal site” (<https://nihonnokamisama.visionary-c.com/>), accessed 20 December 2021.

to, which had been composed in 712 A.D. Ohno and the president of the publisher organize workshops on usage of the cards. Official qualified courses are also available, and there are at least 69 “Formal Instructors” and 111 “Formally Authorized Readers”. Based on their comments on the websites, many students, almost all of whom are Japanese, are attracted to the cards because this deck is rooted in Japan.

Having elaborated on the popularity of card decks, I now turn to consider psychic, intuition and channeling. It is true readers are often seen as being capable of foreseeing the future because of special abilities that ordinary people do not have. However, according to the interviews, I realized not all the readers considered themselves to be using these kinds of abilities. Around 2017 to 2019, I had been interviewing people in Japan who called themselves Witches (Kawanishi, 2022). Some of them did divination, and we talked about their practices and intuition, psychic abilities or channeling. I was surprised to learn that some of them did not consider that they were using intuition, psychic abilities or channeling. And the same was true of my study in Glastonbury.

What Liz said was interesting. She said that some people who claimed themselves to be psychic did not, in fact, possessed special abilities. She considered herself to be not a psychic but a straight up reader of card symbols, said that she felt the deck, an external tool, had a kind of spirit. In this sense, she did feel a kind of special power. This was slightly different from Ria, a channeler, who also noted the energy of the deck, which was not very powerful.

Georgina said that the development of psychic abilities was essential for divination and said that she did not deliberately call spirits, but instead opened herself to receive messages and asked for help from the Goddess, her ancestors and her guides. Therefore, her source of information was her internal ability. She mentioned spirits, Goddesses, ancestors and guides, and she considered them as all higher beings. Students in her Tarot courses were training to develop their psychic abilities through meditation and other similar practices. It was interesting that Georgina considered psychic abilities not only applicable specific people, but potentially present in everyone.

During my stay that time in 2021, I had a talk about psychic ability with a local lady and her teacher, whom I have known since 2006. Her teacher was a healer and received his psychic abilities from a near-death experience. He used swimming as an example: almost all the people have the inherent capability to swim, but they need to train to be able to swim. Some people develop their abilities and become Olym-

pians, some people enjoy swimming as a hobby, and some people cannot swim at all because they have a fear of water. Psychic abilities are the same. According to him, some people are talented and some people are not, and that even the talented need training, but everyone has this ability. From the conversation with people who regard themselves as non-psychic, I notice that they often think only special or chosen people are psychic. There is a gap of notion whether psychic ability is congenital or acquired, between the people who use it or not.

Ria said that although she used intuition as well, she also channeled “Mother Earth” and related her words to clients when she did card reading. She believed channeling was more important than intuition. As this knowledge came through channeling from outside of her, it was different from intuition or psychic ability that came from within. Channeling was an external source, like the Tarot deck, which was a tool. However, it was coming through human body and in this sense, it was similar to psychic ability.

To conclude, the readers I spoke to were all users of cards for divination, but their methods of getting messages were different: the deck itself, psychic ability, intuition and channeling. However, I would like to point out that their reputation as diviners did not depend on the way how they read the cards. Georgina and Liz are well-trusted readers who have been reading for nearly 20 years in Glastonbury, where plenty of Tarot readers come and go. Ria does not make her home in Glastonbury nor does she read cards regularly, but the positive comments from her followers on social media shows how trusted she is.

The flyers, signs or websites of the card readers may mention the types of cards used, but they do not always mention how exactly the readers do their work. This is probably not very important for the people who come to get a reading. It is far more important that the reader has confidence in their own way of reading and reads sincerely for their clients.

7. Pandemic and the Tarot

During the interview, Liz told me that the Hanged Man and the Hermit came up a lot during the pandemic¹⁶. According to her, it was prob-

¹⁶ The Hanged Man is often represented as a figure hanging by one foot. This card suggests a situation where one cannot move forward or backward because one cannot decide where one stands (Kagami, 2018, p. 237). The Hermit is usually depicted as an old man with staff. This card suggests spending solitary time away from the hectic daily routine (Ibid, p. 223).

ably because people could not do anything because of the lockdown. Since the Hanged Man card came up in the position of the “near future” (within six weeks) for my reading, she said, “That’s come up, possibly another lockdown is coming. Oh, my goodness. It can be difficult to get anything done. Things are going to go back [to normal] very slowly.” Hearing this, I remembered that a few days before that, Georgina told me that she was getting 300 referrals every day throughout the entire lockdown¹⁷ and that the majority of her clients were suffering from mental health issues or domestic violence. But then I realized that this reading was being done as an example; moreover, it was an example for me.

“It came up in a reading done for me, so you probably won’t be in lockdown,” I said.

“Yeah, no, hope not,” Liz answered.

Four weeks later, I was writing the original essay of this paper. At that time, there was no sign of the lockdown, either in the UK or in Japan, but I was in self-isolation at home. On the one hand, I thought this was the future that the Hanged Man card had predicted, but on the other hand, I thought it had been just a sample and therefore had not predicted anyone’s future. In either case, the ‘near future’ which had come about in Glastonbury already expired three years ago. As I look at the cards I bought in Glastonbury on my desk, I wonder what I would find if I shuffled the cards and picked one while thinking of a new near future.

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According to Liz, the Tower, a collapsed tower with fallen people, often came up just before 9.11 in the US in 2001 for lots of people’s readings. This card suggests the possibility that everything you have achieved will collapse at once, or that an unexpected accident will occur (Ibid, p. 253).

¹⁷ After the COVID-19 pandemic of started, several articles on website said that people became more interested in divination, including Tarot. For example, Froelich and Balsamini (2020), Linton (2020) Matsumura (2021) and Wilkins (2021).

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