



Mythopoeic Society

mythLORE

A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis,  
Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature

---

Volume 40  
Number 2

Article 19

---

4-2022

***Pamela Colman Smith: Tarot Artist: The Pious Pixie* by Dawn C. Robinson and *Pamela Colman Smith: Artist, Feminist, and Mystic* by Elizabeth Foley O'Connor**

Emily E. Auger  
*Independent Scholar*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore>



Part of the [Fine Arts Commons](#)

---

**Recommended Citation**

Auger, Emily E. (2022) "*Pamela Colman Smith: Tarot Artist: The Pious Pixie* by Dawn C. Robinson and *Pamela Colman Smith: Artist, Feminist, and Mystic* by Elizabeth Foley O'Connor," *Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature*: Vol. 40: No. 2, Article 19. Available at: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol40/iss2/19>

This Book Reviews is brought to you for free and open access by the Mythopoeic Society at SWOSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature by an authorized editor of SWOSU Digital Commons. An ADA compliant document is available upon request. For more information, please contact [phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu](mailto:phillip.fitzsimmons@swosu.edu).

To join the Mythopoeic Society go to:  
<http://www.mythsoc.org/join.htm>

SWOSU<sup>TM</sup>

---

## Online MidSummer Seminar 2025

### More Perilous and Fair: Women and Gender in Mythopoeic Fantasy

August 2-5, 2024

Via Zoom and Discord

<https://www.mythsoc.org/oms/oms-04.htm>



***Pamela Colman Smith: Tarot Artist: The Pious Pixie*** by Dawn C. Robinson and  
***Pamela Colman Smith: Artist, Feminist, and Mystic*** by Elizabeth Foley O'Connor

#### Abstract

**Pamela Colman Smith: Tarot Artist: The Pious Pixie.** Dawn G. Robinson. Fonthill Media, 2020. 213 pp. with notes, bibliography, and 32 plates. ISBN 978-1-78155-741-9. \$29.00.

**Pamela Colman Smith: Artist, Feminist, and Mystic.** Elizabeth Foley O'Connor. Clemson UP, 2021. 320 pp. with notes. Index, 34 b/w illustrations. Hardcover ISBN 978-1-949979-39-8. \$115. eISBN 9781949979404.

#### Additional Keywords

Tarot; Pamela Colman Smith; Catholicism; Bude; Cornwall; Parc Garland; Lizard

#### Creative Commons License



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-No Derivative Works 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

This book reviews is available in Mythlore: A Journal of J.R.R. Tolkien, C.S. Lewis, Charles Williams, and Mythopoeic Literature: <https://dc.swosu.edu/mythlore/vol40/iss2/19>

demonstrate the format and conventions of good letter writing, such as creating a balance between sharing something interesting with the reader about oneself with asking questions about how the recipient is doing, or sharing a memory of a mutual common experience from the past; asking about the recipient's significant other (inclusiveness was a consistent characteristic of all of the letters written by Campbell and his circle of friends, and this inclusiveness made Jean Erdman, his wife, a constant, though usually off screen, presence throughout the book); and being diplomatic and courteous. Slattery observes that the rarity of letters "enhanced the thrill of receiving a handwritten letter or card, which carries a charge the other vehicles lack" (xiii). I personally know this to be true. Before the ubiquity of email I was a big letter writer, and more than one old college friend has told me over the years that they have kept my letters all of this time.

There are many ways that *Correspondence: 1927–1987* can be read. The book can be enjoyed by a reader who loves everything by Joseph Campbell. It can be consulted for biographical information about him, or any of his correspondents, especially to see Campbell's development as a professional and to read, in his words, the challenges of producing all of the major works that he edited or wrote. I also think this book could be inspirational to young academics, who don't know how the story of their professional lives are going to go, because it provides a success story in Campbell's personal hero's journey. However the book is approached by the reader, *Correspondence: 1927–1987* is another fine addition to The Collected Works of Joseph Campbell series.

—Phillip Fitzsimmons



**PAMELA COLMAN SMITH: TAROT ARTIST: THE PIOUS PIXIE.** Dawn G. Robinson. Fonthill Media, 2020. 213 pp. with notes, bibliography, and 32 plates. ISBN 978-1-78155-741-9. \$29.00.

**PAMELA COLMAN SMITH: ARTIST, FEMINIST, AND MYSTIC.** Elizabeth Foley O'Connor. Clemson UP, 2021. 320 pp. with notes. Index, 34 b/w illustrations. Hardcover ISBN 978-1-949979-39-8. \$115. eISBN 9781949979404.

**O**ALUN C. ROBINSON IS A TEACHER, LECTURER, FREELANCE WRITER, and author of *Bude Through Time* (Amberley, 2013), *Bude The Postcard Collection* (Amberley, 2015), and *Secret Bude* (Amberley, 2016). While working on *Secret Bude*, she developed an interest in Pamela Colman Smith, co-creator of the famous *Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot* (1909). While many know the origin story of this deck, few know that after the artist finished it, she converted to Catholicism

(1911), moved to Parc Garland, Lizard, in Cornwall (1918), and finally to Bude (1942) where she died in 1951 at the age of 73. It was her years in Cornwall that inspired Robinson to write *Pamela Colman Smith: Tarot Artist: The Pious Pixie*.

Two other books dedicated to the life and art of Pamela Colman Smith have been published recently: *Pamela Colman Smith: The Untold Story* (2018) by Stuart R. Kaplan, Mary K. Greer, Elizabeth Foley O'Connor, and Melinda Boyd Parsons, and O'Connor's own *Pamela Colman Smith: Artist, Feminist, and Mystic* (2021). Robinson, like these authors, traces Smith's childhood and professional career as a writer, performer, and artist, but she dedicates her last six chapters to the years after she converted to Catholicism and moved to Cornwall where she tried to re-establish a Catholic chapel. Few researchers have been motivated to study this period in any depth because during them the artist's friendships with other famous interesting people lapsed and she sold very little art. Robinson, however, threw herself whole-heartedly into all things Bude after moving there around 2010, including Smith's connection to the region.

Robinson begins by retelling the real-life adventures of two groups of travelers in search of the artist's burial place. The first group, including Tarot specialist Mary K. Greer, set out in 2017 to explore British towns with mystical histories; Greer had asked Robinson to guide them to the local church and graveyard in Bude where Smith is undoubtedly buried. In 2018 Linda Marson arrived with the second group to complete the tale. If you have not already heard it by word-of-mouth or on Susan Wands's podcast, you will simply have to get a copy of *The Pious Pixie* to learn the rest. Incidentally, Susan Wands published a historical fiction novel about Smith's life called *Magician and Fool* (2017).

Apart from that slightly spooky aside, Robinson keeps her focus on Smith's talent and success: her years in Jamaica; her training; her interest in folktales and theatre; her connections with Ellen Terry, the Yeats family, and other famous people of the day; synesthesia; involvement with the Golden Dawn and Arthur E. Waite; and so forth. What is most refreshing about Robinson's presentation is the way she gives voice to the questions many still have about the artist. Exactly what was her relationship with the famous actress Ellen Terry? How close was she really with the Yeats family? Was she gay, transgender, or just uninterested in marriage? Robinson wonders aloud about these and many other points of interest without descending into rumor, without resorting to academic frames or lenses, and without over-stating twenty-first-century viewpoints that Smith would probably have found alien to her experience.

In the last third of the book, which addresses Smith's years as a Catholic and resident of Cornwall, Robinson considers why the artist chose to leave both her Golden Dawn connections and the more lucrative opportunities

open to her in the city of London. What she shows us (ch. 21) is an artist who may have turned to the Golden Dawn and later to Catholicism for similar reasons: because she thought they might be “fun” and perhaps because she liked to feel she was on a mission. Robinson doesn’t draw out the similarities between the two associations, but they are hard to miss. Even further, the difficulties attached to Smith’s too long commitment to the revitalization of the chapel at “The Lizard” echo the factionalism and divisions that plagued the Golden Dawn. Many of the locals were strongly anti-Catholic and Smith’s attempts to revitalize it were faced with stiff opposition right up until it closed in 1943. Through Smith’s correspondence about the project (ch. 22 and 23), Robinson shows us her many frustrations and difficulties with the project, and then, with a genealogist’s attention to loose ends, she also tells us what she discovered about the fate of Parc Garland after Smith’s departure.

Robinson makes excellent use of a wide range of primary sources, including Kaplan, Greer, and Parsons’s contributions to *The Untold Story*, and offers unique details about Smith that she gleaned from her interview with Tony Edwards, who was “Miss Smith’s” errand boy c. 1943 (ch. 24) and who recalls her appearance, her continuing artistic practice, and Catholicism. Additional points of interest about Smith’s comings and goings were unearthed through Edwards’s other relatives and their encounters with Smith. It is in this section that Robinson most vividly shows us her beloved Bude as it was at the time Smith lived there: the shops, the closer connection the town enjoyed with London at the time, the local amateur painting scene, the arrival of American troops for naval military training for what became D-Day, and so forth. Finally (ch. 25), Robinson considers whether or not Smith died a pauper, giving particular attention to her connection to Nora Lake, health, unpaid bills, possible alcoholism, and will.

Robinson does not claim to offer satisfaction on all points of curiosity, but she does have a knack for articulating what is on the minds of many of Pixie’s modern-day fans and for framing her materials in a kind of direct response to that telepathy. *Pamela Colman Smith: Tarot Artist: The Pious Pixie* may not top the list of recommended books about the artist behind the *Rider-Waite-Smith* deck, but it certainly provides extraordinary insight into how her not-so-famous neighbors and acquaintances knew her and how she lived after leaving the Golden Dawn behind.

Elizabeth Foley O’Connor, an Associate Professor of English at Washington College, is most widely known as the author of the opening biographical section in *Pamela Colman Smith: The Untold Story* (2018). This volume also includes contributions by Stuart R. Kaplan, Mary K. Greer, Elizabeth Foley O’Connor, and Melinda Boyd Parsons. Pamela Colman Smith

(1878–1951) was a successful artist, illustrator, and performer who presented her work in exhibitions, publications, and both private and public events. She remains famous today as the artist of the *Rider-Waite* or *Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot* (1909) which she created with Christian mystic and fellow Golden Dawn member Arthur E. Waite (1857–1942). The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn was established in 1888 in London. Waite joined in 1891 and when it broke up, he formed The Independent and Rectified Rite of the Golden Dawn (1903–14) and then the new Fellowship of the Rosy Cross with which Inkling Charles Williams (1886–1945) was involved from 1917 until at least 1927. Smith was introduced to the original Order in 1901 by W.B. Yeats and followed Waite to his Rectified Rite, but her involvement with it waned when she became a Roman Catholic in 1911.

*The Untold Story* and *Pamela Colman Smith: Artist, Feminist, and Mystic* are essential reading for anyone interested in knowing about Colman Smith's art, life, and especially the person who created the world's most popular Tarot deck. The obvious differences between the two books are indicative of the broader audience to which *The Untold Story* was released and the more academic libraries likely to acquire copies of *Artist, Feminist, and Mystic*. In stark contrast to the over-sized *Untold Story*, which is flush with hundreds of color reproductions of art and other primary source materials, *Artist, Feminist, and Mystic* is limited to relatively few black-and-white illustrations. New copies of *The Untold Story* are still available on amazon for \$45; *Artist, Feminist, and Mystic* sells at \$115. In *Untold Story*, Pamela Colman Smith is frequently identified as Pamela (undoubtedly the publisher's decision), while the significant males in the story are identified by their surnames; in *Artist, Feminist, and Mystic* she is Colman Smith, in recognition of both parents and her professional status.

There is no shortage of notes and sources in the earlier essay, but there are even more in the *Artist, Feminist, and Mystic*. The University Press title clearly assumes a familiarity with the current norms of academic writing. In it, O'Connor details and enlarges her *Untold Story* essay with sections and chapters on Colman Smith's early life in Jamaica, her development and training as an artist, her life as "Pixie," and some of her major projects, including her miniature theatre performances, *The Green Sheaf*, Anansi Stories, music pictures, the *Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot*, and Suffrage posters. The introduction alone provides a substantial amount of biographical information as the author establishes her intention of framing Colman Smith's life relative to her personal experience of being identified as "Other" in her own lifetime. The term "Other" will be familiar to humanities scholars, but might possibly confuse the general interested public and those more deeply versed in the entirely different arcane terms of reference that proliferate in Golden Dawn and esoteric Tarot studies. O'Connor further portrays the world of Colman Smith's most active

professional years from the 1890s through the 1900s as that “after the demise of the New Woman but before the sweeping social changes of the interwar period” (14) when “masculine” women were perceived as a threat to the nation and even the species. She presents Colman Smith as one of those “women who did not bear or raise children and positioned themselves in opposition to heterosexual, bourgeois marriage; women who defiantly exhibited masculine strategies, who wanted to be a part of the public sphere, and who asserted their own agency and identities” (14). Not everyone without a history degree will immediately understand what is meant by the “New Woman,” “bourgeois marriage” (certainly not as something undesirable), or “agency.” The same basic content is conveyed in *The Untold Story* without the academic language.

That is not to say that *Artist, Feminist, and Mystic* is particularly dense or difficult and O'Connor's familiarity with both the relevant primary sources, including personal letters and the historical frames and lenses currently applied to the period in question allows her to effectively detail Colman Smith's complex artistic and cultural world. Her success in that world, as O'Connor establishes, was in large part due to her talent for manipulating and capitalizing on the gender-based racially-inflected discourse into which her critics and supporters alike interpolated her. All readers will find themselves well-informed about the artistic influences that were formative to Colman Smith's style, including that of Arthur Wesley Dow at the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn where Colman Smith studied for a time, and Ellen Terry, a British actress who befriended the artist and was evidently responsible for her decision to return to London before graduating.

While she excels in the presentation of Colman Smith's life and art as a whole, disappointingly few pages are devoted to the *Rider-Waite-Smith Tarot*. It is in this too brief section that O'Connor makes an unusual point about the creation of the famous deck. First, she establishes the timeline for that period of the artist's life: Colman Smith went to New York in 1908 to prepare for her show at the Stieglitz 291 Gallery, returned to London in late May 1909, and had all seventy-eight Tarot images ready for the printers by the end of October or very early in November of the same year. Most Tarot-interested historians have accepted the notion that Colman Smith must therefore have produced the entire deck in a mere five months. O'Connor proposes that she very likely began work on it sometime in 1908 before leaving for New York. Certainly, the key aspects of her style as represented in the deck were all well-developed before the 291 exhibition, so while it cannot be proven, it is a point well worth consideration.

O'Connor's general elucidation of Colman Smith's artistic style is considered and effective, particularly the observation of her use of figures as seen from the back. This positioning, as first year art history students will already know, was revolutionary when it was first applied by Giotto in the early

1300s because of the way it drew the viewer into the scene and made them participants in the often emotional events transpiring in the rest of the painting. Colman Smith obviously appreciated the effect of this compositional strategy and used it and numerous others drawn from art history as well as theater to facilitate the experience of “reading” the Tarot cards.

O'Connor makes good use of the research provided by the other authors and primary documents in *The Untold Story*, but there are a few indications that she may be less familiar with the history of Tarot than she is with social, cultural, and art history. Minor oversights can survive, even in otherwise carefully written, thoroughly documented, and carefully proofread and edited studies such as this one. There is one point in particular that may become a source of future confusion and that arises from the use of a general website article for information about the “earliest known” Tarot decks (188) followed by references to excellent sources on the subject a mere note or two further on. Even the most casual Tarot historian will be or should be aware that while the late fifteenth-century *Sola Busca* has the distinction of being the first known deck in which the pips, court cards, and trumps are illustrated, the earliest, nearly complete, extant Tarot decks are the mid-fifteenth-century *Visconti-Sforza* and *Cary-Yale* decks.

*Pamela Colman Smith: Artist, Feminist, and Mystic* and *The Untold Story* are complimentary volumes. The earlier book provides copious illustrations, primary resource materials, and discussions by known authorities on the artist. O'Connor's new release provides a more scholarly, detailed analysis of the artist and her work that is attentive to both the context of her time and the forms of current scholarly discourse. Both are essential reading for anyone seeking an in-depth understanding of the artist and her work.

—Emily E. Auger



**DOROTHY L. SAYERS, A BIOGRAPHY: DEATH, DANTE, AND LORD PETER WIMSEY.** Colin Duriez. Lion Hudson, 2021. 256 p. ISBN 9780745956923. \$14.95

**DOROTHY AND JACK: THE TRANSFORMING FRIENDSHIP OF DOROTHY L. SAYERS AND C.S. LEWIS.** Gina Dalfonzo. Baker Books, 2020. 298 p. ISBN 9780801072949. \$17.00

FOR FANS OF NOVELIST, PUBLIC INTELLECTUAL, AND DANTE SCHOLAR Dorothy L. Sayers, 2020-2021 was a good year. Three Sayers biographies appeared within 10 months of each other: in August 2020, Gina Dalfonzo released *Dorothy and Jack: The Transforming Friendship of Dorothy L. Sayers and C.S. Lewis*. Two months