

Adam McLean's Study Course on the artwork and symbolism of modern tarot



Lesson 11 : Tarots based on books

In the last lesson we looked at tarots that were only published as illustrations in books. Now let us look at tarots which were inspired by a book.

- 1986 I Tarocchi del Re Sole
- 1988 I Tarocchi di Pinocchio
- 1989 Alice in Wonderland
- 1990 Tarocchi de Giulietta e Romeo
- 1991 William Blake Tarot
- 1993 Decameron
- 1994 I Tarocchi di Pinocchio
- 1995 Le tarot Ambre
- 1996 Lord of the Rings
- 1996 Kalevala
- 1998 Tarot Druuna - The main character in Paolo Eluteri Serpieri's science fiction epos *Morbus Gravis*.
- 2002 Tarot of Oz
- 2002 Tarot of the Journey to the Orient
- 2002 H.P. Lovecraft
- 2004 Le Tarot de L'Ange Liberte
- 2005 Tarot of the Thousand and One Nights

Some examples of tarots based on comic books rather than novels or written stories.

- 1991 Martin Mystere - Tarocchi di Atlantide
- 1992 Nathan Never - Tarocchi del Futuro
- 1993 Diabolik - I Tarocchi Neri
- 1991 Dylan Dog - Tarocchi dell'Incubo
- 2001 Condorito
- 2003 Fradella Adventure Tarot

The *Wonderland tarot* designed by Christopher Abbey with the artwork by Morgana Abbey, draws on the famous 19th century Tenniel illustrations for Lewis Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* and *Through the Looking Glass*. The majors are a delight and introduce many of the major characters and events in the two stories. The Hatter is the Fool, Alice herself the High Priestess, while the Cheshire Cat appears as the Emperor. The Hierophant is the



Caterpillar in the opening section of *Wonderland*, and the Lovers are the scowling Tweedledee and Tweedledum. The dormouse in his teapot is the Hermit, and the Moon card shows the Walrus and the Carpenter, chatting to the naïve oysters who are not expecting to be the main item for lunch. The suits have emblematic pips which are closely drawn from the Rider-Waite deck, though they are here renamed. Wands is now



peppermills (remember the chapter 'Pig and Pepper' in *Wonderland*); Cups are now the Mad Hatter's Hats; Swords are renamed to Flamingos (who were used as the mallets in the game of croquette); and Oysters is the name now used for the suit of Pentacles. The artwork is simple pen drawings with lovely clear lines, and subtly

coloured with watercolour or acrylic. The modelling of forms relies on the drawing not on the colouring and the artwork has an integrity and coherence throughout the 78 cards. It is a well thought out and executed tarot deck.

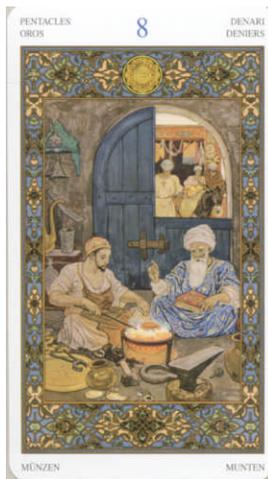


The *Tarot of Oz* is based on the books of the American Frank Baum written in the early decades of the 20th century, and later made famous through the Judy Garland *Wizard of Oz* film. The artwork for this deck published in 2002 was made by the illustrator David Sexton who also created the *Winged Spirit Tarot* in 1999 and has worked on a number of comics. The majors depict various characters from the books, beginning with Dorothy as the Fool setting out on her journey along the yellow brick road, then the Wizard of Oz, naturally appears as the Magician. The four suits have emblematic pips, but the imagery does not draw from the Rider-Waite but instead each suit tells the story of some of the major characters in the stories. The Swords tell us about the man of straw, Wands about the history of the cowardly lion, while the tin man is

the subject of the suit of Cups, leaving Dorothy as the protagonist in the Stones or Pentacles suit. The artwork is more modern compared to that of the *Wonderland Tarot*, with detailed modelling with graduated tones probably using an airbrush, giving a more mid twentieth century feel. The images are intended to be more like modern cartoons than old book illustrations. Like the *Wonderland* we have a deck which closely reflects its source books.

Giovanni Boccaccio was an Italian writer from the generation following Dante. His main known work (outside of the scholarly community) is his *Decameron*, a series of ten stories

written around 1350 reflecting and satirising the society of his day. Though parts of these stories have a bawdy nature (like Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, written about 40 years later), the *Decameron Tarot* published in 2003 with artwork by Giacinto Gaudenzi bears almost no link to the text itself. Instead it is just seems a peg on which to hang a series of erotic drawings. It is not worth considering this as reflecting Boccaccio and instead we will look at this deck under a later lesson on Erotic Tarots.



The *Tarot of the Thousand and One Nights*, 2005, is based on a book most of us know about but few indeed have ever read in totality. The structure of the book is that the stories are being told by Scheherazade to entertain the misogynist Sultan Schahriar, who had got it into his head that he had to have each woman he married, killed after their wedding night. Scheherazade, being determined to live a bit longer, tells him such amazing tales that he foregoes the ritual execution as he wants to hear the next episode. It is a good line around which to weave a series of stories, most of which are versions of traditional Indian, Persian and Arabic tales. We are all familiar with Aladdin, Sinbad and Ali Baba who appear in some of these stories, but the material is dense and complex. Sir Richard Burton's famous translation of the *Arabian Nights* 1885 amounted to some sixteen volumes each of around 300 pages. The artwork for the tarot deck is by Léon Carré, which he originally created as illustrations for a French edition of *Le livre des Mille Nuits et une Nuit*, Paris, 1926-32. These are very fine paintings, which on the cards are placed within such a rather large ornate border, that they are consequently reproduced rather too small and we are not given the opportunity to see all the detail that Léon Carré has put into his work. The artist, were he still alive, would I am sure be not a little disappointed that the thousands of hours spent working on the detail was lost so much in the printing. Léon Carré created perspective, drama, texture and incredible density of detail in his work. The original 1920's edition with the Carré paintings is nowadays an expensive collectors item but luckily a condensed version (in one volume) was recently published with many of the original illustrations. Of course there is no connection between *The Thousand and One Nights* and the tarot, but the editor has managed to find reasonably good fits for most of the Majors. The Minors are more difficult to choose within the theme but the artwork surely delights enough for this not to matter.

Earlier in 2002, Lo Scarabeo, the publisher for *The Thousand and One Nights Tarot*, had issued a *Tarot of the Journey to the East*, ostensibly based on Marco Polo's account of his travels which he dictated at the end of his life while in prison in 1298-9. This account *Il milione* was later widely circulated and provided much of the European understanding of Chinese society and culture up till the 18th century when closer cultural and economic connection was made between European nations and China. It is not entirely sure if Marco Polo had travelled as far as China or was merely retelling stories he had heard at second hand from other travellers, but his account was taken as authoritative at the time. The tarot of paintings by Severino Baraldi, is well constructed, the Major arcana being quite fine workings

of the tarot archetypes into Eastern forms. Baraldi is a quite prolific tarot artist who has illustrated at least four other tarots - *Tarot of the White Cats*, *Tarot of The Druids*, *Dragons Tarot* and *Ramses: Tarot of Eternity*. He seems to adopt a rather muted palette and with thin paint models his figures with immediate brush strokes, rather than overworking the detail. This produces a rather appealing style which seems entirely suited to the limited space available on a tarot card. The Minor arcana depict scenes from Marco Polo's account of his travels.



The story of Pinocchio written by Italian author Carlo Collodi in 1883 has had a universal fascination. Being a classic of Italian literature it is not surprising that two Italian tarot artists have turned to this children's story as a source for tarot images. The earlier of these two was Armando Valcauda's *I Tarocchi de Pinocchio* published by Lo Scarabeo back in 1988 when that company was still focussed on producing art tarots rather than mass market items. Valcauda produced children's cartoon images for his tarot which are engaging, very colourful and amusing. He recognises his debt to Walt Disney and indeed he was drawn to work in the film industry, producing graphics and special effects. The 22 cards are



disappointingly not connected with the standard tarot structure, being renamed to the various characters in the stories and with little attempt to link these to the ideas and imagery of our familiar Major arcana.

The other *I Tarocchi de Pinocchio* was by the Bulgarian artist and illustrator Iassen Ghiuselev, who works for some of the best-known publishers and magazines in Sofia and Italy. This deck, produced in 1994, has large cards, 9 by 4 inches (225x107mm), which give space for all the details of the artwork to be appreciated. His images are very fine detailed and subtly toned paintings. He is obviously talented at drawing, and these at first glance appear like fine drawings, but I understand they are tempera paintings, some of which are still for sale at around \$5000. Ghiuselev has subsequently illustrated a printed edition of *The Adventures of Pinocchio*, but for this he made line drawings rather than using his earlier tarot card images. He recently received a great deal of critical praise for his detailed illustration for an edition of *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*. His Pinocchio tarot, as I have said, is excellently illustrated, but he does struggle to produce Major arcana which tie together the traditional imagery with that of the story. As the stories of Pinocchio have nothing to do with tarot as such this is a problem. A few cards work okay in this regard, the Magician as the carver who created the puppet, the Chariot, Justice, Hermit, Wheel of Fortune, the Hanged Man and Death work well enough, but with most of the other cards our illustrator merely turns to important themes in the stories, rather than trying to fit this to our



tarot archetypes. This is a problem, of course, for all these decks which try and produce an artificial parallel between the stories in a book with tarot imagery. This is a fine effort and the sumptuous artwork is a delight in itself.

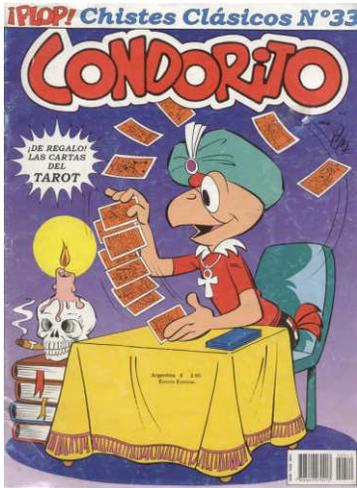
Another childrens' story (though perhaps many adults will disagree with it being labeled as such) is Tolkien's *The Lord of the Rings*. Two tarots have appeared on this theme. The first, predates the recent film (2001, 2002, 2003), being issued by U.S. Games back in 1997. This is based on paintings by Peter Pracownik, a well know British fantasy artist, who also worked on the Dragon Tarot (1996) for the same publisher, and has a large output of album covers, cards and computer game designs. Pracownik's images suffers in this deck from being surrounded by an unnecessarily large border which does not allow them to be printed sufficient large enough for us to appreciate all his work. The Lord of the Rings is such a long and complex narrative that it has not been too difficult for Peter Pracownik to find tarot like associations, and the Major arcana seem to work quite well - Gollum as the Fool, Gandalf the Magician, Lady Eowyn the High Priestess, and so on. The pip cards depict key events from the story but there does not seem to any particular reason (except in a few cases) behind why one image was chosen to be mapped to a particular pip and suit. They are not even in time sequence. The courts each have a key figure from the books. Interestingly another contributor, Mike Fitzgerald has created a card game for this deck, the rules for which are in the little white book.



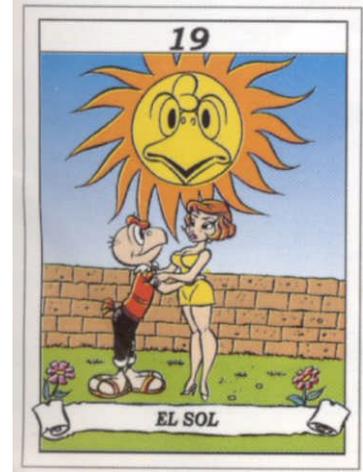
In 2003, the Taiwanese company New Line Cinema, issued a Lord of the Rings tarot using posed still photographs from the famous film trilogy directed by Peter Jackson. Like the Pracownik the Fool and the Magician are assigned to Golum and Gandalf. The Major arcana work quite well, but whoever chose the photos found the task more of a struggle with the Minor arcana, and we have a multiplicity of characters with swords and staffs with little clear symbolic content. This deck was designed for collectors of 'Lord of the Rings' memorabilia rather than for the tarot enthusiast.



We can finish with a promo tarot issued with a Chilean cartoon comic 'Condorito', an anthropomorphic figure based on the condor, the national bird of Chile. The cartoon character was created back in 1949 by René Ríos known as 'Pepo'. *Condorito* is not a comic made for children, but instead the stories have an established formula, in which one of the adult



characters is set up to give an inappropriate response which causes the other figure to keel over with a characteristic 'Plop!' It is social humour, poking fun at peoples' preconceptions and prejudices rather than political satire. The cartoon comic is very popular in South America, so much so that Microsoft used it in its branding for the South American version of Windows 98 and the associated issue of Internet Explorer. The



Argentinean edition 33 of March 2001 included a story line in which the Cordorito character sets himself up as a tarot reader. The comic included 22 tarot designs printed on thicker card in the centerfold, so that this could be removed and cut up into cards. The instructions provided are very funny. Although far removed perhaps from high art of the Thousand and One Nights Tarot it is very effective in its own terms.

You should as an exercise try and explore some of the other tarots based on books. The series issued by Lo Scarabeo based on comic novels Martin Mystere, Nathan Never, Diabolik, and Dylan Dog are very interesting. Roger Zelazny produced a series of novels with a tarot theme which was later produced as 'Le tarot Ambre'. All these are worth following up and investigating further.