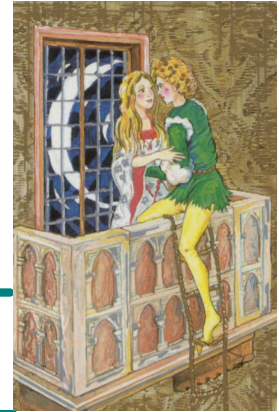


# Adam McLean's Study Course on the artwork and symbolism of modern tarot



---

## Lesson 7 : Shakespeare themed decks

---

In the last lesson we looked at the general way in which tarot creators and artists have explored the tarot structure through various themes. Here we will look at the small group of tarots that try to give tarot a Shakespearian slant.

There are four tarot decks that use this theme

*I Tarocchi di Giulietta e Romeo* of 1990, by Luigi Scapini [Also known as the 'Shakespeare Tarot' and the 'Romeo and Juliet Tarot'.]

*The Shakespearian Tarot* of 1993, conceived by Dolores Ashcroft-Nowicki, artist Paul Hardy.

*The Shakespeare Oracle* of 2003, conceived by A. Bronwyn Llewellyn with artwork by Cynthia von Buhler [Despite the name 'oracle' this has a true tarot structure.]

A Russian *Shakespeare Tarot*, edited by Vera Skljarova, in 2003.

So we have an Italian, a British, an American and a Russian view of Shakespeare through tarot. Firstly let us note these are all 78 card decks. Dolores Ashcroft-Nowicki's *Shakespearian Tarot* provides us with a fully emblematised Minor arcana, the imagery of which is freshly conceived, rather than being some variation on the familiar Rider-Waite emblems for the pip cards. Here the suits are named Sceptres, Orbs, Swords and Crowns corresponding to the more conventional wands, cups, swords and pentacles or coins. The *Shakespeare Oracle* does not have emblematic pip cards, and the suits are named Sceptres, Chalices, Quills [the pen is mightier than the sword obviously] and Coins. Luigi Scapini's tarot takes a middle path, with the pip cards set out in Tarot of Marseilles style, but with additional emblematic imagery placed on this conventional layout. He keeps the standard names for the suits, Wands, Cups, Swords and Coins. The Russian deck has fully emblematic Minor arcana.

The court cards on the Ashcroft-Nowicki are named Lady, Lord, Queen and King and the imagery depicted there is not the conventional figures, but reflects scenes from the plays. The *Shakespeare Oracle* has a name at the bottom of each card of a character from one of the plays.

	Sceptres	Chalices	Quills	Coins
King	Philip the Bastard	Antony	Richard II and Henry Bolingbroke	Shylock
Queen	Katharine of Aragon	Hermione	Beatrice	Helena
Lord	Richard Plantagenet	Valentine	Armado	Falstaff
Lady	Volumnia	Rosalind	Viola	Mistress Page

This does seem at first sight a rather strange choice in places for characters associated with the court cards, but all is explained in detail in the accompanying book.

Scapini's court cards are more conventional, being Fante (page), Cavallo (knight), Regina (queen) and Re (king) with kings and queens shown on thrones, the knights all on horseback, and the pages standing and holding the symbol of the suit, as is usually found in the tarot courts.

Scapini entirely avoids any textual references, but both the Ashcroft-Nowicki and the *Shakespeare Oracle* use quotations from Shakespeare as a part of their tarot. Each card in the Ashcroft-Nowicki has a short quotation with the source play at the bottom of each card. These are appropriately chosen to resonate with the imagery on the card. With the *Shakespeare Oracle* we find a different approach, for here the short quotations and sources are only placed handwritten on little scrolls on the pip cards. The Majors and the courts do not have any such quotations - here we have the imagery only.

So we can begin to see the different approaches that each of the designers and artists have adopted. The Majors, always the heart of a tarot, reveal a great deal about the style of the artist and deviser of the deck. Ashcroft-Nowicki's Major arcana adopt the Rider-Waite order (Strength VIII and Justice XI) while the other two use the Tarot of Marseilles order which has the Strength and Justice cards interchanged. Dolores Ashcroft-Nowicki holds to the Rider-Waite order in her other *Servants of the Light* tarot of 1991, even though her mentors and fellow British magicians Dion Fortune and Gareth Knight hold to the Marseilles order in the tarots associated with them. The Ashcroft-Nowicki and the Scapini both have the standard names for the Majors, but the *Shakespeare Oracle* associates a character from one of the plays or some other Shakespearean link with each of the Major arcana through a subtitle at the bottom of the card. Thus the Fool is Feste from *Twelfth Night*, the Hermit is Caliban from the *Tempest*, and so on. The Magician is Shakespeare himself (no doubt echoing the speech closing the *Tempest*) while the World depicts the Globe Theatre itself, a rather engaging image.

The artwork of these three tarot could not be more different. Paul Hardy has created detailed highly polished paintings (probably in acrylic) for the Ashcroft-Nowicki. Cynthia von Buhler, the artist who created the *Shakespeare Oracle*, is a well established American artist and illustrator. Her artwork appears to be in the medium of oils and used larger brushes and often a thin layer of paint so one can see textures through the paint layer. Though less polished and detailed than Hardy's work her style is very expressive and well suited to its playful use of symbolism. The Magician card with its puppet master Shakespeare working a puppet, which works a puppet, which works a puppet, in an seemingly infinite regress is a truly amazing image. Luigi Scapini has made a number of

tarots and is a very accomplished artist. He knows 15th and 16th century Italian art very well and creates artwork which echo this, though he is not averse to quoting images from more modern paintings. His work here is thus dense with allusion and quotations from paintings and from illustrations in manuscripts. The cards in the original edition are large and allow the fine detail of his artwork to be seen. Each card has a stylised border (differing for the four suits and the Majors), and the backgrounds have a kind of parchment wash which is very attractive. The outlines of the figures appear to have been drawn and then coloured making a very tight, well thought out and coherent work.

Let us now look at a few of the Majors from each deck.



In the world from the Ashcroft-Nowicki *Shakespearian Tarot* we find the text "all the world's a stage" with the actress proclaiming in a stylised theatrical space. The four shields have the symbols of the four holy creatures lion, bull, eagle and man which are usually found on the World card. The four curtains in the windows and doors have pictures of the four elements fire, air, water and earth. The moon card draws on a *Midsummer Night's Dream* with its text "Ill met by moonlight proud Titania". Here Oberon meets Titania under the full moon. Each have a dog on a leash thus keeping to the conventional tarot image for this card, and stand in front of a pool. The inclusion of the child is again a need to hold to the conventional tarot Moon card symbolism, and the child has no relevance to that section of the play. We see here how the choice of a text to reflect the tarot trump does not really structure the imagery of the card in these cases.

In the case of the Judgement card, the conventional tarot image has been abandoned in favour of a textual source for the imagery. Following the concluding speech of the play Pericles,

Virtue preserved from fell destruction's blast,  
Led on by heaven, and crown'd with joy at last:

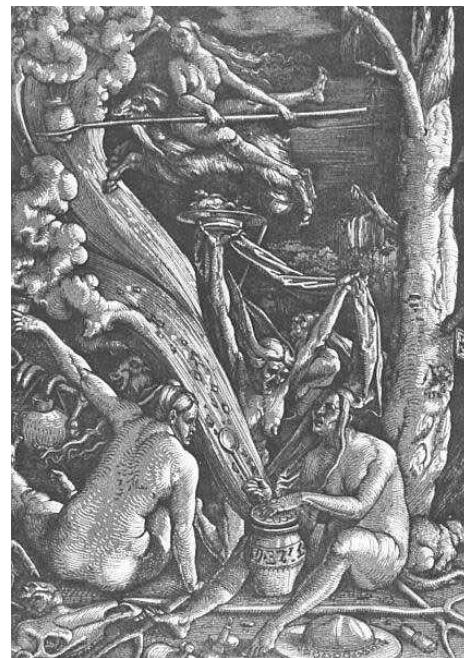
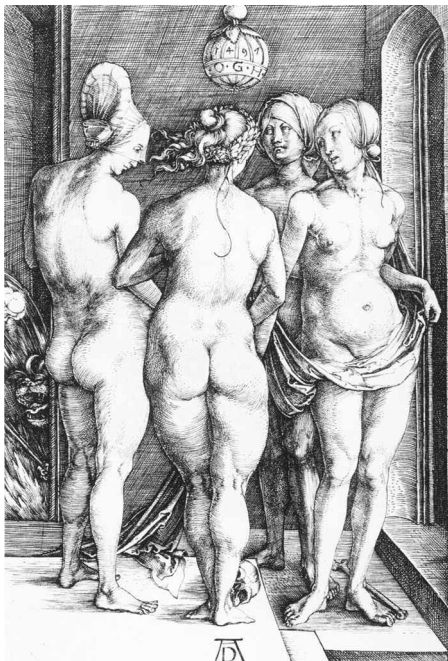
the imagery shows Pericles and his Queen Thasia. Until this point Pericles thought her to be drowned but in the final scene she is brought forth having been saved from destruction. We can see how this might echo the idea of a judgement. Here they are given a crown of laurel leaves, but the artist has moved a bit far from the play where the crowning with joy is metaphorical rather than actual. This deck is interesting in that it tries to bring together something of the text with the tarot structure. On some cards they meld and in others they struggle a little against each other, but it was a great idea to attempt this union.

The *Shakespeare Oracle* is perhaps more decorative in intention. The artist's coherent style plays delightful games with the imagery. Here are the Magician and Moon cards.



As we have already indicated the magician has that deliciously engaging self-referential image of the puppet manipulating a puppet, manipulating a puppet, which appeals so much to the modern mind. The moon card, with its three witches is a pictorial quotation partly from a woodcut of the 16th century German artists Hans Baldung Grien (the witch flying across the moon) with a cut down

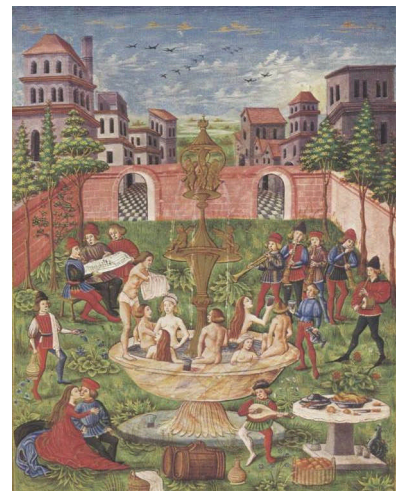
version of Albrecht Durer's *Four Witches* to three! Images like these are truly among the the treasures of modern tarot art.



Italian tarot artists are so lucky to have all the imagery, that originally flowed into and formed the traditional tarot designs, still living around them in their culture and art galleries. Luigi Scapini is obviously immersed in this material and he is able to weave many strands of visual material into his tarots. His Romeo and Juliet tarot is in his best style.



The hanged man is suspended over a pool within which we see the drowning Ophelia, quoted from the famous Pre-Raphaelite painting of Sir John Everett Millais (1851). The Ace of Cups draws more on an image contemporary with the origin of tarot, from the 15th century *De Sphaera* illuminated manuscript produced for the Duke of Estensi. This has the fountain of youth placed within the walled garden. Scapini adapts the image modernising the figures of the bathers and places the faces of Romeo and Juliet on the stem of the fountain. This Scapini deck has so many amusing details contrived to delight the viewer. Just one example - in some of the pip cards for the suit of cups he has his name set in a little paper boat floating on the water. This deck will repay



many hours of study. Scapini focuses particularly on the story of Romeo and Juliet but there are many general references to Shakespeare's work. The book that accompanies the deck was written by Scapini himself and shows the breadth of his study, both of text and image.

The Russian deck of 78 cards each depicts a scene from a Shakespeare play. The Fool, for example, shows Hamlet looking at the skull of Yorick, the court jester that he had known when he was young. Whether Hamlet or poor Yorick is here meant as the Fool is uncertain, perhaps they both are. The Hanged Man is again a scene from the play *Hamlet*. Here we see Ophelia drowning in the pool, depicted, like the Scapini, after the famous painting by Millais. Although the images chosen for the Majors seem related to the tarot imagery, it is very difficult to see why a particular image from a play is associated with the Minor arcana cards. In any case the Minor arcana are not divided into suits, being merely numbered 23 through to 78. Card 62 shows the famous scene of the three witches from *Macbeth*.



This small group of tarots devoted to the Shakespearean theme serves to illustrate the different approaches that creative individuals can bring to the task of creating a themed tarot. We will look at many more themed decks in this course. This is a good compact little group with which to make a start.