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The Literary Tarot, The Literary Classics Edition Guidebook, and Oracle's Atlas: A Companion to The Literary Tarot Classics Edition from the Brink Literacy Project

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The Literary Tarot, The Literary Classics Edition Guidebook, and Oracle's Atlas: A Companion to The Literary Tarot Classics Edition from the Brink Literacy Project

Abstract

Review of *The Literary Tarot, The Literary Tarot Classics Edition Guidebook, and Oracle's Atlas: A Companion to the Literary Tarot Classics Edition*. © 2022 Brink Literacy Project. UPC 195893099603.

Additional Keywords

Tarot; literacy; education; Rachel Pollack; Oedipus; Catherynne M. Valente; Erin Morgenstern; Holly Black; Madeline Miller

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view which Lewis himself describes in *The Discarded Image* (1964). Such an example also illustrates Selby's comparative neglect of other Lewis scholars—including, but not limited to, Robert Boenig's 2012 *C.S. Lewis & The Middle Ages* (Kent State UP).¹ Of course, one book can only do so much, and Selby well-accomplishes his goal to "trace the theme of earthy spirituality" in Lewis's body of writings. In drawing extensively from a rich well of personal experience and decades of teaching, Selby not only convincingly argues for the importance of our "creaturely situation," but also provides practical instruction on how to joyfully *live* an incarnational faith.

—Sarah O'Dell

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SARAH O'DELL PhD, is an MD/PhD candidate at the University of California, Irvine, where she has completed a PhD in English with an emphasis in Medical Humanities. In addition to her dissertation research, she is an expert on physician and Inkling R.E. Havard, who provides the focus of her current book project: *The Medical Inkling*. Her research on Havard has previously appeared in *Mythlore* and *VII: Journal of the Marion E. Wade Center*. As a future physician-scholar and aspiring psychiatrist, she is passionate about what the past can teach us about healing the mind. Updates are available on her website: sarahodellmdphd.com.



THE LITERARY TAROT, THE LITERARY TAROT CLASSICS EDITION GUIDEBOOK, AND ORACLE'S ATLAS: A COMPANION TO THE LITERARY TAROT CLASSICS EDITION. Brink Literacy Project, 2022. UPC 195893099603.

BRINK LITERACY PROJECT (<https://www.brinklit.org>) is a non-profit founded by Dani Hedlund to foster world literacy through education and community outreach, including the Frames Prison Program intended to help counter the low literacy rates of women in U.S. and U.K. prisons. It also offers mentorship and publishing opportunities for writers, such as a fifteen-week internship providing an introduction to many aspects of the industry. Much of the funding for the Project comes from an annual gala, a gala that was cancelled in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Faced with the near immediate shut-down of their programs, Hedlund's decision to develop a Tarot deck funded on Kickstarter (<https://www.kickstarter.com/projects/brinklit/the-literary-tarot>)

¹ See also Jason M. Baxter's *The Medieval Mind of C.S. Lewis*, published by IVP in 2022, several years after *Pursuing an Earthy Spirituality*.

proved to be truly inspired. The plan to make it a specifically literary Tarot, with widely-recognized contemporary authors aligning the cards with their favorite classics, was pure genius.

As with most Kickstarter projects, backers could choose to offer a little or a lot of support by way of their advance purchasing choices. As support grew exponentially, so did the qualitative possibilities, which in turn inspired still more support, not only for the basic deck and mini-guidebook, but for the *Oracle's Atlas: A Companion to the Literary Tarot Classics Edition*, the special Tarot-themed issue of *F(r)iction* #19, the Tarot Cloth, the Major Arcana Booster Pack, and so forth. All told, support for *The Literary Tarot* totalled almost \$800,000, far more than any gala would have collected, and supporters were well rewarded for their generosity. The basic boxed set includes seventy-eight custom-illustrated foil-inlaid cards and a mini guidebook in a "swanky" book box: all of which are of uniformly high quality and absolutely stunning visually. The card stock is sturdy. The gold edging and foil inlays are tasteful and effective and are beautifully enhanced by the black edging, as are the richly coloured face images. The reversible back design is perfectly suited to the deck, being composed of pots for ink (wands), candles for light (cups), quills (swords), and parchment (pentacles). Ink from the pots forms a swirling lemniscate around a central book balanced on either side by a candle, quill, and parchment arrangement.

The complete story of how *The Literary Tarot* came to be is told at the beginning of the hardcover *Oracle's Atlas*. The core content of the *Atlas* is an illustrated description of each card with explanations of its literary pairing. The majors and minors are divided by a couple of pages on how to use the "booster" cards. This material is followed by an appendix showing how the art for each and every card developed; then there is a brief explanation of the development of the cover design; and finally, an "about the authors" section. The back of the last page acknowledges the Brink team, many authors, Tarot advisors, and volunteers who made the project a success, as well as the five artists (Sam Dow, Ejiwa "Edge" Ebenebe, Shan Bennion, Isabel Burke, Bradley Clayton) who spent an entire year illustrating the cards under Hedlund's direction.

The "about the authors" section is a who's who of award-winning comic, fantasy, mythopoeic, and science fiction writers, all of whom enthusiastically offered to match their favorite literary classic up with a Tarot card. Those who have been winners or runners up for the Mythopoeic award include Rachel Pollack for *Temporary Agency* in 1995, Margaret Atwood for *The Penelopiad* in 2006, Catherynne M. Valente for *The Orphan's Tales* in 2008 and *Palimpsest* in 2010, Erin Morgenstern for *The Night Circus* in 2012, Holly Black for *The Darkest Part of the Forest* in 2016, Madeline Miller for *Circe* in 2019, and, given the length of the contributor list, there may well be a few more that I have missed. Pollack paired the Knight of Quills (Swords) with Sophocles's *Oedipus*

Rex; Atwood paired the Queen of Light (Cups) with Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre*; Valente paired The Empress with Chaucer's *The Wife of Bath's Tale*; Morgenstern paired the Five of Light (Cups) with F. Scott Fitzgerald's *The Great Gatsby*; Holly Black paired The Four of Ink (Wands) with Lord Dunsany's *The King of Elfland's Daughter*; and Miller paired the High Priestess with Shakespeare's *King Lear*. Readers of *Mythlore* will also be pleased to learn that Simon Tolkien paired The Chariot with Robert Louis Stevenson's *Treasure Island*.



The Knight of Quills printed with permission from Brink Literacy Project (brinklit.org). Pairing Author: Rachel Pollack. Artist: Isabel Burke. Copyright 2022 Brink Literacy Project

Of all of these, the Knight of Quills created by Isabel Burke is my favorite (among seventy-eight favorites) card and deserving of a special note because Rachel Pollack passed away on April 7, 2023: *The Literary Tarot* is one of her last projects. Pollack is a much-published author and Tarot teacher; she also worked as a translator with David Vine on *Tyrant Oedipus: A New Translation of Sophocles's Oedipus Tyrannus* (Eyecorner Press, 2012). While she had several suggestions to offer, the alignment of the Knight of Quills with Oedipus is perfect and so is the final redesign of the former Knight of Swords. The image dispenses with the traditional horse in favor of the moment when Oedipus, having learned the truth of his parentage and his actions, blinds himself. He is shown crowned and in profile, his eyes streaming with blood, on the lower half of the card in front of three ionic columns entwined with vines. The three columns and

vines may be taken as metaphors for the entanglements created by the three oracles that are ultimately responsible for bringing about Oedipus's fate. The first told Oedipus's father King Laius that his own son would murder him; thus, Laius condemned Oedipus to death, but instead, he was raised by a couple he long believed to be his true parents. Much later, when Oedipus has unknowingly killed Laius and married his widow (his mother), the people suffer from a plague, so Oedipus sends his brother-in-law to consult the Oracle

of Delphi regarding a cure. The Oracle says he must find Laius's killer. Oedipus then calls on the blind prophet Tiresias for aid. Tiresias tells him that it was he who killed the king and then married his own mother, Jocasta. When subsequent investigations prove this to be the truth, Jocasta commits suicide and Oedipus blinds himself.

The upper half of the card shows the hooded head and shoulders of the last prophet, Tiresias. He faces away from the waxing crescent moon on the left and toward the suit sign to the right; away from the development of Laius and Oedipus's choices and toward their consequences as they will be recorded. The mist swirling from eyes to quill suggest his ability to see the truth, in spite of being blind, and also echo the growth of the metaphorical vines that trap Oedipus. It is also easy to read the three branches of the sigil on Oedipus's cape brooch as references to the three oracles and to misread it as the Elder Futhark rune of Fehu, which only has two branches and refers generally to mobile wealth, such as cattle, and also luck. Such details, like the waxing crescent moon, are part of the rich interpretive possibilities that the card offers: Pollack, with the help of the Brink team, cautions all who would read their futures that, that future is always and ultimately a matter of choice.

It is only through a careful reading of the story of Oedipus that the card itself can be read, as is the case with all *The Literary Tarot* cards. This marriage of Tarot and literature is bound to be a marvelous inspiration for many to read and reread the classics and to use their motifs and themes as a basis for reading the cards and perhaps also the possibilities of their own lives in them. Book-based *Literary Tarot* clubs, or perhaps they should be called *Literary Tarot*-based book clubs, cannot be far behind. If only there were another edition so that everyone who missed the Kickstarter could have a copy of the deck too. In the meantime, you just might be able to order one of the last copies of this edition at the *F(r)iction* website (<<https://frictionlit.org/shop/literarytarot/>>).

—Emily E. Auger

EMILY E. AUGER (Ph.D.) is the author of numerous books and articles, including *Cartomancy and Tarot in Film 1940-2010* (2016) and *Tarot and Other Meditation Decks* (2004; new expanded edition 2023), editor of the multi-author *Tarot in Culture Volumes I and II* (2014); and co-editor with Janet Brennan Croft of *Divining Tarot: Papers on Charles Williams's The Greater Trumps and Other Works* by Nancy-Lou Patterson (2019). She also served as the area chair for Tarot and Other Methods of Divination at the Popular Culture Association / American Culture Association conference from 2004-2020.

