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The Unlikely Milliner & The Magician of Threadneedle-Street [Article]

Abstract

Susanna Clarke uses the tarot in her novel *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* much as she uses history: twisting it to open up spaces for magic and playfulness. She offers modifications on the traditional Tarot de Marseille that accurately predict the narrative events, yet deftly obscures the outcomes by leading the readers (and the characters) to jump to the wrong conclusions. Laity's analysis of the Tarot readings performed by Childermas and Vinculus shows that Strange and Norrell enjoy mastery in magic, only to find that that mastery brings great suffering to others and also isolates them from the world as they once knew it.

Additional Keywords

Clarke, Susanna. Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell; Tarot in Susanna Clarke; Magicians; Magic in Susanna Clarke



THE UNLIKELY MILLINER & THE MAGICIAN OF THREADNEEDLE-STREET

K.A. LAITY

SUSANNA CLARKE USES THE TAROT IN HER NOVEL *Jonathan Strange & Mr Norrell* (2004) much as she uses history: twisting it to open up spaces for magic and playfulness. Her slightly altered version of the Tarot de Marseille (hereafter TdM) plays an important role in recording and anticipating events in the novel. As for all querents who approach the cards, the readers make interpretations fueled by their guesses about connections based on the layout that turns up. Likewise those interpretations are often colored by their assumptions about what the cards mean in both the abstract and relational senses, though things are not always what they seem; after all, Clarke's deck, the "cards of Marseilles" (hereafter CoM) aren't quite the TdM (185). Clarke obscures the narrative lens by creating a novel twist: she changes this long-famous deck by having one character make a singular copy of it. This innovation mirrors the effects of her slightly-altered history throughout the tale, leading to alternate interpretations of established 'facts' previously known. In short, readers will get things wrong. Characters (and potentially, readers) misunderstand the signs they glimpse, then make errors about their significance. The prophecies conveyed in both words and cards turn out to be correct in the end, but almost inevitably misinterpreted throughout the narrative. The interpretations offered *in media res* lack knowledge of the 'big picture': namely, the truth of the Raven King. The way Clarke uses the tarot echoes her skillful misdirection throughout the novel.

This novel is an enormous tome. Though difficult to summarize succinctly for readers unfamiliar with it, it is helpful to say that the two titular magicians come together first as master and student, then as friends and equals, and finally as enemies, only to once more work in tandem at the end to stave off disaster. Mr Norrell embodies everything conservative and fearful, whilst Jonathan Strange personifies everything reckless and creative. As the street magician Vinculus recites from the Raven King's prophecy, "*Two magicians shall appear in England . . . [...] The first shall pass his life alone; he shall be his own gaoler; the second shall tread lonely roads, the storm above his head, seeking a dark tower upon a high hillside . . .*" (123). Prophecy in this novel is akin to the medieval notion of the term. In much of current fantasy, 'prophecy' is an individual's fortune—marking out a chosen one for greatness, for example—whilst the (sadly understudied) genre of medieval prophecy concerns nations if not the whole

world. Prognosticators like the 13th century Robert Grosseteste and 12th century Joachim de Fiore sought to understand the divine plan and write it down. Robert E. Lerner, writing about religious dissent expressed in the genre, notes that “much of the content of medieval religious prophecy can be read as the expression of dissatisfaction with the present and hope for the future” (7). For many within the church, prophecy was a call for change. The twelfth century mystic Hildegard of Bingen, for example, concerned herself primarily with the future of the Christian church in *Scivias* but later in the *Liber divinatorum operum* her apocalyptic prophecies concerned “creation as a whole, and humanity in particular” (Mews 46). Prophecy was meant to see change not just in a life but in the world.

In Clarke’s fantasy, the man called John Uskglass, known as the Raven King, received his magical training in Faerie and reappeared in England accompanied by the *daoine sidthe*, the fairy host. For over three hundred years, fairies were inextricably part of Uskglass’s rule of Northern England. Gilbert Norrell has a particular loathing for the Raven King, hates fairy, and thus has no interest in his prophecy. Dedicated to restoring English magic as a ‘respectable’ undertaking for a gentleman, he hopes to purge it of any association with fairy. After all, he has learned his magic from books since childhood (86). Nevertheless, he is driven to using fairy magic in order to make a splash in London society and to secure the patronage of the government. He summons a fairy (referred to only as ‘the gentleman with thistle-down hair’) who resurrects Sir Walter Pole’s dead fiancée. Norrell’s fame and official status as *the* English magician rely on this fairy helper and the terrible bargain he makes for half of (the soon to be) Lady Pole’s life. The magician’s private shame hides this secret, though his public excoriation of fairy magic continues.

His pupil Jonathan Strange, however, only becomes a magician by accident (as detailed below) when casting about for a profession. Because Norrell has hoarded most of the books of English magic in his own library, the first magical book Strange acquires from his fiancée is Lord Portishead’s *A Child’s History of the Raven King* which he later calls “one of the most perfect things of its kind” which “conveys to the reader a vivid sense of the eeriness and wonder” of the Raven King’s magic (412). He is eager to learn about fairy magic, until Norrell forbids him that pursuit. From the start of his career, Strange is more sympathetic to Uskglass’s legacy. Yet ignorant of its history when he first hears the prophecy from the street magician, Strange does not figure out its significance for himself. Much of the drama of the overarching conflict between the two magicians relies upon Strange’s obliviousness of what the prophecy signifies and Norrell’s refusal to accept its importance.

Once Norrell has a little power, one of his first acts is to petition the government “for the removal of these vagabond magicians” who roam the

streets of London and other cities, telling fortunes and promising spells (177). Most are chased away by the crackdown, but Vinculus the magician of Threadneedle-street obstinately remains. Mr Norrell sends his 'man of business' John Childermass to pose unconvincingly as a milliner in search of a love spell from Vinculus, though he clearly knows nothing about the trade. Norrell has given him spells to employ to chase the street magician from the city, for he cannot bear any competition—least of all the man who claims to see his future.

After being exposed as an agent of Norrell, whom Vinculus refers to as "the magician of Hanover-square" (182), Childermass reads a spread of cards, which he calls "the cards of Marseilles" (185), signaling their difference from the TdM. The reading for the street magician contains clues to the rest of the lengthy novel for Clarke manipulates the traditional deck just a little, allowing the small changes to reverberate throughout the story like her changes to the history of the Napoleonic wars and English history in general do as well. While many alternate history narratives rely upon a "point of divergence" (Singles 7) from which history shoots off into the 'alternate' direction, Clarke's novel offers many points of divergence while playfully attempting as much as possible to contain the fantastic within the extant historical record. Her tinkering with the TdM is indicative of her skillful approach to the manifold strands of the novel: the CoM are recognizably much the same as the standard deck, but the small changes have enormous consequences within the narrative.

Vinculus returns the favor of fortune telling, spreading the cards for Childermass, though he is unable to read them himself. It does not keep the man from demanding Childermass lay out the cards a third time, saying "I am going to tell his fortune" which we assume to mean Mr Norrell's (188). As Vinculus bids Childermass turn over the cards one by one, each turns into IIII. L'Empereur, but with a difference for "[t]he lines are thick and smudged so that the Emperor's hair and robe appear almost black" (188). As the eagle at his feet turns into a raven, the identity of the figure becomes clear: he is The Raven King. That is the future.

When Childermass shares this prophecy with his master, Norrell was "very angry" about the "Black King" but, typical of his scorn for the Raven King, he refuses to consider the impact of this information, instead berating Childermass for having been "tricked" by the street magician (190) who obviously switched decks with some sleight of hand. Norrell's contempt for the disreputable street magician overrides any concern about what the cards may tell. Indeed he loathes the cards themselves nearly as much as he despises the Magician of Threadneedle-street who had already shared the Raven King's prophecy when he broke into his house at Hanover-square after Norrell's first explosion of fame. Norrell dismisses the predictions as nonsense, "[m]ystical ramblings about stones and rain and trees" (123). It is no wonder that he

assumes Vinculus has simply created a duplicate deck of fakes in order to fool Childermass.

However, things are not quite that straightforward (if that can be said to be straightforward). Everything about Childermass's deck is just a little bit unusual, which would make it impossible to substitute an alternate. The TdM is well known and much reprinted over the centuries: the CoM is singular. The 'Tarocchi' has been around as playing cards since at least "the middle of the fifteenth century" (Pollack 7). Though the deck was not actually called the Tarot of Marseilles until 1930 (Decker et. al 35), its occult history goes back as far as the eighteenth century, when "an occultist named Antoine Court de Gébelin declared [it] to be the remnant of the Book of Thoth" (Pollack 9). There has been much discussion of its use and meanings from various points of view, but especially for magical history it is important to know that "the [19th century] occultists knew no other pattern than the Tarot de Marseille" though it "had never been more than one pattern among many" (Decker et. al 36-37).

Clarke gives this magical history a twist. Although Childermass's deck was copied from the TdM, it has a singular nature that allows Clarke to both use the traditional card meanings and add twists of her own that further innovate the mythology of the cards. The origin story of this singular deck provides fascinating reading. "They are copies of a set belonging to a sailor I met in Whitby," Childermass tells Vinculus, the sailor having purchased them in Genoa in hopes of using the cards to find pirate gold (185). Unable to read them, the sailor makes a deal with Childermass to exchange the latter's ability to read the cards with the opportunity to copy the cards, for Norrell's servant cannot afford to buy them outright. Because the sailor departs sooner than planned, "half are done from memory" he explains. So when Childermass shows Vinculus "the cards of Marseilles" the magician has indeed seen their like but acknowledges "yours are different" (185). That difference offers Clarke the opportunity to open up the interpretations of the cards both for her characters as readers of the cards and for her readers of the story. The question is not so much what the right interpretation is, but how the characters imbue them with meanings.

Even the shape of the cards is unique for, due to Childermass's poverty at the time, "the cards were drawn upon the backs of ale-house bills, laundry lists, letters, old accounts and playbills" (185). This is no accident of course. They are particular to their creator and his itinerant life (Childermass has a long and varied history before he comes into Norrell's employ, including some time as a child pick-pocket). There is an added wrinkle that makes the cards a sort of palimpsest of others' words, reflecting in a material sense the weight of history behind them. "At a later date he had pasted the papers on to coloured cardboard, but in several instances the printing or writing on the other side shewed

through, giving them an odd look” which emphasizes their singularity (185). This fact may also be a sly reference to the book of the Raven King inscribed, too, where it is not expected to be and overlooked because it doesn’t seem relevant.

As with the rest of the history portrayed in the novel, Clarke carefully chooses the spaces in which to allow play, but always from a position of wider knowledge. As Deirdre Byrne argues, she “practises magic with great precision, using the techniques of literary analysis and interpretation with care to ensure that the results are exactly as desired” (6). In interviews she has spoken of her zeal for research. “I love doing research. [...] I wanted to use the historical background to make the magic seem more real, more convincing” (Goodwin). Even a history as esoteric and sometimes vexed as the tarot receives due respect from the writer. The magical history of the TdM comes from “a succession of French occultists” despite the deck’s origin as a gambling card game in 15th century Italy; in the late 19th century the deck “spread from France to Britain, and from there throughout the Western world” (Decker et. al. 48, 52). Clarke introduces a playful twist into this history (as she does the wider military, social and literary histories of Britain) that builds on the traditional meanings of the TdM cards in a thoughtful way. Her enthusiasm for tarot comes through clearly in her interview with modern magician Alan Moore (“Wonderful Wizard”); but though she waxes rhapsodic about researching the Napoleonic wars or “soldiers’ accounts of Waterloo, the social anthropology of George Ewart Evans and [...] styles of visiting cards and mausoleums” (Hodgman), I have not located an interview where she mentions studying tarot.

Yet Clarke demonstrates a clear sense of knowledge of the TdM cards and the general practices of tarot reading. She chooses a very specific layout for Childermass to use with the CoM in the scene with Vinculus. “Like the tarot, a layout is symbolic” (Riley 252) but it is not easily discerned what the layout may symbolize to anyone but the querent. The spreads of cards prove consistent within the scene: nine cards laid out in a row. Nine is a resonant number in Anglo-Saxon (early English) tradition (cf. the Nine Herbs Charm), though it is not the most typical spread amongst modern card readers. The set of three threes is resonant, as the simplest reading tends to be three card past-present-future form, one card to represent each: doubling and trebling the primary three is common magical practice. Perhaps the most popular version of this is the so-called Lenormand square, 3x3, though that deck had fewer cards: 36 rather than the traditional 78 of most tarot decks (Decker et. al. 141). Clarke however offers the nine cards as a continuous narrative of the future which Childermass laid out “in a line” (185). Anyone who has ever consulted a modern tarot reader knows that personal preferences and showmanship count for a lot. As James

Frost details in his hermeneutic examination of tarot reading, the factors engaged in any consultation offer the space for this kind of variety:

If we now return to Gadamer's model we can say that divinatory tarot reading is concerned predominantly with the *symbolic*, involving personal recollection and recognition of the symbol. It is also *festive*, usually taking place in a secluded ritual context such as in the practices of an occult group, a fortune-teller's or psychic's booth, or even a formalised therapeutic setting. Inevitably, the relationship between reader and querent involves back and forth and is therefore *playful*. As we have seen, the themes of modern tarot packs alternate between the humorous and serious. (Frost 23, italics in original)

Clarke makes the most of this latitude. Though not always orthodox, the reading is highly symbolic of the subsequent adventures of the novel and affects the reader's interpretation of the characters involved. She lays the ground for the eventual revelation of the Raven King himself, but also of the forthcoming conflicts between the two magicians and their cohorts. Like all good authors, she seeks to lead her readers to make assumptions, but ultimately she holds all the cards herself, so logic often leads to incorrect guesses about the outcomes of the story.

The festive element comes into play via the unlikely location of their tarot consultancy. While Vinculus indeed has his own fortune-teller's booth—its yellow curtains much derided by Norrell—they meet in an ale-house called the Pineapple which “had once been the refuge and hiding-place of a notorious thief and murderer,” down “three greasy steps” in a “gloomy parlour” where the two men “sat down at a table in the corner” (183). Vinculus is most anxious to share his treasure, the prophecy of the Raven King (“the greatest glory and the greatest burden,” 185), while Childermass seeks to persuade the magician to leave London as his master wishes. He marshals the cards to convince Vinculus of the advantageousness of Norrell's plan. He has no apparent interest in the prophecy.

The element of play results from the contested readings the two give, potentially amplified by the reader's own interpretations of the cards whether knowledgeable or not about the tarot itself. A modern fiction reader, accustomed to doubting the words of unreliable narrators, may at least express some uncertainty about the spread, but the characters' amused disagreements fit the ale-house setting more so than any serious ritual space. Though they consider themselves magicians, the two feel both awed by Norrell's obvious power yet somewhat truculent that their own skills are not recognized; the magician of Hanover-square forbids them both from practicing. This knowledge renders their interactions both tentative and slightly belligerent, but always

infused with a mordant sense of humour, as when Vinculus laughs at the revelation of the sailor's fortune that he would drown.

The spread begins:

VIII. L'Ermite

It shewed an old man in a monkish robe with a monkish hood. He carried a lantern and walked with a stick as if he had come near to losing the use of his limbs through too much sitting and studying. His face was pinched and suspicious. A dry atmosphere seemed to rise up and envelop the observer as if the card itself were peppery with dust. (185-86)

Childermass turns over the first card to reveal the Hermit. In the original TdM the card is indeed labeled with the Roman numerals as above and not the more common designation (IX). The ninth card features what appears to be a monk in robes and a hood, with a stick and also a lantern. The facial expression is vaguely rendered, so 'pinched and suspicious' is a gloss, even more so the atmosphere. The interpreter places the card as signifying who governs Vinculus's actions at present, remarking "we knew that already" and one concludes that the hermit is Norrell, hence the embellishments of tone to the image, for he is nothing if not pinched and suspicious.

0. Le Mat

[...] the only picture card to remain numberless, as if the character it depicts is in some sense outside the story. Childermass's card shewed a man walking along a road beneath a summer tree. He had a stick to lean upon and another stick over his shoulder with a handkerchief bundle hanging from it. A little dog skipped after him. The figure was intended to represent the fool or jester of ancient times. He had a bell in his hat and ribbons at his knees which Childermass had coloured red and green. It appeared that Childermass did not know quite how to interpret this card. (186)

The card of the Fool may be the best known of the iconic tarot images. It seems odd that Childermass appears not to know how to interpret the card until he turns over the next two. Perhaps it is merely the familiarity of the image. The colored ribbons suggest the familiar image of the Morris Dancer, but the image on the whole reflects the typical TdM image with one exception: the "summer tree" his road passes beneath. While the traditional dog, sticks and bindle are all there, the barest of landscapes is sketched in, usually a few tufts of grass. In contrast, the most popular deck in modern times (due to its commercial availability) the Smith-Rider-Waite, the Fool appears at the edge of a cliff, seemingly unmindful of the peril before him. As tarot scholar Rachel Pollack

writes, it serves as “the leap into the archetypal world of the trumps” (24). But there is no tree in the Rider deck.

The “summer tree” presents another moment to demonstrate Clarke’s subtle changes to the tradition. It seems mostly likely to be directly symbolic of the hawthorn tree upon which Vinculus will be hanged by the gentleman with thistle-down hair in chapter 65. Nine years have passed (and over 500 pages). The time is February 1817 and not summery, but very wintery: the gentleman stares at “a distant line of white hills” presumably snow-covered (738), and later Childermass lays out the apparently dead body of Vinculus “on a barren, winter moor” (752). Thus there is an element of playfulness in Clarke’s reference to the tree. However, there’s a deeper resonance as well: the tree is ‘summery’ because it represents that truth of Vinculus’s declaration to his would-be executioner “I am very hard to kill” (737) as well as his eventual rebirth provided by the Raven King who lies behind every card. In this way the “summer tree,” despite its winter trappings, represents a kind of metonymy for the eternal magic of the King. “*In winter the barren trees shall be a black writing but they shall not understand it,*” as the prophecy goes (122). Winter may represent a kind of death and loss but spring brings the return of the leaves that presage summer. It is perhaps this doubling of meaning that gives Childermass pause in his interpretation, turning over two more cards to understand the path, though not yet the prophecy:

VIII. La Justice and The Two of Wands

[...] a crowned woman holding a sword and a pair of scales [...] the wands were crossed and might among other things be thought to represent a crossroads. (186)

The meaning of the three cards in concert is immediately clear to Childermass. He tells the magician that *La Justice* “tells me you have weighed your choices and come to a decision” (186). The most direct interpretation of the card sidesteps the inherent image of Justice as not only weighing options but choosing the right one. For Childermass and his master, the right one is clearly that Vinculus must leave the capital, but for the prophecy of the Raven King, it is inevitable that he do so, too, for that is the way he will meet the second magician. The traditional meaning, however, is one of adjustment, seeking or achieving equilibrium (Riley 40-41) and that seems to suit as well, for the street magician will seek out new streets. But it is telling that Pollack describes the “psychic laws of Justice” as being dependent upon advancing “according to our ability to understand the past” (83), for the whole of the novel hinges on this: Norrell who denies the past and Strange who remains ignorant of it.

As Childermass confirms, the *Two of Wands* “tells me that your decision is: you are going wandering” (186). This is in keeping with tradition: the two is

about making choices and the suit of the wands is generally aligned with the passions one seeks—"career, wisdom, imagination, inspiration, creativity" (Riley 84). Clarke uses the wands often to indicate those who pursue magic, especially as a career. Vinculus, however, only pursues magic in a desultory way: his real magic is the book inscribed on his body, a fate he cannot escape yet need not expend any effort towards. In apparent terms his career is not so much a passion as a grift. As Childermass relates, the widely-held opinion is that Vinculus is no more than a "yellow-curtained, ragged-arsed sorcerer" who uses "fake spells and pretend oracles" (184). Yet when the street magician shares his prophecy with Norrell, he speaks "as if in a religious ecstasy of some sort" (120). His decision to wander has a huge impact on the field of magic as his travels bring him at last into contact with Jonathan Strange as is clearly fated to happen. Childermass chides him for it: "So many protestations, Vinculus, and yet you always intended to go!" (186). Vinculus shrugs at this; it remains unclear whether he has indeed already intended departing or if he is merely acquiescing to the easiest path.

Valet de Coupe

The fifth card was the *Valet de Coupe*, the Page of Cups. One naturally thinks of a page as being a youthful person, but the picture shewed a mature man with bowed head. His hair was shaggy and his beard was thick. In his left hand he carried a heavy cup, yet it could not be that which gave such an odd, strained expression to his countenance—not unless it were the heaviest cup in the world. No, it must be some other burden, not immediately apparent. Owing to the materials which Childermass had been compelled to use to construct his cards, this picture had a most peculiar look. It had been drawn upon the back of a letter and the writing shewed through the paper. The man's clothes were a mass of scribble and even his face and hands bore parts of letters. (186)

It is striking that while Childermass has laughed and felt in charge of the situation up to this point, he momentarily loses confidence here. It is Vinculus who laughs and "gave the card three taps in a friendly greeting" (186-87). Childermass suggests uncertainly that the Magician of Threadneedle-street has a message to deliver, but certainly never guesses the nature of that message: a book inscribed on his body. The reader is just as unlikely to figure it out, although given many hints. In the very first chapter, would-be magician John Segundus mentions the street magician's "strange disfiguration" (8). When he first appears to Norrell, the Magician of Hanover-square notices on Vinculus "a curious curving mark of a vivid blue, not unlike the upward stroke of a pen" (123). Despite making that explicit comparison to writing he does not realize the significance of it, nor of Vinculus's immediate desire to shield the mark from

sight as if in embarrassment. The street magician confines himself on this first meeting to reciting the prophecy he has memorized—for as we discover, he cannot read himself.

Historical discussions of the card agree in general with this interpretation. For notorious self-promoting occultist Aleister Crowley, there's an element of being "[v]ery dependent upon others, but at the same time helpful to them"; [Smith-Rider-]Waite also affirms "[n]ews, message" (Riley 180-81). Traditionally the card does indicate a man with a message, particularly of family matters: what could be more of a family matter than Vinculus's book? As he tells it, "It is my inheritance. It is the greatest glory and the greatest burden that has been given to any man in this Age" (185). The Page's heavy cup is matched succinctly by this description. He inherits the book of Robert Findhelm (310) from his father Clegg in the most peculiar way, not handed down in the usual manner of legacies, but inscribed upon his body at birth four years after his father, in a drunken contest, "tore [the book] into strips and ate it piece by piece" (313). The Book of Magic written in the King's Letters by the Raven King—holding the whole of English magic's truth—would be a heavy burden indeed.

In keeping with the changed image of the Page, we find Vinculus described as not youthful, but mature, "a thin, shabby, ragged hawk of a man. His face was the colour of three-day-old milk; his hair was the colour of a coal-smoke-and-ashes London sky" (119). The heavy burden that has hung upon Vinculus causes him to berate the prophesied magician with the complaint that he has been waiting twenty long years for him. Norrell, who has been "tormented with the idea that he had betrayed English magic by his dilatoriness" (119), greets this revelation with surprise and guilt.

Cavalier de Baton

A man in a broad-brimmed hat sat upon a horse of a pale colour. The countryside through which he rode was indicated by a few rocks and tufts of grass at his horse's hooves. His clothes were well-made and expensive-looking, but for some inexplicable reason he was carrying a heavy club. Even to call it a club was to make it sounder [sic] grander than it was. It was scarcely more than a thick branch torn from a tree or hedge; there were still twigs and leaves protruding from it. (187)

Clarke has a great deal of fun with this card. The image itself is not much different from the traditional rendering in the TdM. There is perhaps a little more detail about the club, but even on the original TdM card that club is not a carved weapon but an impromptu one, betraying evidence of its recent life as a part of a tree. "Vinculus picked up the card and studied it carefully" but Childermass immediately turns over the final three cards. Of the sixth card, he says only "you may expect a meeting" (187). The meeting of course is with

Jonathan Strange, the second magician prophesied, the one who “shall long to behold me” (123) as Vinculus told Norrell on his initial visit to Hanover Square.

The scene where Strange meets Vinculus, fulfilling the prophecy and the tarot reading, is a delight. Clarke does her best to make the most unlikely image completely believable, “to wrap the surreal in the mundane” (Hodgman). She carefully builds the background of both Jonathan Strange—and his horrible father (the novel is full of mostly terrible fathers, so Lord Portishead’s shining example gleams even brighter)—as well as the back story of his servant Jeremy Johns who ends up playing a pivotal role as Strange’s right-hand man at home and in war. For this analysis, all that is necessary to know is that a young man, not mourning the sudden passing of his father, contemplates the more pleasing thought of finally being able to marry the woman he has loved for what seems to him an eternity as he travels in the company of his trusted servant.

Whilst journeying to visit Miss Woodhope in expectation of finally persuading her to marry him, Strange and Johns come upon a village queerly empty of adults. Beyond the village they discover “a crowd was gathered around a winter hedge. They carried an assortment of weapons—billhooks, sickles, sticks and guns. It was a very odd picture, both sinister and a little ridiculous” (196). In a novel full of marvels, Clarke is always at pains to make magic believable by creating a sense of realism that borders on dullness. “It seemed to me that you make magic real by making it a little prosaic, a little difficult and disappointing—never quite as glamorous as the other characters imagine,” Clarke has said (BBC), so this moment stands out. Acknowledging the strangeness of the moment and at the same time trying to make it as vivid and realistic as possible, Clarke lends it an unforgettable quality that proves equal parts amusing and completely believable.

Craning their necks to discover what has captivated the villagers, the two men discover it is a slumbering figure, though Strange admits, “At first I took him for a hedge-root” (196). Their idle curiosity met, they ride on until they enter a dark wood. There Strange imagines recounting to Miss Woodhope the strange sight of the armed villagers gathered round the man asleep in the hedge, and fears her approbation for not assisting the man. He and Johns ride back. Fearing there will be violence with the villagers, Strange asks his servant whether they have weapons. Responding that they had none, Johns jumps down from his horse, saying, “I can make us some clubs out of these branches which will do almost as well as pistols” though our narrator casts some doubt on their quality, remarking that what Johns handed his master “was scarcely a club, more of a branch with twigs growing out of it” (197). With this complex yet utterly mundane formulation, our Knight of Wands has been fully equipped for his prophesied encounter in a manner ridiculous but prosaic.

The villagers try to dissuade the bustling gentleman, fearing he will wake the man whom they know to be a magician, which would “risk bringing his dreams out of his head into the world” (198). The magician of course is the wandering Vinculus. When Strange speaks he awakes at once. Not only is Vinculus hardly distinguishable from a hedge root, but as he attempts to extricate himself from the hedgerow he rises covered in “various parts of it—hawthorn twigs, elder branches, strands of ivy, mistletoe and witches’ broom” (198)—all of which have connections to magical and faerie lore. Strange fails to take any notice of this, even when Vinculus announces his ten-day wander has the aim of finding “a man who is destined to be a great magician” whose picture he has seen and now “by certain mystic signs” recognizes it to be him (199).

Jonathan Strange is surprised and definitely not interested. Far from the usual fated meeting where the participants understand at once the gravity of the situation, the two talk at cross purposes. Vinculus recites once more his prophecy from the Raven King, while Strange protests that the magical path sounds “entirely dreadful” thus “I suggest you chuse someone else” (199). Vinculus is not put off by this nor by Strange’s protest that he does not know any magic. The old magician offers to sell the new magician the spells which he had picked from Childermass’s pocket. Though he gives him the seven shillings and sixpence demanded to avoid being remanded for vagrancy, Strange does so only in hopes that “it will stop him talking to me” (200).

There is no immediate revelation of Strange’s prophesied abilities. The narrative instead digresses into a discussion of the lovely Arabella Woodhope, soon to be Strange, and his evening with her and her friends. In the course of dilatory conversation as the young suitor attempts to work his way around to persuading her to marry him, Strange suddenly latches onto the idea of magic as his new career, having found that the other industries he has tried do not suit him. That moment, too, gets brushed aside as other gentlemen arrive for the evening and conversation continues. When the subject arises again, Strange does not appeal to the weight of prophecy or any supposed ability (knowing nothing at the time of his innate aptitude), for

He did not wish to tell his real reason—which was to impress Arabella with his determination to do something sober and scholarly—so he fell back upon the only other explanation he could think of. “I met a man under a hedge at Monk Gretton who told me that I was a magician.” (202-204)

This allows Clarke to naturalize the moment: far from exotic, it feels entirely plausible and realistic, as well as comical rather than portentous. The scene follows the natural digressions of everyday conversation.

Eventually Strange tries the spells bought from Vinculus, though he has not even looked at them and has no idea what they are for. Deciding to attempt the spell to glimpse his enemy, Strange indeed works the magic successfully and sees Norrell in London at that very moment. This means nothing to him, as at that point the other magician is a stranger to him. Though far from covering himself with glory, it seems the suitor has at least amused his intended, for Arabella calls her friends to see the trick. Despite the success of the moment, Clarke carefully deflates the scene. Strange has managed to produce a genuine and relatively impressive feat of magic on his first attempt, yet even he seems disappointed with the reality of magic: looking at the dour Norrell he remarks, "I appear to have conjured the spirit of a banker" (206). It makes for a believable moment of a prophecy fulfilled, inspired by the utterly fantastic image on the card, yet completely believable because of its deflating realism.

Two of Swords, XII. Le Pendu and XXI. Le Monde

The seventh card was *The Two of Swords*. Childermass said nothing but immediately turned over the eighth card—*Le Pendu*, The Hanged Man. The ninth card was *Le Monde*, The World. It shewed a naked female figure dancing; in the four corners of the card were an angel, an eagle, a winged bull and a winged lion—the symbols of the evangelists. (187)

Childermass seems to have run out of certainty at this point. At least he is unwilling to hazard guesses for, as he tells Vinculus, "there is nothing here that says you are anything more than a charlatan" (187). Yet he sees another meeting, "an ordeal of some sort, perhaps even death" and avers that the cards confirm to the magician of Threadneedle-street "that you will achieve your purpose" (187). But that purpose remains elusive. The Two of Swords emphasizes the theme of duality: the two worlds, the two magicians. The suit of swords "governing all intellectual manifestations" (Riley 127) suggests a precarious balance about to be undone. The two magicians who found each other as enemies in a mirror, came together as master and student somewhat later, only to finally part as enemies. Yet they must rejoin forces by the end of the book to deal with disruptions from the 'other' land of fairy as embodied in the gentleman with thistle-down hair. This "impasse" or "stalemate" that the two of swords suggests (Riley 127) is indeed solved by the corporeal body of Vinculus.

Clarke passes over *Le Pendu* without interpretation from its reader. On the one hand, it seems obvious enough: death or at least an ordeal. Vinculus is hanged by the gentleman, admonishing him, "Try if you can do it, Fairy! You will discover that I am very hard to kill!" (737). On an empty moor, with a rope made of sleet, Vinculus's neck is snapped as he hangs upon an aged hawthorn tree. The gentleman loses interest once he is dead, so it is up to Childermass to

find *Le Pendu* and discover how he can be restored to bring about *Le Monde*, the image of dancing delight predicted by the final card.

When Childermass discovers the body, however, his primary thought is for the precious book inscribed on Vinculus's flesh: the only book Norrell has not been able to obtain. "This is the King's Letters [...] This is Robert Findhelm's book" (752). Vinculus had asked, "Do you know what I am now?" at the end of the tarot reading, but only when he finally sees the stripped hanged man can Childermass understand how he is "not like the others" (187). He is the treasure long sought by his master Norrell. The Raven King's Book of Magic is discovered only when it is out of the magician's reach, for Childermass is no longer in his employ and Norrell himself has become trapped in Strange's black tower, likewise a curse from the gentleman with thistledown-hair.

Yet it is the reunion of master and student in the black tower that helps set the denouement in motion. Strange has come to Norrell's Hurtle Abbey from Venice where he had exiled himself after his wife's sad fate. It is no accident that the evangelist Mark is the patron saint of that city, whose symbol is the winged lion, just as on the card. Clarke has made use of the symbolism of *Le Monde* with another clever strand of narrative that brings the elements together in unexpected ways. Strange and Norrell together aim to conjure the Raven King, never suspecting that, as Vinculus argues, "They *are* the spell John Uskglass is doing" (758). They hope to summon John Uskglass for help yet manage instead to give all of England's magic to the "nameless slave" whom readers know as Stephen, Sir Walter Pole's butler (763).

Magic returns to England with the spring. Arabella Strange has been released from enchantment and Lady Pole rescued from her half-life in the gentleman with thistledown-hair's realm. Strange and Norrell may be trapped, but magic permeates all England. As Childermass informs the Learned Society of York Magicians, "You are magicians once more, if you wish to be" (777). There is work for them to do: the Book of Magic is no longer what it was. "I have changed!" Vinculus exclaims to Childermass, yet he has no more notion of how than he had before. "Perhaps I am a Receipt-Book! Perhaps I am a Novel! Perhaps I am a Collection of Sermons!" (773) When Vinculus laid out the cards for Childermass's fortune, he ended with the King of Cups, which may well suggest the way ahead: a "jovial" man, a "man of business" and for Pollack, "[s]omeone who has had to discipline and even suppress his dreams in order to achieve success" (Riley 174-75), which describes well Childermass and his service with Norrell.

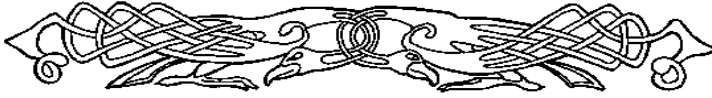
Clarke demonstrates a playful, thoughtful, subtle and inventive approach to the cards while paying homage to the traditional meanings. She offers modifications on the traditional Tarot de Marseille that accurately predict the narrative events, yet deftly obscures the outcomes by leading the readers

(and the characters) to jump to the wrong conclusions. This suggests that like all the rest of her careful historical research, the author has taken the time to consider how best to use the traditions of tarot reading whilst still keeping the interpretations both interesting and faithful. Within this playful space, readers get to experience the life immersed in magic, "Behind the sky. On the other side of the rain" (778), though the tarot is only one of many keys to this novel.

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