

## Renaissance Adventures in a Magical World

Shakespeare lived during a time of intellectual ferment. The English Reformation had swept away the power of the Roman Catholic Church, and with it the old religious certainties. Now people could read the Bible in their own language and intellectual inquiry into the nature of human beings and the world was no longer controlled by the Church. At the same time great economic and social upheavals had upset the old feudal sense of hierarchy. The disruption of schooling through the dissolution of the monasteries had paradoxically encouraged a revival in education. While the learning of Greece and Rome was being rediscovered, and educated people could all understand Latin, the English language was becoming a subtle and expressive instrument used by all classes of people.

The Renaissance had begun in Italy, where, in the 15th century, some texts were discovered which were believed at the time to be as old as Moses, and apparently written by Hermes Trismegistus, named after the god Hermes, or Mercurius, the patron of alchemy. These texts were known as the *Corpus Hermeticum*, and the scholar Marcilio Ficino (1433-1499) was given the job of translating them before he had finished his translation of Plato. The texts contained the idea that human beings could become like God by studying nature and by the correct use of magic. In fact we now know the texts were written by Gnostics in the first or second century AD, before this religion was stamped out as a heresy by the Christian Church because it rejected the Church's hierarchy and claim to a monopoly on magic.

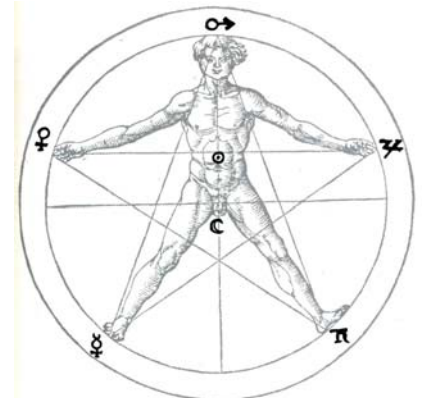
Ficino was inspired by the *Corpus Hermeticum* to practise and write about magic, and how magic could be performed using correspondences between spiritual ideas, music and the substances in the material world. The key was 'platonic' love, such as that between Dante and Beatrice.

Ficino's pupil Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) wrote the 'Oration on the Dignity of Man', asserting that human beings, with their consciousness, do not have a specific place in the hierarchy of beings from angels to vegetables and stones, so that according to their behaviour they can occupy any position on the scale. Shakespeare alludes to this text in *Hamlet*.

Ficino and Pico enjoyed the protection of the powerful rulers of Florence, but other people who took up such ideas were in great danger from the Church and the Inquisition. Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522), who wrote a book on the magical properties of language, had to point out that he only meant the names of God and Jesus. Johannes Trithemius (1462-1516) invented stories about an evil magician called Faustus to draw attention away from himself and his friends. Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) wrote detailed books on the practice of magic but wrote another book at the same time asserting that all knowledge including magic was useless. Paracelsus (1493-1541), an alchemist and physician, was constantly on the move around Europe. Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) also travelled widely and visited England, but was burnt at the stake after being captured by the Inquisition.

What these Renaissance magicians meant by magic was the use of spiritual powers to affect the material world. In order to do this they tried to gain as much knowledge as they could about both the spiritual and material world. In particular they looked for correspondences and analogies between them. Their studies of natural phenomena (including the foundations of biology, chemistry and physics) and of mathematics aroused as much suspicion as their magical theories. In this diagram dating from 1531, which relates to a famous drawing by Leonardo da Vinci, Agrippa shows the analogies between the human body, geometrical forms and astrological signs.

In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, these magicians and thinkers were particularly interested in the ancient subject of alchemy, which involved transformations. Some of the principles behind alchemy were set down in the *Tabula Smaragdina* (emerald tablet) including: what



is below is like what is above; everything is produced by the one; its father is the sun and its mother the moon; the wind carries it in its belly; its power is perfect; the subtle must be separated from the gross, using fire; it rises, then descends, combining the power of the upper and lower; this is how the world was created. This is typical of the enigmatic and complex language of alchemical symbolism.

Later ages laughed at the idea that people thought they could turn lead into gold, and alchemy was dismissed as a superstition later to be replaced by the true science of chemistry. Indeed, when it was discovered that the great physicist Sir Isaac Newton (1642-1727) had written more about alchemy than he had about mathematics and physics, the information was at first suppressed and later discounted. In the 20th century the Swiss psychiatrist C.G. Jung, who made a thorough study of alchemy, suggested that it was primarily a spiritual method of transforming a worthless or meaningless experience into something valuable. The process was then projected into real materials. Alchemy (the *opus*, or work) starts with a *prima materia* (chaos or 'dross'). This is transformed through various stages (the *nigredo* or black stage, the *albedo*, or white stage, the *rubedo*, or red stage, the appearance of various creatures, the intervention of the trickster spirit Mercurius, the chemical wedding of opposite and complementary qualities sometimes represented by a king and queen, leading to the *cauda pavonis*, or peacock's tail) until finally the alchemical gold is created, also called the philosopher's stone or *lapis*.



Alchemical image showing hermaphrodite figure with egg of *prima materia*

In England, there were also important representatives of this tradition in Shakespeare's time. John Dee (1527-1608) was employed by Queen Elizabeth as an astrologer and mathematician. Thomas Hariot (1560-1621) was an alchemist and friend of Sir Walter Raleigh. He was also employed by Raleigh to teach his sea captains mathematics and navigation. Hariot went on the expedition Raleigh sent to Virginia and learnt the Native American language spoken there. He was also a friend of Christopher Marlowe, and probably influenced him in writing *Doctor Faustus*. Hariot accepted the new Copernican theories about a heliocentric system (the planets going round the sun) and was the first person to observe the moon through a telescope. Robert Fludd (1574-1637) published beautiful drawings illustrating the correspondences he thought existed between human beings and the universe. Meanwhile, the German alchemist and philosopher Michael Maier (1568-1622), who had served the Emperor Rudolph II, came to the court of King James in London towards the end of Shakespeare's life.

Johannes Kepler (1571-1630), who also served Rudolph II, is one of the last thinkers in this tradition. This is represented by his difficulties with the orbits of the planets. He still wished to believe that, by analogy with divine perfection, they should be perfect circles, but was faced with the evidence that they were in fact ellipses. Galileo Galilei (1564-1642) was a representative of the new Enlightenment way of thinking which reduced knowledge to things which could be proved empirically, and this empiricism led to the split between the spiritual and material world which we now call Cartesian dualism after the philosopher René Descartes (1596-1650).

Shakespeare was certainly aware of some of these currents of thought. Some critics have suggested that his play *The Tempest* can be interpreted as an alchemical allegory, and alchemical imagery plays a part in both his plays and poetry. The Renaissance magicians were also interested in preserving and connecting knowledge in a memory system. One way this was done was to imagine a theatre where each seat and place on stage was associated with a piece of information that could be memorized. The fact that Shakespeare's theatre was called the Globe takes on a further meaning in the light of this.

[Michael Mitchell]