Shakespeare: The Civil and Divine Art of the Word

Jeremy Johnson

Introduction

> That Shakespeare's view of society is bound up with his belief in kingship as the principle of order, the divinely ordained channel for maintaining a just order on earth corresponding to the divine rule of the cosmos, is one of the most obvious and incontrovertible aspects of his outlook in life.
> — Frances A. Yates, *Shakespeare's Last Plays*[1]

> Never ignore a pooh-pooh!
> — General Melchett, *Blackadder Goes Forth*[2]

Shakespeare's worldview and his language expressing it, provides the preeminent imagination and power behind English as the *lingua franca* of Western exceptionalism. This literary 'big bang', as it were, of the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century Elizabethan and Jacobean eras still resonates today. Shakespeare's language and narratives were infused with fantastic and supernatural themes, many of which are drawn from the fascination with the mystic and occult currents of the time. As Martin Lings notes, like other Elizabethan poets,

> Shakespeare was familiar with the various doctrines—some truly esoteric, others merely occultist […] the mainstream of the mystical legacy of the Middle Ages was Christian; but by the end of the sixteenth century it had been swelled by many tributaries—Pythagorean, Platonic, Cabalistic, Hermetic, Illuminist, Rosicrucian, Alchemical.[3]

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[1] Frances Yates, *Shakespeare's Last Plays: A New Approach* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1975), p. 43.

[2] R. Boden, dir., 'General Hospital', *Blackadder Goes Forth* (London: BBC, 1989).

Within a secular and global context, this dominant linguistic and cultural legacy of Shakespeare remains the *soleil absolue* around which all else revolves.

The earliest stirrings of the English literary Renaissance emanated through the humanist teachings of the Valencian scholar Juan Luis Vives (1493-1540), a Jewish Christian convert and acolyte of Erasmus, who was employed by Henry VIII to tutor the Princess Mary. In fact, Vives' educational manifestos holistically revolutionised the complete Tudor school system in the same way Peter Brook's manifesto *The Empty Space* (1968) and Jerzy Grotowski's *Towards a Poor Theatre* (1968) impacted Western theatre practices in the second half of the twentieth century.[4] Though dedicating his lengthy observations commissioned by Erasmus on Augustine's *De Civitate Dei* to Henry VIII, Vives was imprisoned for his stance opposing the annulment of Henry's marriage to Catherine of Aragon, and Vives later fled to Bruges where he wrote his influential works disputing the unquestioning authority of the Aristotelian philosophical model.[5] Moreover, it was the Italian exiles decades later, of which Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) was the seminal figure, who were instrumental in the ignition of the English Renaissance. The Neoplatonists from the Chartres School held certain significance—*ars sine scientia nihil est*: "art without knowledge is nothing."[6] As Renaissance historian Frances A. Yates (1899-1981) writes: "Above all, the [Plato's] *Timaeus* in

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[3] Martin Lings, 'Shakespeare in the Light of Sacred Art,' in *Ye Shall Know the Truth: Christianity and the Perennial Philosophy*, ed. Mateus Soares de Azevedo (Bloomington: World Wisdom, 2005), pp. 178-9.

[4] See Juan Luis Vives, *De initiis, sectis et laudibus philosophiae* (On the Origins, Schools and Merits of Philosophy), 1518 in Juan Luis Vives, *Early Writings*, eds C. Matheeussen et al (Leiden: Brill, 1987). See also Jeremy Johnson, *The Shock of Presence: Peter Brook & Jerzy Grotowski and the Reinvention of Australian Theatre* (Masters thesis, University of Sydney, 2017).

[5] Lorenzo Casini, 'Self-Knowledge, Scepticism and the Quest for a New Method: Juan Luis Vives on Cognition and the Impossibility of Perfect Knowledge', in *Renaissance Scepticisms*, eds G. Paganini and J. R. Maia Neto (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), pp. 33-60; Rita Guerlac, *Juan Luis Vives Against the Pseudodialecticians* (Dordrecht: Springer, 1979).

[6] Attributed to fourteenth century architect Jean Mignot. See René Querido, *The Golden Age of Chartres: The Teachings of a Mystery School and the Eternal Feminine* (Edinburgh: Floris Books, 2008).

Chalcidius's Latin translation was known and studied throughout the Middle Ages, particularly by the School of Chartres."[7]

Bruno, whose residency in England 1583-1585 was crucial in the flowering of the literary and philosophical sciences, stated his purpose was primarily to undo the rigid Aristotelianism of the contemporary Tudor Oxford scholars. Their adherence to "Ciceronian eloquence and rhetorical art,"[8] in his view, deviated from the truer Christianised form of Platonism dominating thought in the early Middle Ages, an era when nobility and holiness were the imperatives of the human state. Bruno's aim was to revive, in his words, "the splendour of a most rare and noble part of philosophy, now in our times almost extinct."[9] Yates referred to Bruno's contribution as a revival of the sciences attributed to the Egyptian prophet Hermes Trismegistus.[10] The greatest champion of Bruno's Neoplatonic/Hermetic revival (infused with Dionysian mysticism) was the patriarch of the English poetic Renaissance, Sir Philip Sidney.[11] Yates argued the keystone to Shakespeare's cosmology holds a Platonic rather than Aristotelian philosophical view, thus, harmonising the physical and moral constitution of 'man' and its substance fully within the hierarchy of heavenly bodies.[12] In recent years, Yates' interpretation of Bruno's heliocentric philosophy (being governed by the principals of Hermeticism and the Neoplatonists) has been called into question by Hilary Gatti who writes that:

> aspects of his [Bruno's] thoughts seem closer to the age of Post Einsteinian relativity and quantum mechanics with their theoretical justifications of scientific approximations rather than logical certainties and indisputable truths.[13]

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[7] Frances Yates, *The French Academies of the Sixteenth Century* (London: Routledge, 1947), p. 87.

[8] Frances Yates, *Renaissance and Reform: Collected Essays* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1983), p. 159.

[9] Quoted in Yates *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2002), p. 231.

[10] What survives today of the writings of Hermes Trismegistus are the *Emerald Tablets.* Also see, Hermes Trismegistus, *Hermetica* (Boston: Shambala, 1993). In some esoteric circles he is considered the prophet of science and astronomy and is known in Islam as the prophet Idries.

[11] Yates, *Renaissance and Reform*, p. 144.

[12] This is essentially a defence by Bruno of a pre-Reformation philosophy. See Frances Yates, *Lull & Bruno: Collected Essays* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1982), p. 155.

The concept of the English Renaissance is principally devoted to the spoken word through the portal of its poets. This has an unexpected alignment with the cosmological view taken by the tenth century secret society known as Ikhwan al-Safa (Brotherhood of Purity), an Islamic hierarchical order in Basra, Iraq, not dissimilar to the Philip Sidney Circle or Raleigh's School of the Night.[14] The writings of the Ikhwan brotherhood were quoted and elaborated upon in works of the Andalusian mystic and scholar of Spain's Islamic Golden Age, Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi (1165-1240) writing in Volume II of his *Meccan Revelations*: "Sound is the fifth celestial element or nature (*tabîal al-falak*) that is the element or nature through which the upper world joins the elemental world."[15]

Linguist Giovanni (John) Florio (1553-1625), whose English translation of Montaigne earned him great renown, became one of the most sought-after language tutors in London. Florio's *First Fruits* (1578) and *Second Fruits* (1591) are compendiums of parallel dialogues (printed side by side in English and Italian) that significantly enriched the English vocabulary. While *First Fruits* bore the 1570s literary fashion of euphuism;[16] *Second Fruits* demonstrated the 1590s' literary craze for Petrarch and Sir Philip Sidney.[17] Though Florio was born in London, his father Michelangelo arrived in England as a protestant Italian refugee of Tuscan provenance, and tutored Lady Jane Grey during the reign of Edward VI (1537-1553).

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[13] Hilary Gatti, *Giordano Bruno and Renaissance Science* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1999), p. ix.

[14] The members of Sir Walter Raleigh's School of the Night were wrongly considered by the Church to be a group of heretics and atheists. This was because like Bruno and the Neoplatonists they were Copernican and heliocentric in their scientific reasonings unlike the Church where Ptolemy's science of a static earth where all else revolves was an undisputed fact. Members included, Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Hariot, and 'The Wizard Earl' Henry Percy, the Earl of Northumberland.

[15] Muhyiddin Ibn Arabī, *The Meccan Revelations*, trans. William C. Chittick and James W. Morris (New York: Pir Press, 2004), p. 132.

[16] Euphuism being a flowery and elaborate writing style: highly artificial.

[17] Sir Philip Sidney (1554-1586) Although he died at the age of thirty-one, Sidney is regarded as the archetype of an English Renaissance figure, both as a literary icon for initiating through his work *Astrophel and Stella*, the first Elizabethan sonnet cycle, and the heroic prose romance, *Arcadia*. His famous Philip Sidney Circle was central in the formulation of a Protestant power within the Elizabethan Court and its foreign policy dictates. He died in battle. See Roger Howell Jr, 'The Sidney circle and the Protestant cause in Elizabethan foreign policy', *Culture, Theory and Critique*, vol. 19, no. 1 (1975), pp. 31-46.

During the latter half of the sixteenth century, England was the preferred destination for French and Italian Protestants fleeing the growing persecution in Catholic Europe, culminating with the St Bartholomew's Day Massacre in Paris (1572).[18] Refugees pouring into England became sought after tutors in the classics and (especially) modern French and Italian as local language skills, which were obligatory for commercial traders and within the diplomatic services abroad. Fluency in French and Italian was no longer merely a requirement of an aristocratic education but an indispensable asset for English merchants seeking to leverage economic advantage from the turmoil on the continent. English was considered a second-rate language at this time, as Florio attests in this exchange of dialogue from *First Fruits* (1578):

> What think you of this English tongue, tel me, I pray you?
> It is a language that wyl do yu good in England, but passe
> Douer it is worth nothing.[19]

During Bruno's residency both in London and at Oxford University (1583-1585) 'The Nolan'—the name used by Bruno, being from Naples, referred to himself and was known by his contemporaries—felt no compulsion to learn English at any point. He reasoned scholars, nobility, and educated people capable of cultivated discourse, would be sufficiently fluent in other languages to be able to converse with or at least understand the concepts he imparted. English was, then, a famously vulgar tongue and in the *Ash Wednesday Supper* he explains his lack of fluency sardonically: "It is an advantage to be really deaf from necessity at times when one might choose to be deaf to what one does not want to hear."[20]

Following the death of Elizabeth I (1603), Florio became tutor to the young Prince Henry and Princess Elizabeth at the Court of James I, and is credited for adding 7,000 new words into the English language. Many of these words are well-documented as being included amongst the 1,700 words Shakespeare enriched and popularised via his own canon the English

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[18] It is estimated that between 5,000-30,000 Huguenot Protestants were murdered by Catholics over a several week period starting on the feast day of St Bartholomew. See R. M. Kingdon, *Myths about the St Bartholomew's Day Massacres, 1572-1576* (London: Harvard University Press, 2013).

[19] See Yates, *Renaissance and Reform*, p. 165.

[20] Quoted in Yates, *Renaissance and Reform*, p. 165. See also Frances Yates, *John Florio; the Life of an Italian in Shakespeare's England* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1968).

vocabulary to this day.[21] What is remarkable is that within a span of only thirty years (1552-1582) the great poets and writers of the English Renaissance would be born, whose quills would set in motion the drama, poetry, and literature, paving the way for English to become, in due course, the governing tongue of global affairs. No small irony that the works of Shakespeare, beginning life on stage at the Globe would, three hundred years later, encircle it.

According to German architect and medieval historian, Max Hasak (1856-1934) "The greater the ignorance of modern times, the deeper grows the darkness of the Middle Ages."[22] It is quite evident in the last half century that producing Shakespeare plays for the modern audience, secular accommodations have restricted perceptions from the Shakespearean canon through materialist adaptations obscuring primordial, pagan, and pre-Reformation Christian understandings, historical references, and symbolic intentions. Post-secularism now opens the door to a recirculation of these themes of a divine order resonating within the Bard's plays, no longer deferring to the uncertainty of relevance resulting from the remoteness separating our respective eras. Shakespeare's characters transgress and transcend their imagined boundaries between exoteric and esoteric, terrestrial and celestial arcs of human activity, within the pre-Renaissance ideals of the Middle Ages.

The Incorporeal in Communion

> If we imagine no worse of them then they of themselves,
> they may pass for excellent men.
> — Shakespeare, *A Midsummer Night's Dream*,
> act V, sc. 1.

Martin Lings' *The Sacred Art of Shakespeare*[23] posits that inside what T. S. Eliot called the "Shakesperean rag"[24] four levels of meaning can be drawn

[21] Florio is another contender in the ongoing debate surrounding the true authorship of Shakespeare.
[22] Ananda Coomaraswamy, *The Essential Ananda K. Coomaraswamy* (Indiana: World Wisdom, 2004), p. 128.
[23] Also published as *Shakespeare's Window into the Soul* (Rochester: Inner Traditions, 2006). Martin Lings (1909-2005) was the keeper of oriental manuscripts and books at the British Museum.
[24] T. S. Eliot, *The Waste Land* (London: Faber and Faber, 1980), p. 55.

from for interpretative analysis: the literal, the allegorical, the moral, and the anagogical. It is the literal and allegorical contexts that afford the contemporising of plays such as *Romeo and Juliet* with a hip-hop vibe; *Measure for Measure* performed in Russian and set in modern Putinized Russia; or *Richard III* in a dystopian pre-war United Kingdom. Within all Shakespearean texts, the subconscious attraction of his works' moral and esoteric truths present themes unrestricted by historic time, which performance makers continually revisit and engage with to manifest these deeper treasures anew interpretively, and theatrically.

The role of a monarch and their actions sets the plots in motion for nearly all Shakespeare's plays. Dramatising how disorder follows when kings are betrayed through the folly of their own devising, or the ambition of others to usurp his position, runs thematically throughout the Shakespearean canon. Lings draws the conclusion that Shakespeare stands not as a Renaissance Man as much he is the last bridge between the traditional world view of Middle Ages Christendom and the approaching Age of Enlightenment. Rarely is it noted that Shakespeare was born the same year as Galileo, and less than three months after the death of Michelangelo (18 February 1564); or that Shakespeare's rival, Christopher Marlowe, was born two weeks prior (6 February 1564).

To contextualise perception of divine rulership within the Tudor and Stuart dynasties (Shakespeare straddled both) it is important to understand changes within imperial English rule were a defining issue when Elizabeth ascended the throne in 1558. Beginning with Henry VII, the Tudor's "earthly crown" reached its "ripest fruition"[25] under the rule of Elizabeth, who (having been excommunicated by the Pope) was fashioned by her court and subjects as Gloriana the Virgin Queen a "celestial object of worship:"[26]

> The accession of Queen Elizabeth I to the throne provoked two legal problems concerning her claim. Firstly, her being considered as an illegitimate offspring of Henry VIII, secondly, her being a woman. The annulment of the marriage of Henry VIII to Catherine of Aragon was considered by many to have no legal basis. This made Henry's subsequent marriages bigamous and the children of these marriages illegitimate. If Elizabeth was illegitimate, she could not succeed to

[25] See Christopher Marlowe, *Tamburlaine*, act 1, sc. 2.
[26] Frances Yates, *Astraea: The Imperial Theme in the Sixteenth Century* (London: Ark Paperbacks, 1975), p. 29.

> the throne and the next in line of succession was Mary Stuart (Mary, Queen of Scots) who was a Catholic. The Tudor myth was a helpful means to support Elizabeth's claim to the throne […] Indeed, by virtue of all her institutions, Queen Elizabeth was portrayed as a holy figure: she was St George, the title page of the Bible, Astraea, Gloriana, Diana, Cynthia, and the Virgin Queen. This was the side that was technically ritualized by Elizabeth and her court.[27]

The divine right of kings (and queens) necessitated justification following the Reformation (in the absence of a Papal authority) to approve or depose a monarch. Elizabeth, depicted by her adorers and in the literature of her poets, became a hybrid of the Virgin Mary and a moon goddess. Yates puts this as "the Cynthian cult appears to take on some kind of esoteric philosophical significance."[28] Amongst these popular images illustrating her celestial sovereignty was Elizabeth the vestal virgin.[29] One of the few factual references made by Shakespeare to Elizabeth directly in this capacity is given to Oberon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*:

> Cupid all arm'd: a certain aim he took
> At a fair vestal throned by the west,
> And loosed his love-shaft smartly from his bow,
> As it should pierce a hundred thousand hearts;
> But I might see young Cupid's fiery shaft
> Quench'd in the chaste beams of the watery moon,
> And the imperial votaress passed on,
> In maiden meditation, fancy-free.[30]

A Midsummer Night's Dream is one of three plays demonstrating distinctive frames of vice regal morality in the Shakespearean monarchical stewardship of the human condition, and the dramatic consequences of imbalances in their application. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* exemplifies the incorporeal in communion, as *King Lear* illustrates the incorporeal in absence, and *The Tempest*, the incorporeal in exile.

Additionally, in this early work Theseus contrasts both Lear and Prospero from the latter works. Unlike these later kings, Theseus' rule is beyond contention and devoid of hypocrisy, representing one of the purest

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[27] Akram Shalghin, 'Elizabethan Construction of Kingship', *IISTE*, vol. 4, no. 12 (2014), p. 1.
[28] Yates, *Astraea*, p. 76.
[29] Vesta being a female divinity and daughter of Saturn for the Romans. The Vestal Virgins were charged with protecting the sacred fire at the temple of Vesta. See T. C. Worsfold, *The History of the Vestal Virgins of Rome* (London: Rider, 1932).
[30] *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, act II, sc. 1.

models of nobility in character and just rulership ever written. A victorious warrior of the Amazons, Theseus has taken from amongst them his Queen (Hippolyta), and says: "For never can anything be amiss when simpleness and duty tender it."[31] The post-modernist gender theorist or secular ideologue of a humanist world view neglects that the Elizabethan and Jacobean world was yet to be refashioned by the enlightened eighteenth century rationalist; the materialist outlook of the nineteenth century industrialist; the twentieth century psychologist; and the twenty-first century technocrat. Shakespeare specifically set *A Midsummer Night's Dream* in Ancient Athens for "a play bathed from beginning to end in moonlight"[32] and is entirely concerned with the matters of the heart: Love therefore, and tongue-tied simplicity / In least speak most to my capacity.[33]

Even the rude mechanicals, to whom Theseus is referring here, addresses what dwells in their yearning hearts—pecuniary patronage from the King. With these characters, Shakespeare illustrates the mechanical nature of devotion to transient matter as the 'Bottom level', and is symbolic of base desires which must be reconciled. *A Midsummer Night's Dream* structures a completely rounded fable of the earthly condition; the hierarchical order of the omnipresent celestials it contains; and places the mortal man of great stature as pinnacle in the pantheon of creation. Here, Theseus is not the mythical slayer of the Minotaur but the embodiment of "wysdom and chivalrie" in Chaucer's 'Knight's Tale' as an Athenian monarch, firm in mind and heart.[34] Theseus wills harmonious resolutions for his kin and subjects' needs in order for his wedding to Hippolyta to take place. Whatever transpires later from these unions is positioned within the fleeting moment of Midsummer, when all is at the apex of ripest bloom, and the human completion in happiness is commanded to reflect this moment as well. In the myths of Ancient Greece, it is not man who is envious of the gods but the gods who are envious of man, as they wish for conjugation with the earthly women, and are jealous men should discover fire. It is a misjudgement to assess the incorporeal world of the fairies in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* as superhuman for the advantage of their ability to see us while humans see them not for it is the superiority of the corporeal

[31] *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, act V, sc. 1.
[32] Yates, *Astraea*, p. 77.
[33] *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, act V, sc. 1.
[34] Geoffrey Chaucer, *The Canterbury Tales* (Peterborough: Broadview Press, 2012).

world in all its mortality, to which the unseen world submits to on earth even as it plays games and tricks of deception.

Produced by Peter Brook's company fifty years ago, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (1970) became a performance capstone of 1960s counterculture. The production's premier captured the essence of that revolutionary decade of peace and love which had just expired. With Brook's production, Shakespeare had become fully twentieth century at last and would never look back as the citadel walls had been breached, and the Edwardian and Victorian eras of Shakespearean interpretation demoted.

The Incorporeal in Absence

It is in Brook's reflections on Shakespeare in *The Quality of Mercy* that

> If *King Lear* is the Pinnacle of all European writings, matched only by *The Brothers Karamazov*, it is due to the total integration of every one of its parts into a whole, encompassing almost all of social, familial, political, personal, and inner life.[35]

This echoes G. Wilson Knight several decades earlier: "No Shakespearean work shows so wide a range of sympathetic creation: we seem to be confronted, not with certain men and women only, but with mankind."[36] In the same book Knight titles one of his chapters on *King Lear* 'The Comedy of the Grotesque'. Four hundred years on, this has relevance to humanity in the twenty-first century as Shakespearean studies compel the question as heirs to Shakespeare's abundant world of language and content: How can credibility be given to kingship and the divine rule of law, integrally, when these concepts are unfamiliar if not repulsive to secular sensibilities? "Oh let me kiss thy hand," says the blind Gloucester to his King, now crowned with the floral vestiges from a wilderness to which they are both banished. "Let me wipe it first, it smells of mortality," Lear replies.[37]

The question is: Can these texts and this period's 'belief' be performed from a secular position, giving full weight and totality of meaning to this exchange? What democratic forces support secular interpretations in the entirety of Shakespeare's canon to successfully propel this challenge of literature and governance? In the anagogical world there is

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[35] Peter Brook, *The Quality of Mercy: Reflections on Shakespeare*, second edn. (London: Nick Hern Books Limited, 2014), p. 57.
[36] G. Wilson Knight, *The Wheel of Fire: Essays in Interpretation of Shakespeare's Sombre Tragedies* (New York: Routledge, 1989), p. 202.
[37] *King Lear*, act IV, sc. 6.

much to be made of the date of Shakespeare's alleged birth, and agreed death on 23 April 1616, the feast day of St George the patron saint of England and the Order of the Garter.[38] One of the keys to understanding the Shakespearean canon more fully is the St George legend, which cannot be overemphasised and while under analysed academically. The universality of Shakespearean themes are tied to this mythology sharing the exoteric and esoteric orders of the Abrahamic faiths. HRH Prince Charles noted in his eulogy of King Abdullah of Jordan, "the mysterious prophet of the Muslims, Al Khidir, was identified with the Jewish Elias and the Christian St George."[39] The common understanding of St George (as the heroic emblem of Rule Britannia) is one of patriotic duty, bravery, youth and martyrdom—"Cry God for Harry! England and St George!"[40]

This revered figure was allegedly a Roman soldier born in the late third century CE in Cappadocia, and raised Christian by his widowed mother in her hometown of Lydda in Palestine.[41] Such was his devotional piety that he refused to persecute Christians under the directive of the Emperor Diocletian, and so was tortured and finally beheaded. So impressive was his conviction of faith under torture that many witnesses to his endurance of suffering converted to Christianity, including the Emperor's wife Alexandria. Within a generation the cult of St George had grown exponentially, prompting then the Emperor Constantine to affirm St George's sanctity by the dedication of a church in Lydda to house the holy relics of the saint. Many appearances of the sainted martyr as a young soldier on a white horse have become synonymous with valour and

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[38] The Order of the Garter was founded by King Edward III of England in 1348. It is the most senior order of knighthood and is dedicated to the image of St George whose cross is featured on the emblem of the Order.

[39] See Prince Charles, 'A tribute by HRH The Prince of Wales at King Hussein's Memorial Service, St Paul's Cathedral, London', *The Prince of Wales and the Duchess or Cornwall*, at https://www.princeofwales.gov.uk/speech/tribute-hrh-prince-wales-king-husseins-memorial-service-st-pauls-cathedral-london. Accessed 15 February 2020.

[40] *Henry V*, act III, sc. 1.

[41] The town of Lydda was annexed by Israel in the Arab-Israeli war of 1948 resulting in the fleeing and expulsion of 50,000-70,000 Palestinian Arabs. For the Israelis it is remembered as a victory in the War of Independence. For the Palestinians it is called 'the Lydda Death March'. Lydda has been renamed Lod and is where the Church of St George is located which shares space with the El-Khidr Mosque. Al-Khidr being often associated with St George and the Green Knight in the Sir Gawain legend.

chivalry in battle. None more so than the battle of Antioch during the First Crusade (1098) when St George was seen in the sky leading an army of heavenly warriors to aid in the victory leading then to the fall of Jerusalem from Muslim hands the following year. Thus, St George became appropriated into Western culture.

Edward III adopted St George as patron saint of England in 1350, and Shakespeare's *Henry V* calls on St George to ensure victory prior to the battle of Agincourt. Renaissance paintings, frescos, and Russian icons retell the fable of St George's miraculous charge to the rescue of the virginal princess from being eaten by a dragon. Versions of this tale are numerous and contingent on cultural providence. The legend from the Byzantium perspective has the location of Silene, a pagan township in Libya, where a dragon/serpent/crocodile was eating the inhabitants as they drew water from the lake. Being prone to superstition, the townspeople believed that by sacrificing the young virgins in the town via lots, the dragon would be appeased. When finally, it was the king's daughter's turn to be sacrificed, St George appears on his white horse as the monster emerges from the lake to devour the young girl. Making the sign of the cross the young soldier subdues the beast with his spear, instructs the princess to tie her belt round the neck of the wounded beast and lead him into the town where all witness St George's final slaying of the monster. The town at this point converts en masse to Christianity.

Arden's *Shakespeare Miscellany* mentions St George sixteen times in the plays, most famously in *Henry V*.[42] The symbolism of this legend goes much deeper than the aforementioned Silene narrative. By definition, symbolism is "based on real analogies between the divine and cosmic orders."[43] The meanings of the St George and Dragon legend are where one can see weighty parallels in both *King Lear* and in *the Tempest.* However, it is with *King Lear* that this is most obvious.

[42] Jane Armstrong, *The Arden Shakespeare Miscellany* (London: Bloomsbury, 2011).
[43] Frithjof Schuon, *Stations of Wisdom* (Bloomington: World Wisdom Books, 1995), p. 63.

Fig. 1 Paolo Uccello, *St George and the Dragon* (1470). Public domain.

Paolo Uccello's painting of *St George and the Dragon* (fig. 1) at London's National Gallery depicts a Princess holding a slender thread attached round the dragon's neck.[44] The valiant knight has pierced the dragon's eye with his lance while the other eye is locked in cowering subjugation to the determined stare of St George high up on his horse. Here, the wounded dragon representing the process by which the soul is purified. For Shakespeare, the soul is the receptacle which houses man's ego as represented by the dragon, who shares this receptacle with the divine spirit or higher self, depicted by the pure, virginal princess, who, while leading the dragon by that slender thread will be consumed by the dragon if it is not restrained by the knight. The knight's chivalrous duty is to ensure the just domination of spirit over the crass and worldly part of our soul (the dragon). This metaphor is the passage Lear is forced to endure in the play; as well as Gloucester, "I stumbled when I saw"; [45] and more willingly too,

[44] *St George and the Dragon* by Paolo Uccello (c. 1397-1475), is one of the earliest works acquired by the National Gallery London.

Edgar, who barely hesitates to assume the mantle of lunacy and poverty as Poor Tom. The knight is an emblem of a striving will which tirelessly keeps the crass and lowly part of human behaviour at heel. Lear, as the knight, has neglected to subdue the dragon in his love of position. He has forgotten the imperatives of kingship and even what it is to be a man; clinging to its tyrannical shell of imperial pomp and the trappings of power. Perennialist scholar, Charles Upton, says of Lear:

> The ego believes it can reign without ruling, that to be taken for a King by others – the image of a King—a player King—is to be 'every inch a King' […] When the crown passes from the Self to the ego, who immediately loses it, or throws it away, the faculties of the soul rebel.[46]

Lear's Fool tells him: "Thou shouldst not have been old till thou hadst been wise,"[47] and therein lies the most potent and comic essence of universal tragedy.

The pure part of his soul is now swallowed by the dragon, who has retreated back into his dark cave. The storm (kept at bay in the background of the Uccello painting) is unleashed and now gathers apace with unrelenting fury by the machinations of his two older daughters (Goneril and Regan), leaving feeble old Lear stripped of dignity and tipping into insanity by this reversal of fortune. Lear has no recourse but to pursue the dragon into that dark lair (metaphorically fashioned by Shakespeare at one point by Edgar's hovel on the heath), and lay siege to the beast so his soul may be reunited even in death with his better self. It is only then Lear is released from a Dante-esque journey through hell, and up through the purgatorial realms before a purified death reunited in his arms with his beloved Cordelia, his daughter and pearl of paradise he banished in the first scene of the play. Thus, as Knight says, "the tragic purification of the essentially untragic is yet complete."[48]

As a literary and performance work, *King Lear* is the most human in its paradoxically immortal sense of the word: characters are richly individuated in both strengths and weaknesses. There are no conversations with (or appearances of) ghosts and the supernatural is an evenly weighted

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[45] *King Lear*, act IV, sc. 1.
[46] Charles Upton, *Knowings: In the Arts of Metaphysics, Cosmology, and the Spiritual Path* (California: Sophia Perennis, 2008), p. 160.
[47] *King Lear*, act 1, sc. 5.
[48] Knight, *The Wheel of Fire*, p. 198.

conflict between good and evil encompassing the breadth of humanity and earthly forces. *King Lear*'s plot hinges on little more than a daughter refusing "that glib and oily art to speak,"[49] and Lear's realisation, only too late, that "The art of our necessities is strange, and can make vile things precious."[50]

Secular interpretations of supernatural dimensions problematise contemporary renderings of Shakespeare. Such was the case with Neil Armfield's production of *King Lear* at the Sydney Theatre Company (2015) with Geoffrey Rush in the title role. A distinguishing feature of the production was how the narrative arc and themes were expressed more clearly in the geometry of the actors' placement on stage rather than by the delivery of text.[51] I have no knowledge if this was dependant on the director's familiarity with the laws of 'sacred geometry' common in the staging of court masques. The actors' ostensible inability to convey meaning through text with an equal understanding had nothing to do with lack of skill or bad acoustics; indeed, Geoffrey Rush (Lear) and Robyn Nevin (Fool) are amongst the finest actors of their generation. Yet, it was apparent the actors failed to penetrate textual meanings beyond conveying relevance to the contemporary issues of our secular age by highlighting what is relatable to modern audiences at the expense of its 'soul'. Dramaturgical visas were not, so to speak, stamped for an interior journey inside the heart of what is referred to as Shakespeare's greatest play.

Inadvertently, Nick Schlieper's lighting design emphasised the lack of awareness within their performances, in particular the wilderness scenes on the heath. Here, Schlieper created an almost exact replica of a James Turrell installation where actors engaged with one another in a horizon free blanket of white light. Turrell's Quaker upbringing and spiritual leanings inform every one of his installations in their use of space and light, both

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[49] *King Lear*, act I, sc. 1.
[50] *King Lear*, act III, sc. 2.
[51] It was the legal aftermath of this production which earnt the production its notoriety. The 2018 courtroom drama which ensued following claims by one of the actors in the production of sexual misconduct by the star put the performing arts in Sydney on the front page of the national newspapers. The defendant was eventually awarded damages as he counter sued the newspaper for its allegations and headline which ran '*King Leer*'. The ironic aspect of this episode being how the real-life story which followed the production mirrored in many ways the same story arc of King Lear only with more profoundly felt consequences than what was evidenced on stage.

artificial and natural. There is no other artist in the last half century who is as central to the investigation of place/space phenomenology than James Turrell:

> I would like to have the physicality of my light at least remind you of this other way of seeing. That's as best I can do. It's terrible hubris to say this is a religious art … The arts, without a doubt, extend these spaces, whether it's in literature or in music or visual art.[52]

The production's lighting laid bare the lack of belief evident in the actors while transforming their spatial surroundings within an ethereal non-corporeal dimension. Again, the question arising from this performance experience is: Can actors convincingly communicate characters experiencing a world governed by the divine right of kingship if no credibility is given to this form of governance within their secular universe?

The Incorporeal in Exile

The Tempest's Prospero is Lear's opposite in matters of state and the rule of his subjects. Prospero has busied himself with mastering divination of the spiritual world, thus allowing his evil brother Antonio to usurp him as Duke of Milan. Forced into exile on that mystical island, Prospero explains to his daughter Miranda (at the end of a 12-line sentence):[53] "And to my state grew stranger, being transported and rapt in secret studies […] I thus neglecting worldly ends […] in my false brother awakened an evil nature."[54]

Stephen Orgel reasons *The Tempest* is the first play in the *First Folio* (1623) because the magus Prospero (in this last play) is Shakespeare himself. Orgel writes: "The notion of Prospero as autobiography has remained solidly within the critical canon."[55] However, Yates challenges this by suggesting Prospero was doubtless based on John Dee, Queen

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[52] Quoted in Constance Grady, 'Why Kanye's new spiritual work keeps borrowing from James Turrell', *Vox* (5 November 2019), at https://www.vox.com/culture/2019/11/5/20942006/kanye-west-james-turrell-jesus-is-king-roden-crater. Accessed 1 July 2020.

[53] A writer from Texas once asked the British director Tyrone Guthrie (1900-1971) what the most essential quality was necessary to act Shakespeare. Guthrie response was, to be able to do 9-12 lines on a single breath fully acted and fully projected.

[54] *The Tempest*, act I, sc. 2.

[55] Stephen Orgel, 'Introduction', *The Oxford Shakespeare: The Tempest* (New York: Oxford World's Classics, 1998), p. 10.

Elizabeth's court astrologer. Dee fell from favour during the charged political and stoically Protestant Jacobean reign; followed by a new era of abeyance for the magical and occult arts, which saw him banished, Prospero-like, into poverty for the last few years of his life.[56] Subsequently Dee's re-evaluation by historians reinstates him as a central figure of Gloriana's reign as a true Renaissance man. Dee's astrological charts and maps were indispensable to the navigational supremacy of English voyagers; giving them a competitive edge against their Spanish rivals; and notably instructing Martin Frobisher in the rules of geometry and cosmography for his discovery of the Northwest Passage to Canada and the New World.[57] The sea as a central theme of *The Tempest*, and opening as it does with a ship in the "foaming brine," is reminiscent of Lear's "pudder."

The first acknowledged performance of *The Tempest* was in front of King James in the banqueting Hall of Whitehall on 1 November (Hallowmas/All Saints Day) 1611. This is not without, as Yates noted, loaded political overtones. The play was allegedly included as part of the future marriage celebrations of Princess Elizabeth Stuart to Frederick V, Elector of Palatine.[58] The great hope was that this marriage would ignite a new Elizabethan Age of peaceful and chivalric Protestant reform on the continent. This hope is emphasised in the Act IV Marriage Masque of Ferdinand and Miranda showing "the extent to which virginity had become by the last years in Elizabeth's reign, a crucial aspect of royal power."[59] The maidenhead is the crucible for infinite bounties. Joining the houses of Prospero (Milan) and Alonso (Naples) was allegorical to the Protestant power base in Europe by marriages between the Hanoverian and Stuart lines. In this way, Shakespeare's final play is symbolically and overtly alchemical. *The Tempest*, then, is a Hermetic coalescence of the elemental, spiritual and human worlds; transmuted and purified by Prospero; who by

[56] Fellow occultists and alchemists of the Jacobean era such as Robert Fludde found their divinatory skills employed in the staging of courtly masques, engineering for spectacle the mechanics of dragons and monsters.

[57] See Benjamin Woolley, *The Queen's Conjuror* (London: Harper Collins, 2001).

[58] The Princess Elizabeth is known as 'The Winter Queen' when she and husband Frederick ruled Bohemia for only a year (1619-1620) before Bohemia's defeat in the Battle of White Mountain against the army of the Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II that instigated the outbreak of the Thirty Years War which, if nothing else, produced 400 years later Bertolt Brecht's *Mother Courage* (1939).

[59] Stephen Orgel, *The Authentic Shakespeare: And Other Problems of the Early Modern Stage* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 127.

the play's end has reconciled to perfection the discord of fire and water (sulphur and mercury) represented by the burning ship at sea, "Full fathom five, thy father lies, of his bones are coral made."[60] Prospero's mastery over air is serviced by Ariel; and the cleansed earth of the island is exemplified by the subjugated Caliban (son of the witch Sycorax who Prospero has slain). Here, all has been purified for a 'Golden Age' to come, and thus the marriage of Ferdinand and Miranda. In the Arden Edition, Frank Kermode surmises the invocations of Prospero can be directly attributed to the fifteenth century mage, Henry Cornelius Agrippa.[61] Brook observed Prospero's final speech was no mere winding up of the play by the actor sending people home, but the harmonization of opposing forces:

> And my ending is despair unless I be relieved by prayer, which pierces so that it assaults Mercy itself, and frees all faults. As you from crimes would pardoned be, let your indulgence set me free.[62]

Brook describes a prayer, which pierces and assaults mercy itself as a "clear yet obscure, incomprehensible paradox"[63] and from that pardoned crime indulges freedom.

The word 'prayer' is mentioned thirty-nine times in Shakespeare's plays: twice in *The Tempest*; and twice in *Midsummer Night's Dream*; but not once in *King Lear*. 'Pray', on the other hand, is mentioned in his plays 781 times. Importantly too, 'free' being the last word of his final play: 'free' is the locus of common law underpinning the exceptionalism of legal governance within the Westminster system of law. Having mastery over nature and reached the pinnacle, Prospero is leaving this behind by realising its inferior status amongst the gifts accorded humanity. Now free by returning to Milan, Prospero will resume his duties as a humbled and now wiser ruler. The word 'heart' is mentioned 960 times: 21 times in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*; 46 times in *King Lear*; and 10 in *The Tempest.*

Conclusion

The Renaissance and Reformation eras in English history were famously described by Yates as "the false dawn of the Enlightenment."[64] This

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[60] *The Tempest*, act I, sc. 2.
[61] Frank Kermode, 'Introduction', *The Arden Shakespeare. The Tempest* (London: Routledge, 1994), p. xl.
[62] *The Tempest*, act V, sc. 1.
[63] Brook, *The Quality of Mercy*, p. 98.

reflects an academic consensus signalling the flares of a revived Hermeticism: its heliotropic sciences; and the birth of English literature igniting the Elizabethan Golden Age were doused and reborn a century later. Aristotelian natural science continued to hold sway over Church dogma, as did the ensuing Puritan witch hunts of Jacobean origins, diluting the wider dissemination of these ideas. Rather, the Renaissance birthed the entire British Empire as the incorporeal celestials and Neoplatonic forces unleashed the Elizabethan scientific and literary magi. These never disappeared and lived, comprehensively, within the Shakespearean canon of plays and in his supreme reputation as a poet, which (until the Restoration) was his major claim to fame. To call this era a "false dawn" is the equivalent of discounting the timing of Newton's Third Law of Motion because it did not immediately produce the aerospace industry. How such knowledge comes to light in Shakespeare's worldview of Kingship (having become a major receptacle of this knowledge in his time), lives outside of the Aristotelian interpretation of 'natural science' imbedded within the philosophy of Late Middle Ages Christendom, or, humanist configurations of The Enlightenment.

The fall of Toledo (1085) and the Norman conquest of Sicily (1091) reinvigorated the scientific knowledge and natural philosophy of Western Europe. Much of the twelfth century (1125-1200) known as the 'century of translations' flourished as a flood of new knowledge was translated into Latin from Arabic and Greek manuscripts. As Edward Grant points out, this became a turning point in history as the *Latinorium penuria* ('poverty of the Latins') was relieved:

> Scholars came from all parts of Europe to join with native-born Spaniards, whether Christian, Jew, or Muslim, to engage in the grand enterprise of converting technical science and natural philosophy from the Arabic language into Latin, a language that had hitherto been largely innocent of such matters.[65]

Ioan Petru Coulianu noted the speed at which this knowledge entered Western Europe was remarkable; In *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*:

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[64] Michael A. Peters, 'Research quality, bibliometrics and the republic of science', in *Assessing the Quality of Educational Research in Higher Education*, ed. Tina Besley (Leiden: Brill, 2009), pp. 341-360.

[65] Edward Grant, *The Foundations of Modern Science in the Middle Ages* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), p. 23.

> Quickly, due chiefly to the college of translators installed at Toledo, the Latin West comes into contact with the principal records of Arab culture (and of Greek antiquity) in the fields of medicine, philosophy, alchemy, and religion.[66]

Aside from Ptolemy's *Almagest*, Gerard of Cremona "drastically altered the course of Western science"[67] translating at least seventy other treatise including major works of Aristotle; Euclidian geometry; the algebraic mathematics of al-Khwarizmi; the medical arcana of Avicenna; and Al-Razi into Latin.

Characteristically, the difference between the natural scientific interpretation of Aristotelian philosophy, as opposed to a Neoplatonic one, is that natural philosophy is observable; material; quantifiable; and eternal. This favoured both the Church and secular humanists alike as it could be housed within the Christian framework of fallen man; redemption through a transcendent God and the blood sacrifice of his issue; and that the incorporeal world (angelic forces, cherubim, demiurges and heavenly bodies) are of a substance entirely separate from the energies or matter of earthly concern. Whereas a secular humanist world's earthly concern and science are empirical by nature, Shakespeare's plays contextualise phenomenological evidence of his era's Neoplatonic multiverse by indicating a coexistence of celestial and terrestrial matter in 'natural' communication being of shared substance both real and etheric. As Prospero tells us: "We are such stuff as dreams are made on."[68]

Or, when Hamlet counsels the scholarly Horatio that "there are more things in heaven and earth than are dreamt of in your philosophy," Hamlet is telling Horatio directly humanity has infinite capabilities of perception,

> What a piece of work is a man! how noble in reason!
> how infinite in faculty! In form and moving how
> express and admirable! In action how like an angel!
> in apprehension how like a god! The beauty of the
> world! the paragon of animals! And yet, to me,
> what is this quintessence of dust?[69]

As with the other Elizabethan poets, the heart's centrality is beyond dispute in Shakespeare's world and cannot be accurately understood in the context

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[66] Ioan P. Coulianu, *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987), p. 14.
[67] Couliano, *Eros and Magic*, p. 24.
[68] *The Tempest*, act IV, sc. 1.
[69] *Hamlet*, act II, sc. 2.

of his plays without investigation of its totality in operation and capacity. Thus, hypothetically, Shakespeare's words spoken from the actors' 'heart' would reveal his symbolic interplay of the divine with humanity in perpetuity. Patrick C. Carriere sees this understanding in his dissertation on Russia's 'Silver Age' as the core of Constantin Stanislavski's teachings on the art of acting.[70] Unrestricted by time and place, the figures atop Shakespeare's hierarchical edifice be it Theseus, Lear, or Prospero, Plantagenet, Bolingbroke, or Burgundy embody virtues and vices in which lie keys to the freedoms sought individually and collectively.

[70] See P. C. Carriere *Reading for the Soul in Stanislavski's The Work of the Actor on Him/Herself: Orthodox Mysticism, Mainstream Occultism, Psychology and the System in the Russian Silver Age* (Doctoral dissertation, University of Kansas, 2020).