

Shakespeare the Magus

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Introductory Remarks

There have been many books written on Shakespeare, and no doubt there will be many more, for this greatest English playwright's works remain endlessly fascinating. But with all the volumes already written on Shakespeare, his plays and his poetry, one finds that very little has been said about the theme of magic in Shakespeare's creations. Probably this omission is the result of a nineteenth and twentieth century prejudice against anything which might appear, to our often closed minds, "superstitious," or "primitive." Shakespeare, we might say, surely didn't really *believe* in that sort of thing. Yet the truth is, Shakespeare, like his Elizabethan contemporaries, understood magic as a natural factor in human relations. What is more, when we examine just how magic appears within his plays, we come to a clearer understanding not only of the plays, but of life itself, for far from being a product of "superstition" from a bygone era, magic functions within the plays on countless levels.

Perhaps such observations as these will alienate some modern readers who, schooled in the relentless rationalism of the present day, are offended even by the mention of such topics as magic except as historical curiosities, preferably denigrated as foolishness to boot. Indeed, precisely this rationalist or materialist worldview, which came to the fore in the nineteenth and was firmly enconced throughout the twentieth century, is no doubt responsible for the curious absence of almost any notice

regarding this central theme in Shakespeare's works. But if the reader will bear with us, he will, we hope, be rewarded by insights into the heart of Shakespeare's plays, into the Elizabethan mind, and perhaps into fundamental aspects of the cosmos and of human relationships.

For magic, in Shakespeare's works, always has to do with human relationships; magic is, one might well say, the science of human relations, at least in a Shakespearean context. Naturally, this is a circumscribed definition, limited by the purview of Shakespeare's plays, which by their very nature cannot extend far outside the human sphere. Works which take place in a theatre and on a stage must in general remain in the human realm—but even so, Shakespeare stretches the bounds of what we term human. For the human realm, in the Shakespearean universe, touches upon all the other spheres of the cosmos as well. In it the human world we see reflected the faery, the natural, the celestial and the demonic, for as microcosms, human beings stand at the center of the cosmos.

Now magic, in the Shakespearean understanding, is not merely a matter of summoning demons—though there is some of that, of course. Rather, magic in Shakespeare's works is at times black, or destructive, and at other times white, or beneficial. What is more, magic extends beyond the bounds of what we moderns would conceive it as: not limited to an incantatory science, so to say, magic in Shakespeare's plays penetrates into every aspect of life. When, in *The Life of King Henry the Fifth*, King Henry seeks the hand of Katherine, Princess of France, he says "You have witchcraft in your lips, Kate. There is more eloquence in a sugar touch of them than in the tongues of the French Council, and they should sooner persuade Harry of England than a general petition of monarchs" (V.ii.267). Then, speaking to the Duke of Burgundy, King Henry continues: "Our tongue is rough, coz, and my condition is not smooth, so that, having neither the voice nor the

heart of flattery about me, I cannot so conjure up the spirit of love in her that he will appear in his true likeness" (V.ii.277). Replies the Duke: "Pardon the frankness of my mirth if I answer you for that. If you would conjure in her, you must make a circle; if conjure up love in her in his true likeness, he must appear naked and blind. Can you blame her, then, being a maid yet rosed over with the virgin crimson of modesty, if she deny the appearance of a naked blind boy in her naked seeing self? It were, my lord, a hard condition for a maid to consign to."

King Henry: "Yet they do wink and yield, as love is blind and enforces."

Burgundy: "They are then excused, my lord, when they see not what they do."

This is of course witty banter—but Shakespeare would have no one banter about a subject wholly unfamiliar to his audience. Here Shakespeare is playing on the common understanding of magic as conjuration, and of falling in love as a form of magical activity. Later, we will consider love and magic in Shakespeare at length, but for now it is sufficient to say that falling in love is, in a magical world-view, seen as a kind of fascination; love is a kind of magic, a woman "capturing" a man, or vice versa. To conjure a naked blind boy is to invoke the "emblem" of this fascination; the blindness, both of the maid and the boy, signifies that love's fascination works beyond the discerning reason. And yet, paradoxically, it is a kind of vision; "love at first sight" does indeed exist, and consists in the power of fascination, a kind of magical encapturing, which is "blind" and yet works "in the eyes."

So here—to take a fairly common example which could be multiplied indefinitely, that of falling in love—magic extends beyond mere conjuration as we might ordinarily understand it. And thus it is with magic throughout Shakespeare. It is ubiquitous. There are of course such obvious practitioners of the dark arts as the witches in

Macbeth, or, on the other end of the spectrum, Prospero the white magician in *The Tempest*, the central magical play of Shakespeare's *oeuvre*, and arguably his greatest work. But there are also conversational references scattered throughout the plays to herbal magic, the science of correspondences, to cursing and to blessing, and to various emblems of occult lore. These conversational references extend magic beyond what we moderns would ordinarily conceive it as: in the Shakespearean world, magic permeates and is an accepted part of everyday life.

This is perhaps the most difficult part of Shakespeare's world-view us to understand: caught in our would-be omniscient scientific rationalism, we feel compelled to regard Shakespeare's references to magic as nothing but idle fancy, or literary embellishment. And of course, Shakespeare's works are so constructed as to allow for this: the theatre is itself a place of magic, a magic circle in which the master can work his conjurations and invocations. Shakespeare's genius consists in the multifaceted nature of his creations, which are so generously constructed as to be construable in virtually countless ways. Of course, in many respects, we can say that characters like Macbeth, Hamlet, Falstaff, Touchstone and Prospero are more alive or real to us than people we actually know. But it is still possible to relegate the plays to a distance, regarding them as divorced from the real world, and in this way references to magic or sorcery in the plays become acceptable to the modern mind.

So the reader may take our discussion of these matters in whichever way he wishes. But the fact remains that magic is a profoundly important element of the Shakespearean drama, so much so that in some ways it may even be considered as inherent in the nature of theater itself. Theater is a form of magic, a bringing to life of characters and situations which have never been, and never will be real and which yet in a certain sense are more

than real. There is in fact a kind of "theatrical alchemy," which entails the melding of the audience and the characters, and the transmutation of the whole into another sphere entirely. The theater can serve as a window into the celestial; in it we see not only ourselves, our own emotions and motivations, our own foolishness, heroism, and all the rest—but we see the mythological as well. We see the human, and the more than human; we can find in theater precisely what we will, and what we need.

Here lies the greatness of Shakespeare: that in his work we can find reflected the whole of the cosmos. In viewing his work we are as gods, looking impartially or sympathetically upon the foibles and triumphs of the human world. The magus is not one who works his will upon the world, but one who restores it to its original harmony, who draws together heaven and earth—and hell. In his work we see the principles of the world manifested. In this sense we call Shakespeare a magus—I make no assertions (which, seeing that we are blessedly¹ furnished so little of the playwright's biography, would necessarily be unfounded) regarding Shakespeare as a practising magician.

My purpose then is to discuss Shakespeare's work as it manifests a magical world-view. Shakespeare has been called the first modern, but we find this a rather idiosyncratic description of the great playwright; as we shall see, his own view of our world was much richer than the word "modern," which connotes a kind of two-dimensional image of the cosmos, a cosmos stripped of all but the earthly human sphere, limited to what can be known by mere rationalism. Many have noted how large Shakespeare's characters are to us: the foibles of a Falstaff and the greatness of a Lear, the evil of an Iago seem to us more—or less—than human, and yet we cannot often convincingly account for why this is. But perhaps it is because we live in a smaller, more impoverished cosmos than Shakespeare

did. Perhaps if we can widen our view of the cosmos, if we can accept that there are other realms than ours, that heaven and hell, good and evil, faery and elemental realms, all are real, that there can be such things as white magic and black magic, demons and angels—perhaps then we can understand something of Shakespeare’s characters’ scale. For they live in a greater world than we do, and this book will introduce that magical world.

That magical world includes astrology, herbalism, ceremonial magic, sorcery, ghosts, spirits, faeries—a cosmology essentially foreign to the modern mind. And all of these are based in knowledge of the subtle realms. Indeed, to read Shakespeare thoroughly is to have read a primer on magic: to understand the plays and sonnets thoroughly, one will have to understand the nature of fascination, of the faery realms, of sorcery and of ceremonial magic, of astrology and all the rest. Shakespeare of course does not often—if indeed ever—explain his references; the hidden body of knowledge which informs his works is indeed hidden, or invisible; and the function of this book is to body it forth, to make it explicit.

Our purpose in doing this is several fold: for one, modern readers of Shakespeare are often unaware of just how deeply the plays are grounded in medieval and ancient magical understanding, and we would like to highlight this grounding. For another, students of hermetic knowledge in the West often overlook the ways that this knowledge is embedded in literature, how indeed the study of literature can be more than entertainment. To understand the works of Hieronymous Bosch or of Shakespeare truly, one must, one *must* understand the magical symbolism that infuses them. Understanding this symbolism is more than mere intellectuality: it is a matter of working with symbols on a level which is, we might say, pre-intellectual and even visionary. To highlight how magical knowledge works in Shakespeare is our primary objective.

I. *The World of the Magus*

To completely introduce the world of a medieval magus, one would have to enter into it as the magus himself. One would have to experience what was meant by Mercury, Mars, the Moon, the Sun, Jupiter, the realm of faery, the elementals, daemons, and many other things. But Shakespeare, who lived in a world where all these are ways of understanding the deeper aspects of the human realm, offered us this world in the context of his plays. And so it is all too easy for us to ignore the world of the magus, to read Shakespeare’s plays out of context, forgetting that the Elizabethan world was far closer to a medieval and magical worldview than we are today. Here we will begin to reconstruct something of that magical realm.

I say “medieval” because even though Shakespeare is of course historically a Renaissance playwright, his work is permeated with the doctrines he, and any Elizabethan, inherited from antiquity and from the medieval era. Shakespeare’s work is infused not only with Christian doctrine, but with a cosmological understanding which includes astrological science, folklore, white and black magic, witchcraft, herbal lore, faeries, omens, oracles, seers, and much else. He is a Renaissance playwright historically—and does participate in the Renaissance humanisation of Christian metaphysics and cosmology, so that magic in his plays is more anthropocentric than it appeared in centuries past. But the foundation of

Shakespeare's work is medieval.

By magus I mean to say "white magician," for there is no question here of compelling demons, or of black magic. Naturally, the magus is necessarily familiar with general aspects of black magic, as he must be in that he may well confront such a magician—or demons—in the course of his life's work. But the magus is much more concerned with daemons than with demons, with heaven than with hell. Daemons—a Greek term—essentially means "luminous being;" the daemon corresponds to the angelic, in that the daemon is between God and man. "Demons" on the other hand are hell-beings, manifestations of darkness, of greed, wrath and ignorance.

Of course in Shakespeare's work we see both the demonic and the daemonic manifested. Seldom are we directly made aware that the demonic or the daemonic is at work—there is no overt sign saying that a given speech is one or the other. Rather, one senses it: for instance, Iago says "I have't! It is engend'ed! Hell and night/Must bring this monstrous birth to the world's light" (I.iii.397-398). Then we know on a conscious level he has hatched his plot to destroy Othello. But on a cosmological level, he is in fact making himself a vehicle for demonic forces to be unleashed upon the human world. He is a black magician, in a sense. The daemonic is harder to find in Shakespeare; but one finds it in the words of Ariel, Prospero's chief spirit, and in a looser sense, resonating in the love of Romeo and Juliet, in the noble words of Lear, and in the sonnets.

It is harder to find the daemonic than the demonic in Shakespeare, simply because the human passions make better drama than human serenity. One can scarcely imagine a Shakespearean Taoist recluse, though Prospero comes close. Shakespeare is full of activity, of the passions and sorrows, the triumphs and sufferings of mankind. One can obtain within that world of activity, passion and suffering a kind of quiet wisdom, or self-control, like

Prospero the magician in *The Tempest*, or one can wholly immerse oneself in it, like the great villain-heroes, Macbeth or Richard III. But in drama, one cannot escape the world. And in this do we find a source of Shakespeare's constant attraction for us: he is a this-worldly poet and playwright.

The magus too lives in the human world, of course: he is familiar with its depths and its heights because he is familiar with the principles which inform them. The function of the magus is to conjoin the various realms: he lives in the human sphere, but he also lives in other, higher spheres as well, and is aware of those lower aspects of existence which, by way of cracks so to say, penetrate into the human sphere. This is true of the demonic and of the faery and elemental realms as well as of the angelic: human beings are microcosmic, reflecting aspects of all the cosmos, and consequently in man both angels and devils are visible, as well as the elemental and other realms.

Indeed, the human being is, in the world of the magus, recognised to be microcosmic: each being reflects the cosmos as a whole. This is peculiarly true of the human being, of course, for the human being alone is axial, in a sense the "pillar" which unites heaven and earth. Only the human being is "grounded" in the earth, and yet is capable of contacting the subtle and the celestial realms; only man is capable of religious practise and the attaining of enlightenment, or liberation, on earth. This is why, in Buddhism, it is said that the gods themselves come to hear the *dharma* preached by a human master. In Christianity one sees a similar truth manifested in the figure of St. Francis, to whom even the animals came.

Man is the divine viceregent; he stands for God upon earth, and from this truth comes his nobility. Even when he debases himself in destructive, evil behaviour, he does so against the background of his potential nobility; it is by virtue of this nobility that his behaviour can be known as debasing or as evil. And magic can of course work either

for debasing man, as in the sorcery of a Jean de Pucelle, in *The First Part of Henry VI*, or as a manifestation of man's nobility and harmonizing power, as in the white magic of a Prospero, in *The Tempest*. But in either case magic is a function of man's relation to the divine, of the degree to which he accepts his place in the cosmos as divine viceregent.

Magic is of course primarily concerned with the subtle world—with the psychical, with the realm of dreams and symbols and elementals, with the sphere of planetary influences and correspondences. Magic works in the subtle world, in which symbols resonate, in which the future, the present, and the past are all visible in dreams and to oracles—under certain conditions—in which all things on earth are interconnected. When the magus performs a ceremonial rite, he is in fact creating the proper subtle conditions—the proper ambience—for a given influence or manifestation to take place. The magus might evoke Mars, or Venus—or some particular elemental, say—for some special purpose, and to do this he needs to create the proper atmosphere through the propitious use of symbols and correspondences.

Everything upon earth has its subtle correspondences and meanings; minerals and herbs, trees, animals, fish, birds, man, elements, all are interwoven manifestations of subtle or, we might say, dreaming energy. By deploying these correspondences and nexus points or influences in the subtle realm, man can work magic. There are of course other aspects to magical working, in terms of human training—but all magic is based, in its working, on subtle correspondences or interweaving, and on the plasticity and subtle power of the human being.

In Shakespeare these principles are suggested, indeed, interwoven throughout the plays, in which magical fascination, herbalism, astrology, dreaming and oracles play significant roles indeed. In a real sense, one could regard Shakespeare's plays and sonnets as a school for the magus;

for one can envision the plays, regard them in one's mental stage, internalising and transmuting them. I know some who have used the works of Hieronymous Bosch in this fashion, as the center of meditative visionary work; and certainly with the wealth of symbolism he offers, Bosch is eminently suited for this. But Shakespeare's world is the human world alone; the stage is his world, to paraphrase some famous lines. And that stage can be ours as well, the stage within, the theatre of the world, the theatre within.

The world of Shakespeare, in short, is the world of the magus: it is a world in which there are very real powers outside the human realm, in which good and evil have real meaning, in which faery folk and other spirits really exist. It is a world in which, furthermore, the choices of a human being have more than earthly significance. Heaven and hell are, in it, not merely words, but meaningful—they are ultimate consequences of human actions.

This sense of the ultimate pervades the plays, and without it there could neither have been a Rabelaisian Pantagruel nor his lesser reflection, a Falstaff. These figures—men who fling themselves wholly into life, who sin flagrantly, and yet who we as readers forgive because of who they are—could not exist in their wholeness without the vastness of a complete cosmology behind them. Rabelais's characters have a certain grandeur because they exist in and from our perspective against a background in which sin has cosmological consequences, in which heaven and hell have real meaning. And the same is true of Shakespeare's characters: damnation and salvation are realities, not merely words, for them.

This is the ultimate signifier of a magical world-view: it is not bounded by the physical, but rather, the physical is illuminated by and reflects the invisible realms "above" and "below," as well as their transcendent Origin. Rather than being a "flat" world, in which only the physical and, in human terms, the psychological, have reality [the case