HERMETIC SYMBOLISM IN THE SHAKESPEARIAN PLAYS

Lia Codrina CONȚIU[1]

Abstract

Since Hermeticism was an important trend that influenced Western Europe, from the 15th century on, Shakespeare got in contact with these thoughts and philosophies, as an actor with many connections to the royal court. In Shakespeare's plays, we find supernatural elements of the world of myth and fairies, influences of Ovid and Virgil's mythical universe and the theme of a hermetic bond between the natural world and the man's deeds. The storms are symbols of major change, ancient Egyptian magic practices interfere in man's life, and the Lesser and Greater Mysteries of Eleusis are embedded in the structure of the plays through symbolic stories of initiation. In Shakespeare's plays magic is regenerative as nature is (in comedies and fairy plays), mathematical, through the use of music, geometry and astrology, and religious, which can be either ascending or destructive, depending on the hero's inner harmony or imbalance.

Keywords: Shakespeare, hermeticism, symbolism, magic, mythology

Introduction

Shakespeare's work cannot be analyzed outside the cultural, historical and economic context in which it was written. In that period, Hermeticism was one of the most important trends that influenced religious reformation and contributed to the emergence of a creative movement, called Renaissance. Hermeticism was introduced to Western Europe in 1460, by Cosimo de Medici who succeeded in acquiring a Greek text made up of 40 books of teachings, philosophy and magical practices, called *Corpus Hermeticum*, which was supposed to have been in reality written by the Egyptian god, Thoth. In Greek, Thoth translates with Hermes, and so, Hermes Trismegistus was considered the author of this work, which, most probably, was written between the 1st and 3rd century AD. The Academy of Florence, familiar with Plato's philosophy, embraced Hermeticism with enthusiasm, and its influence spread very quickly from that moment on.

In England, Hermeticism arrived mainly through Anne Boleyn, the mother of the future Queen Elizabeth I, who came from the province of Provence, France, where the courtly life was surrounded by the Gnostic philosophies of love and alchemy. These ideas were spread in Europe by the Troubadours, and the rose became the symbol of refined love. The Templar Knights, suppressed in 1307, helped in developing a climate of freedom in which new ideas and creative thinking could flourish, as in Queen Elizabeth's I reign. From them came the symbols of the white rose (an allusion to the Templar White Mantles), and the red rose (the symbol of the red cross used as the emblem of the Templar Knights). In alchemy, the white rose represents the princess, the virgin, or the purified emotions, while the red rose symbolizes the prince, the male element, or the purified intellect, and the

[1] Assistant Professor Ph.D., University of Medicine, Pharmacy, Sciences and Technology of Târgu -Mureș; Ph.D. student in theatre and performing arts, George Enescu National University of Arts – Iași.

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unification of these two symbols referred to the great work of the universe and the divine principle.[2]

These hermetic teachings contributed to Henry's VIII decision to break with the Church of Rome, and this liberation was celebrated, later, in poetry, songs, and through hermetic masques. These plays, which used fantastic decoration, special costumes and special effects, were performed especially by the family members or courtiers of the great houses or courts, and in the end, the audience enjoyed a fancy dress ball. Hermetic thinking has; also, influenced the belief that human civilization was at the beginning of a new golden era in which humanity could regain its inborn powers and awareness that were lost in "the fall".[3]

Michael Baigent and Richard Leigh, in *The Elixir and the Stone,* said that "for more than a century after Henry VIII broke with the Church of Rome, no churches were built in England. Instead, England built theatres. Theatre became a new species of church, a new temple. Within this magic structure, the rites and rituals of the Hermetic mysteries were performed for an insatiable public."[4] In the Elizabethan epoch, the occult belief was practically universal. This belief has shaped the development of Western societies in terms of religion, art, and even politics. Not believing in magic at the time was not a viable option; as the Inquisitors of the Church, Heinrich Kramer and James Sprenger claim in their book, *Malleus Maleficarum* (1484): the fact that you could not believe in magic was considered a heresy from the perspective of church doctrine, and the penalty was as great as the proclamation of witchcraft.[5]

It was the period of Nostradamus, Marsilio Ficino and Hermes Trismegistus, hermetic philosophy and a strong belief in magic, astrology and alchemy, and the Renaissance era saw the emergence of new ideas and a profound curiosity about any mystical thing. Astrology, in particular, fascinated prominent Elizabethans, including Queen Elizabeth I, who relied on John Dee, who, along with his associate, Edward Kelley, were the greatest astrologers of the Elizabethan era.

Shakespeare and the Hermetic philosophy

As Shakespeare had many connections with the world of the royal court, by being an actor, during the reign of Jacob I Shakespeare's acting company was brought under royal patronage and was named *The King's Men*, he was exposed not only to masques plays, which appeared in many of his plays as plays-within-plays (*Love Labours Lost*, *Romeo and Juliet*, *Timon of Athens*, *The Tempest*, etc.) but also to Renaissance ideas that circulated in the educated people's circles.[6]

[2] Oddvar Olsen, *The Temple Antiquities: The Templar Papers II*, "Shakespeare and Hermetic Magic", Atasha Fyfe, 2011, John Hunt Publishing, p. 151.
[3] *Idem*, pp. 152-153.
[4] Quoted in Oddvar Olsen, *The Temple Antiquities: The Templar Papers II*, 2011, John Hunt Publishing, p. 154.
[5] Nethanael L. Payne, *The hermetic Shakespeare*, 2013, Notre Dame de Namur University, p. 3.
[6] Oddvar Olsen, *The Temple Antiquities: The Templar Papers II*, 2011, John Hunt Publishing, p. 154.

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In *The Psychic World of William Shakespeare,* 1961, Sherman Yellen states that Shakespeare "believed in prophecy, witchcraft, astrology, magic and ghosts." The author asserts that Shakespeare "respected the supernatural in a manner unlike that of his contemporaries,"[7] so, in Shakespeare's plays, we cannot just refer to superstition, the playwright has far exceeded it. The magic that appears in Shakespeare's work moves from the "old form" to a hermetic one.

In Shakespeare's plays, magic refers to the supernatural elements of the world of myth and fairies, but there is also a simpler, more natural force, the magic of love, the magic of the elements of nature in manifestation, and even the magic of poetry and art. *Richard III* reflects the dark forces of the supernatural, while *A Midsummer Night's Dream* accepts them in a light comedy. Only villains or misguided men try to ignore supernatural forces, endangering them, such as Edmund in *King Lear*, Iago in *Othello*, and Cassius in *Julius Cesar*.

Professor Jeremy McNamara says that the fairies from Shakespeare's work are modernized gods: "Like Ovid's gods, Shakespeare's fairies are menacing and powerful, with a control over nature and men, even if they are ultimately more benign."[8] Robert Kilburn Root, with *Classical Mythology in Shakespeare* (2006), says that the whole nature of Shakespeare's mythology is essentially Ovidian, and that "Shakespeare himself has shown that he was proud to be Ovid's successful ape."[9]

One of Shakespeare's earliest references to hermetic ideas is found in *Henry IV, Part Two*, through the magician Glendower, who, like John Dee, was from Welsh (at that time it was supposed to be the place of the amateurs in magic). Throughout the entire work of the playwright, there is the theme of a hermetic bond between the natural world, and the men's deeds. Crucial and cruel events are foretold by strange events in nature: such is the death of *Julius Cesar* in Act 1, Scene 3, in which Casca exposes a long list of strange signs. In *Macbeth* we have the predictions of Duncan's murder, stories of unprecedented and unheard things told by the characters who witnessed them, until the final moment when the Birnam forest starts moving to Dunsinane. The storms are full of meaning in the Shakespearean plays, being a symbol of the forces of nature they bring about a major change. Challenged by fairy beasts or black magic in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* or *Macbeth*, they are associated with the white magic of alchemy in the last plays (*Pericles*, *The Tempest*).[10]

This image of a magically connected world was lost in the Age of Reason, replaced by a model of reality based on cause and effect. Hermeticism continued, but as a secret movement, it re-emerged in the 19th century through the romantic poets and then by the Spiritualist movement. In the 20th century, Carl Jung restored the principle of synchronicity, stating that "events occur in similar clusters". Many of Shakespeare's plays,

[7] Quoted in Martin Ebon, *They Knew the Unknown,* Signet, 1972, p. 31.
[8] Jeremy McNamara, „Ovidius Naso was the Man:" Shakespeare's Debt to Ovid, The 1992-93 Fox Classics Lecture.
[9] Quoted in Howard Schumann, "Shakespeare and the Occult: A Path to Edward De Vere", *Shakespeare Matters*,pp.1-32, Summer 2012.
[10] Oddvar Olsen, *The Temple Antiquities: The Templar Papers II*, 2011, John Hunt Publishing, pp. 156-158.

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especially *Hamlet*, contain the idea that events are created by a mindset rather than a cause-effect pattern.[11]

In *Pericles*, although the magician is called Cerimon, the main character makes us think of Paracelsus, the famous alchemist, physician, astrologer, Swiss physicist of the Renaissance. Cerimon uses Egyptian magic to resurrect the dead queen, coming in a trunk on the sea, after the storm. In *The Winter's Tale*, Paulina brings to life the queen's statue, after receiving the king's agreement, through white magic, so restoring the lost divine feminine principle. Such ancient Egyptian magic practices are mentioned in a section, *Asclepius*, of the book *Corpus Hermeticum*, which describes how to bring the dead to life and transform statues into gods.[12]

In Shakespeare's work we, also, find influences from Giordano Bruno, an ardent supporter of *Corpus Hermeticum*, who travelled from Italy to England, Oxford, hoping to convince Queen Elizabeth I to generate a universal reform according to hermetic principles. In this regard, Ulysses' speech in *Troilus and Cressida* (Act 1, scene 3) is the expression of Giordano Bruno's conception that the sun is the physical and spiritual centre of the universe.[13]

With the reign of James I, magic had to withdraw into isolated societies such as that of Rosicrucians because of tough laws imposed against witchcraft and magic. In *Cymbeline*, we find references to this secret society, by finding the tomb of Christian Rosenkreutz (legendary character, considered to be the founder of Rosicrucianism) in a crypt. *The Tempest* is the last play to describe a magician, Prospero. Frances Yates, in *Majesty and Magic in Shakespeare's Last Plays: a new approach to Cymbeline, Henry VIII and the Tempest*, calls the play "a Rosicrucian manifesto infused with the spirit of Dee, using theatrical parables for esoteric communication."[14] The storm in the play is more than the physical manifestation of nature; it symbolizes change on all levels and has, also, alchemical connotations, is the process that helps transform the metal into gold, meaning, in this way, the spiritual evolution of the characters. The island in which Prospero is exiled represents the society, but, also, its own psychic, and the trials through which all the characters go, and especially the magician, aim to bring in harmony the elements in conflict.

Colin Still in *Shakespeare's Mystery Play, A Study of "The Tempest"* states that the play is an allegory, a poetic version of the universal epic, and it presents values that are "enshrined in all that is best and most enduring in ancient myth and ritual, in religious concepts and ceremonies, in art and literature, and in popular tradition." The same author claims that initiation rituals appear in the play as described in the Lesser Mysteries of Eleusis.[15] These consisted of purification rites and "the representation in a dramatic symbol" of what the candidate would, later, if he proved worthy, undergo in the Greater Mysteries. Because the

[11] *Idem,* p. 158.
[12] *Idem,* p. 159.
[13] *Idem,* p. 160.
[14] Quoted in D.W. Cooper & Lawrence Gerald, A Bond for All the Ages: Sir Francis Bacon and John Dee: the Original 007.
[15] Quoted in Michael Cosser, "Shakespeare's Mystery Drama", *Sunrise: Theosophic Perspectives 49*.

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mystery tradition regarded man as having a god within, "drawn into material life in order to bring out of their potential state the various powers and faculties" closed in the core of his being. This process has been seen as a kind of refinement of quality, a cutting of selfish incrustations that leads to the gradual exposure of spirituality, so that man becomes, in time, "a conscious expression of his divine state".[16]

Not only what happens in *The Tempest*, but also the scene directions, are connected with ancient rituals. There are references to Virgil's *Aeneid*, by introducing seemingly meaningless references to Dido (Queen of Carthage) and Aeneas (Act 2, Scene 1), the choice of the location for the Shakespearean characters is Naples and Tunis (the same places, just other names, Cumae and Carthage for Virgil's characters), a shipwreck in both works, making indirectly the connection to the descent in Avernus (inferno). Virgil's inferno does not resemble Dante's, a place where wrongdoers have to pay, but a world of all souls who have ever walked, in a body, in the realms of light, good or bad, happy or unhappy, and who live in eternity as shadows with destiny. It is a descent that tests the soul of the one who must initiate in the knowledge of the world, in its totality, as it appears, in parallel universes.

The term of initiation, which means "beginning", must be understood as meaning the beginning of a new life, the ceremony itself serving only to mark the new stage in evolution and knowledge that the aspirant has already reached. This was its initial use because no ritual per se had the power to carry out a lasting transformation in the character of an individual. There are numerous symbols that lead to Persephone's myth, the one who sank into a deep sleep into Hades, and who was sought by her mother without being found, just as Ferdinand was *lost*. We have Psyche's myth, Eros' wife, who has gained immortality through hard work at the court of Aphrodite, Miranda sowing a great deal with this goddess, and Ferdinand, to conquer her, must go through all stages of initiation. In the end, he tells Prospero that he has received *a second life*; it is the birth after the initiatory death.[17]

Hermeticism refers to the development of the practitioner's awareness or consciousness, allowing them to reach a transcendent state in which the practitioner can then manipulate the natural world. This magical manipulation is done by understanding "sympathies" (each part of the natural world has a corresponding part in celestial and spiritual worlds operating in sympathy with each other). According to hermetic philosophy, a person can learn to consciously manipulate this metaphysical system of sympathies and so to raise their own consciousness and position themselves within this system. In *De Occulta Philosophia*, renaissance occultist Cornelius Agrippa presents how a person can do so. According to Agrippa, there are three types of "magic": natural magic, manipulation of elementary forces by controlling sympathies, then mathematical magic: arithmetic, geometry, music, astronomy, mechanics, and ultimately religious magic, establishing contacts with celestial worlds, meaning spiritism.[18]

[16] Michael Cosser, "Shakespeare's Mystery Drama", *Sunrise: Theosophic Perspectives 49*.
[17] *Ibidem*.
[18] Nethanael L. Payne, *The hermetic Shakespeare*, 2013, Notre Dame de Namur University, p. 4-5.

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Yates, in *The Hermetic Tradition in Renaissance Science. Articles on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology*, states that the hermetic man of "Pimander" (the most famous work of the book *Corpus Hermeticum*) falls, but he can, also, be regenerated. The regenerated hermetic man recaptured their dominion over the nature they had in their divine origin. The moment this man is regenerated, brought into communion with the leader of "all", through the magical-religious communion with the cosmos, they regain their deity.[19]

All these ideas and forms of magic are expressed in Shakespeare's plays. Magic of nature, regenerative in comedies and fairy plays, a mathematical magic that makes use of geometry, music, and astrology in almost all the Shakespearean plays, and a religious magic that, if man is in balance, through contacts with other worlds and forces, helps them in their ascension, if this inner harmony is destroyed, communication with other universes, gods, fairies, witches, only push the man down, to a rapid fall to death, which is no longer initiatory, regenerative, but a destructive one, sometimes causing not only the destruction of the person but of an entire community or nation.

Conclusions

When we analyze Shakespeare's work, we can make it from so many perspectives that we ask who is right or "how we have to read it". And we often do not find an answer, and we remember Iago's words in *Othello*: "I am not what I am". The Shakespearean work is an embedded message in which every reader finds their own lenses to "read" the story, be it comedy, historical drama, tragedy, or fairy-tale. Recognized by critics as the father of modern English, introducing many expressions into the vocabulary, Shakespeare created powerful, brilliant characters with an inner universe full of questions and doubts, characters so vital that they sometimes exceed the size of the real man. They are characters with weaknesses and virtues, with a special dynamism that is based on universal features that attract the audience, regardless of the epoch.

Shakespeare's plays cannot be included in any category, they are universal by their visual character, the brilliance of language, the rhythm of poetry, timeless situations, the themes that are current, regardless the historical period, and especially the convincing nature of the characters. Not only the main characters draw our attention, but Shakespeare also introduced, in his plays, remarkable "minor" characters, full of humour or tragic, wit and spiritual depth. In the Shakespearean work, stories are intertwining, and each reader can identify with one of the heroes, be it the leading or the minor one, through the universal values that animate them.

Shakespeare was a man of his time, but the personality of the playwright was missing from his work. We cannot say for sure anything about his religion (although he is supposed to be a follower of Catholicism, even though he lived in a time when the papacy was replaced by the new Anglican Church) or his views in such a tense and changing world. Opinions, be they contradictory, about love, morality, law, religion, death, are only

[19] Frances A. Yates, "The Hermetic Tradition in Renaissance Science. Articles on Witchcraft, Magic and Demonology" *vol. 11, Renaissance Magic*. Ed. Brian P. Levack. New York: Garland Publishing. 1992, p. 235.

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expressed by his characters. As Priscilla Costello says, "It is as though Shakespeare transcended his own personality, sacrificing singularity in favour of universality, so that he was able to imagine and create every possible human type."[20]

There are so many characters and worlds in his work that only an artist who works with the world's archetypal vision, transmitted from antiquity, can capture an infinite variety of the universe. Understanding the conception of the world, that outlines Shakespeare's works, allows us not only a deeper understanding of his plays, but, also, some of his special qualities: the visionary power, an infinite variety of human typologies and the supernatural, as well as a mysterious elasticity (his plays have been adapted, modified, cut into the theatrical and cinematic adaptations, but have kept their universality and spectacular character). Alexa Visarion states that: "The endless spectacular of these truths can be assimilated by every epoch in a different way. It is the opening of «closed doors» without explaining the gesture, without morality, without ideology."[21] And this "opening of closed doors" allows magic, astrology and Masonic knowledge to be revealed to the readers/spectators through in-depth analysis.

In a beautiful story (*Everything & Nothing)*, Borges captures Shakespeare's universal character, (a symbolic name, the one who "shakes the spear" ... we can say that of the archetypal tradition, started from the Knights of the Round Table and passing through Rosicrucianism and Freemasonry, all woven into the magical fabric of mythology and astrology).

"History adds that before or after dying he found himself in the presence of God and told Him: 'I who have been so many men in vain want to be one and myself.' The voice of the Lord answered from a whirlwind: 'Neither am I anyone; I have dreamt the world as you dreamt your work, my Shakespeare, and among the forms in my dream are you, who like myself are many and no one."[22]

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[20] Priscilla Costello, *Shakespeare and the Stars: The Hidden Astrological Keys to Understanding the World's Greatest Playwright*, 2016, Ibis Press, p. 14.

[21] Alexa Visarion, *Spectacolul ascuns*, Editura Buna Vestire, Blaj, 2010.

[22] Jorge Luis Borges, *El Hacedor*, Alianza Editorial, S.A., Madrid, 1998, pp. 16-17, *(La historia agrega que, antes o después de morir, se supo frente a Dios y le dijo: Yo, que tantos hombres he sido en vano, quiero ser uno y yo. La voz de Dios le contestó desde un torbellino: Yo tampoco soy; yo soñé el mundo como tú soñaste tu obra, mi Shakespeare, y entre las formas de mi sueño estabas tú, que como yo eres muchos y nadie.)*.

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