

WHITE MAGIC IN RENAISSANCE ENGLAND

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Despite the advent of the new empirical world view that the universe consisted of parts integrated, yet isolated, thus leaving man with a sense of nature's detachment and indifference, the medieval ptolomaic concept of the universe still persisted during the Elizabethan period. As a result of this view there existed a belief that there was a divine unity, culminating in a network of correspondences which connected man, God and nature. Hence there was a strong belief in white magic which reflected this unity. It was suggested that the divine powers of God were available to man, i.e. to the white magician through meditation, study and purification of the soul and through the aid of spirits, angels, stars, and planets, or through "invoking terrestrial virtues of the four elements, of those of animals, plants, metals and stones". (Woodman, 12) The white magician had to be "a very perfect Philosopher" who was acquainted with the qualities and effects of the four elements and of distillation. He was also required to be a good physician, "a herbalist and a mineralogist", with a thorough knowledge of mathematics, astrology and of optics. (Shumaker, 112) He was

homo fugi

A pious, holy and religious man,
One free from mortal sinne, a very virgin. (*The Alchemist*, II, ii)

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In other words, the white magician was the man who had succeeded in purifying himself of the baser elements of his nature, thus becoming God's agent. Once God's agent, he could try to raise all inferior things to a state of perfection and the way to do it was to practice the science of alchemy which was the science of removing the baseness of such metals as lead, mercury, iron and transforming them into their state of perfection, that is, turning them into gold or silver.

This night, I'll change
All, that is metal, in thy house to gold.
And early in the morning, will I send
To all the plumbers, and the
And buy their tin, and lead up: and to Lothbury,
For all the copper (II, i)

says Ben Jonson's alchemist, referring to the practice.

Thomas Tymme explained that alchemy
is the way to celestial and supernatural things,
by which the ancient wisemen were led from the
works of Art And Nature to understand every reason
the wonderfull powre of God in the creation
of all things." (Quoted by French, 128)

So Alchemy was a means of understanding the miracle of creation, because the creation of cosmos was a chemical action. By studying chemistry one could learn about Nature and about the Creator and at the same time transmute his nature and transmute base metals into gold and this was a common ambition at the time.

A licence granted in 1456 gives a good account of the alchemical practice and its outcomes:

In former times wise and famous philosophers in their writings and books have left on record and taught under figures and covering that from wine, precious stones, oils, vegetables, animals, metals, and minerals can be made many glorious

and notable medicines, and chiefly that most precious medicine which some philosophers have called the mother and Empress of medicines, others the priceless glory, others the quintessence, others the Philosophers' Stone and Elixir of Life. Of which potion the efficacy is so certain and so wonderful that by it all infirmities whatsoever are easily curable, human life is prolonged to its natural limit, and man wonderfully preserved in health and manly strength both of body and mind, in vigour of limbs, clearness of memory, and perspicacity of intellect to the same period. All kinds of wounds too which are curable, are healed without difficulty, and in addition it is the best and surest remedy against all kinds of poisons. By it too, many other advantages most useful to ...the Commonwealth ...can be wrought, such as the transmutation of metals into actual gold and the finest silver. (Steele, 465 - 66).

Likewise, the byproducts of alchemy were observed in John Donne's "Love's Alchemy", though in a different context.

...no chymique yet th' Elixar got,
But glorifies his pregnant pot,
If by the way to him befall
Some odoriferous thing, or medicinall, (Adams,
888)

The attraction of gold and of possessing the elixir enticed wealthy and noble alike and it became a fashionable practice to support a private alchemist because

He that has once the *flower of the sunne*,
The perfect *ruby*, which we call elixir,

.....

Can conter honour, love, respect, long life,
Give safety, valure: year and victorie,
To whom he will. (*He Alchemist*, II, 1)

Even Queen Elizabeth was lured by the idea and she allowed Cornelius de Lannoy to experiment in Somerset House.

Cornelius de Alneto, or de Lannoy wrote a letter to Queen Elizabeth on February 7, 1565 offering his services and promising to produce for her "50.000 marks of pure gold annually at a moderate charge." However, after two years, having failed to produce the promised gold, he was sent to the Tower "for abusing the Queen's majesty in Somerset House in promising to make the elixir... and ... to convert any metal into gold" (Steele, 473) This was typical of the lives of many alchemists. Those who could not produce the hoped - for gold for Her Majesty ended up in the Tower. Subtle in *the Alchemist* is alluding to this when he says:

And we be lock'd up, in the tower for ever,
To make gold there (for the stete) never come out.
(IV, vii)

As a "magus" of great repute, Edward Kelley was another alchemist who worked for Queen Elizabeth. He was asked in a letter to serve the Queen:

Good Knight, let me end my letter conjuring you,
in God's holy name not to Keep God's gift from
your natural countrie, but rather to help make
Her Majestie a glorious and victorious power
against the mallyce of hers and God's enemies.
(Quoted by Woodman, 32)

Kelley was a favourite of the Royal Court for a while and it was hoped that he might

send her majesty for a token some such portion
(of gold) as might be to her a sum to defer her
charges for this summer for her navy. (Quoted by
Knight, 173)

because it was believed, according to some rumours, that Kelley had succeeded in making gold. (French, 83)

Kelley who, under the name Talbot claimed to have seen visions and who worked as secretary for the conjurer Thomas Allen and as a medium for Dr. Dee was a charlatan. The following passage from Nashe's *Have with you to Saffron - Walden* is an evidence of his control over the pockets of other people:

Carnead. Let him call upon Kelly, who is better than them both (Lully and Paracelsus); and for the spirites and soules of the ancient Alchumists, he hath them so close emprisoned in the frie purgatorie of his fornace, that for the welth of the King of Spaines Indies, it is not possible to release or get the third part of a nit of anie one of them, to helpe anie but himselfe.

Import. Whether you call his fire Purgatorie or no, the fire of Alchumie hath wrought such a purgation or purgatory in a great number of mens purses in England that it hath clean fir'd them out of al they have. (Quoted by Steele, 472)

This imposter was not only associated with Elizabeth I but also with Emperor Rudolph II who had knighted him for his alchemical effects. But after a while the Emperor grew impatient and had him imprisoned because Kelley failed to produce any gold and while trying to escape he fell down from a turret and died. Kelley was not alone in meeting this end.

Since those who are eager to gain more are the easiest to cheat, alchemy was the field of white magic that appealed most to charlatans. These charlatan white magicians through false promises harped on the gullibility, greed and lust of their victims and provided the satirists with a good target to attack. For example, Ben Jonson explored the tenets of white magic and those of the white magicians. In his play *the Alchemist* Jonson satirized the gullibility of greedy and lustful human beings in the hands of cheaters and cozeners such as Subtle and Face. In the play these two in the jar-

gon of alchemy create an aura of the kind of world in which they operate:

Face: When all your *alchemy*, and your *algebra*, your *mineralls*, *vegatalls*, and *animalls*, your *coniuring*, *cosning*, and your dozen trades, could not relieve your corps, with so much linnen would make you tinder, but to see a fire; I go'yu count'nence, credit for your coales, your stills, your glasser, your *materials*.

.....

Subtle: *Sublim'd* thee, and *exalted* thee and *fix'd* thee I'the *third region*, call'd our *state of grece?* wrought thee to *spirit*, to *quintessence*, with paines would twice have won me the *philosophers worke?* (I. i)

In the world Jonson reflected, both the victim and the cozener shared a similar dream. The victim dreamt of an increasing wealth and the cozener dreamt of securing money from his victim. In all his gullibility, Mammon talks about his plans in *the Alchemist* and voices his dreams:

I doe mean
To have a list of wives and concubines,
....
I will have all my beds, blowne up, not stufte:
Down is too hard. And then my oval roome
Fill'd with ... pictures ... Then my glasses,
Cut in more subtill angles, to disperse,
And multiply the figures, as I walke
Naked My mists
I'll have of perfume, vapor'd' bout the roome.
.... and my baths, like pits
To fall into: ...
May meat, shall al come in, in Indian shells,
Dishes of agate, set in gold, and stubbed,
With emeralds, saphyres, hiacynths, and rubies.

The tongues of carpes, dormise, and camels heeles,
Boil'd i'the spirit of sal, and dissolv'd pearle,
And I will eat these broaths, with spoons of
amber,
Headed with diament....
My foot - boy shall eate pheasants, calverd sal-
mons,
... and I myself will have
The beards of barbels, serv'd, in stead of salla-
des;
Oild mushroomes; ... my shirts
I'll have of taffata - sarsnet, soft and light
As cob - webs;
My gloves of fishes, and birde - skins perfum'd
With gummes of paradise, and eastern aire. (II,
ii)

Of course, not all people were gullible and open to cheating mostly because they were skeptical of alchemy. William Perkins being one of them, expressed his incredulity in these words:

The Alchymist is to be reprooved, that spends his time and substance in labouring to change baser metals into gold, a thing in truth impossible (Quoted by Woodman, 25 - 26)

The English Renaissance public lived in a world where scientific and magical were equally valid. Astronomy from astrology, chemistry from alchemy were not completely separated and science and magic were just beginning to diverge. In such a world study of stars was accompanied by a wide-spread conviction that celestial bodies had a direct influence on human affairs and that a skilled observor could foretell the future by a close examination of their movements. Thus astrological examination of the skies was more appealing than scientific. John Dee, a mathematician, philosopher, conjurer and alchemist was a typical man of Renaissance and was aware of the supercelestial world of divine power and believed that he had the power of conjuring angels and that he was an ex-

pert in astrology. His fame was so wide spread that half the fashionable society, including Elizabeth I consulted him. Consulting a magician was such a common practice in those days that as Massinger put it "some statesmen ... (were) wholly Governed by the astrologer's predictions" (II,1)

In 1551 Dee came to be introduced to Edward VI and for his effortshe received a pension from the King. Around the same period Dr. Dee entered the service of Earl of Pembroke and later of the Duke of Northumberland whose children he tutored. Dee's contacts with the court continued and following Mary Tudor's accession to the throne Dee was asked to read her nativity together with those of her husband and Princess Elizabeth. After his service to the Queen he was accused of trying to enchant the Queen and the Princess and was tried on a charge of treason but he succeeded clearing himself.

After Elizabeth's accession to the throne he was often at the court and according to Richard Harvey, "her majestie vouchsafeth the name of hyr philosopher" as Dr. Dee. (Harvey, 5) Thus he became the court astrologer and was asked to select the most suitable day for Elizabeth's coronation. His duties at the court were manifold and at one point he was requested to cast away any harm that might have been intended against the Queen. He was also consulted before explorations, voyages and about matters of state. On October 3, 1580 Elizabeth was interested in her legal rights to foreign lands and Dee was the authority to consult. Concerning this matter he made an entry into his diary:

On Munday, at ii of the klok before none, I deliv-
red my two rolls of the Quene's Majesties title
unto herself in the garden at Richemond, who
appointed after dynner to heare furder on the
matter. Therefore betwene one and two afternone,
I was sent for into her highnes Pryvy Chamber,
where the Lord Threasurer allso was, who, ha-
ving the matter slightly then in consultation, did

seme to dowt much that I had or could make the argument probable for her hignes' title so as I pretended. (Quoted by French, 196)

In 1577 Dee reflected the imperial destiny of Queen Elizabeth I in his *General and rare memorials pertayning to the perfect art of Navigation*. In the book appeared a complicated print depicting the Queen sailing in a ship called "Europa" "with the moral that Britain (was) to grow strong at sea so that through her Imperial Monarchy she (might) become the pilot of all christendom" (French, 85) This was perhaps Dee's foretelling of the victory of the British Armada in 1588. Again in 1577 Dee wrote to the Queen as a "most humble and dutifull subject and servant" and thanked Her Majesty for having called" him, Mr. Kelley and their families" hoame, (her) Biritish Earthly Paradise" and he promised to "endeavour faithfully, loyaly, carefully, warily and diligently... (to) serve ... (her) most Excellent Royal Majestie" (Harlein MS. 6986, fol. 45) He was a favourite of Elizabeth I and she

promised unto (him) great security against any of her kingdome, that would by reason of any of (his) rare studies and philosophicall exercises, unduly seeke (his) overthrow. (French, 7)

Although John Dee was at first favoured by Queen Elizabeth I and his studies were protected by her and her court, later he lost the Queen's favour. In common opinion he was a "magus" and was called a sorcerer, a vile necromancer.

After James I succeeded Elizabeth, Dee asked the King to be tried for sorcery, in the hope of clearing his name and reputation. He said that if he was found guilty, may he "be stoned to death: or to be buried quicke: or to be burned unmercifully". (Quoted by French, 10) But he could not succeed to rise to favour again, and shunned, poverty stricken and isolated, he died in 1608 at the age of 81.

Those who believed in the astrologers' divine powers consulted them and mostly their customers consisted of city dames who went.

.... in disguise to that conjurer and this cunning woman, where the first question is, how soon shall I die? And sets down the answers, and believes 'em above the scriptures. (Jonson, *Epicoene*, II, ii)

These "citydames" consulted magicians also in the hope of finding solutions to their problems concerning their love affairs. For example, it was revealed during the trial of Lady Frances Howard, Countess of Essex that she had written a letter to Dr. Simon Forman, "who combined alchemy with astrology, medicine, necromancy, and other crafts" (Knights, 173) and required him to divert her husband's love from her and help her to win Somerset's affection. (Goltweld, 87) Forman had also a reputation as supplier of love philtres to the court. His name appeared in the dramatic literature of the period in connection with this:

I would say thou hadst the best philtre i'the world, and couldst do more then Madam Medea or Doctor Forman (IV, i)

says Dauphine in Ben Jonson's *Epicoene*

Professionally astrology was divided into three branches, i.e. horary, judicial and natural. In each the celestial bodies were examined by a different method and for a different purpose. (Knobel, I, 456) Horary astrology was the means to answer questions concerning business. For example, Abel Drugger in *the Alchemist* wishes to have astrological direction to conduct business in his new tobacco - shop, saying "One captain Face ... says you know men's planets and their good angels and their bad". (III, iv) Then he requests to have his ill - omened astrological days to be marked down.

Judicial astrology, on the other hand, was used to foretell human affairs. Therefore it was quite common to ask the astrologer whether a certain day and hour "by the planets promise happy success in marriage" or not. (Massinger, II, i) or "ask him if it be my fortune to have her, or no" (Heywood, I, ii)

Natural astrology in which horoscopes were cast was a way of telling the future. Astrologers used different techniques in casting horoscopes and "Chiromancy" was one of these. Ben Jonson's *Subtle* employs this technique and uses astrological jargon in the act of it:

The thumbe, in *chiromantye* we give to VENUS;
The fore - finger to IOVE; the midst to SATURNE;
The ring to SOL; the least, to MERCURIE;
Who was the lord, sir, of his horoscope,
His house of life being libra, which fore - shev'd,
He should be a merchant, and should trade with
ballance. (*The Alchemist* I, iii)

Some people, reflecting Pico della Mirandello's views, believed that astrology

is the most infectious of all frauds, since,... it corrupts all philosophy, falsifies medicine, weakens religion, begets or strengthens superstition, encourages idolatry destroys prudence, pollutes morality, defames heaven, and makes men unhappy, troubled, and uneasy; (Shumaker, 19)

and protestant reformation regarded it as pagan influence. Such social reformers as Thomas Wright denounced astrology in these harsh words:

What vain studies, exercise (for the most part) our Judiciarie Astronomers, by calculating natiuities, foretelling events, prescribing the limits of men's lives, foreshewing their perille and dangers, by meer cosinage and vain cruiofity? (315)

Philip Stubbes was another one who denounced astrology as an abuse and astrologers as abusers. However he also said that "It is the wickedness of our own hearts that draweth us to evil, and not the stars or planets. (Stubbes, II, 55 - 56) Shakespeare appears to share the same attitude in *Julius Caesar*:

The fault dear Brutus, is not in our stars
But in ourselves, that we are underlings (I, ii)

Yet, the astrologer or the stargazer was widely accepted as a

.... parcel Physician,
And as such prescribes my diet and foretells
My dreams...

....
... an absolute Master
In the calculation of Nativites;
Guided by that ne're erring science, call'd
Judicial Astrologie (Massinger, II, i)

Sir Philip Sindney also seems to have been one of those who, though ironically, thought in the same vein:

Though dustie wits dare scrone Astrologie,
And fooles can thinke those Lampes of purest
light,
Whose numbers, wayes, greatneses, eternitie,
Promising wonders, wonder do invite,
To have for no cause birthright in the skie,
But for to spangle the blacke weeds of night:
Or for some brawle, which in that chamber hie.
They should still daunce to please a gazer's
sight,
For me, I do Nature unidle know,
And know great causes, great effects procure:
And know those Bodies high raigne on the low.
And if these rules did faile, prooffe makes me
sure,
Who oft fore - judge my after - following race,

By only those two starres in Stella's face. (Sidney, 177 - 178)

Other than consulting the stars another way of predicting the future used by conjurers was "metoposcopia", that is, the analysis of the face and forehead. Again Subtle claims an ability of judging character and fortune through this technique:

A certain starre i' the forehead, which you see not.
Your chest - not, or your olive - colour'd face
Do's never faile: and your eare doth promise.
I knew't, by certaine sports too, in his teath,
And on the naile of his *mercurial* finger. (*The Alchemist* I, iii)

Besides dealing in alchemy and astrology, the white magicians claimed that they had also healing powers and possessed "cure - all" elixir or potions. Thomas Heywood gives a good, satirical picture of their practice:

Wisewoman: And where doth the paine hold her most?
Countryman: Marry at her heart, forsooth
Wisewoman: Ey, at her heart, shee hath a gripping at her heart
Countryman: You have hath it right
Wisewoman: Nay, I can see so much in the Urine, shee hath no paine in her head, hath shee?
Countryman: No indeed, I never heard her complain of her head.
Wisewoman: I told you so, her paine lyes all at her heart. (III, ii)

People also consulted magicians to have renewed

(Their) youth, and strength, with dirinking elixir, and so enjoy a perpetuitie Of life, and lust. (*Alchemist*, IV, i)

Another very common reason for going to a magician was to recover lost objects. There were several ways of recovering the object but one popular way was to stick a pair of scissors in a sieve. It was thought that the free blade would respond to the article. Face in *the Alchemist* mentions this power of the scissors in addition to other ways of white magic:

have all thy tricks
Of cosning with a hollow cole, dust, scrupings,
Searching for things lost, with a sive and sheers
Erecting figures in your rowes of houses,
And taking in a shaddowes, with a glasse,
Told in red letters (I, i)

The fortune - teller, sometimes called the wise woman, practised an art which was manifold:

Frist, I am a wise - Woman, and a Fortune - teller, and under that I deale in Pysicke and Fore - speaking, in palmistry and recoverings of things lost. Next I undertake to cure Madde folkes. Then I keep Gentlewomen - Lodgers, to furnish such chambers as I let out by the night; Then I am provided for bringing young wenches to bed; and for a need you see I can play the Match - maker. (Heywood, i)

These old women, who were called by such epithets as, "O the Witch, the Beldame, the Hagge of Hogston" (Heywood, I, ii) were generally thought to be partly demented and physically repulsive and according to Reginald Scot,

One sort of such as are said to be witches, are women which commonly old, lame, bleare - eied, pale, fowle and full of wrinkles (Shumaker, 68 - 69)

However, some people entertained more sympathetic feelings towards witches. For example, Arthur Wilson, Steward to the Earle of Warwick, described the eighteen witches condemned in Essex

in 1645, saying that they were no other than "poore, mellencollie, envious, mischevous, ill - disposed, atrabilous constitutions". (Shumaker, 101 - 102)

Sympathetic feelings were not only towards witches but also towards those who had to trust themselves into the hands of the "queer" old women, who claimed to act as mediators between divine powers and those who needed help. Reginald Scot expressed such sympathetic feelings in *The Discoverie of Witchcraft* for the poor widows who in desperation turned to witches for help from heaven since there was none from earth. (Baum, 61)

Ordinary Renaissance man believed in the actuality of the magicians' powers and in witchcraft and according to Hall's definition

Old wives and stars are his counsellors: his night spell is his guard; and charms his physicians. He wears praelcian characters for his toothache: and a little hallowed wax is his antidote for all evils. This man is strangely credulous and calls impossible things miraculous. (Hall, 52)

The number of books published during the Renaissance period on witchcraft gives ample evidence of the extent of belief in witchcraft. Reginald Scot talks about books written by two hundred and twenty four "forren authors" and twenty three English. (Shumaker, 74) Also, according to Robert Reed's discovery, more than seventy Elizabethan and Jacobean plays dealt with the supernatural. (Shumaker, 101 - 102)

As opposed to believers, of course, there existed unbelievers in witchcraft. For example, Reginald Scot, voicing his disbelief in his book *The Discoverie of Witchcraft*, said:

Many through melancholy do imagine, that they see or hear visions, spirits, ghosts, strange noises, etc.: as I have already proved before, at large... Some through imperfection of sight also are afraid of their own shadows, and (as Aristotle

saith) see themselves sometimes as it were in a glass. And some through weakness of body have such imperfect imagenetaions (Scot, 55)

Scot further added that also

they never appear to the whole multitude, seldom to a few, and most commonly to one alone: for so one may tell a lie without controlment. (Scot, 55)

Similar disbelief towards witchcraft found its way into the dramatic literature of the period, too. Luce in Thomas Heywood's *Wise Woman of Hogsdon* says

"Tis strange the Ignorant should be thus fool'd.
What can this witch, this wizard, or old Trot Doe
by Inchantment, or by Magicke spell? (II, i)

Although the dominant philosophy of the Renaissance period was the occult philosophy, the belief in witchcraft was at the same time accompanied by fear of the dangers of tramping on forbidden grounds because a strong denunciation came from different directions, particularly from the Church. Both the Church and the society at large condemned white magicians as feigners and impostors. Acts promising severe punishment for the practice of witchcraft were put into force. The first law against witchcraft was the Act of Henry VIII which passed in 1541. The Act stated that it was a felony

to practise or cause to be practised conjuration, witchcraft, enchantment, or sorcery, to get money: or to consume any person, or to provoke any person to unlawful love (*Statutes at Large*, II, 307)

This law was repealed by Edward VI but Elizabeth I and James I who considered magic as blasphemous passed acts which declared that all those who conjured up evil spirits and who bewitched another person would be punished with death penalty. Elizabeth's

law suggested imprisonment for the first offence and death for the second but James I changed the punishment for the first offence to death. May be that is why trials were more numerous under Elizabeth than they were under James I. The number of deaths during the reigns of these two monarchs are estimated to be between 1.000 and 70.000. (Shumaker, 61) James I who expressed severe views on witchcraft in his *Daemonologie* and condemned it gradually became skeptical about certain accusations and could not help but be fascinated by witchcraft.

..... Agnes Sampson (a well - known witch) was ... brought before the King's Majesty and his Council, and being examined of the meetings and detestable dealings of those witches..." (she confessed that) the devil... (attended) their coming in the habit or likeness of man. ... (she confessed) before the King's Majesty sundry things, which were so miraculous and strange" (that the King said) they were all extreme lies (but Agnes Sampson) "discovered unto him such matters (concerning what He and His Queen spoke about on their wedding night) whereat the King's Majesty wondered greatly, and swore by the living God, that he believed all the devils in hell could not have discovered the same (and acknowledged Sampson's word to be true.) ("Newwes from Scotland", 59)

Again during the reign of James I a certain Dr. Lamb, an astrologer who, according to Mirth in *the Staple of News* made his appearance in the plays of "a profane poet" together with "devils". (I. Intermean) was imprisoned for magic practices and from 1608 to 1623 Dr. Lamb was in King's Bench prison in London but he was allowed to receive his clients there. This controversial attitude of the King serves as a good illustration of the controversial views commonly held about witchcraft during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

White magic in the Renaissance period was a source of excitement, of emotional involvement which, if not totally, at least partially, prevented objective, intellectual approach to happenings and to the analysis of facts, and was also a source of dramatic probing for the playwrights. Edmund's ironic words in *King Lear* may serve as a good epithet to the role of white magic in Renaissance England.

This is the excellent foppery of the world, that, when we are sick in fortune, - often the surfeit of our own behaviour, - we make guilty of our disasters the sun, the moon, and the stars: as if we were villains by necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves, and treachers by spherical predominance, drunkards, liars, and adulterers by an enforced obedience of planetary influence; and all that we are evil in, by a divine thrusting on. (I, ii)

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