"Falling to a devilish exercise": Magic and Spectacle on the Renaissance Stage

Shayne Confer

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“FALLING TO A DEVILISH EXERCISE”: THE OCCULT AND SPECTACLE ON
THE RENAISSANCE STAGE

A Dissertation
Submitted to the McAnulty College and
Graduate School of Liberal Arts

Duquesne University

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for
the degree of Doctor of Philosophy

By
Shayne Confer

December 2009
“FALLING TO A DEVILISH EXERCISE”: THE OCCULT AND SPECTACLE ON THE RENAISSANCE STAGE

By

Shayne Confer

Approved November 11, 2009

________________________________
Bernard Beranek, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of English
(Dissertation Director)

________________________________
Stuart Kurland, Ph.D.
Associate Professor of English
(First Reader)

________________________________
Laura Engel, Ph.D.
Assistant Professor of English
(Second Reader)

________________________________
Magali Michael, Ph.D.
Chair, English Department
Professor of English

________________________________
Christopher Duncan, Ph.D.
Dean, McAnulty College and Graduate School of Liberal Arts
ABSTRACT

“FALLING TO A DEVILISH EXERCISE”: THE OCCULT AND SPECTACLE ON THE RENAISSANCE STAGE

By Shayne Confer

December 2009

Dissertation supervised by Bernard Beranek, Ph.D.

The enormous amount of research on the subject of early modern magic indicates clearly that magical thought occupied a significant place in contemporary mental patterns. Its existence was widespread enough to cause popular prejudice against its most esoteric forms combined with tacit acceptance of “folk” magic. I posit that the early playwrights who dramatized the magus were thus fairly constricted in how the magus could appear without unduly scandalizing the popular audience. This essentially created a sub-genre of the “magus play” that established a self-perpetuating theatrical tradition formed largely by audience prejudice. As this prejudice began to wane (for reasons still only partially understood), later dramatists such as Shakespeare and Jonson found themselves in possession of an increasingly stale tradition that had become shackled to a public morality no longer in existence. They were then capable of utilizing the outer
shell of the tradition to take the magus play in shocking new directions, alternately 
adapting and utilizing its generic conventions to create a new theatrical experience for 
what had by then become a largely upscale audience. This dissertation seeks to trace a 
vital sub-genre of the theatre from its origins through its apotheosis.
DEDICATION

This endeavor is dedicated to my loving wife, Kelly, without whom none of this would have been possible, and my son Haydn, for whom this has all been done.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENT

I would like to thank Bernard Beranek, Stuart Kurland, Laura Engel, and Albert Labriola for their tireless efforts in the formation and execution of this dissertation. More generally, I would like to acknowledge the debt I owe to the faculties of Indiana University of Pennsylvania, The University of Montana, and especially Duquesne University for the large role they have played in shaping my scholarship.
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Introduction

Once grant the possibility of the active agency of the supernatural, and the bases of credibility, as we know them, are radically changed.

-Madeleine Doran

Madeleine Doran’s 1940 article, “On Elizabethan ‘Credulity’: With Some Questions Concerning the Use of the Marvelous in Literature,” immediately presents its reader with a provocative question: “Given certain attitudes towards strange features of the world, how will these attitudes affect the response of the reader and audience towards literature that makes reference to these wonders?”(151). While Doran attempts to provide some answers to this question, she frankly admits that her paper raises far more questions than it answers. However, she has provided for posterity a useful list for organizing future thought on the topic by providing a three-level hierarchy of credulity, roughly summarized as the following:

1. Complete acceptance of the miraculous as factual.
2. Admitting the possibility of the miraculous while not actively convinced of its factuality.
3. Total denial of the possibility of the miraculous, while retaining its symbolical or metaphorical import. (170-1)

While this framework is exceptionally useful, it is also unacceptably broad. Aware of this limitation, Doran restricts her application of it to literature to the final few pages of her essay. Even then, she finds herself confronted by ghosts, witches, the phoenix, and monsters from *The Faerie Queene*; obviously, not all of these would have engendered the
same belief from the same people, and none of us possess world enough and time to explore them all.

The present dissertation is largely inspired by the questions raised by Doran, with some modifications and limitations that allow it to answer at least one of her questions. Since 1940 the study of so-called occult phenomena in Renaissance times has exploded into its own industry and received considerable scholarly attention. The subject has also divided into various disciplines: witchcraft, fairy lore, astrology, alchemy, etc. One can now focus on a specific area of the occult without the need to discuss everything else; it has become clear that a given individual in late 16th century London may have believed in all, none, or a combination of occult phenomena.

Magic and witchcraft have received the most recent scholarly attention, for entirely different reasons. Witchcraft is a community phenomenon with a particular gender bias, and it has proved amenable to sociological, anthropological, and feminist studies. Magic, on the other hand, has received increased attention largely as it relates to the development of modern science; the Renaissance magus worked closely with the natural and occult properties of objects, hoping to create desirable effects by combining a large number of sympathetic properties at a carefully chosen place and time. In this sense, there is a connection between magical practice and modern science. However, the Renaissance magus also attempted to evoke and manipulate “spirits” (whether angelic or demonic) in his magic. This both distances Renaissance magic from modern science in a fundamental way and affects how the magus would have been perceived by his contemporaries. There is an ambivalence inherent in magic that is absent from

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1 Throughout the essay, I use the term “Renaissance” loosely to refer to Europe between approximately 1400-1700; the term “Shakespearean” designates the drama of approximately 1580-1640. While neither term is obviously exact, I use them in place of more cumbersome terms for ease of reading and reference.
witchcraft, and the drama captures a sense of this ambivalence during a twenty-year period when the magus was among the most enduring stage characters.

In choosing magic as the object of this dissertation, I have narrowed the focus considerably from Doran’s original field. However, the more important difference in my approach is the angle from which the subject is viewed. While Doran’s hierarchy concerns itself with the reaction of the audience to supernatural literature, I examine the extent that audience expectations, beliefs, and “credulity” influenced and determined the use of magical spectacle in drama to explain why the magus figure is never allowed an unqualified triumph on the stage. I focus on the six plays written between approximately 1588 and 1611 that deal most centrally with magic: Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, Jonson’s *The Alchemist*, Robert Greene’s *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, Anthony Munday’s *John a Kent and John a Cumber*, and Barnabe Barnes’s *The Devil’s Charter*. These six plays are chosen because magic serves as the main driver of the plot, and my purpose is to show how magic functions in the plays and how it relates to its audience, not to catalogue the appearance of magic in the many, many plays it appeared in during the Shakespearean period. The works of Frances Yates and her followers and revisers (discussed below) have removed the stigma attached to magic as a dirty secret to be explained away or ignored, and Robert Reed and the other taxonomists have conclusively demonstrated that magic occupied a prominent place in the drama of the period. This dissertation attempts to take the next logical step in this progression by examining why magic was portrayed on stage consistently in the same negative manner. I have done so in three ways. First, I focus on audience demographics and how the beliefs of a given audience influenced (and occasionally determined) the
potential outcomes a play could depict and remain commercially viable; as the audience demographics change, the representation of the occult changes as well. Second, I re-examine the roles of religion, science, and the non-Italianate magical tradition in late Elizabethan/early Jacobean society and how they interacted. This is undertaken to show that magical thought is not a clear and well-defined area, as the usual focus on the Italian tradition suggests. Rather, the state of magical knowledge is analogous to the state of Cabalistic studies at around the same time (in fact, the two are frequently intertwined). Joseph Blau could easily be speaking of magical thought instead of Cabala when he points out

It is evident that no single stereotype can describe the Christian interpreters of the cabala. They came from all fields of knowledge, bringing with them inquiring minds marred by an exaggerated respect for authority. They succeeded in creating, for better or for worse, an intellectual situation in which for a time every educated person knew something of the cabala…None of the Christian interpreters knew much about the cabala…Yet each thought he had found in the cabala what he was seeking. (113)

Finally, I attempt to maintain a focus on the “minor drama” or popular drama of the period as a commercially viable and enduring tradition in its own right. Obviously one cannot write extensively on the subject of magic on the early modern stage and neglect *Doctor Faustus*, *The Tempest*, and *The Alchemist*, but to view these plays as the representative (or worse, only) examples of magical drama severely distorts the true character of a distinct theme in a definite historical period. Therefore, I have given as
much time to plays such as *John a Kent and John a Cumber* and *The Devil’s Charter* as the undisputed masterpieces. In aesthetic terms, these plays are not of a kind, but historically they all share a common interest.

Chapter One discusses the nature of the audience for the original plays. Given its central importance to my thesis, I felt that a thorough review of primary documents and current research was necessary. I discuss the pioneering works of Alfred Harbage and Ann Jennalie Cook in some detail; as the two theories they expound are mutually exclusive, I ultimately reject Cook’s theory in favor of a modified and modernized form of Harbage’s, accepting his theory of the middle-class presence in the audience while rejecting the universally lofty moral standards with which he graces them. After reaching my determination of audience demographics, I turn my attention to questions of education and reading culture among this audience.

Chapter Two explores the complex and ever-shifting relationships among science, magic, and religion during Shakespearean times using two historical magi as examples. I first focus on the life of John Dee, a representative example of an actual practicing magus and, until very recently, a sorely neglected figure of intellectual history. In her later work, Frances Yates focused on John Dee as the magus *par excellence* and made him the focal point of her studies of the occult in England. While later research has qualified some of Yates’s thoughts, Dee remains the most visible example of a man who truly thought he controlled magical powers and the varying ways society dealt with him during Shakespearean times.

Cornelius Agrippa forms the subject of the second part of the chapter, as I contend that his theory of magic was largely adopted by the playwrights I explore. A
reasonably full summary of *The Occult Philosophy* constitutes the largest definition of magic in this dissertation and occupies the bulk of this section. I have also juxtaposed Reginald Scot’s *The Discovery of Witchcraft* with Agrippa, as the locus of magical belief for the common man likely lay somewhere between the two. I conclude by showing how the opposition of religion and the inherently elitist and self-serving aims of sorcerers conspired to create an audience mindset largely hostile to the idea of a heroic magus.

Chapter Three begins the analysis of the magus drama proper. I locate the origin of the popular magus play in the chapbook romances much in vogue during the 1580s and 1590s and therefore begin by examining two early plays based on such chapbooks, Robert Greene’s *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* and Anthony Munday’s *John a Kent and John a Cumber*. While both plays are comedies, they also establish a number of tropes that will reappear in several later magus plays, most importantly the highly ambivalent attitude towards magic. In fact, I argue that Greene’s portrayal of Roger Bacon is wholly negative and that such a transformation from the relatively admirable character depicted in the chapbook is only explicable by a desire to cater to an audience hostile to the idea of the magus. Textual problems make firm conclusions about Munday’s play as problematic as conclusions about *Doctor Faustus*, but I use Greene’s and Marlowe’s treatment of the magus as guides for what likely would have happened in the missing final pages of Munday’s drama.

Chapter Four examines the darker side of the magus play in Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus* and Barnabe Barnes’s relatively unknown *The Devil’s Charter*. Marlowe’s play also has its genesis in the chapbook tradition, and I use the original English Faust book as a way of demonstrating the degeneration of Faust through the A- and B- texts of the play.
This necessarily involves an exploration of the textual history of the play and some
analysis of the differences between the texts, as well as the potential differences in
staging them. The declining fortunes of the “serious” Faust in the decades following
Marlowe’s original production help indicate the changing intellectual matrix that led to
such disparate treatments of the occult as The Tempest and The Alchemist.

Barnabe Barnes’s play demonstrates this change in the relatively unprolific genre
of the occult morality play. My discussion of the play focuses on the specific historical
circumstances of the drama and England in general that determined the form and content
of The Devil’s Charter and indicated that the audience for occult plays was becoming
increasingly divided into “private” and “popular” segments. Barnes’s violent and
sexually transgressive production contains several elements suited to a private and
courtly audience and essentially marks the end of the serious magus play as a viable
enterprise for such an audience.

Chapter Five deals with the last two great magus plays, The Tempest and The
Alchemist. Appearing only a year apart and intended for the private theater, these plays
reflect changing attitudes toward magic. The Alchemist satirizes both the entire magical
system of thought and the audience that is credulous enough to believe in it, while The
Tempest reprises the popular magician of John a Kent and John a Cumber by replacing
folk songs and morris dances with masques and pre-operatic airs.

A brief Epilogue serves to examine the causes for the demise of the magus play as
a profitable theatrical enterprise and briefly trace the development of the ideas of the
genre in later masques and operas.
Review of literature

a. Occult Studies

The modern history of the study of the occult begins with Lynn Thorndike’s scarcely conceivable eight volume opus, *The History of Magic and Experimental Science*, published over the years 1923-1958. Ranging from the ancient Egyptians to the end of the seventeenth century, Thorndike’s work touches on every aspect of magic imaginable and is invariably cited as the major reference work used by all later commentators. While I can claim no more than a passing familiarity with a tiny portion of this enormous work, Thorndike has maintained a reputation as an accurate factual historian despite the issue later researchers take with his frequently negative view of the worth of experimental science.

D.P. Walker’s 1958 work, *Spiritual and Demonic Magic from Ficino to Campanella*, remains the fullest treatment of the Ficinian heritage of magic. Walker’s book is divided into sections describing Ficino’s thought, the application and rejection of his thought in various magical thinkers of the sixteenth century, and the later reactions to his thought in the works of Francis Bacon and Tomasso Campanella. Walker also provides a very solid explanation of how natural magic works; indeed, he may be the first modern scholar to make the extremely useful distinction between spiritual (more commonly known as “natural”) magic, which relies on the manipulation of the properties of material objects and the purification of the spiritual self, and demonic magic, which relies on the invocation of otherworldly creatures and must be abjured by all reputable Christians. As I will argue, nearly all treatments of magic on the early modern stage are demonic in reality, if not in theory, so Walker’s work is of limited value in that connection; however,
his reputation and theories are still largely credible and he remains the primary source on
Finico and his magical heirs.

The reputation and theories of Frances Yates, by contrast, have been under constant
assault since the publication of *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition* in 1964.
Yates is the most pivotal and the most controversial scholar in the occult field; as such,
later scholars’ relationships to her ideas are both central and complex. *Giordano Bruno
and the Hermetic Tradition* begins the long process by which Yates argues that the occult
not only is a subject worthy of study in its own right, but that it is central to an
understanding of many other areas of Renaissance thought. The most contentious of
these areas is science. While Thorndike largely treats the occult as an obstacle to be
overcome on the road to true science, Yates argues that modern science is heavily
indebted to occult thought. This debt is presented indirectly in *Giordano Bruno*, where
Yates makes the revolutionary assertion that

quite apart from the question of whether Renaissance magic could, or could not,
lead on to genuinely scientific procedures, the real function of the Renaissance
Magus in relation to the modern period (or so I see it) is that he changed the will.
It was now dignified and important for man to operate; it was also religious and
not contrary to the will of God that man, the great miracle, should exert his
powers. (156)

While I briefly discuss the controversy occasioned by this remark and Yates’s increasing
belief that magic did in fact lead to modern science in Chapter Two, it is a matter best left
to historians of science.
The Occult Philosophy in Elizabethan England is far more germane to the present
dissertation, and it is equally problematic. Here Yates has increased the scope of her
explorations to posit a combination of Hermeticism and Cabalism as the primary
philosophy of Elizabethan England. In her view, “the occult philosophy in the
Elizabethan age was no minor concern of a few adepts. It was the main philosophy of the
age, stemming from John Dee and his movement…The fierce reactions against
Renaissance occult philosophy are also most strongly felt in England” (The Occult
Philosophy in Elizabethan England, 191). The modern scholarly consensus believes
Yates overreaches in both of her contentions, but the tension between belief and reaction
is one of the primary areas I explore. In addition to being a historian, Yates is also a
formidable literary critic, and I cannot simply accept the bulk of her theory and ignore her
application of it to specific literary texts that I also discuss. There is no question that the
modern recognition of the occult as a subject worthy of serious scholarly attention is
largely due to Yates’s efforts; I accept her general premise that the occult was a viable
and thriving area of intellectual exploration during the Renaissance as proven beyond any
doubt and deal with her more specific and controversial contentions as they arise in the
body of the dissertation.

One of Yates’s chief revisers is Paolo Rossi, whose 1968 monograph Francis Bacon:
From Magic to Science strongly rejects the idea that Renaissance magic led to modern
science in the way Yates describes. The first chapter of his book points to the very
different ends sought by the magus and the scientist, a distinction that I will argue is of
paramount importance in the ultimate rejection of the stage magus as a potential hero.
Another key influence on this dissertation is Keith Thomas’s 1971 study, *Religion and the Decline of Magic*. Thomas treats a huge array of supernatural and occult phenomena in his lengthy work, much of which falls out of the purview of my research. However, he does distinguish between learned and popular magic in a very useful way that directly affects the differing stage presentations of the magus and the “cunning man” of rural tradition. Additionally, as the title implies, Thomas provides the best theory I have encountered of the gradual decline of magical belief in England, a theory explained fully in my Epilogue.

Finally, Stuart Clark’s *Thinking with Demons* and Norman Cohn’s *Europe’s Inner Demons* provide a general background into the psychology of magical belief. While both works deal primarily with witchcraft, Cohn’s account of the mindset of persecution running through European history and Clark’s theory of the linguistic and social bases of witch belief are very useful in a general understanding of occult phenomena. Cohn, in particular, gives a very detailed account of how the mistrust and fear engendered by the magus eventually became transferred to the witch, a circumstance that likely explains why interest in stage magi waned while the stage witch was in full flower. Both Cohn and Clark usefully dismiss the strain of credulity in earlier writers on the occult such as Montague Summers and Margaret Murray, who believed (for very different reasons) that there was actually a large and thriving population of witches in Europe during the time in question. While magi actually existed in very small numbers, it is important for this dissertation that magic be dealt with primarily as an intellectual construct rather than a widespread practical fact.
b. The Occult on the Stage

The books discussing magic on the early modern stage fall into two general categories, with some obvious overlap between them. The first category deals with the conceptions of magic during Shakespearean times and is best exemplified by Robert West’s 1939 opus, *The Invisible World: A Study of Pneumatology in Elizabethan Drama*. A more recent addition to this field is the body of work produced by Kathleen Briggs in the 1960s and 1970s, illustrated by such titles as *The Anatomy of Puck* and *Pale Hecate’s Team*. Briggs’s interest is primarily in folklore, especially fairy lore, while West attempts to identify specific sources for the magical elements in Elizabethan drama. Both of these authors could possibly be classed with general magical literature, as they simply demonstrate that the prevalent magical mindset of the age found some expression on the stage. While they have performed an invaluable service in demonstrating the frequency of magic on the stage, that issue seems decisively resolved and hence they play a very minor role in the dissertation that follows.

I term the second group of literature “taxonomic,” and its most important practitioner by far is Robert Reed. In his 1965 work, *The Occult on the Tudor and Stuart Stage*, Reed provides two vital areas of importance for the present dissertation. His bibliography is exhaustive, providing every play that contains even a hint of the occult. In this regard he far surpasses any of his precursors, and research in the field should not be undertaken without referring to his list. This compilation provides a well-defined family of the occult play, which Reed then divides into three distinct genres: the sorcerer play, the witch play, and the fairy play. Equally important for the study of the field, he separates ghosts and intervening gods from the occult proper, identifying them as
holdovers from Senecan tragedy rather than as expressions of contemporary ideas. This general division of the occult play has informed most research since Reed, and forms one of the justifications for my decision to focus solely on the sorcery play as a viable tradition in its own right.

Reed’s work on the speciation of the occult drama is perhaps an even more important contribution. To the best of my knowledge, he is the first author to examine how the occult actually works on stage. As he states in his Preface,

Mr. Spalding, Mr. West, and Miss Briggs have collectively plucked from the drama of the Tudor and Stuart period most of the theories of pneumatology that were current at the time…My purpose, in marked contrast to that of the authors mentioned, is to explore inside the drama. The impact of the supernatural agents on plot and theme, as well as on the total internal organization of the drama, is the central subject of this book.

(11)

Reed’s typical method of exploring the internality of occult drama is largely structural; he identifies recurrent events or set pieces in occult plays. In the sorcery play, he identifies the various species according to their incorporation or lack of these recurrent events: there are plays that focus on the quest for sovereignty and power by the magus, plays that feature a contest between rival conjurers, plays that focus on the attempts by the sorcerer to gain “political advantage,” and plays in which the sorcerer attempts to gain an advantage that is pleasurable, not political (116). While one may quibble with Reed’s choice of defining features for his categories, they make sense and I largely retain them. Finally, Reed does a great service in focusing on the “minor drama” of the period more
closely than his contemporaries; while I differ greatly with a number of his interpretations, in several instances he has provided the fullest available treatment of these plays for a current critic to differ with.

Reed’s shifting of the focus from occult theories to the actual plays was necessary for the field to advance, but he lost necessary historical context in the process. This dissertation attempts to restore the historical context of Renaissance magical thought while continuing Reed’s exploration of magic as a theatrical device.

The taxonomic line does not end with Reed, and later authors in this strain share many of his characteristics. David Woodman’s 1979 work *White Magic and English Renaissance Drama* rehashes many of the standard themes, beginning with a brief history of the Italian school of magic and pointing out some of the conflicts between “white magic” and the church. He takes *The Tempest* and *The Alchemist* as the exemplary plays in the genre, dedicating a chapter to each and detailing the particular elements of white magic apparent in the plays. These larger explorations are preceded by chapters that note instances of minor drama that establish a context for the plays; these shorter chapters are similar to the work of Briggs, in that they list plays with magical elements and provide a quick index of those elements. The true value in Woodman’s work lies in his exploration of two areas of occultism that receive little attention in other books of this sort: the use of white magic in healing (and the resultant “healing play”) and the extensive use of magical elements in the masque. It is in his chapter “The Jacobean Court Masque: The King as White Magician” that Woodman is closest to providing a theory about how magic functions on the stage, opposed to demonstrating that magic does appear on stage:
The masque, of course, reinforced this concept of the king as a symbol of divine power and the giver of fertility and prosperity—the tribal role once filled by the white magician or witch doctor. As the grip of white magic on the public imagination relaxed (the focus on white magic shifted to witch trials), the king, as it were, absorbed the role of white magician. In actuality, neither James nor Charles could exhibit magical powers; yet the masque provided a vehicle to demonstrate their semblance, the nostalgic symbols of the past coalescing in a harmonious synthesis with those of the new age. (88)

The ideas of the social function and the social ramifications of the presentation of magic on stage are explored in this dissertation, and the masque occupies a central role in my closing pages.

The most useful of the more recent books is Anthony Harris’s 1980 study, Night’s Black Agents: Witchcraft and Magic in Seventeenth Century English Drama. The bulk of Harris’s work is taken up by witchcraft; although the topic only tangentially bears on the present dissertation, Harris is one of the earliest literary critics to work with a model beyond the very constricting choice between Montague Summers and Margaret Murray. By incorporating the psychological historicism of Norman Cohn and Hugh Trevor Roper and the painstaking examination of contemporary records undertaken by Alan Macfarlane into his approach, Harris has access to a far more critical intellectual framework to study witchcraft than his forebears. That framework informs his work on magic on the stage by providing a more reasoned perspective of the relative hysteria/interest magic occasioned in Shakespearean London. This sense of balance allows Harris to begin to examine
magic as an audience mindset, a cultural phenomenon, and a dramatic device simultaneously, making him a direct precursor of my approach. This approach allows him to be possibly the first critic to note (if only in passing) the discrepancy between the chapbook version of Friar Bacon and Robert Greene’s representation of him, a detail that I greatly expand upon in this dissertation. Finally, Harris’ discussions of how spectacle was enacted theatrically and the continuing stage history of a number of plays are very worthwhile and only generally touched on in the present dissertation.

The last major treatment of the occult on the stage is Barbara Traister’s *Heavenly Necromancers: The Magician in English Renaissance Drama*, published in 1984. Traister anticipates my dissertation in two key areas: she recognizes the fact that Ficinian magic had little direct impact on stage representations of magic, and she realizes a divide between the treatment of popular and elitist conceptions of magic on the stage. However, she is largely concerned with the “high literary” application of magic in the masterpieces of the age, giving only a chapter to the various plays illustrating the popular conception of magic by showing how they led to the development of various stereotypes. Moreover, she grants little importance to popular conceptions of magic as contiguous with the philosophical conception; noting the decline of magic plays after *The Tempest*, she remarks, “increasingly the property of the lower classes, magic was no longer the pastime of intellectuals” (147). While to some extent true, Traister’s dismissal of the popular attitudes and drama of the period causes her to overlook some of the key ways the occult was used on the public stage.

The enormous amount of research on the subject of early modern magic indicates clearly that magical thought occupied a significant place in contemporary mental
patterns. Its existence was widespread enough to cause popular prejudice against its most esoteric forms combined with tacit acceptance of “folk” magic. I posit that the early playwrights who dramatized the magus were thus fairly constricted in how the magus could appear without unduly scandalizing the popular audience. This essentially created a sub-genre of the “magus play” that established a self-perpetuating theatrical tradition formed largely by audience prejudice. As this prejudice began to wane (for reasons still only partially understood), later dramatists such as Shakespeare and Jonson found themselves in possession of an increasingly stale tradition that had become shackled to a public morality no longer in existence. They were then capable of utilizing the outer shell of the tradition to take the magus play in shocking new directions, alternately adapting and utilizing its generic conventions to create a new theatrical experience for what had by then become a largely upscale audience at court and at Blackfriars. This dissertation seeks to trace a vital sub-genre of the theatre from its origins through its apotheosis.
Chapter 1

In his influential 1978 study, *Popular Culture in Early Modern Europe*, Peter Burke argues for the existence of two cultural traditions in Early Modern Europe, the “great” (associated with learning and writing) and the “little” (associated with orality). Although he cites many factors that divide these two cultural traditions, the most important are economic and linguistic. Burke mediates between two historical theories of popular culture, the “sinking” theory wherein the culture of the great diffuses itself throughout the lower classes, and the “rising” theory wherein the popular culture of the lower classes is either participated in by the upper classes (he cites dances and court festivals of misrule as prime examples of this) or adapted to “high” literary uses. In Burke’s opinion, the transmission of culture was fluid and reciprocal, and one of his key examples is witchcraft. He describes this flux as follows:

One of the most striking instances of interaction between the learned and the popular traditions is that of the witch. Jacob Grimm thought that witch-beliefs came from the people; Joseph Hansen, later in the nineteenth century, argued that they were elaborated by theologians out of material taken from the Christian and classical traditions. More recent research suggests that both men were right—in part; that the image of the witch current in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries involved both popular elements, like the belief that some people had the power to fly through the air or do their neighbors harm by supernatural means, and learned elements, notably the idea of a pact with the devil. (62)
Burke’s theory of the linguistic barrier is also more complex than would first appear. He differentiates between the “literacy barrier” and the “Latin barrier,” arguing that pamphlets and chapbooks occupied a middle ground between oral and learned culture and function as a mediator of these traditions for the twentieth-century observer. Although Burke takes great pains to stress the limitations of pamphlets and other “mediated” material (including the inquisition of witches) for the cultural historian, they are of interest in quite another way to the literary critic. Chapbooks, trials, and pamphlets provide much of the raw material for the witchcraft plays of the 17th century; their ability to provide unmediated depictions of historical truth is far less important in this context than their malleability to fit the demands of popular theatrical audiences.

In addition to Burke’s reasonable theses, I will argue that the Elizabethan theater is also an arena where the great and the little traditions intermixed as thoroughly as any of Burke’s examples, and that the potential for spectacle provided by dramatic depictions of sorcery engaged the “great” and “little” traditions as thoroughly as witchcraft. The stage draws upon elements of both written and oral culture; it is not necessary to be literate to enjoy a play. The use of magic and magical characters was a tempting device for the playwright seeking to draw a large and varied audience; it provided an issue of contemporary interest with large metaphoric potential and the raw material for the audience-pleasing spectacle. This theory of the popularity of the occult upon the stage requires the assumption that the audience of the Elizabethan and Jacobean stages was, in fact, composed of members of both the great and little cultural traditions in something approaching equal numbers.
It is difficult to establish with certainty the demographics of any society before the advent of careful censuses; to then discern what any given individual or segment of that society may have typically done or not done or thought or not thought is nearly impossible. The tools available to the researcher are mainly inference, analogy, and extrapolation. The source materials available to researchers appear to have stabilized: diaries of playgoers and theatrical entrepreneurs, polemics either supporting or condemning the content of the drama and the sorts of people it appealed to, prefaces and prologues to plays, a few letters exchanged between acquaintances, some archaeological evidence on the dimensions of the playhouses. It is unlikely that much more of this kind of evidence will be unearthed, and a great deal of it has been available to researchers throughout the entire tenure of the audience debate. Therefore, the widely varying estimates of audience intelligence, wealth, prestige, and even attendance are derived through biases inherent in the researchers’ analogies, inferences, and extrapolations. A survey of some of the most famous and influential studies of the early modern audience shows clear development of two lines of argument, each laden with its own fault line.

The view posited by Alfred Harbage in 1946 in his highly influential *Shakespeare’s Audience* was that “the theatre was a democratic institution in an intensely undemocratic age,” an idea that held sway for four decades (11). In 1981, Ann Jennalie Cook challenged this view in *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare’s London, 1576-1642*, which, as the title implies, finds the mass of the audience to come from wealthier classes.

Harbage’s view of the early modern audience is largely supported by his research into the cost of attending a play. He makes an impressive display of translating the costs
of various amusements circa 1600 into 1940’s equivalents, but far more useful is his comparison of the cost of play-going to other contemporary pastimes. The cheapest public theater seat available was one penny, and quite impressive seating could be had for three penny; the cheapest private theater seat cost twice as much, and it is very conceivable that this would have been beyond the reach of most citizens. However, even the more expensive public theater seats cost less than a quart of sack or beer, and were roughly equivalent to the cost of a pipeful of tobacco or a dinner at a mediocre (or worse) eatery (59). Harbage sums up his research into cost thusly:

That a penny was a considerable sum of money and that theatergoing was one of the few commercialized pleasures within the workman’s means may be readily seen…A play meant over two hours’ entertainment in impressive surroundings—entertainments of a quality not to be found in the beer and ballads. Craftsmen, then, with their families, journeymen, and apprentices, must have composed the vast majority of groundlings. (60)

Harbage also alludes obliquely to the idea that these groundlings would have been professionally interested in some of what I mean by “science” in the drama, noting that “many were highly skilled, performing functions now allotted to the chemist, architect, and engineer” (60). The next higher income bracket in Harbage’s formulation is occupied by what he terms “Dealers and retailers”; although he admits that the range of income in this group is very large, even a mildly well-to-do shopkeeper would have been on comparable economic footing with the typical craftsman, while the others could have filled out the higher-priced public seats or attended the private theaters. In fact, much of
the humor of Flectcher’s *The Knight of the Burning Pestle* centers on the fact that the economic power to attend plays at a private theater has been extended to a social class considered deficient in taste and culture. Further proof of the composition of the audience comes from Thomas Heywood, although he approaches the subject not from the vantage of the private Blackfriars’s audience but from his own position as a mainstay on the public stage for over three decades as a decided favorite of the middle class. He notes that

> playes have made the ignorant more apprehensive, taught the unlearned the knowledge of many famous histories, instructed such as cannot reade in the discovery of all our English Chronicles; and what man have you now of that weake capacity, that cannot discourse of any notable thing recorded even from William the Conqueror, nay from the landing of Brute, untill this day, beeing possest of their true use. (F3)

While it is foolish to equate intelligence with income, it is less so to equate educational opportunity and literacy with income; additionally, Heywood would have been unlikely to refer to his audience in the “Apology for Actors,” his entry into the theatrical pamphlet wars, as ignorant and illiterate. His appeal to the utility of the theater is aimed squarely at the groundlings, and he made his strongest argument based on drama’s salutary effect on a middle-class audience.

Ann Jennalie Cook’s *The Privileged Playgoers of Shakespeare’s London, 1576-1642* directly reappraises Harbage’s work. Cook bases her claim on the idea that the class structure espoused by Harbage is anachronistic and over-simplified; she rejects his contention of an emergent “middle-class” with distinct values, instead positing a society
whose members defined themselves in relation to those immediately above and below them on the social scale rather than searching laterally for shared interests and values among people of their own standing (14-15). Her society is divided into the “privileged” and the “unprivileged,” the privileged being those who were free from labor and free to “control the entire political, economic, and cultural life of England” (25). Based on these distinctions, Cook goes on to estimate the privileged in London at 15% of the population throughout the period in question, a percentage she considers “conservative.” In her view,

the presence of so many wealthy, titled, ambitious, educated, sophisticated, and relatively idle people had a significant influence upon all aspects of life in London. By comparison with the glittering impact of the privileged, any other set of Londoners faded into silent obscurity. In fact, the city’s complex, cosmopolitan culture principally reflected the tastes and temperament of this select group. (95)

Cook’s other main argument for the domination of the early modern audience by the privileged deals with the time of day the plays were performed. It is generally believed that plays were typically performed in the early-to-mid-afternoon, ending before full darkness. Cook correctly points out that the laborers, apprentices, craftsmen, and shopkeepers who comprise Harbage’s audiences would have been at work during the vast majority of the performances, and she quotes the working hours specified by the Statute of Artificers to show that workers were specifically required by law to be in their places of employment during playing hours (224-5).
While Harbage’s view of the audience has been qualified by later investigators, Cook’s has been attacked, sometimes violently so.² Cook’s stress on the laws against workers being abroad during working hours shows a different perspective, if one adopts the view that laws are more frequently enacted to address what people are actually doing than they are to prevent people from ever conceiving of doing them. A law that attempts to prohibit a worker from going to plays indicates that a number of workers went to plays during working hours. Repeated attempts to ban Sunday performances were ineffective for fifty years, until the Puritans finally succeeded in closing the theaters in 1642. If laws were reiterated because they were not being followed, it seems permissible to entertain the idea that regulations on workmen’s whereabouts were similarly ineffective. There remains a less conjectural problem, however, in the main body of Cook’s argument.

This problem is clear in Cook’s distinctions between the privileged and the non-privileged. While she is probably correct in pointing out that terms such as “middle” and “upper” class are anachronistic, it would seem that Guilds and the apprentice system would have fostered a sense of community and inclusion, a group of shared interests and values, among precisely the kinds of people with whom Harbage populates his audience; while it may not constitute a “class” in the modern term, it does indicate some measure of lateral common interest and definition in the social scale. More serious than this, however, is the fact that Cook’s definitions are not consistent in her study. Cook’s definition of the privileged includes everyone possible when needed to inflate the numbers of the privileged in London to the necessary numbers to support several theaters (she includes “threadbare scholars” and poor clergymen amongst the privileged in this

² Martin Butler’s Theatre and Crisis, 1632-1642 contains two appendices which refute almost all of Cook’s arguments on a point-by-point basis.
instance), while it shrinks into a curious homogeneity when she uses it to show the uniformity of privileged values reflected on the various stages.

There is a wide variety of subject matter in plays from the period in question; rather than attempting to understand this unquestionable phenomenon in terms of multiple audiences, Cook removes the audience from the equation. She does this by first espousing a literal truth, claiming “it is essential to distinguish between approving a play and authoring a play.” However, her next step in the argument is far more questionable, as she asserts “in a competitive business, every dramatist hoped for success, but public taste did not dictate his poetry nor even the true merit of his creation, as Jonson and Webster testified when their work went unappreciated” (7). Cook returns to the topic later in her book; she points out that “Wealth, status, education, and power did not confer aesthetic infallibility. Worthless plays sometimes proved extraordinarily popular and excellent ones, dismal flops. Yet the privileged playgoers usually had sense enough to favor the truly great plays like *Hamlet* and *Faustus* and *Volpone* until the very end” (167). Cook does not consider the idea that “worthless” plays appealed to a different sort of theater-goer than her privileged playgoer, nor does she recognize that the plays she mentions had their origins on the public stage and remained staples there, accessible to anyone who could afford the one penny price. It seems far more likely that plays such as *The Shoemaker’s Holiday* and *The Gentle Craft* were inspired by a desire to praise the workers attending the plays than that they reflected a sudden upswing in interest in shoemaking among the privileged. She also ignores the fact that after the opening of the private theaters in the first decade of the seventeenth century the repertory of the public
and private theaters seemed to undergo a division, with the higher-priced private theaters providing different fare than the less expensive public theaters.

It would be interesting if the depiction of the occult on the stage differed markedly between the public and private theaters, and there is at least one notable instance in which it does. However, there are enough mitigating factors to cast strong doubt on any conclusion that could be reached on the subject. According to Harbage, the strong distinction between public and private theaters seems to begin about 1600, and they steadily diverge after that; however, both Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay and Doctor Faustus had been played for several years prior to that, and were established as sure draws no matter where they were played. This is also the case with several other plays with more marginal relationships with the occult; compounding the problem is the fact that most of the non-extant plays from the period come from the public stage, so it is difficult to form a complete picture of what was being portrayed. Furthermore, the private stage seems to have been dominated by a relatively small number of dramatists, and for many years focused on erotic/city comedy. While a witchcraft play such as Middleton’s The Witch can position itself, albeit uneasy, in this genre, more serious treatments of the occult are unlikely to have found a sympathetic audience amongst those who had come to expect satirical comedy. Skeptic plays such as The Alchemist found much more fertile ground in the private theater; Simon Baylie’s The Wizard seems to contain enough satire and sophistication to have received a positive reception in the private theater as well, although there is no evidence of where or when it was performed.

The best recent critic on the subject, Andrew Gurr, is mixed in his support for Harbage’s views. While in favor of the idea that attendees in the theaters comprised a

3 Shakespeare and the Rival Traditions, passim.
representative cross-section of the London population, he also feels that although the cost
of admission may have stratified the audience more at indoor theatres such as the
Blackfriars than elsewhere, “it is easy to exaggerate the difference, and certainly the
Globe, at least after 1609 as the King’s Men’s summer resort, attracted the playgoers
used to seeing them at the Blackfriars…The rich and the poor audiences were not
mutually exclusive; rather the rich went to hall and amphitheatre playhouse alike, the
poor more exclusively to the amphitheatres” (215-6).

However, this does not mean that Harbage’s distinctions between the private and
public theaters are of no significance to the study of the occult on the stage. While
Harbage probably overstates his case in drawing clear-cut boundaries between the
“Theater of the Nation” and the “Coterie Theater,” Alexander Leggatt has pointed to a
strong strain of community values in the public theater that would have made sorcery
plays especially popular there. The distinctions between learned and popular conceptions
of sorcery will be dealt with in the next chapter; for now, it suffices to say that plays were
much more likely to concern themselves with the more learned types of magic as a threat
to the social order and ignore (or sympathize with) the “folksier” aspects of magic that
the popular audience likely accepted as part of their community. As Leggatt points out,
“the story was not properly told until it was generalized in a clear and satisfying way,
creating a sense of community between stage and audience, relating the story to a world
of agreed truth” (128). Magical science could be divisive, but some level of belief and
awe of it reached across all social strata, and we shall see that playwrights dealt with
learned magicians fairly uniformly; when one considers the potential for spectacular
stage effects joined with a story that creates a community bond, sorcery clearly fulfills
Legatt’s conditions for successful popular drama: “the theatrical occasion includes both the telling of a story and the display of theatrical effects” (70).

The first performances of the occult plays occur in several different venues; while this is complicated by contractual obligations of playwrights to specific companies and venues, as well as the fact that some of the most popular occult plays were first staged before the opening of the private theater, it also shows that plays with occult themes were considered a likely draw to all audiences, no matter what the demographics. *Doctor Faustus* remained a staple on the stage for the entire period in question, in a variety of venues; Greene’s *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* was acted by four different companies in three different theatres in the thirteen years after its composition. Sorcerers were depicted on the stage because they appealed to a wide range of audiences; an exploration of the education of the popular audience and its taste in “literature” helps explain why one particular portrayal of the sorcerer came to dominate the stage.

**Education and Its Discontents**

It is relatively clear that education became increasingly available to the London population during the reign of Elizabeth; it is also clear that the interests of what we would now term the “middle class” were being served in some way by the surge in schooling, as many of the new schools were being funded by the newly upwardly mobile segments of society. As it is typically (if problematically) defined, the Humanistic approach to education would have been of fairly limited use to train the next generation of merchants and shippers, so some shift in curriculum would be expected to signal a shift in those who needed certain kinds of education. The thought that openly magical science would have formed part of this new curriculum is clearly preposterous, and of
course it did not. However, the kinds of subjects brought into the curriculum are broadly science-based, and there is at least a hint that these subjects reflected a rising interest in scientific matters in the wider communities that could encompass areas we would not now consider science. A notable example may be gleaned from Sir Humphrey Gilbert’s proposed reform of the educational system, set forth in “Queene Elizabeths Achademy.” Gilbert strongly urges an education that would prepare students for war and trade; it will be argued throughout this work that magical science is intricately linked with matters of national defense, and is most acceptable when employed for the glory of political power. Gilbert’s proposed faculty contains mathematicians, a natural philosopher (scientist), and a “Doctor of phisick,” all of whom are to work in concert for purposes of navigation and the martial arts; additionally,

This phisition shall continually practize together with the naturall philosopher, by the fire and otherwise, to search and try owt the secreates of nature, as many waies as they possiblie may. And shalbe sworne once every yeare to deliver into the Treasurer his office, faine and plaine written in Parchment, without Equivocations or Enigmaticall phrases, under their handes, all those their proofes and trialles…the better to follow the good, and avoyd the evill, which in time must of force bring great thinges to light, ye in Awcomistrie there be any such thinges hidden. (6)

Gilbert’s idea that the academy could also serve as an alchemical laboratory, as well as his distinction between good and evil aspects of alchemy, shows that such practices did engage the mind of at least one educational reformer, and that it was intertwined with national wealth and defense. In and of itself, Gilbert’s request cannot be seen as proof of
a strain of magical science in education; however, the sciences necessary for increase of
trade, the military, and navigation are mathematics, astronomy, and chemistry. It is at
least plausible that Pythagoreanism, astrology, and alchemy may have remained closely
linked to the “legitimate” sciences in the minds of the faculty, as they seemed to have
done in the minds of the scientists of the coming “Scientific Revolution,” and could have
seeped into the popular discourse of the educated classes. Whether or not Gilbert’s
specific plan of reform was ever actually implemented in a specific academy, later
scholars of the history of education overwhelmingly support the idea that sciences
entered into English education around this time, and that the interest in trade, navigation,
and governance specifically sparked this evolution. ⁴

Especially noteworthy are the observations of Joan Simon and others on the
important role of John Dee in the development of navigation and W.H.G. Armiyage that
groups like the “School of Night” and informal societies of scientists were in the
vanguard of English political and intellectual life, although many of the societies were
ultimately killed by a lack of patronage/funding until the founding of The Royal Society
in 1660, outside the temporal purview of this study. The “School of Night” famously
included a number of poets and playwrights, and was rumored to engage heavily with the
occult. Finally, all of the above scholars note the presence of Gresham College in
London, which employed seven professors to give lectures in English to “merchants and
other citizens” on subjects such as astronomy, geometry, and medicine. Simon also notes
the ultimate success of Gilbert’s proposed reforms as she establishes her idea of London
itself as a university, claiming “by the early seventeenth century there was teaching in

⁴ Armiyage, W.H.G.  Four Hundred Years of English Education. P. 9-11.
London of all the arts and sciences Gilbert had wished to promote, not in an academy
cnfined to gentlemen, nor within four walls, but in the city at large and in some branches
very much open to citizens” (388). The linkage of Gilbert’s sciences with the occult and
the widespread popularity of accessible means of disseminating them certainly present a
plausible scenario for widespread interest in and knowledge of the kinds of science
presented on the stage amongst the people attending these plays. There was, however, a
counter-movement against education in general, and against precisely the sort of
education that promotes inquiry into first causes in the way that science does.

In the first part of The Advancement of Learning, Francis Bacon directly
addresses arguments that are made against education and learning. The nature of these
arguments is interesting; they are undoubtedly arguments made by those in power to
restrict the education of the lesser folk. For instance, Bacon lists the complaints made by
politicians about the effects of learning: it makes men unfit for war, it leads to curiosity
and interrogation of the order of things, it turns men from active business and work to a
love of leisure, and, most tellingly, “it doth bring into states a relaxation of discipline,
whilst every man is more ready to argue than to obey and execute” (126). In other words,
learning makes the unruly mob that much harder to control. Modern despots restrict the
education of certain of their citizens, carefully control the learning so that it reflects party
doctrine, and deny scientific truths that challenge their chosen positions; it is not
anachronistic to imagine earlier governments doing the same. Although Bacon goes on
to demolish the arguments of the politicians, the important point is that such an argument

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5 It is interesting to note how Bacon praises James I in the opening paragraphs of his essay; he states “your
majesty standeth invested of that triplicity which in great veneration was ascribed to the ancient Hermes;
the power and fortune of a King, the knowledge and illumination of a Priest, and the learning and
universality of a Philosopher” (122). Even in correspondence between a King and the age’s finest scientific
mind, Hermes Trismigistus remains a name to conjure with.
needed to be addressed at all; we may assume that if the highest powers of the land felt that way about educating their citizens, they also had the tools to restrict and demonize learning and would have put them in place.

Bacon also addresses the arguments of the “divines” against learning, which are similar in intention to the political arguments. Church leaders are of the opinion that “knowledge is of those things which are to be accepted of with great limitation and caution; that the aspiring to over-much knowledge was the original temptation and sin, whereupon ensued the fall of man; that knowledge hath in it somewhat of the serpent…that experience demonstrates how learned men have been arch-heretics, how learned times have been inclined to atheism, and how the contemplation of second causes doth derogate from our dependence on God, who is the first cause” (122). Wielded by men who exercised control over the spiritual fate of their parishioners, these arguments would have been powerful instruments of dissuasion. Perhaps the most powerful tool of all was the charge of heresy; as has been shown, the leading occultists were heretics in the eyes of the church. Although not directly related to this dissertation, heresy became the leading charge in the witch crazes that flared in England and on the Continent throughout and beyond the Renaissance. Norman Cohn has conclusively demonstrated the growth of later witch trials out of methods originally developed by Inquisitors to ferret out heresy and many characteristics of the ceremonial magician were later transferred to the witch;⁶ during the reigns of Elizabeth and James poor, illiterate, and aged women were to feel the full force of this transference time and again.

Furthermore, there were significant reasons for the various churches to take a strong stance on the doctrines espoused by the occultists at precisely this time. Puritans

⁶ Cohn passim but especially 165-205.
and Anglicans were sharply divided on some issues of the supernatural and the miraculous, but both had a vested interest in thwarting the threat of Catholicism and its embrace of miracles. D. P. Walker has written on this three way struggle in his article “The Cessation of Miracles”; in his view,

The Puritans believed that diabolic phenomena, such as possession and witchcraft, were still going on, whereas at least some Anglicans included these in the class of miracles and therefore maintained, cautiously but sometimes explicitly, that present-day demoniacs and witches could do nothing superhuman and were either diseased or deluded or fraudulent.

(112)

However, a large number of Catholic controversial works “used the continuance of Catholic miracles and the lack of Protestant ones as a God-given mark of the true Church” (113). Walker notes a flood of these materials between 1580 and 1605; these works in themselves would have assured that Puritans and Anglicans alike would have been exposed to vicious rhetoric about the dangers of “miracle men” who claimed the ability to perform deeds beyond the natural order precisely during the time of the great vogue of the sorcery play. Of the plays to be explored in this argument, The Devil’s Charter is unquestionably violently anti-Catholic, and at least one critic has seen John a Kent and John a Cumber as a recusant response to perceived anti-Catholicism in Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay; with the addition of the scene at the Papal court in Doctor Faustus, there is strong evidence that this controversy not only found its way into the

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7 Donna Hamilton in Anthony Munday and the Catholics, 1560-1633; the virtues and faults of this claim will be discussed in Chapter 3.
sorcery plays, it also shaped how a sorcerer could be acceptably portrayed before a popular audience without drawing the ire of church authorities.

**Books and pamphlets**

The use of printed materials to establish contemporary interest in certain topics has obvious advantages and equally obvious drawbacks. Literacy rates in Shakespearean England are nearly impossible to ascertain; the most recent study of the topic, Adam Fox’s *Oral and Literate Culture in England 1500-1700*, acknowledges that the most tangible evidence of literacy is the ability to sign one’s name, and even this has an extremely tenuous relationship to actually being able to read. In Fox’s view, many more people could read than could sign their names, and the general trend in London was towards increasing literacy throughout the period in question. Almost all that can be reasonably inferred is that literacy rates increase as one travels up the social scale, and men were much more likely to be able to read than women. There is, however, a very strong likelihood that many kinds of literature were available even to the illiterate; aside from the obvious point that one does not have to be literate to enjoy a performance of a play, there also seemed to be a general tendency to read aloud to groups. The Bible is probably the work of literature which was most widely disseminated in this way, but it is eminently reasonable to assume that much ephemeral literature, especially broadsides, ballads, and news pamphlets, could be found in taverns and other social settings and read aloud (Fox, 1-50). Much of the evidence for a contemporary popular interest in witchcraft and crime lies in just these types of publications, cheap enough to be frequently purchased by anyone of modest means and able to inform large numbers through a single purchase.
Tessa Watt’s *Cheap Print and Popular Piety, 1550-1640* is the fullest account of ephemeral literature in the Shakespearean age, and she details the shift that occurred in popular tastes throughout the period. While religious themes dominated the cheap presses (as they did the book trade, discussed below), ballads were exceptionally popular up until approximately 1600, and only slowly decreased in popularity thereafter. Nearly all of the witchcraft trials and executions of record were accompanied by a ballad commenting on the event, and the popular taste for moralizing leached from religious literature into these ballads. The next phase of the popular press is even more supportive of the idea that the contemporary public craved news of witches and the supernatural; Watt points out that “after 1600, the overall output of the ballad publishers began to shift, with a concentration on ephemeral or ‘popular’ materials such as news pamphlets and plays,” and she recounts the words of Henry Peacham to demonstrate the subject matter of these pamphlets and their cost (281). According to Peacham, “For a penny you may have all the Newes in England, of Murders, Flouds, Witches, Fires, Tempests, and what not, in one of Martin Parkers Ballads” (11). Peacham’s account dates from 1641; even if one assumes that a penny was as dear to the working class then as it was for Harbage’s artisans of forty years earlier, one of Martin Parker’s ballads could have conceivably been relayed to an extremely large audience through public readings and public postings. One is put in mind of Addison’s “modest computation” that each copy of *The Spectator* was read by twenty people; it may be assumed that the popular ballads and pamphlets reached at least as many people (2473).

Pamphlet accounts of witch discoveries and trials were a frequent source material for witchcraft plays on the popular stage; they reflected the popular taste for sensational
news and disseminated it both laterally and upwards through the various social classes attending these plays. The “throw-away” nature of these pamphlets and ballads poses serious problems for the historian trying to recover precise data; however, the exceptionally high probability that the majority of pamphlets and ballads were never entered into the Stationer’s Register lends credibility to the idea that witchcraft held a vastly larger place in the popular literary marketplace than the extant materials show.

The representation of science and sorcery in the popular press is more problematic. Both the legitimate and the occult sciences\(^8\) received more sympathetic treatment in book form than they did in the popular press; opinions on these topics diverged more widely according to educational level than did opinions on witchcraft, which found adherents and skeptics alike among all educational and social levels. Furthermore, the most widely popular accounts of the scientist/magus, the “biographies” of Faust and Roger Bacon, probably are more appropriately classified as literature, rather than as pamphlets, owing to their survival rates and many editions, although their subject matter follows the dictates of popular taste similar to sensational pamphlets. As the two most popular accounts of sorcery and science in the period, they tend to skew the data wherever they are placed.

Additionally, the drama and popular literature fostered the idea of a “war” between science and religion that is both inherently dramatic and generally false; the fact that this idea still persists in some quarters speaks to the fact that an interesting narrative of conflict will not be deterred by mundane facts. Paul Kocher, in *Science and Religion*

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\(^8\) These anachronistic terms are unavoidable in order to clarify distinctions for modern readers that did not exist for the Shakespearean public.
in Elizabethan England, points out the way popular literature reinforced the idea of conflict, claiming

Whatever the sincerity of the numerous literary men who handled it, the idea that a scholar must burn his books in order to repent evidently had more than a merely superficial currency among the people to whom this literature was addressed. No doubt it sprang in part from the common dread and awe of learning often associated in the public mind with the black art. Significantly, the attitude flourished best in such genres as the drama and the prose pamphlet aimed at a large, unselected, and relatively unschooled audience…But this attitude of all or nothing—all religion with no science or all science with no religion—was not, we must recall, the view prevailing among theologians, scientists, or lay intellectuals who were neither. (24)

This imaginary conflict between science and religion is an easy explanation for the complicated set of circumstances informing the various churches’ opposition to education and magic outlined above. In many ways, it provides the main structural principle for the sorcery plays; the importance of Kocher’s observation here is that popular literature influenced popular sentiment in an inaccurate and inexact appreciation of the role of science in the world, and that this misprision was increasingly dispelled the farther one climbed the educational scale.9 As has been noted, however, the majority of the early modern audience were not “theologians, scientist, or lay intellectuals,” and conformity to a pattern of conflict was a sure way to appeal to popular sentiment.

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9 Of course, the idea that science and religion never came into conflict is equally misleading, but the blanket assertion that they must always conflict ignores the complex reasons why they do at some times and not at others.
When one turns from ephemeral literature to the book trade, science receives a much different treatment. If one adopts the most catholic definition of “science” possible (including medical manuals, herbals, agricultural treatises, navigational manuals, translations of classical works treating science, as well as legitimate and occult sciences proper) then science nearly rivals religion as the most popular subject for books. Even if one restricts science to the “hard” sciences, two of the most popular books of the sixteenth century would undoubtedly meet the standard. Robert Record’s *The Grounde of Artes; teachyng the Worke and Practise of Arithmetike*, first published in 1542, went through thirteen editions by 1640 (Bennett 197). According to H.S. Bennett, Humphrey Baker’s *The Well-spryng of Sciences*, first published in 1568, “was a great success, and survived with little change until the end of the next century” (198). Bennett’s exploration of the popularity of science books continues in *English Books and Readers, 1603-1640*, where he notes the continuing popularity of the above works as well as an explosive interest in magnetism and astronomy, allied with an increase of navigation and trade, and astrology. Astrology’s enormous popularity is attested to by the fact that almanacs and prognostications were amongst the most profitable works printed in the Shakespearean age; E.F. Bosanquet contends that “millions of copies” were sold of the 2000 editions of almanacs he estimates were printed in the 17th century (qtd. in Bennett 166). Finally, Francis Bacon’s *Sylva Sylvarum* went through fifteen editions in the 17th century; although all of its popularity may not be attributable to its scientific aspects, it would be rash to assume that Bacon was immensely popular in spite of one of his favorite topics of exploration.
The two most popular works of “science” are also the most problematic. *The Damnable Life and Deserved Death of Doctor John Faustus* and *The Famous History of Friar Bacon* are certainly not scientific treatises, and they illustrate better than any other works mentioned here the foisting of a largely untenable view of the conflict of science and religion upon the general public. While the content of the two works will be dealt with in connection with the plays they inspired, their undeniable popularity is important to note. Charles Mish’s article “Best Sellers in Seventeenth-Century Fiction” lists the nineteen fictional works which appeared in ten or more editions in the seventeenth century; while neither work is in the upper half of his list, they are amongst a very small number of best-sellers which are neither religious allegories nor romances of some kind. Mish comments on the affinities between the two, noting they represent “a group of books, which, for want of a better term in English, we must call *Volksbücher*” (368). A more obvious way to characterize the two books would be as cautionary tales of the dangers of the occult. It should also be noted that several of the works of “hard” science listed above easily meet Mish’s criteria for a best-seller. The evidence from the world of print plainly shows that works of and about “science” were genuinely and enduringly popular, selling in numbers far too large to be accounted for by a small intellectual elite; furthermore, the stage representations of the magus drew their inspiration from the false conflict between science and religion perpetrated in precisely the works that had the broadest appeal to several social classes by conflating the ideas of “science” and “magic.” John Hale, in *The Civilization of Europe in the Renaissance*, sums up the relationship between science and magic as it is represented in the literature of the time with the thought that
For every book which can be called scientific there continued to be a host of far more congenial compilations which repeated the old encouraging myths about the fountain of youth or the power of amber to detect infidelity in a wife. What most people wanted was not methodology but magic; the science of the non-numerate, the potential power of the unprivileged. This was the helpmeet, too, of those scientists themselves who were in a hurry to break open nature’s secrets. If the cosmos was tended by spirits…they could be persuaded to explain the secret workings of the universe so that men, armed with this knowledge, could worship God with a fuller understanding of His plan—or seek power for themselves. (580)

Hale is correct about what people were seeking from science, yet he is viewing science from a perspective that eliminates precisely “the old encouraging myths” that most people clung to persistently. The difference between learned conceptions of magic, the kind that allows one man unlimited power, and the folk traditions of the “cunning” man or woman, receive very different treatments on the stage and from the authorities. Understanding this difference is the key to understanding the depiction of the magus and how it relates to the popular audience.
Chapter 2: Magical Thought in Shakespearean Times

The career of England’s greatest magus, John Dee, slightly predates the vogue of the sorcery play in England, and the sorcery play itself predates the Scientific Revolution as it is commonly understood. The guiding dramatic argument of this dissertation is that with three extremely problematic possible exceptions, not a single magician on the stage is allowed both to triumph due to his magic and to retain his magic intact at the end of the play.¹⁰ This makes it very difficult to accept the view espoused by some historians of science that magical science was an acceptable “escape” for the early modern audience and it directly contradicts Hugh Kearney’s contention in Science and Change: 1500-1700 that

To men with imagination, the message of neo-Platonism offered a heaven-sent escape route from the rationalism of academic Aristotelianism. This was the sixteenth-century equivalent of Romanticism. Indeed we could do worse than look upon Shakespeare’s The Tempest as an appeal possessed by the Hermetic tradition. Prospero was the ideal type of the Hermetic scientist bringing justice and peace to a disturbed world, an approach which had great appeal in a century torn by religious bitterness. (41)

These conditions raise several questions that will be addressed in this chapter:

How are science and magic (as we now understand the terms) related for the playwrights and audiences? Does the short vogue of the sorcery play coincide with the rise of a more

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¹⁰ Peter Fabell in The Merry Devil of Edmonton does perform a magical act in binding the devil at the beginning of the play, but he explicitly denies using magic to achieve the union of Millicent and Mountchensey (V.II.140-44). Merlin binds the devil to rescue his mother, Joan Go-too’t, but his only role in the main plot is to prophesy and interpret signs for Uther Pendragon. Despite their title roles, neither character is really the main character in their respective plays (although titling plays only slightly connected with the occult after the occult characters speaks to its popularity). The problems with viewing John a Kent as a successful magician will be dealt with at length in Chapter 3.
“scientific” world view? Finally, and most importantly, why is the success of a magician unacceptable for the early modern audience?

Here, as in other instances, the career of John Dee provides an instructive example. Dee was the most prominent magus in England, a man who at least sporadically held the ear of the Queen before falling under the sway of the notable fraud, Edward Kelley, ultimately leading to his downfall and disgrace. There is a great deal of truth in this biographical construct, but the emphasis on Dee as an occultist has tended to obscure his work in other areas, and also has the tendency to ignore the practical applications and public utility of much of Dee’s work. Yates’s contention that Dee embodied “the disappearance of the Renaissance in the late sixteenth century in clouds of demonic rumour” is correct in some ways; it would be difficult to invent a fictional character who exemplified the intertwining of magical and legitimate science more fully than Dee (The Occult Philosophy 109). It is also true that Dee met an ignoble end, the circumstances of which seem irreconcilable with his intellect. However, it is probably inaccurate to portray Dee as an innocent victim of a reaction against magical science far beyond his control. To do so compartmentalizes various aspects of Dee’s life that would not have seemed incompatible or even separate to his contemporaries; to say he was punished for his occultism is to ignore the extent to which occult sciences colored even his greatest successes in “modern science.” It also suggests that Dee rose and fell in the Queen’s esteem for reasons unique to him, instead placing him in a matrix in which nearly all dependents on the court fought for influence with varying degrees of success.

Later critics attempt to distance themselves from Dee’s association with the occult, but they ultimately fall victim to the same artificial compartmentalizations.
William Sherman rightly complains “the myth of the magus… essentializes Dee by isolating him from his social and spatial circumstances—or at least by failing to treat them in all of their contingency and complexity” (19). However, it also must be acknowledged that Dee was viewed by some of his contemporaries as a magus, and this had positive and negative effects on his career; more importantly, the apparent incompatibility of the various aspects of Dee’s life is an intellectual failure on our end of the historical spectrum.

Dee’s list of accomplishments is impressive, and it is as thoroughly wrapped in political intrigue as it is magical science. He was first arrested under suspicion of conjuring during the Protestant purge under Queen Mary, but he resurfaced quite quickly and mysteriously in the entourage of his inquisitor, Bishop Bonner. Despite his connection with the Catholic Bonner, he was chosen to cast the horoscope to determine the most auspicious date for the coronation of Queen Elizabeth; this relationship would continue sporadically throughout her reign, as Dee occupied the same tenuous relationship with Elizabeth as many other courtiers. Elizabeth visited him at his home on at least two occasions, and he was frequently summoned to court to consult on various matters.

His greatest achievements in “legitimate” science occurred during this period; he penned the preface to a translation of Euclid, he was one of the chief consultants on the reformation of the calendar, and he instructed the navigators of Martin Frobisher’s expeditions to discover the North-West Passage. During the course of his life Dee also assembled an impressive library and laboratory, which drew many distinguished visitors

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11 The biographical details of Dee’s life are taken from Benjamin Woolley’s *The Queen’s Conjurer* unless otherwise noted.
to his house in Mortlake, including Sir Philip Sidney and (probably) Giordano Bruno, as well as the much less reputable characters who were later to wield influence over him. Though all aspects of Dee’s life during his period of court influence reveal a fusion of elements that now seem incompatible, it is perhaps in his writings on navigation and mathematics that Dee most fully exemplifies the connections between magic/science and mercantile, military, and governmental matters. In the *General and Rare Memorials Pertaining to the Perfect Art of Navigation*, Dee urges England to take full advantage of his navigational knowledge and its own resources in order to establish national dominance in several spheres. He lists several advantages in his plea for the establishment of a “Petty Navy Royal,” the most relevant being his plans for military and economic dominance through control of the seas and increased security for trade. Yates and others have pointed to this tract as the first printed mention of “the British Empire.” Whether it deserves this distinction or not, Dee undoubtedly presses the military and economic conditions of imperialism in the following excerpt:

So that this Petty Navy Royal is thought to be the only Master Key wherewith to open all locks that keep out or hinder this incomparable British Empire from enjoying, by many means, such a yearly Revenue of Treasure, both to the Supreme Head and the subjects thereof…For when all foreign Princes, our neighbors, doubtful friends, or undutiful people, subjects or vassals to our Sovereign, perceive such a Petty Navy Royal hovering purposely here and there, ever ready and able to overthrow any of their malicious and subtle secret attempts intended against the weal
public…every one of them will or may think that, of purpose, that Navy was made only to prevent them. (53,55)

That Dee was sincerely committed to the defense and expansion of his country may be seen by his work in the field of navigation; more obliquely, one may assume that he refused the various offers to serve in foreign courts out of a combination of patriotism and the hope that a similar post would be forthcoming in his own land.

Dee’s knowledge of navigation and mathematics, however, had some basis in what would now be termed occult science. In his “Preface to Euclid,” he begins by outlining the various arts and sciences of mathematics, concluding that their highest use is “in things supernatural, eternal and divine, by application ascending” (38). This places him firmly in what would now be termed neo-Platonism, as would his definitions of Astrology, “which reasonably demonstrates the operations and effects of natural beams of light, and secret influence of the planets and fixed stars,” and Thaumaturgike, “which gives certain order to make strange works of the sense to be perceived and of men greatly to be wondered at” (40-1). Even his explanation of the uses of navigation has strong occult tendencies; he notes “and so of Mone, Sterres, Water, Ayre, Fire, Wood, Stones, Birdes, and Beastes, and of many thynges els, a certaine Sympathicall forewarning may be had: some tymes to great pleasure and profit, both on Sea and Land” (42-3). The differences between sympathetic magic and demonic magic are important to this study, and will be discussed in due course; it is important to note here that Dee is advocating scientific methods very similar to sympathetic magic, and drawing on an occult tradition in the very methods that would provide the greatest practical applications.
However, this kind of knowledge of mathematics and the heavens also had an unintended consequence, one he addresses at the conclusion of his “Preface to Euclid”: “He that seeks (by St. Paul’s advertisement) in the Creatures, Properties, and wonderful Virtues to find just cause to glorify the Eternal and Almighty Creator: shall that man be condemned as a companion of hell-hounds and a caller and Conjurer of wicked and damned spirits?” (44). Even in the early period of his career Dee was dogged by innuendo and insinuation; it seems natural to assume that these accusations grew as his scientific pursuits began to include alchemy and the actual conjuring of angels, which certainly encroaches on the domain of demonic magic as it was typically understood. Following this line of thought, the idea that Dee’s library and laboratory were smashed by an irate mob of superstitious villagers seems quite logical, and Yates’s characterization of Dee as a victim of a reaction against the occult strains of the Renaissance seems justified.

Unfortunately, this was probably not the case. Dee’s fortunes at court fluctuated independently of his involvement with magical science; there are many reports of his being an “intelligencer.” While it is difficult to ferret out the truth of these reports, his adaptability during the Protestant purge, the shadowy reasons underlying his trip to Eastern Europe, and his familiarity with codes and cryptic writing make the idea at least plausible. Dee’s letter to Queen Elizabeth at the end of his six years abroad in Europe hints that she had played a part in sending him there; he writes

Happy are they that can perceive and so obey the pleasant call of the mighty Lady, Opportunity. And therefore finding our duty concurs with a most secret beck of the said Gracious Princess, Lady Opportunity, NOW
to embrace and enjoy your most excellent Royal Majesty’s high favour and gracious great clemency of CALLING me, Mr. Kelley and our families home into your British Earthly Paradise. (98)

Whether or not this cryptic reference places Dee in the world of espionage is debatable, and ultimately unimportant to this argument. What seems credible is that Dee frequently served the Queen in a number of capacities, both known and unknown to modern readers, and that his influence waxed and waned according to the utility of his service and the auspices of his allies at court. The lurid details of Dee’s time in Krakow with Edward Kelley make for scandalous and sad reading, including Kelley’s ability to cajole and mislead Dee into a strange group marriage, but they only emerge from his private diaries; the repeated emphasis on secrecy in the diaries seems to dispel the idea that Dee became persona non grata in Elizabeth’s court because of widespread knowledge of his dealings in angelic magic, although certainly rumors of his activities hastened his departure from Catholic Poland. On the other hand, though, Dee and Kelley’s other interest while in Krakow, alchemy, “produced an unexpected frisson in the Lord Treasurer William Cecil, who in coming years would do everything in his power to lure Kelley back to England” (Woolley 254). Finally, the story of the angry mob despoiling Dee’s library as a reaction against his magic has come under increasing scrutiny; recent scholars such as Benjamin Woolley, Julian Roberts and Andrew Watson, and William Sherman feel that the library was more likely looted by Dee’s scientific and political peers because of the intellectual and economic value of the items inside.

The life of Dee was multi-faceted, to say the least. His connections with the occult cannot be separated from his works in legitimate science and his involvement with
political life, but the sensational details of his life must not overwhelm the practical application of many of his ideas.

A balanced view of Dee helps to illuminate the ambivalence shown towards magical science on the stage; his magic is accepted in proportion to its utility to the interests of powerful people, but there is always an undercurrent of suspicion and danger. Ultimately, neither Dee nor the stage magus can be allowed to succeed while retaining their magical powers.

As shown by the divergent paths of the research cited above, the questions of the influence of magical thought on the Renaissance and the relationship between magic and science are complex and still under debate. This is not the place for a thorough discussion of the development of magical thought in the Renaissance, a subject that would fill volumes. Although I will argue that the magical works with the most influence on Elizabethan England are frequently overlooked, it is not my intention to stress the importance of any particular indebtedness of any author to a specific work of Renaissance magic on a point by point basis. As Robert West points out in his early, but still eminently sensible, treatment of the occult *The Invisible World,*

Since all pieces of general literature appeal necessarily first to an ordinary rather than a specialized knowledge, it is not supposed that any profound or esoteric learning was required for a reasonable understanding of Elizabethan plays by the public for which they were produced. Nor is it

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12 The most useful recent guide to this complexity is H. Floris Cohen’s *The Scientific Revolution: A Historiographical Inquiry.*
13 There are, in fact, several book-length studies of this development, of varying scholarly merit. Although the works of D.P. Walker and Frances Yates are now somewhat dated and probably guilty of overemphasizing their case, they remain the most important pioneers, and their theories are now so ingrained into the field that one or the other could reasonably be cited after nearly every statement made on the subject.
necessary to think that every playwright who treated of spirits kept in mind the speculations of pneumatologists…Elizabethan plays doubtless proffer, nevertheless, various levels for appreciation and can sometimes accommodate a close as well as a wide correlation with contemporary theory of spirits. Certainly, at any rate, many Elizabethan Englishmen had access to the literature of pneumatology and with it must surely have conferred spirit scenes of the plays whether the authors intended it or not.

(64)

Even in an era saturated with magical thought, a play that appealed only to those who had digested the whole of the *Corpus Hermeticum* or *The Occult Philosophy* would have drawn a scant audience. However, the playwrights clearly did have some familiarity with occult doctrines, and the problem of how to convey complex and esoteric material to a popular audience without turning plays into dull disputations led to a series of interesting negotiations. With this in mind, I suggest that dramatists did not rely on an audience’s understanding of the finer points of acceptable magic versus damnable magic: if a magician is lauded at the end of the play, he has not crossed the line; if he is carried off to hell by devils, he clearly has. So far as I can see, Greene’s *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* is the only play of the period to contain a disputation that attempts to probe the efficacy of one kind of magic against another; as will be shown, Greene is also careful to make clear to his audience by specific reference which kind of magic is allied with Lucifer. In fact, he oversteps the bounds of any magical treatise I have seen in his demonic contentions. Therefore, the problem facing the literary researcher is two-fold:
to trace out the basic outline of Renaissance magic and to show the likely response of the popular audience to it.

There is not a clearly defined theory of magic in the Renaissance that everyone could have agreed upon. In *The Occult Philosophy in Elizabethan England*, Frances Yates is correct in pointing out that “It would surely not be wise to assume that this northern country, in which a certain type of Reformation had been established, absorbed its Renaissance Neoplatonism direct from the original Ficino-Pico movement of a hundred years earlier, without taking into account what had happened to that movement in the century since its inception. Yet this is what, on the whole, has been done” (6). The sorcerers that appear on the stage are not Ficinian, almost by definition; they all work with the assistance of conjurations and summonings, means of magic which Ficino was always careful to distance himself from. Yates goes on to demonstrate the vast importance of the Christian interpretation of the Cabala in Renaissance magical thought, and while she is probably correct, the stage magicians do not engage in any overtly Cabalistic acts. The kinds of magic practiced by Ficino and the kinds of powers gleaned from the Cabala are simply not amenable to stage representation; there is nothing dramatic about them, yet nearly every survey of magic on the Renaissance stage begins with an introduction to Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. The kind of magic depicted on the stage is dynamic, replete with spirits and demons, and for the source of this magic one is forced to look beyond the original Ficinian tradition of sympathetic magic and the Cabalistic work of Pico and Reuchlin to a man who synthesized their work and combined it with the more dangerous (and dramatic) element of spirit-aided magic.
Cornelius Agrippa, an enormously important figure in the occult thought of the Renaissance, attempted the most thorough compilation of magic in *De Occulta Philosophia*. Charles Nauert has compiled a list of the sources Agrippa drew upon in his attempt to systemize magic; the breadth of the list illustrates the enormous complexity and heterodoxy of Renaissance magical thought. A partial list of Agrippa’s sources, interests, and influences includes: alchemy, astrology, Ficino’s translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum* and his own *De vita triplica*, Reuchlin’s *De arte cabalistica*, Pliny’s *Natural History*, Arabic magic such as the *Picatrix*, Plato (especially the *Timaeus*), Porphyry, Pico della Mirandola, St. Augustine, Dionysius the Areopagite, Roger Bacon, Albertus Magnus, Raymond Lull, and of course the Bible, to end this tiresome exercise by citing only the most well-known of the sources (115-6). This list of sources occurs again and again in the literature on Renaissance magic, and even a cursory knowledge of some of the authors reveals an apparent incompatibility in their philosophies and doctrines. Put simply, occultists such as Agrippa believed this apparent incompatibility was the direct result of human sin and frailty, and that a combination of study and spiritual purification would allow man to comprehend the connections of all the ancient wisdom that had been sundered in the modern age. Indeed, most of the occultists sought a greater understanding of Christianity itself through the study of ancient wisdom. Not surprisingly, the Christianity expressed by the occultists was not embraced by either the Catholic Church or the various reform movements, and charges of heresy dogged Agrippa and others throughout their lives. However noble their aims may have been, the occultists were simply not ever going to receive sanction from the churches they insisted on characterizing as repositories for fragmented and misunderstood ancient knowledge.
Agrippa pushed this hostility even farther by insisting also that the spirits of the universe both could and should be used to aid human ends. The efficacy of the churches’ efforts to demonize Agrippa can be seen in the legends that arose after his death that he was always accompanied by a black dog, which they claimed to be his familiar spirit. It has also persisted until very recently in the complete lack of respect accorded to Agrippa in the history of thought, reflected also in the long obscurity and gradual recognition of the importance of John Dee and Giordano Bruno.

Despite his relative obscurity in modern times, Agrippa was influential in England. He visited there in 1510, and although both his authentic and spurious works were not translated into English until the 1650’s, Marlowe shows familiarity with them in Doctor Faustus. Perhaps more significantly, both Jean Bodin (the most influential and hysterical proponent of the persecution of witches) and Reginald Scot (a comparatively clear-eyed, though vehemently anti-Catholic, skeptic) frequently reference Agrippa in their widely read works, published in and about the time of the vogue of the sorcery play. Yates points out that Bodin begins his attack on witchcraft by attacking magical thought, and “Bodin’s fulminations against the De occulta philosophia are alarming. It is an utterly damnable work. The famous black dog was a demon who had inspired his master’s evil practices” (80). Scot also comments frequently and in depth on Renaissance magic, and perhaps the best way to understand contemporary conceptions of magic is to place the writings of Agrippa and Scot in conversation; Scot is certainly familiar with Agrippa’s works, and the way he appropriates the theories of Agrippa to suit his own ends demonstrates at least one of the various stances towards magic that may be taken in Shakespearean England. Agrippa’s work does not easily reduce to an outline.
intelligible by the modern mind, but its influence in Shakespearean England requires some familiarity.

Agrippa begins *De occulta philosophia* with an introduction to the three forms of magic. As Agrippa uses several terms for the same kind of magic and later commentators use the terms interchangeably as well, it is appropriate to list the various correspondences in the three kinds of magic. Agrippa terms the world “threefold”; it consists of the elementary, the celestial, and the intellectual. The elementary is comprised of things terrestrial; its magic is termed natural magic and its philosophy is natural philosophy. The first book deals with natural magic. The celestial world takes astrology as its basis; the magic associated with it is termed “celestial magic” and is revealed through mathematical philosophy. Celestial magic is the concern of the second book. The intellectual world is the world of the spirit, and ceremonial magic is its province; theological philosophy and divinity are its ideational basis. It forms the subject of the third book.

The terrestrial world is composed of four elements, each partaking of two qualities: fire is hot and dry, earth is dry and cold, water is cold and moist, and air is moist and hot. Fire and air are active elements, earth and water passive, and fire and water are contraries in the same way that earth and water are. Each of the four elements is represented by a perfect body: stones represent earth, metals water, plants air, and animals fire, although each class of perfect bodies displays the whole range of elements. For instance, Agrippa points out “amongst metals, lead and silver are earthy: quicksilver is waterish: copper, and tin are airy: and gold, and iron are fiery” (23). In man, the four elements correspond to the four humors familiar to all students of the Renaissance.
Every object in the world is full of “natural virtues” which depend immediately upon the elements of which the object is compounded and to what degree each element predominates. In this, Agrippa seems very much in line with orthodox Renaissance natural philosophy, strange as it may seem to the modern reader.

His next step, however, is certainly into the occult world. Agrippa also identifies “occult virtues,” or hidden qualities, in things which do not arise from the natural combination of elements. These occult virtues may be infused by the Soul of the World into the ideal forms of each object, or they may be infused by the rays of the stars; additionally, these occult virtues may vary from individual to individual of the same species. Occult virtue is ultimately dependent on the First Cause, which for Agrippa is synonymous with God. The will of God allows for the variation of occult virtues between species, individuals of the same species, parts of an individual (for instance, the basilisk’s killing power lies solely in its eyes), and even between living and dead body parts of an individual (a tooth removed from a living mole cures toothache, while “a drum made by the skin of a wolf, makes a drum made of a lambskin not to sound”) (60). The occult virtues of things must be found out by similitude or antipathy; Agrippa gives the simplest formulation of this idea as follows:

If therefore we would obtain any property or virtue, let us seek for such animals, or such other things whatsoever, in which such a property is in a more eminent manner than in any other thing, and in these let us take that part in which such a property, or virtue is most vigorous: as if at any time we would promote love, let us seek some animal which is most loving, of which kind are pigeons, turtles, sparrows, swallows, wagtails: and in
these let us take those members, or parts, in which the venereal appetite is most vigorous, and such are the heart, testicles, matrix, yard, sperm, and menstrues. (46)

Agrippa terms this method of research similitude; one may also use antipathy, wherein one searches for an object in nature that has power over another object, especially where no natural virtue explains it, such as the elephant’s proverbial fear of mice. These sorts of occult virtues are imbued by the Soul of the World into the object’s ideal form.

The other kind of occult virtues are caused by the influence of superior bodies on inferior bodies; Agrippa essentially concentrates on the influence of the heavens upon the objects of the earth, and creates an extensive list of what terrestrial characteristics or bodies are governed by what heavenly bodies. In its most complex form, this involves the casting of a horoscope for an individual man, although lower orders of things are simply classed with whatever heavenly body they seem most to resemble; for instance, gold is under the influence of the sun because they share the quality of splendor.

Once the occult virtues of things are discerned, one attracts their power to oneself by compiling as many things sharing the desired virtue as possible. Time and place also play an important role, as they do in modern astrology: some times and places are propitious for attracting certain virtues and not others.14 However, Agrippa goes farther than showing how to draw occult virtues to oneself; he describes means of divination and augury, both from dreams and from the natural world. Most relevant to the present discussion, he also describes the power of natural magic to create sorcery, which affects

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14 It is important to note that Agrippa does not offer concrete formulae for producing magical effects; the legitimate *De occulta philosophia* is a guide to magical research, not a recipe book for certain spells. It differs significantly in this from the probably spurious *Fourth Book of Occult Philosophy* and the *Heptameron*, believed to furnish the magical thought of Doctor Faustus and *The Devil’s Charter*, discussed below.
bodies and objects outside of the magician, “to subvert, consume, and change all inferior things” (121). The ability to affect other people depends on knowledge of their composition; according to Agrippa, humans are composed of five external senses, four inward senses, three powers of the soul, three appetites of the soul, four passions of the will, and eleven passions of the mind. When this knowledge is combined with proficiency in language (knowing proper names, proper rhythm and intonation, and the very act of speaking aloud) or writing (preferably in Hebrew, the most magical of languages due to its connections to the Bible and the Cabala), the natural world may be “bound” in any number of ways: fear, love, obedience, and others.

The second and third books of Agrippa’s work extend the principles of natural magic into celestial realms. Book Two is best seen as a compendium of numerology and astrology; while Agrippa’s methods of deriving angelic writings from the stars and fashioning images to effect magical results certainly could not have been sanctioned by any orthodox church, they are not that different from general astrological and numerological thought in the Renaissance. It is in Book Three that Agrippa veers into secrecy and elitism through his treatment of the religious aspects of magic and makes explicit the distinctions between “folk” magic and “ceremonial” magic that ultimately renders the successful magus unpalatable to the early modern audience.

Agrippa views true religion as an aid to magic and a safeguard against evil spirits and urges a program of ascetic purification on the initiate into the magical arts while deploring as “superstition” the more vulgar kinds of magic likely to be familiar to the common audience. The second chapter of the book clearly distinguishes between the initiate and the vulgar and urges silence regarding magical matters lest the rabble pervert
them. While this makes sense from a practical standpoint, the concealment of knowledge is not an ingratiating characteristic. Even more problematic in the eyes of the common man are Agrippa’s claims of nearly godlike powers to be gained through magical arts; he speaks rapturously of the ability to “predominate over nature, and cause such wonderful, sudden, and difficult operations, as that evil spirits obey us, the stars are disordered, the heavenly powers compelled, the elements made obedient” (455). This kind of thinking appears dangerous to everyone but the magus, and the most evil depictions of sorcery on the stage stress precisely this hubris. While Agrippa continues his practice of not revealing magical incantations or formulae, he does describe the ability of the mage to raise the dead, summon good spirits and bind evil spirits, and predict the future. This is the sort of magic displayed again and again on the stage, and its relationship to “black” or demonic magic is extremely problematic. Black magic is differentiated from white magic on the basis of the kinds of spirits importuned for service. While the ceremonial magician uses words derived from religious sources to invoke and implore the aid of angels or other heavenly beings (or, as in the case of Dee, relies on these angels to reveal the Enochian language that would enable him to unravel the mysteries of the universe), the black magician uses similar means to compel demons from the infernal regions to come to his service. The distinction between ceremonial magic and demonic magic, therefore, resides in the nature of the otherworldly beings summoned; this distinction can obviously be blurry and hard to define for twenty-first century readers, and probably would have been so even for most members of the original audience.

Dramatists dealt with this gray area by introducing or adapting elaborate set-pieces to allow the audience a clear and unfettered view into what kind of magic is being
presented. The dramatists used spectacular and overt confessions to absolve their magicians from black magic or damn them utterly by bringing demons onto the stage to carry them to hell. However nuanced and complex the Agrippan system of magic may have been, the dramatic “moral” of the story is always enforced by unmistakable stage effects, ranging from Hell-mouths to broken staves.

To what extent were the more dangerous aspects of Agrippan magic considered real-world perils rather than exciting stage effects? Reginald Scot’s skeptical mind makes several subtle distinctions that probably were not drawn by his less discerning contemporaries. Scot accepts several Agrippan precepts concerning natural magic; he willingly grants

\[ \text{God indueth bodies with woonderfull graces, the perfect knowledge whereof man hath not reached unto: and on the one side, there is amongst them such mutuall love, societie, and consent; and on the other side, such naturall discord, and secret enimitie, that therein manie things are wrought to the astonishment of mans capacitie.} \] (243)

This is very similar to Agrippa’s precepts in Book One, and it is this emphasis on close observation of natural properties that gives a veneer of modern science to magical thought.\(^{15}\) Scot directly contradicts a key point of Agrippan magic, however, by claiming “when deceit and diabolicall words are coupled therewith, then extendeth it to witchcraft and conjuration; as whereunto those naturall effects are falselie imputed” (243). Scot

\(^{15}\) In fact, Scot’s references to Agrippa are nearly always complimentary. It is most likely that Scot is using Agrippa’s skeptical work *The Vanity of Arts and Sciences* to refute Bodin’s characterizations of Agrippa drawn from *The Occult Philosophy*. The synthesis of Agrippa’s completely contradictory and nearly simultaneously published works remains, thankfully, beyond the scope of this essay. The key point is that Agrippa’s *Occult Philosophy* was known to Scot’s chief antagonist and its central ideas had infiltrated popular thought enough for Scot to feel the need to refute them.
then goes on to demonstrate at great length the ways in which false sorcerers make it appear that they are using magic, when in fact they are relying on scientific phenomena and deceitful technology, especially in the use of the “perspective glass” that plays such a large role in Greene’s *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*. Even more interesting for the student of the stage is the judgment Scot passes on the kinds of sorcerers described in Agrippa’s Book Three and depicted again and again on the stage. The vast majority of Scot’s work is concerned with witchcraft; he demonstrates that the punishment visited on supposed witches is a gross injustice imposed on a largely helpless and deluded population of aged women, none of whom have the powers they are accused of. When the witchcraft play supplants the sorcery play as the main vehicle for the occult on the stage, there is a surprising amount of sympathy shown to the witches in plays like *The Witch of Edmonton* considering the violent popular sentiment against them. “Sorcerers” were never persecuted in England in numbers even remotely approaching witches, yet the main idea of this dissertation is that they were never depicted wholly sympathetically on the stage. Scot points to the key reason for this comparatively rough treatment when he opines

> if we seriouslie behold the matter of conjuration, and the drift of conjurors, we shall find them, in mine opinion, more faultie than such as take upon them to be witches, as manifest offenders against the majestie of God, and his holie lawe, and as apparent violators of the lawes and quietnesse of this realme: although indeed they bring no such thing to passe, as is surmised and urged by credulous persons, couseners, liers, and witchmongers. For
These are always learned, and rather abusers of others, than they themselves by others abused. (359, italics mine)

There is no place in the Agrippan plan for the betterment of common humanity; it is a manifestly disruptive force for the benefit of the magus alone, and is jealously guarded from the uninitiated. While Scot views the whole operation as manifestly fraudulent, even the most credulous members of the audience could see that the magus rarely acts in the public interest. There is, however, a magical tradition in England that does appear to benefit the common man, and this tradition is more closely allied with witchcraft than with Agrippan magic.

Keith Thomas’s *Religion and the Decline of Magic* clearly outlines the differences between popular magic and “intellectual” magic. Thomas argues that the two magical strains were distinct during the Renaissance, and moreover that the intellectual speculations on magic derived more inspiration from the “village wizard” than vice versa (228ff). The kinds of magic practiced by the village wizard (or witch) rarely make their way into magus plays; Thomas lists “magic to win at cards, to defeat one’s opponent in a lawsuit, or to escape arrest…Other sigils brought immunity in battle, made the wearer invisible, kept off vermin and gave protection against lightning; and there was magic to put out fires, make children sleep and avoid drunkenness” (231). While morally questionable in many cases, these effects were undoubtedly useful for the lucky recipient. Not surprisingly, the various churches and government officials were vehemently against these practices, and prescribed harsh penalties against their employment. There are very few records, however, of successful prosecution of village wizards. Those helped by the wizard would be extremely unlikely to risk his or her wrath by publicly testifying, and
even those who felt swindled would be hesitant to admit to having recourse to supernatural aid (262-3). It was only during periods of mass hysteria or in cases where social relations had soured irreparably that enough people could be found to testify against a supposed wizard, and in most cases this happened to an aged female witch. The “public service” of the village wizard was a shared part of community life throughout much of England, unlike the aloof and hermetic sorcerer.

There is, in fact, a line of Elizabethan and Jacobean plays that depicts the “cunning man” or “cunning woman” of folk tradition, and the depictions of these characters are unquestionably more positive than their more sagacious counterparts. John a Kent owes much of his comparatively positive treatment at Munday’s hands to his similarities to the “village wizard,” and The Merry Devil of Edmonton employs “folk” magic more than “intellectual” magic. Even when the cunning folk are revealed as frauds, as in Heywood’s The Wise Woman of Hogsdon or Simon Baylie’s The Wizard, they serve to expose greater evil and hypocrisy. Given that authorities fulminated against “white witches” and the practitioners of black magic with equal vehemence, it must be supposed that the same dramatists who sought to please their audience with the condemnation of intellectual magicians realized that the popular audience was unwilling to see an integral part of their community as an agent of evil.

**Conclusion**

It follows, then, that the popular audience (and much of the magic on stage occurs in plays overlooked by modern scholarship and targeted precisely towards a popular audience) was willing to be entertained by magical spectacle as long as it was contained and dispelled by the end of the play. Theodore Rabb has posited magic as a fantasy of
possible control in a world marked by uncertainty or “crisis,” to use his favored term.

Speaking of the flowering of mysticism across Europe in the first half of the seventeenth century as a means of escape, he notes

something of the same character attached itself to efflorescence of magic and witchcraft: the hopes for easy answers from the astrologer or ‘cunning man’ and for panaceas in the persecution of witches… But there was another, perhaps more important, aspect to these credulous longings—an obverse that applies equally to the introspection, the reverence for Nature, the self-restraint, the science, and the mysticism and millenarianism mentioned above—and that was the quest for control. (52)

In a sense, Rabb is correct: the persecution of witches does seem to occur during periods where a demand for order occurs, and the aims of the occultist and scientist alike could often be seen as attempts to impose order and control upon unruly times. However, a magical solution that allows a single individual to impose order and control appears to be wholly unacceptable to the popular audience of the stage precisely because of the efforts of those actually in control to make it unacceptable to them, efforts outlined in Chapter One.

This is decidedly not to claim that the dramatists of the supernatural were uniformly attempting to either espouse the views of those in power or subtly subvert them. The above is an effort to show reasons why the audience would not have been disposed to uncritically applaud the deeds of the magus and to explain how a playwright sensitive to his audience’s expectations would have come to his ambivalent (frequently worse, rarely better) depiction of the sorcerer on the stage. It is not my intent to portray
the playwrights in question as church or government propagandists, although some may have been so; rather, the cultural conditioning of the audience left the playwright little choice in how to depict a magician while still writing a profitable play and avoiding the unpleasant consequences of flaunting authority.

In any event, the two main pillars of control and power in Shakespearean England had a vested interest in limiting the kind of knowledge that would lead to the challenging of their power; it is one thing to have a citizenry with enough grasp of science to aid manufacture of goods and the growth of trade, quite another to have dozens of potential Fausts with popish sympathies and designs on self-aggrandizement. Faced with this kind of threat, it follows that the government and the church would have applied all of their power towards its suppression. Those executed as witches could testify as to the effectiveness of these powers.

Bacon’s *The Advancement of Learning* was written amid the vogue of sorcery plays and the controversy on miracles, yet he viewed the difficulties of the occult sciences in his plan for the progress of education in a different light, and his view would be the one adopted by the later satirists of the sorcery play. In Bacon’s view, “the sciences themselves which have had better intelligence and confederacy with the imagination of man than with his reason, are three in number; Astrology, Natural Magic, and Alchemy; of which sciences nevertheless the ends or pretences are noble” (143). The role these sciences would play in Bacon’s program is obviously problematic. Stephen McKnight provides a lucid explanation of this ambivalence in his book, *The Modern Age and the Recovery of Ancient Wisdom: A Reconsideration of Historical Consciousness, 1450-1650*. In a chapter dealing with Francis Bacon’s engagement with the *prisca*
theologia tradition initiated by the recovery of the supposedly ancient works of Hermes Trismegistus, McKnight resists the temptation to show Bacon either as an avatar of modern science or as a “magician.” According to McKnight, proper appreciation of Bacon’s thought involves the recognition that “Bacon, like Renaissance Neoplatonists and like Agrippa, Campanella, and Bruno, does view the present disorder as the result of an age of darkness produced by learned ignorance. Moreover, he also agrees that the knowledge to be recovered is like that of Hermes Trismegistus…the knowledge of nature that permits the relief of mankind’s state” (141). Bacon, a contemporary of nearly all the playwrights to be studied here, is concerned with the state of affairs in England and a large part of his utopian re-organization of learning is a recovery of the sorts of texts that provide the intellectual basis for Renaissance magic. The crucial difference between Bacon and someone like Agrippa consists in what is to be done with the recovered knowledge. The “magical thinkers,” contradictory as it may seem, are in some ways deeply conservative; they urge a return to the “Golden Age.” James Barry points to the key difference when he notes “Bacon does not seek a return to some lost state of knowledge. If he believes in such knowledge, it is only because he is even more convinced that we moderns have equal, if not superior, access to it” (66-7). Agrippa’s constant stress on secrecy and ascetic self-purification directly contrasts with Bacon’s call for open learning and a New Atlantis. While the techniques of magic and science occasionally overlap, McKnight rightly calls attention to the problematic aspect of “magic,” pointing out that “Bacon is convinced that magic has been corrupted; as a result, its methods are faulty. Science provides a better means to obtain the same ends” (141).
Bacon’s view would come to win the day, and it is possible that the spread of his outlook on the occult sciences would factor in the demise of the sorcery play.
Chapter 3- The Early “Comedies”

The magus play makes its first appearance at the earliest flowering of the Elizabethan stage. While there seems to be no satisfactory resolution to which of the magus plays came first, Greene and Munday had both produced a play in the genre by the late 1580s, and it is possible that *Doctor Faustus* had its earliest incarnation at roughly the same time. All of these plays were produced upon the popular stage rather than the universities, and the similarities they share may indicate which features the audience most desired to see. *Doctor Faustus* is thematically very different from the efforts of Greene and Munday, and is best considered in conjunction with its most notable heir, Barnabe Barnes’s *The Devil’s Charter*; however, its concerns with magic, the potential political use of magic, and the effect of magic on the soul makes it more similar to *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* than would appear at first glance. The plays of Greene and Munday are thematically very similar; they both move towards the fulfillment of marital love and judge magic according to its ability to advance or hinder this love. Elizabethan comedy, as a very general rule of thumb, ends in marriage, so Greene and Munday added a magical element to an already popular formula. As demonstrated below, Greene in particular expanded the romantic element of his source in order to highlight the opposition of love and magic.

There is no argument that the literary genesis of the sorcerer play is the popular chapbook; Greene, Marlowe, and Munday all drew upon chapbooks for their plots, and the later sorcery plays draw upon the generic conventions that these playwrights established. Of course, it is difficult to ascertain exactly which source a playwright used, especially when the source was in chapbook form; as has been noted, the original
chapbooks were literally torn to pieces in the process of being read and reread. This is more of a problem with the legends of Friar Bacon (which may have existed in more than one version) and John a Kent (whose existence in chapbook form can only be surmised from Munday’s play and a few scattered references) than it is with Marlowe’s source, still extant in unique copies from 1592, 1608, and 1610 (Thomas and Tydeman 186).

Greene’s use of his source, the prose romance chapbook *The Famous History of Fryer Bacon*, is by far the most interesting. The original chapbook was a collection of legends that arose after the death of the 13th century Franciscan friar and scientist, Roger Bacon. Bacon’s pioneering work with optics gave rise the legend of his “perspective glass” that plays a large role in the prose romance as well as Greene’s play. Lynn Thorndike recounts that “in 1277, we learn ‘solely on the very contestable authority of the Chronicle of the XXIV Generals’…that at the suggestion of many friars the teaching of ‘Roger Bacon of England, master of sacred theology,’ was condemned as containing ‘some suspected novelties,’ that Roger was sentenced to prison, and that the pope was asked to help suppress the dangerous doctrines in question” (2: 628). Thorndike goes on to note that many later scholars feel this involved Bacon’s study in magic and alchemy, although Thorndike himself rejects the claim as spurious. Whatever the case, it is indisputable that Bacon became the subject of legend following his death, and his name was frequently attached to magical practices and the legend of the prophetic ‘brasen head’ he supposedly created. While Greene makes use of the chapbook’s version of these legends, his play differs from the surviving copies of the source in key areas that cast Friar Bacon in a very different (and less positive) light. The major changes concern Bacon’s role in the love triangle between Margaret, Lacy, and Prince Edward and
Greene’s elimination of scenes from the romance that stress the scientific underpinnings of Bacon’s art while playing up its demonic aspect. *The Famous Historie* presents a complex picture of Bacon’s involvement with magic and the benefits that may accrue to England through its use; the option of portraying Bacon as a Christian patriot is at least as readily available to Greene as the option of allying him with the demonic, yet Greene chooses the demonic at every turn and thus casts a shadow over all of Bacon’s deeds.

The love plot occupies at least as much of the stage time as the magical plot in Greene’s play, and Greene’s treatment of it undercuts any attempt to view Bacon as an unqualified hero. In the extant romance, the lovers’ triangle is of very limited importance. The chapbook tells of Maid Millisant, beloved of an unnamed gentleman of Oxfordshire, and the obstacles they encounter in trying to marry after a mutually agreeable courtship. The main impediment to their marriage is the greed of her father, who desires to see Millisant married to an unnamed knight in order to further his own social prestige. The knight, the father, and Friar Bungay16 then concoct a plan to arrange the marriage by trickery, with Bungay promised a substantial financial reward for his compliance. The Oxfordshire gentleman, upon realizing he cannot find his now kidnapped beloved and fearing the worst, contacts Bacon, who shows him the ongoing nuptials through his perspective glass. Bacon allays the man’s fears, strikes Bungay mute, and immediately transports the gentleman and himself to the church, where he conducts the wished-for marriage. Bungay, the knight, and the father are temporarily blinded by Bacon and stumble around the church until the next day, while Bacon provides a handsome nuptial feast, lodging, and magical masque for the entertainment of

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16 I retain Greene’s spellings throughout, even though they differ from the romance, as long as they clearly apply to the same character.
the happy couple. The entire episode takes less than four pages of the romance and is
entirely self-contained; it is merely one of seventeen episodes recounted in the romance.

Greene elevates this seemingly insignificant episode to fuller prominence in his
play; the remainder of the romance lacks a love plot or even much of a female presence,
and the pursuit of the marriage of Margaret and Lacy provides a quiet tenderness to
counterpoint the bombast and spectacle of the magic plot. The only other subplot offered
by the prose romance is Bacon’s acts of Christian charity and goodwill; for instance,
Bacon saves a man who has been tricked by the devil, he outwits a noted usurer, and he
even converts an assassin sent by a rival magician to Christianity. These episodes also
contain magical scenes, and do not provide the necessary counterpoint; additionally, the
depiction of Bacon as a Christian actor throughout the play would greatly lessen the
dramatic effect of his abjuration of his magic and his subsequent decision to become an
anchorite. Greene’s selection of the love episode as the one to expand into a major
subplot is dramatically reasonable, and the commercial success of the play attests to its
success.

Greene’s treatment of Bacon’s role in the love triangle is puzzling and completely
contradicts his source. In Greene’s play, Margaret’s true love is Lacy, the Earl of
Lincoln. Lacy, unfortunately, has been wooing Margaret in the stead of Edward, Prince
of Wales, when he realizes that he has fallen for Margaret. A clear conflict between true
romantic love and duty to a friend and social superior is developed. Greene traces this
conflict and leaves no doubt which side the audience is to take as Lacy soliloquizes his
plight and its right resolution:

Recant thee, Lacy, thou art put in trust.
Edward, thy sovereign’s son, hath chosen thee,
A secret friend, to court her for himself,
And darest thou wrong thy prince with treachery?
Lacy, love makes no exception of a friend,
Nor deems it of a prince but as a man.
Honor bids thee control him in his lust;
His wooing is not for to wed the girl,
But to entrap her and beguile the lass.
Lacy, thou lovest; then brook not such abuse,
But wed her, and abide thy prince’s frown,
For better die, than see her live disgraced.17 (vi. 54-65)

Greene is clear and eloquent that duty to a prince is compatible with disobedience to the prince’s wishes; Lacy can be true to his lord, his honor, and his love by restraining Edward’s intemperate desires, unfit for royalty. This proves to be the case; after reaching a murderous rage while confronting Lacy and Margaret in Scene viii, Edward realizes that his behavior is incompatible with his honor and his duty as Crown Prince and comes to the realization that “So in subduing fancy’s passion,/ Conquering thyself, thou get’st the richest spoil” (viii. 121-2). The love plot appears to be effectively resolved at this point, although Greene later introduces a clumsy ruse by Lacy to test the loyalty of Margaret.

More important, though, is the role that Greene assigns to Bacon in this lovers’ triangle, the exact opposite of his role in the prose romance. In Greene’s rendering, it is Bacon to whom Edward applies to further his lust, and it is Bacon who stops Bungay’s

17 All quotes are taken from the Regents Renaissance Drama edition of the play, edited by Daniel Seltzer.
attempts to marry Lacy and Margaret before retiring from the love plot entirely. In fact, in Greene’s adaptation Bacon becomes the villain. There are only two possible explanations for this. Greene may have been working from a different source than the one that has been preserved for posterity; as Daniel Seltzer points out in his Introduction to the Regents Renaissance Drama edition of the play, “Greene’s major printed source was an anonymous prose romance, probably dating from the middle of the sixteenth century, but surviving today in no copy earlier than an edition of 1627” (xii). It is plausible that the character of Friar Bacon underwent a shift over the course of the eight decades suggested by Seltzer as encompassing the unknown printing history of the extant romance; popular conceptions of Roger Bacon did in fact improve with the advent of science, and there may have been a desire to play down the occult aspects of his image as his scientific discoveries proved useful to an emerging generation of scientists. It is, however, unlikely. As noted in the preceding chapter, the prose romance of Bacon remained consistently popular over a long period of time, making it unlikely that printers would have risked a valuable property by drastically redefining its main character. More important, however, is the brevity of the love plot in the extant 1627 edition. Greene’s play was also consistently popular, and was being performed as late as 1630, according to the title page of that year’s quarto (Seltzer 10). If an author working after Greene’s play had attempted to rehabilitate Bacon’s image while still aspiring to commercial success, it is very unlikely that he would have so drastically reduced such an important part of Greene’s success in both scope and importance.

It is far more likely that the second explanation of the discrepancy between the source and the play is correct: Greene wished to portray Friar Bacon as a villain
throughout much of his play. Barbara Traister, in *Heavenly Necromancers: The Magician in English Renaissance Drama*, tries to occupy a middle ground in which Bacon’s dubious role in the lovers’ triangle is less villainous, but the argument is ultimately unpersuasive. In Traister’s view, the disruption of the wedding is comic, as is the devil who carries Bungay off to Oxford; she suggests “the transportation of Bungay and the laugh with which Edward responds to it suggest early in the play, I think, that Edward is not as angry as he pretends to be and that his intentions toward the lovers are not particularly malicious” (80). If true, this robs the later confrontation of its dramatic power and its importance in showing Edward’s realization of the proper role of royalty; an important and striking aspect of the play would then have to be played as a farce. Traister seems to sense this when she later contends that “perhaps Bacon helps Edward because he feels that seeing at a distance is, in this case, the best thing. After all, it is the glass, not Lacy, that absorbs Edward’s initial sword-thrust” (83). If Edward does transform from murderous lover to playful foil, he does so extremely quickly in this scene. Most damaging to Traister’s case, however, is her identification of Bacon with Margaret as the hero of the play, and with it the idea that both magic and beauty must be contained within the social order. Margaret is certainly one of the heroes of the play; her fidelity to Lacy through his cruel test puts her firmly on the side of true love, to the point that she eventually reverses her decision to enter a nunnery to be with Lacy despite his desire to test her. Traister, however, points to the death of two of Margaret’s suitors in a duel later in the play as linking her closely with Bacon; she claims “both share responsibility for the deaths in the play…Though Margaret’s and Bacon’s powers have been shown to be dangerous and easily misused, neither beauty nor magic is essentially
evil” (72). To assign equal blame to Bacon and Margaret for the deaths of her suitors is unfair; Margaret is already betrothed to Lacy at the time, and she would have been married had Bacon not interfered. While Margaret does not explicitly deny the request of either man, she is also compelled to keep her engagement secret; she asks that they grant her ten days to decide, at which time she believes she will be already married and able to extricate herself from their rivalry without giving offense. Bacon has prevented the marriage, and he later provides the sons of the suitors with the magical means to observe their fathers’ quarrel, after which they too fall to fatal blows. Bacon clearly must shoulder the majority of the blame for their deaths.

More importantly, all of Greene’s other main changes from the source material support the idea that he deliberately set out to portray Bacon as a villain. Greene removes a patriotic and science-based scene from his source. The Famous Historie tells of a French town besieged by an English King for three months without success; in desperation, the King offers ten thousand crowns to whomever delivers the town into his hands. Bacon comes to the King’s aid, and argues forcefully for the utility of science in service of the King’s arms. Bacon informs the King “that art oftentimes doth those things that are impossible to armes…I will speak onely of things performed by art and nature, wherein shall be nothing magical” (302). Bacon then describes the arts of navigation and especially optics, by which an army may conduct surveillance from afar. After instructing the King to place a series of “perspective glasses” atop an erected mound, Bacon arranges the glasses so as to light the town square on fire and allow the King to take the town during the conflagration. The King offers Bacon wealth and honor, but Bacon declines both, asserting “Your maiesties love is all that I seeke let me have that,
and I have honour enough, for wealth, I have content, the wise should seek no more”
(304). This scene shows Bacon as a loyal subject eager to employ his scientific skill in
the service of King and country; combined with his acts of kindness and charity, the
Bacon of the Famous History had lived an admirable life even before he abjured his
magic and turned to an even stricter form of Christian self-discipline.

All of this is omitted by Greene, except for the final conversion. Greene goes so
far as to specifically deny that Bacon works by scientific means; when approached by
Friars Burden and Mason concerning his alleged magical practices, Bacon is extremely
reticent to discuss them until their discussion piques his pride. Mason remarks to Burden

    No doubt but magic may do much in this,
    For he that reads but mathematics rules
    Shall find conclusions that avail to work
    Wonders that pass the common sense of men. (ii. 72-5)

In other words, Mason feels that Bacon can accomplish things through the application of
mathematics that appear magical to those not instructed in the science. Burden goes
further, pushing his skepticism into scorn:

    But Bacon roves a bow beyond his reach,
    And tells of more than magic can perform,
    Thinking to get a fame by fooleries.
    Have I not pass’d as far in state of schools,
    And read of many secrets? Yet to think
    That heads of brass can utter any voice,
    Or more, to tell of deep philosophy—
This is a fable Aesop had forgot. (ii. 76-83)

Bacon’s response to this challenge is to use a devil to summon Burden’s mistress before the group, much to the mirth of all save the philanderer. Bacon then taunts him,

Burden, tell me now,

Thineest thou that Bacon’s nigromatic skill

Cannot perform his head and wall of brass,

When he can fetch thine hostess in such a post? (ii. 142-5)

Until his final prophecy, there is not a single scene in the play in which Bacon performs any spectacular act which is attributed to anything other than power over demonic spirits. The scientific aspect of Roger Bacon is utterly suppressed, although it is stressed in Greene’s source. Bacon uses his magic to act as a panderer for a lustful prince who promises a great financial reward (although Bacon never explicitly accepts nor denies the reward- he moves the discussion forward without mentioning the bounty in each instance it is offered). He proudly shows off his power over infernal demons, and attributes all that he can accomplish to this power. Greene has stripped Bacon of every virtue bestowed upon him in the prose romance; yet Bacon still seems admirable in his service to his country, as his ultimate desire is to encircle England with an impenetrable wall of brass and he does honor to his university and his country in his contest with Vandermast.

Many commentators have noted the “double-plotting” of the play; clearly, Greene tells the story of the love between Lacy and Margaret and also shows the transition of Bacon from demonic magician to devout Christian. However, there is still a third dimension to the play: the political dimension. The play culminates in a politically motivated marriage of Edward, closing with Bacon’s prophecy of the future and praise of
Queen Elizabeth and England’s place in Greene’s contemporary time. There is also a significant theme of patriotism in the contest of Bacon and Vandermast, whose name, as James MacCallum points out, “is a mixture of Spanish, French, and Dutch (German)” (213). As such, Bacon’s victory over Vandermast stands as precursor to the later prophecy of England’s domination of all Europe under Elizabeth, and it occurs in a bloodless intellectual coup stressing the superiority of England’s universities.

Additionally, the scene provides Greene with his greatest opportunity for crowd-pleasing magical spectacle, the dragon guarding the Hesperian Tree. However, a reading of the scene with an eye towards the magical implications shows Bacon and Bungay engaging in black magic, while Vandermast does not.

Bungay and Vandermast commence the magical display with a disputation about the superiority of pyromantic magic against geomantic magic. Vandermast cites as his guides Hermes Trismegistus, Porphyry, and Pythagoras in arguing for the primacy of pyromantic spirits; he reasons that they are formed of fire, and therefore are the “purest.” In terms of Renaissance magical thought, his sources are impeccable and form the core of

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18 It is this bold prophecy at the end of the play that leads many commentators to date the play to after the defeat of the Spanish Armada; others date it after Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus in a thinly veiled attempt to give Marlowe the credit of inventing the sorcerer play in addition to excelling at it. The evidence for the priority of either play seems murky at best.

19 The main thrust of MacCallum’s article is that the character of Vandermast is a satire of Giordano Bruno, who disputed at Cambridge and wrote acrimoniously about his visit while Greene was a student there in 1583. MacCallum’s theory seems well-evidenced, although Vandermast’s centrality in the most important continuous storyline of the prose romance is sufficient reason for his appearance in Greene’s adaptation. MacCallum also points out that Greene changes Vandermast’s royal sponsor from the French king in the prose romance to a more generic “Emperor” in his play, perhaps to avoid giving direct offense to a powerful rival.

20 There is undoubtedly a commentary on the role of royalty in supporting the universities running throughout the play. Edward offers Bacon more land for the university for his role in the lovers’ triangle, Rafe threatens the university with extinction under the guise of the Prince in a somewhat puzzling scene, and Bacon insults the King and his consorts with a display of ‘scholar’s fare.’ Holding an MA from both universities certainly qualifies Greene to speak of university life, and his depiction of the Oxford friars as arrogant and bumbling combines with his jabs at royal interference and manipulation to paint a rather negative picture of the state of at least one of his alma maters.
ceremonial magic. To those in the know, Vandermast is referring to the more acceptable sort of magic. Bungay, on the other hand, casts his lot with “earthly fiends, clos’d in the lowest deep” (ix. 52-3). In case the subtle implications of this are lost on the audience, Greene then has Vandermast explicitly spell out the source of Bungay’s power in a speech which situates the source of the English magicians’ powers specifically enough to merit full quotation:

Rather these earthly geomantic spirits
Are dull and like the place where they remain;
For, when proud Lucifer fell from the heavens,
The spirits and angels that did sin with him
Retain’d their local essence as their faults,
All subject under Luna’s continent.
They which offended less hang in the fire,
And second faults did rest within the air;
But *Lucifer and his proud-hearted fiends*
Were thrown into the center of the earth,
Having less understanding than the rest,
As having greater sin and lesser grace.
Therefore such gross and earthly spirits do serve
*For jugglers, witches, and wild sorcerers;*
Whereas the pyromantic genii
Are mighty, swift, and of far-reaching power. (ix. 56-71, italics mine)
Vandermast specifically accuses Bungay of practicing demonic magic, calling directly on the powers of Satan and descending below the realm of acceptable magic; Bungay does not even attempt to refute the claim, but instead, according to the stage direction, “Here Bungay conjures, and the tree appears with the dragon shooting fire” (ix.sd). Even in this, Bungay has placed himself on the wrong side of the audience’s sympathies, as presumably they would side with dragon-bester Hercules, precursor to dragon-slaying St. George.

Vandermast has certainly won his competition with Bungay, but the arrival of Bacon causes the victory to be short-lived. Bacon’s victory is somewhat anti-climactic, and is achieved by very questionable means. Hercules simply quits collecting the apples, despite Vandermast’s order to continue to do so in the name of “all the thrones and dominations,/ Virtues, powers, and mighty hierarchies” (ix. 138-9). Hercules replies that Bacon’s command of demons such as Belcephon and Asmenoth prevents further action, and Vandermast is forced to concede “Never before was’t known to Vandermast/ That men held devils in such obedient awe./ Bacon doth more than art, or else I fail” (ix. 141-3). Bacon is apparently so in command of the infernal powers that Vandermast cannot overcome him by his lesser skill in the greater “art” of ceremonial magic.

Whatever Greene’s command of the finer points of magical science may have been, his audience could not have missed the fact that Bacon and Bungay are allied with Satan, dragons, and exotically named demons. The magical disputations are entirely absent from Greene’s source, and can only represent an intentional interpolation that

21 Seltzer puzzlingly glosses these lines as follows: “thrones…hierarchies: occult terms ordering the devils of varying powers,” despite the equal applicability of these terms to the angelic order set forth by Pseudo-Dionysios. Vandermast’s earlier arguments certainly tend more towards the angelic application of ceremonial magic than the infernal powers.
serves to complicate the moral implications of Bacon’s “patriotic” victory. Additionally, Greene has also eliminated the reason for the contest given in his source. In the prose romance, Bacon and Vandermast compete as part of the peace process initiated by Bacon’s taking of the French town through his scientific use of the perspective glass, which directly involves Bacon in the conflict between nations at all levels through its successful resolution (even the French are impressed by the mercy shown by the English king and happily accept him as their new benevolent monarch.) Most damning is Bacon’s response to his victory over Vandermast. In The Famous Historie, Bacon is characteristically modest and above material concerns; it is related “the king of England thanked Fryer Bacon, and forced some gifts on him for his service that he had done for him; for Fryer Bacon did so little respect money, that he never would take any of the king” (307).

In Greene’s play, however, Bacon is imperious in victory and flaunts his magical skills at the expense of the King and his retinue. When the Emperor requests Bacon to dispute with Vandermast, Bacon firmly asserts his place in the power dynamic by flatly refusing:

I come not, monarchs, for to hold dispute
With such a novice as is Vandermast.
I come to have your royalties to dine
With Friar Bacon here in Brazen-nose (ix. 150-3).

All of the assembled royalty bow to Bacon in his insubordination; even Henry ingratiates himself to his subject:

Bacon, thou hast honour’d England with thy skill,
And made fair Oxford famous by thine art;
I will be English Henry to thyself.
But tell me, shall we dine with thee to-day? (ix.169-72)

The implications of this brief praise are clear: Bacon has used his “art” to assert the power of England over Germany, the academic reputation of Oxford over Hapsburg, and the fit reward for such a man is to rise in the King’s esteem so much that the monarch must request the honor of dining with him. The King and his retinue absorb further abuse from Bacon; he promises them a great feast, yet serves them a meager meal to illustrate the poor fare he and others at Oxford subsist on. Although Bacon then causes a greater feast to be served, it is clear that he holds himself on equal terms with the King.

There is certainly an uneasiness in such an alliance of practical necessity with devilish means, and Greene’s interpolations into the play make that abundantly clear even to an audience with little knowledge of academic distinctions between white and black magic. By the end of the play, Bacon’s great plan to fashion a speaking head of bronze has failed, and with it his hopes to encompass England with a wall of brass; additionally, his magical observation glass has led to a fatal duel between two youths. As noted above, Bacon bears a double responsibility for the deaths of the youths: not only do they fall to blows after witnessing their fathers’ duel in Bacon’s glass, their fathers are dueling for the love of Margaret, who would have already been married to Lacy and removed as an object of potential strife were it not for Bacon’s earlier intervention on the side of lust.

This shadow persists even to the climax of Bacon’s dramatic role in the play, his repentance and conversion. Faced with the death of the youths, Bacon accepts responsibility for the dark side of his art and breaks his “prospective glass” before
abjuring the life he has led and turning to the contemplation of God in hopes of avoiding damnation. This scene has led Robert Reed to lament “the repentance accords with The Historie of Friar Bacon. Nevertheless, to the careful reader it presents a problem: although only moderately stressed, it does not seem in full accord with the portrait of a magician whose art has been dedicated to the betterment of his fellow men. We are inclined to ask, ‘What need had he to repent?’” (103). There are several areas of Reed’s statement that call for refutation. Bacon’s repentance is not “moderately stressed”; it occurs as a direct result of the play’s only depiction of death in the duel between the youths, it involves Bacon’s dramatic shattering of his perspective glass, and it marks the climactic moment of the play’s title character. Reed elsewhere refers to “at least three” instances of Bacon using his magic for “promoting the welfare of good and honest people,” although he does not list these instances, and I am frankly at a loss to find them in the play (104). Until his final prophecy, I have argued that Bacon never uses his magic solely on the side of “good.” Most problematic, though, is Reed’s assertion that Greene incorporates the repentance according to his source. It is true that Bacon repents in both versions; the language of his repentance, however, shows Greene again deliberately changing his source to paint a much darker portrait of his title character. The Famous Historie depicts Bacon’s need for repentance in a stunning speech decrying the vanity of human arts and sciences compared to the highest calling of divinity, and it does so in the language of science and sympathetic magic, while Greene’s version shows a man in fear of damnation through long dealings with infernal powers. The contrast is instructive and deserves quotation in full.
The prose Bacon addresses a company of scholars in order that they may not follow his example:

My good friends and fellow students, it is not unknowne unto you, how that through my art I have attained to that credit, that few men living ever had: of the wonders that I have done, all England can speak, both king and commons: I have unlocked the secret of art and nature, and let the world see those things, that have layen hid since the death of Hermes, that rare and profound philosopher: my studies have found the secrets of the starres; the bookes that I have made of them, doe serve for presidents to our greatest doctors, so excellent hath my judgment beene therein. I likewise have found out the secrets of trees, plants, and stones, with their several uses; yet all this knowledge of mine I esteeme so lightly, that I wish that I were ignorant, and knew nothing: for the knowledge of these things, (as I have truly found) serveth not to better a man in goodnesse, but onely to make him proud and thinke too well of himselfe. What hath all my knowledge of natures secrets gained me? Onely this, the losse of a better knowledge, the losse of divine studies, which makes the immortall part of man (his soule) blessed. (327)

There are two things worth noting in this speech. In keeping with the mostly positive depiction of Bacon in the romance, he laments the amount of time he has spent in natural philosophy because it has taken time away from his divine studies, not because the study of natural philosophy conflicts with his religious beliefs. Bacon is an astronomer/astrologer and a seeker of the natural magic found in the sympathies between
earthly objects; he is certainly not on the damnable side of demonic magic. Secondly, Bacon warns his fellow scholars against the sin of pride in knowledge; following his speech, he publicly burns his books so that others would not be tempted to follow him into sin. Bacon warns against learning as an end unto itself and as a source of intemperate pride; this is a very different position than the confession Bacon makes to Bungay at the end of Greene’s play.

After breaking his perspective glass, Bacon turns to Bungay with the following lament:

The hours I have spent in pyromantic spells,
The fearful tossing in the latest night
Of papers full of nigromantic charms,
Conjuring and adjuring devils and fiends,
With stole and albe and strange pentaganon,
The wrestling of the holy name of God,
As Sother, Eloim, and Adonai,
Alpha, Manoth, and Tetragrammaton,
With praying to the five-fold powers of heaven,
Are instances that Bacon must be damn’d
For using devils to countervail his God (xiii. 85-97).

The contrast is clear; Greene’s Bacon explicitly acknowledges the conjuration of devils as well as angels. A method existed in Greene’s source to force Bacon to give up his magic without implicating himself in conjuring, but Greene altered that element of his source to increase the force of his judgment on his title character.
Additionally, Greene changes the nature of the devil’s final appearance in his play. In the prose romance, the devil sets upon the servant Miles when Miles attempts to conjure him to gain money; Bacon arrives on the scene just in time to save Miles, forgive him for his error, and pay for the surgical repair of Miles’s leg, broken by the devil. Greene’s version ends with Miles being carried to hell by the devil at Bacon’s request, even after Bacon has repented; while the scene is presented comically, the final stage direction, “Exeunt roaring,” leaves room for a truly terrifying interpretation of Miles’s realization of what going to hell entails. Although Bacon has given up devilish exercises, the evil he stirred lives on after he has relinquished his ability to control it.

In the final scene, though, Bacon complies with the King’s request to foretell the issue of Prince Edward’s marriage, relying on the “deep prescience of mine art,/ which once I temp’red in my secret cell” (xvi. 43-4) to produce an idyllic vision of England’s future, echoed by Henry in the concluding line of the play, “Thus glories England over all the west” (xvi.77). The entire last scene is the culmination of spectacle in the play; the characters are equipped with iconographical markers (a blunted sword, a globe, a rod of gold tipped with a dove, etc.) and the speeches are liberally sprinkled with mythological references to the Golden Ages, past and future. Taken in this vein, Bacon’s prophecy should not present a serious problem for the reader; Bacon admits that he is unable to speak because he is “repentant for the follies of my youth,/ That magic’s secret mysteries misled” (xvi. 36-7) as well as speechless with joy at the prospect of the marriage before him. At the king’s urging, however, he prophesies a world where wars have ceased, and England stands at the head of a world order based on knowledge and beauty. While still technically reliant on magic to produce the prophecy, Bacon here unites the three strands
of the play into their proper order: wisdom, beauty, and right rule will be combined in “Diana’s rose” in the same way that beauty (Margaret), wisdom (the repentant Bacon), and right rule (Henry and the now temperate Edward) are combined in the last scene. Most importantly for the magical thread in the play, Bacon here serves the King, rather than equaling him. This final submission to hierarchy serves to highlight how far Greene’s Bacon has strayed from his original characterization in the prose romance, where he is the willing subject throughout.

The changes Greene makes in the character of Friar Bacon are numerous and show a deliberate intention to emphasize the most sensational aspects of demonic magic, while the debate between Vandermast and Bungay makes Bungay and Bacon’s magic clearly demonic in the eyes of the audience. True love and right rule triumph at the end of the play, yet the main threat to both has been the magic of the supposed hero. The main recent commentator on the play, Kerstin Assarsson-Rizzi, frequently and correctly asserts that “The play is controlled by the aim to achieve matrimony based on true love, and by the aim to condemn magic” (49). I have also argued briefly that Greene wished to comment upon the roles emotional temperance and moral clarity play in proper government; Prince Edward changes dramatically as a character as he progresses towards his marriage with Princess Eleanor and Henry revels in the prophecy of England’s peaceful empire under Elizabeth, inviting all the visiting rulers to feast at England’s banquet of plenty. Greene’s motto affixed to the play, “Omne tulit punctum qui miscuit utile dulci,” (all that is brought forth is to mix utility with sweetness) is certainly half explained by the above interpretation of the play; the audience has been instructed in right action in love, knowledge, and power.
The dulci remains to be explained, and therein lies the appeal of the subject matter to a mass audience. Modern estimates of Greene’s literary achievements vary considerably, and his deathbed attacks on playwrights such as Marlowe and Shakespeare have not won him much sympathy. The common ground that does exist is summed up by John Clark Jordan in the best biography of Greene. Jordan takes the following as the basis for his entire literary judgment of Greene: “Whatever literary form he took up, it was for exploitation; whatever he dropped, it was because the material or demand was exhausted. He did what no man before him in England had done so extensively: he wrote to sell” (5). In this view, Greene’s literature was certainly for an age, not for all time, yet the continued success of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay through the following decades speaks well of Greene’s ability to provide the audience with what they wanted, even if he reaped little financial or emotional satisfaction from it. True love and benevolent rulers were (and are) sure crowd-pleasers, but they can be situated in any number of plays; if one accepts that Greene knew what his audience wanted, it follows that the audience wanted magic. Furthermore, it seems that the audience wanted the spectacle of magic, as long as it was sufficiently contained and condemned by the structure of the play. Assarsson-Rizzi is again astute in judging Greene’s intertwined plot lines in terms of spectacle; she claims

One detail connected with the cast of characters is a further indication of Greene’s endeavors to make the most of the visual element offered by the appearance of royalty on the stage…As opposed to the visual effects created by the group of royalty accompanying King Henry, the effects produced by magical skill are part of the action in that they illustrate and
prove Friar Bacon’s magical powers. In addition, magical feats fulfill a function as mechanisms of plot. It goes without saying, however, that all the spirits of various shapes that are included in the play are not part of the action in the sense that they are indispensable to the telling of Friar Bacon’s ‘history.’ They have an intrinsic value of their own which rests on their appeal to the eye. (51-2)

Three things in particular appeal to the eye in the play: royal spectacle, magical spectacle, and the beauty of “the fair maid of Fressingfield,” who, it should be noted, is of decidedly common stock yet rises to marry an Earl. There is total inclusion at the end of the play; the stage is full of royalty, yet there are places for the humble maiden on the left hand of Princess Eleanor and a humbled magician who has repented. Alexander Leggatt has pointed to the popular theatre in fostering community; in his view, “The story was not properly told until it was generalized in a clear and satisfying way, creating a sense of community between stage and audience, relating the story to a world of agreed truth” (128). In *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* magic is the element that divides community and Bacon’s renunciation of it allows for him to be reintegrated into the community.

**Magic and Love in Munday**

Most commentators on the occult in early modern drama focus on Marlowe, Shakespeare, and Jonson, a limitation that forms a distorted view of how the occult was presented on the popular stage by authors who have not been treated as kindly by the broad sweep of literary history, yet enjoyed a measure of success in their own time. The clearest indication of how popular the occult was is the number of plays which feature some measure of magic without taking it as their main focus; Reed counts at least sixteen
plays between Peele’s *The Old Wives Tale* and *The Tempest* that deal in some measure with magic, as well as three later Jacobean plays that satirize magic (87-147). The simple fact that one play a year, on average, relied on magical devices to pull in an audience testifies to its popularity; if one is to include fairies and witches under the broad umbrella of “occult,” the number of plays swells even more. To expect every author to treat of magic with the skill of Shakespeare or Marlowe is unreasonable, but to ignore plays of lesser stature is necessarily to underemphasize the appeal of magic to a mass audience.

Anthony Munday’s play *John a Kent and John a Cumber* (variously dated 1588-1591) is perhaps the magical play most conspicuously targeted for a popular audience. It is full of songs and references to folk legends and ancient sacred spots, and contains a morris dance as well. Anthony Munday was at least superficially similar to Robert Greene in his ability to adapt to public taste and his predilection for moralizing that may have had more to do with a desire for financial gain than with the edification of his audience.22 Whatever the motives behind it, Munday’s pamphlet “A View of Sundry Examples” selects the most fantastic and sensational instances of God’s wrath as indications that London is in need of repentance; like many other “newspapers” of the day, it is replete with murders, monstrous births, and otherworldly phenomena. The gentle magic of *John a Kent* is quaint by comparison, but there is no doubt that Munday had made the connection between sensationalism and commercial success.

Munday could not have been ignorant of the success of Greene’s play, or vice versa; there is as much controversy over the date of Munday’s play as there is over Greene’s and Marlowe’s. As I’m not arguing for direct influence in any of the plays, but

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22 The common attribution of several anti-theatrical tracts to Munday seems to confirm that he was not above blatant self-contradiction when loyalty to power or money warranted it; his most sympathetic modern critic, Donna Hamilton, refers to him as a “hack” (*passim*).
rather a desire to employ popular occult subject matter, the sequence of the plays is relatively unimportant. Munday’s play and *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* share similar plots, although the relative obscurity of Munday and his play necessitates a brief introduction.

Anthony Munday is perhaps now best remembered for his role in the capture and execution of the Jesuit Edmund Campion and his associates, a role that Munday celebrated through a number of self-congratulatory pamphlets. Munday had somehow spent time in a seminary in Rome, where he learned the existence of a plot to send Catholic agents into England; although Munday presented himself as a loyal subject, the actual existence of such a plot and the exact nature of Munday’s time in the seminary are both unclear. In any event, Munday’s testimony was instrumental in the case against Campion, and Collier surmises that shortly afterward “Munday was enabled to add to his name, on his title-pages, the words ‘one of the Messengers of her Majesty’s Chamber’” (xli).

The rest of Munday’s early life is as murky as his involvement in the Campion affair. He apparently spent time on the stage as an actor, and a pamphlet written to attack him after Campion avowed that he had also written a tract against the theater and supported himself for a time by cozening. Although he was a prodigious author, relatively little of his work is extant and he is rarely mentioned by his contemporaries. Between 1605 at the latest and the mid-1610s he was commissioned to write a number of pageants to celebrate the inauguration of the Lord Mayor of London, and also apparently became a draper. After the death of John Stow, Munday came into possession of Stow’s

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23 The following details of Munday’s life are culled from J. Payne Collier’s Introduction to *John a Kent and John a Cumber*. 
papers and continued to publish and expand the Survey of London, although Collier points out “the result is not remarkable for industry or accuracy, points which Stow always justly considered of paramount importance in a work of the kind” (liii). In sum, Munday seems to have been a man with his finger on the pulse of popular demand, although not necessarily skilled or scrupulous in how he exploited it.

The plot and textual state of John a Kent and John a Cumber are of a piece with its author’s shadowy life. The play exists in only one copy, much damaged by water and wear and missing half of the final page. The implications of this imperfection will be discussed below. Although it bears Munday’s signature, the date of 1595 is not in his hand and the play appears to have been composed earlier, either directly before or after Greene’s play.

The plot seems simple enough, but it is replete with twists and disguises. Sirs Griffin Merridock and Jeffery Powesse are unable to wed their beloved Sidanen and Marian, respectively. The ladies’ fathers have instead arranged for them to be married to Pembrook and Morton, and Merridock and Powesse are at the point of launching a desperate attack in order to free their ladies when the noted conjurer John a Kent appears and offers to help.

Kent easily arranges for the heroes to obtain the ladies, but then decides to separate them again for his own amusement. At this point the rival conjurer John a Cumber arrives to aid Pembrook and Morton, and Kent and Cumber confront each other in a series of magical plots. Kent is ultimately the victor, and Merridock and Powesse wed Sidanen and Marian in full view of family, rival suitors, and John a Cumber. The interweaving of a love plot and a magical plot is very similar to Friar Bacon and Friar
Bungay, and Munday is either pioneering a lasting trend in the magus play or trying to emulate the success of Greene’s play.

Unlike Greene, however, Munday uses a number of devices to remove controversial elements from his use of magic, and many of them distance Kent from the black side of sorcery. The first of these is evident in Kent’s role in the love plot that drives the story. Although he does (eventually) guide everyone into holy matrimony, he looks at their love as an opportunity for amusement and self-aggrandizement; he will “upon these loovers practise thou thy wit./ Help, hinder, give, take back, turne, overturne,/ Deceive, bestowe, breed pleasure, discontent,/ Yet comickly conclude, like John a Kent.” Like Bacon, Kent’s role in the plot is problematic; his decision to divide the lovers after first uniting them nearly produces disaster, although no one is ever in any real physical danger from his meddling. Kent is unlike Bacon, however, in that he sees himself as the author of the play’s action. In many ways, Bacon reacts to circumstances such as his failure to hear the brazen head speak and the matching duels, while very little happens in Munday’s play without Kent’s guiding hand. This is an important part of Munday’s strategy to soften Kent’s magic; when Munday places Kent in complete control, the element of danger inherent in Bacon’s traffic with the Devil largely vanishes. For instance, although reuniting the lovers he has separated proves slightly more difficult than he anticipated, Kent’s use of a theatrical analogy to justify his decision reinforces his sense of authorship. After seeing the couples safely off, he mutters to himself

Heers loove and loove: Good Lord! Was nere the lyke!

But must these joyes so quickly be concluded?

Must the first Scene make absolute a Play?
No crosse, no change? What! No varitie?...

O! that I had some other lyke my selfe,
To drive me to sound pollicyes indeed…

But since my selfe must pastime with my selfe,

Ile anger them, bee’t but to please my selfe.  (22)

There are two important elements in this speech. First, Kent laments the fact that John a Cumber is not yet come to try his wits against him; he gets what he desires, but this is the rare time in the play that Kent does not anticipate the actions of his rival. More important is the way the theatrical language draws the audience into complicity with Kent. The audience is expecting “two hours traffic,” an amount of time specifically alluded to later in the play by Kent, and they are familiar with the conventions of playgoing. This self-referentiality not only reminds them of the artificiality of what they are seeing, it places them in the position of authorship with Kent; they know the likely outcome and that it is being staged for their benefit. The repeated “my selfe” also draws the audience into sympathy with Kent; in the space created by his desire for others like him and his decision to amuse himself with the trials of the lovers, there is ample room for the audience to insert themselves and identify themselves with the most powerful figure in the play. Unlike Greene, who places Bacon on the wrong side of several issues and associates him with the baser aspects of royalty against the fair maid, Munday takes pains to please his audience with inclusive and harmless spectacle. Kent is not a learned and imperious Friar from a well-known university dealing with matters of national import; he is a Welshman (a distancing device of itself) who is relatively humble among others and speaks in rusticisms as a way of deflecting attention away from his powers.
When he is questioned by Griffin, “Canst thou, my freend, from foorth the vaults beneathe/ Call up the ghosts of those long since deceast,/ Or from the upper region of the ayre/ Fetche swift winged spirits to effect thy will?”, Kent merely answers “Can you, my Lord, and you, and you, and you,/ Go to the venson for your suppers drest,/ And afterward goe lay ye downe to rest?” (7). In a similar scene, Bacon summons the devil; Kent answers a serious question with a nonsensical question, and actually never does any of the things Griffin attributes to him.

Kent’s style of magic and his way of describing it are part of the same device. There are no learned disquisitions or conjuring of devils; Kent refers to his “wit” more than his art, makes only one reference to “Chiromancie,” and feigns palmistry only to add a sense of attention-getting wonderment to what he already knows about Sydanen and Marian. The audience never actually sees the practice of magic on the stage; although Kent makes it clear that his disguises are magical, it is simply a matter of donning a different costume each time he wishes to appear as someone else. The play climaxes with the least visually exciting display of magic ever to appear on any stage, with Griffin and Powesse simply walking into the church past Cumber because Kent has cast an invisible mist over his eyes.

This is not to say that pleasing spectacle is absent from the play. Kent uses a familiar spirit, Shrimp, who appears as a small boy who can become invisible at will and displays remarkable proficiency in music and song. As spirits go, Shrimp is not particularly fearsome, nor is he likely to cause the audience to attribute his appearance to demonic forces. Most of the spectacle in the play is musical, and most of it emanates from Shrimp. In this sense, *John a Kent* bears a much stronger resemblance to *The
Tempest than it does to Greene’s play. Shrimp and Ariel also perform a similar function in relation to the audience. They both act as a mechanism to distance the sorcerer protagonist from his magic; in other words, although the plays are replete with magic, most of the effects are produced by someone other than the protagonist, and what “magic” the audience does see is typically related to the (relatively) harmless pursuits of music and dance.24 There are, in fact, as many scenes in John a Kent that feature music as there are scenes that feature magic, and the two are frequently linked.

Both of the magical contests between Kent and Cumber rely on music and dance. At the beginning of Act Three, Cumber unveils his plan to unnerve Griffin and Powesse. He disguises himself as Kent, and shows the lovers an “antic” with each of the four principal opponents (the rival lovers and the fathers of the women) singing a song of love lost or wayward offspring. The stage directions of the antics reveal the tone; the singers are “queintly disguysed,” they dance, curtsey, and either rise from under the stage or “from out of a tree, if possible it may be.” Although this is the height of the “evil” magician’s magic, it is nothing but pure entertainment. The fathers’ songs are slightly ribald, the lovers’ songs slightly menacing; when one considers that Munday was accounted among the best balladeers of the day and was selected to write several pageants for the inaugurations of Lord Mayors (Collier, xlix-li), it may be surmised that the whole scene was quite satisfactory to the audience.

Kent is bemused by Cumber’s ability to assume his appearance and produce the antics, even more so by his ability to bar the castle door to the protagonists. However, he quickly uses Shrimp to ascertain that Cumber is plotting a play to further disgrace Kent,

24 The clear difference between these entertainments in the plays lies in the difference between folk dance and courtly masque; the implications of Shakespeare’s use of “higher” entertainment will be discussed below.
and that he is not yet in possession of the ladies; their appearance is a mere illusion.

After some brief surveillance, Kent reveals his plan to thwart Cumber, again relying on theatrical language to make his point:

I know not what this play of his will prove,
But his intent, to deal with shadows only,
I mean to alter; we will have the substance:
And lest he should want actors in his play,
Prince Griffin, Lord Powesse, and my merry master,
I will introduce as I shall find due cause.
And if it chance as some of us do look,
One of us Johns must play beside the book. (42)

Kent’s insistence on substance over shadows is important; he will repeat it in his final stratagem. It is also reassuring to the audience to see Kent reassert his authorship of Cumber’s play as well as the play as a whole; unlike Cumber, “an abce scholler,” (60), Kent can “play beside the booke,” or perform extempore.

This, of course, is precisely what happens to Cumber’s play, although the exact sequence of events beggars paraphrase. Cumber’s plan is to disgrace Kent by exposing him to abuse in the form of both illusory spirits and actual rustics; Kent will be made to wear the fool’s coat and be roughly treated. Kent anticipates him, however, and disguises himself as Cumber before Cumber can remove his Kent disguise; promising them that they will be able to abuse “Kent,” the actual Kent (disguised as Cumber) rallies Llwellen, Chester, Moorton, and Pembrook with the words “Though once I minded but to use your shadows, Pardon me, now I may employ your persons” (45). He then sets them forth.
to abuse Cumber, disguised as Kent; Cumber, believing them to be spirits he has raised, is shocked when his real allies begin to insult and abuse him. The cycle is repeated several times: Cumber is congratulated by the ladies and Griffin and Powesse, who believe him to be Kent, on his success in reuniting them; trounced and dressed in motley by the rustics; and made to play the fool in the morris. While the disguises are confusing to a reader, in performance the audience joins Kent as the only people in the theater not deceived by them. The complicity of the sorcerer/author with the audience is complete, and it occurs during a play within a play capped by a rousing dance familiar to everyone.

Although Cumber admits defeat when all disguises are stripped away, he and Kent agree to strive once more for mastery, with no less than the ladies at stake. It is agreed that a marriage will take place at Chester Abbey, and that Cumber himself will act as porter at the door and be in sole charge of who may enter. Griffin and Powesse are concerned about their ability to disguise themselves as Moorton and Pembrook and gain entry, but Kent pushes their fears aside with his plan:

Tush! Wele no shapes, nor none of these disguysings:
They heretofore served bothe his turne and myne.
As now ye are so shall ye passe the gate;
And for the blame shall not reyle alone
On poore John Cumber, when the faulte is spyed,
Albeit his skill will be the lesse therby,
The Prince Llwellen and the Earle of Chester
Shall bothe be by, and graunt as much he:
Nay, more, them selves shall bring ye to the Chappell,
And at their handes shall you receive your Brydes.

If this I doo not, ere two houres be spent,

Never let me be called more John a Kent. (58)

There are several elements of the speech that are vital to Kent’s role as protagonist. First, Kent appears to abjure magic, although we shall see how problematic that claim is. Second, Kent promises to have the fathers of the brides deliver Griffin and Powesse to their daughters themselves, thus legitimizing the marriage in every point. Finally, Kent makes his last reference to himself as author with the familiar “two hours” reference to the time of the play, again cementing his bond with the audience.

What Kent predicts seems to come true to the smallest point. Cumber expects disguise and magic; when Griffin and Powesse appear as themselves, Cumber immediately passes them off to the fathers. In a play that makes such use of meta-theatricality, it is a beautiful irony of dramatic history that the most mundane element of practical stagecraft fails the reader completely at this point. The only surviving manuscript of the play is badly damaged on the last page; the climatic scene contains only the first or last half of every speech, so that everything said is either lacking the sense or the attribution. This is precisely the point where one would expect love to triumph and magic to be renounced, and it is definitely clear that love does triumph. It is decidedly less clear that magic is also renounced. The last full speech retained in the manuscript is missing the name of the character that speaks it, but that character upbraids Cumber from afar, “O rare magitian! That hast not the power/ To beat aside a sillie dazeling mist,/ Which a meere abce scholler in the arte/ Can doo it with the least facilitie.” (60) This seems to indicate that Kent has magically obscured Cumber’s vision,
and has not fully relied upon truth and right appearance to carry the day. However, there is absolutely no textual evidence to indicate why Cumber believes Griffin and Powesse to be other than themselves; he merely chastises them for being late and hastens them into the church. The half-speeches remaining in the play cannot shed light on the subject; the only clues that magic has been renounced are Kent’s earlier declaration to do away with disguise and the final two half-lines of the play: “*** fortune was not evill/ *** overmatchde the Devill,” (62) which are ambiguous at best, given that we do not know who speaks them or what the first half of them are. The best evidence is surmise; in a play containing so many features sure to appeal to a popular audience, it would be curious indeed if it were to be the only play of the period where the magician does not renounce his magic at the end and remains triumphant. However, Munday’s very use of popular features in his writing has been questioned in a way pertinent to the argument.

Among his many other compositions, Munday’s two plays on the character of Robin Hood also show his sense of the popular audience. Tom Hayes, in his book The Birth of Popular Culture: Ben Jonson, Maid Marian, and Robin Hood, casts Munday as an absolute villain for his treatment of Robin Hood; he sees Munday as a “sycophantic, opportunistic writer” who was “encouraged to defuse the more dangerous and subversive aspects of the legend by blurring the class antagonism inherent in the legend, thus making the outlaw and his band palatable to all classes” (102). Hayes’s censure develops out of his desire to show how folk culture is “simultaneously represented, appropriated, and marginalized” by the rise of the middle class in Shakespearean England, and it is relevant to John a Kent in that Munday does in fact use the above-mentioned “folk” devices in his play (3). I have already stated that my intention is not to show playwrights as agents or
subverters of government or church power as it deals with the supernatural, but as writers trying to make the most money possible by giving their audience what it wanted, and thus I cannot feel Hayes’s self-righteous indignation at Munday’s ability to make folk devices and the supernatural “palatable to all classes.” It seems, rather, that Munday deftly deploys the possibly controversial aspects of his play precisely in such a way as to please the largest segment of his audience, even if in the process he does “simply drain it of social energy” (58). Hayes’s belief that Munday ultimately caters to the powers-that-be in his writings would lend credence to the idea that he would not risk offending them by not disowning magic at the end of the play.

There is, however, a difference of opinion on the social significance of *John a Kent*, and it suggests Munday and Greene may have shared an even closer connection concerning their sorcery plays. Donna Hamilton argues that *John a Kent* is primarily a response to what she perceives as anti-Catholicism in *Friar Bacon*. I have shown that the sorcery play did achieve its greatest popularity in the midst of a three-fold religious controversy, but Hamilton imputes explicitly religious motives to playwrights beyond what I have suggested. In her view “Friar Bacon’s magic is, like the magic that Protestants claimed was at the heart of Catholic ritual and ceremony, a disgraceful sham” and the fulfillment of the play’s message is the movement away from superstition to a new order of Protestant rule (114). Hamilton believes that Munday’s use of traditional folk elements and magic is highly charged with social significance:

> using old traditions to mock the enemy, *John a Kent* demystifies the rhetoric of control being used against Catholics, revealing it to be more full of shadows than anything of which the Catholics could be accused.
Shifting, rather than reversing, the terms that produce meaning in *Friar Bacon*, John a Kent offers an alternative to repressive and ultimately ineffective state control over religion. (114)

In arguing for Munday’s religious tolerance, Hamilton is taking on an enormous burden of proof, given Munday’s reputation as violently anti-Catholic. Leaving aside the issue of the Campion pamphlets, I see two problems with Hamilton’s theory, which left unrefuted presents a clear motive for Munday NOT to abjure magic at the end of the play. First, Bacon’s magic is not a “disgraceful sham,” but rather so effective that it is difficult to control and directly leads to fatalities. As we have seen, Anglicans and Puritans concluded that Catholic magic must either be denied or demonized; allowing Bacon to practice dangerous and efficacious magic AND successfully repent does not seem to fit an anti-Catholic agenda. Hamilton does connect a number of “folk” references and locations in the play with recusant activity and/or older Catholic associations, which is a strong point in her favor, as is the Countess’s admonition when Kent tells the ladies to wash themselves in St. Winifred’s spring: “but my Lord condemns these ancient rules,/ Religiously observed in these parts” (12). However, Hamilton insists that the most telling point is Kent’s decision to have his favored lovers enter the church undisguised, in marked contrast to the disguises ubiquitous in the play so far; she sees this as “a moment when people are able to enter the church as themselves, undisguised, not pretending to be something they are not” (115). Here Hamilton clearly does not address the problem posed by Kent’s last speech, asserting only that “countering Deynville’s suggestion that

25 Hamilton’s argument on this score relies on close examination of the rhetorical devices used by Munday in his anti-Catholic tracts. She feels that his close connection with the execution of Campion placed him in a position where he could not afford to vacillate, but also argues that he uses the pamphlets as a means of communicating the words of Campion and other Catholics to recusants when they would have otherwise been censored.
the only way to get in is to dress in the clothes of the enemy, John a Kent announces that their strategy will be to use no magic and no disguises,” ignoring the ambiguity addressed above (118). Although I feel that Munday’s attitude towards his audience’s expectations would have led him to renounce magic, ultimately, like so much else in the play, the matter remains a secret shared between the author/magician Kent and his original audience.
Chapter Four: “Falling to a devilish exercise”

Robert Greene and Anthony Munday formulated an approach to the magus play that was largely comic, although the role of magic remained problematic at best. As we have seen, Greene certainly altered his original source to more fully condemn magic, providing a counterpoint to the lighter romance episodes. The remaining early extant magus play, Christopher Marlowe’s *Doctor Faustus*, is now by far the most highly esteemed. However, the counterpoint between comedy and condemnation that Greene exploits is often decried in Marlowe. *Doctor Faustus* can undoubtedly be read as a condemnation of magic, but it too had its origin in a popular chapbook that freely intermixed comedy and tragedy. In fact, as the play evolved throughout its stage history it became more comedic, a development that indicates that a large part of its initial appeal was based on the episodes now deemed unworthy of Marlowe’s hand.

In his 1997 book, *Marlowe’s Counterfeit Profession*, Patrick Cheney points to three key problems that every critic encounters when discussing *Doctor Faustus*. Cheney’s term for these problems is “doubling”: there are two extant and substantially different texts of the play; the date of its composition is unclear, making it uncertain if it represents the culmination of Marlowe’s achievement or an intermediate step in his development; and the play shows the hands of two authors in the “A” version, and two more revisers in the “B” version (190ff). The second of these conditions poses a slight problem for this dissertation, although not the problem that Cheney makes explicit; I am not interested in tracing Marlowe’s development, nor am I concerned with *Doctor Faustus*’s ultimate standing in the Marlovian canon. While it is obviously a worthwhile pursuit to correctly ascribe texts and parts thereof to the proper author, my concern is
with the play’s effect on its audience; while Eric Rasmussen presents a compelling case for Henry Porter as Marlowe’s original collaborator, it ultimately does not matter who it was for the purposes of this argument (71-73).

The problem of date is significant for this dissertation because of the uncertain dating of the three early sorcery plays I discuss: *Doctor Faustus, Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, and *John a Kent and John a Cumber*. Each play has its advocates as the earliest, and thus the distinction of originating a productive and profitable genre of English drama. However, no single argument is compelling, and the issue must still be considered unresolved. While it would be interesting to know the proper chronological sequence of the plays in order to trace the borrowings and influences the authors display, it is enough for this study to show that the plays appeared in relatively quick succession and clearly found favor with the popular audience. Roslyn Knutson conclusively demonstrates that revivals of *Doctor Faustus* were numerous and profitable; the first such revival in 1594 ran “almost continuously through 5 January 1597. During this long run, the play received twenty-four performances that averaged 24s. 8d. to Henslowe” (35). Knutson also lists a number of “Friar” plays that appeared on the stage from 1588 through 1602; in addition to the plays discussed here, there were also *John of Bordeaux* (an extant play that is largely a reworking of *Friar Bacon* and contains many of the same characters) and the non-extant “Friar Francis,” “Friar Spendleton,” “Friar Fox and Gillian of Brentford,” and “Friar Rush and the Proud Woman of Antwerp.” A revival of *Doctor Faustus* accompanied “Friar Spendleton” and another non-extant “Friar Bacon” play, as well as later plays such as “The Wise Man of West Chester” and *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*. The order in which the plays appeared is of less importance than the facts that they
spawned a number of imitators and that *Doctor Faustus* was clearly linked to them by popularity and subject matter.

The problems of authorship and textual integrity bear more directly on this dissertation, and they become intertwined in my approach. *Doctor Faustus* is clearly the greatest aesthetic achievement of the first wave of the sorcery play, and it was also the most popular on the stage. There is no shortage of critical commentary on the play in general, or its magical elements in particular, and more commentary in this vein would be superfluous. The aim of this discussion is more modest; I simply wish to show that the additions and revisions made to the play between its first and second printing were made to add specific elements to the play that would make it even more appealing to changing audience tastes by exploiting religious friction and expanding the comic scope of the original.

This stance in itself presupposes a number of assumptions. First, I accept the contention most fully explained by Eric Rasmussen that the A-text is the earlier of the two chief texts and represents a work closer to that of Marlowe and his original collaborator. I also accept Rasmussen’s contention that the changes made in the B-text are most likely the revisions that Henslowe paid William Byrde and Samuel Rawley for in 1602, and that Byrde and Rawley probably revised the text enough to account for the changes beyond the added scenes, with the exception of the censorship imposed on the play sometime after 1606 (*A textual companion to Doctor Faustus*, passim). This is the overwhelming contemporary scholarly consensus, but it must be noted that the exact opposite conclusion was reached and embraced by the previous generation of scholars,
led by the textual studies of W. W. Greg. This is noteworthy because there are already the rumblings of a reaction against some of Rasmussen’s findings.

In a 2006 article in *The Papers of the Bibliographic Society of America* Michael Keefer has decisively rejected Rasmussen’s claim that the A-text was printed from Marlowe’s authorial manuscripts. After considerable deliberation, I have determined that this does not affect my conclusions in any meaningful way. To show that Faustus changed as a character from the chapbook to the two versions of the play does not require access to Marlowe’s original manuscript unless one believes that the A-text as it now stands is a completely and thoroughly revised version of Marlowe’s original, far more even than the B-text revises the A-text. There is no foundation for this belief, and I have not even encountered such a suggestion. In fact, Keefer’s revision of Rasmussen’s theory leaves untouched what is important for this dissertation; he makes a crucial distinction between versions of plays and texts of plays when he concludes “we clearly know which version of the play is the earlier and more authentic one…the no less orthodox view that B has no textual authority, but is primarily of interest for what it shows about early seventeenth-century revisions and reinscriptions, must be rejected” (257). I hope to avoid this conflict between the texts of the plays by not basing my analysis upon textual minutiae, but rather by examining large passages of thematic import in the discussion that follows.

There are legitimate reasons for a critic to focus on one text instead of the other, and there are reasons to use a composite text; however, in this case it is certainly appropriate to look at the two texts forming a continuum of the Faust legend in England, beginning with the original translation of the *Faustbuch* titled *The History of the*
While this is not the place for a thorough examination of the Faust legend in European literature, it should be pointed out that the literary efforts of Marlowe, Goethe, and Mann represent exceptions to the overall treatment of Faust rather than the rule. In other words, Faust has had many more incarnations as a “popular” figure than he has as the main character of “serious literature,” to use unacceptably broad classifications to express an undeniably true circumstance. J.W. Smeed’s study of the Faust legend, *Faust in Literature*, does not dismiss the “popular” strain of the Faust legend, but is obviously more concerned with the “literary” works. Smeed acknowledges, though, that the original printed versions of Faust are German chapbooks, and he consistently chooses one or two works in any given period as representative of the “literary” Faust while quickly mentioning many more popular versions. Marlowe’s play was largely drawn from a popular chapbook as Goethe’s would later be drawn from puppet plays drawn from popularizations of Marlowe’s play; until Goethe’s work, popular treatments of Faust vastly outnumbered literary treatments (5-6). Lois Potter points to the heart of the matter by asserting

Successive adaptations, in Britain and abroad, which made the play increasingly spectacular and comic, only developed what, judging from contemporary references to bushy-haired devils with fireworks, was already there. As Michael Hattaway puts it, ‘it was the spectacle of the devils and not the mind of the hero that was at the center of the play.’…By
now [1675] Faustus was making trees move and calling up an army of
devils. (263)

Even to the present day, Smeed points out, “the history of the Faust legend has its
oddities: Goethe’s Faust reworked in Bavarian dialect, the Faust theme used to provide a
puff for an encyclopedia, even an early eighteenth-century Faust pantomime enacted by
performing dogs. There have been Faust postcards and china statuettes of
Mephistopheles” (13). By and large, Faust throughout his history has been a character
with which to entertain the popular audience, rather than a grand literary expression of
the dangers and virtues of an inexhaustible thirst for knowledge. While the changes from
the original English translation of the Faust legend (EFB) to the A-text serve to debase
Faustus’ motives, the revisions and additions in the B-text undoubtedly emphasize the
spectacular and the comic and set the play on the course Potter describes. The best way
to clarify these changes is to first view the EFB in comparison with the plays at certain
key points to ascertain the changes made to Faustus’ character and ambition, and then to
analyze the material added to the B-text to expand the comic scenes of the A-text.

There are two key thematic differences between the EFB and the plays. The first
is Faustus’ bravado and complicity in his own damnation. Faust is certainly the
embodiment of pride in all versions, but in the EFB he is proud enough to think that he
can outwit the devil; as we shall see, he thinks this because Mephistopheles literally
makes him think it through a form of subtle mind control. When Mephistopheles
originally announces to Faustus that the only way he can gain what he has asked for is to
promise his soul, Faustus angrily replies “I will have my request and yet I will not be
damned”; when Mephistopheles then refuses his request, Faustus banishes him from the
room, but not before commanding him to return at evening after consultation with Lucifer. After this scene, Faustus is shown “pondering with himself how he might obtain his request of the devil, without the loss of his soul, yet he was fully resolved in himself, rather than to want his pleasure, to what the spirit and his lord should condition upon” (792). This is a surprisingly sophisticated summary of Faustus’ condition, showing the conflict between Faustus’ conscious mind and his baser instincts, but it is consistent with the idea in the EFB that Faustus is beguiled and deceived far more than he is in the plays.

Further confirmation of this theory is found in the next chapter of the EFB, the exchange of the list of demands between Faustus and Mephistophiles. Unlike Marlowe’s adaptation, Faustus is incurious about the nature of Hell and the torments therein, and Mephistophiles does not give anything resembling Marlowe’s famous “This is Hell, nor am I out of it” speech. Ceri Sullivan has pointed to the theological, as well as the dramatic, purpose of Mephistophiles’ insistence on the signing of the pact, his painstaking review of the terms, and his impassioned speech about the full nature of Hell. She ascertains

many conditions are necessary if Faustus is to sin mortally: knowledge of the gravity of the act; of its consequences; of his freedom to choose between good and evil; and an actual, conscious, historical decision. It could, therefore, be argued that the legalism of the bond and the exact descriptions of hell given by Mephostophilis are essential to damn Faustus, not merely to provide dramatic justification. (50)

Marlowe’s Faustus is provided all the information he needs to make an informed decision, and he defiantly chooses the route leading to his eventual damnation. In
opposition to Marlowe’s defiant admonition to “learn manly fortitude” from Faustus, the EFB’s Faustus is carried away by the delights he has been promised; his “mind was inflamed, that he forgot his soul, and promises Mephistopheles to hold all things as he mentioned them; he thought the devil was not so black as they use to paint him, nor hell so hot as people say” (793). Faustus in the EFB is constantly tempted and consistently falls; Marlowe’s Faustus openly courts ruin and brazenly invites his own damnation.

An interesting comparison may be made between the EFB and the Marlowe plays concerning the signing of the demonic pact. Marlowe introduces a whole spectrum of divine agencies to guide Faustus on the proper path; he is advised by the Good Angel and experiences difficulties drawing blood to sign his contract. The recent film adaptation of Faust by Czech filmmaker Jan Svenkmajer captures Marlowe’s intent very clearly in this scene; angels (represented by wooden puppets) keep breaking the quill Faust tries to write with, much to the frustration of Faust and Mephistopheles. After a number of such interruptions, the evil angels storm the good angels and allow Faust to sign the contract. The implications are clear: Marlowe’s Faustus is made fully aware of the battle between opposing forces for his soul, and he willfully chooses the evil course. In the EFB, however, there is no mention of good angels and Faustus encounters no difficulties signing the pact; in fact, it is an impressive legal contract that Faustus devises himself and easily replicates upon demand. The EFB’s Faustus appears to be left to the mercy of Mephistopheles’ wiles, with no divine guidance to help him avoid his tragic outcome.

Mephistopheles’ revelation of Hell to Faustus comes at a later time and in a different vein in the EFB, and the manner of the revelation further colors Faustus’ character. It begins when Faustus begins to ask Mephistopheles about Hell in a purely
intellectual way; its shape, construction, origin, etc. Through the series of answers to his questions, Faustus begins to see parallels between himself and Lucifer as willfully fallen creatures of God and the realization leads him to despair. It is at this point that Mephistopheles reveals the cruelest torment of all: he has deliberately encouraged and misled Faustus his entire life and his eventual damnation is largely the result of unperceived devilish intervention. Mephistopheles reveals to Faustus that there are such spirits innumerable, that can come by men, and tempt them, and drive them to sin, and weaken their belief; for we rule the hearts of kings and princes, stirring them up to war and bloodshed, and to this intent do we spread ourselves through all the world, as the utter enemies of God and his son Christ, yea, and all that worship them, and that thou knowest by thyself Faustus…To this said Faustus, Then thou didst also beguile me?

(805)

Mephistopheles answers Faustus bluntly; he admits to entering into his mind and causing him to have thoughts of necromancy. There is a subtle but crucial distinction between the EFB and Marlowe on this point; while Faustus is never in control of Mephistopheles in either case, in the EFB Faustus turns to Mephistopheles because Mephistopheles has already begun to warp and control his mind. In Marlowe, Mephistopheles is clear that although Faustus did not directly summon him, he appeared as a result of Faustus’ actions:

That was the cause, but yet per accidens,

For when we hear one rack the name of God,

Abjure the Scriptures and his Savior Christ,
We fly in hope to get his glorious soul;
Nor will we come unless he use such means
Whereby he is in danger to be damned. (1.3.44-9)

Marlowe’s Faustus could have avoided damnation simply by not calling on Mephistopheles; in the EFB, Faustus has no choice but to call on him, and he does so because he is being controlled. Not only is Faustus not provided with heavenly aids in the EFB, it appears as though he has been abandoned by God to the devils.

This lends irony to the second key thematic difference: the Faustus of the EFB is primarily motivated by intellectual curiosity that is only partly his own, while Marlowe’s Faustus professes to be motivated by his own thirst for knowledge yet quickly abandons intellectual pursuits for the fleshly pleasures of the world. Upon realizing that he has been deceived, the EFB Faust correctly diagnoses his fatal flaw:

Ah, woe is me, most miserable Faustus! How have I been deceived? Had I not a desire to know too much, I had not been in this case; for having studied the lives of the holy saints and prophets, and thereby thought to understand sufficiently heavenly matters, I thought myself not worthy to be called Dr. Faustus, if I should not also know the secrets of hell, and be associated with the furious fiends thereof; now therefore must I be rewarded accordingly. (805)

Faustus here realizes that intellectual ambition is his downfall, whereas Marlowe’s Faustus is damned for more worldly ambitions. The Faust of the EFB never abandons his intellectual curiosity; even after resolving that his sin is too large to be forgiven, he
perseveres in astronomical and calendrical studies and achieves a measure of renown as a maker of almanacs.

Marlowe’s Faustus, on the other hand, pays only lip service to the desire for greater knowledge. Immediately after he settles on necromancy as the proper course for his studies, Faustus falls to a largely material reverie; he will gather gold, pearls, and exotica; he will enclose Germany in brass fortifications and engage in espionage; he will invent dread weapons of war and rule as a king. The only aspect of his fantasy that relates to his intellectual curiosity is that he’ll have spirits “read me strange philosophy” (I.1.84). In fact, Faustus’ opening speech rejects all his learning precisely because none of it suffices to make him truly great in the worldly sense; while he can gain the admiration of his fellows through his oratory, he has already tasted that pleasure and found it wanting. The desire for wealth and power grows as he moves towards the act of conjuration. As Sara Munson Deats points out, the scene involving Valdes and Cornelius, “the only non-comic episode without correspondence in the source,” stresses the desire for wealth and power, with occult learning only mentioned as a necessary adjunct (214). Further evidence of Faustus’ lust for power is included in both the A and B texts in Act 2, Scene 2, when the Good and Bad Angels reappear immediately before Faustus signs his pact with Mephistopheles. After the Good Angel implores Faustus to turn his mind to repentance and grace, the Bad Angel clinches the argument with his admonition to “think of honor and wealth” (2.1.21). “Wealth” is in fact the magic phrase that steels Faustus’ resolve, as his next soliloquy reveals his desire for political position (the “seigniory of Emden”) and its attendant prosperity. Faustus begins the play by lamenting the inability of his knowledge and the limitations of human endeavor to change
and improve the lot of humanity; the temptations of the Bad Angel underscore his turn towards self-interest and are still far more grandiose than the actual triviality of the magic he “performs.”

Additionally, Marlowe’s Faustus quickly devolves from his desire for worldly power into an obsession with fleshly pleasure. In comparison, it is only in the last four years of his pact that the Faust of the EFB becomes obsessed with worldly pleasure, and that is in despair at contemplating the foolish bargain he has made. Moreover, his dalliance with Helen of Troy is not given the grim implications it has in Marlowe’s versions. There is no hint that Helen is a succubus or that Faustus commits his final unforgivable sin by turning from repentance to lust, as is clearly meant by Marlowe’s famous line “Her lips suck forth my soul; see, where it flies” (5.1.95). There is some measure of human feeling in Faustus’ relations with Helen in the EFB: “he fell in love with her, and made her his common concubine and bed-fellow; for she was so beautiful and delightful a piece, that he could not be an hour from her, if he should thereof have suffer’d death, she had stolen away his heart” (874-5). While Faustus is attracted to Helen’s sexuality, there are also two explicit mentions made of his love for her, in addition to his lust.

The final large change in Faustus’ character occurs in his speech to the assembled scholars on the night of his demise. Just as Greene eliminates Bacon’s repentance and instruction to his peers, Marlowe strips his Faustus of the lessons learned in the EFB, leaving only a Faustus concerned for his own death and damnation. The EFB, however, contains a lengthy disquisition on the exact nature of Faustus’ fall and the following advice to the gathered scholars:
I beseech you let this my lamentable end...be a sufficient warning that you have God always before your eyes, praying unto him, that he will defend you from the temptation of the devil, and all his false deceits...Neither let the evil companionship of the wicked mislead you, as it hath done me: visit earnestly and often the church; war and strive continually against the devil, with a good and steadfast belief in God and Jesus Christ, and use your vocation in holiness. (881)

This Faustus exists in a universe where the devil may enter unawares and tempt an essentially helpless man. His advice to his fellows is to pray constantly for the aid of God to ward off the temptations of the devil, aid that was apparently lacking in his life. While he began with a scheme to cheat the devil of his knowledge while retaining his own soul, all of Faustus’ decisions and motivations in the EFB are open to question; did he really think that he could cheat the devil, or did Mephistopheles make him have those thoughts? Marlowe never gives any indication that his Faustus is not working with the full use of his faculties; while he may be deceived as to the extent of his power in the relationship and frequently cowed by physical threats, there is always a sense in Marlowe that Faustus could repent and that God has provided him with avenues to do so.26 In a strange way, considering the reputation of the EFB as a popular chapbook filled with low comedy, Faustus retains a measure of dignity here that is denied him in Marlowe; our last view of Faustus in the EFB is urging his friends to use him as a cautionary tale, and his friends merely hear him cry out briefly as the devils brutally slaughter him. It is true that Faustus’ dismembered body is recovered the next day in a pile of dung, but there is a

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26 It must be noted that there is a considerable difference between the A- and B- texts in this regard, specifically regarding B-text 5.2.90-98. This difference is discussed in some detail below.
difference between the desecration of a corpse and the debasement of a soul. Marlowe, on the other hand, gives us Faustus’ last pathetic moments; while his final speech is justly famous, it is a far cry from the defiance of the man who admonished Mephistopheles to learn manly fortitude from him.

None of this is meant to suggest that the EFB is a work of aesthetic beauty comparable to Marlowe’s play, nor that its reading audience would have seen Faustus as a pitiable figure. The EFB contains all of the broad comedy found in the A- and B- texts, and more besides. Marlowe’s revision of his source is not nearly as drastic as Greene’s reworking of *The Famous Historie of Friar Bacon*, but it is undertaken in much the same spirit. What Marlowe has excised or changed is what serves to make Faustus’ actions understandable, if still wholly damnable. When Marlowe’s later “collaborators” returned to the EFB, what they restored was more broad comedy without the sense of desperation and world-weariness that accompanies it in the original. In all three versions Faustus is Rabelaisian in his appetites. Most of the little he accomplishes in the plays is related to food, drink, or sex, whether robbing the Pope’s feast of meat and wine or conjuring grapes for the pregnant duchess; in the B-text and in the EFB, he eats an entire load of hay, the ultimate statement of the gross animalism to which he has degenerated. He quickly gives up his desire for marriage in return for a ready supply of concubines, although the EFB provides him a modicum of recognizable human feeling in his love for Helen. The A-text uses comic scenes as a foil to enhance the horror of the audience at the pettiness of Faustus’ bargain; the B-text includes even more of these scenes for their own sake. Given that the play had already been popular for a long time, it stands to reason
that these later revisions reflect what the audience wanted; Faustus was already well on
the path that would lead to puppet shows and troupes of canine actors.

The A- and B- Texts

There are seven substantial passages in the B-text that do not appear in the A-text, and they can be broken into three subsets:

1. Comic scenes adopted from the EFB. These include the expansion of the “horned knight” episode, with the introduction of Benvolio as a major character; his subsequent revenge plot; and the meeting of the Horse-courser, Carter, and others at the tavern, where they exchange unstaged stories of Faustus’ trickery taken from the EFB.

2. The scenes at the papal court where Faustus and Mephistophilis rescue Bruno and set him on his way to becoming a rival pope.

3. Scenes that comment on Faustus’ complicity in his own damnation and his ability to repent. These include a large part of Act 5, Scene 2, the completely new Act 5, Scene 3, and the numerous stage directions indicating that devils are already on stage at various points in the play.

Many of these additions can only be explained by an audience desire for spectacle and farce; this does not diminish their importance or their quality, but rather emphasizes and exaggerates the function of the comic scenes in the original. Speaking of the revisions as a whole, Thomas Healy has noted “the more likely scenario of the ‘B’ text’s additions is that they were principally conceived to expand and clarify what the companies already felt they possessed in the ‘A’ text, not to recast or censor the play…on balance, it appears that the ‘B’ text helps clarify how the ‘A’ text was previously performed” (183-4). In
terms of the comic additions, one really need not venture beyond Healy’s theory for an explanation. The mixture of low comedy and tragedy that so vexed 19th and early 20th century commentators on the play would not have seemed incongruous to an Elizabethan audience. This mixture of genre had plainly figured in the development of English drama, as evidenced by Sidney’s lament in *The Defence of Poesy* that

> all their plays be neither right tragedies nor right comedies, mingling kings and clowns, not because the matter so carrieth it, but thrust in the clown by head and shoulders to play a part in majestical matters, with neither decency nor discretion; so as neither the admiration and commiseration, nor the right sportfulness, is by their mongrel tragic-comedy obtained. (1663)

This comment was made directly before the great flowering of the English stage, and it shows that the blend of comedy and tragedy that reached its full maturity in Shakespeare was already an integral part of the rudimentary efforts of his predecessors.

Perhaps even more relevant to Marlowe is the precedent of the morality play; Bakeless has pointed out that while “in Canterbury, little Kit Marlowe was probably having even better opportunity to see the drama of his day. Canterbury was interested in drama and had been long before Marlowe was born” (31). Some of the drama Marlowe witnessed in Canterbury was the still persistent morality play, a genre that certainly has connections to the great drama of the Elizabethan theater. The links between them are complex, but they have been thoroughly explored and established by David Bevington, Robert Weimann, and a host of other critics and scholars. While it is probably incorrect to read *Doctor Faustus* strictly as a morality play, it does occupy a clear place in the
transition from the morality proper to the more familiar Elizabethan forms. In a way, Marlowe has inverted the morality play, producing a mirror image that represents “backsliding” into occasional moments of virtue and doubt before plummeting to damnation rather than ascending to salvation. Additionally, by focusing on a semi-historical character known to his audience, Marlowe has taken a step away from the overtly allegorical significance of the early moralities. Marlowe’s variation on the morality is in keeping with a gradual transition in the form noted by Lawrence Clopper, who notes “many of these do not follow such moralities as Mankind and The Castle of Perseverance so much as Bale’s King John, in which morality figures are mixed in with characters who have personal names or are historical persons” (285). In other words, Marlowe is instrumental in establishing a variation of the morality that relies on characterization more than allegorical or personified types, but he freely retains the comic elements of the morality that tended to deflate the Vice figure in the play. Marlowe’s thundering rhetoric and use of classical allusion may have obscured the morality origin of the play in the tragic scenes, but the interspersed comic scenes would have performed a vital role in orienting the audience towards exactly what they were seeing. Rather than the jarring shifts they appear to be when reading the play, when seen in the theater the scenes involving Wagner and the clowns would serve to mimic, mock, and thereby clarify the “high magic” scenes they were juxtaposed against. David Bevington’s early appraisal of Marlowe’s success in this regard is still the most concise explanation of what works in Doctor Faustus:

Marlowe’s legacy in the moral tradition was thus, broadly speaking, twofold. From it he was able to discover a formula for Christian tragedy
based on the unrepentant decline of comic vice, and a formula for vivid
chronicle (or romance) portraying a succession of stage-filling episodes in
the life of a secular hero, often mixed with humorous scenes involving
historically related figures of low comedy. His indebtedness to classical
learning and to his reading in various subjects was of course considerable,
but the native tradition became vital in the structure of his plays written
for a popular London company. (198)

The play was obviously a tremendous popular success before the revisions; with the
tragic material of the EFB already fully exploited, nothing would be more obvious to the
revisers than to return to the source and exploit the other remaining mine of material, the
comic.

The addition of the scene with the rival popes is more difficult to explain. While
Faustus visits Rome in the EFB, the conflict of the popes appears to be an original
invention of the B-text revisers. The scene is usually read as a bit of Protestant
propaganda; in light of Barnabe Barnes’s exploitation of anti-Catholic sentiment in The
Devil’s Charter in 1607 (discussed below), such an explanation would hold if the
additions to the play occurred around that time. However, if this scene is part of the
revisions Rawley and Byrde were paid to make, they were made a full five years earlier.
Pope-baiting seems to have been a popular pastime throughout the period, but the years
between the tract wars and the Gunpowder Plot seem to be relatively quiet in that regard.
Perhaps the revisers were simply more in touch with simmering tensions in the popular
audience than we can hope to be four hundred years later. Recent criticism seems equally

27 Rasmussen suggests that Rawley drew upon Foxe’s Acts and Monuments for this scene, noting the
similarities between the anti-papal sentiment expressed here and that of Rawley’s own When You See Me,
You Know Me (90), but see below.
confused about the significance of the scene. For a representative sample of critical
disagreement on the implications of this scene one must only contrast Leah Marcus’s
“Textual Instability and Ideological Difference: The Case of Doctor Faustus,” which
suggests that the “A text is clearly more ‘Protestant’ and the B text more ‘Anglican’ or
Anglo-Catholic,” (165) with David Bevington’s assertion in “Staging the A- and B- Texts
of Doctor Faustus” that the scene of the rival popes is “patriotic Protestant bravado” (44).
The examination of theological niceties in Doctor Faustus seems to have become a
cottage industry, which is ironic given Marlowe’s much-discussed atheism, but it is
difficult to imagine the original audience composed of discerning theologians. I think it
likely that the conflation of Catholicism with sorcery discussed in a preceding chapter
provides enough explanation, without thereby turning Faustus into a Protestant hero.
John Parker’s The Aesthetics of Antichrist provides a useful commentary on the scene,
and possibly how the religious implications of the play as a whole would have been viewed. He notes “while the ‘purgatory’ and the ‘pardon’ that the friars think Faustus
wants to beg of the pope may have been exposed in Reformation England as pure fictions
of the Antichrist and thus become a laughingstock, no one could afford to laugh at
redemption as such…in the theater audiences could again pay for the momentary
transport of a sensuous indulgence and come away, as they had in the past, morally
strengthened by the wonder of it all” (242-3).

A concern with theatricality, rather than theology, can also explain some of the
differences between Faustus’ ability to repent in the two versions. The B-text tends to
bring the devils onstage prior to Faustus’ actions to, most notably at the beginning of the
conjuration scene in Act 1. There is also the addition of a convocation of devils at the
beginning of Act 5, Scene 2, which serves no purpose other than to get the devils on stage again to delight and terrify the audience. It makes sense that in their close attention to the EFB the revisers would have drifted closer to the chapbook’s version of a Faustus that is manipulated and controlled, and the increased frequency and timing of the devils’ appearances give that impression. The same can be said of the final appearance of the Good and Evil Angels in Act 5, Scene 2. The Good Angel is quite clear that Faustus is beyond repentance; it departs with the admonition “the jaws of hell are open to receive thee” (5.2.115). While this seems to remove all doubt about Faustus’ final end, the scene may have been written as much to introduce the Hell mouth stage effect, to which the Bad Angel draws attention and describes. In other words, there is little in this scene that cannot function as the introduction of additional spectacle at the grand finale of the play rather than as a disquisition on the nature of Faustus’ sin. The apocryphal story of “the extra devil” at a performance has been often repeated, and it must be imagined that this did nothing to discourage interest in the devilish component of the play; William Prynne remembered thirty years later “the visible apparition of the Devill on the Stage at the Belsavage Play-house, in Queene Elizabeths dayes, (to the great amazement both of the Actors and the Spectators) whiles they were there prophanely playing the History of Faustus (the truth of which I have heard from many now alive, who will remember it)” (Maclure 48). While Prynne is anything but an impartial reporter, if it is true that the story circulated during Elizabeth’s lifetime it very likely circulated before the B-text revisions, giving extra incentive to the revisers to show the audience more of the devils they wanted (and feared).
The addition of Act 5, Scene 3, where the scholars discover Faustus’ body, can be explained in similar terms. It echoes the EFB and gives the revisers one more chance to show off special effects; they have already added a phantom decapitation to the detachable leg, so they clearly possess an adequate number of false limbs.

There may be serious theological implications in the differences between the A- and B-texts, but they are not necessary to explain the changes the revisers have made. In an effort to extend the life of an already wildly popular play, the revisers took the most fantastic and comical elements remaining from that play’s wildly popular source and used them to enhance the already sinister and fantastical reputation of the original. This explanation seems to survive the test of Occam’s Razor far more easily than the thought that the play was revised to reflect subtle doctrinal differences at the same time it moved towards broad farce. The A-text is a drama of characterization, and the ambiguity of Faustus’ spiritual status heightens the tension of his character; the B-text, like the EFB, is a more didactic drama of situation that illustrates the inevitable consequences of tampering with forces beyond one’s control. This technique of simplification in order to popularize continues to this day.

Stephen Jay Gould has decried this technique in contemporary terms:

Hollywood knows only one theme in making monster movies, from the archetypal Frankenstein to the recent mega-hit Jurassic Park. Human technology must not go beyond an intended order decreed by God or set by nature’s laws. No matter how benevolent the purposes of the transgressor, such cosmic arrogance can only lead to killer tomatoes, very
large rabbits with sharp teeth, giant ants in the Los Angeles sewers, or even larger blobs that swallow entire cities as they grow. (53)

Or, it may be added, disposable limbs and gaping hell mouths with fireworks.

Of course, Marlowe’s own attitude towards Faustus is very difficult to discern; it seems that a critical desire to read plays in terms of the author’s personality is more striking in Marlowe than in any other contemporary author, with the possible exception of Shakespeare. While contemporary accounts of Marlowe’s outrageous comments on the subjects of atheism and the occult would suggest some sympathy for the God-shunning grotesques who grace his greatest plays, it must always be remembered that most of these accounts came from Thomas Kyd, at that time under investigation (and possibly subjected to torture) on the basis of his own alleged atheistic writings; beginning with Christopher Bakeless, prudent biographers have noted that the recently deceased Marlowe would have been a very convenient scapegoat for any dangerous papers emanating from the apartment he shared with Kyd. It is undeniable that the known details of Marlowe’s life are more sensational than those of most of his contemporaries, and it is plausible that Marlowe was an outlandish figure given to saying outrageous things and flaunting authority at every chance. It is certainly true, as Bakeless points out, that in the years following Marlowe’s demise his biography became a morality tale in miniature for any number of anti-theatrical authors. As Thomas Beard sermonized for all who would listen:

The manner of his death being so terrible (for hee euen cursed and blasphemed to his last gaspe, and togither with his breath an oath flew out of his mouth) that it was not only an horrible and fearefull terrour to all
that beheld him. But herein did the iustice of God most notably appeare,
in that hee compelled his owne hand which had written those blasphemies
to be the instrument to punish him, and that in his braine, which had
deuised the same. (Maclure 41)

Quotes such as this leave little doubt about how Marlowe’s sterner contemporaries felt
about his lifestyle or his drama.

All of this does not mean, however, that Marlowe’s plays must be read solely as
expressions of his personal struggle with authority. This kind of conflation of art and
author especially plagues studies of Dr. Faustus. There is a significant strain of criticism
that views Faustus as a prototype of the Byronic hero, engaged in a noble but ultimately
doomed struggle to elevate himself above the lot of mere mortals. This view of the play
is representative of a mindset that can no longer seriously accept the terrible reality of
damnation for Doctor Faustus’s original audience. While an individualistic spirit and
rebellion against authority may now inspire a certain admiration, it would have been clear
to the first patrons of the play that Faustus had paid the ultimate price, one that would
render any momentary pleasure or power forever meaningless. Robert Reed provides a
clear explication of this view. He finds it “difficult to regard Faustus as an evil man,”
seeing him more as a victim of over-reaching ambition rather than as a willing agent in
his own damnation. Adducing evidence from Faustus’ fondness for practical jokes and a
somewhat vaguely defined “jovial affection for his fellow men,” Reed sees the end of the
play as “intensely tragic” and feels “the reader of the play senses that a renunciation of
God, although sinful, is more than counterbalanced by a genuine love of one’s fellow
men” (93). To take this view requires one to ignore the means by which Faustus acquires
his powers, the ends to which he applies them, and the fact that he will now undergo perpetual damnation, regardless of how much fun he may have been at a party. Unlike Prospero and Bacon, Faustus specifically enters into a pact with the devil; wherever one wishes to draw the line between “white” and “black” magic, Faustus is clearly on the black side. Marlowe in Doctor Faustus and Barnabe Barnes in The Devil’s Charter craft the two most prominent tragedies involving black magic, and they both emphasize the wickedness of their magicians through the use of a device generally not connected with the magus: the signing of a pact with the Devil. Barnes presents the pact in a dumbshow replete with Papal regalia (the obvious implications of which will be discussed later), while Marlowe makes better dramatic use of the signing to show the inner struggle of Faustus. These scenes have led many commentators to proclaim Faustus a witch, rather than a sorcerer. From the vantage point of four centuries later, they are technically correct; however, the vast majority of the audience would have recognized a witch as a witch based primarily on her gender, followed by her use of rustic malleficum. Faust and Alexander are sorcerers and conjurers, and the signing of the demonic pact exists to remove any ambiguity whatsoever about whether they are “good” or “bad” magicians rather than to show the playwright’s specific knowledge of the finer points of pneumatology.

Additionally, Faustus employs his powers for personal aggrandizement; if Prospero, seeking to instill penitence and restore rightful rule, must ultimately renounce his powers to satisfy the audience, nothing less than damnation could serve for the largely unrepentant Faustus. By locating his play in the currents of Renaissance magic, Marlowe is raising questions an audience familiar with the issue would have known how to
answer. In her book, *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, Frances Yates provides an analysis of the play more in line with the occult tradition, and more amenable to the theatrical convention I have been discussing throughout. She explicitly warns against anachronism in its interpretation, concluding with the thought that if one attempts to enter the contemporary mindset of the audience,

it begins to look less like the thought of an heroic individual soul, struggling with problems of science or magic versus religion, and more like a piece of propaganda constructed in view of a current situation…It was written to be produced in the popular theatre, with horrific diabolical effects, to audiences working up into hysteria…We are in fact witnessing in this play the reaction against the Renaissance. (140)

**Popery and the Anti-Catholic Backlash**

The works of Greene, Marlowe, and Munday, in whatever order they appeared, constitute the high-water mark of the popularity of the magus drama in Shakespearean times. The remaining occult plays position themselves in the tradition established by these three authors in various ways. The “merry” magician established by Munday (and, to a much lesser extent, by Greene) continues in *The Merry Devil of Edmonton*, *The Birth of Merlin*, and “cunning” plays such as *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon* and *The Wizard*. The magic in these plays is either downplayed or obviously fraudulent, and the magus figure is generally portrayed positively as befits his or her status as a folk magician. The one exception to the generally lessened importance of magic is the grandest spectacle of the magus play, *The Tempest*. The exception to the positive portrayal of the magus is the “skeptic” play *par excellence*, Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist*, which joins the “cunning”
plays in displaying fraudulent magic without sharing their sympathy for the good-hearted fraud. The way these two plays form the apotheosis of the magus play is the subject of the next chapter.

Marlowe’s line of terrifying homiletic tragedy proved less prolific; in itself, this indicates why the revisers of the play moved it in the direction of comedy and spectacle. The evil magus was typically relegated to one of many villains in stage adaptations of chivalric romance. The most notable instance of demon-conjuring after Marlowe occurs in Chapman’s *Bussy d’Ambois*, where it occupies a relatively minor place in the overall plot. *Dr. Faustus* may have remained *sui generis* had not an unusual set of fortuitous circumstances compelled the darkest of tragedies from a dramatist uniquely suited to the task.

Barnabe Barnes’s only extant play, *The Devil’s Charter*, demonstrates how the uglier aspects of magic could be made to fit a slightly different set of audience expectations. The sensational story of the Borgia family became amenable to stage representation through a number of disparate conditions. First, a wave of anti-Catholic sentiment swept the nation in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot in 1605. The plot was to have included the murder of Parliament and the other chief governmental officials. The chief target of the assassination, James I, was notably interested in the demonic and diabolical, having authored a treatise on the subject and believing himself to have been targeted for death by a Scottish coven of witches years earlier. The call for the play to receive a royal screening on Candlemas in 1607 indicates that the themes were to James’s liking (Somogyi, p. vii-viii). Additionally, the tone of the drama in general was becoming increasingly bloody and lurid; Barnes’s orgy of demonism, blood, and sexual
transgression stands alongside contemporary works such as Marston’s *Sophonisba* and *The Insatiate Countess, Macbeth*, and Middleton’s *The Revenger’s Tragedy*, to name a few. Having already penned the most sexually and psychologically deviant sonnet sequence in the heyday of the sonnet vogue (itself no small feat) and possessed of a knowledge of the works of Peter de Abano, Barnes was abundantly prepared to take the biographies of the most notorious family in Renaissance times and embrace the excesses that characterized some Jacobean drama.

Antonia Fraser’s exceptionally readable account of the Gunpowder Plot, *Faith and Treason*, traces (mainly in a series of footnotes and asides) some of the influences of the Plot on Shakespeare’s *Macbeth*. Unmentioned, however, is the even more important influence of the Plot on *The Devil’s Charter*. *Macbeth* deals with the consequences of the killing of a lawful ruler, and contains a measure of witchcraft; *The Devil’s Charter* deals with the most notorious abuses of the papal court and contains even more demonology. There is no other reason for Barnes’s play to have received its first performance before the King; Barnes at the time was a relatively obscure writer and had been absent from London for much of the preceding decade for reasons that will be discussed in due course. Barnes’ fullest biographer, Mark Eccles, muses, “it is hard to imagine what induced Shakespeare’s company to choose this crude melodrama for Court performance…The explanation I should suggest is that James had liked *Macbeth* and wanted another play with even more demonology, which Shakespeare was in no mood to write. Shakespeare, going his own way, produced *Lear*, and Barnes, writing to order, *The Devil’s Charter*” (233). The importance of this conjecture is that, if true, it shows that Barnes was originally writing for a very elite, court-centered audience and could
incorporate a number of devices designed specifically to appeal to James, who styled himself as an expert in the fields of occult knowledge and religion. Moreover, Barnes’s use of learned demonology, his specific reference to one of the key theological disputes in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot, and his incorporation of techniques of “courtly writing” all separate *The Devil’s Charter* from the popular milieu of the magus play.

While *The Devil’s Charter* has not been afforded the amount of attention that other magus dramas have received, it is the play that shows the closest familiarity with learned occult doctrines. In fact, Barnes’s use of Peter de Abano’s *Heptameron* is the only instance of clear borrowing from an actual occult document I have found in all the magus plays. The *Heptameron* is one of a number of books of “black magic” that formed an influential area of demonism beyond Agrippa’s *Three Books of Occult Philosophy* and shared a number of interesting characteristics.

As noted in a previous chapter, Agrippa’s work is theoretical, rather than practical. In other words, the reader is no more prepared to actually summon a demon after reading the book than he or she would have been beforehand; there are no explicit incantations or formulae provided, although Christopher Lehrich notes that “Agrippa wrote of a ‘secret key’ to the occult philosophy, a key which would be revealed only to his closest friends” (1). Lehrich goes on to list a number of reasons why Agrippa would have been hesitant to publish a “recipe book” for magic: the impracticality of adding innumerable sets of directions to an already voluminous work, the fact that such rituals would firmly push Agrippa into the realm of “black magic” and lay him open to serious charges, and the ease with which the “vulgar” could then access the supernatural, an idea repugnant to Agrippa (203). One of the main points of Lehrich’s work is that he feels the
“secret key” to the occult is a thorough religious understanding, but this could hardly have been acceptable to those looking at magic as a means to quickly better their station in life. A large number of “practical magic” manuals emerged to fill this obvious void.

Jean Baptiste della Porta’s *Natural Magic* is possibly the most well-known of these works, but it deals with the practical application of “natural magic” and is hardly the kind of spectacular foray into the demonic that would have excited Barnes’ attention. A number of more overtly magical texts have been grouped together by an accident of history, their translation and publication by Robert Turner in 1654 under the title *Fourth Book of Occult Philosophy of Henry Cornelius Agrippa*. This collection contains two works attributed to Agrippa, “Of Geomancy” and “Of Occult Philosophy: The Fourth Book,” as well as de Abano’s *Heptameron*, and the *Isagoge* by Georg Pictorious Villinganus, Gerard Cremonensis’ “Of Astronomical Geomancy,” and Arbatel’s “Of the Magick of the Ancients.” Works of this sort, attributed to past figures of learning, could seem to provide the “secret key” to the occult that Agrippa refused to reveal in his compendium. Taken together, they are a fair sampling of the explicitly practical manuals of spirit conjuration, although it is only the works attributed to Agrippa and de Abano that relate directly to James I and Barnes.

Johannes Weirus, Agrippa’s pupil, denied Agrippa’s authorship of the “Fourth Book,” and this opinion has been accepted by all later scholars. It is equally certain that the *Heptameron* is not the work of Peter de Abano; I have no knowledge of the authenticity of the remainder of the texts. While Turner may have been the first to group these treatises together, there is no question that the “Fourth Book” was known to James,

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28 Donald Tyson, editor of the most recent edition of *The Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, agrees that the “Fourth Book” is spurious but presents an interesting case for the authenticity of “Of Geomancy” (773).
who references it in the opening pages of *Demonology*. Barnes himself provides exhaustive proof of the *Heptameron* being available and accessible before Turner’s edition through his extensive use of it in the first scene of Act 4 of *The Devil’s Charter*.

The extent of Barnes’ use of de Abano in this scene deserves full explication. The purpose of the conjuration is to allow Alexander to learn who killed his son, the Duke of Candy. Barnes indicates in his stage directions that Alexander is first to handle a “magical glass” and later take a book from his study, presumably the magical book provided by Satan at the beginning of the play. Alexander begins by reckoning the time from the constellation Arctophilax (Boötes), containing the star Alcamech, which Agrippa notes as one of fifteen fixed stars possessing influence over stones and plants (*The Occult Philosophy* 99). Except for this reference, the rest of the terms in the scene come directly from a comparatively small section of the *Heptameron*. de Abano begins by instructing the apprentice mage to work while “the Moon be increasing and equal, if it may then be done, and let her not be combust,” (81) corresponding to Alexander’s excitement at noting “Bright Armatas²⁹ increaseth, she is not combust” (4.1). Alexander further notes that it is midnight (Salam), during the summer (Casmaran, also signified by the term Armatus for moon, Athemay for sun, and Festativi for earth, seasonal terms from de Abano), ruled over by the angels Gargatel, Tariel, and Gaviel (76-7). Although Alexander does not refer to the day of the week, he clearly signifies it as Sunday through his identification of the attendant angels (Michael, Dardiel, and Huratapal), Varcan (the King of the Air), and Andas and Cynabal (ministers of Varcan). Everything in the scene is taken from de Abano, from the Latin invocation down to the odor of the incense (88-9). Given his extraordinary attention to detail, however, Barnes somehow describes a

²⁹ de Abano’s term for the moon.
conjuration that is completely wrong for the information sought by Alexander. To uncover the secrets Alexander seeks, the proper mage would follow either the conjurations for Monday or Wednesday, while Barnes describes exactly the conjuration for Sunday. The only plausible explanations for this incongruity are that Barnes either leafed through the *Heptameron* more or less at random before lighting on a likely set of names and actions, or that he deliberately limited and misconstrued the material he was presenting to his audience in order to avoid the kind of “extra devil” Marlowe’s productions were rumored to be liable to. Given that the entire scene is consistent with material found in various places in the *Heptameron* and the very short Latin conjuration provided is stripped of all actual “conjuring” words, it seems more likely that the confusion is intentional. While Barnes may have desired to show off his knowledge of demonology to curry favor with his king, elements from his highly questionable past would have forced him to use extreme caution lest he be suspected of practicing what he displayed on stage.

Barnes’s past indicates he may have had a motive beyond pure profit and favor in producing a virulently anti-Catholic piece in the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot. Although as the son of the Bishop of Nottingham he was originally of high station and presumably secure in the Protestant faith, contemporary reports refer to him as “Italianate” and he had sought the patronage of many of those implicated in the Plot, chiefly Northumberland and the younger Percys, most suspiciously Thomas. In his earlier years, Barnes had been an ardent supporter of Essex, so his associations and patrons were rife with supposed and actual traitors. Perhaps even more damningly, Barnes himself spent some time as a fugitive from justice for the poisoning of John
Browne, an accusation that was almost certainly true and resulted in his interrogation by Edward Coke and William Waad, both of whom would play key roles in the punishment of the Powder conspirators; poison was considered an especially heinous form of murder and was closely linked in the popular mind with Italy and Catholicism. While Barnes’ *Divine Century of Spiritual Sonnets* is rigidly doctrinal, his earlier sonnet to the Virgin in *Parthenophil and Parthenophe* could have been adduced as further proof of his possible disloyalty. Wherever Barnes’s personal allegiances lay, it was certainly prudent for him to appeal to James I through a piece that appealed to his interest in witchcraft and his fear of sedition.

Whatever his personal motives may have been, Barnes was certainly not alone in trying to turn a profit by demonizing the Gunpowder Plot. Garry Wills’s *Witches and Jesuits: Shakespeare’s Macbeth* traces an organized official response to the Plot, where various clergy and government officials quickly adopted James’s explanation of the Plot and tailored their sermons and investigations to the official account (16-17). Even more germane to the present argument, Wills notes that, “Issuing after and around the official statements, both popular and learned literature dwelt on the Plot and its discovery. Censorship of books and plays normally discouraged acrid theological and political controversy; but this ban was relaxed after the Powder Treason, to channel public wrath into approved reactions” (17). While Wills later qualifies this remark to show that direct representation of the Plot was still curtailed on the stage, the guiding thesis of his book is that various playwrights spoke about the Plot in thinly coded language that no longer evokes the same reactions from the modern ear. He has assembled an impressive roster of plays from the immediate aftermath of the Plot to back his thesis: in addition to
Macbeth, John Marston’s Sophonisba, Thomas Dekker’s The Whore of Babylon, and of course The Devil’s Charter all appeared within a year of the Plot’s discovery and shared a number of plot elements and charged terms. Given the enormous public fear and the coordination of the government’s reaction against the Plot, it would be far more surprising if a number of playwrights did not incorporate the Plot into their plays. Even Doctor Faustus fits the mold of these plays; while it is far older in its origin, we have seen that it was reworked at least once in the early 1600s to move in an anti-Catholic direction. In this sense, The Devil’s Charter may be as historically and politically close to Doctor Faustus in the B-text as it undoubtedly is in its interest in the evil sorcerer.

While any piece of anti-Catholic propaganda was likely to receive a favorable hearing in the years immediately following the Gunpowder Plot, Barnes includes two scenes in his play directly aimed at equivocation, one of the more popular charges against Catholics. Macbeth’s equivocating Porter is well-known, yet he appears in only one scene in the play. Barnes uses Machiavellian equivocation in Act 1, Scene 4, drawing both on contemporary charges against Catholics and Marlowe’s introduction of Machiavelli on the stage as the embodiment of evil in The Jew of Malta. Even more significantly, the climax of Barnes’ play is a learned debate between Alexander VI and the Devil that explicitly turns on the idea of equivocation.

Antonia Fraser provides a working definition of equivocation and the lengths to which it could be pushed in the concluding chapters of Faith and Treason. In the course of showing how Edward Coke was able to use equivocation as a means of painting all Catholics as devious liars, Fraser notes
the underlying principle of equivocation was that the speaker’s words were capable of being taken in two ways, only one of which was true. A typical example, which caused a great deal of Protestant indignation, had occurred in February when a certain Father Ward swore to the Dean of Durham that he was ‘no priest’—meaning, it transpired, that he was not ‘Apollo’s priest at Delphos’...One can see the absurdity of this: at the same time one can admire the earnest conscience which found it necessary to justify such life-saving lies. (242)

While it is possible to understand the moral dilemma faced by conscientious Catholics in England from a distance of four hundred years, the public and King were not in such a contemplative mood following the Plot and the execution of those involved (or rumored to be involved.) The “Oath of Allegiance” was strengthened and expanded in 1606; it “empowered any bishop or any two justices of the peace to tender to anyone under the sentence or indictment of recusancy, or to any stranger confessing the same under oath—if over eighteen and not noble—an oath acknowledging James as ‘lawful and rightful’ King, denying the authority of the Pope to depose him, promising to defend him in case of attack and to disclose all treasons or conspiracies against him”(McIlwain, p. li). The Oath itself contained the phrase “And all these things I doe plainely and sincerely acknowledge and sweare, according to these expresse words by me spoken, and according to plaine and common sense and understanding of the same words, without any Equivocation, or mentall evasion, or secret reservation whatsoever” (78, italics mine). James, in his apologia for the Oath, specifically mentions equivocation as one of the grounds on which Catholics might object to the Oath; it is the only one of the fourteen
points of disagreement he outlines that does not specifically relate to himself or the Pope, but to the taker of the oath (86-7). Equivocation is the only means by which a recusant could take the Oath and not subscribe to its contents, all of which are explicitly political. In other words, equivocation is not a matter of spiritual conscience; in James’ view, it is treason.

James’ interest in equivocation allows Barnes to end his play with a very learned debate between the Devil and Alexander VI concerning the meaning of the Latin contract Alexander signed at the beginning of the play to assure his reign as Pope. The phrase at the heart of the debate is “Sedebis Romae Papa summa in felicitate tui et filiorum anno undecimo et septimo die octavo post moriere.” Alexander understands the contract to read that he will reign for eighteen years and eight days; however, the Devil demonstrates the equivocation inherent in the contract by pointing out

Numbers without distinction placed thus

*Anno* with the figure *undecimo* signifying eleven years, and the figure seven applied to *die*, importing seven days…

So that *anno undecimo*, without distinction, signifying eleven years; and this figure seven, added to days; and that *octavo post*, importing the eighth day following—*moriere*; thou shalt die. (107-8)

It is highly unlikely that a popular audience would have been able to follow this disquisition, while James almost certainly could have; in either case, however, the point is to show Alexander “hoist by his own petard” on the doctrine of equivocation.

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30 James is at pains to point out that nothing in the Oath “concerne in any case the *Popes Supremacie in Spirituall causes*” (87).
It is a more difficult subject to identify why Barnes would have depicted Alexander’s homosexuality and pedophilia in a play before the King; Michael Young points out that both charges were levied against James himself during his reign (64). Young locates most of these charges at the time of the ascendancy of Carr and Buckingham during the 1610s, however, and the 1607 performance of *The Devil’s Charter* occurs during a time when James seems to have forgone the open favorites that had been rumored in Scotland and before his dalliance with Carr had become common fodder. One must assume that if James’ homosexual dalliances were public knowledge, Barnes would not have inserted the gratuitous scenes involving Astor and Philippo, although he had ample warrant in the public eye for pointing out the sexual peccadilloes of Catholics.

Leaving aside the wisdom of demonizing homosexuality in a play written for a bisexual king, there is no doubt that Barnes’ depiction of deviant sexuality had its genesis in his own sonnet sequence *Parthenophil and Parthenophe* and that he intended these scenes for an audience that would have been familiar with sonnet sequences in general. In his introduction to *Parthenophil and Parthenophe*, Victor Dyno gives the source of the magical charms of seduction in the notorious and climactic “Sestine 5” as Virgil’s “Eclogue VIII,” (xli) but the poem contains many aspects of witchcraft that appear in any number of dramas; coupled with the extraordinary “Zodiac Sonnets” (comprising sonnets

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31 Although Young does much to point out that James’ dalliances may have been considered a prerogative of power had he not so lavishly spent resources to maintain his favorites; much of his interesting work revolves around conceptions of homosexuality in Shakespearean England and how they colored public perception of James.

32 J.N. Hilgarth notes that Alexander VI became associated with Faust legends around 1599 in the works of Georg Widman, a devout Lutheran, where his pact with Satan “is interspersed with attacks on the Catholic clergy—*all*, as in Luther, seen as sodomites—and with accusations of incest between Alexander and his daughter” (121); aspects of the tale Barnes was thrilled to include, although they are absent from Guiccardini’s account.
32-43), the sequence shows that Barnes had long been aware of knowledge at the margins of the occult. Even more significantly for a courtly audience who may have been aware of his own sequence (and certainly would have been aware of at least some of the numerous examples of erotic poetry of the previous decade), Barnes slyly incorporates the poetic blazon in two circumstances in his play, both in instances that graphically subvert the Petrarchan ideal of love.

The first of these instances occurs in Act 3, Scene 2, immediately after Astor has confided to his brother Philippo that he fears Alexander plans to introduce him to “vild, brutish and unkindly lust” (42). Given the desperate state of Astor, the audience could not miss the grotesque parody of the Petrarchan blazon when Alexander enters and salutes Astor with

> Let me behold those bright stars, my joy’s treasure,

> Those glorious well attemper’d tender cheeks;

> That specious forehead like a lane of lilies;

> The seemly nose, Love’s chariot triumphant… (43-4)

and so on for several more lines, all in a style that would have been easily recognizable to any ears used to the tropes of the sonnet sequence. The remainder of the scene is also undoubtedly in the Petrarchan vein, and much of the irony would be lost on an audience who did not realize that Barnes was satirizing his own sexually explicit sonnet sequence in order to describe a Pope attempting to seduce an unwilling young boy. If Barnes’ sole intent was to demonize Catholicism, he could have done so very bluntly in a way that the popular audience would have immediately understood by depicting violence or imperiousness rather than a simpering and wheedling Alexander VI.
The death of Lucretia Borgia is also accompanied by a blazon, even more cleverly designed to reveal the general psychological unhealthiness and licentiousness underlying the Elizabethan sonnet sequence. In this instance Lucretia blazons herself while gazing in a mirror; she expounds upon each feature of her body by listing the praise given to it by a different lover and revels in the overtly sexual effect her body has had on many men. This deftly parodies the traditional Petrarchan blazon, wherein the lover praises each feature of his chaste and virginal beloved, by attributing an air of carnal manipulation and narcissism to the atomized Lucretia. Of course Barnes cannot stop with a clever parody; during the course of her self-praise, Lucretia is unwittingly powdering her face with a poison that then graphically disfigures her before killing her. Again, while this scene could illustrate the dangers of pride to a popular audience, the specific subversion of hackneyed elements of the sonnet sequence serves to illustrate the hypocrisy of the Petrarchan tradition in wordplay that seems to be aimed squarely at a courtly audience.

Barnes’s play represents a transitional period in the history of the sorcery play; Alexander VI and his dealings with the devil comprise the main plot, but elements of social commentary have begun to bleed into the magic and somewhat lessen its importance. Additionally, there are elements of *The Devil’s Charter* that signify its composition for a different and more sophisticated audience than the earlier plays. The two remaining great magic plays of the stage build upon this shift of audience and the use of magic as an adjunct to social commentary to produce the magical masque of *The Tempest* and the satire of credulity that is Ben Jonson’s *The Alchemist*. 
Chapter 5: Apotheosis and Satire

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away…

The Tempest and The Alchemist are as unlike in their evocation of human feeling as any two plays in the Elizabethan canon, yet it is a fact of dramatic history that they appeared nearly simultaneously and appealed to very similar audiences. Both were performed by the King’s Men, The Alchemist beginning in 1610 and The Tempest beginning no later than November 1, 1611, when it was performed before the King in Whitehall (Vaughan and Vaughan 6). It is reasonable to assume that The Tempest was probably played many times at Blackfriars,³³ and The Alchemist was certainly played there. Richard Burbage was the original Prospero, and it is likely that he also played the fraudulent alchemist Subtle. From audience to cast, the two plays share a remarkable number of similarities. Perhaps most interesting is the improbability of two such plays succeeding at all at Blackfriars at that time. The Tempest belongs to the very end of the vogue for sorcery plays; in fact, had it not been composed one could limit the fashionableness of the sorcery play to Greene, Munday, and Marlowe, with Barnes and (possibly) Rawley attempting a curious revival to fit a specific occasion long after the animating spirit had passed. The Alchemist had already initiated the skeptic play, which draws on the conventions of the sorcery play in order to mock and expose them, and the more upscale crowd at the Blackfriars did not seem to share the predilection for magical spectacle that characterized earlier mixed audiences and continued unabated on the public stage.

³³ Although John Demaray points out that the only recorded performances are at Whitehall, a point discussed below.
In fact, the only serious depictions of the supernatural to be found in the extant Blackfriars’s repertoire are of witches: Erictho in John Marston’s *Sophonisba* and the various witches in *Macbeth* and Middleton’s *The Witch*. Erictho is drawn largely from a classical conception of the witch, specifically taken from Book VI of Lucan’s *Pharsila*, befitting Marston’s attempt to write a tragedy in the classical mode with a classical setting (Corbin and Sedge 6). This would be intriguing if the play was typical of the depiction of the occult on the private stage, but it is unique in almost every way. Classical tragedy was not an overly popular genre on the private stage, nor was it Marston’s characteristic mode of writing; classical depictions of witchcraft seem to be absent from all other extant witchcraft plays; *Sophonisba* is only peripherally concerned with the occult (Erictho appears in only one scene and plays a less influential role in the plot than the witches in *Macbeth*, for instance), and the critical literature on the play is ambivalent, at best, on how and if the scene involving Erictho contributes to the play as a whole. The witches in *Macbeth* are perhaps best seen as a tribute to James’ struggles with witches in theory and practice, and Middleton’s wholesale recycling of Shakespeare’s witch scenes in *The Witch* produced a commercial flop even while witch plays remained popular on the public stage.³⁴

*The Tempest* and *The Alchemist*, on the other hand, were successful. While both draw heavily on the tradition of the magus plays we have been discussing, Jonson and Shakespeare were able to adapt the tropes of these plays to fit their audience.

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³⁴ Sometime around the year 1624, Thomas Middleton responded to Thomas Holmes’ expression of interest in a renewed staging of Middleton’s play *The Witch* by providing a manuscript accompanied by a brief epistle. Middleton expresses his gratitude for the renewed interest in the play, referring to it as an “ignorantly ill-fated labour.” He elaborates this idea as follows: “Witches are, *ipso facto*, by the law condemned and that only, I think, hath made her [the play] lie so long in an imprisoned obscurity” (Schafer, 4)
Shakespeare is able to resurrect the fanciful magician for a more sophisticated audience by drawing even more attention to the unreal and the theatrical elements of his play. His setting is incredibly exotic, his plot improbable, and his design incorporates the ultimate in sheer theatricality, the masque. The Tempest would set the tone for the depiction of the occult in later musical plays and the opera. Jonson, on the other hand, plays upon his audience’s sense of sophistication through a gritty and devastating satire that always insists upon pointing out that it is happening right here and right now, capitalizing on the popularity of the city comedy genre he largely invented. However, their success also signals the demise of the true magus play. By reducing the occult to satire or presenting it as operatic spectacle, these playwrights demonstrate that they were composing for an audience rapidly losing interest in the “straight” depiction of magic. These plays serve not to condemn magic per se, but rather to reinvigorate an increasingly stale genre by manipulating its conventions to scandalize or delight.

The Alchemist

Alchemy represents the highest unification of occult learning with physical sciences. While no simple method of explanation will do justice to its long and multi-cultural history, a full exploration of the subject is far beyond the scope of this dissertation. The following remarks are the least amount about alchemy one needs to know to make sense of Jonson’s play, and I have tried to limit the scope to alchemical thought roughly contemporary with the Shakespearean age.

35 See Chapter 11 of Anthony Harris’s Night’s Black Agents for a full discussion of the musical and whimsical treatment of the occult in the mid-to-late 17th century. 36 My discussion of the history and processes of alchemy is largely indebted to John Read’s 1936 work, Prelude to Chemistry: An Outline of Alchemy. While it is now over seventy years old, it remains readable, lucid, and rational. It may also be noted that alchemy as a science is, to borrow a quip from my old Latin teacher, Dr. Lawrence Gaichas, discussing that language, a decidedly static subject. I have also
The theories of alchemy Jonson drew upon were not originally indigenous to England, or even to Europe; there is a Chinese tradition of alchemy dating to the 5th century BCE and a more relevant Arabic tradition. The probable development of European alchemy, as sketched by Gareth Roberts, wandered from the early Greeks through Arabic writers such as Geber and Avicenna and became available to noted scholars such as Aquinas, Roger Bacon, and Albertus Magnus largely through the translations of the Arabic authors into Latin. Along the way alchemy acquired an even more ancient, and entirely spurious, beginning; Mammon’s promise in The Alchemist to produce a “book, where Moses, and his sister,/ And Solomon have written of the art;/ Ay, and a treatise penned by Adam” (2.1.81-3) is of course absurd, but it does reflect a general belief in the enormous antiquity of alchemical pursuits and wisdom. Just as the writings of Hermes Trismegistus were deemed credible based on their supposed antiquity, alchemical writings were attached to either ancient or highly respected authorities. Roger Bacon, for instance, was the supposed author of a number of alchemical works in addition to his few genuine comments on the subject, and it is unlikely that Ramon Lull ever penned any of the 143 alchemical works later attributed to him (Roberts 40).

Alchemy waxed and waned in popularity through the succeeding centuries; Chaucer considered it ripe for satire, which indicates that his contemporary audience would have been familiar with the practice and open to a measure of satire of it. However, it is Jonson’s time that illustrated the full and paradoxical nature of alchemist belief; as Read points out,

supplemented Read with the far more recent (1994) The Mirror of Alchemy, by Gareth Roberts, who also draws heavily on Read.
Of all periods, the seventeenth century is the richest in alchemical writings. Although it can now be seen that alchemy was then on the wane, this century produced a surprising efflorescence of treatises expounding and defending alchemical doctrines, detailing marvelous transmutations, and emphasizing the allegorical, mystical, and spiritual aspects of alchemy. The publications of this last type are particularly characteristic of the declining days of alchemy. (80)

This, then, is the intellectual climate of The Alchemist’s audience: an explosion of alchemical texts straying farther and farther from the “scientific” aspects of alchemy against a backdrop of growing skepticism and the advance of modern chemistry. In this climate, all levels of belief could have been found. The entire history of alchemy in Europe is checkered by doubt and fraud, but Reinhard Federmann’s lively account The Royal Art of Alchemy demonstrates that kings and princes still sought after “real” alchemists well into the eighteenth century.

Alchemy, as a science, deals with two areas of human learning that have since largely been severed: chemistry and philosophy. The chemical aspects of alchemy are concerned with the properties of matter and the transmutation of one form of matter into another; in its most typical formulation, lead (or some readily available material) is to be transformed into gold. This process is effected through the use of the “philosopher’s stone” or “elixir” (Jonson employs the terms interchangeably, and there are several other terms for it in the alchemical literature). This chemical strain of alchemy would ultimately bear scientific fruit, but it is also the aspect of alchemy that lent itself to chicanery and resulted in ridicule. The adepts of the philosophic aspects of alchemy
believed in the possibility of the transformation of the soul into higher unions with the universe; it is very similar to Agrippa’s ideas concerning the purification of the magus.37

The idea of transmutation of elements began with Aristotle’s theory of the four elements: fire, earth, air, and water. In Aristotle’s view, “We maintain that fire, air, water, and earth are transformable one into another, and that each is potentially latent in the others” (qtd. in Roberts 47). As metals and minerals were composed of these elements, it was thought that a shift in the distribution of the elements could result in a transmutation into an entirely different kind of metal. There was a line of thought that all metals would eventually mature into gold, the highest of the metals, given enough time, but alchemy stood as a notable shortcut in the process.

The second major contribution to the practice of alchemy was the theory of the \textit{tria prima}. This theory identifies sulphur, mercury, and salt as the primary agents of transmutation; between these agents and the four elements comprising all metals, the right combinations could produce nearly any metal (Read 27ff).

To explore beyond this point is to enter a bewildering abyss of techniques, colors, equipment, and gestation periods. If it is an exaggeration to say that there are as many alchemical formulae as alchemical authors, it is not much of one. Knowledge of the \textit{tria prima} and of the general aims of practical alchemy is quite sufficient to understand the vast majority of Jonson’s comedy in \textit{The Alchemist}; in fact, it is almost certain that the copious verbiage of Subtle, Face, and Mammon would have sounded like so much gibberish to the audience, heightening the humor through the parody of jargon.

The philosophical aspects of alchemy, on the other hand, make its chemical aspects appear unified and rational. The metaphorical potential of the transmutation of elements

37 In fact, this is the aspect of alchemy that interested Carl Gustav Jung in the previous century.
the base into the sublime through the applications of the proper methods is staggering, and Jonson plays with several possibilities in his play. Additionally, the alchemical writers were extremely secretive and encoded their works with any number of metaphors accessible only to the elite. Gareth Roberts cites Petrus Bonus to sum up the possibilities: “The Stone may be compared, by analogy, with all things in the world: creation, animals, vegetables, conception, and death” (66). Given this vast range of material available for satire, it becomes nearly impossible to trace every oblique reference to philosophical alchemy Jonson makes in the play; it is enough to realize the potential for satire exists everywhere.

This divide between the chemical and philosophical strains of alchemy was beginning to take place in the early 17th century; Jonson exploits the tension between them in the figures of Sir Epicure Mammon and the Anabaptists, discussed below. Perhaps more importantly, this tension made the entire idea of alchemy amenable to satire. Mircea Eliade has accurately defined the shedding of the philosophical nature of alchemy by acknowledging that from a historical perspective “chemistry was born from alchemy, or more precisely, it was born from the disintegration of the ideology of alchemy. But…alchemy posed as a sacred science, whereas chemistry came into its own when substances had shed their sacred attributes. Now there must, of necessity, be a break of continuity between the sacred and the profane plane of existence” (9). Historically and intellectually, The Alchemist occupies a place when the gaps in continuity were beginning to show.

While it is incorrect to imagine a consensus attitude among Jonson’s audience, the playwright’s own attitude towards alchemy is fairly easy to discern. While The Alchemist
may be considered a satire of credulity as much as a satire of alchemy proper, Jonson’s masque of 1616, *Mercurie Vindicated from the Alchemists at Court*, dismisses the petty greed of low-ranking members of the court for material gain and attacks the ultimate claims of the alchemists: immortality and creative power rivaling Nature herself. The lead alchemist of the masque, Vulcan, is earnest and fully believes in his ability to create life if only he can force Mercury to comply with his demands. Mercury ultimately escapes this perversion of his nature and shows the only types of men Vulcan can create are characters similar to those of *The Alchemist*: duelers, astrologers, and contentious lawyers. When Vulcan summons his creations forth, they are in fact deformed and hideous creatures, with heads composed of stills. While the final scenes of the masque degenerate into a farce equating women’s make-up with the alchemist’s desire for immortality, the serious implications of the masque seem to show Jonson conclusively rejecting the loftier spiritual transformations of alchemy as fully as he dismisses the base greed that motivates most of the characters in *The Alchemist*.

Jonson’s rejection of alchemy does not mean, however, that he does not possess a mastery of its vocabulary and methods. Jonson employs the jargon of alchemy in both the masque and the play with a level of competence that has led critics to ascribe alchemical meanings to the characters of *The Alchemist* and to discern a transformational structure in the play.

**A Satire of Credulity**

That said, it is important to note at the outset that the play is not primarily a satire of the art of alchemy; rather, alchemy provides the framework for Jonson to satirize several different kinds of credulity and foolishness. All of the characters in the play are
utterly controlled by greed, and this blinds them to the very real obstacles and
improbabilities associated with their pursuit of gain. While the Philosopher’s Stone does
not actually exist in the play, it is a powerful metaphor for the pull of greed. Even Subtle,
Face, and Dol, the masterminds and manipulators of the others, are ultimately exposed by
their overreaching for profit.

These three chief mischief makers allow the theory of alchemy to underlie their
fraud; in their view, everyone and everything is transmutable from desire into profit.
Their own persons are no exception; they assume disguises and personas readily, all of
which are far above their original stations. Subtle, we are told early in the play, has been
an alchemical fraud for some time, with no success; in the argument which opens the
play, Face reminds him that his prior attempts at cozening had gained him only “A felt
rug, and a thin threaden cloak./ That scarce would cover your no-buttocks” (1.1.36-7).
Obviously, it is difficult to believe that a man with access to infinite wealth would not be
able to afford decent clothing, and thus Subtle’s first transformation must be into a
“reputable” alchemist, with an actual lab and instruments. However, when Face reminds
Subtle that he has provided him with the necessary trappings, Subtle is quick to point out
that neither the house nor the money is Face’s own; Face’s transformation is from servant
to home owner in the absence of his Master Lovewit, while he has also promoted himself
to the rank of Captain (1.1.49-79). It remains for Dol to point out the hypocrisy of these
transformations, while tactfully avoiding the fact that she practices the purest form of
alchemy of the three by transforming her “common matter” into gold through
prostitution.
While these disguises and transformations are notable in a play on alchemy, they are also indigenous to the magus play as a whole. The vague and symbolic nature of alchemical writings allows for an extremely wide range of interpretation, and it is no surprise that several critics have attempted to read alchemical processes into the play itself. The most frequent attempt is to see Dol, Subtle, and Face as representing the three chief elements of alchemy- Mercury, Sulphur, and Salt- although different critics have arrived at different permutations. My favorite, if forced to choose, would be Gabrielle Bernhard Jackson, who identifies Dol with mercury, Subtle with sulphur, and Face with salt, (124) although David Riggs’ identification of the three with the world, the flesh, and the devil (172) or Hereford and Simpson’s targeting of Dee, Kelley, and Laski (10: 47) all seem sufficiently fluid to be appropriate. This is, obviously, the least conclusive way of incorporating alchemical principles into the play. Jackson is on much firmer ground when she notes what she calls a “hierarchical heightening process” taking place in the play, similar to the heightening transformations of alchemy: each successive dupe desires more than the one before, and the frauds of Dol, Subtle, and Face become more intricate to keep pace (136). As a result, the first few scenes of the play constitute a primer on magical thought.

Dapper, the first of the gulls, desires nothing more than what could have been provided by the cunning man or woman of rustic magic; he wants a small familiar that will enable him to cheat at cards. From there Subtle and Face prod him into a bigger investment, but Dapper still wants the basic benefit of the help of the local cunning man. Subtle and Face finally convince Dapper that he is kin to the Fairy Queen; while this interlude may seem more in keeping with *A Midsummer Night’s Dream* than with
Jonson’s urban satire, rural belief in fairies allowed skilled con artists to prey upon the credulous as late as 1613, three years after *The Alchemist*. According to “The seuerall notorious and lewd Cousenages of John West and Alice West…” a man named Thomas Moore was gulled by a similar scheme enacted by the Wests. Alice West growing inward with a maid servant that belonged to this Thomas Moore, communicates to her a strange revelation, how that the fayrie king and queene had appeard to her in a vision, saying they had a purpose to bestow great summes of gold upon this man and this woman…[she] first entreats for money to performe the due rites of sacrifice…which she received, to the summe of foure score pound. And having drawn him thus dry, she and her husband fled the town by night. (Hazlitt, 226-8).

For the sake of brevity, I have omitted the many steps Alice West took from making the acquaintance of the maid to finally absconding with Thomas Moore’s life savings, but the incident shows that a belief in fairies still did exist past the time of Jonson’s play.

For satirical purposes, the Fairy Queen interlude allows the more sophisticated Blackfriars’s audience to share in the joke; there is obviously no “real” fairy in the play, and the part of the Fairy Queen is taken by the prostitute Dol. Dapper is the most viscerally humiliated of all the gulls; in keeping with fairy lore, he is pinched, half-beaten, and robbed. He is also gagged and imprisoned in a privy, adding to the farcical nature of the scene; fairies, clearly, are not to be taken seriously by *The Alchemist’s* patrons.

There may, however, be more social commentary in the scene than is apparent at first glance. While fairy beliefs could be considered the “lowest” form of magical belief
in 1610 and the belief most associated with the rural (and poor) members of society, Dapper is both urban and of a higher status than any of the malefactors of the play. In an informative article dealing with the fairies of *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*, Mary Ellen Lamb has posited a more complex relationship between class and fairy belief than the one outlined above. Examining the persistence of fairy belief in England, she notes these references suggest the sophistication and range of the weapons of the weak used by members of subordinated subgroups to forward their own interests. These interests were not always directly opposed to those of more powerful groups. Despite the presence of ongoing social struggle, various strategic interventions, such as fairy practices, sometimes merge the interests of common and dominant cultures to reveal the inadequacies of any simple model of oppression and resistance. (284)

In the realm of “low magic” (including fairies and witchcraft) the lower classes possessed an instrument of power; while Dapper is an urban legal clerk, he knows exactly where to turn for help with gambling. As urban lowlifes, Subtle and Face ruthlessly exploit this means to power. Ultimately, this reversal of power is what keeps the entire fraudulent magic industry alive throughout the first half of the seventeenth century. “Respectable” people encounter problems or desires that cannot be redressed through official channels, but rumors persist of aid to be had from the lower classes, be they alchemists, cunning men, white witches, or otherwise. Only in rare instances would the suitor be willing to risk ridicule and exposure by turning to the authorities after being taken by a magical fraud, and a particularly skillful manipulator could easily convince his suitor that the fault lay not in the magic but in the motives. In fact, both Sir Epicure Mammon and the
Anabaptists fall victim to this ploy, as discussed below. In such circumstances fear of the magician’s wrath would be enough to seal the lips of the suitor, thus perpetuating the fraud.

The difference between Jonson’s play and the popular fare is the target of the satire. Thomas Heywood’s *The Wise Woman of Hogsdon* can stand as a representative example of the popular form of this conceit. In Heywood’s play, two women (curiously both named Luce) fall victim to the romantic wiles of young Chartley, described in the *Dramatis Personae* as “a wild-hearted Gentleman.” The original Luce (who appears second in the play, and is therefore given the uninspired and uninspiring title “2nd Luce” by Heywood) has followed her betrothed Chartley to London in disguise, only to discover him in the process of negotiating a marriage settlement with Luce and her father. The ceremony is to be performed by the Wise Woman of Hogsdon before a very select audience, as young Chartley insists on concealing the fact of his marriage. Upon overhearing the plan, 2nd Luce assumes the guise of a young boy and hastens to the Wise Woman, where she obtains employment as an assistant and becomes privy to the Wise Woman’s methods. Like Jonson’s trio, the Wise Woman is a fraud; she is a bawd for men and a mid-wife for unwanted pregnancies, and her method of fortune-telling is very straightforward. She has constructed a small closet off the main door; when anyone desires a fortune be told, she instructs 2nd Luce

\[\text{you must to the door and question them, to find what they come about,--if} \]
\[\text{to this purpose, or to that. Now, they ignorantly telling thee their errand,} \]
\[\text{which I, sitting in my closet, overhear, presently come forth, and tell them} \]
\[\text{the cause of their coming, with every word that hath passed betwixt you in} \]
private; which they admiring, and thinking it to be miraculous, by their report I become thus famous. (3.1)

2nd Luce is very adept at the task she has been given, and quickly arranges a group wedding to take place in the dark between all the chief characters of the play. By means of this ruse 2nd Luce nets her beloved Chartley, while Boyster is married to Luce. Everyone is scattered by a loud noise before they can realize whom they have married, and young Chartley immediately sets about wooing a wealthy young lady in the city. 2nd Luce perpetuates another ruse to reassemble the main characters at the Wise Woman’s house; all is revealed, and the lovers are properly matched. Leaving aside the problematic psychology of why 2nd Luce would desire a man who has already abandoned her once and has just been caught trying to marry two other women, they all presumably live happily ever after and the Wise Woman continues her way of life without reprimand or punishment.

Heywood’s play is a romantic comedy with a hint of supernatural trickery thrown in for effect, yet the Wise Woman has the honor of being the title character. Jonson’s play has a heavier investment in the jargon of alchemy, yet it still could fairly be described as a city comedy with the occult functioning to separate it from the other city comedies prevalent at the time. As Brian Gibbons has noted, a “thorough examination of the satiric-didactic element, the form of the exempla and the manner in which characters are satirically presented, does … reveal how the play actually is based on the form of City Comedy and derives much of its superb comic potential from the conventions of the genre” (170-1). The Wise Woman of Hogsdon and The Alchemist both contain a fraudulent practitioner and multi-layered schemes, and the chief mischief-maker is left

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unpunished at the end of each, yet they were intended for very different audiences. The
target of Heywood’s humor is young Chartley, a gallant who would not seem out of place
watching *The Alchemist* at Blackfriars. Heywood’s popular audience could have reveled
in seeing one of their superiors receive his comeuppance at the hands of a cunning
woman and a crafty country dame. Jonson targets a similar kind of character for his
satire, focusing on his greed instead of his lust. The difference is that Jonson’s audience
was peopled with exactly the kinds of gallants he satirizes.

The next of the gulls, Drugger, serves as an example of Jonson’s satiriacal
treatment of his audience. Drugger requires a more sophisticated form of magic. He is
interested in opening a drug store and tobacco shop and desires someone with a
knowledge of sympathetic magic to help him arrange his shop, as well as someone with
astrological sense “to look over, sir, my almanac,/ And cross out my ill days, that I may
neither/ Bargain, nor trust upon them” (1.4.94-6). Of all the dupes, Drugger’s aims are
the most modest, and he has the most practical plan to make his way in the world. He is
also the most gently satirized of all the gulls. There are two reasons for this. First,
astrology and sympathetic magic were not the ridiculed beliefs of rustic rubes, as was
fairy lore. As we have seen, even Reginald Scot held some belief in the idea of
sympathy, although he fully discounted the idea that humans could influence or use it.
As for astrology, even Jonson’s great contemporary Johannes Kepler was unable to fully
separate what we now classify as astronomy and astrology. Drugger’s request for
Subtle’s aid in these matters is not ridiculous, nor is it motivated by pure greed. He
wants a successful business in order to successfully woo his young neighbor, Dame
Pliant. He is also onstage the least of all the gulls and loses the least financially. Unlike
the other characters, he seems practical and level-headed except in matters of love, and he loses his love to the most respectable character in the play, Lovewit. Drugger escapes severe satirization because his function in the play is to enable Jonson to satirize a number of societal trends not related to the occult; in other words, Drugger allows Jonson to hold the mirror up to his audience as a target of his satire.

By dealing in tobacco and cosmetics, Drugger provides two costly means for people to appear fashionable. These are also the vices of many playgoers. David Riggs has noted a decided ambivalence in Jonson towards the audience of *The Alchemist*; as he observes,

> In the playhouse, where the spectators purchase the right to identify with roles designed expressly for their consumption, the opportunities for self-forgetfulness are vastly enhanced; but a playwright can also use the resources of the stage to sharpen the spectators’ awareness of their extratheatrical selves. (173)

Drugger does not represent a glorified version of the audiences’s selves, but neither is he so overtly ridiculous that the audience can feel secure in mocking him. He caters to gallants and reputedly easy women; Jonson’s favored pun in connection with his character’s trade in cosmetics is “fucus.” Drugger’s associates are Kastril, an upstart who believes one becomes a respected gentleman by learning to quarrel, and Dame Pliant, a nineteen year old widow who refuses to marry below a knight yet appears ready to be swept away by the most proximate male, be it Drugger, Surly, or Lovewit. Both of these characters are only slight exaggerations of the pretensions carried by many of the audience, all too eager to display their gallant, sophisticated, and marketable selves by
taking seats on the Blackfriars’s stage. There is little difference between the betterment of the self offered by Drugger and that offered by Subtle, and the lack of a clear satirical target for the audience to focus on in these scenes brings the superficial trappings of the Blackfriars’s class uncomfortably close to the surface.

In fact, none of the distancing devices characteristic of other magic plays are displayed in *The Alchemist*; the play is relentlessly, even perversely, localized. The Prologue announces London as the scene, home of “your whore,/ Bawd, squire, imposter” (7-8); Blackfriars’s neighborhood is the setting, and Dapper refers to the recent acquittal of Simon Read on charges of summoning spirits (1.2.18-9). *The Alchemist* is not set long ago and far away; it is happening right here, right now, and the audience is constantly reminded of the fact. Ananias specifically dates the day of his gulling to either November 1 or October 23 of 1610, when he made payment to Subtle for the procurement of the Stone, and nineteen year old Dame Pliant gives out that she was born three years after the defeat of the Spanish Armada. The most troubling localizing feature is the reference to plague, the occasion for Lovewit to be out of London; given that 1610 was a plague year and that the theaters had been closed in July, the references to plague would have been uncomfortable, to say the least.38 All of these features are present throughout the play, but it is Drugger’s character, business, and associates that most resemble the audience and provide the least amount of satirical distance.

There is one other character that reinforces the idea that alchemy is not the sole target of satire in the play, the dour skeptic Surly. Described by Gabriele Jackson as a

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38 In fact, Geoffrey Tillotson has pointed out that *The Alchemist* was likely played in Oxford in September 1610 by the King’s Men due to the closure of the theaters, and this may well have been its debut. While this may push the composition of the play to a slightly earlier date, it does nothing to change the fact that the play is set in the present.
“counterfantasist,” Surly surely would be the hero of a straight alchemical satire; he sees through every scheme and reveals exactly what is happening to Mammon far before Mammon himself realizes it (135). If Jonson’s intention were simply to skewer alchemy, it would be Surly who triumphantly unravels all the frauds and wins Dame Pliant’s hand, yet none of these things happen. Surly is not a clear-sighted skeptic; he is a confirmed cynic who would deny the grandiose potential of humanity as surely as Face and Subtle inflate its potentiality in others. J.A. Bryant has noted Surly’s tendency towards negation. When Mammon tells Surly what he would do with the Philosopher’s Stone, curing the sick and reversing the effects of old age, Bryant observes that

> Surly thinks that conquering old age would simply mean increasing trade for the London prostitutes and that putting an end to the plague would benefit mainly the players…What J.B. Steane has called ‘Surly’s mean-spirited scepticism’ is as evident here in his first appearance as it elsewhere in the play; and it turns Mammon’s gullibility and extravagant daydreaming into a highly preferable alternative. (120)

The rest of the characters in the play strive for ridiculous and morally questionable aims, but Surly strives to negate and destroy exuberance and wonder. Jonson’s choice not to make Surly the hero points strongly towards the idea that the science of alchemy is not his only target of satire, but rather a convenient shorthand for a mindset that seeks the furthering of the self through shortcuts and fraud.

The epitome of this effort in *The Alchemist* is Sir Epicure Mammon, and he desires nothing less than the Philosopher’s Stone proper. While Dapper could be satisfied with familiars and fairies and Drugger employs sympathies and astrology,
Mammon’s quest for the final fruit of alchemy can only be expressed through the most bombastic language in the play. The fantasy that prompted Surly’s derision discussed above is truly an Edenic view of the wonders the stone can work in the hands of one committed to the betterment of humanity:

‘Tis the secret

Of nature, naturized ‘gainst all infections,

Cures all diseases, coming of all causes…

Past all the doses, of your drugging Doctors.

I’ll undertake, withal, to fright the plague

Out o’ the kingdom, in three months…

I’ll give away so much, unto my man,

Shall serve th’ whole city, with preservative. (2.1.63-5, 68-70, 73-4)

In this sense, Mammon is near the ideal pursued by Francis Bacon, that of the man who can control nature and use that control to make the world a better place. While alchemy is an esoteric art with jealously guarded secrets, Mammon represents what could be done if such awesome power resided in the proper hands. If his only aims in employing the stone were, as he solemnly informs Subtle, in “founding of colleges, and grammar schools,/ Marrying young virgins, building hospitals,/ And now and then a church” (2.3.51-3). Mammon’s gulling would be cruel and serve no satirical purpose. However, Mammon is also the most self-indulgently sensual of all characters. While he would use the stone for great good, he is not a popularizer of knowledge in the Baconian sense; he approves of the mystery surrounding alchemical knowledge, so that “the simple idiot should not learn it,/ And make it vulgar” (2.3.201-2). While Mammon has no ability to
achieve his aims, he shares the elitist qualities that have made other stage magi eminently
unlikeable. In addition to this unwarranted intellectual pride, Mammon also fantasizes
about using his immense wealth to build a pleasure dome where he could indulge every
sexual fantasy imaginable by paying mothers, fathers, and husbands to provide wives and
daughters for his lust (2.2. 41-88).

James Loxley has noted the fantastic aspect Mammon’s desires, observing that by
“encompassing the full range of the senses and thoroughly sexual, Sir Epicure’s litany of
bodily pleasures is thoroughly appropriate to a man of that name. The mention, too, of
obscene pictures and ‘succubae’…marks this as a transgressive longing beyond the limits
even of mere luxury. Equally significant, though, is the global quality of Sir Epicure’s
desires, their formal similitude to the structure of the tricksters’ republic” (81).
Mammon, like the magus, attempts to transgress beyond the bonds of what is permitted to
humanity.

While J.A. Bryant is correct that Mammon’s lust for life is preferable to Surly’s
drive for negation, neither is admirable. There is no direct target for the satire of
Mammon; his scope is too large to be contained by any one person or class. Mammon
represents the inevitable result of a magical universe as surely as Faustus does by
displaying the utter incommensurability of infinite resources with the frailty of the flesh.
Jonson has simply displaced this character from the morality tale and inserted him into a
more sophisticated satirical comedy designed for a later audience. The fact that this
could be displayed through satire rather than terror says much about the changing
mindset of Jonson’s audience towards the occult and helps sound the death knell of the
magus play.
The same theme is sounded in Jonson’s treatment of the Anabaptists, but they also stand for an easily identifiable target of satire. Norman Cohn has provided an insightful history of the Anabaptists and their beliefs and customs in his 1970 book, *The Pursuit of the Millennium*. Most germane to Jonson’s satire are the Anabaptists’ desire for communal wealth and their congenital distrust of the world outside their sect, both unsettling enough to 16th century authorities to ensure some level of scrutiny and attention. More overt persecution of the mostly peaceful sect created a militant wing that attempted to usher in the millennium through violence from 1532-1536, led most notably by March Matthys and Jan Bockelson’s establishment of an Anabaptist reign of terror in Muenster (Cohn 272-306). While apocalyptic violence among the Anabaptists essentially ended with the execution of Bockelson (by then known as King John of Leyden) via public torture, memories of their violent past combined with their essential oddity and otherness in Shakespearean England to leave the Anabaptists ripe for satire. Indeed, Jonson does refer to the reign of terror at Munster early in his conversation with Ananias by referring to him as “Knipper-Doling,” a pointed reference to Bernard Knipperdollinck, one of the leaders of that bloody coup who was executed along with Bockelson, (Cohn 306) and Subtle feeds the flames of worldly domination in his promises to Tribulation in Act 3, Scene 2, lines 18-60. Still, the main satire of the Anabaptists, illustrated by the very worldly Tribulation’s frustration with the overzealous Ananias, refers to their greed and their willingness to feign holiness in order to amass great wealth. Like Mammon and Subtle himself, the outer guise of spiritual purity only partially disguises the desire for worldly gain that burns inside of each of them.

39 Thomas Nashe writes of the occupation of Muenster in *The Unfortunate Traveller*. 
The end of the play highlights Face as the stage manager, a role he has shared throughout with Subtle. The return of his master Lovewit requires that Face transform himself back into Jeremy the butler and dissolve his “indenture tripartite” (5.4.131). Face reveals all to Lovewit, who is more than happy to support him in his lies in return for the hand of the young Dame Pliant and the bulk of the stolen loot. Jonson also reinforces the point that the occult fraud thrives best in an atmosphere of secrecy and fear, as none of the gulls is willing or able to turn to the law to recover what remains of their stolen property. While Face does escape charges or beatings from his fellow cons and the cozened, it requires outside aid and an enormous amount of effort; while Lovewit would seem to stand for the restoration of order and normalcy, he also stands as the beneficiary of the outlaws’ criminal practices. As he addresses the audience,

if I have outstripped
An old man’s gravity, or strict canon, think
What a young wife, and a good brain may do:
Stretch age’s truth sometimes, and crack it too. (5.5.153-6)

Ultimately, The Alchemist does reward virtue while punishing vice, but the virtue is pragmatism and the vice credulity. Relentlessly localized and determinedly satirical, The Alchemist could never faithfully portray a hero who could put all to rights solely by virtue, especially by magical virtue. At the end of the Shakespearean age and the end of the magus play, such a treatment could only take place in a masque-like fantasy on an invented Mediterranean island.
The Tempest

There are two conflicting views of The Tempest as it relates to the magus play. As is so often the case, Frances Yates has provided one pole of the debate. In *Shakespeare’s Last Plays: A New Approach*, Yates argues that The Tempest (along with *Pericles*, *Henry VIII*, *The Winter’s Tale*, and *Cymbeline*) represents “a revival of Elizabethan traditions, centered on the younger royal generation, on Prince Henry and his sister” (103). In Yates’s view, James’s “unscientific” and “superstitious dread of magic” (96) is synonymous with the general malaise she feels the country fell into in the 1610’s, accompanied by a longing for the golden age of Elizabeth. In her view, John Dee is the logical model for Prospero, and *The Tempest* is one of the heralds of the emergent Rosicrucian movement in England.

The other view is not as clearly defined, but tends to view the play as a progressive forerunner of the direction the magus play was to take as well as a reaction to changing styles in theater. The efficacy of Prospero’s magic is challenged in this view, as well as his relation to the kind of magic practiced by Dee. Stephen Orgel presents a measured critique of the Yatesian view, claiming “Many critics talk about Prospero as a Renaissance scientist, and see alchemical metaphors in the grand design of the play. No doubt there is something in this, but what the play’s action presents is not experiments and empiric studies but a fantasy about controlling other people’s minds” (108). Gary Schmidgall’s *Shakespeare and the Courtly Aesthetic* presents an even more direct critique of Yates’s theory: “Nor does Yates offer convincing evidence for another main thesis of her book, namely, that Shakespeare was a partisan for the ‘new science’ and
therefore particularly interested in refurbishing the reputation of that strange man John Dee” (6).

Most current scholars seem to view this debate as esoterica, and much of the current criticism of *The Tempest* is engaged in the colonial or post-colonial implications of Caliban, signified in part by the linguistic imperialism of Prospero. It is not my purpose to engage these ideas; they do not relate to the idea of magic in the play. Caliban and Ariel are fantastic creatures, not humans exploited for their resources; Prospero is a magician striving to return to his homeland, not an opportunist seeking to establish a new empire; and the virtually uninhabited island is in the Mediterranean, not in the Caribbean. Caliban is not forced into servitude because of his inherent otherness, but because he has forgone the privilege of shelter and nurture by the attempted rape of Prospero’s daughter while living comfortably with them. Given my focus on the magus play, I see *The Tempest* not as the precursor to a line of protest plays, but as the apotheosis of a tradition of serio-comic magical plays meant to appeal to a popular audience.\(^{40}\) To see the play as the culmination of this tradition is to use Robert Greene and Anthony Munday to illuminate Shakespeare, while at the same time understanding the different market forces being brought to bear on what is essentially the same type of play.

John Demaray’s book, *Shakespeare and the Spectacles of Strangeness*, is the clearest exposition of the idea that *The Tempest* is best understood in the terms of the most theatrical pastime of the aristocracy, the masque. In Demaray’s view, the play is structured like a masque and ultimately can be best interpreted as a drama/masque designed to appeal specifically to the court of James I. While Demaray may overreach in

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\(^{40}\) See Patrick Murphy’s “Interpreting The Tempest” for the fullest recent critical history of the play, especially concerning the more recent strands of criticism.
his structural analysis, the masque form does inherently lend itself well to spectacle: it is
ephemeral, it is typically performed for the glorification of one of its audience members,
it features song and dance, and it often contains elaborate costumes. The revelation of
costumed figures in their proper shape provides part of the power of Milton’s *Comus* and
Jonson’s works in the form, and is especially relevant to the magus tradition via *John a
Kent and John a Cumber*, a play that shares many elements with *The Tempest*. Masques
were undeniably popular at court, and Ben Jonson had exploited the license of the
masque to stage *The Masque of Queens*, possibly the most learned production of the
occult during the era. We have already seen that Barnabe Barnes exploited James’
interest in the occult in *The Devil’s Charter*, and the witch scenes in *Macbeth* cohabitate
with the spectacle of Banquo’s heirs, ultimately culminating in James seeing himself in
the proffered mirror. Demaray is amenable to the idea that *The Tempest* probably was
performed at Blackfriars, and possibly at The Globe, but he is insistent that “as a
historical record, the only early performances known to have been mounted were those
before the king and the court, the first almost surely staged at the Masquing House, and
the second for a royal wedding celebration, probably staged there as well” (5). One need
not accept all of Demarary’s theories about the masque form controlling the play to
realize that *The Tempest* is heavily influenced by its courtly pedigree and the tension
involved in composing a play both fit for the grand spectacle of a royal wedding and the
more modest resources of the Blackfriars’s stage.

This performance at court likely affected how Shakespeare altered some of the
conventions of the earlier comedies to suit a more aristocratic audience. Like *John a
Kent and John a Cumber*, *The Tempest* contains a majority of aristocratic characters;
unlike the earlier play, however, none of the lower-class characters further the aims of the protagonists. The sense of inclusion and community that characterizes the end of the occult comedy on the public stage is treated as a return to a hierarchal order in *The Tempest*. While *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* ends with the magus, the commoner, and the king sharing equal prestige on the stage, when the inefficient trio of Trinculo, Stephano, and Caliban are brought before Prospero and the others they are restored to their places as servants in order to win pardon. It has been shown that John a Kent is the magician with the most characteristics of “everyman” in the sorcerer tradition, and I have suggested that this contributes largely to his portrayal as the least objectionable of magicians. Prospero is far more aristocratic, but he is also portrayed as a benevolent ruler who became too absorbed with abstract learning to recognize threats to his ability to govern a state effectively. The use of a variety of devices pioneered by Munday to distance Kent from the darker implications of his magic are adopted and transformed by Shakespeare to make Prospero not only an acceptable magus, but a recognizably human and largely sympathetic character. The first of these devices is the most magical figure in *The Tempest*, Ariel.

Robert Reed has developed a significant argument that the character of Ariel is a direct descendant of Anthony Munday’s Shrimp from *John a Kent and John a Cumber*. He notes four characteristics shared by Shrimp and Ariel: both are small and “elf-like”; both can travel vast distances in little time; both are musicians of some accomplishment; both are able to lull their “victims” to sleep (109-10). By also pointing to similarities in dialogue between the characters, Reed has created a very convincing argument that Shakespeare is heavily indebted to Munday for one of his most memorable creations.
Equally interesting from the point of view of audience reactions is the similarity in how these helpful familiar spirits function in the play. Both Ariel and Shrimp allow their masters to appear as relatively positive characters (opposed to the typical magus) by performing much of the “dirty work” of magic for them. Prospero only actually performs one magical act that the audience sees in the entire play, and that is the marriage masque arranged for his daughter and Ferdinand; all of the other magic is performed by Ariel, albeit at Prospero’s bidding. This pattern is shown in Ariel’s first appearance in the play, as Prospero asks him “Hast thou, spirit,/ Performed to the point the tempest that I bade thee?” (1.2.193-4) and Ariel replies at some length how he “performed” the tempest, dividing himself and creating multiple illusions. The idea of performance is key to the relative acceptability of magic in the play; nobody is actually ever physically affected by any of the magic. It is all spectacle and play, and Ariel delights in his performance.

Referring to Ariel’s description of his illusory tempest, Harry Berger has noted “how his obvious delight in magical performance is doubled by his pleasure in describing it” (13). This delight in the rhetoric of magic is shared by his master; as we shall see, Prospero’s descriptions of his magic far exceed any magical act he actually performs. The rhetoric of magic is necessary to fully convey the magical spectacle that a courtly and sophisticated audience would have expected from a play performed at Whitehall, and we have seen that the play was performed there twice. As capable as the stage technicians at Blackfriars may have been, they simply did not possess the seemingly limitless resources present at Court, and Shakespeare must have had a sense that *The Tempest* could not survive as a viable commercial production if it relied solely on the special circumstances for spectacle provided at Whitehall. Gary Schmidgall has noted the struggle in
Shakespeare’s late plays between the expectations of theatricality raised by Inigo Jones’s masques at court and the necessity of writing for the scantier resources of the private stage. He notes that finding himself concerned to express the two-edged nature of magnificent illusion…Shakespeare naturally sought to shift from the weakness of the relatively bare stage to its strengths, which were gestural and rhetorical. The magical transformations wrought by the masque perspectivists become metaphorical in The Tempest…What Inigo Jones achieved with sightlines Shakespeare had to achieve through poetic lines. (132)

The verbal delight of Ariel and Prospero serves two roles: it supplements the visual spectacle through rhetorical splendor as it distances Prospero from unpleasant implications contained in magic. The description of a terrible spectacle such as the storm that opens the play softens its effect; once the audience hears Ariel’s ebullient description of the storm and is assured that no one was hurt, any malevolence attached to the act fades. Moreover, the necessity for non-visual magic increases Ariel’s role as singer and musician in the play. It is Ariel that provides the songs of enchantment, just as Shrimp provided the music that contained most of the “magic” in Munday’s play. Befitting Shakespeare’s more courtly audience, the music is operatic rather than folksy, just as the morris dance has been replaced by a masque, yet the effect is the same. Given that The Tempest is one of few Shakespeare plays without a definite source, the similarities in magic and song suggest that John a Kent and John a Cumber was more influential on the magical portions of The Tempest than has been hitherto suggested.
This influence colors the role of Prospero as well as Ariel. While the magic in the play is undertaken in Prospero’s name, he is very similar to Kent in describing his magical feats rather than performing them. The great litany of Prospero’s powers occurs in Act V, Scene 1; he asserts that he can control the weather (evidence of which appears in the first scene, although he controls Ariel who controls the weather) and raise the dead. It is plain that he has power over one spirit, and that he has defeated the witch Sycorax in a magical contest. The audience sees none of this in the play; Ariel handles all the magic. It is well known that Prospero’s magical speech is a loose translation of Medea’s speech in Ovid’s Metamorphoses, perhaps reliant on the translation of Arthur Golding; in any event, Shakespeare borrows the fullest discussion of Prospero’s might from elsewhere. This does not suggest a heavy investment in contemporary theories of magic; Shakespeare’s interest in magic lies in its theatrical, rhetorical, and spectacular potential. Like Kent, magic serves to make Prospero a suitable stage manager and is abandoned when it has served that purpose.

Prospero’s role as stage manager is even more obvious than Kent’s; everything that happens in the play happens because Prospero wishes it to be so. The one possible exception to this is Miranda’s infatuation with Ferdinand; while Prospero certainly arranges their first encounter, one does not get the sense that he magically forces them to fall in love. As we have seen, the arrangement of marriage is a staple of the comedic magus plays, and the character of the magus is largely colored by his relation to the marriage; much of Bacon’s negativity stems from his attempts to thwart a loving union, while Kent gains the audience’s respect by ultimately getting the proper parties to the

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41 See the numerous critical opinions on the matter on pages 234-5 of A New Variorum Shakespeare: The Tempest, edited by Horace Howard Furness.
church on time. Prospero is different, however, in the personal stake he has in his daughter’s marriage. While the actions of Bacon and Kent are influenced by their relationships to the ruling powers in their plays, Miranda’s union with Ferdinand is also a political act that furthers the aims of Prospero himself.

The initial encounter between Ferdinand and Miranda is replete with devices familiar to the earlier magus plays. After charming Ferdinand forth, Prospero carefully observes the youths’s reactions to each other; while he is pleased at the affection that quickly grows between them, he is also concerned that things are moving too quickly. He remarks to himself (and the audience, of course) “They are both in either’s powers, but this swift business/ I must uneasy make, lest too light winning/ Make the prize light” (1.2.451-3). Much like Kent before him, Prospero realizes that one act does not a play make, but Prospero has the additional burden of being a father; his repeated insistence on chastity that has puzzled or troubled later commentators is easily explicable if one bears in mind that one of the lovers in question is his fifteen-year-old daughter, his sole human companion for many years. While Prospero’s alternating advancement and obstruction of true love is a standard device, Prospero is also a recognizably human character acting on complex yet credible motives. Unlike Bacon and Kent, Prospero does not enter into the action from afar; he orchestrates the action, yet his own ambition, fatherly love, and sense of fraternal betrayal form the back story of the play. Therefore, his freezing of Ferdinand’s sword arm is different in kind from the same action in the earlier plays; the binding initiates a test and shows off his power, but it is a magical action performed as a father setting firm boundaries on his future son-in-law rather than a magical act by a magus intent on demonstrating himself as such.
The complicated matrix of Prospero’s aims and emotions does lend an element of
self-interestedness to the marriage of Miranda. While neither she nor Ferdinand
possesses all the knowledge of what their union would entail politically, Prospero is quite
aware of the loving revenge he would effect on his brother through their marriage.
Stephen Orgel states the case perfectly:

If we look at that marriage as a political act (the participants are, after all, the
children of monarchs) we will observe that in order to prevent the
succession of his brother, Prospero is marrying his daughter to the son of
his enemy. This has the effect of excluding Antonio from any future claim
on the ducal throne, but it also effectively disposes of the realm as a
political entity…Prospero has not only regained his lost dukedom, he has
usurped his brother’s. In this context, Prospero’s puzzling assertion that
‘every third thought shall be my grave’ can be seen as a final assertion of
authority and control: he has now arranged matters so that his death will
remove Antonio’s last link with the ducal power. (111)

There is no question that Prospero delights in the match, both for his daughter’s
happiness and his own. Prospero lost his realm because he lost touch with human affairs
when he retreated into study after his wife’s death; he gains a realm for his daughter by
returning to humanist politics at the same time he does his best to ensure her future
happiness. It is true that the same interaction can be stated in overtly negative terms
(Lorie Leininger points out that “Prospero needs Miranda as sexual bait…It is Prospero’s
needs—the Prosperos of the world—not Miranda’s, which are being served here” [227])
but the alternative to marriage with Ferdinand and return to Milan is solitary old age with
a semi-human creature who has already asserted his intent to repopulate the island in his image through rape. Prospero’s act is not devoid of self-interest, but it is also in Miranda’s interest. The fact that Prospero’s stake in the matter is not purely financial (as with Bacon) or competitive (as with Kent) helps make his subsequent abjuration of magic a believable and laudable act, not one undertaken out of fear of eternal damnation.

The abjuration takes place as the climax of the speech where Prospero lists his magical powers, discussed above. The renunciation is one long sentence, notoriously elusive and worthy of quotation in full:

But this rough magic
I here abjure; and when I have required
Some heavenly music (which even now I do)
To work mine end upon their senses that
This airy charm is for, I’ll break my staff,
Bury it certain fathoms in the earth,
And deeper than did ever plummet sound
I’ll drown my book. (5.1.50-7)

After the solemn music called for at the end of the speech, the malefactors are brought forward and the spell quickly fades away. It would seem that this is the moment when Prospero has renounced his magic, although the promised destruction of the magical instruments is not indicated by stage directions here or elsewhere in the play. Ultimately, the staging of the physical act of breaking the staff is a matter best decided by an individual production; there is no doubt that Prospero does give up magic, and his release of Ariel from his servitude is a fitting symbol if one is required. As a dramatic device
ingrained in the tradition of the magus play, Prospero must renounce his magic if he is to be saved; however, *The Tempest* as a magus play is an anomaly occurring two full decades after the early comedies. Shakespeare, who had already transformed so much, could surely have allowed Prospero to retain his magic. The pertinent question is not when Prospero officially abjures his magic, but why he does so. Unlike Bacon’s statement of regret and fear, Prospero does not provide a rationale in his speech, but one that must be sought in his final actions in the play.

James Driscoll has noted that “magic dissolves the rigid social identities of all the characters thrown upon Prospero’s enchanted shores. The magic of the storm strips from Alonso his identity as a king and from Ferdinand his identity as a crown prince…magic effects Alonso’s miraculous repentance, Prospero’s restoration to his dukedom, and Ferdinand and Miranda’s mutual acquisition of new identities in love” (91). Driscoll is largely working within the Yatesian tradition that sees the play as a celebration of Hermeticism, and Prospero’s ultimate renunciation is necessary for him to elevate himself spiritually to the highest level possible. I would contend, however, that the key to the abjuration lies in Driscoll’s first observation, that magic has overturned all social distinction. Prospero must renounce magic in order to restore the natural order of hierarchy; while new identities and knowledge may be retained and benefited from, Prospero’s return to Milan requires everyone to return to their rightful roles. Ferdinand is still a Crown Prince, and Miranda is now a future Queen; this is the outcome we could expect had Prospero never been deposed. In order for Prospero to return to his rightful place, he must restore himself to the right mental state as an involved and attentive ruler, not as a hermit absorbed in esoteric learning. Just as Stephano and Trinculo must be
restored to servitude, Prospero and the rest of the aristocracy must return to their rightful roles through choice, not magical compulsion.

While the above furthers the idea of Prospero as a Machiavellian, there is another side to his necessity that all recover their true places through free choice. As magus, Prospero retains the power to bend others to his will without changing their inner state; he can forcefully restore himself to his dukedom without altering the circumstances that originally led to his banishment. Never in the magus plays discussed here does magic permanently deceive or alter the emotional or spiritual being of another character. Faustus and Barnes are damned, but they do it to themselves; love may be found and lost, but it ultimately dies or thrives on its own merits. Prospero’s final interactions with the other characters involve two closely aligned yet distinct emotional actions, mercy and forgiveness. Alan de Gooyer highlights this distinction in a remarkable essay, “‘Their senses I’ll restore’: Montaigne and The Tempest Reconsidered.” In de Gooyer’s view, Prospero must remove the advantage that allows him to be superior to his foes in order to transition from mercy to forgiveness; since this advantage is clearly magical, the abjuration is necessary for his action to be freely given and freely received. de Gooyer points out that “He [Prospero] could have remained the magician and made an imperious public show of his mercy, for mercy requires the power to control, to punish, and even kill, as well as an audience to behold its munificence…Forgiveness, on the other hand, is something privately felt, and it requires that one see one’s self as a thing of darkness implicated in sin and bound with all to a common ending in the grave” (528).

This, then, is Prospero’s particular triumph; unlike the other magicians of the stage, he is able to recognize his common humanity and reassert it on his own terms.
while granting the same strange gift to his former enemies. Magic has brought about
propitious circumstances for Prospero, but his great wisdom is knowing when to let it go
and avoid the fate of his dramatic precursors. At the last, Shakespeare confines his magic
to its fit place on the stage, allowing Prospero to show forth the deeper meaning behind
the spectacle:

   Now I want
   Spirits to enforce, art to enchant;
   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 your crimes would pardoned be,
   Let your indulgence set me free.
Epilogue

_No, our science is no illusion. But an illusion it would be to suppose that what science cannot give us we can get elsewhere._

_Freud, The Future of an Illusion_

Of all the myths that I know to be untrue, the myth of Shakespeare leaving the stage forever with the breaking of Prospero’s staff is by far my favorite. There is a way, however, that this myth becomes true in the purview of this argument. Just as Shakespeare never again wrote anything as aesthetically pleasing or highly esteemed as _The Tempest_, the magus play as a viable theatrical genre ended with that momentous act.

I have briefly speculated on the reasons for the demise of the magus play earlier in this dissertation. “Demise,” however, is a relative term. Setting aside the continuing popularity of the three major magus plays, the occult continued to be a major draw on the stage until the closing of the theaters. It did, however, undergo a significant shift, as the “witch crazes” grasped the attention of the nation. The sense of immediacy, of a present-day phenomenon, transferred to witches, as did most of the positive and negative attributes of the magus. The occult had always had its biggest draw on the public stage, and as the attention of the general public naturally gravitated towards the fact that witches were suddenly being executed in England, the talents of the dramatists followed the public interest.

There are other reasons for the near-extinction of the magus play. While the Scientific Revolution, as commonly understood, was still in the future, the pioneers of that revolution were being born and maturing in a climate that made it possible. In other words, the growing interest in the Mechanical view of the sciences would have begun to
seep into the intellectual climate at this point, unless one wishes to believe that an entire
generation of scientists suddenly cast off the prevailing view of the universe in a
conversion moment similar to Saul’s on the road to Damascus. While the credit for great
scientific discoveries typically goes to individuals, these discoveries rarely occur without
the gradual preparation of a generation of educators stumbling along towards a new view.
Such educators must have begun to quietly but insistently prepare the next generation of
scholars, while their studious industry is lost to history. Their young protégées would
have presumably not been interested in the vestiges of a disappearing world view on the
stage. As Paolo Rossi points out, “the fact remains that around 1600 the English
intellectual was more than half medieval and around 1660 he was more than half
modern” (x).

This gap between the full flowering of the Scientific Revolution and the end of
prevailing magical belief is attested to by Keith Thomas, who admits to some
dissatisfaction with his findings. After listing the probable causes of increasing
technology- the more scientific mechanical philosophy, the growth of urban living, and a
general faith in human capacity to survive without supernatural aid- he asserts

    We are, therefore, forced to the conclusion that men emancipated
themselves from these magical beliefs without necessarily having devised
any effective technology with which to replace them. In the seventeenth
century they were able to take this step because magic was ceasing to be
intellectually acceptable, and because their religion taught them to try self-
help before invoking supernatural aid. But the ultimate origins of this
faith in unaided human capacity remain mysterious. (663)
Thomas has likely hit upon the key idea in this passage. Beginning with the publication of *De revolutionibus orbium coelestium* in 1543, the certainties which had guided life for centuries fell. England was wrenched between religions at the behest of its rulers, and what had promised salvation a generation earlier could easily make one liable to persecution if the tide shifted. Given that all of Henry’s heirs had occupied the throne in short succession following his death in 1547 and all died without issue, the question of who would rule England and what religion they would impose was always a concern. The threat of outside invasion was palpable before the defeat of the Spanish Armada, and the foiling of the Gunpowder Plot showed that a bloody change could occur at any time. The Civil War and subsequent regicide capped a century that must have been as disconcerting and disorienting as any since to have lived through.

In times of crisis, people often are drawn to what cannot be easily disproved. In addition to the crises listed above, England and Europe as a whole found itself in the middle of an epistemological crisis at the time of the magus play. John Donne’s endlessly cited line from “The First Anniversary,” “And new Philosophy calls all in doubt” (205) neatly sums up the situation, but the entire poem is a serious consideration of the way the world seemed to be disintegrating and the complete failure of man’s mind to adequately process the new realities absent the old certainties. As science advanced, magic began to fall away because science could accomplish many of the same things and provide explanations for what it could not replicate. However, science also began to cast doubt on the positive side of the supernatural, religion. The province of the folk magician and his sinister counterpart, the witch, was chance, sickness, the weather, the harvest, fertility, and childbirth, most of which are much harder for science to predict,
control, or explain away. In time, the occult transformed from an object of reverent fear to a scapegoat for hysteria. The old, infirm, insane, and (especially) female witch was the new centerpiece of the occult drama, and, less happily, the new focus of attempts to eliminate the supposed center of evil in the kingdom.

More prosaically, the magus play had enjoyed as lengthy a run on the stage as nearly any other dramatic sub-genre. The revenge tragedy and the city comedy both exhausted their allotted spans in similar amounts of time while they produced roughly the same number of masterpieces; the fickleness of public taste may well be sufficient to explain the disappearance of the magus play without recourse to the above explanations. In any event, *The Tempest* marked the end of a genre, if not of an era.

The small world of the theater both reflects and shapes the larger world from which it is spun. The magus was both a promise and a threat of what humanity could accomplish if it could only overcome the fatal flaw of being human. Early playwrights such as Greene, Marlowe, and Munday drew from the popular stories and legends of magical men and fashioned a wildly popular dramatic genre that alternately delighted and terrified its original playgoers, spawning a rash of imitators that have not survived the winnowing of time. As belief in magic began to wane, the genre began to grow stale; awe was no longer enough. Comedy and religious polemic occupied larger roles in revivals of Marlowe, while a number of playwrights saw the aftermath of the Gunpowder Plot as a fit opportunity to resurrect the occult to demonize the real-world apparitions seeking to overturn the religious and political world with flames from underground. Finally, the two masters of the finest flowering of the London stage capped the genre, one by ruthlessly satirizing the credulous mindset that made magic possible and the other by
creating the most human of the magi and demonstrating that magic could indeed be summoned, but only for a short while before it must be relinquished. At every turn, the subtle interplays between popular belief and popular drama, between art and propaganda, and between the public and the private theaters manipulated and were manipulated by playwrights seeking to tell essentially the same tale in a new and pleasing way.

Of course, interest in the past spurs revivals. John Milton’s *A Mask Presented at Ludlow Castle*, commonly referred to as *Comus*, was first presented in 1634, nearly thirty years after *The Tempest* and far outside the original scope of this essay. Although the magical tradition on which it draws is not the tradition discussed in this dissertation, it merits mention here because the production history of *Comus* after its initial performance is representative of how the magus would be represented on stage after the re-opening of the theaters. Alwin Thaler and Edward Peple have admirably traced the history of *Comus* in performance; Peple sums up his findings succinctly by noting “from its first, private performance before the Earl of Bridgewater in 1634 through the adaptations of Dalton, Colman, Vestris, and others, it was gradually made more and more spectacular with a consequent and increasing submergence of the poetry under the weight of musical and scenic effects” (241). The theme of chastity that is so prevalent in Milton’s original is gradually replaced by a greater emphasis on music. We have already seen the gradual changes in *Doctor Faustus* towards greater spectacle at the expense of its tragedy.

This increasing reliance on music was not unique to productions of Milton. As Northrop Frye points out, “the only place where the tradition of Shakespearean romantic comedy has survived with any theatrical success is, as we should expect, in opera…When

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42 Thaler in “Milton in the Theater.” *Studies in Philology* 17 (1929). 269-308; Peple’s reference is in the Works Cited.
we look for the most striking modern parallels to *Twelfth Night* or *The Tempest*, we think first of all of *Figaro* and *The Magic Flute*” (25). In the operatic future of the magus play, the spectacle and grandeur are all that remain when the underlying belief is lost.
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