

Introduction by the Editor

In April 2022, Robert Baxter recommended the DVS invite Jane Nelson to contribute a 'John Dee article' following her thesis on Shakespeare and Christian Hermeticism. At that time the thesis was embargoed, and Robert wrote a 'preview' (pp. 35-44) based on the website of the publisher, Brill, which is highly relevant to the Shakespeare Authorship Question and to Alexander Waugh's YouTube videos, the most popular of which are those concerning John Dee:

<https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCHN7SCKlsa9lPYJmqqQ2uIg/videos>

In September 2022, Jane sent the DVS and other Oxfordians the excellent news that her book had been published by Brill in August 2022. She was delighted to read Robert's preview and sent the complementary article below.



CHRISTIAN HERMETISM AND SHAKESPEARE

By Jane Nelson

Following the Editor's invitation for me to write about my thesis on Christian Hermeticism (see Robert Baxter's preview of the monograph based on the thesis, p.35), I propose to outline very briefly some of the salient teachings of the Hermetic texts which may not be widely known. Let me first clarify the distinction between 'Hermeticism' and 'Hermetism'. The former refers to the practical or technical texts and is an amalgam of *magia*, alchemy, astrology and Cabala examples of which are recognizably present in Shakespeare's plays as any work of art is saturated with the culture from which it springs.

On the other hand, religious and philosophic Hermetism contained in the seventeen texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* outlines the 'way of Hermes' which is the ascent to *gnōsis* or the suprarational knowledge of the Mind of the god within us all. It may be achieved through the perfection of the individual self, resulting in love that expresses itself as *agape* or charitable love, and motivates us to serve others. Thus, the goal of life for the Hermetist is to use the contemplative mind to know oneself, and the will freely to choose to behave oneself in this life in ways

that will lead to the perfecting of self; the texts promise that the reward for the perfected Adept is ascent to Olympus.

According to the texts, Mind, who is God (known as Pymander) created a second mind, a craftsman god, who brought forth from the elements all the things of the earth, air and water thus ordering the existing chaos (since *nihil ex nihilo fit*, or nothing comes from nothing). Mind (God) who is androgyne, then created humankind in his own image, also androgyne; however, whether we become like God, depends on how we choose to behave. The Hermetic doctrine teaches that the knowledge of self leading to knowledge of God is the greatest virtue; the only vice is ignorance. Sin is defined as the consequence of Man's choices.

The Hermetic texts describe the nature of humankind as twofold, a view derived from (or which possibly influenced) the Christology articulated by Bishop Nestorius of Syria around 430 CE, and which may also reflect the Gnostics' view of the universe as a duality of matter and spirit. In the long debate about how to explain the incarnation and resurrection of Christ, Bishop Arius had previously advanced the heretical opinion that Jesus was not God at all, but fully man, while Bishop Nestor later explained the miracle differently; he held that Jesus Christ was both fully human and fully divine; in other words the incarnate Christ was two persons, human and divine, separable but united in life, as he explained, under one *prosōpon* or persona (theatrical mask). The opinion of neither bishop prevailed, and the belief that Christ is three persons united inseparably in one Trinity – Father, Son and Holy Ghost – was officially adopted by the church and expressed in the Nicene creed still affirmed by believers to this day. Nestor was accused of heresy at the Council of Ephesus but even so, Nestorian Christianity spread eastwards as far as China and survived in various forms for 1000 years. Nestor's Christology survives in the Hermetic explanation of death. Whereas the church teaches that the material body and the essential soul, divided at death, will be reunited on the Day of Judgment, the Hermetic texts teach that death is only change and separation; the human or material part of men and women dissolves and is recycled back into the cosmos, while the separated soul, the spiritual or essential part, is immortal. Whether the immortal soul retains its personality in the afterlife has been a matter for debate.

A close reading and Hermetic exegesis of *Love's Labour's Lost*, *King Lear*, *Othello* and *The Tempest*, arguably reveals Shakespeare's growing understanding of the doctrine.

The fourteen texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* (earlier known as *Pymander*) entered the Latin West after the fall of Constantinople in 1453. Purchased by Cosimo de' Medici, the Florentine merchant prince, they were translated from the Greek by Marsilio Ficino. A version containing three additional texts was obtained and translated by the poet, Lodovico Lazzarelli. It is significant that none of these seventeen texts contained any hint of magic, unlike a companion Hermetic text, *Asclepius*, which had been known in Latin for centuries and contained two clauses about a god magically entering and animating a statue.

When the texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* arrived in Italy from Byzantium around 1460, they were embraced as God's first words to mankind, older than the Torah itself. It was believed that the texts were the work of one man, Hermes Trismegistus, known in the ancient world as king, philosopher, and priest, although the mediaeval English scholar, Thomas Bradwardine of Oxford, described the triple majesty of Hermes as king, philosopher and poet.

In quattrocento Italy, the well-known mythical Hermes/Mercury, depicted with winged helmet and caduceus, merged with the newly recovered 'apollonized' Hermes Trismegistus, whose principal characteristic was his eirenicism, and who trailed in his wake religious toleration. So revered was Hermes Trismegistus that in 1488 he was depicted in an inlaid panel on the floor of the newly built Duomo where he may be seen to this day by any visitor to Siena in northern Italy.

At its heart, the *Corpus Hermeticum* reiterates Christ's simple message of love, that we treat others as we ourselves would like to be treated; the Books illustrate the path by which men and women may ascend to the knowledge of God that brings love, spiritual regeneration and salvation. However, the texts pose a dilemma for the believer.



Hermes Trismegistus

Book I urges those who have received the knowledge to become ‘guide to the worthy’ and thereby save the human race; Book XIII on the other hand warns that those with the knowledge must promise to be silent about the miracle (of regeneration through love). A third Book completing and validating Books I and XIII was discovered amongst the Gnostic or Apocryphal gospels found at Nag Hammadi in Egypt in 1945. Obviously unknown in the sixteenth century, the spectacular find confirmed that, in attempting to define itself in the earliest days of the Christian or Common Era, the Christian church had rejected Gnosticism, even of this optimistic kind. Nevertheless, the gnostic texts of the *Corpus Hermeticum* were welcomed and respected in Italy by those with access to the manuscript Latin translations of Ficino and Lazzarelli. With the advent of printing, new editions and new translations spread the Hermetic doctrine into France where it was openly read and well-received by the episcopate and the court, whose matriarch Catherine de Medicis was descended from the family that had introduced Hermetism to Europe. Bishop François Foix de Candale published a French translation and lengthy commentary which he dedicated to her daughter, Marguerite de Navarre in 1579. Despite this interest and approval, religious toleration did not prevail in France where the population was decimated by eight religious wars from 1563 until 1585 just before Henri, Huguenot King of Navarre, became King of Catholic France.

The *Corpus Hermeticum* circulated in print from 1473; it was known to Cornelius Agrippa who, as a young student in Paris, found ways to reconcile the pagan texts to Christianity. Michael Keefer, the Canadian scholar, calls him a Christian Hermetist. Indeed, the long sixteenth century is studded with Christian Hermetists: Lodovico Lazzarelli, Agrippa, John Dee, Foix de Candale, Friar Rosselli, Francesco Patrizi among them. I omit the famous Giordano Bruno from the list on the grounds that he had been excommunicated from his Dominican order for his Arian beliefs and embraced a return to the magical Egyptian origins of Hermetism. The peripatetic Dee is clearly a nodal figure in the spread of Hermetic thought and knowledge of the texts. Although not translated into English until 1650, the Hermetic texts were known and read in late Tudor England despite Draconian censorship. Those who knew include Philip Sidney, George Chapman, Christopher Marlowe, Thom Nashe, Francis Bacon, Walter Raleigh, members of Gray’s Inn,

and, as I argue in the recent publication by Brill reviewed in this newsletter (p.35), William Shakespeare.

The long sixteenth century, from the transmission of the earliest translations of the recovered Hermetic texts until 1614, is recognized now as the golden age of Hermetism. In a century when attempts to reform the institution of the Christian church led to accusations of heresy, to state-sanctioned torture and punishment, to war and bloodshed on an appalling scale, gnostic Hermetism offered a path to salvation that was both eirenic and tolerant, possessing the potential to reconcile all faiths. Admittedly pre-Christian, the *Corpus Hermeticum* had the status of a text older than the Old Testament and prophetic of the New. Significantly, because Hermetism can co-exist with any religion, it offers a viable alternative which the individual of any faith can follow alone or with like-minded others. It simply requires the individual to choose to live a life of moral rectitude and loving service. It requires no dedicated buildings, sacraments, vestments nor candles, no liturgies, priests nor Pope; moreover, its followers do not need to seek redemption from the risen Lord nor see Christ as our only Mediator and Advocate. For all these reasons, Hermetism, despite its acceptance in politique France, was dangerous to follow in England. There the state was suspicious of atheists of any kind, of practising Catholics, and, for a time, of non-conformists who were also deemed heretics and subject to the laws governing traitors.

Tracing the history of Hermetic thought throughout the long sixteenth century reveals the emergence of a number of brotherhoods whose practices, beliefs and ideals appear to be infused with Hermetic doctrines. Research published in Paris in 2012 disclosed an aborted experiment by Henri of Navarre to reconcile Huguenots and Catholics in a 'laboratoire de coexistence' in Nérac after 1576. That brotherhood did not survive, but others did, and continue to do so. Chief amongst them is the Haus der Liebe, begun in Emden in 1540 by Henrik Niclaes which emerged in England in 1550 as the Family of Love, and surfaced again between 1578 and 1582 when it was officially outlawed. The peace-loving Familists appear to have survived by keeping a low profile only to emerge nearly a century later at the time of the Restoration as the Society of Friends or Quakers. Another who welcomed members of all faiths and none is the Freemasons, whom Joscelyn

Godwin calls ‘the most lasting creation of the Hermetic tradition in the West’. Similarly, the Hermetic Rosicrucian fraternity, which proclaimed its existence very publicly in Germany in 1614.

Mackey noted ‘a very great similarity’ between the Hermetic doctrines and those of Freemasonry (in Clegg, 342). *Ordo ab chao* or order out of chaos, for example is the motto of the 33rd degree. And Macoy notes that ‘one of the most interesting degrees in Freemasonry [the 28th] ‘Adepts or Knights of the Eagle and the Sun’ is founded on the Hermetic Philosophy (81). Despite debate about the date and origin of Freemasonry, there is general agreement that the movement in its modern speculative form began in the sixteenth century. Support for this comes from Leon Hyneman’s *History of Freemasonry in England*, 1878, where he lists Grand Masters of the Lodge from 1561 to 1663. They include Thomas Sackville, 1561-1567, Charles Howard who was Grand Master in the South until 1588, followed by George Hastings, the Earl of Huntington until 1603, then Inigo Jones from 1603 to 1618 succeeded by William Herbert, Earl of Pembroke from 1618 until his death in 1630. Self-evidently, the existence of Grand Masters presupposes the existence of masonic lodges throughout the years of interest to students of Shakespeare. Those three societies, (the Familist/Quakers, Freemasons and Rosicrucians), with roots in the sixteenth century and with strong links to various aspects of Hermetic thought and teaching were eventually to spread worldwide; today they continue to welcome men, and women too, of all faiths. But for a time in the seventeenth century two of them disappeared from the public record altogether and the third was exposed to reprisal and ridicule.

Why? Why did a religious philosophy, older than Moses, older than Plato, with the potential to reform mankind, to end religious warfare forever, to unify the monotheistic religions, with beliefs and practices in sympathy with Buddhism and with Hinduism, in short with the potential to reform the whole wide world, disappear? Why was esoteric Hermetism discredited, regarded with disdain, mocked, rejected, virtually forgotten and for many years held in disrepute by academics and others?

The answer may lie in three watershed events that occurred in 1614. First, Isaac Casaubon in the employ of James VI and I in England was able to demonstrate on

secure philological grounds that the ‘ancient’ texts, believed to be contemporaneous with Moses, were in fact written in the first few centuries of the Christian Era probably in Hellenic Egypt and by several hands. This finding cast serious doubt on the provenance and validity of the texts. Second, Raleigh published the *History of the World* that he had been working on for Prince Henry during his long years in prison; Raleigh’s strong Hermetic leanings are revealed in the text and on the cover, which carries the great All-Seeing Eye of Providence, the Egyptian symbol of Osiris or the sun (Clegg, 338). It is the visible symbol of the eye of God or Mind; it is the mind’s eye ‘that beholds the inmost recesses of the human heart’, as well as being the symbol of the 3rd degree (Clegg, 317); its use implies that Raleigh is a master mason. Third, three manifestos, each more overtly Hermetic than the last, were published in Kassel, Germany. The first in 1614, in German, was titled ‘Universal and Grand Reformation of the Whole Wide World; together with the *Fama Fraternitatis* of the Laudable Order of the Rosy Cross . . .’ The work contains oblique references to Dee and to a work by Bacon, as well as to a certain brother I.O. or Fr. O who had died in England along with Fra. D also dead. The second manifesto in Latin, in 1615, called for the overthrow of the Pope. The third in 1616, about an ‘alchemical wedding’ of a legendary ‘Christian Rosenkreutz’ lends itself to interpretation as an allegory of the wedding of Princess Elizabeth Stuart with Frederick V Elector Palatine in 1613. The three Rosicrucian manifestos marked a clear departure from the Hermetic philosophy known in England where the Hermetic texts were, as I am arguing from some of Shakespeare’s plays, interpreted as leading to inner or esoteric knowledge. By contrast, the German interpretation of Hermetism in the Rosicrucian texts muddied the waters by linking them to the exoteric alchemical and kabbalistic tradition and to a Faustian magical manipulation of the physical world (for more on this see Christian McIntosh).

The reaction to the manifestos was immediate. Frances Yates, the English historian describes it as a *furor*. In Germany, men clamoured to join the rumoured brotherhood, others rushed to dissociate themselves from it.

In England the response seems to have been more measured, although an examination of the manifestos suggests that their changed direction would have

caused alarm. History records that in 1618 the Spanish ambassador to England, Count Diego Gondomar, advised King James that the Spanish king wanted him to authorise Raleigh's death. From a variety of outdated and trumped-up charges to do with his treatment of the Spanish years before in Guiana, Raleigh was indicted and in November beheaded. The man who had spent ten years in gaol for allegedly supporting the Spanish when they were England's enemy is condemned now as an enemy of the Spanish whom James wishes to appease. I am well aware of the dangers of a *post hoc* argument but one tiny reference survives to connect Raleigh's treatment to his open avowal of Hermetism:

Gondomar to Philip III (?August 1618): From England they write all marvellous things, how the King is at once putting in hand what he promised me about matters of religion and about Walter Ralé, who has been declared a traitor and a pirate and as such has been sent to the Tower, waiting for our master, Your Majesty, to order what should be done. DIHE, II 85. (Trevelyan, 529) my emphasis.

It is possible that an examination of *Documentos Inéditos para la Historia de España* (DIHE) at La Biblioteca de Palacio in Madrid may yield more information. Raleigh was not the only Englishman in Gondomar's sights. Two years later he was demanding the head of the eighteenth earl of Oxford.

I have argued in *Shakespeare and religio mentis A Study of Christian Hermetism in Four Plays*, that Shakespeare had an intimate knowledge of Hermetism, the non-conformist gnostic religion that informs early Freemasonry. Like Prospero, Shakespeare might have been the last of the Christian Hermetists. He might indeed have been a practising Freemason. If so, he would not have been alone, and his brother masons may well have feared for their lives following King James' treatment of Raleigh. Interestingly, Francis Bacon's book, *New Atlantis*, records a meeting between the mariner/explorers and a man wearing a white turban with a red cross; the work is believed to date from 1614 to 1617 but it was withheld from publication until after his death in 1626.

In my next article I will discuss what steps might have been taken both to save the lives of these putative brother masons, if there were any, from the Spanish, and also to protect a movement whose aim in 1614 seems to have been to transform

humankind one by one into nations of morally upright men and women committed to the loving service of others. Religious Hermetism had the potential to reconcile all faiths and confessions in a world where the avowed masonic principles of religious freedom, equality and brotherhood of humankind prevailed. Revealing Shakespeare as a Christian Hermetist validates Jonson's accolade: Soul of the age!

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