

The Occult Theory in the Elizabethan Age and Christopher Marlowe's Doctor Faustus

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MARLOWE'S *DOCTOR FAUSTUS***

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Potpis _____

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1. INTRODUCTION

“Black Magick is the process of self-transformation through an antinomian initiatory structure, Black meaning the hidden wisdom, power of darkness, dreams and staging the reality you wish and Magick being the process to ascend, become immortal in spirit.”

Michael W. Ford (2006)

This thesis aims to study and describe the occult practices of the Elizabethan age, where and how they developed, what kinds of occult practices were popular at the time, how they were received by the ruling authorities and the general public and how they influenced works of literature of that age, focusing mainly on one tragedy, *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* (1604) by Christopher Marlowe (1564 – 1593). At the center of Marlowe’s work is the eponymous character of Dr. Faustus, an occult practitioner whose existence is influenced by occult philosophy. Along with Marlowe’s Faustus, this thesis will also explore other works of literature in this age with the goal of identifying and studying the elements of these work that were influenced by occult theory. Two of Shakespeare’s plays will be explored: *The Tempest and A Midsummer Night’s Dream* (1595), all with the purpose of demonstrating the influence that occult theory had on the writers of the time. In order to achieve this, the philosophies and sciences of the time will be explored, along with some of the most famous thinkers of the time whose influence shaped the beliefs of the contemporary society and science of the time. The effect of these philosophies on the theatre will be explored, along with the process of development of theatre and the myths and legends which inspired Marlowe in writing *Doctor Faustus*.

2. THE OCCULT IN THE ELIZABETHAN AGE

“The Elizabethan world was populated, not only by tough sea- men, hard-headed politicians, serious theologians. It was a world of spirits, good and bad, fairies, demons, witches, ghosts, conjurors.”

Yates (2004, p. 87)

In order to understand how the occult philosophy in the Elizabethan age influenced Marlowe’s work, we must first understand the Elizabethan age itself. This is the period in which Queen Elizabeth I ruled over England. Her rule, along with the whole period, which lasted from 1558 until 1603, is considered the golden age in England’s history. It is in this period that English expansion commenced, but it is also the period of internal religious turmoil between Protestants and the main religious force of the continent, which was Roman Catholicism. Furthermore, this was also the period in which some of the greatest writers in English history, such as William Shakespeare, wrote their works. This new wave of literature, along with the significant interest in theatre that was awakened in this period, was intertwined with the dominant theory of the time, which was the theory of the occult.

Many of the theorists of the occult in the Elizabethan age believed they could unite sciences such as mathematics and magic in order to achieve impressive feats. According to Frances Yates, one such scientist and expert of the occult who studied the influence of numbers was John Dee (1527 – 1608) whose “studies in number, so successful and factual in what he would think of as the lower spheres, were, for him, primarily important because he believed that they could be extended with even more powerful results into the supercelestial world” (Yates 2004, p.96). This knowledge of the power of numbers was not a new idea; the famous Italian poet Dante Alighieri had already implemented it in his studies and his writings in the thirteenth century. Thomas Rendall (2010, p. 151) points out the importance of the relationship of the numbers four and three: “These numbers had special significance in Dante’s time. The number four was the number of the world, of the material—the four seasons, the four directions and, especially, the four elements. The number three was the number of God”. He saw meanings hidden in numbers and some of them represented the divine and others the profane.

Furthermore, sacred geometry was an entirely new branch of study. It was widely believed that through the use of certain geometrical shapes a conjurer could summon and bind the unholy spirit and command it to do their bidding. As Robert Lawlor (2002, p. 16) emphasizes "whether the product of an eastern or a western culture, the circular mandala or sacred diagram is a familiar and pervasive image throughout the history of art. India, Tibet, Islam and medieval Europe have all produced them in abundance". This type of magic was believed to be demonic and it was considered to be an offense against God. Furthermore, there was another type of magic, called natural magic, which relied on the manipulation of properties of material objects and the purification of the spiritual self (Confer, 2009, p. 13).

2.1. KING JAMES VI OF SCOTLAND

The popularity of the occult theory in the Elizabethan age can mainly be attributed to king James VI of Scotland, later also known as king James I of England. He was king of Scotland until the passing of Queen Elizabeth I in 1603, when he ascended to the English throne as the first Stuart king.

In order to understand how he ushered the popularity of the occult theory into England, it is important to understand the characteristics of his reign. During his rule of Scotland, he was mostly successful in pitting Christian and Protestant nobles against each other in order to hold most of the power in the country. However, during his rule over England he encountered a surprising amount of resistance from the Parliament. James was a firm believer in royal absolutism and refused to be restricted by the parliament. The parliament in turn limited his income and further restricted his rights and powers (Mathew, 2022).

All this led to the king becoming increasingly worrisome of his own well-being and he began developing conspiracy theories. These theories combined with his paranoia were at the root of the Elizabethan occult philosophy. James was the husband of Anne, the daughter of Frederick II of Denmark and the couple often visited Anne's home country. In 1590, during a return from one of their visits to Denmark, a terrible storm caught their ship and they were almost lost at sea. Upon their return to Scotland, James was paranoid and believed that the storm was a product of witchcraft which had been orchestrated by his enemies in order to eliminate him. He ordered the interrogation of many Scots and three hundred of them were declared guilty of

conspiring to kill him. They were accused of burning a wax effigy in order to provoke the storm which was intended to take his life.

Afterwards, James took a great interest in the occult studies and wrote his own dissertation on the topic, entitled *Daemonologie* (1597). It is thanks to this work that the terms such as necromancy became popular in sixteenth century England.

Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus* was first performed in 1594, followed by William Shakespeare's *Macbeth* (c. 1605) and Thomas Middleton's *The Witch* (c. 1613). Ben Jonson's early masque for the Stuart court, *The Masque of Queens* (1609), featured a dance of witches who appear with snakes and rats on their heads. Putting evil spirits on stage ensured commercial success. (Bain, 2022)

Although James' work contributed to the popularity of the occult, the occult also ran into certain problems with the law. According to Chris Trueman (2015), "Witchcraft had been a criminal offence in Scotland prior to 1590 but action against suspected witches was limited. However, after 1590 and in the last thirteen years of the reign of James, Scotland fully accepted the Christian witch theory". From this newly amassed fame that witchcraft and the occult had earned, many of the old theories on the functioning of the world resurfaced and many new ones were being created.

2.2. NEOPLATONISM

Neoplatonism was the dominant ideology among Elizabethan occult theorists. It influenced all fields of life, from poetry to the very perception of existence and belief in a higher power. The term "Neoplatonism" refers to a philosophical school of thought that first emerged and flourished in the Greco-Roman world of late antiquity, roughly from the time of the Roman Imperial Crisis to the Arab conquest, i.e., the middle of the 3rd to the middle of the 7th century. Christian Wildberg (2021) states how "in consequence of the demise of ancient materialist or corporeal thought such as Epicureanism and Stoicism, Neoplatonism became the dominant philosophical ideology of the period, offering a comprehensive understanding of the universe and the individual human being's place in it". Wildberg claims that Neoplatonists were famous for their brand of speculative thought. One of their most famous assumptions about the world was that a mindful consciousness was more important than the physical and the material world. It was through this mindful consciousness that a

person could connect to the ultimate reality. They revered this mindfulness as the highest sense a human could possess, one that would be able to lead them closer to the divine.

The second most important assumption of the Neoplatonic ideology is the idea of The One. Wildberg (2021) points out that Neoplatonists shared this idea with Stoics and Hermetists (an influential group of Egyptian religious thinkers that predate the rise of Neoplatonism). The main idea of this theory was that reality, in all its cognitive and physical manifestations, depended on the highest principle, which is unitary and singular. Wildberg (2021) explains that “this idea categorizes Neoplatonic philosophy as a strict form of principle-monism that strives to understand everything on the basis of a single cause that they considered divine and indiscriminately referred to as ‘the First’, ‘the One’, or ‘the Good’.

During the Elizabethan age one of the main representatives of the Neoplatonic ideology was Edmund Spenser. Spenser was born in sixteenth century London to a relatively poor family. He attended Pembroke College where he undoubtedly obtained knowledge regarding ancient Latin and Greek literature and philosophy, which later informed his epic poem *The Faerie Queene* (1590).

Throughout this and many of his other works there are clear indications that point to the persistent influences of the pagan myth, medieval folklore and legends, along with the influence of the Christian doctrine. However, it is clear that his Neoplatonic views are most visible in his work *Fowre Hymnes* (1596). *The Hymnes* were first published in 1596, six years after the first instalment of *The Faerie Queene* and in the same year as the second instalment. Spenser may have intended *The Hymnes* as an explanation of, or apology for, the philosophy behind *The Faerie Queene*. *The Hymnes* abound in references to Plato and to Platonic philosophy and their cult of heavenly love and beauty is Platonic in conception. However, their basic structure is that of a Hermetic ascent and descent through the spheres of the universe. (Yates, 2004, p. 113)

Malcolm Hebron (cited in Dambe, 2009, p. 31) explains that *the Hymns* are addressed in turn to Love (Cupid), Beauty (Venus), Heavenly Love (Christ) and Beauty (Holy Wisdom). They combine tropes from courtly love, Platonism and Christianity”. Hebron (2017) goes on to state that “the main Platonic ideas can be recognized in the second part of the work, where Spenser is inspired by Beauty. This beauty, according

to Spenser, can be seen as a goodly Paterne, or in other words as the platonic form". Spenser expressed that "true love starts with an admiration of the body, but the material image is reimagined into an intellectual one, a more refined form, by which the lover's contemplation is moved to a higher dimension. Thus, Spenser embraces the Platonic doctrines" (Hebron cited in Kaske, 2000, p. 161).

2.3. JOHN DEE AND THE CABALA

Another famous theoretician, mathematician, astrologist and practitioner of the occult was John Dee. Mordechai Feingold (2022) states that he was born in London in the sixteenth century and attended the university of Cambridge. After his travels through Europe, he returned to England and served at the court of queen Mary I as her consultant and astrologer. During this time, he was imprisoned on charges of witchery, but was soon released. It is important to note that during the rule of Mary I mathematics was seen as a science that was similar to conjuring. After his release, Queen Elizabeth I ascended to the throne and he became her scientific and medical advisor. He greatly contributed to the development of England, especially by making maps, calculating naval pathways and teaching sailors how to navigate. However, along with his occupation with sciences, he was a master of the occult and a cabalist (Feingold, 2022).

Cabala comes from the Hebrew word for tradition. The term refers to the set of mystical beliefs in Judaism. The main tenet of the Cabala is the faith in the ability to interpret the hidden meanings of the holy scriptures and communicate with the higher power, in this case God. Alex Johnson (2019) claims that John Dee's main goal was to be able to interpret and produce Enochian, the language in which angels communicated. He continues by stating how in hindsight the church should not have had a problem with this kind of practice, but the problem lies in the usefulness of the church. The men of faith had long been revered as the intermediaries between the terrestrial and the divine. If a regular man was able to establish a communication with the heavenly host, that would render the priests and bishops of the Catholic church obsolete and all their studies and teachings would become inconsequential.

Furthermore, communication with the divine beings was not enough for Dee, he wanted to achieve more:

Dee believed that he had achieved, together with his associate Edward Kelley, the power of conjuring angels. In one of the descriptions of his séances with Kelley, Dee speaks of the book of Agrippa as lying open on the table and there is no doubt that Agrippa was Dee's main guide in such operations. (...) Like the Christian Cabalists in general, he believed that such daring attempts were safeguarded by Cabala from demonic powers. (Yates, 2004, p. 96)

It is important to note that the part when Cornelius Agrippa and his book (manual on the occult) are mentioned is directly tied to the basic rules of the Cabalist practice. Yates states that the Cabalists believed that a practitioner should always have assistance from a more experienced Cabalist or even a higher power protecting them in case of a demonic interference. Yates (2004, p. 96) goes on to explain Dee's belief in the justness of his cause by stating how "a pious Christian Cabalist is safe in the knowledge that he is conjuring angels, not demons. This conviction was at the center of Dee's belief in his angelic guidance". Along with the practice of Cabalism, Dee was also well versed in the pseudoscience of alchemy, the main goal of which was to be able to acquire the power to turn any base metal into gold or any other element that the practitioner desired. It is believed that "during his travels in Europe during the 1560s, Dee seems to have become acquainted with a wider range of alchemical doctrines and began to accumulate a substantial library of alchemical literature" (Rampling, 2011, p. 498).

To this day the exact nature of Dee's studies remains somewhat of a mystery. He took great inspiration in the authors and scientists that came before him, but also collaborated with many of his contemporaries. "Often the two groups come together, for one interest that Dee shared with many of his acquaintances was an active interest in recovering, reading and putting into practice the works of past adepts" (Rampling, 2011 p. 498). It can be concluded that Dee's interests and affinities varied, but were, to a certain extent, influenced by the occult theory and served as an inspiration for authors and scientists that came after him.

2.4. SKEPTICISM

"Cogito ergo sum" (Descartes, 1637) is a phrase by René Descartes and perhaps one of the most famous philosophical ideas ever uttered. In order to understand its origin and the ripple it caused in the philosophical circles of the world, we must first

explore philosophical skepticism, one of the dominant philosophical practices of the 16th and 17th centuries which greatly influenced the works of many authors and introduced uncertainty among Christian worshippers, the scientists of the period and the clergy itself.

The word skepticism originated from the Greek word *skeptikos*, meaning the person who inquires. In everyday life, skepticism is manifested in doubt, such as doubt of the accuracy of a statement or a belief, or doubt of one's knowledge or intentions. In philosophy, skepticism implies doubt of all knowledge. It starts at a basic level of questioning widespread beliefs and dogmas, but philosophical skeptics delve deeper into the matter of knowledge by questioning the truthfulness of science and claim that the only way to establish certainty is through empirical research. It is exactly this current of doubt and questioning of everything in existence that led Descartes to the only truth one cannot doubt: I think, therefore I am. This laid the foundation and served as the ultimate criterion in deciding whether something is true or not. This criterion allowed for individual perception and for science to become the solution and the foundation for certainty.

Philosophical skeptics often clashed with the church and it is not hard to see why. The core of Christian belief is exactly that: belief in something which can neither be seen nor proven, belief in a creator who does not wish to reveal himself and demands worship regardless. However, during the Elizabethan period and sometime after its end, skepticism and the church worked hand in hand and skepticism had immense value for the church (Popkin, 2020). Melissa Caldwell explains the value of doubt by stating the following:

The English church of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries was an institution in its adolescence that, from its very outset, capitalized on areas of moral vacuity. Uncertainty was a powerful ally in the struggle to define Protestant religious identity, to strengthen the legitimacy of a national, reformed church and to transmit normative moral value. Bernard Verkamp has shown the importance of the concept of *adiaphora*, things indifferent to salvation, to the definition of the sixteenth-century English church. Since *adiaphora* could be any practice or belief not prescribed by the Bible, the English church had the freedom to develop and revise moral value in the interest of a national unified religion. (Caldwell, 2009, p. 15)

Skepticism was used as a weapon in the battle between Protestant authorities in England and the Catholic church, which laid claim to much of Europe. According to Eric Pudney (2019, p. 12), both sides used skepticism to weaken each other's claim to spiritual authority during the period. In the Renaissance, skepticism was intertwined with the church and, interestingly, with the occult practices and beliefs of the period. When discussing the impact that skepticism had on the Renaissance, Pudney (2019, p. 10) states that "philosophical skepticism played a significant role in undermining the certainties offered by the philosophy of the later medieval period, which was dominated by Aristotelian scholasticism".

Not only did skepticism influence the philosophical circles, but it also shaped the way people perceived witchcraft and the common belief that was held about the existence of witches. Pudney (2019, p. 11) states how "the most obvious role for this newly sceptical mentality in relation to witchcraft would seemingly be to encourage people to deny the possibility of such a thing". However, a direct link between philosophical skepticism and skepticism about witchcraft itself does not exist. At the most basic level the main hurdle between these two forms of skepticism is of a chronological nature. Pudney states how during the medieval period believing in someone being a witch or a practitioner of dark arts was considered heresy. In that case skepticism served as a tool for the ecclesiastic authorities to use in their fight against the occult. If the general public was too afraid to proclaim that someone was a witch at the risk of being accused of heresy because they believe in witches, theoretically the church would have been able to root out the occult tradition altogether. However, this did not happen and during the Renaissance the skeptical approach to witchcraft and the occult made a drastic shift: "witchcraft was widely proclaimed to be real and executions for it reached levels never seen before, or since, anywhere in the world. The rise of witchcraft belief, therefore, seems to have coincided with the rise of scepticism" (Pudney, 2019, p. 11).

Along with skepticism, the Protestant authorities in England realized the value of theater, especially of witchcraft drama, discussed further in a later chapter. Pudney (2019, p. 46) claims that "before the advent of permanent purpose-built theatres, things were quite different. Protestant reformers in the reign of Henry VIII, for instance, urged the King to use theatrical performance as a means of attacking the Catholic Church". According to Pudney, Sir Richard Morrison (scholar and diplomat, propagandist of Henry VIII) advised the king not to ban such plays, but rather to have

them performed on holidays to demonstrate the wickedness of the Catholic clergy and all those who follow it. The main goal of the Protestant authorities was to invoke certain feelings and views in the audience which were beneficial to the Crown. Eric Pudney sates how

The kind of Catholic witchcraft represented by *Idolatria* must be both dismissed and taken seriously. Catholic magic must be shown to be no more than cheap trickery, so that the claims made for it can be contradicted. At the same time, it must present a genuine threat to true religion, since if it were harmless there would be no need to oppose it. Both scepticism towards and belief in witchcraft are therefore required of the audience. (Pudney 2019, 51)

It would seem that skepticism and the Elizabethan theatre went hand in hand and enabled the Crown to install a Protestant authority in England by means of shaping what the masses considered right. Skepticism made the common folk further doubt the legitimacy of the Catholic clergy while also building suspicion and mistrust in them, making them view the Catholic religion as both impotent and as a threat to their eternal souls, something that was meant to lead them astray from the Protestant values which the Crown had convinced them were the only path to salvation.

3. WHAT IS WITCHCRAFT (AND WHAT IT IS NOT)

In order to analyze the occult within Marlowe's famous play and the genre of witchcraft drama which it belongs to, it is necessary to discuss the practice itself, the craze it caused and the reactions that it provoked from the church. When discussing witchcraft, "On a social level, witchcraft is directed against others and thus understood as a deviation from the social norms of the community, the anti-social crime par excellence and the 'quintessence of immorality'" (Mencej cited in De Blecourt, 1999, p. 151). Mencej continues on to state how "witches were considered destructive and malicious figures and have always represented the opposite of positive values that the community held to be its own". One of the practices that actually started the whole witch craze in the Elizabethan age is folk witchcraft. This was a form of witchcraft passed down from generation to generation. It often involved extensive knowledge of herbs and brewing potions. Aside from a practical knowledge of nature, such "witches" were also credited with a knowledge of spirits and the ability to manipulate them. Practitioners of this form of witchcraft were prosecuted and often met a gruesome end at the hands of the authorities and the townsfolk (Horne, 2019, p. 9). A separate form of witchcraft, dark magic witchcraft or satanism, is related to Marlowe's tragic play. Perhaps the most popular and most often represented in fiction, this type of witchcraft is based on worshipping the Devil or any demon from hell's extensive hierarchy. Dark magic involves doing harm to others, achieving inhuman longevity or assuming supernatural powers.

3.1. ORIGIN OF WITCHCRAFT DRAMA

A previous chapter concerning skepticism discussed how witchcraft drama was used by Protestant authorities as a tool for undermining Catholic faith. How and where did this type of drama originate and what are its main characteristics? Pudney claims the following:

The earliest English play to feature a witch may be John Bale's (1495 – 1563) *Three Laws* (1538?), an allegorical anti-Catholic polemic which shows the three laws ordained by God – the laws of nature (Naturae Lex), Moses (Moseh Lex) and Christ (Christi Lex) corrupted by various personified vices acting under the direction of Infidelitas. (Pudney 2019, p. 48)

This play demonstrates one of the basic characteristics which was attributed to witches by the Church: the power to corrupt the very laws set in place by God. Pudney continues by stating how several characteristics which were believed to be attributes of witches were present in *Idolatria* (character of a witch that represented the sin of idolatry), such as the power to manipulate nature, power to find missing objects and the power to conjure the Devil. It is elements like these, combined with magical ingredients and spells, that were so characteristic of the witchcraft drama and thus recognizable to audiences.

Interestingly enough, according to Pudney (2019, p. 50) “witches on stage seem to have generated smiles and perhaps laughter too, from the very start. The Tudor interlude *Thersites* (c.1562?) contains a similar scene which is even more obviously comical”. It would seem that such plays both instigated fear among the masses and also served as comical relief. This was achieved by almost mocking witches and making them seem like incompetent and comical characters who doom themselves by making obvious mistakes. This is one of the main characteristics which makes *Doctor Faustus* a witchcraft drama. From the very moment Faustus strikes his deal with Mephistopheles, the reader/viewer expects him to employ his new powers to achieve great feats and perhaps even trick the Devil into retaining his soul while also enjoying his powers. However, as the story progresses, true to the nature of this type of play, the titular character becomes a target of ridicule and his authority and even his power to frighten or impress the audience are reduced to nothing.

It was also not a rare occurrence for male magic to be represented as a higher form of magic in comparison with female magic. One more play needs to be mentioned as one of the predecessors and inspirations for witchcraft drama: *Gammer Gurton's Needle* (1533), written by a presumably female author known only under the pseudonym of Mrs. S. The plot of the play revolves around a lost needle and the character of Hodge, who tries to find the missing needle. This play is very specific, as it demonstrates to a great extent how witchcraft accusations functioned. They were often ridiculous and did not have any real foundations. For example, in this play a character is accused of bewitching cows because the cows were too lively. This comical aspect was based in reality. Mancej (2015, p. 113-127) states that people would be accused of witchcraft by those who wanted them to be eliminated or by those wanting revenge. Often a person would accuse their neighbor of being a witch if they

did not get along. Family members also sometimes did the same thing and so did disputing parties who went to court, as well as jealous lovers who were either cheated on or rejected. It can be concluded that witchcraft plays were to some extent based on reality and real social problems. More often than not, they served as both comical relief and as propaganda by the ruling authority.

3.2. REACTION OF THE CHURCH

This section explores the manner in which witchcraft and its representation on the stage was received by ecclesiastical authorities, both Protestant and Catholic. When discussing the existence of a link between Church and witchcraft, Pudney (2019, p. 46) claims that “the development of the professional theatre in sixteenth-century England was, like much else at the time, marked by the Protestant Reformation. Witchcraft first appeared in the theatre in connection with Catholicism and this link remained intact”.

Before the rule of queen Elizabeth, the national religion in England was Catholicism. Elizabeth’s predecessor, her sister Mary, was a devout Catholic who condemned Protestants and often executed them. Mary was the daughter of Henry VIII. and Catherine of Aragon and through her mother she had a direct connection to Roman Catholicism. Her grandparents were the two most prominent rulers of Catholicism: Isabella I. of Castile and Ferdinand II. of Aragon and her mother was a firm believer in Catholic values. Mary despised Protestantism as it was created by her father to enable him to annul his marriage with her mother. However, after her rule ended Elizabeth reinstated Protestantism as the official religion of the kingdom.

As stated in a previous chapter, the witchcraft craze was of great use to Protestants in their campaign against Catholicism. Belief in witchcraft was widespread and often linked to Catholicism in order to weaken its claim to the spiritual supremacy in England. New doctrines were introduced into the belief system of the isles during the rule of Henry VIII.

The proliferation of printed books and pamphlets and the mounting visibility of heresy caused important changes in the laws governing treason and evidence in heresy trials. English heretics exiled to the Continent wrote and exported their vernacular works back into England to an audience impatient for their arrival. The importation of heretical works elicited a dramatic and distinctly public response from the Tudor government,

namely book burnings and the development of a new representative of religious knowledge: printed religious polemic. At the same time, the rise in heretics and the resulting heresy trials—one outcome of this uncontrollable importation—occasioned discussions over the nature of the evidence for religious belief. (Caldwell 2009, p. 79)

This initially hostile response to all things Catholic was later replaced by a more subtle campaign of linking all things immoral, mainly witchcraft and the witchcraft drama, with Catholicism and distancing it from Protestantism in order to turn the people against the Catholic authority. As witchcraft and its representations were used as propaganda tools, people accused of practicing it suffered greatly at the hands of the two opposing religions. Witch trials served the two religions as means of getting ahead in the religious race. They tried to gain as many followers as possible by means of executing the supposed witches (Caldwell, 2009, p. 79). This was done in order to appease the public and to gain their backing. In the end, however, it would seem that even with all of the hostility that was aimed at it, witchcraft and witchcraft dramas managed to survive.

4. THE OCCULT ON THE STAGE

As established in the introduction, the occult beliefs that were popular in the Elizabethan age greatly influenced the arts. In this period there was one art form in particular that became extremely popular: theatrical performance.

Mark Cartwright (2020) states that “Elizabethan theatre witnessed the first professional actors who belonged to touring troupes and who performed plays of blank verse with entertaining non-religious themes. The first purpose-built permanent theatre was established in London in 1576 CE and others quickly followed”. As Justin Cash (2021) states, the main playwrights of the time included William Shakespeare, Christopher Marlowe, Ben Johnson and many others.

The Elizabethan plays were so recognizable that when referring to the Elizabethan theatre we are most often speaking about the style of the theatrical performance rather than the age they were performed in.

In this thesis the focus will be on the morality play. These plays were often allegorical dramas that depicted good and bad deeds, as well as the consequences that befall the characters. The content and structure of morality plays is described by Craig Hardin (1950, p. 64): “In the morality play the hero is not an individual but a symbol of humanity as a whole. Thus, the hero proceeds on the highway of life usually accompanied by certain abstract domestic virtues”. He continues on to state how the man that represents mankind is met by personified vices that lead him astray. Only after a period of indulgence does the character realize his sins. It is only through divine grace that the character is finally redeemed.

Perhaps the most famous play of the Elizabethan age that incorporates elements of the morality play is *The Tragical History of the Life and Death of Doctor Faustus* by Christopher Marlowe. In this tragedy the titular character is a prominent German scholar who grows tired of the conventional sciences and decides to try his luck with the occult art of conjuring unholy spirits. One day he manages to summon Mephistophilis, who is a servant of Satan. Faustus makes an arrangement with Satan: Satan grants Faustus supernatural powers for twenty-four years, but his soul will serve in hell at the conclusion of this period. The comical part of the play begins when Faustus begins to use his newly acquired powers. He fulfills none of the goals he sets for himself, instead playing pranks on various historical figures and conjuring ghosts for his amusement, the most famous of which is Helen of Troy. The interesting thing

is that even Mephistophilis tries to get Faustus to turn away from the deal and save himself, but Faustus refuses that even while experiencing immense fear regarding his upcoming fate. In certain moments in this work even God himself tries to save Faustus and warns him to repent, but Faustus does not falter. This play uses typical elements of the Elizabethan morality play in that it shows the pattern of immoral behavior and finally the fate that befalls the evildoer. As we see at the end of this play, Faustus' punishment is that he gets dragged down to hell by a swarm of devils.

Marlowe wasn't the only playwright of the time whose works were affected by the influence of the occult theory. Two of the most notable examples of the influence of the occult theory, aside from Marlowe's *Faustus*, are Shakespeare's *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. In *A Midsummer Night's Dream* Shakespeare explores the concept of otherworldly beings such as fairies as well as the belief that magic casting and spells were commonplace. On the other hand, in *The Tempest* Shakespeare demonstrated some of the darker aspects of this belief system. Just as in the previously mentioned play, there are otherworldly beings and spell casting, but in this play, there is also the main character who practices the occult. Through his use of magic, Prospero influences and manipulates others. This is best demonstrated by Prospero's action of manipulating a whole roster of characters found within the play, all with the purpose of achieving his goals. Prospero first enslaves the spirits of the island with the help of his magic, then he manipulates his own daughter Miranda and all of the sailors who were stranded on his island.

If we compare the two plays by Shakespeare with Marlowe's *Faustus*, it appears that they share some common characteristics. There is the titular protagonist who casts spells and calls upon otherworldly beings to do his bidding, there is also comical relief in his actions which can be compared with the mistakes of Robin Goodfellow. There is also anxiety in the fact that Faustus can, on a whim, influence the lives of others and alter the course of events just as Prospero was able to do. With these characteristics in common, it would be safe to conclude how these plays all, to a certain extent, fit into the same pattern and rely on somewhat similar tropes that were common in this genre.

4.1. THE WITCHCRAFT BASIS IN *DOCTOR FAUSTUS*

Interestingly, the character of Doctor Faustus was probably inspired by a range of legendary and historical personages. During the first millennium of the Christian era, a number of stories developed concerning men who were supposed to have acquired supernatural gifts or powers by making agreements with the Devil. One of the earliest and most widespread of these legends told of a bishop's seneschal named Theophilus who, in the reign of emperor Justinian, was wrongfully dismissed from his office. In his resentment, he sealed a contract renouncing Jesus Christ and the Virgin Mary and acknowledging Satan as his lord. His restoration to the office followed immediately. But Theophilus soon became terrified at what he had done. For forty nights he fasted and prayed to the Virgin; at last, she appeared and listened to his plea. Reassured of the divine mercy, he made a public confession of his sin and proclaimed the miracle of his preservation. The contract was burned and Theophilus shortly afterwards died in a state of grace, becoming known as Theophilus the Penitent (Jump, 1965, p. 1).

Along with this legend there are historical files alluding to the existence of a doctor called John Faustus who lived in sixteenth century Germany and was accused of heinous crimes and involvement with the forces of hell. Lizzie Davis (2021) states how there is evidence to his existence: "Though long a point of contention with historians, the existence of a real Dr Faustus is now accepted as fact. Having died around 1540 in Germany, the real Dr Faustus is recorded in contemporary sources as being well-travelled and knowledgeable".

One of the main indicators which demonstrate how Marlowe's play is based on the principles of the occult is Faustus' desire to bend the laws of nature. He wishes to drop the moon from its sphere, to bring back the dead and to perform many other perversions of the natural laws. Some other indicators are more obvious like the conjuring of the devils and the geometrical patterns and circles of protection which Faustus uses that are common in the occult practice of conjuring. Whether or not any such legends are rooted in real life, they may have served as inspiration for Marlowe's tragic play.

After having covered the basis upon which Faustus was written, it would be most useful to discuss the different versions of the text throughout the time, how the tragedy was presented on the stage and how it was received by the contemporary and modern literary critics. As we have established earlier, it would seem that however

strange Marlowe's tragedy may be, it was, to a certain extent, rooted in real life. Marlowe, in fact, was not the first to have written about the German scholar. Before the first ever version of Faustus was written, there were documents which detailed his life and accomplishments. After several elaborations and many additions to the existing documents, the first version of what would become *Doctor Faustus* was published in 1587 by an anonymous Protestant scholar. This version is often colloquially referred to as the *German Faust-Book*. John Jump explains the following about the *German Faust-Book*:

The *German Faust-Book* aims above all at edification. It shows the awful consequences of a sinner's deliberate commitment of himself to evil with a view to gratifying his pride, ambition and lust. At the same time, the historical Faustus had been a wandering scholar and even his moralistic biographer was affected by the characteristic influences of his time. So, the German Faust-Book allows its hero some slight touches of the Renaissance intellectual curiosity. The century was also that of the Reformation. So, it was easy enough for the legend to acquire a markedly anti-papal bias. (Jump, 1964, p. 2)

Soon after this version was published in Frankfurt-am-Mein, an English translation followed. This translation, according to Jump, was written by a man whose identity is unknown and who is only known by the initials P. F. His version is commonly referred to as the *Damnable Life*. In his translation, the author took several liberties, mostly in elaborating on Faustus' travels, which were not described in the German original. Paul Kocher (1940, p. 9) argues that "the tendency of present-day scholarship is to view the character of Faustus as the product of Marlowe's creative genius working upon the materials afforded to him by the English translation of the *Faustbuch*". When discussing which version of the book inspired Marlowe in writing his tragedy, John Jump (1964, p. 4) states with certainty that "not one significant instance has been found of the play's agreeing with the German version when the English translation disagrees with it. We may safely assume that *Doctor Faustus* derives from the *Damnable Life*". He further states how there exists a divide among literary critics about the authorship of Faustus. Some critics believe that Faustus could not have been the work of Marlowe alone. This theory is fortified by shifts in style of writing and several inconsistencies found throughout the text. Samuel Rowley is named, by some critics,

as a possible candidate who might have assisted Marlowe in writing the comical scenes of the play, such as those involving the Pope, the Duke and the Emperor.

As unclear as the history of the Faustus text may seem, the theatrical history of the play is no simpler. One thing that most critics and literary historians agree on is that the play's popularity lasted around half a century, from the 1590s when it was performed at the Rose theatre until the closing of the theatres due to the Civil War in the 1640s. The Faustus play was not only performed in England. The play also reached the continent and was performed by several companies and at multiple locations all around Europe.

Focusing on England, the acting companies each contributed something of their own to the play, either by improvising certain lines, which was common practice at the time before Vittorio Alfieri's theatrical reform, or by using spectacular special effects which impressed the audiences at the time and made them believe that magic was really used in the production of the play. According to Jump (1964, p. 43), a 1620 account detailing the productions of Faustus describes vivid shows performed by Prince Henry's men at the Fortune theatre: "A man may behold shag-haired devils run roaring over the stage with squibs in their mouths, while drummers make thunder in the tiring-house and the twelpenny hirelings make artificial lightning in their heavens".

As such special effects were not commonplace and were a novelty to the audiences of the time, cautionary tales were circling around England, warning Puritans of the supposedly cursed play. Not only was the Fortune theatre production deemed cursed, but there were also two other productions that inspired fear in the audience and even the actors themselves. The first of these two was the Belsavage theatre production, which, according to the audience, featured a real-life devil. Another, perhaps more unusual and unnerving production may be the Exeter production. According to written accounts, the actors performing this production felt like there was an extra devil on stage with them. The audience panicked at the visibly disturbed actors and they, upon the end of the play, spent the whole night reading the Bible and praying to God to save their souls.

After the re-opening of theatres Faustus saw a decline in interest and was neither performed nor printed until the 19th century. Ever since the play's revival in the 19th century, it has remained popular around the world.

4.2. SUPERNATURAL THEMES, MOTIFS AND SYMBOLS

Having established the main philosophies and practices of the age as well as inspirations and real-life sources that helped shape Marlowe's play, it is time to move onto the play itself, or rather its supernatural themes, motifs and symbols in which the influence of the main beliefs of the age is visible.

The first theme that is present and the one that permeates the work, is the theme of damnation and repentance. This theme is rooted in the Christian belief that all sins, no matter how grave, can be forgiven only if the sinner repents and begs for forgiveness. From the moment that Faustus signs the deal with the Devil, he is given signs that his course is not a righteous one. In Christianity the act of renouncing God and accepting the Devil is seen as the gravest of sins, blasphemy.

Even as Faustus is signing the deal, he is immediately given a sign, his blood congeals as if his body is resisting that which he is doing. Faustus himself is confused by this and proclaims the following: "What might the staying of my blood portend? Is it unwilling I should write this bill? Why streams it not, that I may write afresh? "Faustus gives to thee his soul". Ah, there it stayed! Why should'st thou not? Is not thy soul thine own? Then write again, "Faustus gives to thee his soul" (1965, p. 63-64). From this monologue it can be seen how even after realizing what the congealing of his blood meant, Faustus is still adamant about selling his soul, justifying his act by saying that his soul is his own and that he can do with it as he pleases. After this act, an inscription appears on Faustus' arm: "But what is this inscription on mine arm? Homo, fuge! Whither should I fly? If unto God, he'll throw me down to hell. My senses are deceived; here's nothing writ. I see it plain; here in this place is writ. Homo, fuge! Yet shall not Faustus fly" (1965, p. 64). However, Faustus decides to ignore this sign as well.

There are many more warnings that appear to Faustus, such as the blood of Christ which flows through the air on his last night and the good angel which tries to convince Faustus to repent and save his soul, but the scholar ignores these signs as well. Throughout the work there is the possibility of repentance, which leaves the impression that there might still be a chance for Faustus to save himself. It is only at the very end of the book when Faustus, facing death, begs the Lord for forgiveness and is denied. This ending is contrary to the Christian framework in which the play is set, as it breaks the fundamental Christian belief that all sins may be forgiven. It is a

sudden shift made by Marlowe where he seems to be breaking the main rules set by Christianity and subsequently by himself within the pages of the play.

The second theme is that of temptation, which is closely tied to the theme of damnation and repentance. Christian belief states that the Devil is the prince of lies, the father of deceit and the great corruptor of the mankind and it is through his deceitful promises that humans damn themselves to eternal hell. In the play it is affirmed by Mephistophilis that even he was deceived and that he regrets his part in Lucifer's rebellion against the heavens as his current existence is never-ending torment: "Why this is hell, nor am I out of it: Think'st thou that I who saw the face of God and tasted the eternal joys of heaven, am not tormented with ten thousand hells, in being deprived of everlasting bliss? O, Faustus! leave these frivolous demands, which strike a terror to my fainting soul" (1965, p. 59).

This line spoken by Mephistophilis is a subversion of expectations: as he is a servant of Lucifer, we would expect him to want to lead Faustus to damnation rather than attempting to convince him to turn down the deal. Another temptation comes in the form of the bad angel. The bad angel tries to influence Faustus to act immorally and in a way which would ultimately lead to his eternal damnation:

GOOD ANGEL: "Sweet Faustus, leave that execrable art."

FAUSTUS: "Contrition, prayer, repentance! What of them?"

GOOD ANGEL: "O, they are means to bring thee unto Heaven!"

EVIL ANGEL: "Rather illusions—fruits of lunacy, that makes men foolish that do trust them most."

GOOD ANGEL: "Sweet Faustus, think of Heaven and heavenly things."

EVIL ANGEL: "No, Faustus, think of honour and of wealth."

(1965, p. 62)

Going forward, the main supernatural motifs in the story are magic and the supernatural. As previously mentioned, acquisition of magical powers was the main goal of many Elizabethan age occultists. In the beginning, Doctor Faustus wishes to achieve great feats by using magic:

Had I as many souls as there be stars, I'd give them all for Mephistophilis. By him I'll be great Emperor of the world and make a bridge thorough the moving air, to pass the ocean with a band of men: I'll join the hills that bind the Afric shore and make that country continent to Spain and both contributory to my crown. The emperor shall not live but by my leave, nor any

potentate of Germany. now that I have obtained what I desire, I'll live in speculation of this art till Mephistophilis return again.

(1965, p. 60).

He is further reassured by Mephistophilis about the scope of his powers:

MEPHISTOPHILIS: "I'll fetch him somewhat to delight his mind."

[Exit. Re-enter Mephistophilis with Devils, who give crowns and rich apparel to Faustus, dance and depart.]

FAUSTUS: "Speak, Mephistophilis, what means this show?"

MEPHISTOPHILIS: "Nothing, Faustus, but to delight thy mind withal, And to show thee what magic can perform."

FAUSTUS: "But may I raise up spirits when I please?"

MEPHISTOPHILIS: "Ay, Faustus and do greater things than these."

(1965, p. 64)

The themes and motifs regarding the supernatural are further reinforced by the symbol of blood. The first time this symbol appears is when Faustus signs his contract with the Devil and blood again appears on Faustus' last night. This time it is the blood of Christ which is linked to the Christian belief that Christ redeemed mankind by spilling his own blood on the mountain of Golgotha. The blood of Christ appears as an omen just as Faustus' blood did earlier in the story. It was his final opportunity to repent but in his pridefulness he refuses to do so, thus condemning himself to hell.

5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it is apparent that a large part of life in the Elizabethan age was the belief in the occult (Mencej, 2015). This belief shaped the way the people of the time perceived the world around them. Furthermore, the influence of the dominant philosophical theories such as Neoplatonism and approaches such as scepticism were also widespread among the philosophers and writers of the time.

The occult theory reflected the fear and paranoia that many of the inhabitants of England at the time felt and also served as inspiration for numerous artists. Together with the occult theory, belief in witchcraft and the rise and development of witchcraft drama exerted significant influence in the cultural, political and religious turmoil of this age. Such beliefs also had great value for Protestant authorities in their attempt at undermining the Catholic church.

This thesis demonstrates how Marlowe used certain aspects of the occult theory in writing his play. It integrates all of the occult practices and beliefs that were at the core of the occult theory: casting spells, using mathematics and other natural sciences in order to conjure otherworldly beings.

Furthermore, this thesis covers the main philosophical approaches along with the scientists and thinkers of the time. Along with this, it also covers the history of the influence that these approaches had on the theatre and mainly on Christopher Marlowe and his play *Doctor Faustus*.

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this thesis is to define and explore the different aspects and philosophical approaches of the occult theory in the Elizabethan age. Along with this, it demonstrates how the theatre of the age developed and how it was influenced by these approaches. The main focus of the thesis is Christopher Marlowe's *Doctor Faustus*. It is a tragic play written in the 16th century by Christopher Marlowe. The plot revolves around the titular character of Doctor Faustus as we follow his journey through the world of the occult. This thesis explores certain beliefs and practices that were popular at the time when Marlowe wrote this work, how their influence can be seen within the play, the dominant themes displayed in the story, how the play originated and its development and influence through time. This play made Christopher Marlowe one of the most famous authors of the Elizabethan age, thus, as such an important work of literature, it should be further understood through the context of the age it was written in and the mentality of the contemporary society that surrounds it.

KEY WORDS: *Doctor Faustus*, Christopher Marlowe, occult, Elizabethan age, theatre.

SAŽETAK

Cilj ovog rada je definirati i istražiti različite aspekte i filozofske pristupe okultne teorije u elizabetanskom dobu. Uz to, ovaj rad prikazuje kako se kazalište tog doba razvijalo i kako su na njega utjecali ti pristupi. Glavni fokus disertacije je *Doktor Faustus* Christophera Marlowea. Riječ je o tragičnoj drami koju je u 16. stoljeću napisao Christopher Marlowe. Radnja se vrti oko titularnog lika Doktora Fausta dok pratimo njegovo putovanje kroz svijet okultnog. Ovaj diplomski rad istražuje određena vjerovanja i prakse koji su bili popularni u vrijeme kada je Marlowe napisao ovo djelo, kako se njihov utjecaj može vidjeti u predstavi, dominantne teme prikazane u priči, kako je drama nastala te njen razvoj i utjecaj kroz vrijeme. Ova drama učinila je Christophera Marlowea jednim od najpoznatijih autora elizabetinskog doba, stoga je, kao tako važno književno djelo, treba dalje razumjeti kroz kontekst doba u kojem je napisana i mentaliteta suvremenog društva koje ga okružuje.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: *Doktor Faust*, Christopher Marlowe, okultno, elizabetansko doba, kazalište.

ASTRATTO

Lo scopo di questa tesi è definire ed esplorare i diversi aspetti e approcci filosofici della teoria occulta in età elisabettiana. Insieme a questo, questa tesi dimostra come si è sviluppato il teatro dell'epoca e come è stato influenzato da questi approcci. L'obiettivo principale della tesi è il *Doctor Faustus* di Christopher Marlowe. È un dramma tragico scritto nel XVI secolo da Christopher Marlowe. La trama ruota attorno al personaggio principale del dottor Faustus mentre seguiamo il suo viaggio nel mondo dell'occulto. Questa tesi esplora alcune credenze e pratiche che erano popolari all'epoca in cui Marlowe scrisse questo lavoro, come la loro influenza può essere vista all'interno dell'opera teatrale, i temi dominanti visualizzati nella storia, l'origine dell'opera teatrale e il suo sviluppo e influenza nel tempo. Questa commedia ha reso Christopher Marlowe uno degli autori più famosi dell'età elisabettiana, quindi, in quanto opera letteraria così importante, dovrebbe essere ulteriormente compresa attraverso il contesto dell'epoca in cui è stata scritta e la mentalità della società contemporanea che la circonda.

PAROLE CHIAVE: *Doctor Faustus*, Christopher Marlowe, occulto, età elisabettiana, teatro.