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Currie, Catherine and Neal, Ian (2011) Shakespeare and the Spheres:the representation of astrology, astronomy and folklore surrounding the moon in King Lear, A Midsummer Night's Dream and The Tempest. Education-Today.net.

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Shakespeare and the Spheres: the representation of astrology, astronomy and folklore surrounding the moon in *King Lear*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*.

Education-Today (www.education-today.net/currie/spheres.pdf)

May 2011

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Abstract

*This paper discusses the representation of astrology, astronomy, and folklore surrounding the moon, in *King Lear*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* and *The Tempest*. It includes an explanation of the forms of astrology and astronomy practiced during the Renaissance while discussing their representation within the three plays. The paper shows how Shakespeare's reference to astrology and the folklore surrounding it reflects the social, historical and cultural significance of his work at the time, and therefore the importance of Shakespeare and his place in English Literature.*

Introduction

With the upsurge in interest in esoteric and occult practices brought about by popular books such as Stephenie Meyer's *Twilight* series, films such as *The Craft* and television series such as *Charmed*, school students are becoming more and more alive to these references. Teachers will always seek to find ways in which to show how English literature is relevant to students' interests. One of the more interesting playwrights to make references to occult and esoteric practices is Shakespeare – arguably one of the more difficult authors to get school students interested in. Most of his work makes some reference to occult or esoteric practices, but the background to his referencing is a little more obscure. We hope in this paper to show some of this background and context to give readers a start in the fascinating “edge” to Shakespeare's work. We are not suggesting that some of these discussions would be of value to *all*

youngsters, but for those who already have an interest readers may gain a few ideas to use in the classroom from what we offer.

Why have we chosen to use The Moon as the focus of our paper? Simply because we had to start somewhere, and The Moon is not only central to many esoteric practices, it is also a clear and tangible link with the occult as portrayed in modern popular fiction that students can easily understand. And of course Shakespeare makes a lot of it – more than one might think!

Historical Context

In Shakespeare's England, as in the rest of Renaissance Europe, there was belief in the power of the stars as evidenced in the almanacs and prognostications of the time, which were popular with the general public (Camden, 1933). The frequent mention of astrology in drama, not only Shakespeare's plays, presupposes an audience familiar with the subject and its surrounding folklore (Sondheim, 1939). Astrology was divided into *astrologia naturalis* (natural astrology) and *astrologia judicialis* (judicial astrology). Natural astrology was the theory and practice of calculating and predicting natural phenomena; the influence of the planets, including the sun and the moon, on weather, the tides, and the birth, growth and death of all living things and was more a branch of physical study than a faith. Judicial astrology was the theory and practice of prophecy in relation to the planets on human destiny; a fatalistic doctrine (Sondheim, 1939).

The Moon

In *King Lear* the characters pose the question '*What is the ultimate power that motivates our actions and causes the conflict and suffering that ensues?*' Shakespeare shows how the question of what rules the world is pondered upon by introducing differences in the language and thoughts of the characters (Bradley, (1904), p.249).

Shakespeare acknowledges natural astrology briefly in *King Lear*'s curse on Cordelia, although there is also reference to the myth and folklore surrounding the moon through the naming of Hecate, a goddess of the moon and also of witches (Gallagher, (2005), p.111) :

*'...For by the sacred radiance of the sun,
The mysteries of Hecate and the night,
By all the operation of the orbs
From whom we do exist and cease to be...'*

(*King Lear*, 1.1.109-114)

This brief recognition that the sun and moon are necessary for existence can be compared with Shakespeare's representation of judicial astrology in *King Lear*, through Kent's belief that rank is destined, evidenced in his observation that Albany and Cornwall have spies '*as who have not that their great stars / Thron'd and set high, servants...*' (*King Lear*, 3.1.22-3) as well as his perplexity over the difference on people's nature despite identical parentage:

*'It is the stars,
The stars above us govern our conditions,
Else one self mate and make could not beget
Such different issues.'*

(*King Lear*, 4.3.33-6)

The superstition and fear surrounding judicial astrology is represented by Gloucester's fearful pessimism over recent eclipses:

*'These late eclipses in the sun and moon
portend no good to us. Though the wisdom of Nature
can reason it thus and thus, yet nature finds itself
scourged by the sequent effects. Love cools, friendship
falls off, brothers divide: in cities, mutinies; in
countries, discord; in palaces, treason; and the bond
cracked 'twixt son and father.'*

(*King Lear*, 1.2.103-109)

Eclipses of the sun were looked upon as omens of approaching disaster, and were the source of extraordinary alarm occasioning crying in the streets and calls to prayer (Dyer, (1883), p.62). In 1605, the same year as the probable composition of *King Lear*, there appeared translation of *A Treatise of Specters* by Pierre Le Loyer, dedicated to King James, which associated the fear of eclipses with paganism and which echoed Gloucester's position of a man who had '*a certaine terrour and feare of the puissance and power of the starres*' (Elton, (1988), p.151).

In *King Lear* Gloucester's speech is immediately followed by Edmund's diatribe against judicial astrology:

*'This is the excellent foppery of the world, that
when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeits of our
own behaviour, we make guilty of our disasters the sun,
the moon and the stars, as if we were villains on
necessity, fools by heavenly compulsion, knaves, thieves
and treachers by spherical predominance; drunkards,*

*liars and adulterers by an enforced obedience of
planetary influence; and all that we are evil in by a
divine thrusting on.'*

(*King Lear*, 1.2.118-126)

Edmund continues, stating that it is convenient for his father to blame his lechery on the influence of a star, and that it follows that Edmund is rough and lecherous, being conceived under the dragon's tail and born under Ursa Major (*King Lear*, 1.2.126-131), terms which are not actually astrological. By their use, Edmund is stating that it was the illicit affair between his unmaidenly mother and lecherous father that caused him to have the character he has (Smith, 1958), not the influence of the planets, and that he '*should have been that I am had the maidenliest star in the firmament twinkled on my bastardizing*' (*King Lear*, 1.2.131-3).

This apparent opposition between Edmund and his father reflects the Renaissance controversy over the validity of judicial astrology, and no doubt the divided beliefs of the audience. In creating characters with opposing views, Shakespeare explores the argument between astrological supernaturalism and self-determinism; an issue which engaged his patron, King James, whose *Daemonologie* revealed a dislike of the judicial forms of astrology (Elton, (1988), p.156).

In contrast to *King Lear*, *A Midsummer Night's Dream* focuses more on the myth and folklore surrounding the planets, and less on the effect of the planets on the lives of the characters. In Act 1, Scene 1 Theseus states to Hermia that she can marry the man of her father's choosing or become a nun '*Chanting faint hymns to the cold fruitless moon*' (*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1.1.73). Here the moon is identified with Diana, the maiden goddess of the forest who, as 'maiden', is identified with women-only spaces (Gallagher, (2005), p.108) such as a convent, and with the associated chastity of a nun. A further reference to this goddess associated with the moon is made in Lysander's revelation of his plans to Helena:

*'Tomorrow night, when Phoebe doth behold
Her silver visage in the wat'ry glass,
Decking with liquid pearl the bladed grass
(A time that lovers' flights doth still conceal),
Through Athens' gates have we devis'd to steal.'*

(*A Midsummer Night's Dream*, 1.1.209-13)

Shakespeare here draws on Seneca's *Hippolytus* (Brooks, (1979), p.17); Phoebe is another name for Diana and it is apt that this goddess of the forest is named as the lovers are planning to meet in the woods outside the gates of Athens.

At the beginning of Act 2, Scene 1 there is a reference to Ptolemaic astronomy; when questioned by Puck a fairy responds:

*'I do wander everywhere,
Swifter than the moon's sphere;
And I serve the Fairy Queen...'*

(A Midsummer Night's Dream, 2.1.6-8)

The Ptolemaic cosmos consisted of transparent spheres which moved at different speeds around the earth, as illustrated by Peter Apian's *schema, Cosmographia*, in 1539 (Hussey, (1971), p.20). Each planet, including the moon, was attached to a separate sphere; the moon was attached to the first sphere which is closest to the earth and this is what the fairy is referring to. That the earth was the centre of the universe was a commonly held belief until Galileo proved in 1610 that the planets did not circle the earth; they were not fixed in spheres that could not intersect as in the Ptolemaic model of the cosmos (Hussey, (1971), p.23).

One of the most familiar references to the folklore of the moon in *A Midsummer Night's Dream* is the discussion in Act 3, Scene 1 among the actors on how to represent moonlight in the play *Pyramus and Thisbe*. Quince suggests that one of them must come in with a bush of thorns and a lantern to represent the person of Moonshine. This course of action is undertaken later in the play and Robin Starveling, Moonshine in the Interlude, states:

'All that I have to say is, to tell you that the lantern is the moon; I the Man i' th' Moon; this thorn-bush my thorn-bush; and this dog my dog.'

(A Midsummer Night's Dream, 5.1.247-9)

As Harrowven states, the origin of the legend of the man in the moon is believed to be in The Bible - Numbers 15:32-36 where Moses comes across a man gathering sticks on the Sabbath and orders that he is stoned to death, although the punishment of being banished to the moon is not mentioned in the Bible. A twelfth century writer, Alexander Nechum, recorded a Latin verse explaining the shadows on the moon which, in translation, states:

*'See the rustic in the Moon,
How his bundle weighs him down;
Thus his sticks the truth reveal,
It never profits man to steal.'*

(Harrowven, (1977), p.6-7)

Shakespeare refers to the legend of the man in the moon again in his last play, *The Tempest*; the first mention of the myth being made by Antonio:

*'She that is Queen of Tunis; she that dwells
Ten leagues beyond man's life; she that from Naples
Can have no note unless the sun were post –
The man i' th' moon's too slow...'*

(The Tempest, 2.1.246-249)

Here Antonio is stating that the moon takes longer to circle the earth in contrast to the sun, reflecting the belief in the cosmos of Ptolemaic astronomy, and using folklore as a reference to the moon.

This is in contrast to Stephano's claims to Caliban in Act 2, Scene 2:

*'Caliban Hast thou not dropped from heaven?
Stephano Out o' th' moon, I do assure thee. I was the
man i' th' moon when time was.
Caliban I have seen thee in her, and I do adore thee!
My mistress showed me thee, and thy dog and thy bush.'*

(The Tempest, 2.2.134-8)

Stephano is claiming to have once been the man in the moon; a direct reference by Shakespeare to the folklore surrounding the moon, no doubt in an attempt to make Caliban believe he is someone of some importance. That the myth of the man in the moon is referred to by characters of different social standing implies a commonly-held knowledge of the story; knowledge which, no doubt, was held by the audience of the time.

Shakespeare refers to natural astrology in Caliban's claim on the island:

*'...This island's mine by Sycorax, my mother,
Which thou tak'st from me. When thou camst first
Thou strok'st me and made much of me; wouldst give me
Water with berries in't, and teach me how
To name the bigger light and how the less
That burnt by day and night.'*

(The Tempest, 1.2.332-337)

This elementary natural astrology, identifying the sun and the moon as bigger and lesser lights respectively, is drawn from Genesis 1:16, where it is stated that God created the lesser light of the moon and the greater light of the sun (Vaughan, (1999), p.173).

The Ptolemaic cosmos is referred to again by Gonzalo, speaking to Sebastian and Antonio, in Act 2, Scene 1:

*'You are gentlemen of brave mettle. You would
Lift the moon out of her sphere, if she would continue
in it five weeks without changing.'*

(The Tempest, 2.1.182-184)

The audience of the time would 'know' that the moon was fixed in her sphere, and would understand that Gonzalo was therefore saying that Sebastian and Antonio were all talk; to lift the moon from her sphere is an impossibility and therefore no action should be expected from the two men despite what they may say (Vaughan, (1999), p.197).

Astrology

Yates says that it is impossible to read *The Tempest* and look at the character of Prospero without reference to John Dee, the great magus (one who has the ability to "read the stars") who was in the confidence of Queen Elizabeth I (Yates, (1975) p.95). Dee had cast the horoscope of Queen Mary when she had succeeded her brother in 1553, and later cast the horoscope for Elizabeth after being called upon to decide the most auspicious day for her coronation. Queen Elizabeth I and John Dee are credited with the popularisation of judicial astrology during her reign (Camden, 1933). It is acknowledged that Shakespeare modelled Prospero on John Dee and that *The Tempest* is a conscious defence of Dee and his reputation, who had fallen out of favour with the Court; an indication of the active controversy over the occult sciences and practitioners at the time (Yates, (1975), p.119).

That Prospero, like Dee, is engaged with judicial astrology is clear in the following lines:

*'...and by my prescience
I find my zenith doth depend upon
A most auspicious star, whose influence
If I now court not, but omit, my fortunes
Will ever after droop.'*

(The Tempest, 1.2.180-4)

Prospero's speech reveals his reliance on astrology; his knowledge of events before they happen, and his awareness that his highest point is dependent on his acknowledgement of the power of the stars or his fortunes will fail.

Shakespeare refers to astrology when making it clear how different the high magic of Prospero is compared to the low witchcraft and sorcery of Sycorax:

*'...His mother was a witch, and one so strong
That could control the moon, make flows and ebbs,
And deal in her command without her power.'*

(The Tempest, 5.1.269-271)

Prospero states that Sycorax could control the moon and, in doing so, control the tides; a reference to natural astrology which acknowledged the influence of the moon on the tides, but in the context of the abuse of that knowledge through the use of witchcraft to manipulate nature.

However, Prospero acknowledges that he has also used his magical powers to influence nature when, tracing a circle and reciting his magical powers with a view to renouncing them, he states

*'...I have bedimmed
The noontide sun...'*

(The Tempest, 5.1.41-2)

He is stating that he has caused eclipses of the sun and, as already noted in this essay, eclipses were seen to be portents of disaster; Prospero is perhaps acknowledging that he has not always used his powers in a noble way. The audience of the time would, therefore, have viewed Prospero's renunciation of his powers as a noble act; Shakespeare again attempting to show the magus as a good character as opposed to the evil Sycorax (Yates, (1975), p.94).

Conclusion

Through this exploration of 'Shakespeare and the Spheres' we hope to have shown that Shakespeare's knowledge was in accordance with the astrological and astronomical doctrines of the day, as well as the myth and folklore surrounding the moon. Since Shakespeare was writing for audiences in the commercial theatre of his time it is clear that his use of this understanding demonstrates the common knowledge held by the public. Shakespeare's work reflects the thinking of the day; from the acceptance of judicial astrology in Queen Elizabeth's court, to the renunciation of it in the court of King James I. That the public were familiar

with the subject is reflected in the almanacs and prognostications of the time and the debates in *King Lear* in particular surrounding the validity of astrology are an insight into the arguments of the times. An analysis of the theme 'Shakespeare and the Spheres', over just these three plays, gives a clear indication how Shakespeare's work reflected the social, historical and cultural arguments and thinking of his time. Readers will be able to think of so many other examples in Shakespeare's works.

Introducing youngsters to that side of Shakespeare's thinking and work is not only interesting for them, since it links in with other areas of more modern interest for them, it also begins to give them an insight into the thinking of the age. To our mind, the thoughts, beliefs and debates that engaged society during this period in history are well worth knowing if youngsters wish to *really* begin to understand Shakespeare.

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