

**The necromancer Friar Bacon  
in the magic world of Greene's comedy  
*Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay***

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ABSTRACT

Many important Elizabethan dramatists, from George Peele and Christopher Marlowe to William Shakespeare, addressed the controversial topic of magic in some of their plays. Due to its political and religious implications, the literary treatment of magic bore on the figure of the Renaissance prince at a time when a ruler's education and use of power was an important concern. *Robert Greene's Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* (1589, published in 1594) is perhaps one of the most significant examples of the treatment of magic in Elizabethan drama. This is a romantic comedy posing as a historical play, in which Greene sought to draw on parallels between the contentious political turmoil of Elizabethan England from a critical point of view. For this reason, in the play, black magic practitioner Friar Bacon serves the purpose of mirroring, albeit in a covert manner, the uncertain political reality of the reign of Elizabeth. The English dramatist's tendency in the late sixteenth century to bring magic onto the stage took advantage of the Queen's own keenness for the so called Occult Philosophy. In fact, one of Elizabeth's achievements as a monarch was to promote this cultural and philosophical movement from which she took her ability to build her own public image in a society in which magic meant more than a sheer petty concept and revealed a set of beliefs based on reliability, infallibility and fear. The topic is analysed from a hermeneutic-comparative approach.

KEYWORDS: magic, occultism, politics, power, Robert Greene

Many of the significant plays in Elizabethan drama concentrated on magic. Elements of magic appear in, for example, *Romeo and Juliet* (1595) with the potion that Juliet drinks to feign her death, or in *A Midsummer's Night Dream* (1595) with the magic forest where fairies and elves like Oberon and Titania dwell. Christopher Marlowe mentioned magic not only in *Doctor Faustus* (1594) but also in *The Jew of Malta* (1589) and it is also present in George Peele's *The Old Wives'*

*Tale* (1595).<sup>1</sup> Furthermore, Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* follows this widespread tendency. This romantic comedy poses as a historical play at a time when Catholics and Protestants were confronted with each other in what we could call a cold war characterised by uncertainty and fear.<sup>2</sup> Magic in the sixteenth century was deeply implicated in the many-sided contest of *res* and *verba*, of verbal and visual signs, of scripture and ceremony. Such a conflict could not be ignored whenever magic was put on the stage in the late Elizabethan plays (Von Rosador 1993: 37-38).

The Reformation battle placed magic and religious claims alongside the immediacy of basic human needs (Von Rosador 1993: 41). The comedy *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* concentrates on magic and emphasises Elizabeth's supremacy as a monarch. As a political weapon, it reflects public opinion.<sup>3</sup> Theatrical entertainment at the time represented a medium through which the Queen's subjects could be encouraged to pursue a particular course of action (see also Helgerson 1976: 79-104). I will bring forth into the readers' consideration that through the fictional character of Friar Bacon, Robert Greene states publicly in the manner of a comedy what would have been the fate of all those who dared to challenge the religious and political authority of Queen Elizabeth I.

## 1. King Henry III and Friar Bacon versus Elizabeth I and John Dee

The plot of the comedy *The Honourable History of Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* is based on the legend of a medieval scholar who was the Oxford Franciscan friar Roger Bacon and his allegedly necromantic practices.<sup>4</sup> In the play, Friar Bacon assisted by Friar Bungay builds a head of brass thanks to the power of necromancy that will defend England with its unbelievable knowledge. Unfortunately, Bacon's

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<sup>1</sup> Gorley S. Putt (1972) in his essay "An Argumentative Muse: A Background for the 'University Wits'" suggests this idea. See also Boas (1959).

<sup>2</sup> For further information, see Lewis (1968: 52-55) and Mattingly (1959).

<sup>3</sup> See also Seltzer (1963: ix-x), Senn (1976), Holzknrecht (1963), Maynard (1981) and Lake (1999: 57-84).

<sup>4</sup> *The Honourable History of Frier Bacon and Frier Bungay* was written between 1589 and 1590 and it was published for the first time in 1594. It is thought that a second folio published in 1599 existed because it appears in later editions between 1630 and 1655. Between 1590 and 1594 an anonymous second part of the play ascribed to Robert Greene appeared. However, its author was probably John of Bordeaux. The title for this second part was *John of Bordeaux or The Second Part of Friar Bacon* (Dean 1981: 262-266). See also Seltzer (1964: ix, xii).

project of a talking head falls below his expectations and proves to be a failure.

Such is the layout in *Friar Bacon* of sixteenth-century England, a country under the reign of Elizabeth who held the political and religious supremacy, whereas Spain represented a Hispanic-Papal Catholic power eager to threaten English political and religious stability by assailing protestant beliefs and influencing public opinion. At that time England was trying to consolidate its position as a leading protestant country (Aylmer 1974: 209-241). There were people both inside and outside the country who were struggling to restore Catholicism and overthrow the protestant monarch, as proved by the 1588 expedition of the Spanish Armada (Lewis 1968). Nevertheless, what Greene sought in his treatment of the past was not only to make the audience aware of its historical reality but also to echo its present existence just as it was when performed on the stage.

The analogical treatment of history together with a peculiar attitude towards anachronism helps to explain the numerous chronological inaccuracies present in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*.<sup>5</sup> Robert Greene recalls events and historical figures from the past to draw similarities between past and present; even to reflect and criticise certain aspects of everyday life in his time that otherwise would have been impossible to openly comment upon in a non-historical context (Senn 1976). For this reason, Greene depicts a fictional character named Friar Bacon based on the medieval intellectual Roger Bacon together with Bacon's contemporary King Henry III to maintain logical chronology.<sup>6</sup>

A parallel is then established: on the one hand King Henry III and his courtier Friar Bacon in thirteenth-century England<sup>7</sup>; and on the other hand, in the sixteenth century, Queen Elizabeth I and her

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<sup>5</sup> The idea of the attitude to anachronism among Elizabethan playwrights is taken from Galloway (1970).

<sup>6</sup> Roger Bacon (c.1214-1292) developed an interest in experimental science. Ahead of his time, he suffered persecution for his ideas and Greene immortalised him in the fictional character of Friar Bacon as a necromancer or black magician to evoke the popular belief that the medieval Bacon had ever been a sorcerer (Butler 1993: 144-159).

<sup>7</sup> Medieval Catholic Henry III was king of England from 1216 to 1272 (Delderfield 1966: 48-49).

favourite courtier John Dee, an advocate of occultism.<sup>8</sup> That is, Catholicism and faith vs. Protestantism and magic at a time when this discipline was prone to be recognized as sorcery. In fact, the magic, fictional world of *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* relates to one of the Queen's ancestors whose adviser was not merely a Franciscan friar from Oxford but, what is more, an extraordinary intellectual versed in necromancy or black magic.<sup>9</sup> As a fictional character, Friar Bacon operates according to the demands typical of the social status of a friar. Yet, he does not leave out his own wishes of promotion and intellectual zest that characterised members of the clergy during the Renaissance (Kieckhefer 1992: 65).

As a consequence of the censorship exercised on theatrical entertainment, the play *Friar Bacon* becomes an instrument to covertly mirror the bewildering political reality by drawing parallels between the past and the author's own present time. However, the comedy suggests differing outlooks in a society that portrays Catholics as guilty of evil magic while justifying the Queen's paradoxical keenness on the Renaissance Neo-Platonism of John Dee's Occult Philosophy and its more practical applications when focussed on the significant act of ruling a country.

By the time the comedy was written in 1589, John Dee was carrying out a continental mission of promoting his Occult Philosophy (1558-1603), an entire philosophical movement comprising all off the intellectual knowledge at the time from

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<sup>8</sup> John Dee (1527 – c.1608, 1609) was a notorious English astrologer, geographer, navigator and tutor of Queen Elizabeth I whose favour he enjoyed. As a scientist, he was versed in Mathematics and Astronomy and as a Christian magician, he had knowledge of alchemy, divination, hermeticism and angeology. Dee was one of the most cultivated people of his time. He made of England one of the most important colonial powers in the whole of Europe. He toured Poland and Bohemia (1583-89) giving exhibitions of magic at the courts of various princes.

<sup>9</sup> In Elizabethan England magic was a term used to refer to a whole set of practices and rituals that could be divided into two different tendencies: natural or *white magic*, dealing with forces of nature and angelic entities, and *black magic* or necromancy that dealt with the devil and death. In regards to etymology, the term comes from the Latin *niger*, *-gra*, *-grum* meaning 'treacherous dark soul, gloomy, mournful,' related to the Greek *nekroi* meaning 'death' (Daxelmüller 1997: 23).

scholars like Giordano Bruno,<sup>10</sup> Picco della Mirandola,<sup>11</sup> Agrippa and disciplines such as alchemy,<sup>12</sup> Hermeticism,<sup>13</sup> cabbala and magic.<sup>14</sup> Nevertheless, the year 1589 was a time when the Hermetic-Cabalist movement started to fail as a religious reform and was thought of as the incarnation of evil judgments and behaviour and therefore, evil Catholicism. In *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* Catholicism is compared to black magic to praise the sort of white magic supported by John Dee as close to the concept of modern science and its experimental method.

As far as the intellectual context is concerned, magic was a subject of study in European universities and also, in Oxford and Cambridge.<sup>15</sup> Scholars of philosophy were eager to break with the past and discover new approaches to knowledge. The Renaissance philosopher was interested in the political and moral framework, in man, life, culture, in creating new methods of search and inquiry:

It cannot be explained as medieval survival, nor can it be explained in terms of 'Italian Renaissance' [...]. It is Christian Cabalist Neoplatonism, adapted to the expression of a northern poetic reformation [...]. And how

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<sup>10</sup> Giordano Bruno (1548-1600) was an Italian philosopher, astronomer, mathematician and occultist whose theories anticipated modern science. He is chiefly remembered for the tragic death he suffered at the stake because of the tenacity with which he maintained his unorthodox ideas at a time when both the Roman Catholic and the Reformed churches were reaffirming rigid Aristotelian and Scholastic principles in their struggle for the evangelization of Europe.

<sup>11</sup> Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463-1494) was an Italian scholar and Platonist philosopher. Introduced into the Hebrew cabbala, Pico became the first Christian scholar to use cabbalistic doctrine in support of Christian theology.

<sup>12</sup> Henry Cornelius Agrippa von Nettesheim (1486-1535) was a German magician interested in scientific knowledge and occultism, an astrologer and an alchemist. His masterpiece *De occulta philosophia libri tres* is a kind of *summa* of early modern occult thought. In this book he explained the world in terms of Cabalistic analysis of Hebrew letters and acclaimed magic as the best way to know God and nature. He was for some time under the service of Maximilian I, probably as a soldier in Italy, but he mainly devoted his time to the study of the occult sciences and theology. He served the Renaissance revival of skepticism. He was jailed and branded as a heretic.

<sup>13</sup> A doctrine of revelations on the occult, the logical and philosophical subjects ascribed to the Egyptian god Thoth (Greek Hermes Trismegistos) who was believed to be the inventor of writing and patron of all the arts depending on writing.

<sup>14</sup> Hebrew cabbala adapted to Christian beliefs and Arabic magic were essential for the Occult Philosophy. For further information about magic and the Occult Philosophy, see Vickers (1984) and Yates (1979). This topic has also been studied by Walker (2000), Traister (1984), Thomas (1971), Butler (1949) and Levack (1992).

<sup>15</sup> See Schmit (1984) and Yates (1993).

was it that John Dee, the philosopher of the Elizabethan age, could base himself on Agrippa's occult angelology whilst at the same time believing himself to be the ardent supporter of a widespread Christian reform? The answer surely is that Dee believed himself to be, like Giorgi and Agrippa, a Christian cabalist (Yates 1979: 5).

Hence, what is the difference between John Dee and the fictional character of Friar Bacon? According to Yates, in the context of Occult Philosophy the mystic was acquainted with God, the magus had the ability to create or destroy and the theurgist had the gift to unveil the hidden name of God. This was to show the new relationship that had been established between knowledge and the new philosophy of beauty, love, life and not only spiritual but also intellectual enlightenment in what the redemption of the world was concerned through moral purification and rebirth (Garin 1993: 175-180). Great scholars at that time created their own fields of study with the approval and protection of kings and queens, with the court as the centre of new ideas and cultural innovation (Yates 1979).<sup>16</sup> However, from 1582 to 1585, Greene's formative years, the type of philosophy represented by Dee was discredited and considered as superstitious which could lead to consequently discredit Elizabeth's sovereignty too.<sup>17</sup> This is the reason why Greene freed himself from any remorse in depicting the character of Friar Bacon as a failure by involving him in awkward circumstances at the end of the play due to his dealings with evil magic and sorcery that were far-off from Dee's Cabalism.

E.M. Butler refers to the literary significance of the social phenomenon of sorcery and sorcerers:

One is often in two minds about them; and if one has the courage to laugh at them, their frightening power goes. For simple minds at least it is perfectly possible to fear and deride almost in one breath. [...] Moreover, the trickery and charlatanism which seem inseparable from magic, even when the sorcerer is convinced of his own powers, made [legends] peculiarly effective vehicles for that mixed emotion which craves for sensation and terror and yet wants to laugh such fears to scorn (Butler 1995: 63).

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<sup>16</sup> See also Burke (1993: 133-162).

<sup>17</sup> Agrippa's intellectual approach – alchemist and magus, necromancer according to others – was associated with Dee's Cabalism (Yates 1979).

A sorcerer, apart from being a scholar, a magus and a wise man that could fabricate amulets, prepare miraculous potions and being familiar with divination techniques, was considered *divine* during the Renaissance. He was not only the mediator between the individual and its environment but he was also able to manipulate the cosmos and reach absolute power through knowledge. That is how the Renaissance intellectual developed into a scholar who was thought to be competent enough to expand civilization by surprising means and lend a hand to his fellow countrymen. We all know about the engravings that reflect the image of the alchemist lost in thought while steadfastly gazing at his crucible with the hope of transforming any kind of non-precious metal into gold. For any scholar who recognized the infallibility of white magic and alchemy, it was easy to fall into the hands of necromantic premises of evil nature (Kieckhefer 1992: 60).

From a social and intellectual point of view it is important to bear in mind the significant general concern of the ruler's education and use of power when in the hands of a monarch. However, during the Renaissance, the person of the educator was essential in the search for the perfect ruler. Agnes Heller (1980: 133-135) refers to this kind of "illuminating" tutor as a versatile courtier with socio-political knowledge whose function was to make sure that the monarch enjoyed a state of inner peace, balance, temperance and virtuous knowledge of good and evil. Such was the task of the sorcerer and magus John Dee for Elizabeth, to grant her a source of virtue understood as harmony. Reliable magic vs. black magic becomes the key concept in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* to understand the relationship between the perfect tutor and the perfect kind of ruler if we establish parallels between the character of Friar Bacon and thirteenth century England and Dee and the sixteenth century.

On the other hand, according to Renaissance philosophy, the identity of a scholar responded to a series of characteristics that determined his personality and behaviour (Culianu 1999: 80). Most of those characteristics shaped the so-called "melancholic humour," one of the four humours referring to human temperament. Melancholy or *melancholia* was a crucial element in the arrangement of the personality of an individual to which magic and learning was

concerned.<sup>18</sup> In the study of *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* it is sensible to consider this fact apart from the idea of the tutor for a better understanding of the motivations and personality of Friar Bacon – the fictional advisor of King Henry III – in contrast to John Dee – Elizabeth’s advisor in real life.

In terms of his tuition of the Queen and fondness for his countrymen, Dee came across more as an advantageous wizard rather than as a black magician.<sup>19</sup> Above all, any Elizabethan

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<sup>18</sup> The predominance of four different fluids in the organism (yellow bile, blood, phlegm, black bile) determined the four temperaments – choleric or bilious, sanguine, phlegmatic and melancholic respectively – that corresponded to the four elements, the four cardinal points and the divisions of day and human life (Culianu 1999: 80).

<sup>19</sup> Roughly speaking, for a sixteenth-century mind conjuring or sorcery meant:

The use of power gained from the assistance or control of evil spirits. Sorcery is distinguished by some writers from witchcraft in that it may be practised by anyone with the appropriate knowledge, using charms, spells, potions, and the like; whereas witchcraft is considered to result from an inherent mystical power and to be practised by invisible means. Sorcery can be protective – for example, as a guard of property against theft. A practitioner of sorcery is called a sorcerer, or a wizard. The distinction between sorcery and witchcraft is not considered universally maintained. During the witch-hunts of the sixteenth and seventeenth century, courts frequently regarded witches and sorcerers alike as candidates for burning (McHenry ed. 1992: 19).

The connotations associated with the words “magic” and “magus” vary according to the evolution of the social, religious and intellectual orientation of magic. To be able to understand these two concepts it is interesting to consider the definitions made by contemporary scholars such as Richard Kieckhefer who regard magic as the point of intersection between religion and science (1992: 10). For Christoph Daxelmüller it is science and wisdom that could serve for divination or sorcery (1997: 9, 44). I.P. Culianu states that magic is the knowledge that establishes undisclosed relationships between the different parts of the universe (1999: 21-5). Magic may be related to any ritual activity able to modify events and behaviour by supernatural means associated to heresy, alchemy and witchcraft due to the similarity that these practices sometimes share (McHenry ed 1992: 671-672).

In sixteenth-century England a whole set of practices and technical knowledge were known under the name of magic, which included among others the fabrication of vegetable and animal pigments, pyrotechnics, a range of optical and medical procedures, cryptographic methods and various communication techniques. In fact, the Elizabethan Occult Philosophy stressed the idea of ritual magic to improve everyday life, that is, the practical approach of such a discipline characterised by the use of spells and charms to transform reality (Yates 1993: 111). In that sense, it was not entirely clear if they were angels or on the contrary evil spirits assisting the magus in the pursuit of more efficient means of communication and fantastic medical procedures.

intellectual felt it necessary to inquire about himself, his own destiny and in the case of Dee, about the destiny of English Imperialism. Ioan P. Culianu explains the nature of such a need. Man exiled (*exul*) from the world lives in a permanent state of sadness and lethargy (*maerior*) of obscure origin. He is constantly caught up in a utopia that turns his life into a dream (1999: 87). The situation of exile and sadness of a mysterious origin came to be associated with the idea of a necromancer for some and a sorcerer for others. In fact, a necromancer was an observant man of science who analysed contradictions in search of truth and progress. Friar Bacon is that kind of scientist eager to break into the reality of the occult and into nature and therefore he claims that he is versed in the Liberal Arts, that is, Occult Philosophy. Let us recall these words uttered by Friar Bacon in the play:

What art can work, the frolic friar knows;  
And therefore will I turn my magic books  
And strain out nigromancy to the deep.  
I have contriv'd and framed a head of brass  
(I made Belcephon hammer out the stuff),  
And by art shall read philosophy.<sup>20</sup> (I. ii. 56-61)

The astounding trust this man had in the magnificence of his intellect to move on from ignorance to wisdom and his anxiety to transcend (Heller 1980: 253- 286) was triggered by a lack of peace and harmony which was part of his own melancholic temperament. Moreover, God had created man to overcome the limitations of knowledge and human existence in a wish to bring about the divine (Garin 1993: 163-196). In the case of Queen Elizabeth it was John Dee who served the purpose of raising a perfect monarch. At this point we can assert that the difference between Friar Bacon and John Dee is that Bacon rises above limitations by means of evil magic whereas Dee was aided by the divine and God. Dee was not only an

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The idea of the extraordinary and the idea of what it is not come together to show the various synonyms that are used to state that Friar Bacon is a necromancer. Necromancy is also called "art" (Seltzer 1964: I, i, 181) in the sense of ability to perform supernatural deeds such as for example the fabrication of Bacon's talking head, his main project. Once more, the relationship between knowledge and magical activity is pointed out. The word "art" in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries meant "cunning", "science" as it appears in the academic degrees of B.A. o M.A. – Bachelor of Arts and Master of Arts. See also Burke (1993: 133-162).

<sup>20</sup> All quotations from *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* are taken from Seltzer (1964).

enthusiastic intellectual but he was interested in using his knowledge for the advantage of his countrymen. Thus, Dee created a programme at once political and religious in keeping with the nature of Elizabethan Imperialism and its sense of destiny:

It was not only concerned with national expansion in the literal sense, but carried with it the religious associations of the imperial tradition, applying these to Elizabeth as the representative of 'imperial reform,' of a purified and reformed religion to be expressed and propagated through a reformed empire, the empire of the Tudors with their mythical 'British' associations. The glorification of the Tudor monarchy as a religious imperial institution rested on the fact that the Tudor reform had dispensed with the Pope and made the monarch supreme in both church and state. This basic political fact was draped in the mystique of 'ancient British monarchy' with its Arthurian associations, represented by the Tudors in their capacity as an ancient British line, of supposed Arthurian descent, returned to power and supporting a pure British Church, defended by a religious chivalry from evil powers (evil according to this point of view) of Hispano-papal domination (Yates 1979: 84-85).

These were the aspirations accomplished through the Neo-Platonist notion of the melancholic intellectual and philosopher as a man of genius expressed by Pico or Agrippa in his *De occulta philosophia* although not in the case of Bacon in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* in which the Elizabethan Empire and its supremacy were concerned.<sup>21</sup>

## 2. The magical nature of Diana

Christoph Daxelmüller refers to the magical nature of the Queen in her pursuit of a strong empire in Europe and in the world. For that purpose she would present herself to her countrymen by means of several identities that carried magical connotations associated with Diana or Astraea, the mythological character representing justice and linked to the moon, the frontier between the divine and the human and an important source of ideas concerning magic (1997: 237). The Queen took her ability to manipulate public opinion and build her

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<sup>21</sup> Renaissance melancholia became the humour shaping the qualities of great thinkers and religious visionaries for having personalities near to the divine, thanks to their prodigious memory and their astonishing analytic capacity. Hence, Saturn was the sign that conferred them with extraordinary qualities, those resulting from the practice of magic but also from *eros* understood as all that a human being might wish in a general sense that encouraged to transcend limitations (Yates 1979). See also Culiari (1999: 80-87).

own public image from the murky qualities associated with Diana. The idea of a Queen-goddess versed in magic and associated with the dark and gloom, the night, the cold, disasters and fear would have been more than striking for a sixteenth-century mind. Such was the nature of the Queen of England thanks to her adviser's tough policy. The establishment of bonds or *vinculum vinculorum* (Culianu 1999: 131-143) such as hope, fear, compassion, love, hate, wrath, happiness or any other feeling that a person in particular or a group of individuals in general were susceptible to, was a method of manipulation in itself and the basis of effective magic.

On the other hand, faith understood as trust in the efficiency and skill of the person of the magus – or anyone versed in magic – was essential in the establishment of bonds. That is how Elizabeth managed to rule, by developing people's faith in her godly magical self so as to gain respect and to make believe she would defend her people with her divine quality. In this way, the queen inspired fear and respect in her performance of her duty of defending her country. On the other hand cruelty, selfishness and cynicism exercised on people, advisers or on other rulers were just a few of the appalling descriptions related to the person of the ruler or prince during the Renaissance (Law 1993: 23:50). But above all, kings and queens were independent rulers who trusted in their own qualities and capacity to rule so that violence in gaining, maintaining or even losing power was a constant drawback. Elizabeth I used magic as a means to frighten her enemies and encourage her followers' support. At the same time, it was well known that both benefits and misfortunes derived from reliable magic.

However, neither political thought nor moral philosophy in the Renaissance justified violence for the sake of violence even though a ruler's duty was to ensure security and stability, to punish rebels and defeat enemies (Law 1993: 26-30). As such, Queen Elizabeth tended to reduce the status of Catholics by associating them with the increasingly popular evil magic. It could be assumed that Elizabeth came into contact with quite a lot of Dee's knowledge and if intellectuals were willing to recklessly break limitations, Dee could also induce the Queen to do so. Robert Greene places that kind of attitude in the person of Bacon and his Catholicism with the difference that he turns out to be a self-centered counsellor to the

advantage of John Dee and to Elizabeth. As Bacon states in *Friar Bacon*: "My life, my fame, my glory, are all past."<sup>22</sup> (IV. i. 95)

It was frequent that a scholar and advisor like Friar Bacon would exceed his own limitations, and surrendered to the vice of excess that was an attitude akin to the Renaissance and used to be associated with evil as Agnes Heller (1980: 317) remarks. It was popularly known that sin or Satan was always getting hold of victims through human weakness, and love of wealth and power in particular. Intellectual pride went together with curiosity, an innate temptation that was supposed to ensure popularity and unlimited knowledge (Daxelmüller 1997: 11-45, 45-47, 77-99). Of all the four temperaments, melancholic people were more open to this kind of sinful and wicked attitude. They were exposed to the seductions of voluptuousness due to a great fantasy, an attitude akin to speculation and contemplation that made them emotionally unstable (Culianu 1999: 142-143).

This kind of emotional instability shapes the character of Friar Bacon and his behaviour in the play. To begin with, necromancy is suggested in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* as a means of defending England from outside potential threats. Defending England with a wall of brass thanks to the power of a brass talking head becomes the delusion of a king, Henry III, and his adviser Friar Bacon. Necromancy becomes a means of manipulation as both of them become involved in the rules of the courtly game of flattery: Bacon's duty is to please the king from who he may get some reward for helping him to defend his country. Friar Bacon is never reluctant to admit his dealings with evil souls in the pursuit of his goals assisted by the devils Belcephon and Hecat, the goddess of the underworld. Thus, he asserts in the play: "I have fram'd out a monstrous head of brass,/ That, by th'enchanting forces of the devil,/ Shall tell out strange and uncouth aphorisms" (IV. i. 17-19).

Bacon the friar trusts more in necromantic power than in divine power and so he does not enjoy a fulfilling social life though he never grieves over his loneliness, being secluded in his cell in Oxford apart from infrequent visits to the court. He spends most of his time absorbed in his magic books. Not even Miles, his disciple, accompanies him in his study of magic. Curiosity leads Bacon to invoke infernal entities, to fall into the sin of pride. In fact, Friar Bacon's most treacherous evil is his excessive arrogance and his

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<sup>22</sup> See also Seltzer (1964).

conceited attitude drives him to failure. The very same night of the performance of his task to encompass England with a head of brass, he leaves his project on the hands of his clumsy apprentice, Miles, wasting his only chance to become the king's most faithful servant, loosing his prestige as an intellectual and a favourable public image (IV, i).

Bacon fails his country and his king because of his selfish attitude and reprehensible lack of concern to achieve his goals. Friar Bacon is not as successful as he expected and falls into pessimism and sadness. In the words of Friar Bungay, his colleague: "What means the friar that frolick'd/ it of late,/ to sit as melancholy in his cell/ As if he had neither lost nor won today?" (IV. iii. 1-4). Beyond doubt, the friar seems to have become the victim of his own melancholy.<sup>23</sup> His grief reveals how important it was for Elizabethans not to attempt to go against the social and cosmological order and its harmony, caused by the sin of pride and by a tendency to excess.<sup>24</sup> That is when nonconformity turns the scholar's attitude into boldness not only against his own life and nature but also against God. The monarch was supreme in both Church and State and Elizabethan Imperialism followed the pattern of the Occult Philosophy to counteract any kind of temerity.<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> Melancholic people corresponded to the planet Saturn, the autumn as a season, and the black bile as the predominant fluid in their organism. Due to Saturn as their regent planet they were sad, pessimistic individuals, people not overly successful condemned to perform servile and despicable actions (Culianu 1999: 80-87).

<sup>24</sup> In its hierarchy, human beings were below God and above Beasts. According to the chain of being concept to depart from one's proper place in the chain was to betray one's own nature. All existing beings had their own precise place and function in the universe and by not allowing reason to rule the emotions was to descend to the level of the Beasts. On the other hand, to attempt to go above one's proper place, as Eve did when she was tempted by Satan, was to court disaster (Tillyard 1963: 37-50).

<sup>25</sup> In the Elizabethan age, a happy man was someone who did not question his place in creation because every single being occupied its rightful place in the chain of being by God's will. From there he could exercise his own particular authority and responsibility, his own duty towards the rest of the beings or links in the chain. Every link was irreplaceable, unique for the others so that it was essential to respect each other's wellbeing. Each link of the chain represented a being, creature, and an object in creation. The higher links had more intellect, more mobility, authority and capacities than those below. For instance, plants only had authority and attributes to order minerals. Animals had power over plants and minerals and humans had more attributes than animals and could govern the natural world. Spiritual entities like angels and God were superior beings to man and they could control and govern human beings and the rest of the animal and vegetable world (Tillyard 1963: 37-50).

Therefore, against the sin of pride and the lack of moderation the main source of harmony was virtue and more precisely, temperance (Heller 1980).<sup>26</sup> Bacon's failure in the play shapes the kind of monarch he argues against, a monarch who prefers self-control and restraint driven by compassion and ruthlessness. Temperance was an essential virtue during the Renaissance and it is precisely for lack of this virtue the reason why Bacon loses everything he praised and honoured. Excess tended to bring about a fear of "disorder" that was not merely a philosophical concept but also had significant political ramifications. In any social, intellectual and religious background magic was intended to crush enemies in spite of its evil implications since the practice of sorcery could easily become a source of trouble and catastrophe (Kieckhefer 1992: 190). Besides, it was thought that either prosperity or misfortune could be transmitted through magical activity.

Elizabethan England was a moment in time when diabolic propaganda became a weapon against political and religious movements some of which were thought to be potentially dangerous and to be eradicated.<sup>27</sup> In addition, the Church of England was willing to replace a deep-rooted magical explanation for a theological one in the person of the Queen, the head of both Church and State, and her alleged white magic (Rowse 1964: 153).<sup>28</sup> Judicial and anecdotal evidence pointed out that the clergy stood amongst the practitioners of magic due to their interest in a discipline called "demonomagic" or magic that focused on the *modus operandi* to catch the fancy of the spiritual world (Culianu 1999: 197). Therefore, the term *conjurer* became a synonym of *recusant priest* because the

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<sup>26</sup> The four virtues described in *De Bono* by Albertus Magnus: Strength, Temperance, Justice and Prudence. Peace and Magnanimity are also virtues as opposed to the vices of Tyranny, War, Greed, Pride, Vainglory and Idolatry (Yates 1974: 116-121).

<sup>27</sup> As magic was linked to the spiritual world, the boundary between necromancy and the incipient modern science in its practical approach became unclear (Butler 1993: 111).

<sup>28</sup> Moreover, secular laws imposed various punishments for the crime of witchcraft particularly when it was harmful, more than for the actual magical practices themselves (Kieckhefer 1992: 190). The Elizabethan *Royal Injunctions* of 1559 banned the use of spells, charms, invocations, magic circles or divination techniques (Thomas 1971: 179-206) and in small communities, archives were brimming with accusations of witchcraft regardless of the age, gender, sex or social status of those found guilty:

Ever since its arrival in England, the Christian Church had accompanied against the resort of the laity to magic and magicians. The Anglo-Saxon clergy forbade soothsaying [...]. The Church did not deny that supernatural action was possible, but it stressed that it could emanate from only two possible sources: God or the Devil (Thomas 1971: 303).

*Prayer Book* criticised an attitude that could have been close to witchcraft because of possible harm inflicted on the Reform (Thomas 1971: 58-89). Protestant England thought that the invocation of evil spirits was a tendency followed by the Catholic Church. However, a thorough reading of *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* shows that the comedy is neither an apology for Catholicism nor of the Reform but merely reproduces the widespread attitude amongst society of rejecting certain sectors of the ecclesiastical hierarchy, friars in particular and similar religious orders due to the anti-Catholic policy of Henry VIII and some of his ministers (Delderfield 1966).

The proscription against trying to rise above one's place was useful to political rulers because it helped to reinforce their authority. The implication was that civil rebellion would have direct consequences on other realms. It was a sin against God as ruler to claim to rule by "Divine Right".<sup>29</sup> Friar Bacon's behaviour in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* is a challenge against the legal, political and institutional order. Bacon only has in mind the assertion that the wiser an intellectual the more powerful he was and the more successful he would be in political life.<sup>30</sup> In the play:

BACON.

Miles, thou knowest that I have dived into hell

And sought the darkest palaces of fiends;

[...]

And three-form'd Luna hid her silver looks,<sup>31</sup>

Trembling upon her concave continent,

When Bacon read upon his magic book. (IV. i. 7-8, 12-14).

The daring friar does not realise that true privilege does not come from enjoying flattering admiration or from having lots of formal and practical knowledge of black arts, but from the fact of enjoying a right kind of wisdom, a state of admonition and repentance. Because of Bacon's black art, Serlsby and Lambert, two students from Oxford, die (IV. iii) and Prince Edward explodes with anger and yearns to

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<sup>29</sup> Civil disorders were often accompanied by dramatic disturbances in the heavens (Tillyard 1963: 37-50).

<sup>30</sup> It is important to remember that for Elizabethan occultism and magic was a discipline itself that led to formal study, as it was in the case of Mathematics, Physics or Theology.

<sup>31</sup> *Luna* refers to the moon, associated to the Roman goddess Diana and so, to Queen Elizabeth.

kill his companion, the earl of Lincoln, when he discovers that he also woos his beloved Margaret, a maid from Fressingfield (III. i). Fortunately, these events develop a sense of guilt in the person of the friar so that he decides to spend his remaining life in spiritual retreat and resignation. For once, he is ready for admonition and repentance. However, Bacon's failure dignifies Elizabethan Imperialism as it proves, from the imaginary world of a comedy, to have no dealings with the devil. Instead, it is the Catholic uprising together with black magic that would certainly lead to catastrophe. In this way, the white magic or beneficial magic of the Occult Philosophy and its followers were not the ones to blame for any possible disaster.

Greene implies that the Queen is able to keep England's enemies at bay so that the Catholic threat is under control thanks to Dee's true policy when compared to that of Friar Bacon.<sup>32</sup> In fact, any possible rumours suggesting that Elizabeth is unable to maintain the prosperity of the country are efficiently hushed up even though an underlying doubt is covertly posed.

### 3. The Occult Philosophy and England

That thought of an ideal ruler is found, in one way or another, in several other plays such as Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* (1599) and *1 Henry IV* (1590-92). In *Julius Caesar*, the protagonist grows too powerful, too arrogant and so he must be stopped. Within the context of Elizabethan politics, any conspiracy such as the one directed against him would be associated with Papist plotting. The audience of Shakespeare's play would easily relate the character of Mark Antony with a figure like John Dee as a defender of the established order (Sanders 1967).

In *Henry IV*, King Henry has seen recent civil strife take its toll on his country. He is sad that brother has fought against brother and is anxious to unite his people under a religious crusade. As a leader, King Henry IV is cautious but disciplined and does not let his people forget his obligations to him. He also wisely offers the rebels generous terms for their surrender to avoid war and he uses his cunning to confuse them. This would be the efficient approach Elizabeth followed to unite her people under a religious crusade against the Catholics while being generous with her enemies who would probably surrender. The complex character of Falstaff in

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<sup>32</sup> Chronological inaccuracy.

*Henry IV* is both comic and dramatic and possesses a real gift for avoiding trouble and censure, for redeeming himself by his words and actions, an attitude akin to that of Friar Bacon and his resignation (Sanderson 1969).

The concept of an ideal ruler also appears in *The Tempest* (1611), where Shakespeare emphasizes that magic is the instrument to restore political and spiritual harmony through the intellectual movement of the Occult Philosophy.<sup>33</sup> *The Tempest* is an apology for the Elizabethan intellectual John Dee in search for the perfect kind of advisor who is behind a perfect kind of ruler at a time when England was under political and religious threat:

the white magician Doctor Dee, is defended in Prospero, the good and learned conjuror, who had managed to transport his valuable library to the island. The presence of the Dee-like magus in the play falls naturally into place as part of the Elizabethan revival. That was the world to which Shakespeare had belonged, the world of the Spenserian fairyland, the world of John Dee (Yates 1979: 160)

Yates refers to Dee as a white magician. As far as *The Tempest* is concerned, Prospero, the legitimate Duke of Milan and the main character in the play, raises a threatening tempest with his magic causing a shipwreck close to the island where he lives in exile so that he manages to restore social order in his dukedom in opposition to his brother Antonio, the usurping Duke of Milan (see Kermode 1954:

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<sup>33</sup> James I transformed the fear of magic into such an obsession that he wrote a treatise under the title of *Daemonologie* (c. 1597). It explored two kinds of magic: natural or white magic in which power derived from God, and black magic, in which power derived from the devil and it was used for the evil purpose of witchcraft. Disciplines like demonology, necromancy and magic art in general inspired the rejection of Elizabethan occultism:

James has much more to say about "the Divil's School" which thinks to climb to knowledge of things to come "mounting from degree to degree on slippery scale of curiosity" believing that circles and conjurations tied to the words of God will raise spirits. This is clearly "practical Cabala" interpreted as black art, a fruit of that tree of forbidden knowledge of which Adam was commanded not to eat (Yates 1979: 93).

The discrimination of magic did not happen because of what was essential to it but because of ideological, socio-political calculations and intellectual and religious changes when facing a new reality that was witchcraft (Daxelmüller 1997: 72). Witchcraft originated from the Alps and spread to Northern Europe. It was brought into play during the witch-hunts at a time when it was never clear if it had been angels or the devil the one addressed during magical invocations and rituals (Daxelmüller 1997: 175-211).

I.ii.73-132). Similar to Dee and England, Prospero at the end of the play acquires an extraordinary and powerful knowledge exercised in the context of the island.<sup>34</sup> Through the character of Prospero and in a symbolic manner, Dee's wishes to restore an Imperial Reform after Queen Elizabeth's death in 1603 comes true:

Prospero, the beneficent magus, uses his good magical science for utopian ends. He is the climax of the long spiritual struggle in which Shakespeare and his contemporaries had been engaged. He vindicates the Dee science and the Dee conjuring [...] and establishes white Cabala as legitimate (Yates 1979: 160).

Through education Prospero becomes the perfect ruler who defends his countrymen's welfare, someone who knows himself, who accepts his place in society, someone who overcomes his limitations wisely. A transposition of Dee in the fictional character of Prospero is then observable. The white magician in *The Tempest* – unlike *Friar Bacon* – establishes harmony in the island by keeping the malignant monster Caliban under control in an example of temperance and compassion.<sup>35</sup> This attitude is similar to that of a monarch like Elizabeth who stands for wisdom when dealing with her countrymen to avoid stirring them into revolt. Divine power always finds its way and the usurpation of a ruler's legitimate place in society sets the divine law into motion. In this way Elizabeth managed to sustain the unstable political situation by offering her beneficial and divine support to all those who trusted their monarch. A good monarch was always led by a reliable tutor especially if that tutor stood for wisdom and protection. Without any doubt, John Dee would fulfil those expectations to their utmost. At a moment in the play *Miranda*, Prospero's daughter, asks the white magician: "How came we ashore?" (I. ii. 158). To which Prospero answers: "By Providence divine." (I. ii. 159). Despite his sorrow and distress, Prospero is taken safely to an island in the middle of the sea by the protecting power of Providence. In the same way Elizabeth tutored by Dee would bring ashore those wise attitudes claimed by the Occult Philosophy and its Arthurian associations.

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<sup>34</sup> Notice the similarities between England as an island under the reign of a monarch and the island in *The Tempest* under the reign of a perfect ruler like Prospero.

<sup>35</sup> However, Prospero is a tyrant from the point of view of Caliban, who tells him: "As I told thee before, / I am subject to a tyrant, a sorcerer, / That by his cunning / Hath cheated me of the island" (Kermode 1954: III. ii.40-42).

#### 4. Conclusions

Robert Greene in *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay* opts for the same utopic reformist movement that Dee promoted from the very beginning in his role as the Queen's advisor and that Shakespeare honoured years later. Greene underlines a political and spiritual order separated from the hands of a weak and nonchalant ruler inviting his fellow citizens to accept their own limitations because it is only one person, Queen Elizabeth I, the single individual who can be efficiently responsible for the privileged duty of ruling their people while preserving their integrity. In *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, there is a final banquet in which the Queen is dignified as the "Rose of England" in an attempt to highlight the glory of England as a protestant state under the rule of an efficient monarch who is intellectually innovative, defends all arts and is good to her country. The phrase "Rose of England" highlights the supremacy of the country and its queen. This is Friar Bacon's prophecy for Albion after his repentance:

But then the stormy threats of wars shall cease.  
[...]  
And peace from heaven shall harbour in these leaves  
That gorgeous beautifies this matchless flower.  
Apollo's heliotropian then shall stoop,  
And Venus'hyacinth shall veil her top;  
Juno shall shut her gillyflowers up,  
And Pallas'bay shall bash her brightest green;  
Cere's carnation, in consort with those,  
Shall stoop and wonder at Diana's rose (*Friar Bacon* V, iii, 50-62).

These words praise the mystic personality of the Queen when comparing her to the gods and also praise Albion, that is, Britain and its Arthurian tradition and foresee a country full of peace. Harmony shall prevail and any kind of political or religious uprising be crushed. The strength of the Tudor monarch lies in unlimited, indisputable, absolute power thanks to her supernatural nature. Associations in the fictional character of Bacon between Catholicism and necromancy respond to the pretensions of the Protestant reform to discredit such an institution as the Catholic Church. With this intention, countervailing its power to the advantage of the Reform becomes a main goal despite the possible irony implied in Bacon's final spiritual retirement by which he assumes that the Church of

England is the right path to follow through the repentance of a dejected arrogant friar.

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