

## A Brief Introduction To Renaissance Mages\*

**Marsilio Ficino:** Largely responsible for bringing Greek and Plato back into European scholarship around 1450 and thereby a key figure in the “rebirth” of interest in classical civilization that sparked the Renaissance, Ficino rediscovered the Corpus Hermeticum, which he believed to be of great antiquity but which was actually written in the Third Century, A.D. It purports to be a handbook of ancient Egyptian magic handed down from Hermes Trismegistus (Moses’s tutor). Ficino’s interest is in summoning angels to do “good” or “Christian magic.” In more traditional philosophy, Ficino maintained that people turn to God by a decision based on free will rather than by God's grace, as St. Augustine maintained. Like his magic, this philosophy sees itself as a reforming view *within* Christianity rather than an attack on it.

**Giovanni Pico della Mirandola:** Pico’s main contribution as a Mage, and it’s a big one, is to study the Jewish Cabala, a mystical tradition of assigning number values to Hebrew letters, and to create a “Christian Cabala,” which will be used for summoning angels to do “Christian magic.” Madonna would approve. Pico also considered Ficino's philosophical point and refined it to say that God's grace led to humans being in God's image, but free will determines whether humans take advantage of this "godliness." While Pico incorporates Jewish mysticism into his magic, both his magic and philosophy are intended by him to be a reforming view *within* Christianity. Beginning with Pico, Renaissance Mages tend to be far more respectful of and cooperative with Jews than most Christians of the time.

**Francesco Giorgi:** A Franciscan Friar, Giorgi follows in Pico’s footsteps as a Christian Cabalist and uses Cabala to “prove” that Jesus is God. He believes, like Pythagoras, that all is number and that God is an architect and that the universe is his grand temple. His concept of *de harmonia mundi*, the harmony of the world, is vital to Renaissance philosophy and demonstrates the new interest in proportion and balance in the arts. He is also trying to summon up angels for Christian purposes in the early sixteenth century.

**Theophrastus Phillippus Aureolus Bombastus von Hohenheim, a.k.a. Paracelsus:** The son of physician and reputedly the pupil at one time of the very learned mystical churchman Johannes Trithemius, he became an important but controversial healer and writer who had many followers during the Renaissance. His major difference with the other physicians of his day was to look down on ancient writers like Galen and Aristotle because they focused too much on math. Instead, Paracelsus combined an emphasis on close observation with a more mystical (Hermetic) interest in the relationship between the macrocosm (the universe) and the microcosm (a human being) and in the Holy Scriptures. Paracelsus and most of his followers didn’t have university degrees, and they felt university learning was a hindrance. Paracelsus was considered more successful as a doctor than his contemporaries, and practically, this seems to have stemmed from his interest in proto-chemistry and his use of (al)chemical principles to create balms and other healing combinations that actually worked. Paracelsus utilized the alchemical idea of separation of pure and impure to good effect in his medical practice as well. Rejecting the theory of the humours, Paracelsus thought illness was caused by a breakdown of the purifying purpose of our organs. In seeking purification, Paracelsus sought to purge patients of impurities, which made a lot more sense than bleeding them. Of course, he was widely seen as a dangerous wizard, and since some patients died, it was easy to claim he was murdering people.

**Henry Cornelius Agrippa:** German author of De Occulta Philosophia, he was branded a black magician by the church authorities and became a focal point for evidence about witches during the height of the witch hunts a century later. He is following in the tradition of trying to summon spirits to do magic that descends from Ficino and Pico, and his written work combines them clearly. His elevation of melancholy through three semi-Platonic stages until it helps one glimpse the secrets of God and the universe was also influential and may, directly or indirectly, have influenced Hamlet. He also wrote about the sciences of

his time, and his explanation of the theories of his friend Augustino Ricci likely influenced Marlowe's eccentric but actually more correct astronomy in Dr. Faustus.

**Dr. John Dee:** The leading English mage and astrologer to Queen Elizabeth I, Dee was also the leading mathematician and cartographer of his day, bringing Euclid to workmen in a clear and useful way so that his math handbook was used for centuries. Dee had the best library in England at his house Mortlake until it was burned by a mob. Dee in fact was a Christian Cabalist who was trying to summon up angel magic for good ends and was taken in by a charlatan medium, which led to his bad reputation late in life. Marlowe and Shakespeare certainly had him in mind in their characters Dr. Faustus and Prospero.

**Giordano Bruno:** Bruno was a Dominican Friar who spread Copernican theory throughout Europe twenty years before Galileo. He debated in favor of Copernicus at Oxford and appears to have spied for the British government against the Catholics while living at the French Embassy in London despite having major objections to Protestantism (especially the turn against works as a means of salvation) as well as Catholicism. (His value is demonstrated by being excommunicated by both the Catholics and the Calvinists.) Among his surviving works are the Spaccio: The Expulsion of the Triumphant Beast (which in the view of Frances Yates outlines his overview of the triumph of Christian magic over evil magic and a sort of messianic role for Queen Elizabeth, a Protestant monarch) and the Cena: The Ash Wednesday Supper, which discusses his debates at Oxford and introduces many of his key scientific ideas. Bruno was well known in his time and appears as a sympathetic character in the B text of Dr. Faustus, probably revised from the A text around the time of Bruno's execution (and after Marlowe's death), and as a possible influence on the character Berowne in Shakespeare's Love's Labors Lost. Bruno returned to Italy in 1592 for reasons that are much debated. According to Frances Yates, his return was to try to convince the Pope to integrate Christian Hermeticism into Catholicism. More recently, Hilary Gatti argues that while he was interested in magic in a philosophical and metaphorical way, he was primarily a key early figure in the scientific revolution that was about to occur, and his devotion to both Copernican theory, which he expanded to promote the idea of an infinite universe with infinite worlds, and renewing atomic theory make me lean in Gatti's direction even though Yates's is more fun.\* After seven years of attempted "persuasion" by the Inquisition in Rome, he was burned at the stake in February of 1600. Like Dee, he combines important and accurate math and science with deep interest in magic. He also did a lot of work on memory systems, which were very popular among philosophers and occultists of this period.

**Henry Percy, The Ninth Earl of Northumberland:** Yes, Shakespeare buffs, he was a descendant of Hotspur, and a contemporary of Shakespeare's, although he lived a lot longer. While Northumberland was known as "the Wizard Earl," he was likely much more of a scientist like Giordano Bruno. He and his circle, which included the scientist Thomas Harriot (had a telescope before Galileo) as well as Sir Walter Raleigh, read Bruno with interest and were particularly interested in magnetism as a solution to many problems including what would eventually be gravity. Unfortunately, the Wizard Earl was implicated in the Gunpowder Plot through one of his servants being a participant, and he spent many years in the Tower of London after 1605, which gave him the opportunity to do even more reading.

**Robert Fludd:** An English Rosicrucian best remembered for continuing Bruno's and Dee's work on mystical memory systems, he continues in the Christian Cabala/Hermetic tradition of his predecessors. An incidentally important thing about Fludd is that his memory system involved visualizing a stage, and the illustration in his memory book of a stage may well be the stage of the Globe Theater, per Frances Yates. If so, it would be the only extant illustration of the interior of Shakespeare's company's main theater.

\* For more information, I recommend Frances W. Yates, Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition on the Italian and German Mages and her Theater of the World for more on the English Mages (Dee and Fludd). Her The Occult Philosophy in

the Elizabethan Age summarizes much of this material and ties in Marlowe and Shakespeare. For Gatti's theories, see her books, especially the recent Giordano Bruno and Renaissance Science and her earlier The Renaissance Drama of Knowledge: Giordano Bruno in England. Gatti respects Yates's work greatly, as does any scholar of this material, but she thinks Yates misinterprets Bruno. I sadly agree, but Yates's first book recommended above is an excellent introduction to the people on this list ahead of Bruno.