Early Modern visual-verbal esoteric imagery and the theatre: *Julius Caesar* 1.3

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Abstract
Adopting a method which combines close readings of iconography and playtext with broader historicist and cultural investigations, this article attempts to contribute to the field of visual-verbal Shakespeare studies through outlining how polysemous images and imagery are recombined within circular designs (wheels, spheres, globes, playhouses) upon which 'actors' are 'staged', in order to facilitate spiritual and practical insight into the micro- and the macrocosm. All these elements—or equivalents thereof—are present in the Renaissance theatre also, and Act 1 Scene 3 of William Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* contains a striking range of esoteric verbal-visual imagery offering an opportunity to analyse its compositional design and to assess its effects. This article argues that the esoteric visual tradition plays a major role in the composition and generation of meaning within that play, and that studying these aspects of Julius Caesar and the stage upon which it was performed aids us in seeing how it approached societal and political issues in Elizabethan England.

Key words: early modern, Renaissance, Shakespeare, *Julius Caesar*, the Globe, western esotericism, magic, occult, alchemy, emblems, astrology, Frances Yates

The visual poetics of the Early Modern period are sometimes quite strange. One reason for this is that many figures—verbal as well as visual—were appropriated by and formulated through the esoteric arts: alchemy, cabbala, astrology, Hermetic philosophy and 'magic'.[1] The painter, the poet, the emblematist and the dramatist utilised the same stock of symbols and devices as the astrologer, the alchemist and the cabbalist.

There are many parallels between visual and poetic uses of such figures. Horace's dictum *ut pictura poesis* ('as is painting so is poetry') is well known, as is the Renaissance debate about the relative merits of visual

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[1] I use 'esotericism' in line with Wouter J. Hanegraaf's definition, as fields of study subsequently rejected by the academe as mere superstition and, until the 20th century, considered unworthy of cultural, philosophical, historical and religious scholarship (Hanegraaf 2012: 152, *passim*). The word 'magic' is used in a loose sense, as an alternative shorthand, and always in inverted commas.

and verbal arts known as *Paragone*. Some have sought to distinguish between the different 'sister arts', others see common origins and the potentials of their combination. As Stuart Sillars points out in *Shakespeare and the Visual Imagination*, the Renaissance term *disegno* describes the ways in which meaning is produced through both spatial and temporal arrangements, in drama and poetry as well as in painting and engraving (Sillars 2015: 27). *Disegno* or a 'design' can be both a plan for how to proceed with a string of actions, and/or a configuration of elements on a surface, like a canvas, a book-page, or the façade of a building. It is both picture and narrative. This paradoxical commonality, between things that are sometimes literally set in stone and things that move across time, is a central element in the visual poetics of the Renaissance, including both 'magic' and Jacobethan stagecraft.

　　Disegno is one concern in a burgeoning interdisciplinary field of study that seeks to investigate 'Shakespeare's concern with visual art, and the visual sense in all its dimensions', because 'a larger acceptance of the power of the visual within the working of the plays and poems has not as yet been achieved, if even considered' (Sillars 2015: 1). A central tenet is that 'the exchange of word and image [occurred] on a larger, compositional scale', and it is possible 'that the dramatist and much of his audience were familiar with major visual forms and the ideas on which they rested' (ibid.). I argue that the visual tradition of esotericism makes up a major visual form with its own recognisable iconography, which is clearly discernible in some plays by Shakespeare (though only one will come under scrutiny here), and with which Renaissance audiences would have been familiar to varying degrees.[2]

　　Adopting a method which combines close readings of iconography and playtext with broader historicist and cultural investigations, this article will attempt to expand the field of study described above by outlining how polysemous images and imagery are recombined within circular designs (wheels, spheres, globes, playhouses) upon which 'actors' are 'staged', in order to facilitate spiritual and practical insight into the micro- and the macrocosm. All these elements—or equivalents thereof—are present in the Renaissance theatre, too, and Act 1 Scene 3 of William Shakespeare's

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[2] In addition to Sillars' *Shakespeare and the Visual Imagination*, the interstices between poetry, drama and the visual arts are studied in works by Richard Meek, George R. Kernodle, Kristin Phillips-Court, Catherine Belsey, Lucy Gent, Roy Strong, Frances Yates and many others (see the references).

Julius Caesar contains a striking range of esoteric verbal-visual imagery offering an opportunity to analyse its compositional design and to assess its effects. This article will argue that the esoteric visual tradition plays a major role in the composition and generation of meaning within that play, and that studying these aspects of *Julius Caesar* and the stage upon which it was performed will aid us in seeing how it approached societal and political issues in Elizabethan England.

Polysemy—having multiple meanings—is typical of the visual figures current in the Early Modern period. A single pictorial item or sign could carry an abundance of signifiers: in various circumstances, one and the same figure might be read as a Christian symbol of devotion; or an element of satire; or it might be understood (by ostensible initiates) as a codification of an occult, deeper truth set in visual terms: an *enigmatic hieroglyph*. Such a wide range of signification does not apply to all figures, but it is sufficiently common that any discussion of esoteric visual poetics will address signs and symbols that are potentially both 'magical' and not 'magical' at the same time.

Signs and symbols were recombined according to certain patterns: the technique known as *imitatio* was a creative act and *copia* connoted abundance; neither ought to be construed as mere copying or mindless derivation, because the context and the reconfiguration would be new. It is instructive that in the parlance of the time, sometimes a text would be 'English'd', rather than 'translated' (Greene 1982: 17; 47-48; 54-80); and John Manning describes the Renaissance handling of images, figures and emblems as 'an art of the fugue, where a simple theme could be twisted and restated in different keys and registers' (Manning 2002: 31).[3]

One single example—the many uses and meanings of 'Mercury'— illustrates how such polysemous images might be recombined. Most figures have conventional names and established visual appearances: 'Mercury' is simultaneously a divine name and a visual figure endowed customarily with winged headgear, winged sandals and a caduceus—an iconography instantly recognisable to many Medieval and Renaissance readers and onlookers. Mercury's wide range of signification relates to many typical Early Modern fields of interest and he or it is therefore a

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[3] As Deanna Smid points out in *The Imagination in Early Modern English Literature*, some early modern theorists of the imagination, for example Thomas Hobbes, believed its power was limited to combining known elements in new constellations (Smid 2016: 21).

good example of the various uses to which figures, *imprese*, emblems and devices might be put, and the fields within which this could take place.

Let us itemise some of them: Mercury is a planet, moving so swiftly across the sky that the Romans named it after their fleet-footed messenger god, who was also the god of thievery. As a planet, it has both astronomical and astrological functions, its movements determined by complex mathematics, its placement affecting human temperaments. The Romans conflated Mercury with the Greek god Hermes who, in his turn, was identified with the Egyptian god Thoth, the inventor of written language. This may be why he or it is also a symbol of eloquence. Mercury/Hermes/Thoth corresponded to the legendary Egyptian sage Hermes Trismegistus, the 'thrice great', imagined in the Renaissance to have been a prophet roughly contemporary with Moses. Hermeticism, moreover, is a component of early modern Neoplatonism, and Mercury and his accoutrements are associated with it, too. Finally (though more could have been added), Mercury is also an element, sometimes known as Quicksilver, a vital component in many alchemical/medical recipes. These fields, it is worth noting, would not have always been divided by disciplinary bulkheads.

Images of Mercury could be treated with great subtlety. By way of synecdoche, depicting or naming just one part of the figure, Mercury's snake-entwined staff, the *caduceus*, would suffice to bring all these meanings to mind. Religion, both Christian and 'heathen'; myths; science and pseudo-science; well-wrought speech or writing; 'magic'; and much else, all reside within this one image. Placing the caduceus in a different context might engender new meanings. Manning shows how one emblematist, Otto Vænius, equipped Cupid with the caduceus in his *Amorum Emblematum* (Antwerp, 1608), thus suggesting that '[Love] has filched Mercury's caduceus, because he has become eloquent' (Manning 2002: 169). Elsewhere a similar effect is achieved by alluding to Mercury's winged hat (ibid. 223). In such usages, imbued with *sprezzatura* and courtly wit, there seems to be little of the esoteric and the arcane, but these 'magical' aspects might be brought forward, depending on the execution in word and image. From a certain point of view, one might see Cupid wielding the caduceus not just as an elegant, courtly comment on love poetry, but also as something tinged with Neoplatonic ideas.

In Shakespeare's works, Mercury is most often a byword for a (divine) herald, but in its guise as quicksilver, there might be hints of its application

as a cure for syphilis. And in *Troilus and Cressida*, the line 'Mercury, lose all the serpentine craft of thy caduceus', spoken by Thersites shortly after he has threatened to 'conjure and raise devils', suggests a more 'magical' allusion, while bringing to mind also Mercury's function as god of thievery (2.3.5-6; 11-12).

Sources of figures and devices included fables and fairy tales, the Greek and Roman myths and pantheons, medieval heraldic symbols, the Hebrew alphabet, numbers, geometry, alchemical symbols, the zodiac, animals and plants, and—above all—Christian iconography; and as always, a great deal of overlap in intent and interpretation exists between these categories. Aside from Greek, Roman and biblically derived images and ideas, the two most important sources of esoteric images are the *Hermetic Corpus* and Egyptian hieroglyphs. In fifteenth-century Florence, texts attributed to the aforementioned Hermes Trismegistus were translated by Marsilio Ficino.[4] These tracts, including the *Pimander*, the *Emerald Tablet* and the *Asclepius*, formed a cornerstone in the Neoplatonism of Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, Giordano Bruno and many others, maybe even in England. In a similar vein, Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* was believed to explain the meanings of Egyptian hieroglyphs, and Horapollo was imagined to be a venerable, ancient authority. But as was the case with the *Corpus*, the *Hieroglyphica* too originated in the first centuries CE rather than in the millennia before, and its fanciful inventions are without relation to the real meanings of hieroglyphics, which were first understood in the early nineteenth century.

In the meantime, Egyptian hieroglyphs seemed to harbour the secrets of Hermes and the ancient priesthoods of Isis. These symbols took on a wealth of meanings, and 'hieroglyph' became a byword for a visual riddle or rebus. As Liselotte Dieckmann says about the *Hieroglyphica*, it

> has two characteristic features which the Renaissance fashion took over. The first is that several symbols can stand for one and the same idea and several ideas can be expressed by one and the same symbol. The second feature is that, in spite of this variety, the symbols are believed to have a 'necessary relationship' to what they symbolize. (Dieckmann 1957: 310)

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[4] See Yates 1964 and Hanegraaf 2012. Ficino also translated Plato's *Symposium* on Love; an intermingling of Cupid with Mercury like the one in Vænius' emblem can be related to Ficino's Neoplatonic world-view (see Ficino 2016).

She also accounts for the popularity of such figures and devices, stating that '[p]ainters in the fifteenth century, always looking for picturesque symbols, found in Horapollo's *Hieroglyphica* a rich source of new and fascinating symbols, whose meaning, known only to the initiated few, would be lost on the vulgar crowd' (Dieckmann 1957: 311). Such enigmatic pictures had enormous appeal to the Renaissance mind. In the sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries, people as (seemingly) different as Ben Jonson and John Dee engaged directly with these shadowy shapes, but for somewhat different purposes. Jonson used them in masques (*Masque of Blacknesse*[5] (1605) and *Masque of Beauty* (1608)) and Dee in order to create his *Monas Hieroglyphica*, a sort of esoteric $E=mc^2$, or a key to the mysteries of the universe (see Figure 1).
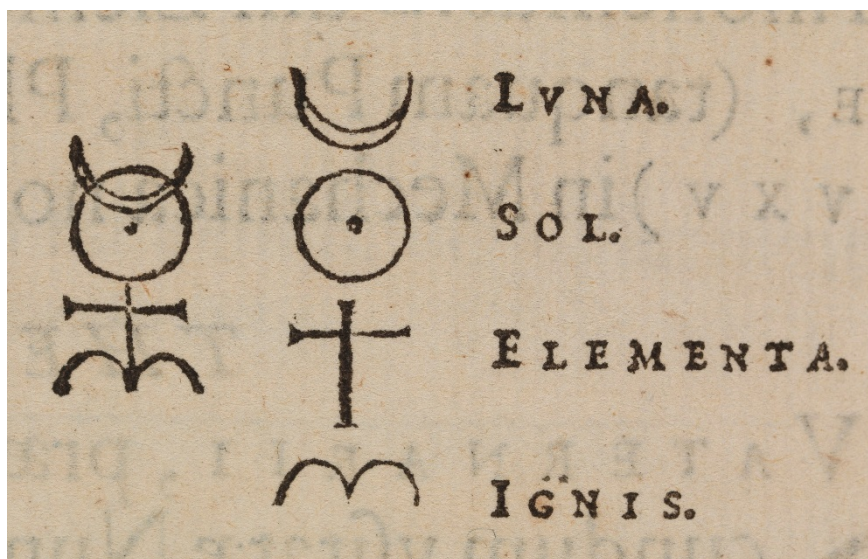

Figure 1. John Dee's *Monas*, with an itemisation of its composition. ©Wellcome Images.

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[5] Performers in the masque would appear carrying a 'mute hieroglyph', which, according to Jonson was a 'symbol I rather chose, than imprese, as well for strangeness, as relishing of antiquity, and more applying to that original doctrine of sculpture, which the Egyptians are said first to have brought from the Æthiopians' (Jonson 1605: 622).

Dieckmann argues that for Dee, 'the sign is itself reality and all things, worldly and eternal, *are* in those lines and circles' (Dieckmann 1957: 315). Some of the shapes Dee uses are variations on hieroglyphs, like the moon and the sun, and others seem to have different provenances. Not coincidentally, his symbol for the four elements resembles a Christian cross.

Some qualities seem to recur in esoteric visual poetics. It consists of configurations that may sometimes be labelled as artistic; it may have multiple meanings; and it is occult, in the sense of enigmatic or 'hidden'. For reasons that may relate to the eloquent linguistics of Thoth and Hermes Trismegistus, there appears to have been a close relation between poetic imagery on the one hand and the theory and practice of esoteric arts, on the other. The language of alchemy and astrology is a language of substitution and transformation, rife with metaphor and poetic invention. The visual language of esoteric emblems and illustrations follows in the same vein. The act of recombination epitomised by Dee's *Monas* is but one example of something old being used to make something new. At the same time, it also demonstrates how simple shapes can be utilised to create something profoundly mysterious. We understand that his hieroglyph is a combination of the symbols for the moon, the sun, the elements in general, and fire specifically, but we cannot comprehend precisely how it is meant to work. Dee's failure to explain this in detail typifies the Early Modern 'magician' to a tee: it is not for the hoi polloi to understand. But then again, if these forms were easy to decipher, they would not have stimulated the intellect or the imagination to the same degree. As we will see, subsequent cases (including *Julius Caesar*) are equally elusive, possessing the same generative ambiguity,[6] and the same sense that obscurity itself is a rhetorical device, suggestive of something important, something secret, exclusive and heightened.

The spectrum of esotericism ranged from charlatanism through alleged black magic to deeply serious philosophy and theology. Additionally, many 'magicians' (including Dee) were excellent astronomers and mathematicians. Others, like Paracelsus, began to change the science of medicine (or medical alchemy, also known as *iatrochemistry*). In addition to generating an income for its practitioners

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[6] For 'generative ambiguity', originating from the notion that two things can be true at the same time, see Sillars 2013.

(with good or duplicitous intentions), it seems clear that the esotericism of the Renaissance was set on discovering knowledge, both spiritual and practical. A similar impulse formed an important strand of dramatic and poetic invention. And both fields—the 'magical' and the literary—relied on verbal-visual imagery to represent their moral and philosophical riddles. In what follows, some esoteric and literary uses of figures might begin to exemplify what these fields of 'thinking with pictures' have in common. As was the case in Dee's *Monas*, the circular design is especially important, both as polysemous symbol and as an organising principle for such thought experiments.

A significant piece of verbal-visual esoterica is Giordano Bruno's memory wheel, which is described in writing in his *De Umbris Idearum*, or *On the Shadow of Ideas* from 1582. Frances Yates, who made the illustration based on Bruno's cryptic writings, attempts a brief description:

> Here are concentric wheels divided into thirty main segments, each of which is again subdivided into five, giving 150 divisions in all. On all these divisions there are inscriptions which will, I am afraid, hardly be legible. This does not matter because we shall never understand this thing in detail. (Yates 1966: 209)

Yates seems flummoxed by the memory wheel, describing it as a 'curious looking object', like some 'disc or papyrus of incredible antiquity dug up in the sands of Egypt', characterised by 'appalling complexity' (ibid.). The captions indicate that the wheel is organised astrologically, and Yates says that it is 'evidentially magical, for the images on the central wheel are the images of the decans of the zodiac, images of the planets, images of the mansions of the moon, and images of the houses of the horoscope' (ibid.). To make matters even more complex, the idea was that the wheels should turn independently of one another, placing the 150 inscriptions into numerous possible combinations. The inscriptions themselves are enigmatic. One reads 'First image of Saturn: A man with a stag's head on a dragon, with an owl which is eating a snake in his right hand'. Another: 'A huge, dark man with burning eyes, dressed in white'. Finally, on the outermost wheel, there are things like 'Osiris, the inventor of agriculture' and 'Ceres, the inventor of yokes for oxen' (ibid. 215). In the face of this complexity, it is difficult to imagine how it would help anyone remember anything at all, but according to Yates, Bruno was a Hermetic magician for whom the world was governed by stars, and this memory wheel would help to inscribe on the adept's memory the power of astral forces,

connecting the stars and the planets from the innermost circle with the everyday objects and activities described in the outermost one.

Subsequent scholarship suggests that the memory wheel might have been 'an adult toy' designed to learn foreign words through combining figures associated with certain roots and inflections (Bruno 1991: LXVIII, *passim*). This seems prohibitively cumbersome, and, as Francesco Torchia points out, this method, if anything, would make learning foreign words more difficult (Torchia 1997: 131-51). He posits instead that the real purpose of the wheel would have been to link together a series of mysterious allegorical figures for the purpose of gaining insight into and discoursing on a topic. This claim chimes with the Renaissance predilection for meditating on enigmatic hieroglyphs and 'the Neoplatonic concept of vision, according to which the eye is the higher organ' (Dieckmann 1957: 313). The purpose of the memory wheel, then, and of many other Renaissance exemplars of 'magical' visual forms, would be to produce *knowledge* and *ideas*. Thus, the title of Bruno's book, *On the Shadow* [read: outline] *of Ideas*, begins to make more sense; it is a dissertation on a spiritual search into Platonic cosmology, and like so much else in the Renaissance it is simultaneously stringent, exoteric, intellectual, and spiritual, esoteric and mysterious.

While the memory wheel is not represented by an illustration in Bruno's book (it only contains instructions for making and assembling it), its visual properties remain crucial. The fact that it is shaped like a circle is not merely practical. In this period, the circle represented the cosmos, heaven, perfection, infinity and much else, and was frequently used to illustrate the idea of microcosm and macrocosm, and the zodiac, which is central, both literally and figuratively, in Bruno's wheel.

Allesandro G. Farinella expands Dieckmann's account of Neoplatonism, as he explains the connection between seeing, the shape of the sphere or the circle and the role played by the individual soul in animating and thus understanding the *ideas* which underlie external reality. Giordano Bruno's leading light was of course Plato, but as Farinella states, one 'aspect of Aristotelian gnoseology which Bruno retains is the principle that there can be no knowledge unless a trace of a perception, a sensory image, has been left in our memory' (Farinella 2002: 598). Here, the sensory images would be the insistently visual figures from the zodiac, the strange figures like the man with the fiery eyes, dressed in white, and the inventors on the outer circle. But the circular shape that

frames these figures is equally important, in part because it allows movement:

> Bruno discovers that the union of the visual force of images with the Neoplatonic principle of the dynamism of the soul would allow him to insert in the Lullian wheels—the memory system used by him—what had so far been omitted: movement and life. In other words, images are recognized as having an internal principle of movement given them by the soul itself. (Farinella 2002: 599)

Furthermore, according to Farinella, Pico della Mirandola

> reproposed a parallelism between the movement of the heavens and that of people's souls: in *Heptaplus* he affirms that the 'rational soul is called heaven. In fact, Aristotle also calls heaven a self-moving animal (*De caelo*, 2. 6) and our soul (as the Platonists hold) is a self-moving substance (Plato, *Phaedrus*, 245c). Heaven is a circle and also the soul is a circle; Plotinus even says that heaven is a circle because its soul is a circle' (*Enneads*, 4.4. 45). (Quoted in Farinella, ibid.)

As the figures on the wheel become dynamic through movement and spiritual and intellectual animation, it is tempting to think of them as 'actors', both in the general sense of things that perform actions as well as the more specific sense of 'players' on a theatre stage. Bruno's memory wheel combines the dynamic and aesthetic senses of *disegno* in a framework redolent of the theatre in more than one way, as will become apparent in a moment.[7] It is important to note that to make the wheel dynamic and animated is to instil it with a temporal dimension; there is always another future state for it to assume. I am arguing here that through techniques akin to *copia* and *imitatio*, the main outcome of the *ars memoria* may have been *inventio,* a word that can mean both 'discovery' and 'invention'. In rhetoric, *inventio* denotes the act of finding arguments, but the modern senses of 'invention' and 'innovation' are not far off. This, however, does not mean there is no place for *remembering* in Early

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[7] Another famous instance of the arts of memory is Giulio Camillo's Memory Theatre (described in *L'Idea del Theatro* 1579), a sort of reversed amphitheatre in which an audience of one would occupy the stage and gaze upon a plethora of enigmatic figures fanning out concentrically where seats for the audience would be in a normal theatre. As was the case with Bruno's memory wheel, this would allow the viewer to meditate upon (re-)combinations of forms as a means to obtain deeper knowledge (Yates 1966: 135-62).

Modern (memory) theatres; only that this is a topic for a slightly different discussion.[8]

Not every 'magician' or practitioner of esoteric arts in the Renaissance was a Neoplatonist or a Hermeticist, but similar kinds of thinking permeated the field nonetheless, which goes some ways towards explaining the profligacy of circles and spheres in the visual poetics of the period. These circles, moreover, tended to be concentric, one inside another, inside another. Due to their ubiquity, it is very easy to find interstices between drama, poetry and esoteric conceptions of spheres and circles, and briefly discussing one example will be valuable in the current context.

After being rebuilt on the other side of the Thames, the playhouse formerly known as The Theatre changed its name to The Globe. Charles Moseley discusses how unusual and exotic the choice of the name "The Theatre" would have been for an English playhouse in 1576. It is not at all clear what such a name would have advertised or what kinds of expectations it might have created for prospective audiences. A further question is what its sign might have looked like (Moseley 2014: 1-2).

Mosley does not make the claim, but the design of the sign might have been circular, even before the change of name, because as Moseley *does* point out, the 'theatres' ('places for viewing') in existence in Northern Europe around 1576 were anatomy theatres, which were circular (see Figure 2); and the purpose of an anatomy theatre is to dissect a human being (or an animal) before an audience placed concentrically and vertically away from the table in the middle of the room. The other, more frequent use of the term was the Latin *Theatrum Mundi*, itself a commonplace famously alluded to by William Shakespeare and many other dramatists and poets. Circular designs seem obvious choices for both kinds of 'theatre'.[9]

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[8] Lena Perkins Wilder's *Shakespeare's Memory Theatre* (2011) is the best introduction to the topic of recollection in the Renaissance theatre.

[9] It is worth noting, too, that the world's first atlas, Ortelius' *Theatrum Orbus Terrarum*, was a big seller in the late sixteenth century.
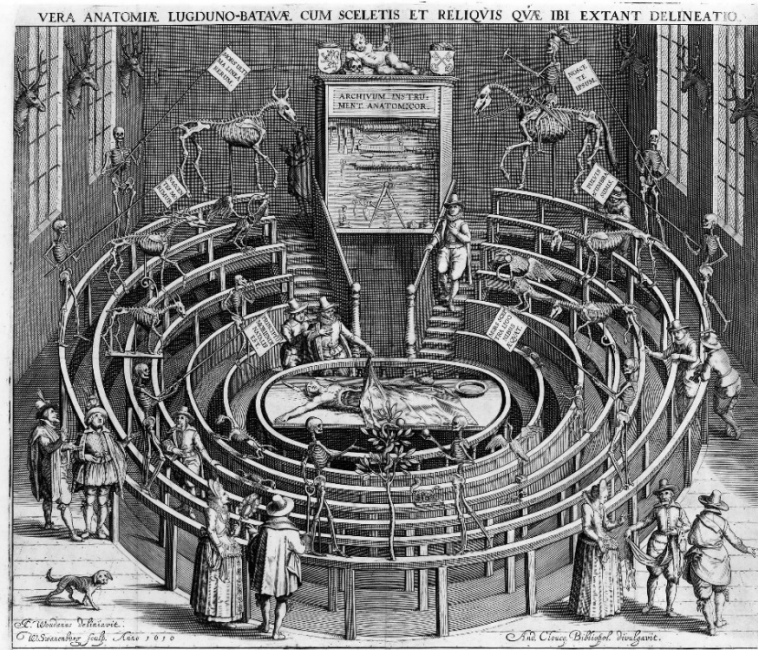
Figure 2. An early seventeenth-century engraving by Willem Swanenburgh of The Anatomical Theatre in Leiden, after a drawing by Johannes Woudanus. ©Wikimedia Commons.

Of course, there is no evidence that such a sign consisting of circles existed or that it were connected to the playhouse's new name, The Globe, but this is not crucial because the suggestion of 'dissecting man' in front of an audience placed in a circle is unavoidable. In doing so, and in the process of 'baring the soul' of a Macbeth, a Hamlet or a Brutus, at least some audience members might recall how the microcosm of the individual human being was supposed to reflect the macrocosm of the universe. The fact that the 20-sided Globe theatre was if not circular, then at least very nearly so tends to strengthen this suggestion, as does the possibility that a zodiac was painted on the ceiling above the stage (the reconstructed Globe in current-day London has one, though its inclusion is based on conjecture).

It would perhaps be an exaggeration to suggest that 'the magic of the theatre' was an occult or esoteric practice, as we understand those terms today. And while plays by Shakespeare and others were often set on *lifting*

the veil, in a sense prying for that which is hidden to view (which is the literal meaning of 'occult'), I do not mean to suggest that Burbage, Condell, Heminges, Shakespeare and the other shareholders, actors and writers made up a cabal of magicians engaging in public rituals on the stage. Rather, I mention this to reemphasise the point that there were hazy distinctions between the mainstream and the esoteric, indeed that the mainstream was in some ways esoteric and vice versa. In fact, after Leonardo da Vinci's 'Vitruvian Man' there could be no sharp distinction between the mysterious and the mundane in the visual arts. The proportions invented by Vitruvius and revivified by Leonardo were tied elegantly and mysteriously to the Cosmos. In *Theatre of the World,* Frances Yates (1969) is at pains to establish that The Globe is a Vitruvian construction and that classical ideas of proportion, micro- and macrocosm travelled through Renaissance Europe, via John Dee in England, to the men who built The Theatre, Peter Street and James Burbage. Arguing against this view, John Orr claims that the connection between Vitruvius and a builder like Street would have been very slight and that traditional, medieval building methods played a bigger role (Orr 1983: 139-40). Although Yates may have overestimated the Vitruvian influence on The Globe, its shape nevertheless suggests *imitatio* and re-*disegno* of Classical theatres, as well as the aforementioned anatomy theatres.

Recombinations of polysemous signs on the theatre stage come together in act 1 scene 3 of Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar* which was 'probably written to open the new Globe Theatre in 1599' (Daniell 2006: 3). Of special interest are the 'prodigies' that swarm the streets and the way in which 1.3 engages with emblems and alchemy. I will argue that the whole scene coheres organically when read through a lens of esoteric visual poetics.

As the conspirators plan to murder Caesar on the Ides of March, a profligacy of dreams, visions, prophecies and omens occupy the first act. These events come from one of Shakespeare's main sources, Plutarch's *Parallel Lives* (translated by Thomas North in 1579), whose sections on Caesar and Brutus contain much material theatrically configured and adapted. Shakespeare, however, reframes these elements in a manner which—I would argue—is enriched by a visual esoteric reading. Let us look at how these prodigies appear in the play.

CASKA
A common slave–you know him well by sight–
Held up his left hand, which did flame and burn,
Like twenty torches joined; and yet his hand,
Not sensible of fire, remained unscorched.
             […] I met a lion
Who glazed upon me and went surly by
Without annoying me. And […]
Men, all in fire, walk up and down the streets.
And yesterday the bird of night did sit
Even at noonday upon the market-place
Hooting and shrieking. When these prodigies
Do so conjointly meet, let not men say,
'These are their reasons, they are natural':
For I believe they are portentous things
Unto the climate that they point upon.
(1.3.15-18; 20-22; 25-32)

In the course of the first couple of acts, these and other signs and symbols become points of debate. As we have seen, Caska refuses to believe there are any natural explanations for these phenomena. They must be 'portentous things'. Not everyone believes that, and, at any rate, there are disagreements about how such signs ought to be interpreted. Two things are worth taking note of here: one, by framing Plutarch's figures in the context of an English-language play on a playhouse stage, this would change them according to the aforementioned principles of *copia* and *imitatio*—they, too, would be 'English'd' (via North) and instilled with new meaning; and two, Shakespeare's audiences would have taken extremely seriously the importance of interpreting enigmatic figures, even if they were not always capable of doing so themselves.[10] It is of course also noteworthy that these prodigies are represented with significant visual force, so much so that it is easy to forget that there are no actual images beyond the ones produced before your inner eye as you read or hear Caska's speech. Whether these are good or ill omens depends, from the point of view of the conspirators, on whether they are right to kill Caesar

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[10] Understanding that there is something you do not understand can be significant. Sillars quotes Ben Jonson' statement about the designs he made for Stephen Harrison's 1604 triumphal arches that they should 'be so presented as, upon the view, they might without cloud or obscurity declare themselves to the sharp and learned; and for the multitude, no doubt but their grounded judgements did gaze, said it was fine and were satisfied' (Sillars 2015: 12).

and put Brutus in his place. They worry that the gods are expressing their displeasure through these occurrences. Here, and in the play's many astrological allusions (chief among them is Caesar's assertion that he is 'constant as the Northern star' [3.1.60]), the Hermetic and Neoplatonic concept of 'as above so below' is in evidence. This is why it seems so apt that a circular zodiac[11] should appear above the action, though the relationship between the mundane and the heavenly worlds is complicated by irony and asymmetry in Shakespeare's interpretation.

Act 1 scene 3 of *Julius Caesar* is also the site of an allusion that has perplexed the play's modern editors, but which can be understood through reference to the visual expression of partly esoteric ideas. Cassius exclaims he would rather kill himself than allow Caesar to rule Rome, asserting that 'Nor stony tower, nor walls of beaten brass,/ Nor airless dungeon, nor strong links of iron,/ Can be retentive to the strength of spirit:/ But life being weary of these worldly bars/ Never lacks power to dismiss itself' (1.3.93-7). The Arden 3 editor, David Daniell, is bemused by the image of 'walls of beaten brass' and comments in a footnote that it is 'a bizarre notion', because '[t]he four actualizations of the effects of the abstract tyranny move logically in scale from larger to smaller—tower, walls, dungeon, chains, each noun with a stereotyped epithet except the second, where walls are unexpectedly of brass' (note to 1.3.93).

In fact, a probable explanation to the presence of the brazen walls can be found by looking at the image in the context of the dialogue as a whole, by reference to an emblem, and to another allusion to Horace. As I will ultimately make clear, 'brass walls' was more proverbial than Daniell seems to think.

Cassius' complaint is a response to Caska, who has become unnerved by the portents and prodigies described a couple of pages ago. Before his itemisation of the slave with a burning hand and the owls and lions prowling the streets, he proclaims to Cicero (who is present at the beginning of the scene) that

> I have seen tempests when the scolding winds
> Have rived the knotty oaks, and I have seen
> Th'ambitious ocean swell, and rage, and foam,
> To be exalted with the threatening clouds:

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[11] 'Climate', quoted above, is another astrological term, referring to an earthly zone of celestial influence (Daniell 2006: note to 1.3.32).

> But never till tonight, never till now,
> Did I go through a tempest dropping fire.
> Either there is a civil strife in heaven,
> Or else the world, too saucy with the gods,
> Incenses them to send destruction.
> (1.3.4-13)

Through this entire dialogue, the stage directions (from the First Folio) inform us that there should be constant sounds of thunder, indicating an ongoing tempest. In this particular case, Shakespeare does not borrow all the details from Plutarch. Instead, looking at an emblem by Geoffrey Whitney may serve to transform our understanding of what is going on in this scene, and what role images play in it.
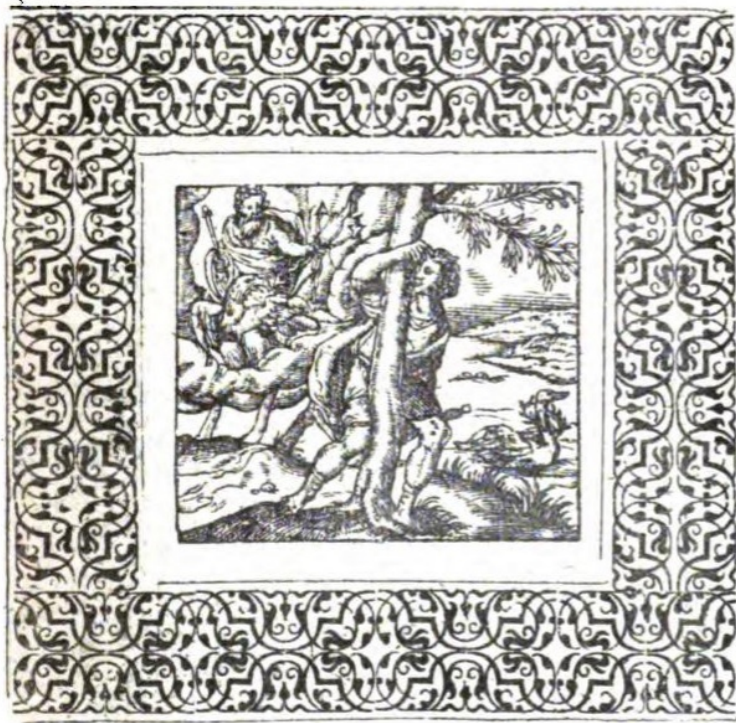

Figure 3. MURUS ÆNEUS, SANA CONSCIENTIA, from Geoffrey Whitney, *A Choice of Emblems*. Courtesy of The Internet Archive.

Whitney was an important emblem writer in the Elizabethan era, and there are strong indications that Shakespeare was familiar with his emblems and alluded to them in his plays. But though Shakespeare probably modelled scenes in some plays on emblems from Whitney's *Choice of Emblems* (1586), a sustained exploration of the connection between Whitney and Shakespeare cannot take place here.[12] Suffice it for our purposes to look at one particular emblem by Whitney, namely number 67, MURUS ÆNEUS, SANA CONSCIENTIA (Figure 3).

An emblem is often defined as a tripartite structure, containing a motto, a picture and a poem, though there are many variations on the form. This motto can be translated as 'a sound conscience is a wall of bronze/brass'. In the Renaissance, bronze and brass were often synonymous and both were names for the same alchemical concept, the *laton*: 'philosophical gold, which is the unclean body or raw stuff of the philosopher's stone' (Abraham 1998: 114). The *pictura*, or picture, depicts an unidentified man clinging to a tree while Jupiter, clasping his thunderbolts, looks down threateningly from a cloud.

Finally, the poem reads:

Bothe freshe, and green, the Laurell standeth sounde
Though lightnings flasshe, and thunderbolts do flie:
Where, other trees are blasted to the grounde,
Yet, not one leafe of it, is withered drie:
Even so, the man that hath a conscience cleare,
When wicked men, doe quake at everie blaste,
Doth constant stande, and dothe no perrilles feare,
When tempests rage, doe make the worlde agaste:
    Such men are like unto the Laurell tree,
    The others, like the blasted boughs that die.

Whether it is a commonplace or a coincidence, or whether Shakespeare actually studied it, the emblem contains several central elements present in *Julius Caesar* 1.3: angry gods raining down punishment from up on high, thunder and lightning, an arboreal metaphor for resilience, a

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[12] See Henry Green's *Shakespeare and the Emblem Writers* (1870) for a very thorough survey of 'similarities of thought and expression' between Shakespeare and Whitney. See also Sillars 2015 and Simonds 1992. Neither Green nor Manning connect Horace/Whitney's emblem with *Julius Caesar*, nor does anyone else as far as I am aware.

frightened human in need of courage, and a moral question about 'a conscience cleare' (5).

As was common at the time, Whitney borrowed the woodcut from another emblem book, Sambucus' 1564 *Emblemata*. John Manning explains how Whitney reconfigured the emblem in his own work, introducing a new motto, which he had borrowed from Horace *Epistles* 1.1.6:

> *hic murus æneus esto,*
> *nil conscire sibi, nulla pallescere culpa*
>
> Be this our wall of brass to have no guilt
> at heart, no wrongdoing to turn us pale.
> (quoted in Manning 2002: 105; emphasis added)

'Horace's lines had acquired almost proverbial status', Manning explains, adducing, *pace* Daniell, that 'Whitney is hardly displaying any uncommon erudition, but rehearses a commonplace' (ibid.). Manning's main purpose here is to investigate the decay of the reused woodcut, but of greater present interest is his remark that 'the appropriation of the classical text may […] be part of Whitney's larger programme […] of translating the moral virtues of Augustan Rome to a new English environment' (ibid.), i.e. 'Englishing' them. Shakespeare too is interested in addressing moral issues in *Julius Caesar*, as well as pragmatic politics,[13] and in this very complex scene, he combines an alchemical conceit with emblematic imagery through a long dialogue.

To reiterate: in 1.3 of *Julius Caesar*, there is a selection of enigmatic, symbolic figures who roam the streets. A variety of reactions to these prodigies is presented, and counter-reactions are introduced in their turn. Caska relates to Cicero what he has seen and, with a possible allusion to Whitney's emblem (with 'knotty oaks' instead of a laurel tree[14]), construes these sights and the constant thunder as representing the displeasure of the gods. Caska believes that the imminent murder of Caesar is the cause of this, but when Cassius enters, he instead identifies Caesar's continued

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[13] Daniell sees Shakespeare as addressing a parallel between the long periods of peace under Augustus and the Tudors (2006: 7).

[14] See also Horace, *Odes* 1.3: 'Triple *bronze and oak* encircled/ the breast of the man who first committed/ his fragile bark to the cruel sea' (2003: n.p.; emphasis added).

existence as the cause of the disruption of Nature. Approaching the moral sense of the emblem from a different angle than Caska, Cassius argues that one must be resilient, that the tempest and the portents are to be viewed as tests of the will rather than warnings, and he asserts that the spirit is even stronger than the Horatian walls of brass alluded to in Whitney's emblem. In a sense, the dialogue between Caska and Cassius can be viewed as a *disputio in utramque partem* on behalf of Shakespeare—two completely different interpretations of the same visual riddles.[15]

Cassius is the most ardent of the conspirators, and the play seems to indicate that he is also in the wrong, from its point of view, though there are few entirely good people in *Julius Caesar*. In order to understand the play's attitude towards the moral question surrounding the murder of Caesar, we must look to the conclusion of 1.3, where the portents, the emblematic allusion and the debate are summarised in an alchemical metaphor. And if the identification of brass/bronze as an alchemical element with connotations to the philosopher's stone seems spurious, the following speech is at least explicit.

> CASSIUS
> […]
> Come, Caska, you and I will yet ere day
> See Brutus at his house. Three parts of him
> Is ours already, and the man entire
> Upon the next encounter yields him ours.
>
> CASKA
> O he sits high in all the people's hearts:
> And that which would appear offence in us
> His countenance, *like richest alchemy*,
> Will change to virtue and worthiness.
>
> CASSIUS
> Him, and his worth, and our great need of him
> You have right well conceited. […] (1.3.153-162; emphasis added)

This reference to alchemy is not entirely a positive one. According to Stanton Linden the majority of poetic and dramatic uses of alchemy up until the early parts of the seventeenth century tended to be satirical, and generally considered alchemy in a negative light, as a shorthand for gilding

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[15] For other aspects of *in utramque partem* in *Julius Caesar*, see Hebron 2016.

rather than gold-making, and for charlatanism rather than natural philosophy or spiritual growth (Linden 1996: 26-28). It was an exoteric rather than an esoteric alchemy. By the same token, the alchemy that transforms ill will to virtue and worthiness has an air of disingenuousness about it, detectable in Cassius' use of the words 'like' and 'conceited'. Their conceit is that they define Rome as a sick society, where Julius Caesar is the cause of the illness—he is 'base matter' (1.3.109)—and Brutus is the cure. They conceive of themselves as medical alchemists (iatrochemists) burdened with the task of restoring the natural balance of society, and they appoint Brutus as their Philosopher's Stone, as it were. But, as their wording and actions reveal, here and elsewhere in the play, their motivations and their attitudes are neither pure nor honest. Earlier in the first act, Cassius states of Brutus in his absence that his 'honourable mettle [as opposed to Caesar's 'base matter'] may be wrought/ from that it is disposed'—meaning that Brutus' image can be manipulated (1.2.308). And we know that Cassius cheerfully embezzles gold and that he is every bit as corrupt as he claims Caesar is. Cassius and his set are hypocrites, and they are alchemical charlatans.

Another explanation of the failure may be the death of Portia. For the Philosopher's Stone to be created, the raw materials of the 'King' must be united in a 'chemical wedding' with the 'Queen' forming the *laton*. With the loss of Brutus' wife, this balance is gone and defeat becomes inevitable. In the moral world that the play creates, this appears to be represented as an appropriate outcome, and it is worth remembering that Julius Caesar too goes to his death because he fails to take seriously Calpurnia's inauspicious dream (2.2). If, by way of a metaphor, society is an alchemical process, purity, knowledge and understanding are required to make it function—and so is balance.

It seems safe to conclude that a reading of *Julius Caesar*—and 1.3 especially—is enriched by a visual and esoteric critical framing. Only by understanding the occult, moral and spiritual nature of its tropes and intertextual configurations, and only through recognising the widespread awareness of such matters in the Renaissance, can we begin to understand fully what the play must have meant to its audience, and on how many levels it operated. The 'enigmatic hieroglyphs', i.e., the ambivalent symbolism of the portents roaming the streets; the equally equivocal emblem; and the alchemical metaphor all make sense when we read 1.3 as one sustained and organic engagement with esoteric visual-verbal

imagery. The various elements of the scene mutually enrich each other, and its function as a sort of social diagnosis comes even more insistently to the fore.

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William H. Sherman is critical of approaches to 'magic' that see '"the occult philosophy" as an *explicans* (a thing to do the explaining) rather than as an *explicandum* (a thing to be explained)' (1995: 20).[16] It would take a book-length study to address what 'magic', 'occult philosophy' and esotericism *are*, but this article has tried to show that while these remain things to be explained, they also have the capacity to explain aspects of what is going on in early modern drama. Obtaining greater awareness of and insight into early modern esotericism, then, is a way to identify its potential—and its limitations—as an *explicans*.

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[16] Specifically, Sherman is thinking of how Frances Yates and her followers approached the arguably too narrowly construed 'occult' habitus of John Dee.

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