SHAKESPEARE IN JERUSALEM?

An investigation into a mysterious signature, possibly the Bard's, in a 16th-century book by the physician and jurist Cornelius Agrippa, which found its way to the National Library in Israel. And a few reflections on science and magic

By Avner Ben-Zaken

"What strength I have's mine own."
– Shakespeare's "The Tempest"

One summer morning I entered the National Library of Israel in Jerusalem. I made my way to the small Edelstein Reading Room, which houses rare books in science and medicine collected by Sidney Edelstein and Harry Friedenwald. I had come to see a 16th-century book about medicinal herbs, but took advantage of the opportunity to introduce myself to the librarian and director of the collection, Hava Nowersztern. I have always thought that librarians and historians should be friends.

We held a long friendly chat in which I told her about myself and my current research interests. In addition to writing about medicinal herbs, I told her about another research project, concerning a medieval Arabic *grimoire* – a manual of black magic – that circulated in the Renaissance period and sparked the attempts to link magic and science. Among the figures of interest to me I mentioned the name of Cornelius Agrippa, a magician, physician and jurist from the early 16th century who sought to turn magic into the new philosophy of science. Hava tensed up. She said the collection contains several books by Agrippa and that rumor had it one contained the signature of William Shakespeare, no less.

"It must be his satire, 'The Vanity of Arts and Sciences,'" I guessed.

"I don't know," she said. "Let's order the books and see."

About an hour later, Alexander Gordin, from the rare books division, arrived carrying a cardboard box. We took out the books. I first opened a copy of a translation from Latin to English of "The Vanity of Arts and Sciences" (first edition in English, 1569). On the title page I found various, largely illegible scrawls.

Agrippa (1486-1535) published this work after having written his masterpiece, "Three Books of Occult Philosophy" (1510), though well-justified fears kept him from publishing the latter for 20 years. In the meantime, he tried to prepare the ground for his magnum opus by publishing his attack on the state of the sciences.

For Agrippa, the sciences were merely the product of a scientific and institutional structure that sought to justify its underlying assumptions. Not only had the medieval universities erred by pursuing the Aristotelian philosophical tradition: Their institutional logic and structural rigidity kept new ideas from developing, even if unknowingly. Instead of describing natural phenomena, Agrippa called for uncovering nature's operative mechanisms as they work behind the "curtain of natural phenomena."

For him, magic was not a practice involving occupation with unnatural spiritual phenomena, but the exact opposite: an art that would expose invisible physical entities (forces, radiation, light, particles), which operate as mediators between bodies and constitute the primary source of motion in nature.

In order to illustrate his philosophical proposition, Agrippa, who was also a jurist, volunteered to defend in court a woman who was accused of practicing witchcraft. He took a bold line of defense, opting to admit the deeds and deny the interpretation. Agrippa showed that none of the "acts of witchcraft" performed by the woman deviated from the laws of nature; they only manipulated them. The woman's acquittal gave him greater incentive to assail witch hunts and write what is perhaps the first feminist tract, "On the Nobility and Superiority of the Female Sex" (1529).

Testimonies from 1903

Agrippa thus adopted a new persona: The philosopher who reflected on the purposes of natural phenomena now became the scientist-magician who actively manipulates nature, and by means of mathematical quantification is able to describe the underlying causes and mechanisms of natural phenomena.

Who actually determined that the scrawls on the book's title page belong to no less a personage than Shakespeare? This copy of Agrippa's work reached the National Library by a tortuous route. From England it found its way to the New York Public Library. As the seal shows, the copy was discharged from the library at some point in the early 20th century. Libraries usually get rid of books when they possess more than one copy of the same volume. But it's hard to believe that anyone in the NYPL would forgo a copy of a book containing Shakespeare's signature. It is more likely that it was sold to a book collector who wanted to learn more about the signatures on the title page.

A typewritten note attached to that page offered a hypothesis about the signatures. The note quoted William Stoddard, an early 20th-century Shakespearean scholar who published a book containing new information about the Bard's private life. He examined the book and noted that on the upper part of the title page someone had written a Latin sentence – "The secret I have's mine own" – and adjacent to it was a signature which began with the letters "HH," followed by "Holland." Stoddard conjectured that the individual in question was the poet and adventurer Hugh Holland (1569-1633).

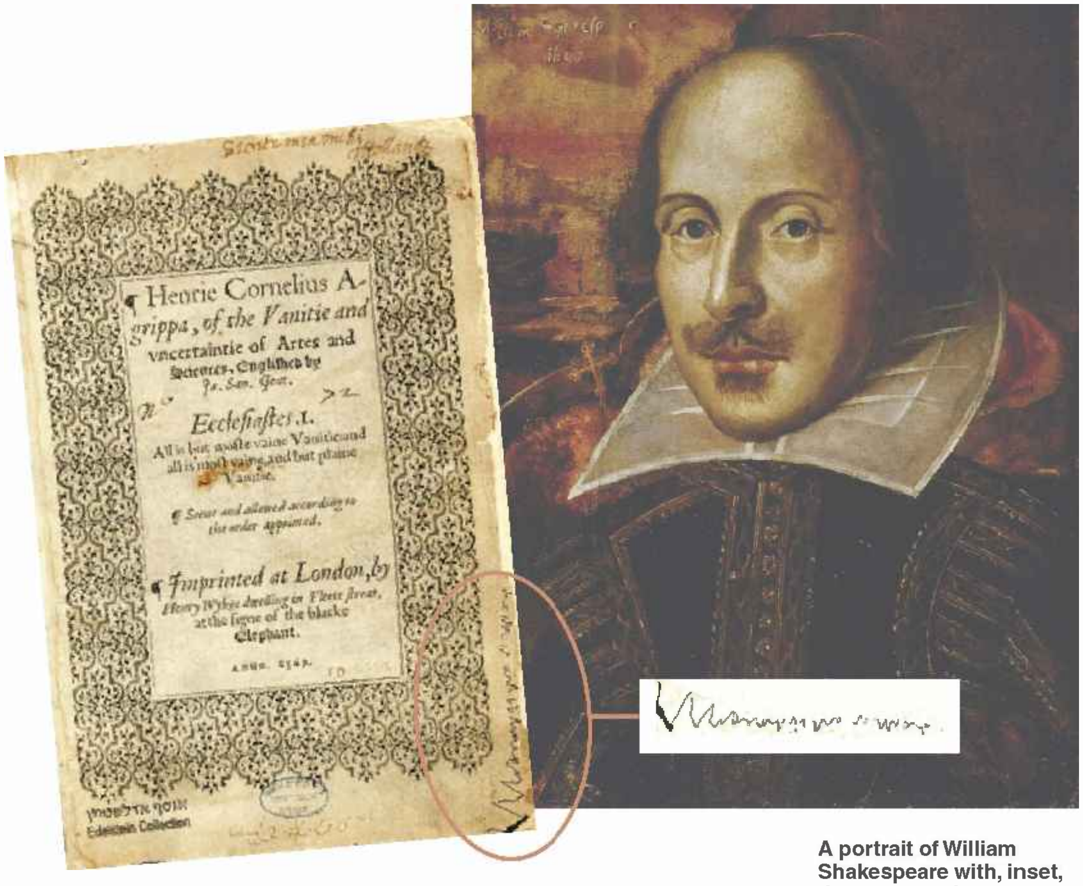
After completing his studies at Cambridge, Holland had traveled widely, visiting Italy, Jerusalem and Istanbul, where he was reprimanded by the English ambassador for daring to speak out publicly against the monarchical establishment. After returning to London he joined the group of poets and playwrights with whom Shakespeare socialized, which probably accounts for the fact that an elegiac sonnet he wrote appears in the preface to the First Folio of Shakespeare's plays.

At the bottom right of the title page of Agrippa's book is a long, unclear signature. Stoddard believed it was identical to Shakespeare's, as it was copied on the second edition of his plays.

In the course of my search for additional details about Stoddard, I later found a report from 1903 in The New York Tribune about an exhibition of rare books in which Stoddard's copy of the book was on display. The report noted that the discovery should stir new controversy about Shakespeare's identity. Stoddard apparently sold this volume – with his stunning conjectures about the signatures appended – to Edelstein, who decades later donated his impressive collection of rare books to the National Library in Jeruslem.

Traces of sorcery

I am not a Shakespeare scholar; far from it. However, in the light of the mystery that was dropped in my lap, I could not resist asking a few simple questions. For example, is this really Shakespeare's signature? There are six signatures attributed to Shakespeare on three different documents, and their authenticity is debated. One is on a deposition from 1612, two on real-estate documents from 1613 and three on his last will, dated 1616. The resemblance between the signatures led to the conclusion that they are probably Shakespeare's. However, for proponents of conspiracy theories – who doubt Shakespeare's existence altogether – the fact that all the signatures date from the final years of his life underscores the fact that we know nothing about his existence beforehand.



Henrie Cornelius A-
grippa, of the Vanitie and
vncertaintie of Artes and
Sciences, Englished by
Ja. San. Gent.

Ecclesiastes. 1.
All is but moste vaine Vanitie and
all is most vaine, and but plaine
Vanitie.

Seene and allowed according to
the order appointed.

Imprinted at London, by
Henry Wykes dwelling in Fleete street,
at the signe of the blacke
Elephant.

Anno. 1569.

אוסף אדלשטיין
Edelstein Collection

A portrait of William Shakespeare with, inset, the mystery signature on the first edition of Cornelius Agrippa's "The Vanity of Arts and Sciences".

When I put this question to the Folger Shakespeare Library in Washington, D.C., I was referred to the library's curator of manuscripts, Heather Wolfe, who is also an expert on signatures. After making a careful examination, she wrote that as with everything pertaining to Shakespeare's elusive identity, "I am highly skeptical, of course!" She added, "However, there is a signature similar to this one in William Lambarde's book 'Archaionomia,' which is also said to have been in the playwright's possession." (The latter is a collection of Saxon laws published during Elizabeth I's reign.)

Whether or not this is Shakespeare's signature, it is clear that Stoddard, like other researchers, far from being surprised, actually expected to find Shakespeare's signature on a book by Agrippa. And with good reason. Much scholarly ink has been spilled in uncovering Shakespeare's occupation with magic and sorcery. Agrippa is a prominent presence in various plays by Shakespeare, even if he is not directly mentioned. In "The Merry Wives of Windsor," for example, Shakespeare refers to Agrippa's notion of the magic power that resides in odd numbers and writes, "They say there is divinity in odd numbers, either in nativity, chance, or death."

Agrippa writes about the importance of the number three, and notes that in addition to the Three Graces there are also the Three Fates, who become the three witches in "Macbeth." For Agrippa, the number seven represents stages in the structure of the universe and in human history; in "As You Like It," Shakespeare foisted those stages on man's development from birth to old age.

Agrippa writes that love is "without eyes, because it is above the intellect," and in "The Merchant of Venice" Jessica says, "Love is blind, and lovers cannot see / The pretty follies that themselves commit." Shakespeare also found a way to evoke in depth the mood of his heroes and the world in which they are buffeted – as in the Richard plays, "Hamlet" and "Macbeth" – by citing Agrippa's recurrent propositions about the interdependence between the four humors and human happiness or depression. For Shakespeare, the human psyche is a lifelong battleground upon which people seek to preserve the balances between lofty ideals and the limitations of daily life, and that struggle is the wellspring of the tension in the plays.

However, the play that deals most intensely with questions of magic and in which traces remain of a reading of Agrippa's "The Vanity of Sciences" is the last play Shakespeare wrote alone. "The Tempest" is the story of Prospero, the Duke of Milan, who sold his soul to the devil and was a sorcerer. While he renounced the vanities of politics for occult knowledge, his brother and another man conspired to depose him. Prospero and his daughter, Miranda, are set adrift on a leaky vessel, which is sea-swept to an empty island. There, Prospero summons his magic powers and foments a storm that brings the ship of his brother and the other conspirator to the shores of the island – not in order to take revenge, but to rebuke them.

Prospero likens the magician to the director who conjures up a play. Toward the end of "The Tempest," Prospero looks back on his life and declares his despair of the "vanity of mine art," which he prefers to relinquish altogether. And in an echo of the words written on the title page of our copy – "The secret I have's mine own" – Prospero says in the Epilogue, "What strength I have's mine own."

Magic on the stage

Even if Shakespeare owned or only perused Agrippa's book, how did he come into possession of it? An examination of his possible access to philosophical scientific literature turns up no few difficulties. Shakespeare was not educated in the sense of a university graduate. Nor were there public libraries close to him. And in contrast to educated people of his time, the personal library he left behind was quite meager. Nevertheless, he might have gained access to important works by dint of curiosity, resourcefulness and social ties.

Shakespeare came to London from Stratford, a provincial town, probably in 1590. He left behind, in addition to his low social status as the son of a glover, a wife and three children. Once in the big city he set about reinventing himself. He entered the world of the public theaters and joined an actors' company. This was a relatively new arena, whose basic elements were still taking shape. Very quickly, though, Shakespeare found himself hobnobbing with those on the social margins of the London world of learning and culture. ►

◄ At the Mermaid Tavern, and other pubs in the area, he met poets and playwrights who were part of a circle known as the "University Wits," among them Christopher Marlowe, Thomas Nashe, Robert Greene, Thomas Kyd and others. Even though almost all of them were graduates of Cambridge and Oxford, they scorned the old educational establishment. In their perception, the universities taught science, philosophy and poetry as theoretical bodies of knowledge, which originated in the Middle Ages and became a source of authority for all interpretation. They argued, instead, that life's practical aspects could not only be reflected in philosophy but should and could shape it. Art, poetry and all of philosophy need to be founded from the bottom up, from reality to idea.

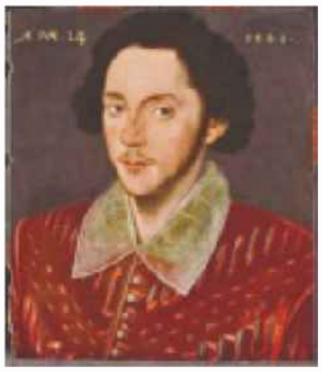
Accordingly, English medieval poetry and literature required an overhaul. If literary creation were to be intertwined with daily practicalities, it had to leave the universities and enter the theaters. There, by means of playwriting, it would be possible to fuse poetry and mythology with contemporary language and give the broad public accessibility in narrative form to philosophical issues and national myths that shape historical consciousness. Thus, the English translation of Agrippa's satirical book, which scorned the arrogance and vanity of the sciences, made a soft landing in their hands.

Agrippa became one of the actors' intellectual heroes; what he had done to science by means of magic, they wished to do to literature by means of the theater. The first of them to take Agrippa seriously was Christopher Marlowe – one of those whom proponents of the conspiracy theory claim was the person behind the plays that Shakespeare "supposedly wrote."

An ancient German legend tells how Faustus sold his soul to Satan in return for a few years of the life of this world. The legend was translated into English and Marlowe adapted it into a play, "Doctor Faustus" (first edition, 1604). Over and above matters of language and the distribution of the text among the different characters, Marlowe introduced some revisions into the plot itself. Act I begins with a soliloquy in which Doctor Faustus talks about the vanity of medieval science, in which scholars "level at the end [find the purpose] of every art, / And live and die in Aristotle's works." He declares that he "Will be as cunning as Agrippa was / Whose shadows [referring to Agrippa's practice of necromancy] made all Europe honor him."

Another member of this circle, satirist Thomas Nashe, wrote a work titled "The Unfortunate Traveler," in which he mentions several times Agrippa's power to transform the practice of magic into the philosophy of science.

Indeed, Nashe notes that even Thomas More, who visited the European continent, and Thomas Cromwell, the king's ambassador there, were "very urgent to be partaker of some rare experiment" of Agrippa's that they might report back in England.



THE PHILOSOPHER NOW BECAME THE SCIENTIST-MAGICIAN WHO ACTIVELY MANIPULATES NATURE, AND IS ABLE TO DESCRIBE THE UNDERLYING CAUSES AND MECHANISMS OF NATURAL PHENOMENA.

Even though the members of the University Wits group drew from Agrippa the inspiration for the antiestablishment sentiment they cultivated against the dogma of the universities, they were skeptical of anyone who tried his hand at writing without a formal academic education. As is still the case today, brilliant individuals who sprang from the lower classes were perceived as impostors and charlatans.

Thomas Nashe and Robert Greene were behind the essay "A Groatsworth of Wit," in which they used wordplay to intimate that Shakespeare the actor could not be a playwright and poet, and castigated him as "an upstart crow beautified with our feathers." These were the seeds which later engendered the theory that Shakespeare was a fictitious figure.

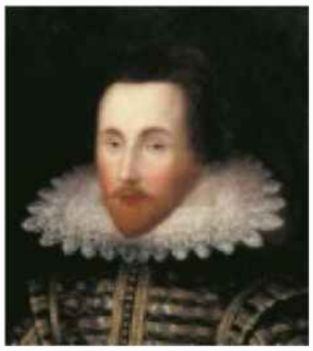
At the same time, this circle was Shakespeare's major source of inspiration, from which he broadened his intellectual world, drew contemporary terms and concepts and became acquainted with Agrippa's book. Shakespeare became more successful than all the rest because he had a different point of observation. What rankled the group of poets about Shakespeare was not only his humble social status but also, and perhaps principally, the fact that he was an actor who sought to cross disciplinary and cultural borders and take up writing as well.

Different points of view gave rise to different plays. Thus, Shakespeare, instead of treating the role of playwright as that of a poet who supplies the framework of the plot which the actors make use of on the stage, wrote plays experimentally, from the actors' viewpoint, like one who – like Agrippa's magician – mixes practicality with theory and practice, poetry with the vernacular. While the circle of poets continued to apprehend playwriting in terms of poetry external to acting, Shakespeare turned the playwright into a magician seeking to manipulate not nature but the audience in the theater, which became a laboratory of the human sciences. There, by showing extreme cases and sharp contrasts, he manipulated the emotions of the audience and extracted from the viewers intense feelings of expectation, anxiety and relief. For Shakespeare, writing a play was a process of trial and error, and he revised and adjusted the text based on the audience's response over a period before finalizing it.

Shakespeare the experimentalist perceived the theater as a space in which all the moral laws inculcated in the schools and churches, in sermons and leaflets are suspended. In the theater, absolute good is not the focusing of one's thoughts on God; it is an aspiration for power as such. With the social and moral conventions set aside, the theater became a laboratory of the human sciences in which the inner workings of the mechanism of the restless human struggle are revealed by the playwright, thus forcing the viewers to observe themselves.

Was Shakespeare the theater experimentalist a source of inspiration for the experimentalists of science in England? Is it possible that the theater influenced science? The paramount figure whom the conspiracy advocates claim is secretly behind the name Shakespeare is none other than Francis Bacon, the Lord Chancellor of King James I – but more important, the major philosopher of the experimentalist doctrine. Instead of reading the books of the medieval scholars, Bacon urged a direct reading of the "book of nature," by means of observation, data collection and, above all, experiments.

If the philosophers had once contemplated first principles which exist in their own right without human contact, Bacon proposed that they be supplanted with "facts" created by the manipulation of nature. In the same way that Shakespeare shifted the weight of gravity from the writer-poet to the actor-playwright, Bacon wished to be attentive to the judgment of the ordinary person and came out with the famous dictum, "[Man] has begun to be his own master, let him (if he will) use his own judgment." As in Shakespeare's Globe Theater, Bacon, in his scientific utopia "New Atlantis," described the central structure, Solomon's House, as a theater hall in which experiments are conducted in view of a free audience.



THE FIRST EXPERIMENTS WERE DESCRIBED AS A TYPE OF PLAY, VIEWED BY WITNESSES WHO WERE NOT ONLY AN AMUSED AUDIENCE BUT WERE ESSENTIAL TO ENDORSE THE EXPERIMENT'S CREDIBILITY.

The advocates of experimentalism viewed Bacon as the source of inspiration by which experimentation would become the method on which all of science is based, but implicitly they seem to have taken the form from Shakespearean theater. The first experiments were described theatrically as a type of play, displaying tension, expectation and anticlimax, viewed by witnesses who were not only an amused audience but were also essential to endorse the experiment's credibility. Moreover, the narrative structures of the theater were transposed to the writing of laboratory reports.

In contrast to earlier scientific writing, which possessed persuasiveness and exemplification internal to the text, the text relating to an experiment describes a reality and facts which exist in their own right, external to the text. In a play the text is distributed among the characters and maintains rhythm and balance until the particular moment at which the hero delivers a soliloquy, the moment at which he utters abstractions and generalizations in the monologue. In just the same way, in a laboratory report (although certainly more drily) the scientist describes the hypothesis, the instruments, the stages of the experiment, the results – and then, at a particular moment, in a concluding monologue, seems to subject the experiment to abstraction and generalization, transforming the conclusions from the distinctive case of the experiment into a sweeping generalization about the laws of nature.

The intellectual revolution at the outset of the modern age rested primarily on a fusion of practice and philosophy – that is, on how to "make a philosophical city without philosophy," in the words of Thomas More. It began with art, when Leon Battista Alberti (1404-1472) sought to understand the connection between "to paint" and a painting, and transformed the painter into an artist. It continued with Cornelius Agrippa, who wanted to grasp the connection between "the magical manipulation" and "nature," and transformed the magician into a scientist. It passed through Shakespeare in literature, as writing poetry was bound up with "making theater" and the playwright became the important literary persona. The artisan, the philosopher and the poet – who in ancient times purported to describe reality in itself – were superseded by the artist, the scientist and the playwright, who set out to describe reality and left us looking into ourselves.

Dr. Avner Ben-Zaken, a historian of science, teaches at Ono Academic College and is the author of "Cross-Cultural Scientific Exchanges in the Eastern Mediterranean, 1560-1660" (Johns Hopkins University Press, 2010)

Translated by Ralph Mandel