Mebane, John S. *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age: The Occult Tradition and Marlowe, Jonson, and Shakespeare*. Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989. Pp. ix, 309.

Occultism and pseudo-science in the Renaissance have been the subject of considerable academic scrutiny over the past three decades, primarily through the studies of scholars such as Frances A. Yates, Eugenio Garin, Wayne Shumaker, Keith Thomas, Kurt Seligman, Brian Vickers, and Ioan P. Couliano (whose *Eros and Magic in the Renaissance*, University of Chicago Press, 1987, Mebane fails to note). More recently still, we have seen David B. Ruderman's *Kabbalah, Magic and Science: The Cultural Universe of a Sixteenth Century Jewish Physician* (Harvard University Press, 1988) and *Hermeticism and the Renaissance: Intellectual History and the Occult on Early Modern Europe*, edited by Ingrid Merkel and Allen G. Debus (Folger Books, 1988). Given the wealth of material at the disposal of the student of the Renaissance, one might well wonder whether there is a need which can be uniquely met by Mebane's contribution. Yes, there is. Mebane's scholarly and lucid accounts of the Neoplatonic, Hermetic, and cabalistic components of Renaissance magical thinking, and his discussions of how occult philosophy fits into the intellectual and political history of the period, will be of great value to those who are new to the study of Renaissance occultism and feel overwhelmed with the mass of material, often highly technical, which confronts them. Mebane's reviews of the scholarship pertaining to his various subjects, his extensive notes, and his substantial bibliography are a boon to all readers.

The general organization of *Renaissance Magic and the Return of the Golden Age* is not unlike that of Yates' *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, the book it most resembles in purpose as well. After an introductory chapter, Mebane devotes successive chapters to Marsilio Ficino, Pico della Mirandola, and Henry Cornelius Agrippa; these chapters on the continental backgrounds are followed by one on magic, science, and witchcraft in England; then follow four chapters dealing respectively with Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, Jonson's *The Alchemist*, Jonson's masques, and Shakespeare's *The Tempest*.

Mebane's survey of the scholarship and controversy arising from the work of Frances Yates, especially *Giordano Bruno and the Hermetic Tradition*, is both concise and informative. Mebane focuses specifically on two areas of continuing debate: 1) the relationship between occult philosophy and humanism; and 2) the contribution, if any, of occult philosophy to the genesis of genuine science. Emphasizing magic as a pragmatic rather than as a contemplative form of knowledge, Mebane argues that "philosophical occultism carried to its logical extreme the humanists' affirmation of the power of human beings to control both their own personalities and the world around them" (p. 3). On the second matter, Mebane offers a carefully and heavily qualified variant of what has come to be called "the

Yates thesis" – that occult philosophy played a crucial role in the development and dissemination of genuinely scientific modes of thought. Mebane points out that occult philosophy was "only one of several important influences"; that the early contributors to the scientific revolution "were often eclectic thinkers" so it can be quite difficult to isolate the strands of influence upon any given individual, "much less upon the age as a whole"; that occultists and scientists have incompatible conceptions of the nature and role of mathematics; that, unlike science, occult philosophy depends on knowledge gained through a special revelation; and that real "progress occurred only as subsequent generations reinterpreted and reevaluated their predecessors" and "rejected those aspects of occult philosophy which are incompatible with more advanced forms of rational inquiry" (p. 37). These qualifications accepted, what remains of the Yates thesis? Only, it would seem, an argument from the "intellectual atmosphere of the times" rather than from more concrete and demonstrable influences; that is, that occult philosophy contributed to the development of science through its optimistic belief that humankind can understand and control itself and the natural world. Such an assertion, it seems to me, is relatively safe, but it does not take us very far. It is probably for this reason that locutions such as "ultimately led to" or "eventually contributed to" occur fairly frequently in this book. Mebane's research suggests, however, that we may not be able to get much further at this time. It is to his credit that Mebane relies much less on tempting speculations and unsubstantiated generalizations than does Yates.

Throughout the book, Mebane stresses that one of the aims of the serious magician was the redemption of humankind and the world, both the natural and the social worlds. His discussions of the political ramifications of such a program are informative and stimulating. Also of considerable interest are discussions of the tensions and conflicting impulses experienced by a number of Renaissance occult philosophers; for example, the desire, especially in Pico, to assert the individual personality vs. the desire to lose the self in a mystical union with the divine; and, especially in Agrippa but perhaps also in *Dr. Faustus*, the confounding of the sense of the magus' sacred mission with egocentric ambitions. Although it may not really be within the expected scope of such a survey, Mebane's discussion of the persecution and prosecution of alleged witches would profit from the citation of some actual cases and trials and from a more complete examination of who the accused actually were – I suspect that the majority of those accused would be unlikely to be regarded as philosophers of any sort, much less occult philosophers.

Readers will want to supplement Mebane's chapters on continental occult theory with a few studies that undoubtedly appeared too late for Mebane to take into account: the studies printed in *Astrology, Science and Society: Historical Essays*, edited by Patrick Curry (Woodbridge, Suffolk and Wolfeboro, New Hampshire: The Boydell Press, 1987); Michael H. Keefer's "Agrippa's Dilemma: Hermetic 'Rebirth' and the Ambivalences of *De vanitate* and *De occulta*

philosophia," *Renaissance Quarterly* 41.4 (1988), 614–653; and Frank L. Borchardt's "The Magus as Renaissance Man," *Sixteenth Century Journal* 21.1 (1990), 57–76.

Mebane's readings of the literary works he selects are considerably more sober and disciplined than those Yates offers in her *The Occult Philosophy in the Elizabethan Age*, and avoid her often extravagant speculations and circular arguments. One instance of an advance over Yates' readings of the literature is the interpretation of Prospero. Yates' presentation of Prospero as a triumphant vindication of John Dee cannot offer an explanation of Prospero's abjuration of his magic; indeed Yates is totally silent on this issue. Mebane argues that because Prospero's magic is linked with "intellectual and spiritual self-purification," it is based on "the participation of the awakened human soul in the very highest levels of the cosmic hierarchy" (p. 181) and thus is an art "through which God's will is accomplished" (p. 176). But, he maintains, it is an art with definite limitations, limitations imposed in part by permanent weaknesses in human nature that magic cannot efface. In Mebane's reading, Prospero's renunciation of magic signifies that learning and contemplation are not escapes from nor substitutes for political life and involvement in the human community, but preparations for such commitment (p. 182).

I found the reading of *Dr. Faustus* to be the least persuasive of the readings of literary works. Mebane indicates that readings of this play can be divided into those that argue: 1) that the play attacks traditional ideas and institutions; 2) that it is an entirely orthodox condemnation of Faustus' magic; or 3) that it is ambivalent in its attitudes to magic and occult philosophy (p. 115). Mebane sides with the third position: "*Dr. Faustus* is neither a morality play nor an unambivalent celebration of radical humanism; it is a tragedy which dramatizes a conflict between two irreconcilable systems of value, each of which, we may feel, has at least partial validity and a genuine claim to our allegiance" (p. 118). The main supports for this view are stylistic arguments to the effect that the verse is much more impressive when used to express unorthodox views and biographical evidence concerning Marlowe's heretical beliefs; Mebane admits that neither of these supports is especially strong in isolation, but maintains that "the weight of these two types of evidence is considerable when they are combined" (p. 117). If I too may adopt an approach through style, it seems to me as I reread this chapter that Mebane keeps finding himself drawn towards the orthodox reading of the play and must struggle consciously to resist it and make the play look ambivalent. I for one find the comment that to " 'confound hell in *Elizium*' [l. 282] is to persuade oneself that one can change the nature of things-in-themselves merely by manipulating their names; the alteration takes place in the mind of the magician, not in reality" (p. 133) to be considerably more convincing and insightful as an indictment of Faustus' folly and intellectual blindness right from the outset than the comment that "the poetry of these lines [80–89] communicates the exciting appeal of the magician's vision"

(p. 124) is as an argument that the play is ambivalent. Mebane tells us that the "ultimate effect of the opening scene," which contains the lines allegedly enticing the audience to respond sympathetically to the magician, is to unsettle the audience and cause them "to raise questions concerning the limits of human nature, to make them wonder whether the individual does, after all, have the right to make his or her own decisions concerning philosophical, scientific, or religious truth" (p. 124). On the contrary, I would argue that an audience that has just viewed Faustus confusing Aristotle with Ramus, misquoting Justinian, assuming that the words of a prescription are as efficacious as the medicine itself, and, finally, totally misconstruing the New Testament, all the while presenting himself as the compleat philosopher, lawyer, physician, and theologian would be highly sceptical of Faustus' ability to get anything correct. Moreover, as Mebane notes frequently, the occult philosophers "believed that magical power was derived from the magus's ability to purify the soul, to return it to its prelapsarian condition" (p. 135). Faustus makes no discernible effort to accomplish such a purification, and the often flippant and selfish uses to which he applies his magic imply that he certainly does not possess the requisite purity. The play does not really suggest that such purification is impossible (Mebane, p. 135) since it is not even sought after. Marlowe's Faustus attempts an illegitimate shortcut, namely witchcraft. The story of Faustus need have no implications at all concerning Marlowe's presumed attitude to occult philosophy proper. I would have liked to have seen Mebane also tackle Robert Greene's *Friar Bacon and Friar Bungay*, a play which addresses many of the concerns of his book: magic which seems efficacious in some ways, but also morally suspect; the temptations of sensual delights; politics; and the theme of commitment to vs. escape from the normal human community.

This book is attractively printed and illustrated, but there is the following rather mystifying annotation in the bibliography: "Argues that Shakespeare responds in *The Tempest* to the aesthetic of both *Dr. Faustus* and *The Tempest*."

J.M. RICHARDSON, *Lakehead University*

Millicent V. Hay. *The Life of Robert Sidney, Earl of Leicester (1563–1626)*. Washington: The Folger Shakespeare Library; London & Toronto: Associated University Presses, 1984. Pp. 260.

Robert Sidney is hardly a well-known name today. Yet in his own time he was a distinguished man. Governor of the strategic town of Flushing for Elizabeth and James, Lord Chamberlain of Queen Anne's household, ambassador on several important missions to Scotland and France, he was rewarded by James with the titles Viscount Lisle and Earl of Leicester. The younger brother of Sir Philip Sidney, he