

Scholar, Courtier, Magician: The Lost Library of John Dee

Royal College of Physicians of London

18 January-28 July 2016

At the Royal College of Physicians, the oldest medical college in England, founded in 1518 by a Royal Charter from King Henry VIII and now located across from the southern boundary of Regents Park at 11 St. Andrews Place, London, there is a brilliant [exhibition](#) on the public and private life of John Dee examined through his books, works, and artifacts. In the College's modern multi-tiered exhibition halls the life of John Dee (1527-1609) as student, scholar, courtier, mathematician, astrologer, magician and interpreter of the language of the angels is surveyed. Dee graduated from St. John's College in 1546 and became a founding member of Trinity College, Cambridge, in the same year, entered the Royal Court of Edward VI in 1551, and was arrested for a time in 1555 for casting horoscopes about Queen Mary I. In 1564 he published his *Monas Hieroglyphica*, an investigation of the mystical world, a subject he would continue to pursue for the rest of his life. In 1566 he settled at Mortlake, which today is in Richmond on Thames, where he amassed one of the largest libraries of 16th century England: more than 3000 books and 1000 manuscripts. He even had suggested to Queen Mary that his collection become a national library. Upon leaving on a European trip of occult discovery in 1583, however, Dee's brother-in-law reportedly sold almost all of the books. Some 117 have survived and with some 43 books that might have been part of his collection, are now in the library of the Royal College of Physicians, after passing through several hands. In a case on the first level one sees his copy of Quintilian (Gryphius 1539-40) opened to a page showing his extensive annotations, cross references, and his hand-drawn manicules pointing to several passages. On the page of Cicero's *De natura deorum* (in Estienne's *Opera* of 1539-40) Dee had made an exquisite small drawing of an Elizabethan galley departing from shore which he placed directly opposite the lines Cicero quotes from Accius on a shepherd's first sight of a ship:

tanta moles labitur

fremibunda ex alto ingenti sonitu et spiritu;

prae se undas volvit, vertices vi suscit,

ruit prolapsa, pelagus respergit reflat. (ll.xxiv.89)

(so huge a bulk / glides from the deep with roar of whistling wind: / waves roll before, and eddies surge and swirl; / hurtling headlong it snorts and sprays the foam.) Little could Dee

have realized how fortuitously emblematic of the course of his future life those lines would be.



Detail from Dee's illustration of a ship. Source: <https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/events/scholar-courtier-magician-lost-library-john-dee>

In 1570 Dee wrote a 50-page preface, covering the history of geometry and more, to Henry Billingsley's first English translation of Euclid's *Elements*, which in itself is a remarkable work with its template sheets to be cut out for assembling three dimensional figures. Among his alchemical and astrological books on display are his annotated copy [Dee was an extensive annotator] of the *Introductio in divinam chemiae artem integra* attributed to Petrus Bonus (Basel, 1572), Girolamo Cardano's *Libelli quinque* (Nuremberg, 1547), the *Epitome totius astrologiae* of Joannes Hispalensis (Nuremberg, 1548) and many more. A case at the end of the gallery displayed an alembic bottle, Dee's crystal ball, his black obsidian mirror used by Aztec priests in the new world for divination, and an inscribed magical disc of gold employed by his scribe Edward Kelley in attempts to communicate with angels.

On the top gallery both evidence of his afterlife and a major reason for his notoriety were exhibited. Meric Casaubon in his London 1659 work *A true and faithful relation of what passed for many years between J Dee and some spirits* accused Dee of Satanism. Thomas Arnold's *Observations on the nature, kinds, causes, and prevention of insanity* (London, 1705) argued that Dee, even though the greatest polymath of his age, was in fact insane. A

wood engraving for *The Tempest*, Act iv, scene i, by Duncan C. Callas (London, 1893) displays Dee as Prospero, for whom he was seen by some, as the model for Shakespeare's character. And finally, the album of Damon Albarn's rock opera *Dr. Dee* (released by Parlophone in 2012) brings John Dee almost up to date.

That Dee strayed from scholarship, as we acknowledge it, and science, as it was developing, is in part the cause of the odium and suspicion directed toward him. In his copy of Guillaume Postel's *De originibus* (Basel, 1553) Dee made notes on the Cabala, Hebrew letters, and the *Book of Enoch*. His friend Edward Kelley claimed and demonstrated, at least to Dee's satisfaction, that he could see, converse with, and transcribe the language of the angels through the guidance of the angels Gabriel and Nalvage. Dee recorded Kelley's conversations with angels on their trip to Poland on May 23, 1584. (The manuscript of his conversations, *Mysteriourum libri quinque*, is in the British Library.) Dee thus tried to understand the universe through knowledge of the language of God and his angels. He thought, in Kenneth Knoespel's words, that "numbers and letters are signs representative of universal structure." All of the exhibits are carefully arranged thematically, well lighted, and for the most part accompanied by succinct informative captions. For a few of the more obscure works, an explanatory sentence might have been helpful to some visitors. For example, Dee's note "*Hic nihil de quo Troiano equo*" on his copy of the *Belli Troiani* (Basel, 1573) of Dictys Cretensis perhaps could have had a fuller explanation.

If the attractively printed 15-page handlist of materials on display in the exhibition together with other items belonging to Dee was produced by the curator Katie Birkwood and the library's rare book librarian Sarah Backhouse, they both are to be further congratulated. This free exhibition opened January 18, 2016, and runs through July 29, 2016.

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