JOHN DEE AND EARLY MODERN OCCULT PHILOSOPHY

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John Dee has always been a favorite character of English Renaissance research. The books already devoted to his career and achievements would now fill quite a few bookshelves. One could even speak of the rise of a John Dee “industry” which organizes specialized conferences and runs professional newsletters. The reasons for the interest in Dee are manifold. To begin with, he was a truly versatile Renaissance character whose interests embraced all the major territories of 16th-century science, from “hard-core” mathematics through geography and history to the dark terrain of occultism, magic and spiritualism. He was also an important background-figure of the Elizabethan court, a protégé of the Queen; and as such he was entrusted to choose the astrologically best fitting day for the coronation in 1558. Dee had excellent contacts with the greatest politicians and courtiers of his day, such as Leicester, Walsingham, Raleigh; and he tried to bring himself in a position of having his say in political plans and exploration projects. Therefore, his activities could not escape the attention of scholars belonging to various fields of historical research, from the history of politics to the history of science, as well as mathematics, geography and antiquarianism.

Not surprisingly, a man with such wideranging scholarly interests was also a passionate collector of books. He gathered a library of about four thousand volumes, including many valuable manuscripts. Some of its books (a number of which are annotated by himself) and some catalogues have survived, but for the most part its holdings were eventually scattered. It still remains that, judging from what can be reconstructed with regard to its contents, this library appears to be one of the most interesting testimonies to English intellectual life.
in the 16th century. As such, it is of the utmost importance for the study of early modern esoterism as well.

Another reason for Dee’s popularity as a research subject is due to the fact that besides his published works he left behind an amazing amount of personal documents – correspondence, personal diaries and extended spiritual journals – which not only bear witness to some arresting aspects of his career, but enable us also to assess the complexity of this multifaceted personality of the late Renaissance.

We have not yet mentioned the “dark side” of Dee. But this aspect also has triggered the interest of many scholars, and of enthusiasts as well. In the middle of his career a strange, although not unprecedented turn took place in the distinguished Doctor’s life. Having lost his faith and confidence in the human sciences he turned to a bizarre magical practice, upon which he bestowed the name “angelic conversations”. To sum up his aim in one sentence: since he could no longer believe that human science might ever prove able to provide a complete understanding of the divinely ordained universe, he concluded that one should learn the ultimate truths from superhuman beings, the angels. Being able to carry on conversations with the angels requires, though, that one learns their language. This became Dee’s goal, which moved him for more than thirty years to conjure up celestial beings daily in the endless sessions of his so-called “Enochian magic”, in order to learn their language and be able to ask them about the greatest mysteries of Creation.

The above brief summary exhibits a versatile and adaptable character who has been attracting interest in various fields of curiosity and research. But if we look at the historiography of Dee studies, we see that the focal points of scholarly interest have been very different, somehow always converging with the principles of historical evaluation dominant in any period. The problem with most books and studies about Dee has been that he was treated as an emblem of this or that movement, intellectual trend, or cultural occurrence. At different times Dee has been labelled a leading Elizabethan spy, one of the founding fathers of English natural science, a charlatan alchemist, a great enthusiast, a hermetic philosopher, and so on. Of course this has resulted in a distortion of the overall picture, because to a certain extent Dee embodied all of these occupations and attitudes.

In his time John Dee was a respected scholar, and although he was sometimes accused of being a “conjuror”, even half a century after his death he was still remembered as ‘the wise doctor’. The publication of his spiritual diaries by Meric Casaubon in 1659, however, especially in the light of the distrustful preface of the editor, gradually undermined his reputation; and by the time of the Enlightenment he had come to be considered (if he was given attention at