

Scholar, courtier, magician: the lost library of John Dee (Royal College of Physicians, 18 January - 29 July 2016)

Review Number: 1925

Publish date: Thursday, 28 April, 2016

ISBN:

Date of Publication: 2016

Publisher: Royal College of Physicians

Publisher url:

Place of Publication: London

Reviewer: Sara Charles

John Dee is a name that often conjures up images of shady spells muttered in dark rooms with bubbling potions, but the exhibition at the Royal College of Physicians, titled *Scholar, Courtier, Magician: the Lost Library of John Dee* seeks to offer a view of Dee as an articulate, extremely well-read, educated man. Rarely the sole focus of examination, Dee has featured in a variety of exhibitions since the turn of the millennium, mainly showcasing his collection of magical instruments such as his obsidian mirror and crystal ball. An exhibition in 2013 at the Bodleian Library called *Magical Books: From the Middle Ages to Middle-Earth* and another at the BL from last year entitled *Terror and Wonder: The Gothic Imagination* placed Dee firmly in the public sphere as a slightly sinister figure.⁽¹⁾ A brief examination of recent academic publications reveals a slightly more nuanced view, with articles covering his mathematical and geographical knowledge, although again there is a heavy emphasis on alchemy and magic.⁽²⁾

This exhibition challenges the imbalance of past portrayals by presenting the many sides of John Dee, as an educated man who rose to prominence under Elizabeth I and became part of the court. As the title suggests, the exhibition centres around his collection of books that came into the Royal College of Physicians library after being donated by the family of Henry Pierrepont, the Marquis of Dorchester. In 1583, Dee had the contents of his library catalogued, and using the original manuscript held in Trinity College, Cambridge as well as further academic work done by Robson and Watson in the 1990s, it has been possible to ascertain which books in the Royal College would have belonged to Dee (even if the books are otherwise pristine).⁽³⁾ This places the Royal College in the enviable position of holding the largest collection of books that belonged to John Dee, at over 100 volumes, although it is believed that Dee originally owned around 3000 books and 1000 manuscripts.

The Royal College of Physicians was founded in 1518 by Henry VIII and Thomas Linacre, and is currently situated alongside Regent's Park. Feeling rather jaded by recent blockbuster exhibitions, it is an absolute joy to experience an exhibition that you can flow through at your own pace, unheeded by timed entries, one-way traffic and trodden-on toes. It is a small exhibition, displaying almost 50 rare books associated with Dee, as well as painting and objects connected to his more mystical beliefs, such as a crystal ball and a scrying mirror, through which he tried to connect to spirits or angels. The exhibition is attractively presented in thematic order, and the layout of the building ensures a natural progression along the display cases. The first two cabinets are hidden behind thick black drapes, inviting the viewer to uncover the treasures beneath. Of course this is to prevent the fragile books inside from being exposed to too much natural light, but it feels

like an intimate act, a tactile gesture to draw the viewer into the world of John Dee. The unveiled books are a selection of Dee's collection, showing his wide reading and interest in all manner of subjects, including ancient history, astronomy, cryptography and mathematics. Immediately the viewer is presented with Dee's signature written on the title page of one volume, along with the date that he acquired it, once again creating a personal connection. His beautifully scripted handwriting is seen throughout the exhibition, as he was a prolific note-taker, and the marginalia he added to his books gives an indication of his academic abilities. The ever-delightful manicule (a sketched hand with an outstretched finger pointing to a relevant piece of text), often seen in medieval manuscripts, is also a prevalent feature in Dee's books. Slightly more alarming is a sketch of a three-headed bearded man in the margin of Arnaldus de Villanova's *Opera* (1527), which also seems to serve as a text marker, or perhaps even a mnemonic device.

The exhibition places much emphasis on the fact that Dee's library was lost (or more accurately ransacked) while he was travelling abroad with his family. He left his brother-in-law Nicholas Fromond in charge of his house in Mortlake, but he seems to have neglected his fraternal responsibility and allowed Dee's prized collection of books to be depleted of stock. It is suspected that one of Dee's students, Nicholas Saunder, had an active hand in the disappearance of these books, and evidence is presented in the next display case, where his signature is shown heavily inscribed over Dee's original marking on the title page of Taisnier's *Astrologiae iudicariae ysagogica* (1559). Although Saunder cannot be directly accused of stealing, the fact that he attempted to remove Dee's name from a number of books, either by bleaching, overwriting or cutting out his signature suggests that he was not entirely innocent. The pilfering of Dee's collection reminds the audience that books were a precious commodity in the 16th century, and that access to knowledge then was a far cry from today's digital world.

The introductory section of the exhibition includes a video installation, featuring a 20-minute conceptual piece by Jeremy Millar, exploring the life of Dee and his house in Mortlake and drawing parallels between then and now. While interesting, perhaps it would have better placed at the end of the exhibition, providing a space for reflection; it was hard to concentrate on the nuances of the art piece when there was such a sumptuous collection of physical objects to explore in the rest of the exhibition. Much more informative were the short videos from librarian Katie Birkwood and Simon Singh who gave historical accounts of John Dee and some of the objects on display, including a cryptogram.

The main part of the exhibition is presented thematically, dividing the life of Dee into scholar, courtier, alchemist, doctor and magician. Large display boards give a chronological overview of his progression from Cambridge University, where he first discovered a love of mathematics. The cabinets below present more books from his collection, such as *De lateribus et angulis triangulorum* by Copernicus (1542), featuring annotations from Dee. It is a real treat to see so many rare books on display, and the volumes have been chosen and presented to show the personal reflections of Dee as he commented on the texts. Much improvement has been made recently in the use of display stands for books in exhibitions, allowing the viewer to observe a selection of pages, and even the binding and boards. For rare book specialists, it is of great interest to see the pastedowns and binders waste that were used on the spines and inside covers of these tomes, and to see the titles of books written on the fore-edge, as was the practice before the explosion of book production.

There are several instances when the personality of Dee really comes through, such as the information that when he went travelling to Europe in the 1583, he took 800 of his most precious books with him. The logistics of this are incomprehensible, yet any modern bibliophile will surely raise a smile in recognition of this desire to cram as many books as possible into a suitcase. The librarian and curator of the exhibition, Katie Birkwood, also draws attention to her favourite item on display, a sketch of a ship in the margin of Cicero's *Opera* (1539–40), hand-drawn by Dee. The sketch is brilliantly executed, with marvellous attention to detail (particularly on the sails), and adds a further, more playful dimension to the character of Dee.

The exhibition provides personal and professional information on Dee's life, and dispels the popular misconception that he was a qualified physician, despite being referred to as 'Doctor Dee'. However, he was

well versed in medical knowledge, and undertook a lengthy and perilous journey to Germany to obtain a remedy for Elizabeth I, who was ailing from 'toothake and the rheume' in 1578. He was also heavily consulted on navigational matters, yet was not a seaman. However, his personal studies in geography, cartography and astronomy made him a popular source of knowledge for mariners searching for the Northwest Passage. With his accrued wisdom and powerful contacts, it is unsurprising that he became a well-known name in Elizabethan England.

Inevitably, there was a darker side to Dee, and historians have speculated that his interest in cryptograms and his close acquaintanceship with Walsingham and Cecil may have meant he was a spy. One book on display that may have been owned by Dee, *Polygraphie et vniverselle esriture cabalistique* by Johannes Trithemius (1561), presents a coding system with a complicated turntable of symbols. Whether this belonged to Dee or not, it is worth remembering that ciphers were a rapidly developing medium in Tudor times, as Mary, Queen of Scots learnt to her cost when using an inferior code during her communications with Babington. Therefore, it is highly likely that a polymath like Dee had a certain level of experience with ciphers, although whether he used them for underhand operations is still a subject of speculation.

The last section on this floor of the exhibition focuses on Dee's scientific and supernatural interests. Although since classical times there had been blurred lines between science and superstition (with astrology being a respected discipline), it seems that Dee's fascination with the occult was too unpalatable even for Tudor tastes. He was arrested in 1555 for reading Mary I's horoscope without permission, and was placed under house arrest under the custody of Bonner, the Bishop of London. Once again a glimmer of Dee's character shines through, as he inscribed a copy of *Mathemalogium prime partis* by Andreas Alexander (1504) indicating he read it at Bonner's house during this time, in 'the house of my singular friend'. Bonner was a notorious persecutor of heretics, so whether this inscription is sarcastic or genuinely friendly remains unknown, but as Dee managed to avoid any charges, it can be assumed that there was some common ground between the two men. In fact Glyn Parry provides evidence in his recent book *The Arch-conjuror of England: John Dee* that Dee was never in danger from Bonner, and was in fact his chaplain in early 1555.⁽⁴⁾

His desire to make gold may seem ludicrous to modern scientists, but an examination of his annotations on scientific and astronomical books portrays just how driven he was in later life to achieve success with alchemy. It is to the curator's credit that this aspect of Dee's life comes late in the exhibition, when he has already been established as a man of great learning and wisdom, and presented as someone with a thirst for knowledge; with this grounding in his character, the later interests of Dee do not seem so sensationalised. It is interesting to wonder whether Dee had achieved so much in life, and had become so learned in academic and global matters, that he had outgrown his earthy surroundings. Perhaps his world had grown too small, and his interest in angels stemmed from a desire to explore an alternative landscape. The interest Dee had in connecting with spirits is reminiscent of another controversial figure, William Blake, whose visions of angels were also regarded with suspicion by his contemporaries. However, unlike Blake, Dee only had one successful encounter with the spirits, despite numerous attempts and his reliance on his personal scryer, Edward Kelley. The final display cabinet is packed full of magical objects, such as a golden disc for contacting angels, a crystal ball and scrying mirror for seeing into the future. It is strange that even now these objects possess a certain potency, inspiring a mixture of fascination and trepidation; a slight hesitation in looking in the mirror, just in case anything looks back. Thomas Culpepper, a 17th-century herbalist, clearly felt the same. He came into possession of the crystal ball through Dee's son Arthur, and a document signed by Culpepper is on display, claiming he had to stop using the object as he felt it was evil. An important caveat added by the curators at this point is that most of these objects are associated with Dee, but cannot be proved to be the original items, again tempering the fanciful notions that have grown up around Dee.

The exhibition concludes on this level with the painting of *John Dee performing an experiment before Elizabeth I* by Henry Gillard Glindoni.⁽⁵⁾ Dee is painted in the typical outfit of a sorcerer, with a black robe, beard and white ruff. Painted sometime before 1913, it provides an insight into later attitudes towards Dee, although an original circle of skulls have been painted out, perhaps being too macabre even for Victorian

tastes. This painting allows the visitor to contemplate various interpretations of Dee, whose reputation over the years seems to have developed a life of its own.

The final part of the exhibition is located on the floor above. More books associated with Dee are displayed, including a copy of Dee's own publication, *Monas hieroglyphica* (1564), a commentary on the values of a symbol he invented and designed. The last cabinet hosts an eclectic mix of interpretations of Dee, right up to the present day. Proving just how influential the character of Dee has been, it features comics, images and even a musical on the Tudor polymath. It is an excellent note to finish the exhibition on, reminding the viewer that there are many ways to represent the past.

The curators do an excellent job of portraying Dee as a much-accomplished scholar, avoiding falling into the trap of representing him as an eccentric occultist. It is sobering to learn that the loss of his prized personal library seems to have had a disastrous effect on his well being, as he seems to have slowly retreated into his house at Mortlake, spending more time pursuing his supernatural interests. He died at a friend's house, his once brilliant character much tarnished by his later belief in angels. Although Dee has been regarded with suspicion and fascination in his own lifetime and beyond, it is impossible not to come away from this exhibition feeling that he has been somewhat undersold. The beauty of this exhibition is that it allows the character of Dee to come through in his own words, via his careful annotations, sketches and manicules in the margins. The emphasis is firmly on his book collection, so this is a must for any librarians and rare book specialists, as well as Tudor historians.

Notes

1. <<http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/whats-on/online/magical-books> [2]> [accessed 26 April 2016]; <<http://www.bl.uk/events/terror-and-wonder--the-gothic-imagination> [3]> [accessed 26 April 2016].
[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. Resources searched on the Bibliography of British and Irish History, available through Brepols: <<http://cpps.brepolis.net/bbih/search.cfm> [4]> [accessed 26 April 2016] [subscription required].[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. <<http://trin-sites-pub.trin.cam.ac.uk/james/viewpage.php?index=773> [5]> [accessed 26 April 2016]; <<http://www.bibsoc.org.uk/content/john-dees-library-catalogue> [6]> [accessed 26 April 2016].[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. Glyn Parry, *The Arch-Conjuror of England: John Dee* (New Haven, CT, 2013).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. <<http://artuk.org/discover/artworks/john-dee-performing-an-experiment-before-elizabeth-i-125915> [7]> [accessed 26 April 2016].[Back to \(5\)](#)

For more on John Dee, see Sara's [blog post here](#) [8].

Other reviews:

TimeOut

<http://www.timeout.com/london/things-to-do/scholar-courtier-magician-the-lost-library-of-john-dee> [9]

Telegraph

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/authors/the-man-who-spoke-to-angels/> [10]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/1925>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/173639>

[2] <http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/bodley/whats-on/online/magical-books>

[3] <http://www.bl.uk/events/terror-and-wonder--the-gothic-imagination>

[4] <http://cpps.brepolis.net/bbih/search.cfm>

[5] <http://trin-sites-pub.trin.cam.ac.uk/james/viewpage.php?index=773>

[6] <http://www.bibsoc.org.uk/content/john-dees-library-catalogue>

[7] <http://artuk.org/discover/artworks/john-dee-performing-an-experiment-before-elizabeth-i-125915>

[8] <http://blog.history.ac.uk/2016/05/john-dee-tudor-polymath/>

[9] <http://www.timeout.com/london/things-to-do/scholar-courtier-magician-the-lost-library-of-john-dee>

[10] <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/books/authors/the-man-who-spoke-to-angels/>