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052162228X - John Dee's Conversations with Angels: Cabala, Alchemy, and the End of Nature

Deborah E. Harkness

Excerpt

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Introduction

We know in part, and we prophesy in part. But when that which is perfect is come, then that which is in part shall be done away.

When I was a child, I spake as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child:

but when I became a man, I put away childish things.

For now we see through a glass, darkly;

but then face to face: now I know in part;

but then I shall know. . . .

I Corinthians 13:9–12

Between 1581 and 1586, and again in 1607, Elizabethan England's most highly regarded natural philosopher, John Dee, talked with angels about the natural world and its apocalyptic end. With the aid of an assistant, or "scryer," and a crystal called a "showstone," Dee attempted to see through the dark days of his own time and into what he hoped was a bright and promising future. Scattered through several manuscript collections in the Bodleian and British Libraries,¹ Dee's records of these conversations now represent one of the early modern period's most enduring intellectual mysteries: why would a Cambridge graduate who boasted the title "the Queen's philosopher" engage in such a seemingly fruitless, apparently groundless, and enormously time-consuming activity? Was Dee a gullible fool?² Had he suffered a mental breakdown?

1. Dee's angel diaries are now British Library Sloane MSS 3188, 3189, 3191; British Library Add. MS 36674 and Bodleian Library MS Ashmole 1790.
2. See Frances A. Yates, *The Theatre of the World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1969), pp. 5–18, for a sensitive but still guarded interpretation. John Heilbron, in his introduction to John Dee's *Propaedeutumata aphoristica*, demonstrated less sensitivity to medieval and early modern beliefs, describing Dee's latter years as a balance of "more lucid moments," when the natural philosopher attempted to "clear himself of charges of invoking spirits," and less lucid moments spent conversing with angels. J. L. Heilbron, "Introductory Essay," in *John Dee on Astronomy: Propaedeutumata aphoristica*, ed. and trans. by Wayne Shumaker (Berkeley: University of

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Given these serious reservations about Dee and his conversations, historians of science have wondered if the angel diaries can yield any useful information to scholars specifically interested in the practice of natural philosophy in the late sixteenth century or illuminate the cultural and intellectual world of Elizabethans more generally.³

The answers to these questions can be found, but not exclusively within the pages of Dee's manuscript angel diaries. The diaries offer only pieces of the puzzle, fragmentary remnants of a vast intellectual undertaking. Today, only a small number of them remain; the greater proportion were destroyed by Dee and by a zealous seventeenth-century kitchen maid who used the pages from the volumes to line her employer's pie plates.⁴ But even were the diaries complete, we would still not find all of the answers we seek. Like the transcripts of court trials or the written inventory of a library, the diaries that remain are full of telling silences and ellipses, devoid of the nuances of voice and gesture that could tell us so much about what happened when Dee looked into his showstone.

We still, however, can look for further clues into Dee's mysterious project. First, we can examine the treasures of his extensive library to

California Press, 1978), p. 15. Shumaker interpreted the angel diaries as evidence that Dee was gullible to a fault, pointing out that "even in his own period few men were so susceptible to the portentous" (Wayne Shumaker, "John Dee's Conversations with Angels," in *Renaissance curiosa* 15–52 [Binghamton, NY: Center for Medieval and Early Renaissance Studies, 1982] p. 48). But he was forced to admit that Dee appeared entirely rational throughout, noting he "does not lose control, he does not rave, but transcribes the visions and conversations reported by his scryers with sober accuracy" (*ibid.*, p. 22).

3. While Clulee pointed out the important links between Dee's studies and the natural philosophers who preceded him, he was still unable to reconcile these traditions with Dee's interest in the angel conversations. Dee's angel diaries remained an intellectual aberration to Clulee, one that "cannot be considered as science or natural philosophy," despite their inclusion of concepts from the cabalistic and alchemical traditions (Clulee, p. 203). Christopher Whitby's analysis of the earliest angel diaries, the history of crystal gazing, and biographies of the chief participants in the conversations remains the cornerstone of scholarship on these matters. See John Dee, *John Dee's Actions with Spirits*, ed. with intro. by Christopher Whitby, 2 vols. (New York: Garland Publishing, 1988), *passim*.
4. For Dee's description of the destruction of his manuscripts, see Dee, in C. H. Josten, ed. and trans., "An Unknown Chapter in the Life of John Dee," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 28 (1965): 223–257 hereafter cited as Dee in Josten, and Dee, PD, entries for 1607. For Ashmole's introduction see Dee, AWS II: 2–4.

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see if we can piece together his intellectual rationale for the conversations. Frances Yates believed that the intellectual richness of the Renaissance was contained within Dee's library, and its contents have recently been studied and every attempt made to account for the volumes he owned and to make them accessible.⁵ Not only do the authors of Dee's books offer us further insights into why he undertook to talk with angels; Dee himself left a trail for us to follow in the marginal comments he made in his books.⁶ Underlined passages, references to other authors, and accounts of his own life experiences lead like a path of footprints to the angel conversations, helping to contextualize and ground them.

We can also cast our eyes beyond Dee's intellectual training and his personal experiences and try to situate his conversations with angels in the broader cultural context of the second half of the sixteenth century. This period was vital and chaotic: deepening religious divisions, sharp political disagreements between England and her European neighbors, a renewal of apocalyptic fervor, and the growth of print culture all helped to make it so. Information from newly discovered lands fostered a sense of crisis among the intellectual elites, as they tried to reconcile new worlds with old texts.⁷ Cities like London struggled to accommodate the growing number of people seeking employment, anonymity, or religious refuge within their bursting walls. Those who could not be so accommodated began to cross the Atlantic. Spies and intelligencers of every stripe traveled the countryside, gathering news of religious radicalism, political conspiracy, and heresy. Dee's contemporaries were often pessimistic about what they perceived as a chaotic state of affairs and thought that the end of the world was certainly near.

The marginalia in Dee's library, when tracked through the late-sixteenth-century belief that the world was coming to an end, lead straight to his angel conversations. These conversations did not represent

5. Yates, *Theatre of the World*, pp. 1–19. Dee's final extant library catalogue was completed in 1583 just before his trip to Europe with Edward Kelly. Roberts and Watson argue persuasively that the 1583 list contains annotations indicating which books were selected for Dee's traveling library. Roberts and Watson, pp. 53–54.
6. For two different interpretations of the marginalia and their significance, see William Sherman, *John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the Renaissance* (Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995), and Deborah E. Harkness, "The Scientific Reformation: John Dee and the Restitution of Nature," Ph.D. diss., University of California, Davis, 1994.
7. See Anthony Grafton, *Defenders of the Text: The Traditions of Scholarship in an Age of Science 1450–1800* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1991).

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a break in Dee's natural philosophy or intellectual development; instead, they furthered and supported Dee's interest in the natural world while taking into account the particular challenges presented by the times in which he lived. In particular, the angel conversations confirmed Dee's belief that the natural world was analogous to a text. But the Book of Nature was not a reliable text; it was an imperfect, corrupt, and decaying text that could not be read properly. The angels gave Dee the exegetical and restorative tools to read, understand, and rectify the Book of Nature. The angel conversations thus represent Dee's attempt to practice natural philosophy at a time when many thought that nature, time, and the world as they knew it were approaching their end.

The angel conversations reveal Dee's belief that a key aspect of his role as a natural philosopher practicing his art at the end of nature was to communicate – with angels, with patrons, and the public – information about the Day of Judgment that was near at hand. The first chapter describes the conversational and communicative qualities of Dee's enterprise, shifting attention away from the angel *diaries* as static texts and focusing instead on the personalities and properties that were involved in each conversation. Chapter 1 also examines the ways in which Dee's angel conversations were perceived by the people who took part in them, from the king of Poland to scryers. Few of the individuals who experienced the conversations expressed doubts about them, though some questioned Dee's ability to serve as an apocalyptic prophet.

Chapter 2 considers the genesis of the angel conversations. Drawing on information from Dee's library as well as his own published natural philosophical works, this chapter argues that for some time Dee had been looking for a way to close the gap between the perfect, immutable heavenly spheres and the corrupted Book of Nature. Manuscript marginalia in his books reveal his search for a universal science that would be capable of understanding, perfectly and with certainty, the mysterious workings of the natural world. In each of Dee's works we can see his struggle to extend a ladder from the deteriorating world to the heavens.

As Chapter 3 explains, Dee's frustration over his failure to construct a universal science, given the natural philosophical methods available, led him to a new course of action: the angel conversations. Dee's marginalia are particularly important to our understanding of how he arrived at this decision, for he left no single synthetic analysis of angels and their place in the Book of Nature. Scattered notes, underlinings, and marks of emphasis must instead tell us what Dee found most compelling about angels in the many books he owned and studied. These annotations clarify his belief that angels comprised the perfect intermediary between God and humans, celestial and terrestrial, sacred and mundane. Inter-

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mediary agencies had long fascinated Dee – he discussed the intermediary potential of everything from mathematics to hieroglyphics to light in his published works – but it was not until he constructed an optically grounded method for communicating with angels that his efforts generated satisfactory results.

Dee's excitement about the angel conversations becomes understandable only when seen through the lens of Reformation culture. Although England had embarked on its own religious path when Dee was a child, common beliefs fueled most sixteenth-century reform movements, both Protestant and Catholic, as Chapter 4 outlines. A belief in eschatological signs, for example, fostered a sense that the current human condition was nearing its end and would soon be replaced by the New Jerusalem, where people would live in peaceful harmony with a perfect knowledge of the world and its mysteries. From accounts of rains of blood to monstrous births, the early modern literate public had an insatiable interest in cataloguing and contesting signs of the end of nature appearing around them. One eagerly anticipated eschatological sign was increased communication between the celestial and terrestrial levels of the cosmos. Angelic messages had preceded many events of cosmic importance, such as the birth of Christ, and angels were harbingers of the end of days in the prophetic biblical revelations of Saint John. Before the Fall, Adam had enjoyed communication with God and the angels in Paradise. Dee's conversations with the angels thus conformed to a contemporary sense that God, through his intermediary angels, would alert some select individuals to imminent events.

Dee still had to grapple with the problem of interpreting the decaying Book of Nature, however. The angels revealed an interpretive tool that would further his efforts: the "true cabala of nature." Chapter 5 describes this angelic cabala and explains how it is similar, and dissimilar, to the Jewish and Christian cabala of the early modern period. Like many other aspects of Dee's angel conversations, the cabala of nature was not entirely compatible with existing early modern systems of thought. Such incompatibilities tell us a great deal about the methodological limitations facing a natural philosopher like Dee as well as his aspirations to apply natural philosophical techniques to some of the most pressing problems facing society.

After interpreting the Book of Nature, Dee was expected to heal the corrupted text by using an angelically revealed "medicine." In Chapter 6 the angels' medicine is put in the context of Dee's alchemical studies and the alchemical beliefs of his contemporaries. Alchemy was one of the most promising, as well as most frustrating, early modern natural philosophical enterprises. Few alchemists dared to boast of success in

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transmuting base metals into gold, and even fewer believed that they had achieved the highest goal of all: the transmutation of the human body from mortal and corruptible flesh to incorruptible quintessence. Dee and some of his contemporaries thought that their failures were due in part to the flawed methods they employed; others, that their own imperfections hampered their efforts. Dee hoped, through the information imparted to him by his angelic “schoolmasters,” to practice a restored alchemy that would finally yield positive results.

With the Book of Scripture in hand and the Book of Nature before him, Dee was attempting to refashion the identity of the natural philosopher to include a reinterpretation of knowledge, a universal reform of institutions, and a restitution of nature and all things. In his angel conversations, the Old Testament prophet receiving revelations from God merged with the New Testament magus responsible for interpreting nature. This combination provided a new direction for natural philosophy that eventually shaped the aspirations of many seventeenth-century natural philosophers. At the same time, however, Dee’s approach remained faithful to the ideas of the past. Just as his angel conversations served as a liminal exchange between celestial and terrestrial, so Dee emerges from this study as a liminal figure between medieval and modern, magical and scientific, Protestant and Catholic.

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PART I

Genesis

And certainly He to whom the whole Course of Nature lyes open, rejoyceth not so much that he can make Gold and Silver, or the Divells to become Subject to him, as that he sees the Heavens open, the Angells of God Ascending and Descending, and that his own name is fairely written in the Book of Life.

—Elias Ashmole,

“Prologomena” to the *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*
(1652)

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*The Colloquium of Angels**Prague, 1586*

A learned and renowned Englishman whose name was Dr. De[e]: came to Prague to see the Emperor Rudolf II and was at first well-received by him; he predicted that a miraculous reformation would presently come about in the Christian world and would prove the ruin not only of the city of Constantinople but of Rome also. These predictions he did not cease to spread among the populace.

—Lutheran Budovec,
*Circulo horologi lunaris*¹

Lutheran Budovec lived in Prague in the latter half of the sixteenth century, and when he noted in his journal the activities of John Dee he profiled a man far different from the “magus of Mortlake” with whom we are familiar.² An ambassador, a popular prophet, and a religious rebel – all are suggested in Budovec’s brief remarks, but the natural philosophical persona we have come to associate with Dee is absent. The link between Dee’s personae, as outlined by Budovec, is *communication*, a side of Dee’s life and activities explored only recently but which is emerging as an important feature of his enigmatic intellect. Recently described as an “arch-communicator” of ideas, Dee is beginning to be seen as both a contemplative natural philosopher and a vocal participant in the intellectual and cultural life of late-sixteenth-century Europe.³

1. Quoted in R. J. W. Evans, *Rudolf II and His World* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1973), p. 224.
2. The most reliable and comprehensive recent biographies of Dee are Peter French, *John Dee: The World of an Elizabethan Magus* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1972), and Nicholas Clulee, *John Dee’s Natural Philosophy: Between Science and Religion* (London: Routledge, 1988). See also Charlotte Fell Smith, *John Dee (1527–1608)* (London: Constable and Company, 1909).
3. See William H. Sherman, *John Dee: The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance* (Amherst and Boston: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995).

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Such a combination of activity and contemplation can be seen vividly in the records Dee kept of his conversations with angels as well as the events that surrounded them. Throughout, we see Dee the “arch-communicator” in a new light: as a natural philosopher prepared to engage in conversation with all levels of the cosmic system in an effort to come to terms with the intricacies of natural philosophy and the state of the natural world.

On 10 April 1586, John Dee made an account of the hum of activities in his household, which had temporarily relocated to the central European city of Prague. It was a time of crisis, when Dee believed a “great catastrophe” was “overhanging the world.” His life and career were at a critical juncture.⁴ His local patron, the Holy Roman emperor Rudolf II, was angry and frustrated. Though Dee had arrived in the city nearly two years earlier, he had not been as useful in the emperor’s alchemical experiments as Rudolph expected. In Rome, the center of European Catholicism, word of Dee’s prophecies about a “miraculous reformation” reached the ears of the pope, who became so concerned that officials launched an inquiry into Dee and his activities. Dee’s assistant, Edward Kelly, was threatening to part company and was, in any event, a difficult, troublesome man. Kelly, unlike Dee, was absorbed with the emperor’s alchemical problems and wanted more time to devote to them. He had, in addition, started to confess his myriad sins to the nearby Jesuits, thus increasing Catholic awareness of Dee and his household. As if this were not enough to worry England’s foremost natural philosopher, Dee’s wife was annoyed with him too. Their family and household had been on the road since the autumn of 1583, their children had to be fed and cared for, and she detested Edward Kelly and his disruptive presence.⁵ But although the crisis facing Dee varied in its manifestations, the root of all the problems could be found in a single place: his conversations with angels.

The crisis of April 1586 marks the beginning of the end of Dee’s best-documented efforts to communicate with angels. Though this seems an odd moment at which to enter into the challenging mental and cultural

4. These remarks, and a single conversation also dated 10 April 1586, were separated from the other diaries that contain Dee’s angel conversations. Now Bodleian Library Ashmole MS 1790, ff. 1–10, they can be found in “Dee in Josten.” Dee in Josten, p. 226.
5. For a detailed description of the Dee household and the important role of Jane Dee in its management, see Deborah E. Harkness, “Managing an Experimental Household: The Dees of Mortlake and the Practice of Natural Philosophy,” *Isis* 88 (1997): 242–262.

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I I

world of Dee and his contemporaries, it is often this later image of the angel conversations which makes the deepest impression: the slow deterioration of an intellectual project with implications too vast for its audience to comprehend, too difficult for its participants to sustain. Interpersonal conflict, suspicion, patronage difficulties, notoriety, and a confusion of purpose have come to characterize what most scholars dismiss as evidence of John Dee at his most gullible, of Edward Kelly at his most deceptive, of Jane Dee at her most exasperated, and of Rudolf II at his most skeptical. Such a characterization, as the next chapter will discuss, is inaccurate and misleading. Still, it is useful to begin the angel conversations when they were at their most volatile and complicated, when all that Dee was struggling to keep coherent was about to dissolve into chaos.

Orienting oneself in the complex, multivalenced, and densely populated world of John Dee is not easy, and no one moment in the conversations can serve as a guide to the entire body of evidence now at our disposal. The solitary magus that so many conjure up when thinking of Dee is particularly difficult to find in the angel diaries, with their records of conversations with angels, court officials, alchemical assistants, papal nuncios, Jesuits, and household members. This chapter serves as a general introduction to Dee's complicated world – the people, angels, and properties that appear throughout his angel conversations. With this information, we will be in a position to retrace our steps and go back to the earliest surviving conversations from this more familiar juncture in the life of John Dee.

Throughout the chapter, Dee's interaction with the angels will be referred to as *conversations*. Though some scholars refer to the conversations as "spirit actions," and others focus on the "angel diaries" that record them, Dee himself described his experiences as the "colloquium of angels." To Dee the conversations were a group discussion, an ongoing attempt to reconcile what was known about the natural world with the unknown and mysterious. Emphasizing the conversational nature of the events makes their dynamism more apparent. Like most conversations, Dee's angel conversations can abruptly stop in the middle of an important exchange or contain allusions to people and places outside the parameters of the recorded conversation. Dee was not intent merely on contacting angels, nor in keeping detailed diaries of those conversations. He was determined, as his own designation implies, to communicate and discuss his concerns about the natural world and its future with the angels, his associates in the conversations, and, as Budovec reminds us, with a broad popular audience.

Dee's audiences for the conversations would have been receptive to