John Dee’s Conversations with Angels

John Dee (1527–1608/9) was a Cambridge-educated natural philosopher who served Queen Elizabeth I as court astrologer and who wrote works on many subjects including mathematics, alchemy, and astronomy. His most prolonged intellectual project, however, was conversations with angels using a crystal ball and a variety of assistants with visionary abilities. Dee’s angel conversations have long puzzled scholars of early modern science and culture, who have wondered how to incorporate them within the broader contexts of early modern natural philosophy, religion, and society. Using Dee’s marginal notes in library books, his manuscript diaries of the angel conversations, and a wide range of medieval and early modern treatises regarding nature and the apocalypse, Deborah Harkness argues that Dee’s angel conversations represent a continuing development of his natural philosophy. The angel conversations, which included discussions of the natural world, the practice of natural philosophy, and the apocalypse, were conveyed to audiences from London to Prague, and took on new importance within these shifting philosophical, religious, and political situations. When set within these broader frameworks of Dee’s intellectual interests and early modern culture, the angel conversations can be understood as an attempt to practice natural philosophy at a time when many thought that nature itself was coming to an end.

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John Dee’s Conversations with Angels
Cabala, Alchemy, and the End of Nature

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– To My Guiding Spirits –

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(1930–1994)
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Abbreviations and Conventions

The following abbreviations are used in the notes for frequently cited works. Full information on these titles can be found in the Select Bibliography.

Agrippa, DOP  
Henry Cornelius Agrippa, *De occulta philosophia libri tres* (1533)

Clulee  
Nicholas H. Clulee, *John Dee’s Natural Philosophy: Between Science and Religion*

Dee, AWS II  

Dee, CR  
John Dee, *Compendious Rehearsal* (1592), in *Autobiographical Tracts of Dr. John Dee*, edited by James Crossley

Dee, MH  
John Dee, *Monas hieroglyphica* (1564), translated by C. H. Josten

Dee, MP  

Dee, PA  
John Dee, *Propaedeumata Aphoristica*, edited and translated by John Heilbron and Wayne Shumaker

Dee, PD  
John Dee, *Private Diary of Dr. John Dee*, edited by J. O. Halliwell

French  
Peter J. French, *John Dee*

Roberts and Watson  
Julian Roberts and Andrew Watson, *John Dee’s Library Catalogue*

TFR  
John Dee and Edward Kelly, *A True and Faithful Relation of what happened for many years . . .*, edited by Meric Casaubon
Abbreviations and Conventions

Thorndike
A History of Magic and Experimental Science. 8 vols.

Whitby, AWS I
John Dee, John Dee’s Actions with Spirits, edited with an introduction by Christopher Whitby. 2 vols. Vol. I

Quotations

When quoting from the angel conversations, I have retained the original spelling, punctuation, and capitalization. Any marks of emphasis that appear are Dee’s own. Carets indicate text that has been inserted above the line in the manuscript. Additional letters have been supplied in square brackets when Dee’s spelling might lead to a misreading of the text.

Dates

Based on the evidence from the angel diaries, Dee began each new year as we do, on the first of January. When he was on the Continent from 1583 to 1587, Dee began gradually to incorporate the new calendar into his entries, noting both “stylo novo” and “stylo veteri.” For clarity of reference, the date that Dee recorded in his diary entries has been maintained, even though this may cause some chronological confusion.

Items from Dee’s Library

When reference is made to one of Dee’s books, a notice is made of the number assigned to it by Roberts and Watson. Bibliographic details are thereby kept as brief as possible, and readers are directed to Roberts and Watson for more information on a given title, multiple editions, present location, shelfmark, and so on. For Dee’s books that contain marginalia cited in this work, full bibliographic information, including current location if known, is included in the Select Bibliography.