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12-2016

### Review: Scholar, courtier, magician: The lost library of John Dee [exhibition at Royal College of Physicians Museum, London, 18 January - 28 July 2016]

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#### Citation

SOON, Emily, "Review: Scholar, courtier, magician: The lost library of John Dee [exhibition at Royal College of Physicians Museum, London, 18 January - 28 July 2016]" (2016). *Research Collection School of Social Sciences*. Paper 3385.

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## REVIEW:

*Scholar, courtier, magician:  
the lost library of John Dee*

Emily Soon

HARTS & Minds: The Journal of  
Humanities and Arts

Vol.3, No.1 (Issue 8, 2016)

**REVIEW** by *Emily Soon*

***Scholar, courtier, magician: the lost library of John Dee.***

**18 January – 28 July 2016**

**Royal College of Physicians Museum, London**

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In the mural the acclaimed illustrator Quentin Blake created to commemorate Cambridge University's 800<sup>th</sup> anniversary (2009), the Cambridge alumnus and polymath John Dee (1527 – 1609) comes across as a delightfully demented figure. Cloaked in black and surrounded by books and odd objects, Dee looks intent on conjuring up visions from within a large crystal ball.<sup>1</sup> Blake's watercolour encapsulates the popular image of Dee as a dabbler in the dark arts, one whose quest for the philosopher's stone represents the equally dark state of learning thought to exist before the emergence of modern science. Indeed, the contemporary cultural fascination with Dee-as-conjuror draws upon a longstanding dismissal of Dee's work within scientific circles. In 1806, Dee was included in Thomas Arnold's *Observations on the Nature, Kinds, Causes, and Prevention of Insanity* – as a patient rather than physician of mental illness. Yet this somewhat narrow focus on 'Doctor Dee' as a deranged magus who tried to speak to angels distorts both the astonishingly wide-ranging nature of Dee's academic pursuits and the richness of sixteenth century learning he drew upon. Invaluably, *Scholar, courtier, magician: the lost library of John Dee* thus provides a much broader vision of a man who once owned the largest private library of his time, using the books Dee owned to illuminate his contributions to Elizabethan society. The fact that this exhibition is mounted by the Royal College of Physicians (RCP), an organisation that holds the world's largest collection of books once owned by Dee, further testifies to how much more secure today's medical establishment is about acknowledging some of its more colourful predecessors.

*Scholar, courtier, magician* provides this more holistic view of Dee by organising the display around the three facets of Dee's life highlighted in the exhibition's title. As the display cases flank the first and second floor corridors overlooking the RCP lobby, the visitor is naturally guided in a linear manner through the exhibition. This physical arrangement contributes to re-focusing attention on Dee's lesser-known achievements, for before encountering the famous magical mirrors, the visitor's attention is drawn first to Dee's role as scholar and courtier. Hence, the reader comes to see Dee as an earnest, if somewhat naïve, intellectual, one who heavily annotated the books he collected only to lose the bulk of his library to opportunistic peers. One also comes to appreciate Dee's contributions to nation-building, as he first mooted the idea of a 'Brytish Impire' in his *General and Rare Memorials Pertayning to the Perfect Arte of Navigation* (1577) and provided practical advice to overseas adventurers. By the time the visitor reaches the display of texts, tools and paintings relating to alchemy and angelic conversations, one is therefore more cognisant of how this much-mythologised aspect of Dee's career represents only part of his story.

The final section of the exhibition explores Dee's posthumous reputation, showing how the image of Dee as a mad magician took hold in both the scientific and cultural spheres. The two crystal balls some believe may have been used by Dee for divination are in fact tiny – the bigger of the two looks no more than two inches in diameter – and yet in artistic reinterpretations Dee's crystal ball looms ever larger, eventually taking centre-stage in Blake's mural. Commendably, the display on Dee's imaginative afterlife traces his presence across diverse media. Alongside a wood engraving alluding to the longstanding belief that Dee may have inspired the figure of Prospero in William Shakespeare's *The Tempest*, the exhibition uncovers the good doctor's presence in contemporary pop culture, such as in Neil

Gaiman's comic series, *The Sandman: Preludes and Nocturnes* (1991) and Damon Albarn's musical album, *Dr Dee* (2012). *A Constellation for John Dee* (2016), a film by artist Jeremy Millar, can be seen as the exhibition's own contribution to the Dee's cultural afterlife. Commissioned by the RCP for this exhibition, Millar's film extends the exhibition's efforts to provide a multifaceted portrait of Dee. With disjointed documentary-style fragments on different aspects of Dee's life spliced amongst more abstract meditative sequences, Millar's film aptly reflects Dee's status in contemporary culture as an enigmatic figure of both history and imagination, science and art.<sup>2</sup>

What comes across strongly in this compact yet comprehensive exhibition is a strong sense that in Dee's world, disciplines that are today considered quite separate were once inextricably linked. Dee's library serves as a physical reminder that the 'Renaissance man' was expected to have a thorough grounding in both the humanities and the sciences. Thus, Dee not only wrote a lengthy preface for the first English translation of Euclid's *The Elements of Geometrie* (1570), a seminal mathematical work, but also studied classical poetry, rhetoric and history. The 'Groundplat' Dee included in his preface to *The Elements of Geometrie* outlines diagrammatically how Dee viewed all 'Sciences, and Artes Mathematicall', including such diverse fields as 'Astronomie', 'Cosmographie' and 'Musike', to be inter-related. As Dee explains, the pursuit of one field, mathematics, therefore has the power to illuminate creation as a whole, enabling the scholar to 'behold in the Glas of Creation, the *Forme of Formes* [...] both visible and inuisible'.<sup>3</sup> That the '*Forme of Formes*' should be both appreciated aesthetically and understood analytically comes across most neatly in *Alae seu Scalae Maethmaticae* (1573), a text written by Dee's former pupil, Thomas Digges, on the recent appearance of a supernova in the constellation of Cassiopeia. Opened to show a beautiful illustration of the personified constellation opposite a page of detailed measurements of the same stars, the book encapsulates how the arts and sciences were once much more closely allied than they may often seem to be today. The sense that the advancement of learning in any one field is inevitably reliant on knowledge gathered from other disciplines, times and places further comes across from the panels recounting Dee's extensive continental travels, and the fragments of musical and other medieval manuscripts one glimpses in the binding of some of these texts, many of which were published in diverse European cities, and some of which draw upon Arab sources.

The exhibition highlights, too, how the early modern world had yet to distinguish between what today's society regards as the 'proper' and 'pseudo' sciences. The intensity with which Dee repeatedly annotated his copy of *An Introduction to the Divine Art of Alchemy* (1572) demonstrates the earnestness with which he – and many of his compatriots – sought the elixir of life and to transmute base metal into gold. However, the exhibition goes beyond showcasing Dee's well-known devotion to this quasi-mystical forerunner of modern chemistry to focus on another semi-scientific field that fascinated Elizabethan society: astrology. Horoscope casting may now be considered a somewhat specious pursuit, but as revealed by the complex mathematical diagrams within Girolamo Cardano's astrological text, *Libelli Quinque* (1547), consulting the stars was once treated as a serious intellectual project. The exhibition further emphasises the complex relationship early modern England had with this 'science'. On one hand, the visitor is reminded that the date of Elizabeth I's coronation was purportedly chosen via such calculations, testifying to the respect astrology commanded in the period. On the other, the accounts of how Dee suffered under Elizabeth's predecessor (Mary) and successor (James) for the self-same act of practice underscores the field's ambivalent reputation.

Overall, this exhibition provides a fascinating insight into John Dee's life and times, highlighting how 'Doctor Dee' became both more and less the philosopher he had been in reality, and showing how societal attitudes to different 'sciences' have changed over time. As

with any exhibition, one could always wish that more had been included. For instance, perhaps displaying manuscripts showing Dee's hand-written transcripts of the angelic exchanges he purportedly participated in could have enabled visitors to judge for themselves if they agreed with Robert Hooke's characterisation, in his 1705 *Posthumous Works*, of these conversations as 'a rhapsody of incoherent and unintelligible whimsies'. But to include such manuscripts would be beyond the scope of this exhibition, which sought to display the collection of Dee books owned by the RCP. As it is, by putting such a generous selection of Dee's books on display for the first time, this exhibition succeeds in creating a powerful image of Dee as scholar, courtier and magician.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A printed postcard of Blake's illustration was displayed in this exhibition. The original mural may be viewed at Addenbrooke's Hospital, Cambridge.

<sup>2</sup> This film may also be accessed online, via the RCP website (<https://www.rcplondon.ac.uk/events/scholar-courtier-magician-lost-library-john-dee>).

<sup>3</sup> As cited by Bill Sherman, 'Inside Dee's miraculous mind: Back to the future with John Dee' (Royal College of Physicians, 9 May 2016). A recording of this and other lectures that accompanied this exhibition may be accessed via the RCP website.

### Biography

**Emily Soon** is a PhD student at King's College London. Her research focuses on the role of the imagination in early modern English encounters with the overseas world, particularly within literary representations of the East Indies.