

Stephen Clucas, ed. *John Dee: Interdisciplinary Studies in English Renaissance Thought*.

International Archives of the History of Ideas 193. Dordrecht: Springer, 2006. xviii + 366 pp. index. illus. tpls. bibl. \$189. ISBN: 1-4020-4245-0.

This collection of studies grew out of the proceedings of an interdisciplinary colloquium on John Dee that was held in 1995 at Birbeck College, University of London. The increasingly familiar premise of this challenging and often rich volume is that studies of the early modern period require an interdisciplinary approach that can better identify its distinctive intellectual and cultural formations. It would be anachronistic, moreover, to characterize Renaissance thought as combining disciplines that have been classified by us in the first place. As Stephen Clucas suggests in his introductory comments, we must learn to see what may initially look like awkward epistemic hybrids as “unique and self-constituting modes of thought (or practice)” (11). This approach is particularly valuable as a method for engaging the remarkable range of John Dee’s writings and activities, especially since in the past the complexity of his achievements has been minimized by scholars (chiefly Frances Yates and her Warburg “circle”) predisposed to fitting as many of his works as possible into a unified philosophical framework. Given the number of essays included, a very short and incomplete summary of these will have to serve to give a general impression of its offerings.

Nicholas Clulee, whose own work began to question the Hermetic Dee fashioned by Yates, starts off this collection with a useful summary of this critique and with some reflections on how recent reassessments of the Scientific Revolution may alter our perspectives on Dee’s career and canon. Robert Goulding and Stephen

Johnston explore Dee's mathematical work in relation to his younger contemporary Thomas Digges. While Goulding focuses on their different methods for measuring parallax, Johnston examines Dee's influence on Digges's early work and traces their eventual divergence with respect to the place of mathematics in a hierarchy of knowledge. Both essays underscore the fluid status of mathematics and astronomy as disciplines during this period. Richard Dunn concludes this section by noting the discrepancies between Dee's innovative astrological theory and the traditional methods he used in his actual consultations.

Robert Baldwin and William Sherman provide complementary perspectives on Dee's involvement in the project of British expansionism. Baldwin traces his many activities as advisor to the Cathay Company and Frobisher voyages in the 1570s, reminding us of the extent of his knowledge of navigation, geography, cartography, metallurgy, and even mining law. Sherman's reading of the marginalia in Dee's copy of an account of Christopher Columbus's discovery of the New World underscores the practical political and economic dimension of Dee's interests as a corrective to perspectives that have tended to privilege the prophetic strain in his writings on this subject. In the section dealing with Dee's writings on the occult, Federico Cavallaro and Karen De Léon-Jones provide new insights into Dee's *Monas Hieroglyphica*. While Cavallaro traces the connections between the *Monas* and the stages of the alchemical process, De Leon-Jones investigates Dee's creative transformation of traditional Jewish and Christian Kabbalah. She suggests that Dee's *Monas* symbol is constructed as a mathematical proof and representation of the hidden powers of the cosmos rather than as a linguistic medium for mystical union with the divine. In the third essay of this section Jim Reed, a professional cryptographer, deciphers the mathematical structure of the "magical tables" of the *Book of Soyga*, a text treasured by Dee and recently discovered by Deborah Harkness.

György Szöny, Stephen Clucas, and Deborah Harkness present some interesting new perspectives on Dee's angelic conversations. Szöny investigates the influence of both Paracelsus and popular magic on Dee's scrying practices. Clucas offers particularly rich insights into the historical and cultural context of these conversations by connecting them to the pseudo-Solomonic magical practices of the late Middle Ages and by tracing the significant overlap between medieval and Renaissance magical invocations and normative traditions of Christian prayer. Deborah Harkness reveals the extent to which the books on angelology and eschatology in Dee's library can illuminate the methods and contents of the angelic revelations. In their studies of Dee's skryer Edward Kelley, Susan Bassnett and Jan Bäcklund offer new information by introducing archival and biographical information about Kelley's stepdaughter, Elizabeth Weston, and about an alchemical circle possibly associated with Dee and Kelley. The volume concludes with additions and corrections to Julian Roberts's and Andrew Watson's important study of Dee's library holdings. It is perhaps appropriate that this volume end with this remarkable library, since it looms as a constant presence throughout Dee's career.

Two major points that largely confirm recent scholarship on Dee emerge from

this varied collection taken as whole. In the first place, it seems evident that Dee simply was not aware of or interested in the distinctions we make between occult and scientific mentalities. His knowledge of the latest discoveries and innovations in the fields of mathematics, astronomy, geography, cartography, and so on, served both practical and theoretical aims which do not necessarily fit our own notions of usefulness in either practice or theory. Secondly, it now seems very unlikely that Dee's diverse works and activities can be assimilated to a unifying master discourse such as Hermeticism or Neoplatonism. Like many early modern thinkers, Dee was an intellectually omnivorous *bricoleur*. If any continuity is to be found in Dee's career, it is simply in his consistent desire to access final causes, concealed powers, and universal knowledge. He did so using the widest possible array of authoritative sources available in his time. In this sense Dee very much belongs to what has been defined as an age of discovery. He was a restless and relentless explorer committed to uncovering truths and realities that would yield a better world for himself, for England, and for humankind. If his career at times seems to reflect an awkward convergence of self-interest, nationalism, and spiritual idealism, our own contemporary history teaches us not to be too perplexed by it.

ANTHONY PRESTI RUSSELL

University of Richmond