

REVIEW ESSAY  
 A Conjurer and a Quack?  
 The Lives of John Dee and Simon Forman

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**Lauren Kassell**

*Medicine and Magic in Elizabethan London: Simon Forman, Astrologer, Alchemist, and Physician*

OXFORD: CLARENDON PRESS, 2005. XVIII + 281 PAGES

**György E. Szónyi**

*John Dee's Occultism: Magical Exaltation through Powerful Signs*

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XVIII + 362 PAGES

IN 1780 THE SURGEON JOHN AIKIN published his *Biographical Memoirs of Medicine in Great Britain*, which included an unflattering account of the Rosicrucian physician Robert Fludd. A “certain vein of warm enthusiasm,” Aikin remarked, ran through Fludd’s works, and his success as a physician was attributable to “a kind of sublime unintelligible cant” that he had inflicted on his patients, “which by inspiring them with greatest faith in his skill, might in some cases contribute to their cure.” Aikin concluded the *Memoirs* by noting that Fludd was said to have owned the manuscripts of the astrologer Simon Forman, and such “circumstance” provoked an extended reflection on “the pretenders to physic and astrology, who were much in vogue about that time”:

We have seen that the studies of mathematics, astronomy and medicine were early united in several persons who have been the subjects of these memoirs. Real astronomy gave birth to judicial astrology; which offering an ample field to enthusiasm and imposture, was eagerly pursued by many who had no scientific purpose in view. It was connected with various juggling tricks and deceptions, affected [*sic*] an obscure jargon of language, and insinuated itself into every thing in which the hopes and

fears of mankind were concerned. The professors of this pretended science were generally persons of mean education, in whom low cunning supplied the place of real knowledge. Most of them engaged in the empirical practice of physic, and some, through the credulity of the time, even arrived at a degree of eminence in it; yet since the whole foundation of their art was folly and deceit, I cannot think them proper subjects for a more particular relation. Chemical empirics, though enthusiastical, and perhaps in general ignorant, may introduce valuable improvements in the practice of medicine: but astrological impostors never can.

Disdainful of “this sect,” Aikin referred the curious reader to the autobiography of the astrologer William Lilly for evidence of their “united ignorance and knavery.”<sup>1</sup>

By 1780, Forman’s reputation, along with that of all other “astrological impostors,” had long been relegated to the oblivion that Aikin’s assessment confirms, apart from the notoriety Forman briefly garnered in 1615—four years after his death—as an unwitting accomplice in the murder of Sir Thomas Overbury. Nearly two hundred years after Aikin’s account, however, the historian A. L. Rowse stumbled upon Forman’s manuscripts in the Bodleian Library and made use of them to shed light on certain aspects of Elizabethan society and, especially, on Forman’s sex life, thereby conferring fresh posthumous notoriety on the astrologer. The stigma stuck: “Forman possessed a mesmerizing personality and the sexual appetite of a goat, and he made himself the most popular astrologer of his time,” concluded one historian, adding that certain astrologers “were sexually rapacious and used their art as an aid in seduction,” and Forman—the “Casanova of the astrological consulting rooms”—demonstrated how “pure sex appeal could affect the composition of a practice.”<sup>2</sup>

A wish to rehabilitate Forman’s reputation from detractors of all sorts informed Barbara Traister’s *The Notorious Astrological Physician of London*, published four years ago. The true Forman, she proposed, “as revealed in his own manuscripts,” differed markedly both from the character portrayed by Rowse and from the “demonic” persona attached to him by certain authors in the aftermath of the Overbury trial. However, though Rowse’s coverage was often superficial, incomplete, and deliberately popular, focusing on Forman’s lifestyle and proclivities, he did not fundamentally misrepresent him. Nor is it accurate to characterize Forman’s reputation in the wake of the Overbury trial as singularly “demonic.” Chief Justice Edward Coke may have dubbed Anne Turner, who administered the poison, as “the daughter of the devil Forman,” but the dead astrologer was implicated only in having supplied the love potions used by Lady Francis Howard. Forman’s reputation as purveyor of love potions in fact long predated the trial. As early as 1609 Ben Jonson had alluded to it in *Epicoene*, where one

1. John Aikin, *Biographical Memoirs of Medicine in Great Britain from the Revival of Literature to the Time of Harvey* (London, 1780), 271–75.

2. Michael MacDonald, *Mystical Bedlam: Madness, Anxiety, and Healing in Seventeenth-Century England* (Cambridge, 1981), 25, 37.

character assures another: “thou had’st the best *philtre* i’ the world, and couldst doe more than madame *Medea* or Dr *Foreman*.” In *The Devil Is an Ass* (1616), Jonson singled out “Oracle Foreman” as the fashionable practitioner to whom ladies habitually flocked, “As to their President; their *Law*; their *Canon*,” in search of potions and remedies.<sup>3</sup> Earlier in the play Jonson had indeed listed Forman among astrologers who failed to summon the devil, but this was certainly incidental to his purpose. Only the poet Richard Niccols, in his *Sir Thomas Overburies Vision* (1616), elaborated fully on Forman’s “demonic” character. The astrologer is depicted as a “fiend in humane shape, / That by his art did act the devills ape.” Niccols portrayed Forman as a “cunning Exorcist” and a “blacke Inchanter, with sad lookes,” who

Sat turning over his blasphemous bookes,  
 Making strange characters in blood-red lines:  
 And to effect his horrible designes,  
 Oft would he inuocate the fiends below,  
 In the sad house of endlesse paine and woe,  
 And threaten them, as if he could compell  
 Those damned spirits to confirme his spell.<sup>4</sup>

This *pièce d’occasion*, however, was soon forgotten, and the ensuing eclipse of Forman’s reputation was chiefly consequent on his own silence. The reputation of even the most distinguished physicians rarely survives beyond the grave, and given Forman’s reluctance to venture into print, posterity rightly failed to take notice of him. Now that Forman’s papers have resurfaced, however, a reassessment is certainly appropriate.

Traister sought to recover the unadulterated Simon Forman as revealed in his manuscripts, and she patiently sampled aspects of the “works and days” of a medical astrologer, author, occultist, family man, and observer of public events. Lauren Kassell’s aim is to carry rehabilitation even further by delving deeper into his surviving manuscripts, in an attempt to recapture the totality of Forman’s mental world. Her book is not a biography. As she announces at the outset, Forman “was too twisted and self-absorbed to act as a lens; instead his papers are a cornucopia, offering up the histories of medicine and magic in London.” Kassell does make good on her promise to scrutinize Forman’s manuscripts, recover his own voice, and firmly contextualize his writings and practices. She offers detailed accounts of the philosophy and practice of a medical astrologer, his two decades of struggle with the monopolistic College of Physicians, and the several dimensions of his occultist writings. The methodology informing her coverage, Kassell states, “is ingenuous and forensic, assuming nothing, recovering the value and meaning of each event and text through close analysis and

3. Barbara H. Traister, *The Notorious Astrological Physician of London: Works and Days of Simon Forman* (Chicago, 2001), xi, 185; *Ben Jonson*, ed. C. H. Herford and Percy and Evelyn Simpson, 11 vols. (Oxford, 1925–52), 5:222–23; 6:207.

4. Richard Niccols, *Sir Thomas Overburies Vision* (London, 1616), 36, 50–51.

association.” Such an apparently neutral methodology enables her to present “vivid stories” pertaining to “the circulation of esoteric texts, the politics of medicine, the popularity of astrology, the vagaries of Paracelsianism, and the powers of magic.” But the Forman that emerges from such a study, at least by insinuation, is a radical astrologer-physician who purposely attempted to undermine the principles of humanist medicine, and who stood apart from the medical elite not simply for a lack of formal education but “because he represented, and boldly asserted, medical ideas that were antithetical to those held by most learned physicians.”<sup>5</sup>



Whereas the “rehabilitation” of Simon Forman is relatively recent, John Dee has been the beneficiary of scholarly investigation for more than fifty years, starting with I. R. F. Calder’s monumental 1952 doctoral thesis that, in addition to arguing for a Neoplatonist foundation to Dee’s mathematics and natural philosophy, offered a nearly complete record of the surviving biographical material. During the following two decades Frances Yates incorporated Dee into her expansive hermetic/Rosicrucian framework, claiming that he should be understood as a *magus*—an inspired master of divine and natural order whose efforts proved central to legitimizing a radically new conception of nature known today as the Scientific Revolution. Subsequent research, notably by Nicholas Clulee and William Sherman, helped mitigate some of the more extravagant claims Yates and her followers made, as well as providing a more discerning (and comprehensive) reading of Dee’s agenda and writings. But the appeal of the occult informs virtually all recent Dee scholarship. It is apparently no longer necessary to explain away Dee’s conversations with angels, over a period of six years, as an aberration. Rather, they are typically embraced as the culmination of a grand intellectual enterprise that spanned much of his adult life, with these dialogues interpreted as the practice of natural philosophy by other (and higher) means.<sup>6</sup>

György Szónyi’s *John Dee’s Occultism* is the latest contribution to this perspective.<sup>7</sup> According to Szónyi, Dee and other magi took literally the notion that man was created in God’s image and likeness, and they were consumed by the desire to regain His distinguishing characteristics of omniscience and omnipotence. Exaltation, for Szónyi, best describes the “program of deification” sought by magi such as Dee. Attempting to revive, with minor modifications, the Yates thesis, Szónyi argues that Renaissance magic must be understood in terms of hermetic and Neoplatonic occultism, and focuses on Dee as one of the foremost exponents of this tradition. Whereas Yates argued for a trajectory from magic to science, however, Szónyi prefers

5. Lauren Kassell, *Medicine and Magic in Elizabethan London: Simon Forman, Astrologer, Alchemist, and Physician* (Oxford, 2005), 3–4, 12–13, 6.

6. Christopher Whitby, *John Dee’s Actions with Spirits* (New York, 1988); Deborah E. Harkness, *John Dee’s Conversations with Angels* (Cambridge and New York, 1999).

7. György E. Szónyi, *John Dee’s Occultism: Magical Exaltation through Powerful Signs* (Albany, N.Y., 2004).

the converse, “from science to magic”—from mathematics and natural philosophy to the highest form of wisdom, “the conscious and open reception of divine revelation.” Szónyi claims that Dee was inspired by numerous medieval and Renaissance treatises on magic, even in the absence of evidence for Dee’s knowledge of them; and he furthermore proceeds to decide what Dee must have found important in these texts. It has been noted that Dee was interested in Johannes Trithemius’ *Steganographia* because of its treatment of ciphers, but Szónyi is convinced that what Dee really sought there was applied magic. Agrippa’s *De incertitudine et vanitate omnium scientiarum* is absent from Dee’s library catalogue, but Szónyi finds it “difficult to imagine” that Dee did not know it.

Dee may well have read the book, but I found problematic Szónyi’s use of it in his construction of Dee’s mental world, and in general Szónyi’s highly selective approach to evidence. He argues that Dee was “haunted” throughout his life by an *idée fixe*, the burning desire for inspired knowledge within a “strong theological framework.” The claim remains unsubstantiated and, ultimately, it is Szónyi’s own *idée fixe*—that magic has made a central contribution to Western culture, both in the early modern period and today—that informs the book. This prevents him from seeking to understand the complexity of Dee’s intellectual life and the often nonlinear progression of his learned interests. Szónyi attributes to Dee a coherence of mind that is not supported by either prior scholarship or new evidence—for example, that “from the earliest years of his scholarly career [Dee] was occupied by an ambition to seek and acquire perfect knowledge, which necessarily made him aware of esoteric concerns.” The mystical and theological framework is also unsatisfactory for understanding Dee’s ambitions after his return to England in 1589.



Much as Newton’s alchemical and religious practices tend to embolden aficionados of other occultists to argue for similitude in mentality and achievement, so students of Forman sought to draw parallels to that other Elizabethan magus, John Dee. Rowse initiated the practice of attaching Forman to Dee’s coattails, arguing that the astrological, alchemical, and magical interests of the former hardly differed from Dee’s. Indeed, as Rowse admonished in 1974, Dee “is treated with respect—too much so—nowadays.” Traister followed suit. Forman’s notoriety and neglect following Overbury’s trial, she insisted, paralleled Dee’s reputation over three centuries as “a quack and a dupe,” a consequence of Meric Casaubon’s publication of Dee’s angel conversations in 1659. More to the point, Traister reasoned, the two magi had much in common. Both “kept a private diary, collected books, practiced astrology and alchemy, summoned spirits,” and exhibited interest in British antiquities. Furthermore, like Dee, Forman attempted “to put in practice the magical rituals” that Pico and Ficino “had theorized about.” And since the occult was central to their interests, both were branded quacks and dismissed as dupes. Kassell is more circumspect in drawing parallels insofar as

astrology is concerned, but insinuates a near equivalence between Forman's magic—which “could be seen as a science with which to master the working of nature”—and the “perspective fostered by early modern natural philosophers who pursued magic,” such as Dee, Boyle, and Newton. Indeed, the main difference is that Forman, unlike Dee, was a medical practitioner, and his ambitions as a magus were thus more confined in scope.<sup>8</sup>

Absent from this analogizing between Forman and Dee, however, is any serious attempt to differentiate between the scope, depth, or precise nature of their respective scholarly pursuits, save for the intermittent acknowledgment of Dee's superior learning. Such an analysis cannot be offered here, but it is worth taking a fresh look at certain aspects of their lives that bore directly on their scholarly production, by way of amplifying Charles Webster's observation that Dee and Forman represented “the two ends of the social spectrum of London *magi*.”<sup>9</sup>



Both Traister and Kassell eschewed the constraints of a thorough biography, which would inevitably have required some attention to Forman's sexual forays and related follies, instead focusing on the details of his medical practice and the content of his manuscripts. But the occasionally embarrassing biographical details provide invaluable context. Consider Forman's celebrated dream of January 1597, in which he and Queen Elizabeth, “in a coarse white petticoat all unready,” took a long walk, at the climax of which Forman lewdly offered to “wait *upon*” Elizabeth so that he “might make this belly a little bigger.”<sup>10</sup> Traister dismisses the long dream as “an amorous walk” while Kassell ignores it altogether. Surely, this account, however peculiar, deserves some attention, for it and similar relations of dreams offer important insights into Forman's mind. Prior to the bawdy proposition, Forman wrote, he had engaged the queen in lengthy intellectual exchange—they were “talking and reasoning”—a detail quite suggestive of Forman's learned pretensions and social aspirations. The sexual context is equally significant, not for its salaciousness but for the clues it furnishes regarding Forman's fixation on power relations and his attitude toward women. It is impossible to evaluate Forman's career without considering his incessant preying on women, for his lucrative practice depended on the support of the numerous women he seduced—literally and figuratively.

Dee's diaries, on the other hand, attest to his fidelity as well as the abstinence he practiced as a means to attain the spiritual purity necessary for those in search of

8. A. L. Rowse, *Sex and Society in Shakespeare's Age: Simon Forman the Astrologer* (New York, 1974), 240; Traister, *The Notorious Astrological Physician*, xvi, 97, 109, 119; Kassell, *Medicine and Magic in Elizabethan London*, 211–12.

9. Charles Webster, “Alchemical and Paracelsian Medicine,” in *Health, Medicine, and Mortality in the Sixteenth Century*, ed. Charles Webster (Cambridge, 1979), 301–34 at 310.

10. Rowse, *Sex and Society in Shakespeare's Age*, 20.

higher mysteries.<sup>11</sup> At the same time, the diaries reveal the care with which Dee monitored his sexual life, including such matters as his wife's menstrual patterns. They also reveal the unpleasant details surrounding the pact between Dee and his scriber, Edward Kelly, to share wives—a pact that the latter, claiming to follow instructions from the spirits, had coerced Dee into in 1587. Dee's agony, and his wife's humiliation, shine through the dry diary entries, and what they tell us about the relations between Dee and Kelly should give scholars pause. The scrying sessions are typically accepted as serious intellectual endeavor, and Kelly is no longer seen as the opportunistic charlatan who deluded a gullible and trusting Dee. Now Dee is thought to have been fully committed to (and in charge of) the enterprise, while Kelly is seen as the reluctant partner who, after initial enthusiasm, repeatedly attempted to terminate the sessions over Dee's objections.

I do not wish to argue that the angel conversations are unworthy of study. They illuminate the nature and continued circulation of occultist ideas during the Renaissance, but it is necessary to reflect on the motivation of the participants. After all, Dee never saw or heard the spirits; he only transcribed what Kelly had imparted, and the revelations, as Clulee reminded us, "are very likely the joint product of Kelly's imagination and stock of knowledge and what he knew of Dee's thinking from their discussions and his reading among" Dee's books.<sup>12</sup> Was Dee really the tragic Dr. Faustus who desperately appealed to the spirits upon failing to gain the coveted wisdom by traditional means? Or was it Kelly who enticed Dee with promises to reach the ultimate truths, and who further convinced him that such knowledge would be rewarded more handsomely on the Continent? These and related questions are prerequisite to a study of the the angel conversations, because a great deal hinges on the conclusions reached.

What Dee and Forman certainly shared was an inordinate passion for learning, although their ambitions took different forms and had different consequences. Even as an undergraduate, Dee recalled, he was "so vehemently bent to studie" that he devoted eighteen hours of every day to his books, allowing only four hours for sleep and two for meals and refreshment. Such inordinate and continued zeal was the basis for Dee's solicitations for patronage. For the past twenty years and more, he wrote William Cecil in 1574, "it may be very truly avowched that I have had a mervailous zeale, taken very greate care, endured great travayle and toyle, both of mynde and body, and spent very many hundred powndes, onely for the attaining some good and certain knowledge in the best and rarest matters mathematicall and philosophicall." A decade later Dee made an even more sweeping statement to Emperor Rudolf II:

All my life time I had spent in learning, but for this forty years continually, in sundry manners, and in divers Countries, with great pain, care,

11. Deborah E. Harkness, "Managing an Experimental Household: The Dees of Mortlake and the Practice of Natural Philosophy," *Isis* 88 (1997): 247–262 at 256–57.

12. Nicholas H. Clulee, *John Dee's Natural Philosophy: Between Science and Religion* (London and New York, 1988), 205.

and cost, I had from degree to degree, sought to come by the best knowledge that man might attain unto in the world: And I found (at length) that neither any man living, nor any Book I could yet meet withal, was able to teach me those truths I desired, and longed for: And therefore I concluded with my self, to make intercession and prayer to the river of wisdom and all good things, to send me such wisdom, as I might know the natures of his creatures; and also enjoy means to use them to his honour and glory.<sup>13</sup>

Dee's public protestations of scholarly zeal are matched in Forman's poignant private diary entries, where he recounted his quest for knowledge in terms of triumph through adversity. Detested by his mother (or so he claimed), Forman, age eleven, was removed from school following his father's death, and put to hard work on the farm. Upon reaching his fourteenth birthday Forman apprenticed himself to a Salisbury grocer for ten years, on the condition that he be allowed to attend school for three of those years. His master failed to keep his promise and, begrudging Forman's private study, also confiscated his Latin books. He was undeterred: his bedfellow attended the local school, and "whatsoever he learned by day that did Simon learn of him always at night." Forman managed to release himself from this arrangement after five years and returned home, where he attached himself to a local schoolmaster. He was so "greedy on his book," Forman wrote, that

[I]f his master would not have beaten him if he could not say his lesson well, he would have wept and sobbed more than if he had been beaten. If his master gave him leave to play, that was death or a great punishment to him; for he would say, "Play, play, here is nothing but play: I shall never be a good scholar." When his fellows went to play he would go to his book, or into some secret place to muse and meditate.

Two months later, when his mother refused to support him any longer, Forman turned a schoolmaster for half a year, and in spring 1573 proceeded to Oxford in order "to get more learning." He offered himself as a servant to two Bachelors of Arts in return for their promise to help him procure university education. Unfortunately, the two were addicted to hunting and wooing, and dragged their hapless servant along. Finally, in September 1574, the despondent Forman bade Oxford farewell.<sup>14</sup>

The significance of Forman's fashioning of a scholarly persona of course features in Kassell's argument, but her conviction that Forman continued to subscribe to

13. *Autobiographical Tracts of Dr. John Dee*, ed. James Crossley (Manchester, 1851), 5; *A Collection of Letters Illustrative of the progress of Science in England from the Reign of Queen Elizabeth to that of Charles the Second*, ed. James O. Halliwell (London, 1841, reprint ed., London, 1965), 13; *A True and Faithful Relation of what passed for many Years Between Dr. John Dee... and Some Spirits*, ed. Meric Casaubon (London, 1659), 231.

14. Rowse, *Sex and Society in Shakespeare's Age*, 269–80.



the erudition of the scholarly community seems to me mistaken. Repeatedly, she writes of Forman's forming a library: "He went on book-buying expeditions throughout the 1580s"; "He occasionally traveled to the south of England to buy books"; "Forman continued to collect books and to pursue medicine and magic." She accepts as a matter of fact that Forman actually read the many authors whose names adorn the margins of his manuscripts (and the body of his one printed pamphlet), concluding that stacked "end to end these works would have filled several shelves in Forman's study in 1606." However, every piece of evidence we have suggests that Forman copied and owned manuscripts, not printed books. Purchase of the only volume mentioned by Kassell, Cornelius Agrippa's *De occulta philosophia*, is deduced from Forman's notes to himself to look for references in the work.<sup>15</sup>

It is necessary to emphasize Forman's immersion in the culture of scribal publication because manuscripts were the preferred source for Renaissance practitioners of alchemy and astrology, especially of those lacking formal education. Both Kassell and Traister present overwhelming evidence of Forman's obsession with manuscripts: he copied, annotated, emended, revised, recopied, and synthesized the many sources he found, ultimately making them his own. Notwithstanding his indebtedness to such material, however, Forman often boasted, as he did toward the end of his life, that he "never lerned anythinge of any man, neither could I say that ever I was behoulding to any man for Art but to on[e] simple fellowe, but to god and nature. For I was borne to find out arte and to make yt perfect." He further insisted that he compiled his treatises "out of all my books of experience."<sup>16</sup>

Apparently, the conviction that God blessed him with extraordinary gifts made it unnecessary for him to pursue erudition via the usual channels. Interpreting his own nativity in 1602, Forman found that he "shall practice arte with wisemen and with religious men and shalbe of greate understange and have subtile serching wit and be very politick and of great truth in Judgment. and shall have foresighte and knowledge in many artes and sciences and be apte to learne any thinge." The prognostication further assured him that he would not only find success in astrology and medicine but also would make "new inventions of arte and geomantia, magick, cosmografie filosofie, diviniti and in all depe and subtile artes." Three years earlier he boasted that "[n]ever any man before my tyme that I could read or heare did fynde this secret, nor the secrets of the judgments of diseases, nor shewe how to know the causes in his degrees of every disease and sick person." God "hath given me the true knowledge thereof that all the world that heard me or sawe me have wondered at my judgments." Elsewhere he attributed such success to the fact that he was "god among men," who was "borne to find out arte and to make yt perfecte."<sup>17</sup>

15. Kassell, *Medicine and Magic in Elizabethan London*, 32–33, 35, 51–52.

16. *Ibid.*, 57, 70.

17. Traister, *The Notorious Astrological Physician of London*, 14; Kassell, *Medicine and Magic in Shakespeare's Age*, 70; Kassell, "The Food of Angels": Simon Forman's Alchemical Medicine," in *Secrets of Nature: Astrology and Alchemy in Early Modern Europe*, ed. William R. Newman and Anthony Grafton (Cambridge, Mass., 2001), 345.

A more thorough examination of the surviving papers, and comparison with the manuscripts that Forman appropriated, is necessary before we can determine the extent to which he understood the sources he relied upon and the precise nature of his independent contribution. Here I consider only the ramifications of Forman's estimation of himself and his learning on his relations with learned circles in London.

In 1591 Forman published *The Groundes of the Longitude*, his only printed work. Kassell somewhat misrepresents it as "an astronomical pamphlet," on a par with contemporary astronomical and navigational treatises, although she acknowledges that it lacked any "substance." In fact, *Longitude* is a piece of invective and rambling rhetoric by a pretender to mathematical learning who had been snubbed by his betters. In brief, Forman narrated that Providence permitted a London merchant by the name of Robert Parkes to discover a method of determining longitude at sea, and the mathematically innocent Parkes requested Forman to perfect the idea. Forman succeeded, also "by the grace of God," and the resulting method rendered all existing techniques, all instruments and astronomical manuals, redundant. Any seaman in possession of the easy-to-master method, Forman declared, "shall finde such a practise and knowledge that shall prove, or disprove all [their] Maps, Cardes, Globes, and Bookes that here before have beene written thereof and further it resolveth and discovereth all the doubts here before had in Navigation." Kassell further contends that Forman "had witnesses to and proponents of his methods," namely the globe-maker Emery Molyneux. However, Kassell has apparently misunderstood Forman's convoluted conclusion, where Forman announces that were he to be properly rewarded, he "shall perhaps make declaration, of the principles of another science, as much desired" as was the longitude, though "a thing more mysticall and of greater importance." Molyneux and others have called on him to make public this more considerable secret—not the longitude.<sup>18</sup>

No sooner had Forman arrived in London than he boasted of his divinely inspired discovery, and he proceeded to disparage the talents and tools of local practitioners. Some of the noted mathematicians in the capital, Thomas Harriot and Thomas Hood among them, retorted by exposing Forman's pretensions, and the smarting astrologer tried to galvanize public opinion by pitting himself, a self-taught benefactor of mankind, against the learned elite. Forman lashed out at "great and learned clarkes," who either called attention to the unworkability of his method—or perhaps dismissed him because they themselves failed to make the discovery. Forman insisted that it was God's will to hide the knowledge from the learned, and "shewe his glory and power even by the simple and least made account of, to confound the wisdome of the wise and mightie." His detractors, he inveighed, not only wished to appropriate for themselves the glory owing to him, thereby hindering the benefit to the commonwealth, but their action was also contrary to God's will.<sup>19</sup>

18. Simon Forman, *The Groundes of the Longitude* (London, 1591), A4v.

19. *Ibid.*, A3v–A4v.

Three years later it was the turn of the learned members of the Royal College of Physicians to humiliate Forman by challenging his unlicensed practice of medicine. According to the official records of the college, the “pretended *Astrologer* and great *Impostor*” confessed that he had practiced for sixteen years, and he further “boasted that he made use of no other help for the discovery of distempers but his *Ephemerides*, and that by the heavenly Signs, Aspects and Constellations of the Planets, he could presently know every disease. Being examined in the principles of Astronomy as well as in the Elements of Physick, he answered so absurdly and ridiculously, that it caused great mirth and sport amongst the Auditors.” At a subsequent examination Forman claimed to have read only two obscure medieval English medical manuscripts, and reiterated that his practice was based entirely on astrology. He was examined on his understanding of that art as well, and “was found not to understand the common principles of it.”<sup>20</sup>

Forman never ventured into print again and appears to have shunned contact with learned culture and its purveyors, those “who might make him feel inadequate and inferior.” He also assumed the persona of the misunderstood and persecuted prophet. In the introduction to an unfinished treatise on the philosophers’ stone, written in 1606, Forman vented his wounded pride. He composed the treatise, he explained, “not for any love I beare unto the worlde or people lyvinge: because both the worlde and people ar all Enimies unto me, and hate me and ever did.” Rather, he writes for posterity, “because arte shall not be buryed in oblivion and because knowledge shall not decay in the future tyme in the generations that shall com hear after & ar yet unborn.”<sup>21</sup>

So we return to Forman’s reputation, or the lack thereof. Whatever notoriety he had garnered in his lifetime remained local and circumscribed. Lilly, who gained access to Forman’s papers, thought that had Forman “lived to have methodized his own Papers, I doubt not but he would have advanced the *Jathromathematical* Part thereof very completely.”<sup>22</sup> Whether others would have concurred, had they studied Forman’s papers, is an open question; the fact remains that Forman sank into oblivion because he opted to become a secluded magus.



Dee’s reputation, in contrast, both during his lifetime and in subsequent centuries, was public and multifaceted. Numerous contemporaries extolled Dee’s achievements in the highest terms. During the 1570s, for example, the Danish astronomer Tycho Brahe praised Dee as a “noble man and illustrious philosopher and mathematician”; the

20. Charles Goodall, *The Royal College of Physicians of London Founded and Established by Law* (London, 1684), 337.

21. Traister, *The Notorious Astrological Physician of London*, 99; Kassell, *Medicine and Magic in Elizabethan London*, 56.

22. *The Last of the Astrologers: Mr. William Lilly’s History of his Life and Times*, ed. Katharine M. Briggs (London, 1974), 13.

mathematician Thomas Digges paid homage to Dee as his “revered second mathematical father”; and the antiquary William Camden styled him as a “famous” mathematician. For his part, the physician Richard Forster pointed to the centrality of Dee’s learning for the revitalization of English science: “Astronomy, which in England first began to revive and emerge from darkness into light through the efforts of John Dee, keen champion of new hypotheses and Ptolamaic Theory, will, as a result of the indifference of unskilled persons, go to ruins with the heavens of Copernicus and Rheinhold unless Dee again interposes his Atlantean Shoulders.”<sup>23</sup> Nor did Dee’s esteem lessen in the aftermath of his “magical tour” to the Continent. In 1593, Thomas Nashe attempted to differentiate Dee from the rabble of conjurers and seers who spread “incredible reports of omens, monsters and prophecies” when accounting for the recent plague: “Under Maister *Dees* name,” he protested, “the lyke fabulous divinations have they bruted, when (good reverend old man) hee is as farre from any such arrogant pre-science, as the superstitious spreaders of it are from peace or conscience.”<sup>24</sup> Nashe did not extend the same absolution to Forman. In the following year he depicted the meteoric rise of a “cunning man”—clearly Forman, though he did not name him—who gains a fortune and powerful patrons through fraudulent alchemy and “artificiall and ceremoniall Magicke.” Indeed, lamented Nashe, “most of our chiefe noted Augurers and Soothsayers” today gain their reputation “by no other Arte but this.”<sup>25</sup>

The distinction Nashe made between true artists and empirics was common practice in learned circles during the early modern period, in the face of the popular misconception of mathematics and mathematicians. As John Aubrey noted in his biography of the Oxford mathematician Thomas Allen, in “those darke times astrologer, mathematician, and conjurer, were accounted the same thing,” and “the vulgar did verily believe him to be a conjurer.” Allen’s great collection of scientific instruments, Aubrey added, further tended to “confirme the ignorant in their opinion.” The mistaking of the mathematician for a magician affected Dee as well. As Aubrey remarked elsewhere, Dee was “one of the great Ornaments of his Age, but mistaken by the Ignorant for a Conjurer.”<sup>26</sup>

Dee’s repute as a conjurer originated at Cambridge in 1547. Having been elected under-reader of Greek at Trinity College, the ambitious Bachelor of Arts immediately embarked on an elaborate student production of Aristophanes’ *Peace*, complete with a mechanical scarab that catapulted one of the actors onto the ceiling of Trinity Hall. Such a spectacular semblance of flight, Dee later complained, occasioned “great wondering, and many vaine reportes spread abroad of the meanes how

23. Thomas Digges, *Alae seu scalae mathematicae* (London, 1573), A2; Richard Forster, *Ephemerides meteoregraphicae* (London, 1575), G4v; trans. Richard Deacon, *John Dee: Scientist, Geographer, Astrologer and Secret Agent to Elizabeth I* (London, 1968), 37.

24. *The Works of Thomas Nashe*, ed. Ronald B. McKerrow, 5 vols. (Oxford, 1966), 2:172.

25. *Ibid.*, 1:379; Charles Nicholl, *A Cup of News: The Life of Thomas Nashe* (London, 1984), 196–201.

26. John Aubrey, *Brief Lives*, ed. A. Clark, 2 vols. (Oxford, 1898), 1:27; John Aubrey, *The Natural History and Antiquities of the County of Surrey*, 5 vols. (London, 1718–19), 1:82.

that was effected,” and the reputation stuck. By 1555 charges of “lewde and vayne practices of calculing and conjuring” were leveled against Dee before the Privy Council. Dee managed to exonerate himself, as well as satisfying Bishop Bonner of his (Catholic) orthodoxy, but he soon incurred similar libels from several Protestant faithful who were interrogated by Bonner, and the charges were printed in John Foxe’s *Book of Martyrs*. These and other charges continued to haunt Dee until his death for, as the church historian Thomas Fuller has noted, “when once the repute of a conjuror is raised in vulgar esteem, it is not in the power of the greatest innocence and learning to allay it.”<sup>27</sup>

Innocent or not, Dee devoted considerable time and effort, and much of his published output, to dispel this reputation. His famous preface to the 1570 English translation of Euclid, for example, was as much a defense of his own intentions as of mathematical learning: “ought any honest Student, and Modest Christian Philosopher, be counted, & called a *Conjurer*?” Dee protested in a “Digression Apologeticall” inserted toward the end of the preface. “Shall the folly of Idiotes, and the Mallice of the Scornfull, so much prevaile, that He, who seeketh no worldly gaine or glory at their handes: But onely, of God, the threasor of heavenly wisedome, & knowledge of oure veritie: Shall he (I say) in the meane space, be robbed and spoiled of his honest name and fame? . . . Shall that man, be (in hugger mugger) condemned, as a Companion of the Helhoundes, and a Caller, and Conjurer of wicked and damned Spirites?” The folly and malice of even pretended friends, Dee was certain, was attributable to envy of his great learning: “because he knoweth more, then the common Student . . . therefore, he must needs be skilfull, and a doer, in such matter and manner, as you terme *Conjuring*.” A quarter of a century later Dee petitioned James I, as he had Elizabeth I, to clear him of a “horrible and damnable, and to him, most grievous and dammageable Sclaunder” that plagued him for many years—namely, that “he is, or hath bin a *Conjurer*, or *Caller*, or *Invoker* of divels.”<sup>28</sup>

Dee’s reputation turned more complex during the seventeenth century. He was “a most excellent mathematician and astrologer,” opined Fuller, “well skilled in magic, as the ancients did, the Lord Bacon doth, and all may accept the sense thereof, viz. in the lawful knowledge of natural philosophy.” Fuller’s absolution was probably written before the publication of Casaubon’s narration of Dee’s conversations with angels, but the wish to preserve Dee’s reputation persisted after these séances became known. Robert Hooke reviewed Casaubon’s book and found nothing blamable in the conversations, which he interpreted to be a sort of cipher concealing secrets of nature or state. By the early eighteenth century Thomas Smith thought that Dee merited a place in the constellation of celebrated English mathematicians and scholars whose biographies he had written (including Henry Briggs, John Bainbridge, John Greaves, and James

27. *Autobiographical Tracts of Dr. John Dee*, 5–6; Thomas Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England*, ed. P. Austin Nuttall, 3 vols. (London, 1840), 3:137.

28. *Mathematical Preface*, Aiv–Aiiiv; *The true Copie of M. John Dee his Petition to the Kings most Excellent Majestie* (London, 1604).

Ussher), because Dee was endowed with uncommon learning and was celebrated throughout Europe. Four decades later the editors of the *Biographia Britannica* appropriated Smith's material as well as his rationale for perpetuating Dee's memory. He was "a person famous in the XVIth century for his extensive learning, more especially in the Mathematical Sciences; but withal extremely credulous, extravagantly vain, and a most deluded enthusiast." Nevertheless, they added on several occasions, "with all his whims and weaknesses" Dee was "a man of learning and sense," and "there is no reason for burying his memory or his writings in oblivion."<sup>29</sup>

According to Lilly, Dee "was the most ambitious person living, and most desirous of Fame and Renown." For later observers, it was precisely Dee's unbridled ambition, and the attendant pride, that was the cause of his ruin. Casaubon reasoned that if pride and curiosity "were enough to undo" Adam, though "otherwise innocent, and in possession of Paradise," "should we wonder if it had the same event in Dr. Dee?" Casaubon found in Dee's supplication to God, "that he might understand the secrets of Nature that had not been revealed unto men hitherto," a desire to glorify himself, not God, in order that he "might become a *glorious man* in the world, and be admired, yea, adored every where almost, as he might be sure it would be, had he compassed his desire." Casaubon further accused Dee of "Spiritual pride," in presuming himself "an extraordinary man, both *for parts*, and for *favour with God*," as well as for aspiring "to such eminency above other men, and by means that are not ordinary." Likewise, Smith and the editors of the *Biographia Britannica* were convinced that it was Dee's "depraved judgment" that ultimately got the better of him: "His ambition to surpass all men in knowledge carried him, at length, into a desire of knowing beyond the bounds of human faculties, and, in order thereto, of having recourse to methods equally contrary to the laws of God, and to the rules of right reason."<sup>30</sup>

Dee, like Forman, often blew his own horn. He wrote William Cecil in 1563 that England "hath no man (that I ever yet could here of) able to set furth his fote or shew his hand" in the chief sciences by which "the huge frame of the world is fashioned." Only he was up to the task, and it was the duty of his monarch and her ministers to support his endeavors. A decade and a half later, perceiving that his rewards were not commensurate with his worth, Dee lashed out, "yf in the foresaid whole cours of his tyme, he had found a Constant & Assistant CHRISTIAN ALEXANDER: BRYTAN, should not have bin, now, destitute of a CHRISTIAN ARISTOTLE."<sup>31</sup> It was owing to Dee's high estimation of himself, as well as to his early establishment of a high reputation in court, that he sought loftier rewards than had traditionally been bestowed on learned men. Thus, university positions he contemned, declining professorships of mathematics at both

29. Fuller, *The History of the Worthies of England*, 2:205; Thomas Smith, *Vitae quorundam eruditissimorum et illustrium virorum* (London, 1707), separately paginated; *Biographia Britannica*, 7 vols. (London, 1747–66), 3:1633, 1638.

30. *A True and Faithful Relation*, D4v; *Biographia Britannica*, 3:1638.

31. "Dr. John Dee to Sir William Cecyl," *Philobiblion Society* 1 (1861): 6–7; Dee, *General and Rare Memorials Pertayning to the Perfect Arte of Navigation* (London, 1567), \*iv.



Paris and Oxford. Even more unwilling was he to accept church livings, making it clear that he refused to concern himself with the cure of souls. What he aspired to was a generous government annuity as well as official and exclusive titles—such as mathematician or philosopher to the monarch. None of these aspirations materialized and Dee died a poor and broken man. Like Forman, perhaps he drew solace from being “promised” posterity by the spirits—orchestrated, of course, by Kelly, who was fully cognizant of Dee’s fragile ego: “when thou diest, and shalt depart this world,” the mighty Raphael assured him, “thou shalt die with fame and memory to the end, that such an one was upon the earth, that God by him had wrought great and wonderful Miracles in his service.”<sup>32</sup>



Was Dee a conjurer, and was Forman a quack? Judging by recent scholarship the historical consensus appears to be a resounding “yes” for the former proposition, and an equally unequivocal “no” for the latter. Are such judgments merited? Dee certainly acquired a reputation for being a magus, and he did hire scryers to conjure up spirits for him. But the extent to which his conversations with angels actually encapsulated his entire *Weltanschauung* is another matter. Dee’s complicated persona and the vagaries of his career are central to any interpretation of his frame of mind, while a more expansive understanding of early modern erudition must inform any research into his conception of mathematics and natural philosophy. Only then will it be possible to determine Dee’s true stature.

The *Oxford English Dictionary* defines a quack as “an ignorant pretender to medical or surgical skill; one who boasts to have a knowledge of wonderful remedies; an empiric or impostor in medicine.” Clearly, Forman believed that he was divinely inspired and in possession of great secrets. Such beliefs also informed his medical practice—an astrologically based medicine where diagnosis was grounded almost entirely on his ability to cast horoscopes, to the habitual disregard of whatever his patients told him. There is enough in Forman’s pretensions and practices to mark him as a quack, despite his very successful career (he died worth £1,200). Nor is it enough to point at a trove of fifteen thousand manuscript pages as establishing his learned credentials. He may not have been the ignorant impostor depicted by his learned medical rivals, but what precisely he was—apart from a fascinating and resourceful individual—remains to be seen.

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32. *A True and Faithful Relation*, \*35.

