One Devil Too Many: Understanding the Language of Magic Spells in the English Renaissance

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In the Details: The Theology of James Clerk Maxwell

Sint mihi dei Acherontis propitii! Valeat numen triplex Jehovoe!
Ignei, aerii, aquatani spiritus, salvete! Orientis princeps
Belzebub, inferni ardentis monarca, et Demogorgon, propitiamus
vos, ut appareat et surgat Mephistophilis, quod tumeras:
per Jehovam, Gehennam, et consecratam aquam quam nunc spargo,
signumque crucis quod nunc facio, et per vota nostra, ipse nunc
surgat nobis dicatus Mephistophilis! (Faustus 1.3.16-24)

In the early 1590s, in the south of England, a company of actors was passing through Exeter, touring their production of Christopher Marlowe’s The Tragical History of Doctor Faustus. Touring was by no means as lucrative as playing in London, but plague and licensing issues had shut the theatres and ground the clockwork of city life to a halt (it is during this downtime, for example, that Shakespeare is frequently imagined to have found time for his sonnet sequence—perhaps an income-supplementing private commission that turned into something rather else), making life on the road a steady, if unglamorous, alternative, and Marlowe’s Faustus, with its broad spectacle of magic and witchcraft, had proved a crowd-pleasing favourite.

But according to an early 17th century commonplace book, as the actor playing Faustus that night began to intone Marlowe’s incantation ritual (see above), and dancers dressed as
demons emerged to the sound of drums from their trapdoor beneath the stage, something went horribly awry:

[…] as certain number of Devils kept everyone his circle there, and as Faustus was busy in his magical invocations, on a sudden [the dancers] were all dashed, everyone harkening other in the ear, for they were all persuaded, there was one devil too many amongst them; and so after a little pause desired the people to pardon them, they could go no further with this matter; the people also understanding the thing as it was, every man hastened to be first out of doors. The players (as I heard it) contrary to their custom spending the night in reading and prayer got them out of town the next morning (Chambers in Sofer 2009, 2)

Nor was the apparition at Exeter an isolated incident. There is a stage legend that while playing Faustus in Dulwich, the celebrated actor and originator of the Faustus role, Edward Alleyn, was so terrified by an apparition that manifested during his monologue that he vowed that night to found a school there, which he would call ‘the College of God’s Gift’. Dulwich College remains to this day, its students and faculty still uncomfortably recalling their debt to Alleyn’s nameless terror.

Similarly, in his 1633 book Historiomastix, which launched a Puritan attack upon the sins of the stage (a common Puritan sentiment that would eventually see them closed during Cromwell’s Interregnum), William Prynne asks his readers to recall another famous manifestation in one of London’s inn-yard theatres, again during a production of Faustus:

[…] the visible apparition of the devil on the Stage at the Bel-savage Playhouse in Queen Elizabeth’s days (to the great amazement both of the Actors and Spectators) whiles they were there profanely playing the History of Faustus (the truth of which I have heard from many now alive, who well remember it) there being some distracted with that fearful sight (Prynne 1633).

There seems, then, to be a problem with the text of Marlowe’s Doctor Faustus, in particular its evocation meant to summon Lucifer and his horde; it seems to work too well. I propose we consider why that might be.

Imagine a being, said physicist James Clerk Maxwell, so small that he could consider our world’s tiniest and most insignificant details—who could put his hands upon the quantum detritus, sense their spin and measure their mass, before sending them on their way back through the ether in whatever direction and on whatever errand he wished:
He is a being with no preternatural qualities, and differs from real living animals only in extreme smallness and agility. He can at pleasure stop, or strike, or push, or pull any single atom of matter, and so moderate its natural course of motion. Endowed ideally with arms and hands and fingers—two hands and ten fingers suffice—he can do as much for atoms as a pianoforte player can do for the keys of the piano—just a little more, he can push or pull each atom in any direction (Kelvin 1879, 145).

Standing at an absolute boundary, such a creature, freed from Levinas’ ontological ‘accidents’, would thus be the perfect unattached observer - capable of assessing and arranging the tiny fragments of our reality with perfect quantum precision. Like Psyche’s ant, it could sift and sort the world from the ground up, classifying and ordering chaos—an archivist of the infinitesimal.

Maxwell’s point was to illustrate that entropy could be made to run in reverse—that, given a sufficiently minute and sufficiently conscientious steward, a system need not proceed towards chaos. But there was never any guarantee, in his thought experiment, that ‘Maxwell’s demon’, as this creature has come to be called, was on humanity’s side; able to bar the door, he is equally as free to bear the knife himself, just as capable of letting in the horde—of leaving the trapdoor open a little too long or too wide, and releasing one devil too many cavorting upon the planks of the stage.

We can, I think, understand language itself as calling forth an apparition of Maxwell’s demon. Language has the ability to distinguish this thing versus that; differentiate one boy (‘Tim’) from another (‘Tom’), creating a difference around which things like identity, possession, and history can coalesce. Against the forces of entropy and chaos, language erects walls, finds order, breathes forth taxonomies and geographies to organize a haphazard world. We might perhaps recall that the God of the Old Testament’s creation is ‘formless and empty’ until He speaks a division—fiat lux—separating the darkness which He calls ‘night’ from the light which He calls ‘day’; several generations later, it was a slight and predictable sophistication of this theological linguistics that led the evangelist John to identify his Christ with this original and originary Word (the speech-act theory of scholars like Sofer may be yet another sophistication still). At the infinitesimal boundary, the limit-point of what-is against what-is-not, language possesses the power to divide and classify the universe with a precision exceeded by every other human technology; an atom is both, simultaneously, particle and wave—vibrating in and out of matter itself—but in that word, ‘atom’, we have seized it and pinned it as surely and as fast as a rod through the thorax of a butterfly—a chalk circle traced around the devil’s hoof. It was naming the atom that was man’s great achievement; once that was done, once words had made it possible to get the dextrous hands of the mind upon it, splitting it was merely an inevitable footnote.

This thaumaturgic power of language has of course been noted before. J.L. Austin’s model of speech-acts (‘I christen this vessel The Mary Rose’, ‘I now pronounce you man and wife’, etc) is one such case. Words are spoken, and by those words is reality rewritten. In his rebuttal to Austin’s How to Do Things with Words, John Searle posed a question, however, that deeply troubled Austin’s linguistic architecture:
I can’t fix the roof by saying ‘I fix the roof’ and I can’t fry an egg by saying ‘I fry an egg,’ but I can promise to come and see you just by saying ‘I promise to come and see you’ and I can order you to leave the room just by saying ‘I order you to leave the room.’ Now why the one and not the other? (Searle 1969, 85)

Andrew Sofer believes that it is precisely this gap which Faustus exploits, and precisely why it was capable of so unsettling its audiences:

*Faustus* continually challenges J. L. Austin’s distinction between “efficacious” (successful) performatives and “hollow” (unsuccessful) theatrical quotations of them. Austin’s distinction breaks down whenever a speech act in the world of the play makes a material difference in the world of the playhouse. But what constitutes a “material difference?” As [...] John Searle suggests, performativity’s transformative magic lies less in measurable changes in objective states of affairs (an actor cannot build a bridge by saying “I build a bridge”) than in its phenomenological effects (an actor might blaspheme by blaspheming, just as he might laugh by laughing or eat by eating) (Sofer 2009, 2).

The purpose of this essay, then, is to broaden Sofer’s point by dislodging it from the theatre, by suggesting that this phenomenon is not peculiar to *Faustus* or the stage, but is a feature common to English magic of the period (which we will demonstrate with an example of ‘real-world’ magic totally divorced from the dramaturgical framework that Sofer identifies as necessary to effect this bifurcation), and ultimately to English, and language, *tout court*.

Sofer has posited that ‘much of the fascination conjuring held for Elizabethan audiences can be traced to its unnerving performative potential’ (Sofer 2009, 2). He suggests that the power of *Doctor Faustus* comes from its being ‘poise[ed] on the knife-edge between representing (*mimesis*) and doing (*kinesis*) [...] Faustus’ spells enact theatre’s potential to escape from the character’s (and actor’s) control and unwittingly bring into being that which it names’ (2). I wish to suggest that this dangerous capacity for language to escape its bounds was not limited to the stage, but that *Doctor Faustus* and its perilous tendency to generate spontaneous hellmouths was merely a symptom of a burgeoning Early Modern linguistic *techne* for opening such portals. Sofer is quite right to assert that the Elizabethan theatre was a space where the membrane between speech and reality was most evidently porous (drama’s capacity to weave propagandistic myth whole-cloth was recognized early, subject to careful censorship and occasionally weaponized, as when the Earl of Essex charged Shakespeare’s company to mount *Richard II* as a clarion call for rebellion), but this ontological distinction between word and reality had suffered more than its share of assaults in the decades before Marlowe began staging his public demonstrations of its efficacy. All across England, not merely on the stage but in private homes and princely courts alike, the chalk circle enclosing these unearthly powers was being blurred or broken.

In the linguistic evidence amassed at one such magical site—a library at Mortlake—we will find cause to dismiss an effective difference between dramaturgical and practical
summoning rituals; we will then utilize this evidence to explain why no such split is possible: *all language* is necessarily constantive; *all language* participates in the authoring of reality, and as such, all language is, properly understood, ‘magic’ — an act of summoning the radical and inhuman ‘Other’ that is the necessary and originary interlocutor of all speech.

To speak in the Early Modern period, whether on the stage or no, was to invite that chaos; to risk a fiend slipping past the tongue: ‘Bang your thumb with a hammer and mutter an ill-advised curse, and you just might have a demon on your hands’ (Sofer 2009, 4). There is a quantum devil crouching among the details of language—a creature whom we have yoked to our service but, through malice or through negligence, lets slip and lets fall what he absolutely should not.

‘Between the idea / And the reality’ said Eliot, ‘Between the motion / And the act / Falls the Shadow’ (Eliot 1925 v). Let us take that shadow’s measure.

The Prerogative of Children and Half-Wits

We might doubt whether Angels, or Demons, since they be pure spirits, use any vocal speech, or tongue amongst themselves, or to us; but that Paul in some place saith, If I speak with the tongue of men, or angels: but what their speech or tongue is, is much doubted by many (Henry Cornelius Agrippa 1510, 23).

We will first need to ascertain how the magic words and incantations of the English Renaissance were imagined to function—or perhaps *understood to function* is the better choice, for as we will see, imagination and comprehension are not so tidily segmented one from another. This perhaps bears some explanation.

History is first and foremost a study in phenomenology; if no tree falls in a forest, but everyone hears and behaves as if one fell, the archaeologist or the paleo-botanist may tell us the tree still stood—may indeed be standing still—but the historian is bound to relate the story of its collapse, its causes and consequences, its echoes and its repercussions. In Neil Gaiman’s *The Kindly Ones*, the Lord of Dreams tersely and wisely remarks that ‘it has always been the prerogative of children and half-wits to point out that the emperor has no clothes. But the half-wit remains a half-wit, and the emperor remains an emperor’ (Gaiman 1996). Even stark nude, the emperor is clad by the elaborate fictive (*fictio* – ‘fashioned’) vestments of state, no less real simply because they happen not to exist; similarly, the fact of his nakedness does not become a reality until it is discovered and pointed out—just so, in fact, for Adam and Eve in the garden: ‘And the eyes of them both were opened, and they knew that they were naked’ (Gen. 3:7).

Whether or not, for example, an itinerant Galilean peasant—who, during the Passover celebrations, sufficiently disrupted the religio-civic functions that the San Hedrin and occupying Roman forces felt compelled to grant him a hasty state execution—was or was not the Son of God is immaterial to the historian or the literary critic; what is important, however, is that much of history, including several empires, then behaved as if he were. Similarly, the existence of demons (and the attendant likelihood of their possessing theatrical aspirations) is of
no consequence to us; for the stampeding crowd on that 17th century afternoon in Exeter or in that playhouse in Bel-savage, the Adversary was on their heels.

What conditions, then, of thought, religion, and language made possible this certainty? As with so much about Early Modernity, the answers begin with Pico della Mirandola.

Belonging to the brilliant circle which surrounded the Medici court in Florence, Pico all but singlehandedly launched the Renaissance. In 1486, at only 23, he proposed his impossibly comprehensive 900 theses, initiating the ambitious project with his ‘Oration on the Dignity of Man’ which itself quickly became the manifesto of the Humanist movement. Pico unfixed man in the great chain of being, able to choose for himself his slot therein:

Upon man, at the moment of his creation, God bestowed seeds pregnant with all possibilities, the germs of every form of life. Whichever of these a man shall cultivate, the same will mature and bear fruit in him. If vegetative, he will become a plant; if sensual, he will become brutish; if rational, he will reveal himself a heavenly being; if intellectual, he will be an angel and the son of God. And if, dissatisfied with the lot of all creatures, he should recollect himself into the center of his own unity, he will there become one spirit with God, in the solitary darkness of the Father, Who is set above all things, himself transcend all creatures (Pico 1996, 4).

With his theses as lever and the resplendent Florentine court as fulcrum, Pico, despite his short life, proved Archimedes right, and shifted the intellectual topography of Europe.

What is often ignored by commentators on Pico, however, who prefer a version of the philosopher who lionizes man’s virtues through metaphor, is that he literally meant it. Fusing Cabalistic methods to Neo-platonic theology, Pico envisaged a mystical ascent through the spheres of the universe to communion with the angels and to a mystical Nothing beyond them. Man was fully capable of achieving seraphic, cherubic, even cosmic awareness and power—not just of emulating divine goodness in quiet, monkish obeisance, but communing, and eventually fusing, with the empyrean.

A full 72 of Pico’s 900 theses are Cabalist in nature (Yates 1979, 21), employing a sophisticated blend of gematria, astrology, and occult philosophy to, for example, prove Jesus was the Christ solely through the symbolic operations of his name: IESU, he affirmed, was the Hebrew vowels YHWH spliced with a humanizing medial S (sin); ‘the S in the Name of Jesus [thus] makes audible the ineffable Name (composed only of vowel sounds) and signifies the Incarnation, the Word made flesh or made audible’ (Yates 1979, 20). (that we have now twice had occasion to mention the Incarnation of the Word in an exploration of the mystical power of speech-acts is not accidental; the divinity of the God-man is inextricably tied up with questions of the thaumaturgic power of utterance).

Pico would pass on this fascination with the magical qualities of language to many of his intellectual progeny, splicing Christian symbolism with a decidedly Jewish gematriac practice and making it possible to imagine that the universe could be explained solely through the operations of spelling and grammar. It is this abstruse mystical side of Pico which is most often marginalized by scholarship, but which he clearly held to be the height of his learning and the...
razor’s edge of human endeavour. Pico was thus the first of a new kind of person: the Renaissance Magus. Whereas medieval scholars had sought in etymologies and numerologies to uncover the universe’s underlying structure, Pico and the magi he inspired wished to seize that Adamic power for themselves (we may see here the roots of the German Reformation, English Protestantism, and even the rise of the Witch Craze, as the idea of an eternal authorized matrix of power is fissured into a function of sufficient study and mastery of technique): they would, at a word, shuffle the elements like a pack of cards, confer immortality upon the sick, or command spirits to do their bidding. Just as he had destabilized man’s place in the Great Chain of Being, free to whizz to its heights or plummet to its depths, Pico’s occult, humanist philosophy assured Renaissance adepts, after centuries bewailing our fallen natures and the host of attendant incapacities inherited thereby, that a recovery of Adamic language was both possible and even sanctified.

When it came to the occult, then, Pico’s Renaissance was not merely a return to the classics; it was a return to the primordial garden, where Adam spoke the names of the animals and thus unfolded their being. Pico had created a scientific field for the attainment of divinity.

There were several such magi who took up Pico’s work and sought this mystical union, a discipline that included exhaustive research into the transmutation of lead into gold and the alchemical manufacture of the so-called Philosopher’s Stone. Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1486-1535) was one of the earliest and most influential of these occult thinkers; one of the last of these was—perhaps surprisingly to us—Isaac Newton (1643-1723). That Newton, who we hold up as one of the great symbols of Reason and Enlightenment, should have been immersed in occult lore and alchemical practice (indeed, his inquiries into trivialities such as physics and gravity were only in the service of what he held to be this higher calling, which otherwise monopolized his time) is as startling to the 21st century mindset as it would have been organic to him; the sciences led upward to theology as surely as base metals proceeded towards gold, or as the perishable gave way to the immortal. What seems to us to characterize the ‘Renaissance man’—a dilettante fascination with sundry fields—was in fact a kind of monomania: an obsessive hunt for mystical truth in whatever thicket and whatever tome may hide it.

But of these Renaissance magi, there was none so celebrated, so castigated, or so obsessed, as Doctor John Dee: Britain’s own real-life instantiation of the Faustus legend, and, for the purposes of this paper, our test case of the Early Modern magical imperative.

The ‘Angelical Language’ of Doctor Dee

John Dee (1527-1609) was one of the lights of his era. His father a Welsh mercer and minor courtier in the boisterous but tempestuous movable court of Henry VIII, Dee’s brilliance, like Pico’s, was evident from a very early age. A gifted scientist, cartographer, mathematician, astronomer, astrologist, and navigator, Dee travelled extensively through Europe in the course of his life, hoarding books and meeting with the intelligentsia of the continent, all the while conducting his own experiments and authoring scores of treatises on topics ranging from Euclidean geometry to Protestant doctrine. At 23, he delivered a series of lectures on algebra in Paris to crowds so huge and venues so packed that people stood straining to hear under open windows (Turner 1989, 16). When he returned to England, he parlayed his erudition into great
esteem and influence, earning for himself the patronage of the Earl of Leicester (himself the favourite of Queen Elizabeth), and serving as private tutor to Leicester’s nephew, Sir Philip Sidney.

Dee’s library at Mortlake, comprised of over 2500 books and forming the largest collection in England, became the epicentre of Elizabethan learning and the hub of British exploration. Dee’s careful and comprehensive archive of maps, growing collection of ingenious navigational devices, and his own encyclopaedic learning brought luminaries of the age of exploration like Sir Francis Drake and Walter Raleigh to his parlour (indeed, Dee seems to have instructed them on several points of cartography). It is to Dee we owe the phrase, and perhaps the existence of, the ‘British empire’ (Turner 1989, 14-30, Yates 1979, 79-94).

As with Shakespeare’s Prospero, however (for whom the esteemed Doctor likely served as real-world model, as well as for Jonson’s Subtle in The Alchemist and Marlowe’s aforementioned debt to Dee for his own version of Faustus) (Yates 1979, 161), Dee had a deeper and darker fascination: the occult. From his early days at Trinity College rumours eddied and swirled about him of witchcraft and sorcery; his stage effects for a house-play were so ingenious, it was said, that they must have cost a soul (Levack 1992, 119).

His school-boy days over, Dee did little to dispel the rumours. He committed an act of treason when, at an imprisoned Elizabeth’s behest, he cast the horoscope of Queen Mary and her benighted cousin, promising the latter that Mary would die childless and the young Elizabeth would ascend to the throne, ushering in a ‘golden age.’ Dee was jailed; the charges read that he had ‘endeavoured to destroy the queen by calculating, conjuring, and witchcraft’, and he barely escaped being burnt as a heretic and
traitor (Yates 1979, 82—5). Elizabeth, however, never forgot the kindness or the loyalty, and when she became Queen, it fell to Dee the honour of choosing the most auspicious date for her coronation (the judgment of history seems to be that, by and large, he evidently chose wisely), and he remained her trusted advisor throughout her reign, granted the title of Astrologer Royal and tasked with averting several ‘magical plots’ against her virgin majesty (for example, a wax effigy stuck with pins discovered in Lincolns Inn Fields).

Like Faustus, Dee grew increasingly frustrated with his academic pursuits, and came to believe that the key to ultimate knowledge lay in communication with supernatural forces. He simply lacked the means. He wrote in his diary in 1581:

I have often read in thy (God’s) books and records, how Enoch enjoyed thy favour and conversation; with Moses thou wast familiar; and also that to Abraham, Isaack, and Jacob, Joshua, Gideon, Esdras, Daniel, Tobias, and sundry others thy good angels were sent by thy disposition, to instruct them, inform them, help them, yea in worldly and domestic affairs, yea and sometimes to satisfie their desires, their doubts, and questions of thy secret: and furthermore considering the shewstone, which the high priest did use, by thy own ordering. That this wisdom could not be come by at man’s hand or power, but only from thee, o God (Dee in Laycock 2001, 10-11)

Dee thus convinced himself, influenced by the writings of Pico and Agrippa (as well as older, neglected Hermetic and Cabalist texts resurfacing thanks to the bustling industriousness of humanist scholarship Pico had set in motion on the continent), that direct communication with God was possible, if only he could recover God’s language—the unfallen, pure tongue of Adam in Eden, of man before Babel, and of the angels. He sought the ‘fiat lux’—the mathematic language through which God had authored the universe, but it seemed hopelessly lost.

Until, one day, a man arrived at his door: Edward Kelley. Then using the alias of ‘Talbot’, Kelley was and remains one of the most shadowy and suspect figures of the age; he was wanted at the time for the ghoulish crime of necromancy, apparently having unearthed a corpse to harvest parts of it for the casting of magic spells (that Aleister Crowley, the notorious ‘wickedest man alive’, would gleefully claim Kelley as one of his previous incarnations should provide some testament to both the notoriety and fascination of his reputation) (Crowley 2006). Kelley told Dee he had a talent for communing with the spiritual realm, and, in exchange for a living, would help Dee contact the other side.
Using a complex apparatus of waxen seals, a ‘holy table’ inscribed with various Hermetic symbols, Dee’s ‘sigillum aemeth’ (an extraordinarily sophisticated heptangular glyph) and a ‘shewstone’ (at first a crystal ball, then replaced by an obsidian mirror of Aztec origin, given to Dee as a gift from one of the explorers making use of his library), Dee and Kelley began a series of ‘divine experiments’ attempting to contact the spirit realms, with Dee conscientiously recording all the events, exchanges, and phenomena of these sessions in a series of scrupulously maintained diaries. Kelley proceeded to have intense visions of angelic and sometimes demonic entities—ranging from terrifying beings with suns for eyes, to young, nubile girls like the coquettish ‘Madimi’, who became the most familiar spirit of these visitations (and after whom Dee would eventually name his daughter). According to Dee’s diaries, Kelley was convinced that what the two men were doing was a dreadful sin, and insisted all the beings they spoke to were devils, but Dee pressed, and they often spent up to ten hours a day staring into the crystal (it was only Kelley who saw anything; Dee was dependent on his description, which he dutifully copied into his journals).

The results appear to have been rather mixed. Highlights include a moment in an entry dated 5 May 1583 that seems to predict, with startling accuracy, the execution of the Queen of Scots and the sinking of the Spanish Armada; lowlights include farcical attempts to find buried treasure, detailed advice about finding the (non-existent) northwest passage, and the perpetually opportunistic Kelley’s attempts to borrow money from (understandably bemused) members of the heavenly choir.

It was allegedly from the archangel Uriel himself, on 26th March 1583, that Dee finally received what he had been searching for: the Adamic, angelic tongue which we call ‘Enochian’ (named for Enoch, the biblical patriarch who ‘walked with God’).

The principal function of the Enochian language, so far as Dee and Kelley were concerned, was in the generation of a series of 49 calls—summoning incantations for angels or spirits of various orders. Kelley traced the alphabet during one of his trances, while Dee transcribed the Enochian language phonetically. Here is part of one such call:
The linguist Donald C. Laycock (most famous for his works on the languages of Papua New Guinea) has made a careful study of Enochian, and noted that, for all its claims to linguistic primacy, it shares many of its features with the English of Dee’s time. Written right to left like Hebrew, it is comprised of 21 characters—which is exactly the 21 sounds one needs to speak English (‘perhaps Dee was interested in spelling reform’ (Laycock 2001, 47):

As far as we can tell, each letter of the Roman alphabet transcription represents one Enochian character—which means that Enochian spelling, too, has ‘hard’ and ‘soft’ values for c and g, and combines letters such as s and h to make the sh sound. Very English behaviour for a language ‘which Adam verily spake in his innocency, and was never uttered nor disclosed to man since til now’ (21 April 1584) (Laycock 2001, 41).

This magical tongue comes to us, alas, incompletely; of its 250 extant vocabulary words, only half are ever repeated. Nevertheless, the corpus we do possess tantalizingly hints at potential cases and conjugations (see the table, extrapolated from Laycock, for examples). Enochian resembles neither proto-Semitic, Egyptian hieroglyphics, nor Sumerian, which we would expect to be its nearest relations, but neither is it a form of glossolalia, which is common when mediums or mystics ‘speak in tongues’ and is marked by repeated phonemes and syllables.
Indeed, from Dee’s diaries we learn that far from spontaneous utterance, Dee insists the angels relate their messages through careful reference to a colossal grid, and when the angels (through Kelley) ask to speed the process up, Dee insists that if their messages are to have any meaning he must copy them exactly. One of the great mysteries about Enochian is, limited as it is, it seems to have remarkable consistency; if Kelley was a fake, he has to have devised extremely complex poetry in a made-up language (which is not impossible – see for example, the work of J.R.R. Tolkien, a scholar of language whose free time was spent devising songs and ballads in Elvish and Dwarfish tongues of his own fabrication—and which have since found their way into his fantasy epic *The Lord of the Rings* and its various appendices) which Kelley would then have had to commit to memory and spelt aloud using painstaking grid coordinates, backwards.

Whether the language of the angels or a cipher devised by Kelley, it is clear in its grammar and phonology that Enochian is first and foremost derived from, and perhaps even a form of, *English*; the translations furnished by Dee demonstrating that, for example, word order seldom ever requires changing (making it unlike even other European languages, much less Semitic ones).

Nevertheless, this English wellspring for the ‘Angelical’ language does not seem to have impacted its efficacy, as Dee’s diaries record a series of apocalyptic visions delivered by the strange entities summoned by the Enochian calls. For example, in the entry dated 23 March, 1583:

His Hed is a marble stone. His hart is the blud of a dragon. His leggs are the tops of the Northen Mowntaynes. His eyes are bright, and his face of many Cullours, eche substance amongst the turmoyle and trubble of nothing. For as then, they were Nothing: had a forme applyable and necessary according to theyr quantitie and secret qualitie. The heuens are lightened by his two eyes: whereof the one sight is brighter then the other. Aboue and in him self which
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is by him self, and in no other, is this great and vertuous fowntayne. [...] My words ar sentences. My sentences, wisdome; My wisdome the end in my message of all things (Dee 1583, 260).

As with Faustus’ invocation, however, Kelley and Dee occasionally summoned forth creatures they had not intended to call. Frequently, while awaiting instructions from angelic messengers, beings manifest in the crystal with decidedly more sinister motives:

Being therfor now ready to receyue instructions of our frendes, there appered in the stone One, in a foles cote, going abowt a clowde, which appered first in the stone. I charged him if he were the enemy of God to depart. He tore his clothes all, and appeared all hery under: and sayd, Penestrati vim iniusticae meae [You penetrated the power of my inquity]. [I said] Glorifie God and depart. He sayd, Feci, Nam decedo [I am done, for I depart]. He went away as it had byn a bunsh of fethers pulld in peces (Dee 23 March 1583, 257).

This hirsute demon, which Dee names ‘Pilosus’ (‘Hairy’) seems to menace Kelley more than once, deceiving him for days while Dee is in London only to reveal himself when caught in heresy (Dee 1583, 275). Nor is Pilosus by any means alone; when summoning angels, it seems, one never quite knows who has picked up the phone.

Similarly, as Kelley learned rather painfully one afternoon, the calls possessed their frightening potency even when it was not the summoner’s intent to use them. Dee’s diary records that, while Kelley (always apparently rendered rather nervous by the spirits even at the best of times, and frequently given to panic attacks at their manifestation) was working in the study one day, combing through the notes from the angelical experiments and correcting aloud one of the calls, he received a rather dreadful visitation:

As EK was reading, he read a parcel thereof…and thereupon suddenly at his side appeared three or four spiritual creatures like labouring men, having spades in their hands and their hair growing about their ears, and hastily asked EK what he would have, and wherefore he called them. He answered that he called them not. And they replied, and said that he called them. And he replied and said that he called them not, then I began to say, they lied, for his intent was not to call them, but only to read and repeat that which he had written, and that every man who readeth a prayer to perceive the sense thereof, prayeth not. And I bade them be packing from the place. And thereupon I removed from my desk to the green chair, which was by the chimney, and presently he cried out and said, they had nipped him, and broken his left arm at the wrist…and in the meanwhile they assaulted him (Dee 15 April 1583, 348).

Dee’s insistence to these violent (and invisible, to him if not to poor benighted Kelley) spirits that to read is not necessarily to pray has, coming from a man steeped in the arcane and
forbidden, a hint of alarm about it. If we are responsible for what we read and what we say regardless of our intent, then Dee (who, along with his occult study, heard and gave evidence as an expert during witch trials) was undoubtedly damned, the instruments of that perdition stacking the bookshelves and heaped upon the desks all around him.

Kelley’s broken arm must have begged of Dee a question: what if, when we speak, God can’t hear the quotation marks?

Implications of Enochian: The Nature of English Magic

Clearly, then, Doctor Faustus and the English stage are not the only place where magical language can slip its yoke or cross the circle enclosing it. What principles of English magicks can we extrapolate from this brief study of the test-case of John Dee and his Angelic tongue? I would propose five:

- They are in some way ‘alienated’ from the everyday language of their speaker.
  - Often in the form of Latin, Greek, Hebrew, or else in constructed or imaginary languages, or signalled as ‘different’ in rhyme, etc.
- They require effort or talent to be effective.
  - Despite using and speaking the same words, Kelley could see angels and demons while Dee simply could not.
- They must be pronounced precisely or their meaning can be garbled or lost – sometimes disastrously.
  - Dee worked tirelessly to ensure exactness of pronunciation even when angels tried to move faster; he said that misinflection could summon wrong (and often evil) spirits.
- They are often accompanied by ritualistic technologies or actions.
  - Dee’s assortment of magical equipment (shewstone, sigillum, etc).
- They are indifferent to intent and often escape or exceed the caster’s will (what I call the ‘Sorcerer’s Apprentice Effect’).
  - Kelley’s violent attack by spirits for speaking calls without intent; Dee and Kelley’s constant worry that they were in fact being deceived by disguised demons.

Many of these notions about magic have survived with us in popular culture to this day; Hermione Granger demonstrates principle three when she corrects Ronald Weasley’s calamitous mispronunciation of ‘wingardium leviosa’ (Harry Potter and the Philosopher’s Stone, 2001); similarly, when a newcomer joins the ‘Scooby Gang’ who aid the titular heroine in Buffy the Vampire Slayer, his scepticism leads to an unfortunate demonstration of principle five:

RILEY: These spells, they really work? I mean, can you really turn your enemies inside out? Or [reading from a spellbook]...learn to excrete gold coins?
ANYA: That one’s not so much fun.
WILLOW: They work, Riley, but they take concentration. Being attuned with the forces of the universe—
XANDER: Right, you can’t just go ‘librum incendere’ and expect ... [the book in Xander’s hand bursts into flames; Xander closes it rapidly]


It will not be hard, however, for readers to note that these features of ‘magical’ language are also true of all language (indeed, a very similar schema is outlined by Jacques Derrida in his Of Grammatology). Austin himself, in segmenting a constantive utterance, which describes things ‘as they are’ (‘the ball is red’), and a performativ e utterance, which effects the deed it articulates (‘I vow to get revenge’) recognized that the former speech-act, articulates into being—a kind of linguistic ‘ex nihilo’:

In these examples it seems clear that to utter the sentence (in, of course, the appropriate circumstances) is not to describe my doing of what I should be said in so uttering to be doing or to state that I am doing it: it is to do it. […] When I say, before the registrar or altar, &c., “I do”, I am not reporting on a marriage: I am indulging in it (Austin 1962, 5).

A vow, in other words, makes itself in the speaking. What Austin did not recognize, however, is that all language is such an act of creation; his colleague (and greatest critic) John Searle noted this when he diagnosed ontology as rooted in language: ‘whatever is referred to must exist. Let us call this the axiom of existence’ (Searle 1969, 77). We should hear here, I think, echoes of Heidegger: language is the “house of being” – that is, it is that which allows Being to manifest within the “clearing” (1971, 35); as such, man becomes the custodian of Being itself, as in his pronunciation of the cosmos he effects differentiation and articulation. The act of naming (for Heidegger, for Searle, for Dee, for Faustus) thus takes on shades of biblical significance; to speak is to make real.

It was therefore (as Derrida points out) no accident that the Egyptian Thoth was god of both writing and magic (Derrida 1997, 313 – though against Heidegger, Derrida will insist on the primacy of writing over speech); both summon from nothing; both fret at the skin around which reality is constructed. A book of magical rituals is called a ‘grimoire’ (merely a French term for ‘grammar’); we ‘spell’ words (that is, invoke them through language to bring them forth); magic and language are inextricably, inexhaustibly fused. Every smoker who asks for a light, every vagrant and every politician who solicits for change, is a spellcaster of the utmost accomplishment: they speak, and the world’s warp and woof bend to their will.

But how then, do we explain Faustus’ extra demon, or Kelley’s vicious beating by shoveltoting spirits? If we are the authors of existence, how does it escape our grasp—or turn around and destroy us? ‘An utterance,’ said Searle, ‘can have Intentionality, just as a belief has Intentionality. But whereas the Intentionality of the belief is intrinsic the Intentionality of the utterance is derived’ (Searle 1983, 27). Something in language perpetually eludes, perpetually escapes, can only come after and then only incompletely. Heidegger’s understanding of the speech-act, as demiurgic as it is, also incorporates a keen sense that the linguistic moment conceals as much as it reveals; it is a simultaneous expression of illumination and obscurity, for
the contours it makes manifest needs must also shield aspects of that which it articulates from the human eye.

Levinas, Heidegger’s student, who sought to rescue his teacher from his Faustian monomania, envisioned not just a man articulating Being, but doing so to another; not just talking, but talking back. Language is not merely a naming; it is a naming to another – not a letting, but a showing: ‘this tie to the Other…where invocation is not preceded by comprehension, we call religion. The essence of discourse is prayer…What is named is at the same time that which is called’ (Levinas 1998, 7). This Other (‘Autrui’) is one with whom one relates via the mechanism of attempted comprehension – a comprehension which must ever be unconsummated, because the Other cannot be subsumed by articulation; despite Heidegger’s objections to the contrary, he cannot be smothered into subjection. He is therefore our Interlocutor, summoned and invoked. Words no longer name a thing, but they name it to another; language is not a pronounced imperative, but a descriptive act, a showing. Speech is, first and foremost, an address. We cannot be surprised if it is from time to time taken amiss.

To say all this heady material another way (in other words), we might finish drawing our circle and turn again to Doctor Faustus.

The Latin evocation that began this essay, and which caused all the trouble in that theatre in Exeter and gave the students of Dulwich a school to allay their founder’s frayed nerves, is a triumph of Latinate and occult scholarship. It is a testament not only to Marlowe’s peerless Renaissance education—a Master of Arts from Cambridge, conferred despite his rumoured Catholicism through the direct intervention of the Queen’s Privy Council, and beyond the ken of, say, William Shakespeare, who knew, according to Ben Jonson, ‘small Latin and less Greek’—but betrays a study of blacker arts.

It contains, for example, a reference to ‘Demogorgon’, a very old and obscure name for a rather enigmatic demonic entity. First mentioned in a 4th century commentary on Statius’ Thebaid written by one Lactantius Placidus (later conflated with the lesser Church father Lactantius, an aide de camp of the Emperor Constantine), it is supplied in an annotation as the frightful name of the lord of the triplicis mundi, a demiurgic being who was ‘the chief power of Hell, the very mention of the name of which was to invite disaster’ (Dictionary of the Occult 2002, 66). This tradition of Demogorgon’s unspeakably dire evocation was alive and well in Early Modern England, at least among more scholarly literary circles; Edmund Spenser illustrates the unrepentant evil of his wicked sorcerer Archimago by saying he was ‘A bold bad man, that dar’d to call by name / Great Gorgon, Prince of darknesse and dead night, / At which Cocytus quakes, and Styx is put to flight’ (Spenser 1590, 1.37), and later Milton (an avid Spenserian in his own right) makes this strange, primordial demon an inhabitant not even of God’s created Hell or a denizen of the Angelic Rebellion, but one of the strange figures in the primeval, anarchic realm of Chaos, where sitting silent in that weird court the refugee Satan encounters ‘the dreaded name / of Demogorgon’ (Milton 1667, 2.964-5). If we needed a diabolical culprit to explain the eerie manifestations plaguing productions of Doctor Faustus, its invocation of this forbidden name seems as good a place to start.

Except that, even by the metaphysical logic of the play itself, none of this matters. When Faustus at last has received his demonic servant Mephistophilis, he crows with glee at his magical proficiency: ‘Such is the force of my magic and my spells! / Now, Faustus, art thou
Conjuror Laureate!' (1604, 1.2.31-2); Faustus believes he has become the *ne plus ultra* of another scholarly field—of blacker havor than his colleagues at the University of Wittenberg, but no less efficacious or learned (as indeed his invocation of 'the dread name' suggests). And yet when he exhorts Mephistophilis to do his bidding, expecting him bound to service, he is stopped short:

MEPH. I am a servant to great Lucifer,  
And may not follow thee without his leave:  
No more than he commands must we perform.  
FAUSTUS. Did not he charge thee to appear to me?  
MEPH. No, I came hither of mine own accord.  
FAUSTUS. Did not my conjuring speeches raise thee? Speak.  
MEPH. That was the cause, but yet *per accidens*;  
For, when we hear one rack the name of God,  
Abjure the Scriptures and his Saviour Christ,  
We fly, in hope to get his glorious soul;  
Nor will we come, unless he use such means  
Whereby he is in danger to be damn’d.  
Therefore the shortest cut for conjuring  
Is stoutly to abjure the Trinity,  
And pray devoutly to the Prince of Hell (1604, 1.2.40-54)

All of Faustus' vaunted art, then, is mere showy hocus-pocus; as Levinas intimated, the words themselves, the accidents of stage or study, monarch or milkmaid, do not matter nearly so much as *who is listening*.

*•*

Aleister Crowley, the Great Beast, the Wickedest Man in the World and (by his own admission) professedly the reincarnation of Edward Kelley himself, once defined magic as follows:

**DEFINITION.**
Magick is the Science and Art of causing Change to occur in conformity with Will.  
(Illustration: It is my Will to inform the World of certain facts within my knowledge. I therefore take 'magickal weapons', pen, ink, and paper; I write 'incantations'---these sentences---in the 'magickal language' ie, that which is understood by the people I wish to instruct; I call forth 'spirits', such as printers, publishers, booksellers and so forth and constrain them to convey my message to those people. The composition and distribution of this book is thus an act of Magick by which I cause Changes to take place in conformity with my Will.)  
(Crowley 2006)
Another mage, the science fiction writer Arthur C. Clarke, once famously propounded that ‘Any sufficiently advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic’; between Crowley and Clarke we might begin to see that what we call ‘magic’ is nothing other than techne with its labour concealed—with a gap in it. Crowley recognized that the word ‘magic’ does not designate a specific kind of speech, but merely a way of comprehending all speech: everything we say or write, understood as fundamentally reshaping and reforming the world around us. Every act, like every magic trick, consists of three parts: the will, the labour, and the result; magic merely requires concealing the labour, so that result seems an effortless product of will: to a person who does not understand electricity, an illuminated lightbulb will seem a miracle; to a person who does not understand late Judeo-Christian political theology, a room of people kneeling to a monarch will seem enchanted. The word ‘magic’ itself is not a measure of its wielder, but of its observer and interlocutor. Language is the last great magic trick: a motley assortment of more or less arbitrary sounds and shapes which can rearrange the cosmos, divide cities into grids and continents into nations, mobilize millions of people to war or to peace. But a language that is merely ours to wield is no language at all, just as there is no such thing as magic unless there is someone there to behold it—just random noise, meaningless squiggles, and a sad playing card tucked up a sleeve.

‘The comprehension of the other is inseparable from its invocation’ (Levinas 1998, 24). Yet when we invoke this other, as Levinas knew of Heidegger, as Kelley learned when his forearm was snapped, and as that playhouse crowd in Exeter learned 400 years ago, something which we cannot totalize, or obliterate, or subsume, hears us; what we risk—not just on the stage or in the crystal ball, but with every word we utter or write—is that it will speak back.

‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said, in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean — neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you can make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master — that’s all.’

-Lewis Carroll, Through the Looking-Glass, and What Alice Found There (1871)
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