Book Reviews

Comptes rendus

William H. Sherman. *John Dee. The Politics of Reading and Writing in the English Renaissance*. Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 1995. Pp. xiv, 291.

Aside from Nostradamus, perhaps no sixteenth-century dabbler in the occult is better known today than John Dee (1527–1609). Ironically, the fraudulent French prophet was in fact merely a mediocre court poet and purveyor of quack medicines, far less important than his reputation for prognostication suggests, while Sherman demonstrates that the English Dee's alchemy, angelology, magic, and the like were but a small part of a very distinguished career that was more conventional and more important than is often recognized. Students of the Elizabethan era have long known that Dee was a prodigious collector of books and curiosities and an authority on geography, history, law, mathematics, medicine, theology, and more — in short, a Renaissance man. However, the work of Frances Yates and her students, notably I. R. F. Calder and Peter French, has created what Sherman terms the “myth of the magus,” wherein Dee appears as an eccentric, isolated, Hermetic, Neoplatonic philosopher-magician, the “reincarnation of Merlin at the Tudor court” (p. xii). So influential has this view been, in academia and beyond, that only recently have scholars like Nicholas Clulee begun to question it. Sherman's fine addition to the Massachusetts Studies in Early Modern Culture series, edited by Arthur F. Kinney, offers a convincing reinterpretation of Dee and his role in the English Renaissance and Elizabethan politics.

Sherman bases his account on sources that scholars hitherto have largely ignored, particularly Dee's manuscripts and his marginal notations in books that once formed part of his library. Beginning with Dee's “Compendious Rehearsall” (an account of his career) and his private diary, Sherman shows that Dee, far from being a loner, was well connected to leading Elizabethan courtiers (e.g., Lord

Burghley) and intellectuals at home and abroad (such as Tycho Brahe and Gérard Mercator); once he even received an offer of employment from Ivan the Terrible.

Born to a London mercer employed by Henry VIII, Dee studied at Cambridge (under John Cheke) and Louvain. Contrary to recent accounts, Dee successfully sought royal patronage both in his own right and via his wife, Jane Fromonds. His home at Mortlake, Surrey — which Sherman describes as the first modern “think tank” — contained the largest library in Elizabethan England, laboratories, and a museum, and attracted a steady stream of courtiers and intellectuals who came to confer with Dee and consult or borrow his books. Sherman dispels two myths associated with Dee’s mysterious sojourn (1583–1589) with Holy Roman Emperor Rudolf. First, Julian Roberts and Andrew Watson have disproved the familiar story that a mob outraged by Dee’s sorcery destroyed his library; rather, it was pillaged by other scholars during his absence. Second, Dee experienced no disgrace on his return but continued to provide advice to Elizabeth’s court and even became James I’s mathematician. Sherman also contends that it is a mistake for intellectual historians to assign Dee, a true polymath, to any particular “school” of thought (e.g., Hermetic, Neoplatonic).

Sherman examines not only *what* Dee read but *where* and *how*. His discussion of Dee’s *Bibliotheca Mortlacensis* confirms that Dee made all knowledge his province and tells us much about the state of various intellectual disciplines in its day. After situating Dee among his books, Sherman turns to the relationship between reader and text. He rejects much twentieth-century literary criticism, including the formalism of the New Critics and the more recent reader-response theories, e.g., deconstruction, preferring the methodology D. F. McKenzie calls the “sociology of texts.” Most important, he insists that “Theories of reading . . . must give way to, and be grounded in, histories of the reading practices of actual readers” (p. 59). This leads to a detailed account of “adversaria,” *i.e.*, marginal notations that readers made in books. His chapter on Dee’s marginalia — with sections on alchemy, history, mathematical sciences, astronomy / astrology, and medicine — should be required reading for all students of the English Renaissance.

Almost half of the book concerns Dee’s own writings. Sherman corrects widespread erroneous belief (shared by Yates and Graham Yewbrey) that most of Dee’s manuscripts have not survived; in fact, they are abundant and can now be seen in proper context. Sherman rejects the notion that Dee’s printed works are more important, pointing out that since some of his manuscripts were “position papers” prepared for Elizabeth’s government, making them public was out of the question. If studying Dee’s library and his relationship to others’ texts were not sufficient to destroy the myth of the magus, Sherman’s examination of his manuscripts finishes the job. For example, he shows Dee to have been a very careful historian — the most understudied aspect of his career. Dee and his contemporaries are more “compilers” than original “authors,” relying heavily on earlier texts, but this led

them to develop "a genuine, critical historiographical method" (p. 124), and if Dee's sources were sometimes faulty (e.g., Geoffrey of Monmouth), his research was meticulous nonetheless.

In the Tudor-Stuart era the study of history and political science was meant to be didactic, and Dee's "students" were often highly placed. Prepared at the privy council's request, *Brytannicae Reipublicae Synopsis* (1570) is an important contribution to commonwealth literature: Dee's trenchant analysis of the cloth trade qualifies him as a mercantilist, his comments on law and the navy are well-informed, and in general he works within the humanist tradition (e.g., in his reliance upon Cicero). Equally significant was Dee's role as "one of Tudor England's leading maritime advisers" (p. 148), which placed him in the company of the Hakluyts, Martin Frobisher, Humphrey Gilbert, Walter Raleigh, and others, and led him to produce *General and Rare Memorials* (1576–1577), *Of Famous and Rich Discoveries* (1577), *Brytanici Imperii Limites* (1576–1578), and *Thalattokratia Britanniki* (1597). Seen in their proper relation to one another and to contemporary concerns, these were neither propagandistic nor mystical, as they have been portrayed, but offered practical advice on promoting a favorable balance of trade and a sound defense.

This review only hints at the thorough re-evaluation of Dee that Sherman has begun. His book deserves high praise and a wide readership.

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L'homme de guerre au XVI^e siècle. Actes du Colloque de l'Association B.H.R., Cannes 1989. Saint-Étienne, Publications de l'Université de Saint-Étienne, 1994.

Pour être consacré aux spéculations philosophiques et au renouveau littéraire, le seizième siècle n'en est pas moins une époque de fer et de sang marqué par les antagonismes religieux, le conflit franco-espagnol et la résistance de l'Occident aux menaces turques: de là l'importance des témoignages et réflexions sur le fait militaire, et il est utile, dans *L'homme de guerre au XVI^e siècle*, qu'ils aient été regroupés de manière thématique et présentés, lorsque cela était possible, suivant un ordre chronologique.

La première partie du volume, "Images de l'homme de guerre," débute par une étude de Nicole Cazauran sur *Guy de Warwick*. Au service de sa Dame, puis de Dieu après sa singulière conversion, le héros de cette épopée médiévale fait preuve de vertus "courtoises," à peu près identiques, malgré quelques retouches destinées à flatter le goût moderne, dans le remaniement en prose du seizième siècle. Pour Jean Jacquart, la part de fiction est grande encore chez *Le loyal serviteur*, qui modifie l'éclairage des faits et