Booknotes

Notes de lecture

Deborah E. Harkness. *John Dee's Conversations with Angels: Cabala, Alchemy, and the End of Nature*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 1999. Pp. xiii, 252.

In a well-organised discussion of a singularly problematic aspect of the career of the famous English magus, Deborah E. Harkness places John Dee's efforts to invoke angelic assistance in the context of his efforts fully to understand "the book of Nature," another source of divine knowledge, like "the book of Scripture." Her presentation of his earlier works, the *Monas hieroglyphica* (1564) and his "Mathematicall Praeface" to the first English translation of Euclid's *Elements* (1570), shows them to have been aimed at the same goal.

After a concise introduction that lays out her structure and conclusions, Harkness begins her book with a discussion of Dee's reputation and actions in the 1580s, the decade from which most of the surviving evidence of his angelic "conversations" dates. She takes pains to distinguish his actions and those of the "scryers" he employed from those of modern mediums, and underlines the open, daytime environment of the conversations. The scryers were men of reputed openness to astral or psychic influences who spoke the angels' words while seated at a purposely built table (constructed according to the angels' specifications), and while using a "showstone," or crystal, in which the angels were claimed to appear.

Here one confronts what I think is the greatest problem with Harkness's presentation. She remains open to the reality of the angelic appearances and declarations to a degree that tests her reader's credulity. It may be appropriate to underline Dee's sincerity, but she passes rather too rapidly over what was either the scryers' collusion in his self-deception or their active willingness to deceive him. On a number of occasions she reports the appearance or statements of the angels as if they were unquestionable phenomena. In a world where increasing numbers of students seem to take New Age ideas on trust, I would be reluctant to put this book on a course bibliography without a disclaimer.

Dee's connections to the world of sixteenth-century scholarship and thought are nicely presented: he was obviously not a solitary, idiosyncratic monomaniac. The ideas he expresses in his *Monas*, which presume a "Cabala of nature," derive from his reading of Pantheus' alchemical *Voarchadumia contra alchimum* (1530), just as some of the ideas in the "Praeface" come from Proclus' fifth-century commentary on Euclid. Hieroglyphs, then geometry, were seen as means truly to read the "book of Nature" in a pre-apocalyptic world that was rapidly losing its clarity, like a fading manuscript. Dee's use of prayer before each conversation underlines his active avoidance, not just of the appearance of magic, but of its essence; it locates him in the context of Christian concerns in the later Reformation era, although not necessarily among the most orthodox of Christians. Harkness twice alludes to the possibility that he was influenced by, or in some way attached to, the Familists, but does not really explore this avenue.

A few errors mar her generally well-written study. Dee was eighty, not sixty-five, in 1607 (p. 218), and although "even the most daring eschatological commentators knew better than to include clear predictions of their own sovereign's demise" (p. 146), Tycho Brahe did not. Such problems do not substantially reduce the book's value as a solid contribution to our understanding of sixteenth-century intellectual history and of Dee's own vision.

ALAN G. ARTHUR, *Brock University*

Russ McDonald. *The Bedford Companion to Shakespeare: An Introduction with Documents*. 2nd ed. Boston and New York: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2001. Pp. xxiii, 451.

The scrupulously edited and annotated pages of the editions in which our students encounter Shakespeare's plays serve as reminders — often daunting ones — that those pages derive from a country that is vast, but far from undiscovered. Russ McDonald's *Bedford Companion to Shakespeare*, revised and expanded in this second edition, does much to bridge the gap separating the newcomer from the thriving world of Shakespeare studies. This engaging introduction to a range of contemporary approaches — historical, theoretical, textual — is aimed especially at the undergraduate reader. Individual chapters consider questions of authorship, Shakespeare's language, dramatic modes of the period, the history of the stage, the sources upon which the poet drew, the production and editing of the texts, the cultural and economic contexts of the plays, familial and social structures in early modern England, political and religious currents of the time, and the plays in performance from the seventeenth century to the present. Appended to each chapter is a rich selection of illustrations and documents: maps, sketches, photographs, excerpts from royal speeches, homilies, conduct books and a wide range of other sources. These, along with a bibliography and an annotated list of useful websites, make the book an excellent starting point for research. McDonald's stated aim is simply to enhance students' experience of the plays by offering a look at some of