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The Hermetic Frontispiece: Contextualising John Dee’s Hieroglyphic Monad

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This essay examines the elaborate title pages of some of alchemist, astrologer, and bibliophile John Dee’s publications with a focus on the two best known works that feature his famous Hieroglyphic Monad, the Propaedeumata Aphoristica (1558) and Monas Hieroglyphica (1564). The aim is to cast light on its context, identify sources for some textual influences in the works, unpack the visual symbolism in the two “monadic” title pages in relation to the two complementary sciences of “superior” and “inferior” astronomy, speculate on some of the more enigmatic details, and conclude with a brief discussion of a possible astrological significance to the dates of composition of the Monas Hieroglyphica.

On judging a book by its cover

The “single most important feature of a book,” that best displaying “the book’s typographical character,” historian of typography and graphic communication Margaret Smith argues, is the title page.¹ In a similar vein, Renaissance scholar Margery Corbett and art historian Ronald Lightbown observe that “the purpose of the ambitiously designed title-page was more than simply to decorate the book; rather its purpose was to epitomise the book and glorify its author and his work.”² Such is arguably the case with the English alchemist and occult philosopher John Dee (1527–1608/9), whose title pages are rarely random events, but rather deeply considered productions, albeit at times so cryptic that their message remains concealed to this day.


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Delta means Dee (1570)

One of the more accessible manifestations of Dee’s cryptic style is his well-known fondness for visual and verbal plays on his name.⁵ Although the elaborate title page for Henry Billingsley’s 1570 translation of Euclid’s Elements of Geometrie into English, printed by John Daye (1522–1584), “one of the titans of the Elizabethan book world,”⁴ is not Dee’s design, but Daye’s recycling of the frontispiece of The Cosmographical Glasse he printed for the physician William Cuningham in 1559,⁶ the opening page of the Mathematicall Praeface that Dee wrote for Billingsley’s edition is one hundred per cent Dee. The main text, beginning with the words, “Divine Plato,” opens with a huge decorative initial letter D (Figure 1), within which is found the Greek Delta Δ, representing both the fourth letter of the Greek alphabet and the number three as a triangle in geometry, as well as the initial letter of Dee’s surname.⁶ Dee had already used this Delta as a signature at the end of the Monas Hieroglyphica in 1564,⁷ and a manuscript in Oxford’s Bodleian library, “Primi Quatridui Mysterium,” with four couplets addressed to William Cecil, is likewise subscribed with Dee’s Δ, which mirrors the huge triangle

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4. For Dee’s other self-referential devices, including the page signatures running from a to d and then beginning again with A, see Sherman, John Dee: The Politics of Reading, 10. See also William W. E. Slight, Managing Readers: Printed Marginalia in English Renaissance Books (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 143. Dee expounds on the mysteries of the letter Delta in a letter to William Camden, dated Mortlake, 7 August 1574. See Oxford, Bodleian Library, MS Ashmole 1788, arts. 1–18; Sherman, John Dee: The Politics of Reading, 119. Consider also Dee’s fondness for the Virgilian “thrice happy, four times happy” (Aeneid 194: Terque Quaterque beati). See Monas Hieroglyphica Theorem XX, in C. H. Josten, “A Translation of John Dee’s ‘Monas Hieroglyphica’ (Antwerp, 1564), with an Introduction and Annotations,” Ambix 12 (1964): 84–219, at 185: “O thrice and four times happy, those who can reach that (as it were, copulative point of the ternary, and who can part with that loathsome and superfluous point of the quaternary.” In his “Dissertation on the Number Seven” in Somnium Scipionis, bk. 1, chap. 6, Macrobius alludes that with this phrase Virgil is saying “seven times happy,” to signify the most full and consummate Felicity.
5. Dee, Monas Hieroglyphica, sig. 28r: “Amen, Dicit Littera Quarta, Δ”; Josten, “A Translation,” 219: “Amen, says the fourth letter, Δ.” See Josten’s n. 130 on the same page concerning Dee referring to himself by the letter Delta. In his letter to Emperor Rudolf II of 17 August 1584, Dee calls himself Triplicis Alphabetti littera Quarta (Fourth letter of the Threefold Alphabet), by which he must have meant the Latin D, Greek Delta, and Hebrew Daleth. Others occasionally followed suit: for example, for a reference to “Liber Monadis J. Λ” in an alchemical manuscript (Kassel, Landesbibliothek MS chem 67, fol. 1v), see Jennifer M. Rampling, “John Dee and the Alchemists: Practising and Promoting English Alchemy in the Holy Roman Empire,” Studies in History and Philosophy of Science 43 (2012): 498–508, at 503.
of the holy trinity on the frontispiece. Such a combination of morphology and arith-
mology was part and parcel of Dee’s fascination with the alpha-numeric exegetical
speculations of Jewish Kabbalah, the magic alphabets found in the works of Trithe-
mius, Agrippa, and Pantheus, and the “hieroglyphic” ciphers of alchemy. Visible at
the bottom of the huge letter D in the *Mathematicall Praeface*, beneath a version of
Dee’s coat of arms, is his famous hieroglyphic monad, or London Seal of Hermes, an
image central to the title pages that form the focus of this essay.

A British hieroglyph (1577)

Dee, who had been fellow and under-reader of Greek in 1547–48 at Cambridge’s
newly founded Trinity College, displays a delight in the inclusion of the exotic typo-
graphy of Greek that went beyond the simple use of the *Delta*. This was an author-
tial trait that persisted throughout his life. One of his later works, indeed the first
publication discussed in Corbett and Lightbown’s *The Comely Frontispiece*, his

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10 It is worth noting that the prefatory “A necessary Advertisement, by an unkown freind, giuen to the modest, and godly Readers” at the start of Dee’s *General and Rare Memorials* does not have the standard signatures, e.g. Aij, but instead Αij, etc.
General and Rare Memorials pertyning to the Perfect Arte of Navigation (London, 1577), published, like Euclid’s Elements, by John Daye, bears an impressive woodcut title-page containing so much cryptic information that Dee felt compelled to provide his readers with a partial explanation of its contents towards the end of his introductory letter to one of Elizabeth’s favourites, Christopher Hatton (1540–1591), “Captain of her Maiesties Garde.” As William Slights observes, Dee’s book’s “title is surrounded by a hermetic aphorism, his title page illustration by a hieroglyphic pronouncement,” much of which must have been mystifying for the general reader.11 The oval around the title contains the phrase “Plura Latent Quam Patent” (More is Concealed than Revealed), a phrase perhaps influenced by the third symbol in the Italian humanist Achille Bocchi’s Symbolicarum Quaestionum Libri Quinque (Five Books of Symbolic Questions, 1555), depicting Socrates, his daimon, and a stele.12

Dee’s “fondness for esoteric symbols”13 appears on the frontispiece (Figure 2): in the Hebrew four-letter name of God, the Tetragrammaton הוהי in the heavens; in the archangel Michael (labelled with his name in Hebrew) flying above the emblematic figure of Occasio (Opportunity); and in the Greek Chi-Rho christogram on the masts of the ship ΕΥΡΩΠΗ (Europa), where Queen Elizabeth I sits enthroned at the helm, with a suppliant, the female embodiment of “Res Publica Brytanica,” requesting an “armed fleet” (Στολος Εξωπλισμενος), next to a town identified as the “citadel of security” (το της ασφαλειας ορουριον).14 This allegory of empire is enclosed by a square border bearing the Greek words ΙΕΡΟΓΛΥΦΙΚΟΝ ΒΡΥΤΑΝΙΚΟΝ (Hieroglyphikon Brytanikon – The British Hieroglyph).

Even in his “ekphrastic recapitulation” of this image,15 however, Dee does not reveal everything, and only in 1785 did the bibliographer William Herbert (1718–1759) – in his revision of the Typographical Antiquities of the antiquary Joseph Ames (1689–1759) – explain the significance of the four Greek letters in the roundels at the corners of the square in Dee’s title-page, suggesting that the letters ό

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11 Slights, Managing Readers, 155.
13 Fowler, Mind of the Book, 90.
14 Dee, General and Rare Memorials, 53. See Corbett and Lightbown, Comely Frontispiece, 50. For further analysis see Slights, Managing Readers, chap. 4; Lesley B. Cormack, Charting and Empire: Geography at the English Universities, 1580–1620 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 31; Eliza Richter, “The Ship of Europe: The Iconography of John Dee’s General and Rare Memorials,” in Early Modern Constructions of Europe: Literature, Culture, History, ed. Florian Kläger and Gerd Bayer (Abingdon: Routledge, 2016), 181–93, at 188: “a fully equipped expeditionary force.” Fowler, Mind of the Book, 93, convincingly argues that the design is almost certainly Dee’s, with reference to a draft of the frontispiece among the papers of Elias Ashmole: MS Ashmole 1789.
15 Slights, Managing Readers, 139.
(alpha), φ (phi), ο (omicron) and ς (stigma) stand for the numbers one, 500, seventy, and six in the ancient Greek Milesian numerical system. It is perhaps more likely

Kieren Barry, The Greek Qabalah: Alphabetic Mysticism and Numerology in the Ancient World (York Beach, ME: Samuel Weiser, 1999), 22. See William Herbert’s revised edition of Joseph Ames, Typographical Antiquities, or, The History of Printing in England (London: Longman, Hurst, Rees, Orme, and Brown, 1819), vol. 4, 142, where we can see that Herbert has read the final letter as a Stigma, with the value of six, giving the date of the “year of the execution” of the engraving, rather than a Zeta, with the value of seven, for the year of publication.
that the final letter in this chronogram is a \(\zeta\) (zeta) and thus a seven, which makes more sense, given that the publication date of *General and Rare Memorials* was 1577.

### An aphoristic introduction (1558)

Our story, however, begins two decades earlier, in London in 1558, when the stars seemed to be shining favourably on John Dee. Queen Mary (1516–1558) – who had imprisoned him in 1555 under accusation of treason for “lewde vayne practices of calculing and conjuring,” because he cast horoscopes of her, her husband Philip of Spain, and the Princess Elizabeth – passed away and her half-sister, Elizabeth (1533–1603), came to the throne. Elizabeth was far more sympathetic towards Dee, even asking him to confirm by means of elective astrology that the date chosen for her coronation was suitably propitious. At this time Dee’s reputation as a “Mathematicus” rested on his skill with astronomical calculation. His expertise in astrology extended beyond genethliology, the calculation of nativities or personal birth charts, to the casting of elective charts in order to determine the most propitious day for a voyage, a magical ritual, or indeed an alchemical process, and to the considerations of Mundane astrology, orientated not towards individuals but instead towards general world events, concerned with large-scale natural and historical changes, from meteorological to political. Dee’s diaries, entries made in the margins of the astronomical ephemerides that he owned, contained “notes on the weather on particular days, potentially the basis of a systematic programme of observations linking weather patterns with planetary positions.”

These kinds of observations served as the basis for Dee’s first major work of significance in natural philosophy, the *ΠΡΟΠΑΙΔΕΥΜΑ ΑΦΟΡΙΣΤΙΚΑ* [Propaedeumata aphoristica] – *An Aphoristic Introduction concerning certain outstanding virtues of Nature*, first published in 1558. Truth be told, its appearance on the world stage was not particularly impressive. It appeared as the final piece in a collection of works on astrology and is rather overshadowed by the *Brevis et perspicua ratio iudicandi genituras* (A Brief and Clear Way of Judging Birth Charts) of the famed Bohemian astrologer and mathematician to the Elector Palatine, here presented as the “excellent Mathematicus” (that is, both mathematician and astrologer) Cyprian Leowitz (1514/24–1574), and the *Admonitio de vero & licito astrologiae usu...*
(Admonition Concerning the True and Licit Use of Astrology) by Leowitz’s correspondent, the Bavarian scholar Hieronymus Wolf (1516–1580), presented as “a man outstanding in all humanistic literature, in understanding of languages, and mathematical arts.”22 Modestly, at the very bottom of the page, in smaller print, we find Libellus de præstantioribus quibusdam naturæ virtutibus (A Little Book Concerning Certain Outstanding Virtues of Nature) by the London author John Dee. On the collection’s title page, Dee’s Greek is ignored, only appearing at the start of his work at the back of the book (Figure 3). In John Johnson’s account of Henry Sutton’s contributions to the history of typography in his Typographia (1824), Dee’s work is not even registered as a separate publication.23 At first it is difficult, then, to imagine why Dee would have chosen Henry Sutton as his publisher. Most histories of printing mention that Sutton had a shop in St Paul’s Churchyard, and lived in Paternoster Row, at the sign of the Black Boy,24 and that during Queen Mary’s reign he printed various church books,25 and was a well-known printer of ballads.26

It transpires, however, that Sutton was an original member of the Stationers’ Company, officially incorporated as the Company of Stationers of London by a royal charter, granted by Philip II of Spain and Mary Tudor, on 4 May 1557. This charter guaranteed exclusivity to the Company: no one in the realm should act as a printer unless he were a Freeman of the Stationers’ Company of London. Sutton’s name is well known in the cultural bibliography of theatre studies because of his famous apprentice Valentine Simmes (1594–1623), printer to many of the notable playwrights of Elizabethan and Jacobean England.27 Perhaps this is the reason for Sutton’s appeal to the ever ambitious Dr Dee?

As a publisher, Sutton was clearly quick off the mark. The very first Stationers’ Register entry solely concerned with the publication of a dramatic text appeared in October/November of 1557, and it concerned Dee’s publisher: “To Henry Sutton to prynyte an enterlude upon the history of Iacobe and Esawe out of the xxvij chapeter of the fyrste boke of moyses Called genyse.”28 The following year

21 Continued

22 Title page, Brevis et perspicua ratio: “Hieronymum Wolffium, virum in omni humaniore literatura, linguarum, artiumque Mathematicarum cognitione praestantem.”


24 See, for example, Philip Luckombe, The History and Art of Printing (London, 1771), 102; Thomas Curson Hansard, Typographia: An Historical Sketch of the Origin and Progress of the Art of Printing (London, 1825), 129.


saw Sutton’s publication of Dee’s Propaedeumata, on “the power of the heavenly bodies.” In the 120 aphorisms of his “Great demonstrative work on the New Art,” Dee set down the outlines of his innovative new astrological system, in a combination of astronomical theory and astrological practice, optimistically arguing for a mathematical, especially geometrical study of the influences operating on all things in the natural world.

Identifying Dee’s Greek sources

In addition to his call for observation of natural phenomena, it was also likely from the imposing Greek title of the Propaedeumata Aphoristica that Dee would make use of his linguistic abilities to provide newly rediscovered material in support of

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30 Shumaker, John Dee on Astronomy, 113.

his ideas from the writings of Greek antiquity; this is indeed the case, although he is surprisingly reticent about his sources. Thus it is that we have the inclusion, in Greek, of such quotes as,

CXIX. Χωρὶς τῆς κοσμικῆς συμπαθείας, τοῖς ανθρώποις οὐδὲν ἐπιγίνεται: ut nos Mercurius ille Termaximus docuit.

[Nothing happens to men without cosmic sympathy, as Thrice-Great Hermes has taught us.]32

This source turns out to be the second-century BCE Ἰατρομαθηματικὰ Ἑρμοῦ τοῦ Τρισμεγίστου πρὸς Ἀμμώνα Αἰγύπτιον (Iatromathematica of Hermes Trismegistos to Ammon the Egyptian).33 Other sources, unidentified until now, include the earliest surviving work on physiognomy, Ἀριστοτέλους Φυσιογνωμικά (the pseudo-Aristotelian Physiognomika);34 Ptolemy’s Τῶν πρὸς Σύρον ἀποτελεσματικῶν (the Apotelesmatica, better known as the Tetrabiblos);35 Ptolemy’s Καρπός (Centiloquium);36 and Alexander of Aphrodisias’s Περὶ Ἐἰμαρμενῆς (On Fate).37

The ultimate purpose of all this material is to “make smooth a broad way to a complete knowledge of astrology,”38 so that, armed with such knowledge, “a wise man … can drink in a most noble science for the purpose either of procuring good fortune or of removing bad, or contrariwise, as much for himself as for others.”39

Astrology is not, however, the only subject of interest in the Propaedeumata, as an attentive reader would note from the title page. After the extremely bland cover-page to the whole volume,40 Dee’s personal architectural title-page is striking. Dominating the centre of the page, flanked by Dee’s initials, is a symbol of particular significance in the history of occult philosophy, his Hieroglyphic Monad or London Seal of Hermes, composed of the symbols that represent the seven planets of the Ptolemaic cosmos in astronomy and astrology and the seven metals of transmutational

37 Shumaker, John Dee on Astronomy, 198; Alexander of Aphrodisius, Ad Imperatores De Fato et de eo quod in nostra potestate est (Zurich, 1824), chap. XXV, 78/80.
38 Shumaker, John Dee on Astronomy, 189: “amplissimam ... viam, ad perfectam Astrologiae sapientiam, sternes.”
39 Shumaker, John Dee on Astronomy, 197, Aphorism XCVIII: “Sapiens ... nobilissimam Scientiam haurire potest: sive de prosperis procurandis, sive removendis noxibus: vel e contra: tam sibi quam alius.”
40 Neither of the other works has its own cover page, indeed they appear in a different sequence from that given on the title page, with Wolf’s work preceding that by Leowitz, which starts on sig. D2r. Dee’s work begins with new pagination.
alchemy. Although Dee claims that it was first conceived in 1557, the Hieroglyph’s first appearance in public was on this very page, where it stands enclosed in a cartouche and flanked by a scroll which announces,

\[\Sigma T I A B O N \text{ [Stilbôn] acumine praeditus est instar omnium planetarum.}\]

[Mercury, endowed with a sting is the form of all the planets.]

In light of Dee’s tendency to play with words, numbers, and signs, suggestive of readings on different levels, a slight pun is likely here: playing on the word \textit{Acumen} as point, hook, sting, and mental shrewdness – divine Mercury being, after all, the herald of the gods. There is certainly a sting in the motto beneath the arch of his monument, Dee’s irascible challenge: “He who does not understand should either be silent or learn.”

Those who \textit{had} some learning would probably have known the term \textit{Stilbôn}, one of the Greek names for the planet Mercury, which literally translates as the “Gleaming” or “Glittering One,” from Cicero’s \textit{On the Nature of the Gods}, Aristotle’s \textit{On the World}, or indeed from Isidore of Seville’s \textit{Etymologies}. The astrologically inclined would have found it in Martianus Capella’s fifth-century \textit{De Nuptiis Philologiae et Mercurii} (On the Marriage of Philology and Mercury) or the \textit{De Astronomia} of Gaius Julius Hyginus (ca. 64 BCE–17 CE). In light of Dee’s evident fascination with hieroglyphs and the symbols representing both planets and metals, as well as his knowledge of Greek, it is possible that he was aware of the suggested derivation of the astrological and alchemical sign for Mercury from the first two letters of the Greek for \textit{Stilbôn}. The rays emanating from this hieroglyphic Monad anticipate Dee’s statement in the \textit{Propaedeumata}’s fourth aphorism, that,

\[\text{III. Whatever exists by action emits spherically upon the various parts of the universe rays which, in their own manner, fill the whole universe.}\]


42 Josten, “A Translation,” 86.

43 Cf. Shumaker, \textit{John Dee on Astronomy}, 103: “Mercury, endowed with a sting, is like all the planets.”


46 Cicero, \textit{De Natura Deorum} 2, 20, 53; Plutarch \textit{De facie} 925a; Aristotle, \textit{De mundo} 2 392a23.

47 Martianus Capellus, \textit{De nuptiis}, 8 851; Hyginus \textit{Astr.} 2, 42. fin. See Bruce Eastwood and Gerd Grasshoff, \textit{Planetary Diagrams for Roman Astronomy in Medieval Europe CA. 800–1500} (Philadelphia: American Philosophical Society, 2004), vol. 94, pt 3, 126: “Sed idem Stilbon, licet Solem ex diversis circulis continetur, ab eo tamen numquam ultra XXII (Ms. XXXII) partes poterit aberrare nec duobus signis absistere, nunc praeteriens, nunc consistens aut certe regrediens” (“This same Stilbon, though it accompanies the Sun in its varied epicycles, will never be able to depart from the Sun by more than 22 (Ms. 32) degrees of elongation; never will it be able to be two signs away, as at times it passes by the Sun, then comes to a halt, and then retrogresses”).


The primary recipients of these rays can be seen to be the Sun and Moon on the columns, to either side of the Monad. Dee informs us of their significance in aphorisms 103 and 104:

CIII. The Moon is the most powerful governor of moist things: it is the arouser and producer of humidity.50

CIII. [A] special dominion over vital heat accompanies the Sun’s excellent light.54

Their primary importance in astrology is reinforced a few lines down:

CVI. From these considerations, it is manifest that the Sun and Moon are, after God, the chief and truly physical causes of the procreation and preservation of all things that are born and live in the elemental universe.

To use the words of our philosopher [Ptolemy], “Everything is compounded and made to increase,” by heat and moisture.52

Hence, of course, the rays reaching up to the tops of both columns of the triumphal arch, to the two elemental qualities: Calidum (Hot), i.e. solar heat, and Humidum (Moist), lunar moisture. Two other rays reach down to the base of the columns, to the small images representing Terra and Aqua (Earth and Water). Thus we have the four traditional elements of natural philosophy, plus the sense of the Moon as mistress of moisture, so important for the theory and practice of iatromathematics, where the zodiacal position of the moon determines, for example, the time for bloodletting or for administering purgatives.53

Given the focus of the Propaedeumata on the powers of the stars, the curved pediment overhead is fittingly adorned with the stars of the firmament, and on the base of the archway scriptural warrant is provided for this interest in astrology with a biblical quotation from Luke 21:25: “And there shall be signs in the Sun, and in the Moon, and in the Stars.” This verse was common parlance amongst astrologers during the Renaissance and Reformation, introduced in the context of apocalyptic natural phenomena, anticipating the second coming and the end of days.54

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50 Shumaker, John Dee on Astronomy, 184–85: “LUNA, potentissima est humidarum rerum moderatrix: humiditatis-que excitatrix & effectrix.”
51 Shumaker, John Dee on Astronomy, 184–85: “Solis excellentem LUCEM, praecipuum vitalis caloris moderamen comitatur.”
52 Shumaker, John Dee on Astronomy, 184–85: “SOLEM & Lunam omnium in elementali mundo nascentium & viventium, tum procreationis tum conservationis, praecipuas (post Deum) & vere physicas esse causas, ex his fit manifestissimum. Per Calidum enim & Humidum, πάντα συγκρίνεται και αύξεται, (ut philosophi nostri verbis utar).”
Est in Mercurio

Nothing, however, is ever simple with Dee, for it quickly becomes apparent that his hieroglyphic Monad, and by extension the whole of the Propaedeumata, is a polysemous text, to be read on more than one level. A reader familiar with alchemical works would not have been surprised to learn of Dee’s association of the hieroglyphic Monad with the art of transmutation. This is clearly indicated on the title page by the phrase “Est in hac Monad quicquid quaerunt sapientes.” Here, in his declaration, “There is in this Monad whatever the Wise men seek,” Dee is paraphrasing the alchemical aphorism: “Est in Mercurio quicquid quaerunt sapientes,” that is, “There is in Mercury whatever the Wise men seek,” with Mercury or Quick-silver symbolising the primal (and ultimate) matter of the Philosophers’ Stone. The phrase was a favourite of many well-known figures in the history of alchemy: including pseudo-Raymund Lull, Bernard Trevisan, and Michael Maier (1568–1622), as well as those who, like Dee, were involved in both astronomy and alchemy, such as Tycho Brahe (1546–1601).55

We know from Dee’s own account that he read a vast amount of alchemical literature in the years preceding the composition of the Propaedeumata.56 He acquired his first alchemical text in 1551, and in 1556 recorded a list of no fewer than fifty-five “alchemical authors I read during July.”57 It is an impressive list and immediately provides us with sources for the “Est in Mercurio” quotation, which can be found, for example, in the Clangor Buccinae (The Trumpet’s Clangour), a work included in the 1550 collection De alchimia opuscula complura veterum philosophorum (Several Little Works of the Ancient Philosophers about Alchemy).58 The two-volume De alchimia is best known for including the famous sequence of alchemical images in the Rosarium Philosophorum (Rose-Garden of the Philosophers), which analogically represent alchemical operations through both the passionate love, union, death, and regeneration of the Sun and Moon and the mysteries of Christian religion: Christ’s resurrection and the Coronation of the Virgin.59 Dee shows that he read the Rosarium in July 1556, most likely this edition, which appears in his library catalogue.


58 De alchimia opuscula complura veterum philosophorum (Frankfurt, 1550), vol. 1, includes the Clangor. See fol. 28v: “Est in & in eo sunt omnia metallæ ut dicunt Philosophi. Versus. Mercurio quicquid quaerunt sapientes. Nam sub umbra sua viget haec substantia quinta.”

59 De alchimia opuscula (1550), vol. 2: Rosarium philosophorum. Secunda pars alchimiae de lapide philosophico vero modo praeparando, continens exactam eius scientiae progressionem. Cum figuris rei perfectionem ostenditibus, (Frankfurt, 1550), sigs. [Xiiij]v (Androgynæ); [Ziiij]v (Virgin); [aiij]v (Christ).
“Est in Mercurio” is quoted in another work in Dee’s catalogue, Janus Lacinius’s *Praeciosa ac Nobilissima Artis Chymiae Collectanea De Occultissimo ac praeciosissimo Philosophorum Lapide* (A Precious and Most Noble Collection of the Art of Chymistry Concerning the Most Hidden and Most Precious Philosophers’ Stone). The Calabrian Franciscan Janus Lacinius (Giano Lacinio) was already a popular name among alchemy enthusiasts for his 1546 edition of Petrus Bonus’s fourteenth-century *Pretiosa margarita novella* (New Pearl of Great Price), which contained the first printed alchemical image cycle, and which Dee evidently also read in July 1556. Bonus’s argument that alchemy, encompassing far more than metallic transmutation in the natural laboratory, was “partly natural and partly divine or supernatural,” that the Stone could only be known through divine inspiration or revelation, and that the alchemist should be a “pious illuminé,” would probably have appealed to Dee, who sustained his interest in the physico-chemical operations of laboratory alchemy alongside the practice of scrying in order to gain knowledge and advice from angels and spirits. On a visual level, it is also possible that Bonus’s diagrams in the *Pretiosa margarita novella* influenced the design of Dee’s hieroglyph, especially the image of the elemental qualities on the cross of matter (Figure 4) and the curious rod-like trees of the seven metals (Figure 5).

Dee may well have been happy with Sutton’s edition of the *Propaedeumata*. He may also have been pleased to see Sutton publish, the following year, *The Secretes of the Reverende Mayster Alexis of Piemount*, and an *Almanacke for the yeare 1559*, composed by *Mayster Mych. Nostrodamus Dr. of Phisicke* (London, 1559), even if Sutton tarnished his reputation by being fined four shillings in 1561 for printing it without license. I doubt whether the earnest Dr Dee would have been as impressed, however, with subsequent publications. In 1560 Sutton published the *Antiprognosticon contra inutiles astrologorum praedictiones, Nostrodami, Cuninghami, Loui, Hilli, Vaghami, et reliquorum omnium* of the English Puritan controversialist William Fulke (1538–89), followed in 1561 by an English translation: *Antiprognosticon, that is to saye, an invective agaynst the vayne and

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60 Janus Lacinius, *Praeciosa Ac Nobilissima Artis Chymiae Collectanea De Occultissimo ac praeciosissimo Philosophorum lapide* (Nuremberg, 1544), 28: “Est in Mercurio quicquid quaerunt sapientes. Nam sub umbra sua viget haec substantia quinta, propuer hoc, quia sua media substantia ut dicit Geber est incombustibilis. Nam illa quinta substantia, quae est in hoc Mercurio Philosophorum, figitur, & mutatur, quod ignem sustinet, & non fugit, sed perseverat in eo.”


63 The secrets of the reverende Mayster Alexis of Piemount: Conteyning many excellent remedies agaynst dyuers diseases, wounds, and other accidents, with the manner to make distillations, parfumes, confections, dyings, colours, fusions, and meltynges, trans. Wylyam Warde (London: Henry Sutton, 1559).

unprofitable predictions of the astrologians, as Nostrodame, &c. Dee, who was concerned about possible slights to his reputation for most of his life, perhaps felt encouraged to consider a change of publisher.

Silvius and the Devises héroiques

Whatever may have been the case with Sutton, Dee’s next major endeavour, another work bearing a Greek title – albeit not in Greek characters – the Monas Hieroglyphica was published not in London, but over the English Channel in the Low Countries city of Antwerp. As a work of typography, the Monas is a much more sophisticated piece of work than the Propaedeumata and it is easy to see how publications issuing from Willem Silvius’s print-shop, at the very beginning of his career as a publisher, would have caught Dee’s eye: works like the beautifully illustrated 1563 Principelijcke Devijsen, Silvius’s Dutch translation of the Devises héroiques (Heroic Devices, 1551; 1557) of the French emblematist Claude Paradin (1510–73). As an alchemist, Dee would surely have been attracted to the images of the Golden Fleece and the Phoenix; as a Christian Cabalist, to the device bearing the Hebrew divine name EL; and as both, to the image of the brazen serpent on the Cross, from Numbers 21:9.

Paradin’s popular work had, of course, been published in French and Latin editions by the Plantin Press in 1561 and 1562. It is clear that Silvius’s work continued to appeal to Dee long after the publication of the Monas, for we find in his library catalogue that he had a 1577 French edition of Nicolas de Nicolay’s Navigations, which the enterprising Silvius published in no fewer than four languages.

Hieroglyphic monad

Having looked at the title page of the Propaedeumata Aphoristica, let us now consider that of the Monas Hieroglyphica, published six years later in 1564 (Figure 6). While the Propaedeumata essentially implied two levels of reading, that is, the astrology and alchemy of “superior” and “inferior” astronomy, in the Monas Dee explicitly states at the start of his twenty-four theorems that there are four levels of exegesis: it is “Mathematicè, Magicè, Cabalisticè, Anagogicèque explicata.” With the word Mathematicè

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67 No copy of Paradin’s Devises is recorded in Dee’s Catalogue, although he does have a copy of Paradin’s Alliances Genealogiques des Rois et Princes de Gaule (Lyon: Jean de Tournes, 1561).
we should bear in mind not just Dee’s interest in Pythagorean arithmosophy, but the host of arts and sciences he associated with mathematics in the “Ground-plat of Mathematics” included in his Mathematicall Praeface.\textsuperscript{70}

One possible reason for this explicit engagement with additional levels of reading, including the cabalistic, is that in 1559 Dee received the Venetian alchemist Giovanni Agostino Pantheo’s novel combination of alchemy and Cabala, the *Voarchadumia contra alchimiam* (Voarchadumia against Alchemy; Venice, 1530) as a gift from Giovanni Baptista Agnelli (fl. 1560–77), another Venetian alchemist living in London.71 This copy survives in the British Library, with extensive annotations by Dee, including the discovery that his name, calculated in the values of one of the *Voarchadumia*’s occult alphabets, the “transitus fluvii” (Crossing of the River)

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adds up to the highly significant cabalistic number seventy-two, associated with the seventy-two names of God, seventy-two angelic powers, and so forth.\(^\text{72}\)

Some architectural elements in the Monas title page are the same, or similar, to those on the Propaedeumata title page. We again have a triumphal arch, serving as a grand entrance into the book, again surmounted by the stars of the firmament, beneath which appears the same irascible advice on the entablature’s frieze to be silent or learn. A biblical verse again stands at the foot of the archway, but this time, rather than the New Testament reference to the stars in Luke’s Gospel, it is a verse from the Old Testament, Genesis 27:28, Isaac’s blessing to Jacob: “May God give thee of the dew of heaven and of the fat of the earth.”\(^\text{73}\) This verse was popular with

\[\text{FIGURE 6} \quad \text{John Dee, Monas Hieroglyphica (Antwerp, 1564), frontispiece. Courtesy of the Ritman Library, Amsterdam.}\]


\(^{73}\) “De rore caeli, et pinguedine terrae, det tibi Deus.” According to Glyn Parry, Dee presented Landgrave Wilhelm of Hessen-Kassel with his new Latin pamphlet, “About God’s Secrets and Mighty Works, called in the Apocalypse Alpha and Omega,” the first page of which bore Dee’s Hieroglyphic Monad, with the same alchemical verse from Genesis 27:28 that appeared on the title page of the Monas; Parry, Arch-Conjuror of England, 195. Dee would probably have been familiar with the alchemo-cabalistic reflections of the Franciscan friar Francesco Giorgi (1466–1540)
alchemists, who generally interpreted it as speaking of the two main medieval ingredients of the Philosophers’ Stone: watery Mercury of the Philosophers, as the dew of heaven, and fiery, unctuous Sulphur, the fat of the earth. Dee would have been able to find a description of Sulphur as the fat of the earth in that most famous of medieval authorities on laboratory alchemy, Geber’s *Summa Perfectionis*, published, for example, in Guglielmo Gratarolo’s *Verae alchemiae artisque metallicae, citra aenigmata, doctrina* (The Not-so-Enigmatic Doctrines of True Alchemy and the Metallic Art), which, needless to say, he had in his library.75 As on the *Propaedeumata* title page, the Sun and Moon are prominent on the framing pillars, this time, though, with the words for the elements Fire and Air above, and pictures for Earth and Water below.

The Greek word *Stilbón* recurs, contained within a ribbon entwined around the Hieroglyphic Monad, though in a slightly different phrase from that in the *Propaedeumata*. Here we read “ΣΤΙΛΒΩΝ [Stilbón] acumine stabili consummatus, omnium planetarum parens, et rex fit,” that is, “Mercury becomes the parent and king of all the planets when made perfect by a stable pointed hook.”76 It is difficult to imagine nowadays how provocative this must have sounded, but the claim that Mercury becomes ruler and parent of all the other planets would have sounded outrageous to any astronomer. Johannes Kepler, for instance, would immediately argue that the “Rex Planetarum” is the Sun.77 Admittedly, if we take Dee to be talking about both superior and inferior astronomy, i.e. astrology and alchemy, the statement sounds less extreme. Taking *Stilbón* as alchemical Quicksilver or Mercury of the philosophers, the primal matter and hence parent of all metals, would make perfect sense to alchemically literate readers. The fact that this Mercury is made stable or fixed by the pointed hook of fiery Aries would also accord well with at least some alchemical literature, with fiery sulphur participating in the fixation of primal mercury into the sought-after gold.78

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73 *Continued*

concerning this verse in *De harmonia mundi* (Venice, 1525), II, 7, iv and xviii, where he interprets the dew as divine grace and as a symbol for the Tetragrammaton. See Frances A. Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment* (London: Routledge, 1972; repr. 2007), 45–46, where she points out that the Rosicrucian *Confessio Fraternitatis* (Kassel, 1615) first appears with a work based on Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica*, the *Consideratio Brevis*, which includes the same verse from Genesis 27 on the verso of its title page. See *Rosarium Philosophorum* (1550), sig. [K.iiij]r for an image labelled “Ablutio vel Mundificatio,” depicting the dew of heaven falling down on the alchemical hermaphrodite, with the words: “Hie feld der Tauw von Himmel herab/ Unnd wascht den schwartzen leyb im grab ab.”

74 See, for example, the *Mutus Liber* (1677), with its title page image of Jacob resting his head on a stone (by implication, the Philosophers’ Stone), where Genesis 27:28 is printed in reverse. Susanna Åkerman notes the Danish alchemist Olaus Borrichius’s discussion of Genesis 27: Susanna Åkerman, “Three Phases of Inventing Rosicrucian Tradition in the Seventeenth Century,” in *The Invention of Sacred Tradition*, ed. James Lewis and Olav Hammer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 158–76, at 169. See also Hermann Fictuld (ca. 1700–ca. 1777), *Abhandlung von der Alchymie, under derselben Gewißheit* (Erlangen 1754), 178.


76 Josten, “A Translation,” 113, slightly modified.

77 Johannes Kepler, *Astronomi Opera omnia*, ed. Ch. Frisch (Frankfurt 1870), vol. 8, pt 1, 267: “Rex planetarum a motu, mundi Cor a virtute.”

78 See Principe, *Secrets of Alchemy*, 17, discussing Zosimos: “when the vapor of sulfur turns mercury into a solid, not only does the mercury lose its volatility and become fixed (that is, nonvolatile), but the sulfur also becomes fixed and remains combined with the mercury.” See also Johann Joachim Becher, *Chymischer Glücks-Hafen* (1726), 387, “Figu-rung auf den Mercurium.”
We know that in the Monas its hieroglyph is explained as a combination of the symbol for the planet Mercury above and the zodiacal sign Aries below. The two horns of the ram Aries form the hook or point at the base of the hieroglyph. Aries, the first sign of the Fiery Triplicity in the zodiac, on one level stands for the fire of the alchemical Art of Fire. Dee makes it clear that this is one thing that he has in mind in Theorem 10:

**Theorem 10** We have added the astronomical sign of Aries, therefore, to signify that (in the practice of this monad) the aid of fire is required.

Dee possibly also had another popular motto of the alchemists in mind: “Ignis et Azoth tibi sufficiant” (Fire and Azoth are enough for you). Azoth is a code name for Philosophical Mercury, again yielding that combination of Mercury and Fire. A manuscript that once belonged to Dee, now in the Mellon Collection at Yale, shows those terms written in the margin in his hand. Yet another possible interpretation is that Aries stands for fiery Sulphur, in which case the two medieval ingredients of the Philosophers’ Stone are present in Dee’s hieroglyph.

Some alchemists, such as Dee’s younger contemporary Michael Maier, physician and counsellor to Emperor Rudolf II in Prague, had an interest in mythoalchemy, that is, in the interpretation of classical mythology as if it contained alchemical secrets. Such readers would doubtless make the association with the story of the Golden Fleece, with Aries being the Ram’s fleece, guarded by the Dragon, Mercury. Although no convincing explanation has ever been offered for the numbers connected with the ribbon on the right hand side of the Monas title page, it is suggestive that the numbers one to four connect with the letters I – A – S – N; indeed the number four appears above the two letters “ON,” allowing for the speculation that Dee is alluding to the well-known myth of Jason and the Argonauts. If so, could the pair of letters connected with the other numbers one and four below, that is A and V, be the initials of Aureum Vellus, that is, the Golden Fleece?

The Monas Hieroglyphica title page contains other new elements. One of the most obvious is the appearance of an oval, egg-shaped cartouche surrounding the hieroglyph, of significance to both astronomers and alchemists. In Theorem Eighteen, where Dee explicitly states that “celestial astronomy is like a parent and teacher

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81 On Azoth as Quicksilver, see Martin Ruland, *Lexicon Alchemiae* (Frankfurt-am-Main, 1612), 96.

82 Yale University Library, Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library, Mellon MS 12, “A Collection of alchemical texts attributed to Lull, with additional matter,” fol. 174r.


to *Astronomia inferior*, i.e. alchemy,” we learn that “it is well known to astronomers that Mercury on his course in the ether performs an oval orbit.”

In the very same theorem, moving as it were from observatory to laboratory, Dee voices what sounds like a Paracelsian scorn for empirics, who lack theory, and literalists, who interpret all alchemical texts at face value, declaring that “the most wretched alchemists” may “hence take admonishment and learn to recognize their various errors. May those very inexperienced impostors in their desperation hereby understand what is the water of the white of eggs, what the oil from the yolks, and what the chalk of eggs and many more things like these.” Notwithstanding his interest in the cosmological ideas of Copernicus, Dee provides a diagram of a particularly Ptolemaic—and inverted—cosmic egg, with the sun firmly in the centre, in the oil or yellow of the yolk, together with Venus and Mars, the planets most subject to its influence; and the rest of the planets, those most subject to a lunar influence placed in the watery white of the egg. The symbolism, again, is fairly obvious: the white of the egg representing the aqueous mercurial moisture of the moon, the yolk the fiery sulphurous liquid or oil of the Sun. As for the chalky earthy shell, in Dee’s interpretation, that is dissolved by heat and subsequently compounded with the white and yolk by repeated “rotation.”

Another notable addition to the title-page is the introduction of zodiac signs. Above the Hieroglyphic Monad, a Crab represents Cancer, Dee’s own birth sign, the sign ruled by the Moon, which is conveniently positioned immediately below the Crab, as the lunar “horns” of the hieroglyph (Figure 7, left). At the opposite, pointed end of the egg, close to the hieroglyph’s “pointed hook,” a Lion represents Leo, ruled by the Sun. This pairing of Lunar Cancer and Solar Leo symbolises the union of the Sun and Moon (Gold and Silver or Sulphur and Mercury in medieval alchemy). On the left is the Ram’s head, symbolising Aries and the sign in which the Sun is exalted. On the right is the Bull of Taurus, the sign in which the Moon is exalted. Dee emphasises the astrological significance of his hieroglyph, showing how it contains the signs for Aries and Taurus (Figure 7, right). Not all alchemists were astrologers, but a significant number did attempt to align their alchemical practices with the stars. A clear instance of this is the *Mutus Liber* (“Silent Book”; La Rochelle, 1677), which includes an engraving of alchemists collecting celestial dew (Figure 8). In the heavens the Sun is visible, top


86 Josten, “A Translation,” 177.


89 French, *John Dee*, 213.

90 See Forshaw, “Chemistry, That Starry Science.”
left, and the Moon, top right, while on the ground, behind the alchemists, a Ram can be seen facing a Bull. This denotes the astrological exaltations of both luminaries, the Sun in Aries and the Moon in Taurus, when they are at the height of their powers, as the perfect time to commence the alchemical work.

Returning to the Monas title page, we have not one but two Mercuries reclining at the top of the image, above the hieroglyph. They represent two zodiac signs, both ruled by the planet Mercury: Gemini and Virgo.\(^\text{91}\) What Dee presents, then, is the sequence of the first half of the zodiac: Aries, Taurus, Gemini, Cancer, Leo, Virgo. Anyone familiar with astrology will recognise that these relate to the planets Sun, Moon, Mercury, Venus, and Mars, and related metals (gold, silver, quicksilver, copper, and iron), while realising that there are no zodiac signs connected with the two outermost planets of the Ptolemaic system, Jupiter and Saturn (alchemical tin and lead), which are conspicuous by their absence. Although Dee is silent about this, he is far more forthcoming about the significance of the two main luminaries, the Sun and Moon. In Theorem Fourteen he cites the Emerald Tablet attributed to Hermes Trismegistus:

> Theorem XIII. It has already clearly been proved that this whole magisterial work depends upon the Sun and Moon, a fact of which a long time ago thrice great Hermes admonished us, when he asserted that the Sun is its father and the Moon its mother, and we know that it is nourished in Lemnian earth by lunar and solar rays which exert a singular influence around it.\(^\text{92}\)

**Astrological speculation on the birth of a book**

I would like to conclude with a little speculation concerning the influence of “lunar and solar rays” on the composition of the Monas, and why Dee so

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\(^\text{91}\) It is tempting to argue that their placement in Dee’s title-page is a quiet joke shared between Dee and his printer, as an echo of Silvius’s own printer’s device with two cherubs lounging in a similar pose.

\(^\text{92}\) Lemnian earth was the most popular medicinal earth. Henry William Bristow, *A Glossary of Mineralogy* (London, 1861), 213: “We learn from Dioscorides that the Lemnian Earth was considered sacred, and that only the priests were allowed to meddle with it. They mixed it with goat’s blood, and then made it into cakes, upon which the impression of a seal was added, with great ceremonies.”
carefully noted the dates of the beginning and end of its composition. At the conclusion of the work he says that he ended “his labours peacefully on the 25th day of January which he had begun on the 13th day of that month.” Dee was a man steeped in astrology, and so specific a set of dates encourages consultation of an Ephemeris for the year 1564. Dee’s library catalogue shows that he possessed a copy of the 1557 edition of the Ephemeridum Novum of Cyprian Leowitz, author of the Brevis et perspicua ratio published with Dee’s Propaedeuma in 1558.

The data for the days in question is intriguing, at least. On the day that Dee started writing the Monas, 13 January 1564, the Moon was conjunct the Sun in Aquarius, and that conjunction was opposite a conjunction of Saturn and Jupiter in Leo.

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95 Roberts and Watson, John Dee’s Library Catalogue, entry 234.
The conjunction of the Sun and Moon is, of course, the symbol for the
“Chemical Wedding,” and hence for the alchemical production of the Philosophers’
Stone.97

The coming together of Jupiter and Saturn is immensely important in astrology,
for it represents one of the “Great Conjunctions.” The theory of Great Conjunctions had reached the West through translations of the works of Arab philosophers, the most influential being the De magnis coniunctionibus (Concerning the Great Conjunctions) of the ninth-century astrologer Albumasar (Abu Ma’shar). His treatise presented the idea of a universal history couched in an astrological framework, where conjunctions of the two outermost planets in the Ptolemaic cosmos, Saturn and Jupiter, defined world ages. In Arabic astrology, Saturn and Jupiter are jointly responsible for religion, prophecy, empires, kingdoms, and dynasties.98 Their conjunctions occur approximately every twenty years, cyclically effecting changes in religious beliefs, the rise and fall of empires, victories and losses in war.99 Different events take place depending on the zodiac sign in which a particular conjunction occurs, and to which element the sign belongs.

Dee was definitely interested in this theory; indeed, he owned the 1564 De coniunctionibus magnis insignioribus superiorum planetarum ... expositione (Exposition on the Extremely Remarkable Great Conjunctions of the Superior Planets) by one of the most influential Renaissance exponents of this universal astrology, Leowitz. I cannot say, for sure, what might be the significance for Dee of a Great Conjunction in Leo, other than a rather glib suggestion that Leo was ruled by the Sun and hence symbolised philosophical Gold, or perhaps the completion of the “Operation of the Sun” mentioned in the final line of the Emerald Tablet. On a more profound level, the Islamic astrologer Masha’allah (ca. 740–815), in his On Conjunctions, Religions, and Peoples, argued that the Great Conjunction in Leo in 26 BCE heralded the rise of a new force: the birth of Christ and the emergence of Christianity.100 Bearing in mind the inclusion on the Propaedeumata’s title page of the verse from the Gospel of Luke, often connected with the Second Coming, perhaps this adds further significance to the date. Could one implication of the absence of the planets Jupiter and Saturn from the Monas title page be that, in the Monas, they are to be understood less on an alchemical level than on an astrological or chronosophical level? It could also be that Dee wanted to place more overt emphasis on the conjunction of the Sun and Moon, while at the same

97 Dee’s hieroglyphic monad in fact appears on the wedding invitation in the Rosicrucian Chymische Hochzeit (Strasbourg, 1616), 5.
time making his readers wonder about the significant absence of the two outer planets.¹⁰¹

As for the date of the completion of the Monas Hieroglyphica, 25 January, the astrological aspects are at first glance less dramatic, with the Moon in a relatively benign sextile to Mars.¹⁰² If we look, however, at the positions of planets in signs rather than at the planetary relationships, and bear in mind the relationship between “superior” planets and “inferior” metals, we will see that Dee started writing his work when the Sun was in three degrees Aquarius and completed it when Mercury was in exactly the same position twelve days later. During the process of Dee’s writing, that celestial position of three degrees Aquarius had been occupied first by the Sun and Gold, then by Mercury – the symbol of Dee’s Hieroglyphic Monad.

Conclusion

Dee’s typographically elaborate frontispieces advertised themselves (and their author) as sophisticated, occult, and deeply learned in multiple fields of knowledge. Dee displayed his skills and showcased his abilities on many levels, particularly so in the Monas Hieroglyphica, with its claims to be “Mathematicè, Magicè, Cabalisticè, Anagogicèque explicata.” In intellectually synaesthetic combinations of humanist Greek, Pythagorean arithmosophy, Euclidean geometry, and Ptolemaic astronomy, conjoined with the arcane mysteries of alchemy, astrology, magic, and Cabala, he presented material that challenged his readers to puzzle out meaning from minutiae. These ranged from anatomised words and permutations of geometries, to letters that turn into numbers, and shapes that become sounds. Imaginative participation in (and speculation on) Dee’s ludic delight in such verbal and visual conceits helps us to read his polysemous frontispieces – and the works they introduce – as he, perhaps, intended. They also offer new insight into the inception and birth of the best known and most enigmatic work of a hermetic philosopher who reduced his name to a single letter, a number, a geometrical shape; in short, a monad: Δ.

Notes on contributor

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¹⁰¹ My thanks to the anonymous peer-reviewer who noted a parallel to Dee’s starting date for the work in Marsilio Ficino’s deliberate postponing of the publication of his translation of Plato until 1484, the year of another Great Conjunction. See James Hankins, Plato in the Italian Renaissance (Leiden: Brill, 1991, I, 301-4).

¹⁰² On the significance of Mars sextile Moon, see Wolfgang Hildebrand, Ein neues außerlesen Planeten-Buch (Erfurt, 1613), sig. [liv]: “An diesem Tage ist gut mit Beschlichshabern/ oder Häuptleuten des Krieges zu handeln/ mit Reutern und Landsknechten/ umbgeben/ und zuschicken. Item/ Kriegsvolk annemen/ und inn Krieg ziehen/ Musterung halten/ Faldtlager auffsclagen/ ist auch gut im Fewr arbeiten mit der Alchimey/ wer sie wol gelernt hat.”
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