

A Problem of Authorship: John Dee, Edward Kelley, and the 'Angelic Conversations' more

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Ross Christopher Feldman



DR. JOHN DEE




EDWARD KELLEY

Abstract

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This paper takes an in-depth look at the question of authorship of Dr. John Dee's 'Angelic Conversations,' the private transcriptions of sessions conducted between 1581-1589 in which Dee purportedly made contact with spiritual beings through his 'scryer' or spirit medium, Edward Kelley. Particular focus is placed on Kelley's role; this paper examines whether it was possible for Kelley to have perpetrated the entire affair as a hoax, the difficulties involved, and motivations he might have had for doing so. The paper will show what resources were available to Kelley, and whether these would have enabled him to have tricked Dee into believing the two men were receiving genuine communications from angels. I also examine the evidence as to whether Dee, one of the most educated men in England at the time, could have been fooled by such a hoax, and if so, why. The paper looks at the magical system received in the 'Conversations' in relation to earlier magical texts such as the Solomonian primaires, the writings of Aecinna and

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tury and extending through the ‘occult explosion’ and ‘New Age’ of the late twentieth century to today, these writers, like the academic community, have taken Dee’s spiritualism at face value (while deliberately downplaying or even ignoring his religious viewpoint), with the popular writers presenting Dee’s magical opus from the perspective of believers in such matters, and the scholars with skepticism. Neither has thus far examined to any major extent the question of authorship of these purported spirit communications. Although Peter French and others have offered the image of Dee as a foolish old duffer being manipulated by a scheming Kelley, they do not seem to have actually performed any research into the issue to provide evidence for their claims. By conducting a comprehensive investigation of the subject, this paper hopes to clear up at least some of the mystery surrounding this significant aspect of Dee’s life.


The field of research into Dee’s life and his writing has expanded recently, growing far beyond the early attempts of writers like Edward Arthur Waite and Charlotte Fell Smith a century ago. In particular, significant scholarly studies have been conducted in recent years by Clucas, Clulee, Harkness, Sherman, Szönyi, Szulakowska, and others. In addition to providing significant material for research into, and theories around, the role of mysticism and millennialism in the dawn of the Early Modern period, Dee’s life and writing has had a direct impact upon esotericism that still persists today. His work has influenced—one might go so far as to say catalyzed—a number of occultist efflorescences, from the Rosicrucian adventure in the seventeenth century to the occult revival of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries as witnessed by the growth of such groups as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (where the main emphasis in the Second or ‘inner’ Order was use of Dee’s “Enochian Magick”) and their various progeny in twentieth and twenty-first century occultism.

The research for this paper relies upon both primary and secondary sources. I begin by placing Dee and Kelley within their historical background, tracing the life of each prior to the beginning of their collaboration, a brief overview of their work together, and their lives after their parting of ways. Having outlined some of the themes running through the ‘Angelic Conversations,’ the paper turns to an examination of the resources available to Kelley in such an endeavor. The succeeding section then examines in depth the types of material received. These fall broadly into the categories of prophecies, personal admonishments, and a complex, but for the most part coherent, magical system. I next examine theories of authorship, one of which is the hypothesis regarding deliberate deception perpetrated by Kelley upon Dee. This leads to an investigation of possible motives on the part of Kelley to commit a deception of this magnitude, and potential motives on Dee’s part for acquiescing in it. The paper examines Dee’s records of the ‘Conversations,’ looking for evidence for and against the hypothesis of fraud on Kelley’s part, and the ease or difficulty of such an effort. Concluding with a summary of findings, the paper reviews the argument for the viability of the hypothesis and the viability of competing explanations.


By conducting this inquiry into the authorship of the ‘Angelic Conversations,’ I hope to demonstrate the previously underestimated role of Edward Kelley, and to add in some meaningful way to the growing body of knowledge around John Dee and his work.

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