

**GYÖRGY E. SZÖNYI**

***John Dee's Occultism.***

***Magical Exaltation through Powerful Signs.***

Albany, NY: SUNY Series in Western Esoterism, 2004.

Pp. 330, + 32 illustrations.

## SUMMARY

The primary subject matter of this book is the magic of John Dee, the famous mathematician and the 'conjuror of Queen Elizabeth'. His character seemed a suitable focus for re-searching Renaissance occultism because his career and works well demonstrate the various sides of this complex phenomenon. His connections with Central Europe, at the same time, justify why a scholar from Hungary chooses him as an anchor for his presentation of early modern magical symbolism.

A number of heterogeneous topics meet in the book, but there is a connecting link, which, according to the author's intention, provides coherence to the treatment. This is the ideology of *exaltatio*, that is the deification of man, which Szönyi sees as an important intellectual foundation of magic, a foundation that up to today validates magical aspirations and their scholarly research. The author also argues that it was the desire for *exaltatio* which framed and tied together the otherwise diversified thought and activities of John Dee. Szönyi gives a definition of *exaltatio* in relation to magic in the chapters under the heading DEFINITIONS. The following two parts of the book operate with different methodologies. After the Introduction, the chapters of the second part entitled "INPUT: 'In many bokes and sundry languages...'", analyse a selection of "eminent" magical texts – all in the possession of Dee according to his library catalogue. Although these texts were all known to Dee, Szönyi's aim is not simply to offer a review of his sources. As New Historicism and related recent trends angrily rejected the positivistic ideals of source hunting, he also thinks that what needs to be grasped here is the complex and often paradoxical interdependence of cultural and ideological inclinations and appropriations. In this section he disregards the chronology of Dee's intellectual "development," instead, he has chosen to present the ingredients of the ideology of magic according to the chronology of European cultural history. The fact that Dee absorbed ancient, medieval and renaissance lores in a particular order and that his thought became composed of different layers of high and popular culture will become meaningful in the following part of the book, entitled "OUTPUT: 'AGlyms or Beame of Radicall Truthes'." Here Dee's works are revisited, following the order in which he wrote them, from his early scientific treatises to his most voluminous body of writings, the spiritual diaries, or as he called them the *Libri mysteriorum*.

As for the methodological background of the book: textual interpretation is complemented by various historical approaches, including the history of mentality, historical anthropology and comparative religion, touching upon various subtexts and contexts. The chapters dealing with "Dee and the interpretive community" highlight an as yet little explored aspect of studies. Here Szönyi connects the magical program to its psycho-sociological and politico-ideological contexts, using concepts such as patronage, self-fashioning, and techniques of identifying "the Other." Some of these chapters deal with East-Central Europe, since this is the territory where the Hungarian author might offer unique information to Western readers.

**About the author:** GYÖRGY E. SZÖNYI (1952), since 1998, is the director of the Institute of English & American Studies at the University of Szeged, Hungary and since 2006 professor of intellectual history at the Central European University, Budapest. He is a cultural- and literary historian with special interest 1/ in the Renaissance, 2/ the role of the occult in early modern literature/culture and in modern fiction, 3/ in cultural theory, especially in cultural symbolization and the relationship of words and images.

He graduated from the University of Szeged majoring in English and Hungarian (1977, dr. univ. 1981, PhD 1993, habilitation 2000, doctor of the Hungarian Academy of Sciences 2004), in the 1980s also pursued studies of Polish philology at the University of Budapest.



His recent books (monographs and editions) include *Gli Angeli di John Dee* (Rome: Tre Editori, 2004); *Pictura & Scriptura. 20<sup>th</sup>-Century Theories of Cultural Representations* (in Hungarian, Szeged, 2004); *John Dee's Occultism* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2005). He has also edited among others: *European Iconography East & West* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996); *The Iconography of Power: Ideas and Images of Rulership on the English Renaissance Stage* (with Rowland Wymer, Szeged: JATEPress, 2000); *The Iconography of the Fantastic. Eastern and Western Traditions of European Iconography 2* (with Márta Baróti-Gaál and Attila Kiss, Szeged: JATEPress, 2002); *"Not of an age, but for all time": Shakespeare across Lands and Ages. A Festschrift for Holger Klein* (with Sabine Coelsch-Foisner, Wien: Braumüller Verlag, 2004); "The Voices of the English Renaissance," Special Issue of *Hungarian Journal of English and American Studies* 11.1 (2005).

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