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Issue 39

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## The Mercurial Spy: Charles Sledd and the Sloane Alchemical Notebooks

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The British Library's Sloane collection includes a series of thirty-four notebooks,<sup>1</sup> predominantly concerned with alchemical and medical topics, compiled by an anonymous diarist sometime around the end of the sixteenth century. The notebook manuscripts in question have been most comprehensively studied by Anke Timmermann and David Evett. Evett's contribution focuses especially on six of the notebooks that include a series of programs for the execution of allegorical paintings more concerned with social and political themes than iatrochemistry.<sup>2</sup> The only direct clue to the compiler's identity is the initials "C. S." inscribed on a page pertaining to one of the aforementioned allegories.<sup>3</sup> However, copious circumstantial evidence points to a strong possibility that C. S. is, in fact, Charles Sledd, apothecary, anti-Catholic spy and informer for Francis Walsingham at home and abroad, and sometime acquaintance of John Dee. In what follows, I will lay out some evidence for this identification.

The man variously identified as Charles Sledd, Sled, or Slade appears to have lived, consecutively, two starkly contrasting lives. Based on his familiarity with one Robert Barrett, a fellow spy and runaway merchant's apprentice, late of London, whom he engaged during his undercover reconnaissance in Rome, it has been speculated that Sledd may have been similarly indentured to a mercantile guild in London in the early 1570s.<sup>4</sup> In 1579–80 he was in Rome at the behest of Francis Walsingham, spying on English Catholics and reporting on their various activities and machinations, including their instigation of the Pope to send Spanish troops to join the Second Desmond Rebellion in Ireland.<sup>5</sup> Sledd's account of this sojourn is recorded in British Library, MS Additional 48029.<sup>6</sup> The French provenance of the manuscript paper suggests that this may in fact be Sledd's autograph copy, compiled shortly before or soon after his return to England; however, as Stephen Alford has observed, there is no confirmed sample of his handwriting against which to compare it.<sup>7</sup> Unfortunately, the text in MS Add. 48029 is also in an affected secretary hand, complicating attempts to match it with the handwriting of the Sloane notebooks of C. S.<sup>8</sup>

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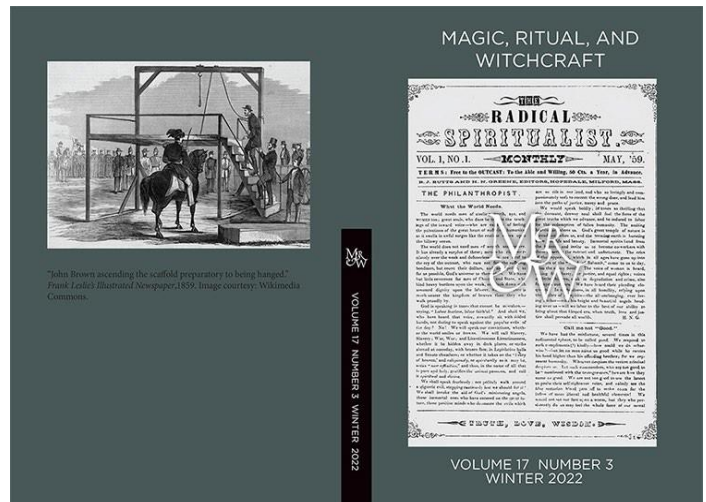
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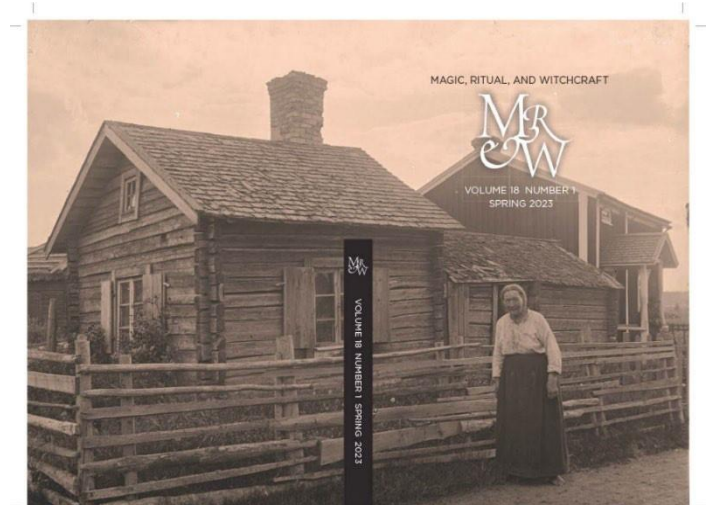
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### *The Mercurial Spy, cont'd*

Perhaps as something of a benefice in recognition of his work abroad, Sledd appears to have been given free rein to scour London for Catholic priests in the years immediately following his return, apparently plundering their goods. One priest, Robert Persons, wrote frantically to the rector of the English College in Rome that Sledd "...has authority from the royal council to break into all men's houses as he will and to search all places...wherever there is a gleam of hope of booty."<sup>9</sup> As Alford notes, the agents operating under Thomas Phelippes, Walsingham's spymaster, were not terribly well remunerated directly,<sup>10</sup> so incentives must have taken other forms. Besides seized assets, we know that Sledd was also granted some real estate in order to support himself once his notoriety had made it impracticable to continue his career as a spy and informant:

On a particular [for a lease in reversion] drawn up in 1582, [Francis] Walsingham wrote to [Chancellor of the Exchequer, Walter] Mildmay: 'The bearer, Charles Sledd, is one who hathe by his payne and travell aswell beiond sea as at home byn a principall meane to discover the practices of most of the lewde Jesuites and seminaries, for their better apprehention, wherebie he hathe incurred such hatred of that sorte, as he can not without danger of his lief continew his vacacen and trade of marchandiz as heretofore he hathe employed him self.'<sup>11</sup>

Although Walsingham may well be speaking euphemistically of Sledd's "trade of marchandiz"

here, it is not implausible, in light of the circumstantial evidence for his apprenticeship with a mercantile guild, that he had once been publicly associated with such a profession.

Material rewards notwithstanding, Sledd appears never to have been wealthy, and Alford questions the possible motives of a man he describes as "so passionately driven" in his work of espionage.<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Sledd's own report of his "work" in Rome is peppered with stereotypical but strident anti-Papist rhetoric. He accounts himself "As a traviler...desyerous to lerne languages & also to see the naturall enclynations and dispositions of strainge & forayne contryes with their inhabytes...comittinge my only truste in Jesus Christe...& not to the abyomible [*sic*] abuses of Poperye,"<sup>13</sup> neatly encompassing both the anti-Catholic sentiment and scholarly preoccupations which reveal themselves again, severally, in the Sloane notebooks. For instance, one of the allegorical programs in Sloane MS 1041, evidently illustrating one or more of the contemporary plots against Queen Elizabeth, decries "most wycked & odyouse traytores," compares them to the Antichrist, and lays their doings at the feet of "the holy howse of Spayne."<sup>14</sup>

Sledd was still being called upon to testify against English priests whom he had formerly convinced of his Catholic sympathies as late as February of 1584,<sup>15</sup> but he seems to exit the public record soon thereafter. However, it is in 1582, around the time that he was availing himself of Walsingham's largess in one form or another, that we first find documentary evidence of Sledd's acquaintance with Dr. John Dee of Mortlake. On 10 September of that year, Dee writes in his diary that he "requested Mr. Charles Sled [*sic*] to help [John Leonard Haller] to make his money over to Paris and Nuremberg, and to help him with the searcher of Rye to pass his horse: and to help him with Mr. Osborn the Alderman with his letters to Constantinople."<sup>16</sup> It is unknown precisely how Dee may have come to know Sledd, aside from the fact that both men were well and truly caught in the orbit of Walsingham's government, but facilitating the navigation of checkpoints, as well as the dispatch of funds and documents, between England and the Continent would have been a task well within the competence of someone with Sledd's background.

The relationship was not without its turbulent patches. In Dee's *Mysteriorum Libri Quinque*—that is, his transcript of some of the prophetic communications received by Edward Kelley and himself during their crystal scrying experiments—he records the



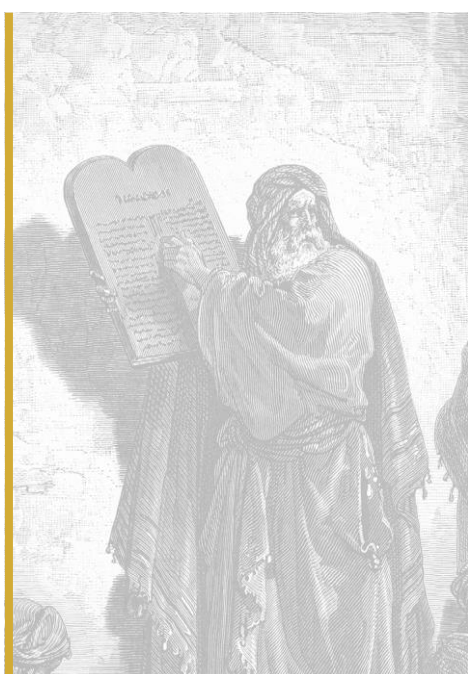
following for 5 April, 1583 “A Voyce:—Serue God and take hede of Nettels. Δ: This was spoken to EK in respect of a great anger he was-in yesternight, by reason that one had done him inurie in speche at my table. [Charles Sled.]”<sup>17</sup> Tensions were evidently still high a couple of months later, as Dee inquired of another spiritual interlocutor, “Concerning Charles Sled, his nose gushing out with blood twice (yesternight and this morning) upon my charitable instructions giving him to virtue and godliness: meaneth he well toward me?” The reply of the angel Galvah, “The evil spirit that posseseth him was cast out of him, even at his nose. Trouble me no more with him,”<sup>18</sup> if perhaps tersely reassuring, unfortunately did not signal a final end to hostilities, as on 24 August, 1584, Dee, now in Prague, writes: “At noon this day I received letters from the Lord Laski, from my wife, and from my brother Nicholas Fromonds in England: how Mr. Gilbert, Mr. Sled, and Mr. Andreas Fremonsheim my bookseller used me very ill in

divers sorts.”<sup>19</sup> This is almost certainly at least partly in reference to the named parties’ pillaging of Dee’s library in his absence, and, as we shall see, it is Dee’s library that forms one of the signal links between the identities of Charles Sledd the spy, and C. S., the author of the Sloane notebooks.

The content of the notebooks consists overwhelmingly of excerpts from medical and alchemical texts, arranged in a manner to facilitate practical reference.<sup>20</sup> The compiler was assembling a reference library of diseases, diagnostics, and treatments, drawn from specialized treatises by a wide array of medical authorities, and intended for use; his work is not to be confused with the quotidian commonplacing of the typical householder.<sup>21</sup> The strictly alchemical citations are no less extensive or practically-oriented, with notes on minerals, metals,

transmutatory processes, and the manufacture of gold.<sup>22</sup> Copying all of these sources, many of them still only available in manuscript form at the time, would have entailed gaining access to numerous private collections.<sup>23</sup> The compiler must surely have been a person of stature within the English intellectual milieu of his day—or one possessing social gravitas by virtue of some other ascribed authority—in order to manage this. Timmermann has observed that “the most likely candidate owning all the alchemica our physician’s heart could desire was the polymath John Dee; however, there is no evidence that these two men exchanged books or ideas.”<sup>24</sup> Of course, if the C. S. of the notebooks is Dee’s occasional visitor Charles Sled[d], who may have even liberated a number of Dee’s volumes for his own use at some point circa 1583–4, this evidentiary gap disappears.

**Cont’d on page 5**



## Call for essays for future newsletters

We invite proposals for essays to run in future issues of the newsletter. We are looking for short essays (1500-2500 words) announcing new developments deriving from research in the study and teaching of magic and its related topics. We are interested in relevant articles dealing with all regions and time periods.

We are also looking for smaller pieces, such as interviews or announcements for our notes and queries column. News about dissertations in progress or completed, manuscript discoveries, or other such items are welcomed.

Send your proposals to the editors at [newsletters@societasmagica.org](mailto:newsletters@societasmagica.org)

## *The Mercurial Spy, cont'd*

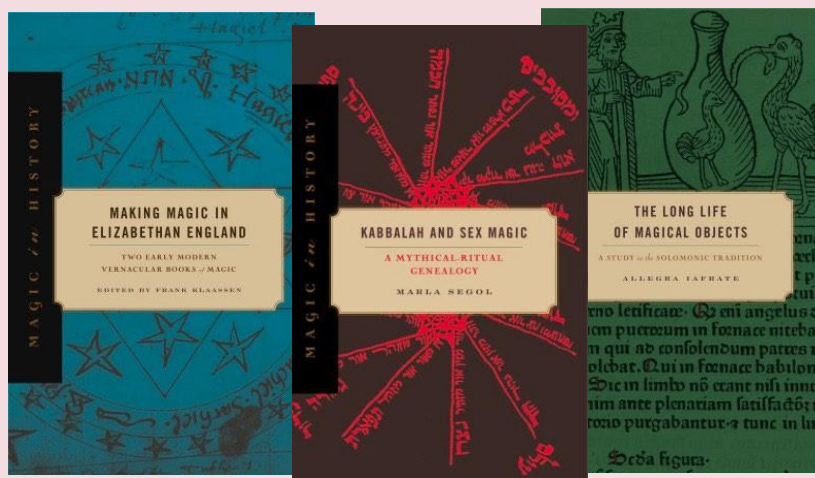
An obstacle for historians in identifying the Sloane notebooks' author has been the absence of a name corresponding to "C. S." in any of the relevant rosters of medical practitioners for the period correlated with the notebooks' probable composition, or in the rolls of Cambridge University, to which school the author obliquely implies belonging. Evett's proposed candidates, Christopher Shute, Clement Smith, Christopher Saxton, and Charles Seckford, are all more or less unsatisfying, not only for the various reasons which Evett himself adduces,<sup>25</sup> but because there is no evidence to suggest they might have been meticulously collecting alchemical and medical lore. Timmermann, however, has suggested that C. S. may have been an "irregular medical practitioner."<sup>26</sup> Such unlicensed practitioners were not uncommon in sixteenth-century London: both apothecaries and other purveyors of medical treatments were known to operate without the sanction of either the College of Physicians or their own professions' governing bodies, especially those who favored the alchemy-adjacent chemical treatments of Paracelsian medicine, which the College rejected.<sup>27</sup>

One such London apothecary appears to have been our Charles Sledd. In the astrologer William Lilly's autobiography, he mentions "Doctor Ardee, but his true name was Richard Delahay...; hee was of moderate judgment both in Astrology and Phisick; hee had

been formerly well acquainted with Charles Sledd, an Apothecary, who used the Christall, and had a very perfect sight."<sup>28</sup> Lilly's mention of Ardee/Delahay is in the context of recollections from circa 1633, placing the Doctor's acquaintance with Sledd some time before that. If Charles Sledd the spy had indeed been of age to be apprenticed in the early 1570s, he would have been approaching eighty by 1633, but could certainly have been active well into the decades preceding. Moreover, in a marginal note to his manuscript copy, Lilly directly identifies Sledd the apothecary with the Sled of Dee's journals. The allusion to his skill at crystallo-mancy further supports a likely collaboration with Dee, who employed several such

adepts over the years. Further biographical details in the Sloane notebooks also point towards the author's residence in London, with multiple references to locations and individuals in the city's environs.<sup>29</sup> There are also allusions that further correlate with what we know of Charles Sledd's life and times on the periphery of Elizabeth's court, particularly in the allegorical programs sketched in several of the manuscripts. In addition to numerous prominent personages and events in Tudor society with whom a man of Sledd's background would have been familiar,<sup>30</sup> Evett discerns signs of "a protracted and frustrating lawsuit so clearly reflected in the *Justitia* allegory of Harleian 6857,"<sup>31</sup> and returning to Dee's diaries, on 25 October, 1595, he writes that "Sled was a suitor to me for help in law against his father."<sup>32</sup>

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Devil, exclusion and social cohesion  
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Abstracts of no more than 250 words should be submitted through our online submission portal at <https://devil2024.co/> by **15 October 2023**.



### ***The Mercurial Spy, cont'd***

It is not clear how Sledd and Dee may have been reconciled after the fiasco of the library, but they could evidently at least extend one another a degree of professional courtesy once again; earlier in October of 1595 Sledd joined Dee in lending money to one Edmond Hilton,<sup>33</sup> and in March of 1599 Dee appears to be acting as his intermediary in one or more credit transactions.

And that a laconic note in John Dee's daybook is virtually the last we hear of Charles Sled/Sledd/C.S., but we are left with a web of clues tying together with three personages. An apothecary by the name of Charles Sledd, whom William

Lilly identifies as the Charles Sled mentioned in John Dee's published diary, was practicing medicine (perhaps with a sideline in crystal scrying) in London by the early 1600s. An independent student of that profession would have had a practical motive for compiling extensive reference and working notebooks of the kind ascribed to one C. S. in the Sloane collection, and would have also required access to the personal collections of learned individuals in order to procure the scarce scientific texts with which to do so Dee's own notes confirm that he and Sled were acquainted for almost two decades, with the latter visiting his residence on at least a few

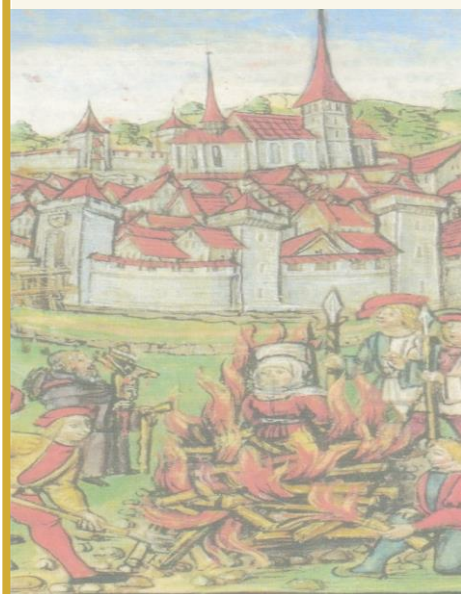
occasions, and in 1584 evidently involving himself in the theft of Dee's books. Dee had social and professional connections within the government of Queen Elizabeth I, and particularly with the diplomatic and espionage activities of her secretary Francis Walsingham, who employed a man called Charles Sledd to spy on Catholic enemies of the state in the early 1580s; this background would provide a pretext for Sled[d]'s initial acquaintance with Dee, as well as context for some of the political vitriol found in the Sloane notebooks.

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## **Societas Magica call for papers**

### **International Congress on Medieval Studies, Kalamazoo, 2024**



To inquire about a session, please contact the person listed after the title; to submit abstracts go to <https://wmich.edu/medievalcongress>  
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*Co-sponsoring Organization: Research Group on Manuscript Evidence*

Organizer: Rochelle Rojas [Rochelle.Rojas@kzoo.edu](mailto:Rochelle.Rojas@kzoo.edu)

#### **Alchemical Manuscripts, Early Printed Books, and Other Materials (in person)**

Organizer: David Porreca [dporreca@uwaterloo.ca](mailto:dporreca@uwaterloo.ca)

#### **Conjuring Wombs: Magic for Female Reproductive Disorders (in person)**

Organizer: Claire Fanger [cfanger@rice.edu](mailto:cfanger@rice.edu)

#### **Magic and Power in Elite and Popular Culture (in person)**

Organizer: Vajra Regan [vajra.regan@mail.utoronto.ca](mailto:vajra.regan@mail.utoronto.ca)

#### **Magic, Nature, and the Environment (in person)**

Organizer: Samuel P. Gillis Hogan [spg140@mail.usask.ca](mailto:spg140@mail.usask.ca)

## *The Mercurial Spy, cont'd*

In the absence of any more probable candidate with the same initials, the circumstantial evidence presented here suggests that the author of the Sloane alchemical notebooks is the same Charles Sledd known to both John Dee and Francis Walsingham. Our cast of characters appears to have come full circle, yet definitive proof remains elusive: was Charles Sledd C. S.? Was the spy of '79 considering a new profession in pharmacy by '83, buoyed by what he had learned in (and perhaps pilfered from) the library of England's most learned alchemist and astrologer? I am optimistic that the foregoing will inspire other scholars—perhaps those with more ready access than myself to the British Library's manuscript collections—to pursue this question for themselves, if only to disprove my, perhaps fanciful, reconstruction.

### Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> BL MSS Sloane 1041, 1042, 1043, 1060, 1061, 1062, 1063, 1082, 1092, 1093, 1095, 1096, 1097, 1098, 1099, 1105, 1113, 1114, 1127, 1136, 1146, 1147, 1148, 1149, 1150, 1151, 1152, 1153, 1158, 1169, 1170, 1171, 1181, 1186. BL MS Harleian 6857 includes annotations in the same hand as the Sloane manuscripts, and allegorical content congruous with that of Sloane 1041, 1062, 1063, 1082, 1096, and 1169.

<sup>2</sup> Anke Timmermann, "Doctor's Order: An Early Modern Doctor's Alchemical Notebooks," *Early Science and Medicine* 13:1 (2008), 25–52 and *Verse and Transmutation: A Corpus of Middle English Alchemical Poetry*

(Leiden: Brill, 2013, 173–202; David Evett, "Some Elizabethan Allegorical Paintings: A Preliminary Enquiry," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 52 (1989), 140–66.

<sup>3</sup> MS Sloane 1041, f. 12v.

<sup>4</sup> Stephen Alford, *The Watchers* (New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 69–70, 336.

<sup>5</sup> Clare Talbot (ed.), *Miscellanea Recusant Records* (Catholic Record Society, 1961), 214–45.

<sup>6</sup> British Library, MS Additional 48029, ff. 121r–42v.

<sup>7</sup> Alford, *The Watchers*, 336.

<sup>8</sup> My own comparisons, based on two arbitrary sample pages (MS 1097, ff. 42r and 44r), have been inconclusive. A more thorough examination of the corpus may yield better results.

<sup>9</sup> Alford *The Watchers*, 100.

<sup>10</sup> Alford *The Watchers*, 210.

<sup>11</sup> David Thomas, "Leases in Reversion on the Crown's Lands, 1558–1603," *The Economic History Review* 30:1 (1977), 67–72 at pp. 68–9, citing Public Record Office, Exchequer 310/40/10 m. 1048.

<sup>12</sup> Alford *The Watchers*, 87–8.

<sup>13</sup> Talbot (ed.), *Miscellanea*, 214.

<sup>14</sup> Evett, "Allegorical Paintings," 145–6.

<sup>15</sup> John Hungerford Pollen (ed.), *Unpublished Documents Relating to the English Martyrs, vol. I, 1584–1603* (Catholic Record Society, 1908), 60.

<sup>16</sup> Edward Fenton (ed.), *The Diaries of John Dee*

(Day Books, 1998): 46.

<sup>17</sup> BL Sloane MS 3188, f.77v; transcription in Joseph H. Peterson (ed.), *John Dee's Five Books of Mystery* (Weiser Books, 2003): 319. Bracketed text is in the original.

<sup>18</sup> Fenton (ed.), *Diaries*, 93.

<sup>19</sup> Fenton (ed.), *Diaries*, 139. The Gilbert in question is most probably Adrian, with whom Dee and John Davis had previously mooted a business venture to colonize the New World. Davis himself would later be identified by Dee, in annotations to his library catalog, as another book thief (Benjamin Woolley, *The Queen's Conjurer* [Henry Holt and Company 2001], 277).

<sup>20</sup> Timmermann, *Verse and Transmutation*, 175–6.

<sup>21</sup> Timmermann, "Doctor's Order," 31–2.

<sup>22</sup> Timmermann, "Doctor's Order," 35.

<sup>23</sup> Timmermann, "Doctor's Order," 34.

<sup>24</sup> Timmermann, "Doctor's Order," 35–6.

<sup>25</sup> Evett, "Allegorical Paintings," 150–1.

<sup>26</sup> Timmermann, "Doctor's Order," 29.

<sup>27</sup> James Stuart Campbell, *The Alchemical Patronage of William Cecil, Lord Burghley*. MA thesis, Victoria University of Wellington (2009): 55–6.

<sup>28</sup> Sue Ward (ed.), *The Life of William Lilly, Student in Astrology* (The Tradition Library, 2010): 34.

<sup>29</sup> Timmermann, "Doctor's Order," 30.

<sup>30</sup> Cf. Evett, "Allegorical Paintings," 146–9.

<sup>31</sup> Evett, "Allegorical Paintings," 151 (n. 28). As noted above, Harleian MS 6857 is associated with the Sloane notebooks because its *Justitia* allegory bears annotations in the same hand as those manuscripts.

<sup>32</sup> Fenton (ed.), *Diaries*, 276.

<sup>33</sup> Fenton (ed.), *Diaries*, 286.



# Societas Magica Newsletter

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**John Dee performing an experiment before Queen Elizabeth I. Oil painting by Henry Gillard Glindon. Welcome Collection, completed before 1913.**

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