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## Roots of Coded Metaphor in John Dee's *Monas Hieroglyphica*

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Roots of Coded Metaphor in John Dee's *Monas Hieroglyphica*

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements of the degree of  
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with a concentration in Humanities  
Department of Humanities and Cultural Studies  
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## **Dedication**

This thesis is dedicated to my mother, father, and son, and to my students past and future.

## Acknowledgments

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## Abstract

An enormous amount of research on John Dee has materialized within the last forty years. Contrary to research published earlier in the twentieth century, such relatively recent studies have considered Dee's idiosyncratic *plurality* of parallel traditions instead of trying to pigeonhole his activities into one of several discrete camps. That research (much of which is listed in the Bibliography) has been helpful hypothesizing what his *Monas Hieroglyphica* (1564) may mean for several fields of study in an interstitial capacity. Students of Early Modern mathematics, neoplatonism, and the histories of alchemy, chemistry, Christian kabbalah, and astronomy are among the many diverse subjects to which the *Monas* speaks though its obscure references.

Dee's claim that his "sacred art of writing" can unify and even supersede the boundaries of disciplines is predicated on *poesis* or poetic constructive-readings of "hieroglyphics" using geometrical forms, letter shapes, and numerical values which are assigned signification in a bank of poetic spiritual meanings. Using the mathematical substructures of the *Monas* which carry hieroglyphic meanings (coded and compacted meanings), readers may unfold and lift anagogical readings of new relationships between animated elements in motion seen through dynamic cognitive registry, new literary and visual relationships which join with their own preconceived bank of significations to create novel unions of localized, personal meaning and poetic insight. While extant literature directly addresses the *Monas'* intertextual references to alchemy, mathematics and theology among others, this paper seeks to consider a wide base of generalized

semiotics of the period and its roots in the emblematic and hieroglyphics traditions of Europe. In doing so, it seeks to comment upon less well-known field-relations between “hieroglyphics” and the *Monas* for a wider readership in cultural studies, facilitating more specialized readings made available in the Bibliography for those interested.

The present study begins by introducing the Renaissance semiotics of “hieroglyphics” which developed in the wake of publications of Horapollo’s *Hieroglyphica*, a fifth-century text discovered at Andros in 1419 and taken to Florence for translation and wide publication resulting in significant cultural adoption. Next, the terms and concepts of György Szönyi (“*exaltatio*”) and Håkan Håkansson (“symbolic exegesis” *via* James Bono) are contextualized to help frame later inquiry into the *Monas*’ claims of instigating “a metamorphosis.” After reviewing their related literature, a short summary and analysis of Renaissance hieroglyphics centers the theoretical framework of the *Monas*’ use of coded and compressed iconographies and exploitations of symbolism in cultural circulation at Dee’s time. After discussing Szönyi and Håkansson, I observe how the Hermetic and Kabbalistic soul-ascension concepts of Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico of the Neoplatonic Florentine Academy are central sources of Dee’s mystical repertoire in his “hieroglyphic construction” of the *Arbor Raritatis*, the Tree of Rarity depicted in the *Monas*’ dedicatory letter to Emperor Maximilian II. I argue that the *Arbor Raritatis*, a “hieroglyphic figure,” introduces the reader to Dee’s first use of the term “hieroglyphic,” a key point which this paper further argues as setting an explicit record of how he expects the reader to interpret the rest of the *Monas* in lights of specialized knowledge. While the rich array of research from which this paper is drawn does a fine job of exploring the *Monas* in relation to specialized fields, the present work offers readers unfamiliar with the *Monas* a basic but crucial launching point of understanding how it relates to Renaissance hieroglyphics without having to



be experts in alchemy, astronomy, geometry, and the several other subjects it references. In the end, readers may garner new understandings of how Dee characterizes metaphorical insight from literary and mathematical semblances in the *Monas*, and how his Early Modern mind articulated its ‘*aha*’ and ‘*eureka*’ moments with the *Monas* as holy illuminations.

## Introduction

The *Monas Hieroglyphica* (1564) of John Dee (1527-1608/9) is a tract of twenty-four theorems whose central topic is a visual icon by the same name.<sup>1</sup> While the icon itself appears in the frontispiece of Dee's antecedent *Propaedeumata* (1558) and in Dee's marginal annotations of books owned in years prior, it is not until 1564 that he publicly articulates the icon's capacities for a plurality of poetic functions beyond ornamentation.



**Figure 1:** Hieroglyphic Monad of Theorem 3.  
Reproduced from Josten (1964) p. 154.

Today's readers in Renaissance historiography would find no shortage of contexts in which to discuss John Dee and his mysterious work, the *Monas Hieroglyphica*. Perhaps best known as court astronomer and mathematician to Queen Elizabeth I (1533-1603), John Dee continues to serve as an exemplary figure from the era, with intellectual legacies in mathematics,

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<sup>1</sup> The initials "MH" followed by *Ambix* page number cite the classic English translation of the *Monas* by C.H. Josten (1964), while Josten's comments and Dee's introductory letters in that work will be cited by respective name and the year 1964. Since the words *monad* and *monas* refer to multiple but related objects, this study uses the following scheme of reference: "monad" and "*monas*" to refer to the Greek concept of "unit; the italicized and capitalized variations "*Monas*," "*Monas Hieroglyphica*" and the English "*Hieroglyphic Monad*" refer to the work as a whole (letter of dedication, letter to the printer, and the twenty-four theorems and illustrations); aligned and capitalized as "Monad," it refers to the generalized symbol itself (fig. 1) first introduced in the frontispieces of *Propaedeumata* and *Monas Hieroglyphica*.

astronomy, navigation, cartography, and many more disciplines which could be roughly classified as the sciences of his day. In addition to being an erudite Cambridge humanist and founding reader of Greek at Trinity College, Dee lectured on Euclid in Paris and enjoyed a rich academic life there and at Louvain where he developed close associations with a number of cartographers, mathematicians, and astronomers.<sup>2</sup> While Dee is known for his wide array of knowledge, he is admired not so much for grand contributions to the history of science and natural philosophy, but rather for the curious intersectionality of his idiosyncratic thought. His participation in the history of ideas continues to be discussed today thanks to the rich array of related research which came forth particularly in the last 40 years. His *Monas* continues to baffle scholars and general readers alike, possibly since it makes several claims which only imply answers rather than explicating them in our late-modern sense.

Dee claims that his icon clarifies and unifies multiple disciplines in a new “sacred art of writing,” but scholars have continuously speculated on the exact nature of his obscure instructions.<sup>3</sup> Recent scholars have dismissed earlier attempts to define Dee’s *Monas* as exclusively belonging to any one discrete intellectual or philosophical tradition, whether science, religion, or Hermetic philosophy, and instead have characterized the *Monas* as multi-referential. One of his modern interpreters, C.H. Josten, states that

Dee goes so far as to assert that, although he called the work hieroglyphic, it is endowed with a clarity and rigour almost mathematical[2]; yet at the same time he leaves it to the reader even to guess that the subject of the elaborate display... is the

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<sup>2</sup> See French (1972), Clulee (1988), Sherman (1995), Harkness (1999), Håkansson (2001), Szónyi (2004), Forshaw (2005, 2017), Clucas et al (2006), and Rampling et al (2012) for varied, rich biographical and historical examinations of Dee and his work in general, and as surveys of where he has been ‘placed’ within historical models over the years.

<sup>3</sup> Dee (1964), p. 123.

hermetic quest... [since The Monad] lends itself easily to digressive secondary interpretations of a numerological, cabbalistic, astrological, cosmological, or mathematical nature, all which, however, are without any doubt given so as to establish significant connexions with the all-embracing central theme, alchemy, which is barely mentioned.<sup>4</sup>

As the Dee studies since the 1980s to the present decade attest, singular answers to Dee's enigmas have given way to a plurality of social-contextual inquiries centered on the icon's textual references to some distinct practice, from alchemy to mathematics, to theology and studies of classical allegory.<sup>5</sup> This paper seeks to address the literary framing Dee asserts when he uses the term "hieroglyphic" since that term is so open to interpretation according to context and time period.

This study is about the literary roots of the *Monas* which arise from the hieroglyphics traditions of Renaissance Europe. Since there are so many hieroglyphic examples in the *Monas* as a whole, the present study will focus on one example called the "*Arbor Raritatis*", the Tree of Rarity (fig. 2) used in his letter to Maximilian, which in turn introduces the reader to "hieroglyphic syllogisms" as they are used in the rest of the work.<sup>6</sup> Using that one example, I argue that Dee uses hieroglyphics and emblematics of his era to code and compress data into his images to be ideogramatically co-constructed by the reader's idiosyncratic readings of shared information.<sup>7</sup> The present paper articulates previous Dee scholarship to propose that such readers

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<sup>4</sup> C. H. Josten, (1964), "A Translation of John Dee's "Monas Hieroglyphica" (Antwerp, 1564), with an Introduction and Annotations," *Ambix* 12 (2-3):), p. 84, citing *MH* p. 121.

<sup>5</sup> See French (1972), Clulee (1988), Sherman (1995), Harkness (1999), Håkansson (2001), Szónyi (2004), Forshaw (2005), Clucas et al (2006), and Rampling et al (2012).

<sup>6</sup> See Dee (1964), p. 118 or the present paper, p. 26 for the *Arbor Raritatis*. See *MH* p. 193 for "hieroglyphic syllogisms."

<sup>7</sup> I am indebted to Daniel Belgrad, Ph.D., for the suggestion to look at theories of ideograms in relation to the *Monas*.

gained novel insights of a poetic nature (“hieroglyphical arguments,” “hieroglyphic interpretation” among several other phrases) as they re-created the *Monas*’ logics in their readings of the received instructions of the *Monas*.<sup>8</sup> In figure 1 for instance, each element of the *Monas*’ images has an array of meanings from symbolic traditions, such as a point in a circle representing the earth and the geocentric view of the sun’s path, or the cross representing the four Aristotelian elemental qualities.<sup>9</sup> In visually animating them, the design elements of the *Monas* ‘speak to’ the receiver through *active* “hieroglyphic” coding of metaphor. This coproduction of knowledge is possible due to the emblematic and hieroglyphic artistry and literary conceits which were in style in Dee’s lifetime.

It is not unreasonable to state that *Monas* recipients not only read soteriological and eschatological narratives in their projects, but also cognitively generated novel associations through *poesis* based in hieroglyphic traditions. Since those associations could arise within animated visualizations, they were personal ones arising from the era’s hieroglyphic conventions, associations which were not necessarily voiced within received, explicit instructions. It is possible that Dee anticipates this by his encouragements to the reader, such that they “examine [the Monad’s] depths” for its “great secrets” and “philosophical treasures” to be found “lying inwardly enveloped in the recesses of our monad.”<sup>10</sup> When a personal poetic insight arose in context of the larger paradigm of esoteric Christianity already in place during the *Monas*’ composition, it may be that the reader could interpret their own novel insights as a ‘divine dialog’ between abstract *Logos* and their own mind. In studying such a dynamic of poetic narrative-generation characterized a “hieroglyphical interpretation,” this study could point the

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<sup>8</sup> See *MH* p. 121 for “hieroglyphical arguments” and pp. 123, 157 for “hieroglyphical interpretation.”

<sup>9</sup> *MH* p. 155, 159.

<sup>10</sup> *MH* 114, 146, 150, 186, quoted in Håkan Håkansson (2001), *Seeing the Word: John Dee and Renaissance Occultism*, (Lund, Lund University), p. 74.

way to more advanced research on coded “hieroglyphic” artwork previously hidden in plain sight, such as alchemical texts with geometrical and spiritual meanings waiting to be unpacked through experimental interplay of visualized hieroglyphic significations. That metatextuality acts as a basis for the reader to engage the theorems’ texts and images through prompted cognitive dynamism as they visualized the changes and transformations described by Dee. Situated as such, the *Monas*’ static image is constructed as a mediated *visual compression* of poetry in motion, a “hieroglyphic art.”<sup>11</sup>

To contextualize how the *Monas* packs such meaning by way of emblematic and hieroglyphic traditions of Early Modern Europe, first two key examples of Dee scholarship are introduced, then we examine the European hieroglyphics traditions in more detail.

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<sup>11</sup> *MH* p. 189.

## Literature on John Dee

Two readings of related literature are particularly helpful to the present paper in tracing the grains of Dee's many philosophical framings of "hieroglyphic demonstrations."<sup>12</sup> One is Håkan Håkansson's *Seeing the Word: John Dee and Renaissance Occultism* (2001) which heavily focuses on the linguistic legacies of Dee's era as they relate to both Dee's sources and his own work. Håkansson's dissertation from the Department of Cultural Studies at the University of Lund isolates and connects Dee's sources in reference to divine and human languages, the histories of their perceived divergence, and Dee's imperative of restoring them to a prior unity. Since the *Monas* claimed to unify and expand upon alchemy, astrology, mathematics, optics, grammar, medicine, and more, it "seemed to comprise a virtually inexhaustible knowledge of the world, a knowledge which somehow had been incorporated into one distinct graphical *symbol*."<sup>13</sup> Håkansson notes that some *Monas* theorems may seem straight forward in reference to particular allusions to some discipline, but they still leave "a number of questions...unanswered," such as "why Dee throughout his text seems to regard the properties of his monadic symbol as a means to understand reality; why he considers himself to shed light on the laws of nature by explicating a graphical symbol."<sup>14</sup> By pointing out the expected function of the *Monas* – Dee's claim that it illuminates the laws of nature – Håkansson highlights the idea that the *Monas*' epistemological function is not obvious from its stated mission. A more nuanced

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<sup>12</sup> *MH* p. 141.

<sup>13</sup> Håkan Håkansson (2001), *Seeing the Word: John Dee and Renaissance Occultism*, (Lund: Lund University), p. 75. Emphasis in original.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 78. Emphasis added.

frame of reading which incorporates the reader's subjectivity may be required. Furthermore, "none of the reappraisals [Dee] was laying claim to — of alchemy, arithmetic, astronomy, optics and of a host of other disciplines — were substantiated by referring to conditions in physical reality. These reappraisals were supposed to be achieved by *contemplating the symbol itself...* [so] the symbol was the very means by which the world could be explored."<sup>15</sup> In pointing this out, Håkansson indicates a move away from passive reading to an active involvement for *reading and writing* with the *Monas*. Håkansson goes further to state that it is precisely those concepts that "we need to examine if we are to understand *Monas hieroglyphica...* as an attempt to comprehend the world."<sup>16</sup>

The manner in which such comprehension could be effected, according to Håkansson, is in the functional connectivity of human language, scripture, and nature as a text wherein God's word (or "Word," as in the Greek *Logos*) could be mediated. Håkansson employs the concept of "symbolic exegesis" termed by James Bono to illustrate this mediation. As Håkansson states, symbolic exegesis is

Neither grounded in a monolithic "theory" of language, nor in a specific philosophical "tradition of thought"... [but rather] a set of assumptions about the relations between language, nature and the divine which authorized attempts to fathom nature through the medium of language... [These] relations were metaphorically defined and could be construed differently by being embedded in different cultural narratives and conceptual frameworks.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 84.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*



As Håkansson explains of Dee’s time, whereas “it was a common belief that the knowledge of the ancient sages was accessible to contemporary man through a variety of symbolic languages, Dee also fused these different symbolic expressions — hieroglyphic, allegorical, kabbalistic and mathematical — into a single geometrical figure [leveraging] underlying assumptions of Pythagorean number symbolism [...] [with an expectation] that symbolic expressions can ‘awaken’ innate ideas in the human mind,” thereby expressing a “kinship between hieroglyphics and number symbolism...”<sup>18</sup> In showcasing such a pageant of distinct but intertextual currents in the history of ideas, Håkansson illustrates the historical chain which inspired Dee to craft the *Monas* as an “instrument by which the mind was able to transcend dianoetical reasoning and raise itself into pure intellection, *noesis*.”<sup>19</sup> In staging a platform for writers previous to Dee who articulated explicit relationships between the “Word of God, the languages of man, and the Book of Nature,” Håkansson provides a useful literary workstation for considering symbolic exegesis in the *Monas*.<sup>20</sup>

One more recent treatment of Dee’s work acts as a primary motivational and guiding work for the present paper, that of György E. Szőnyi who explicates another useful concept for framing the anagogical function *Monas*. In *John Dee's Occultism: Magical Exaltation through Powerful Signs* (2004), Szőnyi sketches Dee’s philosophical background and cultural contexts in a manner resembling Håkansson’s, from ancient and Medieval world views to Renaissance influencers like Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico. While Håkansson is valued for his treatment of symbolic exegesis, Szőnyi’s study centers upon particular readings of *exaltatio*, “the doctrine according to which” one may bring oneself “into such a state to...seek the company of the

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<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 202.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 208.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*

Deity.”<sup>21</sup> Szőnyi employs the term in several contexts to outline “this program of deification, according to which a *mystically elevating state* can be achieved.”<sup>22</sup> Through Szőnyi’s inquiry, the motifs of “rising” to higher planes of spiritual experience are studied in great detail as they relate to the *Monas*. The concept of *exaltatio* is useful as a start since Szőnyi refines his use of it in reference to Dee’s varied sources. Szőnyi stresses that there are

a great number of phrases in [esoteric] texts dealing with deification of [people] that characterize the magical exaltation: *elatus, elevatio, exultio, furor, illuminatio, inspiratio*. I have chosen *exaltatio* as a collective term for all these primarily because of its connotation in modern European languages—think of the French term *l’exaltation* [praise, elevation, admiration], or the German *exaltiert*, or the English *exalted*.<sup>23</sup>

In framing the *Monas* in terms of *exaltatio*, Szőnyi’s work provides the present study with utilitarian frames of reference for connecting it to Dee’s “hieroglyphical construction” of spiritual change and ascension.<sup>24</sup> It also serves to illuminate alchemy within readings of the *Monas*, “which is not only a chemical process but also a... *spiritual* alchemy that indicates the purification process of the soul...”<sup>25</sup> Far from being simply a “trend of speculative thinking,” *exaltatio* “had far reaching consequences for those who adhered to it,” for it “not only determined their thinking, the metaphysical goal also customized their behavior, social interactions, strategies of self-fashioning, the iconography of their gestures, as well as their

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<sup>21</sup> György E. Szőnyi (2004). *John Dee's Occultism: Magical Exaltation through Powerful Signs*. (State University of New York Press, Albany), p. 34.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.* Emphasis added.

<sup>23</sup> Szőnyi, p. 36.

<sup>24</sup> For “hieroglyphical construction,” see *MH* p. 201.

<sup>25</sup> Szőnyi, p. 37. Emphasis added.

poetic imagination.”<sup>26</sup> With such insights, Szőnyi articulates the poetic possibilities of what Dee called “a union performed in the realm of [astral] influences,” and what could be meant by “he who fed [the Monad] will first himself go away into a metamorphosis,” a transformation possibly implied by *exaltatio*.<sup>27</sup> With assistance from Håkansson’s characterizations of symbolic exegesis and Szőnyi’s contextualization of *exaltatio*, the present study thereby considers the *Monas* as a device of poetic and theurgic performance framed as “hieroglyphically considering the [Monad].”<sup>28</sup> Next we consider the genres of emblematics and hieroglyphics from which the *Monas* derives its message-bearing capacities.

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<sup>26</sup> Szőnyi, p. 37.

<sup>27</sup> Dee (1964), p. 135.

<sup>28</sup> *MH* p. 161.

## Renaissance Hieroglyphics

Most people today probably think of Egyptian hieroglyphs when they hear or read “hieroglyphics,” but in Dee’s time the field of study was not strictly Egyptian since it encompassed European concepts and techniques of communicating *through similitudes*, or ideogrammatic signaling in addition to phonetic functions. The word “hieroglyph” means “sacred writing” or “priestly writing” in Greek, and it is in that broad sense that it was used by Dee and his peers to represent a secret philosophical tradition of writing, Egyptian or not, as explained below.<sup>29</sup>

Still, the wider sense of “hieroglyphics” in Renaissance arts did initially have their roots in Egyptian hieroglyphics as they were then known, quite imperfectly. Egyptian hieroglyphics of the sixteenth century were still as yet undeveloped much from the initial publication of Horapollo’s *Hieroglyphica*, for that text “was to become one of the main sources of inspiration for authors from the fifteenth to the eighteenth century...[which] contributed more than any other ancient source to clouding the issue of the true Egyptian hieroglyphics and making it impossible for many centuries to decipher them.”<sup>30</sup> Written in Greek, discovered at the island of Andros in 1419, it was popularly received in Florence where it was translated and widely published, “quoted over and over again and used as a rich source of interesting and novel symbols.”<sup>31</sup> Titled as *The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo Niliacus, written by him in the Egyptian*

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<sup>29</sup> *Etymonline: Online Etymology Dictionary* (2020), s.v. “Hieroglyphic”, <https://www.etymonline.com/search?q=hieroglyphic>.

<sup>30</sup> Liselotte Dieckmann (1970). *Hieroglyphics; the History of a Literary Symbol* (St. Louis: Washington University Press), pp. 26-28.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 27.

*Tongue and put into Greek by Philip*, Dieckmann states that nothing is known of the author or translator, and that the author given is most certainly a penname derived from solar gods, the Egyptian Horus and Greek Apollo.<sup>32</sup> The book consists of paragraph entries discussing both abstract and concrete symbols and their interpretations, almost entirely consisting of animals and meanings derived from their perceived properties (whether through observation or fantasy, as one might say today). Dieckmann informs us that the interpretations present no coherent philosophy, but that there are “a number of ideas related to the hermetic tradition [with] no consistent pattern.”<sup>33</sup>

To illustrate her point, Dieckmann highlights Horapollo’s habit of switching back and forth between a general idea, such as “eternity,” which may be symbolized by the sun and the moon “because they are eternal elements,” and animals such as the serpent which is used to describe eternity “differently” when its tail is concealed by its body. Yet when the serpent is shown biting its own tail, it symbolizes the universe itself. Additionally, there are a number of other variations of contextual spins to meaning contributing to the associative poetics of each symbol, as when Horapollo extends the idea of the serpent even further; the “variegated scales” by which “they suggest the stars in the heavens,” while “the beast is the heaviest of animals” so it is associated with the “heaviest” element, earth.<sup>34</sup> But the key points Dieckmann makes in these regards is that the symbolism is not Horapollo’s alone, but parts of “common property,” possibly with elements from “widespread heritage.”<sup>35</sup> The encyclopedic nature of the entries as well as their polyvalence suggest that there was no one-to-one meaning in any given symbol but rather that a symbol insinuated several parallel meanings. Not only that, further works were

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<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 28.

<sup>34</sup> Horapollo (1950). *The Hieroglyphics of Horapollo*. Translated by George Boas. New York: Pantheon Books, p. 57. Quoted in Dieckmann, p. 28.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

found and translated such as Ammianus Marcellinus where the word hieroglyphics was used when speaking of the glyphs on obelisks, and so the word eventually “became the common property of humanistic scholars.”<sup>36</sup> Yet a grasp of the phonetic components of Egyptian hieroglyphs remained unknown and their translation delayed for hundreds of years due to the idea that “hieroglyphs were symbols of words or ideas rather than letters of the alphabet,” causing theories of hieroglyphs to be formulated “based exclusively on the misinformation found in late ancient writers.”<sup>37</sup> The Renaissance and Early Modern enthusiasts of Egyptian hieroglyphs did not know about the phonetic component of hieroglyphs, and so they were characterized as having only ideogrammatic signification.<sup>38</sup>

Yet as Dieckmann states, it is “precisely this misunderstanding which led...to the eighteenth and nineteenth century metaphorical usage of the term.” And although Dieckmann says this begins in the eighteenth century, the polyvalence of symbols begins much earlier.

After the publication of Horapollo’s *Hieroglyphica*, Renaissance writers, painters, architects, and sculptors began to pepper their works with symbols “largely derived” from Horapollo but also “welded with ancient and Medieval traditional symbolism...” and added “their own symbols to this vast stock of so-called ‘Egyptian hieroglyphs’.”<sup>39</sup> Indeed, a whole new fashion arose in relation to other “mannerisms of the period,” but still distinct as their own form of “Renaissance hieroglyphics.”<sup>40</sup> While a full study this development is out of the scope of Dieckmann’s work as well as this present paper, it is worth echoing that “their exploration is helpful in determining influence, deciphering meaning, and producing a pattern of historical and

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<sup>36</sup> Dieckmann, p. 31.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 31-32.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 3; Daly, pp. 20-22.

<sup>39</sup> Dieckmann, p. 32.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*

intellectual interrelationships” to sense out a “Renaissance *mode* of this symbolism.”<sup>41</sup> Both Dieckmann and Daly point to Leone Battista Alberti (1404-1472) as coming the closest to expressing the observation in the era that Egyptian symbols implied universal meanings, for he stated that familiar words are only known to their nations but figures could be known by the wise of any land.<sup>42</sup> He gives a “universal significance” to the symbols when he praises the foresight of Egyptians in seeing the possible “loss of language” and instead enshrined their wisdom in pictures “with philosophical meanings.”<sup>43</sup> Due to his own membership in the community of humanists who had common references to ancient texts, Alberti (paraphrased by Dieckmann) further emphasizes that the pictures would only be known to those educated in their philosophical meanings, and that “art is a kind of language understandable to all who are educated in its particular idiom.”<sup>44</sup> Dieckmann continues by stating that the interest in hieroglyphics did not just cease at adding to a library of aesthetic ornamentation, but that the ideas were philosophically taken up by Renaissance Neoplatonists in a project of verifying and restoring an ancient theology from the Egyptians, and hence part of the reasons that Hermeticism gained such an interest at the time of the translation of the *Corpus Hermeticum*. More specifically, the “young Neoplatonic Florentine Academy took up Alberti’s ideas and welded them with their own speculative system of thought, thus laying a philosophical foundation to the idea of the hieroglyphics, which proved to be extremely productive, philosophically as well as esthetically.”<sup>45</sup>

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<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> Leone Battista Alberti (nd), *Ten Books on Architecture*, Bk. VIII, ch. IV, initially cited by Rudolf Wittkower (pp. 69-70), 1972, “Hieroglyphics in the Early Renaissance” in *Developments in the Early Renaissance*, ed Bernard S. Levy (pp. 58-97), Albany; in turn cited by Daly, p. 22; Alberti’s Bk. VIII is also cited by Dieckmann, pp. 32-33, but she does not give a version reference.

<sup>43</sup> Dieckmann, p. 33.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>45</sup> Dieckmann, p. 34.

## Florentine Roots of Hermetic Ascension Concepts

Today, we know that Dee was an avid reader and commentator on the Florentine Neoplatonist, Marsilio Ficino (1433–99) and the Florentine Kabbalist, Giovanni Pico (1463–94), whose “platonic theology” he associated with his own aspirations to spiritually ascend the ‘ladder of Jacob’ to develop (or discover) the *mens adepta*, the “mind of the adept.”<sup>46</sup> Ficino was and continues to be well known for his translations of and commentaries upon Plato (~423-347 BCE).<sup>47</sup> Giovanni Pico, “after Marsilio Ficino,” is “the best-known philosopher of the Renaissance” who happened to live a short but energetic life, having written the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*, now known as the “manifesto of the Renaissance.”<sup>48</sup> Both Ficino and Pico are still regarded as the preeminent authorities on magic and astrology of their period, but to what extent did the *Monas* incorporate their ideas of hieroglyphics regarding spiritual ascension? To approach that question, this study will examine a section of Pico’s *Oration* as an initial survey of contact points between his and Ficino’s ideas and how they may have inspired the *Monas*.

Ficino and Pico met in 1484 in the home of Lorenzo de’ Medici (1449-1492) who was Ficino’s patron and the founder of Florence’s Platonic Academy; while the “academy” was not a formal university, it was Lorenzo’s wish that Ficino should facilitate philosophical discussions and research during gatherings hosted by Lorenzo at the Villa Careggi, and thus the ‘Platonic

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<sup>46</sup> On *mens adepta*, see Håkansson, pp. 209-230, as well as Szőnyi, pp. 165-174. For some examples of Dee’s commentaries upon Ficino, see Håkansson, pp. 130, 138.

<sup>47</sup> Celenza (2017).

<sup>48</sup> Celenza (2017); Churton (1987).



Academy of Florence' was conceived as a social imperative for the mutual edification of attendees.<sup>49</sup>

Pico's education resulted in a desire to reconcile Plato and Aristotle (~384-322 BCE); eventually his ambition grew to harmonize all known schools of thought.<sup>50</sup> Calling himself an "explorator," he sought the "unity of truth in a single harmonious philosophic and religious order, a unity [he thought was] present in a single historical tradition descending through Jewish, Egyptian, and Greek wisdom," once again invoking the perennial philosophy.<sup>51</sup> It has been established by writers like Miller, Kaske & Clark, Celenza, and Copenhaver that both Pico and Ficino represented new currents of Platonism and 'Hermeticism,' although they both "understood these materials not in a strictly historical way"; rather, they deployed ancient sources in consonance with their own "constructive" purposes.<sup>52</sup> John Dee, too, would carry on these "constructive" deployments.

It is in that light of personalized deployment that attention is turned to Pico's *Oration* and a small survey of its possible lines of association with Ficino's and Dee's concepts. After leaving Florence in 1485, Pico travelled to Paris to further study Aristotelian scholasticism in a bid to reconcile that body with Plato's in order "to join all schools of thought in a single symphony of philosophies."<sup>53</sup> During his travels, he planned to underwrite a magnificent conference on this theme [of universal reconciliation] in Rome early in 1487, and in preparation he assembled 900 theses from numerous authorities...and, to introduce them, he composed a work of eventually immense fame: the *Oration on the Dignity of Man*. The *Oration* began by addressing the "esteemed fathers" to be gathered, quoting Hermes Trismegistus, the main figure of

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<sup>49</sup> Celenza (2017).

<sup>50</sup> Copenhaver (2016).

<sup>51</sup> Miller xxv-xxvi.

<sup>52</sup> Miller xxvi.

<sup>53</sup> Copenhaver (2016).

Hermeticism: a “great miracle, Asclepius, is man.”<sup>54</sup> Continuing, Pico eventually brings up the possibility of spiritual initiation by ascension, invoking the authority of the ancients:

104. For at what else, by Hercules! was the observance of the different degrees of initiation in Greek mysteries aimed? Only after having been purified through moral philosophy and dialectics, those arts that we might call expiatory, could the initiates gain entrance to the mysteries.

105. And what else can such an initiation possibly signify if not an understanding, achieved through philosophy, of nature’s most mysterious things?

106. Only then did that ἐποπτεία, the intimate vision of divine things by the light of theology, come to those who were so disposed.

107. Who would not yearn to be initiated into such sacred rites?

108. Who, leaving behind all human concerns, scorning the goods of fortune and pleasures of the body, would not wish to become a guest at the table of the gods while still alive on earth and, inebriated by the nectar of eternity, to receive, though still a mortal creature, the gift of immortality?

109. Who would not wish to be so inspired by those Socratic frenzies, which Plato celebrates in the Phaedrus, that he is whisked

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<sup>54</sup> *Oration on the Dignity of Man: a New Translation and Commentary* (2012). Edited by Francesco Borghesi, Michael Papio, and Massimo Riva. New York: Cambridge University Press, Verse 2. Hereafter this edition will be referenced as (Borghesi et al, [verse or page number]).

away to the heavenly Jerusalem, soaring from here – that is, from  
this world set on evil – with oarlike strokes of wings and feet?

110. Let us be led away, fathers, let us be led away by the Socratic  
frenzies that will so lift us beyond our minds as to put our mind  
and ourselves in God!<sup>55</sup>

When Pico speaks of the “observance of the different degrees of initiation in Greek mysteries” and to where they are “aimed,” he references the Eleusinian mysteries of Greece.<sup>56</sup> The idea of the Greek mysteries as purification stages in philosophy is “typical” of Neoplatonism and likely stemmed in part from *Phaedo* 69b–d which states that “these men who established the mysteries were not unenlightened, but in reality had a hidden meaning when they said long ago that whoever goes uninitiated and unsanctified to the other world will lie in the mire, but he who arrives there initiated and purified *will dwell with the gods.*”<sup>57</sup> Here, Ficino and Dee would agree that the preparation for theology by way of philosophy is an initial part of the *prisca theologia*.

Pico goes on to question who would “not wish to be so inspired by those Socratic frenzies...with oarlike strokes of wings and feet” and prescribes that all should “be led away by the Socratic frenzies that will *so lift us beyond our minds,*” and in so doing he affirms the schema of Plato as known by Ficino.<sup>58</sup> In the matter of “Socratic Frenzies,” Pico and Ficino are in accord that Socrates’ higher aims reside in the divine, and that he could invoke it in himself and others. In commenting upon Socrates’ framing, Ficino writes

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<sup>55</sup> Borghesi, et al.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, v. 104.

<sup>57</sup> Quoted in Borghesi et al, fn. 118 on p. 163. Emphasis added.

<sup>58</sup> Emphasis added.

...indeed Plato's style appears to be more poetical than philosophical; now his words thunder and reverberate like those of a seer, now they flow gently, and all the while they obey no human power but one that is prophetic and divine; he does not play the part of a teacher so much as a priest or prophet, now enrapturing some whilst expiating others, and seizing them with divine frenzy in the same way.<sup>59</sup>

Their common source for this idea of “frenzy” is very likely Socrates’ passage in *Ion* 533d-535a, as seen in Voss’ quotation, commenting that during lyric frenzy “the poet can enhance and transform ordinary reality through listening to his imagination which is a gift of the Muse,” although one must first rise above one’s own reasoning.<sup>60</sup> Quoting Socrates, “a poet is a light and winged thing, and holy, and never able to compose until he has become inspired, and is beside himself, and reason is no longer in him,” the frenzy is thus characterized as an anagogical function of *poesis* to which Ficino, Pico, and Dee aspired. In *De Amore*, Ficino defines divine frenzy as “an illumination of the rational soul by which God unerringly draws the soul, which has fallen from higher to lower, back from lower to higher.”<sup>61</sup> It is this very “illumination of the rational soul” that Dee seeks in his hieroglyphic ‘aha!’ moments.

Like John Dee after them, both Ficino and Pico were passionately interested in the then-novel translations of Plato, and both are still looked to for glimpses of how ‘the master’s master’ was coming to be received and adapted in the Italian Renaissance. Each of them used a topology of “rising” or “flying” to indicate the anagogical ascension of being back unto the One. Ficino

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<sup>59</sup> Marsilii Ficini Florentini, *commentaria Platonis, ad Laurentium Medicem virum Magnanimum, prooemium. Op.om.*, p. 1129. Quoted in Voss (1991) fn. 17, p. 70. Translated in Voss (1991) p. 19.

<sup>60</sup> Voss 1991, p. 104.

<sup>61</sup> Farnell, p. 152.

and Pico also agreed that such a flight is winged by virtue of Socratic frenzies. In light of such admonitions unto spiritual ascension while yet living, both Ficino and Pico served as direct guides for Dee in his study of alchemy and astronomy as tools for spiritual initiation.

## Secrets in the *Monas*

For Dee, Ficino, and Pico, astronomy and alchemy were adjuvants to aid and restore corrupted nature, to purify and ascend the soul back to the Empyrean; alchemy in particular was an art of facilitating the restoration through proportional redistribution of elements into correct disposition, facilitating the correct reflections of higher principles into the lower, and restoring the lower gross elements to facilitate the mind's elevation to realms of the higher in a circuitous route.<sup>62</sup> The illustrations in the *Monas* are Dee's pictographic means of facilitating this restoration in the imagination whenever one is traced out on paper or animated in the mind since it held elements of commonly referenced symbolism. Dee "relied on a variety of traditions which viewed symbolism as a means to attain a mystic ascent of the soul...[and the Monad] provides an illustrative example of how such traditions as hieroglyphics, kabbalah, and Pythagorean number symbolism could be conflated and accommodated to a Christian framework by being embedded in the myth of a perennial philosophy."<sup>63</sup> But exactly what did Dee consider to be a significant secret or insight from the *Monas*?

Was Dee talking about something he was reproducing from tradition, or a new knowledge he put there, or something completely new for the reader to discover? A number of commentators from Dee's generation and that which followed it have written opinions on what the *Monas* may mean – or conversely, like Meric Casaubon, have confessed that they can

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<sup>62</sup> For alchemy and astrology in these contexts from antiquity to Dee's time, see Jean Pierre Brach, R. Broek, Antoine Faivre, and Wouter J. Hanegraaff (ed.) (2005). *Dictionary of Gnosis & Western Esotericism*. Leiden ; Boston, Mass: Brill, pp. 12-50 (alchemy) and 109-136 (astrology).

<sup>63</sup> Håkansson, p. 71.

“extract no sense nor reason (sound or solid) out of it...”<sup>64</sup> But what did Dee himself have to say on the matter? Aside from the illustrations and twenty-four theorems where he explicates the symbol and its applications, the publication of the *Monas* included a prefixed letter of dedication to Maximilian II of Habsburg, “King of the Romans, Bohemia, and Hungary,” and a letter to the printer, Willem “Silvius” Verwilt, “Royal Typographer, Antwerp,” all authored as “John Dee, of London,” with the *Monas* signed as “the fourth letter, Δ.”<sup>65</sup> Both introductory letters contain important starting points for recovering suggestions of what Dee intended for his Monad. Steven Vanden Broecke writes that the letter to Maximilian is a “highly revealing dedication” and “indeed constitutes our best source on the *Monas*’s overall meaning and goal.”<sup>66</sup> While the present study focuses on the hieroglyphic roots of the *Monas*, anything we can recover of Dee’s authorial intent serves as a fundamental starting point for recovering possible pathways of reader interpretations based on polyvalent emblematics.

The letter of dedication to Emperor Maximilian II of Habsburg explicitly lists Dee’s motivations in conveying the *Monas* to the Emperor. In that dedication, Dee states “two possible reasons” for him to present “so great a King” as Maximilian II with “so small a gift” as the *Monas*, “namely the very great friendliness of feeling” which Dee has for the King, and the “great rarity and remarkable quality of the gift itself” despite it being “small in size” and “slight in bulk.”<sup>67</sup> Dee reports that those who witness the “fullness of [Maximilian’s] virtues” find themselves “insufficient and poor” when attempting to speak of them, as Dee saw for himself and “learned most clearly” as a visitor in 1563.<sup>68</sup> As the opening of the letter suggests from the

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<sup>64</sup> Meric Casaubon, ‘Preface’, *T&FR*, p. 38, quoted after Josten (1964), p. 84; Clulee (1988), p. 78; and Håkansson (2001), pp. 75-76.

<sup>65</sup> These translations of the titles of Dee and Maximilian occur on p. 113 of Josten (1964), and the signature on p. 219. Note that Josten’s translations face the Latin original for comparison. The full name of Willem “Silvius” Verwilt is given as found in Vanden Broecke (2017).

<sup>66</sup> Steven Vanden Broecke, “The Ideal of a Knowledge Society in Dee’s *Monas Hieroglyphica* (1564) and Other Productions of Willem Silvius,” *Ambix*, vol. 64 no. 2, p. 157, p. 161.

<sup>67</sup> *MH*, p. 115.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*

outset, Dee quickly sets up suggestive topologies of relations between both humans and bodies of knowledge. That dichotomous framing is not unusual for the period, but it is important to note the comparative topologies which Dee set up to leverage his *Monas* as belonging to a similarly exalted dignification. In anchoring these comparisons from the outset, Dee constructs an implicit relationship of sympathy (“very great friendliness of feeling [...] I learned most clearly”) which he hopes will allow the *Monas* (and therefore Dee himself) a graduated passage in the King’s eyes from “so small a gift” to “so great” as the King himself is so characterized. By positioning the *Monas* as a “great rarity,” Dee offers the document as something worthy of and related to the King’s business, and by extension, Dee himself as its herald.

Such a comparative topology which carries epistemological and political hopes is reflected in similar analyses by Vanden Broecke, who writes that even within such distancing between Dee and the Emperor, nevertheless, “a common domain was found in the greatness and extraordinary range of the Emperor’s virtues on the one hand, and the inherent excellence of the *Monas* on the other [which] posited a natural sympathy between Emperor and book.”<sup>69</sup> This study affirms the view of Vanden Broecke, who foregrounds Dee’s “introducing the hypothesis of a supremely wise intellectual hero,” one who is described by Dee as one who, through “speculation and comprehension of supra-celestial virtues and metaphysical influences” is positioned in the same linguistic modifiers as the Emperor and his “virtues.”<sup>70</sup>

Having set up polarities of magnitude (“small” and “great”), Dee drafts a structure of relationality between himself and the Emperor, mediated by the *Monas* which both distances and articulates relations between both poles, from which Dee sets forth to communicate the “rarity of

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<sup>69</sup> Vanden Broecke (2017), pp. 161-62.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 162; *MH*, pp. 116-17; quoted after Vanden Broecke, *op. cit.*



the present” through a parable about “a probably singular hero”.<sup>71</sup> Vanden Broecke affirms my own suspicion that Dee is not *necessarily* speaking of himself as others have speculated.<sup>72</sup> Instead, Dee may be positioning *the Emperor* as the “singular hero.”<sup>73</sup> If Dee could get the “hero” to embrace the *Monas*, such an ally and patron would go far in securing its dignification within both the wider Continental and Elizabethan cultural matrices of interpretive communities and patrons. Bearing such a hypothesis, one might turn to a plethora of noteworthy studies examining the *Monas* in contexts of sixteenth-century patronage, colonialism, print culture, and court politics.<sup>74</sup> While such questions remain germinal for inquiries seeking such answers, I examine how Dee introduces the concept of a “hieroglyphic figure” in the letter to Maximillian and how it relates to “rarity” and the “singular hero.”<sup>75</sup>

After Dee’s opening paragraph which stratifies relationality between himself and the Emperor and highlights an affinity between the *Monas* (“great rarity and remarkable quality”) and the monarch (“so great,” “fullness,” and “admirable virtues”), Dee states that he strains “the searching power” of his mind “to the utmost” in the occurrence of a parable: “two diverse alleys of destiny” in the course of human life where a decision is made to either “devote all...to the pursuit of philosophy” or “to a life of pleasure and profit.”<sup>76</sup> Dee continues that one would “easily find a thousand” of the latter but “hardly” name one who has “had the first taste of the fundamental truths of natural science,” and *of those* (in “the republic of letters”) only one in a thousand has “intimately and thoroughly explored the explanations of the celestial events and events [as well as] the reasons for the rise, the condition, and the decline of other things.” The

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<sup>71</sup> *MH*, p. 117.

<sup>72</sup> As cited by Vanden Broecke (2017), p. 162; French (1972), pp. 64–65; Clulee (1988) p. 82; Håkansson (2001), p. 77.

<sup>73</sup> Vanden Broecke (2017), 162.

<sup>74</sup> See Alexander (1995), Borghesi (2012), Clulee (1988; 2006; 2012), Clucas (2006; 2017a; 2017b) Sherman (1995).

<sup>75</sup> “Cuius sic demonstratæ RARITATIS, HIEROGLYPHICVM Typum, ad Pythagoricam (di-ctam) appingemus literam.” Dee (1964), *MH*, p. 118. “We will depict the hieroglyphic pattern of this evidently demonstrated rarity according to the (so called) Pythagorean letter.” I am indebted to Brendan Cook for this translation.

<sup>76</sup> *MH*, pp. 115, 117.

way of sensual gratification is easy and wide, leading to “hell” and “tyranny,” whereas the way of philosophy is narrow and difficult, leading to “adeptness” and “the spiritual.”<sup>77</sup> Here Dee employs Roger Bacon’s use of “powers of ten to exemplify levels of truth and the ‘rarity’ of those perfect in wisdom, truth, and science” in an allegorical articulation between a diagram and conceptual narrative – a pattern which becomes more apparent through the *Monas*.<sup>78</sup> Dee illustrates this ‘fork in the road’ with a scheme (fig. 2) he calls “a *hieroglyphic* figure...after a manner (called) Pythagorean.”<sup>79</sup> Nicholas Clulee notes that several variations of the “Pythagorean ‘Y’ or crossroads” (fig. 3) are “found in Renaissance moral tracts and images designating the choice between a life of virtue or of vice confronting individuals at the beginning of adulthood,” and so the letter demonstrates Dee’s style of intertextual adaptation and reconfiguration for his own purposes.<sup>80</sup>

In examining figures 2 and 3, some general resemblances between them are observed amid numerous differences. Both depictions contain a diagrammatical structure of a wide single line rising from a ground state and then splitting into two branches, the one on the left matching the width of the trunk whereas the branch on the right is slimmer than the trunk. Each picture also has representations of moral coding both along the pathways as well as the branch terminals. The Tory ‘Y’ (fig. 3) depicts the ‘ground state’ of initial conditions literally as earthly ground, whereas Dee’s ‘Y’ (fig. 2) implies it more figuratively as a ‘base line’ origin for a series of graduated degrees up the trunk and branches. Tory, too, depicts graduated degrees of measure using lines, but only on the right branch using emblematic animals for qualitative challenges.<sup>81</sup>

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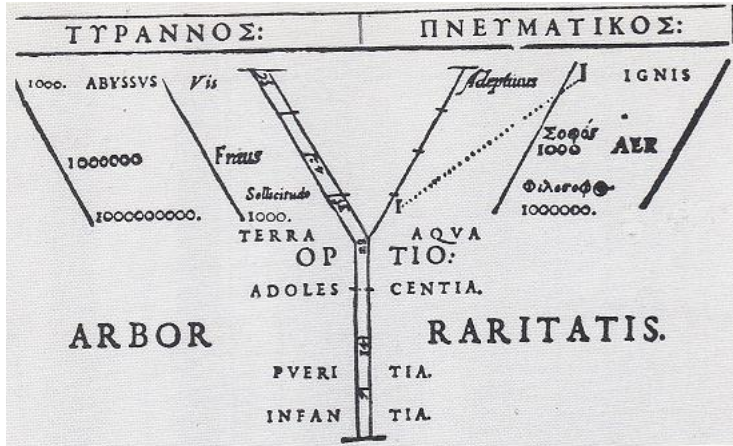
<sup>77</sup> Clulee (1988), p. 81.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*

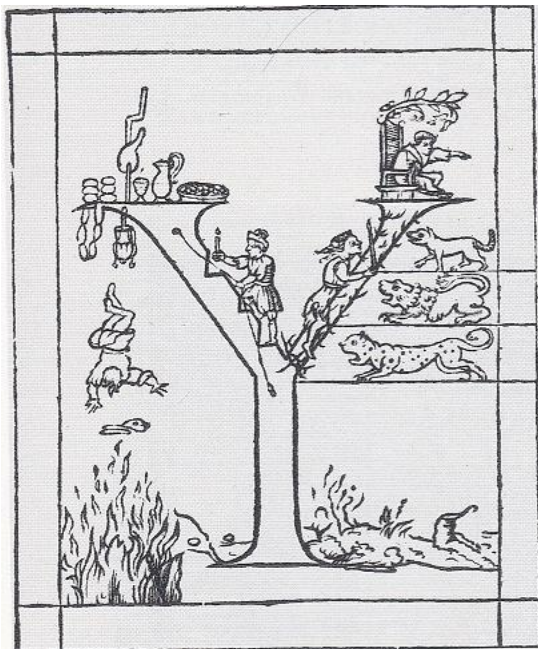
<sup>79</sup> *MH*, p. 119. Emphasis added.

<sup>80</sup> See Nicholas Clulee (1988), pp. 81-82, for his analysis and of Dee’s use of the Pythagorean ‘Y’ and the likelihood that Dee based it on Geoffrey Tory’s *Champ Fleury*, fol. 127v. Additionally, See Clulee’s footnote (1988, p. 264, fn. 17) for his citations on the Pythagorean ‘Y’ and “its treatment in the Renaissance.”

<sup>81</sup> It is worth noting that the emblematic animals in Tory’s *Champ fleury* (fig. 3) match those of Dante Alighieri’s *Inferno* canto 1, the symbolism have been debated at length. See the several commentaries available at [dantelab.dartmouth.edu](http://dantelab.dartmouth.edu) for examples.



**Figure 2:** 'Arbor Raritatis', "a hieroglyphic figure."  
 MH p. 118. Reproduced in Nicholas Clulee (1988) Plate 3.



**Figure 3:** Pythagorean 'Y'. Geoffroy Tory,  
*Champ fleury*, fol. 127v, reproduced in  
 Nicholas Clulee (1988) Plate 3.

Dee on the other hand (or branch) denotes desirable qualitative changes on the right as opposed to Tory's gradation of obstacle-beasts. Overall, Dee's 'Y' matches certain features present in Tory's 'Y': a linear pathway which 'rises' up from a ground state, marked by qualitative gradation mapped to specific moral and intellectual ideas, eventually bifurcated to represent 'choice', and the right-hand path having a slimmer width. While Dee changes some of the features in Tory's 'Y', such as eliminating the object (tree) and figure drawings (animals) in favor of lines and words, he retains those aspects noted above which serve his rhetorical purposes.

In the Pythagorean 'Y', Dee not only eliminates the animals and human figures found in Tory's 'Y' (and thereby erases the emblematics associated with them), he also adds exponentiation symbolism using numbers to analogously suggest 'rarity' through progressive exponential reduction of occurrence from the "republic of letters" to the singular adept, illustrating a hierarchy of excellence according to rarity. In that case, one sees his use of mathematical progression as a *poetic framing* of the adept's rarity.

Since Dee refers to this figure as the "(so called) Pythagorean letter," he explicitly characterizes his image as a contemporary literary device. In that passage, he adapts the preexisting Pythagorean 'Y' *schemata* in order to "depict the hieroglyphic pattern" of the *Monas*' "rarity."<sup>82</sup> That is the first instance of Dee's use of the word "hieroglyphic" in the dedicatory letter, so it provides a precedent for how he characterizes its meaning and use both there and in the *Monas* itself. The "hieroglyphic pattern" to which Dee refers to is not necessarily the Pythagorean 'Y' as one might initially suppose if one did not follow his statement closely – for it is the *pattern of rarity* which is hieroglyphic, not the "letter" itself. While they may be the

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<sup>82</sup> See note 75 above for Brendan Cook's translation from *MH* p. 118.

same thing after a fashion or even have ontological univocity in Dee's eyes, the fact that he linguistically separates the "pattern of...rarity" from the letter "according to" which it is depicted indicates that he thinks of them as related but distinct signs even if they refer to a unit of meaning. In this way, the *Monas* draws upon the hieroglyphic and emblematic traditions of the Renaissance and Early Modern England even if the *Arbor Raritas* itself is not an emblem proper, nor is the *Monas* an emblem book as such.

## Conclusion

The various illustrations of the *Monas* are types of ‘speaking pictures’, a concept which has been associated with works connected to the genre of emblem books from the Renaissance and Early Modernity.<sup>83</sup> While emblem books were of a species within a much larger genre of allegorical literature during the Renaissance, emblematics as a *topoi* of literature was conceptualized and interpreted in several ways according to the various languages and cultures which mediated them. What may unify and identify them all as emblematic is that they contain a moralizing or exegetical picture which signifies some “facticity” or commonly accepted knowledge coupled with text or code which explains it.<sup>84</sup> For instance, as Bath writes, to understand an emblem which uses a stag “as a symbol of swiftness and ardour, we have to share a belief with the emblemist that stags are fleet-footed,” and that we must note that emblem books “drew on materials and motifs which had wider currency and longer history.”<sup>85</sup> They worked by referencing classical and humanistic concepts which were accepted as common knowledge within certain circles, and so they acted as substrates on which to attach new lessons or morals. In the case of exegetical emblems, common tropes and known scriptures could act as vehicles for new meaning through poetic intertextuality, by virtue of the declared symbolism of the author in combination with the motifs being referenced. As numerous researchers have shown, Dee’s *Monas* leverages such motifs and the Renaissance traditions to “forge tight bonds

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<sup>83</sup> Michael Bath (1994), *Speaking Pictures: English Emblem Books and Renaissance Culture* (New York: Longman Publishing), pp. 53-56.

<sup>84</sup> “Facticity” is here used in the sense meant by drama theorist Albrecht Schöne, indicating the common knowledge which makes social reference possible in an emblem, distinct from other forms of metaphor and the “credibility of the motif.” See Bath, pp. 4, 6-9.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 9.

between the notions of ‘natural’ languages, kabbalah, number symbolism, hieroglyphics, mysticism, magic, alchemy, and the doctrine of signatures” in addition to a host of concepts.<sup>86</sup>

Dee’s Pythagorean ‘Y’ does not act in the same manner as a *book* of emblems, but it does function within the cultural atmosphere of Renaissance emblematics in terms of its “dual function of representation and interpretation,” as drama theorist Albrecht Schöne said of the wider meaning of “emblem.”<sup>87</sup> As Håkan Håkansson writes, the “notion that language can ‘mirror’ the world so completely that it yields knowledge of the things it represents was a commonplace in Medieval and Early Modern philosophy, rooted deeply in classical philosophy,” as one can see prefigured in Plato’s dialogue *Cratylus* “in which Plato argued that a name ‘belongs by nature to each particular thing’ and is ‘able to embody its form in the letters and syllables’.”<sup>88</sup> In effect, it is through *resemblance* that language communicates and constitutes an essence, a *formal idea* perpetuated through mimetic construction where “words and the letters represent a thing ‘by likeness’ and are ‘by their very nature like the things’.”<sup>89</sup> Reading such ideas in the sixteenth century, John Dee would have ample material in which to construct hypotheses regarding the natural universality of language, to develop models of natural inquiry which were theologically motivated but also suitable for the physics of his day. For Dee, language “was a means to gain knowledge of the thing it designated,” and he may well have had Socrates in mind who asserted that “when anyone knows the nature of the name — and its nature is that of the thing — he will know the thing also, since it is like the name,” for “language imitated the inner ‘nature’ of the thing, that very essence which constituted the true identity and reality of the thing, making it what it truly was.”<sup>90</sup> While there are numerous ways in which Plato

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<sup>86</sup> Håkansson, p. 66.

<sup>87</sup> Bath, p. 4.

<sup>88</sup> Plato, *Cratylus*, 390 E, p. 31, quoted in Håkansson, p. 85.

<sup>89</sup> Plato, *Cratylus*, 430E, 433D, 434A, pp. 159, 169, quoted in Håkansson, p. 85.

<sup>90</sup> Håkansson, pp. 85-86; Plato, *Cratylus*, 423B-424A, pp. 135-137, quoted in Håkansson, pp. 85-86.

could be read not only in any given era but also among peers, it is still reasonable to assert that Dee could have believed that the idealism of a ‘thing’ was imitated by things in the changing world of day to day existence. For Christians in Dee’s time, these ideas of mimetic idealism were becoming fashionable as Plato’s works were rediscovered and brought to western Europe. In those disseminations and reinterpretations of Plato, some very recognizable features could be said to generally remain within various permutations of *Neoplatonism* even as they mingled with and transformed the existing renditions. For instance, there remained the formal distinction between the supercelestial realm of ideas and the shadowy imitation of it below in the sublunar realm of elemental existence on Earth. As Håkansson points out, such a distinction lies at the “very foundation of [Plato’s] philosophy: the distinction between the world of Being and the world of Becoming, between the eternal Ideas and the perishable things,” a distinction which later “became a fundamental element in the Christian world view.”<sup>91</sup> Such intertextuality becoming stitched between historically unrelated writers (and historically unrelated ideas) was part and parcel of the Renaissance and Early Modern trends of cultural appropriation between authors. As Håkansson continues, in “the hands of patristic writers, Plato’s description of the transitory and changeable world as a pale shadow of an eternally constant — and thus truly existent — realm of Ideas, existing beyond the world of tangible objects, was turned into the basis of the Christian universe...”<sup>92</sup> Not only was the linguistic theory of *Cratylus* supportive of such distinction, it was additionally facilitated by “the apparent similarities between the biblical Genesis and Plato’s account of the Creation in *Timaeus*, describing how the divine Creator shaped the cosmos with the eternal Ideas as his model.”<sup>93</sup> In linking Neoplatonic models with

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<sup>91</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 86.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>93</sup> *Ibid.*



Christian doctrine, “biblical historiography and the metaphysics inherited from Plato laid the foundation for a set of assumptions about the nature of language which made it possible to lay bare *the inherent properties of things through linguistic exegesis.*”<sup>94</sup> According to such Neoplatonic framing, since all things are based on the realm of ideas which formed their essences, one may recover knowledge of the things by studying the language associated with them, the words and letters which not only stood for the things but also conveyed essential features of their being. Since language embodied the essential nature of things, “language appeared as the mirror of nature, providing a means by which man could interpret the physical world [due to the] underlying assumption was that nature itself was a reflection of the *verbum Dei*, the divine force from which the essences of natural things ultimately stemmed...”<sup>95</sup> Thus, for Dee and his contemporaries, there were perceived opportunities for generating allegorical poetics in the informed reading of Nature, since like Scripture, “the Book of Nature was a text whose true meaning — the Word — could only be uncovered by making it subject to the proper exegetical techniques.”<sup>96</sup> Readers of Scripture could thus incorporate Plato’s idealism with the era’s burgeoning natural sciences which sought to study Nature in a holy context. They could do this with not only Plato, but with numerous other writers of antiquity and the Medieval eras with which they perceived contextual harmonies. These included not only the more obvious choices which easily resembled and articulated with each other, but also writers that modern historians have set up as antagonistic or incompatible with Plato, such as Aristotle. While Plato’s ideas were thus popular and spreading at the time of Dee, there was not necessarily for them a direct conflict with the traditional variations of Aristotelianism which were prevalent at the time. Quite

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<sup>94</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 95-96. Emphasis added.

<sup>95</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 96.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*

the contrary, a number of authors, like Dee, came up with distinctive, complex, and idiosyncratic combinations of ideas which historians have at times placed in conflict with each other in the bid to place theories of ‘natural language’ in relation to each other.

For Dee, the unification and mutual support between traditional Aristotelian materialism and Platonic idealism each supported his view of language (and thus letters and words) as ‘natural’, and each had roles to play in his development of *exaltatio* in the *Monas*. While some scholars in the twentieth century made attempts to firmly place Dee in some given camp of thought, today’s research clearly shows his multi-use of a wide spectrum influences. Thankfully, present scholars are not so hemmed in by artificial demarcations of philosophical ‘origins’ since a plurality of Renaissance and Early Modern scholars supported some notion of ‘natural’ human language with roots in the divine semiotics of creation. Present scholars are freed by “focusing on how various linguistic tropes and cultural narratives tied these divergent disciplines and conceptual frameworks into a whole,” allowing us to study “how they could function as elements within a scientific discourse, without necessarily forming a coherent philosophical ‘system’.”<sup>97</sup> Furthermore, Håkansson writes, by “focusing on how theories of language and nature were framed by cultural narratives, we can avoid using historiographic labels like ‘Aristotelianism’ and ‘Platonism’ as monolithic and mutually exclusive categories. Instead, it becomes possible to understand how different conceptual frameworks could intersect and fuse, fostering discourses which not only allowed individual scholars to cross the boundaries of specific philosophical schools, but in which natural philosophy was situated in much larger frameworks, comprising such fields as linguistics, metaphysics, theology, and eschatology.”<sup>98</sup> Håkansson emphasizes, however, that such labels are still in popular use, for although

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<sup>97</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 66.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 68.

intellectual history has been profusely influenced by the recent ‘interpretive turn’ in the cultural sciences, it is to a large extent still focused on mapping out the intellectual horizons of certain periods or individuals with reference to more or less encompassing ‘traditions of thought’ (such as, for example, ‘Hermeticism’, ‘Aristotelianism’ or ‘Neoplatonism’). Such historiographic categories, however, also tend to suppress contextual meanings by being intimately linked to the idea of historiography as a search for origins. When assigning a set of conceptions to a particular ‘tradition’, we classify them according to a scheme that reflects the provenance of ideas, rather than their meaning in local contexts.<sup>99</sup>

Thus it may “suppress contextual meanings” if one tries to pin Dee down to any one movement or school of thought. Dee was deeply interested in knowledge of Nature and God, and his scientific interests operated side by side with his religious and philosophical aspirations in concurrent focus. Divisions between ‘religion’ on one hand and ‘science’ on the other did not exist for Dee as they do today, or at least they were vastly more porous and permeable membranes of ideology than they presently are. For Dee, the Liberal Arts were tools of *exaltatio* to be deployed in the ascension theurgy of hieroglyphic realization. Since languages and their alphabets were rooted in the *Logos*, the Word of God, they reflected the similitude of the image of God within the human *capacity* for language. One can see this capacity for polyvalence in a word or letter’s ability to carry multiple significations, such as the Pythagorean ‘Y’ which could ‘be’ a tree *and* ‘be’ a map of potential pathways. But to Dee, it is important to note that in this

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<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 69.

example the concept of “potential” was realized as already existent in the ideal realm. Reification ‘here’ in the material plane was a matter of living out what already exists in the mind of God as a plan. In reading these schemes, figures, and numbers as patterns in the mind of the creator, in the act of reading one is ‘elevating’ the mind from the gross plane of imperfect examples unto the Empyrean realm of ideal completion, perfection, through symbolic exegesis. As stated in one of John Dee’s “possible sources” of Hermeticism, chapter 4 of the *Corpus Hermeticum* entitled “Mercurii ad Tatum Crater, sive Monas,”

Since the craftsman made the whole cosmos by reasoned speech,  
not by hand, you should conceive of him as present, as always  
existing, as having made all things as the one and only and as  
having crafted by his own will the things that are.<sup>100</sup>

As Szőnyi paraphrases after the quote, man beholds God’s work and thus shares in God’s reason through similitude and capacity.<sup>101</sup> He continues the quote which declares that

The monad, because it is the beginning and root of all things, is in  
them all as root and beginning. Because it is a beginning, then, the  
monad contains every number, is contained by none, and generates  
every number without being generated by any other number.<sup>102</sup>

Szőnyi goes on to note that this, in turn, matches up in several respects with Ficino’s deliberations on the “universal image,” and that the aspirant unto these matters should “sculpt an archetypal form of the whole world,” the “image of the very universe itself...”<sup>103</sup> And furthermore, in the heavens, “lights, numbers, and figures are practically the most powerful of

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<sup>100</sup> *Corpus Hermeticum*, 4:1; quoted by Copenhaver 1992, p. 15; further quoted by Szőnyi 2004, p. 166.

<sup>101</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.2-3; quoted by Copenhaver 1992, p. 15; further quoted by Szőnyi 2004, p. 166-167.

<sup>102</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.10; quoted by Copenhaver 1992, p. 15; further quoted by Szőnyi 2004, p. 167.

<sup>103</sup> *De vita coelitus comparanda*, 3:19; Ficino, 1989, pp. 343-345; first quoted in Szőnyi 2004, p. 167.

all. [...] For thus figures, numbers, and rays, since they are sustained by no other material, then deservedly they claim the most dignity in the primary—that is the celestial—levels of the cosmos.”<sup>104</sup> In other words, within the unity of God’s mind lies the archetypal pattern of the cosmos and all ‘things’ that many arise therein. By reproducing the universal image, one puts the human mind, body, and soul into reflective, symmetrical harmony with its master-image which is like unto God in its primacy since the *figures thus visualized are themselves* “figures, numbers, and rays...sustained by no other material,” or stuff of the subtle realm as distinct from their gross bodies. In this unity between physical examples (the individual person located in space-time as well as the media containing figures) and the subtle idealizations ‘above’ them (the figures in-themselves as seen by Dee)<sup>105</sup> there is formed an interlaced orchestra which vibrates in harmony when so disposed. In unpacking or creating new associations through hieroglyphic imaging, such as the Pythagorean ‘Y’ or the Monad itself in its various forms, the individual experiences a union with God in the *exaltatio*, the exaltation of the insight. As noted by Håkansson, Dee states that the “entire universe is like a lyre tuned by some excellent artificer, whose strings are separate species of the universal whole,” and that those who know how to “touch these dextrously and make them vibrate would draw forth marvellous harmonies.”<sup>106</sup> It may be that by contemplatively internalizing a hieroglyphic image of the pathway of the adept in the Pythagorean ‘Y’ (in our present case), or in the Monad itself (in general), Dee hoped that the mind would resonate not just with his ideas but with the One Idea above and behind them all. In experiencing the multiplicity of meanings in the ‘Y’ (fig. 2), one gains a taste of the wider hieroglyphic feast which Dee has set for the reader in the *Monas* as a whole. For Dee, in

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<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*, 3:17; Ficino, 1989, p. 329; first quoted in Szönyi 2004, p. 168.

<sup>105</sup> The mind as above body, the soul as above mind, God as above soul in the hierarchy of gross to subtle.

<sup>106</sup> Dee (1978), *Propaedeumata aphoristica*, XI, pp. 126/127; see also aphor. LXXV, pp. 162/163; quoted in Håkansson (2001), p. 275.

touching upon the co-occurrence of meanings in a given symbol, one touches their common center in God and the resolution of all contraries. Ideogrammatic reasoning is a sacred process for Dee, and in the various images of the *Monas* he invites the reader to join him in *exaltatio* unto the heights of poetic union with his Lord, the Word.

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