

Richard Byrne: The Playfu

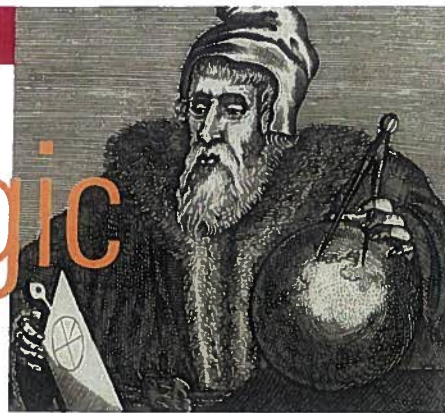


Among the Folger collection items Byrne consulted (left to right): An alchemy text owned by John Dee, *Index eorum*, Venice [1516]; Elizabeth Johanna Westonia, *Poëmata*, Frankfurt an der Oder (Germany), 1602; Oswald Croll, *Basilica chymica*, London, 1670. Folger Shakespeare Library.

"When you're writing creatively about history, the physical object is fascinating. The more you can put yourself in that era or its environs, the better. It's really wonderful to go back to primary sources and dramatize stories around them."

Side of Dark Magic

BY AMY ARDEN



Portrait of John Dee. From *A True and Faithful Relation*. London, 1659. Folger Shakespeare Library.

Magic, spycraft, and Latin poetry are an unlikely combination. When playwright Richard Byrne came to the Folger Shakespeare Library to conduct research for a play based on the lives of mathematician and magician John Dee and his one-time protégé, the alchemist Edward Kelley, he found all three.

Byrne's resulting play, *Burn Your Bookes*, centers on Kelley's high-stakes search for the philosopher's stone, a legendary object believed to possess the ability to transform common metals into gold.

The quest takes the alchemist deep into supernatural experiments and to several royal courts in continental Europe, where Kelley may have practiced espionage in addition to the magic arts.

"The story is the rise and fall of Edward Kelley and, in that story, the end of alchemy as living science," said Byrne.

Byrne's research in the Folger collection yielded the first published account of Dee's spiritual diaries, *A True and Faithful Relation*, as well as a demonology text containing Dee's marginalia, a compendium of alchemical recipes, and a volume of Latin verses written by Kelley's stepdaughter, Elizabeth Jane Weston, who became one of the foremost female poets of the late Renaissance.

"When you're writing creatively about this era, the physical object is fascinating. The more you can put yourself in that era or its environs, the better. It's

really wonderful to go back to primary sources and dramatize stories around them," said Byrne.

In fact, Weston's volume of poetry, *Poemata*, provided one of the key plot points in the play. Byrne compared the

Folger copy with another copy held at Harvard's Houghton Library and discovered four lines of poetry that allude to Kelley's loss of favor—and his family's suffering as a result—that do not appear in the Harvard copy.

"That's the fuel for the playwright. Those four lines that could have somehow been problem-

atic are gone. And so how do you explain that?" said Byrne.

Dee's spiritual diaries, posthumously published in *A True and Faithful Relation*, proved to be another rich source of information. While almost nothing is known of Kelley's early life, Dee recorded minute details in his diaries about the period during which Kelley resided with him. Some of the revelations are mundane, such as Kelley's probable birthdate, but others include risqué descriptions of drunkenness, wife-swapping, and strange encounters with supernatural



messengers.

"Most of what we know about Kelley is these lurid legends that attach themselves after the fact," explains Byrne. "His years with Dee are very well-documented, and there are some references to him in the court records in Prague. But parts are always completely unknowable, and that's where the playwriting comes in."

Four centuries later, Kelley remains a mysterious and paradoxical figure. But thanks to an enterprising playwright, he may finally have struck gold. ■



From the world premiere production of *Burn Your Bookes*. Top: Daniel Flint (Edward Kelley) and Joel D. Santner (Jakub Muller). Photo by Marcus Kyd. Below: Daniel Flint (Edward Kelley). Photo by Teresa Castracane. Taffety Punk Theatre Company, Washington, DC. April 30–May 22, 2010.