

# DOUBLE-OH-SEVEN

[by John H. Lienhard](#)

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Today, an odd story about Queen Elizabeth and her 007. The University of Houston's College of Engineering presents this series about the machines that make our civilization run, and the people whose ingenuity created them.

**J**ohn Dee, the best known English scholar of his times, was born in 1527. He studied in England and Flanders. His mind absorbed everything. Dee trafficked in all known science, and he made heavy use of the quasi-magical side of alchemy and numerology. He was as famous in astrology as he was in astronomy.

In his mid-20s he served Catholic Queen Mary. But he was closer to her Protestant sister, Elizabeth. He tutored Elizabeth in science, and when she took the throne in 1558, Dee took a shadowy role in her court. She didn't make him an official counselor because his science veered too close to the occult. Instead, he traveled Europe as an academic, gathering information for her.

Elizabeth's eerie talent for sizing people up and manipulating the men in her court was legendary. She let an intimate laser charm break through her regal beauty and iron control just often enough to keep them slavishly loyal to her.

Part of that intimacy was her practice of assigning nicknames. Her sea captain, Sir Francis Drake, was *Water*. John Dee she called *Eyes*. And he was her eyes and ears.

Dee signed his memos to Elizabeth with an odd symbol: two Ohs (a pair of eyes) followed by a 7 with its top drawn back across the Ohs. The symbol looked like a Victorian lady's lorgnette. But it was simply a double-oh-seven.



-- 400 years before James Bond.

And why the 7? Historian Richard Deacon thinks it told Elizabeth that Dee put not only his two eyes and the other four senses at her disposal; he offered her his occult sense as well.

For example, by 1585 tension between Spain and England seemed to have quieted, but Dee knew Spain still had designs on England. So he reported a conversation with his crystal. "What do you see?" asks Dee. "I see the risk of fire, great fire," the ball replies.

It was a coded warning. Dee had unearthed a plot in Prague. The Spanish planned to set fire to the English Royal Forest, the source of ship-building timber. For both Dee and his Queen it took a crystal ball to give the message its legitimacy. English forest-keepers rounded up the Spanish arsonists. And when the Spanish Armada struck 3 years later, England's ships were ready.

Dee read his Queen as accurately as she did him. She was, he said, studious, interested in physical fitness, and distrustful of sentiment. All that was probably pure observation, but Dee read it under her astrological sign of Virgo.

So the Queen and her magician spy leave us wondering who believed what. I strongly suspect that each controlled the other by weaving a web of mystery -- even threat -- to hide what was, in fact, only hard-headed intelligence-gathering on both sides.

I'm John Lienhard, at the University of Houston, where we're interested in the way inventive minds work.

(Theme music)

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Clulee, N.H., *John Dee's Natural Philosophy: Between Science and Religion*. New York: Routledge, 1988.

French, P., *John Dee: The World of an Elizabethan Magus*, New York: Dorset Press, 1972.

For more on John Dee, see Engines Episodes [474](#) and [621](#). See also the website,

<http://es.rice.edu/ES/humsoc/Galileo/Catalog/Files/dee.html>

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