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Extraordinary Healing and The Hermeneutics of Privilege: the Healer Valentine Greatrakes (1629–1683), Robert Boyle (1627–1691), and Equivocating about the Miraculous in Early Modern Scientific Medicine

by

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**ABSTRACT**

This dissertation presents three basic theoretical ideas: the hermeneutic of privilege, how allegorical symbolism and esotericism protect elite privilege, and the socio-political utility of anti-dogmatism. Alchemical casuistry is this study’s modern analytical concept that combines aspects of these themes to show how elites cultivated anti-dogmatic perspectives to reconcile themselves with opposing and divisive dogmatic political positions. The ultimate expressions of alchemical casuistry were found in courtly favor, diplomacy, and statecraft; but it also served as a foundation of social suppression—concealing special knowledge. The earliest alchemical texts contained recipes for imitating substances like emeralds and gold—recipes whose value depended on both secrecy and lies. Over time, the systems of allegorical and linguistic contrivance that originally served to protect and preserve the secrets of imitations would extend to cover other things—like miracles. The concept of miracles was divisive after the reformation—characterizing phenomena as “miraculous” could have serious political consequences. Alchemical casuistry explains how members of the nascent Royal Society viewed Valentine Grequakes (1629–1683) and his practically miraculous healing treatments. Because the term “miracle” was central to religious debates, these alchemical casuists carefully avoided using the word “miracle” and equivocated Greatrakes’ extraordinary effects (that had no mechanistic
explanation). G greatrakes is the first instance of early modern science wrestling with what we call today the placebo effect and his witnesses were the product of an elite alchemical tradition that saw itself extending back to ancient Greece. Alchemical linguistic contrivance was an integral aspect of social privilege and education and protected one of society’s most dangerous secrets: how shifting political and philosophical paradigms related to economic disparity.

Building on the momentum of the Protestant Reformation, the Enlightenment was a philosophical assault on the notion of mediated divinity that created a vacuum of institutional credibility. Trust in the both the Church of England and the monarchy suffered when the 1649 regicide challenged their claims to divine authority. G reatrakes’ “miraculous” effects simultaneously negated monarchical claims of divine authority (based on similar healing touch) and the Church of England’s position that miracles had ceased. When the Royal Society became the official institution of early modern science, it extended its influence and credibility by initiating organized Freemasonry as a polarizing device to direct the considerable political potential of lesser elites. The Royal Society’s assault on divinity placed it in the role of mediating truth claims, thereby usurping the social functions of divinity previously administered by the church and monarch. Given what we know about the placebo effect today, it is difficult to doubt that at least some of the Greatrakes narratives described authentic cures. The only consistent
explanation for them (from Francis Bacon, to Robert Boyle, to Benjamin Franklin, and to today) has been the power of the imagination to heal. Through alchemical casuistry effective techniques like hypnosis, acupuncture, Reiki, and many others are marginalized for the economic benefit of medical elites whose pills and procedures have less value when the secret elixir of the imagination is widely known.
Gratitude is vitally important, and I will not apologize for erring on the side of expressing too much, rather than too little of it here. Even though these remarks, in resonance with this dissertation’s title, may be far too long, it is certain that some to whom I am indebted are not mentioned here, and more lengthy comments could be written about each person. Omissions are the product of my limited time, space and memory.

I am grateful to my parents, Raymond and Susan Brochstein, for emphasizing the importance of education to me at a very early age (and for many other things, too). Becoming an scholar was not my childhood ambition. After high school I sought only a very practical Bachelors of Business Administration with a concentration in Accounting. I was certain that the “gentlemanly” Juris Doctor degree I had just barely earned in 1987 would be my last academic “honor,” ever. Happily, my perspective changed.

I am grateful that my friends Al and Lydia Dugan, noting my avid enthusiasms for yoga and extraordinary healing, persistently encouraged me to visit the Esalen Institute. My deeply moving experiences there led the Dugans to introduce me to Dr. Kripal, who was writing his monumental book the complex knot of spiritual movements and ideas that were the essence of Esalen. I was fascinated (even astonished) that academia fostered such kooky interests. The
coincidence that Dr. Kripal was at Rice in Houston, where I lived, seemed auspicious. I will always remember how the Dugans’ gentle persuasion nudged me into a new direction that resulted in me realizing potential that I never even suspected I had.

I can not adequately express the gratitude and esteem I have for the entire Department of Religion at Rice. The stellar faculty radiates international gravitas that attracts top scholars from around the world to participate in its conferences.\(^1\) The department’s focus on Gnosticism, Esotericism, and Mysticism (and the GEM Certificate program) provided me with the nuanced perspective necessary to pursue the dissertation that follows.

Valentine Greatrakes came to my attention after the Fondren Library, on Dr. Kripal’s request, acquired Richard Pavek’s collection of over 1,000 books about energy healing. Pavek agreed to meet with me on his houseboat in Sausalito in 2009 and told me that he believed that Greatrakes was the most important figure in the history of energy healing. My initial research into Greatrakes revealed little to me since scholars to that point had seldom dealt with Greatrakes in detail.

I am indebted to Dr. Michael Hunter, one of the foremost Boyle scholars today, who corresponded with me regarding my research and whose footnote informed me that Dr. Peter Elmer was preparing a monograph about Greatrakes.

\(^1\) My title page was signed before I wrote these heartfelt acknowledgements.
Peter was gracious enough to share his complete drafts with me and correspond with me by both email and phone from 2009 until his exacting research was published by Oxford in 2013.

I am grateful to Dr. Claire Fanger for helping me with Latin when I waded into texts beyond a comfortable depth. Thanks are also due to my classmate colleagues, Dr. Claire Villareal who proofread early drafts of the dissertation and Dr. Michael Heyes who discussed the early conceptions of the thesis with me and also helped with tricky Latin translations. Full responsibility for all errors in translation is mine. My project required access to numerous obscure texts that would have been impossible to acquire without the help of the wonderful staff at Fondren Library who are far too numerous to include all by name, but in particular Sarah Bentley and our fantastic research librarian Jane Segal.

Special acknowledgement is due to my high-school English teacher, Mike Cullinan, who as a professional graphoanalyist was able to confirm my suspicion that a signature upon which a substantial and longstanding historical claim is based is actually a forgery. This would have been enough, but Mike also meticulously proof-read my entire dissertation: footnotes, appendices, and bibliography. Mike is an outstanding example of the faculty at St. John’s School, and my thirteen years there (K-12) inspired far more scholarly inclination in me than I realized at the time.
I am also grateful to my professors Dr. April DeConick, Dr. Elliot Wolfson, Dr. Anne Klein, Dr. Marcia Brennan, Dr. David Cook, Dr. William Parsons, Dr. Elias Bongmba, and Dr. Brian Ogren. Many of my classmates and colleagues also deserve credit: The Venerable Dr. JianYing, Dr. Alejandro Chaoul, Dr. Chad Shaw, Dr. Brian Nichols, Dr. Nate Carlin, Dr. Dustin Atlas, Dr. Aundrea Matthews, Elizabeth Wallett, Minji Lee, Reyhan Basaran, and Erin Prophet. Others to whom I am grateful include Dr. Timothy Daryl Stanley, Dr. Zach Hodges, and Shelia Hetherington.

Sylvia Louie, the department coordinator of RELI, deserves special acknowledgement. Sylvia long ago mastered the bureaucratic intricacies so necessary to large institutions like Rice. When Sylvia announced her impending retirement several years ago, I pleaded with her to remain until I had made it though the maze. Though she certainly had much better reasons for staying than helping me though, her continued presence has been a great benefit to me and all my colleagues for which we are all very grateful.

Those professors who served on my dissertation committee had the most significant influence over my developing dissertation. Dr. John Stroup, with his extraordinary memory for historical facts, combined with an astonishing skill for research, guided me instantly to many of the most important resources I cite. I am also grateful to John for his cultured and nuanced perspective and very careful
reads of my work.

It is difficult to understand precisely how Dr. Elaine Ecklund manages to keep so many plates spinning at the same time. I am very grateful to her for having made the time serve on my committee and read the dissertation so thoroughly. She helped me to see very interesting aspects of social boundaries that will be more emphasized in my future work.

Dr. Jeff Kripal was the true catalyst for my initiation as a disciplined scholar. He pushed my thinking to the edges of reason (and sometimes beyond) to embrace extraordinary narratives and their critical deconstructions simultaneously. Jeff has been a patient mentor into academia and an excellent example of discipline and constancy. He is also an exemplar of scholarly superpowers.

Lastly, I am grateful to Phillip von Stephens, who labored many hours teaching me the esoteric work of Freemasonry. Phillip was extremely knowledgeable about all things, and shared his knowledge with fervor and zeal, occasionally obdurately. Phillip’s insights into Masonry and its history inspired me to consider the origins of Freemasonry and its relationship with the Royal Society as a part of my thesis. Phillip’s death in 2013 ended a very long and distinguished career of Masonic service. This dissertation is dedicated to Phillip, my friend and teacher.
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INTRODUCTION

This dissertation examines a remarkable set of historical records surrounding an extraordinary healer, Valentine Greatrakes (1629–1683). Widely known in his day as the Irish Stroker, the circumstances surrounding Greatrakes’ sensational story, and why it is so little known today, are a fractal of larger religious, social, and political issues. Greatrakes’ story has been recently brought to light by Peter Elmer in *The Miraculous Conformist.* Elmer has removed tons of dirt and debris surrounding Greatrakes’ painstakingly documented and affirmed set of healing observations, and it is clear that Greatrakes belongs prominently in the canon of medical history.

Greatrakes’ absence from the annals of medicine was conjured through a prevaricating alchemical heritage (the secret aspect of alchemy that shrewdly conceals), putatively to reconcile early modern science with Enlightenment humanism. Underneath the cover-story that Greatrakes’ witnesses were gullible dupes, which was clearly not the case, was the subtext of encrypted privilege. Alchemical allegory was designed, in part, to mask elements of elitism, most importantly how the nobility enjoyed godlike estates built by their underclass.

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3 Ibid. The Greatrakes narratives precede by almost precisely 100 years the undisputed healing successes accomplished by Franz Antoine Mesmer which were, like those of Greatrakes, also examined by the most famous leading scientists and medical doctors of his day.
Greatrakes’ gratis healing successes were anathema to a medical profession that marketed expensive, but frequently impotent, pills and potions. Philosophers like Francis Bacon (1561–1626) and Robert Boyle (1627–1691) knew the curative power of imagination well. But in order to appropriate that power to themselves, elites created proxies to generate value from their knowledge of the imagination—like the king’s touch, complex astrological recipes, or costly pills and potions.

Attributing economic motives to displays of religious idealism is not new. The great wealth amassed by today’s charismatic gurus and rockstar preachers raises skeptics’ eyebrows. From a wider perspective, modern Protestantism (unlike earlier Catholic notions of poverty as a virtue) links prosperity with spiritual achievement, creating special impetus for its adherents to accumulate wealth. This link between prosperity and Protestantism was described by Max Weber in his most famous book, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*.4

What is often not examined is the role that trust plays in creating successful religious communities and prosperity (and healing)—or how sectarianism can be corrosive to trust, separating communities and breeding distrust, contempt, and hostility. Early modern England was a highly sectarian environment, politically divided and economically treacherous. The four chapters that follow highlight the

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relationship between conspicuous economic disparity and the middling philosophical perspective that alchemists cultivated to maintain their estates by protecting themselves from dangerous regime reversals. This middling perspective was textually propagated through alchemical systems of linguistic contrivance and allegorical symbolism. Both education and intellectual capacity were required to penetrate their protective alchemical shells, so the secrets of privilege were opened only to those who had the wealth (and leisure) necessary for advanced education and sufficient aptitude to artfully wield their acquired knowledge.

Obviously, a main characteristic of alchemy is secrecy. Not only were alchemical texts originally written in the special languages of the educated elite so that their fullest meanings were mostly inaccessible to others, but some choice bits were encoded by cipher and available only to an even more select group. The ability to cipher and decipher texts had practical utility for seditious actors orchestrating political events, and ciphers were extensively used during the Republic by royalists seeking Restoration.\(^5\) Additionally, akin to today’s standardized testing, the ability to decrypt ciphers would distinguish the sharpest minds. Even more potent was the ability to encode secret messages within texts that putatively had no secret purpose at all. Texts of this genre would not raise any suspicion and could pass the censors without being compromised. In the chapter

“Alchemical Chameleons and the Hermeneutic of Privilege,” we trace a lineage of such texts posing as theological tracts that are actually commentaries about social order and privilege. One important text putatively about demonology was actually a ciphering manual.

One of my central theses is that the conjunction between alchemical secrecy and political secrecy provides an interesting glimpse behind the events of Greatrakes’ narratives and the founding of the Royal Society, which led in turn to the institutionalization of what would become modern science. The significant participants in the Greatrakes’ story highlight the commonalities of the particularly strong connections among the members of Greatrakes’ network. Those commonalities include alchemical study, social status, religious tolerance, and familial connections and resulted in the uncanny ability of these people to avoid the often tragic consequences of being on the “wrong” side of an political issue. During the Republic many loyal royalists lost their estates through sequestration and confiscation while the royalist Greatrakes affiants managed to maintain theirs. A later example, although he did not participate actively in promoting the miraculous successes, was Greatrakes’ brother-in-law, William Godolphin (bap. 1635, d. 1696), a member of the Royal Society who converted to Catholicism in Spain in 1671. He deftly managed to keep hold of a royal salary despite the

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6 Ibid., 7–8.
zealously enforced prohibition against Catholics holding office.\textsuperscript{7}

Greatrakes’ proponents are replete with examples of flexible allegiances resulting in economic sustainability or benefit. It is clear that not only was an adaptable alchemical philosophy eirenic in its motive; it was practical in utility and served to protect and promote the social order, albeit covertly. The establishment of the Royal Society was an alchemical project that shifted the authority over truth claims from an elite bureaucratic clergy (or elite ministers of state) to an elite group of natural philosophers, diplomats and alchemists. Although this shift was gradual, it became an important aspect of social reality for the Enlightenment.

**Theoretical Highlights by Chapter**

Chapter 1, “A Brief Historical Landscape,” presents the historical context of seditious sectarianism in seventeenth century England and emphasizes the links between religious ideology and political factionalism. Greatrakes’ practically miraculous narratives tended to rebut two important seventeenth century ideas—that the monarch’s healing touch proved his or her divine authority and the doctrine of the cessation of miracles. Virtually all of Greatrakes’ proponents were religious moderates whose anti-dogmatic positions helped them maintain wealth and social status. The chapter concludes with a demonstration of how, like

legerdemain magicians, each of the Royal Society’s official historians changed their audiences’ impressions and sentiments by focusing the readers’ gaze on some objects and not others.

Chapter 2, “Education, Secrecy, and Social Order,” examines the Hellensitic influences that produced strong connections among education, secrecy, and the social order and explores how “philosophical syncretism” was integral to the perpetuation of the elite class. This chapter also shows how ideas of privilege were covertly propagated in texts—concealed by means of linguistic contrivance in conjunction with alchemical prevarication, dissimulation and equivocation. Alchemical equivocation reflects the active and important role of anti-dogmatic philosophical moderation, while prevarication and dissimulation supported the precariously top-heavy social structure by secreting those aspects most likely to incite outrage among the underclass. Many of these ideas were hidden outside the vernacular reach in Greek or Latin texts, while at the same time these ancient languages projected a sense of veracity and even sacrality to the even the simplest pedestrian notions.

Chapter 3, “Alchemical Chameleons and the Hermeneutic of Privilege,” introduces a hermeneutic of privilege that strips away the allegorical cover to reveal privilege as a theme of alchemists’ theological and philosophical tracts. A

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8 The nuanced way I use the term “syncretism” here is fully explained in the section “Syncretism, Secrecy, and Education” at the beginning of chapter 2.
corollary of the hermeneutic of privilege is catalytic initiation, the unspoken understanding that elitist secrets bound the upper classes in the clandestine philosophical syncretism (anti-dogmatism) embedded into the memes and mores of social order. The theme of religious or quasi-religious symbolism and esotericism as a strategy of protection or defense is highlighted by specific quotes. This chapter also reiterates how a mere assertion of “ancient” origins imputed credibility and even sacrality to a thought or endeavor, despite loose, absent, or even fictitious historical predicates.

Chapter 4, “The Invisible College and the Politics of Blood Oaths,” traces the themes of syncretism, privilege, dissimulation, and initiation into two formal institutions of the Enlightenment—the Royal Society and Freemasonry. The histories of both of these institutions are linked to Boyle’s Invisible College (an alchemical endeavor) and evaluated with the theoretical ideas presented in the preceding chapters: the socio-political utility of anti-dogmatic moderate philosophies, the use of religious or quasi-religious symbolism and esotericism as a strategy of protection or defense, and the imputation of credibility or sacrality through claims of ancient origins. The ancient origins thesis is examined through Freemasonry’s false “ancient” historical narrative that proclaims a mythical ancient lineage.
The influence of alchemy over Freemasonry is demonstrated by tracing the alchemy of Boyle’s invisible college through the founders of the Royal Society and then to the early leadership of organized Freemasonry to show how the principles of alchemy took root and grew in these powerful Enlightenment institutions. Using these principles, the Royal Society (strongly supported by Freemasonry) ultimately placed itself in the role of mediating truth claims, essentially usurping a previous social function of divinity and categorically marginalizing Greatrakes’ practically miraculous natural healing phenomena.

**Valentine Greatrakes (1629–1683)**

When he is approached from his 1666 autobiography, *A Brief Account of Mr. Valentine Greatraks, and Divers of the Strange Cures by Him Lately Performed*, a reader greets Greatrakes as a man possessed of cultivated civil humility and disciplined, loquacious moderation. Greatrakes published *A Brief Account* in defense to a scathing attack that characterized his healing pretensions as delusions, caused in part by “windy meats, and want of due Evacuations.” This unkind accusation reflects the intense emotional reactions surrounding Greatrakes’ healing

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ministrations. In response Greatrakes amassed a congregation of English society’s most credible and creditable people (including medical doctors, members of parliament, knights, noblemen, and university professors), most notably Robert Boyle, to witness and profess the healings authentic.¹¹ This reply would have been akin to having Einstein and a gang of ninja Nobel laureates pouncing to eviscerate his rhetorical adversary.

Undoubtedly, Greatrakes’ actions encroached on the practice of legitimate medical doctors, and his custom for healing gratis must have perturbed many of them. But other MD’s sang loudly in Greatrakes’ choir: “The disproportionate presence of medical men willing to offer their support is perhaps surprising given both Greatrakes’ marked antipathy toward the profession and the delight which he would appear to have taken in curing those on whom the specialists had given up.”¹²

Greatrakes’ touch was documented to have cured a host of common-place complaints, many of them chronic: headaches, digestive disorders, asthma (or bronchitis), ulcerous wounds, sciatica, scrofula, arthritis, toothaches, gout, fits,

¹¹ Boyle was one of the most trusted men of his era. Steven Shapin, *A Social History of Truth: Civility and Science in Seventeenth-Century England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), 191–192. He was also very wealthy.

¹² Elmer, *The Miraculous Conformist*, 83 A similar attitude exists among the alternative medicine community today.
fistulas, paralysis, kidney stones, tumors, convulsions, and even cancer. A Brief Account (brief by the standards of his time, but practically 100 pages long) contains sixty separate narratives detailing the specifics of these conditions and their resolutions. A single example, attested to by Boyle, two medical doctors, and a baronet, gives a taste of Greatrakes’ story:

Elenor Dickinson, aged 45 years, had a Dropsie 12 years in her belly only, without any tumour in her Legs, but with a drought, was stroked by Mr. Greatrak’s about 16 days since, at 7. a clock at night, and drank at the same time about 6 spoonfuls of his water, and rubbed some of it on her body, which she did of her own accord: the same night she felt a queasiness in her stomach, and about midnight she felt a rumbling in her belly and stomach, and brake great store of wind per annum & per partem domesticam; and then she made water in very great quantity, as 4, 5, or 6 gallons in 24 hours, and continued making water, though in lesser quantity; so that at this present day the skin of her belly is as empty as a glove or purse, and wraps over, and hath no drought, and her belly quite down.”

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13 All these conditions were reported to have been cured by Greatrakes’ touch. Many of the complaints were chronic and some had lasted for over a decade. Greatrakes, A Brief Account.

14 The phrase “per annum & per partem domesticam” seems to be inscrutable outside this obvious context. Ibid., 44–45.
This vignette is followed and confirmed in more colorful detail by Eleanor Dickson’s own statement—including her claim that dabbing a bit of Greatrakes’ urine into her “stopp’d” ears restored her hearing immediately. Reading Greatrakes without the benefit of his socio-historical and economic context is virtually pointless. Over two hundred people appeared in Greatrakes’ narrative, either as witnesses or patients of the miraculous healer; and Elmer dug through archives and manuscripts to bring the characteristics these people had in common into focus. Many of them were men of privilege, and almost all had worked closely enough with Cromwell’s protectorate to be questioned about their loyalty after the monarchy was restored. Many of Greatrakes’ affiants were well known medical doctors, members of the Royal Society, or both. The most striking commonality among them was the religious and philosophical moderation these folks demonstrated, both implicitly and explicitly. A major point of my thesis is that their moderation is the direct result of an elite intellectual lineage embracing the principles of alchemy.

In 1666 over a dozen members of the newly formed Royal Society were plainly aware of the seemingly miraculous healings emanating from Greatrakes’ hands. Although they did not all agree, and some were skeptical, five of the

\[ \text{Ibid., 45.} \]
\[ \text{These were Robert Boyle, Edward Conway (Conway did not join the Society until 1668, but he was one of the first to examine Greatrakes), Henry More, William Petty, John Beale, Daniel Coxe, Ralph} \]
fellows gave sworn affidavits to support the extraordinary narratives. These sworn affidavits were published with Robert Boyle’s endorsements prominently featured. Boyle represented the epitome of the middle path, confirming the extraordinary curative results while diligently avoiding the word “miracle” that would focus the debates on theological issues and effectively prevent the narratives from being considered relevant medical evidence. Curiously, the Royal Society did not record a word about Greartrakes officially until 1699 when a letter from one of the Fellows was entered into their “Philosophical Transactions” detailing his recollections about the healer’s positive sanative effects.

Greartrakes was not mentioned in the first three official histories of the Royal Society. Since the Greartrakes accounts were so extraordinary and difficult to replicate, perhaps this omission was in deference to the Society’s motto: *Nullius in verba*, which “roughly translates as ‘take nobody's word for it.’” Thomas Birch (1705–1766) wrote the second official history of the Royal Society in 1756.
Given that he had previously written two biographies about Robert Boyle in 1735 and 1744, both of which prominently featured lengthy comments about the Greatrakes narratives, his omission must have been intentional. In fact, Greatrakes remained “invisible” in the Royal Society’s official histories until 1848 when, in his chapter on medical history, Charles Weld (1813–1869) chided the Society’s founding members for their “superstitions” about Greatrakes’ events.

After Weld, the Greatrakes story became a rather enigmatic footnote in the history of medicine. The problem, if there is one, is that Greatrakes’ witnesses swore they saw illnesses and diseases cured as a result of his touch. There were only two explanations, neither mechanistic. Greatrakes and many of his observers believed that such effects were produced by God and the “healers” served as divine proxies, while others, like Boyle, also attributed the sanative virtues to the power of the imagination. It was difficult to separate these explanations, but one thing was absolutely clear—this type of “immaterial” cure had happened regularly throughout history.

22 Refer to the section on Weld in chapter 1.
Franz Mesmer (1734–1815)

The G greatrakes narratives precede by almost precisely 100 years the healing successes accomplished by Franz Antoine Mesmer (1734–1815), which were, like those of Greatrakes, also examined by the most famous leading scientists and medical doctors of his day.  

By Mesmer’s time, the Enlightenment philosophy of mechanism was dominant and deistic rationale were methodically suppressed. Mesmer’s failing, according to Benjamin Franklin (1706–1790), was not an inability to cure his patients—many of them did recover. Mesmer had claimed to have discovered a curative “agent,” a “fluid universally diffused” that cured diseases and distempers. Franklin’s report detailed a number of previous healers that used similar methods and included a very positive vignette of Greatrakes. Franklin noted how Greatrakes ascribed “his success to God, publicly expressing his gratitude, and inviting the patient to join with him in the act of thanksgiving.”

However, regarding Mesmer, the commission concluded with an interesting contradiction: that “animal magnetic fluid” was insensible, that its “application” created impressions that were “always hurtful to the imagination,” and that any

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23 Mesmer’s explanations of his healing powers were proven wrong and because of this he was discredited despite his healing successes.
24 See generally: Benjamin Franklin, Report of Dr. Benjamin Franklin, And Other Commissioners, Charged by the King of France, with the Examination of the Animal Magnetism, as Now Practised at Paris. Translated from the French. With an Historical Introduction. (London: J. Johnson, 1785) It should be noted that the commission did not examine Mesmer, but rather M. Deslon, one of Mesmer’s protégés.
25 Ibid., 19–21.
26 Ibid., 12.
beneficial effects were the product of the imagination.27

Historians readily acknowledge the deistic nature of early science, especially as it was expressed in alchemical texts.28 Over time this deistic perspective was marginalized and this influenced how the Greatrakes narratives have been received. It is my contention that the canon of the history of science and medicine relating to this type of healing should begin with Greatrakes rather than with Mesmer. The philosophical debates among Greatrakes’ contemporaries about his ministrations did not focus on the effectiveness of his cures; they were obsessed with causation. Most agreed that God played some role, and that was often reason enough. In Mesmer’s day the clergy had less say, and the simple reason proffered by the Franklin commission—the power of the imagination—simply ignored mechanistic causation. Greatrakes’ narratives contextualize Mesmer’s quasi-

27 The report does not specify the harm to the imagination. It seems that one problem was that the Mesmeric effects might reduce the power of religion in society. Ibid., 105.
mechanistic “magnetic” explanation, draw attention to the consistent theme of imagination when considering these phenomena, and locate an earlier origin of this conversation in the early Royal Society.  

Greatrakes’ ministrations are every bit as thoroughly documented and investigated as Mesmer’s, but the shift in the attitudes of the Royal Society from deist to atheist results in Greatrakes’ having been intentionally obscured from the scholarly gaze. From Birch’s blatant omission in 1756 to Weld’s attacks on Boyle and his “superstitious” fellows in 1848, the official historians of the Royal Society bury the Greatrakes narratives in the category of superstition.  

Here, then, is another central thesis of my dissertation: it is simply not the case that the scientific gaze upon this type of healing phenomenon begins with Mesmer and Benjamin Franklin. Rather, it begins with Greatrakes and Boyle and a dozen early members of the Royal Society—including some of its most influential founders.

29 The parallels between these two sets of narratives is no less than astonishing, and should be examined further. It seems rather likely that Mesmer would have had access to the Greatrakes accounts, but as yet I have seen no evidence of this. Benjamin Franklin, the best known scientist to consider Mesmer’s theories, was a fellow of the Royal Society.


Methodology

My primary methodology is a critical historical perspective. My research is founded on Elmer’s ground-clearing work and accomplished with the significant benefits of modern technology. My project is distinguished from Elmer’s in a number of ways. Although it would be impossible for Elmer to write about Greatrakes without mentioning the Royal Society, for Elmer it is a tangential rather than a central element. Elmer does little to highlight those dozen participants in the Greatrakes story who are members of the Royal Society. In fact, he often mentions that association only in footnotes. Secondly, Elmer argues that Greatrakes’ larger mission was an eirenic calling to heal the body politic. My perspective contextualizes this eirenicism specifically within alchemical philosophy to reveal an eirenic anti-dogmatic lineage connected through intellect, education, and wealth.

The technological aspect of my research is not superficial and would have been impossible a mere decade ago. My research into Greatrakes began in 2009, the very first year that comprehensive online text search of 17th century texts became possible. Although document images of these texts first were made available online in 1998 in the Early English Books Online (EEBO) repository, it was in 1999 that the Text Creation Partnership (TCP) began the first phase of its

work to hand encode and transcribe approximately 25,000 texts. That phase was completed and put online in 2009. To date the TCP has transcribed approximately 70,000 EEBO texts that are now searchable online. That project is currently ongoing, so my research is potentially superseded daily as new transcriptions come online.

This dissertation is divided into four chapters. The first is a synopsis of the important historical facts necessary to contextualize the themes and to emphasize the way the Greateakes narratives fit within the larger picture of the early Enlightenment, emphasizing their reception by the Royal Society. The second chapter describes the historical and archaeological origins of alchemy and how they relate to advanced education and the social order; it ends with descriptions of how the seventeenth century English understood their social structure. The third chapter introduces the hermeneutic of privilege as an interpretive frame to examine a lineage of elite alchemists and locates their texts within the context of social and political disparity. These alchemical texts reveal specific ideas of secrecy and initiation that contribute directly to the philosophical underpinnings of the Enlightenment. The concluding chapter suggests that Boyle’s “Invisible College” links the alchemical texts in chapter three with the Royal Society and Freemasonry. It looks specifically at the relationship between the Royal Society and Freemasonry with emphasis on the prevaricated origins of organized Freemasonry and the
practical utility of Masonic initiations.

**Personal Statement**

Peter Elmer’s historical research is a major factual foundation of my thesis. He generously sent me early copies of his unpublished manuscripts, including his later revisions and the completed final draft of his book. To him I owe a great debt of gratitude. I cannot imagine the amount of time he devoted to his project. My experience with seventeenth-century texts has been far different from his. From the beginning, my access to these texts has been from my desk through the internet, with most of the books even text searchable. The depth and breadth of my project is a product of the digital revolution and internet technology.

Perhaps unfortunately, the interpretation of historical facts can also function as a Rorschach ink blot. Here is where another central aspect of argument of the dissertation comes in: where Elmer sees purely eirenic motives in the Greatrakes narrative, I also attribute economic motives. Rather than associating my perspective with an unduly materialistic bent, I prefer to credit my education and professional experience in both law and accounting. “Follow the money” is a mantra of these disciplines, one not wisely forgotten.

There is also a certain “esoteric” hermeneutic at work here. I was initiated as a Freemason in 2002, and without that experience I might never have seen some of
the patterns explored in the chapters to come. Finally, my high-school education in the 1970s included a course in computer programming that opened my eyes to the digital revolution. My impatient temperament would not sit well with the typewriters and microforms of earlier scholars. It is more than a mere convenience to research and write in the comfort of one’s home; it is an extraordinary luxury that, like flush toilets, will swiftly become a common and expected part of civilized life. Without computers and the internet, it would have taken many decades to do the research accomplished here in just a few short years. Digital textual tools currently under development promise even more scholarly reach.

33 I have taken special care not to reveal any of the esoteric secrets of Freemasonry. Everything about Freemasonry in this work is found in published and cited sources.
CHAPTER 1: A BRIEF HISTORICAL LANDSCAPE

This chapter presents the historical context underpinning the arguments developed in the following chapters and is divided into three sections: 1) the social and political environment of the regicide, Republic, and Restoration, including a very rough sketch of the religious terrain of the period; 2) the history of touch healing; and 3) a summary of four official histories of the Royal Society. The historical events most salient to my thesis begin with Charles I’s beheading in 1649 and culminate with Gatrekakes’ publication of *Brief Account* in 1666. During these two short decades in England, a centuries-old structure of mores and philosophical truths collapsed under the weight of religious and economic disparity, to be rebuilt on alchemical and Masonic principles. This is the era of Gatrekakes’ “miracles,” a time of renovating and reorganizing the intellectual foundations underpinning the religion, politics, and social order of England.

The violent nature of seventeenth century England’s political environment is described in some detail below to frame a theoretical argument connecting anti-dogmatism with political, social, and economic stability—a main construct of my thesis. The argument is that a “syncretic” perspective, one that reconciles conflicting viewpoints, is demonstrated by “alchemists” in each of the following chapters.¹ This chapter highlights religious and political polemical extremes and

¹ Syncretism, as I use it, is defined in the section “Syncretism, Secrecy, and Initiation” in chapter 2.
the importance of this type of philosophical moderation to enduring those times when warring factions reversed individual fortunes frequently.

**Historical Background: Regicide, Republic, and Restoration**

Greatrakes’ story coincides with two momentous events in seventeenth-century England, events that I argue shaped the form and nature of early modern English culture more than any others. The separation of Charles I (1600–1649) from his head was an act with violent social and religious repercussions. The beheading was traumatic for a society that worshipped its king as God’s divine representative; and though Oliver Cromwell’s (1599–1658) title of “Lord Protector” was intended to inspire the confidence of divine authority among his subjects, it fell somewhat short of its mark. The regicide was an important assault on the notion of meditated divinity because one would not expect such a cruel fate to befall God’s chosen agent.

Before the beheading, one way that kings demonstrated their divine authority was by healing their subjects of scrofula, a condition we know today as tuberculosis of the skin that was called “the King’s Evil” in the seventeenth century. Royal “healing touch” ceremonies were regularly held. They were elaborate events that drew throngs of patients largely attracted by the specially minted coins (portraying the image of an angel on one side and the monarch on the
obverse) that all the sufferers were given. These amulets of gold, or silver when state coffers were light, were highly effective at raising a horde to be healed. No one expected all the participants to be healed. But when the crowds were large enough—and the amulets assured that they always were—inevitably some of the sufferers would “miraculously” recover.

Apparently, Cromwell’s charisma did not extend “to the supernatural privileges of royalty.” He did not attempt the healing touch. Unlike the monarchs preceding the Lord Protector, Cromwell did not claim divine authority, and loyal royalists even considered him demonic. His reign was characterized by “a breakdown in censorship which allowed ideas hitherto considered heretical and kept underground to surface in print and in word.” The result was a period of religious and philosophical freedom previously unknown to England, a period which saw the dissemination of heretical or even seditious ideas that had previously been concealed from commoners in the Greek and Latin of the elite.

After the revolution, these previously heretical ideas were openly expressed

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in common language among groups like the Cambridge Platonists and the Hartlib Circle. The Cambridge Platonists were an influential group of moderate, latitudinarian philosophers and theologians highly represented among Greatrakes’ affiants. The Hartlib Circle was a group of important reformers that welcomed the religious freedoms resulting from Cromwell’s coup. There was overlapping participation between them, and both groups were significantly represented among the founders of the Royal Society.

**Robert Boyle (1627–1691)**

Greatrakes’ most famous affiant was Robert Boyle (1627–1691), the natural philosopher who had made himself into one of the most trusted gentlemen of his day.\(^4\) Boyle was closely aligned with both the Cambridge Platonists and the Hartlib Circle. Elmer highlights a variety of parallels between Greatrakes and Boyle: they were born in close temporal and spatial proximity in Ireland, and their fathers died in the same year, 1643.\(^5\) During the war they moved to England for their protection as fatherless young men, their educations fractured, leaving behind in Ireland estates that would be as impacted by the war as were their tender minds.

Later in life, their Irish interests aligned them on political issues, such as the proposed ban on the export of cattle from Ireland to England; both men opposed

the ban because their Irish holdings depended on this commerce, and both
expressed strong faith in providentialism and a marked interest in supernaturalism
and the spirit world. Elmer’s research brings light to a number of facts that are
important to understand the Greatrakes narratives. For example, in addition to
providing extraordinarily detailed biographical information about individuals’
political and religious characters, Elmer shows us how, like Boyle’s, Greatrakes’
image is carefully cultivated as an exemplar of religious tolerance and moderation
as a part of a larger social and political movement.

Elmer’s primary thesis is that Greatrakes’ mission, and Boyle’s support of it,
together constituted an eirenic attempt to restore health to the decapitated body
politic. It is a well-crafted and reasonable argument, one with which I agree.
However, my analysis of the facts Elmer uncovers leads to additional
complementary conclusions, principally that the religious tolerance demonstrated
by Greatrakes’ supporters was motivated by more than pure eirenicism—the
alchemists’ philosophical syncretism was motivated by the privilege they sought to
maintain.

In the following chapters we will see how flexibility of conscience based on
syncretic ideals offered adherents greater possibilities of survival, and even
prosperity, though treacherous times. I will also suggest that the founding of the

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6 Ibid., 108.
7 Ibid., 26.
Royal Society and the birth of Freemasonry share the eirenical motives Elmer sees so clearly in Gtretrakes’ stroking, and I will highlight facts that suggest the two institutions are more closely related than is commonly believed.

Cromwell’s republic introduced a new freedom of religious practice to England. Under the monarchy, religious authority flowed down from the king through bishops to the people, and church worship and attendance were legislatively mandated. Cromwell imposed fewer moral and educational standards than his predecessors, and parish ministers had far more authority than they had previously. Worship outside the parish system, previously outlawed, was now permitted. The already complex religious landscape of England became much more complicated under the republic. Seditious sects, most notably Quakers and Anabaptists, that had flourished mostly unfettered under Cromwell’s republic, understandably resisted the restrictive Restoration.

The return of the monarchy restored rigorous standards of religious conformity, and new strict laws mandating religious belief and practices were directly aimed at subduing seditious sects. Specific religious oaths and practices were necessary to hold most government jobs, not just parish parsonages. Because there was no adequate infrastructure to compel conformity in the early Restoration, many of those who had enjoyed the religious freedom under the protectorate still

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managed to “conform” and take in a non-conforming sermon or gathering at times.

One of the main characteristics common to Boyle and Gatrekkes’ supporters was this type of “flexible” conformity, a sort of Darwinian adaptability. Boyle was very careful about his allegiances, and even declined a bishopric in the Church of England. Gatrekkes had held lucrative government posts under Cromwell. After the Restoration, when one might expect he would have had difficulties, he managed to conform swiftly to the new regime and to maintain his comfortable government job. While others lost their posts for conscientiously refusing to swear out the compulsory oaths, there were plenty for whom such oaths presented no philosophical problem. Prime among these were those men participating in networks influenced by their pursuits of syncretic alchemical philosophy.

**Elias Ashmole (1617–1692)**

One of the consequences of Cromwell’s liberal religious policy was immediate—censorship was significantly relaxed. In 1650 Elias Ashmole (1617–1692), writing under a pseudonym, published an English translation of a Latin “book of alchemical notes and extracts” by Arthur Dee (1579–1651), the eldest son of John

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Dee (1527-1609). Heretofore, alchemical texts had been mostly concealed in the elite’s Latin, so Arthur, who had been set “apart with a solemn rite to be his father’s “skryer,” was puzzled by Ashmole’s translation.

Two years later, with a bit more confidence, Ashmole published *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* under his own name. The *Theatrum* was “a massive collection of texts that reproduced manuscripts of alchemical recipes and treatises in print for the first time.” Ashmole figures prominently in both of the two Enlightenment institutions that are part of my thesis, the Royal Society and Freemasonry. He was an Original Fellow of the Royal Society, and he was reputed to be one of the very first documented Freemasons. I suggest that rather than this being a random connection, that these institutions incorporated specifically to influence thought and behavior in alignment with their moderate alchemical ideals by foisting a covert assault on the common perceptions of the state and Church of England.

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How the English People Loved their Kings and Queens

In large measure, the published accounts of Greatrakes’ “miracles” were part of the demise of an earlier notion of monarchy. England had loved its monarch. It was not an unqualified or unquestioning love but rather was the kind of love one might have for a difficult sibling or spouse. English monarchy was a symbiotic relationship between rulers and subjects seething within the tension connecting periods of tenuous peace and violent episodes of radical change. Each new coronation carried the potential for material calamity or ascendancy, and one might rise or fall with a favorite king.

A principal hallmark of this relationship was struck in 1215 with the signing of the Magna Carta, a social contract between the monarch and the nobility requiring the King to behave within established contractual bounds. The agreement aligned the economic interests of the monarchy with the nobility, especially with regard to taxation, and included an assurance that “the English church shall be free.”¹³ The Magna Carta limited the royal prerogative; but wide latitude remained for monarchs to abuse discretion, and many of them did. These discretionary gaffes included sexual, religious, and economic improprieties. For example, Charles I’s father, James (1566–1625), had difficulties spending within the parameters

considered reasonable by his parliament and people, perhaps a pardonable failing in light of his ascension to the Scottish throne as an infant and his dedicated pacifism.

Barely a year old when crowned in Scotland, James was placed on the English throne in 1603 after Elizabeth (1533–1603) died. Throughout his life he largely maintained her middling course between Catholicism and fully reformed Protestantism. Elizabeth’s reign of over four decades had given momentum to her imperative to unite England religiously. Instead of claiming the title “Supreme Head” of the church as her predecessors had (a designation Protestant and Catholic detractors thought best reserved for Christ himself), Elizabeth assumed the slightly diminished title of “Supreme Governor.” Ultimately, Elizabeth was not the unifying force she had hoped to be, and England remained divided.

Not only did James inherit this religiously fragmented England; there was also a very significant gulf between the religious ideologies of Scotland and England. Scotland was more Calvinist, favoring a Presbyterian structure that localized religious authority among the clergy closest to their parishioners. England, on the other hand, still tended towards the more elaborate rituals and adornments associated with “popery” and the Episcopal structure that centralized church authority among a council of bishops.

14 Shortly after taking the throne, James sponsored the translation of the Bible into English for the Church of England, which became the famous "King James Bible."
Perhaps looking ahead to James’ future English crown, the Scottish Parliament’s “Black Acts” of 1584 seriously disturbed the Scots by transferring authority away from parishioners to bishops overseen by the king. This structure was more in harmony with England’s churches and moved Scotland away from their comfortable Presbyterian past. James’ middling ways in religious matters can be seen in his strategy for marrying off his children. In a gambit Francis Yates describes in the first chapter of *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, James attempts both to assuage the strong Protestant inclinations in Europe and to mollify the powerful Catholic Hapsburg dynasty by marrying his daughter off to the German Protestant Frederick V (1596–1632) while simultaneously pursuing an alliance with the powerful Catholic Hapsburgs by marrying his son Henry Frederick (1594-1612) to a Spanish Catholic princess.15 Sadly, Henry Frederick’s death in 1612 postponed his sister’s wedding and spoiled his father’s plans.

By the time that Charles I was eventually betrothed to his Spanish Catholic princess in 1621, his brother-in-law Frederick V had been badly defeated by the Spanish Catholics, and the twelve-year truce between Spain and the Netherlands was soon to expire. James had little leverage to negotiate continued peace. Considering the religious and political storms brewing, James’ lavish spending did not engender the loyalty among his subjects that his more frugal aunt, Elizabeth,

had enjoyed. After all, she had continually lessened the economic burden of the crown on her people, actually selling assets from the royal trust rather than pushing parliament to finance war in the 1590s.

James’s lavish tastes required more revenue; but rather than despoiling royal assets like his aunt Mary, he cleverly used his prerogative over foreign affairs to implement customs fees, strategically avoiding the necessity of parliamentary approval normally required for implementing taxes. This seemingly small breach in the spirit of the Magna Carta contributed to the ruinous leak in the dike holding social unrest at bay when Charles I (James’ son) later extended royal prerogatives well beyond his father’s sly tactics.

James’ social bequest to Charles I was a fatal combination of lavish taste, entitled and privileged attitude, and inordinate debt bound together by a strong sense of filial loyalty. On taking the throne in 1625, Charles I could have declined to pay some of his father’s more significant creditors but instead chose to honor his father’s memory while declining to tidy the royal accounts. Unfortunately for Charles, he failed to heed his father’s admonition to pursue a pacifistic foreign policy. Knowing the Spanish intended to make a run at the Netherlands on the

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16 Her frugality was also considered to have contributed corruption to her court, since her servants took bribes to offset meager salaries. Edwin A. Abbott, *Francis Bacon: An Account of His Life and Works* (London: Macmillan and Co., 1885), 3.

expiration of the twelve year truce, Charles launched an unpopular, expensive, and seriously under-funded naval expedition in an unsuccessful alliance with the Dutch against Spain. This inauspicious launch charted the course for the growing tensions between Charles I and his kingdom.

**Economic Disparity in the Body Politic and Culture**

The monarch was the public keystone of the social arch of England, but power and influence flowed through a network of familial and economic interests that extended back many generations. Royalty, nobility, and wealth were generally conferred at birth. Though opportunities to rise above or fall below one’s natal position did exist, one might only rise so high or sink so low. We will examine some ways in which education signified and determined social status in detail in the next chapter: “Education, Secrecy, and Social Order.” Keith Thomas in *Religion and the Decline of Magic* describes the seventeenth-century educational landscape: “The social elite was highly educated. It has been calculated that by 1660 there was a grammar school for every 4,400 persons and that two and a half per cent of the relevant age-group of the male population was receiving some form

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19 The pillars supporting this arch were the Church of England and the nobility.
of higher education, at Oxford and Cambridge, or at the Inns of Court.”

Thomas estimates that more than half the adult male population was illiterate. One of the interesting characteristics of Gatrek’s book is the mix of literate and illiterate affiants: many were highly educated and respected academicians, and others could neither read nor write. Not only was there a huge variation in the standard of living among these affiants (the next chapter presents a detailed examination of these economic differences), but they also held widely disparate religious beliefs.

This religious disparity was reflected in the intellectual cultures of the Oxford and Cambridge colleges. Oxford was the more conservative institution while Cambridge was more progressive or liberal. After England renounced Catholicism, Oxford “was the nursery” for the Church of England and Puritan clergy. Henry VIII (1491-1547) used a Cambridge theologian to justify his rebellion against the Pope; Cromwell and his collaborators were Cambridge men as well. But merely considering Oxford to have been more conservative or less progressive than Cambridge, or Cambridge more revolutionary than Oxford, does not capture the complex relationship between them. Both institutions could be a

bridge or a barrier to joining or remaining within the small part of society participating in the elitist alliance of power and privilege we examine in the next chapter. Within this social alliance there was a broad spectrum of ideological and religious beliefs, and these two universities loosely represented polemical extremes: Aristotelian Oxford and Neo-Platonic Cambridge.

Education was a signifier power and privilege. Lack of it was a barrier (though not impenetrable) to participating in the upper levels of society. Hellenistic philosophical and Latin alchemical texts, which contained heretical ideas, were only accessible to an educated elite who made use of them to preserve and perpetuate their place in the social order by shifting their allegiances with the prevailing political winds. We will examine this idea in detail in the third chapter, “Alchemical Chameleons and the Hermeneutic of Privilege,” considering the ways that adhering to a middle-path anti-dogmatic alchemical philosophy allowed intellectuals to shift their political allegiance and so maintain their social status and privilege.

Francis Bacon (1561–1626), whose philosophy underpins both the experimental philosophy of the Royal Society and the rich symbolism of Freemasonry, understood the idea of education as a bridge. His father’s career began in animal husbandry. Through education (and, we may rightly surmise, a

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23 For example, the Aristotelian notion of an eternal universe conflicts with creationism.
great deal of intellect), Nicholas Bacon (1510–1579) rose to the post of Lord Keeper of the Great Seal, a very prominent and powerful position in the government, that was legislatively made equal to that of Chancellor during the elder Bacon’s time. Francis may well have had this example in mind when he coined the phrase “scientia potestas est” or “knowledge is power.” He had seen his father rise to power and enjoyed the attendant economic benefits.

Economic disparity paralleled educational disparity. Thomas figures that during the late seventeenth-century “between a third and a half of the population lived at subsistence level and were chronically under-employed” and that landowners and professionals representing about five percent of the population took in over half the national income. Class tension was so high that “Only members of the landed ruling class were allowed to carry weapons,” and common folk did not normally participate in the militia. Considering that “Inequality of wealth—and of the consequent income from capital—is in fact always much greater than in equality of income from labor,” the results of this educational disparity were very harsh. In the following chapters we will look at how

26 Thomas, Religion and the Decline of Magic, 4.
28 Thomas Piketty, Capital in the Twenty-First Century, trans. Arthur Goldhammer (Cambridge, MA:
education and its relationship to the social structure was essential to understanding alchemical secrets. We will also consider how alchemy played a role in the creation of the Royal Society and Freemasonry and explore the idea that these institutions created a trust network for the benefit of the elite, providing secure relationships with their commoner compatriots.

Income and wealth disparity were at the heart of the Cromwellian rebellion; and as we have seen, Charles I’s attitude in this regard (as demonstrated by his costly unsuccessful war against the Spanish) was particularly bad. He inherited the throne in 1625 along with massive debt. Rather than reduce court expenditures, he chose to raise taxes to pay for his doomed, under-funded war. By 1629 the economic turmoil was so great that he dissolved the parliament after the Commons made resolutions preventing taxation and opposing Charles’s religious prerogative. Since the parliament was his most reliable way of being informed about what people expected of him, dissolving it separated Charles even more from his subjects; and he muddled uncomfortably through the next eleven years of solitary rule.

Despite Charles I’s bad behavior, a large proportion of the English people remained loyal to him and his church. These royalists believed, in part, that the king ruled with divine authority from God and that the Magna Carta did not permit...
regicide. Ardent royalist beliefs were aligned with the Church of England that promulgated a form of Protestantism that viewed divine authority as flowing from the king, through a hierarch of bishops and down to the people. This was similar to the Catholic system of Episcopacy that had dominated England until Henry VIII (1491–1547) and rejected papal authority. After Henry, the official Church’s theology changed regularly with England’s monarchs: Henry VIII’s son, Edward VI (r.1547-1553), moved further toward Protestant ideas; Edward’s sister Mary Tudor (r.1553-1558) shifted back to papal authority; and Mary’s sister, Elizabeth I, (r.1558-1603) returned the country to a moderate Protestantism. Behind this unstable religious backdrop, both Papists and Puritans vied to maneuver into the throne the heir most favorable to their beliefs.

Following Elizabeth, James and then Charles I attempted to chart steady and moderate religious courses, but the tensions between the opposing factions were too deadly. After the combination of religious unrest and economic disparity culminated in beheading Charles I, the Cromwellian republic (probably wisely) loosened the state’s grip on religiosity.

**Theological Tensions in the Headless Body Politic**

Because of the complicated and intractable nature of these religious polemics, the theology of the official Church was *always* a compromise. One main theological
tension was whether or not humanity’s relationship with God was mediated. Catholics believed that the pope was God’s “divinely ordained representative” on earth and that human interaction with God could only be accomplished through the pope or his representatives. Protestants held a variety of beliefs about mediation. Within the Protestant camp, Puritans were as far from the Catholics as possible, believing that humanity’s relationship with God was direct, without mediation. Puritans believed that each person was directly responsible for her or his own direct connection with deity.

Loosely, this polemic was reflected in the Oxbridge dichotomy, with Oxford representing the mediated side favoring an Episcopal hierarchy and “popish” ideas, while Cambridge leaned more towards the Puritans and their “pure” relationship with deity and a Presbyterian structure of church leadership. When William Laud (1573–1645) became Chancellor of Oxford in 1629, he ran the Puritans out. Laud was a “popish Protestant,” one who regimented the church with a strict Episcopal hierarchy and adorned it with the expensive and lavish accoutrements typical of Catholicism that Puritans abhorred.

Laud’s aggressive opposition to the Puritans landed him in hot water in 1640 as the strength of the Presbyterian opposition to Charles I grew. Laud’s belief that the successes of church and monarch were linked was unfortunately prescient for

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29 “Oxbridge” refers to the combination of Oxford and Cambridge.
30 Zimmer, Soul Made Flesh, 47.
him. Laud was executed shortly before the Presbyterian parliament defeated Charles II in war in 1646. The headless Commonwealth ran amuck a bit until the army Parliament created to defeat Charles I, still under Cromwell’s control, set its sights on its creator, effecting a military coup over the Parliament in 1653.

It was during the interim between the military defeat of Charles I in 1646 and the regicide in 1649 that political shenanigans seriously tainted the integrity of the Commonwealth. Puritan parliamentarians aligned with Cromwell sought unsuccessfully to persuade their colleagues to try the king for treason and execute him. This course of action (considered both seditious and heretical by Church of England royalists) ultimately prevailed, but only after violence against the unyielding parliamentary majority. It is during savage and uncertain period when Boyle writes about an “Invisible College” in letters to his friends and that Ashmole claims his initiation into Freemasonry occurred.

In chapter four we look at how a secret Masonic or proto-Masonic network may have helped the royalist conspiracy that arose during the republic in response to the military coup.\(^{31}\) Obviously, the Parliament’s war against Charles I was seditious. But many of the members of Parliament still saw Charles I as God’s agent and were not willing to go as far as the heresy of killing God’s proxy on the throne. The regicide was to permanently alter this conception of the monarch as

\(^{31}\) For a detailed treatment of the royalist conspiracy, see: Underdown, *Royalist Conspiracy in England, 1649-1660*. 
God’s proxy. Those conscientious members of parliament, unwilling to do violence to a man who carried divine authority, were relieved of their moral quandaries when the army took control of the House of Parliament and physically prevented them from entering the building to vote their conscience.

After these royalists were forcibly restrained from exercising their votes the small fraction of the parliamentarians that was left to conduct business became known as the “Rump Parliament” since it contained the “tail-end” or residue of the legislative body—and perhaps also as an intimation of their scurrilous behavior. It was clear that from that point forward, all things would be very different. Vivian Green describes the situation: “The Commonwealth was to be a period of religious experimentation. Oliver Cromwell was highly emotional and deeply religious. He was a man of ‘free spirit’ and like many of his army officers really belonged to the Independents or Congregationalists, who regarded the congregation as the proper nucleus of Church government and did not accept the belief for uniformity in religious matters on which both the Church of England and the Presbyterians insisted.”

It is impossible to separate religious ideology from politics because of the role the church structure played in the economic lives of the congregants. During this era separate taxes were somewhat arbitrarily imposed by both church and state,

32 Vivian H.H. Green, A New History of Christianity (Continuum International Publishing Group, 2000), 193.
and taxation was one of the most compelling inspirations for revolution.

Episcopalian administration of church business was strictly hierarchical, run by bishops like Laud, whose tastes for lavishness were often only grudgingly borne by heavily-taxed congregants. Presbyterian leadership was driven by the preferences of the congregation, who liked to choose whether they preferred to meet their own subsistence needs or to experience the religious ecstasy of seeing a beautiful altar-cloth or gilt candlesticks adorning their church (and furnished by their taxes).

The lavish tendencies of the Episcopalians were relics of their Catholic heritage; and even though queens of England, like the Spanish bride of Charles I, were typically Catholic, Catholicism had been illegal since the reign of Elizabeth I. Being Catholic was a treasonable, capital offence. Illegal Catholic allegiances were popular among the nobility; but unlike royalty, the nobles were not always exempt from prosecution, so they designed their castles and country homes with secret chapels and priest holes so that they might practice their faith covertly in peace.

These hiding holes could be appropriated for other purposes and may have played a role in Charles II’s dramatic and unlikely escape from Cromwell’s army after his father’s beheading.\footnote{Charles II’s escape was considered miraculous by many of his time because his unusual height should have rendered him very easy prey.} In later chapters we will consider the trust necessarily placed in the Masonic craftsmen and other guildsmen who built and maintained these hiding places, and how being in possession of these potentially
treasonous secrets created a special intimacy between trusted guildsmen and their noble employers.

Aftermath of the Republican Hurricane—the Violent Restoration

The schizophrenic attitude towards Catholicism—simultaneously illegal and the professed faith of the sitting queen—characterizes the sand dune-like nature of seventeenth-century England’s larger religious landscape and highlights the danger of developing trusting relationships in traitorous times. English Society drifted constantly as a result of the shifting political and economic winds, and Oliver Cromwell had been a terrific hurricane. The Restoration was just as violent as the revolution had been—but with an extra measure of vengeance.

The forcibly ejected royalist parliamentarians who had suffered during the republic were recalled to serve in the Restoration and felt no compunction at laying heavy hands upon those who had previously driven them out of power. In fact, even before the Restoration, “It was wise to stay on the good side of the exiled royalists, who were known to stalk Parliament’s friends on the Continent and assassinate them.” The Restoration was by no means a peaceful process, and understanding the transition from monarchy to republic and back to monarchy is

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34 Hurricane Ike, that hit Galveston on September 13, 2008, is a perfect analogy.
35 Zimmer, Soul Made Flesh, 127 Such assassinations may have been facilitated by a secret proto-Masonic network.
key to my thesis.

Each shift was traitorous to the previous regime, and yet there were those who managed to maintain their power and authority by putatively pledging allegiance to both sides at once or simply having no true allegiance to either side.

In the following chapters we look directly into the light that alchemical syncretism sheds on this strategy either to remain neutral or prevaricate allegiance successfully and how alchemy helped alchemists swiftly adapt to their changing environment. The illustrious affiants to Ggreatrakes’ miraculous touch healing narratives strongly represent this group of chameleons.

A Brief History of Touch Healing: Ggreatrakes’ Place

Stories about touch healing have carried a special mystique conveying spiritual authority since the biblical narratives about Elisha, Elijah, and Jesus.\(^\text{36}\) Considering philosophical rationales for the putative efficacy of such healing events is beyond the scope of this project. Suffice it to say medical science acknowledges the fact that inexplicable healings (placebo) occur for practically every type of disease, and I suggest that it is impossible to distinguish indisputably placebo cures from the spiritual cures we look at here. So without considering mechanisms, abilities, or realities, we will look only at healing narratives and their real power to convey the

\(^\text{36}\) 2 Kings 4:32, Kings 17, John 11:39
appearance of spiritual authority to efficacious healers.

**Mesmer’s Place and Greatrakes’ Omission**

One of the reasons this project is important is to address the serious omission of Greatrakes’ narratives in the history of science and medicine. Current histories of healing typically tip their hats to biblical sources, make brief references to miracles in the Middle Ages, and then consider the modern origin of healing narratives to be with Franz Antoine Mesmer (1734-1815). It is simply not the case that the early modern scientific gaze upon this type of healing phenomenon began in the age of Mesmer and Benjamin Franklin.\(^{37}\) It began with Greatrakes and Boyle.

For reasons we will examine in some detail later in this chapter, Greatrakes does not appear in some of the best and most thorough histories of medicine and science.\(^{38}\) For example, in *The Cure Within*, Anne Harrington describes the “interweaving religious, philosophical, and political stakes” involved in the appropriation of healing. She looks at Greatrakes’ contemporary Thomas Hobbes (1588–1679) and Hobbes’ skeptical perspective that demonology functioned as a tool of ecclesiastical power and authority.

Harrington then moves straight to Mesmer without a mention of Greatrakes, the serious consideration he received by a dozen members of the Royal Society, or

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\(^{38}\) See the section “History of the Royal Society” below and “Weld’s History” in particular.


In the following section of this chapter dealing with the history of the Royal Society, we see precisely how the scientific gaze is diverted from Gretrakes’ role in the conversations of the early Royal Society as a part of that institution’s continual strategy of bolstering its credibility and public approval by rewriting its history to conform to the shifting sentiments of the times.

**The King’s Touch and the King’s Evil**

Long before early modern science ever considered the idea of spiritual or touch healing, the modality was appropriated by both church and state to influence public
perception to their favor. In 1926 Marc Bloch published, in French, the authoritative text on “the King’s touch,” a term used to signify a royal ritual enacted to cure scrofula (a form of tuberculosis).\(^\text{42}\) Bloch tells us that the tradition of the King’s touch began in the 11th century, when one of Edward the Confessor’s subjects came to him for a favor. She had dreamt that the hideous scrofulous growth on her face would be healed if only the king would stroke her. He did, it did, and ever since the form of tuberculosis cured by the king’s touch was called “the King’s Evil.”

Kings used this “miraculous” stroking, considered a God-given endowment of the monarchy, as direct evidence of their divine authority to rule. Aspirants to the throne would not have the gift, as it was apparently acquired only with a valid coronation and occasionally considered to be a reasonable criterion to distinguish a rightful king from an impostor. Like his predecessors, Charles I avidly stroked his ailing subjects. In 1633 the touch ceremony was incorporated into the *Book of Common Prayer*, and was important enough to be retained even after the Restoration.\(^\text{43}\)

To prevent these stroking ceremonies from seeming common and to preserve their special appurtenance of divine grace, Charles I and “his ministers


\(^{43}\) Bloch, *The Royal Touch; Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, 208, n171.
declared relentless war against the competitors with the royal prerogative.” For example, in 1637 members of the Royal College of Physicians harassed a gardener-turned-healer and leveled official charges against him for stroking for the evil.

When Charles I was defeated, Cromwell permitted touch healing to flourish unfettered among new religious sects, particularly the Quakers. Some Puritans regarded the touch with open hostility because, with its connotations of miraculous effects, it reeked of “popery.” When Parliamentary soldiers (many of them Puritans) finally captured Charles, loyal royalists still came to be touched by the captured king (seemingly oblivious to the detrimental connotations about the king’s divinity resulting from his capture). In recognition of this rather odd incongruence, his capturers pejoratively nicknamed him “Stroker.”

The reason touch healing was associated with popery was that, from a Catholic perspective, current miracles were considered good evidence of divine handiwork. Miraculous healing was a path through which Edward the Confessor eventually became a saint. But along with the reformation of the Church of England, the Protestant doctrine of the cessation of miracles precluded miraculous healing, particularly when exercised by persons of lesser divine status than the

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44 Ibid., 208.
Kings were supposed to be endowed with superpowers, just so long as they were clearly subordinate to Jesus. Divine authority was imputed to authentic kings, and the inability to display divine attributes publicly subjected them to accusations of impostorship. “When Charles had been beheaded, special powers of healing were attributed to his relics, even to handkerchiefs dipped in his blood.”47 Charles II, who had been crowned as king of Scotland on the news of his father’s death, performed touch healing rituals while in exile, hiding from the men Cromwell sent to capture him.48

For Charles II’s Catholic mother, Henrietta Maria (1609–1669), “The advancement of the Catholic religion and protection of English Catholics had been a consistent concern.”49 Although Charles II had not been “properly” crowned in England, people believed in the new king of Scotland’s extraordinary power. We might wonder what the new monarch thought about his own monarchal divinity, given his “divine” Protestant father’s beheading and his mother’s ardent Catholicism.50

48 Ibid.
50 It would be interesting to look into Charles II’s personal notions of divinity and his thoughts about the touch. He was well known for his disregard of the norms of sexual propriety.
I suggest that Charles II entertained doubts about such matters while in exile, seriously questioning the connection between his office and his healing gift, and he might even have come to the conclusion that such touch rituals and the healings that followed might not have been attributable to a causal relationship. A good deal had already been written about the power of the imagination in healing (even the use of a servant’s imagination to heal his master!). This doubt might help explain why, unlike his father, Charles II declined to prosecute healing imitators.

Charles I would not have needed to “declare relentless war” against other healers if none existed. His monopolistic actions belie the fact of commoners engaged in touch healing, and we may assume that the king was able to dispatch his competitors with reasonable efficiency. Charles II’s attitude toward healing competitors was quite different. After the Restoration, Charles II continued performing the touch ceremony like his father and grandfather had done, but he also went so far as to invite G greatrakes to perform healing feats in the royal presence in Whitehall.

G greatrakes was not the only popular healer of that era. Indeed, “recent


52 Bloch says: “We shall never know what Charles II really thought deep down inside of the singular talent so liberally attributed to him by his subjects.” Bloch, *The Royal Touch; Sacred Monarchy and Scrofula in England and France*, 211.

53 Whitehall was the king’s residence, which he shared with a number of courtiers.
history had furnished plentiful examples of other putative miracle workers who turned out, on closer inspection, to be little more than frauds or evangelists for specific religious sects or causes.”54 There were good reasons for these people to want to perform healing touch. George Fox (1624–1691), the founder of the Religious Society of Friends (the Quakers), had built quite a following and reputation using his healing abilities. In addition to Fox, the cadre of famous healers of that time included Charles Bayly, whose unusual life included being sold into slavery and becoming a governor of the Hudson Bay Company after being freed,55 and Ann Jefferies, who was widely lauded in royalist circles and had reportedly been kept alive “by a small sort of Airy People call’d Fairies” wearing green clothes.56 Another, Matthew Coker, was a touch healer claiming powers of divine origin that were explained by Henry More (1614–1687) as “a sort of transfusion of spirit.”57

54 Elmer, The Miraculous Conformist, 108.
57 Elmer, The Miraculous Conformist, 75–76; Sarah Hutton, Anne Conway: A Woman Philosopher (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 129; Matthew Coker, A Short and Plain Narrative of Matthew Coker, Touching Some Mistakes and Mis-Recitals in a Pamphlet of This Day, Intituled Certain Passages of Every Days Intelligence, &c. In Reference to His Gift of Healing; Which Is Herein Clearly Evidenced, in Several Remarkable Instances, Early English Books Online (London: Printed by James
Both Greatrakes and Charles II must have known about James O’Finallty of Tuam, who was a Catholic priest known for performing touch healings.\textsuperscript{58} O’Finallty’s ideas about the cures included both miraculous and demonic explanations. He had both Catholic and Protestant followers, some of whom were also loyal to the king. But Greatrakes seems to stand apart from the others as an exemplar of the new regime’s relaxed and openly curious attitude towards touch healers.

**The Harmony of Miracles: Neither Belief nor Denial**

Jane Shaw, in *Miracles in Enlightenment England*, places the Greatrakes narratives squarely in the middle of the great philosophical debates of the Enlightenment, tracing three streams of thought about miracles.\textsuperscript{59} First, the Church of England’s doctrine that miracles had ceased rebutted Catholics’ claims that Catholic miracles proved Catholicism was the “true” church. These Protestants claimed that God had no need of miracles in modern times. The opposing stream included both Catholics

\textsuperscript{58} Elmer, *The Miraculous Conformist*, 61; Peter Walsh, James Butler Ormonde, and David Rothe, *The History & Vindication of the Loyal Formulary, or Irish Remonstrance*, Early English Books, 1641-1700 ; 442:7 (Jamestown, 1674), 710–736 (DNB) “Walsh argued that loyalty to a protestant king was not only consistent with Catholic faith and moral duty but also the best option for the future of the Catholic church in Ireland.”

and Puritans and claimed that miracles were still good evidence of deity working through human beings.

Some radical Puritan sects that were allowed the freedom to practice openly during the Cromwellian era subscribed to the latter view. Before the religious freedom of the republic, these ideas were snuffed out as illegal and censured as “popish.” But during the republic, Fox, Bayly, and the others were able to safely make claims opposing traditional Protestant doctrine; and early Quaker theology was deeply informed by the belief that Fox and other Quakers had performed healing miracles with God’s special help.\textsuperscript{60}

The third stream was a middle path whose advocates “argued that miracles were plausible, but only with very great evidence.”\textsuperscript{61} This “Solomonic” path became an orthodox view among some Anglican apologists, including Boyle, Greatrakes, and their supporters.\textsuperscript{62} The middle path provides the doctrinal flexibility that permits adherents to adapt like chameleons, always appearing to be in harmony with their environment. In fact, the Greatrakes narratives are presented like evidence as it might be presented in a court of law, a compilation of sworn affidavits meant to be read as very compelling evidence. It is this middle path, validating miracles only on the basis of great evidence, that describes the

\textsuperscript{60} Ibid., 52.
\textsuperscript{61} Ibid., 3.
\textsuperscript{62} The term “Solomonic” alludes to both Baconian idealism and Masonic philosophy, concepts that will be explored at length in subsequent chapters.
alchemically cultivated philosophical position of the members of the early Royal Society who affirmed G Leak's' healing cures.

The History of the Royal Society

The organization that became the Royal Society was formed by a dozen men on November 28, 1660, at Gresham College in London.\(^{63}\) Two of these original founders—John Wilkins (1614–1672) and Robert Boyle—would later make out sworn affidavits supporting G Leak's' “miraculous” narratives that were published in *A Brief Account*.\(^{64}\) In 1662 and 1663 charters were issued that officially transformed the organization into the “Royal Society of London for Improving Natural Knowledge.” Incorporated by the authority of the restored Charles II, the Royal Society would eventually displace the church and the monarch as the final arbiters of truth claims. It would also help establish the primacy of natural philosophy, and ultimately mechanism, as the dominant epistemological paradigm of the Enlightenment.

At its royal inception, this group was primarily philosophical, as was evident from the introduction to its first charter, presented in the royal first person: “We


\(^{64}\) Other members of the society whose certificates are included are Daniel Coxe and Ralph Cudworth. Anthony Morgan and Thomas Willis are reported by others to have been witnesses. G Leak, *A Brief Account*, 46–47, 56–57, 60, 78, 87.
have long and fully resolved with Ourselves to extend not only the boundaries of the
Empire, but also the very arts and sciences. Therefore we look with favour upon all
forms of learning, but with particular grace we encourage philosophical studies,
especially those which by actual experiments attempt either to shape out a new
philosophy or to perfect the old.”

The Royal Society began with a strong
emphasis on deistic ideas, and the Greatrakes affidavits played a role in the early
conversations among the society’s members. Later historical accounts of the
society subsumed its early deistic thinking into the category of superstition; and
Greatrakes was buried in this deep file, being occasionally pulled out by only the
most thorough writers to serve as an odd footnote in the history of medicine or
science.

It was an alchemical feat of sorts, creating an immortal entity (the Royal
Society) with mere words. It had all the rights of a living natural person: the right
to sue in court, possess property, and the like. The special formula of words in the
charter transformed the Gresham dozen’s plan into a “living” entity. It is
interesting to note how the imperialist character of the monarchy takes precedence
over the empirical objectives of the newborn institution. Even more powerfully,
this alchemical feat—creating a living being out of words—ultimately transformed

65 Downloaded from the Royal Society’s website “First Charter of the Royal Society,” accessed June 10,
scripts have been modernized for the sake of the readers.
the philosophical society into something much more: the arbiter of truth claims—
shifting power away from ecclesiastical authority and into the hands of these
alchemical philosophers, transmuting an inanimate, leaden entity into a living
“golden” society.

Sprat’s History - 1667

And just as one might expect of a natural person (one that matures very rapidly),
the Royal Society was concerned with its image from the start. The society’s first
official history was completed by Thomas Sprat (bap. 1635 -1713) in 1667.66
Considering that the society was so young, this project might have seemed
premature until it is considered within the context of the Royal Society’s aims and
sphere of influence. Sprat’s history was written just after Greatrakes’ rapid rise to
fame and it is possible that the founder’s encounters with the narratives were not
included because they conflicted too much with the new society’s motto “nullius in
verba” or, roughly, “take nobody’s word for it.”67

The Royal Society was no ordinary endeavor, and the founders knew it.68

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68 The university system in England had failed to adapt to the spirit of open inquiry that sprang forth during the Republic and continued into the Restoration. That the Royal Society became the official locus
Sprat’s work was overseen by a series of committees that included Wilkins (one of Greatrakes’ affiants), and Boyle’s input was also solicited.\textsuperscript{69} Sprat’s version of the history traced the society’s origin to “the Oxford meetings of the 1650s.”\textsuperscript{70} “It was therefore some Space after the End of the Civil Wars [emphasis added] at Oxford, in Doctor Wilkins his [sic] Lodgings, in Wadham College which was then the Place of Resort for virtuous and learned Men, that the first Meetings were made, which laid the Foundation of all this that followed.”\textsuperscript{71}

Sprat distances the Royal Society from any possible involvement in the regicide with the phrase “after the End of the Civil Wars.” Since Sprat was Wilkins’ protégé, and we know that Wilkins’ role in forming the society was instrumental, Sprat must have had access to accurate facts about the society’s formation (so far as Wilkins was willing to relate them). About 15 years later, in 1678, Sprat’s origin was directly contradicted by another Fellow of the Royal Society (FRS), John Wallis (1616–1703). During the course of a “private controversy,” Wallis claimed to be part of the original group whose origin was in London in the 1640’s, well before the beheading.\textsuperscript{72}

\textsuperscript{69} Purver, \textit{The Royal Society}, 11–12.
\textsuperscript{70} Ibid., xii.
\textsuperscript{71} Sprat, \textit{The History of the Royal-Society of London}, 53.
Also in 1678 Gretrakes’ good friend Edmund Godfrey (1621–1678) died, presumably as a consequence of his role in the Popish Plot, either falling on his own sword or being murdered. The Popish Plot detailed the likely fictive interception of plans by Papists to kill Charles II and make way for a Catholic king, a horrifying prospect for Protestants. We will review Godfrey’s death in chapter 4, “Blood Oaths and the Civilized Mystique of Privilege,” because its circumstances bear strong similarities to imprecations of the Masonic oath of secrecy.

**Birch’s History - 1756**

Writing more than seventy years after Wallis, in 1756, Thomas Birch (1705–1766), then the society’s secretary, wrote a compendious history of the Royal Society accepting Wallis’ earlier origin. In support of the earlier origin, Birch cites peculiar references to an “Invisible College” within Boyle’s extensive corpus of letters. Birch suggests: “This assembly [that precedent to the Royal Society] seems to be that mentioned under the title of the Invisible or Philosophical College by Mr. BOYLE in some letters of his written in 1646 and 1647.”\(^{73}\) We will examine Birch’s Invisible College claim at length in chapter 4, but for now we must note how the official story of the Royal Society develops over time. Birch, who had

previously written two biographies about Boyle that describe the Greatrakes initiatives in detail, uses the Invisible College reference to push the origin narrative back into the era of the civil wars, directly contradicting the previous official version. Astonishingly, Birch makes no reference at all to Greatrakes in his four volume, two thousand page The History of the Royal Society.

We might speculate on a number of reasons why these origin accounts vary. The original narrative could have been crafted to mollify a monarch whose father had lost his head. The subsequent narrative might have been fabricated to sharpen the society’s revolutionary edge in an era when revolution was trending. Whatever the actual intent behind changing the narrative, it gets spun again almost sixty years later.

**Thomson’s History - 1812**

In 1812 Thomas Thomson (1773–1852) published yet another official history (that does not mention Greatrakes) in which he adopts the Wallis claim and says the original group’s formation was “accidental,” adding somewhat gratuitously that they “took no part in the disturbances which agitated Great Britain.”

75 Birch, The History of the Royal Society.
Understandably, after the American Revolution and the new American war in 1812, being revolutionary had lost its appeal; and the society might have liked to distance itself from anyone agitating Great Britain. In fact, the United States was founded upon two of the same principles promoted by Francis Bacon and held dear by the early Royal Society, religious freedom and natural philosophy, applying both to great advantage.

Despite the fact that his predecessors Sprat and Birch place Boyle squarely in the middle of the pack of Oxford participants, Thomson’s 1812 version fails to include Boyle in his list of “remarkable” men of the early society.77 Perhaps Thomson is working to avoid reminding us about Boyle’s Invisible College, which he does not mention at all. Thomson does mention that the early meetings were held in Boyle’s apartments after they had been held in Wilkins’, but he does not mention Birch’s statement that the group had met “at first in Dr. Petty’s lodgings.”78 Significantly, Wilkins and Boyle are both affiants to the Garetrakes narratives.79

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79 Petty may have abstained because he considered Greatrakes his deliquent debtor. Elmer, *The Miraculous Conformist*, 166; Greatrakes, *A Brief Account*, 43, 57.
Weld’s History - 1848

Three and a half decades later, in 1848, Charles Weld (1813–1869) published the *fourth* official history of the society claiming that the previous three were “very deficient . . . in information relating to the rise and progress of the Society.”

This seems an odd claim given the extensive detail included in the three previous accounts and the nearly two centuries separating Weld from the events at issue. Weld complains that Sprat’s bias was to defend “the Fellows from the attacks and criticism of Aristotelian philosophers.” Therefore unsurprisingly, Weld’s project supports these Aristotelians. Weld finds Birch deficient in following the society up to 1687 only; and Thomson, he says, “is filled with rapid sketches of the progress of science.”

Weld casts the society’s founders as a “small band of truth-seeking philosophers, who founded an association which has acquired world-wide renown, and whose members have probably done more than any other body of men to benefit the community by rendering science available for the practical purposes of life.”

Weld’s observation is telling. First, he acknowledges the philosophical nature of the founders and the original organization, a fact impossible to miss in the language of the original charter; but next he seems to separate science from

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81 Ibid.
82 Ibid., vi.
83 Ibid., x.
philosophy, a move that privileges the “new philosophy” above all others. This is characteristic of one of the most interesting and important aspects of the history of the Royal Society: by Weld’s time the “new” philosophy that had previously been simply one among a group of clamoring and discordant voices had become the standard by which most truth claims were arbitrated. And the Royal Society was now the highest authority to apply this standard.84 Weld’s objective is to quietly smother any alternative voices that might challenge the Royal Society’s truth-arbitrating authority.

Weld begins his history by highlighting the “baneful effect” of ecclesiastical authority on literature and science in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, relying on the work of William Whewell (1794–1866). Whewell, also a Fellow of the Royal Society, initiated the academic study of the history of science by writing five compendious volumes on both the history and philosophy of “The Inductive Sciences.”85 Weld quotes Whewell’s telling observation about truth claims: “It was an offence against religion as well as reason, to reject the truth; and the truth could be but one. In this manner arose that claim, which the doctors of the Church put

84 The shifting of the arbitration of truth claims from the Church to the State through establishing experimental philosophy, or science, as the dominant philosophical paradigm was a profound impact of the Enlightenment.
forth, to control men’s opinions upon all subjects.”\textsuperscript{86} Weld then rightly suggests that the society’s intellectual roots should be traced to the scientific institutions founded in Renaissance Italy, connecting the Royal Society with the Italian Platonic Academy, the Medici family, and alchemical thinkers like Marisilio Ficino (1433-1499) and Roger Bacon (1214-1294).\textsuperscript{87} The following chapter, “Alchemical Chameleons and the Hermeneutic of Privilege,” traces just such a lineage directly into the society, detailing specific alchemical ideas (syncretism, natural or experimental philosophy, secrecy, ciphers, and initiation) that serve as the intellectual roots of the Royal Society.\textsuperscript{88}

Weld also presents a lengthy quotation from Wallis’ account of the society’s origin, emphasizing the society’s interest in observing natural phenomena like the circulation of blood, the lymphatic vessels, and observations of the celestial bodies, all the while marginalizing its philosophical aspects.\textsuperscript{89} Although Weld acknowledges Wilkins’ and Boyle’s strong influence over the early society, reiterating that early meetings had been hosted by each of them, he has a

\textsuperscript{87} Weld, \textit{A History of the Royal Society}, 3–6 We will examine alchemical philosophy at length in the next chapter.
\textsuperscript{88} Although the lineage described in the chapter “Alchemical Chameleons and the Hermeneutic of Privilege” begins in Greece and jumps to Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494), many sources link Ficino and Pico closely. Roger Bacon would also easily mesh into the fabric of the chapter but for the constraints of space and time. It is quite possible that Weld’s obsessive focus on natural philosophy to the exclusion of the other ideas is part and parcel of his participation in the secrecy, cipher, and initiatory aspects of alchemy as they continued to influence the Royal Society.
\textsuperscript{89} Weld, \textit{A History of the Royal Society}, 31–32.
condescending attitude towards their view of Greatrakes.

**Boyle’s Invisible College**

Bristling at the suggestion that philosophical clubs had been imported from France, Weld considers Boyle’s Invisible College solid evidence of a proto-Royal Society.\(^{90}\) Weld presents extensive quotes from all three of the Boyle letters that mention the Invisible College. These letters had been previously published *in toto* in Birch’s biography of Boyle, and Weld casts no new light on the cryptic references.\(^{91}\) Despite showing no direct link between Boyle’s Invisible College and the Royal Society or its predecessors, Weld follows Birch in considering this the only possible interpretation. I will devote significant attention to Boyle’s Invisible College in my concluding chapter and offer an alternative interpretation that emphasizes the influence of alchemical philosophers and the application of linguistic contrivances that might better explain the element of invisibility. The Invisible College was not the only problematic historical issue for the Royal Society’s nineteenth century interpretation of itself. The Greatrakes narratives played a role here, also.

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\(^{90}\) Ibid., 38.

Boyle’s Superstitious Belief in G greatrakes

In his fourth chapter, Weld scoffs at the “Superstitions still believed in” by the early members of the Royal Society, including witchcraft, touching for the Evil, and specifically (under its own heading) the problem of “Greatrix the Stroker—Believed in by Boyle.” These subjects had interested the early members of the philosophical society for precisely the same reason that Weld wishes to eradicate them: because they are individually unpredictable and hence invisible to the scientific gaze, they practically demand supernatural explanations. Weld’s intent is apparent in a simple change he makes to the spelling of Greatrakes’ name. Birch had spelt it “Greatraks,” following the autobiography published in 1666. Considering that by the mid-nineteenth-century standardized spelling was becoming the rule rather than the exception, when Weld ignores the “Greatraks” (Great-RAKES) spelling used by Boyle and chooses “Greatrix” (Great-TRICKS) instead, we may see Weld’s intent to eradicate those troubling and lingering deistic ideas that had so disturbingly occupied the early society. Weld even attempts to hide culpatory evidence in footnote 27, in which he prevaricates a claim that Birch uses the “Greatrix” variant spelling.

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93 Note 27 reads: “See Boyle’s Works, and Phil. Trans., No. 256, where his name is spelt as above.” Ibid., 91; Birch only uses the “Greatraks” spelling in Boyle’s Works. Boyle and Birch, The Works of the Honourable Robert Boyle, 151; The Greatrix spelling is indeed used in the Phil. Trans., and the article contains an enthusiastic endorsement of Greatrakes. Thoresby, “Thoresby Letter.”
Weld also minimizes the society’s interest in touch healing by presenting a caricature of the Arise Evans (aka John Evans) (b.c.1607, d. in or after 1660)\textsuperscript{94} narrative: after having a vision that the king’s touch would cure his scrofulous nose, Evans “kiss’d the King's hand, and rubb'd his nose with it, which disturb'd the King, but cured him.” When Weld calls this story “excessively ludicrous,” he is attacking not only the society’s early superstitions but also its alchemical roots.\textsuperscript{95} Evans was a controversial character who taught astrology to William Lilly (1602–1681). Lilly went on to become a highly respected astrologer who was very close with Elias Ashmole.\textsuperscript{96}

Given Weld’s bias, it is not surprising that he portrays Boyle as a gullible victim, completely ignoring the sworn claims of a half-dozen of Boyle’s fellow members of the Royal Society whose affidavits are included in Greatrakes’ book.\textsuperscript{97} Weld says: “That [superstition] existed amongst men possessed of high abilities, is proved by the fact that the Hon. Robert Boyle believed in the efficacy of the touch


\textsuperscript{95} Weld, \textit{A History of the Royal Society}, 90.

\textsuperscript{96} Largely due to his place in the history of Freemasonry—a subject of intense interest beginning in the early eighteenth century—Ashmole had become one of the most famous early members of the Royal Society. The chapter “The Origins of Freemasonry” will look carefully at Ashmole’s central role in Masonic history. In the next chapter, “Alchemical Chameleons,” we will examine Ashmole’s alchemy and the depth of the influence of alchemy on the early Royal Society.

\textsuperscript{97} The are Boyle, Daniel Coxe, Ralph Cudworth, Anthony Morgan, William Petty, Thomas Willis and John Wilkins.
of Valentine Greatrix, who went by the name of Greatrix the Stroker; and who was said to cure the evil, when the King even failed. *Weld also notes, without comment, that he found a letter from Greatrakes to the Archbishop of Dublin in the archives of the society. It contained an account of Greatrakes’ initial impulse to touch and reiterates Greatrakes’ belief that God had given him the power to cure. Since this letter is excerpted into the footnote without any critical commentary, we might surmise that it is included for a single purpose: to show that Greatrakes attributed his cures to God, thereby negating (for Weld and his like-minded cohorts) any possible actual rhetorical value of the Greatrakes narratives in considering the philosophical inclinations of the early Royal Society. We now know (in part from Weld’s scathing treatment) that the Greatrakes narratives provided significant fuel for the nascent Royal Society’s philosophical debates and that some of the most visible and influential members of the society were among Greatrakes’ supporters. For Weld, these inconvenient truths had to be subsumed to the purposes of the society as it reconstituted itself to be an ultimate arbiter of truth claims, eliminating the variable “God” from the equation describing philosophical “truth.”

Modern scholars, unlike Weld, look closely at the philosophical endeavors of the early Royal Society. Margery Purver emphasizes the connection between

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99 Ibid., 91.
Royal Society and the natural philosophy projected by Francis Bacon (1561–1626) that included a religious tolerance unprecedented among such official organizations.\textsuperscript{100} In his brief introduction to Purver’s \textit{The Royal Society, Concept and Creation}, H. R. Trevor Roper applauds Purver’s deconstruction of the society’s traditional histories. Trevor Roper describes the society’s commitment to true utilitarian Baconianism after an adolescent fling with Samuel Hartlib’s “vulgar” Baconianism.

If we are to accept the consensus of modern scholars that the Royal Society was the Baconian project brought to life, it is worthwhile to examine whether Bacon’s alchemical philosophical ideas can be traced into the early Royal Society. William Newman in, \textit{Atoms and Alchemy: Chymistry and the Experimental Origins of the Scientific Revolution}, says: “Bacon himself was significantly influenced by alchemy in a number of ways, as various scholars have revealed.”\textsuperscript{101} In the following chapters we will investigate the roots of alchemical philosophy in order to understand its eirenic impact on the minds of seventeenth-century intellectuals. The alchemical texts these men studied reveal how they were able to assert and maintain various doctrinal positions with equanimity.

\textsuperscript{100} Purver, \textit{The Royal Society}, 236–239.
Conclusion

The Greatrakes narratives, when believed, tended to negate the assertion that “touching for the evil” was evidence of a monarch’s divine authority, since Greatrakes was doing essentially the same thing. The narratives also tended to negate the Church of England’s proposition that miracles had ceased, since the cures reported had no satisfying physical (mechanistic) explanation. The uncomfortable official denial of Greatrakes’ role in the conversations of the early Royal Society is worthy of note, and may be related to the Society’s eventual move towards assuming some of the truth arbitrating authority previously possessed by the monarch and the church. While early modern science was moving away from notions of mediated divinity, wittingly or unwittingly the Royal Society itself became a mediator of truth claims, filling a vacuum of institutional credibility, weighing evidence, and selecting persuasive arguments. By Mesmer’s time, there was little question who was best suited to evaluate his claims about animal magnetism. It was institutionalized early modern science.

When the alchemical roots of the Royal Society are examined in the following chapters, keep in mind the dangerous religious and political polemics described above. These polemics, and the potentially violent consequences of being trapped on a losing side, are the context that made a middle path philosophy vitally important.
CHAPTER 2: EDUCATION, SECRECY, AND SOCIAL ORDER

In this chapter we examine the interrelationship among education, secrecy, and the social order and propose a model of secrecy, esotericism, and coded language that reinforces and preserves the privileges of elites. The most conspicuous secret of the era was the severe economic disparity that remained so deeply buried within the cultural memes and mores of the times that it was simply invisible to all but the most critical perspectives. Not only was this disparity culturally embedded but keys to maintaining status and privilege were linguistically encoded and protected under the veil of allegory.

This chapter shows how the small segment of society who possessed the lion’s share of seventeenth century England’s wealth used higher education to preserve their dominant position in the social hierarchy. This preservation was accomplished by transmitting special knowledge relating to the accumulation and maintenance of wealth (syncretism and mathematics) through texts that were practically inaccessible to those without the requisite education. The next chapter demonstrates how this knowledge was transmitted and received, reinterpreted, and then retransmitted though alchemical texts that both inspired and embodied the Enlightenment. Chapter 4 shows how these lines of transmission flow directly into the closely related lineal descendents of alchemical philosophy: the Royal Society

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1 This argument might easily apply to other countries cultures or cultures not examined here.
and Freemasonry.

This chapter is divided into two main sections. The first examines alchemy as an expression of elite privilege while the second provides a detailed look at the structure of seventeenth century English society and how higher education served to transmit elitist memes. The first section begins by showing how syncretism, secrecy, and initiation are alchemical elements with ancient Greek origins. The second part of the chapter provides a detailed account of how English society saw itself in relation to its complicated schema of social stratification and the enormous disparity in the distribution of goods and services, looking particularly closely at the limited access to advanced education. Special emphasis is given to the elite classes and their beliefs about their wealth, status, and privilege.

Alchemy as an Expression of Elite Entitlement

The epidemic of literacy and then vernacularization transmitted by the printing press required adjustments in the ways the elite broadcast their coded messages and secret memes, since writing was no longer a special tool of the elite. This section examines shows how the elite concealed their practical ideologies under deep veils of allegory. In this light, chrysopoeia (transmuting base metal into gold) was a merely a ruse created to divert the attention and energy of the underclasses while simultaneously creating a protective mystique surrounding wealth, power,
and their appurtenances. This ruse lays the predicate for a hermeneutic of privilege introduced in the next chapter, an interpretative frame that anticipates the elite use of subterfuge to conceal the often harsh aspects of social privilege.

**Syncretism, Secrecy, and Initiation**

Greek expressions of syncretism, secrecy, and initiation are significant cultural aspects of Hellenism’s impressive material success that can been seen as memes and mores of social order that survived the Greek empire’s decline. Like biological attributes that survive in genes, these cultural attributes survived in textual memes that are read, interpreted, and propagated through literature. The genre of alchemy encodes these memes of syncretism, secrecy, and initiation. The main tension encapsulated here is one between separation and unification. Secrecy and initiation separate people and knowledge into different domains—initiates and those in possession of secrets are separated from others. Syncretism (as used here and defined below) serves to bridge separated knowledge and people.

In the study of religion, syncretism typically refers to the merging of different religious traditions or even combining several different gods into a single deity. Eric Maroney in *Religious Syncretism* defines it as “the phenomenon of one religion borrowing elements from another religion.”

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present study, a nuanced understanding of syncretism is useful. Here I follow the
definition used by S. A. Farmer in *Syncretism in the West: Pico's 900 Theses*
(1486) that presents a perspective of syncretism that is specifically valuable to
understanding alchemical texts. Farmer adopts the Oxford English Dictionary’s
definition “the ‘attempted union or reconciliation of diverse or opposite tenets or
practices, especially in philosophy or religion.’”³ It is the idea of *reconciliation*
rather than union or assimilation that renders this definition particularly suitable
here. Rather than incorporating a variety of beliefs into one that becomes
dominant, this definition allows various beliefs to be understood or reconciled
without necessarily being held.

This chapter examines how the European elite divided the lower classes
against themselves by promoting factious language and cultural mores while
remaining secretly unified as elites. This interplay of separation and union
ultimately produces the Royal Society and Freemasonry, institutions that
contributed mightily to the establishment and dominating pervasiveness of
Enlightenment thought by unifying people of varying religious perspectives in
specific philosophical movements. Understanding their alchemical roots–both
syncretic and secret–lends perspective to the development of statecraft and society

³ S. A Farmer, *Syncretism in the West: Pico’s 900 Theses (1486): The Evolution of Traditional, Religious,
and Philosophical Systems: With Text, Translation, and Commentary*, vol. 167 (Tempe, AZ.: Medieval &
in the modern era.

Philosophical syncretism is the element of alchemy that allows alchemists to change colors, so to speak. It is the roadmap that charts what might best be called the “middle path.” By following this “middle-path” and avoiding philosophical extremes, alchemists were able to maintain successful alliances (and thereby their wealth) with people holding fervent beliefs on either side of a doctrinal divide. This type of philosophical flexibility permitted Ggreatrakes’ affiants to transition facilely from royalists under Charles I to republicans following Cromwell and back to royalists in the Restoration without missing a beat. Preferment was important to maintaining wealth and status in early modern England and professing dogmatically on the wrong side of a ecclesiastical issue had potentially lethal consequences.

The alchemical middle path was astutely trod by many great minds including Pico della Mirandola, Cornelius Agrippa, John Dee, Francis Bacon, and Elias Ashmole.4 Robert Boyle carefully tows the middling line in describing the extraordinary results of Ggreatrakes’ ministrations. He very carefully avoids the word “miracle” and its potent Catholic connotations.5 Bertrand Russell sees philosophy generally as a middle path between dogmatic theology and science, one

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4 Each of these figures will be treated separately in the following chapter.
5 The middle path of miracles as described by Jane Shaw is dealt with in the previous chapter. Shaw, *Miracles in Enlightenment England*, 3.
that “began in Greece in the sixth century B.C.[E.]” and “was submerged by theology as Christianity rose and Rome fell.” Distinguishing between philosophy and alchemy is beyond the scope of this project, but we will explore definite intersections of the two.

The rest of this chapter and the entirety of the next is devoted to examining the role of philosophical syncretism in perpetuating the distinct class divisions that endured through the collapse of both the Hellenistic and Roman empires. Though their political bodies failed, the souls of these civilizations lived on in language and culture and were successfully reincarnated into modernity. We now look to the specific memes and mores of Hellenistic thought as they are expressed in the philosophical aspects of alchemy.

**Greek Origins of Alchemy**

Syncretism, secrecy, and initiatory transformation are elements of alchemical philosophy that we can trace back to ancient Greece. These elements appear in fragments about the Pythagorean Academy and pseudepigraphal, apocryphal works like the Corpus Hermeticum. Alchemy is often considered to begin with Hermes

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8 Robert Navon, ed., *The Pythagorean Writings: Hellenistic Texts from the 1st Cent. B.C.-3d Cent. A.D. on Life, Morality, and the World: Comprising a Selection of the Neo-Pythagorean Fragments, Texts, and*
Trismegistus, a Hellenistic “kind of avatar of the Egyptian god Thoth.”

Thus, Hermeticism and alchemy share origin narratives, narratives that were part of Greek culture and were preserved and transmitted into the early modern era by elites through the Greek language. Lawrence Principe traces the origins of alchemy to the first centuries of the Common Era in Hellenized Egypt. The earliest alchemical texts in Greek, the Leiden and Stockholm Papyri dating from the third century, contain practical workshop recipes—mostly for creating imitations of valuable substances. “Since the Papyri also contain a series of tests to determine the purity of various metals, both precious and common, it is evident that the original users of these formulas clearly understood [and benefited from] the difference between genuine and imitation articles.”

The early alchemists may have wanted to create imitations of precious substances for a variety of reasons that do not involve selling them as authentic, but it is difficult to imagine any reasons that do not relate in some way to
perceptions of wealth, status, and power. Creating imitations and testing authenticity present a range of implications for interpreting alchemical transformation, especially since the imitations that were recorded in the earliest texts were of pearls, emeralds, and gold.\footnote{Ibid.} Imitations have considerably more value when they are presented and received as authentic. Several factors are necessary to maximize the reception of imitations as authentic: the physical transformation has to be suitably well performed to create a reasonable facsimile, but more significantly a lie must be told and a secret must be kept in order for the imitation to pass as genuine. In this way secrecy is related to a strategy for acquiring wealth and power.\footnote{“It is reported that Diocletian ordered all ‘books written by the Egyptians on the cheimeia of silver and gold’ to be burned. The source, an account of the martyrdom of Christians during Diocletian’s persecutions, claims that this measure was taken to prevent the Egyptians from amassing enough wealth to rebel again.” Ibid., 22.} The significance of the Greek origins of alchemy is that the original Greek texts were accessible only in translation (and these were rare) or to the few elites who could read Greek.\footnote{The Leiden and Stockholm Papyri were discovered in the early 19th century in Egypt. I’m not suggesting these tests were circulating in the seventeenth century, but rather that other Greek texts were.}

The important nexus between transformation and value or worth depends on a secret and a lie. The secret of the replica must be kept or the lie can’t be told successfully. Implicit in these early alchemical texts is the idea that special “secret” knowledge relating to wealth or value is to be shared with some (those for whom the recipe books were written), but not with others. This idea is the essence of
elitism and privilege, the notion that some are worthy while others are not. Alchemy also addressed the problem of determining with whom secrets might be safely shared. When applied to humans, transformation is the essence of initiation. The secrets of alchemy can be safely shared with initiates. Hermes-Mercurius, “the other Hermes,” is a Greek icon symbolic of transformation. Transformation is a defining element of alchemy and is equally applicable to persons and things.

Because of the association with initiation, it seems natural to connect Pythagoreanism with alchemy. Although Pythagoras is not typically considered an alchemist, three aspects of Pythagoreanism “which in late antiquity became inalienable attributes” of the sect constitute a steady stream in alchemical thought: mathematics, secrecy, and initiation. While scholars agree that the Pythagoreans wielded significant political influence, the facts about the founder of the school remain hotly debated, and the various interpretations of the often inscrutable meaning of Pythagorean source documents assure these debates will continue. More important to the present inquiry is how Pythagorean ideas were received in the early modern period. By the eighth century, pseudepigraphic works

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16 Broek and Hanegraaff, *Gnosis and Hermeticism*, 110.
19 Modern scholars debate about whether Pythagoras established a religious sect with initiatory rituals.
attributed to Pythagoras were widespread. They had been translated from Greek into Arabic and incorporated into the canon of alchemy, and they included ideas of initiation, secrecy, and mathematics.\textsuperscript{20}

The Pythagorean influence on alchemy plays a leading role in Freemasonry’s origin narrative and emphasis on mathematics, secrecy, and initiation. The most conspicuous aspect of Pythagoreanism in Freemasonry is zealous confidentiality. Pythagoreans were famous for their loyalty and secrecy. For example, rather than divulge a secret, Timycha bit off her own tongue and spat it out.\textsuperscript{21} Loose or severed tongues reverberate in the Masonic oath we will see in chapter 4 while examining the expressions of alchemical philosophy (secrecy in this case) that reverberate through the Royal Society and Freemasonry.\textsuperscript{22}

\textbf{The Philosopher’s Stone and Georg Agricola (1494-1555)}

The symbol that best unites and characterizes alchemy is the “Philosopher’s Stone,” a “substance” acclaimed to possess a host of valuable qualities—most importantly chrysopoeia, the power to transform base metal into gold. As we have

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Leonid Zhmud zealously opposes such a notion while Christopher Riedweg is adamantly in favor. Zhmud, \textit{Pythagoras and the Early Pythagoreans}, 148; Riedweg, \textit{Pythagoras}, 100–104.


\textsuperscript{21} This legend was likely invented by Neanthes, but played a significant role in how Pythagoreans were perceived. Zhmud, \textit{Pythagoras and the Early Pythagoreans}, 154; ca 250-ca 330 Iamblichus, \textit{The Life of Pythagoras}, trans. Thomas Taylor (Krotona, Hollywood, Los Angeles, California: Theosophical Publishing House, 1918), 32–34.

\textsuperscript{22} See the section “The Bloody Oath” in chapter 4.
seen, early alchemical texts contain actual recipes or instruction manuals for creating replicas or imitations, but the legend was that the Philosopher’s Stone produced genuine gold.

As the intricate recipes for imitations suggest, alchemists practiced sophisticated laboratory research and meticulously documented huge numbers of trial and error experiments that advanced human knowledge about the natural world. Georg Agricola (1494-1555), who was primarily interested in metallurgy, labored in this vein. He writes uncharacteristically clearly and succinctly for an alchemist and tells us that his predecessor’s texts “all are difficult to follow, because the writers upon these things use strange names, which do not properly belong to the metals, and because some of them employ now one name and now another, invented by themselves, though the thing itself changes not.”

Agricola also makes a telling observation about reports of chrysopoeia, transmuting base metals to gold:

Whether they can do these things or not I cannot decide; but, seeing that so many writers assure us with all earnestness that they have reached that goal for which they aimed, it would seem that faith might be placed in them; yet

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Note: This translation from Latin was made in 1912 by a mining engineer who later became the 31st POTUS.
also seeing that we do not read of any of them ever having become rich by this art, nor do we now see them growing rich, although so many nations everywhere have produced, and are producing, alchemists, and all of them are straining every nerve night and day to the end that they may heap a great quantity of gold and silver, I should say the matter is dubious.\textsuperscript{24}

This observation, of course, would suggest something other than prosperity was intended by reports of chrysopoeia all along—and I suggest it was the preservation and transmission of wealth accomplished by legerdemain. By diverting the energy and attention of bright young competitors into a search for a purely imaginary holy grail of chrysopoeia, the established class could safely rest on their laurels. In this light, chrysopoeia is actually myopia, thwarting practitioners from a more robust philosophical understanding of the world.

When considered as a genre, alchemical texts provide little consistency among the processes, codes, or ciphers they present. In alchemy, symbols often mask underlying meanings, and “alchemical writers ‘call a single thing by many names while they call many things by a single name.’”\textsuperscript{25} For this reason alchemical texts are liable to many levels of interpretation; and as we will see in the next

\begin{itemize}
\item \footnotesize{\textsuperscript{24} Ibid., xxvii.}
\item \footnotesize{\textsuperscript{25} Principe quoting a translation of Zosimos of Panopolis, who was active about the time of the aforementioned papyri. Principe, \textit{The Secrets of Alchemy}, 17.}
\end{itemize}
chapter, the genre is particularly adaptable to multivalence. The language of transmutation also conveys a philosophical preference for free-will over predetermination since the transformational processes involve choice and the ability to produce outcomes. Wouter Hanegraaff explains:

> The Protestant revolution implied a new kind of historical consciousness. Rather than a spatial model of unchanging harmony and beauty—congenial to the idea of a *philosophia perennis*—it required a *linear* perspective based on temporality and irreversible change that could account for the unprecedented struggle in which the reformers found themselves. Many Lutherans and spiritualist sectarians appear to have discovered such a model in alchemical narratives of transmutation . . . 26

The philosopher’s stone is a rather allusive, even illusive symbol. Because of the veiled and multivalent nature of alchemical texts, a nuanced hermeneutic is helpful here. The philosopher’s stone was considered to “redeem ‘corrupted’ matter,” meaning that it might “heal injured bodies, restore political stability, and renew and redeem the natural world and society itself.”27 These allegorical,

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27 Janacek, *Alchemical Belief*, 76.
transformational qualities made the *lapis philosophorum* a symbol onto which alchemical authors would attribute a wide variety of significations.

Because the nature of the stone was secret, claims of its possession or intimate knowledge of its manufacture could be asserted by practically anyone, and such claims were practically impossible to rebut. Hewing from a nuanced perspective, the philosophical “stone” might refer to a substantive or objective “Truth.”

In this vein, one could consider the stone to represent the immutable quality of a philosophical tenet or dogmatic belief held dear by a group. Within the group, such belief is firm and unshakable, like a rock. For example, religious faith might transform an otherwise empty idea or concept, like “thetans,” into an objective reality, at least within a specific community (in this case, Scientologists).

Outside the community the concept remains a void, but within it is concrete, a foundation, a shared reality. Here we can draw parallels to the imputation of genuineness onto artificial concoctions or facsimiles, like when people take artificial pearls to be genuine (or attribute significant value to mere

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28 This relates to passing imitations off as real.
29 This is not a jibe at Scientology. This example is chosen because the term “thetan” is unique and was created and given meaning for the Scientology community and became objective reality for them thereafter.
30 Alchemy also presents a philosophy of practical elitism with the imperative to divide and conquer. In this way the philosophers’ stone symbolizes concepts used to divide communities along ideological fault lines. Such alchemists might endeavor to remain above the fray when polemics divide community. They might also endeavor to assure a fray within the community so they continually have a fray above which to rise.
Agricola’s emphasis on observation places him squarely in a philosophical tributary to what becomes Francis Bacon’s raging river of Inductivism. Bacon, in recommending “that we free our minds of all preconceptions when undertaking scientific inquiry,” provides the main intellectual wellsprings for the Royal Society; and although both Agricola and Bacon overtly disclaim specific aspects of alchemy, alchemical currents run deeply and powerfully beneath their philosophies. Bacon’s rejection of preconception addressed “the received Aristotelian wisdom that had become dogmatic and unproductive” and shined new light on the alchemists’ old laboratory notebooks. But the ciphers and codes protecting the ancient recipes still remained hidden in the dark.

**Vernacularization ≠ Democratization: Biblical and Alchemical Texts**

Elias Ashmole’s mid-seventeenth-century endeavor to translate a significant corpus of alchemical Latin texts into English was part of the trend of vernacularization paralleling the translation of the Bible into English. By

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31 Perhaps a more salient example would be attributing monetary value to pieces of paper depending on the numbers printed on them. The value has nothing to do with the material itself but is entirely dependent on the social convention.


34 Ibid.
presenting a picture of the social environment and culture receiving Ashmole’s translations, this section highlights how Ashmole’s project did more to conceal than reveal alchemical knowledge.

Although the English translation of the Bible was only a very narrow revelation to the moderately literate, it caused quite a stir.35 Latin symbolized the barriers that divided learned from popular culture in the Middle Ages.36 But even in English, biblical texts without exegesis had limited meaning or relevance. Clerical intermediation or interpretation was still necessary even after the English translations, and the clergy continued to conceal the “secrets” of the Bible after vernacularization. Ashmole’s alchemical translations operated in much the same way: rendering Latin and Greek words in English provided some meaning, but rich symbolism and allegory kept those secrets safely ensconced for the educated elite. In *The Bible in English*, David Daniell traces the translations of the Hebrew Bible into Greek, through the Wycliff manuscripts that began circulating around 1380 in Middle English and into the first printed English versions: Tyndale’s New Testament in 1526 and “Coverdale’s first printed complete Bible in 1535.”37 There are always issues with translations, which can be broadly divided into two

35 This refers to the chilly reception of the Wyclif manuscripts described below.
categories: meaning and reception. Issues of meaning relate to the difficulties of transporting the culture-rich implications of a word or phrase from one language to another. Issues of reception are more complicated. Daniell uses a contemporaneous quote to depict the hostile reception the Wyclif manuscripts received. “The Gospel that Christ gave to the clergy and doctors of the Church” had by virtue of Wyclif’s translation “become vulgar and more open to lay men and women who can read than it usually is to quite learned clergy of good intelligence. And so the pearl of the Gospel is scattered abroad and trodden underfoot by swine.”

This comment describes the tension inherent in translating both sacred and secret texts: once they are accessible in the vernacular, who is entitled to receive them, who is appropriate to read them, and who can appreciate their full meaning? Although the assertion that “Christ gave [the Gospel] to the clergy and doctors of the Church” might seem ludicrous today, it was not always so. The sentiment relates to the place of knowledge in a society when literacy was limited to elites of competing domains, clergy and gentry.

Wyclif was clearly on the side of the gentry. Before inspiring the translation that would break the Bible free from the Church’s stranglehold on it, he had

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39 Gentry in this sense specifically includes the nobility. We might also consider here the use of Biblical rhetoric in a Marxian sense - to parallel the argument made in the next chapter about alchemical texts and the hermeneutic of privilege.
supported King Richard II (1367–1400) in a political row over the king’s “withholding taxes due to the pope in time of national need.”

Although the reach of Wyclif’s translation was limited to the literate few, the competition between Church and gentry was constant into the Enlightenment. Conflicts over this type of political appropriation of knowledge were intensified with the broad push for literacy catalyzed by the invention of the printing press and publishing industry in the following century.

Before the Bible was rendered in the vernacular, it was often served to the illiterate with a healthy dose of interpretive dressing. “[T]ranslations of the Bible, and in particular those of the bare text without explanatory comment, were regarded with suspicion by the Church, and those produced by the heretic Wyclif were specifically condemned in 1407.” The way the Church saw it, “the earthly hierarchy should be a model of the heavenly one, in that grace should be mediated from the higher ranks to the lower, from upper clergy to lower, and from lower clergy to laymen.” Mere “possession of vernacular Scriptures was in itself sufficient evidence to warrant the presumption of heresy.”

Extending the example of ecclesiastical hierarchy to the social order

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42 Ibid., 391.
43 Ibid., 391–392.
generally, when literacy was limited to elites, texts did not have to conceal divisive knowledge related to wealth or power. Both church and gentry collaborated in a system that assured their prosperity. Broad literacy challenged the written transmissions of this partnership, requiring ever richer ways to encode the keys to the social order within texts that could be read on multiple levels. Translations contributed to the larger perception of social progress that vernacularization created—but allegorical encryption (hiding messages in allegory) served to protect and preserve the highly stratified social order. It is no secret that education plays a significant role in the social order. The secret of alchemy is how elites maintained the social order by means of language, intention, and momentum despite the earnest and zealous opposition of those laboring at the bottom of the pyramid.

Mathematical Philosophy

While the previous section focused on how languages like Latin and Greek were the exclusive domain of the elite, this section adds mathematical philosophy to that privileged realm. The development of mathematics parallels the progressive complexity of economic activity and social order. It is one thing to be in

44 The next chapter includes examples of these multivalent texts with interpretive analysis.
46 This extends to today, considering modern wealth building strategies like derivatives contracts and
possession of a surplus of goods but quite another to account for it. Accounting (and mathematics) is necessary for amassing surpluses, valuing goods, and executing exchanges. “Control of the movement of goods and services is a critical element in the economic dimension of social power,” and that control depends on writing and math.47 In this way mathematics is not merely related to the social order but is sine qua non for its very existence. The denouement of this trajectory is the use advanced mathematics in science, finance and industry today—empires of social power built on sophisticated mathematical foundations.

Alchemists portrayed mathematics as a form of magic, mediating between the natural and supernatural. It was useful to encase such a valuable tool within a secret compartment—reserving the awesome power of mathematics for the “initiated” elite, the small subset of the upper class engaged in statecraft and diplomacy. Throughout the chapter are practical expressions of multivalent secrecy, those hallmarks of secret agreements that operate as the textual equivalent of the wink or nod and signify elitism: initiation, allegory, steganography, and cryptology—themes that appear as unifying elements with political utility in the

English Social Structure and University Education

This section highlights the very limited reach of university education in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries and the relationship between higher education and wealth or power. It is axiomatic that many of the secrets of privilege discussed in the previous section were transmitted specifically through the universities and the exclusive education offered in them. Although some, like Ashmole (who as a member of the gentry had sufficient leisure to study), managed to educate themselves enough outside the university system to decipher these codes, formal instruction would guide and inform even less motivated disciples. Within this context, it is appropriate to conclude that the universities provided a form of formal initiation. Chapter 3, “Alchemical Chameleons and the Hermeneutic of Privilege,” describes how other types of initiation served similar functions; for example, Ashmole’s adoption by an “alchemical father” was a process that had specific rules and notions of propriety. Alchemists also had a conception of initiation based on simple on degrees of understanding.

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48 For a valuable discussion of the strong roots of secrecy and concealment flowing through alchemical texts of “the Platonic Orientalist Matrix,” see Wouter J. Hanegraaff, Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012), 73–74.
Social Strata - a Matter of Degrees

“When sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Englishmen set out to describe their society, they began by making distinctions, by classifying and ranking.”  

Keith Wrightson’s detailed observations in *English Society: 1580-1680* present an articulate portrait of English social strata and are far more revealing than Ashmole’s translations of alchemical texts. Historians agree, according to Wrightson, that “English society was highly stratified and that such stratification reflected major differentials in the social distribution of wealth, status and power.”

The controversy among historians, Wrightson says, centers on how best to define the layers of social strata: according to wealth or to status. “Rank and power were recognized in dress, in the conventions of comportment which governed face-to-face contacts between superiors and inferiors, in the order in which seats were taken in church, in the arrangement of places at table and in the ordering of public processions. Order, degree, rank and hierarchy seemed self-evident, even natural.”

The structure of these social layers—their permeability, the distances and disparities between and among them—is key to understanding the information that

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50 Ibid.
51 Ibid.
is encoded in secret texts.\textsuperscript{52} Similar to wealth and status, knowledge can not be separated from the social structure that was integral to the set of “legitimizing ideologies” in which social rank and landed interests were considered to have “divine origin.”\textsuperscript{53} A full appreciation of the complex English social structure will help to understand the interrelationships among the characters in the following chapters. It will also illuminate the idea that higher education was “an instrument used by the dominant class to maintain the status quo, including its position of authority over the underprivileged.”\textsuperscript{54}

Wrightson describes several schema of social stratification through which early modern English thinkers saw themselves. He first describes how in 1577 William Harrison (1535–1593) delineated four main social strata in \textit{Elizabethan England}: gentlemen, citizens or burgesses, yeomen, and artificers or labourers.\textsuperscript{55} Wrightson describes Harrison’s schema in detail:

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{52} One might have status without wealth, or wealth devoid of status. Possession of either might help in the acquisition of the other. My final chapter will include an argument that Freemasonry provided an avenue for the elites to confer a type of status, devoid of wealth or power, in a ploy to garner the support of the rising merchant class against both church and state.
\textsuperscript{54} Maureen T Hallinan, \textit{Handbook of the Sociology of Education} (New York: Springer, 2000), 2. Hallinan makes this argument about American education, but it seems clear that the same principles apply for the culture and society at issue here.
\end{flushright}
Distinctions of rank within the category of gentlemen were carefully defined, yet below the level of the yeomanry the internal differentiation of the common people was minimized. . . . Another striking feature of his account is the multiplicity of criteria employed in the allocation of rank. Gentility . . . was broadly defined in terms of birth and blood. Yet in his account of different degrees of gentlemen Harrison showed himself very aware indeed of the importance of wealth to the establishment and maintenance of station.\textsuperscript{56}

The varying degrees of status associated with wealth reflected both “actual” and “apparent” secret knowledge. In actuality, those in the lower social strata simply did not share the private and insulated experiences of the higher strata—rendering the lives of the higher strata enigmatic. This enigma in and of itself is probably irrelevant except for one assumption: climbing the social ladder was always more desirable than descending it. The \textit{apparent} secret of wealth was that special knowledge was involved in the acquisition of wealth, and such special knowledge (and the appurtenant wealth) might be shared. Thus, a complex stratification of social status reflected not only layers of wealth but also a kind of web of “secret” knowledge that was integral to upward mobility.

\textsuperscript{56} Wrightson, \textit{English Society, 1580-1680}, 4.
While Harrison’s top quartile (in status, not population) was “gentlemen,” Wrightson describes another schema delineated by Thomas Wilson (d. 1629), a knight, which he presented around 1600 that “divided the English people into nobles, citizens, yeomen, artisans and rural labourers.” Wilson carefully distinguished between two levels of nobles: “the parliamentary peerage from ‘the meaner nobility’ of knights, esquires and gentlemen.” The parliamentary peerage (often just “peerage” or “peers”) were those who, in addition to their wealth, had a chance to take part in how the state was crafted. Participation in governance aided mightily in the quest to amass wealth and a host of other matters as well. The ranks of this class were relatively small and practically impenetrable to those born outside it. Peerage was the highest rank to which one might aspire (besides royalty), and in large measure membership was determined by the accident of birth.

Peers typically inherited their heraldic titles, including “duke, marquess, earl, viscount, or baron.” These titles were not always inherited and might be conferred by the monarch on persons of suitable wealth and comportment. Thus, upward mobility was possible, albeit rare. As we will see in more detail later in the

58 Wrightson, *English Society, 1580-1680*, 5. Perhaps Wilson’s careful distinction was a matter of his deference as a member of the “meaner” class of knight.
example of Francis Bacon, education could play a significant role in class mobility, adding to the perception (and actuality) that special or secret knowledge was part of social mobility. The “gentry” was, depending on the schema, considered to include the nobility or to be immediately below it. The gentry were considered “gentlemen,” and some were born to the higher rank of esquire. It was possible for a man to be raised from the lower gentry to the status of esquire, knight, or even peer, depending on the circumstances. “In fact baronetcies were virtually auctioned off under the early Stuart kings.”\textsuperscript{60} To appreciate the complexity of the “degrees of persons,” consider the following schema describing five levels of esquire:

(1) younger sons of peers and their eldest sons;
(2) eldest sons of knights, and their eldest sons;
(3) chiefs of ancient families (by prescription);
(4) esquires by creation or office, as heralds and sergeants of arms, judges, officers of state, naval and military officers, justices of the peace, barristers-at-law;
(5) esquires who attend the Knight of the Bath on his installation—usually two specially appointed’ (\textit{Encycl. Brit.}, s.v.). . . in 16th and 17th c. \textit{esquire} was sometimes explained as meaning a man entitled to coat-armour; but by accurate writers this is condemned as involving the confusion between ‘esquire’ and ‘gentleman.’\textsuperscript{61}

Class divisions were not set in stone, and class distinctions might accurately be considered a matter of perception. The perception of gentle rank was important

\textsuperscript{60} Wrightson, \textit{English Society, 1580-1680}, 7.
“since after 1603 entry to an Inn of Court was theoretically confined to the sons of gentlemen.”  

This admission restriction created “a special incentive” to misrepresent status because the Inns of Court were an alternative to Oxbridge as means of higher education. Each seemingly trifling nuance of social rank could imply elaborate consequences of etiquette, and the bare appropriate use of the various intricacies of honorifics or gestures was a hallmark of class and status that could be appropriated by the clever social striver.

**Degrees of Persons**

The third schema Wrightson presents comes from Gregory King (1648–1712). Although lacking a university education himself, King was “skilled in Greek, Hebrew, and Latin.” King’s classifications of the “Degrees of Persons” focused more on the nobility and featured lords and baronets among them.

Lords were born or created by the crown. The order of baronets, on the other hand, enjoyed a heritable title, but had no legal privileges or seats in the House of Lords. Originally created in 1611, baronets technically had to be

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63 Ibid.

drawn from families which had been entitled to display arms for at least three generations and to be possessed of lands to the annual value of at least £1000—a double qualification which in itself is significant.65

The new status of baronet significantly increased the ranks of title-bearing nobility, a key demographic for garnering political power. Just below the nobility were knights. The status of knight was never inherited; instead, it was earned through service to the monarch in conjunction with an appropriate amount of wealth. The “lower” gentility, those below knight and esquire, were distinguished from the lower classes by their selection for government offices, and positions of responsibility and authority.66 King provides a detailed and focused picture of the social structure, at least as he saw it in 1688.67 King’s table, “Scheme of the Income, and Expense, of the several FAMILIES of England; calculated for the Year 1688,” lists social ranks in descending order along with estimates of the numbers of people associated with each rank and their annual incomes. It provides a good idea of the social structure of England in the era. Based on his ideas of the average income and expenses for each class, King’s table separated the population

65 Wrightson, English Society, 1580-1680, 7.
66 Ibid., 8–9.
67 King’s original work “Natural and Political Observations and Conclusions Upon the State and Condition of England, 1696” is republished in: George Chalmers and Gregory King, An Estimate of the Comparative Strength of Great-Britain; and of the Losses of Her Trade from Every War since the Revolution (London: J. Stockdale, 1802), 424–425 I have added the percentage columns and totals, separated the gentry, and eliminated the Expense and Increase columns.
into two main categories: classes that increased the wealth of the nation and those that decreased it.  

King lists three classes below the gentry with incomes equal to or greater than that of the simple gentle-person: Persons in Office, Merchants and Traders by Sea, and

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68 The obvious problematic sociological implications of King’s binary (those who increased and decreased the “wealth” of the nation) are beyond the scope of this work, but they should be noted in conjunction with the elitist hypothesis of this chapter.
Merchants and Traders by Land. Based on the average incomes in these categories, these people were as likely to be able to provide elite education for their children as members of the lower gentry.

King collects his data from public records; and even if his numbers are inaccurate or somewhat distorted, the resulting image of English society is a close enough reflection to be useful.\(^6^9\) Notably, King describes his study as a political one, and rightly so. As we will see in the chapter “The Politics of Blood Oaths,” matters regarding the distribution of wealth were indeed political, and King’s social pyramid gives us a good idea of what paying for higher education must have been like for members of the various classes.

**University Degrees**

To understand the relationship between the social “secret” of rank or status and higher education, it matters little where one layer of social strata ends and the next begins.\(^7^0\) These distinctions amount to trifling differences in many cases. The chasm separating the rich from the poor was only too obvious: people below the level of skilled artisan or small tradesmen had little hope for advancement.\(^7^1\)

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\(^6^9\) I know of no evidence that his numbers are inaccurate or distorted, but his methods are based on assumptions that I cannot, at present, evaluate properly.

\(^7^0\) Clearly, issues of class inequality and structural inevitability are at play here. See: Lynch and O’Riordan, “Education and Society.”

The hallmarks and appurtenances of wealth were as conspicuous to causal observers as the differences between igneous and sedimentary strata are to geologists. Education, as one of the most evident discriminators of wealth or status, however, was far more than a mere hallmark or appurtenance of rank. It defined, propagated, and perpetuated the distinctions of wealth and status. Although universities had significantly increased their admissions since the sixteenth century (Cambridge more than doubled its student body between 1564 and 1622), the percentage of the population with university degrees was still very small. “Whereas in 1584 only 48 per cent of the Members of Parliament had experienced education at the universities or Inns, by 1640–2 some 70 per cent of members had undergone higher education.”

Expansion of universities as a whole, albeit at different rates and in different periods, disguises important variations in the areas of study which were attracting students. The largest universities contained four faculties: arts, theology, medicine and law. Theology was ‘the queen of subjects’ in the sixteenth century, jurisprudence in the seventeenth, and philosophy in the

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age of Enlightenment. The expansion of Oxford and Cambridge was based on intakes into theology and philosophy, and students could indeed take no other course since the London Inns of Court produced the nation’s common Lawyers.\(^75\)

“Formal education at university or the Inns of Court was . . . necessary to those who aspired to reach the higher echelons of their profession.”\(^76\) But higher education was expensive, practically assuring that only those with substantial economic means had access to it. Access to education “diminished sharply as the social scale was descended.”\(^77\)

The higher the degree of education sought, the greater the cost. At the universities, boys from humble backgrounds might benefit from closed scholarships, or work their way through their training as ‘servitors’ or ‘sizars’, waiting upon their wealthier fellow students. But in order to have attained university entrance they would already have had to be maintained at school until their late teens—a formidable burden for any parent. As for the Inns of Court, they offered no such avenues of advancement for the poor.

\(^75\) Houston, *Literacy in Early Modern Europe*, 84.
\(^76\) Wrightson, *English Society, 1580-1680*, 12.
\(^77\) Ibid., 149.
student. Maintaining a youth at an Inn meant expenditure of at least £40 a year, a very sizeable slice from the annual income of even the more wealthy of English families.\footnote{Ibid.}

**Basic Literacy and Vernacularization**

Basic literacy had been increasing among the poorer classes since the sixteenth century. Education was considered practically a panacea for the ills of society.\footnote{Ibid., 147.}

“Bequest after bequest was made for the maintenance of a free school in a village for the elementary instruction of the local children by a poorly paid schoolmaster, who might also be the curate of the parish.”\footnote{Stone, “The Educational Revolution in England, 1560-1640,” 42.} From here, some would go on to grammar school and university, but most would not. “In the towns literacy must have been much more common than in the countryside, being a prerequisite for entry into many guilds.”\footnote{Ibid.} Literacy statistics from the era do not exist, but it is reasonable to assume that about half the population could read and write.\footnote{“Even among the poor, some women were now able to read. The free instruction at Norwich was at the hands of women and was apparently open to children of either sex.” Ibid., 43.}

Literacy was promoted in a Draconian fashion by the state and could mean the difference between life and death. The Calendar of Middlesex Quarter Session Records, for example, is filled with examples of criminals convicted of felony theft.
being hanged if illiterate and merely branded if they could read.\textsuperscript{83} “By the 1630s, a more substantial proportion of the population than ever before was in receipt of higher education, while schooling of all kinds was available to an extent which had never before been experienced. Most market towns had a grammar school capable of preparing boys for the universities.”\textsuperscript{84} This trend continued as the “Interregnum saw both vigorous efforts by the state to promote grammar school education and considerable numbers of dispossessed Anglican clergy setting up as private schoolmasters.”\textsuperscript{85}

While it is likely that more than half the male population of England was literate after the Restoration, there was obviously a significant distinction between basic literacy and higher education.\textsuperscript{86} University instruction was typically conducted in Latin, the universal language for higher education throughout Europe.\textsuperscript{87} Latin was not merely a language of scholarship. It bespoke a culture of elitism that extended throughout Europe and symbolized the barriers that divided learned from popular culture in the Middle Ages.\textsuperscript{88}

\textsuperscript{84} Wrightson, \textit{English Society, 1580-1680, 148}.
\textsuperscript{86} Wrightson estimates that only 30 percent of adult men were literate in 1642. Wrightson, \textit{English Society, 1580-1680}, 152.
\textsuperscript{87} For Catholics in Bavaria, see: Houston, \textit{Literacy in Early Modern Europe}, 42.
\textsuperscript{88} Eamon, \textit{Science and the Secrets of Nature}, 93.
The Elite Secrets of Language and Translation

There was obviously a great difference between basic literacy and elite education. Although alchemical texts were rendered from Latin into vernacular English, their full meaning simply could not be conveyed in translation. Problems of translation were not merely due to underlying cultural differences but were also related to class differences. Readers from lower strata of the social order might easily miss the implications of status and class encoded within the texts, even though the plain reading would yield some insight and meaning.

It is important to bear in mind that before Cromwell, governmental authority supported the church, while ecclesiastical authority supported the monarchy and gentry. Heresy was subversive to the social order and dealt with harshly. Ashmole’s translations might not have been published before the Cromwellian era because the alchemical texts contained heretical elements that would not have passed government censorship. During the Republic, censorship was greatly relaxed, and Ashmole wasted no time in publishing the texts that had previously been taboo. I suggest that rather than rendering these texts accessible to the literate

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90 Examples of this class encoding are presented in the next chapter.
masses, Ashmole’s translations amplified the mystique of privilege.

Before Ashmole translated the alchemical texts into English, only the very small segment of the population who understood Latin might read them. In general, the translations of Latin texts into the vernacular were part of a larger push into literacy, which we can see as an exercise in social engineering with economic motives. Common literacy increased the size of the market for literature, a rapidly growing business in the seventeenth century.\textsuperscript{92} Literacy also rendered people useful for the basic tasks of storing and retrieving information, activities necessary for commerce, ecclesiastical management, and statecraft. Basic literacy fostered economic growth and expansion.

\textbf{The Failure of the Universities to Adapt}

The separation of church and state, begun during the Republic and continued after the Restoration, was not attended by changes in the educational system. The institutions that had previously worked together—church, state, and university—had become disconnected. The educational system now prepared students to participate in a political system that had been defeated and replaced, and no new models of education were created to compensate for the breach. As a result of this

\textsuperscript{92} It is certainly possible that Ashmole’s translations were exclusively a commercial enterprise. Given the popularity of the Rosicrucian narratives, English versions of alchemical texts might have been expected to sell rather well.
decreased relevance, university enrollments declined steadily after the Restoration.⁹³ As Wrightson puts it, “as the universities became stigmatized by association with an outmoded learning, an unfashionable gravity and, by implication, the origins of the civil wars, did gentry involvement with formal higher education begin to wane.”⁹⁴

The violent and rapid shifts in England, from monarchy to republic and back to monarchy, transformed the upper levels of English culture. “The English intelligentsia had ceased to be a branch of the clergy and aristocracy, and had come to incorporate a significant proportion of the propertied laity. Some of them, indeed, became scholars of considerable distinction.”⁹⁵ The implication of Wrightson’s premise—that the intelligentsia had been severed from the university system by the revolution—provides some insight into what happened next.

Conclusion
The Royal Society and Freemasonry, I suggest, were established by and for the elite to fill a breach in social trust caused by the universities’ failure to reform. As we will see in the following chapters, the Royal Society established a new, invitation-only venue for dialogue and discussion to replace previously formal and

⁹³ Wrightson, English Society, 1580-1680, 148.
⁹⁴ Ibid., 154.
⁹⁵ Ibid.
cloistered scholarly discourse. And Freemasonry provided bonding experiences similar to the universities’ matriculation and conferral of degrees. The foundations of the complex social order of seventeenth-century England had roots buried deeply in cultural memes and mores. The propagation of these cultural conventions (cultivating polemical extremes) was integral to the perpetuation of this social order, but this was an exceedingly delicate matter. In the wrong hands, such knowledge would be downright dangerous. Indeed, the universities continued to conduct their initiations by degrees, but the elite now created their own.

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96 This understanding follows Jeffrey Kripal’s insight that “the college or graduate experience is in effect one of American culture’s most developed initiation rituals.” Jeffrey J. Kripal, *The Serpent’s Gift: Gnostic Reflections on the Study of Religion* (University Of Chicago Press, 2006), 129 Kripal’s insight made an impact on me long before I had any inkling that my research would focus on seventeenth-century initiations.
In the quote above, Pico della Mirandola uses the term “chameleon” to describe the mutability of human nature, and he simultaneously implicates the mutability of language and meaning. Pico’s expressions can be so confounding that it is practically impossible to affix definite meaning to his slippery words. This chapter shows how such perplexing language was carefully and intentionally cultivated to coax ideas out of their ancient shadows—while retaining plausible deniability should heresy charges have ensued. These devices of linguistic contrivance and alchemical allegory invisibly and hermetically concealed potentially dangerous secrets of social disparity—that the elite may not have held so dear some of the theological axioms they seemed to profess. This sort of elite heresy is exposed by the hermeneutic of privilege, an interpretative frame that considers texts from the perspective of conspicuous privilege in which elites considered themselves gods acting omnipotently upon their underclass. Those who managed to grasp this context were considered “initiates” by virtue of this understanding.


2 Brian Ogren, Renaissance and Rebirth Reincarnation in Early Modern Italian Kabbalah (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2009), 234, n. 78 and 235, n. 83.
A central theme of this chapter is how an amorphous brotherhood of “initiated” intellectual elites used philosophical syncretism to navigate safely through dogmatic political alliances. Specific examples provide historical context and address a blind spot that Wouter Hanegraaff identifies in *Western Esotericism and the Academy*: the tendency to “downplay the importance of ‘external’ historical influences in favor of the reference to some universal, transcendent, or ‘inner’ spiritual reality associated with the sacred or the divine.” My project adds color and detail to the historiography of the alchemical texts below.

The previous chapter, “Education, Secrecy, and the Social Order,” examined some of the memes and mores of social order to reveal how higher education both distinguished and perpetuated the elite. It also highlighted philosophical syncretism’s doctrinal flexibility (anti-dogmatism) as an element of the elite mindset that allowed them to elude political entrapments. This chapter shows how alchemical prevarication, equivocation, and ambiguity are the written residue of escape from these political entrapments. When the political landslides of the turbulent Republican and Restoration eras buried dogmatists along with their fortunes, Greatrakes’ affiants wittingly and lithely scurried from the ruinous rubble with their lives intact. Their survival was not a product of spontaneous equanimity but rather the payoff of special knowledge designed to cultivate a syncretic elitist

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Multivalence was intentionally encoded into alchemical symbols in order to convey a particular meaning to the intellectual elite while offering little of value to the underclass. Perhaps the best example of this multivalence is the philosopher’s stone. We noted Agricola’s doubt about chrysopoeia in the previous chapter, and the succeeding five centuries have done nothing to remove even the slightest bit of doubt about the veridicality of chrysopoeia.\(^4\) One might reasonably conclude that if five hundred years of technological progress have not resulted in the modern production of gold through alchemical means, chrysopoeia was always simply a ruse. This knowledge leads us to decipher alchemical texts differently—by disregarding those interpretations implying veridical chrysopoeia. Applying a hermeneutic of privilege elucidates deep and powerful currents of thought flowing from ancient Greek philosophers through alchemists directly to Greatrakes’ affiants and the practical construction of the Royal Society and Freemasonry.\(^5\) Secretiveness permeates this history, informing multivalent language and images, ciphers, allegories, and symbolism. The previous chapter, “Education, Secrecy, and the Social Order,” deals specifically with social secrecy and how higher education

\(^4\) And, I might add, the past two centuries have provided such astonishing technological growth that if there was the slightest bit of truth to actual chrysopoeia, we should most certainly know it today.

hid, preserved, transmitted, and perpetuated social order. This chapter builds on that idea through an exegetic analysis of specific alchemical texts to reveal those syncretic elements that are the threads of prevarication, equivocation and dissimilitude from which our alchemists wove their invisibility cloaks.

A main theme of this chapter is the fascination with ciphers in this lineage. What renders these ciphers most interesting is not their ability to convey “secret” messages but rather how some secret messages were designed to be “clear of suspicion.” 6 A plain cipher text practically demands decryption; but hidden within astrological tables and lists of angelic names, the cipher might pass unnoticed. The encoded alchemical texts avoided suspicion by putatively projecting prima facie meaning to protect a secret the hidden message.

Since ciphers are a sort of mathematical puzzle, it also follows that mathematics was also important to the lineage, and indeed advanced mathematics added layers of complexity to ciphers that were particularly difficult for less accomplished readers to decode. 7 This chapter also extracts ideas about alchemical initiation directly from texts. The biographical narratives that follow show an increasingly explicit progression of ideas about alchemical initiation that simultaneously highlights philosophical syncretism and social elitism. This chapter

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concludes with texts that were either written or translated by Elias Ashmole, an early member of the Royal Society whose thoughts and ideas (as we will see in the final chapter) shaped Freemasonry as we know it today and are representative of Greatrakes and his compatriots.

**Heresy, Scholasticism, and Greek Philosophy**

A main thesis of this dissertation is that the elitist ideas hidden in alchemical texts would be corrosive to social order if exposed. This destructive property made heretical ideas dangerous and provoked vicious social repercussions. These social repercussions must be understood within the context of the transition from patristic to scholastic philosophy, since notions of heresy differed significantly between these two systems. “In patristic theology the heretic was a man who did not accept the ‘dogmatic formulation’ or ‘dogma’ of a mystery or object of faith.”

8 Heresy was simple to prosecute under the doctrine of the patristic system. When Aristotelian texts containing humanist ideas inimical to Christian faith were first translated from Greek into Latin in the twelfth century, to avoid allegations of heresy they had to be treated as historical documents (and specifically not theological). In this light they purportedly “helped to clarify in the minds of the

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mediaevals the relation between philosophy and theology.”

Categorizing Aristotle’s theological ideas as philosophy rather than theology was perhaps the first modern act of alchemy, a demonstration of the philosopher’s stone at work—transforming Aristotle’s heretical thoughts into something perfectly harmless. Well, not exactly harmless. Despite the early thirteenth-century prohibitions on teaching Aristotle’s natural philosophy, the restrictions were largely ineffective and Aristotelianism spread. By the mid-fourteenth century Aristotle’s ideas were well established in the Church, as scholasticism—having become requisite knowledge among the well educated after Thomas Aquinas (1225-1274) harmonized them with Christian dogma in the thirteenth century.

Aquinas “made a formal and explicit distinction between dogmatic theology and philosophy.” The theologian accepts principles on authority, on faith, and receives them as revealed. “The introduction of dialectic into theology, the practice of starting from a revealed premise or from revealed premises and arguing rationally to a conclusion, leads to the development of Scholastic theology, but it does not turn theology into philosophy, since the principles, the data, are accepted

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10 Ibid., 2:210.
11 Ibid., 2:210, 303.
12 Ibid., 2:312.
13 Ibid.
as revealed.”\textsuperscript{14} Put another way, “the philosopher starts from the world of experience and argues by reason to God” while “the theologian starts with God” as revealed.\textsuperscript{15} The domain in which philosophy and theology intersect is the set of truths that “have been revealed” and simultaneously “can be established by reason.”\textsuperscript{16}

Aquinas thought it was not possible for a person simultaneously to “accept on authority by faith” and “know as a result of rational demonstration” the same truth. And since knowing as a result of rational demonstration was heretical, this was a pivotal distinction that made heresy very difficult to prosecute.\textsuperscript{17} Given that rational demonstrations of revealed truths were part of scholasticism and that it was considered impossible for a person simultaneously to believe and know, how was it possible to determine whether a person knew or believed a given doctrine?\textsuperscript{18} According to Amos Edelheit, Aquinas developed a doctrine of “right opinions” to handle the contradictions resulting from a multitude of well-reasoned but different “truths.”\textsuperscript{19} Under scholasticism, the “heretic was now a man who opposed this

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{14} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
  \item \textsuperscript{16} Ibid., 2:313.
  \item \textsuperscript{17} Ibid., 2:314–315.
  \item \textsuperscript{18} Indeed, this was no trivial task. See: Ian Forrest, \textit{The Detection of Heresy in Late Medieval England} (Oxford; New York: Clarendon Press, 2005), 1.
  \item \textsuperscript{19} Emphasis added. Edelheit, \textit{Ficino, Pico and Savonarola}, 35, 283.
\end{itemize}
A thorough examination of the definition, detection, and prosecution of heresy is well beyond the scope of this dissertation. It must suffice to know merely that heresy “was counted as an occult or hidden crime” and was complicated to prosecute because its “roots were buried in the depths of the mind.” Heresy was dangerous because it threatened social order by weakening the mollifying effects that religion had on the masses. The same ideas held by the elite were of no consequence at all, assuming that the elite understood their significance and desired to maintain their privilege. With this understanding, we turn our gaze upon the equivocal, prevaricating, and dissimulating writings of elite thinkers whose thoughts were considered, at least by some of their contemporaries, heretical.

**Giovanni Pico della Mirandola (1463–1494)**

“Magia est pars practica scientiae naturalis.”

Magic is the practical part of natural science.

When Giovanni Pico della Mirandola was only twenty-three years old, he organized an international conference in Rome and invited the world’s top philosophers and theologians at his own expense to come discuss and dispute nine hundred theological and philosophical theses he had extracted from a variety of sources.

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20 Ibid., 283.
theological tracts based on his multifaceted interests. 23 Pico “envisioned the final unification of all religion and philosophy in his own time.” 24 Born into an extremely wealthy family, Pico was friends with Lorenzo de' Medici. Pico’s wealth and status likely helped him to get away with youthful, zealous, and potentially far too public expressions of philosophical syncretism. 25 “His famous library was replete with texts of major as well as obscure figures, and his studies of Arabic, Greek, and Hebrew gave him a range of source materials unparalleled in his day.” 26

Pico’s nine hundred points were taken from a very wide variety of Neoplatonic and Kabalistic sources, and the debates were to have covered ideas that had never been openly discussed in Europe. 27 Pico’s theses challenged long-standing dogmatic ecclesiastical positions; and after a papal commission found thirteen of them to be “heretical or of dubious orthodoxy,” the conference never occurred. 28

24 Hanegraaff, Esotericism and the Academy, 257.
27 Ogren, Renaissance and Rebirth Reincarnation in Early Modern Italian Kabbalah, 212; Edelheit, Ficino, Pico and Savonarola, 280.
Pico’s Syncretism

Pico was what later generations would call a perennialist. He labored mightily during his short life to reconcile oppositional dogmatic ideologies. Farmer, who translated Pico’s nine hundred theses, believes that Pico “Self-consciously aimed at collecting material from all the battling sects of his period, which he hoped to pacify.” “Pico was essentially reformulating a well-known theme in medieval philosophical and theological thought by proposing the agreement of every philosophical and theological system in the pursuit of the unity of truth.” Asserting a philosophy of radical reconciliation that had endured over a millennium, “Pico's ‘new philosophy’ lay in a traditional, though highly exaggerated, Neo-Platonic framework, with special ties to those high-syncretic Platonic systems developed in antiquity after Plotinus by Porphyry, Iamblichus, Syrianus, Proclus, and related figures.” Pico wrote Oratio de hominis dignitate (Oration) as an introduction for his grand debate. Often considered as laying the foundation of Humanist philosophy, the Oration should be read as a richly multivalent text that equivocates, prevaricates, and dissimulates.

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30 Farmer, Syncretism in the West, 167:2–3.
31 Pico della Mirandola et al., Oration on the Dignity of Man: Critical Edition, 55 This sentiment seems to be reflected in Einstein’s unified field theory.
33 For Pico and Humanism, see: Ibid., 167:6; Michael Sudduth, “Pico Della Mirandola’s Philosophy of
The Hermeneutic of Privilege

The hermeneutic of privilege\(^{34}\) is my interpretive frame that anticipates authorial subterfuge and contextualizes symbols within an elitist referential system, one that understands the concept of deity as “how the nobility saw themselves”—entitled temporal lords. This hermeneutic supports a humanistic perspective of religion’s function in society, one analogous to Sigmund Freud’s views about religion’s social utility in *The Future of an Illusion*.\(^{35}\) Freud saw religion as a force to mollify the natural tensions between the uneducated, oppressed masses and the privileged class. Freud presumes the elite’s active role in creating an illusion that God punished and rewarded—an illusion Freud believes was created by and for the benefit of the elite. The hermeneutic of privilege anticipates this elite subterfuge to pierce this illusion and reveal its barest essentials: the ancient memes and mores of class structure embedded in the ancient language, symbols, and allegories of religion and Western culture.

Allegorical symbols support a variety of interpretations, typically moral or

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\(^{34}\) Please refer to “Appendix 2 - Pico della Mirandola and the Hermeneutic of Privilege” for a brief discussion and detailed application of this hermeneutic.

political. The philosopher’s stone was certainly a powerful multivalent symbol of alchemy, but it is not the only one. In the Oration Pico used man, angels, heaven, earth, admiration, divinity, animal life, craftsman, Master Creator, brutes, seeds, and chameleon (among many others) with multiple meanings. Richer symbolism provided deeper textual texture for embedding more levels of meaning. The hermeneutic of privilege is a frame for considering the social consequences of allegorical texts, revealing interpretations that would grate harshly on the sensibilities of the underclass. We can only imagine Pico’s conceit in placing himself (at twenty-three years old) as the central focus of an “audience comprising the pope, the College of Cardinals, and scholars brought at his expense from major centers of learning.” His opinion of himself must have been particularly high and mighty.

In the Oration, Pico assumes the mantle of deity and clothes his entire class (the nobility) in angelic, heavenly robes of divinity and admiration. In this way the Oration is a psychological portrait of life amidst the top echelon of society. Since Latin was the special domain of the elite, Pico’s texts did not necessarily need to closely veil his haughty social attitudes, which were potentially incendiary to the lower social classes. But the huge disparity in lifestyle between top and bottom

simply demanded the propriety of noblesse oblige.\textsuperscript{38} And it was certainly possible that some of Pico’s more doctrinally steadfast contemporaries might have been offended by his blatant heretical assumption of the divine mantle. So we will see how Pico’s texts also clearly convey a spiritual message of potential human divinity, one that strongly suggested “the dignity of the human being resides in the fact that human nature is defined by freedom and creativity rather than by pure instinct and simple biology; that the human being can transform itself through thought, language, art, and culture.”\textsuperscript{39}

The \textit{Oration} begins by extolling the wonders of man and reasons for his “highest admiration.” Assuming that the social structure described in the previous chapter is reasonably representative of Europe generally during Pico’s time, a hermeneutic of privilege renders the \textit{Oration} as an apologetic for his easy acquisition of wealth and justification for an intensely oppressive, top-heavy social order.\textsuperscript{40} Brian Copenhaver, a leading authority on Della Mirandola, says that Pico wanted “God’s secrets to be understood only by an élite clever enough to unravel the allegories that conceal them.”\textsuperscript{41} Under the hermeneutic of privilege, a

\textsuperscript{38} His primary concern in this context would have been scribal seepage, the problem of scribes understanding the heretical implications of the texts they copied.

\textsuperscript{39} Jeffrey J. Kripal et al., \textit{Comparing Religions: Coming to Terms} (West Sussex, UK: Wiley Blackwell, 2014), 47.

\textsuperscript{40} Appendix 2 presents a detailed exegesis that applies the hermeneutic of privilege to the first forty stanzas of Pico’s \textit{Oration} and could have gone much father but for the confines of space and time.

\textsuperscript{41} Copenhaver, “Giovanni Pico Della Mirandola.”
traditional dichotomy of upper and lower realms actually describes social
dimension, rather than referring to the heavenly and physical realms—the contrast
is between the “heavenly” privileged class and the “lower world” of the laboring
underclass. Within this hermeneutic, Pico’s observations in the Oration are
distinctly elitist rather than theological: the heavens describe the lives of the
privileged, while the earthly realm is the plight of the poor. Given the gross
discrepancy between the elite’s lavish circumstances and the comparatively meager
lives of the underclass, Pico identifies two distinct species of humanoid animals:
his references to “men” specifically exclude members of the underclass.42

Pico’s Oration is 268 stanzas long, and towards the conclusion he
specifically addresses mathematics a number of times. He presents as new “a
method of philosophizing (one that is carried out with numbers),” which he traces
back to Pythagoras and Plato.43 Attributing ancient origins implicated both validity
and sacrality. Pico then relates how Plato considered the science of numbers to be
the most divine of the liberal arts and sciences and that man was the wisest of
animals “because he knows how to count.”44 Pico is not attributing this
mathematical wisdom to his underclass. As noted in the previous chapter,

42 Appendix 2, “Pico della Mirandola and the Hermeneutic of Privilege.” highlights the textual basis for
this division into distinct species of humanoids.
44 Ibid. Applying the hermeneutics of privilege here, man and divinity refer to the privileged classes, and
in this case “man” specifically excludes the lower classes. For a thorough treatment of this hermeneutic,
see appendix 2.
mathematical knowledge divided the social classes. Here, Pico’s references to mathematical philosophy and mathematical magic refer to elitism and highlight hidden aspects of math and mathematical symbolism in society.

**Catalytic Initiation Exposed**

Pico drops all pretenses of allegorical propriety and relies on sheer grammatical craftiness when he turns his attention to the “priesthood of philosophy,” clearly the domain in which he sees himself.\(^{45}\) He equates the “different degrees of initiation in Greek mysteries” to “an understanding, achieved through philosophy, of nature’s most mysterious things.”\(^{46}\) This view of the ancient initiations—as degrees of understanding—sees them naked of ritual pomp and based firmly on purification “through moral philosophy and dialectics.”\(^{47}\) Here is the smoking gun, if we need one, to prove the point of the previous chapter—that higher education provided a catalytic form of initiation (texts and instruction being the catalyst) separating an in-group (those who understood) from an out-group (those who did not).\(^{48}\) After mere exposure to these texts, some would understand and others would not.

Ashmole’s case, later in this chapter, shows it could be an *unspoken* understanding.

\(^{45}\) Ibid., 161.
\(^{46}\) Ibid., 163.
\(^{47}\) Ibid.
\(^{48}\) Not, obviously, in the traditional ritualistic sense, but rather higher education was the catalyst that allowed the transformation of a person into an active intelligent agent of human potential.
The remainder of this chapter traces Pico’s “catalytic initiation” of unspoken understanding through Agrippa, Dee and Ashmole to Greating’s proponents; Boyle’s Invisible College; and the founders of the Royal Society and Freemasonry.

Initiation, both ritual and catalytic, is examined in detail in the next chapter, “The Invisible College and the Politics of Blood Oaths.” A significant question arises in the case of catalytic initiation: how might one catalytically initiated member recognize another (for an in-group must have more than one member) without the trappings of ritual? Although the “knowing” wink and nod might suffice, they are not the certain signifiers that rituals provide; and while there is no evidence that Pico participated in any ritual initiation, Henry Cornelius Agrippa is another matter.

**Henry Cornelius Agrippa (1486 – 1535)**

It is an old Opinion, and the concurring and unanimous judgment of almost all Philosophers, whereby they uphold, that *every Science addeth so much of a sublime Nature to Man himself*, according to the Capacity and Worth of every Person, as many times *enables them to Translate themselves beyond the Limits of Humanity*, even to the Celestial Seats of the Blessed.

Agrippa, *The Vanity of Arts and Sciences* ⁴⁹

Agrippa was born into middle European nobility, and as a boy he “showed a precocious intellect . . . when he refused to speak anything but Latin.” ⁵⁰ Agrippa’s

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knighthood around 1511 was a ritual initiation into the gentry and a reward for his harrowing service as a captain in Maximilian’s army: “before my face went death, and I followed, the minstrel of death, my right hand soaked in blood, my left dividing spoil: my belly was filled with prey, and the way of my feet was over corpses of the slain.”\(^{51}\) His excommunication in the same year for participating in the Council of Pisa (along with all the other council members) was revoked when his elderly excommunicator, Julius II, died a couple of years later. Agrippa had earned a professorship in theology at the University of Dôle prior to his military service, and he used his popular university lectures to curry favor with Maximilian’s daughter Margaret, who was a powerful patron of learning.\(^ {52}\)

The tactic must have met with her approval, for he later published the successful material as *Declamation on the Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex*, a witty rant against the prevailing patristic misogyny typical of his time.

“Agrippa argued that women were the equals of men in all things that really counted, including public spheres of activity from which they had long been excluded.”\(^ {53}\) His central proposition was that men and women have “an identical

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soul, which sexual difference does not at all affect” and he proceeded to support
his hypothesis with a multitude of arguments detailing the superior beauty, virtue,
and constancy of women.⁵⁴

For example, women are more beautiful because baldness and beards make
men disfigured and ugly, and men can “scarcely be distinguished from beasts.”⁵⁵
More poignantly—women leave cleaner bath water then men.⁵⁶ Because of the
multivalence of this text, scholars still today disagree about the extent of Agrippa’s
earnestness in asserting these arguments.⁵⁷ In a letter introducing Preeminence of
the Female Sex to the “Very Illustrious Lord Maximilian of Transylvania,”
Agrippa denigrates his book as a trifle of his youth and addressing a less profound
and less serious topic.⁵⁸ Whether or not sarcastic or facetious, Agrippa’s style can
be easily read seriously or taken as a ruse, and such multivalent textual fertilizer is
precisely the type of evidence we use to track the alchemical chameleon. Agrippa’s
generally “ambivalent position with respect to various religious and intellectual
issues central to his time” is the syncretic watermark signifying the same deft
political and social adaptability that Greatrakes’ affiants inherited from their

⁵⁴ Rabil and Agrippa von Nettesheim, The Nobility and Preeminence of the Female Sex, 43.
⁵⁵ Ibid., 55.
⁵⁶ Ibid., 56.
⁵⁷ Rabil does a credible job of showing this controversy in the section “Twentieth-Century Interpretations
of Agrippa.” Ibid., 29–33.
⁵⁸ Ibid., 40.
Secrecy and Initiation

Whether or not Agrippa was serious about women’s rights, he was serious about secrecy. In *Three Books of Occult Philosophy*, Agrippa discussed the importance of silence and concealing “things which are secret in religion.”

“Agrippa seems to have joined or formed a kind of secret society when he was a young man, probably in the period 1507-1509.” Later, Agrippa extracted “an oath of silence from those he did initiate to the ceremonies of holy things” and described a lineage passed down from Pythagoras, Plato, Porphyrius, and Orpheus (like Pico imputing the validity and sacrality of ancient origins). Although it is unclear whether these were ritualistic or catalytic initiations, apparently “he also formed or joined a secret society of like-minded occult students, but we have minimal information as he swore an oath of secrecy.”

We will learn much more about such oaths of secrecy from Ashmole later in this chapter.

Agrippa expresses disdain for publishing secret knowledge “out of school.”

In the chapter “Of Concealing of those things which are Secret in Religion” (the

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60 Porphyrius, and Orpheus are mythic characters. Agrippa von Nettesheim and Tyson, *Three Books*, 443.
second chapter of book three) he begins:

Whosoever therefore thou art that now desirest to study this science, keep silent and constantly conceal within the secret closets of your religious breast, so holy a determination; for . . . to publish to the knowledge of many a speech thoroughly filled with so great majesty of the deity, is a sign of an irreligious spirit; and divine *Plato* commanded, that holy and secret mysteries should not be divulged to the people; *Pythagoras* also, and *Porphyrius* consecrated their followers to a religious silence; *Orpheus* also, with a certain terrible authority of religion did exact an oath of silence from those he did initiate to the ceremonies of holy things.\(^{64}\)

This passage makes more sense in light of a hermeneutic of privilege. Considering the typical Christian dogma of the times, speech “filled with so great majesty of deity” would normally and quite liberally be divulged. In the sense here, majesty refers to his majesty the monarch, and deity signifies the noble temporal and spiritual lords of the elite. This elite secret is precisely the type that the alchemists strove to keep hidden in their writing.

Trithemius’ Steganographia—Demons and Ciphers

Agrippa masked his messages, protecting his texts from the uncomfortable glare of disapproving eyes by plying “many tricks to deceive the incautious reader.”65 Some of these tricks he found in *Steganographia*, by Johannes Trithemius (1462-1516), a manual for concealing secrets within a text.66 Containing a number of ciphers, including one decrypted for the first time late in the twentieth century, *Steganographia* was a cryptology primer disguised as a treatise on astrology and demonology.67 The numerological tables of astrological data and the unusual names of the angels and demons were “tricks to deceive the incautious reader” and provided perfect cover in which to bury ciphers and codes, so that naive readers never even suspected they existed.68 Such subterfuge is a well-known element of the alchemy genre that can be traced back to the *Ars Notoria*, an anonymous

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65 Lehrich, *Agrippa’s Occult Philosophy*, 42.
66 As we will see in the next section, this text was also very important to John Dee. Peter J French, *John Dee: The World of an Elizabethan Magus* (London: Routledge and K. Paul, 1972), 52; Johannes Trithemius, *Steganographia* (Frankfurt: John Berner, 1606).
68 Bacon eulogizes such subterfuges in his *Advancement of Learning*.
thirteenth century text. By concealing their syncretic personal philosophies in deep alchemical ambiguity, alchemists like Greatrakes and his affiants created the doctrinal camouflage necessary to pass through violent regime changes unscathed.

Trithemius begins *Steganographia* waxing philosophical: “Men of great learning hold the opinion that the ancient wise men whom we call Philosophers (from the Greek), concealed such secrets as they discovered, whether of nature or art, in various forms and methods, so that they should not come to the notice of wicked men.” Applying the hermeneutic of privilege, we would read “wicked” (*prauorum* in the original is discussed below) as referring to the underclass. The great secret of ancient civilizations was how the elite built societies of law and order on a foundation of faith and trust. This is how elites maintained their wealth, status, and power despite natural physical weaknesses like sickness or the deprecation of age (the elderly or lame make easy targets in a pure “survival of the fittest” scenario). More concisely, the secret is the way the elite maintained the confidence and trust of an oppressed underclass.

Thrithemius proceeds to discuss the secret knowledge and the danger of its

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71 To an unfortunate extent, the social order today similarly depends on the thin reed of trust in the international banking system, as was so plainly demonstrated in 2008.
discovery by what Fiona Tate and Christopher Upton translate as “wicked” men.

The passage reads:

Indeed, while this knowledge in itself is the finest, and of considerable benefit to the State, yet were it to reach the notice of the wicked (God forbid it), the whole order of the State might be thrown into severe confusion in the passage of time. *Public trust would be endangered, all letters, contracts, documents, the very speech of men, would be held in the greatest suspicion.*

No one would then trust confidently in literature, however holy and honourable, and men would rarely show faith in letters, for however virtuous and honest the words were, trickery, fraud and deception might always be thought to underlie them.  

Both these quotations refer to “wicked” (*prauorum* in the Latin) men; but since Trithemius was so fond of dissimilitude, his contemptuous characterization merits deeper consideration. These introductory passages to the putatively demonological

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72 Emphasis added. It is unfortunate that there is no critical translation of Steganographia into English, or any other language that I can find. As far as I can tell, the present translators are not necessarily experts. Upton’s primary field was physiological adaptation of microbial communities, and I can find nothing on Tate. I believe it would be a worthwhile and useful project to publish a critical edition of this little-studied text. Trithemius, *Steganographia (Translation)*, 18–19 The original reads: *Enimuero licet haec scientia in se sit optima, & Republica satis vtilis; tamen si ad prauorum notitiam perueniret, (quod Deus prohibeat) totus Republica ordo per successum temporis non modice posset turbari: fidesque; periclitari publica, literae omnes, instrumenta, conscriptiones, ipse deniq; hominum sermones in grauissimam suspicione verti: nemo iam literis, quantumlibet sanctis & honestis, absq; pauore crederet, sed fide epistolis rarus adhiberet. Trithemius, *Steganographia*, Fifth page of the Preface.*
text easily support the hermeneutic of privilege by reading a connotation of material depravation (rather than moral or spiritual depravation) into *praeroum.*

But even without regard to this characterization of the interloping discoverers, Trithemius’ anticipated consequences tell enough of the story. The horrific potential social consequences are quite clear about the need for secrecy. The larger question is: what type of secret is so important that society would collapse were it known? To the extent that religiosity provides a moral foundation for civilization, knowing the elite did not share the same sense of religiosity could be catastrophic in the hands of the underclass. This dissimulation or something like it is the object of Trithemius’ protection.

*Steganographia* details a variety of techniques for sending hidden information, including hiding ciphers in tables of astronomical data. The title is eponymous for “steganography,” which is the practice of concealing information within that which is not secret, like graphic images (or texts on demonology).

Although Trithemius’ first draft of *Steganographia* was rather straightforward, the cryptographer Thomas Ernst tells us that Trithemius clothed his naked cipher within “a very personal rhetorical metaphor: the well-known pseudo-universe of astral spirits,” a technique Ernst characterizes as *Arkansprache* (arcane

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73 This connotation might not be common or preferred, but given Trithemius’ predilection for prevarication it merely needs to be a possible interpretation within the context.
74 Ernst, “Ciphers in Trithemius’s Steganographia.”
Ernst explains *Arkansprache* by translating a paragraph from Gerhard Eis’ *Mittelalterliche Fachliteratur*: “Arcane language describes a scientific fact or a practical procedure in a manner which is only comprehensible to the initiated. Besides secret writing and encrypted clues it also uses symbols, metaphors, fictitious persons, and mythological narrations of diverse fantastical settings.”

Indeed, the texts that Agrippa, Dee, Bacon, and Ashmole produced used these devices and included rich graphic images with symbolic meanings on many levels. Eis’ notion of *Arkansprache* signifies much more than mere ciphers; it describes the genre of alchemical texts: encrypted clues, fictitious persons, metaphors, mythological narrations—a host of tools that bring light to the initiated while leaving others in the dark. Obviously, spotting these devices as they exist “in the wild” requires a patient and trained eye. The extensive use of such tactics in alchemy, in conjunction with knowledge of their *Arkansprache* nature also helps us attribute meaning to the graphic elements in frontispieces and historiated initials, like the ones present in many of the texts considered here. One particular symbol that reappears often on alchemical frontispieces is the twin columns (the pillars of Herakles) that becomes an important signal of Freemasonry. This symbol

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76 Ernst, “Ciphers in Trithemius’s Steganographia,” 319.
seems to signify the presence of a potentially initiatory text. It also is a potent reminder of the Herakles myth that blurs the distinction between men and gods.

Alchemical ambiguity was equally useful for factions on either side of a polemic. Both Catholics and Protestants would later use Trithemius’ cryptologic techniques to hide “their true thoughts from the initiated”; and in addition to Agrippa, John Dee, Francis Bacon, and John Wilkins (Royal Society founder and Greatedrakes affiant) all applied these techniques with enthusiasm. Trithemius’ willingness “to counterfeit ancient sources for the buttressing of his postulates” is a technique we see expressed rather blatantly by Freemasons in the following chapter.

Mathematical Magic in Agrippa’s Three Books

Agrippa “greatly admired Trithemius.” About the same time he wrote *De Occulta Philosophia Tres Libri* (Three Books), Agrippa met Trithemius and sent

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78 “Appendix 4 - Images” contains some examples of frontispieces with twin columns.
81 The counterfeiting of ancient sources will be clearly demonstrated in the next chapter: “The Origin of Freemasonry.” Ibid., 1136.
the initial draft to Trithemius for comments.\textsuperscript{83} When \textit{Three Books} was printed more than twenty years later, Agrippa’s prefatory note to the reader bemoaned the dark fate that had clouded every magician’s reputation: seemingly infinite accusations of scandal and heresy. He rebutted these negative presumptions: “a magician doth not amongst learned men signify a sorcerer, or one that is superstitious, or devilish; but a wise man, a priest, a prophet.”\textsuperscript{84} In a private letter he sent to Trithemius at the \textit{Three Books’} inception, Agrippa claimed magic “was accounted by all ancient phlosophers [sic] the chiefest [sic] science, and by the ancient wise men, and priests was always held in great veneration” until the Catholic Church changed all this and the holy fathers condemned magic as odious.\textsuperscript{85} Agrippa’s lucid style disintegrates after describing how the term “magic” now had a very common cast and had come to apply to a “doting old woman, dwelling in the country” believed to have divine power.\textsuperscript{86} Agrippa’s sense of magic, by contrast, is decidedly intellectual and scholarly and is “hidden in secret sciences, and arts.”\textsuperscript{87} He clearly disdained being linked with commoners.

Agrippa emphasized the intellectual aspect of magic in the first chapter of the second of his \textit{Three Books}: “The doctrines of mathematics are so necessary to,
and have such an affinity with magic, that they that do profess it without them
[magic without mathematics], are quite out of the way, and labour in vain, and
shall in no wise obtain their desired effect.” Of the second book’s sixty short
chapters, the first twenty-one deal specifically with numbers and mathematical
nuance, and a chapter is devoted to each number from one to ten. Agrippa entitles
the third chapter of the third book “What Dignification is Required, that One may
be a True Magician and a Worker of Miracles.” The term “dignification” is
signaling device—in this case a term with various meanings. “Dignification” might
connote either simple worth and honor. It might also imply a high station of class
or status, with a distinct implication of “nobleness.” Using the hermeneutic of
privilege, any term that even hints at nobility or gentility is especially important.
Agrippa concludes the third chapter of the third book:

If therefore now thou shalt be a man perfect in the sacred understanding of
religion, and piously and most constantly meditatest on it, and without

88 Ibid., 233.
89 Ibid., 448 “Quae dignificatio requiratur, ut quis euadat in uerum Magnum, & mirando rum
operatorum”; See also: Yates, Giordano Bruno, 138.
90 Tyson tells us that dignity “is used in the sense of purifying and exalting, with allusion to the
astrological dignification of a planet, where a planet’s power of working is increased by its position or
aspects.” As applied to humans this use connotes noble birth. Agrippa von Nettesheim and Tyson, Three
Books, 449, n.2; “Dignity, N,” OED Online (Oxford University Press), accessed November 29, 2014,
91 Obviously, this type of signaling is omnipresent in Latin and English and sometimes the signal will be
false, but arcane texts in particular merit extra interpretative care.
doubting believest, and art such an one on whom the authority of holy 
rites and nature hath conferred dignity above others, and one, whom the 
divine powers contemn not, thou shalt be able by praying, consecrating, 
sacrificing, invoking, to attract spiritual and celestial powers, and to 
imprint them on those things thou pleasest, and by it to vivify every magical 
work; but whosoever beyond the authority of his office, without the merit of 
sanctity and learning, beyond the dignity of nature and education, shall 
presume to work anything in magic, shall work in vain, and deceive both 
himself and those that believe on him, and with danger incur the displeasure 
of the divine powers. 92

In this context “magic” simply means effective political or social power—the 
birthright of kings and upper nobility. Used in this way the term contributes to the 
mystique of privilege. Here “one on whom the authority of holy rites and nature 
hat conferred dignity above others” clearly fits this mold. The passage, like Pico’s 
Oration, attributes supernatural qualities to elite power, not necessarily a bad 
alogy considering the practical impossibility of significant social mobility and 
the power differential between the elite and the underclass. In much the way that 
karma and the caste system operate together as a moral justification for class

disparity in Indian societies, the “alchemical” deification of nobility and wealth was how the elite justified their privilege to themselves and their underclass. This cultural encoding of moral justification might be better understood within the context of the push for literacy and consequent vernacularization described in the previous chapter. An increasingly educated populace meant that alchemical authors had to use deeper and richer ways of concealing the material differences (and spiritual similarities) of the rich and poor.

If the elite were not considered to be spiritually superior, preferred by or closer to God, then the material disparity might be cause for class outrage. Linking intellectual pursuits like mathematics to the spiritual realm through magic created an illusory spiritual distinction that served to justify class disparity. Mathematical literacy, important to the rise of technocracy, was introduced into the vernacular by John Dee in his preface to the first English translation of *Euclid’s Geometry* in 1570. Peter French, Dee’s twentieth century biographer, tells us that Dee was strongly influenced by Agrippa and his position that mathematics and magic were inextricable. French cites the first paragraph of Agrippa’s second book (quoted above, p. 132) of *Three Books* as a text Dee clearly used.

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John Dee (1527–1609)

All thinges (which from the very first originall being of thinges, haue bene framed and made) do appeare to be Formed by the reason of Numbers. For this was the principall example or patterne in the minde of the Creator.95

John Dee was born a gentleman, high enough in the social strata to attend Cambridge and receive “his MA in 1548.”96 Dee’s interest in mathematics surpassed the capacity of the English educational system; he found Oxbridge lacking in suitable mathematical instruction, so he immediately set out for the University of Louvain, in Belgium, where Agrippa had been a generation before and where Dee would also study civil law “for recreation.”97 Dee became primarily known as a top mathematician; and because of the connections between mathematics and magic noted above, he was notorious as the “Arche Conjurer of England.”98 Dee’s father had served Henry VIII as chief sewer, an intimate position involving tasting and serving meals, and his father’s influence was likely the source of John’s genteel manners and radiant charm. Dee was a trusted adviser in Elizabeth I’s court from the very start and was given the honor of using his

95 Euclid and Dee, The Elements of Geometrie, without pagination, on the third page of Dee’s Preface.
98 French, John Dee, 2, 9.
astrological expertise to select her coronation day in 1559. As expected of one of the most influential intellectuals of his time, he possessed “the greatest library in sixteenth-century England.”

In 1555 Dee’s facile manner helped him avoid falling prey to accusations of “‘magic’ or conspiring ‘by enchantments to destroy Queen Mary,’” a very serious charge with potentially hellish consequences (he could have been burnt alive); instead, he was fully acquitted after his religious beliefs were found to comport with orthodoxy. Following the transition to Protestantism that came with Elizabeth’s coronation, Dee’s liberal Cambridge education was more in vogue as he advocated Copernicus’s *De revolutionibus* and published his own work in natural philosophy.

**Mathematical Magus: Spiritual and Useful Magic**

By Agrippa’s standards, Dee indeed possessed the “dignity” (high level of social standing) of a Magus. One of the books that really excited Dee was Trithemius’ *Steganographia*, the same book that had been so important to Agrippa.

99 Roberts, “Dee, John” In 1584 or 1585, some thirty-five years after his MA, when he was well over the age of fifty, he earned a medical degree from the University of Prague and entitling him to be called Dr. Dee. Dee and Fenton, *The Diaries of John Dee*, vii.

100 French, *John Dee*, 2.

101 Roberts, “Dee, John.”

102 Ibid.

103 French, *John Dee*, 52; Trithemius, *Steganographia*. 
Steganographia was apparently no ordinary “boke.” Dee wrote in 1563 that it was a book for which “a Thousand Corwns hav ben by others offred, and yet could not be obteyned. A boke for which many a lerned man hath long sowght, and dayly yet doth seek: Whose use is greater than the fame thereof is spread.” These accolades were part of Dee’s plea to his friend William Cecil (1520/21–1598) for additional funds to sponsor his time and expenses in copying Trithemius’ manuscript. The very next year, Dee completed his Monas Heiroglyphica, a tract of twenty-four theorems that explicate the unusual astrological sigil (a monad) Dee invented to represent the unity of nature.

C. H. Josten, Elias Ashmole’s thorough and devoted biographer, provided the first scholarly English translation of Dee’s Monas Heiroglyphica and found that it “bristles with difficult problems of interpretation.” Astonishingly, Josten does not mention the Steganographia or Trithemius’ ciphers at all; rather, he suggests that Dee (and Agrippa) “may have derived their hermetic interpretation of the monad and the idea of its effect on the magus” from Trithemius, a connection

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105 Dee’s actual sentiments may have differed if he had ulterior motives to ask for the money. Seymour, “The Political Magic of John Dee,” 32.

106 In addition to the thirty two pages Dee devoted to his monad, a simple analysis reveals a distinct sexual connotation in the figure penetrating the cleaved ram’s horns. The monad is depicted on the third page of Appendix 4.

Josten derives through excerpts of letters. Because Trithemius’ method had “the goal of concealing the very existence of a message,” it is quite possible that Josten simply did not notice the parallels between the texts (Dee’s *Monas* and Trithemius’ *Steganographia*) that implicate ciphers—like the seemingly random use of different fonts (*italics* or all caps), words that have no meaning (Dee uses Hebrew to do this while Trithemius uses demonic names and invocations), or the rich use of graphic images.

More pertinent to the present inquiry than hidden ciphers is Dee’s seventeen-page message to Maximillion of Habsburg (1527-1576) that prefaces the *Monas Heirogliphica*. The twenty-four theorems relating to Dee’s glyph occupy a slim thirty two-pages—the introduction is over a third of the published text. Buried within Dee’s obligatory obsequity are the deep intonations of secrecy, confederacy, and elitism that suggest the utility of a hermeneutic of privilege. Dee says:

> When infancy and childhood are past, the choice of a future way of life begins to present itself to young men as a problem. Having hesitated for some time at the crossroads of their wavering judgement, they at last come

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108 Josten does note that Ashmole’s later hand-transcriptions of the work are in Ashmole’s own cipher.
110 Josten, “Translation of Dee’s ‘Monas Hieroglyphica,’” 173, n. 70.
111 To my knowledge nothing has been published suggesting that Dee’s *Monas* contains a cipher.
112 “From 1562 King of Bohemia and King of the Romans, from 1563 King of Hungary, and from 1564, as Maximilian II, Emperor of Germany.” Josten, “Translation of Dee’s ‘Monas Hieroglyphica,’” 115.
to a decision: Some (who have fallen in love with truth and virtue) will for the rest of their lives devote their entire energy to the pursuit of philosophy, whilst others (ensnared by the enticements of this world or burning with a desire for riches) cannot but devote all their energies to a life of pleasure and profit.\textsuperscript{113}

Dee’s binary of virtue and vice is obviously problematic since people might simultaneously pursue philosophy and riches with varying proportions of emphasis, so perhaps another level of meaning might equally apply.

In attempting to quantify virtuous or “true” philosophers, Dee suggests a mathematical progression he says “was not lightly adopted.” One in a thousand might be philosophers, but true philosophical devotion can only be found in “one in a million of honest philosophers, and as one in a thousand millions of men of the common sort.”\textsuperscript{114} Remembering Gregory King’s table in the previous chapter,\textsuperscript{115} these orders of magnitude are vaguely representative of class disparity.\textsuperscript{116} Next Dee presents an image of the Pythagorean “\textit{ARBOR RARITATIS}” or “Tree of Rarity”

\textsuperscript{113} Ibid., 117.
\textsuperscript{114} Ibid., 117–118.
\textsuperscript{115} Page 98 above.
\textsuperscript{116} England’s population was less than six million about this time so the suggestions of “one in a million” that is actually “one in a thousand million” of the common sort, are pure hyperbole. King’s numbers were compiled well over 100 years later, and although they are bound to be inaccurate, they are representative enough for the present analysis.
that graphically represents the choice of maturity (at the fork in the “Y”), showing the common path (to the left marked by the thicker line) and the rare path on the right.\footnote{117}

Immediately above the image, Dee states: “If your Majesty will look at it with attention, still greater mysteries will present themselves (to your consideration) such as we have described in our cosmopolitical theories.”\footnote{118} Cosmopolitical implies precisely the type of “universal politics” or non-partisanship that exacting philosophical syncretism produces, and this theory lends itself to the hermeneutic of privilege in the sense that non-partisanship and equanimity are hallmarks of the diplomacy and statecraft we find in Gretrakes affiants. Dee’s truly “virtuous”

\footnote{117} It should also be noted that “Y” is a homonym for the eternal question, “why.”
philosophers (the *Adeptuus*) are those one-in-a-million rarities engaged in diplomacy and statecraft—true alchemical chameleons. If we consider Dee’s numerical rhetoric slightly exaggerated, we can justifiably apply his label of *Adeptuus* to generically include the initiates of understanding described above.

Dee describes his monad on four dimensions: mathematically, magically, cabbalistically, and analogically—all of which connote alchemy and secrecy; but for Dee, the mathematical had special import. Nicholas Clulee, in *John Dee’s Natural Philosophy: Between Science and Religion*, shows how, for Dee, mathematics had a “meruaylous newtralitie [marvelous neutrality]” and served as “a mid-point between the supernatural and the material,” meaning that mathematical philosophy was equally facile at generating spiritual contemplation (like representations of infinity) and useful inventions (like Dee’s textbooks on navigation).  

French tells us that despite opportunity and inducements, “Dee declined to associate himself with either of the English universities.” Perhaps this decision also demonstrates Dee’s chameleon-like adaptability: by declining to pick sides, he could plausibly align himself with any rising stars (and avoid catastrophes).

Characteristic of many of the affiants to Greatrakes’ cures, “John Dee’s generally

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favourable reputation in English court circles seems to have developed early, continued through change of monarchs, and prevailed regardless of court factions.”¹²¹ French believes “that Dee was trying, almost alone and without the encouragement of mystical academies like those that flourished in Italy, to effect in England that same transformation of medieval thought that was a natural part of Italian Renaissance Platonism.”¹²² Pico’s and Agrippa’s influence over Dee was not through physical ritual; rather, the textual evidence suggests it was through Pico’s type of catalytic initiation and the “ancient” or “mystic” understandings that Dee gleaned from his interactions with their texts.

Vernacular Trending: The First English Version of Euclid’s Geometry

Dee’s *Mathematical Praeface* introduces the first English translation of Euclid’s *Geometry*, a work that might rightly have been taken as a challenge to the university monopoly on learning.¹²³ In part of the *Praeface*, Dee labors to rebut the notion that vernacularization affronts university learning. Here Dee aligns interests of gentlemen and craftsmen—an alignment we will examine more specifically in the next chapter. Dee states eloquently that “... both gentlemen and craftsmen who have no intention of studying philosophy in the universities should not be

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¹²¹ Ibid., 6.
¹²² Ibid., 50.
¹²³ Clulee, *John Dee’s Natural Philosophy*, 146–147.
denied the means of furthering their knowledge of arts that will profit themselves and their country.”\textsuperscript{124}

Clulee explains the \textit{Mathematicall Praeface} and writes that Dee's intent “is to promote mathematics among two audiences.” These divide nicely along lines of social distinction and are called perfect scholars (who use mathematics as “preparation for higher intellectual study of philosophy”) and fugitive scholars (who use it as “a foundation for arts of social utility”).\textsuperscript{125} Perfect scholars pursue “the intellectual and spiritual allure of mathematics” (creating a familiar category similar to the “virtuous” in Dee’s \textit{Monas Heirogliphica} and the “dignified” in Agrippa’s \textit{Three Books}, references with special social implications), while fugitive scholars are “interested only in material things, to find the ‘commodity’ and profit in the subject.”\textsuperscript{126} Looking at Clulee’s two audiences through a hermeneutic of social order and social constructivism, as opposed to philosophical affinity renders a very different nuance to the \textit{Praeface}. French argues that “Dee differed from the great Continental magi like Ficino, Pico, Agrippa and Bruno because, unlike them, he wrote tracts in English specifically for the benefit of the rising middle class of

\textsuperscript{124} Euclid and Dee, \textit{The Elements of Geometrie}, A.iiiij.
\textsuperscript{126} Clulee, \textit{John Dee’s Natural Philosophy}, 148.
technologists and artisans.”127 Along with Francis Yates, French believes Dee’s 1570 Preface to be a prime example of writing intended to benefit the middle class.128 Actually, Dee’s Preface is a clear and clever example of a text that simultaneously addresses the elite and the middle class with different messages, and a careful analysis of it will reveal the some of the linguistic and allegorical signals and codes that render its multivalence.

**Dee’s Multivalence in Preface Exposed**

The vernacularized version of Euclid’s Elements of Geometrie was a mathematical primer and a key for the craft class to apply mathematics to industry. It was a contribution to technological development, but that is not the whole of it. Dee intended various readers to take different meanings from his text based on their education and experience. Dee’s preface highlights the deeper metaphysical value of the text as “Mathematical Magic” as it relates to social order and social constructivism. Dee’s first sentence reads:

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iuine Plato, the great Master of many worthy Philosophers, and the constant auoucher,\textsuperscript{129} and pithy perswader of Vnum, Bonum, and Ens: in his Schole and Academie, sundry times (besides his ordinary Scholers) was visited of a certaine kinde of men, allured by the noble fame of Plato, and the great commendation of hys profound and profitable doctrine.”\textsuperscript{130}

The capital “D,” a homophone for Dee, clues the reader into the hidden meaning within the text to follow. Dee’s steganographical skills are demonstrated in the images inside the letter. The lion is part of Dee’s coat of arms, indicating his status as a member of a privileged class.\textsuperscript{131} The lion might also be viewed as floating in clouds to signify the noble “heavenly” divinity we saw in Pico’s Oration. The glyph underneath is his own creation, explained in detail in his Monas Heirogliphica, and signifies his adeptness (and perhaps an initiated status) with alchemical symbolism and philosophy.\textsuperscript{132} The letter Delta (triangle) on the top of

\textsuperscript{130}Euclid and Dee, The Elements of Geometrie, Image enlarged from the first page of Dee’s Preface.
\textsuperscript{131}Josten, “Translation of Dee’s ‘Monas Hieroglyphica,’” 91.
\textsuperscript{132}“In the Monas Hieroglyphica (1564) he [Dee] distinguished his own scholarly endeavours from the general mass of practitioners who had discredited the name of ‘alchymia’, and for this reason he preferred to use the terms ‘voarchadumia’, ‘mechanical magic’ or ‘Real Cabala’ to refer to his own work.” Federico
the lion represents the “*Unum, Bonum, and Ens*” or “the triadic universe formulated by Plato.”¹³³ The triangle also signifies Pythagoras’ theorem about the area of a triangle, the Greek language (Delta) with elitist implications, and the Trinity. In this way, Dee signals readers to look deeper within his text for many layers of meaning.

“*Unum, Bonum, and Ens*” is a Platonic phrase connoting “the highest of Ideas” that would have been familiar to readers familiar with Plato in Latin.¹³⁴ Keeping in mind that this phrase is in a preface to a translation from Latin into English, leaving these words in Latin must be significant. The more Latin Dee’s readers knew, the more easily they could associate this phrase with its richer Platonic meaning. At least in part, Dee conveys here the futility of translation by using Latin terms that reverberate with meaning apparent to the educated but easily lost on others. And if a sophisticated reader was not paying close enough attention, on the next page of the Preface, Dee writes:

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¹³³ French, *John Dee*, 90.

Neuertheles, if, for my sincere endeuour to satisfie your *honest expectation*, you will but lend me your thãkefull mynde a while: and, to such matter as, for this time, my penne (with spede) is hable to deliuer, apply your eye or eare attentifely: perchaunce, at once, and for the first salutyng, this Preface you will finde a lesson long enough. And either you will, for a second (by this) be made much the apter: or shortly become, well *hable your selues, of the lysons claw, to coniecture his royall symmetrie, and farder propertie*. Now then, *gentle*, my frendes, and countrey men, Turne your eyes, and bend your myndes to that doctrine, which for our present purpose, my *simple talent* is hable to yeld you.\(^{135}\)

This paragraph plainly signals multiple layers of meaning, and the key phrases are italicized. The honest expectation of a simple reader is a simple understanding, while the honest expectation of a sophisticated reader is sophisticated. “Second” might just as easily refer to a moment in time or a more sophisticated alternative meaning, while “conjecture” plainly means to “infer or gather from signs or omens; to divine, prognosticate.”\(^{136}\) “Royal symmetry” also depicts a duality of meaning as does “farder (farther) property.” Finally, Dee’s simple talent is not so


simple at all, and he knew it. Several years earlier Dee made a considerable effort in his *Monas Hieroglyphica* to distinguish his alchemical practice from the “general mass of practitioners who had discredited the name of ‘alchymia.’”

Dee continues his *Preface* by dividing the universe (like Agrippa, but with different labels) into three categories: Natural, Supernatural, and Mathematical. He claims that the mathematical category stands between the other two, has characteristics of each, but is separate from them both:

> All thinges which are, & have beyng, are found under a triple diversitie generall. For, either, they are demed Supernatural, Natural, or, of a third being. Thinges Supernatural, are immateriall, simple, indivisible, incorruptible, and unchaungeable. Thinges Naturall, are meteriall, compounded, divisible, corruptible, and chaungeable. Thinges Supernaturall, are, of the minde onely comprehended: Thinges Naturall, of the sense exterior, ar hable to be perceived. In thinges Naturall, probabilitie and conjecture hath place: But in thinges Superlaturall, chief demonstration, & most sure Science is to be had. By which properties & comparasons of these two, more easily may be described, the state, condition, nature, and property

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137 Cavallro, “Dee’s Monas Hieroglyphica,” 159.
138 We will examine the strong relationship between mathematics and the Royal Society in the next chapter, and examine facets of modern science that reverberate with the alchemical emphasis on mathematics and secrecy, especially as they relate to political power.
of those things which, we before termed of a third being: which, by a peculiar name also, are called *Thynges Mathematicall*. For, these, beying (in a maner) middle, betwene thinges supernaturall and naturell: are not so absolute and excellent as thinges supernaturell: nor yet so base and grosse, as things naturell: But are thinges immateriall: and nevertheless, by materiall things hable somewhat to be signified.  

In this passage Dee creates a practically heretical mystique for mathematics by placing it potently in the same seat traditionally occupied by the Church, right between God (the Supernatural) and the material world. Whether Dee intended it to be read as a philosophical or theological tract it is probably safe to speculate that less sophisticated readers would have taken little from it. Dee’s emphasis on the intermediary role of mathematics marks an important move on the path to the Enlightenment and towards the project later implemented by the Royal Society that shifts the arbitration of truth claims away from the Church and ecclesiastical authority to scientists who will ultimately determine the validity of truth claims based on mathematical philosophy.

Clulee describes the *Mathematicall Praeface* as follows: “Frequently

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139 Euclid and Dee, *The Elements of Geometrie*, The original edition is not paginated. This appears on the second page of Dee’s introduction.
140 This was also the seat of the monarch.
compared to Francis Bacon's *Advancement of Learning*, it seems a manifesto of modern science more farsighted than Bacon's because Dee combined an understanding of experimental method with an emphasis on the importance of mathematics and quantification for the study of nature."\textsuperscript{141} Although Bacon is typically considered the intellectual father of the Royal Society, Dee’s mathematical perspective clearly plays a role. Bruce Janacek finds that Bacon “openly rejected the methods of alchemists but indirectly incorporated the principles and goals of alchemy into his natural philosophy.”\textsuperscript{142} Bacon’s disdain for mathematics may have been related to his open hostility towards alchemists; he did not disparage alchemy itself, but he did mirror the sentiments of his predecessors (Agricola, Pico, Agrippa and Dee) reflecting skepticism about alchemical usurpers—unscrupulous (or merely under-classed) popular practitioners of alchemy who accepted the false fronts of the alchemical texts as real.

Mathematics and alchemy suffered a serious loss of repute when Dee’s diaries, documenting salacious stories of Dee’s wife-swapping encounters with his scryer, the knight Edward Kelley (1555–1597/8), were unearthed by Bacon’s contemporaries and published by Meric Causabon (1599-1671) in *A True & Faithful Relation of What Passed for Many Yeers between Dr. John Dee . . . and

\textsuperscript{141} Clulee, *John Dee’s Natural Philosophy*, 146.
\textsuperscript{142} Janacek, *Alchemical Belief*, 93.
**Some Spirits.**

**Elias Ashmole (1617–1692)**

When Elias Ashmole read Dee’s newly published diaries, his admiration of Dee endured despite (or possibly because of) the scandalous revelations. Josten documents Ashmole’s interest in Dee, noting that in 1672 Ashmole had borrowed Causabon’s personal copy of *A True and Faithful Relation* and hand-copied Causabon’s marginalia into his own copy of the book. Ashmole also thought enough of Dee’s library to make a manuscript copy of Dee’s 1583 library catalogue.

Although Ashmole was not born into the gentry, his circumstances put him in that margin between the comfortable merchant class and the gentry, with the means to ascend. His path to increasing his station came through education obtained in the London home of a relative on his mother’s side, where he learned

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143 Dee and Fenton, *The Diaries of John Dee*, ix, 218, 221; John Dee, Meric Casaubon, and Edward Kelly, *A True & Faithful Relation of What Passed for Many Yeers between Dr. John Dee . . . and Some Spirits: Tending (had It Succeeded) to a General Alteration of Most States and Kingdomes in the World: His Private Conferences with Rodolphe Emperor of Germany, Stephen K. of Poland, and Divers Other Princes about It: The Particulars of His Cause, as It Was Agitated in the Emperors Court, by the Pope’s Intervention: His Banishment and Restoration in Part: As Also the Letters of Sundry Great Men and Princes (some Whereof Were Present at Some of These Conferences and Apparitions of Spirits) to the Said D. Dee: Out of the Original Copy, Written with Dr. Dees Own Hand, Kept in the Library of Sir Tho. Cotton* (London: Printed by D. Maxwell for T. Garthwait, 1659), F4.


146 French, *John Dee*, 43, n.3.

music and Latin. He was not university educated but had studied to practice law. He married a woman fourteen years his senior whose family of ancient gentry was short on cash. Ashmole is a little-studied figure best known as a Freemason and for his participation in the Royal Society, and we can directly link the alchemy of Pico, Agrippa, and Dee to those institutions through him. He was about a decade older than Greateakes and Boyle; and while there is no evidence that Ashmole was acquainted with Greateakes, Ashmole and Boyle must have interacted as members of the nascent Royal Society. Ashmole was an Original Fellow of the Royal Society, and although he was “barely active” later, he paid his dues regularly until his death and was involved enough at the inception to have designed a rather interesting coat of arms that we examine in detail in the next chapter. Because of the strong support Greateakes received from some of the early founders of the Royal Society, it is reasonable to surmise that Ashmole knew of Greateakes’ activities, although it is impossible to determine to what extent Ashmole may have considered the healing activities “miraculous.” This detachment may be because Ashmole “was not very much interested in the theological disputes which excited

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148 Ibid., II:312–313.
149 Ibid., I:16.
so many of his contemporaries.” What we do know is that, like Glectakes’
affiants, Ashmole knew how to be a chameleon (diplomatic) and always avoided
taking sides too strongly.

Ashmole was a known Royalist, having benefited from a variety of
appointed government posts under Charles I’s monarchy. In 1645 Ashmole
served very briefly at “the suggestion of his friend George Wharton” as “one of the
four Gentlemen of the Ordnance in the garrison of Oxford” just before the king’s
complete surrender. Shortly thereafter, Wharton was arrested for his openly
Royalist sentiments, while Ashmole remained free despite his clear royalist
connections. Ashmole likely assisted when Wharton managed to escape a few
months later. Ashmole’s Royalist inclinations were certainly known to the
parliamentarians, since in 1648 his land was sequestered, but only briefly; for
“six days later he obtained a release of his lands ‘by the Interest of some Friends
among the godly, meaning friends among the Parliamentarian politicians.’”

152 For example in 1644 Ashmole was appointed commissioner “for the gathering of the excise in
Staffordshire and the City of Lichfield.” Ibid., 1:19.
153 Ibid., 1:28.
154 Ibid., 1:55; William Lilly and Elias Ashmole, The Lives of Those Eminent Antiquaries Elias Ashmole,
Esquire, and Mr. William Lilly, Written by Themselves; Containing, First, William Lilly’s History of His
Life and Times, with Notes, by Mr. Ashmole: Secondly, Lilly’s Life and Death of Charles the First: And
Lastly, the Life of Elias Ashmole, Esquire, by Way of Diary. With Several Occasional Letters, ed. Charles
Burman (T. Davies, 1774), 97.
155 This was a process that completely ruined some royalists. Underdown, Royalist Conspiracy in
156 Ashmole and Josten, Elias Ashmole, 1:59; Citing: Elias Ashmole, The Antiquities of Berkshire. With a
vignette shows two things: the strength of Ashmole’s Parliamentary connections despite his openly Royalist convictions; and the use of the term *godly* (italicized in the original 1717 text) clearly refers to powerful people, a connotation comporting with a hermeneutic of privilege.

**Ashmole’s Alchemical Ciphers**

About the same time that he arrived in Oxford on a mission to obtain political support against a Parliamentarian, Ashmole learned to write in a cipher system “of some 200 ideographic characters and abbreviations.”\(^{157}\) Josten tells us that Ashmole’s cipher is “identical with” the one described in 1602 by Willis (d.1625) in the *Art of Stenographie*.\(^{158}\) Ashmole used this cipher to encrypt his copy of the “code for the exchange of military intelligence between the garrisons of Oxford and of Lichfield.”\(^{159}\) This military code uses all of the astrological symbols for the planets and signs along with a number of other symbols presumably created for the system or appropriated from elsewhere; Ashmole had previously spent time in

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*Large Appendix and a Particular Account of the Castle, College, and Town of Windsor. In Three Volumes.* (London: E. Currll, 1719), viii. Josten tells us that this part of Ashmole’s posthumous text was written by Dr. Richard Rawlinson.\(^{157}\)


158 Josten also says that Ashmole’s transit diary was kept in a revised version of Willis’ cipher. Ibid., 1:10, 21; John Willis, *The Art of Stenographie Teaching by Plaine and Certaine Rules, to the Capacitie of the Meaneest, and for the use of All Professions, the Way of Compendious Writing. Whereunto Is Annexed a Very Easie Direction for Stegan’ographie, Or, Secret Writing*, Early English Books, 1475-1640 / 863:08 (London: Cuthbert Burbie, 1602).

1644 learning astrology, as William Lilly (1602–1681) put it, “only for Recreation.”

Willis’ stenography was akin to the one described in the *Ars Notoria* and is related to the system we know today for writing quickly by abbreviating words and sentences. Willis appended a short chapter to the end of *Art of Stenographie* about steganography, Trithemius’ system for camouflaging covert messages described earlier in this chapter. Although Ashmole had a version of Trithemius’ *Steganography* in his collection of manuscripts, it was apparently over a hundred years old and there is no direct evidence that he studied it.

Lilly’s exact language about Ashmole’s study of astrology survives in manuscripts and supports Pico’s view on the ancient “catalytic” initiations—that initiations of understanding came through interaction with texts. Lilly wrote that Ashmole took time “to initiate him selfe.” Lilly wrote this twenty-two years after Ashmole had studied the texts; and although the passage of time may have dulled Lilly’s perspective, his view might also have been sharpened against the whetstone of hindsight. It plainly refers to the type of “catalytic initiation” that Pico described. This “initiation” happens around the same time when Ashmole learned

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160 Ibid., 1:25.
to cipher and moved to Oxford “to avail himself of such facilities for study as the University afforded.”\footnote{Ibid., 1:20.} In the next chapter we will examine further the conjunction of ciphers, initiations, and higher education as they relate to the amorphous group of Greatrakes supporters; but for now simply note that these elements combine as vague descriptors of an ill-defined in-group.

There is no record of Ashmole’s matriculation at Oxford. Josten tells us that “all contemporary sources agree that Ashmole became a member of Brasenose College, where a chamber had been assigned to his use.”\footnote{Ibid.} However, the Brasenose College website says it “is likely that his status was that of a lodger rather than a member of the College.”\footnote{“Elias Ashmole, Founder of the Ashmolean Museum - Brasenose College, Oxford,” accessed December 11, 2014, http://www.bnc.ox.ac.uk/about-brasenose/history/222-famous-brasenose-names/485-elias-ashmole-founder-of-the-ashmolean-museum.} A number of Greatrakes’ affiants and some early members of the Royal Society did not have formal university education, did not participate in the formal ritual of university degrees, but were nonetheless considered initiates (or part of the in-group) based on their knowledge alone. This “collegiality” suggests that the university ritual conferred something completely different from the initiatory understanding that Pico described and that Lilly attributed to Ashmole. About seven years after Ashmole’s catalytic initiation was supposed to have occurred and a year after he published his first translation of
alchemical texts under a pseudonym, Ashmole received a formal alchemical
initiation. Ashmole was in his mid-thirties when William Backhouse (1593–1662)
adopted him as his only alchemical son.

Ashmole’s Alchemical Books

It is interesting that Ashmole published his alchemical work under pseudonym
before Backhouse adopted him alchemically and then used his real name
afterward. We may never know how or why Ashmole first embarked on the task of
translating alchemical texts into English. It may have been a public demonstration
of his alchemical virtuosity. It might also have been a pecuniary scheme to sell into
the growing popular market that had so eagerly consumed the Rosicrucian texts.
Ashmole’s friend William Lilly was a masterful author who published over
eighteen books and pamphlets in addition to annual ephemeredes from 1652 to
1685.167 Ashmole published only five pieces, and the first three were alchemical
books. The first was published under the pseudonym of James Hasolle in 1650, just
before his adoption by Backhouse (and about five years after his initiation as a
Freemason is thought to have occurred). Remembering the context of the times,
this was right after the fall of the monarchy and published under the Cromwell
regime’s more lenient censors.

167 This is a conservative count from a search of the Early English Books Online (EEBO) database.
Perhaps Ashmole’s use of a *nom de plume* anticipated potentially harsh ramifications of associating his name with the edgy “secret” material, or perhaps he did not want to offend his predecessors in the “secret brotherhood.” Ashmole’s first book was the English translation of a Latin text originally written by John Dee’s eldest son, Arthur Dee (1579–1651), *Fasciculus Chemicus, or, Chymical Collections: Expressing the Ingress, Progress, and Egress of the Secret Hermetick Science, Out of the Choisest and Most Famous Authors: Whereunto Is Added, the Arcanum, or, Grand Secret of Hermetick Philosophy*. As a child, Arthur Dee had been subjected to his father’s enthusiasms for séances and scrying. Josten says Ashmole seems to have seriously studied Dee’s “Spiritual Diaries” (that coincidentally detail bits of Arthur’s childhood) as a means of contacting angels and he conjectures that Ashmole even attempted to repeat Dee’s angelic experiments.168 This might explain why Ashmole chose to work with Arthur Dee’s text first.

Arthur included two separate introductions, the first “To the Students in Chymistry” and the second “To the Candid Reader,” anticipating that even in Latin the book would be received by two types of audience—one that understood the deeper privileged connotations of the text and one that did not.169 Ashmole


169 Dee, Cross, and Espagnet, *Fasciculus Chemicus, Or, Chymical Collections*, These pages are not
prefaces these with a lengthy introduction of his own, complete with a postscript that concludes: “Yet I hope that those who (favored with a propitious Birth) search into the Sacred Remains of Ancient Learning, admire the rare and disguised effects of Nature, and through their Piety and Honesty, become worthy of it, may finde Ariadnes thred to conduct them through the delusive windings of this intricate Labyrinth.”\(^{170}\) Clearly, Ashmole’s anticipates two levels of meaning (“favored with a propitious Birth,” “disguised effects of Nature,” and “delusive windings” are laden with multivalent meaning); but more importantly, Ashmole writes it as an initiate with a full understanding of its disguise and the meaning beneath. Perhaps here Ashmole reveals too much, provoking Backhouse to adopt him and bring him into the fold before he discloses even more.

Ashmole’s second book was published in 1652, right after his “official” alchemical initiation. *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum: Containing Severall Poeticall Pieces of Our Famous English Philosophers, Who Have Written the Hermetique Mysteries in Their Owne Ancient Language* is a collection of alchemical texts from a variety of authors, some of whom were well known, others so obscure they were probably fictive,\(^{171}\) like Abraham Andrews who Ashmole numbered.

\(^{170}\) The parenthetical is in the original. Dee, Cross, and Espagnet, *Fasciculus Chemicus, Or, Chymical Collections*. The quote appears in the postscript to the prolegomena.

\(^{171}\) Reminiscent of Trithemius’ habit of inventing ancient sources cited above.
claimed wrote the *Hunting of the Greene Lyon*. Nevertheless, Ashmole published *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum* as a true initiate, under his own name and with the approval Backhouse, who contributed the poem “The Magistery” to the volume. Ashmole officially attributed that piece to W.B., but his personal marginalia reveals that the poem was composed by his alchemical father, William Backhouse. Ashmole’s third alchemical book, *Way to Bliss*, was published in 1658 with, in Josten’s opinion, Backhouse’s “active interest.”

**Ashmole’s Alchemical Initiation**

Ashmole relates detailed aspects of his initiation by Backhouse in his second book, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*. The anchor tenant of this collection is Thomas Norton’s *The Ordinall of Alchemy*, a widely popular alchemical treatise known for its relatively lucid prose. Norton wrote the *Ordinall* in 1477 in vernacular middle English with a brief introduction in Latin. It was subsequently translated entirely into Latin, presumably so that its wisdom might be spread to the elite of the continent. Ashmole renders a liberally poetic version in the English

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172 Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*.


175 Ashmole, *Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum*.

of his day, including most of Norton’s original Latin introduction. Ashmole’s translation of the first Latin stanza reads:

This Booke the greatest Clearkes may teach,
But shorteneth the Vulgar-Reach:
A Booke that gets by Wealth Renowne,
And Boggles at a thred-bare-Gowne:
A trusty-Booke of faithfull-Things;
Instructing Priests, Advising Kings:
A Booke that’s fitted for the sence
Of Man, who lives without offence:
A Booke of secrets given by God;
To men Elect, a Beaten-Trod:
Availing such as constant be
In Faith and Hope and trusting Me. ¹⁷⁷

This stanza brings to fore a number of elements: “Clearkes” refers to clergy, and this suggests that the text’s heretical elements are veiled enough to be considered

safe for popular consumption. “Shorteneth the vulgar reach” invokes the
problems of vernacularization and secrecy discussed previously, while the next two
lines reinforce the separate realms of rich and poor and basically shouts that this
text was written for the elite. The rest of the poem relates the nature of those
elected for initiation and emphasizes the element of trust, which we will examine
in detail in the next chapter.

Norton’s second chapter deals in part with “the difficulty of finding a
genuine adept for a master.”178 The following selection of the text discusses the
requirement that alchemical secrets must not be written; they must be shared
“mouth to mouth,” and through this sharing one becomes both brother and heir:

Wee speake together, and see face to face
If I shulde write, I shulde my fealty breake,
Therefore Mouth to Mouth I must needes speake
And when you come, mine Heier unto this Arte

I will you make, and fro this londe departe.
Ye shall be both my Brother and myne Heier,
Of this greate secret whereof Clerkes despaire . . . 179

178 Norton, Thomas Norton’s Ordinal of Alchemy, lxviii.
179 Emphasis added. Ashmole, Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum, 33.
Ashmole wrote a very informative endnote to the line “mine Heier unto this Arte I will make you” that he buried over four hundred pages later in an appendix he called “ANNOTATIONS AND DISCOURSES, UPON Some part of the preceding Worke.” Ashmole made no notations letting readers know this bonus material was attached. It was intended only for those tireless and thorough readers who persevered through the endnotes and was rendered without the mist that normally obscured alchemical truths: “There has ever beene a continued Succession of Philosophers in all Ages, although the heedlesse world hath seldome taken notice of them; For the Auncients usually (before they dyed) Adopted one or other for their Sonns, whom they knew well fitted with such like qualities, as are sett downe in the letter that Norton’s Master wrote to him when he sent to make him his Heire unto this Science.”

Ashmole next reveals a text Norton’s master wrote describing the oath of initiation:

Will you with mee to Morrow be content
Faithfully to receive the blessed Sacrament
Upon this Oath that I shall here you give,
For ne Gold ne Silver as long as you live,
Neither for love you beare towards your Kinne,

Nor yet to no great Man preferment to winne,
That you disclose the Secret that I shall you teach,
Neither by Writing, nor by no swyft Speeche;
But onely to him which you be sure,
Hath ever searched after the Secrets of Nature,
To him you may reveale the Secrets of this Arte,
Under the Covering of Philosophie before this World yee depart.\textsuperscript{181}

Ashmole goes on to describe the fate of the honor-bound initiate who did not find a prospective adoptee with whom to share the secrets of initiation. He says “they seldom left the \textit{World} before they left some \textit{written Legacy}” to preserve the secrets given them.\textsuperscript{182} Ashmole describes these texts as immortal legitimate children of the authors’ brains “as if when they dyed their \textit{Souls} had been \textit{Transmigrated} into them” to be received by us as both parent and schoolmaster and long outliving their “Adopted Sons.” Ashmole concludes this lengthy endnote with a poignant poem:

\begin{quote}
\textit{Let Clownes ge Heires, and Wealth; when I am gone,}
\textit{And the greate Bugbeare grisly death}
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{181} Ashmole, \textit{Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum}, 441.
\textsuperscript{182} Ibid.
Ashmole borders on contradiction here. Earlier on the same page he described an oath to disclose the “Secret” only to one who has “ever searched after the Secrets of Nature.” How could an author be certain his readers knew enough of the secrets of nature to be worthy of receiving the secret? He could by encoding the message in ways that only those who understood could comprehend. Here, I think, is the secret of the catalytic initiation: richly encoded texts confirmed the novitiate’s suspicions that the secrets related to privilege and social order. Quietly, subtly, simple repeated exposures to such texts revealed the Natural secret of privilege to careful observers.

Conclusion

Pico della Mirandola equates the “different degrees of initiation in Greek mysteries” to “an understanding, achieved through philosophy, of nature’s most mysterious things.” Reading Pico’s Oration through a hermeneutic of privilege reveals that one of “nature’s most mysterious things” was that elites considered themselves gods. This skeptical proposition has resonance with Freud’s utilitarian

\[183\] Ashmole attributes this poem in footnote w to Rand. Poems pag.63. Ibid.

view of religion and is reminiscent of what Jan Assman calls “Euhemerism.”

Rather than a form of mythical exegesis interpreting mythic gods as immortalized people, a corollary of Euhemerism suggests a practical understanding of spectacular economic disparity through which omnipotent elites saw themselves as gods. Within the Catholic culture of Pico’s era, openly describing the scenario was certainly heretical, so Pico wrote about himself and his deistic pretensions under the guise of a theological tract. Using a hermeneutic of privilege, Pico’s *Oration* is a callous and self-congratulatory apologetic for his conspicuously privileged circumstances.

But Pico’s heresy was not elitist egotism, or even considering himself divine. His *Oration* presented this spectacular self-portrait in terms of equivocating vagary, leaving plenty of room for safe plausible deniability. Pico’s heresy was his syncretic project attempting to reconcile a wide variety of philosophical and theological positions. The danger of such a project was that it undermined the dogmatic religiosity that, according to Freud, mollified the underclass. This notion of heresy is simple: heresy was that which endangered social order. In the hands of the elite, syncretic ideas tended to perpetuate rather than destroy privilege; but in

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the hands of the underclass, same syncretic ideas vitiated the soporific effects of
religion and were corrosive to social order.

Similar examples emanate from Agrippa and Dee’s enthusiasm for
Trithemius’ prevaricating *Steganographia*, a handbook of ciphers and
dissimulation. Trithemius’ successful ruse concealed his text on cryptology as a
tract on demonology. The unusual demonic names and bizarre incantations in
*Steganographia* were actually encoded messages, and the astrological tables
camouflaged keys to the cipher. Like Pico’s theological rants, without some
inkling that ciphers were involved, Trithemius’ readers were simply perplexed by
his practically senseless demonology. The ciphers themselves were not the most
important aspect of Thrithemius’ work; it was the way he managed to masquerade
his secrets past unsuspecting eyes. Although we may never know to what extent (if
any) Agrippa was disingenuous about his *Declaration on the Nobility and
Preeminence of the Female Sex*, it was clearly written in a prevaricating style
subject to multiple interpretations. Dee’s *Preface* to Euclid’s Geometry is an
example of text that both forges a middle path (by way of mathematics) and is
clearly intended to be read with special meaning by elites while serving more bland
fare to a common reader.

Ashmole’s alchemical texts exemplify a scholarly form of prevarication and
dissimulation: burying the good stuff in unmarked endnotes. Ashmole shared
secrets of initiation in endnotes that related to the alchemical tract he presented, but they were not referenced in the text itself. By refusing to mark his endnotes in the corresponding principal text, he would be certain that only those readers who “ever searched after the Secrets of Nature” would find these bits of gold. Here, I think, is the secret of both privilege and the catalytic initiation—richly encoded texts confirmed the novitiate’s suspicions about social order. Quietly, subtly, simple repeated exposures to these alchemical texts initiated careful observers into the Natural secret of privilege.
CHAPTER 4: THE INVISIBLE COLLEGE AND THE POLITICS OF BLOOD OATHS

Plate XII. ¹

Ashmole’s design for a coat of arms of the Royal Society (MS. Ashm. 836, p. 723)

¹ Ashmole and Josten, *Elias Ashmole*, Plate XII See the section: “Symbolism in the Royal Society’s Proposed Coat of Arms” below. The Latin means “know the causes” and can be found in Bacon, quoting Virgil. Bacon, *The Philosophical Works of Francis Bacon*, 72.
The Royal Society’s Alchemical Lineage

This chapter traces a lineage from the catalytically initiated alchemical chameleons identified in the previous chapter into the Royal Society and Freemasonry through Robert Boyle’s curious references to the Invisible College. The chameleonic character of the syncretic alchemists detailed previously radiates through the founders of the Royal Society. Its fellows created similarly prevaricating texts to safeguard social order, a technique demonstrated especially well through their role in forming organized Freemasonry.

Particularly important is how the Royal Society’s founders used chameleonic (alchemical) middling (syncretic) philosophies they inherited from Agrippa and Dee to fill the vacuum of institutional trust that began with the regicide’s assault on the notion of monarchal divinity. Since the monarch was also the head of the Church of England, both institutions lost some of the divine authority they had previously enjoyed. The unsubstantiated scholarly consensus is that Boyle’s Invisible College refers to a small group that later founds the Royal Society (two of whom are Greatrakes’ affiants). The obvious Masonic overtones in the coat of arms that Elias Ashmole proposes for the nascent Royal Society are evidence of analogous if not the exact same influences in the foundations of Freemasonry. The previous chapters have removed a false front from alchemy to reveal how prevarication, equivocation, and dissimulation concealed elitism
through an alchemical secrecy based on allegory, prevarication, and initiation. This chapter reveals how these secrets were woven into the essential fiber of the Royal Society and Freemasonry, two very different institutions that promulgated elitist aims by very different means.

**Definitions - Freemasonry & Masonry**

The term “Freemasonry” is problematic, especially for the period before 1717. A clear boundary between the craft guild and the fraternity begins only with establishment of the Grand Lodge in 1717. The term “Freemason,” in addition to connoting a member of the craft guild, has been commonly considered to refer to

1) a member of the speculative craft (a philosophical fraternity) as opposed to the operative craft (the craft guild); 2) a stone-cutter working in free-stone (like sandstone, without cleavage planes) that may be carved into any shape or form, as opposed to those carving stone with specific planes of cleavage that can only take shape based on the cleavage planes; 3) a man who is not a slave or serf, i.e., a freeman, one who has served his apprenticeship and is not beholden to a “master.”

The term Masonry refers to both the craft guild and the fraternity. I use the terms Masonry and Freemasonry with different meanings: “Masonry” to refer

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2 Bogdan and Snoek, *Handbook of Freemasonry*, 14 Snoek and Bogdan are clear that only one meaning should be attached to the term “Freemason”: the highly skilled craftsman working in free-stone. The term “Freemason” seldom appears in literature before 1700. (N-Gram Viewer/EEBO).
to the craft guild and “Freemasonry” or “organized Freemasonry” to signify the fraternity begun in 1717 that includes men who were neither engaged in building buildings nor elites.\textsuperscript{3} I will refer to elites who were involved with the craft guild as “gentlemen masons” without capitalizing the “m” in “Masons” to signify that these men were neither members of the craft guild nor members of the fraternity of Freemasons (because I think it did not exist), but of another ilk. I suggest that these elites, bound within an affinity of privilege and understanding, enlisted the complicity of their underclass others by means of special “you bet your life” initiations contrived to protect specific secrets by forming special-purpose cabals. Possibly such initiations provided memberships in Pico’s “priesthood of philosophy” or Boyle’s “Invisible College,” but such associations are too speculative to consider more specifically here.

What happens in 1717 for the first time, what distinguishes organized Freemasonry from the craft guild, is the initiation of men with no specific secret to protect who were neither elite nor stone craftsmen. This new fraternity was comprised mostly of wealthy merchants and artisans, men who were not so far from the elite in wealth and status, but who typically lacked the nuanced philosophical understandings of the more privileged elite. It is possible that the fraternity was formed in response to the Whig schism 1717 to garner political

\textsuperscript{3} The gender bias here reflects the historical situation. There are a few times when the term “Freemason” appears in the literature before 1717 and in these cases my use of it relates to the craft guild.
support favoring religious dissenters and the repeal of the oppressive Schism and Occasional Conformity Acts.\(^4\) Promises of “revealed secrets” quickly made Freemasonry a powerful political force that was guided and directed by members of the Royal Society—men who were treading the same path as Greatrakes’ affiants and working towards building better statecraft.

Freemasons claim their history has ancient roots, and the story of the Masonic craft guild’s importance to civilization and elite power should not be underestimated. In the section “The Origins of Freemasonry,” we will examine every reference to Freemasonry that was printed before 1666. This examination reveals those public footprints of the Masonic or proto-Masonic network, a network that looks remarkably like what little we can see of Boyle’s Invisible College.

**Boyle’s Invisible College—Precursor to the Royal Society**

Robert Boyle left behind copious diaries. A glittering facet of the Boyle corpus is a set of curious references Boyle makes to an "Invisible College" in three letters he wrote in 1646 and 1647 during that very uncertain period after Charles’ army had been defeated but before he was executed. Although earlier references to an

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Invisible College or group exist within the Rosicrucian genre, Thomas Birch identified none of them when he wrote the Royal Society’s official version of Boyle’s biography in 1744. Characteristic of alchemical prevarication, each of Boyle’s references to the Invisible College is cryptic and leaves plenty of room for speculation and debate. However, when Boyle stated “that the corner-stones of the invisible, or (as they term themselves) philosophical college do now and then honour me with their company,” he used symbolism (cornerstones are symbolic of novitiates in Freemasonry) that later played a significant role in Freemasonry. Although Boyle often painted his ideas in metaphors, this particular image clearly reminds us of Pico’s “priesthood of philosophy” and “degrees of initiation” through understanding. The word “cornerstones” also had special Masonic meaning, and Boyle used it about the same time that Ashmole claimed to have been initiated into a Masonic lodge. It is important to consider that these references occur in 1646, during the precarious time after the Royalist army had been defeated and before Charles I was to be beheaded.

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5 The same author who wrote the history discussed in chapter 1, Birch, The History of the Royal Society.
7 Boyle and Birch, The Works., xxxiv.
The Birch Hypothesis

Birch, the Royal Society’s second official historian, considered Boyle’s allusions to the “Invisible College” as evidence of the Royal Society’s inception during the era of the civil wars. Boyle’s references are alchemically oblique, not clear evidence of anything in particular. Birch offers two different interpretations of the Invisible College: it was either the beginnings of the Royal Society or a group meeting in London in the 1640s. Birch does not even mention the Rosicrucian brotherhood and their alchemical invisibility. Boyle's Invisible College has been the subject of a variety of scholarly articles, most of which reiterate and confirm the Birch hypotheses.10

Birch begins his 1756 four-volume *History of the Royal Society* by contradicting Sprat’s 1667 contention that the group first began after the civil wars in John Wilkins’ Oxford lodgings.\(^\text{11}\) Although it is undisputed that both Wilkins and Boyle (who were also Greatrakes’ affiants) had played founding roles in the Royal Society, Birch sought to claim an origin earlier than Sprat had. Birch pushed the foundations back into the times of the civil wars and suggested that “in order to divert themselves from those melancholy scenes,” they had “applied themselves to experimental inquiries, and the study of nature.”\(^\text{12}\)

The historical context for Boyle’s letters is relevant; they were written at a very unusual time in English history. Charles I had been defeated militarily, and the Parliamentarians aligned with the army were seeking to try Charles I for treason and execute him.\(^\text{13}\) The uncertainty made it a dreadfully precarious time to take a firm stand supporting any position; and given the gerrymandering ultimately responsible for Charles’ demise, choosing sides would have clearly been unwise. Considering that Boyle’s letters might have been intercepted by either Royalists or Cromwellians, his negotiating a middling line between the two factions in the chameleon-like alchemical fashion described above exhibited true understanding. It seems likely that the unseen collegial philosophers were a group of disaffected

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\(^{13}\) Either in spite of, or, perhaps because of his perceived divine authority.
intellectuals who made themselves “invisible” by hiding their deliberations about current events in order to continue their lives unperturbed, lest they raise the ire of either faction. It is well known that Royalists made considerable use of ciphers to avert Republican eyes, but ciphers were obvious and liable to be decoded so the more sophisticated intellectuals might convey their potentially troublesome ideas under the gossamer veil of allegory.\textsuperscript{14}

In support of his earlier origin hypothesis, Birch recites John Wallis’ claim that the original group had been meeting in the 1640s before the monarchy had toppled.\textsuperscript{15} It is a matter of interest that Wallis was the Parliamentary party’s cipher expert, and in this way Birch’s move preferences an origin that could be linked to the Cromwellian rebellion.\textsuperscript{16} Obviously, Wallis’ Parliamentary affiliation was a detriment in the Restoration, and here is more evidence of the Royal Society’s chameleonic character. Wallis’ origin statement was somewhat the weaker since it had been made over thirty years after the meetings had taken place. Wilkins, who had supplied Sprat with the original origin narrative, had died by the time Wallis contradicted him, so his rebuttal was not to be an issue. Birch bolstered Wallis’ argument by adding what he considered to be putatively corroborating evidence—

\textsuperscript{15} Purver, \textit{The Royal Society}, xiii.
Boyle’s cryptic references in the 1640’s to an Invisible College.\textsuperscript{17}

Within this historical context, it is certainly with the realm of possibility that Boyle’s “Invisible College” referred to the group that later would found the Royal Society, but it seems rather unlikely that any group anticipated themselves two decades into the future so clearly. What does seem likely from Boyle’s references is that a “preisthood” of Pico’s chameleonic “philosophers” gathered from time to time to discuss their mutual interests and possibly even prognosticate the ultimate fate of the king. Based on the ideals of philosophical syncretism delineated in the previous chapters, we may surmise that these invisible alchemists simply did not pick sides and waited patiently for a victor to emerge.

Boyle’s three references to the Invisible College are contained in private letters he wrote during that very troubling time shortly after Charles I officially surrendered to Parliamentary forces in Oxford in June of 1646.\textsuperscript{18} The first was a lengthy missive dated October 22, 1646, to Isaac Marcombes (d. 1654), Boyle’s tutor and traveling companion;\textsuperscript{19} the second was to Francis Tallents (1619–1708), a non-conformist preacher; and the third was to Samuel Hartlib (c.1600–1662), a Prussian liberal Protestant who was at the center of a group of intellectuals

\textsuperscript{17} Birch, \textit{The History of the Royal Society}, 1:2.
Chapter 4: The Invisible College and the Politics of Blood Oaths

promoting the power of Baconian theories of knowledge when used for statecraft.\(^{20}\)

Given the violent political environment of the times and the danger of antagonizing the strongest English parliament ever, it is reasonable to read the Invisible College as a loose network of literati and illuminati (alchemical chameleons) discussing issues of statecraft and diplomacy.

**An Intermediate Hypothesis: The Alchemical Affinity Network**

Birch claims that the “Invisible College” refers to “that assembly of learned and curious gentlemen, who, after the breaking out of the civil wars, in order to divert themselves from those melancholy scenes, applied themselves to experimental inquiries, and the study of nature, which was then called the new philosophy, and at length gave birth to the Royal Society.”\(^{21}\) Given the intervening decade and a half between Boyle’s Invisible College references and the later founding of the Royal Society, two intermediate hypotheses make sense and shed light—that the Invisible College refers to a group of Pico’s type of catalytic initiates concerned by current events or it is related to a group connected to the Rosicrucian texts that appear at the turn of the previous century.

Although many scholars follow Birch’s lead, linking the Invisible College


with the Royal Society, few find alchemical or Masonic references in Boyle's use of the term. Francis Yates considered it to be the product of Rosicrucian texts while Marsha Keith examined the Masonic implication of the Invisible College; both scholars must speculate far beyond direct textual evidence to support their assertions. Rather than linking Boyle’s Invisible College with the Royal Society formed decades later, it makes more sense that the Invisible College refers to a group of like-minded intellectual chameleons who sought to discuss the dangers and opportunities of the revolutionary circumstances without placing themselves in harm’s way.

Boyle’s references to the Invisible College have been reproduced in whole by many authors in both scholarly and popular contexts, but since no other primary references by other authors corroborate the existence of an actual organized group called the Invisible College, Boyle’s remarks should not be taken too literally. Rather than an organized group, the Invisible College probably refers to a loose

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23 Marsha Keith Schuchard, “Freemasonry, Secret Societies, and the Continuity of the Occult Traditions in English Literature” (Ph.D., The University of Texas at Austin, 1975), 121–165; Yates, *The Rosicrucian Enlightenment*, 220–246; Keith says of the network: “As a semi-clandestine network, members of these groups visited each other and shared news from abroad. They were determined that political and religious differences would not interfere with their fragile scientific enterprise, which received no official encouragement or support.” Marsha Keith Schuchard, *Restoring the Temple of Vision: Cabalistic Freemasonry and Stuart Culture* (Leiden; Boston: Brill, 2002), 597.
affiliation (comprised in whole or in part of catalytic initiates) that associated on the basis of their mutual philosophical or religious perspectives and financial interests, similar to what we in Texas call the “good ole boy network.” In this light, the Invisible College is just like Pico’s “Priesthood of Philosophy,” in which he equated “different degrees of initiation in Greek mysteries” to “an understanding, achieved through philosophy, of nature’s most mysterious things.”24 This view adds context and texture to the consensus linking the Invisible College to the Royal Society; and it shows a continuity of ideas flowing from Pico, through Agrippa and Dee, to Ashmole, Boyle, and Wallis and into the Royal Society and Freemasonry: natural philosophy, philosophical syncretism, ciphers, initiation, the “magical” power of mathematics, and secrecy through allegory combined with prevarication, dissimulation and equivocation.

Boyle’s Invisible College reflected his own attitudes about tolerance. Although Boyle conformed to the legislated forms of religious observance after the Restoration (the Clarendon Codes), he “had a most particular zeal against all severities and persecutions upon the account of Religion” and addressed such offences with his most fervent “heat and indignation.”25 Boyle’s tolerance was also diplomatic: he “spoke of the Government, even in times which he disliked, and

upon occasions, which he spared not to condemn, with an exactness of respect.”

Boyle’s letter to Tallents dated February 20, 1647, describes a bit more of the tolerant character of the Invisible College and contains both symbolism and religious broadmindedness that would later be characteristic of Freemasonry:

The best on’t is, that the corner-stones of the Invisible, or (as they term themselves) the Philosophical College do now and then honour me with their company, which makes me as sorry for those pressing occasions, that urge my departure, as I am at other times angry with that solicitous idleness, that I am necessitated to during my stay; men of so capacious and searching spirits, that school-philosophy is but the lowest region of their knowledge; and yet, though ambitious to lead the way to any generous design, of so humble and teachable a genius, as they disdain not to be directed by the meanest, so he can but plead reason for his opinion; persons, that endeavour to put narrow-mindedness out of countenance, by the practice of so extensive a charity, that it reaches unto every thing called man, and nothing less than an universal good-will can content it. And indeed they are so apprehensive of the want of good employment, that they take the whole

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26 Ibid., 3:454–454.
body of mankind for their care.  

Boyle’s reference to the “corner-stones” of the Invisible College should be evaluated as proto-Freemasonry, since (as we will see later in this chapter) it is unlikely that organized Freemasonry existed at that time. It is more likely that the craft guild’s long symbiotic relationship with the nobility fostered the use of this symbolism and inspired the Freemasonic political alliance formed in 1717. However the term “cornerstone” has a very specific meaning in Freemasonry that comports precisely with Boyle’s use of it here. Albert Mackey devotes an entire chapter to the Masonic symbolism of cornerstones and says in part: “[t]he aspirant for masonic [sic] light - the Neophyte - on his first entrance within our sacred porch, prepares himself for this consecrated labor of erecting within his own bosom a fit dwelling-place for the Divine Spirit, and thus commences the noble work by becoming himself the corner-stone on which this spiritual edifice is to be erected.”  

Whether Boyle’s reference is to neophyte Masons or not, the symbolism has a distinct Masonic tint that should be noted. 

Later in this chapter we look at evidence proffered that Elias Ashmole had been initiated into a Freemasons’ lodge about the same time that Boyle writes his cryptic references. This assertion might encourage us to believe that Boyle was

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28 Mackey, The Symbolism of Freemasonry, 162.
visited by some of his novice colleagues of a Masonic lodge. If Ashmole’s initiation was authentic, it would have been possible that Boyle was also an initiated member of a Masonic lodge and that the Invisible College referred to that lodge or a set of related lodges. It could also mean that Boyle had been studying the system of Masonic symbols and allegory, and the Invisible College refers to part of Pico’s “priesthood of philosophy” who studied the allegories of Masonry along with many other systems, sharing alchemical (allegorical) wisdom from mouth to mouth as described in the letter Ashmole presented in the endnotes to the Ordinall discussed in the previous chapter. Whether formally through a Masonic network or informally as an amorphous group of elite catalytic initiates, Greatrakes’ supporters openly colluded to promote new ideas about where trust should be placed in English society.

Birch’s interpretation sheds a bit of light on how he wanted the political deliberations of the Royal Society’s founders to be perceived (or not perceived), and his conclusions regarding the very weak connection between Boyle’s references and the later Royal institution still hold sway today. If Birch is right, the connection is an affiliation of elites using linguistic contrivance and allegory or prevarication (so familiar from the previous chapters) to share information about current events and hypothecate their futures.
Boyle’s Chrysopedia: In Alchemy We Trust

Since the hermeneutic of privilege presents a sceptical perspective of chrysopedia (transmuting base metals to gold), conclusions that Boyle was actively engaged in chrysopoeia must be examined with serious scrutiny. Lawrence Principe in *The Aspiring Adept* writes: “Somewhat surprisingly, he [Boyle] seems to have invested alchemy with a privileged status that required its special treatment; the secrets of the adepti were not for everyone.”  

Principe continues, “Perhaps most difficult for some readers to accept is Boyle’s supernatural alchemy. A Boyle who sought the Philosophers’ Stone to facilitate communication with angels is perhaps as far as one can get from the portrayals of Boyle as a rationalist empiricist that held sway relatively unchallenged from the mid-eighteenth century until quite recently.”

Many documents conveying Boyle’s moral and ethical thoughts were destroyed in the 1740s when Birch was preparing Boyle’s portrait for the Enlightenment audience; and although we do not have the purged documents, we have the redactors’ explanation of their censorship: “Being in the manner of the Schoolmen, it was thought by a very judicious friend to whom I shewd the MS better to omit em as not suited to the genius of the present age.”

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30 Ibid.
considers that the destroyed documents “illustrated the authentic details of Boyle's spiritual life” redacted in an attempt to “sanitize” Boyle’s image into modernity, and Principe bases his opinions about Boyle’s chrysopaedic endeavors upon the remnant corpus.\textsuperscript{32} A complimentary interpretation is that some of Boyle’s “disappeared” papers disclose ethical quandaries related to his extraordinary privilege bestowed by birth, quandaries he veiled in the allegories of the gods (similar to Pico’s) in order to communicate about his privilege “invisibly” in ways least upsetting to the social order. Under this scenario, quite possibly the redactors’ decisions (if they had this perspective) were based on social factors and a hermeneutic of privilege rather than philosophical ideologies and strict mechanism.

One of Boyle’s remaining unpublished Latin works is “Dialogue on the Transmutation of Metals.” Principe translates a fragment describing an august assembly’s hostile and sceptical reception of a claim that a bit of gold had been produced chrysopaedically. In Boyle’s narrative the assertion was suspect “since it would be just as easy for an impostor to pretend that any bit of gold was made by art.”\textsuperscript{33} The “Most Noble Society” evaluating the case (and clearly symbolizing the Royal Society) divided itself into Lapidists and Anti-Lapidists to debate the merits of chrysopaedia. Proponents were represented by Zosimos, a character based on


\textsuperscript{33} Principe, \textit{The Aspiring Adept}, 239–241.
the historical fourth-century Zosimos, an early Greek alchemist known for his use of *Decknamen*, or cover names.\textsuperscript{34} Boyle calls Zosimos’ opponent in this debate “Simplicius” to highlight, Principe says, Boyle’s convictions about “the reality of the Philosophers’ Stone and the validity of alchemical claims for its powers.”\textsuperscript{35} Principe’s conclusions are not the only ones that can be drawn from Boyle’s allegorical narrative. Read through the hermeneutic of privilege, Boyle is dividing the reception of chrysopeadia along lines of privilege: a group of “Simplicius” naïve underclass believers and those “blessed” with a deeper, more nuanced, historical perspective that aligns with *Decknamen* and the Hellensitic origins of alchemy.

The Ggreatrakes narratives were an object similar to chrysopoeia and the philosopher’s stone in that no physio-mechanical explanation was available. Many of Ggreatrakes’ affiants shared a special bond: they were typically wealthy, influential men with strong syncretic philosophical inclinations. These were the precisely the sort of people most likely to be Pico’s initiates of understanding, people who were facile with language and understood privilege. Ggreatrakes’ case brought the volatile issue of divinity into sharp focus in two ways: the affidavits described miraculous healings “produced by God” when the Church of England


\textsuperscript{35} Principe, “Boyle’s Alchemical Pursuits,” 93.
denied miracles, and Ggreatrakes did what monarchs had done previously to prove their divine authority. If the Greatrakes narratives were credible, then the Church of England’s position was compromised. This diminution of institutional credibility eventually happened. If Greatrakes possessed the same capacity to channel divine healing as a monarch, then touch healing did not prove a monarch’s special divine authority rule. To the extent that Greatrakes’ activities were viewed as miraculous, they were corrosive of the public trust that had been previously placed in both Church and State. In order for English society to remain stable, that trust had to be placed elsewhere, and it ultimately came to reside in the hands of those alchemical philosophers (the successors of Boyle’s Invisible College) who had organized themselves into the Royal Society.

Symbolism in the Royal Society’s Proposed Coat of Arms

Elias Ashmole, who was an early member of the Royal Society, marked Charles II’s Restoration to the throne with an astute and successful political maneuver—publishing a celebratory book: *Sol in Ascendente, Or, The Glorious Appearance of Charles the Second, upon the Horizon of London, in Her Horoscopicall Sign, Gemini.* Ashmole immediately thereafter became acquainted with the king and was appointed Windsor Herald, a position responsible for registering coats of arms

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and recording the complicated layers of the richly stratified nobility.\footnote{Ashmole and Josten, \textit{Elias Ashmole}, 1:130.} Perhaps this official position inspired his interest in the Royal Society’s coat of arms and prompted the unsuccessful design that Conrad Josten believes Ashmole proposed.\footnote{See the image reproduced at the beginning of this chapter. Ibid., 1:149, 3:924 n.4; See also: Hunter, \textit{Establishing the New Science}, xiv, 41–43.} This design is worthy of note for several reasons. It is richly allegorical, with symbols atypical of established heraldry.\footnote{See generally: Frederick Edward Hulme, \textit{The History, Principles and Practice of Heraldry} (London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co., 1892).} The design features a hand descending from the clouds holding a plumb-line that divides the shield vertically. Josten attributes this design to Ashmole based on its Masonic content; and although later in this chapter I question the claims relating to Ashmole’s initiation as a Freemason, Ashmole was clearly interested in Freemasonry and Masonic symbolism.

**Masonic Symbolism**

A relatively short time after Freemasonry was officially organized in 1717, the “Plumb Rule” was considered an important emblem of Freemasonry that Masonic officers wore “about their neck.”\footnote{Samuel Prichard, \textit{Masonry Dissected: Being a Universal and Genuine Description of All Its Branches, from the Original to the Present Time} (London: Printed for J. Wilford, 1730), 10, 11.} The relevance of the Plumb in Freemasonry is
also emphasized by its place in the current initiation ritual that discusses the allegorical meanings of different working tools used by the craft guild:

The Plumb is an instrument made use of by operative Masons to raise perpendiculares, the Square to square their work and the Level to lay horizontals; but we, as Free and Accepted Masons, are taught to make use of them for more noble and glorious purposes; the Plumb admonishes us to walk uprightly in our several stations before God and man, squaring our actions by the Square of Virtue, and remembering that we are traveling upon the Level of Time, to “that undiscovered country, from whose bourne no traveler returns.”

As we will see later in this chapter through the analysis of Masonic texts and references that existed before the 1660s, it is impossible to determine with certainty to what extent, if any, Ashmole might have considered this symbolism Masonic. Other elements of Ashmole’s design also link both alchemy and Freemasonry with the Royal Society.

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Connotations of Privilege in the Coat of Arms

More certain connotations of the proposed coat of arms are plenty. The image of a hand holding a string from above might represent deity in control of the physical world, or even a puppeteer. John Evelyn (1620-1706), like Ashmole an original fellow of the Royal Society (Boyle was even more deeply involved in the Society’s origin as a “founder fellow”), produced a sketch of the “descending hand” coat of arms among a variety of proposals in his diary on a page marked “Arms & Mottos proposd for the R. Society 1660.”42 Evelyn’s image portrays the hand more clearly descending out of clouds than the version at the beginning of this chapter. Other symbolic details of interest include the fact the end of the string that is not bearing weight is tied in a very loose knot with a hook at the end. This knot and hook may be symbolic of a “knotted” or convoluted allegory, perhaps designed to recruit (hook) understanding fellows or simply to put them on notice to look more profoundly into the symbolism. The knot might also be an attempt to gain the support of the restored king by hinting at the group of royalist conspirators known as the “Sealed Knot” who labored for the Restoration during the Republic.43 The shield is divided horizontally into two fields, a field of light above and dark below that are also symbolic of the spiritual and material. Within a hermeneutic of

42 This page is reproduced in appendix 4 - Images. Charles John Smith, Historical and Literary Curiosities, Consisting of Facsimiles of Original Documents (London: H. G. Bohn, 1852), without page numbers; It is also reproduced in: Hunter, Establishing the New Science, xiv.
privilege, this connotes class distinction with the privileged class above “pulling the strings” and the underclass laboring with the leaden pendulum below, in the dark, being moved about by a puppeteer.

Another interesting aspect of the symbolism of the pendulum is that the “word ‘canon’ comes from a Greek term that originally referred to a measuring plumb line,” so the image may have carried connotations of religious canonical propriety and even doctrinal dogmatism to those who were proficient in Greek. Sprat tells us that the pendulum was also a topic investigated by the early Royal Society, in connection with clocks and watches, the elliptical motion of the moon, and its period from rest to rest; so it could be read as a signifying the passage of time, or even cyclicity. In addition to the other implications of the image, there is another analysis that should be considered—that the image connotes divination.

The Pendulum Used for Divination

As a tool for construction, a plumb line should be suspended from a fixed object since the weight always tends to move about when hand-held. It seems that Ashmole’s proposed image on the shield resembles a “dowsing” pendulum rather than a tool used by the Masonic guild for construction. There are few

44 Kripal et al., Comparing Religions, 21.
46 It seems that pendulums were probably not regularly used for dowsing before the nineteenth century.
contemporary references to pendulum dowsing in the seventeenth century, but in 1662 Gaspar Shott apparently mentions pendulums tangentially when he writes about dousing for minerals.47 Dowsing for minerals with a rod (similar to dowsing for water) was well known to alchemists, and the process was described in 1556 by the same Georg Agricola mentioned in chapter 2 who so elegantly expressed his doubts about chrysopoeia.48 The Greek Ammianus Marcellinus (c.330-c.400) writes about the use of a pendulum suspended from a tripod for divination in the fourth century, but it is unclear whether the image in the proposed coat of arms would have presented Ashmole’s contemporaries with a connotation of divination.49

Divination was well known to the alchemists. Agricola, upon whose straightforward analysis of chrysopoeia we have already relied, gives us an opinion about the use of diving rods for finding minerals. He tells us that those who use diving rods are “cunning manipulators,” and more importantly he says that if a person “is prudent and skilled in the natural signs, he understands that a forked

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47 Unfortunately I have been unable to locate the original text to verify this myself. Transactions of the American Institute of Mining, Metallurgical and Petroleum Engineers, vol. 60, 1883, 422.


stick is of no use to him, for as I have said before, there are the natural indications
of the veins which he can see for himself without the help of twigs.” Assuming
that Agricola is right and a divining rod is useless for finding minerals, that does
not mean that it had no purpose. I suggest that divination was a device of
prevarication and dissimulation used by clever conjurors (those who understood
the “natural indications”) to keep their knowledge secret should brutish usurpers
attempt to compel the disclosure of their expert knowledge. Feigning special
diving sensitivity would be akin to Trithemius’ ruse of a text on demonology: a
cover story to allow those who did possess the secrets of the “natural indications”
to publicly disclose senseless misinformation while safely preserving their secret
knowledge.

In this light, the symbolism of the pendulum is even more profound when
considered as an implement of divination: it represents the keeping of secret
knowledge by the same means of dissimulation as practiced by all the alchemists
discussed in chapter 3. And as if to confirm this alchemical interpretation, the lion
that had lived in John Dee’s coat of arms is reincarnated in Ashmole’s coat of arms
for the Royal Society, in miniature—perhaps as a quiet wink and nod to Dee’s

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50 Agricola, De Re Metallica, 41.
51 It is important to note here that this skeptical perspective of dowsing does not address any other uses or
narratives about dowsing and should not be considered a general rebuttal of “authentic” dowsing.
Compare: Elizabeth Lloyd Mayer, Extraordinary Knowing: Science, Skepticism, and the Inexplicable
power and continuing influence over Pico’s loosely affiliated catalytic initiates.

**An Elite, Amorphous “Chameleonic Brotherhood” (Good ole Boys)**

Motivated by both fear and pragmatism, Greatrakes and his affiants participated in this amorphous proto-Masonic brotherhood. The revolution and Restoration had badly rent English society into a variety of polemicized factions. Greatrakes’ affiants followed the alchemical recipes and codes (detailed in preceding chapters) to cultivate their ability to “transcend conventional partisan politics” and move freely through a wide latitude of social circles. The larger English society still painfully suffered the ill effects of political whiplash, and the catalytically initiated chameleon brotherhood knew it; understandings of this type were part of their nature. The political function Charles II envisioned for the Royal Society was “in mending ideological bridges, uniting minds of diverse faction in the common cause of a single nation.” In short, it was designed as a receptacle for the trust that common people could no longer place in either the church or the state.

It was within a Petri dish of toleration (philosophical syncretism) that the spores of the Royal Society took root. A number of philosophical groups and secret clubs had preceded the Royal Society, like the Hartlib Circle, The Clubmen, the

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53 Ibid., 43.
Sealed Knot, the Green Ribbon Club, and the Rota Club. Although some of these specific groups, like the Hartlib Circle, have been considered the single direct predecessor to the Royal Society, none have been unquestionably proven to play this role. The rest of this chapter examines the Royal Society’s specifically alchemical roots without regard to which constellations of early members may have played the starring roles. One of the most intriguing hypotheses about the early Royal Society is the speculation we have already examined about Robert Boyle’s Invisible College. Boyle’s descriptions of his secret association include terms like “men of so capacious and searching spirits,” “ambitious to lead the way to any generous design,” “persons that endeavor to put narrow-mindedness out of countenance,” and “they are so apprehensive of the want of good employment, that they take the whole body of mankind for their care.” These characterizations are probably how the originators of the Royal Society and organized Freemasonry portrayed themselves: part of a larger coordinated mission for the benefit of society.

The Reciprocal Origins of Freemasonry

Even though Freemasons like to trace their genealogy back to the building of

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Solomon’s Temple, there are no primary texts about Freemasonry before 1717.

Because of the secrecy surrounding the initiation rites of both Freemasonry and the early craft guild initiations of gentlemen masons, the origin myths of Freemasonry are often confused with the facts of Freemasonry. Considering the pervasiveness of prevarication and equivocation employed by the philosophical ancestors of Freemasonry, it is imperative to critically evaluate several of the facts that have been accepted and repeated about the origins of Freemasonry.

This origin history is plagued by what Michael Barkun calls “stigmatized knowledge,” describing a type of truth claim based on “conspiratorial” stigmatization.\textsuperscript{57} In this case, information about the origins of Freemasonry is considered to have been suppressed by authoritative institutions “for fear of the consequences of public knowledge” or some other motive for “hiding the truth.”\textsuperscript{58} This results in presumptions of truth based on the fact of stigmatization alone. By this logic “stigmatization is employed as a virtual guarantee of truth.”\textsuperscript{59} In response:

The literature of stigmatized knowledge enthusiastically mimics mainstream scholarship. It does so by appropriating the apparatus of scholarship in the

\textsuperscript{57} Michael Barkun, A Culture of Conspiracy: Apocalyptic Visions in Contemporary America (Berkeley, California: University of California Press, 2003), 26–29.
\textsuperscript{58} Ibid., 27.
\textsuperscript{59} Ibid., 28.
form of elaborate citations and bibliographies. The most common manifestation of pedantry is a fondness for reciprocal citation, in which authors obligingly cite one another. The result is that the same sources are repeated over and over, which produces a kind of pseudoconfirmation. If a source is cited many times, it must be true. Because the claims made by conspiracy theorists are usually nonfalsifiable, the multiplication of sources may leave the impression of validation without actually putting any propositions to the test of evidence.60

This “pseudoconfirmation” effect is precisely what happens with the history of Freemasonry. Masonic authors will occasionally simply make something up and publish it, then subsequent Masonic historians cite that material as authoritative (and beyond reproach since it was printed by a trusted brother!) while no one bothers to go back and check the source. The remainder of this chapter is an endeavor to trace a couple of “facts” about Freemasonry back to their sources.

As historian Margaret Jacob aptly put it, the “details of the historical process by which, after 1650, a guild of workers evolved into a voluntary society of gentlemen are probably forever lost.”61 Given what we know about Robert Boyle’s

60 Ibid., 28–29.
redacted documents, it is also possible that some of these details were destroyed.

The most recent scholarly publication about Freemasonry and its origins is Henrik Bogdan and Jan Snoek’s massive edited volume *Handbook of Freemasonry*. It includes chapters from the most the noteworthy scholars dealing with Freemasonry’s history; however, today’s historians may rely on Masonic authors with insufficient skepticism. Based on the quantity and quality of evidence we have for alchemical prevarication, more careful attention must be paid to the earliest representations of Freemasonry.

Almost three hundred years of speculation about the origins and history of the fraternity have resulted in practically no consensus, and theories have ranged from ideas that Noah and his sons were the first Freemasons to Hitler’s conviction that the fraternity was a Jewish conspiracy. The first undisputed historical fact of the modern fraternity of Freemasonry is the formation of the Grand Lodge in England in 1717. Relatively few documents about Freemasonry created prior to 1717 have survived, if they ever existed. Shortly after 1717, texts written by Freemasons about Freemasonry began to appear and propagate both facts and

63 For Noah and his sons, see: J Scott, *The Free Masons Pocket Companion; Containing the Origin, Progress and Present State of That Antient Fraternity; the Institution of the Grand Lodges of Scotland; Lists of the Grand Masters and Other Officers of the Grand Lodges of Scotland and England; Their Customs, Charges, Constitution, Orders and Regulations* (Edinburgh: Printed by Ruddiman, Auld, and Co., 1761), 8–9; For some interesting background about Hitler’s obsession, see: Jacob, *The Origins of Freemasonry*, 7–8.
myths about the origin of the fraternity.

**Early Evidence—Before 1717**

This section is devoted to examining documents indicating the existence of the fraternity during Ggreatrakes’ time, particularly textual references occurring before the establishment of the Grand Lodge in 1717. The most common theory for the origin of Freemasonry is what Jan Snoek and Henrik Bogdan call the “Gould Thesis, first formulated by Robert Freke Gould and his friends around the time when they founded the first research lodge in the 1880s, the Quatuor Coronati Lodge No. 2076.” Gould and his friends were Freemasons and his thesis asserts that the Masonic fraternity developed slowly through the initiation of increasing numbers of gentleman masons in the Eighteenth century—an explanation that harmonizes “ancient origins” claims. Snoek and Bogdan believe that the evidence presented below proves that the fraternity is significantly older than the 1717 Grand Lodge. They suggest that gentlemen joined the fraternity to learn the secrets of speculation from the stonemasons. Their approach ignores the socio-historical context of secrecy, allegory, and social power; and it depends too much on unreliable Masonic sources that blur the very sharp line drawn in 1717 by the

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Whether the establishment of the grand lodge in 1717 marks a birth or a transition depends on whether Freemasonry had been a philosophical society or merely a powerful craft guild before that time. Shortly after 1717 the founders of the grand lodge, in the prevaricating, equivocating, and dissimulating tradition of their alchemical forefathers, launched a propaganda campaign to create the perception that the fraternity was ancient, a strategy that imputed credibility and even sacrality to their endeavor. Citing fictitious facts and imaginary documents, the early “historians” of the fraternity fabricated the image of an unbroken initiatory lineage that extended back to Pythagoras and beyond. Using broader brushstrokes and thicker paint than the mercurial historians of the Royal Society, the authors of Freemasonry’s history deceived an uncritical audience who seldom questioned the authority or scholarship of their trusted fraternal leaders.

The 1717 innovation of Freemasonry was built upon the strong symbiotic bonds of trust between the craft guild and the elite, a close relationship that had endured for many centuries. The power and secrecy of the craft guild was well known to all, so the process of transforming Masonry into a fraternity with an

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65 The Quatuor Coronati Lodge is the premier Masonic research institution today; however, requests from Rice’s Fondren Library to borrow or purchase their serial publication “Ars Quatour Coronatum” (AQC) were unsuccessful, as were attempts to acquire AQC articles through the interlibrary loan system. Fortunately, these materials are available in a Masonic library in Houston. For obvious reasons, AQC articles are not a significant part of this research (they are practically impossible for other scholars to obtain).
ancient legend was simple enough, especially since the target of the deception (the wealthy yet untitled middle class) largely lacked the historical skills necessary to critically evaluate the detailed factual assertions. And they probably didn’t know that the philosophical ancestors of their lineage regularly just made things up to prove their points.

Like Sprat’s first official account of the Royal Society that was discussed in detail in chapter 1, Freemasons sought early on to memorialize their history. *Anderson’s Constitutions*, published in 1723, is the first official history of Freemasonry, and it promotes the fraternity while proclaiming its ancient origins.66 James Anderson was an ordained dissenting minister of the Church of Scotland and a grand warden of the newly founded grand lodge who had published a Presbyterian apologetic sermon condemning the 1649 regicide in 1715.67 This apologetic sermon demonstrates the lasting impact the regicide had on England (written 65 years after the beheading) and gives us a clue about the role Masonry might have played during the Republic and Restoration. Participation in the craft guild required an oath of secrecy that may have been appropriated by Royalist


conspirators during the Republic to impress upon their underclass collaborators the life-threatening dangers of revealing their seditious secrets.\textsuperscript{68}

Anderson declares that the starting point of Freemasonry was the building of King Solomon’s temple. On its face, this narrative does not distinguish the craft guild from the fraternity and is based on exceedingly thin textual or historical evidence.\textsuperscript{69} Anderson claimed to have extracted his history “from the ancient RECORDS of Lodges,” a set of manuscripts also referred to as “The Old Charges.”\textsuperscript{70} Freemasons have ever since sought in vain to procure some of these source manuscripts.\textsuperscript{71}

**Manuscripts Hastily Burned**

We might surmise that the missing manuscripts generated controversy since Anderson’s 1738 revised and expanded edition of *Constitutions* includes a curious note explaining the missing manuscripts:\textsuperscript{72} “This Year [1720], at some private Lodges, several very valuable Manuscripts (for they had nothing yet in Print)

\begin{footnotes}
\footnote{68}{This might explain Ashmole’s claim of initiation in 1646 and his singular lodge visit thereafter. Special “Masonic” lodges were created to swear members to secrecy for specific important matters that were never revealed to outsiders. About Royalist conspiracy see generally: Underdown, *Royalist Conspiracy in England, 1649-1660*.}
\footnote{69}{It is possible when Anderson describes the Temple he is actually referring to Francis Bacon’s Solomonic vision of utopia.}
\footnote{70}{Anderson, *The Constitutions of the Free-Masons* (1723), 49.}
\end{footnotes}
concerning the Fraternity, their Lodges, Regulations, Charges, Secrets, and Usages (particularly one writ by Mr. Nicholas Stone the Warden of Inigo Jones) were too hastily burnt by some scrupulous Brothers; that those Papers might not fall into strange Hands.”

One obvious question is why, if the manuscripts were “hastily burnt” in 1720, Anderson does not mention that fact in his first edition in 1723? Perhaps he expected his less demanding readers simply to take his word for it? We should also consider the very real possibility that those manuscripts never existed. A more definitive opinion about the missing manuscripts is beyond the scope of this project, but this discrepancy between the two editions is important to consider when evaluating any of Anderson’s other claims about the history of Freemasonry. From 1723 on, a wide variety of propositions about the history and origin of Freemasonry were written and published, most by Freemasons. Some of these were well documented, and in accord with Barkun’s notion of stigmatized knowledge and the mimicry of mainstream scholarship, almost all faithfully repeated some part of Anderson’s speculations into the past.

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75 Some were concise, like Thomas Paine’s posthumously published work in which he concluded that Masonry was a cover for and continuation of the Druid religion Thomas Paine, *An Essay on the Origin of Free Masonry*. (London: R. Carlile, 1826); Others were far more sweeping, like Emmanuel Rebold’s lengthier but no less creative history Emmanuel Rebold, *A General History of Free-Masonry in Europe,*
The present inquiry considers whether Freemasonry played a role during
Greatrakes’ time, a proposition difficult to evaluate because primary sources
documenting Freemasonry before 1717 are scant. There are two types of primary
documents to consider: 1) those manuscripts Anderson cites that have been found
and preserved or published by the fraternity, and 2) incidental references in texts
not specifically commenting on Freemasonry’s history but whose context provides
some light. A search for Anderson’s sources is far from futile. All sorts of
documents have been produced that fit the bill; however, a journal article published
in 1924 is likely the first “scientific” attempt to evaluate the authenticity of these
early manuscripts. A disappointed Masonic author, Herbert Poole, found only
four manuscripts he could date prior to 1717, and he was content to leave
Anderson’s accounting for the missing manuscripts unquestioned. Only three of
Poole’s four might have been created early enough to pre-date Greatrakes: “Grand
Lodge MS. No. 2-mid-seventeenth century; Buchanan MS.-second half,
seventeenth century; and the Harris MS. No. 1-second half, seventeenth century.”

———. Based upon the Ancient Documents Relating To, and the Monuments Erected by This Fraternity from Its
Foundation in the Year 715 B. C. to the Present Time., trans. J. Fletcher Brennan (Cincinnati: American
Masonic Publishing Association, 1868).
76 The term “scientific” is the one used by Herbert Poole. The attendant connotations of truth and
trustworthiness are deeply ingrained cultural conventions that many not necessarily be warranted in this
case. Herbert Poole, “Masonic Ritual and Secrets Before 1717,” ed. W. J. Songhurst, Ars Quatuor
Coronatorum 37 (1924): 4–43.
77 Ibid., 4.
78 Ibid., 5.
Remaining Manuscripts

Sadly, Poole does not share his criteria for making the determination that these manuscripts should be dated in the seventeenth century and not later. In a comment characteristic of Masonic authors, Poole privileges those documents that he believes have always remained in the hands of the fraternity, suggesting that others “may have been wholly or in part invention.” Poole’s critical analysis is based solely on the language of texts themselves, comparing various versions of the manuscripts and attempting to discern which ones may have preceded the others. He does not subject them other dating techniques, or critically evaluate the chain of custody.

Writing a couple of decades later, Douglas Knoop and G.P. Jones expanded on Poole’s scope and depth in *Early Masonic Catechisms*. They make no claims that any of the documents can be dated earlier than 1696. Knoop and Jones do present transcriptions of five manuscripts that precede the founding of the grand lodge, and we might take these as some evidence that the fraternity was active at this time—though it is also possible that the documents refer only to the craft guild

79 Ibid., 8. If the Baconian hypothesis is accurate, the opposite may be true.
or were merely fabricated as evidence and pre-dated. For the most part, the Masonic catechisms and the Old Charges are held within the cloistered domain of the fraternity itself and do little to signify the actual nature of the fraternity or why gentlemen might have wished to join it. So the search for an origin of Freemasonry might be better informed by the public reception of the term “Mason” as it appears in literature: laden with meaning extending beyond the guild of building builders. A number of instances of the word “Mason” do occur in work published well before the establishment of the grand lodge in 1717, although the terms “Freemason” and “Free-Mason” are seldom used.

The Mason Word (1638 & 1653)

The phrase “Mason Word” refers to a password by which initiates might distinguish one another, and it appears several times in literature published well before 1717. The first printed use of the term “Mason Word” occurs in 1638 in a Scottish threnody composed by Henry Adamson (bap. 1581, d. 1637). Adamson wrote his posthumously published book of poetry to commemorate the death of

81 These are the Edinburgh Register House MS., 1696; the Chetwode Crawley MS., c. 1700; the Sloane MS. 3329, c. 1700; the Dumfries No. 4 MS., c. 1710; and the Trinity Collete, Dublin, MS., 1711 ibid., vii, 3.
John Gall, a Perth merchant who was likely a Protestant reformer.\textsuperscript{83} This text, \textit{The Muses Threnodie}, is considered important by a number of scholars dealing with Freemasonry. David Stevenson’s \textit{Origins of Freemasonry} is one of the most thorough scholarly investigations into early Freemasonry. He rightly considers the poem “stupendously tedious.”\textsuperscript{84}

\begin{verbatim}
1 Thus \textit{Gals} sweet words often do me comfort,
2 And my good \textit{Genius} truely doth report
3 Them unto me, else sure my splene should wholly
4 Be overcome with fits of melancholie;
5 Therefore I courage take, and hope to see
6 A bridge yet built, although aged I be,
7 More stately, firme, more sumptuous, and more fair,
8 Then any former age could yet compare;
9 Thus \textit{Gall} assured me it would be so,
10 And my good Genius truely doth it know:
11 For what we do presage is not in grosse,
12 \textbf{For we be bretheren of the Rosie Crosse;}
13 \textbf{We have the Mason word, and second sight,}
14 Things for to come we can foretell aright;
15 And shall we know what mysterie we meane,
16 In fair acrosticks CAROLUS REX, is seene
17 Describ’d upon that bridge, in perfect gold:
18 By skillfull art; this cleerelie we behold,
19 With all the Scutcheon of great Britaines King,
20 Which unto Perth most joyfull news shall bring,
21 Loath would we be this mysterie to unfold
\end{verbatim}


\textsuperscript{84} David Stevenson, \textit{The Origins of Freemasonry: Scotland’s Century, 1590 to 1710} (Cambridge University Press, 1990), 126. Stevenson chooses to excerpt a more abbreviated selection from “The Muses Threnodie,” stopping at “aright” even though the sentence does not actually end for another eight lines. We might consider the idea that the poem is “stupendously tedious” because it contains a ciphered acrostic and was intended to convey a coded message rather than to present an elegant eulogy.
But for King Charles his honour we are bold.\textsuperscript{85}

What is important about \textit{The Muses Threnodie} is that it contains the first printed indication that Masonry is more than a craft guild building buildings; and considering the allusions to second sight, foretelling, presaging, and mystery, along with the acrostic, it is rich in significance relevant to a secret fraternity. The reference to the “bretheren of the Rosie Crosse” is, of course, connected to the Rosicrucian texts that had been circulating for a few decades before the \textit{Threnody} was written. Yates tells us that Ashmole had been an enthusiast of the Rosicrucian texts, copying an English translation himself and penning a Latin address to the invisible brothers asking to join them, though Yates does not believe that he was making the request of “any real contemporary group.”\textsuperscript{86} Although the dates of Ashmole’s transcriptions are not given, they are bound in a folio of manuscripts dating as early as 1648 and as late as 1655, placing them after Ashmole’s 1646 claim of Masonic initiation and close to his alchemical adoption by Backhouse.\textsuperscript{87}

We do not know precisely when Adamson wrote \textit{The Muses Threnodie}, but it was after James’ Five Articles of Perth had imposed very unpopular English

\textsuperscript{85} Bold emphasis added. Adamson, \textit{The Muses Threnodie}, 32.
\textsuperscript{86} Yates, \textit{The Rosicrucian Enlightenment}, 249 n.4, 267.
religious standards on Scottish Protestants in 1618. Almost a full two decades later, in 1636, some Scots were still bitterly recalling the martyrdom of the early Protestant reformers and complaining of the forced return to “poperie” and “tyrannicall oligarchie.” Stevenson, who does not consider Adamson’s use of the “Mason word” to signal common usage of the phrase, discusses how the term was used in 1637 in court records as an accusation of sorts: “and said he had the Masone word among the nobilitie.” This connotation of the Mason Word implies secret collusion and supports the proposition that special “lodges” were occasionally formed to bind specific groups to specific secrets.

Marsha Keith Schuchard also devotes a good deal of attention to The Muses Threnodie. In Restoring the Temple of Vision, she suggests that Adamson includes a number of other references that signify the Masonic fraternity, including Euclid, David’s Temple, and geometers. In Western Esotericism and Rituals of Initiation, Henrik Bogdan makes use of the Muses Threnodie passage to link Freemasonry with alchemy, a link that is a foundational proposition of this thesis and is the

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88 David Calderwood, A Re-Examination of the Five Articles Enacted at Perth Anno 1618 To Wit. Concerning The Communicants Gesture in the Act of Receiving. The Observation of Festivall Dayes. Episcopall Confirmation or Bishopping. The Administration of Baptisme And The Supper or the Lord in Privat Places (Anon, 1636), A.
90 Schuchard, Restoring the Temple of Vision, 111.
essence of the chapter “Alchemical Chameleons.” However, this link does not prove the existence of Freemasonry when Adamson wrote The Muses Threnodie since the references might just as easily be explained as Adamson’s speculations about the Rosicrucian texts.

Stevenson tells us that the next printed use of “Mason Word” is found in Thomas Urquhart’s satirical construction of a universal language, an allegory for a utopian attempt to deconstruct the confusion of biblical Babel and reconstruct a tolerant religious world. The context for the specific passage is an attack on educated people who dupe the uneducated by attributing supernatural causes to events they know have a natural source. Urquhart describes how educated men, who “wear gowns and beards longer then [sic] ever did Aristotle,” would “delude the commons” by attributing an eclipse to God rather than to its well-understood physical causes. In this context Urquhart gives the Mason Word some meaning:

I saw once a young man, who for his cunning conveyance in the Feats of

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93 The tension between educated and uneducated is thoroughly examined in the previous chapter “Education, Secrecy and the Social Order.”

Leger Demaine, was branded, by some of that Fry, for Sorcery, and another (for being able, by vertue of the Masson word, to make a Masson, whom he had never seene before, without speaking, or any other apparent signe, come, and salute him) reputed, by many of the same Litter, to have had a familiar, their grosse ignorance moving them, to call that supernaturall, or above the naturall reach of meere man, whereof they knew not the cause.  

Urquhart compares the commoners’ reception of Masons to sleight-of-hand magicians taken for sorcerers. In discounting the supernatural claims made about Masons, Urquhart implies that he knows more than he shares, as the phrase “without . . . apparent signe” suggests Urquhart is aware that the Mason is using some physical signal that uninitiated observers simply don’t see.

We see a similar secretive recognition behind the term “Masons Word” in a 1672 satirical treatment of affairs of state by Andrew Marvell. *The Rehearsal Transpros’d* is a detailed attack on an extremist text promoting state-compelled religion. In a passage satirizing the palpable divisiveness between two factions, those favoring and opposing forced religion, Marvell writes: “as those that have the Masons Word, secretly discern one another; so in the peeling or cutting but of an

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95 Ibid., Book 1, 9.
Onion, a Guelp[h] and vice versa would have at first sight distinguished a Ghibiline.”  

Only six years before writing this, while serving as a member of parliament, Marvell was a witness to Ggreatrakes’ cures. Marvell’s reference to the “Masons Word” is good evidence that secret collusion happened in some form during the time of the Ggreatrakes affair. Note that the Mason Word was used to distinguish friend from foe and the term was well-known enough for Marvell to expect his audience to understand the implication.

The First Recorded Initiations: Moray and Ashmole

Although these explicit contemporary references are not sufficient to prove the active operation of a secret fraternity during Ggreatrakes’ time, they are enough evidence to justify a more thorough investigation into the possibility that some of the Ggreatrakes’ affiants knew about or participated in a secret Masonic or proto-Masonic network. The evidence most commonly cited by Freemasons supporting the existence of the fraternity during the period before the civil wars relates to two men who later became founding members of the Royal Society, Elias Ashmole and Robert Moray.

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98 Elmer, The Miraculous Conformist, 96.
**Robert Moray (1641)**

Lodge records first made public in 1804 claim to indicate that Robert Moray, Fellow of the Royal Society, became a gentleman mason in 1641. If these records are authentic, this is the earliest documented instance of a gentleman mason. The claim is first made in *The History of Freemasonry, Drawn from Authentic Sources of Information*, a title that alone might arouse suspicion in skeptical readers, given the prominence of its allegedly “authentic sources” and combined with some of the ideas about prevarication dissimulation we have examined thus far. The “authentic sources” presented are the “minutes of St. Mary’s chapel, which is the oldest lodge in Edinburgh” and they are offered to rebut the assertion by Dr. Robinson that gentlemen admitted to the fraternity before 1717 were all architects. According to these minutes, “Robert Moray, Quartermaster-General to the army in Scotland, was created a master mason in 1641.”

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99 Robert Moray’s initiation as a Freemason is mentioned as early as 1804, but the title of the book in which it occurs does not write that he had seen this document himself. The earliest document in the appendix of this book dates back to 1700, and is a charter of an early lodge. It does not contain lodge records. David Brewster and Alexander Lawrie, *The History of Freemasonry, Drawn from Authentic Sources of Information; with an Account of the Grand Lodge of Scotland from Its Institution in 1736, to the Present Time, Compiled from the Records; and an Appendix of Original Papers*. (London: Longman and Rees, 1804), 102; A facsimile of the lodge record and transcription is in: David Murray Lyon, *History of the Lodge of Edinburgh (Mary’s Chapel) No. 1. Embracing an Account of the Rise and Progress of Freemasonry in Scotland* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood and Sons, 1873), 80.


101 Ibid.
Keeping Anderson’s allegedly burned manuscripts in mind, it is curious that this seemingly valuable factoid (the initiation of a prominent member of the Royal Society) surfaces a mere 165 years after the event and some eighty years after the first official history of Freemasonry was published. It is certainly possible that the author, Alex. Lawrie, was simply placing his feet directly into the footsteps of his predecessors, adding spurious facts that he knew his fraternal readers would never confirm while managing to sell into an increasingly lucrative market for Masonic literature and contributing to the growing canon of “reciprocal” Masonic history. It was barely two hundred and thirty years after the initiation was said to have occurred and the original record was reportedly created (in 1873) that David Lyon published a facsimile of the minutes as part of his History of the Lodge of Edinburgh. All of the handwriting in Lyon’s numerous exemplar facsimiles, covering a span from 1598 to 1770, is eerily similar, even those of reproductions appearing to be on age-damaged parchments.

If the facsimiles are all written by the same hand, their contents were likely fabricated and those relating to Moray created simply to strengthen Lawrie’s earlier assertion. I have yet to find an example of a modern scholar who

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102 See the section “Manuscripts Hastily Burned” above.
104 Lyon, History of the Lodge of Edinburgh, 9, 224.
105 Suspiciously consistent characteristics include letter height, the length of strokes above and below the
discusses Moray’s Scottish initiation who does not rely on Lawrie and Lyon to make the case.\textsuperscript{106} This supposition does not mean that there is no evidence supporting Moray’s connection with Masonry. In 1913 Alexander Robertson wrote a biography about Moray for his Bachelor’s thesis that was posthumously published in 1922. He reports a Dutch archive that states Moray was presented to Maastricht civic authorities in March of 1659 as a member of the Masonic craft guild and “took under this craft the necessary oath, and the right of citizenship was granted him, according to custom.”\textsuperscript{107} Robertson also claims the Royal Society holds archives declaring that Moray wrote a history of Masonry; but considering that the purported history did not survive, this account is also dubious.\textsuperscript{108} We know that Moray included a pentagram in his signature and considered it his average letter height, the slant of the script, the humps of the m’s and n’s, and the lack of an upstroke hook from the downstroke. Even the pen seems to have the same character throughout the exemplars. I have only an amateur interest in graphoanalysis, but these characteristics are apparent even to a non-expert.\textsuperscript{106} Appendix 1 includes the details of these citations while Appendix 4 contains images comparing an authentic Moray signature with the one reproduced by Lyon and the details that indicate forgery.\textsuperscript{107} Alexander Robertson, \textit{The Life of Sir Robert Moray, Soldier, Statesman and Man of Science, 1608-1673} (London: Longmans, Green & Co., 1922), 1; David Stevenson, “Masonry, Symbolism and Ethics in the Life of Sir Robert Moray, FRS,” \textit{Proceedings of the Society of Antiquaries of Scotland} (1855) 114 (1984): 419.\textsuperscript{108} Robertson cites the Royal Society archives as proof of Moray’s intention to write this history. It is interesting that Robertson cites a 1702 edition of Sprat’s History to prove Moray was a Freemason, but alas, I could not find this second edition (it is listed in Worldcat - but with no libraries holding it) and such assertions are not in the first or fourth editions. Robertson, \textit{The Life of Sir Robert Moray}, 163, 164, 185; Moray’s intentions to write a history of Masonry are confirmed by what seems to be a presentation of the society’s minuets for March 14 and August 15, 1666. Birch, \textit{The History of the Royal Society}, 2:67, 109. Given the Royal Society’s penchant for preserving important documents, the fact that no history of Masonry by Moray has survived is significant.
“Mason’s mark.” 109 Lyon leverages on this well-accepted fact when he publishes the facsimile of Moray’s pentagram signature, but unfortunately Lyon’s reproduction appears to be a forgery. 110

Given the dubious circumstances, it is not safe to conclude that Moray was initiated as a Mason based on the evidence asserted by Lowrie and Lyon, nor must we consider the minutes of St. Mary’s chapel necessarily probative of the existence of initiated gentlemen Masons or speculative lodges in England during Greatrakes’ ministrations. A more conservative interpretation of Moray’s Masonic connection is that he acted as a member of the guild while in the Netherlands or that he may have joined a special lodge formed to keep a specific secret. 111 Clearly Moray was well acquainted with Masonry and even used a pentacle as his “mason mark” to signify places he wrote in invisible ink, but this “mark” does not necessarily indicate Moray’s actual initiation in the fraternity since, according to Stevenson, Moray used the pentacle well before his Scottish Masonic “initiation.” 112

110 Lyon’s facsimile and an authentic signature from archives are presented in Appendix 4 along with the detailed differences that indicate forgery.
111 More research (including a look at the original archive) is required to discern what this reference actually indicates.
Elias Ashmole (16 Oct. 1646)

In contrast to the sketchy documents supporting Moray’s initiation, Elias Ashmole’s personal memoirs mention his initiation very specifically. Josten’s 1966 five-volume account is the best scholarly treatment of Ashmole’s life to date.\(^{113}\) The source documents that Josten transcribes are, for the most part, manuscripts in Ashmole’s own hand, bequeathed by Ashmole to Oxford and catalogued in 1875 by William Black. Unlike the minutes of St. Mary’s, these remain available for critical review.\(^{114}\)

Josten’s scholarly portrayal of Ashmole’s Masonic affiliation is seems clearly unfettered by any interest in promoting the fraternity or selling books. If the records Josten describes are authentic, their interpretation should be absolutely clear. In a note dated “16 Oct. 1646,” Ashmole writes: “4H. 30’ P.M. I was made a Free Mason at Warrington in Lancashire, with Coll: Henry Mainwaring of Karinham in Cheshire.”\(^{115}\) From this moment until 1682 (36 years later), Ashmole makes no surviving written reference to his Masonic affiliation, a fact that does not bother Josten in the least because the notes were not a diary but rather “a loose chronological arrangement of autobiographical notes which Ashmole began to

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\(^{113}\) Ashmole and Josten, *Elias Ashmole*.

\(^{114}\) Bodleian Library and Black, *A Descriptive, Analytical, and Critical Catalogue of the Manuscripts Bequeathed unto the University of Oxford by Elias Ashmole* Compare this with Appendix 1 - Robert Moray’s Initiation as a Freemason. If the minutes of St. Mary’s are available, it is astonishing that none of the scholars mentioned in this appendix have consulted them directly.

write in 1678 at the age of sixty-one.”\textsuperscript{116}

We might wonder how it was possible for Ashmole to remember in 1678 the precise time and date of an event some thirty-two years earlier. In \textit{The Origin of Freemasonry: The 1717 Theory Exploded}, Chalmers Izett Patton labors to rebut the idea that Ashmole was actually part of a group who fabricated Freemasonry’s “ancient” origins.\textsuperscript{117} Patton’s sixty-page rebuttal is largely aimed at the 1866 English translation of Joseph Findel’s \textit{History of Freemasonry} originally published in German.\textsuperscript{118} Findel scathingly attacks the early historians of Freemasonry on many fronts. For example, Findel bristles at Anderson’s “unauthenticated and scarcely credible statement that king Henry himself (1442) was initiated into Masonry.”\textsuperscript{119} Findel also exposes other manuscript-grounded claims to be based on “dust and nothing but dust.”\textsuperscript{120}

Although Findel meticulously details a host of other factual inconsistencies presented by Anderson and the cadre of Freemasonry’s early historians, perplexingly he does absolutely nothing to confirm or deny the documents memorializing Moray or Ashmole’s initiations. Since Findel was a member of

\begin{footnotes}
\item[116] It is a goal of mine to examine the original document for evidence of forgery. Ibid., 4, 34.
\item[119] Findel, \textit{History of Freemasonry, from Its Rise down to the Present Day}, 106.
\item[120] Ibid., 109.
\end{footnotes}
lodges in Germany, France, and Italy,¹²¹ it is possible that he discreetly chose to leave those assertions—assertions that had become so integral a part of Masonic lore—for others to examine because negating them might wreak serious havoc on the fraternity. Findel does provide us hints. He impugns Lawrie’s claim that Moray joined a lodge that met annually by noting that “there were but comparatively few masons who could bear the expence of such a journey once a year.”¹²² And he says that Ashmole’s thirty-six-year absence from the fraternity indicated that he “did not there [in Freemasonry] find, what he most likely sought, an occult science.”¹²³ Findel’s attacks were clearly corrosive enough to provoke Patton’s rambling, disorganized and largely unsubstantiated ranting refutation.

Despite the suspicious nature of the documents used to prove the origin of Freemasonry, one thing is certain: both Elias Ashmole and Robert Moray knew something about Masonry, whether they were initiated into it or had initiated something of it themselves. As much as possible, I have consulted primary sources accessible today. As we have discovered, the primary sources are not always what they seem, and when placed within context, they often directly controvert their prima facie meaning. For example, centuries of Masonic scholars have wrongly interpreted Ashmole’s notes as contemporaneous diary entries, a conclusion that

¹²¹ Ibid., Title page.
¹²² Ibid., 113.
¹²³ Ibid., 120.
Josten tells us is false. Rather, Josten tells us that Ashmole’s pre-dated notes were the fodder for a pending autobiography.\textsuperscript{124} This conclusion comports with credible reports about the previous condition of Ashmole’s notes. William Black compiled a 1500-page catalogue of the Ashmole archives in 1845; and with regard to the folio containing the reference to Ashmole’s initiation, he says that they “consist of MSS. and papers collected into portfolios covered with parchment; within which they formerly lay loose, but are now bound and fixed” and that they had been collected and printed in 1717 and again in 1774.\textsuperscript{125} We will not be immediately suspicious of the 1717 coincidence, especially since Anderson does not mention Ashmole in his 1723 edition. Anderson does make use of the “diary” in the 1738 edition of \textit{The Constitutions};\textsuperscript{126} however, the 1717 fabrication hypothesis benefits significantly from this coincidence. After 1744, authors may have reasonably relied upon the listing for Elias Ashmole in \textit{Biographia Britannica} that includes the mistaken characterization of the note as a diary account.\textsuperscript{127}

\textsuperscript{124} Ashmole and Josten, \textit{Elias Ashmole}, 4.
\textsuperscript{125} Bodleian Library and Black, \textit{A Descriptive, Analytical, and Critical Catalogue of the Manuscripts Bequeathed unto the University of Oxford by Elias Ashmole}, 970. In other entries Black notes when manuscripts can be attributed to other hands; here he is silent.
\textsuperscript{126} Anderson, \textit{The New Book of Constitutions} (1738), 105; Anderson, \textit{The Constitutions of the Free-Masons} (1723).
\textsuperscript{127} \textit{Biographia Britannica : Or, The Lives of the Most Eminent Persons Who Have Flourished in Great Britain and Ireland, from the Earliest Ages, down to the Present Times} (London: Printed for W. Innys et al., 1747), vol 1, 224.
Secrets and Trust

Given the nature of the evidence we have, arguments about the origins of Freemasonry before 1717 are necessarily speculative. This uncertainty may be another reason to consider the fraternity a “speculative” endeavor and the craft guild “operative” in contrast. We can be quite certain that some aspects of Masonry (the guild) were popularly (or vulgarly) known prior to Greatrakes’ brief fame, like secret recognition and the Mason Word; but what are we to make of them and how do they fit within the historiography of the Enlightenment? Several threads intertwine to create a reasonable line of speculation to address this question: 1) the clearly established bonds of trust between the Masonic craft guild and the nobility, 2) the dangerous economic (and occasionally lethal) circumstances of political polemics and the consequent need for secrecy, and 3) the fearsome power of the Masonic oath for preserving secrecy.

The Bloody Oath

By 1730 the ritual oath of organized Freemasonry had been committed to writing. Samuel Prichard relates the emphasis on secrecy and describes the details of the blood oath:

I Hereby solemnly Vow and Swear in the Presence of Almighty God and
this Right Worshipful Assembly, that I will Hail and Conceal, and never
Reveal the Secrets or Secrecy of Masons or Masonry, that shall be Revealed
unto me; unless to a True and Lawful Brother, after due Examination, or in a
Just and Worshipful Lodge of Brothers and Fellows well met.

I furthermore Promise and Vow, that I will not Write them, Print
them, Mark them, Carve them or Engrave them, or cause them to be Written,
Printed, Marked, Carved or Engraved on Wood or Stone, so as the Visible
Character or Impression of a Letter may appear, whereby it may be
unlawfully obtain’d.

All this under no less Penalty than to have my Throat cut, my Tongue
taken from the Roof of my Mouth, my Heart pluck’d from under my Left
Breast, them to be buried in the Sands of the Seas, the Length of a Cable-
rope from Shore, where the Tide ebbs and flows twice in 24 Hours, my
Body to be burnt to Ashes, my Ashes to be scatter’d upon the Face of the
Earth, so that there shall be no more Remembrance of me among Masons.¹²⁸

Ashmole and Moray might well have participated in rituals with similar oaths in
order to conceal specific secrets since this blood oath, incorporated into the
initiation ritual, served as a means to bind men together in confidence. When

¹²⁸ Prichard, *Masonry Dissected*, 8 Although it is likely that the imprecations of the oath were purely
rhetorical and dramatic, see the following section about Greatrakes’ good friend Edmund Godfrey.
administered solemnly, such an oath would give an affiant considerable pause before violating it. The nobility participated in their own reliable trust networks, like the Order of the Garter that Ashmole documented as Windsor Herald. But they needed to be able to establish dependable lines of confidential communication with members of their underclass who were necessary to implementing seditious strategies but who lacked the ties of trust that bound the elite. For this reason Masonry was widely known: special “lodges” were occasionally formed in specific circumstances to protect secrets by administering “the oath” to common folk that the elite wanted to impress for unique tasks.

The “Masonic” Death of Edmund Godfrey (1621–1678)

Edmund Godfrey became one of Greatrakes’ “leading patrons in London” during the 1666 sensationalism that surrounded the healer. In 1678 Godfrey was found with his own sword piercing his left breast, sticking “7 or 8 inches out of the right side of his back.” The coincidence of the mortal wound (left breast) with the imprecation of the Masonic oath above “heart pluck’d from under my Left Breast” may not be significant. But evidence that Godfrey was actually first strangled with

a “cord or cloth” about his neck and found “hoodwinked” with his coat “up over his head” reverberates with the tones and details of Masonic initiation ritual documented in the 1760s.\footnote{Ibid.} An anonymous author wrote out (probably in violation of some oath he had given) a series of questions and answers that were part of the ritual. In response to the question “How was [sic] you prepared?,” the answer was “I was neither naked, nor clothed, bare-foot, nor shod; deprived of all Metal; hood-winked, with a Cable Tow about my Neck.”\footnote{R S, \textit{Jachin and Boaz: Or, an Authentic Key to the Door of Free-Masonry, . . . Calculated Not Only for the Instruction of Every New-Made Mason; but Also for the Information of All Who Intend to Become Brethren.}, A new edition, greatly enlarged and improved. (London: W. Nicoli, 1790), 11.}

The actual cause of Godfrey’s death—whether he fell upon his own sword, was run though by someone else, or was strangled—was never definitively determined. Questions and rumors circulated for many years after three men were hanged for Godfrey’s murder.\footnote{Interestingly: “Three men had been hanged in London for the murder of Sir Edmundbury [sic] Godfrey at Greenberry Hill: the names of the murderers were Green, Berry and Hill.” John F Michell and Robert J. M Rickard, \textit{The Rough Guide to Unexplained Phenomena} (London: Rough Guides, 2006) 243; See also: Roger L’Estrange Sir, \textit{A Brief History of the Times, &c. in a Preface to the Third Volume of Observators}, Early English Books, 1641-1700/153:06 (London: Printed for Charles Brome, 1687), 2:28–30 (document image 115).} But if speculation is to rule the day, as in some circumstances it must, it is possible that Godfrey’s death, with the hoodwink, opened left breast, and cable around the neck implicated a Masonic message or, more ominously, a warning of what might happen to people who violated the sanctity of a Masonic oath.
The Royal Society’s Influence on Freemasonry

Trust was the essential element of the Masonic network, especially important amidst the turbulent political and economic climate that prevailed during the transition from the Renaissance to the Enlightenment.\(^{135}\) There is reasonable evidence, Marsha Keith Schuchard argues, that an extended clandestine trust community (far beyond the Sealed Knot) played a significant role on the Royalist side of the English revolution and helped to bring about the Restoration.\(^{136}\) This conspiracy is convincingly confirmed by Underdown.\(^{137}\) Those outside this conspiratorial network, if they knew it existed, must have had their doubts about the secretive motives of any Masonic or proto-Masonic association. If the network had played a significant role in creating the Restoration as Keith suggests, the restored monarch would have been much indebted to it.

The Restoration introduced a new type of monarchy, one with less power and authority than before. The full extent of the restored king’s actual authority was unclear at the start of the Restoration, and his budget was extremely limited.

By chartering the Royal Society, Charles II rewarded an elitist association and

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\(^{135}\) See: Shapin, *A Social History of Truth*. Here Shapin takes a hard look at the role of trust in the social order from the perspective of knowledge and truth claims.


\(^{137}\) Underdown, *Royalist Conspiracy in England, 1649-1660*. 
some of his more loyal supporters with a form of immortality by incorporating their philosophical aims. The founders of the Royal Society were catalytic initiates who understood the fluid and mercurial nature of influence. Their goal was to arrogate social power to themselves. Because the membership records of the Royal Society are public knowledge, establishing a connection between it and organized Freemasonry merely requires an accurate list of Freemasons and cross-referencing the lists. J. R. Clark addresses this task in his brief article: “The Royal Society and Early Grand Lodge Freemasonry” in which he states “that nearly all the noble Grand Masters during the first fifty years of the existence of Grand Lodge were Fellows of the Royal Society, and that their Deputies during the first ten years had the same honour.” If this portrayal is an accurate one of the leadership of early organized Freemasonry (a reconciliation between online lists published by the Royal Society and the United Grand Lodges of England suggests that it is), then it is safe to suggest that the Masonic fraternity was clearly formed and operated under the dominating influence of the Royal Society.

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138 Not all of the members of the early Royal Society were necessarily Royalists - this is part of the reason for the conflicting version of the history of the Royal Society.
140 More research needs to be done to fully appreciate the meaning of this association. The first two “Grand Masters” were not members of the Royal Society, but a long string thereafter were. “List of Grand Masters of the United Grand Lodge of England at Masonic-Lodge.info - UGLE - 109G,” accessed February 6, 2015, http://www.masonic-lodge.info/MLI/mli109g.htm; “Fellows | Royal Society,” accessed February 8, 2015, https://royalsociety.org/about-us/fellowship/fellows/.
CONCLUSIONS

This dissertation relates three basic theoretical ideas.

First, I have argued that one aspect of alchemy involves an unspoken lineage of privilege comprised of elites who were initiated in degrees of practical antidogmatic understanding that perpetuated their place in the social order.

Second, I have argued that these “initiated” elites considered chrysopoeia and divination as a ruse and used these concepts symbolically as linguistic contrivances and alchemical prevarications to write self-reflexively and create multivalent texts;

And third, I have argued that an important secret zealously protected under the veil of alchemical allegory was the elite’s perpetual exploitation of the underclass. These interrelated themes reveal how the miraculous Greatrakes narratives have been practically excluded from the history of medicine, an error that should be redressed.

The preceding chapters relate two kinds of secrets: 1) philosophical secrets relating to social privilege and 2) practical secrets of sedition. “Alchemical chameleons,” like Pico Della Mirandola, Cornelius Agrippa, and John Dee, soaring within the clouds of social rank, used allegory, prevarication, and linguistic contrivance to communicate philosophical ideas of privilege to a “priesthood of philosophy.” These “catalytic” initiates understood the ancient secret—how
religious and cultural constructs of privilege permitted the “gentle class” to exploit the lives of their underclass peacefully. The residue of their prevarications becomes visible in the light of their alchemical philosophical lineage and political objectives (maintaining their wealth and status).

The problem of alchemy that plagued elite philosophers and caused them to reject or disdain “alchemists” was a matter of misinterpretation and appropriation. Great thinkers like Agricola, who knew the philosophers’ stone to be useless for chrysopoeia (transmuting base metals into gold), cringed at the idea of common charlatans selling recipes for it. Their issue was that the alchemical allegory system devised to protect real secrets of the elite (like instructions for creating imitation pearls and emeralds or heretical elitist self-reflection) was usurped by commons to connive innocents—that was the domain of the elite. Within the confines of an understanding elite, and through a hermeneutic of privilege, noble philosophers reflected on their nobility as if they were entitled gods. And in terms of power and privilege, they might just as well have been gods—except, perhaps, for their constant fear of losing “divine” status and being submerged into the underclass, a fear somewhat exacerbated by Charles I’s gruesome fate.

The Royal Society was devised as a sort of a seat-belt to protect the elite class from the often violent religious and political whiplash that occurred with the frequent traumatic political collisions of the times, like the regicide. These royal
alchemists crafted their institution to protect their slice of the social order from the whims of egocentric monarchs, greedy courtiers, and charismatic church leaders by creating in their own syncretic image a trusted institution to arbitrate truth claims. It was an attempt to chart a middle path that would permit more harmonious regime transitions when the time came. Without directly attacking anything or anyone, Greaterakes and the dozen members of the Royal Society who supported him presented his narratives as compelling evidence of what, if believed, must have looked very much like miracles even if the word “miracles” was never used.

**History of Medicine**

Peter Elmer tells us that Greaterakes “represented one of a number of challenges to orthodox medicine that was welcomed by many who were becoming increasingly disaffected with the costly and ineffectual treatments advocated by the purveyors of traditional Galenic therapies.”¹ Greatekrakes’ “miraculous” effects served to disprove the Church of England’s doctrine that miracles had ceased and simultaneously reduced the royal mystique of the king’s touch. Harold Weber in *Paper Bullets: Print and Kingship Under Charles II* discusses the demise of “touching for the evil” that was brought about in part by Greaterakes’ successes. He says “the final victory of the eighteenth-century medical community over the royal

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¹ Elmer, *The Miraculous Conformist*, 78.
miracle involves precisely how ‘history’ will be written and understood. Official medicine claims the power not only to determine how a disease might be cured but how the chronicles of the nation's past might be read and interpreted.”

The later historians of the Royal Society, particularly Thomas Birch and Charles Weld, actively obscured GReatrakes’ image. Birch’s document destruction spree and Weld’s implications that Boyle and his fellows were superstitious and gullible might be explained as an attempt to reconcile the Royal Society’s history with an humanist Enlightenment philosophy. But this is not the only explanation. Boyle and his contemporaries were neither naive nor gullible. They understood the power of the imagination to produce healing effects, and how freely imagination might be marshaled. GReatrakes’ ministrations were delivered to the suffering gratis—there was no cost at all to cultivate these cures, save the bit of time it took to enflame the imagination. GReatrakes has been excluded from the chronicles of medicine for all the wrong reasons. His proponents were not the superstitious and gullible dupes that Weld makes them out to be. They were every bit as rational and analytical as the members of the royal commissions appointed to investigate Mesmer a hundred years later. The official scientific gaze on this type of healing begins with GReatrakes, not Mesmer. Boyle’s explanation, that the healing was produced by an excited imagination, reflects Francis Bacon’s earlier ideas and

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CONCLUSIONS

presages Benjamin Franklin’s report on Mesmer. It deserves a prominent place in
the canon of medical history.

Initiations of Understanding

It is impossible to determine to what degree Valentine Greatrakes or even Robert
Boyle may have been initiated into Pico’s “priesthood of philosophy” by degrees
of understanding. We do know that Greatrakes took no “Publick” payment for his
healing ministrations, and he fervently denied any type of recompense at all.3 This
connects Greatrakes with the “invisible” Rosicrucian brotherhood. The agreements
on which the secret Rosicrucian brotherhood was founded are defined in The Fame
and Confession of the Fraternity (translated into English in 1652). First and
foremost was “That none of them should profess any other thing than to cure the
sick, and that gratis.”4 Greatrakes’ gratis healing ministrations places him squarely
within the aims of the Rosicrucian movement. Francis Yates asserts that the
Rosicrucian movement had political undertones.5 So did Greatrakes’ narratives. To
the extent Greatrakes was believed to facilitate miracles, those beliefs corroded the
public trust in both the Church of England (by refuting their claims of the cessation

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3 Greatrakes, A Brief Account, 10–11.
4 Johann Valentin Andreä, The Fame and Confession of the Fraternity of R: C: Commonly, of the Rosie Cross. With
a Praeface Annexed Thereto, and a Short Declaration of Their Physicall Work. By Eugenius Philalethes., trans.
Thomas Vaughan (London: Printed by J.M. for Giles Calvert, at the black spread Eagle at the West end of Pauls,
1652), 14; Yates, The Rosicrucian Enlightenment, 303.
5 Yates, The Rosicrucian Enlightenment, 56.
of miracles) and the monarch’s divine authority (since touching for the king’s evil did little to prove the king’s divine authority if Greatrakes could do it successfully). The Greatrakes narratives served to create a vacuum of institutional credibility that the Royal Society was designed (or at least destined) to fill.

The invitation-only membership of the Royal Society was also a form of initiation, and members were typically welcomed for either their skill in experimental philosophy or their ability to support the organization financially in its work. Though we might be able to link some of the fellows of the Royal Society by catalytic initiation to the alchemists discussed in chapter 3 (Pico, Agrippa, Dee, and Ashmole), clearly not all fellows of the Royal Society were of the same ilk. The true “initiated adepts” were those fellows engaged in diplomacy and statecraft, the ones “pulling the strings” in the image of the Society’s proposed coat of arms. Boyle’s cryptic references to an Invisible College are strong evidence of this type of behind-the-scenes political influence (it might also refer to the entire corpus of multivalent alchemical texts). Elias Ashmole’s design for the Royal Society’s coat of arms shows that Masonic symbolism was used by the society’s founders. And the influence of Royal Society’s members (privileged elites) over early organized Freemasonry suggests that the 1717 establishment of the Grand Lodge may have been a political device addressing a rift in the Whig party rather

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than a means of propagating alchemical revelation. The histories of both the Royal Society and organized Freemasonry are fraught with issues of authorial bias and prevarication that are not easily ignored by careful researchers.

**Chrysopoeia and the Hermeneutic of Privilege**

A significant part of my thesis relies on what I have called *a hermeneutic of privilege* through which the alchemists’ texts and ideas take are crafted with double entendre. In this vein the *adept* alchemist never truly believed in the transformation of base metals into gold but was engaging in subterfuge or legerdemain. This sentiment is voiced in the Rosicrucian manifesto as “the true philosophers are far of another mind, esteeming little the making of gold, which is but a *parergon*;" for besides that they have a thousand better things.”

A vulgar misreading of elite alchemical allegory resulted in alchemical texts that are insusceptible to the hermeneutic of privilege. Such vulgar texts were written by authors whose inept claims of adeptship placed them quite far from Pico’s initiations of understanding.

Catalytically initiated elites spoke of their privilege in theological terms, clothing themselves in the garb of the gods, looking down from their lofty heights

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in the social stratosphere upon an underclass they considered to be an inferior species. The temporal and spiritual lords of England considered themselves no less gods to their subjects than Caesar was to his people. Such overt spiritual egomania was common heresy in a society where Jesus was the only superlative king, so if it was to be written about, this power differential had to be encoded in allegory giving rise to the hermeneutic of privilege. A host of common “alchemical” pretenders futilely strained every muscle and nerve to create the philosopher’s stone while ignoring the powerful multivalent words that were the veridical stones of philosophers. The mechanistic alchemy produced from the Greeks’ creation of replicas and imitations was a tedium of trials and errors, measurements and recordings that ultimately became experimental philosophy. To be valuable, those imitations and replicas required secrets and lies. The system created to protect and propagate the secrets and lies of the replicas and imitations took on a life of its own embedded in the memes and mores of society.

**Alchemical Casuistry**

It was by considering the underclass as a separate species that elites were able to morally or ethically justify the gross disparity of their society’s economic circumstance—rendering the poor as inferior prey. The most dangerous secret that the alchemists hid was the culture propagating conspicuous economic disparity.
This fiction of privilege was a secret so toxic to the top-heavy society that it had to be hidden. The secret was how the “gentle class” commanded the productivity of the underclass by wit and organization, law and order, bound together with the people’s induced love for their leaders as gods. This secret was putatively passed down from ancient Egypt and Greece, the secret of the “good ole boy” network; the wink and nod of Greek societies. Catalytic initiation was the unspoken understanding that any seeming social inequity was part of the grand scheme of Nature. The precarious pecuniary circumstances of the Republican revolution and Restoration were dire. Properties confiscated by the Republicans had been gifted to cronies but in the Restoration might be returned to Royalist predecessors—or they might not. The economic uncertainty was unnerving to elites who might lose their privilege. Diverse Protestantism had gained so much momentum when Cromwell let up on the brakes (called off the censors) that a unified Church of England might never regain its former power and glory. The upper class was horrified at this instability and needed some way to wrest control from fickle monarchs and rebel leaders. The social instability that resulted from staking truth claims into shifting political landscapes was the inspiration for establishing more solid ground in the Royal Society.

Greatrakes’ affiants had all experienced some degree of fickle economic fate, and their larger project aimed to create an independent association to arbitrate
truth claims and thereby stabilize their place in society. The strategy was to neutralize the violent political partisanship that polarized along religious lines by staking a secure middle path of entitlement. This unspoken elitist enthusiasm inspired the Royal Society and Freemasonry—further securing privilege for themselves in relationship to their underclass by stabilizing the rough waters of prosperity to be more successfully navigated by those who simply understood.

Given what we know about the placebo effect today, it is difficult to doubt that at least some of the Greatrakes narratives described authentic cures. The only consistent explanation for them (from Francis Bacon, to Robert Boyle, to Benjamin Franklin, and to today) has been the power of the imagination to heal. Through alchemical casuistry effective techniques like hypnosis, acupuncture, Reiki, and many others are marginalized for the economic benefit of medical elites whose pills and procedures have less value when the secret elixir of the imagination is widely known.
APPENDIX 1: ROBERT MORAY’S INITIATION AS A FREEMASON

Robert Moray’s identity as a Freemason is considered an historical fact, and as far as I can tell, every reference is either without citation at all or springs from the original claim by Brewster and Lawrie in 1804 and David Lyon’s specious reproduction of 1873. This appendix should be considered within the context of Michael Barkun’s views of “stigmatized knowledge,” discussed above in the section “The Reciprocal Origins of Freemasonry.”

Brewster and Lawrie - 1804: “the Honorable Robert Moray, Quartermaster-General to the army in Scotland, was created a master mason in 1641.” (Without citation.)

Lyon - 1873: “At Neucastell the 20 day off May 1641. The qwilk day ane serten number off Mester and others being lafule conveined, doeth admit Mr the Right Honerabell Mr Robert Moray, General quarter Mr to the Armie off Scotlan, and the same bing aproven be the hed Mester off the Mesone of the Log of Edenbroth, quherto he haue set to ther handes or markes. A. Hamilton, R. Moray, Johne Mylln, James Hamilton.” (citing the image produced therein and reproduced below in Appendix 4, page 257)

Almost all later references to Moray’s initiation contain very similar language to Lawrie’s original: “Robert Moray, Quartermaster-General to the army in Scotland, was created a master mason in 1641” Below is a partial list of the subsequent references, in chronological order. As far as I can tell, no attempts have been made

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1 Barkun, A Culture of Conspiracy, 28–29.
3 Lyon, History of the Lodge of Edinburgh, 96.
4 Brewster and Lawrie, The History of Freemasonry, 102.
to verify Brewster and Lawrie’s original claims or Lyon’s reproduction, until now.

Steinbrenner - 1863: “ROBERT MORAY, Quartermaster-General of the Scottish array, was made a Master Mason in 1641.” (Without citation.)

Findel - 1866: “Robert Moray; Quartermaster-general of the Scottish Army, was made a Master-Mason in 1641.” (Without citation.)

Mackey - 1879: “Robert Moray, Quartermaster-General of the Army in Scotland, was created a Master Mason in 1641.” (Without citation.)

Fort - 1881: “Robert Moray, a Quartermaster-General of the Scottish army, was admitted as Mr. (Master?) in the year 1641.” (footnote 1 Lyon, History of Mary Chapel Lodge, pp. 96-7; footnote 2 Hughan, in Masonic Magazine, p. 212, anno. 1875.) I have not been able to procure a copy of the 1875 edition of Masonic Magazine.

Gould - 1884: “That this distinguished soldier and philosopher was received into Freemasonry at Newcastle in 1641, has been already shown” (footnote 3: For further details, see Lyon, History of the Lodge of Edinburgh, p. 90; and Lawrie, History of Freemasonry, 1804, p. 102.)

Hughan - 1887: “On the 20th May of that year, the ‘Right Honerabell Mr. Robert Moray, General Quartermaster to the Armie off Scotland,’ (as the record runs) was initiated at Newcastle by members of the ‘Lodge of Edinburgh,’ who were with the Scottish Army.” (Without citation.)

Calhoun - 1899: “Robert Moray, a quartermaster general of the Scottish

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5 G. W Steinbrenner, The Origin and Early History of Masonry (New York, 1863), 121.
6 Findel, History of Freemasonry, from Its Rise down to the Present Day, 120.
army, was admitted as master in the year 1641.” (Without citation.)

Hartley and D. C. Martin - 1960: “Elias Ashmole is generally credited with being the first gentleman mason whose initiation in England is on record but the first ascertained recorded Masonic initiation on English soil seems to relate to Moray. Dudley Wright in his book England's Masonic Pioneers, 1925, London, reproduced a facsimile of the following minute of initiation:” (Then follows an exact transcription, without further citation, of the Lyon text. Dudley Wright was a prolific writer for the Masonic market, and his book reproduces the Lyon text and image without citation.)

Yates - 1972: “Though Ashmole’s Masonic initiation in October 1646 is usually taken to be the earliest on record, there is, in fact, a well authenticated earlier one. This is the record of the admission into the mason’s lodge of Edinburgh of Robert Moray, on 20 May 1641.” (footnote 12 -See D. C. Martin, ‘Sir Robert Moray’, in The Royal Society, ed. H. Hartley, p. 246.)

Stevenson - 1984: “On 20 May 1641 members of the masonic lodge of Edinburgh who were serving in the army of the covenanters which had occupied northern England met in Newcastle. They proceeded to admit to their lodge as fellow-crafts and masters Alexander Hamilton, general of the artillery, and Robert Moray, quartermaster-general (Carr 1962, 118-19). That Moray became a mason in 1641 has been noted by a number of writers, but no attempt has been made to indicate what the significance of this might be. This is understandable, because what membership of a Scottish masonic lodge in the 17th century meant is obscure, the evidence fragmentary and complicated.” (Stevenson relies on Carr’s Masonic reprint of Lyon’s book.)

Stevenson - 1988: “In 1640-1 the covenanters’ army occupied the north of England, and on 20 May 1641 members of the Lodge of Edinburgh serving

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11 S. Fredrick Calhoun, Historic Masonry; Outlines of a History of Freemasonry from the Most Ancient to Modern Times. (Cleveland: Kneale, 1899), 131.
with the army admitted Moray and Alexander Hamilton, general of the artillery, to membership of the lodge.” (Stevenson cites Carr’s Masonic reprint of Lyon’s book.)

Jacob - 1991: “Both Alexander Hamilton and Robert Moray were skilled in artillery and possessed some scientific knowledge about the principles of local motion as well as technical expertise. In effect they were themselves already practicing aspects of the mason’s craft. Their admission to the guild at this time had more to do, however, with political alliances between covenants and parliamentarians than it did with anything ‘secretive.’” (Without citation.)

Bullock - 1996: “Stevenson cites Sir Robert Moray, initiated into a lodge in 1641 and a leader in the early English Royal Society, as a central example of this new Masonic experience. Moray's letters boast about his membership in explanations of the pentangle he had chosen as his personal symbol before his initiation and then later selected as his mason's mark.” (This is a review essay that considers Stevenson’s books along side Jacob’s *Living the Enlightenment*. Bullock makes no attempt to fact-check Moray’s initiation)

Albanese - 2007: “These prognosticators of the future word had apparently formally organized themselves in Edinburgh at least by 1641. In that year Robert Moray, who later played a prominent role in the establishment by Charles II of the Royal Society of London (Britain’s earliest scientific organization), joined an Edinburgh Masonic lodge.” (Without citation.)

Goodrick Clark - 2008: “Moray had been initiated a Freemason in an early lodge in 1641.” (citing Churton, *Golden Builders*, pp. 168–175. Churton, however, does not make the claim that Moray had joined a lodge.)

Collis - 2012 : ”Stuart agent and Freemason Sir Robert Moray, who

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became an expert in all forms of secret communication.” (Without citation.)

Monod - 2013: “The first known non-operative or ‘speculative’ Freemason was none other than Robert Moray, the Scottish alchemist. He was admitted at Edinburgh in 1641, along with Alexander Hamilton, commander of artillery for the Covenanting army then fighting against King Charles I. Moray later enjoyed affixing his ‘mason mark’ to letters, either as a seal or a drawing—it consisted of a pentacle, the five-sided star associated with ritual magic and familiar to readers of the Clavicula Salomonis.” (footnote 102: “Stevenson, Origins of Freemasonry, ch. 7; David Stevenson, ed., Letters of Sir Robert Moray to the Earl of Kincardine, 1657–73 (Aldershot, Hants, and Burlington, Vt., 2007), pp. 62, 63, 66, 67, 80, 125, 128, 140, 263, 280. In explaining the pentacle mark, Moray referred to Egyptian and Greek sources, but he cannot have been unaware of its use in ritual magic.”) (It should be noted that all the pages Monod references in Letters refer to instances where Moray uses his “mason’s mark.”)

Stevenson - 2007: “On 20 May, the masonic lodge of Edinburgh (Mary’s Chapel) met in Newcastle. Edinburgh stonemasons, it is to be assumed, had been enlisted in the Scots army, probably to serve as pioneers, and they had decided to honour two generals with membership of their lodge, Quartermaster General Robert Moray and General of Artillery Alexander Hamilton.” (Footnote 11: “The Minutes of the Lodge of Edinburgh, Mary’s Chapel, 1598-1738, ed. H. Carr (London, 1962), 118-19. Hamilton’s admission is dated 1640 in the manuscripts, but internal evidence that this is an error and that the year was 1641 is convincing. Moray’s admission refers to him as ‘thie Right honerabell Mr Robert Moray.’”)

Stevenson - 2014: “Thus in 1641 Edinburgh Lodge initiated Robert Moray, quartermaster general, and Sir Alexander Hamilton, general of artillery.” (Citing his works above.)

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21 Moray, Letters of Sir Robert Moray, 5.
Rognon - 2014: “What is more striking is that the first men to be admitted as members who were not stone masons, were military men: Robert Moray (1609–1673), quarter master general in the Scottish army in 1641 and, to a lesser extent, Elias Ashmole (1617–1692), artillery officer in a Royalist regiment in 1646.” (Without citation.)

APPENDIX 2: PICO DELLA MIRANDOLA AND THE HERMENEUTIC OF PRIVILEGE

Pico had inherited a fortune that made him one of the wealthiest men in Europe. The interpretative comments below frame the Oration as a moral justification for his privilege and preference. To be clear, this is not the only, or necessarily the preferred, interpretation; but rather it is a possible and reasonable sense among others in this multivalent text. The first forty consecutive verses of Pico’s Oration on the Dignity of Man are analyzed below.¹ The text is treated as a whole (consecutive verses rather than selected excerpts) in order to show a cohesive referential frame that Pico builds carefully with his argument.

1. Most esteemed fathers, I have read in the ancient texts of the Arabians that when Abdallah the Saracen was questioned as to what on this world’s stage, so to speak, seemed to him most worthy of wonder, he replied that there is nothing to be seen more wonderful than man.

The Oration begins with a puzzle. No one is certain about the identity of this Abdallah.² This signals the reader to look for multivalent meaning in the text. Abdallah is an Arabic name that roughly translates to servant of God. Pico had reasonable knowledge of Arabic, Aramaic and Hebrew.³ Pico may have invented this ancient character to impute a sense of authority and even sacrality to his text.

2. This opinion is seconded by Mercury’s saying: “A great miracle,

Working with English translation is not necessarily a detriment here. This new critical translation reflects an hermeneutical emphasis on human rights and the “‘pluralistic’ convergence and potential consensus among diverse religious and ethical traditions” reflected in Pico’s work is particularly suitable to demonstrate elements of “secret” social codes, privilege, mathematics, initiation, and obviously, syncretism.
² Ibid., 109.
³ Ibid., 16.
Asclepius, is man.”

Asclepius signals healing, and the rest of the selection will be interpreted as Pico’s effort to heal the pangs of conscious resulting from his exceedingly fortunate birth and palatial circumstances.

3. Still, when I considered the reasons behind these maxims, I was unsatisfied by the arguments put forward by many men to explain the excellence of human nature: that man is the intermediary between creatures, a companion of the higher beings, a king of the things beneath him; that, by the acuity of his senses, by the discernment of his reason and by the light of his intelligence he was the interpreter of nature; that man is the midpoint between fixed eternity and fleeting time, the bond (as the Persians say) or rather the wedding-song of the world, and only slightly inferior, as David affirms, to the angels.

Pico is beginning to broach class distinction here. By “man” Pico means “gentleman” as described in my chapter “Education, Secrecy and the Social Order.” “Fixed eternity” might also refer to the written word or even the social order itself - that had separated rich from poor throughout history.

4. These reasons are indeed great, but they are nonetheless not the principal ones. That is, they are not the main grounds on which man may rightfully claim for himself the privilege of the highest admiration.

This refers to the rules of etiquette based on social order.

5. Indeed, why then would we not find the angels themselves and the blessed choirs of heaven even more admirable?

This continues the theme of self-adulation.

6. At length, it seemed to me that I had come to understand why man is the most fortunate of beings and therefore worthy of all admiration, and what finally is the condition that befell him in the universal order, a condition to be envied not only by beasts but even by the stars and the intelligences dwelling beyond this world.

Beasts refers to those born to the lower class; later he will cast them as plants. Universal order here means social stratification.
7. A thing surpassing belief, and wondrous too!

This might refer to the difference between knowledge (heretical) and belief (orthodox) suggesting that the heretical knowledge of the elite surpasses the “beliefs” that are the domain of the underclass.

8. And why not? Since, for this very reason, man is rightly called, and thought to be, a great miracle and a being worthy of all admiration.

The miracle of a “fortunate birth.”

9. But hear, fathers, exactly what this condition is and, while you listen benevolently, kindly indulge me in my endeavour.

Oration was written to address the preeminent scholars of Pico’s day that he had planned to assemble, at his own expense, to debate his nine hundred theses.

10. In accordance with the laws of His mysterious wisdom, God the supreme Father and Architect had already fashioned this worldly home we behold, this most sacred temple of His divinity.

Pico conflates privilege (civil laws that support class structure) and Deity, perhaps reflecting the social convention of addressing the higher classes with deistic honorifics.

11. He had already adorned the supercelestial region with intelligences, enlivened the heavenly globes with eternal souls, and filled the excremental and filthy parts of the lower world with a multitude of forms of animal life.

Pico here acknowledges the reality of the lower classes. Eternal souls here are the institutions (church, state, corporations) that perpetuate social order—they also might connote individuals who amass enough wealth to support generations that follow or the use of metempsychosis as justification for extreme class distinction.

12. But when the work was finished, the Craftsman still longed for there to be someone to ponder the meaning of such a magnificent achievement, to love its beauty and to marvel at its vastness.
Pico beckons his audience to ponder society. The term “Craftsman” was carefully translated and links to the philosophical roots of Freemasonry that we examine in Chapter 4.

13. So, when everything was done (as Moses and Timaeus testify), He finally thought to bring forth man.

Create a distinction justifying social stratification.

14. But there was nothing among His archetypes from which He could mould a new progeny, nor was there anything in his storehouses that He might bestow upon His new son as an inheritance, nor was there among the seats of the world any place for this contemplator of the universe.

15. Every place was by then filled; all things had already been assigned to the highest, the middle, and the lowest orders.

This mirrors the scheme of social stratification outlined in the chapter “Education, Secrecy, and the Social Order.”

16. But it was not in the nature of the Father’s power to fail, as if exhausted, in His final creation. It was not in the nature of His wisdom to hesitate, as if at a loss, when faced with a necessary task. Nor was it in the nature of His beneficent love to have one who would praise divine generosity in all other things be forced to find it blameworthy in regard to himself.

Pico’s personal moral justification, stated explicitly.

17. At length, the Master Creator decreed that the creature to whom He had been unable to give anything wholly his own should share in common whatever belonged to every other being.

Refers to the lower class. Note that the term “man” is not used.

19. Once defined, the nature of all other beings is constrained within the laws We have prescribed for them.

Perhaps a reference that “laws” govern the lower classes (once again, the term “man” is not used) and the gentry was typically “above the law.”
20. But you, constrained by no limits, may determine your nature for yourself, according to your own free will, in whose hands We have placed you.

Pico refers to the gentry, “constrained by no limits” and his audience likely did not include any of the lower classes.

21. We have set you at the centre of the world so that from there you may more easily gaze upon whatever it contains.

Pico refers to the gentry, and perhaps elite education that offers a broad perspective.

22. We have made you neither of heaven nor of earth, neither mortal nor immortal, so that you may, as the free and extraordinary shaper of yourself, fashion yourself in whatever form you prefer.

Here Pico refers to the gentry.

23. It will be in your power to degenerate into the lower forms of life, which are brutish. Alternatively, you shall have the power, in accordance with the judgment of your soul, to be reborn into the higher orders, those that are divine.”

Here Pico refers to the gentry.

24. O supreme liberality of God the Father, and supreme and wonderful happiness of man who is permitted to obtain what he desires and to be what he wills!

Here Pico refers to the gentry.

25. As soon as they are born, brutes bring with them from their mother’s womb, as Lucilius says, all that they are going to possess.

“Brutes” refers to the lower classes that shall not accumulate wealth.

26. The Intelligences have been, either from the beginning or soon thereafter, what they are perpetually going to be throughout eternity.
Referring to the perpetuation of class distinction.

27. The Father infused in man, at his birth, every sort of seed and all sprouts of every kind of life.

Relates birth and social status.

28. These seeds will grow and bear fruit in each man who sows them.

29. If he cultivates his vegetative seeds, he will become a plant. If he cultivates his sensitive seeds, he will become a brute animal. If he cultivates his rational seeds, he will become a heavenly being. If he cultivates his intellectual seeds, he will be an angel and a son of God.

Pico had cultivated his intellect scrupulously, as had his anticipated audience. Vegetative (lacking motility) and sensitive (ruled by emotion rather than reason) relate to the lower classes.

30. And if he—being dissatisfied with the lot assigned to any other creature—gathers himself into the centre of his own unity, thus becoming a single spirit with God in the solitary darkness of the Father, he, who had been placed above all things, will become superior to all things.

Pico suggests that empathy for the underclass is elevating; once again they are referred to as creatures, not “men.”

31. Who will not wonder at this chameleon of ours?

Indeed!

32. Or rather, who will admire any other being more?

33. Not without reason, Asclepius the Athenian said that man was represented in the secret rites by Proteus because of his changing and metamorphous nature.

As reflected in the chapter “Education, Secrecy, and the Social Order” there was considerable mobility within the elite class. Secrecy is introduced explicitly, but it has been the theme of the Oration all along.
34. Hence the metamorphoses renowned among the Jews and the Pythagoreans.

35. Indeed, even the most secret Hebrew theology at one time transforms holy Enoch into an angel of divinity, whom they call [ מטטרון ] Metatron, and at other times it reshapes other men into other spirits. According to Pythagoreans, wicked men are deformed into brutes and, if Empedocles is to be believed, into plants as well.

The lower classes are represented as plants and brutes.

36. Imitating them, Mohammed frequently remarked that he who strays from divine law becomes a brute.

Divine law, as distinguished from common-law, relates to the social order. Perhaps connotes consequences for disturbing the social order.

37. And, indeed, rightly so. It is not in fact the bark that makes the plant, but dull and insentient nature; not the hide that makes a beast of burden, but a brutish and sensuous soul; not the circular body that makes the heavens, but straightforward reason; not the separation from the body that makes an angel, but its spiritual intelligence.

See stanza 29.

38. If you see someone who is a slave to his belly, crawling along the ground, it is not a man you see, but a plant; if you see someone who is enslaved by his own senses, blinded by the empty hallucinations brought on by fantasy (as if by Calypso herself) and entranced by their bedevilling spells, it is a brute animal you see, not a man.

The lower classes were typically hungry, thus slaves to their bellies.

39. If you see a philosopher discerning things with right reason, worship him, for he is not an earthly creature, but divine.

The upper class included intellectuals without regard to their material wealth.

40. If you see a pure contemplator, oblivious to his body and absorbed in the recesses of his mind, this is neither an earthly nor a heavenly...
creature: this is a still more eminent spirit, clothed in human flesh.

Selections from Pico’s Nine Hundred Theses

28.7. When Solomon says in his prayer in the Book of Kings, Hear O heaven, by heaven we should understand the green line that circles the universe. [ Cf 1 Kings 8:32ff. "green line" = standard kabbalistic symbol for the third sefirah, "intelligence." There is an occult link between this thesis and 22.12 from Porphyry (see 11>29 and note). Wirszubski (1989: 26) cites two texts from Mithridates that mention the "green line," but neither of these throws light on Pico's sense in these linked conclusions.]

Here conflating the green line and intelligence makes “heaven” a reasonable symbol for the upper class.

28.13. Whoever knows in the Cabala the mystery of the gates of intelligence will understand the mystery of the great jubilee. [ Cf especially 11>68-69. "gates of intelligence" = standard symbol for the third sefrah, Binah or "intelligence" (cf 11>69). "great jubilee" = eschatological return of the world to Binah, "mother of the world" (cf Scholem 1974: 336). Pico presumably would have correlated this thesis with others in his text involving eschatological issues, e.g., 10>20-21]

The great jubilee, with its connotation of Ein Soph, would refer to the unity of the elite class.

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4 Farmer, Syncretism in the West, 167:348–349.
DEAR MR. HARTLIB,

IT was very needless in your last to make apologies for the glad parliamentary news you began your letter with; for besides that its goodness authorities its nature, and were able to prefer so pleasing a disobedience to the most exact compliance with my desires; besides this, I say, you interest yourself so much in the Invisible College, and that whole society is so highly concerned in all the accidents of your life, that you can send me no intelligence of your own affairs, that does not (at least relationally) assume the nature of Utopian. And truly, Sir, for my particular, had you been to coin and shape news, not so much to inform, as to delight me, you could scarce have made choice of any, that were more welcome, either to my wishes for their own particular satisfaction, or for those, that I dedicate to the good of the public, which can acknowledge your merits with no advantage, that has not a direct tendency to its own, and which, by the highest expressions of gratitude for your service to it, does but enable your zeal to multiply and continue them. The phrases of the ordinances (which these alone of yours have brought me into charity with again) were indeed extremely civil in respect of those, that framed them; and yet but barely just in regard of him, for whom they were designed. Certainly the taking notice of, and countenancing men of rare industry and publick spirit, is a piece of policy as vastly advantageous to all states, as it is ruinously neglected by the most. And therefore we may evidently observe those commonwealths (as the Hollanders and the Venetian) to be the most: happy and the most flourishing, where ingenuity is courted with the greatest encouragements. Mr. Hall's unmerited elogium of me I must in justice ascribe rather to his civility, than to his opinion; to the former of which I am also redevable for a very handsom complimentary letter, he was lately pleased to honour me with, to which I shall request a speedy conveyance of the inclosed (though unsuitable) answer, and a belief, that I lift it not amongst the least of your favours, to "procure me the acquaintance of a person, that treading antipodes to the strain of his contemporaries, has September in his judgment, whilst we can scarce find April upon his chin."

My sense of his propositions concerning the College I mull necessarily suspend, till a more exquisite information of the particulars of his whole design. Only by the by I shall take the freedom to tell you, that though I esteem Mr. Hall very moderate in the point of pecuniary duties, you can scarce be too tender in talking you collegiates as to the duties of the brain, since they being all of them to be persons of quality and voluntiers, will hardly support with alacrity any thing, that favours of constraint; besides that the gallantry and nobleness of their own principles will carry them on unimposedly to do much more, than your strictest constitutions can reasonably enjoin them. The expedients you propose to Mr. Hall's tutor are not at all unlikely to take; and the applications you counsel him to make to those three famous mathematicians, can promise a great deal of probability for their success especially Gassendus, a great favourite of mine, I take to be a very profound mathematician, as well as an excellent astronomer, and one, that has collected a very ample treasury of numerous and accurate observations of all, that belongs to the abstruse science of those sublimer bodies. I find you very happy,
or rather very judicious, in the nominating of the persons, Mr. Hall’s Tutor is by you addressed to; and am confident, as well as you, “that those elevated spirits will not prove half so costive and so pedantic, as the great scholarians of our colleges, whom yet I am apt enough to pardon, in confederation of the usefulness (for the most part) of the knowledge they conceal, which perhaps being admired but as long as kept in a mystery, an imparting discovery would depreciate.

THE rise you have now to resume your former correspondencies with the great Mersennus, I hope you will greedily embrace, he being a man truly incomparable in his own way, and the mechanics he transcends in as greatly beneficial as little understood. The Englishing of, and additions to Oughtred’s Clavis Mathaematica does much content me, I having formerly spent much study on the original of that algebra, which I have long since esteemed a much more instructive way of logic, than that of Aristotle. No body has yet been charitable enough to send me either the long desired Office of Address, or Mr. Dury’s wished for discourse concerning Accommodation, though my longings for their sight have been very suitable to the contentments I expect from their perusal. I have written along letter to Mr. Dury, by the same post, that is to deliver you this; and it shall not be the neglect of my improving my rhetoric to the uttermost, that shall impede my prevailing with him, by exemplifying his rules, to clothe with flesh and skin his excellent skeleton of the Art of Reasoning.

For your bedfellow’s receipt for the stone (which certainly wants a parallel, if it be not more easy than effectual) I beseech you to return her (together with the present of my humble service) most humble thanks, which I mean very shortly, God willing, to pay you in an epistle I have drawn up to persuade men to communicate all those successful receipts, that relate either to the preservation or recovery of our health; to which (if you will pardon me a clinch) I shall add, as to the disease last named (so cruel in its tortures, and so fatal in its catastrophe) that they must have their hearts more hard than a very stone, that can refuse a sanative remedy for the stone.

As for me, during my confinement to this melancholy solitude, I often divert myself at leisure moments in trying such experiments, as the unfurnishedness of the place, and the present distractedness of my mind, will permit me; which when once my vacant intervals of time will give me leave to blot paper with, and make some short discourses and reflections upon, you “may (with all the services you shall be pleased to command their author) confidently expect from,

Sir, your most affectionate friend and humble servant,

ROBERT BOYLE.
APPENDIX 4: IMAGES

Sketch from the diary of John Evelyn (1620-1706) showing proposals for the Royal Society’s coat of arms with Ashmole’s featured in the center of the top row.¹

¹ Smith, *Historical and Literary Curiosities, Consisting of Facsimiles of Original Documents.*
Note the symbolism of the sun on the left and the moon on the right and the mathematical magician in the middle at bottom.²

² Euclid and Dee, *The Elements of Geometrie.*
Once again the sun on the left and the moon on the right, this time with columns. Dee’s Monas is the central feature, between his Latin initials.\(^3\)

\(^3\) John Dee, Propaedeumata Aphoristica Ioannis Dee Londinensis, de Praestantioribus Quibusdam Naturae Virtutibus, Ad Gerardum Mercatorem Rupelmundanum, Mathematicu & Philosophum Insignem. (Londini: Excudebat Henricus Suttonus, 1558).
Left and right are represented without the sun and moon, but the columns are prominent.⁴

The sun and moon reappear with more symbolism. On the left are tools of mathematics, construction, and music while those on the right deal with the art of warfare.\(^5\)

\(^5\) Dee, Cross, and Espagnet, *Fasciculus Chemicus, Or, Chymical Collections.*
Genuine Signature of Sir Robert Moray (directly above,\textsuperscript{7} compare with Lyon’s facsimile at top of the page),\textsuperscript{8} showing Moray’s pentacle “mason mark” in the tail of the “y” (Royal Society of London, Letter book M.1, no. 5)

Note differences in the hook of the “R,” the second peak of the “M,” the “o,” the connection between the “o” and “r” and especially how fluidly the pentacle is drawn in the authentic while the Lyon version was more an afterthought. All these differences indicate that the signatures were written by different people.

\textsuperscript{7} Stevenson, The Origins of Freemasonry, Plate 6a between pages 122–123.

\textsuperscript{8} Lyon, History of the Lodge of Edinburgh, between pages 96–97.
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