

SOURCES OF MASONIC SYMBOLISM Part 3

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PART III

Some Masonic phrases we find have even invaded the plays of Shakespeare, as an indication that some of our peculiar language was now beginning to be understood by the people for whom these plays were written -- otherwise, why write them? As in the play Anthony and Cleopatra, where a character confesses, as he puts it, that "I have not kept my square," but promises that all that is to come "shall be done by rule." This is typically Masonic language. Other words and phrases in Shakespeare's plays have been quoted to much the same purpose, one writer going so far as to say that, because of these many words and phrases in Shakespeare's plays, this was an indication that it was Shakespeare himself who was the creator of Speculative Masonry. Another writer thinks this honor should go to Sir Francis Bacon, for analogous reasons. Needless to say, these two theories themselves are far-fetched, but the fact that Masonic words and phrases are found in these writings of Elizabethan times is beyond dispute, later becoming part of the Masonic vocabulary, by assimilation.

Familiar phrases and allusions were also beginning to come into the more general non-Masonic literature of those early times. This is exemplified in the English translation of a German work in 1550, which said in part: "The free mason hewyth the harde stones, and hewyth off, here one piece, and there another, tyll the stones be fitte and apte for the place where he wyll laye them." And this the author compares to the afflictions of life, intended for our moral perfection -- an apt reflection on our own moralization on the Common Gavel, one of our important Working Tools.

A still more apt moralization is that which is ascribed to another work, The Pilgrimage of Perfection, 1526, and which says in part (in language which I have had to modernize):

"The freemason sets his 'prentice first to learn to hew stones; and when he can do that perfectly he admits him to be a master of the craft. So we must, as 'prentices, labor continually and learn to hew, polish, and square the precious stones of virtue built in our souls. Of which building the four walls are the Four Cardinal Virtues; the roof, that covers all, is the theological virtue, Hope. The foundation is Faith. The windows giving light are Love and Charity, which we call the Stairway of Grace, whose seven rungs are the Gifts of the Holy Ghost. And so to build to Almighty God a glorious and pleasant Temple in our souls; we, as the workmen, and He, as the principal Author and Master of the Work."

All this could have been written by a modern Speculative Mason, from our own teachings; with clear reference to the Four Cardinal Virtues -- Temperance, Fortitude, Prudence and Justice -- and the indirect

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and metaphorical reference to Jacob's Ladder in the Bible, with its seven rungs, the three principal rungs of which are said to be Faith, Hope, and Charity, and with the Great Architect of the Universe as the principal Master of the Work, of which we ourselves are the humble workmen.

Another source of early symbolism that is frequently overlooked is the symbolism practised by the Heralds; that is, those who design Coats of Arms for the landed gentry and the Lords of the realm. These are sometimes thought to be haphazard designs, without rhyme or reason. But not so, says W. Cecil Wade, who

writes on The Symbolism of Heraldry, and who tells us that Sir Walter Scott, Chaucer, Spenser, Shakespeare and others, "afford many poetic references to the symbols of heraldry," with "thousands of examples of ancient coats of arms that contain a clear symbolic expression." Perhaps the "thousands of examples" is a bit of poetic license, but here are a few of the designs that have obvious Masonic interest, taken mostly from "that grand old Herald John Guillim," who wrote in 1610, these Heraldic designs include the Bee (reminding us of our Masonic Symbol, the Beehive); the Carpenter's Square, obviously similar to the Mason's Square, and with a similar symbolism; the Sun and the Moon; the Hand and the Heart (remember the Baal's Bridge Square?); the Lily; the Hour-glass; the Eagle; the Cross; the Pelican. And, above all, the Acacia, which we would hardly expect to find in a Coat of Arms, but which Guillim assures us, signifies "eternal and affectionate remembrance," as well it might. This Evergreen, sermonized upon in our American Masonic Funeral Service, is appropriately a symbol of Immortality. And it is remarkable how close Guillim comes to our own moralization on these symbols and designs; or perhaps I should say, how close we come to the symbolism in Heraldry, as the source of our own. I will cite only one or two other examples:

"The HAND" says Guillim, "is the pledge of Faith, Sincerity, and Justice. Two right hands conjoined denote Union and alliance."

"SQUARES (that is, four-sided figures, with sides of equal length, forming right angles) ... are symbols of Wisdom ... and equity...." The phrase as to "square dealings" says the writer of the Guillim reference, reminding us of the quotation from Shakespeare, "perhaps arose from such symbols, which are of high consideration among Freemasons," as indeed we know they are, especially in business.

Our own Masonic Herald, the famous Randle Holme 111, who wrote in 1688 on the Academie of Armory, had occasion to cite the use among Freemasons, "of these several tools following, some whereof I have seen," he says, "borne in coats of arms", etc. Here we have a direct concordance of Masonic Symbolism with Heraldic Symbolism, from an authority personally acquainted with both systems.

In addition to the Bestiary, and Heraldry, as well as the Bible, as sources of some of our symbols, there was also the mediaeval institution of Christian Iconography, briefly previously mentioned: the science of emblematic figures representing religious sentiments and ideas, often allegorically or metaphorically. This is brought out in a frequently cited non-Masonic two-volume work published a hundred years ago, by the Frenchman Didron, with the specific title Christian Iconography, and with its explanatory sub-title; "The History of Christian Art in the Middle Ages". And the more recent work of Sydney Heath, also non-Masonic, The Romance of Symbolism with its still more significant sub-title: "Its relation to Church Ornament and Architecture."

In pictorial Iconography, we find such Items as Jacob's Ladder, previously mentioned, frequently represented with its seven rungs, illustrating Jacob's Dream, in the Bible, and showing a Ladder of Salvation, as the Road to Heaven, is seen in a painting in Chaldon Church, painted as early as about 1200 A.D. Jacob's Ladder reminds us of the Seven Liberal Sciences featured in the oldest of our Old Charges of the Operative Masons -- these Old Charges, being constitutions together with a history of the art of building, the reading of which to a Candidate constituted his ceremony of admission. In the oldest of these Old Charges, written down about 1390 A.D. the famous Regius MS. - we find the suggestion that

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these Seven Liberal Sciences were, to the Operative Masons, symbolical of the totality of the then accumulated human knowledge, and of which they said that he who possessed it, "he would have heaven" as clear an indication of Operative Symbolism, as of 1390 A. D., as one would wish: Knowledge as the Ladder of Salvation. Hence our listing of the Seven Liberal Arts and Sciences in the Staircase Lecture for the Fellowcraft.

As an example of simple geometrical symbolism, in Christian Iconography, is the 16th century illustration in which we find the Equilateral Triangle inscribed with a Circle, this dual symbol being held with in hands of God, clearly symbolizing the divine triplicity within the circle of divine Infinity. But the idea of Unity in Trinity, is also found geometrically expressed in a number of ways, as in Lichfield Cathedral, built about 1300 A.D., with its series of spherical triangles.

Finally, in the tympanum of the 12th century French Cathedral of Autun, we find an allegorical representation of the Last Judgment, with the Sun on the right hand, and the Moon on the left hand of Christ as Judge of the world. Whether this may have led to our Three. Lesser Lights that we find alongside of our Altars in the Lodge Room, and which we now explain as the Sun, the Moon, and the Master of the Lodge, is anyone's guess, but it is highly suggestive. Freemasonry, in Operative days, was exclusively Christian in character, but has now become non-sectarian in the Craft - the Scottish Rite and Royal Arch. We still retain the symbol, but we now give it a non-sectarian interpretation.

Some of our other Lodge practices we can correlate with popular ideas that once may have been universal: for example, the wearing of white gloves, which is limited to the Officers of a Craft Lodge in America, but which is required of all Members attending an English Lodge, as part of their Masonic Clothing, along with the Apron. To understand the significance of these white gloves: Those of you who may remember seeing Queen Elizabeth's Coronation ceremony on TV twenty-five years ago may remember that she was invested, not only with the Crown and Sceptre, but also with a white glove for her right hand -- to keep it symbolically free from becoming soiled by wrongful conduct. It must have been a symbolism generally well understood from older times, by the people at large, and therefore must have been understood by the Operative Mason as well. And thus you can understand the symbolism in our play-acting when the twelve recanting fellowcrafts present themselves before King Solomon, wearing white gloves and aprons in token of their innocence Just as in the Hiram Legend of the French Compagnonage, some centuries ago this was a Craft institution analogous to our Freemasonry, all of the Craftsmen claiming descent from the Builders of King Solomon's Temple, as our own Legend does -- the members of the Craft of joiners and Locksmiths claimed the exclusive right to wear white gloves as part of their official regalia, because of their belief that they alone were descended from those craftsmen at the building of Solomon's Temple who did not steep their hands in Hiram's blood.

What I have been trying to demonstrate all along is that the early Operative Masons could not have been a tribe set apart, isolated from the rest of the community and culture in which they lived, cut off from its general practices and beliefs. And to say that non-Masons could indulge in what we today recognize as Masonic Symbolism, in their thinking and in their literature, as we have just seen in so many instances, but that the Operative Masons did not do so, as some claim, is to rise to the heights of sheer improbability. The Operative Masons in fact had symbolism all around then, in so many different forms, and could no more escape its influence than they could escape breathing

the very air in which they lived.

Thus, much of our present-day Masonic Symbolism can be seen to go back, one way or another, to our Operative predecessors, whose labor, using their own Working Tools, has led to our own moralizing on these Working Tools and other features of the Operative Craft; as a natural progression from Operative to Speculative, wherein we strew the purpose; and intent of this moralizing practice. This is stated most clearly and unambiguously in an 16th century Lanchshire ritual that Colin Dyer refers to, in his recent work on Symbolism in Craft Freemasonry, and in which our various Working Tools get listed one by one, and their several moralizations explained.

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"The various implements of our profession," says this old ritual, "are emblematic of our conduct in life, and are intended to imprint on the memory wise and serious truths which every Mason ought well to understand and constantly bear in mind..."

This in fact expresses in an nutshell the entire ethical purpose of Masonic Symbolism, based on what one writer has aptly described as "the working tools of life" -- which indeed they are. And all this, I have tried to demonstrate almost ad nauseam, stems essentially, one way or another, from the period of the Operative Masons, not only in their working, but also in their thinking.

But we ourselves are now no longer Operative Masons. We are only symbolical, speculative or theoretical Masons, the historical and spiritual descendants of those who have preceded us. We no longer work with our hands; only with our hearts and minds; with Symbolism our meat and drink, and the very essence of our Masonic lives.

THE END

FOR FURTHER STUDY

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