

# **The Adornment of Silence**

## **Secrecy and Symbolic Power in American Freemasonry**

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### **Abstract**

The post-civil war period in America - the same era that witnessed an unprecedented growth in industry, science, technology and urbanization - was also the golden age of secret brotherhoods, and above all, the more elaborate orders such as Scottish Rite Freemasonry. While a variety of historians have discussed the importance of Masonry and other fraternal organizations in Victorian America, few have explored the central role of secrecy, esoteric ritual and occult symbolism in these traditions. This article suggests a fresh interpretation of the phenomenon of American Freemasonry, and a new approach to religious secrecy in general, by examining the deep connections between secrecy and social power in Scottish Rite Freemasonry. Using some insights from Georg Simmel and Pierre Bourdieu, this article argues that secrecy operates as kind of “adornment,” which, like fine clothing, enhances one’s status even as it conceals one’s person. In Bourdieu’s terms, secret information thus serves as powerful form of “symbolic capital” - that is, a rare and precious resource that enhances one’s prestige within a particular social hierarchy.

### **Introduction**

The secret operates as an adorning possession. . . . This involves the contradiction that what recedes before the consciousness of . . . others and is hidden from them is emphasized in their consciousness; that one should appear as a noteworthy person through what one conceals (Simmel: 337).

I will always hail, ever conceal, and never reveal (Pike 1871: 63).

[1] It is surely one of the most striking paradoxes in the history of American religion that the period of the late nineteenth century - the same period which witnessed an intense acceleration of technological progress, social and economic growth, industrialization and urbanization - also witnessed the greatest flowering of the esoteric rituals and secret traditions of Freemasonry. This was an era permeated by what some have called a “general mania” of clubs, fraternal organizations, secret societies, and above all the Masonic Lodge. In the years between 1879 and 1925, in fact, membership in the Lodges suddenly rose from 550,000 to over three million (Dumenil: xii; Kauffman: 8f; Clawson).<sup>1</sup> Even as the mainstream Protestant churches were attempting to address the problems of an increasingly urbanized, industrialized, and multi-racial society, the Lodges were attracting white, middle class native males in unprecedented numbers. The widespread presence of the Masonic lodges in the late nineteenth century, and above all, the popularity of the most esoteric Lodges like the Scottish Rite, present us with a series of apparent contradictions: an ideal of democracy and liberty side by side with elitism and authoritarianism;

<sup>1</sup> As James West comments, “nearly every approved male joined one or more of the well-known lodges” (382-83). Others estimate that the number of members in fraternities may have been even higher, perhaps as many as thirty million (Ames: 19).

and a rhetoric of brotherhood and universal humanity side by side with elaborate hierarchies of exclusion (Carnes 1989; Dumenil).

[2] Known as the “Moses” of American Freemasonry, Albert Pike (figure 1) stands out as perhaps the clearest single embodiment of the series of paradoxes which pervade the nineteenth century Lodge. A man of remarkable boldness and tremendous egotism, Pike was, in his youth, one of the greatest adventurers in the American Southwest. In his maturity, he served as Brigadier General in the Confederate Forces during the Civil War. Yet after losing his entire fortune and reputation due to a humiliating scandal, Pike retired into the esoteric traditions of Scottish Rite Masonry. If he had lost his previous economic wealth and status, it would seem that he recovered a new kind of status, power and prestige as the greatest scholar of the Scottish Rite and the most respected authority on the innermost secrets and highest degrees of the Brotherhood.

[3] Various scholars have offered possible interpretations for the enigmatic role of American Freemasonry. As early as Toqueville, for example, it was suggested that the obsession with secret fraternities was the consequence of a democratic society without fixed hierarchies: “In a nation devoid of established hierarchies and traditional protections, the citizens sought strength through association” (129; cf. Kauffman: 8). Others like Mervyn Jones and Brian Greenberg have pointed to the role the Lodges played in late nineteenth century business and capitalism, as a kind of “unofficial guild of businessmen” amidst modern industrialized society (Jones: 177).<sup>2</sup> And still others like Lynn Dumenil argue for the sociological function of American Masonry, which served as a spiritual oasis in a rapidly changing and increasingly heterogeneous world. By separating men from the outside world, placing them securely amongst the brothers of the lodge, the Lodge reinforced the traditional values of middle-class white Protestant men (Dumenil: 32-42; cf. Clawson 1984: 6ff).

[4] Unfortunately, although Dumenil and others have provided useful insights into the social role of Masonry, few have made serious efforts to understand the enormous role of secrecy, occult symbolism and ritual in the Lodges. In other words, why did these middle class men take such delight in arcane secrets and esoteric ceremonies, rather than joining a more secular fraternal group? One of the few scholars to examine the role of secret ritual in the Lodges is Mark Carnes, who combines psychological and sociological theory to look at gender symbolism in Masonic initiation. During a period in which mainline Protestant churches were increasingly dominated by women, he argues, the secret initiation of the Lodge offered a means of achieving the difficult transition from the feminine world of domesticity to the masculine world of the workplace. The aim of fraternal ritual was, in short, to “provide solace and psychological guidance during young men’s passage to manhood in Victorian America” (1989: 14; cf. 1996: 72f).<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Greenberg suggests that the lodge served as a moral policing institution, whose symbols reflected capitalism’s needs for free labor; the entire ethos, he argues, was dominated by capitalism (89-100). Clawson argues that fraternal orders, with their emphasis on brotherhood and mutuality, represent a more complex response, which involved both a critique and an accommodation of capitalism (1984: 14ff).

<sup>3</sup> Another important exception to this general neglect of the role of secrecy and esoteric ritual is the recent volume of essays collected by Brockman which focuses on the theatrical nature of Masonic ritual performance. However, the focus here is largely on the aesthetics of the Lodge and the ritual as a kind of dramatic art, rather than on the role of the esoteric symbolism itself.

[5] While not denying the value of each of these interpretations on a limited level, I will suggest a new approach to the problem of nineteenth century Masonry, and more importantly, to the problem of secrecy in the history of religions as a whole. Secrecy, I will argue, is best understood not in terms of its substance or content, but rather in terms of its *form* and the ways in which secrets are *concealed and exchanged*. Here I will adapt and modify some of the early insights of Georg Simmel, and his key notion of secrecy as an “*adorning possession*.” Rather than a simple mask for some alleged hidden content, secrecy, Simmel argues, is a sociological form which adorns the owner of concealed knowledge with the mark of social distinction or status. Like fine clothing or jewelry, secrecy simultaneously *conceals* even as it *reveals*, at once hiding certain aspects of its wearer from view and surrounding him with an aura of mystery, awe and power (337ff). Secrecy thus functions much like Pierre Bourdieu’s notion of “symbolic capital” - as a rare, scarce resource or valuable commodity, which confers a special kind of prestige and so determines one’s status within a given hierarchy of power (1977a, 1981).

[6] It is precisely this kind of adornment or capital, I submit, that attracted Pike and so many others to the arcane mysteries of the Lodge. Although Masonry, like other esoteric organizations, has frequently been attacked as a subversive, rebellious, or “counter-cultural” phenomenon (Tiryakian; Roszak),<sup>4</sup> more recent scholarship has shown that the Lodges were predominantly conservative, respectable, and elitist organizations. In contrast to many working class fraternal groups, the Masonic orders reinforced traditional values, conferred status and cemented business relations, primarily among white, native, middle and upper class males (Dumenil: 89ff).<sup>5</sup> As I will argue, Pike and others turned to the secret mysteries of the Lodge in large part as a means of reinforcing their own symbolic capital. It helped these white males to maintain their traditional status amidst the rapidly changing world of post-Civil War America, in the face of tremendous economic growth, racial integration, feminism, and other forces which threatened their long held privileges. Masonry offered a means of preserving the cherished American ideals of democracy and freedom, while at the same time maintaining a clear form of elitism and exclusivism. At the same time that it constructed an elaborate hierarchy of advancements, ostensibly based on “merit” and moral goodness, it also masked and re-coded deeper differences of wealth, class, sex, and race.

[7] After a theoretical discussion of the problem of secrecy, I will recount Pike’s life and his role in late nineteenth century Masonry. I will then examine three main strategies employed by Pike and his fellow Masons in their quest for symbolic capital: first, the creation of a new social space, which is ostensibly based on egalitarianism and meritocracy, but which in fact reproduces the status of a small elite; second, the preoccupation with esoteric symbolism, which creates a body of rare and valuable knowledge that can be exchanged as a source of symbolic capital; and third, the construction of an elaborate hierarchy of degrees, which offers a ladder of upward mobility and ever-increasing “distinction.”

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<sup>4</sup> Tiryakian comments, “As a spiritual reaction against the rationalistic-industrial-bureaucratic ethos of modern society, it is part of the counter-culture” (496).

<sup>5</sup> Similar arguments have been made in the case of English and European Freemasonry; see Jacob; Urban 1997. On the essentially elitist nature of other esoteric traditions, such as Kabbalah, see Scholem: 21f.

## The Adornment of Silence: Secrecy and Symbolic Capital

Among children, pride and bragging are often based on a child's being able to say to the other: I know something you don't know...This jealousy of the knowledge about facts hidden to others is sown in all contexts from the smallest to the largest. . . . The secret gives one a position of exception. . . . All superior persons . . . have something mysterious. From secrecy . . . grows the error according to which everything mysterious is something important and essential (Simmel: 332-33).

All men desire distinction, and feel the need of some ennobling object in life (Pike 1871: 349).

[8] The past several years have witnessed a remarkable proliferation of interest in the topics of secrecy and esotericism.<sup>6</sup> Not only in a variety of academic disciplines, but also in popular entertainment, cinema, media, or novels such as *Foucault's Pendulum* (and even, now, on the Internet), there appears to be a growing fascination with the tantalizing regions of the unknown and the occult. Yet perhaps rather fittingly, despite this growing interest in the topic, the subject of secrecy remains poorly understood and theoretically confused in the academic community. Among historians of religions, such as Mircea Eliade and Kees Bolle, the study of secrecy has remained disappointingly general, universalistic and largely divorced from social and historical context. Even Antoine Faivre's extensive work on Western esotericism takes virtually no account of the very real social and political contexts in which esoteric traditions emerge, and within which they are inextricably intertwined (see Urban 1998, in press).<sup>7</sup>

[9] This is not the place to enter into a full discussion of all the various theoretical approaches - sociological, psychological, political, literary, etc. - that have been applied to the study of secrecy. Here I will trust the lead of Beryl Bellman, T.M. Luhrmann, and others who have critically evaluated the diverse approaches, pointing out the problems and weaknesses of each.<sup>8</sup> As Bellman suggests, most past sociological approaches have been hampered by a persistent problem: namely, to define "secrecy" primarily in terms of a hidden "content", and then to construct various typologies based on the kind of content or on the effects of revealing secrets (1-2). Even as early as 1906, Simmel's classic study had pointed out the crucial distinction between the *form* and the *content* of secrecy: for secrecy is a "sociological form that stands in neutrality above the value functions of its contents" (331). Yet, Bellman argues, most studies of secrecy have ignored this distinction, and have instead remained satisfied with classifying the various contents or effects of secret information. On the one hand, scholars as diverse as Norman MacKenzie, E.J. Howsbawm, or Mak Lou Fong, have generated a wide variety of different, often conflicting, typological schemes based on the content of secrecy.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, there are

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<sup>6</sup> The term "esotericism" was first coined by Jacques Matter. The works on individual esoteric traditions are too numerous to cite here; for good overviews on Western esoteric traditions, see Yates; Faivre.

<sup>7</sup> Two important exceptions to this general trend are the recent edited volumes by Wolfson and Kippenberg and Stroumsa, which do make a better effort to address the social, historical and political contexts of esoteric traditions.

<sup>8</sup> For the major sociological approaches see Simmel; Tefft; Bonacich; Warren and Laslett. For discussions of the ethical issues involved in the concealment and revelation of secrets, see Urban 1998; Bok. For a nice literary analysis of secrecy in biblical hermeneutics, see Kermode. For the perennialist view, see Guénon; Schuon.

<sup>9</sup> According to MacKenzie, there are eight primary types: 1) Patriotic ; 2) Racial ; 3) Political ; 4) Economic ; 5) Civic ; 6) Religious ; 7) Military ; 8) Scientific; 8) Judicial; Mak Lou Fong uses R. K. Merton's sociological model

those like Edward Shils, in his classic study of McCarthyism and the dread of Communism, who have examined the effects of exposing concealed information (22ff).<sup>10</sup> However, neither of these approaches has proven particularly useful in understanding the more concrete role of secrecy in social relations; instead, Bellman suggests, they have contributed to a general confusion in the academic study of secrecy (1; see Urban 1998, in press).

[10] For my own part, I wish to suggest a new approach to the problem of secrecy by returning to some of Simmel's original insights and combining them with more recent insights of Bourdieu and Michel Foucault: it is more fruitful, I submit, to turn the focus of our analysis away from the content of secrecy and instead toward the *forms* and the *strategies* through which secret information is concealed, revealed, and exchanged. Here I wish to undertake a "theoretical shift," similar to the series of shifts undertaken by Foucault in his study of power and sexuality. In his investigation of the question of power, Foucault realized that he needed to turn from the study of "power" as an oppressive, substantial force, imposed from the "top down" in the political hierarchy, to a study of the *strategies* through which power is manifested. Power thus appears as a far more subtle, complex, and plural phenomenon, as a productive rather than an oppressive force, which is radiated from multiple points at all levels of the social organism.<sup>11</sup> So too, I would suggest that we undertake a theoretical shift away from the "secret" as simply a hidden content, and instead investigate the strategies or "games of truth," through which the complex "effect" of secrecy is constructed. That is to say, how is a given body of information endowed with the mystery, awe, power, and prized value of a "secret?" Under what circumstances, in what contexts, and through what relations of power is it exchanged? How does possession of that secret information affect the status and prestige of the "one who knows"? As Bellman has similarly argued in his work on the Poro society of Liberia:

[S]ecrets cannot be characterized either by the contents of the concealed message or by the consequences . . . they are understood by the *way* concealed information is withheld, restricted . . . and exposed. The practice of secrecy involves a do-not-talk-it proscription . . . that is contradicted by the fact that secrecy is . . . a sociological form . . . constituted by the very procedures whereby secrets are communicated (144; cf. Tefft: 321).

[11] As I wish to define it, secrecy is best understood as a social form, a strategy aimed at the effect of "adornment." The concept of secrecy as adornment, I submit, remains one of the most provocative, most useful, and also hitherto most ignored aspects of Georg Simmel's classic early study on secrecy, and one in most need of further development. As I wish to define it, secrecy or the controlled circulation of valued information serves to transform knowledge into something rare, a scarce resource. Like precious jewelry (figures 2 and 3) or expensive clothing (figures 4, 5,

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of the five modes of role adaptation: conformity, retreatism, ritualism, innovation and rebellion (11-12). For other typologies see Hobsbawm (30-107).

<sup>10</sup> Shils contrasts secrecy with "privacy" and "publicity" : whereas privacy refers to the voluntary withholding of information reinforced by willing indifference, secrecy refers to the "compulsory withholding of knowledge, reinforced by the prospect of sanctions for disclosure." He then argues that liberal democracy requires an "equilibrium of publicity, privacy and secrecy" and discusses the problems which ensue when this balance is disrupted (26-27).

<sup>11</sup> "A theoretical shift had been required to analyze . . . the manifestations of power; it led me to examine . . . the *open strategies and the rational techniques* that articulate the exercise of powers (Foucault 1986: 6).

6, and 7), it is a *covering*, something which *conceals or obscures* aspects of the physical person; but it is also an *ornament*, something which accentuates the person, and so serves as a mark of distinction and prestige. The secret, like a piece of fine jewelry or clothing, “radiates” a kind of aura of good taste, honor, and status which also masks the more real material and economic basis of its existence:

Adornment intensifies or enlarges the impression of the personality by operating as a sort of radiation emanating from it. . . . The radiations of adornment, the sensuous attention it provokes, supply the personality with such an enlargement of its sphere: the personality, so to speak *is* more when it is adorned (339-40).

[I]n the adorned body we possess more; if we have the adorned body at our disposal, we are masters over more and nobler things. . . . *Bodily adornment becomes private property above all*: it expands the ego and enlarges the sphere around us . . . which consists in the pleasure and the attention of our environment (344, my emphasis).

Adornment is thus a critical part of the larger process of *social transformation*: it is that mystifying process which turns ordinary material wealth (the possession of jewelry or clothing) into social wealth (the possession of prestige, dignity or respect): “Adornment is the means by which social power is transformed into visible, personal excellence” (343). So too, the “adornment of silence” that we find in secrecy likewise serves to transform the possession of certain valued knowledge into the possession of status and superiority.

[12] Here I would like to combine Simmel’s early notion of secrecy as adornment with Pierre Bourdieu’s more recent concept of symbolic capital (1986; cf. Calhoun). Extending Marx’s definition of the term, Bourdieu defines capital as including not only economic wealth, but also the nonmaterial resources of status, prestige, valued knowledge, and privileged relationships. It refers in short to “all goods, material and symbolic that present themselves as *rare* and worthy of being sought after in a particular social formation” (1977a: 178; cf. 1981: 118-19). Like economic capital, however, symbolic capital is not mere wealth which is simply hoarded and stockpiled; rather, it is a *self-reproducing* form of wealth - a kind of “accumulated labor,” which gives its owner a form of “credit,” or the ability to appropriate the labor and products of other agents (1986: 252ff). Symbolic capital is itself the product of a kind of “social alchemy,” a process of misrecognition, through which mere economic capital is transformed and legitimated in the form of status, class, or distinction. This is the process at work, for example, in the purchase of an expensive work of art, which confers the mark of taste upon its owner, or in the investment in a good education, which bestows cultivation and “cultural capital.” As such, the dynamics of the social field are determined largely by the strategies and maneuvers of agents in their ongoing competition for these symbolic resources:

Symbolic capital is the product of a struggle in which each agent is both a ruthless competitor and supreme judge. . . . This capital can only be defended by means of a permanent struggle to keep up with the group immediately above . . . and to distinguish oneself from the group below (1981: 123).

[13] In the context of an esoteric organization, two processes are at work that serve to transform secret knowledge into a kind of capital. First, the practice of secrecy and the strict guarding of information transforms knowledge into a scarce resource, a good that is “rare and worthy of being sought after.” To use Bourdieu’s terms, secrecy involves an extreme form of the “censorship”

which is imposed on all statements within the “market of symbolic goods.” For every individual censors his or her expressions in anticipation of their reception by the other members of the social field (1977b; 1984: 77). Secrecy, however, is an extreme form of *self-censorship* - a deliberate, self-imposed censorship - that occurs in a very specific linguistic market. Its function is to maximize the scarcity, value, and desirability of a given piece of knowledge. For “if you seek to *create* highly valued information . . . you must arrange worship so that few persons gain access to these truths” (Barth: 217). Likewise as Luhmann comments:

Secrecy is about control. It is about the individual possession of knowledge that others do not have. . . . Secrecy elevates the value of the thing concealed. That which is hidden grows desirable and seems powerful (161).

All knowledge is a form of property in that it can be possessed. Knowledge can be given, acquired, even sold . . . like the difference between private and public property, it is secret knowledge that evokes the sense of possession most clearly (137).

[14] As Lamont Lindstrom has suggested in his work on the peoples of Tanna in the South Pacific, secrecy is a central part of the “conversational economy” which constitutes every social order. The practice of secrecy serves to transform certain information into something that can be owned, exchanged, accumulated - “a commodity, something that can be bought and sold” (xii-xiii). As such, what is important about secrets is not the hidden meanings they profess to contain, but rather, the complex “economy of exchanges” or the resale value which secrets have as a commodity of knowledge and power within a given “information market”:

Secrets turn knowledge into property that can be exchanged. People...swap or sell their secrets and/or their knowledge copyrights for . . . money and other goods. Marketable information of this sort includes, spells, medicines, songs, metaphorical words with new meaning. . . . By preserving pattern of ignorance within the information market, secrecy fuels talk between people who do not know and those who do (119).

[15] Secondly, once it has been converted into this kind of scarce resource or valuable commodity, secret knowledge can serve as a source of “symbolic capital” in Bourdieu’s sense of the term, as a form of status and power which can be accumulated by social actors, and which is recognized as “legitimate” by others within a given social field. As Simmel himself had long ago pointed out, “*The secret gives one a position of exception*. . . . [A]ll superior persons have something mysterious” (337). Secret knowledge thereby functions both as a form of both “cultural capital” - that is, as special information or “legitimate knowledge”, which purports to be the key to inner gnosis - and as a form of “social capital” - that is, a sign of membership within a specific community, and of hierarchical relationships with significant others (e.g. between the master who holds esoteric knowledge and the initiate to whom it is given). Particularly when combined with a series of initiations or a hierarchy of grades, this is, like all capital, a *self-reproducing* form of wealth, which grows increasingly more profound and powerful as one advances in the ranks of esoteric knowledge and ritual degrees.

[16] However, in distinction to most of the forms of “capital” which Bourdieu discusses, the symbolic goods of the secret society can only be exchanged behind closed doors, in the esoteric realm of ritual. Secret knowledge is not valued and exchanged publicly in mainstream society or in the field of exoteric relations, but solely within the field of the esoteric society. Hence we

might even call it a kind of “black market symbolic capital,” a form of capital which is valued only in special circumstances outside of ordinary social transactions. Indeed, in some cases, this knowledge may even be considered dangerous, threatening, or illegal in the eyes of mainstream society. This danger, however, only makes it all the more powerful, valuable, and desirable.

[17] As such, the strategy of secrecy may be employed for a variety of different social interests. It may be used by the ruling elite to reinforce a particular social arrangement or hierarchy of power, but it may also be used by subordinate and marginalized groups to subvert, challenge, or undermine such hierarchies. In Foucault’s words, “silence and secrecy are a shelter for power, anchoring its prohibitions; but they also loosen its hold and provide for areas of tolerance” (1978: 101). Unfortunately, most past literature on secrecy has tended to exaggerate its revolutionary, subversive, anti-establishment potential (Tiryakian; Hobsbawm). I shall argue, on the contrary, that secrecy is very often, perhaps even more commonly, employed by the ruling elites and powerful aristocracies. Tactics of secrecy very often “work within an established body of tradition which is designed, *not to disrupt order and conformity, but to reinforce it*” (Davis: 284).<sup>12</sup> In Bourdieu’s terms, the mystery surrounding secret knowledge is a powerful expression of that “social alchemy” - that mystification and misrecognition, which transforms the arbitrary arrangements of society and asymmetrical relations of power into something that appears “legitimate” or even “natural” (1977a: 171-97).

### **The Moses of American Freemasonry: The Life and Works of Albert Pike**

The disenfranchised people of the South, robbed of all the guarantees of the Constitution . . . can find no protection for property, liberty or life except in secret association (Pike in W. Brown 1997: 440).

[18] Albert Pike (figure 1) stands out as a striking example of the role of secrecy and esoteric knowledge as a source of symbolic power. Famed in his youth as an adventurer and “one of the most remarkable characters in the annals of the Southwest,” Pike was revered in his later years as the greatest authority on Masonry and the foremost proponent of the esoteric traditions of the Scottish Rite (W. Brown 1997: 417ff; Fox: 89ff). Born in Boston in 1809, the son of an irreverent, alcoholic cobbler and an extremely pious, puritanical mother, he was from his youth a man of striking extremes and contradictions. Although he attended Harvard in 1821, he was soon forced to leave when he was unable to pay his tuition. Hence, he decided in 1824 to ignore his mother’s wish that he become a minister in order to live an adventurer’s life in the Southwest: he rode on wagon trains, survived snow storms, nearly froze to death, and fought Indians, all the while exulting in these hardships, for “he longed to share in the unconstrained life of the noble savage” (Carnes 1989: 136). He was known, moreover, for his wild parties, his skill in seducing women, and for his tremendous physical and sexual appetites (he is said to have weighed over 300 pounds in full manhood).

Torn by extremes represented by his irreverent father and pious mother, Pike initially pursued a quest for manly assertion reflected in frontier adventures, the

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<sup>12</sup> As Simmel comments, “This significance of the secret society as the intensification of sociological exclusiveness is strikingly shown in political aristocracies. Secrecy has always been among the requirements of their regime. . . . By trying to conceal the numerical insignificance of the ruling class, aristocracies exploit the psychological fact that the unknown appears to be fearsome, mighty threatening” (365).



pursuit of wealth and military glory, gastronomic and sexual excess (Carnes 1989: 138).

[19] In 1831, Pike returned to the East, where he studied law and was admitted to the Bar in 1836. Famed for his heroism in the Southwest, Pike quickly built up a new reputation among the wealthy society of Little Rock where he was extremely active and respected in the law, journalism, and the politics of the day. However, the real turning point in his life did not occur until he entered the Confederate army during the Civil War, where he held the rank of Brigadier General, and was placed in command of the Indian regiments. Pike suddenly became the center of an enormous scandal when the Indians under his charge killed and mutilated the bodies of the Union soldiers. At the war's end, Pike was blamed for the incident - by both Union and Confederate sides - and denounced as the most malevolent of rebels, charged with disobeying commands and inciting the Indians to revolt. His former wealth and property were confiscated, and along with them his former status and prestige. Fleeing civilized humanity, Pike withdrew into the hills of Arkansas and lived as a hermit in the wilderness. It was not until 1869 that he was publicly pardoned and allowed to return to society (W. Brown 1997: 443ff).

[20] One of the most controversial and troubling questions in Pike's life is his possible involvement in another infamous secret brotherhood which also emerged in the South during the post-war years - the Ku Klux Klan - and the possible links between the Scottish Rite and the secret rituals of the Klan. Indeed, many critics have long charged Pike as not only a member, but even as a founding father of the KKK (see Wade: 58n). As Walter Lee Brown has shown, there is no concrete evidence that Pike was ever actually a member or he even had particularly close ties to the Klan. However, given his political stance, his shattered social and economic position, and his hostility to the Negro suffrage movement, it is not difficult to imagine that he would have been deeply sympathetic to such a group: "one might reasonably surmise that Pike, considering his strong aversion to Negro suffrage and his frustration at his own political impotence, would not have stood back from the Klan" (1955: 783; cf. Fox: 81-82). As far as is known, Pike only refers to the Klan once in any printed document, in an editorial to the *Memphis Daily Appeal* in 1868, where his comments are somewhat critical, but still largely sympathetic to the cause of the Klan, suggesting that its main problems lie not in its aims, but in its methods and leadership: "We do not know what the Ku Klux organization may become. . . . It is quite certain that it will never come to much on its original plan. It must become quite another thing to be efficient" (cited in W. Brown 1997: 439). In fact, Pike goes on in the same article to call for something even greater than the Klan - a great Order of Southern Brotherhood, uniting all white men of the South in a secret fraternity to defend their traditional property and power and to work against the Negro cause:

The disenfranchised people of the South, robbed of all the guarantees of the Constitution . . . can find no protection for property, liberty or life except in secret association. . . . If it were in our power . . . we would unite every white man in the South, who is opposed to Negro suffrage, into one great Order of Southern Brotherhood, with an organization complete, active, vigorous, in which a few should execute the concentrated will of all, and whose very existence should be concealed from all but its members. That has been the resort of the oppressed in all ages (cited in W. Brown 1997: 440).

It was perhaps in his search of such a "resort of the oppressed" that Pike and many other white men of post-Civil War America turned to the secret traditions of the Masonic Lodge.

[21] Upon his return to civilization, Pike began to immerse himself in the study of the most arcane and occult secrets of the world's esoteric traditions - Kabbalah, Gnosticism, alchemy, Templar traditions, as well as Indian religions, Zoroastrianism, and the Greek Mysteries.<sup>13</sup> Withdrawing from his public sphere of military career and law, it seems, Pike turned inward to the inner realm of mystery, rite, and symbol:

Pike's life was in ruin. He faced charges of inciting the Indians to revolt, and his property was confiscated by Union officers. He had squandered his fortune, and his marriage had disintegrated. . . . Pike sought to refract his experiences through the wisdom of the ancients. . . . He scoured the classic religious texts...Latin sources, the Zend Avesta and the Indian Vedas, studying the Cabala and the gnostics (Carnes 1989: 137).

Above all, Pike began to turn to the lore of Freemasonry, which he saw as both the continuation and culmination of these many ancient esoteric traditions. Pike is commonly regarded as the single most important figure in the history of American Masonry, the "Moses and Second Creator" of the Lodge, who "smote the rock of chaos and brought forth a system of morality more perfect than was ever built by human hands" (Richardson: 26; cf. Newton: 3; Oxford: 60). Above all, Pike began to expound the highest mysteries of the tradition, as they were embodied in the most arcane, most elaborate initiations of the "Scottish Rite."<sup>14</sup>

[22] Pike, I would suggest, is a striking exemplar of a much broader trend taking place in late nineteenth century America. As Dumenil, Clawson and others have argued, the sudden popularity of the Lodge in the late nineteenth century was closely related to the rapidly changing social and economic context of post-Civil War America. "The period from the 1870s to the 1890s was one of prolonged, intense, bitter class conflict. . . . Yet it also witnessed the growth of fraternal orders that attracted a membership of massive proportions" (Clawson 1984: 6-7; cf. Wiebe: 1-75). This was a period that saw rapid change on all levels - the growth of an increasingly heterogeneous society, the break up of small town communities, enormous technological changes, and national corporations which undermined local businesses. At the same time, the homogeneity of white Protestant society was shattered by the influx of blacks and immigrants, who did not always share the values of middle class American culture. As we see throughout Masonic writings of the late nineteenth century, there were growing fears of

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<sup>13</sup> On the historical origins of Freemasonry, see Yates: 209ff; Stevenson: 78ff; Knoop and Jones. Yates believes that the first speculative Masons were Elias Ashmole - a known Hermeticist and Rosicrucian who was admitted into a craft lodge in 1646 - and Robert Moray - who was admitted into lodge in Edinburgh in 1641. Both Moray and Ashmole later became members of the Royal Society. Stevenson locates its origins much earlier, around 1600 in Scotland, with the admission of Robert Schaw into an operative lodge (232-33). Yates suggests a link between the Rosicrucians and Freemasons, through which the mysteries of mathematics, architecture, and the arts of memory were shared. The Rosicrucian influence seems to have entered Masonry through Ashmole, while the Templar legend was adopted through Andre Michel Ramsey (1686-1743), who brought this lore within him from Scotland.

<sup>14</sup> The so-called "Scottish" Rites emerged in France in the mid 18th century as a reformist movement, which attempted to restore what they saw as the original spirit of Masonry, including a more elaborate hierarchy and ritual. Some believe that this movement was begun by Chevalier Ramsay, who introduced the Templar mythology and other occult elements to France in 1736. See Ames: 21ff; Naudon; Lantoine.

“Pandemonium, confusion, strife” and the destruction of all stable values of traditional America.<sup>15</sup>

[23] Many upper and middle class males also appear to have been seeking an alternative to the mainstream Protestant churches of the late nineteenth century. As Dumenil and others have pointed out, the churches of the post-Civil War era began to worry increasingly about their lack of influence over the urban masses (particularly Jewish, Catholic, and non-English speaking immigrants) who constituted a large sector outside the pale of American Protestantism (Mead: 134; Carter; Ahlstrom: 763-84). There was a growing effort among the Churches to attract and accommodate these groups. At the same time, as a wide range of scholars have shown, the Protestant Churches of the late nineteenth century were becoming increasingly dominated by women and women’s concerns. During a period in which two-thirds of all Protestants were women, the Church came to be identified as the “woman’s realm,” the “private sphere” of domesticity, children, and morality. For many white, middle and upper class males, all of this signified that the church had been “emasculated,” “feminized,” and robbed of its traditional “American” (i.e. white, native, male) values (Hackett: 131; cf. Carnes 1989: 77; Braude; Cott; Sweet).

[24] Amidst this increasingly pluralistic world, Dumenil suggests, the Masonic Lodge offered a model of a harmonious society, free from the increasing chaos of the outside world, where white, native American males still formed a homogenous and well-governed society. The Lodge provided a vision of traditional values, as well as respectability and prestige, for many males who felt profoundly threatened by the changes taking place around them:

The importance of Masonry’s commitment to morality and its promise of respectability can be understood in the context of late nineteenth century Americans’ struggle to maintain their traditional ideology in the face of an increasingly disordered world (88).

[25] Pike’s classic text, *Morals and Dogma of the Ancient Accepted Scottish Rite of Freemasonry* (1871) stands out as the single most important work of nineteenth century American Masonry. By no means simply a commentary on a set of arcane rituals, it is very much a *political* document, which constantly reminds the Mason of the direct relevance of the Craft for society and just government. In fact, the first three chapters of the text contain at least as much discussion of government and nineteenth century politics as they do an explication of Masonic symbolism; and the entire third degree of Master seems to be an exhortation to men of public office, warning against the dangers of political misrule and advocating the virtues of proper governance (1871: 62-105). Pike’s work makes it clear that Freemasonry is anything but a rebellious or subversive movement (as it has often been accused); rather, it claims to be the fullest embodiment of true “American” values.<sup>16</sup> The text is, moreover, filled with powerful criticisms of the social and political world around him, as well as a call to all good men to join the well-governed society of the Lodge. Bemoaning the weakness of the men of his time and

<sup>15</sup> As Henry Highton said in his address, “The Function of Freemasonry in Modern Society” (1883): “Ancient, changeless, it is the very type of immutable law. . . . It insists upon order and subordination, because without them the world would be a Pandemonium . . . there would be little else than confusion and strife” (Dumenil: 93).

<sup>16</sup> “Masonry had a tangible appeal rooted in the order’s ability to confer respectability. Far from being suspect as a cable of . . . libertines and subversives, Masonry was a prestigious organization. Joining masonry was the accepted thing to do” (Dumenil: 30).

warning of the danger of losing their freedom, he observes that “there are certainly great evils of civilization at this day,” that “this nation is in distress,” that “fraud, falsehood and deceit in national affairs are the signs of decadence” and that contemporary politics, both in America and in Europe, have become “selfish and driven by greed.” The nation has become “feminine,” passive, emasculated, as “the effete State floats on down the puddled stream of time. . . . The worm has consumed its strength and it crumbles into oblivion” (1871: 837, 67-68, 83, 33).

[26] For Pike, the Lodge is nothing other than the ideal society, the model of the perfect, just government - the “Holy Empire.” For the Lodge represents the perfect wedding of the sovereignty and freedom of the individual with fellowship and equality for all:

Masonry is a march and struggle toward light. For the individual as well the nation, Light is virtue, manliness, intelligence, liberty. . . . The freest people, like the freest man, is always in danger of relapsing into servitude (1871: 32).

From the political point of view there is but a single principle - the sovereignty of Man over himself. The sovereignty of oneself over one’s self is liberty. . . . The concession which each makes to all is Equality. . . . The protection of each by all is Fraternity (1871: 43).

As Pike portrays it, Masonry alone remains un-feminized and preserves the strength and autonomy of the individual: “Masonry, un-emasculated, bore the banners of Freedom and Equal Rights, in rebellion against tyranny” (1871: 50).

[27] In sum, it is not difficult to understand why Pike and so many others like him would have been attracted to the rituals of Masonry in the late nineteenth century: As the image of the ideal “American” social order, the Lodge was a social space in which white, native, Protestant males could retain their long held authority and status. However as we will now see, these ideals could only be reserved for the elite few by excluding the profane masses outside of the brotherhood, by enshrouding the Lodge in secrecy and symbolism, and by constructing an elaborate hierarchical system of promotions and degrees.

### **The Lodge as a New Social Space: Egalitarianism, Elitism and Meritocracy**

A good Mason . . . is said to live upon the level with all men. *Yet Freemasons are by no means Levellers . . . order and subordination are requisite for the welfare of society* (Reverend James Smith in Jacob: 64-65; my emphasis).

[28] Throughout the Lodges of the late nineteenth century, we are confronted by a persistent ambivalence and a double-edged rhetoric. On one hand, the Lodges tirelessly proclaim the virtues of Masonry as an egalitarian, democratic institution, in which men of all castes and creeds join together as free equals. But on the other hand, as most every historian of freemasonry admits, the lodges were predominantly comprised of upper and middle class, white native males; moreover, they often clearly served to reinforce the power and privileges of a small elite, while excluding other groups, such as blacks, immigrants, and lower classes. As we will see, the key to this double edged logic is the claim that the Lodge represents a form of “meritocracy:” it is a

hierarchical structure based, ostensibly, on the acquisition of virtue and moral excellence, but which, in fact, serves to mask and recode deeper forms of elitism, nativism, and racism.<sup>17</sup>

[29] Like most Masonic works, Pike's writings celebrate the ideals of equality and the brotherhood of all mankind. The Lodge is hailed as the embodiment of the unity of all mankind and unity of all religions, which is in fact even older than Christianity, Islam, and other world religions. "Freemasonry is one faith, one common star around which men of all tongues assemble" (Whalen: 10). It was, moreover, on precisely this point that Pike took issue with the Catholic Pope. Whereas the Catholic Church excludes all who do not belong to its own institutions, the Lodge opens its arms to all sects and creeds, recognizing that every man is free to choose his own religion: "No man has any right to interfere with the beliefs of another . . . each man is absolutely sovereign as to his own belief . . . opening wide its portal it invites . . . the Protestant, the Catholic, the Jew, and the Moslem" (Allsopp: 263-64). As such, Pike believes that Masonry is not only compatible with, but is the true fulfillment of, the ideals of democracy and freedom represented by the American system of government.

[30] Yet despite this apparently liberating democratic ideal, Pike and his Masonic brethren were generally far from egalitarian. As Margaret Jacob and others have argued in the case of European Masonry, the constant rhetoric of egalitarianism, democracy, and meritocracy is for the most part rather superficial. More often than not, it actually served to mask deeper asymmetries and social hierarchies. Even though "cosmopolitanism and natural equality are the obligatory themes of all the harangues of the Lodges," the European Lodges were usually far from "democratic," but were predominantly aristocratic and highly elitist organizations.

Fraternal binding also obscured the social divisions and inequities of rank endemic to the lives of men who embraced "equality" and "liberty." In making social divisions less obvious freemasonry ironically served to reinforce them. . . . They obfuscated the real divisions of wealth, education and social practice (Jacob: 45).

[31] As Dumenil points out in the case of American Masonry, even though the Masons insist on their universality and tolerance of all classes, the Lodges were a predominantly white, middle class, Protestant male phenomenon. Unlike many working class fraternal orders, the Masonic Lodges drew an estimated 75 percent of their membership from white-collar workers. In fact, the various dues demanded of the Masons were generally far beyond the financial means of most blue collar men. In the Lodges which Dumenil studied, for example, the initiation fees ranged from \$50 to \$100, with dues from \$6-12 dollars; most blue collar workers at that time earned only about \$570 annually, meaning that few if any could afford membership.

Masons insisted that their order was committed to the principle of *universality*, which they defined as the association of good men without regard to religion, nationality or class. . . . Although Masonic principles theoretically allowed for heterogeneity, the fraternity was predominantly a white, native Protestant middle class organization (13).

Throughout Masonic rhetoric, moreover, we find a clear disdain for the common, ordinary dullards - the "profane" - outside the sanctuary of the Lodge: "Masons distinguish between the

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<sup>17</sup> On this point, see Lincoln: "Egalitarianism . . . is never a simple matter, there being a multitude of ways in which hierarchy may be reasserted, the most egalitarian of claims and intentions notwithstanding" (85).

sacred world of Masonry and the external world of the profanes . . . they contrasted the stability of their fraternity with the disorder of American society” (Dumenil: xiii; Jacob: 123).

[32] As we see in the writings of Pike and many other American Masons moreover, there is often a significant and rather disturbing element of racism in the Lodge. Despite the fact that there were, by the late nineteenth century, a number of Black Masonic orders, these were seldom recognized as “legitimate” or authentic by the white Lodges. Even though Pike himself had declared that “Freemasonry is one faith . . . around which men of all tongues assemble,” nevertheless, he also forcefully declared, “I took my obligation to white men, not Negroes. When I have to accept Negroes as brethren or leave Masonry I shall leave it” (cited in Whalen: 10). Although, as we have seen, there is no evidence that Pike himself was ever formally involved with the Ku Klux Klan, it is clear that he was in many ways sympathetic to the Klan’s agenda and its defense of traditional white Southern values (W. Brown 1997: 439ff). Throughout the latter nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, there was often a disturbingly close relationship between the Lodge and the Klan: after all, both groups shared common ideals of true Americanism and a common suspicion of those racial and cultural groups - Negroes, Jews, immigrants - who did not accept what they regarded as essential American values:

Although Masonry was less virulent in its Americanism campaign than the Ku Klux Klan . . . both organizations shared some of the same goals. Dismayed by all the factions disturbing America’s harmony, both called for unity in American life. But this unity . . . meant conformity to their vision of American ideals, which included political and social dominance of their own kind (Dumenil: 147).

Rather than opening their doors to men of all races and social classes, creating an egalitarian utopian society, the Lodges were more often highly exclusive clubs, the membership of which was carefully selected, and which offered very clear avenues to achieving status, distinction, and social connections: “membership carried tangible benefits. Businessmen made contacts, cultivated credit sources, and gained access to a nationwide network of lodges. Ambitious young men could socialize with their bosses” (Carnes 1989: 2).

[33] As I wish to argue , Pike and others became interested in the rituals of Masonry as a means of resolving a number of profound tensions faced by many affluent males of late nineteenth century America - above all, the tension between the ideal of democracy and brotherhood, on one the hand, and the wish to reinforce their own elite privileges, on the other. The solution is to construct, within the esoteric space of the Lodge, an alternative hierarchy of status, one which is ostensibly a “meritocracy.” In other words, a man gains status in the lodge, not because he comes from a good family or has economic wealth, but because he is a “good man,” a virtuous individual who has proven himself through good works and character.

[34] In this way, the hierarchy of the Lodge not only complemented but in many ways *reinforced and reproduced* existing social and economic hierarchies. In Bourdieu’s terms, we would say that the rhetoric of “merit” serves to bestow a form of symbolic capital upon the Mason, and this in turn legitimates deeper asymmetries of power and economic capital in society. Elites in all cultures, Bourdieu suggests, must constantly exercise the greatest “ingenuity to disguising the truth of economic acts” - that is, to make their economic and political dominance appear to be based on something else, such as merit, taste, or virtue. Through a kind of “social alchemy” “economic capital is made to appear “legitimate,” becoming transformed into “symbolic capital” by means of acts of charity, public displays of generosity, patronage of the arts, etc. (1981: 114).

Bourdieu describes a similar process at work in the modern educational system. Whereas the educational system purports to be a democratic system, a form of “meritocracy” based on the progressive acquisition of valuable knowledge, it in fact reinforces the power of the dominant classes. Providing the dominant classes with a “theodicy of their own privilege,” it transforms their economic capital into a form of “cultural capital” - a degree, linguistic skills, a fluency in art, and other cultural forms - which in turn justifies their status in the social hierarchy, making it appear “legitimate” or “natural” (1981: 133). The dominant class thus appears to be dominant, not simply because it possesses economic capital, but because it possesses distinction, taste, and valued knowledge:

The importance of institutionalized knowledge and qualifications lies in social exclusion rather than . . . humanistic advance. They legitimate and reproduce a class society. A seemingly democratic currency has replaced real capital as the social arbiter in modern society. . . . It is the exclusive “cultural capital” - knowledge and skill in the manipulation of language - of the dominant groups which ensures . . . the reproduction of class position. This is because educational advancement is controlled by the “fair” meritocratic testing of precisely those skills which cultural capital provides (Willis: 128).

In a similar way, I submit, the elaborate system of advancements in Scottish Rite masonry functioned to bestow a kind of cultural capital upon the initiate, a new status, and reputation as a virtuous, charitable, upstanding individual. Under the appearance of a meritocratic system, it helped to legitimate and naturalize the power of the dominant classes.

### **Symbolism and Secrecy: The Creation of Scarce Resources of Knowledge and Power**

Knowledge is the most genuine and real of human treasures; for it is Light and Ignorance darkness. Secrecy is indispensable in a Mason of whatever degree. It is the first . . . lesson taught to the Entered Apprentice (Pike 1871: 107, 109).

The great secrecy observed by the initiated Priests . . . and the lofty sciences which they professed, caused them to be honored and respected throughout all Egypt. . . . The mystery which surrounded them strongly excited curiosity (Pike 1871: 365).

[35] The primary mechanism for accumulating symbolic capital within the Masonic tradition is through secrecy and esoteric symbolism. Like the mysteries of the Greeks or the occult symbols of the Egyptians, Masonic truths are too profound to be conveyed in plain literal language. Rather, they must be transmitted through obscure, often seemingly nonsensical symbols and enigmas, for there are “thoughts and ideas which no language ever spoken by man has words to express.” Moreover, secrecy and symbolism have been necessary to preserve the most precious teachings from corruption by the institutional church or tyrannical governments:

When despotism and superstition . . . reigned everywhere, it invented, to avoid persecution, the mysteries, the symbol and the emblem and transmitted the doctrines by secret initiation. Now it smiles at the puny efforts of kings and popes to crush it (Pike 1871: 221).

Because they are so precious and so potentially dangerous, Pike warns, the Masonic secrets must be reserved solely for those who are properly initiated. One must be of the proper moral and intellectual calibre to be entrusted with the possession of this awesome sacred knowledge. For

those ignorant souls who lack these qualifications, the elaborate symbols and hermetic interpretations of Masonry are designed, not to lead them closer to the Truth, but, on the contrary, to confuse, mislead, and misdirect them away from the innermost secrets of the Craft:

Masonry, like all religions, all the Mysteries . . . *conceals* its secrets from all except the Adepts and Sages or the Elect and uses false explanations and misinterpretations of its symbols to mislead those who deserve only to be misled; to conceal the Truth . . . from them and to draw them away from it. . . . So Masonry jealously conceals its secrets and intentionally leads conceited interpreters astray (Pike 1871: 104-5).

[36] Yet, despite these repeated warnings, it would seem that the secret symbols of Masonry are, in themselves, really not particularly shocking or remarkable; in fact, most of them would seem rather mundane: “many people who take the oath would be hard pressed to define what they are supposed to keep secret, unless it is simply the ritual steps, signs, and passwords. These have long been accessible to any outsider who cares to do a little research in a good library” (MacKenzie: 176). So why is it that they need to be surrounded with such an enormous amount of secrecy, occultism, and mystery? As I would argue, it is precisely all this secrecy and ritual ornament - this “adornment of silence” - which functions to *transform the otherwise fairly mundane and unremarkable body of Masonic teachings into a rare, scarce and highly valued commodity* (see Barth: 217; Luhrmann: 161; Urban). They create a precious resource, one which *grows in value and buying power* the further one advances in the Lodge.

[37] A complete analysis of all the various symbols - not to mention all the levels of interpretation and hidden meaning - in Pike’s system would require a study at least as massive as the *Morals and Dogma* itself. Let it suffice here simply to mention a few of the more important symbols. The Lodge itself (figures 8 and 9) is a great Temple full of symbols, patterned after the Temple of Solomon, which mirrors the great cosmic Temple of God’s universe; its two main pillars, called by the biblical names Jachim and Boaz (figure 10), symbolize the primordial opposition of the positive and negative forces of creation - male and female, light and darkness, sun and moon, heaven and earth. For “every lodge is a temple, and as a whole symbolic. . . . The arrangement of the Temple of Solomon, the symbolic ornaments which formed its decorations, all had referents to the Order of the universe” (Pike 1871: 7). Constructed of four hierarchical levels, the Lodge is then correlated with the initial Masonic grades (the blue Grades of Tyler, Warden, Master, and the Divinity above them), with the four dimensions of the cosmos (the physical, psychic, heavenly, and divine worlds). As one ascends each of the initiations, the secret symbols of the Masonic tradition are revealed in a progressive and hierarchical order. At each grade, a new set of secrets is entrusted to him, and it is largely the possession of this valued information - this cultural capital - which defines the Mason’s place within the hierarchy. In the first degree of Apprentice, for example, the initiate is instructed in the meanings of the Gavel, the Chisel, and the 24 inch Gauge, which represent the faculties of passion, analysis, and measured choice; in the second degree, he is taught the significance of the level, plumbline, and square (figure 11), which symbolize respectively the standards of justice, mercy, and truth; finally, in the third degree, he is taught the inner meaning of the compass, pencil, and skirrett, representing his capacity for creativity, understanding, and balanced judgment. Beyond these initial, rudimentary symbols, as one passes into the esoteric grades of the Scottish Rite, the symbols multiply profusely. From his eclectic readings of the world’s sacred texts, Pike conceives an



elaborate symbolic tapestry, woven not only from the imagery of the Craft, but also from alchemical, Kabbalistic and Templar lore (see Blanchard; Naudon: 235-36).

[38] Yet even though he devotes hundreds of pages to elaborating their meaning, Pike repeatedly warns that the secret symbols of the Lodge can never be reduced to a final interpretation. Indeed, their power lies precisely in the fact that they transcend the limits of ordinary human thought. These are secrets which “no language ever spoken by man has words to express.” Ultimately, the *content* of the symbols is not the most important factor: what is important is the *effect* of the symbols on the initiate, their *affective power* in generating awe, mystery and the sense of the hidden power of the Masonic tradition. For “even if members failed to comprehend the nuances of the rituals, the symbols evoked an appropriate *feeling*” (Pike 1871: 22; cf. Carnes 1989: 35). As I would argue, what is important about secrets is not primarily the occult knowledge they profess to contain, but rather, the *ways in which secrets are exchanged, the mechanisms of power through which they are conferred*, and above all, *the kind of status and “symbolic capital,” which the possession of secret information bestows upon the individual*. The content is not, of course, entirely arbitrary or meaningless, but its importance is secondary to its function as a source of symbolic power. Pike himself seems to say as much when he describes the awesome power of the “Grand Arcanum” - a secret so profound it cannot be expressed in any form, a secret so dangerous it would destroy those who reveal it, a secret so precious because it is the source of both knowledge and power:

[T]he Grand Arcanum [is] that secret whose revelation would overturn Earth and Heaven. Let no one expect us to give them its explanation! He who passes behind the veil that hides this mystery understands that it is in its very nature inexplicable, and that it is death to those who win it by surprise as well as to him who reveals it. This secret is the Royalty of the Sages, the Crown of the Initiate (1871: 101).

[39] Not only are the numbers of symbols unlimited, but the levels of interpretation, which become progressively more mysterious, are equally endless. At each grade of initiation, in fact, the previous truths of the earlier grades are stripped away, shown to be limited, relative, teachings for the immature, while the deeper truth lies beyond. Pursuit of knowledge becomes like peeling the layers of an onion, or exploring a set of Chinese boxes: information on one level is the deceitful cover that creates another kind of truth at a deeper level (see Barth: 82). The truth, Pike suggests, is so easily profaned that it must be intentionally obfuscated or concealed from low-level initiates, and reserved solely for the better prepared adepts.

The Blue Degrees are but the outer court of the Temple. Part of the symbols are displayed to the initiate, but *he is intentionally misled by false interpretations*. It is not intended that he shall understand them, but that he shall imagine he understands them. Their true explication is reserved for the Adepts (1871: 819; my emphasis).

Indeed, even at the penultimate, thirty-second grade of the Sublime Secret, the candidate is not actually told the deepest, innermost meaning of Masonic symbols; rather, he is instructed that many symbols had still deeper meanings and ties to ancient mysteries, but that he had “succeeded in obtaining but a few hints” and could “communicate no more to you” (Blanchard: 438).

[40] In short, this system of progressive unveiling, this peeling of the layers of secrecy, insures that the power and symbolic value of the secret as a precious commodity always remains in tact. It remains a source of mystery and a scarce resource, precisely because the Mason can never know its final meaning, but must continue ascending grades of initiation, ever uncovering deeper levels of truth. "Symbolism tended continually to become more complicated; all the powers of Heaven were reproduced on earth, until a web of fiction and allegory was woven . . . which the wit of man . . . will never unravel" (Pike 1871: 63). Hence esoteric knowledge always remains a valuable commodity, and, like all capital, *the symbolic capital produced by the possession of this commodity continues to grow and reproduce as one ascends in rank and status.*

### **Initiation, Hierarchy, and Status: Ascending Grades of Secrecy and Power**

The fact that a man was connected with the Institution ought to be a passport into any respectable society (*The Trestleboard*, 11 [May 1897]: 213-14).

Among men, some govern, others serve, capital commands and labor obeys, and one race, superior in intellect, avails itself of the strong muscles of another that is inferior (Pike 1871: 829)

[41] The third strategy I wish to examine is the construction of an initiatic hierarchy, a graded structure of ranks, which the Mason ascends as he rises in esoteric knowledge. By being initiated into the Masonic secrets, the novice gains a new identity, which is inscribed as a subordinate limb within the hierarchical body of the Lodge ("Power in our Rite *descends* from the summit," as Pike put it [Letter March 11, 1866, in W. Brown 1997: 423]). Yet at the same time, this hierarchy also becomes a "ladder of symbolic capital," a means to upward mobility which confers increasing status and power upon the Mason (see Moore: 31-32; Clawson 1996: 53-54).

[42] The Scottish Rite is the most elaborate and complex of all Masonic traditions. Whereas most Masonic orders have just three grades - the Blue grades of Apprentice, Fellow, and Master - the Scottish Rite adds an additional thirty, increasingly more mysterious levels of initiation (figure 12). The first three grades, as we have seen above, contain the more basic teachings of morality, loyalty, and obedience, as the novice is taught the meaning of key Masonic symbols and the symbolism of architecture. The third level of Master involves the important initiatory process of death and rebirth (figures 13 and 14), whereby the Mason dies to his old identity in the exoteric world and is reborn into a new identity within the Lodge. The brothers reenact the legendary narrative of Hiram Abiff - the architect who knew the secret of Solomon's temple and was killed by assassins for the sake of his knowledge. In the process, the initiate himself undergoes a symbolic death and rebirth, now grafted as a limb onto the greater hierarchical body of the Lodge (see Blanchard: 438ff).

[43] Once he passes beyond the first three lower grades, having undergone this death and rebirth into a new identity, the Mason enters into the more elaborate hierarchy of the thirty higher grades. These more secret initiations are conceived on the model of an intricate architectonic structure, a great pyramid of increasingly prestigious ranks. We need not analyze all thirty of these here - which begin with the grade of Secret Master and extend to the highest, most powerful grades of Grand Inspector, Inquisitor Commander, the Sublime Prince of the Royal Secret, and Sovereign Grand Commander. What is important to note is, first, that these progressively esoteric grades create a complex "map" or structural model of the ideal social order, an order based on ever more esoteric degrees of knowledge, and ever increasing levels of

status (Moore: 31ff). At the grade of the Sublime Secret, for example, the Commander leads the candidate to the west end of the lodge, where a series of complex geometric figures are drawn upon the floor. First, there is a nonagon, around which the other members stand, which is said to be “symbolic of an encampment of the Masonic army.” Having been informed that he will now learn the most esoteric meaning of the order, the candidate then circumambulates the nonagon twice. The figure is surrounded by a series of nine flags, and at each flag, the Commander explains the meaning of the first eighteen grades. He then reveals to the candidate a drawing of a nonagon, within which are inscribed several smaller geometric figures - a septagon, which symbolizes the nineteenth through twenty-fifth degrees; a pentagon which refers to the twenty-sixth through thirtieth degrees, and within the pentagon there is a triangle, then a circle and finally, at the very center of it all, a single point. These last three figures refer to the three highest Masonic grades - the Grand Inquisitor Commander, the Sublime Prince of the Royal Secret, and finally at the center of all, the Sovereign Grand Commander. In this way, the entire hierarchy of the Lodge is imaginatively constructed as a great pyramid or a series of concentric geometric figures, mirroring the architectonic structure of God’s universe. Just as the entire cosmos ascends as a hierarchical structure, rising from its base in the material world to the supreme point of Divine Unity, so too, the Lodge ascends from its base in the common mass of mankind all the way to the most elite, most sublime point of unity, the Sovereign Grand Commander (Pike 1871: 7-8, cited above).

[44] As Bourdieu, Lincoln, and others point out, symbolic maps and hierarchical schemas like this are very often also maps of social space: they provide structural blueprints of a particular social and political arrangement, making that arrangement appear to be “natural,” as if inscribed into the very structure of creation by the hand of the Divine Architect. In short, “symbolic space (e.g. house, temple, ) is model of social space (social, economic, and political hierarchies)” (Bourdieu 1977a: 89). In fact, these kinds of symbolic hierarchies often serve to mask and recode social hierarchies, making them appear “legitimate”: by creating homologies and secret correspondences between social, cosmic, and psycho-physical levels of existence, they “provide an ideological mystification for sociopolitical realities,” such that “arbitrary social hierarchies are represented as if given by nature” (Lincoln: 139-41).

[45] Finally and most importantly, however, the elaborate grades of this initiatic hierarchy serve not only to create a kind of social map, they also create a ladder of symbolic capital, a means to achieving new status, power, and prestige within the Masonic community. As Dumenil suggests, one of the primary reasons for the enormous popularity of the Lodge in late nineteenth century America was that it offered young men a powerful source of status and distinction: By creating an “elite group offering prestige by advancements through the degrees,” it served to “confer status on a small number” and also offered a means to “financial aid, business and political connections, and sociability.”

[F]raternal orders provide average men with avenues for achieving distinction. One major vehicle for attaining prestige within masonry was office-holding. Masonry had a complex system of government staffed by numerous officials. . . . [A] Mason would progress through the offices of Steward, Junior Deacon, Senior Deacon, Junior Warden, and Senior Warden to become Master (14; cf. Clawson 1996: 52).

As such, Carnes suggests, the elaborate ranks and promotions in the Scottish Rite were especially attractive to socially ambitious men during an era of rapid economic change:

Preoccupied with issues of status in a changing society, these ambitious and politically active men did not intend to throw the doors of the lodges open to all comers, but conceived of the order as a means of validating their own attainments (1987: 22-23).

[46] Ultimately, at the highest level of initiation, the Mason comes to learn the most profound, most secret essence of the Brotherhood, which is at the same time the most prestigious of achievements: this is embodied in what Pike cryptically calls the “Mystery of Balance” or coincidence of opposites. Pike takes this mystery from the traditions of alchemy and Kabbalah, and, in fact, the frontispiece of chapter thirty-two of *Morals and Dogma* is a famous alchemical engraving of the Rebis or Androgyne (figure 15), borrowed from Basil Valentine. This is what the Kabbalist treatise, the Zohar, describes as the secret of universal equilibrium between good and evil, light and darkness. All contraries emanate from a single God. Male and female, sun and moon, light and dark - symbolized by the Masonic compass and square, and by the two pillars Jachim and Boaz - all come from the same source, and all re-unite in the highest initiation. Pike believes that this most profound mystery can be discovered by using the Kabbalistic technique of letter combination, by taking apart and reforming the letters of the tetragrammaton, the holy Name of God, YHWH. If the tetragrammaton is divided and read backwards, it produces the word HO-HI. In Hebrew HO is the masculine pronoun, HI the feminine. The reordered tetragrammaton is then translated as HE-SHE, which Pike believes to be a confirmation that God is, in his ultimate essence, the bisexual coincidence of opposites:

Reversing the letters of the Ineffable Name, and dividing it, it becomes bi-sexual, as the word Yud-He or Jah and discloses the meaning of the obscure language of the Kabbalah. . . . God created man as male and female (Pike 1871: 849).

[47] Carnes would like to give this esoteric teaching a kind of psychological/gender interpretation: it affirms, he suggests, the secret fact that men too have a feminine side, something which few Victorian American males could admit publicly (1989: 149-50). However, I would argue for a more social and political interpretation. Pike himself suggests that the true meaning of this union of opposites is really the harmonious wedding of individual freedom with hierarchical authority, the wedding of self-will with obedience to law, which is the basis of the ideal social order. It is the subordination of individual appetite - the human in us - to Reason and Moral Judgment - the Divine in us, which is embodied in the Lodge. This hierarchical union is the foundation of Freemasonry and the means to achieving the true “Holy Empire,” of which the Lodge is the model and prefiguration: “FREEMASONRY is the subjugation of the Human that is in man by the Divine. . . . That victory . . . is the true HOLY EMPIRE. Such is the true Royal Secret, which makes possible, and shall at length make real, the HOLY EMPIRE of Masonic Brotherhood” (Pike 1871: 855, 861). On the social and political level, this is the union of individual free will and obedience to hierarchical power, which is the foundation of the ideal Society and the truly just Government:

[T]he Equilibrium between Authority and individual action constitutes Free Government by settling on . . . liberty with obedience to law, equality with subjection to authority, Fraternity with subordination to the Wisest and the Best (Pike 1871: 827).

[48] Here we find the final resolution of the deep tension running throughout the American Masonic tradition - namely the emphasis on freedom, equality, and individual sovereignty, on

one hand, and elitism, hierarchy, and subordination to higher authority, on the other. On one hand, this supreme degree represents a powerful affirmation of the ultimate sovereignty and freedom of the individual conscience. “We respect the creeds of all men, because God alone is the supreme judge of his children. Each of our Brethren has the right to . . . worship according to the dictates of his own conscience” (Pike, in Whalen: 65). But at the same time, even while it affirms individual freedom, it also reinforces a hierarchy of power based on reverence for rank and the pursuit of status - the so-called “meritocracy” we have analyzed above.

[49] Ultimately, Pike suggests, this is none other than the natural law at work in all of creation, the subordination of the lesser to the greater, the weak to the strong, the poor to the wealthy, which has been ordained by God in nature and in the just society. Class hierarchies, labor relations, even racial domination and *slavery* - all of these are established by the will of God, and it is the duty of the true Mason freely to obey them. As Pike explains in one particularly shocking and, to a contemporary reader, quite offensive, passage:

The law of Justice is as universal as the law of Attraction. . . . Among bees, one rules while the other obeys, some work while others are idle. . . . The lion devours the antelope that has as good a right to life as he. Among men, some govern, others serve, capital commands and labor obeys, and *one race, superior in intellect, avails itself of the strong muscles of another that is inferior*; and yet, no one impeaches the Justice of God. . . . It is easy for some dreaming theorist to say that it is unjust for the lion to devour the deer... but we know no other way . . . in which the lion could live . . . [God’s] justice *does not require us to relieve the hardship of millions of all labor, to emancipate the slave, unfitted to be free, from all control* (1871: 829; my emphasis).<sup>18</sup>

Thus the secret truth of the highest degree is also the secret to reconciling the ideals of freedom and equality with the desire for symbolic capital; it offers a means of harmonizing democracy with the pursuit of status in an asymmetrical hierarchy of ranks and degrees, based on a clear ideology of exclusivism, classism, and racism.

## Conclusions and Comparative Comments

The vagueness of symbolism, capable of many interpretations, reached what the . . . conventional creed could not. Its indefiniteness acknowledged the abstruseness of the subject; it treated the mysteries mystically (Pike 1871: 22).

[50] By the second quarter of the twentieth century, the Lodges appear to have lost much of the dominant role they had played in late nineteenth century America. According to some like Dumenil, this was due to the increasingly secular character of modern American culture, which made the religious aspects of the rituals appear to be outdated and archaic. “The somber religious tone of its ceremonies placed Masonry out of step with modern times” (163). Others suggest that the economic functions of the Lodge, as a site of business connections and financial relations, were rendered obsolete amidst the increasingly complex structures of industrial capitalism. And

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<sup>18</sup> “God has made this great system of the Universe and enacted laws for its government. . . . He has made necessary among mankind a division of labour, intellectual and moral. He has made necessary the varied relations of society and dependence, obedience and control. . . . We have the right to live . . . by the legitimate exercise of our intellect, and hire or buy the labor for the strong arms of others, to till our grounds, to dig in our mines, to toil in our manufactories” (Pike 1871: 831-32).

still others like Carnes point to changing conceptions of manhood, suggesting that young men in twentieth century America shared fewer of their fathers' anxieties about masculinity, and so no longer needed the elaborate patriarchal ritual of the Lodges (1989: 154ff).

[51] Yet, whatever may be the reasons for its gradual decline in this century, the American Lodge did for a time provide a kind of oasis, an ideal realm in which white, upper and middle class values could be reinforced. For men like Albert Pike, the secret symbols and hierarchical initiations offered a means of acquiring status amidst an increasingly heterogeneous world. But more importantly, the layers of secrecy also served to re-code and legitimate that status, making it appear to be based on merit, character, and moral goodness.

[52] Finally, I would also like to suggest that this alternative approach to secrecy and this model of "adornment" could also have much broader comparative implications for the study of esoteric traditions cross-culturally. As I have argued here, secrecy is a strategy which may be deployed for a wide range of interests; like all discourse, it may be used both to support and reinforce, or to subvert and undermine, a given social or political arrangement. It may, for example, be used by dominant elite factions who wish to reinforce their own power and status within the social hierarchy (e.g. Jewish Kabbalah, Sufi orders such as the Chishtiya, the hierarchy of elders among the Australian Aborigines [see Urban 1997; Scholem; Keen]); and it may equally be used by marginalized, disgruntled, deviant, or revolutionary groups (e.g. Haitian Voodoo, the Mau Mau in Kenya, the White Lotus or Triad societies in China [see K. Brown; Roseberg and Nottingham]). Now, the specific *content* of the secrecy in all of these various esoteric traditions will no doubt be radically different and determined by their particular historical, political, and social contexts. However, my suspicion is that *the forms and strategies* through which secrecy operates - such as the creation of an alternative social space, the use of deliberately ambiguous and obfuscating symbolism, the rhetoric of egalitarianism, and the construction of elaborate new hierarchies of power - may well turn out to be strikingly similar across cultures and throughout historical periods.

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