The Role and Significance of the Seven Liberal Arts in the Fellowcraft Degree

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In the first section of the Fellow Craft degree, we learn that the particular placement of the square and compasses upon the greatest light of Masonry is meant to teach us that Freemasonry is a progressive moral science that is attained only by degrees. The series of three degrees reinforces this idea of the incremental attainment of light: the first degree, corresponding to childhood or youth, concerns the physical aspects of the candidate and emphasizes the curbing of the passions; the second degree, corresponding to young adulthood and manhood, concerns the intellectual aspects of the candidate and emphasizes the attainment and cultivation of knowledge; and the third degree, associated with adulthood and maturity, concerns the spiritual aspects of the candidate and emphasizes the necessary metaphorical death of the old self and the raising of the new self into Masonic light. In all three degrees, the candidate is seeking light, but in increasingly higher levels of understanding and in accordance with the candidate's ability to comprehend the nature of the light being revealed. As the candidate is literally brought from darkness to light in the Entered Apprentice degree, he is figuratively brought from ignorance to knowledge in the Fellow Craft degree, whose emblems and rituals are meant to illustrate the mind's struggle to attain truth, both moral and intellectual, on the pathway to divine truth. That truth is humanity's ultimate goal, whose full attainment and realization is, ultimately, beyond human comprehension but nevertheless the goal that all human beings ultimately seek.

In order to represent the ascent of the mind to knowledge of the divine, it is appropriate that in the second section of the Fellow Craft degree the candidate is conducted to a set of winding stairs—consisting of five, three, and seven steps—which are *necessary* to ascend in order to reach the Middle Chamber of King Solomon's Temple so that he may have his name enrolled among the workmen and may be taught the wages of a Fellow Craft Mason. The final set of steps, appropriately correspond to the seven liberal arts, which historically constituted the medieval curriculum in Europe and which, in themselves, symbolized the appropriate pathway to higher philosophical or theological knowledge. A consideration of the nature and significance of the liberal arts in the late antique and medieval curriculum, especially within the cathedral schools of twelfth-century France, the liberal arts themselves and their traditional order, beginning with the *trivium* and progressing through the *quadrivium*, and the function of the liberal arts as the final seven steps, ultimately leading to the to the Middle Chamber, will reveal that the seven liberal arts are not only necessary for the attainment of a liberal education but that they are also, and more importantly, necessary for the attainment of divine truth and knowledge.

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Just as the three steps and five steps preceding the seven steps under discussion have their own symbolic values in respect to Freemasonry, so do the seven steps metaphorically allude to many sevens, some of which include the number seven as a perfect number, the number seven as the symbol of completeness, the seven days of creation, the seven years required for the erection of King Solomon's Temple, the seven principal officers of the Lodge, and, more particularly, the seven liberal arts and sciences—grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, geometry, music, and astronomy—enumerated here in the order in which they appear in the second section of the Fellow

Craft degree. In the Tennessee ritual, the candidate is instructed that the number seven represents completeness, both moral and spiritual, which is the aim of the three degrees, and that it refers to the seven liberal arts, which were anciently studied in order to complete a liberal education. The ritual singles out geometry, in particular, for fuller explication, as it is considered to be the foundation of Masonic science and that which enables the architect to draw his plans and execute his designs. In like manner, geometry becomes emblematic in Freemasonry of the Deity as the Great Architect of the Universe, who created the heaven and the earth, a conception famously expressed by John Milton in *Paradise Lost*:

> [The Father] [s]tay'd the fervid Wheels, and in his hand
> He took the golden Compasses, prepar'd
> In God's eternal store, to circumscribe
> This Universe, and all created things:
> One foot he centred, and the other turn'd
> Round through the vast profundity obscure,
> And said, Thus far extend, thus far the bounds,
> This be thy just circumference, O World.
> Thus God the Heav'n created, thus the Earth…[i]

In this literary example, the Deity is depicted as the architect who fashions the universe with materials from his own store, the tools of the Master Mason. This is not to suggest that Milton himself was a Freemason but rather to demonstrate one example of the rich tradition of the liberal arts as expressed in epic literature that may have reinforced the image of the Deity as architect employed in the Masonic ritual. Aside from the representation of the Architect of the Universe in this passage, the principal theme of *Paradise Lost* is the fall of humanity and the restoration through the Son, a pattern of unity followed by separation ending in eventual restoration that can be seen as well in the pattern of the Masonic ritual, in which a candidate, created in the image of the Deity, finds himself in total darkness, seeks and receives light, and ultimately experiences rebirth and regeneration, ending where he began.

Masonic scholar W. L. Wilmhurst observes that, to the ordinary person, geometry "means nothing more than the branch of mathematics associated with the problems of Euclid" or the "Science of earth-measurement,"[ii] subjects that are seemingly unrelated to the Craft, but that, on the contrary, geometry means something much more profound within the context of Freemasonry. According to Wilmshurst, geometry is "synonymous with self-knowledge, the understanding of the basic substance of our being, its properties and potentialities."[iii] To understand the Deity in this way, perhaps, can lead to self-knowledge if we accept that within each one of us resides a spark of the divine. Although the order and relative significance of each of the seven liberal arts could differ slightly within the classical tradition, the purpose of progressing through the arts of the *trivium* and the sciences of the *quadrivium* remained the same: that is, the attainment of higher knowledge, specifically, the attainment of divine knowledge, accessible only through the study of philosophy.

The Seven Liberal Arts, their Sequence, and the Path to Speculative Philosophy

In order to be duly and truly prepared to study philosophy, one had first to study the full range of the seven liberal arts, not in a piecemeal fashion but in the particular order in which they were established and taught from late antiquity through the middle ages. The revival of classical education in the cathedral schools in Europe during the twelfth century could be witnessed in the flourishing of liberal arts instruction during the period, which included the study of the individual arts and sciences as "professional disciplines in their own right as well as for their ability to mold

character or to inform biblical exegesis, homiletics, and theology."[iv] Thus, not only did the liberal arts education offered in the medieval monasteries of Europe become a vehicle for converting to Christianity the various Germanic and Celtic peoples under such rulers as Gregory the Great, but it also provided an intellectual bridge between early medieval thinkers and their classical and patristic forebears.[v] The progression from what Aristotle labeled practical philosophy to what he labeled theoretical philosophy manifests itself quite literally in the order of the two divisions themselves: the *trivium*, or "three-fold path," is founded upon grammar and culminates in dialectic, or logic, while the *quadrivium*, or the "four-fold path," as coined by Boethius, is founded upon arithmetic and culminates in astronomy. In order to reach the highest levels of learning, one must first study and master the fundamentals, or the basic building blocks, of knowledge.

In his critical commentary included with his translation of Boethius's *De Institutio Arithmetica*, a sixth-century Latin treatise on Pythagorean number theory that was widely known and frequently used as a textbook throughout the medieval period, Michael Masi writes that there was some disagreement on the proper sequence of the liberal arts, arising primarily in respect to the placement of music and geometry in the quadrivial sequence. The traditional order, established by Boethius in his *De Arithmetica*, was as follows: grammar, rhetoric, logic, arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy.[vi] According to Boethius, often called the "schoolmaster of the West," in order to comprehend the order of the universe, one has first to concede the primacy, or priority, of arithmetic as the basis for the remaining three quadrivial arts. The relationship between them is discussed in Book I of his treatise on number theory: "arithmetic considers that multitude which exists of itself as an integral whole; the measures of musical modulation understand that multitude which exists in relation to some other; geometry offers the notion of stable magnitude; the skill of the astronomical discipline explains the science of movable magnitude."[vii] Arithmetic, then, may be regarded as the source and end of all things, representing in its simplest form that which prior to creation and that which is simplicity and sufficiency itself. From arithmetic come all the other quadrivial arts, and an understanding of those arts is prerequisite to an apprehension of higher wisdom.

Boethius underscores the significance of mastering the *quadrivium* when he writes, "If a searcher is lacking knowledge of these four sciences [arithmetic, music, geometry, and astronomy], he is not able to find the truth; without this kind of thought, nothing of truth is rightly known….He who spurns these, the paths of wisdom, does not rightly philosophize. Indeed, if philosophy is the love of wisdom, in spurning these, one has already shown contempt for philosophy."[viii] Therefore, the *quadrivium* equips the mind to rise above the senses and to progress to those things apprehensible to the human intellect. The difference of opinion concerning the placement of music and geometry, according to Masi, "depends upon whether music is considered a mathematical study and is paired off with arithmetic (Boethius) or an harmonic study and paired off with astronomy (Capella)."[ix] In the case of Freemasonry, the preference seems to be for the latter, resulting in the placement of geometry after arithmetic. While geometry is considered to be the foundation of architecture and the root of mathematics, its placement as second in the sequence of the four quadrivial arts does not diminish its symbolic Masonic significance.

In his discussion of the iconographical representations of the liberal arts throughout the ages, Masi draws particular attention to a series of woodcuts printed in a compendium of learning assembled by Gregorius Reisch entitled *Margarita Philosophica*, which first appeared in Freiburg in 1503 and which was republished no less than twelve times.[x] It contains chapters on all of the seven liberal arts, on moral philosophy, metaphysics, and theology, with accompanying woodcuts for several of the chapters depicting an aspect of each study. The *Typus Grammaticae* (concerning the

first trivial art, grammar), for example, reveals the persistent vitality of the tradition of the liberal arts into the early Renaissance. The woodcut depicts an allegorized woman, with one hand, presenting her student with a tablet containing the alphabet and, with the other, holding and extending a key towards a door. Beside them stands a structure meant to resemble a university, the levels of which correspond to the seven liberal arts with rooms on each level housing the authors of the ancient texts for each discipline. This allegorized teacher holds the key to the first floor of the university, in which Priscian and Donatus (authors of grammatical texts) reside. On the second level we find Aristotle (for logic), Cicero (for rhetoric), and Boethius (for arithmetic). On the third floor we find Pythagoras (for music), Euclid (for geometry), and Ptolemy (for astronomy). Above them, on the fourth level, we find two faces bearing the titles of *philosophia practica* and *philosophiae theoretica*, with Peter Lombard hovering above and meant to symbolize theological studies. This illustration of the liberal arts reinforces the Boethian order of the liberal arts and recalls the ascent from practical to theoretical knowledge depicted on the robe of his allegorized personification of wisdom, Lady Philosophy, as depicted in *De Consolatione Philosophiae* 1p1.8-25:

> It was difficult to say how tall she might be, for at one time she seemed to confine herself to the ordinary measure of man, and at another the crown of her head touched the heavens; and when she lifted her head higher yet, she penetrated the heavens themselves, and was lost to the sight of men. Her dress was made of very fine, imperishable thread, of delicate workmanship: she herself wove it, as I learned later, for she told me. Its form was shrouded by a kind of darkness of forgotten years, like a smoke-blackened family statue in the atrium. On its lower border was woven the Greek letter Π (P), and on the upper, Θ (Th), and between the two letters steps were marked like a ladder, by which one might climb from the lower letter to the higher. But violent hands had ripped this dress and torn away what bits they could. In her right hand she carried a book, and in her left, a scepter.[xi]

Boethius's narrator, by following the instruction of Lady Philosophy and by ascending the rungs of the ladder depicted on the front of her robe, will gradually recognize his teacher, remember who he is, where he is going, and from whence he came, and ascend to the source of light and truth, symbolized here by the theta at the top of Lady Philosophy's garment.

Conclusion

The Masonic ritual for the Fellow Craft degree clearly draws upon this medieval and early Renaissance educational and iconographical tradition of the classical liberal arts, albeit with a greater emphasis upon geometry as the dominant science and the characteristic most representative of the Deity. Likewise, the journey from operative to speculative masonry corresponds to the gradual progression from practical to theoretical knowledge as taught in the cathedral schools of medieval Europe, as depicted upon Lady Philosophy's robe in Boethius's *De Consolatione Philosophiae*, and as suggested by numerous iconographical representations of the liberal arts in the medieval manuscript tradition. The inclusion of the seven liberal arts in the second section of the Fellow Craft degree is therefore meant to take the candidate on a similar curricular journey as that experienced by the medieval scholar with the similar purpose of developing and cultivating the human intellect in order, ultimately, to contemplate the divine.

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Notes

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[i] John Milton, *Paradise Lost* 7.224-232, in *John Milton, Complete Poems and Major Prose*, edited by Merritt Y. Hughes (Indianapolis and Cambridge: Hackett Publishing Company, 2003; reprint of 1957 edition by Prentice Hall).

ii W. L. Wilmshurst, *The Meaning of Masonry* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1999; reprint of 1922 edition), pp. 88-89.

iii Ibid, p. 89.

iv Marsha Colish, *Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition, 400-1400* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1997), p. 175.

v Philip Edward Phillips, "Review of *Medieval Foundations of the Western Intellectual Tradition, 400-1400*, by Marsha Colish," *Carmina Philosophiae: Journal of the International Boethius Society* 7 (1998): 110.

vi Michael Masi, *Boethian Number Theory: A Translation of the* De Institutione Arithmetica, Studies in Classical Antiquity 6 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1983), p. 13.

vii Ibid, p 72.

viii Ibid, pp. 73-74.

ix Ibid, p. 13.

x Ibid, p. 19.

xi Boethius, *Tractates; The Consolation of Philosophy*, Trans. H. Stewart, E. K. Rand, and S. J. Tester, Loeb Classical Library 74 (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1973), pp. 133-135.