Book Review


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Despite some progress made in the research on female freemasonry since the 1980s, the perception of the general public, and sometimes of male masons themselves, is that lodges represent a realm reserved for male-only associational pursuits. Historically, the one-sided gendered affiliation has been one of the most distinctive features of freemasonry, supported unequivocally by the eighteenth-century founders of modern freemasonry, James Anderson and Laurence Dermott. Demonstrating the ways in which groups define themselves through distinctive symbolism and rituals provides invaluable source material for the study of the gendered aspects of fraternalism. Hitherto, the study and interpretation of masonic rituals have for the most part been firmly grounded in issues relating to manhood, which are seen as conflicts that are dramatized and resolved in a ritual on a symbolic level. In *Initiating Women in Freemasonry*, Jan Snoek fills this gap by tracing the transformation of the rituals and the development of the function of female freemasonry in the Adoption Rite.

The study of the Adoption Rite raises several significant theoretical and research problems. In the past, the supposed scarcity of sources on female freemasonry would seem to have hindered the undertaking of a scholarly investigation of the subject. However, Snoek completely over-turns this assumption by basing his work on the thorough study of some 130 rituals, some of which are provided in their entirety in English translation in the appendices. The core of the study is based on the rituals emanating from French lodges, with valuable additions from Dutch, German, Danish and Swedish sources. This breadth of the source base is impressive and truly unprecedented, allowing for an analysis of the transformation of the Adoption ritual not only in the eighteenth century, which has been the main focus of most of the previous studies on female freemasonry, but also throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries.

The polemical nature of the book derives from a problematic issue familiar to anyone who is involved in the study of freemasonry in general and ritual in particular: since the fraternity claims ancient roots, there is a sharp distinction between ‘tradition’ and ‘modernity’ inherent in the self-fashioning of the ritual. If the Adoption Rite is an invented tradition, when was it invented and how and why was it transformed? Snoek asserts that, contrary to the traditional views of the Adoption Rite’s origins, it was not established in the mid-eighteenth century ‘by some male Freemasons, just to keep quiet those ladies who pressed to get into the lodges, in order to keep the real lodges male only’ (p. 380). Instead, he views it as a continuation of the Harodim (or York) tradition within freemasonry. This is a less well-known branch, which was strongly associated with the Jacobite diaspora in...
France. Within this social milieu the first Adoption lodges were mixed, only later becoming exclusively female in the early 1740s.

The issue of symbolism in the rituals raises yet another theoretical problem: how do we make sense of ritual? It is an essential performative and substantive part of freemasonry, yet ritual is notoriously difficult to interpret because it exploits the metaphorical use of language. Ritual is also a formalized social interaction that somehow unites individual meanings into a coherent whole that is decipherable to the members of a group, but is often incomprehensible to outsiders. If so, how is it even possible to understand the individual and the collective meanings of a ritual? As Snoek demonstrates, ritual is sensitive to local figures of speech, especially to metaphor, and an analysis of language and representation is best performed within a historical framework, while being sensitive to the linguistic, ethnographical, anthropological, theological, and philosophical issues embedded in the reciprocal relationship between word and action.

Symbols can also be dissociated from specific social contexts, representing many things about which it is difficult to establish consensus, as often claimed by modern sociologists or semioticians. Do changes in society correspond with changes in the language and the meaning of a ritual? Or does a ritual change first, thereby facilitating a transition in society? More particularly, how did the Adoption ritual acquire meaning, and has this meaning changed together with societal and gender norms? As the author points out, ‘the starting point for the research project […] was to test the theory of “transfer of ritual”, according to which rituals change following a change in context, and vice versa’ (pp. xiv–xv, 156, 269, 341 and 379–89). One of the conclusions he draws, as a result of testing out the ‘transfer of ritual’ hypothesis, is that the differences in the rituals can be attributed to variations between what he calls ‘families’ of rituals or traditions within the Adoption Rite. Analysing the similarities in the questions and answers to the catechisms of the first three degrees, Snoek distinguishes the ‘families’ of the Adoption ritual (such as the ‘Clermont’, the Grand Orient, the ‘Third’ tradition, and mixed families), with several corresponding ‘sub-families’. While the classification elucidates some fascinating textual interconnections, as Snoek admits, it is impossible to identify the exact sources for each ritual within each family and sub-family, and thus the context becomes somewhat disassociated from the text (p. 340).

Throughout the book the author consistently reiterates the problematic inter-connection between meaning and context. Consequently, he dedicates three chapters to the development of the Adoption Rite ritual as demonstrated in documents from the first half of the eighteenth century, leading on to the French Revolution and Napoleon, the first feminist wave in the nineteenth century, and the transformations of the Grand Loge Féminine de France throughout the twentieth century. It is in these chapters that the voices of the women participating in the Adoption Rite are heard the most, which, combined with a meticulous analysis of the sources, proves that changes in the context did cause modifications to the rituals.

This tome provides a formidable example of the development of a scholarly argument with an eye for both theory and narrative, supported by the provision of an extensive series of appendices, as well as relevant illustrations, and a comprehensive bibliography. This book will undoubtedly become a focal point for anyone who is attempting to make sense of the emergence and transformation of female freemasonry, irrespective of whether they agree with Jan Snoek’s far-reaching conclusions.

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