

## Enlightened Values: The Masonic Paradox

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By the 1680s in parts of northern and western Europe a new set of values could be seen at work in cities where we find literate Protestants, among others, particularly in Britain and the Dutch Republic. Central to the new enlightened values were certain fundamental principles: a growing abhorrence of absolutism in church and state, with a special distain for the French king, Louis XIV; a belief in religious toleration with John Locke as its major theorist; and not least the emergence of illicit publications, best associated with the unknown publisher supposedly located in Cologne, Pierre Marteau. An imprint rather than a person, Marteau published anti-clerical, sometimes pornographic texts, aimed at the French king and clergy. Political events solidified, if not caused, adherence to this new enlightened counterculture: the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 (hence a renewed persecution of French Protestants), the Revolution of 1688-89 in England and the end of absolutist monarchy in the British Isles; the outbreak of a war between England and France that threatened the independence of the Low Countries.

Amid these fundamental political events, allied as they were to a new understanding of state power and religious freedom, stood the practice of the new science. With the publication of Newton's *Principia* in 1687 came a set of practices and beliefs: the experimental and mathematical complemented the search for order and regularity in worldly events, all made possible by the order and law-like behavior of nature proclaimed by Newton's achievement. Freemasonry emerged in this new political and cultural universe, and it reflected these new enlightened values. Or did it?

I will be arguing here that freemasonry embodied the new enlightened values: men meeting "upon the level" suggested that symbols of power and authority could be earned and were not necessarily inborn and inherited. In London and Dublin lodges, where we can identify the religious affiliation of members, Presbyterians, Anglicans, and Catholics broke bread together and addressed one another as brother. In 1731 there was a London lodge where six surnames out of twenty-nine were in all probability Jewish. In the same decade masonic surnames in Amsterdam also indicate Jewish identities. Significantly and at the same time, brothers can easily be located who were Newtonian practitioners of the new science, of whom Jean Desaguliers is the most famous.

Indeed, there is a very high collaboration between early lodge membership in Britain and being a Fellow of the Royal Society. Yet despite the identification with the science and the practice of religious toleration, a paradox lies at the heart of masonic history's relationship to the Enlightenment, one that suggests a more complicated story.

Where we find enlightened values, we also find contradictions. British masonic leadership after 1717 displayed an identification with the court, not the country. Whig grandees like the Duke of Chandos, in 1737 grand master of the united English and Scottish lodges, dedicated himself to the Hanoverian succession and a strong monarchy. Recall that masonry regarded itself as "the Royal art," and had seen the craft as furthering monarchical strength. After 1688-89 in Britain the commitment was no longer to absolute monarchy, but still it was to the strength of king and court. William of Orange had been given the kingship by act of parliament; James II had been dethroned, yet the lodges were led by brothers who identified with the court and not the parliament.

A similar identification with the court can be seen in the Dutch Republic where freemasonry entered through the entourage of the stadholder, the closest thing the Dutch had a centralized monarchy. William IV's French chef, Vincent de la Chapelle, also served as

master of this court-centered lodge. This, the earliest Dutch lodge with official standing, began in 1731 in The Hague and it included the British ambassador, Lord Chesterfield. Once again, we have identification with the court, and in this case with the British-Dutch alliance against France. And once again, over time, we find another evolution, this one toward a more radical and representative message visible in masonic rhetoric and ceremonies. By the 1750s we find the Dutch lodges, with the blessings of the British Grand Master, establishing “at The Hague a National Grand Lodge for the Estates General of the United Provinces.”

What began as an enterprise of the Dutch court was evolving into a form of constitutional government that included a symbolic version of the major representative institution, the Estates General of the Republic. In this instance enlightenment values look forward to the nascently democratic forms of government that emerged in the 1770s in Philadelphia, and in the 1780s in Brussels and most spectacularly in Paris. To effect this transformation from an enlightened political ideal to an institutional reality, required some reworking of canonical texts. John Locke’s second *Treatise on Government*, translated into French in 1691, had to be subtly reworked. The skilled translation was supplied by the most prominent freemason in the Dutch Republic, Rousset de Missy, in

a new preface to the French Locke. The 1691 translation into French had already identified a commonwealth as “a republic.” Rousset’s enlightened preface of 1755 proclaimed Locke as the theorist of a republic and the safety that it offers “free men.” Rousset warned that some who are distinguished as “noble” would try to introduce an unbearable slavery. The preface reads as a call to preserve the historic opposition to French absolutism and to repudiate any compromise that the aristocratic Dutch oligarchy would make with it.

Rousset de Missy provided a republican preface to the 1755 French edition of Locke which became the most widely read and referenced Continental version of Locke from the second half of the eighteenth century. Rousseau knew it, as did the French revolutionaries who looked for justifications of their new republican form of government.

The search for enlightened forms of governance evolved in many directions. In the masonic case the evolution, once again, presents us with paradoxes. After the Revolution of 1747 in the Dutch Republic freemasons around the stadholder, William IV, also turned to new social mores and values. While men “meeting upon the level” might mean religious tolerance, as we saw on both sides of the Channel in the 1730s, it could also lead to an unprecedented

meeting upon the level of men and women. We will stay now with freemasonry in The Hague where we find one of the earliest social expressions of a gendered egalitarianism to be found in European thought and practice.

By the 1750s on the Continent gender exclusion within freemasonry had begun to break down. Lodges “of adoption” as lodges for both men and women are called turn up fleetingly in records from Bordeaux, for example. The most extensive set of records, however, come from The Hague in 1751. In that year Juste Gerard, baron van Wassenaer initiated a French speaking lodge for men and women and signed its *Livre de Constitution*. Possibly in recognition of this unique break with the commonplace, and in recognition of his special patronage, the new lodge took his name, La Loge de Juste. Central to the lodge’s membership were actors and actresses in the theatre in residence, the Comédie Française. They were joined by William Bentinck, who paid the largest initiation fee of 52 guilders to belong to La Loge de Juste. Bentinck was at the heart of the Dutch court, an intimate of William IV. He was joined by various local elites, among them a few members who could not pay the initiation fee. When the fees did not meet the cost of opening the lodge, the Grand Lodge of the Republic covered the overhead. Using French, all the male and female officers were

identified by gendered nouns, *le maistre, la maitresse*. Songs and orations given at the lodge justified the admission of women: ignorance has been displaced, “our profound study in the art of masonry has enabled us to find a true method of perfecting our buildings. It is by the assistance of our sisters.” There were women and men equally as officers, each with garments and jewels that signified their position.

We have no evidence that this lodge survived beyond 1751. A subsequent history of Dutch freemasonry said that the lodges of adoption were not well received. In the 1760s and 70s orations were given on why women were excluded from the lodges although in 1778 there is evidence for a lodge of adoption at work in The Hague, and in 1790s they appear to have returned to the Dutch Republic. In general, these lodges were much more common in France where a brother from Vienna described them as “without a doubt one of the most noteworthy new developments in the world of masonry.” The American historian, James Smith Allen has written a remarkable account of French women’s freemasonry and its forward-looking political meaning, “Briefly but intensely, during the revolutionary events of 1789, 1830, 1848, and 1871, assertive women played roles in political clubs, in the streets, even on the barricades. Their subsequent participation in politics grew as the

first feminist movement pushed for female education and training, married women's property rights, fertility control, and integral suffrage. (p. 16)" Women's participation in freemasonry had always been controversial; indeed, the majority of brothers probably disapproved. This did not stop the lodges of adoption from spreading.

And these lodges also began to invent their own rituals. These spoke brazenly about the "tyranny" that men exercised because of their knowledge of the sciences. In response to such tyranny women need to take up "the bearing of arms and the study of the sciences." If they do that there will be "equality" between "the Amazons and the Patriarchs."

Having arrived at amazons and patriarchs we would seem to have wandered far from the high ideals we associate Locke or the *Encyclopedie*, or have we? The lodges were places where highly literate men, and as we now know some women, could pursue a variety of purposes, some of them paradoxical in relationship to the abstract values associated in the first instance the Enlightenment. Support for king and court might seem a lesser good than support for parliament and country. But having just defeated the absolutism of James II the strength of the Hanoverian court and king, along



with the weakening of the established Church, seemed a progressive, indeed enlightened, move.

The Whigs, and especially the radical Whigs like Toland and Collins, supported enlightened values and the alliance against France. They and their Huguenot associates in the Dutch Republic are central to the first generation of European *philosophes*. With their coterie we can associate some of the most extremely anti-religious works of the first quarter of the century, in particular, *Le Traité des trois imposteurs*. It labelled Jesus, Moses and Mohammed as the three. Out of this same coterie also came Picart and Bernard's *Ceremonies and Religious Customs of all the peoples of the world*, that beginning in 1723 was the first text anywhere in Europe to treat all the religions of the world even-handedly, and not least, to give us the first pictorial representation of freemasonry.

The association of the generation of Pierre Bayle's Huguenot refugees and freemasonry places both at the epicenter of the early Enlightenment. They translated English texts and sociability into French and thus spread both into circles at odds with the religious persecution effected by the French Church and monarchy. The revocation of the Edict of Nantes created a diaspora of Protestants, many of them highly literate, all of them angry and bitter, and free

from French censorship. Their international associations knitted the early Enlightenment together with publishing ventures, clandestine treatises, and personal ties aided by their spoken and written use of French. Not least the Continental lodges brought women into formal association with lodges that conformed to a constitution, made their own rules, and contributed to secular forms of charitable activity. Centuries would pass before women entered the public sphere as voters, officials, leaders. But in the mid-eighteenth century, few women – actresses for the most part – played at a fantasy that we have been able to make a reality.