

John Dee

The first two verses of the 367th Quatrain of Michel de Nostradame, better known as Nostradamus, is commonly translated as:

“A new sect of Philosophers
Despising death, gold, honors and riches...”

As with much of his work, the meaning of these lines is subject to varied interpretation. Christopher McIntosh, in his work, “The Rosicrucians”, notes that one interpretation would appear to have application to the Rosicrucian Brotherhood.

Nostradamus, who lived from 1503 to 1566, completed his “Prophecies” in 1555, well before the emergence of the Rosicrucian movement, and, as well, before the emergence of Speculative Freemasonry, with which Rosicrucianism has been linked. Rosicrucianism may be considered the phase in European culture intermediate between the Renaissance and the scientific revolution. In the history of thought, it represents a stage in which the Hermetic-Cabalist tradition received the influx of another Hermetic tradition, that of alchemy. Several individuals were instrumental in the development of the Rosicrucian philosophy and this evening I would bring some of those briefly to your view. The development of Rosicrucianism has been the subject of intensive study by various scholars in addition to McIntosh, among them Dame Frances A. Yates, an historian of the Renaissance period. Yates states that a major Rosicrucian figure was John Dee. Dee lived from 1527 to 1608. Among his contemporaries he was known and respected not only as a mathematician and philosopher, but also as a geographer, antiquarian, mechanic, teacher and theologian. In the words of his contemporary, George Gascoigne, Dee was “a great learned man”. He belonged to the Hermetic tradition, which he expanded in an original direction, applying his mathematical brilliance. His “Preface” to Euclid provided a brilliant survey of the mathematical arts in general. In his “Monas Hieroglyphica”, he believed he had discovered a formula for a combined cabalist, alchemical and mathematical science which would enable its possessor to move up and down the scale of being from the lowest to the highest sphere. In the super celestial sphere, Dee believed he had found the secret of conjuring angels by numerical computations in the cabalist tradition. Per Yates, “Dee as ‘Rosicrucian’ is thus a figure typical of the late Renaissance Magus who combined ‘Magia, Cabala, and Alchymia’ to achieve a world-view in which advancing science was strangely mingled with angelology.”

Dee gained his greatest ascendancy after the coronation of Queen Elizabeth in 1558 until his departure for Bohemia in 1583. Following his return in 1589, his influence at court appeared to have waned, until his death in the 5th year of the reign of James I. His continental sojourn has been suggested by Yates and others to have had a major influence on the Rosicrucian Manifestos of the early 1600’s. It has been established that the reign of Frederick V and his wife Elizabeth, daughter of James I, in the Palatinate of the Rhine, was a Hermetic golden age, which was nourished by Dee’s “Monas Hieroglyphica” as well as the alchemical movement led by Michael Maier. Maier, born in 1568, was responsible for putting an alchemical stamp on Rosicrucianism. He believed they possessed the secret of producing gold. Maier was the most prominent alchemical physician in Germany since Paracelsus. He was prolific in his writings, publishing a number of works between 1614 and 1620, dealing mainly with his religious and philosophical attitudes through alchemical symbolism, and showing the influence of the earlier Dee. He wrote of the Rosicrucians in many of his works, his last defence of the brotherhood being “Themis Aurea”, written in Latin and published in Frankfurt in 1618. In this work, he describes the Brethren as hard-working physicians and chemists, dedicated to the study of nature and the bringing about of a reformed world. He says of the Rosicrucians, “They have the true astronomy, the true physicke, mathematicks, medicine and chemistry by which they are able to produce rare and wonderful effects. They are very laborious, frugal, temperate, secret and true.” He threw no light on the brotherhood itself, but his powerful advocacy of Rosicrucianism established it firmly as a subject of interest for serious minds. Prior to his “Themis Aurea”, he had spent time in England, and is thought to have conferred with Dee’s

follower in the Hermetic tradition, Robert Fludd, who was also publishing during the same period.

Fludd (1574-1637) began his Rosicrucian career by publishing two works, in Latin, expressing admiration for the Brothers and their aims as expressed in their manifestos. In the second of these, "The Apologetic Tractatus for the Society of the Rosy Cross", he states that the Brothers R. C. use only good kinds of magic, mathematical, and mechanical, and the magic of the Cabala which teaches how to invoke the sacred names of angels. Magia, Cabala, and Astrologia as studied by the Brothers R.C. are both scientific and holy, in Fludd's view. Fludd's major work, "The History of the Two Worlds,--the Great World of the Macrocosm and the Little World of Man, the Microcosm" is an attempt to cover the philosophy based on the harmonious design of the cosmos and the corresponding harmonies in man. It is a presentation of Renaissance Magia and Cabala, with the addition of Alchymia as developed by Paracelsus and of the developments introduced by John Dee into these traditions. If the Rosicrucian manifestos are interpreted as fiction through which is set forth a plea for reformation based on new developments of Magia, Cabala, and Alchymia introduced by Paracelsus and Dee, then it can be seen that Fludd's philosophy was indeed a "Rosicrucian" philosophy, a Renaissance philosophy brought up to date.

Maier's "Laws of the Fraternity of the Rosie Crosse (Themis Aurea)" was later published in English in 1656. This printing is of interest since it includes a special dedication to the "Honoured, Noble, Learned, Elias Ashmole, Esq.". Ashmole, of course, will be recalled as the first recorded 'speculative' Mason in an English Lodge. According to his diary, he was initiated in a casual Lodge near Warrington on October 16, 1646. Of Ashmole, Yates says he was "a staunch loyalist who lived in retirement during the civil wars and commonwealth pursuing his many interests. Alchemist, astrologer, antiquary, assiduous collector of records of the past, Ashmole's roots were in that Hermetic universe governed by magical correspondencies whence the new science was emerging. Yet he was not exactly out of date for his interest in alchemy reflects the very strong revival, or renaissance, of alchemy in the seventeenth century." Ashmole was a foundation member of the Royal Society and the founder of the Ashmolean museum at Oxford. In his "Theatrum Chemicum Britannicum" of 1652, Ashmole tells the story of Dee, stating firmly that Dee deserved "the commendations of all Learned and Ingenious Scholars, and to be remembered for his remarkable abilities." Ashmole states further that Dee particularly excelled in mathematical studies "in all parts of which he was an absolute and perfect master". A.C.F. Jackson states that "from the evidence available it would seem that (Ashmole's) interest in the hermetic sciences was more important to him than his Freemasonry."

In the study of the 17th century, it may be seen that the two fraternities, speculative Masonry and Rosicrucianism, had a common ancestry and a common mystical background. They were both started within a few decades of each other by men of similar intellectual qualities. Both had approximately similar aims: self-improvement and religious mysticism. Can it be more than coincidence that they both developed at the same time, particularly in light of the prophecy of Nostradamus? For that prediction,

"A new sect of Philosophers
Despising death, gold, honors and riches..."

could scarcely apply as equally to the Masonic fraternity as to the Rosecruciaris. Let us then, as members of the Masonic Rosecrucian Society, do our part to insure the truth of the Quatrain.

Henry G. Law, VIII°

Presented in Delaware Conclave, S.R.I.C.F.

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