THE MASONIC NECROMANCER: SHIFTING IDENTITIES IN THE LIVES OF JOHANN GEORG SCHREPFER

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When in October 1774 a suicide in a forest near Leipzig was reported to the local authorities, it was the climax and at the same time the spectacular ending of a short, yet mysterious and sensational life. The man who shot himself on this autumn night had gained a dubious reputation in electoral Saxony. He was known as a coffeehouse-keeper, French nobleman and colonel, Freemason, magician, and necromancer. He had a number of friends, sponsors, and disciples, among whom were a minister of the Saxon government, the Duke of Kurland, and several members of Leipzig's Freemasons’ lodge called ‘Minerva’. Johann Georg Schrepfer’s personality appears to fit well into the pattern of eighteenth-century adventurers such as Casanova and Cagliostro, although Schrepfer is not as well-known as they were to their contemporaries and still are to us today.¹

So besides being an impostor and swindler or, as he was called in the magazines, a ‘Windbeutel’,² what was it that made him famous as well as notorious all over the Ancien Régime? What was his necromancy like? How did the Freemasons consider him and his (Para)masonic rituals? What kind of light does his example shed on practical eighteenth-century magic? Would he from our twenty-first century perspective be considered a genuine esotericist or a swindler? And to what extent do discussions, narrations, and legends derived from Schrepfer’s performances constitute a polemical debate, contemporary and historical?

¹ In contemporary and historical accounts of eighteenth-century adventurers Schrepfer is named together with Cagliostro, Mesmer, and Gassner; see e.g. Sierke, Schwärmer und Schwindler. Louis-Claude de Saint-Martin compares Schrepfer to Cagliostro; see Saint-Martin, Apodiktische Erklärung, 131.
² Nicolai, ‘Rezension’, 272.
1. Mediocrity and Imposture—Shifting Identities

Let us begin with a short glimpse of Schrepfer’s biography.¹ Not much is known of him before he came to Leipzig in August 1761, and all available information has to be scrutinized with respect to its potentially tendentious Masonic perspective.² Johann Georg Schrepfer, or Schroepfer, born in Nuremberg in 1739, was a man of poor education, no erudition, and rough manners.³ His profession was that of a cooper. He had served in the Prussian Army during the Seven Years War before he came to Leipzig to start his Masonic and necromantic career. He then became a citizen of the Saxon town of fairs and trade and was listed as a ‘Weinschenk’. In September 1761 he married Johanna Katharina Herr, daughter of a local tailor, and became the tenant of a wine-tavern in the Boettchergaesschen. Eight years later, in 1769, he took over a more famous tavern, the ‘Weissleder’sche Kaffeewirtschaft’, a coffeehouse right in the center of Leipzig. This coffeehouse became the focus of necromantic interest in Saxony in the early 1770s, when Schrepfer started to perform his necromancy and to initiate disciples into his own Masonic lodge in his private home. The lodge was at the center of his efforts to establish a system of “true freemasonry”: Its members met to perform Masonic rituals as well as necromantic experiments, both of which followed the distinctive rules of Schrepfer’s “system”.

When Schrepfer tried to take over the master’s position in Leipzig’s Freemasons’ lodge ‘Minerva’, he came into conflict with the protector of the Saxon lodges, the Duke of Kurland, as he claimed its members were misled by the Masonic system of the ‘Strikte Observanz’ which he considered a depraved kind of freemasonry.⁴ Despite his dubious reputation, Schrepfer went to Dresden soon thereafter and contacted the court directly to offer an economic plan that would earn Saxony’s public purse millions. He met the Minister Friedrich Ludwig von

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¹ All biographical data, unless otherwise noted, taken from the entry ‘Schrepfer’ in the Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie (ADB), vol. 32, 490–491.
² The most detailed and probably most reliable source of information on Schrepfer’s activities in Leipzig is Schlegel, Tagebuch, which includes a number of letters and papers penned by Schrepfer, his adherents, and adversaries. This volume seems to have served as the basis for all later historical accounts of Schrepfer’s life.
³ The entry in the ADB dates Schrepfer’s birth to 1730, but since his age at his death in 1774 was noted as ‘35’, it is more likely to be 1739. See Findel, Verirrungen, 70.
⁴ Schlegel, Tagebuch, 3–4.