LORD GEORGE GORDON AND CABALISTIC FREEMASONRY: BEATING JACOBITE SWORDS INTO JACOBIN PLOUGHSHARES

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The first Christian Prince that expelled the Jews out of his territories, was that heroick King, our Edward the First, who was such a scourge also to the Scots; and it is thought diverse families of these banished Jews fled then to Scotland, where they have propagated since in great numbers; witness the aversion that nation hath above all others to hogs-flesh.

—James Howell (1652)

To make the wrong appear the right,
And keep our rulers in;
In Walpole's time 'twas Jacobite,
In Pitt's, 'tis Jacobin.

—Edward Coxe (1805)

My interest in the quixotic figure of Lord George Gordon grew out of a research project on the Cabalistic-Masonic milieu of four equally outré eighteenth-century characters—Emanuel Swedenborg, Dr. Samuel Jacob Falk, Count Cagliostro, and William Blake. In the process of tracing the transformation of Jacobite Freemasonry into Jacobin Freemasonry—in Sweden, Poland, France, and Britain—the strange career of Gordon emerged as a palimpsest of the more extreme factors in that transformation. Moreover, it became clear that his sensational conversion to Judaism was not the irrational act of an eccentric fanatic but the rational conclusion to an ancient Scottish tradition of philo-Semitism, in which radical patriots proudly identified themselves with the embattled Jews.

Though most historians continue to portray “Rabbi” Gordon as “obviously insane,” a more flattering portrait is given by the biographer Percy Colson: “Lord George was the first aristocratic Socialist in England, the first pacifist in the modern sense, and one of the first to make a protest against the extreme brutality of the penal
laws.”¹ He was also the firebrand demagogue who brought England to the brink of violent revolution, when much of London went up in flames in the Gordon Riots of 1780. Seven years later he was revered by thousands of Jews as a reborn Moses who would lead them back to the Promised Land. It is testimony to the eclecticism and complexity of Freemasonry in the eighteenth century that Gordon found a Masonic niche for his idealistic and antinomian personality.

George Gordon was born in 1751 in the family townhouse in London, the sixth and posthumous child of Cosmo, Third Duke of Gordon. The Gordons were proud—even haughty—about their ancient Scottish lineage, and the family still possessed enormous wealth and property in the North. They also possessed notions of European grandeur, which colored Lord George’s grandiose sense of his own destiny. His father was named for Cosimo III de Medici, Duke of Tuscany, who had been a close friend of George’s grandfather. The Gordons also boasted of their blood-ties to many Polish aristocrats—all of whom were active in Polish-French versions of Scottish Masonry (which were generically called Écossais rites).² As Gordon learned later, several of these Polish families had Jewish blood and were fascinated by Sabbatian forms of Jewish Cabalism.³ Three years after his father’s death, Gordon’s mother Catherine set her sights on Stanislaus Poniatowski, King of Poland, who claimed not only Gordon but Stuart and Jewish blood.⁴ She dressed her young sons up as cupids and had them shower the visiting King


² The Gay Gordons (London, 1908), 53; Ernst Friedrichs, Freemasonry in Russia and Poland (Berne, 1908), 57–62; Lusqif Haas, Sekta jarmazoni warszawski (Warszawa, 1980), 85–87, 96, 177.


⁴ Poniatowski was the great-grandson of Lady Catherine Gordon; see J.M. Bulloch, Bibliography of the Gordons (Aberdeen, 1924), 175–76. For Poniatowski’s Stuart, Jewish, and Masonic relations, see Claude Nordmann, La Crise du Nord au Début du XVIIIe siècle (Paris, 1962), 152–53; Stanislas Mnemon, La Conspiration du Cardinal Alberoni et Stanislas Poniatowski: la Franc-Maçonnerie et Stanislas Poniatowski (Cracovie Universite, 1909), 60–67.