

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.³ 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.⁴ Johann Georg Schrepfer, or Schroepfer, born in Nuremberg in 1739, was a man of poor education, no erudition, and rough manners.⁵ 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.⁶ 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

³ All biographical data, unless otherwise noted, taken from the entry 'Schrepfer' in the *Allgemeine Deutsche Biographie* (ADB), vol. 32, 490–491.

⁴ 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.

⁵ 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.

⁶ Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 3–4.

Wurmb who was a skeptic concerning Schrepfer's magic, but who of course had professional interest in a fiscal bargain that he suspected came from the Jesuits.⁷ To convince Wurmb and the Saxon court of his abilities and the authority of his superiors, Schrepfer performed a necromantic session—like seventeenth-century alchemists, he combined business and magic.⁸

Having gained some influence in Leipzig's Freemasonic scene, Schrepfer grew bolder in his imposture and, in September 1774, acted as French nobleman under the name 'Baron Stein von Steinbach'.⁹ He succeeded in deceiving some of his Masonic friends, but when the envoy of the French court in electoral Saxony, Marboies, found out about his pretense, he demanded that Schrepfer present a written proof of his legitimacy.¹⁰ Schrepfer was unable to do so and preferred to escape from Dresden to Leipzig where he felt safe from prosecution.¹¹ A few weeks later, Schrepfer could no longer bear the pressure of his prosecutors, and, after another necromantic session in his coffeehouse, he put an end to his life.¹²

2. *The Lodge as a Vehicle of Defining Identity: Schrepfer's Masonic Career*

After establishing himself as coffeehouse-keeper in Leipzig, Schrepfer founded his personal Masonic lodge and recruited not only "profanes" and women but also members of Leipzig's leading Freemasons' lodge 'Minerva'. The legitimacy and authenticity of his own Masonic system was his main argument in his competition with 'Minerva': In a leaflet that Schrepfer delivered in the streets of Leipzig in August 1773, he published the initiation rites of the 'Minerva' lodge—a breach of the secrecy of Freemasonry—and accused the lodge of deceiving its initiates and demanding inappropriate fees for elevating them to higher Masonic degrees.¹³ When Schrepfer continued his incriminations in the presence of the lodge's protector, the Duke of Kurland, he was

⁷ Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 6–7.

⁸ Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 7–8.

⁹ Letter to Georg Christoph von Roepert, 4 November 1774, quoted in Frick, *Die Erleuchteten*, 452–453; Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 193, gives the name 'Baron von Steinbach'.

¹⁰ The envoy's letter to Schrepfer is printed in Bekker, *Bedenken*, 26; a translation is given in Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 209–210.

¹¹ Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 65 (see also footnote).

¹² Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 19, and *Beylagen* 14.

¹³ Quoted and printed in Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 28 and 93–94.

arrested and punished by ‘200 *Arsprügel*’ (‘strokes on the bottom’) for his disorderly conduct.¹⁴ The receipt he had to sign for this penalty was published in several newspapers, but Schrepfer himself publicly denied not only that he had signed the receipt, but also that he had been punished at all.¹⁵ According to his own point of view, the reported punishment was nothing but defamation. Furthermore, he would accept neither the legitimacy nor the authority of a society seeking to revive the order of the Knights Templar under the name of freemasonry. To restore his dignity, Schrepfer went to Brunswick and returned with a letter from the Grand Master of German freemasonry, Duke Ferdinand, who recommended him to the Leipzig lodge, particularly emphasizing Schrepfer’s ‘sciences’.¹⁶ This letter served as Schrepfer’s ticket to the lodge’s sessions and convinced his opponents, at least for a short period of time.

Before initiating new members, Schrepfer examined them carefully, using mysterious rituals that confirmed his reputation. The room where the examination took place was decorated only with a table that carried a bowl of punch, salad, candles, and glasses of water. Talking about everyday topics at first, he then interviewed the candidate about the immortality of the soul and life after death. Occasionally throughout the ritual, Schrepfer would take a glass of water and inspect it by looking at it and drinking from it while standing in front of a mirror. This procedure served as a test of the candidate’s integrity: clear water signaled an honest desire to be initiated, while cloudy water revealed pretense.¹⁷

When he felt he had recruited enough members of the ‘Minerva’ for his own system, Schrepfer entered a session of the lodge by force and expelled the Master with the aid of a pistol, claiming the Master’s position for himself.¹⁸ In the summer of 1774, he succeeded in taking over the chair of the lodge, and his Masonic enemies were said to finally have submitted to his authority. The system of the ‘*Strikte Observanz*’ was abolished and replaced by Schrepfer’s necromantic sessions, which

¹⁴ Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 121; the duke’s order to the local authorities, dated 10 September 1773, is printed in Erdmann, ‘Ueber Cagliostro’, 115.

¹⁵ The receipt was published in the newspaper *Wandsbeker Bote* No. 167, 12 October 1773, Schrepfer’s counterstatement in the *Frankfurter Zeitung*, 29 October 1773; cf. Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 43–44, 123–126; Bekker, *Bedenken*, 32.

¹⁶ Wurmb, ‘Cours de Maçonnerie’, 5.

¹⁷ The whole ceremony as described in Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 196–198, footnote.

¹⁸ Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 20 and 199.

he claimed to be the source of true freemasonry.¹⁹ The role Schrepfer played in Leipzig became well-known in the German Masonic scene, and a few months later when ‘the greatest Freemason of all times’—as he was called in a letter from a French brother²⁰—had killed himself, it was general disillusionment that made the lodge and its members regard this episode as a case of embarrassing aberrations.²¹

3. *Between Freemasonry, Natural Magic, and Esotericism?* *Schrepfer's Necromancy*

Johann Georg Schrepfer had a remarkable ability to stage necromantic performances that captivated his spectators throughout all-night sessions, repeated over the course of weeks and months. He raised the spirits of deceased celebrities of old and recent times and impressed his public by talking to the spirits and giving them orders.²² The apparitions were said to be clearly visible, clothed according to the habits of their lifetime, hanging in the air, and screaming awfully. His spectators described the faces of the spirits they witnessed as human, but the material looked more like smoke or vapor than flesh and skin. By means of enthusiastic speeches, prayers, aromatic smoke, and punch-drinking, Schrepfer caught the attention of his audience or, as his critics wrote, dazed them.²³ During his sessions, beginning at midnight, the spectators had to remain seated, having been told that they would face immense danger if they disobeyed this rule. To complete the rituals of his ceremonies, Schrepfer performed blessings and used crucifixes and holy water.²⁴

Among the most impressive examples of raised spirits were those of the two Danish traitors Struensee and Brandt, whose beheading in 1772 had made the news all over Europe. In 1773, the first of his two

¹⁹ Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 4, 10.

²⁰ Letter from a certain du Porte, August 1774, in: *Geheimes Staatsarchiv Preußischer Kulturbesitz Berlin, Freimaurerlogen und freimaurerähnliche Vereinigungen*, 5.2 B 113 *Johannisloge Carl zur gekrönten Säule*, Braunschweig, Nr. 661: *Briefe und Actenstücke über Schrepfer und dessen Herkommen*.

²¹ Cf. the entry on Schrepfer in the *Internationales Freimaurerlexikon*, 758–759; Erdmann, ‘Ueber Cagliostro’, 114–116.

²² The following descriptions are compiled from the reports of witnesses as published in Schlegel, *Tagebuch*; Crusius, *Bedenken*, and ‘Auszug eines Schreibens’.

²³ E.g. Nicolai, ‘Rezension’, 274.

²⁴ Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 201.

successful necromantic years, Schrepfer made them appear in his lodge with their heads in their hands and wearing the same clothes as on the day of their execution.²⁵ But when he was asked to raise the spirit of the famous poet Christian Fürchtegott Gellert, known in person to some of Schrepfer's spectators, he refused to do so, arguing that this would go beyond his necromantic abilities.²⁶

To impress his Masonic audiences, Schrepfer evoked the spirit of the Templars' last Grand Master, Jacques de Molay, during a session in Dresden, and ordered him to travel to Frankfurt and visit Schrepfer's companion, a man named Gradmann. Molay obeyed, and a few minutes later the spirit returned with a receipt that apparently had been signed in Frankfurt.²⁷ During another session, also in Dresden, Schrepfer called the spirit of one 'C.F.S. G.F.M.' who appeared in his full shape, engulfed by flames and roaring dreadfully, pleading with Schrepfer not to torture him in such a way.²⁸ Before calling this spirit, Schrepfer had raised a number of tutelary spirits that announced their presence by a tone that sounded like ringing glass, a sound which remained audible for hours. The whole performance was so horrifying that Schrepfer himself remarked that he would never repeat it, since this kind of necromancy could prove lethal the next time it was performed.²⁹

According to contemporary descriptions, Schrepfer distinguished between two classes of magical works, '*pneumatische*' and '*elementarische*'. Pneumatic necromancy meant the calling of spirits, while elementary necromancy focused on the use of light—each person he conjured up appeared in a different light. The spirits of the deceased would appear in three different states, described as 'good', 'medium', and 'damned'.³⁰ During his conjurations, Schrepfer himself usually turned pale, a state that was understood as the effect of some demonic power acting upon him and that he tried to hold off by carrying a crucifix. Other so-called elementary works, which he performed in the countryside, made stars shine brighter or thunderstorms arise at Schrepfer's command;³¹ thus, necromancy was the most impressing, but not the only kind of magical performances that Schrepfer undertook.

²⁵ Bekker, *Bedenken*, 10.

²⁶ Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 203.

²⁷ Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 11.

²⁸ Bekker, *Bedenken*, 22–23.

²⁹ Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 206–207, Bekker, *Bedenken*, 24.

³⁰ Bekker, *Bedenken*, 15–17, 21–22.

³¹ Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 205.

So what was his necromancy like? Was it nothing but deceit, or is there anything to suggest that Schrepfer himself took it all seriously? Or, as the theologian Johann August Ernesti, quoted in Johann Salomo Semlers *Sammlungen*, put it, was Schrepfer an impostor or a fanatic who believed in the integrity of his necromantic actions?³² Looking at his own written remarks, he appears to have had little training using *refined skills* like writing and conversation,³³ but he definitely had quite some knowledge of freemasonry, magic, and at least a popular kind of numerology. This allowed him to support his actions by means of appropriate rituals and cryptic symbolism.³⁴ So even if the spirits he called did not actually appear, he still may have been serious in claiming to be able to come into contact with them—he may have understood the actors he needed to perform his rituals as merely the representations of the actual spirits.

4. *Necromancy—Practical Magic or Instrument of Deceit? A Polemical Debate*

Having as many critics as admirers, Schrepfer was at the center of a wide range of discussions. These discussions were largely predicated on the polemical stance of Schrepfer's opponents: From their perspective, he was an impostor and swindler, deceiving his audiences for his own personal benefit and disseminating superstition. On the other hand, he—at least temporarily—won over members of the educated class, who joined in the debate in order to defend their master. Altogether, he was paid as much attention by adversaries and adherents.

The debate developed in three different stages: First of all, the magician himself used polemics in his competition with Leipzig's leading Freemasons' lodge 'Minerva', questioning their legitimacy and unveiling their secrets, thereby defining his own Masonic identity. Secondly, a debate between adherents and adversaries unfolded in printed publications. Finally, as a result of this debate, the story of the necromancer became a *topos* in fictional and historical literature.

As we might expect, many of his critics, especially the "enlightened" ones, were utterly skeptical and suspected that the magic shows were

³² Ernesti, 'Inhalt des lehrreichen Zusazes', 82.

³³ Cf. the copies of Schrepfer's letters in Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', *Beylagen* IV–V.

³⁴ Cf. the "cabalistic" sheet printed in Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, between 98 and 99.

based on optical illusions—a séance is reported where one of the spectators, a merchant, hid under a table and identified one of the apparitions as Schrepfer's domestic; the merchant recognized that the shoes of the "spirit" had been bought in his own shop the day before. The same skeptical spectator managed to lock the doors before one of the sessions began. Surprisingly, the spirits had to stay outside rather than, as disembodied beings, move through closed doors, thereby giving the skeptic strong evidence of their physical nature.³⁵ The undeniable fact that the majority of Schrepfer's audience nevertheless believed what they witnessed was, in this skeptical perspective, seen as the result of a combination of being enclosed in darkness and intoxication.

To sum up, "enlightened" interpretations and explanations of Schrepfer's necromancy varied from adducing psychological causes, such as suspecting the magician of trickery by deceiving the senses,³⁶ to attributing the effects to mere optical illusions caused by using pseudo-magic apparatuses like the *laterna magica*, concave mirrors, or opaque smoke.³⁷ However, these psychological and technical explications were not generally accepted as sufficient: none of the few eyewitnesses who considered themselves to be impartial observers reported to have discovered the use of any apparatus of this kind.³⁸ They assumed that Schrepfer was indeed able to command demonic powers that could delude the senses of his audience. This conclusion could be drawn from the argument that there was no evidence for the suggestion that the apparitions were faked by means of technical equipment—even by those who felt that magical operations were inconsistent with both reason and faith.³⁹ Thus, like other popular showmen of *magia naturalis*, Schrepfer profited from the ambivalence of an age when no distinct boundary had as yet been drawn between "enlightened" skepticism and "regressive" superstition.⁴⁰ This ambiguity made it possible for

³⁵ Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 203–204, 206.

³⁶ Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 201; Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 15.

³⁷ Mendelssohn, 'Anmerkungen', 279–280; Bekker, *Bedenken*, 16. On the *laterna magica* cf. Sawicki, *Leben mit den Toten*, 81–84.

³⁸ Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 15; the *laterna magica* theory was dismissed in 'Gespräch von Schröpfers Zauberey', 174–175, as was the hypothesis that Schrepfer used a variety of mirrors, *ibid.* 190–191.

³⁹ In the aforementioned 'Gespräch von Schröpfers Zauberey', 191, the protagonists of the (fictitious?) discussion arrive at the conclusion that, since there is no satisfactory physical explanation, Schrepfer must have applied 'theurgische, das ist, magische, zauberische Künste'.

⁴⁰ See Hochadel, *Öffentliche Wissenschaft*, 293–295.

Schrepfer's spectators to follow his performances with skeptical amusement or shivering fascination.

Shortly after the necromancer's death, in 1775, a debate unfolded in journals and publications, triggered by an anonymously published article that was penned by Christian August Crusius, a theologian in Leipzig who had been asked by an interested nobleman to give his opinion on Schrepfer's performances. Crusius relied on a single anonymous eyewitness, complaining about the inconsistency of the manifold accounts he knew. His main argument was that Schrepfer had mingled Catholic Christian rituals and pagan magic in the name of Jesus Christ—the necromantic sessions had been an expression of Crypto-Catholicism. Crusius' conclusion was that Schrepfer should be regarded as a sign of the coming of the Antichrist.⁴¹

This radical, rather apocalyptic perspective provoked various reactions in the same year. The first to accept the challenge was 'Balthasar Bekker der jüngere', an unknown author who claimed to be the grandson of the Dutch theologian Balthasar Bekker who in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries had initiated a debate on witchcraft that had involved philosophers like Christian Thomasius.⁴² Bekker doubted the reliability of Crusius' eyewitness, thereby accusing Crusius of displaying a lack of critical sense and of interpreting the séances without understanding sufficiently the common techniques of *magia naturalis*.⁴³ Bekker went so far as to call some of Crusius' explanations simple-minded ('*einfältig*').⁴⁴

This publication was reviewed in the *Allgemeine Deutsche Bibliothek* by Friedrich Nicolai, who mocked Schrepfer as a charlatan and '*abgefeimter Bube*' ('cunning fellow') and his devotees as credulous enthusiasts ('*Schwärmer*').⁴⁵ Nicolai considered Schrepfer's success a symptom of the superstition and prejudice that were still influential among the learned.⁴⁶ His opinion on Crusius was quite similar to Bekker's: Nicolai suggested that Crusius was generally known as a theologian who explained almost everything by referring to demonic powers ('*Mitwirkung des Teufels*'),

⁴¹ Crusius, *Bedenken*; the question was: 'Was von den, von dem berufenen Schroeffer verbreiteten Gerüchten zu halten, als ob derselbe habe Geister erscheinen lassen, und dergleichen, und wie die ganze Sache anzusehen sey?'

⁴² Bekker, *Bedenken*; on his being Balthasar Bekker's grandson, *ibid.*, 27.

⁴³ Bekker, *Bedenken*, 14, 23.

⁴⁴ Bekker, *Bedenken*, 24.

⁴⁵ Nicolai, 'Rezension', 273–275.

⁴⁶ Nicolai, 'Rezension', 275.

and therefore Bekker's comments were superfluous for those who wished to judge the validity of Crusius' arguments.⁴⁷ More to the point, he suggested, were the '*Anmerkungen*' published by the philosopher Moses Mendelssohn, who had also commented on Crusius in 1775. Mendelssohn pointed out that the Freemasons, who were the audience at Schrepfer's performances, were used to expecting miraculous phenomena and were thus susceptible to believing in 'artificial fraud' ('*künstlichen Betrug*') of the kind that Schrepfer presented.⁴⁸ Contrary to Nicolai, Mendelssohn did not content himself with merely satirizing Schrepfer, but went into technical details about the *laterna magica* and concave mirrors, although in conclusion he did not abstain from ridiculing Crusius' '*metaphysische Möglichkeit*' ('metaphysical possibility') of spirits actually appearing in one or another way.⁴⁹

Bekker's and Mendelssohn's commentaries occasioned a detailed response by the famous theologian Johann Salomo Semler, who was professor at the University of Halle and a major exponent of eighteenth-century enlightened theology. Semler commented on Crusius and Bekker, reprinted Mendelssohn's text and added a longish article in which he put forth his own perspective on Schrepfer.⁵⁰ Semler's argument rested on the conviction that the physical existence of the '*Teufelsreich*' was of no relevance whatsoever for Christians and that all notions of angels and demons in the Bible were adopted from '*Chaldäern, Egyptiern etc.*' and could not be considered as part of divine revelation.⁵¹ Thus he rejected the position represented by Crusius, who conceded the possibility of demons acting upon the human soul; this would, Semler felt, add up to believing in Schrepfer's necromantic competences.⁵² Semler insisted that Schrepfer's performances were nothing but '*Hocuspocusstreiche*', as could readily be seen from the fact that Schrepfer himself was an impostor.⁵³ The fact that the theologian wished to engage in this debate was probably due to his desire to combat what he considered to be superstition—he could not remain passive when a colleague of his supported irrational beliefs.

⁴⁷ Nicolai, 'Rezension', 276–277.

⁴⁸ Mendelssohn, 'Anmerkungen', 278–279.

⁴⁹ Mendelssohn, 'Anmerkungen', 279–281, quotation 281.

⁵⁰ Semler, 'Anmerkungen'. On Semler, see also Peter Hanns Reill's chapter in the present volume.

⁵¹ Semler, 'Anmerkungen', 21–23.

⁵² Semler, 'Anmerkungen', 25, 33.

⁵³ Semler, 'Anmerkungen', 29, 35–36.

The latest contribution to the controversy initiated by Crusius was an apparently fictitious dialogue, ‘*von Schröpfers Zauberey*’, that was published in 1777.⁵⁴ Again, Schrepfer was assessed and Crusius’ and Bekker’s texts were commented upon; the protagonists—quoted only by their initials—were supposed to be theologians who had different opinions on whether Schrepfer’s séances were the result of ‘*natürliche Künste*’ (‘natural arts’), fraud, or genuine magic. The pros and cons of all three possible solutions to Schrepfer’s mystery were discussed; Bekker’s suspicion concerning the *laterna magica* was dismissed, and finally the debaters agreed that necromancy was ‘*magische, zauberische Künste*’ (‘magical, enchanting arts’).⁵⁵ At the same time, Crusius’ notion that Schrepfer signaled the coming of the Antichrist was rehabilitated and complemented with a reference to Crypto-Catholicism.⁵⁶

From Crusius to the *Gespräch*, we have seen how adversaries and adherents not only discussed Schrepfer’s activities, but magic in general. On the one hand, Bekker tried to ridicule Schrepfer as well as Crusius, while Semler tried to deconstruct superstition on scientific grounds. On the other hand, Crusius argued that it may well be possible for demons to appear on earth, and in the *Gespräch* his “metaphysical” position was defended against all earlier attacks. Some of the combatants employed strategies that can be seen as polemical, according to the criteria suggested by Wouter J. Hanegraaff: There are protagonists who feel an urge to express their opinion, it is ‘not entirely clear’ what should be thought of Schrepfer and necromancy, the debate has a target, it is published in books and journals, and some of the arguments are rather crude, using invectives such as ‘*Windbeutel*’.⁵⁷ Still, the debate shows how in the 1770s public opinion and theological perspectives on magic in the broadest sense of the word were not clearly oriented in one or the other direction. Despite its partially polemical tenor, the debate did not result in any final decision on whether Schrepfer had been an impostor or not.

By contrast, the literary accounts of Schrepfer’s life, which were written years and decades after his spectacular demise, have arrived at some degree of consensus: the necromancer is an oddity, a fairy-tale figure in the age of Enlightenment. A typical nineteenth-century

⁵⁴ ‘*Gespräch von Schröpfers Zauberey*’.

⁵⁵ ‘*Gespräch von Schröpfers Zauberey*’, 191.

⁵⁶ ‘*Gespräch von Schröpfers Zauberey*’, 194.

⁵⁷ Hanegraaff, ‘*Forbidden Knowledge*’, 226–227.

example is Theodor Fontane's description of how Schrepfer won over wealthy and educated men in Leipzig; Fontane tells his story ironically, and although he does not engage in polemics against Schrepfer, he has no respect for the magician's admirers.⁵⁸ Goethe, Wieland, and Jean Paul mention Schrepfer; in their works he becomes a recurring metaphor for the archetypal impostor and adventurer. The opinion that many Masons had once held, i.e. that Schrepfer was a remarkable man, is now generally reinterpreted as an embarrassment for the history of freemasonry.⁵⁹ Schrepfer was included in books on magicians and swindlers, works which reproduced the polemical opinions of his critics, and presented Schrepfer's life as a cautionary tale designed to deter readers from superstition and 'pseudo-masonic aberrations'.

5. *Charlatanism or Magic? The Debate on Necromancy in Late Eighteenth-Century Germany*

There was an extensive debate among philosophers and theologians in late eighteenth-century Germany about what might happen to the human soul after physical death.⁶⁰ A famous example is Kant's view of Emanuel Swedenborg's concept of a spirit world, published anonymously in his *Träume eines Geistersehers* (1766).⁶¹ At the time of Schrepfer's appearance in public, this partly enlightened, partly inspired discourse had not yet arrived at a definite rejection of the existence of spirits and specters—it was still common sense that they did exist. However, the possibility of apparitions perceptible by the human senses, of visualizing and materializing spirits, was increasingly doubted. In this respect, there was an important difference between Lutheran and Catholic churches: The Protestant churches *grosso modo* denied the existence of angels and demons and rejected the possibility that the souls of the deceased could wander among the living. Catholic doctrine, on the other hand, accepted not only the reality of angels and demons, but also that souls could appear from heaven or out of purgatory and take on a perceptible form.⁶² A famous example of the official acceptance of the existence

⁵⁸ Fontane, *Wanderungen*, 302–303.

⁵⁹ Kalka, *Wir haben Mehreres erwartet*. I am grateful to the author for having made his manuscript accessible to me.

⁶⁰ On the debate as a whole cf. Sawicki, *Leben mit den Toten*, 56–84; Sawicki, 'Die Gespenster'.

⁶¹ See Weissberg, *Geistersprache*.

⁶² Sawicki, *Leben mit den Toten*, 59–65.

of angels and demons was the Bavarian priest Johann Joseph Gassner, a contemporary of Schrepfer, who was allowed to perform exorcisms in the diocese of Regensburg.⁶³

With this in mind, it is not surprising that Schrepfer was accused of Crypto-Catholicism, and with his extensive usage of holy water and incense he seemed to confirm this accusation. His necromancy, however, would have brought him into conflict with the Catholic Church, even if the Church had accepted that his rituals worked: necromancy was considered a demonic delusion and was therefore strictly prohibited.⁶⁴ Although a categorization in such terms may be rather anachronistic, Schrepfer's position was certainly far closer to Masonic esotericism than to orthodox Christianity.

6. *An Esoteric Impostor?*

Although Schrepfer was considered a swindler and impostor by many of his contemporaries, he managed to acquire loans from some of his devotees, debts that were never paid off.⁶⁵ In spite of the fact that he left behind liabilities rather than assets, not even his opponents such as the Saxon minister Wurmb accused him of financial fraud.⁶⁶ Apparently, discretely losing money was less embarrassing than openly admitting that one had believed in such a dubious figure.

At first glance, Schrepfer quite obviously matches the contemporarily well-known pattern of popular showmen and impostors like Cagliostro. This will have assured his temporary success as well as his dubious reputation in eighteenth-century Saxony. The contemporary "public opinion" was divided between outright rejection and uncritical enthusiasm, with supporters and detractors paying equal attention to him and his magic. His necromancy was performed as a mixture of religious and Masonic rituals, appealing both to "Christians" and "esotericists". Schrepfer was a virtuoso at using symbolism and spiritual practices derived from freemasonry, his understanding of kabbalistic thought, and Christian religion, and he managed to fascinate his public in many ways.

⁶³ On Gassner see Midelfort, *Exorcism*.

⁶⁴ Sawicki, *Leben mit den Toten*, 61.

⁶⁵ Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 180–181.

⁶⁶ Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 19.

What his own convictions really may have been is something we can only guess at, based on the evidence of his performances and the letters he left behind. To modern observers, he may appear to have misled his supporters for his own personal fame and benefit. It can be tempting to explain Schrepfer's career by attributing motives such as pure egocentrism or drive for prestige to him, but ultimately such an explanation is not very satisfying. The most important aspect about Schrepfer's "Masonic necromancy" is its symbolical function: In analogy to the initiation ceremony to the master's degree, necromancy is the preferential way to gain access to higher secret knowledge. During the initiation ritual, the initiate is raised from his symbolic grave, following the legend of Hiram.⁶⁷ Schrepfer took the legend literally and interpreted it as the calling of spirits, culminating in the conjuration of Jacques de Molay. Thus, the necromantic performances definitely were an expression of the esoteric quest for higher knowledge. For the spectators, pursuing this quest indicated neither superstition nor simple-mindedness, but was rather evidence of a serious spiritual endeavor.

Although we do not know if Schrepfer himself was aware of this context, his Masonic audiences should have realized it, and therefore his success may have been based on the fact that he seemed to fulfill one of the most important Masonic promises. Consequently, Freemasons of his epoch were partly impressed, partly annoyed by his efforts to construct a Masonic ritual that he claimed to be the only authentic version. This makes Schrepfer resemble other Masonic impostors who irritated and influenced European freemasonry from time to time—the former superintendent Dietrich Schumacher alias Philipp Samuel Rosa had been successful with his '*Clermont-Rosasches Kapitel*' in the nearby cities of Halle and Jena only a decade before.⁶⁸ Although it remains an open question whether Schrepfer was just a swindler or an esotericist, the role of freemasonry in Schrepfer's career is quite clear: being the most widespread and generally approved form of institutionalized esotericism of his age, the lodge served as the symbolic and organizational background for his performances. Accepting the legend of Hiram in the Master's degree at face value matched the esoteric interests of Schrepfer's Masonic audiences. And it was Masonic tradition that popularized Schrepfer for at least two centuries.

⁶⁷ Neugebauer-Wölk, 'Geheimnis und Öffentlichkeit', 20–21.

⁶⁸ Cf. the entries 'Rosa, Philipp Samuel' and 'Clermont, Kapitel von' in the *Internationales Freimaurerlexikon*, 182–183 and 714–715.

7. *Epilogue: Schrepfer's Suicide as the Ultimate Necromantic Performance*

Returning to where we started from, let us have a look at Schrepfer's suicide again. He had just accomplished another necromantic session in his coffeehouse, a ritual that was so exceptionally successful that Schrepfer and his audience had been forced to leave the room to which the spirits had been called and to wait for their disappearance before continuing their séance.⁶⁹ He then invited his devotees to go for a walk at midnight and promised to let them share in another event, one that would be as exceptional as any they had ever seen and probably would ever see again. They walked to the Rosenthal, a forest near Leipzig, where Schrepfer suddenly disappeared. A shot sounded, and he was found dead. Despite this obviously rather distressing experience, some of the witnesses would claim that the shot had not been lethal and that Schrepfer had vanished in some supernatural way. The belief in the dignity of their master was strong enough to survive his dishonorable death: apparently his resurrection would only require yet another necromantic ritual.

The investigation of the suicide that took place within the following days revealed that Schrepfer had announced his ending in sealed letters addressed to his companions and that he had bid farewell to his wife and children. This indeed seemed to confirm the suspicion of fraud. The secrets he had promised to reveal to the public after his demise, items sealed in a heavy package, turned out to be a heap of underwear and stones.⁷⁰ What Schrepfer had pretended to be the contents of his secrets remains unknown, but presumably they must have referred to his Masonic system, not to his necromancy. The radical uncovering and exposing of the non-existence of Schrepfer's secret knowledge distinguishes him from other "esotericists" of his age, such as the secret orders or the Masonic system of the *Strikte Observanz*: esoteric "secrets" tend to lead to the gradual disillusionment of their supporters, who interpret their disappointment as their own individual failure or their lack of virtue. In Schrepfer's case, there obviously was no secret knowledge, beyond the fact that we do not have any evidence of how

⁶⁹ The description of the necromancer's ending and the following investigation is compiled from Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie', 18–22, and Schlegel, *Tagebuch*, 211–212.

⁷⁰ The skeptics among his disciples had not kept their promise to leave the package closed and had opened it three weeks before Schrepfer's death; cf. Wurmb, 'Cours de Maçonnerie'; *Beylagen*, 11.

his necromancy was performed. Thus, the techniques of the magician and showman have remained his secrets until today. Apart from that, Schrepfer kept his mysterious aura, and when a decade later two of Schrepfer's disciples impressed the successor to the Prussian throne, Frederick William, with necromantic sessions, they passed on the legacy of a dazzling late eighteenth-century personage.

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