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Death by Publicity: U.S. Freemasonry and the Public Drama of Secrecy

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Rhetoric & Public Affairs

Michigan State University Press

Volume 11, Number 2, Summer 2008

pp. 243-277

10.1353/rap.0.0029

ARTICLE

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Abstract

In this essay I argue that the decline of Freemasonry in the United States is homologous to a general decline in civic engagement. An examination of the centuries-old ritual and symbolism of the fraternity reveals a dynamic relationship between promise making and secrecy that has sustained Masonry for almost 300 years. In the context of its dwindling membership, I argue that recent attempts by Masonic leaders to promote the fraternity in the language of transparency not only bespeak the paradoxical way in which publics are threatened by publicity, but also suggest that a sense of mystery is necessary to sustain a public over time.

DEATH BY PUBLICITY: U.S. FREEMASONRY AND THE PUBLIC DRAMA OF SECRECY

JOSHUA GUNN

In this essay I argue that the decline of Freemasonry in the United States is homologous to a general decline in civic engagement. An examination of the centuries-old ritual and symbolism of the fraternity reveals a dynamic relationship between promise making and secrecy that has sustained Masonry for almost 300 years. In the context of its dwindling membership, I argue that recent attempts by Masonic leaders to promote the fraternity in the language of transparency not only bespeak the paradoxical way in which publics are threatened by publicity, but also suggest that a sense of mystery is necessary to sustain a public over time.

"These two pillars are the most duplicated architectural structures in history. Replicas exist all over the world. . . . [They] are exact replicas of the two pillars that stood at the head of Solomon's Temple." Langdon pointed to the pillar on the left. "That's called Boaz—or the Mason's Pillar. The other is called Jachin—or the Apprentice Pillar." He paused. "In fact, virtually every Masonic temple in the world has two pillars like these."

—Robert Langdon in *The Da Vinci Code*¹

At the conclusion of Dan Brown's wildly successful novel *The Da Vinci Code* (2003), Professor Robert Langdon and his younger companion Sophie Neveu arrive at the famous Rosslyn Chapel in Edinburgh, Scotland, on their quest for the Holy Grail. Brown's use of Masonic symbolism in the novel is frequently inaccurate, such as in Langdon and Sophie's discussion of Boaz and Jachin while standing in the sanctuary (see fig. 1). Although it remains the oldest and best-known occult organization in the world, contemplative

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Rhetoric & Public Affairs Vol. 11, No. 2, 2008, pp. 2-13-278
ISSN 1094-8392



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