

Chapter 1

Introduction: The Theoretical and Biographical Ingredients

The Theological-Magical Nexus

One of the more prominently featured themes in the history of ideas, extensively spelled out by Lynn Thorndike in a multivolumed study, is the association between magic and science. “My idea,” explained Thorndike at the outset of his vast scholarly undertaking, “is that magic and experimental science have been connected in their development; that magicians were perhaps the first to experiment; and that the history of both magic and experimental science can be better understood by studying them together.”¹ Refining this thesis for the early modern period is Frances Yates, who, by claiming that the Hermetic expression of magic in particular played a substantive role in the evolution of modern science, has raised a virtual hornets’ nest in the midst of Renaissance studies.

The intellectual breakthrough setting the stage for the modern scientific temper, according to Yates, required a critical change in the conception of man’s relation to the universe, the key of which lay in the shift from a geocentric to heliocentric cosmic outlook. Instrumental in promoting this revolutionary shift, Yates has argued,

was a revived Hermeticism. With Giordano Bruno her main focus, whose Hermeticized world view reputedly resonated with and helped to confirm the heliocentric cosmic outlook of Copernicus and Galileo, Yates forced a reevaluation among Renaissance historians concerning the proper connection between the Hermetic revival and the seventeenth-century scientific revolution. While intrinsically fascinating in its own right, however, it will not be our object here to enter into the controversy surrounding the so-called Yates thesis concerning the origins of modern science.² The subject of the present study, the abbot Trithemius (1462–1516), rather highlights the affiliation of magic with another discipline more basic than science, since even science was traditionally said to hinge from it. Reference of course is to theology, which represents the intellectualization of religious attitude and practice.

One of the founders of modern anthropology, Bronislaw Malinowski, concluded after a lifelong investigation of the magically conditioned Polynesian Trobrianders that, in their primitive beginnings, magic and religion are essentially indistinguishable. Magic, Malinowski determined on the basis of his Trobriander study, springs from an instinctual and emotional need of the human being to press forth “into impasses where gaps in his knowledge and the limitations of his early power of observation and reason betray him in a crucial moment.” An important social consequence of this inner drive to resolve the enigmas of existence, Malinowski maintained, is the formation of a system of “rudimentary modes of behavior and rudimentary beliefs,” with the function of magical ritual being to fix and standardize such behavior and beliefs into permanent forms.³ Inasmuch as these are traits which also inherently belong to religion, it followed for Malinowski that magic and religion, at bottom, are essentially one and the same.

When such primitive impulses to bridge the gaps of knowledge and overcome human limitations are organized by religion into an intellectual system, the result is theology. To the extent that religion, as Malinowski would persuade us, can be identified with magic, the result is “magical theology”—*theologia magica*. It will be the object of the present study to go one step further. When a conscious attempt is made, as in the case of the abbot Trithemius, to recapture the religious origins of magic and to harmonize its precepts with Christian dogma, the outcome is more properly termed “Chris-

tian magical theology"—*theologia magica Christiana*. Though himself only marginally immersed in practical magic (his specialty lay in the techniques of cryptography, or secret communication through magical means), Trithemius, first at Sponheim and later at Würzburg, was not content to leave the matter there. He devoted considerable time and effort to the problem of how to rationalize the theory of magical theology upon which his practical operations rested.⁴

Living to the threshold of the Lutheran revolt from Rome, Trithemius was immersed in a Christian tradition of magic that linked him with occultist strains in the scholastic and humanist movements of the past and the reform movements of the future on both sides of the Catholic-Protestant divide. Much as Trithemius could scarcely uphold the legitimacy and benefits of magic without reference to certain of its leading champions of the Middle Ages, so did the sixteenth- and seventeenth-century exponents of magical theology commonly call upon the name and ideas of Trithemius among their forerunners to justify their magical speculations and operations. Indeed, as we will subsequently note, some were so taken by his magic, originally deemed to constitute a bridge from the ancient pagan and Jewish theologies to the theology of Christ, as to perceive in it a further bridge to reconciliation between Catholics and Protestants.

If, as will be conceded, Trithemius shares some blame for the ensuing witch persecutions by authoring certain writings which played a part in their justification, it will be pointed out that he also helped set the stage for the Renaissance and seventeenth-century movement, spearheaded by the Paracelsians, to preserve a legitimate place for magic within the orthodox theological schemes of Catholic and Protestants alike. There were predecessors and even contemporaries, it is true, who, assuming a more thoroughgoing and systematic approach to the revival of the ancient arcane traditions than is represented by Trithemius's sporadic outbursts in the same vein, may have exercised a more decisive influence on later occult theory. Among the latter were the Italian Platonists Marsilio Ficino and Giovanni Pico della Mirandola and Trithemius's German acquaintances Johann Reuchlin and Agrippa of Nettesheim.⁵ The point of the present study, however, is not to uphold a dominant influence by Trithemius on the history of magic. Rather,

on a more modest scale, it is to present the theological rationale for magic of one of its more provocative Renaissance spokesmen, and to show how that rationale was diversely received during the highly volatile two centuries after the abbot's death commensurate with the Reformation, the witch hunts, and the onset of the scientific revolution.

Needless to say, Trithemius's theory of magical theology did not arise out of a vacuum. It was forged out of a particular life experience which embraced, in conjunction with the occult studies, a strong desire to effect spiritual reform both in its author and in the wider Christian Church to which he devoted his monastic way of life. Prior to entering into the theoretical intricacies of the magical program formulated by Trithemius, accordingly, we need first, in a concluding section to this introductory chapter, take stock of the concrete circumstances within which that program was forged.

The Biographical Setting

Trithemius, according to a story put into circulation during the latter half of the sixteenth century, was once summoned into the presence of Emperor Maximilian I where, in a dramatic demonstration of necromantic powers for which he had earned widespread notoriety, he conjured from the dead, together with sundry ancient heroes, Maximilian's own deceased wife Mary of Burgundy. That a similar tale was contemporaneously afloat concerning a certain Doctor Faustus, who was said to have performed a comparable feat for Maximilian's son Charles V, was not lost to the demonological critics of both men. As one among these, Christoph Zeisseler, observed in relation to the Faustian anecdote: "Some men relate that this same act was performed by Johannes Trithemius."⁶

How, then, did the magical legend of the abbot Trithemius, coalesced as it came to be with the legend of Faustus, take shape? Unlike the historical Faustus, Trithemius came to his magical studies from what initially was an entirely different slate of interests. Trithemius was first and foremost a Christian monk, a member of the Benedictine order, who dedicated his life to fulfilling the requirements of monastic piety. Secondly, Trithemius was an exceptionally erudite monk who, as the abbot of two monasteries during

his lifetime, zealously advocated in the pursuance of his monastic goals, not piety alone, but *learned* piety. This feature of Trithemius's career led him not only into more traditional ventures expected of the monastic career, such as mystical theology and ecclesiastical history, but also into the not so traditional venture of humanistic studies which were in a state of widespread revival in his day. Thirdly, Trithemius joined forces with other learned theologians of his day in taking the offensive against those he considered to be foremost human conveyors of the demonic arts, the witches and sorcerers. Only fourthly did Trithemius himself enter into the arcane field of magic, centering on the techniques of cryptography for his special interest but furnishing them with a solid foundation of occult theory which also drew on affiliated magical studies such as astrology, Pythagorean number theory, alchemy, and Cabala.⁷

What, then, are the biographical particulars that led Trithemius from his uncontroversial beginnings to the controversies of his final decades? Christened Johann Heidenberg, Trithemius acquired his Latin name from his birthplace of Trittenheim on the banks of the Mosel. Following the premature death of his father, his mother eventually remarried and, adopting the new family name Zell, produced several more children, of which only one, Johann's half-brother Jacob, survived to maturity.⁸ Convinced by a "miraculous" dream at the age of fifteen that he was destined to a life of letters, and frustrated at every turn in this regard by a stern stepfather who had a very different idea about his future, the young Johann was anxious to leave home as soon as possible to pursue his education. Upon breaking away from his parents Trithemius at first adopted an itinerant way of life, spending a short spell in nearby Trier, moving on into the Netherlands, and at last making his way to Heidelberg where, enrolled in the *studium generale*, he came into association with some of the foremost German humanists of his day. In the company of these, who included in their number Johann von Dalberg, Conrad Celtis, Jacob Wimpfeling, and Johann Reuchlin, Trithemius helped to form the Rhenish Literary Sodality.⁹

After completing his Heidelberg studies, in 1482, Trithemius set out in the company of a friend on a journey back to the Mosel valley. He did not, however, reach his goal, being caught up in a snow storm on his way home and taking shelter in the nearby

Benedictine monastery of St. Martin at Sponheim, located in the diocese of Mainz. In obedience to what he construed to be a providential hand guiding his way, Trithemius, once the storm ceased, chose to remain within the cloister's walls as a novice. By the age of twenty-one he was elevated to the Sponheim abbacy, which office he occupied for the next twenty-three years.¹⁰

In his abbatial role Trithemius vigorously pursued the career of letters which he believed that God had marked out for him. His avowed ideal was "true monastic erudition"—*vera eruditio monastica*, conceived as the union of learning with piety, of the intellect with the will, of pagan philosophy with the "philosophy of Christ." In keeping with this ideal he gathered on the shelves of his abbey library a large collection of texts, "of about two thousand volumes, both handwritten and printed," as he later nostalgically recalled after being compelled to forsake them following his move to Würzburg. To promote this venture he pressured his monks into handwriting texts in the monastic scriptorium even as the printing revolution was making that task seemingly superfluous.¹¹ And at his writing desk he undertook his own private literary career, concentrating for most of his Sponheim period in the areas of monastic reform, mystical theology, ecclesiastical history, and Christian humanism in keeping with the principles of literary elegance he shared with his associates of the Rhenish sodality.¹² In both functions, as bibliophile and literary scholar, Trithemius became renowned throughout Europe, in which dual role he served as an attractive magnet for some of the most illustrious men of his age. Among these were not only leading literary scholars of his day, but also a number of princely patrons. Of the topics of interest championed by Trithemius which increasingly drew these visitors to his cloister, not the least noteworthy is that of magic.¹³

If Trithemius gave much to his many studious visitors, he also took much from them. This held true especially in the area of language study, concerning which, he later acknowledged, he owed his earliest lessons in Hebrew to an unnamed Jew he had met in Heidelberg, his first Greek lessons to Celtis, and his advanced lessons in both languages to Reuchlin. It was especially as a Greek scholar that Trithemius earned fame in humanist quarters, with one visitor to Sponheim revelling in this regard: "The abbot was Greek, his monks Greeks, and likewise Greek were his dogs, stones, and vineyards.

And that entire monastery seemed as though it were located in the middle of Ionia."¹⁴ Both the proficient Greek and the less proficient Hebrew of the abbot, as it turned out, directly played into the formulation of his magical theories, since, through Greek, he gained access to the obscure mysteries of Pythagoras and Hermes Trismegistus, and through Hebrew, to the mysteries of Cabala.

Until 1499 the visible scope of Trithemius's intellectual activity was largely circumscribed by the conventional boundaries of the medieval liberal arts curriculum. Then, as if out of the blue, Trithemius in that year declared himself to be an exponent of the occult arts. The form in which this announcement took place was a letter addressed to a Carmelite monk of Ghent, Arnold Bostius, the object of which was to inform the correspondent of a treatise the abbot was currently composing. The subject was steganography, that is, the art of writing secret messages and transmitting them over long distances through the mediation of angelic messengers. Unhappily for the future reputation of Trithemius, Bostius was not in a position to receive the abbot's letter, having died shortly before its arrival. As a result, words intended for Bostius's eyes alone fell into the hands of the unsympathetic prior of the cloister, who, expressing shock by what he beheld therein to be an admission of illicit demonic magic, circulated the abbot's words to the general public. Thus was born Trithemius's magical legend.¹⁵

Reinforcing the abbot's notoriety as a black magician was a sharply negative response to the cryptographic tract in question by a visitor to Sponheim a few years later, the French scholar Carolus Bovillus, who, during a fortnight stay at Sponheim, was requested by his host to read and comment upon the completed portions of his steganographical tract. To the abbot's surprise and consternation Bovillus was far from pleased by what he gleaned therein, and at some later date, after pondering the experience, wrote a letter to a mutual friend of the two men in which he recounted his Sponheim visit and acrimoniously stigmatized his host as a demonic magician.¹⁶ While not discouraged by these traumatic events from further engaging in his magical speculations, Trithemius was chastened by them into being more circumspect about their disclosure, one facet of which lay in his decision to retain the completed portions of the steganographical handbook in manuscript form accessible only to specially selected disciples.

In the ensuing years Trithemius and his Sponheim monks developed increasingly strained relations, and by 1505 they mutually agreed to a parting of their ways. There is no direct evidence that Trithemius's emerging magical interests played a part in this decision, the more probable bone of contention lying in the abbot's imposition of highly demanding scholarly standards upon his monks which even included the hand copying of texts as if the art of printing had never come into existence. As the years of his Sponheim abbacy wore on, Trithemius evidently became looked upon by his monks as an uncompromising taskmaster whose exactions from them went well beyond what they believed to be the just requirements of their vows. However, while Trithemius's rapidly proliferating reputation as a magician may have played no direct role in the quarrel with his Sponheim monks, it may well have played at least an indirect role. For very likely exacerbating the tension between the resident abbot and monks was the disturbing intrusion into their cloistered tranquillity of many visitors. While some of these were certainly attracted by the conventional monastic subjects of Trithemius's scholarly expertise, others were undoubtedly attracted by his reputation for unconventional subjects in the arcana and by the many magical offerings on his monastic shelves.

In any case the bad rapport between Trithemius and his Sponheim monks reached a breaking point, and in 1505 the abbot was handed a convenient means to finalize the break by accepting an invitation from the margrave-electors Joachim of Brandenburg to meet him during an assembly of the German princes in Cologne. Trithemius's official resignation from Sponheim came the following year when, after spending a period itinerantly (part of the time as Joachim's guest in Berlin), he succeeded in finding a new post at the head of the monastery of St. Jacob in Würzburg. Here Trithemius was to last out the remainder of his life, dying in 1516 at the relatively young age of fifty-four.¹⁷ It is true that, in his new Würzburg home, Trithemius often found cause to lament the loss of his Sponheim cloister and the magnificent library which he had collected there. The trade-off, however, was that his changed environment provided him with much-needed peace and quiet. Being no longer besieged by the strife characteristic of his Sponheim years, Trithemius at last felt free to pursue untrammelled the ambitious

literary program to which he had dedicated himself years before.¹⁸ Among the works completed during this seminal period were some, such as the Hirsau annals, which might be expected of a monastic scholar. Other writings appearing during this period of intense literary activity, however, did not so easily fit the contours of monastic custom, pursuing as they did a theme of occult causation laid down earlier in the aborted *Steganographia*.

The special significance of Trithemius for the present study lies in more than his effort to justify the occult studies. It lies in the specifically theological mode in which he chose to express that justification. While still at Sponheim, primarily through a series of letters to friends, Trithemius began a protracted campaign to rationalize his invention of steganography, crucial to which was the reconciliation of magic with the theological dogmas defining Catholic orthodoxy, and after arriving at Würzburg brought to fruition a number of further writings in the same vein. Following the guidelines of this theologically conditioned program Trithemius concentrated on two separate genres of occult writings, the first consisting of extended demonological warnings and the second of positive defenses of magic.

Trithemius's removal from Sponheim to Würzburg afforded him the time and psychological respite he needed to bring to fruition this bipartite magical program. Belonging to the first category, demonology, were his *Antipalus maleficiorum* and *Liber octo quaestionum*, the latter of which, directed to certain theological queries posed by Emperor Maximilian, was considerably taken up with the issues of demonic influence. In addition he outlined a projected encyclopedia of demons, *De demonibus*, for which he completed a preface, and composed a query, no longer extant, into the association between demons and epilepsy, *De morbo caduco et maleficiis*. Belonging to the second category in turn, the theory and practice of magic, were an apologetic of magic inserted into the autobiographical *Nepiachus*, the second major cryptographical tract titled *Polygraphia*, and the *De septem secundeis*, an amalgamation of astrological with Cabalistic theory about occult influences upon human behavior which drew on the same system of planetary angels enlisted in the controversial steganographical tract and identified by critics such as Bovillus with the demonic servants of Satan. In addition Trithemius used this opportunity to pen a more complete

answer to Bovillus than was hitherto possible, a *Defensorium mei contra Caroli Bovilii mendacia*, which, like the *De morbo caduco*, has been lost to posterity.¹⁹ Trithemius's intention in all of these arcane writings, to be spelled out in the following pages, was to stem the tide of accusations against his magic triggered by the waylaying of his 1499 letter to Bostius and augmented by the unsympathetic response of Bovillus to his reading of the *Steganographia*.

The format for the remainder of this study is organized according to the following scheme. Being mindful of the need for an historical context within which Trithemius could credibly plead for adherence to his magical program, we will proceed in chapter 2 to a presentation of the patristic, medieval, and early Renaissance magical heritage from which Trithemius drew sustenance for his occult speculations. Following this preparatory step we will move, in chapters 3 and 4, to a systematic exposition of the occult theory forged by Trithemius in his Sponheim and Würzburg cloisters, with one part consisting of his demonology and another of his positive magical program. That mission accomplished, we will proceed in chapter 5 to an examination of how Trithemius came to serve as a kind of hub for the further debate over occult studies in the context of such subsequent events as the Protestant and Catholic reform movements, the culmination of the witch persecutions, and the emergence of the scientific revolution and accompanying "new philosophy." In the concluding chapter 6 we will take note of sundry post-1700 scholarly responses to Trithemian magic and elicit from the foregoing five chapters what this author has perceived to be a basic theme of consistency underlying what sometimes appears to be its divergent and even self-contradictory goals.

Unlike Doctor Faustus, with whose magical legend his own became popularly entangled, Trithemius furnished to apologists of magic in the next two centuries a thoroughgoing Christian rationale for engaging in the occult arts. The posthumous image of the magical abbot for some was of one who had consorted with demons, whereas for others, just as committed as himself to the proposition that true magic represents a divinely sanctified branch of Christian theology, Trithemius helped reinforce the conviction that magic can just as easily obey the commands of God as those of the Devil. Finding in the great medieval scholastic Albertus Magnus one of

his own favored paradigms for the union of magic with theology, Trithemius in turn became a foremost paradigm for others dedicated to the same goal.