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FROM SCIENCE TO FAITH THROUGH SUPERSTITION, AND VICE VERSA: PHILOLOGY, ALCHEMY AND KABBALAH IN THE WORKS OF BLAISE DE VIGENÈRE

Abstract

Taking into account all the original and translational works of one of the most significant writers of the French Renaissance, it is the opinion of the author of this paper that a more accurate analysis of de Vigenère's viewpoints would be productive and could contribute to understanding even better and in more detail the positions that humanists took on science, faith and superstition. Although his greatest merits belong to the domain of the translations of Roman and Byzantine historians in the first place, nevertheless de Vigenère's original contributions to the history of ideas in the Renaissance, which derive from the prefaces to and commentaries on the published translations, remained considerably in the shadow, as was also the case of two of his entirely original publications, namely the *Essay on Codes* and the *Essay on Fire and Salt*. While in the second work the subject matter is predominantly alchemy, the first piece of writing especially deals with the subject that the author assigns himself the task to promote, i.e. the creation of a universal religion for all the peoples of the world, established upon an esoteric and Kabbalist interpretation of the Scriptures and other Christian dogmas. Such a holistic approach (having its roots mostly in a late antique, Neoplatonist *milieu*) is based on the application of the occult knowledge appertaining to mythology, religious syncretism and Kabbalah, but is also founded on the aspirations of the Jesuits, who were striving to convert recently discovered "heathen" peoples using local languages and writing systems.

Keywords: cultural translation · early modern humanism · French literature · alchemy.

If it is commonly accepted that the Renaissance humanists had wide literary and antiquarian interests, comprising primarily the philosophy and cultural history of Classical antiquity, then this fact applies all the more so to one of their representatives in 16th century France, Blaise de Vigenère (b. 1523), who was a polyhistor, translator and cryptographer at the service of the French

king Henry III, among others.¹ Before moving to a more detailed review of de Vigenère's activity, it will be useful to pause to consider the context regarding the broader alchemical and Kabbalist tradition in which it is situated, because he was certainly not the only scholar attempting to combine Kabbalah and alchemy. Among others, the activity of the German humanist and theologian, Johannes Reuchlin (1455-1522) was especially important in this field. His first work on Kabbalah, *De Verbo mirifico* (from 1494), was significant due to its contribution to the discussion on language, i.e. on the occult powers and properties of words and names in the Renaissance. At the time of the publication of his piece *De arte cabalistica*, in 1517, Reuchlin had already become a leading Christian Hebraicist of his age. In both works he offered a combination of authentic Jewish sources and Neopythagoreanism, claiming that this philosophy in general, and the symbolism of numbers in particular, had ultimately derived from the older and more original Kabbalah.

One of the most important alchemists, intrigued by the exegetical possibilities of Kabbalah, was the Swiss physician Theophrastus Paracelsus (1493-1541), who was interested in novel approaches to alchemy. Since Paracelsus and later Paracelsians also held a significant interest in Kabbalah, another issue deserving attention is de Vigenère's Paracelsian influence, because both Paracelsus's original works and the spurious ones brought strong arguments in favor of the combination of alchemy, astrology and Kabbalah in the service of medicine. Furthermore, an interest in the "Cabala chymica" appears to be a particularly Paracelsian phenomenon (Forshaw, 2013: 375).

Later Kabbalist alchemists can include John Dee (1527-1608), Andreas Libavius (1555-1616) and Heinrich Kuhnrrath (1560-1605), to mention only the most influential ones. One of the scholars who fully integrated the alchemist and Kabbalist tradition was the German physician Heinrich Kuhnrrath. Much appreciating Paracelsus and Reuchlin, he emphasized, among other ideas, the symbolism of certain letters. A contemporary and acquaintance of Kuhnrrath's, the English magus John Dee, was ranked in his time among those best informed in the so-called chemical Kabbalah, primarily due to the alchemist symbols interpreted in a mathematical, magical and Kabbalist way in his writings. Thus, in Dee's opus one can distinguish a literal, Kabbalist interpretation of Jewish letters from an interpretation connected with the natural magic and the decipherment of the hieroglyphs taken as cosmic symbols, while Kuhnrrath insisted on the stance that Kabbalah, magic and alchemy have to be combined and used simultaneously (Forshaw, 2013: 378).

While the majority of Paracelsus's followers obtained their knowledge of Kabbalah through Christian Kabbalist authors, de Vigenère, as far as one can notice, stands out as a unique case in the following respect. Unlike other

1 I would like to express my gratitude to the anonymous reviewers for useful suggestions for the improvement of the article's quality. I also took the liberty of borrowing a few formulations from their reviews, incorporating them into the final version of the article.

scholars who accessed Kabbalah mainly through Christian interpretations, de Vigenère was able to approach Jewish Kabbalist texts, such as the *Zohar*, and the rarity of this connection is to be emphasized, although some other alchemists also cited Jewish language and Kabbalist words as witnesses to the great antiquity of the alchemist art. For writers like Kuhnrrath and de Vigenère, for example, "the combination of Kabbalist and alchemist art contributed to strengthening their faith and simultaneously reinforced science and religion"².

Numerous alchemists ascertained the imperfection and arbitrariness of languages, made of signs inappropriate to name objects in a precise and functional way. Thus, de Vigenère and Kuhnrrath aligned their alchemist science with the considerations on Jewish language, frequently presented as the language of the first man, Adam. Paracelsus, on the other hand, claimed that a language of signs could be deciphered and offered to all without mediators (Greiner, 2004: 354-355).

De Vigenère died in 1596 and we know his two posthumously published translations: the first is the *Apollonius of Tyana*, a Greek text by Philostratus the Older, dating back to the 1st century AD.³ The importance which the idealized picture of the personality of Apollonius of Tyana exerts within the framework of the Neopythagorean movement of the late antiquity and the early modern era, is commonly known. Since his teachings and miracles reminded the readers of those of Christ himself, the interest in Neopythagoreanism of a Kabbalist like de Vigenère is not surprising.

Another posthumous publication of his is the *Essay on military art* by the Greek writer Onosander.⁴ Although this work was, by then, known in its rendering into Latin and French, de Vigenère nevertheless undertook a new translation so that, in his version, it would eventually become a manual for modern warfare. Thus, for example, the readers are provided with information about the production of gunpowder, the weights of bullets, the number of horses required for transporting a cannon, and so on. As in his other translations, de Vigenère involves Classical writers in order to "serve" the modern users of his reading matter (Baldwin, 2007: 126). Moreover, the translations fill de Vigenère's annotations and digressions (Czerny, 1929: 689), which are filled with the translated passages in verse and prose from various Classical writers: starting from Homer and Hesiod, through Herodotus, the Orphic Hymns, Pindar, Polybius and Catullus, to Pliny and Ovid. It is important to notice that Vigenère, while doing so, belongs to the kind of 16th century "modernists" who pleaded against the too literal imitation of Classical writers (Aulotte, 1991: 21). In some other texts, i.e. translations, of the period, which deal with the subject that occupied the minds of the intellectuals –

2 Forshaw, 2013: 389.

3 Vigenère, 1599: *passim*.

4 Vigenère, 1605: *passim*.

and we are referring to the threat for the Christian world by the Ottomans, constantly looming over from the East – the authorial commentaries, in which the Jewish origin of numerous aspects of the Islamic religion runs through, make an appearance. By way of illustration, a recurrent theme is the striving for interconnection of all monotheistic religions, which manifests itself through the intentions for the launching of a new crusade, as well as through undertaking the publication of editions of daring contents, as was the edition of the *Koran* or the first translation of the *Koran*.

That kind of approach will be continued and expanded by de Vigenère himself. Not only did the crusade ideology connect the like authors with de Vigenère, but it also influenced his religious and prophetic aspirations (Balsamo, 2004: 210-211), as is evident by later de Vigenère's translations from Italian (*Jerusalem Liberated* by Torquato Tasso)⁵ and old-French (Villehardouin's *History of the Conquest of Constantinople by the Crusaders*)⁶. In this sense, a peculiar revelation of the crusaders' eschatology was formed and became dominant in the contemporary intellectual circles. Within the obsession of regrouping and unification that distinguishes the spirit of Counter-Reformation, the crusaders' campaign toward Jerusalem, i.e. unity, which Tasso understood to be the main subject of his epic, did not leave de Vigenère indifferent either, since the theological and mystical spirit stands in the basis of his opus, which makes it one of the richest and most fascinating „encyclopedias of sacred and secular knowledge of its time“⁷.

The connection between myth and contemporary history, which the translator accentuates in this matter, also enables him to adopt the eschatological utopia of Tasso's poem and its mythical and historical, that is, allegorical aspects. In Tasso's *Liberated Jerusalem*, such forms of esoteric aspects of culture and philosophy can be found as if they were made to fascinate a follower of alchemy such as de Vigenère. In other words, he certainly found subtle analogies in *Liberated Jerusalem* between the world this poem reflects and the speculations of the Italian humanists of Neoplatonic provenance, Marsilio Ficino and Pico della Mirandola. It is true also that Tasso's poetry contains an essentially visionary component that, like some of de Vigenère's original pieces of writing, links the esoteric experience with practical counsels for intellectual activities. The manneristic aesthetics and the metaphysics of light, originating from the work of Pseudo-Dionysius the Areopagite, give their contribution also to the very style of the de Vigenère's translational poetry (Chavy, 1994: *passim*).

Regarding the translation of the description of paintings by the Greek writer Philostratus the Younger, published in French under the title of the *Pictures, or Tablets of Plain Painting*⁸, it is obvious that the epistemological

5 Vigenère, 1595: *passim*.

6 Vigenère, 1584: *passim*.

7 Maillard, 1982: 237.

8 Vigenère, 1578: *passim*.

foundation of painting could only take place against the background of relation between the word and the picture (Lecerle, 1991: 339). Since de Vigenère, as a follower of Kabbalah, believed in such a genealogy of designation which the letters brought closer to symbols, hieroglyphs and pictures, he could not deny the existence of a common root of the visual arts and the interpretation of nature of the visible world (Repaci-Courtois, 1992: 62). The same is evident also in his original treatise *On the Figures, i.e. Codes*,⁹ where it is obvious that he and similar minds searched for the essence of every semantic form precisely in the mythological memory. Likewise, it is important to note that de Vigenère considered the dissociation of mental and material images as wrong. He believed in the conceivability of visual forms and regarded it as a necessary expression of the cognitive function of the human spirit. That can be considered as a demystification of the power that words have to make things visible (Eichel, 1991: 639), inasmuch as de Vigenère too became aware of the fact that verbal images cannot fully replace the visual ones. Therefore, he can be seen as a pioneer of a new age in this respect (Plattard, 1914: 498).

De Vigenère's essay *On Fire and Salt*¹⁰ represents a good example of the writing that, in the form of commentary, proceeds with the aim to describe the properties of nature, particularly the fiery element and the salty principle which play a key role (Franckowiak, 2010: *passim*). In it, de Vigenère reminds his readers that "everything that exists is divided in the three so-called worlds" and that "every world of these has its proper science, which is double: one is common and ordinary, and the other mystical and secret. The intellectual, i.e. supernatural world has for its science our, i.e. Christian theology and Kabbalah, the celestial world has astrology and magic, and the elementary, i.e. material world has physiology and alchemy"¹¹. It seems that the observation of reality did not have a decisive effect on the evolution of concepts in de Vigenère, since, in this piece of writing, he primarily resorts to his acquaintance with both the Bible and Classical authors in order to explain some natural processes.

Likewise, in his already mentioned *Essay on Codes, or Secret Manner of Writing*, de Vigenère explains that these three worlds, that man regarded as microcosm, correspond with the following three parts: intellect, soul and body, since they are "represented primarily by the three letters which constitute the word for Adam in the Jewish alphabet. These are: aleph, the letter designating the intellectual, dalet the celestial, and mem – the material world"¹². Regarding alchemy as an art of fire, de Vigenère attributes a very special importance. Alchemy is a fundamental knowledge, the science of this, lower world, and this was precisely what the Classical poets "professed"

9 Vigenère, 1586: *passim*.

10 Vigenère, 1618: *passim*.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 48-51.

12 Vigenère, 1586: f. 18v-19r.

through myths and fairytales, according to him. In one of the commentaries on the already mentioned translation of Philostratus's *Pictures*, taking as an example the myth of Prometheus from the same book, he claims that the ancients taught from this book about the strength of the very alchemy, considered as the destroying power of fire and, thereby, about its extraordinarygnoseological value, because it is precisely alchemy that enables us to reveal the most recondite secrets of nature (Vigenère, 1578: p. 530).

In Kabbalah de Vigenère finds the alchemist theory of elements and constitutive principles of all things. In the first place, as is said in the *Essay on Codes, i.e. Figures*, the quadruple nature of the basic constructive elements is reflected in the divine tetragram: "the primary foundations of things are designated by the four letters of the great inexpressible name, which constitute the four elements"¹³. It should be stressed, also, that de Vigenère does not find most of his alchemist principles only in Kabbalah, but that he detects them also in Classical mythology. As a result, his works represent an important stage in the history of the alchemist hermeneutics of Classical myths (Secret, 1981: 8). Thus, for the sake of argument, analyzing the theme of the picture portraying the birth of Athena, de Vigenère explains to the readers that the colors of the clothing of Athena Tritogenia (which are gold, porphyry and azure) denote the three so-called elements – salt, mercury and sulphur – but, at the same time, they denote three of Paracelsus's formal principles. These three principles, furthermore, as de Vigenère argues, were denoted already by Orpheus as Typho, Cerberus and Chimaera, or as Jupiter, Neptune and Pluto. Among other elements, the salt occupies the main place, inasmuch as it represents the principle of fertilization, because the salt, according to de Vigenère, causes sensuality, i.e. lust, that he explains with the paretyymology¹⁴ of the name of one of Neptune's wives, Salacia in Latin, as well as of the Latin word for lasciviousness (*salacitas*).

The peculiarity of another de Vigenère's original work, the treatise *On Prayers and Orations*,¹⁵ lies in numerous references to the writings of Jewish mysticism, especially the *Zohar*, in addition to adducing the authorities of Classical poets and philosophers, such as Homer, Virgil, Ovid, Pythagoras and Zoroaster. Here de Vigenère rejects the tripartite division of the spiritual life in: 1) *cogitatio*, 2) *meditatio* and 3) *contemplatio*. Speaking of which, he demands that the agent of prayer be concentrated only on the third level (Galand-Hallyn, 2011: 617), *contemplatio*, where the *intelligentia* resides. Thus, he does not take into consideration the entire soul, but only its peak, the place where the so-called *appetitus superior* is situated. As already observed (Fumaroli, 1981: 37), the main property of any language, according to de Vigenère, is to express the essence of things. The question in which language to pray to God is irrelevant, "since words in themselves do not mean

13 Vigenère, 1586: f. 442v.

14 „Les mots à la lettre“ (Huchon, 1991: 256).

15 Vigenère, 1589: *passim*.

anything¹⁶, but he, nevertheless, gives precedence to Latin, regardless of the fact that a number of believers does not understand it. For all that, he gives a very curious explanation that people believe more in something that sounds strange and elevated than in something that is very close to them or „worn out“ by everyday usage.

He is interested only in the allegorical, i.e. anagogical, meaning of words, so that passages from Homer are interpreted by him in the same manner as they were treated by the Neoplatonist Porphyry, inasmuch as the latter was especially important among intellectual circles of the 16th century due to the introduction of the so-called Chaldaean Oracles into Neoplatonism (Pépin, 1965: *passim*). This kind of interpretation pleads for the aesthetics of abundance in the hermeneutical sense: namely, it is necessary to offer the greatest possible number of references in order to create a peculiar network, where the meaning is integrated and absorbed (Maclean, 1992: 128). It can be added that, for de Vigenère, prayer enables the deciphering of a higher order, i.e. a decipherment of the divine plan perceived in its entirety. There is no more a gap between visible and invisible, but only an instituting of the circle of exchange. In this way, commentary comes into being: namely, united in front of the face of God, men can keep the same spirit and remove every trace of disorder. The person who prays should be included in the network of concordances so as to contribute to the realisation of universal harmony. The prayer associates itself with something that could be termed as a pious encyclopedism (Roudaut, 1994: *passim*).

Regarding the terminology, the complete opus of Blaise de Vigenère is very enlightening, and the same holds true especially for his work *Essay on Codes*, where the term „occult“ is used in its ordinary meaning, whenever the author refers to his main subject, i.e. the secret writing under the aspect of codes. However, it is also used in order to indicate the „*qualitates occultae*“ (= hidden properties of nature). It is a very important fact that de Vigenère was, in all probability, the first one who explicitly referred to the sciences concerned with the secrets of nature as occult sciences. In that context, he describes Kabbalah, magic and alchemy as three occult and mystical sciences. (Hanegraaff: 8-9).

It is thus not surprising that de Vigenère, as a follower of Kabbalah, reconsiders the ways of addressing God in prayer: „Since God is a pure spirit, completely deprived of matter and, thereby, unattainable to our senses... He is not to be ascribed any name that would express his essence, because his true name is equal to his essence¹⁷. This kind of consideration would point to the main arguments of negative theology, connected to the notions of Kabbalah, where God is presented as a „being that resides outside the universe, in the endless emptiness of space and time (ENSOPH in Hebrew)¹⁸“.

16 *Ibid.*, f. 78r.

17 *Ibid.*, f. 111v.

18 *Ibid.*, f. 142v.

De Vigenère is a translator who was perfectly acquainted with Greek and Latin, and who also possessed solid basic knowledge in Hebrew. Likewise, it is not at all strange that he was interested in Classical mythology, Kabbalah and the *Zohar* alike. For him the pagan myths and the Biblical psalms alike are the equivalents of a „secret manner of writing“; the apparent meaning underlying them has to be removed to the benefit of the real meaning, hidden under the external guise. Speaking about apparent and hidden meaning equals contrasting the sensory and the imaginable, seeing and thinking. For de Vigenère, the myths and psalms are images that represent the secrets of the world and creation in a figurative sense, so, in the first place, he perfected the spiritual quality of the images or, so to say, mental pictures which talk and teach. In this respect, the Jesuits of the 17th century become the first authors under the influence of de Vigenère, and it will be the case especially with his most „profane“ book, the translation of and commentaries to the Philostratus's *Pictures*, which, at first sight, leaves one with a paradoxical impression. However, it is nothing to be surprised about, taking into account that de Vigenère interprets the pictures with pagan topics primarily in light of allegorical exegesis by Christianizing the pagan motifs (Matton, 1994: *passim*).

Therefore, we can see that there is no border between the secular and the religious, since the pagan mythology is understood as the hidden Revelation. In the spirit of Neoplatonism, de Vigenère yields to the ambition to make an encyclopedia that would gather sacred and secular sciences. The anagogical method of his hermeneutics of the myths and the Scriptures, interpreted according to the double scheme of alchemical and Kabbalist reading, finds its rhetorical expression in a hierarchy of styles, and its aesthetical counterpart in the visual arts. Thus, it can be said that the rhetoric in de Vigenère is the most important instrument of the symbolical image, be it Biblical, mythological or visual, since that peculiar kind of rhetoric binds together the sensory with the imagined, the material with the spiritual level. As to the spiritual level, images and semantic pictures leave their polysemic line of thought in the reader's mind in order to form a certain rhetoric of silence, as a pre-requisite for *metanoia*, or deification, which a man can reach through inner prayer (Vigenère, 1589: f. 177r). This *metanoia* represents a counterpart to the Kabbalist version of spirit (in Hebrew, TESHUVAH). Although never completely vanishing, the symbolic path, in a way, becomes exhausted in Dionysian apophatic mysticism, supported by Kabbalah. This mysticism would become a model for the emergence of a special spiritual literature in the following 17th century, not only in the church oratory of the Jesuits, but also among the pious humanists, because de Vigenère was the first who formulated the so-called loss of self, as well as the „euthymie“, i.e. spiritual tranquillity (Crescenzo, 1994: *passim*).

The main purpose of de Vigenère's *Essay on Codes* is to classify the sciences of the three worlds – material, celestial and intellectual – inside a network of analogies, systematically reviewed. To each of these levels belongs a mathematical model, bearing in mind that "all things of this world are essentially only a cipher (= a code, or a number)"¹⁹. De Vigenère strived to inextricably bind mathematics to a, so to say, mystical shell, following a movement initiated by Ioannes Trithemius at the beginning of the 16th century (Huchon, 1991: 257). Thus, only a short time before the beginning of the scientific revolution in the 17th century, de Vigenère's work represented an important stage in the exploration of a universal language and a form of mathematics whose interpretation was more effectively facilitated by cryptography than by any other discipline.

The socio-political importance of this work, on the other hand, is in the fact that de Vigenère also followed a prophetic dream about a universal religion, to which all the peoples would convert if only they had access to the esoteric understanding of the Scriptures, Christian dogmas and ritual practice, in the same way as in the tradition of Kabbalah. One can also see that the esoteric and mystical paths are not the only ones that lead to this universality, but much space is also dedicated to the missionary activities of the Jesuits. An interest in all the languages of the world, testified by the presence of 56 types of alphabets graphically shown, corresponds to that kind of aspiration. Thus, de Vigenère's book fits well with such an intellectual movement which brings to the same level a care for conversion, on the one hand, and exotic curiosities, on the other. Therefore, the *Essay on Codes* can be considered as a reverberation of the literature about travels, in full swing at that time. As an illustration of this, a commentary on Chinese religion and script can be reported. It is told there that the Buddhist monks use "a kind of Kabbalah and routine of signs by means of which they communicate without words, being subject to the obligation of silence resembling that of the Pythagoreans"²⁰.

We can also say that the main purpose of the author of the *Essay on Codes* was to bring back a regulated structure, till then concealed, to the vast variety of languages and alphabets (Huchon, 1991: 259). The primary universality of Hebrew, the language of antiquity, disrupted by Babylonian confusion, was to be reestablished at another level. In other words, linguistic research, like other secular sciences applied to the world of multiplicity, is able to bring men closer to the divine status thanks to the advancement of knowledge. We can clearly see, then, that a "pact" was concluded between education, the idea of progress and pious humanism, uniting themselves in an eschatological perception simultaneously directing human history and arranging its diversity. Therefore, we can say that the newly-established

19 Vigenère, 1586: f. 538v.

20 Vigenère, 1605: f. 559v.

inquiry into rationality did not yet cause a rupture with the transcendental, and that "to reach the secrets of nature did not imply its observation and description, but rather an ascendance to its divine origin by reaching for the experience of a hermeneutical essence in the first place"²¹.

Finally, it should be stressed, together with Greiner, that there were three pairs of opposition concerning the status of language. Firstly, there is an opposition between the Judeo-Christian model of linguistic theology and the concept of linguistic conventionality; secondly, between the traditional reference to authors practising the exegesis and the critical use of reason; and thirdly, between a persistent dedication to the mysterious and the dissemination of knowledge (Greiner, 2004: 356). The Renaissance understanding of science constituted a considerably meaningful system founded primarily on a spiritual dimension of the reality, while the transition from a community dominated by superstition and/or faith to one characterised predominantly by scientific viewpoints, is based on a shift in the sphere of the imaginary. To conclude, one cannot help thinking that the aspirations of alchemists and Kabbalists, whose activity the opus of de Vigenère is here taken as an illustration of, were analogous to those of modern scientists, inasmuch as both essentially derive from an inherent human need for spiritual abstraction.

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21 Greiner, 2004: 354.

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