

“THE BROTHERS” AND THE
ENGLISH *COMTE DE GABALIS*

by

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Comte de Gabalis is a short novel in the form of five discourses, published anonymously in 1670 and certainly authored by the Abbé Nicolas de Montfaucon de Villars (1635?-1673).¹ Anglophone readers are most likely to find it in a translation first published in 1913 and often reprinted.² Attributed only to “The Brothers,” it carries a pseudo-scholarly commentary every verso page and on 145 pages at the end, in which Villars’ lively and satirical text is treated as a solemn source of esoteric teachings. Who were these Brothers? This article seeks to answer that question and to illuminate an enigmatic episode in *Gabalis*’ reception history.

Villars’ novel was an instant success. It was soon banned in France, reprinted in Holland and Cologne, and supplied with spurious sequels. Two different English translations appeared in 1680, inspiring Alexander Pope in his *Rape of the Lock* (1712), and a third soon afterwards.³ Pope’s mock epic introduced English readers, as Villars had the French, to the picturesque realm of the elementals: sylphs, salamanders, undines or nymphs, and gnomes. Gabalis, a German count, claims deep knowledge of them and their habits, as well as of Kabbalah, alchemy, and occult mysteries. He urges the sceptical narrator to renounce human women and to marry a sylph, adding that the greatest ones of the past were all the result of such inter-species intercourse.

The 1913 translation is accurate, if ponderous, and omits Villars’ more salacious passages. The Brothers are named as publisher and copyright holder, and leave us to draw our own conclusions from their oval emblem (figure 1), which appears insistently: twice on the dust jacket, twice embossed on the cover, and four more times inside the book.

1. The best scholarly edition, exactly transcribing the 1670 print, is Montfaucon de Villars, *Le Comte de Gabalis; La Critique de Bérénice*, Introduction et Commentaire par Roger Laufer (Paris: A. G. Nizet, 1963).

2. The title page reads: *Comte de Gabalis / by the / Abbé N. de Montfaucon de Villars / Rendered out of French into English / with a Commentary.* / “When a thing is hidden away with so much pains, / merely to reveal it is to destroy it.” Tertullian / Published by The Brothers / [symbol] / and printed at The Old Bourne Press, / under the supervision of W. H. Broome, / 15 Holborn, London, EC. / Copyright, The Brothers, 1913.

3. *The Count of Gabalis: or Conferences about Secret Sciences* (London: for Robert Harford, 1680); *The Count of Gabalis, or, The Extravagant Mysteries of the Cabalists* (London: for B.M., Printer to the Cabalistical Society of the Sages, at the Sign of the Rosy-Crucian, 1680); *The Count of Gabalis, Being a Diverting History of the Rosicrucian Doctrine of Spirits* (London: for B. Lintott & E. Curll, 1714).