Commodity, the Supernatural, and the Global in Nineteenth Century England

In 1898, the Fortuna Cup Co. of New York released "The Fortune Telling Tea Cup." The cup, one of the first of its kind, came with a twenty-six page book that provided detailed instructions for decoding a fortune. The general idea was to pour a cup of tea—including some leaves—from the pot into the cup. When the tea was consumed, the leaves would be left to fall on certain symbols (markers of the seasons and signs of the zodiac). By looking up the position of the leaves, the fortune would then be revealed.[1]

By the 1904 fortune telling tea cups, and tasseography in general, had become all the rage. In response, the Ansley Company of Staffordshire, England released the Nelrose Cup of Fortune which, like if predecessor, came with an instructional booklet. The Nelrose cup, however, was much more complex than its predecessor. The consumer still poured the tea and leaves into the cup, however, the symbols and combinations were more advanced. Instead of mere astrological signs, the Nelrose cup used a wide variety of symbols including a diamond, eye, horseshoe, snake, and cross as well as astrological symbols like Venus, Jupiter, the Sun and the Moon. The placement of the tea leaf within the cup would be used to divine events on a particular day, month, and year. The cup went on to be a commercial success and continued to be manufactured throughout the 1920s and 1930s.[2]

The interest in fortune-telling cups was one part of a larger interest in astrology in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Traditionally, historians thought that both the Scientific Revolution and the Enlightenment led to a decline in astrological beliefs. Much of astrology in the medieval and early modern period, for instance, was built on the assumption of a geocentric model of the heavens. With a shift to heliocentrism and other astronomical discoveries, the complex maps and

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[1] John William Hanley, *The Fortune Telling Tea Cup: wonderful combinations in the tea leaves, prophetic, interesting, amusing and instructive* (New York: John William Hanlsey).

[2] "Mystic Tea Room," September 2017, last modified on 11 September 2017, "http://www.mystictearoom.com/wiki/Main_Page; Neville Ross, *Instruction Book for the "Nelros" Cup of Fortune* (London: Hamley Limited, 1904); Cicely Kent, *Telling Fortunes by Tea Leaves: How To Read Your Fate in a Cup* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co., 1923), 43-49.

charts that provided the foundations of astrological divination were discredited. Likewise, Enlightenment attacks on superstition in general, some scholars argue, led to a wider decline in beliefs in divination through the stars and planets.[3]

Despite these developments, the belief in astrology began to increase again in the late nineteenth century. Astrologers such as A.J. Pierce and Richard Garnett published articles and books and created astrology societies. Their methods, however, were still rooted in the older beliefs where charts, maps, and calculation dominated and the astrologer needed secret knowledge and extensive training in order to divine. Things began to change, however, with the emergence of Alan Leo. Perhaps the most well-known Victorian astrologer, and the one most accredited with the popularization of astrology, Leo was one of the first "astrologist for hire." Using magazine advertisements, he advertised mail-in horoscopes. For a small fee and some basic information from a consumer, Leo would prepare a personalized fortune which would then be returned through the mail. At the height of his career, he earned in excess of at least £1,000 a year (or $119,000 by today's standards) and used portions of his wealth to publish the *Astrologer's Magazine* from 1891—1895 and to also create various astrology societies. Leo's goal was to bring astrology to the masses while also shifting the emphasis of astrology from esoteric calculation to spirituality. To this end, Leo emphasized the links between astrology and the popular Theosophical movement.[4]

This little window into late Victorian beliefs about the astrology and the occult reveals some important themes. First, it shows that beliefs that were considered outside the mainstream, such as astrology, not only endured despite the advance of science and scientific criticism, but became even more popular. In addition, the late nineteenth century boom for all things magic reveals that although

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[3]Peter Whitfield, *Astrology: A History* (New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 2001), 188-190.

[4]Ibid., 191-196; Patrick Curry, *A Confusion of Prophets: Victorian and Edwardian Astrology* (London: Collins & Brown, 1992), 122-159

ideas about the supernatural were often considered on the fringe of mainstream Victorian society, commodification allowed occultists and believers in the supernatural to create very public cultural spaces through which to negotiate identity. These identities often transcended geographical, historical, and social constraints. This paper will examine this process by focusing on three occult industries: the periodical press, books and pamphlets, and material culture.

The occult revival of the late nineteenth century was enabled in many ways by the growth of industry and empire. Information and products moved around the world at increasing speeds due to developments like steam engines and telegraphs. Newspapers and periodicals, for example, could be printed in the millions and globally shipped. Likewise, because of the relative low cost of printing, publishers could target specific markets, regardless of national boundaries.

This growth in the press generally was reflected in a specific increase in occult newspapers, magazines, and periodicals in the late nineteenth century. As much as occult groups had an esoteric—internal and secretive—side, they also had a public presence through print culture. As a result, hundreds of periodicals circulated in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century centuries dealing with a wide range of supernatural and occult themes. The goal of these occult societies and publishers was to spread their ideas to the larger world and, at the same time, publically defend those ideas against mainstream criticism. In a larger sense, occultists and believers in the supernatural used the periodical press to carve out a legitimate public presence. This function is clearly seen in two of the most successful and influential periodicals of the time, *The Theosophist and The Occult Review.*[5]

The Theosophical Society began publishing *The Theosophist: A Monthly Journal Devoted to Oriental Philosophy, Art, Literature and Occultism* in October 1879. This monthly journal reported on

[5] Mark S. Morrisson, "The Periodical Culture of the Occult Revival: Esoteric Wisdom, Modernity, and Counter-Public Spheres." *Journal of Modern Literature*, 31, no. 2 (Winter 2008): 3-6.

the latest news from the Society, gave members a place to discuss and debate Theosophical beliefs, and examine how those ideas intersected with other occult topics and science. The journal was edited by English writer Alfred Percy Sinnett and was published from Bombay and Adya. It circulated in the United States, Britain and Europe where publishing offices were established. The success of the Theosophist inspired the creation of over sixty other Theosophical-themed journals in the last decades of the nineteenth century.[6]

The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 by Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Henry Steel Olcott and was perhaps the most influential group in the occult revival of the late nineteenth century. Blavatsky influence, for instance, is seen in the writings and ideas of the founding members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and in other important groups that emerged in the late nineteenth century. The Theosophists also influenced many accomplished thinkers and writers of the time including Annie Besant, William Butler Yeats, Lewis Carroll, Henry Rider Haggard, and Arthur Conan Doyle.[7]

Blavatsky thought that the Theosophical Society would allow her to reveal the ancient knowledge that she had received from what she called the 'Mahatmas." These ancient truths were presented to the world in her writings and teachings including *Isis Unveiled*, published in 1877, and *The Secret Doctrine*, published in 1888. At the core of Theosophical beliefs were three fundamental ideas. First, there was the belief in the basic unity of all existence, which Theosophists called the One Life, the One Reality. According to Theosophist Geoffrey Farthing, it was "the source of Being, and of all beings; it is in everything—in fact, it is everything, for there is nothing else."[8] This oneness incorporated both

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[6] "The Theosophist," The International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals, last modified October 2016, http://www.iapsop.com/archive/materials/theosophist/; Morrisson, 9.

[7] Susan Greenwood, *The Encyclopedia of Magic and Witchcraft: An Illustrated Historical Reference to Spiritual Worlds* (London: Hermes House, 2005), 170-71.

[8] Geoffrey A. Farthing ,"Basic Ideas of Theosophy," Blavatsky Archive, last modified August 21, 2013, http://blavatskyarchives.com/2scope.htm.

the material and spiritual world. As Farthing explained, "all forms that come into being, from atoms to men, are animated by the same Life; the forms disintegrate, the Life remains. We human beings are one with it; our life is that Life."[9] Even differences and apparent opposites in the universe were façades behind which existed the underlying complete oneness.[10]

The second fundamental concept was that of universal law which was cyclical, continuously producing universes and forms out of the absolute being. Theosophists, for instance, rejected the belief in a moment of creation and instead looked to what historian Alex Owen calls "an evolutionary flux . . . a continuous ebbing and flowing of matter and spirit."[11] As Farthing explained, the periods were like day and night, "with the coming of night, everything seems to disappear, merged into a uniform darkness; as the sun rises, all things once more reappear—temporarily, just as their disappearance had been temporary."[12] This process would ultimately cumulate in universal perfection. Thirdly, Theosophists believed in the progress of consciousness developing through these cycles to an ever-increasing realization of unity. On an individual level, this meant the evolution over multiple lifetimes to the realization of ultimate reality.[13]

Both Henry Steel Olcott and Helena Petrovna Blavatsky had travelled extensively to places like Egypt and India and both had a deep and sincere interest in what they encountered. Olcott, in particular, was familiar with the British Orientalist school and also had a deep connection to the cultures of India and in the Indian Renaissance. These interests, combined with Blavatsky's knowledge of

[9] Ibid.
[10] Ibid.
[11] Alex Owen, *The Place of Enchantment: British Occultism and the Culture of the Modern* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004), 34.
[12] Farthing ,"Basic Ideas of Theosophy."
[13] Ibid.

Buddhism were blended to become a large part of Theosophy. The themes on oneness and globality featured prominently in the pages of *The Theosophist*.[14]

Like the *Theosophist*, the *Occult Review: A Monthly Magazine Devoted to the Investigation of Supernormal Phenomena and the Study of Psychological Problems* provided a public forum for the discussion of occult topics. Beginning publication in January 1905, the journal enjoyed a forty-six-year run. Under the editorship of Ralph Shirley and published by William Rider & Sons, the journal covered a wide-ranging topics from astrology, ghosts and hauntings, spiritualism, science, and religion. It was the largest and most influential of the occult journals and reached a worldwide circulation—having offices in the United States, India, and Australia.[15]

The Occult Review also emphasized historical and transnational connections. Many of the articles in the *Occult Review* emphasized links between the past—especially secret or lost knowledge of past civilizations—and the present. Walter Gorn Old, for example, published an article in the inaugural issue of the journal linking the practice of astrology from ancient China, India, and Greece to Europe at that time. Similarly, Campbell Praed argued in the April 1905 issue that all individual memory—no matter when or where the memory was formed--was connected to a larger whole—that of a world spirit, or God. During the first two decades of it run, sixty percent of the *Occult Review*'s content had in some way, international connections.[16]

Many of the writers in the *Occult Review* also claimed to prove their points and arguments using scientific means. Campbell argued, for example, that through experimentation she could demonstrate that her research subjects could remember with accuracy life in ancient times—noting specifically

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[14] Owen, 29-41.

[15] "The Occult Review," The International Association for the Preservation of Spiritualist and Occult Periodicals, last modified October 2016, http://www.iapsop.com/archive/materials/occult_review/; *British Books in Print* 6 (January 1906), back matter, 21.

[16] Walter Gorn Old, "Ancient Beliefs and Modern Notions," *Occult Review* 1, no. 1 (January-June 1905), 35-41; Campbell Praed, "World Memory and Pre-Existence," *Occult Review* 1, no. 4 (April 1904), 171-178.

memories from ancient Egypt and Greece. She was not trying to prove the existence of reincarnation—though that theme was ever present in the journals pages—but rather demonstrate a shared human consciousness.[17]

To Campbell, science existed to compliment, not criticize, and occult ideas and beliefs. Put another way, her understanding of modernity was not one that where science stood in opposition the supernatural, but the other way around. Science existed to prove the connections of all things—to prove the forces beyond human perception. This mission was core to the purpose of the *Occult Review* and *The Theosophist*—to legitimize the occult and supernatural through scientific or "modern" methods.[18]

Occult topics often spilled over to the mainstream press. Famous journalist W.T. Stead, for instance, who had made his reputation as the editor of the *Northern Echo* and *Pall Mall Gazette,* included a regular section on "The Occult Magazines" in his popular periodical the *Review of Reviews* (which had a circulation of over 200,000). Journals like *The Saturday Review* and *The Fortnightly Review* alsooften featured stories and book reviews on occult and supernatural topics.[19]

This desire by occultists and believers in the supernatural to create a public presence reached beyond the periodical press to book and pamphlet publishing. Two of the largest publishing firms specializing in occult themes were George Redway and William Rider & Sons, Ltd. both located in London. Although not the only publishers tapping into the occult market, these two firms published the

[17] Ibid.

[18] Ibid.; for more on modernity, the occult, and science, see Owen, *The Place of Enchantment*; Michael Saler, "Modernity and Enchantment: A Historiographic Review," *The American Historical Review* 111, no. 3 (June 2006), 692-716; Thomas Laqueur, "Why The Margins Matter: Occultism and the Making of Modernity," *Modern Intellectual History*, 3, no. 1 (2006), 111–135; Morrisson, "The Periodical Culture of the Occult Revival," 1-22.

[19] See, for example, "The Occult Magazine," *The Review of Reviews* 41 (June 1910), 564; "Tarots," *The Saturday Review of Politics, Literature, Science and Art* (65 (June 1888), 702; "Ghost and Their Photos," *Fortnightly Review* 53 (January 1893), 116-129.

largest collections—providing consumers with hundreds of titles in the last decades of the nineteenth and into the twentieth centuries and reaching a global market.

George William Redway Company, located in Coven Gardent, began publishing books and pamphlets in 1882. Although offering titles on spiritualism, the occult and the supernatural, the company also offered a wide variety of other types of books. The 1884 catalogue, for instance, lists the *Mysteries of Magic* by A.E. Waite alongside works by William Makepeace Thackeray and books about the history of tobacco and methods of psychology.[20]

Throughout the mid-1880s, Redway continued to offer a wide variety of works while, at the same time, beginning to publish more and more occult titles. By 1886, it advertised a "specialty in mysticism, Theosophy, the Occult Sciences and Folklore."[21] Some of the more important works published by Redway included Rosa Baughan's *The Handbook of Palmistry*, which was in its fourth edition by 1886, and *Psychometry and Thought-Transference* by Henry Olcott. In addition, the company published its Redway Occult Series featuring reprints of classic occult texts such as Samuel McGregor Mathers' translation of the grimoire *The Key of Solomon* (1888).[22]

The increase in occult subjects at Redway can, no doubt, be attributed in some measure to the influence of well-known theosophist A.P. Sinnett, who joined the firm as a partner in 1886. Although William Redway had Theosophist associations prior to meeting Sinnett, Sinnett increased the theosophical content of Redway's catalogue including adding several works written by himself including *"The Occult World Phenomena" and the Society of Psychical Research* (1886) and *Incidents in the Life of H.P. Blavasky* (1886). Redway also became the London publisher for *The Theosophist*. By 1889, the

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[20] George Redway, "Some Reminiscence of Publishing Fifty Year Ago," *The Bookman* 81 (December 1931), 186; *The Advertiser* (May 1884), vii.

[21] *The American Bookseller* (May 1886), 263.

[22] *The Publishers' circular and general record of British and foreign literature* 51 (January-August 1888), 534-536; Leslie Howsam, *Kegan Paul: A Victorian Imprint: Publishers, Books and Cultural History* (London: Kegan Paul International, 1998),143-144.

company had reached enough level of success to merge with the publishing firm Kegan Paul Trench and Co.[23]

The publishing house William Rider & Sons also tapped into the occult market. In addition to producing the *Occult Review*, Rider & Sons also published a wide range of supernatural-themed books including *A Manual of Occultism* by the noted astrologist Sepharial and the successful *A Manual of Cartomancy Fortune-Telling and Occult Divination* by noted occultist A.E. Waite. Rider also published works of fiction with occult themes such as *Dracula*, *The Lair of the White Worm*, and other works by Bram Stoker.[24]

Ralph Shirely, who acted as director of the publishing house and editor of the *Occult Review*, brought the same global approach to the company's book catalogue that he did to the periodical. Books such as the *Occult Science in India* by Louis Jacolloit and translations of the Bhagavad-Gita became mainstays of the company's catalogue. Shirley also emphasized broader global connections, adding, for instance, books like *The Invisible Influence* by Alexander Cannon which examined commonality of magical practices around the world.

Perhaps Rider & Sons most influential product was not a publication at all, but rather a piece of material culture—the Rider –White Tarot deck. Under Shirley's direction, the company had already been offering titles on divination, tarot and other card reading for several years. These works included *The Tarot of the Bohemians* by A.P. Morton and *Card Reading, Practical Methods of Divination by Cards* by Minetta. In 1910, however, the company produced the iconic Rider-Waite tarot deck—the first mass produced deck—which was designed by A.E. Waite and illustrated by Pamela Colman Smith. The Rider-Waite tarot was not the first deck to be sold, but it was the most successful because it was aimed at a

[23] Redway, "Some Reminiscence of Publishing," vii; Howsam, 144.

[24] Bram Stoker, *The Lair of the White Worm* (London: William Rider & Sons, LTd., 1911), back matter company catalog, 1-16.

wider audience. Furthermore, its combination of Egyptian, Christian, and ancient imagery appealed to the global nature of late nineteenth century occult beliefs. In 1911, the cards were packaged and sold with the Waite's book, *The Key to the Tarot,* which provided a history of tarot and instructions. The deck was an instant success and was sold throughout Europe and the United States. It is still produced today, though the deck has outlived its original publisher.[25]

Tarot cards, and even the Nelrose cup that I started this paper with, were only a small part of a growing market for occult material culture in the late nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Amulets, magic mirrors, planchettes, Ouija boards, and charms all began to be mass produced and marketed to eager customers. Like periodicals and books, these material objects were not meant to be secret, but to be public. On a larger level, the popularity of the occult in the Victorian era and beyond also reveals that believers in the occult and supernatural thought that "modernity" too was contested terrain. Using the latest technology and competing in an open marketplace, occult publishers and businesses demonstrated that the assumption that the "modern" would lead to the decline of "the supernatural" was incorrect—the occult and supernatural could be modern too. This "modernity" featured not only forces beyond human perception yet waiting to be discovered though science, but also inherent global connections.

[25] Ibid; Greenwood, *The Encyclopedia of Magic and Witchcraft*, 166-67.