

## Dennis, Denisoff, “The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, 1888-1901”

### Abstract

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This article presents the history of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn (1888-1901), the most influential hermetic society of the nineteenth century. Its members practiced and trained initiates in using natural magic to enrich one’s connection with a spiritual realm of being. Although secretive, the Golden Dawn was, nevertheless, both the product of, and an influential contributor to, a broader social investment in the occult. In addition to offering a brief history of the Order and a synopsis of its structure, this article situates the Order among other related associations of the period, as well as within a literary and dramatic community, considering its writings and ritual practices as creative products. This article encourages a view of the Order not as isolated and inward-looking, but as engaged in a lively exploration of contemporary interests and values, and as making an original contribution to the literature of the late-Victorian period in the process.

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During the nineteenth century, a growing number of Britons were considering the occult as an alternative to scientific materialism or prescriptive conventional religion. From the Latin for hidden or secret, the term “occult” refers to beliefs and practices that engage with the supernatural, emphasizing secret knowledge derived through processes of private education and initiation. On 12 February 1888, three Freemasons—William Robert Woodman, William Wynn Westcott, and Samuel Liddell “MacGregor” Mathers—signed pledges of fidelity to, and thereby founded, a new occult society called the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, which would become the most influential hermetic society of the nineteenth century. Members were recruited through word of mouth and by notices published in the Theosophical journal *Lucifer* (Gilbert, *Golden* 1-2). They practiced and trained initiates in using natural magic to enrich one’s connection with a spiritual realm of being. Although secretive, the Golden Dawn was both the product of, and an influential contributor to, a broader social investment in the occult. It peaked in popularity and influence in the 1890s before dissipating due to internal conflicts.

### The Nineteenth-Century Context

Robert Wentworth Little, a Mason, founded the study group Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia (SRIA), or Rosicrucian Society of England, in or soon after 1865 (the society’s official website gives the date as 1 June 1867). This occurred at the same time that interest in the occult began to see a major resurgence in Britain, and more than two decades before the Golden Dawn itself was founded by the SRIA members Woodman (who had replaced Little as the Supreme Magus of the SRIA), the coroner Westcott, and his protégé Mathers (Fig. 1). In partial accord with the aims of positivist science, technological innovation, and new political movements such as Fabianism, the Order’s self-defined purpose was to enhance individuals’ engagement with the otherworldly realm through natural magic. It operated with logic akin to that of early psychology, and its aim of spiritual development even echoes, as Alison Butler points out, the popular Victorian doctrine of self-improvement (1). From its inception onward, the Order included people from a range of professions; among its members were actors, artists, clergymen, doctors, political activists, writers, and others. The membership was predominantly middle class or, in the words of member and Irish activist Maude Gonne, the “very essence of middle-class dullness” (248).

While most members were male, the Golden Dawn gained much of its momentum through the efforts of women. This is in part because, in contrast to Masonry but in accord with Theosophy (from which most of the initial members came), the Order allowed women and men to participate as equals in its practices. Theosophy was part of a predominantly middle-class spiritualist movement that flourished from roughly 1860 to 1890. Looking at this spiritualist context, which was a major catalyst for the formation of the Golden Dawn in the 1880s, one notes that a woman, Helena Blavatsky, was a founding member and arguably the key proponent of the Theosophical Society,

which arose in New York in 1875 to become the most popular spiritualist movement of the time. In 1883, Anna Kingsford—the second female physician in British history and an activist for women’s and animals’ rights—became president of the London Lodge of the Society. In April 1884, she founded the Hermetic Society which—in contrast to Theosophy’s focus on eastern spiritualities—addressed European traditions, making it a clear forerunner of the Golden Dawn (Barrett 27). In 1886, Marie Corelli published a hugely successful occult romance involving musical out-of-body experiences, astral travel, and electrical communion. Her first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds* was so popular that it inadvertently gave rise to its own international cult. The following year, another founding member of the Theosophical Society and a highly respected spiritualist, Emma Hardinge Britten, launched a spiritualist weekly, *The Two Worlds*, whose title echoes that of Corelli’s novel. Britten’s publication is still active today. The spiritualist movement differed from the occult tradition of the Golden Dawn in its public support of various social causes such as vegetarianism, temperance, and the rights of the working class, as well as in its earnest effort to find scientific proof of the existence of the spiritual realm. These differences are in part ones of degree, with a number of individuals being involved in both spiritualism and the Golden Dawn.



Figure 1: Samuel Liddell “MacGregor” Mathers

While members of the Golden Dawn were more secretive than spiritualists, the Order was never utterly mysterious. It turned, for example, to familiar symbolism derived from Jewish, Christian, and pagan mythology. R. A. Gilbert notes that occult scholar Kenneth Mackenzie had even published the society’s grades and symbols in his *Royal Masonic Cyclopaedia* in 1877—a decade before the Order had even formed (“Masonic”). Mackenzie himself was something of a public figure—being a friend of Walter Savage Landor and a well-known and respected translator. Meanwhile, just as the Golden Dawn was coming into being and reaching its peak of influence in the 1880s and 1890s, Britain was also experiencing a boom in the publication of specialist journals, articles, pamphlets, and newsletters addressing issues of importance not only to the Golden Dawn but to other occult, pagan, and spiritualist individuals and societies; this development normalized to a degree Victorians’ involvement in a range of less conventional spiritualities. Periodicals that contributed to the culture included, to name a few, *The Theosophist* (1879-), *Journal of the Society of Psychical Research* (1884-), *The Two Worlds* (1887-), *Unseen Universe* (1892-1893), *The Pagan Review* (1892), *Borderland* (1893-1897), *Unknown World* (1894-1895), and *The Occult Review* (1905-1951).[1] Thus, during its 13 years of activity as a single order, the Golden Dawn was not an esoteric curiosity, but an engaged contributor to a vibrant network of discourse communities exchanging and modifying their ideas regarding not only magic and the occult but also science and spiritualism.

### The Structure and History of the Golden Dawn

Golden Dawn members were primarily interested in magical philosophy and traditional ritual practice for the advancement of the individual’s spirit. Influences included ancient Egyptian religion, the Kabbalah, Christianity, Freemasonry, paganism, theurgy, alchemy, early-modern grimoires, and Enochian magic, such as that recorded by the early-modern occultist John Dee. Magic, for the Order, was the use of methodological practices to cause changes in consciousness and/or the material world in accord with the universal will (Kraig 9).[2] Ronald Hutton observes that “the object and centre of each operation was now the magician, and its aim was to bring him or her closer to spiritual maturity and potency, by inflaming the imagination, providing access to altered states of consciousness, and strengthening and focusing will-power” (82). For members of the Golden Dawn, the term “will” had a particular meaning; Mary K. Greer describes it as “the consciously focused intention of one’s highest, divine, or God-like Self, charged by a desire that was purified of all ego-content and actualized through an imagination that used all the senses but was untainted by material illusion” (57). As Greer suggests, members of the Order were encouraged to engage not in worship but in the scholarly study of symbols and rituals that would help them attain a higher level of spiritual being through natural magic. Although members of the Golden Dawn did invoke otherworldly entities, they did not focus on the worship of or sacrifices to particular divinities. Rather, a person would use such invocations to develop as a fully spiritual being. Similarly, the Order strongly discouraged practices popular among spiritualists, such as mesmerism and hypnotism, where an intermediary was seen to act as a passive medium separating the individual subject from the other-worldly realm (Gilbert, *Golden* 45).

The texts that serve as the foundation of the Golden Dawn’s own belief system are known as the Cipher Manuscripts. As A. E. Waite makes apparent in his summary of the documents’ history, their origins and authenticity have been

questioned almost from the moment of their first mention (218-19). They may have been found among the papers of the nineteenth-century Freemason and occult scholar Frederick Hockley, or discovered in a second-hand bookstall, or passed on to Kenneth Mackenzie by a Hungarian named Count Apponyi, or simply forged by Mackenzie himself.

Waite convincingly dates the writings to somewhere between 1870 and 1880 (225), supporting the notion that Mackenzie was the author. Mathers at one point declared that it was Westcott who had forged the manuscripts, and it has also been suggested that Edward Bulwer-Lytton, admired by members of the Order for his occult novel *Zanoni* (1842), was responsible (Cicero 49).

Regardless of their actual origins, the Cipher Manuscripts are the basis of the Golden Dawn's ceremonial and symbolic structure. They are written in English from right to left using a Trithemius cipher (Fig. 2)—a polyalphabetic code first described in the fifteenth century by the German priest Johannes Trithemius.[3] In the mid-nineteenth century, examples of the cipher could be readily accessed at the British Museum (Waite 218), confirming that the manuscripts could easily have been forged in London. Once Westcott decoded the documents in 1887, he, Mathers, and Woodman expanded on them to create a coherent system for ritual initiation and practice. According to Westcott, the manuscripts also conveniently contained the address of a woman in Nuremberg named Anna Sprengel (Waite 219). Westcott claimed to have contacted her and, in her reply, Sprengel chartered the first Golden Dawn temple—the Isis-Urania Temple—for the development of the rituals noted in the Cipher Manuscripts. She also conferred honorary grades of Adeptus Exemptus on Westcott, Mathers, and Woodman and, at the same time, gave Westcott permission to sign the official documents for the charter on her behalf. The Isis-Urania Temple in London was joined that same year by the Osiris temple in Weston-super-Mare and the Horus temple in Bradford. These were followed in 1893 by the Amen-Ra temple in Edinburgh and the Athathoor temple in Paris, the latter founded by Mathers, thereby making the Golden Dawn an international association. Chic and Sandra Tabatha Cicero have argued that not only the Cipher Manuscripts but also Sprengel herself is a piece of fiction invented by Westcott and based on Anna Kingsford (50-51), who had died of pneumonia in 1888 at the age of 41. While the Ciceros' claim is speculative, it remains interesting to note that Woodman, Westcott, and Mathers—all members of the exclusively male Freemasons—not only selected a woman as their superior, but also chose to have two goddesses embody the Order's symbolic centre: Isis, the Egyptian goddess of magic and nature, and Urania, the Greek muse of astronomy.



Figure 2: Folio 2 of the Cipher Manuscripts (used with permission)

The structure of the Golden Dawn echoed that of the SRIA. The first of the three levels of the Order was called the Outer Order or, like the institution itself, the Golden Dawn, and its educational curriculum of ritual practices was articulated by Westcott and Mathers based on information in the Cipher Manuscripts. Teachings at this level were focused on the individual's self-development through such things as astrology, tarot divination, and geomancy. The first order was divided into four grades categorized by the elements of earth, air, water, and fire. After passing a written examination on the metaphysical character of an element, the aspirant proceeded to the next grade. Having completed all four grades, and upon approval of the adepts within the second level, an aspirant could be initiated as one of them.

Called the Inner Order, the second level had been envisioned not so much as a level within the Golden Dawn than as a separate order entirely. It was designed by Mathers, who was its sole leader and who called it the Rosae Rubeae et Aureae Crucis (the Ruby Rose and Cross of Gold). In addition to governing and guiding the first order, members of the Inner Order would begin learning practical magic such as astral travel, alchemy, and scrying (attaining otherworldly visions with the aid of objects such as crystals and mirrors). With the permission of the chiefs of one's particular Lodge, members of this level could also initiate aspirants to the first level. Upon passing another examination and with the consent of the other adepts, an aspirant would eventually attain the grade of Adeptus Minor.

The third level contained what Mathers called the secret chiefs, of whom the members of the first and second levels knew little. When, in 1891, Woodman died and Sprengel's correspondences with Westcott suddenly ceased, Mathers declared that he himself had recently been contacted by the secret chiefs, who had given him information on rituals for the Golden Dawn's second level and instruction on alchemy and spiritual sexuality for the third level. The general belief was that the secret chiefs were alchemists whose practices were part of an unbroken hermetic tradition going back to ancient Egypt, but there are no available records clarifying whether the secret chiefs were, in fact, simply

other people, or spiritual or symbolic entities.

In 1892, Westcott disassociated himself from the management of the Order, although he remained involved. Mathers was now the only original founding member leading the Golden Dawn. Operating from Paris, he appointed Florence Farr (Fig. 3) as the Chief Adept in Anglia. Farr was a friend of William Morris's daughter May, who had taught her embroidery and with whom she posed for Dante Gabriel Rossetti's painting "The Golden Stairs" (1876-80). Farr was a feminist and respected West End actress, as well as W. B. Yeats's and George Bernard Shaw's lover.



Figure 3: Publicity Photograph of Florence Farr as "Louka" in George Bernard Shaw's *Arms and the Man* (Division of Rare and Manuscript Collections, Carl A. Kroch Library, Cornell University, Ithaca, used with permission)

The 1890s marked the peak of the Golden Dawn's popularity. With hundreds of members (Owen 46), the Order had taken in a number of influential people, including Farr, Gonne, and Yeats, as well as the theatre producer Annie Horniman, author Arthur Machen, artist Moina Mathers (wife of MacGregor Mathers and sister of philosopher Henri Bergson), co-founder of the Fabian Society and children's author Edith Nesbit, painters Henrietta and Henry Paget, and neo-Celtic writer William Sharp (aka Fiona Macleod). During the final decade of the century, Farr and other members of the British Lodges began challenging Mathers's leadership and the fact that he was the sole correspondent with the secret chiefs. Mathers initiated Aleister Crowley into the Outer Order in 1898, but, when he proposed the younger man's initiation as Adeptus Minor, the London officials refused. Mathers overrode their decision and in 1900 initiated Crowley at his Ahathoor temple in France. As a result, Farr resigned from her position as Chief Adept in Anglia and, less than three months after Crowley's initiation, the other London Adepts expelled Mathers from the Order.

Meanwhile, in Paris, the American con artists Mr. and Mrs. Theo Horos (aka Frank and Editha Jackson [Butler 13]) deceived Mathers for some time into believing that Mrs. Horos was Anna Sprengel, before fleeing to Britain with copies of some of the Golden Dawn's secret papers in hand. They set up a fake order in London as a front for criminal activity and, when, in 1901, Mr. Horos was put on trial and found guilty of the statutory rape of sixteen-year old Daisy Adams, their copy of the Order's Neophyte rituals was made public by the courts (Owen 103-04). The negative publicity, combined with the conflicts between Mathers and the British temples as well as schisms among the British members themselves, lead to many members resigning from the order. That same year, the Golden Dawn began splintering into various groups, with A. E. Waite taking charge of the Isis-Urania Temple, which ran until 1914. Some of the early twentieth-century temples would survive at least until the second half of the century, and a number of associations today still claim spiritual or historical lineage from the original order.

### The Order as Artwork

R. A. Gilbert observed in 1986 that scholars had at last begun realizing that members of the Golden Dawn such as Farr were worthy of critical attention "as writers and artists" (*Golden x*). I would suggest that, in fact, the Order *in toto* can effectively be viewed as a collection of creative works shared across aesthetic movements of the time. This perspective enhances our understanding of the Golden Dawn as a key medium for the complex circulation of the occult. Although Richard Marsh's novel *The Beetle* (1897) depicts the occult negatively, it nevertheless proves a useful entry point for this approach. Late in the work, one of the heroes finally realizes he cannot erase his personal experience of an ancient Egyptian cult of Isis that practiced the sacrifice of young women. But in trying to make sense of this part of his past, he finds the coherence of his story relies on the narratives of others:

presently, tales began to be whispered, about some idolatrous sect, which was stated to have its headquarters somewhere in the interior of the country—some located it in this neighbourhood, and some in that—which was stated to still practise, and to always have practised, in unbroken historical continuity, the debased, unclean, mystic, and bloody rites, of a form of idolatry which had had its birth in a period of the world's story which was so remote, that to all intents and purposes it might be described as prehistoric. (297)

Marsh's description of the "world's story" as arising from a polyphony of prehistoric, or trans-historic, tales speaks to the nineteenth-century interest in archeology, as well as ancient, classical, and folk customs and beliefs. More

importantly, perhaps, for a historical entry such as the one I offer here, it also represents a growing skepticism among Britons regarding the act of writing history itself.[4]

One of the most popular British novels of the fin de siècle, *The Beetle* is characterized by a wrinkled timeline, multiple narrators unable to get to the point, and a climactic breathless rush by a group of disagreeable heroes who, rather than saving the day, repeatedly arrive in time only to get information on where they should rush off to next. In the end, they fail to capture the supernatural monstrosity operating outside the social, legal, and physical laws of modern London society. In this sense, the battle of *The Beetle* can be read as being between those who support non-normative conceptions of history and reality and those who portray such views as immoral, degenerate attacks on an ordered ideal of modern civilization. As its popularity makes apparent, *The Beetle* voiced an opinion that struck a chord with many turn-of-the-century readers who felt imperialism, scientific materialism, and other institutions of control and containment were failing to fulfill their mandate.

In his novel, Marsh depicts the occult as a form of ongoing creative production that proves culturally potent not despite but because of the malleability of its myth-making. As such, *The Beetle* is a reflection of the broader function of associations such as the Golden Dawn that arose in part as an imaginative response to the modern devaluation of those less tangible elements of everyday life. Marsh's representation of an unruly, other-worldly force operating beyond common notions of time tapped into a popular cultural trope of the period—a deep interest in all things defiantly secretive and mysterious. This attention culminated in a string of literary works by Golden Dawn members and others such as Oscar Wilde's *Picture of Dorian Gray* (1890, 1891), Arthur Machen's *Great God Pan* (1890, 1894), and Bram Stoker's *Dracula* (1897). It was no single writer, however, but the collective members of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn that made the nineteenth century's most serious and sustained effort to re-imagine and re-engage with a prehistoric, occult tradition. In this sense, it is the Order that can be seen as the major Victorian author of the often fictional, but no less influential history of occultism and natural magic.

Due, in part, to its emphasis on the role of the imagination in human development, writers and artists had a particular affinity with the Golden Dawn. For Alex Owen, late-Victorian occultism “owed as much to the *modernité* of Baudelaire or ‘the decadents’ as it did a particular socialist tradition or the rationalized components of modern Western society” (9). Four known members of the Golden Dawn—Farr, Nesbit, Machen, and Sharp—contributed to publisher John Lane's Keynote Series, best known for its decadent and feminist works. In her novel *The Dancing Faun* (1894), Farr mocks Shaw's efforts to control her acting career and draw her away from the Order. In 1905, she directed the first English production of Wilde's play *Salome*. The affiliation of a number of the Golden Dawn's members with the theatre scene, including Farr, Gonne, Horniman, and Yeats, coupled with the performance rituals central to the Order's methods, encourages recognition of it as a dramatic engagement with magic. Performance, costumes, props, and stage setting were all key elements of the Golden Dawn's rituals and pedagogical practices.

Scholars have proposed that not only Marsh but many of the authors I have mentioned were affiliated not only with the occult but with the Golden Dawn specifically. Yeats, Farr, and Nesbit were, indeed, members. As was Machen but, while he acknowledged his membership (*Things* 149-50), his attitude toward the Order was ambivalent at best. Although invested in the occult throughout his adult life, Machen more than once noted that he did not hold the Golden Dawn in high regard. Once, in a letter, he referred jokingly to an upcoming ceremony as “Tea & Equinox” (*Selected Letters* 43). Wilde's wife Constance was briefly a member, moving quickly through the ranks (Owen 62-63), and she quite probably shared some of her secret knowledge with her husband (Moyle 173-75). Wilde himself may have had his palm read by Mathers (Weintraub 33), whose obsession with Celtic culture would have made him all the more interested in the Anglo-Irish author. Sharp became a member (Blamires 13), probably through Yeats, who was drawn to Sharp's Celtic neo-paganism and had discussed the Order with him. Moina Mathers described Sharp as “a very remarkable being . . . in every respect, & so strangely psychic” (qtd. in Greer 226). Stoker, meanwhile, was a close friend of the horror writer John William Brodie-Innes, with whom he discussed occultism (*Leatherdale* 81). The latter was an influential member of the Golden Dawn, being in charge of the Edinburgh temple and intended by Mathers to be his successor as the Order's leader. It has been claimed that Stoker was also a member (Picknett and Prince 176), although this has not been proven.

As for Marsh, there is no record of his having been a Golden Dawn member. But this makes it all the more notable that *The Beetle* includes details of ancient Egyptian rites that appear to have also inspired the Order. The eponymous villain of Marsh's novel is a member of a prehistoric sect known as the Children of Isis, a goddess who appears frequently in Golden Dawn works, along with elements of Egyptian magic, myth, and ritual. Kenneth Grant, a twentieth-century occultist trained by Aleister Crowley, believed Marsh's novel had the only known literary reference to the Children of Isis and, remarkably, began using *The Beetle* in the ritual practices of his order—the New Isis Lodge—offering a particularly clear instance of fiction becoming reality.

Marsh's novel, a late contribution to Victorian Egyptomania, may have had no special affiliation with the Golden Dawn or any insider knowledge of its structure or practices. But, as I have shown, this did not keep him from

incorporating into his fiction elements of the Order that were already in popular circulation. Nor, conversely, did it keep his writing from being woven into the Order's own symbology and ritual by people such as Grant. As *The Beetle* and its reception makes clear, the Golden Dawn and its values flourished as part of the potent nineteenth-century investment in occult and ancient spiritual traditions. What ultimately proves most interesting in the rise of the Golden Dawn is not its secrets but the readiness, and even casual ease, with which many Victorians, including some of the Order's own members, incorporated the institution and its interests into the rest of their lives.

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#### HOW TO CITE THIS BRANCH ENTRY (MLA format)

Denisoff, Dennis. "The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, 1888-1901." *BRANCH: Britain, Representation and Nineteenth-Century History*. Ed. Dino Franco Felluga. Extension of *Romanticism and Victorianism on the Net*. Web. [Here, add your last date of access to BRANCH].

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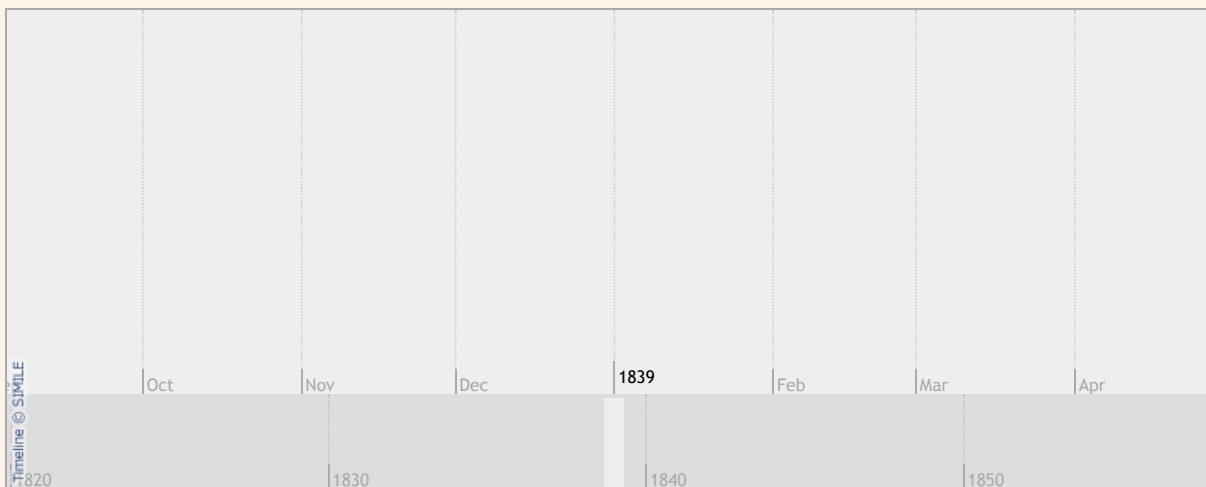
### ENDNOTES

[1] Blavatsky was founding editor of *The Theosophist* and W. F. Barrett of the *Journal of the Society of Psychical Research*. Emma Hardinge Britten edited *The Two Worlds* during its first 5 years and was sole editor of *Unseen Universe*, while William Sharp edited the short-lived *Pagan Review* and W. T. Stead edited *Borderland. Unknown World* was edited by A. E. Waite, and *The Occult Review's* founding editor was Ralph Shirley.

[2] In *The Essential Golden Dawn*, Chic and Sandra Tabatha Cicero offer an insightful discussion of the Golden Dawn in relation to different conceptions of the relation between magic and the individual will (70-71).

[3] The complete Cipher Manuscripts can be found online at the Hermetic Library, both as copies of the originals and in English translation (<http://hermetic.com/gdlibrary/cipher/>; accessed 5 Aug. 2012).

[4] See Kontou and Willburn for a synopsis on the relationship of the occult to historicization (5).



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