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### ***Conjuring the Market: Literature and Occult Populism at the Fin de Siècle***

McCann, Andrew. *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014. 9781107064423. 207 pp. \$95.00.

Since the 1960s at least, Chris Partridge argues in his recent essay 'Occulture is Ordinary' (2013), occultism has increasingly abandoned the associations with secrecy and elitism that once seemed to be its defining hallmarks. 'No longer,' he writes, 'can such thought be considered occulted or esoteric, in the sense of being recondite and secretive . . . the culture in which they are embedded is no longer hidden or unfamiliar. It is ordinary and everyday'.<sup>i</sup> Andrew McCann's fascinating new study of popular occult fiction in *fin de siècle* Britain provides a compelling prehistory for the cultural shift that Partridge identifies, showing how writers such as George Du Maurier, Rosa Praed, Marie Corelli, and Arthur Machen embraced and deployed occult ideas not to resist, but to embrace and revise contemporary conceptions of the popular and of the ordinary business of authorship. A compelling and often polemical intervention in Victorian popular fiction studies, it participates in wider critical efforts to challenge the no longer convincing polarization of both Victorian and modernist writing and of the popular and the *avant garde*. Unique to McCann's study is the claim that the occult was not only central to late Victorian popular fiction but also fundamentally antithetical to the commercialized views of authorship associated with the newly expanded literary marketplace of the *fin de siècle*. While Walter Besant and the Society of Authors were arguing for a new, anti-romantic vision of the author as a 'rationalized, commercially oriented subject' who should be recognized as 'primarily the producer and owner of literary property' (7),

occult novels such as Du Maurier's *Peter Ibbetson* (1891) and Marie Corelli's *Ardath: The Story of a Dead Self* (1889) were questioning the extent to which any self could be deemed sovereign, or any words, ideas, and tastes owned. For McCann, such occult-themed challenges to the foundational precepts of literary commercialization were necessarily egalitarian and anti-hierarchical in implication:

The paranormal enabled authors to reimagine aesthetic experience as something that was no longer qualified by notions of education and taste. It . . . consolidated a vision of aesthetic experience that was democratic and unambiguously pitched at ordinary people. (91)

Occult populism is imagined here as a liberating force that offers its constituents a partial, if never complete, escape from the tyrannies of the marketplace and institutionalized cultural elitism alike.

After opening with a case study of the Walter Besant-sponsored model of commercialized authorship that acts as foil for all its subsequent chapters, McCann's study then moves onto individual examinations of the mediumistic and often implicitly anti-capitalist occult *ethos* of works by Du Maurier, Corelli, Praed, and Machen. Notably absent from this eclectic selection are the any of the time-honored gothic classics—Stevenson's *The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde* (1886), or Stoker's *Dracula* (1897), for example—that still retain a fairly narrow stranglehold on the field of Victorian occult fiction studies. McCann is to be commended for choosing examples that emphasize the political and formal diversity of the literary occult and hence have the potential to disrupt some of the more conventional critical truisms about the anxious ideological work of the late Victorian gothic. Particularly welcome is the chapter on the publications of

Theosophical novelist Rosa Praed, a prolific and contemporarily successful Anglo-Australian writer whose fascinating meditations on the ethics of past and present imperialism through different genres of occult writing have remained, with the exception of McCann's own earlier work, almost entirely off the critical radar. One hopes that his study will initiate a reappraisal of this fascinating figure and her relationship to the largely male-dominated canon of *fin de siècle* British gothic writing. Also laudable here is McCann's attention to the formal as well as simply thematic function of the occult within the popular literary imagination; the occult revival, he contends, provided not simply a topic for popular plots, but also a paratextual structure for authors such as Praed who wished to signal the distance between their active consciousness and the words published under their own names. There is an exciting expansiveness to this study as it offers to move us beyond the more familiar texts, truisms, and approaches associated with Victorian occult fiction studies.

To recognize these considerable strengths is not necessarily to assent to the central claims of McCann's sophisticated argument. The book's carefully strategized structure, which poises Besant against the literary occultists, can sometimes suggest an overly dichotomized opposition between rational commercialist writers and supposedly dreamy mysticists such as Arthur Machen. From the standpoint of a contemporary literary culture pervaded by ghost-written celebrity biographies and confessional blogs, I couldn't help but wonder if practices of dis-individuated authorship and 'unfettered, undisciplined writing' (54) were necessarily as antithetical to literary commercialization as McCann sometimes wants them to be. Indeed, his own example of Gissing's *New Grub Street* (1891),

offered in Chapter One as a representation of the newly mercantiled and Besantian late Victorian literary field, offers a perfect example of the compatibility between commercial interests and the subversion of authorial subjectivity. Marion Yule, trapped in the reading room of the British Library where she first researches and then churns out anonymous articles for sale by her father, ponders her eventual replacement by a literary machine. '[S]urely before long some Edison would make the true automaton,' she considers. 'Only to throw in a given number of old books, and have them reduced, blended, modernized into a single for today's consumption.'<sup>ii</sup> Far from necessarily resisting or undermining the commercialized literary landscape, automated authorship is here recognized as its supreme exemplar. To put this more bluntly, unconscious creation and making a buck are surely by no means mutually exclusive.

If literary commercialization need not rely on a 'proprietary model of authorship' (20), neither did occult authorship in the second half of the nineteenth century depend exclusively on notions of selflessness and passive transmission. It is true that many of the period's most renowned occult texts—H.P. Blavatsky's *The Secret Doctrine* (1888), for example, or David Duguid's *Hafed, Prince of Persia* (1876)—were attributed to supernatural entities rather than to their living mediums, but these beings still very much occupied a defined author function; the occult force of these works absolutely relied on readers accepting the autonomous existence and coherent subjectivity of the Tibetan masters Koot Hoomi and Morya and the Persian warrior-prince Hafed respectively. Indeed, we find no better example of the importance of named authorship in late Victorian occult circles than in the notorious spat between Theosophical pioneer H.P. Blavatsky and her one-time collaborator

Mabel Collins over the supernatural provenance of the latter's Theosophical classic *Light on the Path* (1885). On the book's first publication, Collins was named only as scribe and the content was attributed to the mysterious Eastern master Hilarion; by 1889, however, after a scandalous break from the Theosophical Society over rumours of her involvement in a tantric sex ménage, Collins was ready to change her story. Insisting that she'd only credited Hilarion due to Blavatsky's coercion, Collins now asserted in the *Religio-Philosophical Journal* that '*Light on the Path* was not to my knowledge inspired by anyone.'<sup>iii</sup> The non-occult press was unsurprisingly much amused by this turnabout, with the *Liverpool Mercury* jeering, 'Though she is a Theosophist, Mrs Cook [Collins's married name] apparently has views about copyright.'<sup>iv</sup> Episodes such as these complicate any straightforward establishment of occult models of authorship as wholly contrary to secular proprietary ones. Had McCann perhaps spent more time in the occult archive, he might have been able to avoid the occasionally crude counter-positioning of occult and non-occult approaches to authorship and textual ownership in the late nineteenth century that sometimes mar this otherwise very fine study.

Ultimately, however, McCann's goal here is not to uncover the complexities and contradictions inherent in the public spheres of the occult revival, but rather to expand our understanding of range and oppositional potential of Victorian occult fiction as written by believers and non-believers alike, and, perhaps most of all, to demonstrate the remarkable proximity between theories of popular literature and of occult experience as they emerge in this period. In both cases, he succeeds admirably. *Popular Literature, Authorship and the Occult in Late Victorian Britain* is a very welcome addition to the burgeoning criticism on Victorian popular fiction and

crucial reading for scholars interested in the fascinating interrelationship between modernism and occultism at the *fin-de-siècle*.

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### Note on Contributor

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i Chris Partridge, 'Occulture is Ordinary,' in *Contemporary Esotericism*, Eds. Egil Asprem and Kennet Granholm (Sheffield: Equinox, 2013), 113-133.

ii George Gissing, 1891, *New Grub Street*, (London: Penguin, 1985), 138.

iii William Q. Judge and Archibald Keightley, '*Light on the Path*' and *Mabel Collins*, (New York: 1889), *Blavatsky Archives*.  
<http://www.blavatskyarchives.com/judgelotpamc89.htm>. Accessed 7 January 2015.

iv 'Our London Correspondence,' *Liverpool Mercury*, 1 July 1890, 3.

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