

English Department
FACULTY LECTURE

Victorian Occult Enlightenment: Mabel Collins, H.P. Blavatsky, and the Luciferian Public Sphere



LUCIFER

A Theosophical Magazine,

DESIGNED TO "BRING TO LIGHT THE HIDDEN THINGS OF
DARKNESS"

EDITED BY
H. P. BLAVATSKY AND MABEL COLLINS.

THE LIGHT-BEARER IS THE MORNING STAR OR LUCIFER, AND "LUCIFER
IS SO PROPHANE OR SATANIC TITLE. IT IS THE LATIN LUCIFERUS.
THE LIGHT-BRINGER, THE MORNING STAR, EQUIVALENT TO THE GREEK
phosphor THE NAME OF THE PURE FAIR HERALD OF
DAYLIGHT.—TOWNE.

VOLUME I.
SEPTEMBER 1887—FEBRUARY 1888.

LONDON:
GEORGE REDWAY, YORK STREET, COVENT GARDEN.



Dr. Christine Ferguson
University of Glasgow

Thursday, March 19th at 17:00
Bunghuis 0.04
Spuistraat 210

Abstract

To its contemporary critics, the late Victorian occult revival represented the ultimate betrayal of the Enlightenment ideals of reason and secular emancipation in favor of an esoteric supernaturalism. This positioning seems only further confirmed by the contribution of occult revivalists to the fragmented and commercialized late Victorian press networks which, according to Jürgen Habermas, signaled the death knell of the once powerful eighteenth-century public sphere. There are, however, important reasons to rethink such assessments of *fin-de-siècle* occultism as counter-Enlightenment foil, ones nowhere more apparent than in the seminal issues of the period's most defiantly disenchanting occult periodical, the Theosophical monthly *Lucifer* (1887-1897). Focusing on the first two years of its run, when the journal was co-edited by Theosophical founder H.P. Blavatsky and prolific popular novelist Mabel Collins, my paper examines how *Lucifer* embraced the language of Enlightenment to argue for a universal democratic enfranchisement through, rather than in opposition to, occult reading practices and beliefs. The Luciferian public sphere advocated by Blavatsky and Collins is one in which enlightened public debate was counter-intuitively salvaged through its occultation within a commercial periodical outlet geared towards an eclectic and non-partisan audience. My paper argues that the rationalizing impetus of *Lucifer* can guide us towards a new understanding of both the late Victorian public sphere and of the diverse constituencies of the occult revival.

About

Christine Ferguson is senior lecturer in Victorian literature and culture at the University of Glasgow, where her research currently focuses on the literary production of the nineteenth-century occult revival. She is the author of two monographs— *Language, Science, and Popular Fiction in the Victorian Fin de Siècle* (Ashgate 2006) and *Determined Spirits: Eugenics, Heredity, and Racial Regeneration in Anglo-American Spiritualist Writing, 1848-1930*— and co-editor of the multi-volume primary source collection, *Spiritualism: 1840-1930* (Routledge 2014). Her new project, *Open Secrets: The Public Spheres of the Victorian Occult*, investigates the exoteric face of the late Victorian occult revival, examining how occultist and mystical writers such as H.P. Blavatsky, A.E. Waite, Mabel Collins, Arthur Machen, and others used popular fiction and periodical writing to breach the divide between hidden and public knowledge.