

Nicholas Marshall: Robes and Gowns: the Relationship between Scholarship and the Occult in the 20th Century

Prior to the 1980s, scholarship seems to have been, for the most part, deliberately uninterested in the various occult movements like the Theosophical Society and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn which erupted in the early 20th-century and whose teachings found a revival in various forms in the 1960s. However, arguably because of the rise of the occult in popular media, more scholars recently find their interests shifting to occult fields – witness the birth of the journal *Aries* in 2001, as well as the emergence various scholarly societies for the study of classical, renaissance, and modern occultism. Therefore, it seems appropriate to reconsider the *Zeitgeist* that permits such scholarship to exist and within which it has been conducted. This presentation explores the interrelationship between academic study of the occult and the production of occult how-to manuals. I limit my research to an investigation of the term “theurgy” in late twentieth-century scholarly literature, and compare the fruits of this research to the use of the term and accompanying scholarly literature about it by non-academics in post-Golden Dawn occult movements. I focus on the plethora of religious handbooks published by high-ranking members of the Ordo Templi Orientis and The Golden Dawn. In addition to this widely available, printed material, I will explore online material such as various web-based forums devoted to disseminating and explicating this literature, especially Forums of the Aleister Crowley Society (lashtal.com), one of the more ecumenical Thelemic forums,¹ which may provide a more up-to-date glimpse of the lived religion of these organizations, groups, and individuals. I hope to show how occultists within the Golden Dawn and Thelemic communities have wrestled with the terminology of “theurgy” and “magic” in ways influenced by and resembling the debates of historians in the academy, although they do so in order to re-conceptualize their ritual lives, rather than compose histories per se. The case serves as evidence of the creativity of a new religious movement that has available to it the unwitting collaboration of scholarship. Historian Elizabeth Clark, in her *History, Theory, Text* (Harvard UP, 2004) called attention to the way in which all scholarship of a given time is an artifact of that time, enmeshed in that time’s webs of significance. The results of this case study will provide further evidence for the “presentist” stance from which all scholarship begins and from which it struggles to rhetorically distance itself, as well as a look into the current uses and interpretations of theurgy in the new age.

Keywords:

[Occultism](#), [Reception of Scholarship](#)

¹Lashtal.com is a strictly moderated in accordance with guidelines that purport to avoid interdenominational squabbles. Its membership of 9,134 (as of Jan. 31, 2014) is the most significant within similar groups and forums, for example, in comparison with the College of Thelema (heruraha.net), which has 2,262 members.

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