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**Spiritualism, Science and Suspense: Theosophy and the Supernatural Adventure Story**

A dissertation presented

By

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To

The Graduate School

In Partial Fulfillment of the

Requirements

For the Degree of

**Doctor of Philosophy**

In

**English**

Stony Brook University

August 2011

**Stony Brook University**

The Graduate School

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Abstract of the Dissertation

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**2011**

With Darwin's publication of *The Origin of the Species* in 1859, the validity of the three major Western religions was called into serious question by science. In the wake of the scientific progress, made at breakneck speed in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, it seemed as if science and spirituality were increasingly becoming mutually exclusive. However, Theosophy, a hybrid science-religion founded by Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky in 1875, sought to reconcile science and the supernatural by using the former to explain the latter. For Blavatsky, the miraculous and the paranormal did not defy scientific explanation; they simply could not be explained through a contemporary understanding of science. Blavatsky's Theosophy was predicated on belief in a secret knowledge, known to ancient civilizations but lost to modern man that represented a deep, true understanding of nature. When realized, this insight allowed for the accomplishment of the seemingly miraculous, not by magic but by science.

Theosophy's influence on canonical, highbrow modernists such as James Joyce and W.B Yeats is well known. However, its impact on the more widely read novelists of the day has been less studied and this dissertation in part fills that critical void. After an introduction to Blavatsky's Theosophy, this project moves into a discussion of *Dracula*. An understanding of Theosophy provides new insight into the novel's conflict between science and the supernatural. It also provides a new way to view Dr. Abraham Van Helsing., who embraces both the scientific and the unexplainable in much the same way Theosophy did. This project also includes a chapter on H. Rider Haggard's most enduring literary creation, the femme fatale Ayesha. By examining, through the lens of Theosophy, all four Haggard novels in which "She" appears, I offer a new interpretation of this enigmatic character. Specifically, I argue that Ayesha is a fallen Theosophical adept. The final author included in this project is Marie Corelli, one of the world's first bestselling authors. Much of her fiction seeks to reconcile spiritualist beliefs with traditional Christianity. She does so using science, and I argue that she borrows heavily from Blavatsky and Theosophy.

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## **Prelude: A Modernist Fairy Tale**

In 1917, the families of two young English girls, ten-year-old Frances Griffiths and her thirteen-year-old cousin Elsie Wright, shared a house in Cottingley, near Yorkshire. One day Frances returned home drenched in water. She offered the excuse that she had fallen into the brook while playing with fairies that she had befriended in a nearby glen. Her parents did not believe her, and Frances was punished. Elsie, feeling sorry for her cousin and best friend, had an idea: she would borrow her father's camera and photograph the fairies, thereby providing proof of their existence. Elsie approached her father and asked to borrow the camera, using the excuse that she wanted to take a picture of her cousin.

Photography, a relatively new technology, was only recently becoming available to the general public. Elsie's father provided her with a single plate. An hour later, the triumphant girls returned, claiming they now had evidence of the fairies. When the skeptical father developed the picture, he saw an image of Frances facing the camera as four tiny winged women dressed in gossamer clothing danced in front of her. The girls refused to admit that they had, as their elders were convinced, photographed paper cutouts or engaged in some other kind of chicanery. One month later, Elsie's father again lent her the camera and one plate, and they returned with a second photograph. This time, they returned with a picture showing a seated Elsie bidding a gnome-like figure to jump on her lap. Convinced that this was a joke that was getting out of hand, Elsie's father forbade any further use of the camera.

The following year, when Frances's father returned from the war, the Griffiths moved. Just prior to that, Frances wrote a friend in South Africa and enclosed copies of the two fairy photographs. On the back of one, she noted, "Elsie and I are very friendly with the beck fairies.

It is funny I did not see them in Africa. It must be too hot for them there.” In the letter, she alluded to the fairies only briefly and in passing. When rediscovered and published in the *Cape Town Argus* in 1922, Frances’s words would be cited as evidence of the girl’s sincerity and of the photographs’ authenticity. That the pictures were in fact fraudulent was not definitively proven until 1983.

This incident, and what would eventually be known as the “Cottingley Fairy Photographs,” provides an insight into the spiritual and intellectual climate of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Frances and Elsie’s fairies were part and parcel of the spiritual world, a primitive and pagan variant on Judeo-Christianity’s angels and demons. Since Charles Darwin and the 1859 publication of his *Origin of the Species*, creationism, one of the principal tenets of Judaism and Christianity, had been called seriously into question. In the absence of conclusive or dissuasive evidence, belief that God had created humans essentially as they exist today now became an act of faith, no different from belief in fairies. Darwin provided a persuasive and convincing argument against creationism, with scientific evidence to buttress his ideas. If science could be used to assault religious belief, then perhaps it could also be used to support belief in the spiritual and supernatural. Essentially, that was what Frances Griffiths and Elsie Wright were attempting to do with the “photographic evidence” of their encounter with fairies, whether they knew it or not. During the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, acolytes of Theosophy, a new religion with ancient roots, would attempt to use scientific, empirical, and tangible evidence to support belief in supernatural phenomena that ranged from séances to ascended masters and from the spectacular to the absurd.

In 1920, Polly Wright, Elsie’s mother and a Theosophist, attended a lecture on folklore and fairy beliefs. She mentioned her daughter’s photographs to the lecturer, who brought them

to the attention of Edward L. Gardner, a minor London aristocrat and somewhat prominent Theosophist. Gardner entered into a correspondence with the Wrights, who eventually loaned him the original photographic plates, which he then conveyed to an acquaintance who was an authority on photography. Gardner also showed and discussed the photographs at various public lectures and Theosophical meetings. An attendee of one such lecture in May of 1920 alerted Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, the noted author, who was by then an ardent Spiritualist. Doyle encouraged Gardner to submit the photographs for further testing to the Kodak laboratory in London. There, as Doyle would later write, “two experts were unable to find any flaw, but refused to testify to the genuineness of them, in view of some possible trap.”

Gardner finally met the Wrights that summer. He supplied Elsie with a more sophisticated camera, and subsequently she and Frances provided three more photographs of fairies. In the Christmas issue of *The Strand* magazine, Doyle published an article on the first two pictures, and the next March saw a follow-up article including the later three pictures. The story received worldwide publicity, most of it unfavorable and focusing on the question of how the creator of the notoriously clever Sherlock Holmes could be duped by what most saw as an obvious hoax. Yet attempts to debunk the photographs were not tremendously successful. Harry Houdini, eager to draw a distinction between his variety of skilled showmanship and fraudulent parlor tricks that were passed off as “evidence” of the supernatural, asserted that the fairy figures were patterned after those in a certain advertising poster. However, these claims proved groundless once the poster in question was produced. By this time, Doyle had written an entire book on the case, 1922’s *The Coming of the Fairies*. The previous year, Theosophist and

clairvoyant Geoffrey Hodson visited the beck in the girls' company and reportedly saw numerous fairies, although the girls themselves saw nothing.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Clark, Jerome. The Unexplained! (Detroit: Visible Ink, 1999) 540-543.

## CHAPTER ONE

### THE ALIENIST IN A MAD WORLD: MADAME BLAVATSKY AND THEOSOPHY

#### Theosophy and the Modern Era

The late nineteenth and early twentieth century was a bleak time in Britain. Long held beliefs were called into question by the events and discoveries of the day. For instance, allegiance to king and country was weakened by wars with obscene body counts, facilitated by technological advances such as poison gas and machine guns. Faith in religion was put to the test by evolution. Even something as fundamental as the very nature of space and time was turned upside down by Einstein and relativity. Science played a role in all three of these fundamental re-examinations. In fact, the Modern era was a time when science was making incredible strides. As a result, more and more people were transferring their allegiance from religion to science as a means of unraveling the mysteries of the universe. While some were content with science playing this role, there is little compassion for individual humans in science's cold steel and scalpel. Therefore, many people still needed some sort of religion in their lives. Darwin had essentially invalidated the three major Western religions, so people had to look elsewhere for their spirituality. This paved the way for Eastern beliefs, particularly Hinduism and Buddhism, to enter Britain. These religions, which were not predicated on the Creation story, were immune from attack by Darwin and science. In addition, the Eastern belief of reincarnation provided a new version of life after death that was not dependent on the validity of Western religion. People also turned to ancient beliefs and the occult in a desperate attempt to

fill the spiritual void. The result was, as Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky put it, “a death-grapple of Science with Theology for infallibility- a ‘conflict of ages.’”<sup>2</sup> However, Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky offered a third option with Theosophy.

Although Theosophy, an organized quasi-religious system, eventually spun off into various incarnations, this investigation will focus on the Theosophy espoused by its founder, Madame Blavatsky, because her brand was the first and most influential. Within a decade of its foundation in 1875, her Theosophical Society had over 120 lodges and a membership numbering in the thousands. Eventually this number would expand to the tens of thousands.<sup>3</sup> Theosophy was an amalgam of Eastern, occult and spiritualist beliefs held together by the notion that all things mystical could be explained via science. According to Theosophy, ancient people had been in touch with a wisdom based on a deeper, truer understanding of nature. Those possessed of such knowledge could perform seemingly miraculous deeds, not via magic but through natural science. Theosophy offered a sort of middle way between science and religion, a way in which the two could co-exist. It had all the trappings of a religion, preaching about souls and spirits, reincarnation and astral projection, yet “Theosophy was not intended to be a new religion but a science.”<sup>4</sup> According to Peter Washington, “instead of opposing religion with the facts as presented by Victorian science, [Blavatsky] attempts to subsume those facts into a grand synthesis that makes religious wisdom not the enemy of scientific knowledge but its final goal.”<sup>5</sup>

Blavatsky’s Theosophy offered her vision of what science and spirituality could be; however, according to her, both fell far short of that ideal. In her writings and teachings,

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<sup>2</sup> Blavatsky, Helena Petrovna. Isis Unveiled: Volume 1 (Pasadena: Theosophical UP: 1998) 1

<sup>3</sup> Washington, Peter Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon. (New York: Schocken Books, 1995) 68

<sup>4</sup> Washington, 55

<sup>5</sup> Washington, 52

Blavatsky accuses both science and spirituality of the same flaw: making unflagging and absolute claims to “rightness.” As Blavatsky writes in *Isis Unveiled*,

On the one hand an unspiritual, dogmatic, too often debauched clergy; a host of sects and three warring great religions; discord instead of union, dogmas without proofs, sensation-loving preachers, and wealth and pleasure seeking parishioners hypocrisy and bigotry, begotten by the tyrannical exigencies of respectability, the rule of the day, sincerity and real piety exceptional. On the other hand, scientific hypotheses built on sand; no accord upon a single question; rancorous quarrels and jealousy; a general drift into materialism.<sup>6</sup>

Blavatsky’s critique was that both science and religion made claims to be the one and only way to make sense of and understand the universe. Science left no room for the supernatural or religion and maintained that if something, such as ghosts, could not be explained by science then it simply could not be. According to Blavatsky, science’s goal was to “wrest from theology, the entire domain of cosmological theory.”<sup>7</sup> Such absolutism, she felt, was absurd. On the other hand, Blavatsky was no great lover of organized religion, specifically Christianity. According to Godwin, “an absurd theology, supporting a corrupt priesthood and an unintelligible bibliolatry’ that was what Blavatsky saw, and loathed, when she surveyed the history of Christianity.”<sup>8</sup> Much of her writing is critical of Christianity, accusing it of things ranging from shortsightedness to plagiarizing some of its most fundamental doctrines. This mistrust of both modern science and the 2,000-year-old religion of Christianity were central to the genesis of Theosophy and its doctrines.

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<sup>6</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, ix

<sup>7</sup> Blavatsky, vii

<sup>8</sup> Godwin, Jocelyn. The Theosophical Enlightenment. (Albany: SUNY Press, 1994) 292

### Early Theosophy

On one hand, Theosophy was grounded in science, acknowledging its potential but also chastising its myopia. Theosophical teaching also had one foot in the world of spirituality, looking to ancient wisdom and Eastern mysticism as its source rather than the Western religions, which stood on shaky ground. Harmonizing the seemingly disparate worlds of science and spirituality was one of the goals of the Theosophical Society, which was founded in 1875 after an informal talk on Egyptian mysticism given in Blavatsky's New York City apartment. At its inception, "the Parent Society and the other Theosophical bodies had no literature of their own. The Kabala, translations of Plato, Oriental philosophies and religions, the Spiritualist publications, the numerous writings of Christian mystics, and the existent Western works on magic, hypnotism, mesmerism and related subjects supplied the only material for study."<sup>9</sup> An Eastern bent in Theosophy's de facto library is evident, and in fact, "an Egyptian atmosphere prevailed in the Theosophical Society up to the publication of the significantly titled *Isis Unveiled*,"<sup>10</sup> after which Theosophical spirituality showed an increasingly Indian influence. Nevertheless, the Western texts mentioned in this list are worth comment. The ones on magic and hypnosis were esoteric and marginalized by mainstream science and religion alike. They dealt with subjects such as alchemy, transmutation, and other speculative sciences. That the early Theosophical library included works by Christian mystics should seem puzzling, given Theosophy's decidedly anti-Christian attitude. However, it must be remembered that arcane Spiritual texts were at a premium, and the early Theosophical society had to work with what was available. Hence, they dabbled in Christianity, but only in its most obscure and mystical incarnations, and those that occasionally bordered on heresy.

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<sup>9</sup> The Theosophical Society. The Theosophical Movement. (New York: E.P Dutton and Company, 1925) 21

<sup>10</sup> Godwin, 286

Upon its inception, the parent Theosophical Society articulated three “Objects,” or goals, that were to be formally adopted by all subsequently formed societies. In reality, adherence to only the first “Object” was mandatory of all Theosophical societies, and even this was not strictly followed. Meticulously followed or not, the Objectives of the Parent Theosophical Society were:

- I. To form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity, without distinction of race, creed, sex, caste or color;
- II. The study of ancient and modern religions, philosophies and sciences, and the demonstration of the importance of such study; and
- III. The investigation of the unexplained laws of Nature and the psychical power latent in man.<sup>11</sup>

On the surface, these principles seem well obvious, but upon further investigation, they are vague and at times inherently contradictory. Take for example the first objective. It is unclear whether the statement is merely political or just a broad statement of universal tolerance. If it is a proclamation of tolerance, it is unclear how far this tolerance extends. For instance, could persons join the Theosophical Society if they did not believe in some sort of higher power? Peter Washington expounds upon the flaws and inconsistencies in Theosophy’s mission statement, noting that the statement of the three goals implies objectivity and non-partisanship. However, this is impossible. The study of occult phenomena by a society that has already concluded that they exist cannot be objective.<sup>12</sup> Not only was Theosophy plagued by internal inconsistencies, but also its essential texts, *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, were teeming with factual errors, baseless citations, and “facts” that were simply made up. As such, these texts are essentially works of fiction, but they were not universally treated as such when they were

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<sup>11</sup> The Theosophical Society, 20

<sup>12</sup> Washington, 69-70

first published. To the faithful, Blavatsky's words and ideas were gospel truths. 1877's *Isis Unveiled* was the vehicle through which Blavatsky brought her fraudulent truths to the public.

### *Isis Unveiled*

*Isis Unveiled* not only seeks to encapsulate and expound upon Theosophy's Three Objects but also to marshal evidence to prove its various claims. Present in *Isis Unveiled* are all the main tenets of Theosophy, such as,

the solar and phallic origin of religions; the superiority of Eastern and Egyptian wisdom to modern science; the existence of an esoteric tradition handed down by adepts; the validity of all the world's religions; the errors of Christianity and the crimes of the Church; the pre-existence and future evolution of the human soul;...the elementals as causes of phenomena; the existence of adepts; and the significance of Modern Spiritualism to the destiny of humanity.<sup>13</sup>

The work is broken down into two volumes. Volume 1 takes as its general subject "Science." Blavatsky aimed to use science, which signaled the death knell for Western religion, to substantiate her own quasi-religion. *Isis Unveiled* states, "We believe in no Magic which transcends the scope and capacity of the human mind, not in 'miracle', whether divine or diabolical, if such imply a transgression of the laws of nature instituted from all eternity."<sup>14</sup> Blavatsky is claiming that the spectacular phenomena discussed by Theosophy (bilocation, astral projection, materialization) do not necessarily transgress the laws of natural science. She believes that modern science is presumptuous in assuming that it is all knowing, and that perhaps the wisdom of the ancient world was more valid than popularly thought. Volume 2 of *Isis Unveiled* is entitled "Theology" and contains "a great deal of polemical material against Christianity, a discussion of secret societies, esoteric interpretations of Christianity and other

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<sup>13</sup> Godwin, 305-306

<sup>14</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, v

religions, further treatment of the Kabala, an examination of the devil, and a comparison of Christianity with Hinduism and Buddhism.”<sup>15</sup>

What is most striking about *Isis Unveiled* is just how comprehensive it is. Blavatsky outlines her beliefs, but she also supports what she believes with a vast number of examples culled from disparate sources. Her evidence comes from esoteric Western philosophers, half-forgotten alchemists, Indian mystics and, of course, some is just made up. Essentially, Blavatsky’s methodology was to provide the reader with as many different supporting examples for what she was preaching, from as many different sources as possible. If her reader saw a similarity among them, then this was “proof” that both were drawn from a common source, Theosophy’s ancient wisdom.

#### *Theosophical Teachings on the Nature of Man*

One of the most important doctrines of Theosophy is its conception of the nature of man. According to Theosophy, Man’s nature is sevenfold,<sup>16</sup> but only three of its constituent parts are truly important, the “Manas,” “Buddhi,” and “Atma.” This “trinity...is the real man and uses the four lower elements as vehicles through which to work in matter.”<sup>17</sup> In other words, the four lower elements make up the physical body that the upper three parts “inhabit.” The first compound of the upper trinity, the Manas, is the Self, which is more than a corporeal shell since it is the seat of consciousness. It is akin to the conscious mind or intellect. The “astral soul,”<sup>18</sup> or “Buddhi,” is the second essential component of man. It is similar to the Christian soul, and in

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<sup>15</sup> Campbell, Bruce F. *Ancient Wisdom Revived*. (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1980) 35

<sup>16</sup> For a succinct description of the sevenfold nature of man, see Blavatsky’s *Key to Theosophy*, pages 90-93. The most important of the lower four elements that make up the physical body is the “Lings Sharira,” or “astral body.” It is basically a shade, or ghost-like doppelganger for a person’s physical body. It figures prominently in such Theosophical phenomena as astral projection.

<sup>17</sup> Campbell, 66

<sup>18</sup> From which the term astral projection comes.

the Theosophical conception, this element is the true essence of the person, that which gets recycled by reincarnation. These “two are brooded over and illuminated by the third- the sovereign, immortal spirit,”<sup>19</sup> the “Atma.” Blavatsky calls it, “the universal solvent of everything- divine spirit.”<sup>20</sup> Essentially a spark of the divine, it holds together the Manas and Buddhi. This is how man is constituted today, but he did not always have this current make-up.

Once, “man was more spiritual than physical and was able to create with his mind.”<sup>21</sup> However, the spiritual form eventually gave way to a largely physical existence. Blavatsky describes the “fleshy bodies with which, in the progress of the cycles, the progenitors of the race became clothed. Theosophy maintained that the god-like physical form became grosser and grosser, until the bottom of what may be termed the last spiritual cycle was reached, and mankind entered upon the ascending arc of the first human cycle.”<sup>22</sup> This shift marked the beginning of humanity as we know it, and Blavatsky claims that this happened very long ago. Early in *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky claims that the “discoveries of modern science do not disagree with the oldest traditions which claim an incredible antiquity for the human race. Within the last few years geology, which previously had only conceded that humans could be traced back to the tertiary period, had found unanswerable proofs that human existence antedates the last glaciation

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<sup>19</sup> Theosophical Society, 34

<sup>20</sup> In the introduction to *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky spends a paragraph defining her concept of “the spirit” as distinct from “the soul.” She writes, “The lack of any mutual agreement between writers in the use of this word has resulted in dire confusion. It is commonly made synonymous with the soul; and the lexicographers countenance this usage. This is the natural result of our ignorance of the other word, and repudiation of the classes adopted by the ancients....The spirit is the you of Plato, the immortal, the immaterial and purely divine principle in man- the crown of the human Triad; whereas the soul is the nephesh of the Bible, the vital principle, or the breath of life, which every animal down to the infusoria, shares with man” ( 309).

<sup>21</sup> Campbell, 28

<sup>22</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 293

of Europe, over 250,000 years.”<sup>23</sup> The relevance of this figure becomes clearer when taken in conjunction with Blavatsky’s views on the rise and fall of civilizations.

### *Theosophy, Cycles, and Human History*

Humankind, adorned with flesh, experiences history as a series of cycles. This is a concept that Blavatsky introduces early on in *Isis Unveiled*. First man gained bodily form,

Then began an uninterrupted series of cycles or *yugas*; the precise number of years of which each of them consisted remaining an inviolable mystery within the precincts of the sanctuaries and disclosed only to initiates. As soon as humanity entered upon a new one, the stone age, with which the preceding cycle had closed, began to gradually merge into the following and next higher age. With each successive age, or epoch, men grew more refined, until the acme of perfection possible in that particular cycle had been reached. Then the receding wave of time carried back with it the vestiges of human, social, and intellectual progress. Cycle succeeded cycle, by imperceptible transitions: highly civilized flourishing nations, waxed in power, attained climax of development, waned and became extinct; and mankind, when the end of the lower cyclic arc was reached, was replunged into barbarism as at the start. Kingdoms have crumbled and nation succeeded nation from the beginning until our day, the race alternately mounting to the highest and descending to the lowest points of development. Draper observes that there is no reason to suppose that any one cycle applied to the whole human race. On the contrary, while man in one portion of the planet was in a condition of retrogression, in another he might be progressing in enlightenment and civilization.<sup>24</sup>

Because humans have been around a long time, a great number of civilizations have risen and fallen. This becomes more important when a reader realizes that Blavatsky subscribes to the idea that “geologists seem more and more inclined to take for granted that all of the archaic races were contemporaneously in a state of dense barbarism. But not all of our best authorities agree in this opinion.”<sup>25</sup> The nuanced view that Blavatsky latched onto, and ultimately made a central

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<sup>23</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 3

<sup>24</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 293

<sup>25</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 4

tenet of Theosophy, was that these cycles did not affect all civilizations at the same time. Rather, there could be “the existence at one and the same time of the most highly developed races side by side with tribes sunk in savagery.”<sup>26</sup> This would provide logical explanations for supposedly fantastical feats of magic from the ancient world and for hitherto “unexplained” structures like the Sphinx and the Pyramids. According to Blavatsky, “the ancients knew more concerning certain sciences than our modern savants have yet discovered.”<sup>27</sup> With respect to known cultures, she cites an Egyptian medical treatise<sup>28</sup> and the fact that in the *Vedas* “we find positive proof that so long ago as 2000 B.C., the Hindu sages and scholars must have been acquainted with the rotundity of our globe and the Heliocentric system” as evidence of this advancement.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, forgotten ancient civilizations, such as Atlantis, may have had even more advanced learning.<sup>30</sup>

### *Theosophical Evolution*

Blavatsky argues that just as man did not always exist in his current form, he will not always be constituted as he is now. The ultimate goal of man’s existence is to return to his initial, purely spiritual state. How this will be achieved is through Blavatsky’s version of evolution. In 1888’s *The Secret Doctrine*, “the story of mankind is told as the story of a succession of seven ‘root-races,’ each of which inhabits a specific continent. The history of the races reflects the process of involution of evolution.”<sup>31</sup> We are currently in the fourth of these seven root races, or evolutions of man. After three more evolutions, man will shed his skin and

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<sup>26</sup> The Theosophical Society, 31

<sup>27</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 26

<sup>28</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 3

<sup>29</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 9

<sup>30</sup> A scientifically advanced ancient civilization dovetails perfectly with the legend of Atlantis, interest in which was reaching a peak in the late 1800’s, culminating in the publication of Donnelly’s *Atlantis: The Antediluvian World* in 1881.

<sup>31</sup> Campbell, 44

evolve once more into a purely spiritual being. It is the endpoint of the human race in general, but individuals experience Theosophical evolution at their own pace.

In its own way, the Theosophical Society was saying Darwin was right, but only partly so, arguing that the “evolution of monkeys into men is merely one stage in a long chain which allows men to evolve into higher beings.”<sup>32</sup> Blavatsky defines evolution in the glossary for *Isis Unveiled* as follows:

The development of higher order animals from the lower. Modern, or so-called Exact science, holds but to a one-sided physical evolution, prudently avoiding and ignoring the higher or spiritual evolution, which would force our contemporaries to confess the superiority of the ancient philosophers and psychologists over themselves. The ancient sages, ascending to the unknowable, made their starting-point from the first manifestation of the unseen, the unavoidable, and from a strict logical reasoning, the absolutely necessary creative Being the Demiurgos of the universe. Evolution began with them from pure spirit, which descending lower and lower down, assumed at last a visible and comprehensible form, and became matter. Arrived at this point they speculated in the Darwinian method, but on a far more large and comprehensive basis.....The Evolutionist stops all inquiry at the borders of “the Unknowable.”<sup>33</sup>

This definition acknowledges a physical evolution but also chastises the scientific establishment for failing to recognize the possibility of a spiritual evolution. By resting one of its central tenets on Darwin and evolution, Theosophy was acknowledging modern science but also insinuating that it did not go far enough in its efforts to unlock the secrets of nature.

*There are No Miracles, Only Science: Adepts and a Mastery of Nature*

Perhaps the most essential truth of Theosophy is, simply put, that there are no miracles. For Blavatsky, this is true for both Western and Eastern belief systems. Blavatsky writes, “So-

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<sup>32</sup> Washington, 52

<sup>33</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, xxx

called miracles, to begin with Moses and end with Cagliostro, when genuine, were as de Gasparin very justly insinuates in his work on the phenomena, ‘perfectly in accordance with natural law; hence- no miracles’” and that the “phenomena of natural magic to be witnessed in Siam, India, Egypt and other Oriental countries, bear no relationship whatever to sleight of hand; the one being an absolute physical effect, due to the action of occult natural forces.”<sup>34</sup> Her point is that nothing happens outside of the laws of nature, it just seems that way because we have yet to discover all of those laws. Among the things that Blavatsky felt were explainable by natural law were “the rise and fall of civilizations, successive races of men, earth transformations, the three-fold principle of evolution; Spiritual, Mental and Physical; the compound nature of man and the universe; and in such terminology as pre-existence, metempsychosis, transmigration, reincarnation, evolution, transformation, permutation, emanation, immortality, and after death states and conditions.”<sup>35</sup> As fantastical as some of these ideas might seem, she maintains that none would be bound to lie beyond the boundaries of natural law if science would investigate them.

Through a mastery of the laws of science, it is possible to achieve that which appears to be magic. Blavatsky states that once “magic was considered a divine science which led to a participation in the attributes of Divinity itself.”<sup>36</sup> Importantly, knowledge of this divine science was “confined to the temples, carefully veiled from the eyes of science.”<sup>37</sup> Essentially, magic amounts to superior knowledge of Blavatsky’s “nature” or “natural law.” Mastery is reserved for those who have completed Theosophical evolution and become Adepts, though it is possible to affect “nature” while still in a corporeal body by unifying man’s astral soul and immortal spirit,

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<sup>34</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 128

<sup>35</sup> The Theosophical Society, 34

<sup>36</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 26

<sup>37</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 25

thereby becoming more attuned to nature and its laws. Once these laws are acknowledged and understood, magic becomes mere application of this knowledge. The most skilled Adepts can bend nature and its forces to their will. They can even affect the health and well-being of those around them. Particularly skillful Adepts could project their astral soul across the world while their physical bodies remained in one place.<sup>38</sup> Such abilities can be used for either good or ill. Arcane knowledge misapplied is sorcery or “black magic,” and when put to beneficial positive use is called true magic or wisdom, but both are paths of Adeptship.<sup>39</sup>

For Blavatsky and Theosophy, Adepts were proactive. Through their knowledge of “nature” and “natural wisdom,” Adepts were able to exert their will actively, in effect controlling both nature and themselves. This is distinct from mediumship, which Blavatsky defines as “the opposite of Adeptship; the medium is the passive instrument of foreign forces, the Adept actively controls himself and all inferior potencies.”<sup>40</sup> Whereas any disembodied spirit could *communicate* via a medium, it was actually the Adepts that made possible supernatural feats such as those of the whirling dervishes, fakirs, and snake charmers. As Madame Blavatsky explains:

The adept can control the sensations and alter the conditions of the physical and astral bodies of other persons not adepts; he can also govern and employ, as he chooses, the spirits of the elements. He cannot control the immortal spirit of any human being, living or dead, for all such spirits are alike sparks of the Divine Essence, and not subject to foreign domination.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> This is called astral projection and was probably the most famous spiritual phenomenon associated with Theosophy.

<sup>39</sup> The Theosophical Society, 35

<sup>40</sup> *Isis Unveiled, Volume 2*, 588

<sup>41</sup> *Isis Unveiled Volume 2*, 590

Magic is essentially a mastery of natural wisdom that long predates any Western or Eastern religion, and is the wellspring of both. Adepts who completed Theosophical evolution were those who had the most complete mastery of this wisdom, and the two volumes of *Isis Unveiled* contain almost numberless direct and indirect references to celebrated characters in history, tradition, and myth who exemplified Adeptship.<sup>42</sup> According to Blavatsky, “the mighty triad of Buddha, Confucius and Jesus are thought to be Adepts, as are Solomon, Laotze, Boehme, Cagliostro, Mesmer, and many others.”<sup>43</sup> By making such religious and quasi-religious figures Adepts in her “wisdom religion,” she leads the reader to believe that all these beliefs systems are derived from the same source, what she calls ancient wisdom.

#### *How Ancient Wisdom Was Conveyed*

As we have seen, Blavatsky teaches that the soul can evolve as well as the body. She uses the term “metempsychosis” to convey this idea. According to Blavatsky, metempsychosis implies “the indestructibility of matter and the immortality of the spirit.”<sup>44</sup> This profound truth was known by a precious few in the ancient world, and it was transmitted through the ages as “there had not been a philosopher of any note who did not hold to this doctrine of Metempsychosis as taught by the Brahmins, Buddhists, and later by Pythagoras and the Gnostics.”<sup>45</sup> However, being “sworn to secrecy and religious science upon abstruse subjects involving relations of spirit and matter, they rivaled each other in their ingenious methods for concealing their real opinions.”<sup>46</sup> The magnitude of this hidden truth is such that it would supply every missing link in the theories of modern evolutionists and illuminate the mysteries of the

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<sup>42</sup> The Theosophical Society, 35

<sup>43</sup> *Ancient Wisdom Revived*, 54

<sup>44</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 8

<sup>45</sup> The Theosophical Society, 31

<sup>46</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 8

various religions, at least according to Blavatsky. For her, proof of both the indestructibility of matter and the immortality of spirit lies in the universal language of mathematics:

The harmony and mathematical equiformity of the double evolution- spiritual and Physical- are elucidated only in the universal numerals of Pythagoras, who built his system entirely upon the so-called metrical speech of Hindu *Vedas*...In both the esoteric significance is derived from the number: in the former, from the mystic relation of every number to everything intelligible to the human mind; in the latter, from the number of syllables of which each verse in the mantra consists.<sup>47</sup>

Pythagoras<sup>48</sup> was one of the privileged few who were privy to the secrets of metempsychosis, the indestructibility of matter and the immortality of the soul.<sup>49</sup> Both during his life and after, Pythagoras's secrets were available to subsequent generations, but only to those who knew how to look.

Closely guarded secrets, such as the nature of the soul, were only available to a select few "initiates," who conveyed their knowledge to an equally elite cadre of "adepts" who were to learn this ancient wisdom. This wisdom was recorded in writing, but the necessity for extreme secrecy when transcribing this knowledge caused initiates to shroud it in allegory, metaphor and furtive language. As Madame Blavatsky points out, this may account for modern science's dismissal of occult ancient texts:

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<sup>47</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 9

<sup>48</sup> Pythagoras is a name that comes up quite frequently in *Isis Unveiled*, and that is because there is a unique duality to him that is indicative of Theosophy's agenda. He has two traditions associated with him, one mystical and one scientific. The mathematical theorem that bears his name is probably Pythagoras's most enduring legacy. However, he also has a mystical cultic tradition associated with him. As such, he exists right on the border of the scientific and the spiritual and is in many ways iconic of what Blavatsky is trying to achieve.

<sup>49</sup> It is important to note that "metempsychosis" exists within the parameters of Theosophical doctrine as a distinct concept from reincarnation, although reincarnation is often associated with Theosophy. Truth be told, the role of reincarnation in Theosophical belief is somewhat unclear. Bruce Campbell notes that at times Blavatsky contradicts herself with respect to reincarnation. According to her personal notes Blavatsky did not teach reincarnation at all until two years after the publication of *Isis Unveiled*. However, she devotes several pages to the topic in *Isis*, making a point to distinguish it from metempsychosis.

Too many of our thinkers do not consider that the numerous changes in language, the allegorical phrases and evident secretiveness of old Mystic writers, who were generally under an obligation never to divulge the solemn secrets of the sanctuary, might have sadly misled translators and commentators. One day they may learn to know better, and so become aware that the method of extreme necessitarianism was practiced in ancient as well as in modern philosophy; that from the first ages of man, the fundamental truths of all that we are permitted to know on earth were in the safe keeping of the adepts of the sanctuary.<sup>50</sup>

Blavatsky's point is that what modern scientists and philosophers consider to be nonsensical occult ramblings might in fact be the fundamental truths of the world that just happened to be hidden, wrapped up in metaphor and arcane diction and in need of deciphering.<sup>51</sup> For Blavatsky, the best examples of these writings come from the ancient world. In *Isis Unveiled*, she claims that Pythagoras learned his cosmological theory of numerals from an Egyptian hierophant, or initiate. As such, both Pythagoras's *scientific* and *spiritual* insights were born of this "ancient wisdom,"<sup>52</sup> but the language of mathematics obscured its profound truths. However, to the initiated, "the sacred numbers of the universe in their esoteric combination solve the great problem and explain the theory of radiation and the cycle of the emanations. The lower orders before they develop into the higher ones must emanate from the higher spiritual ones, and when arrived at the turn point, be reabsorbed."<sup>53</sup> That the Hindu mystic Decad vaguely recapitulates Blavatsky's reading of Pythagoras is her proof that both Vedic philosophy and Pythagoras's ideas stem from some common wellspring, her "ancient wisdom." However, she merely provides evidence and leads the final conclusion up to the reader:

The key to the Pythagorean dogmas is the general formula of unity in multiplicity, the one evolving the many and pervading the many. This is the ancient doctrine

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<sup>50</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 8

<sup>51</sup> Of course, Blavatsky was just the person to do this as she claimed she was in contact, both in person and via materialized letters that she allegedly received, with no fewer than several ancient ascended masters.

<sup>52</sup> Blavatsky refers to Pythagoras as the "inheritor of ancient lore."

<sup>53</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 7

of emanation in a few words...The mystic Decad  $1+2+3+4=10$  is a way of expressing this idea.<sup>54</sup>

In the above example, Blavatsky provides her own interpretation of Pythagoras as well as her own version of the Hindu Decad. Of course, this is justifiable in that she is the one with access to ascended masters and ancient wisdom, so she knows what Pythagoras and ancient Hindu texts “really meant.” She can see through the obfuscations and secret safeguards designed to obscure the ancient wisdom and provide her own, true interpretations.

Her readings are, for the most part, vaguely correct, or at least correct enough for Blavatsky’s readership. The mathematical sequence she provides can be seen as the numerical representation of “unity out of multiplicity” and “the one evolving the many.” The idea that the sum of the numbers one through four equals ten is simple, but realizing that for the first time may seem to be an insight. There is also some spiritual numerology at play here, imperfect parts coming together to create a perfect whole, ten. Furthermore, seeing this simple notion echoed in two wildly different sources could lead readers to believe the concept came from a common origin, especially if they are looking for quantifiable proof of spirituality.

### *Ascended Masters and Theosophical Charlatans*

What was the source of Blavatsky’s ancient wisdom? According to her, she received Theosophical teachings from specific “Adepts,” who are alternatively called “Mahatmas,” “Ascended Masters,” and “Initiates.” They were the “highest-ranking members of ‘The Great White Lodge,’ that is to say the occult hierarchy which according to Theosophists ran the

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<sup>54</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, xvi

world.”<sup>55</sup> The most important of these was Master Koot Hoomi, but there were others who Blavatsky claimed were instrumental in conveying Theosophical doctrine. According to her, these Masters had been appearing to her for some time and communicated their teachings through both spoken word and written letters. Blavatsky claimed, “From them we have derived all the Theosophical truths, no matter how inadequately some of us may have expressed, or understood, them.”<sup>56</sup> Although there is some speculation that the Masters may have been real people, or at least based on such, they were not immortal beings living high atop the Himalayas as Blavatsky claimed.<sup>57</sup> These Masters never “appeared” to anybody but Blavatsky, so in order to “prove” their existence she was forced to fabricate letters from them and make them materialize from out of nowhere. She did this for a while, setting up sleight of hand tricks in which letters spontaneously appeared or teacups moved, but the charade could only last for so long.

Largely because of these fraudulent letters and parlor tricks, Theosophy developed a reputation for charlatanism. In 1884, the Society for Psychical Research formed a committee to investigate Theosophy and some of its claims. Founded in 1882, the Society was devoted to the investigation of the paranormal in a far more legitimate way than Theosophy.<sup>58</sup> The investigation concluded that Blavatsky was “not the mouthpiece of clairvoyants unknown to the public, nor a common adventurer, but has won her place in history as one of the most accomplished, ingenious, and interesting imposters whose name deserves to go down in history.”<sup>59</sup> The report went on to accuse Blavatsky of being “guilty, along with others of a long-

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<sup>55</sup> Guenon, Rene. *Theosophy: History of a Pseudo-Religion*. (Hillsdale: Sophia Perennis, 2004) 38

<sup>56</sup> Blavatsky, H.P. *The Key to Theosophy*. (London: Theosophical Society Press, 1890) 289

<sup>57</sup> K. Paul Johnson’s *The Masters Revealed* explores the identity of the Masters in detail.

<sup>58</sup> William James was a member of the Society for Psychical Research.

<sup>59</sup> Society For Psychical Research. *Proceedings For the Society for Psychical Research*. (London: The Society for Psychical Research, 1885) 207

continued scheme to produce through ordinary means a series of wonders in apparent support of the Theosophical movement.”<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately for Blavatsky, accusations of fraud were also coming from places other than the Society for Psychical Research, and some of these critics were a lot closer to home.

Eventually, former members of Blavatsky’s inner circle began making allegations of chicanery as well. The most damning of these accusations came from Madame Coulomb, an acquaintance of Blavatsky who worked at the Theosophical Headquarters as a housekeeper. She described Blavatsky’s charlatanism in convincing detail:

She and [Blavatsky] had made a doll together, which they named Christofolo and manipulated on a long bamboo pole in semi-darkness to provide the master’s alleged apparitions. Emma had also dropped ‘precipitated’ letters on to Theosophical heads from holes in the ceiling, while her husband had made sliding panels and hidden entrances into the shrine-room to facilitate Blavatsky’s coming and goings and make possible the substitution of all the broaches, dishes and other objects in her demonstrations.<sup>61</sup>

After Madame Coulomb came forward, several other employees made similar public accusations. Of course, Blavatsky defended herself against these claims. Although she never acknowledged that the Masters did not exist, she did make the argument that their existence should not matter if the knowledge she was imparting was good and popular.<sup>62</sup> In a way, Blavatsky is correct. Theosophy’s veracity is not important for the purpose of this investigation. Fraudulent or not, Theosophy was a popular and influential movement in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, and it influenced the popular literature of the day.

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<sup>60</sup> Guenon, 55

<sup>61</sup> Washington, 81

<sup>62</sup> *The Key to Theosophy*, 298

### Theosophy and Highbrow Modernism

Certainly, Theosophy had an influence on the world of literature, and this is the critical debate which this dissertation enters. Much has been written on Theosophy's impact on canonical, "high" modernism, most of which has focused on Theosophy's relationship to the Irish Revival. As Ernest Boyd states in *Ireland's Literary Renaissance*, "the Dublin Lodge of the Theosophical Society (founded in 1886) was as vital a factor in the evolution of Anglo-Irish literature as the publication of Standish O'Grady's *History of Ireland*, the two events being complementary to any complete understanding of the literature of the Revival. The Theosophical Movement provided a literary, artistic and intellectual centre from which radiated influences whose effect was felt even by those who did not belong to it."<sup>63</sup> Boyd lists George Russell, Charles Johnson, John Eglinton and Charles Weekes as Theosophy's primary contributors to the Revival, for "in their works as writers, editors and publishers they were 'directly and indirectly responsible for a considerable part of the best work in Anglo-Irish literature.'"<sup>64</sup> Of the quartet named by Boyd, the most prominent name is that of George Russell, or A.E. Russell, who considered himself a Theosophist before he actually joined the Society, which he did around three years after the founding of the Dublin Lodge. He eventually ascended to the highest levels of the society elite and moved into in a sort of residential community of believers known as the "Household." Russell and other members of this group began publishing *The Irish Theosophist*, a journal that ran from 1892 to 1897. This journal, and its successor, *The Internationalist*, were veritable organs of the Literary Revival.<sup>65</sup> Theosophy even influenced some of Ireland's most prominent Modernist writers.

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<sup>63</sup> Boyd, Ernest. *Ireland's Literary Renaissance*. (New York: John Lane, 1917) 214.

<sup>64</sup> Campbell, 166

<sup>65</sup> Campbell, 167

William Butler Yeats occupies a hallowed place in the canon of literary modernism. He is also the modernist most readily associated with Theosophy, having taken the revival of eastern wisdom seriously and dabbled in a wide range of esoteric practices. He had read two of A.P. Sinnett's fundamental Theosophical texts, *Esoteric Buddhism* and *The Occult World*, around 1885 though he doubted some of the fundamental truths of the doctrine. He was eventually converted to membership after an encounter with a young Indian Theosophist named Mohini Chatterjee who "arrived in Dublin in 1885 with 'a little bag in his hand and *Marius the Epicurean* in his pocket' ... Yeats later described the difficulty of trying to awaken from the spell Mohini cast over all who met him."<sup>66</sup> Yeats preferred him to Madame Blavatsky, whom he never fully trusted. Nevertheless, for a time he did view her as the person most capable of producing hard evidence of occult phenomena. As part of this quest, Yeats joined a specialized section of the Theosophical Society; known as the Esoteric Section, which delved heavily into occult experimentation that attempted to, among other things, raise the ghost of a flower from its ashes.

Yeats would, however, ultimately have to continue such experimentation elsewhere, because either he left the Theosophical Society or Blavatsky kicked him out, for reasons that have been lost to time. He transferred his allegiances to the Golden Dawn, a mystical brotherhood based on Rosicrucianism. The philosophies of this esoteric society would eventually have a more profound influence on Yeats than Theosophy ever did. Nevertheless, critics continue to note its influence on Yeats work. F.A.C Wilson, in *Yeats and the Tradition*, points out that "Blavatsky was certainly a mine of information for Yeats," and makes the argument that the concept of gyres that would dominate Yeats's poetry and philosophy for a time

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<sup>66</sup> Washington, 91

could be connected back to Blavatsky's conception of the cycles of human existence on the Earth.<sup>67</sup> Despite Yeats's perpetual mistrust of Blavatsky, "one does not, perhaps, outgrow such an authority; one reorients oneself as regards her, but her work retains part-validity, especially when one's own later researches confirm her conclusion."<sup>68</sup> The confirmed conclusions are a reference to Yeats's ostensible success with his wife's dalliances in automatic writing, which was the very same means through which Madame Blavatsky produced precipitated letters from various Ascended High Masters scattered across the globe and cosmos. Yeats's ambivalent relationship with Blavatsky is again on display in his novel *The Speckled Bird*, in which "he used her as a model for the character of Mrs. Allingham."<sup>69</sup> Upon first meeting Blavatsky, Yeats said that she reminded him of an old Irish peasant woman, at once holy, sad and sly. Anna Kingsford, who was to become a prominent figure in Theosophy, also appears in the novel. In addition to Yeats, Theosophy also had its influence on Ireland's pre-eminent novelist, James Joyce.

Although he had already left Ireland by the time Theosophy had reached its peak there, Joyce was well acquainted with many Irish Revivalists, and hence with Theosophy. Joyce's contact with the subject came mostly through George Russell. Although his body of work, most notably *Ulysses*, is often critical of Theosophy, Joyce was actually open to it initially. Stanislaus Joyce acknowledges that his brother James toyed with it briefly as a temporary religion. Also, "Joyce's Trieste library contains three of theosophy's key texts, Henry Olcott's *A Buddhist Catechism*, which he signed 'J A Joyce, May 7, 1901', and Annie Besant's *Une Introduction a la Theosophie* and *The Path of Discipleship*. Consequently, as Ralph Jenkins notes, Joyce's

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<sup>67</sup>Wilson, F.A.C. *Yeats and the Tradition*. (New York: Gollanez, 1961) 144

<sup>68</sup> Campbell, 169

<sup>69</sup> Washington, 91

knowledge of theosophical doctrine is greater than is often assumed.”<sup>70</sup> Despite his knowledge of the subject, it is “probable that he, like Yeats and unlike George Russell, was attracted more by the symbology than by the pious generalizations of Theosophy.”<sup>71</sup>

Even if Joyce felt an attraction to the symbology of Theosophy at one time, that initial attraction soon faded. In a 1903 tirade, Joyce condemned Theosophy as a “vegetable science” and damned Russell and several Theosophists. The vegetable reference was apparently an allusion to the time Russell spent on his Theosophical commune growing vegetables. This vitriol towards Theosophy is much more characteristic of the attitude Joyce adopted towards the topic in his literary corpus. Theosophy is mocked in several episodes of *Ulysses*, but Joyce’s literary criticism of theosophists extends back much further, to the earliest incarnation of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*. An early 1904 version includes an episode in which Stephen struggles with the tension between the limitations of the Church and what is necessary to live an artist’s life. Of course, this dichotomy gets full treatment in the final version of *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man*, but the idea is in its infancy here. Stephen “studies not St. Francis but the heresiarchs Joachim Abbas, Bruno and Michael Sendivogius. He seeks with their help to ‘reunite the children of the spirit, jealous and long-divided, to reunite them against fraud and principality. A thousand eternities were to be reaffirmed, divine knowledge was to be reestablished.’ The plan has Yeats, the Theosophists and Blake behind it.”<sup>72</sup> The apparent purpose of Theosophy was the resurrection of ancient wisdom, but Joyce, with extensive knowledge of the subject, was likely well aware of the fraudulence of Theosophy’s teachings. The most recent work done on the influence of Theosophical doctrine on Joyce’s work focuses

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<sup>70</sup> Mullin, Katherine. *James Joyce, Sexuality and Social Purity*. (London: Cambridge UP, 2003) 119

<sup>71</sup> Ellman, Richard. *James Joyce*. (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1983) 76

<sup>72</sup> Ellman, 146

on the scathing critique the subject receives in *Ulysses*. In *James Joyce, Sexuality and Social Purity*, Katherine Mullins includes a chapter entitled “Typhoid turnips and crooked cucumbers: theosophical purity in ‘Scylla and Charybdis.’” Part of her argument is that a reason for Theosophy’s success in Dublin was that it was an acceptable form of the social purity movement. Theosophy did have rigid guidelines when it came to social purity, and violations of these standards were a source of several embarrassing scandals for the Society. Since Joyce was no fan of social purity, an organization that endorsed it but was caught in a hypocritical scandal would make a prime target for him.

The Irish writer who probably had the most interesting relationship with Theosophy was George Bernard Shaw. While Yeats and Joyce essentially rejected Theosophy, Shaw’s relationship to it was much more akin to that of George Russell, i.e. wholehearted acceptance. Shaw’s introduction to Theosophy came not through Madame Blavatsky but through one of her rivals, Annie Besant,<sup>73</sup> whom he came to know through her acquaintance with H. G. Wells, and most of the early Fabians. The character Raina in *Arms and the Man* is basically Annie Besant. The “thrilling voice Raina used to get her way on stage is certainly taken from Annie who, modest enough off-stage, took on a larger, surer and perhaps more suspect persona when she stepped on to the public platform and carried away both herself and her audience. Yet Shaw saw both women as at heart sincere, passionate and loving.”<sup>74</sup> Only a woman with considerable strength of personality could prove a formidable adversary to someone with the cultic appeal of Blavatsky. However, such a personality came at a price. While Shaw’s creation Raina could, in

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<sup>73</sup> Annie Besant eventually served as the president of the Theosophical Society after Blavatsky’s death. Her influence on Theosophy rivals even that of Blavatsky. According to Alex Owen, when she came to the Theosophical movement in 1889, Annie Besant was already “one of the best known women in England, and the most prestigious and powerful orator of the time.” Owen, Alex. *The Place of Enchantment*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 24.

<sup>74</sup> Washington, 96

her more lucid moments, distinguish between fantasy and reality, there is substantial evidence that Besant could not. However, this did not stop Shaw from looking to her for spiritual guidance.

Besant's doctrines were largely purloined from Blavatsky, and Shaw "agreed with Blavatsky that the purpose once provided by belief in God had been destroyed by a combination of materialism and Darwinism. But that destruction, he believed, was only a prelude to the emergence of a new and rational faith."<sup>75</sup> His new faith, which he deemed Creative Evolution, was frighteningly akin to Theosophy. Rather than worship whatever life force drives the faith, we are expected to understand it, hence reaching a "revival of religion on a scientific basis." In his preface to *Back to Methuselah*, Shaw explains that the true test of a dogma is its universality. International religious legends should be pooled "to make one common stock of fictionalized wisdom. Science, art and religion are not enemies but expressions of the same thing. A religion must be both serious and popular. He even accepts the scientific possibility of clairvoyance."<sup>76</sup> What saves Shaw from a wholesale acceptance of Theosophy is his distaste for the parlor tricks and sleights of hand that were Blavatsky's influence. With the exception of that, however, there was little in the Theosophical doctrine with which Shaw took umbrage.

Although it had its greatest influence on Ireland and its writers, Theosophy made an impact on a number of modern authors elsewhere as well. Quite simply, Theosophy was too popular and too widespread to be ignored by the artistic and intellectual elite of the day, and they engaged it in various ways. Some, such as Gertrude Stein, Upton Sinclair, and Katherine Mansfield spent significant time at retreat compounds established by Theosophy and its

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<sup>75</sup> Washington, 97

<sup>76</sup> Washington, 97

offshoots. Mansfield went to one to be healed of consumption. D. H. Lawrence, having spent time at a Theosophical compound in France called it a “rotten, false, self-conscious place filled with people playing a sickly stunt.”<sup>77</sup> Other high modernist writers echoed this negative view of Theosophy; it is portrayed harshly in Henry James’s *The Bostonians* and in Eliot’s dramas *The Cocktail Party* and *The Family Reunion*.

### *The Middlebrow Supernatural Adventure Story*

Literary criticism of Theosophy and literature focuses almost exclusively on more canonical high modernists. It seems clear to me, though, that Theosophy had a much wider influence. As Shaw mentioned, religion should not only be serious but popular as well. Theosophy was popular, and I intend to examine its influence on literature that was more widely read than the works of the high modernists. Specifically, this project explores the middlebrow supernatural adventure story. By “supernatural adventure stories,” I mean novels that contain elements of the paranormal and in which the hero or heroes defeat a villain, succeed in some sort of quest or conquer an obstacle. I choose this particular type of literature because it seems a natural place to find the influence of a spiritualist belief such as Theosophy.

I wish to be a little more specific with my definition of middlebrow. The Oxford English Dictionary lists the first recorded use of the term middlebrow as 1925, but the roots of the phenomenon go further back. The Education Act of 1870 created a generation of people who were not necessarily educated but nevertheless did have the ability to read and write. Of course, the burgeoning marketplace of literature was eager to supply materials for all types of readers to enjoy. This led to a veritable explosion of popular literature at the same time that a generation of

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<sup>77</sup> Washington, 244

writers was attempting to break away from the confines of the popular. By the 1920's, "the fiction market was divided into novels written according to a formula (lowbrow), the innovative modernist narratives (highbrow) and chronologically the last in this trio of literary phrenology, middlebrow fiction."<sup>78</sup> The term designated "those novels and plays which made no attempt to go beyond or, as the writers themselves would have put it, to deviate from comfortably familiar presentations."<sup>79</sup> Although this definition seems to address only one aspect of what it means to be middlebrow, it is a rather critical one. The relation between middlebrow and highbrow is clear: The middlebrow text certainly lacks the formal and intellectual experimentation of the highbrow. The relation between the middlebrow and the lowbrow is, however, a little less clear. Lowbrow novels, such as *Forever Amber*, appear formulaic in content, but the middlebrow refuses to "deviate from comfortably familiar presentations," which would imply that it used formulas too. However, I think the familiar presentation in the case of the middlebrow has more to do with style than content. It is this lack of experimental *style* that is essential to defining the middlebrow. Perhaps because it was not breaking any literary ground, the middlebrow novel laid claim to literary distinction at the time of its publication, but rarely gestured towards any lasting literary value. Orwell called their works "Good Bad Books," arguing that their value lies in teaching us the difference between art and mere thought on the page. Others have been harsher in their characterizations. Virginia Woolf characterized the middlebrow as being "betwixt and between." The middlebrow novel fell somewhere between the clichés of the lowbrow and the bold experimentation of the highbrow.

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<sup>78</sup> Bracco, Rosa Maria. Merchants of Hope: British Middlebrow Writers and the First World War. (New York: Berg Publishing, 1993) 10

<sup>79</sup> Bracco, 10

Despite the high modernists' aspersions, the middlebrow novel enjoyed tremendous commercial success, which leads to a second characteristic of the middlebrow. These novels filled the circulating libraries, were displayed in bookstore windows, and populated review columns and bestseller lists. A presence on the bestseller list means commercial success, which is another critical element of the middlebrow novel. As Rosa Maria Bracco writes:

To peruse the pages of the *Bookseller*, the book trade periodical, is to trace the history of this inter-war literary phenomenon: the defence of their success as the indispensable financial backbone of the industry; the role of the circulating libraries in propagating this fiction; the emergence of the multifarious Book Clubs, compasses of middlebrow taste; the booksellers monthly lists of bestsellers. Not many people knew about E. M. Forster, but few would be unfamiliar with the names of Frankau, Deeping and Priestley, who from a commercial point of view were the most prominent literary figures of the day.<sup>80</sup>

The prevalence of book clubs was tremendously important. In much the same ways as Theosophical and paranormal societies emerged to serve as forums for discussion of the spiritual and supernatural, book clubs provided a space in which average, not particularly intellectual persons could wax philosophical about the latest novel they had read. Such clubs were important because they pointed to the presence of both a middlebrow taste and a middlebrow standard. One of "the Book Guild's chief aims was to avoid indulging in the deplorable affectation of recommending as a work of genius the sort of thing which is dubbed clever simply because it is mainly unintelligible and written in an obscure manner, or boosting some foreign work simply because it is foreign, and the author's name difficult to pronounce."<sup>81</sup> These words seem to be a direct condemnation of high modernism and establish a correlation between the commercially successful world of the middlebrow and a distinct lack of "unintelligible" literary experimentation.

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<sup>80</sup> Bracco, 11

<sup>81</sup> Bracco, 12

The middlebrow existed as a center, situated between formulaic lowbrow intended merely to entertain and highbrow works that increasingly alienated readers. Its “authors were from the middle class and addressed a middle class audience.”<sup>82</sup> A byproduct of addressing such a large audience and being prominent in the public eye was that middlebrow authors became de facto educators for their audience. These writers addressed subjects that were sometimes the same as those of their high modern counterparts, but they reached a far broader audience. For example, *Dracula* addresses issues of Christianity and faith, but not in the same way as a high modernist text. Lowbrow publications reached an even larger audience but would rarely delve into such topics.

Perhaps the reason why Book Clubs were so critical of the experimentation of high modernism was that modernism represented a drastic rupture with the past. This privileging of tradition is indicative of the third characteristic of the middlebrow modern, specifically that it aimed “to keep the canon of nineteenth century fiction, as it understood it, alive and functioning by safeguarding it against modernism.”<sup>83</sup> This is not to say that the middlebrow did not have anything in common with the contemporaneous high moderns; both described disorientation and waning religious belief, but this parallel was likely inescapable, considering that the heyday of the middlebrow modern was the interwar period. However, whereas high modernists argued for a break with the past, the middlebrow moderns ultimately came down on the side of historical continuity and the preservation of a Western tradition. One way in which high modern novelists broke with their literary past was in experimenting with the tradition of nineteenth-century narrative. Perhaps as a reaction against this experimentation, middlebrow novels were very definitely modeled on nineteenth-century fiction, to the point that enthusiastic reviewers would

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<sup>82</sup> Bracco, 12

<sup>83</sup> Bracco, 12

trumpet comparisons to Dickens and Trollope. The middlebrow novel “employed the nineteenth-century structure of well-rounded narratives, with clearly structured plots and definite endings, and they assumed the presence of an audience bound by a community of values.”<sup>84</sup> To them, the English language and everything it meant to be British were on display in the British novel. It represented the English language at its pinnacle, in its most rarefied form. In fact, the unpardonable sin of the high modernists was that they degraded this tradition, despite any aesthetic brilliance one might find in them. Whereas the high modernists were trying to forge a tradition based on aesthetic beauty, the middlebrow moderns were simply continuing one that was more concerned with being a source of moral value in literary form.

The connection between Theosophy and the middlebrow seems to be a natural one simply because the two are appealing to essentially the same audience. The far reaching education acts that produced a readership for the middlebrow novel also produced one for *Isis Unveiled*. In fact, the readership very likely overlapped. One of the hallmarks of the middlebrow was simply that it was commercially successful. As such, the middlebrow was literature written with the purpose of being popular. To that end, it would make sense for it to include or acknowledge the most popular spiritual belief of the day, Theosophy.

#### *Authors Covered in This Project*

All of the authors covered in this project meet the criteria mentioned in the previous section. Each was a bestseller, and novels dealt with in this project not only contain little experimentation but also uphold the tradition of the Victorian novel. Additionally, each is a supernatural adventure story. In my first chapter, I discuss Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* and read it through the

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<sup>84</sup> Bracco, 12

lens of Theosophy. The novel deals with the clash between science and the supernatural, the very same conflict that helped give rise to Theosophy. I offer a new reading of the character of Dr. Abraham Van Helsing as the embodiment of Theosophy itself. Just as Theosophy offered a way of reconciling science and the supernatural, so does Dr. Van Helsing. My second chapter discusses H. Rider Haggard's four Ayesha novels. Most criticism of Haggard focuses on *She*, but by examining all four novels in which the character Ayesha appears, one can see the impact that Theosophy had on the novels in general and on the character of Ayesha in particular. In this chapter, I offer a new interpretation of the elusive Ayesha, namely that she is a fallen Theosophical adept. Finally, this project concludes with a discussion of two of Marie Corelli's spiritualist novels. Corelli was one of the world's first bestselling authors, and many of her novels invoke a hybrid Christian-spiritualism, one which I contend is indebted to Theosophy.

## CHAPTER 2

### TENETS AND TALISMANS: THEOSOPHY AND STOKER'S DRACULA

There is something vaguely poetic about living in the shadow of a vampire. Count Dracula, the villain from Bram Stoker's classic horror novel, is one of the most popular literary characters of the last century. This popularity is partly a testament to the skill of Stoker, and partly a byproduct of the cinematic boom that occurred not long after *Dracula's* publication. The Count's fame has outstripped that of his author, while vampires themselves have become something of a phenomenon in their own right. However, Stoker's novel also gave rise to another iconic character, Dr. Abraham Van Helsing. While Van Helsing has a cult following all his own, with a comic book devoted to him as well as a few movies focusing on his exploits independent of *Dracula*, his popularity is nowhere near that of his more famous nemesis. To me, though, Van Helsing is the most interesting character in the novel because he is the key to a Theosophical reading of *Dracula*. He is the very embodiment of Theosophy, with one foot in the world of science and one in the world of the supernatural, accepting both. Viewing the novel through the lens of Theosophy allows the reader to look at the characters and events of *Dracula* in what I hope are new and exciting ways.

#### *Bram Stoker, Theosophy, and Dracula*

It is imperative to establish whether Stoker was familiar with Theosophy while writing *Dracula*. Theosophy was popular in the years leading up to *Dracula's* 1897 publication, especially in Stoker's native Ireland, so it is difficult to imagine that he did not encounter the movement. Fortunately, we are left with more definitive evidence of Stoker's engagement with

Theosophy via Constance Wilde. She, along with her husband Oscar, was a frequent dinner companion of Stoker's. According to Stoker biographer Barbara Belford, "Constance moved from spiritualism—a movement supportive of women's rights and a haven for radicals, teetotalers, vegetarians, dress reformers and antivaccinationists—to Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, one of the great eccentrics of the Victorian age."<sup>85</sup> There exists evidence that Bram Stoker shared this interest in spiritualism. Although the subject is open to debate, Stoker has been linked to the Golden Dawn Society, a prominent occult group of the late-nineteenth century. Stoker displays this familiarity with the occult in more than one of his lesser-known works; 1902's *The Jewel of Seven Stars* takes "great pains to describe Egyptian metaphysics in full detail."<sup>86</sup> In addition, 1910's *The Lady of the Shroud* is, as one contemporary reviewer puts it, "tinged with the scientific spirit of H.G Wells on the one side and the influence of the Psychical Research revival on the other."<sup>87</sup> The indebtedness to Egyptian mysticism of *The Jewel of the Seven Stars* and the influence of both science and the spiritual in *The Lady of the Shroud* can also be traced to Theosophy, but nowhere is Theosophy more on display in Stoker's writing than in his most famous novel, *Dracula*.

The plot of *Dracula* is well known. Jonathan Harker, a solicitor from London, is dispatched to deepest, darkest Romania to finalize the nefarious Count Dracula's purchase of a house in London. Disregarding the local peasants' warnings to avoid the Count, Harker, secure in his nineteenth-century scientific, rational mindset, blithely voyages to Dracula's castle. There, after witnessing a series of supernatural occurrences that defy logic, he ends up a prisoner of the

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<sup>85</sup>Bedford, Barbara. *Bram Stoker and the Man Who Was Dracula*. (New York DeCapo Press, 2002) 136.

Belford describes Blavatsky as follows: "Credited with bringing the word occultism into common use, she founded the Theosophical Society in 1875 and linked the spiritualist movement with the exoteric wisdom of Cabbala and Eastern religions. To encourage unconventional behavior, the society condemned civilization and good manners as 'things rotten to the core.'"

<sup>86</sup>Roth, Phyllis A., *The Jewel of Seven Stars, Bram Stoker*. (Boston: Twayne Press, 1982) 68

<sup>87</sup>W.F.P., "Bram Stoker's Latest Novel," *Bookman* 37 (January 1910) 194

Count. Harker eventually escapes, though how he does so is never revealed to the reader. What does become clear is that Harker has inadvertently facilitated Dracula's move to London, where the count wreaks havoc on the people he encounters with the intention of extending his reign of terror to the entire island. One of his victims is Lucy Westenra, the very icon of Victorian British purity. Dracula's repeated attacks on Lucy turn her into a vampire, and when science fails to explain her condition, Dr. Abraham Van Helsing is called in to consult. The open-minded Van Helsing soon realizes the supernatural nature of Dracula and his attacks, and convinces his incredulous cohorts that they are dealing with a vampire. The heroes of the novel travel to Transylvania and ultimately defeat Dracula.

*London, Transylvania, and Amsterdam: Theosophy and the Geography of Dracula*

When discussing the geography of *Dracula*, scholars have focused on the context of late Victorian anxieties about reverse colonization. As Stephen D. Arata writes, "Fantasies of reverse colonization are particularly prevalent in late-Victorian popular fiction...the colonizer finds himself in the position of the colonized, the exploiter becomes exploited, the victimizer victimized."<sup>88</sup> Expanding upon this idea, Patrick Brantlinger discusses the British fear of atavism in his 1985 article, developed further in a 1988 book. Atavism, the tendency to revert to an ancestral type, is quite close to devolution, a popular misunderstanding and misappropriation of Darwinian evolution.<sup>89</sup> Atavism in this context would be a result of mixing British blood with that of the foreigner, and on a very literal level, that is precisely what happens when Dracula feeds on his victims. Although Count Dracula is technically European, Romania is about as far

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<sup>88</sup> Arata, Stephen D., "The Occidental Tourist: *Dracula* and the Anxiety of Reverse Colonization" *Victorian Studies* 33 (1990) 622

<sup>89</sup> Brantlinger, Patrick, *The Rule of Darkness: Atavism and the Occult in the British Adventure Novel, 1880-1914*. (Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1988)

east as one can get in Europe.<sup>90</sup> Though it is a part of continental Europe, Stoker describes Harker's entry into Romania as if he were leaving one world and entering a completely different one. Harker writes in his journal, "The impression I had was that we were leaving the West and entering the East," venturing into "one of the wildest and least known portions of Europe."<sup>91</sup>

Jonathan Harker also notes in his journal that "every known superstition in the world is gathered into the horseshoe of the Carpathians, as if it were the centre of some sort of imaginative whirlpool."<sup>92</sup> Romania, essentially the easternmost part of Europe, is a land replete with superstition. Here, superstition is not limited to conventional beliefs, such as it being unlucky for a black cat to cross one's path. Rather, in this passage, "superstition" has a far more sinister, but by no means less supernatural, connotation. The superstitions that Harker encounters involve not only talk of monsters, but also the trinkets and charms used to ward them off.<sup>93</sup> While werewolves and vampires are more terrifying than walking under a ladder, belief in both stems from the same irrational place in the human psyche. What relegates such beliefs to the realm of superstition is that they lack any proof. In late-nineteenth century England, in the wake of Darwin and evolution, the idea of evidence walked hand in hand with science. In short, scientific validation was essential if an idea was to be taken seriously. Of course, science was seen as the domain of the West. Quite early in the novel, Harker, the rational lawyer, demonstrates the primacy given to information and its orderly arrangement in the Western world. He notes that prior to traveling to Romania, he "visited the British Museum, and made a search

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<sup>90</sup> Also, having Dracula originate in Romania allows the Count to blend into British society, only betrayed by an accent when he speaks. Stoker makes a point of this early on in *Dracula*.

<sup>91</sup> Stoker, Bram. *Dracula*. (Boston: Boston University Press, 2002) 27

<sup>92</sup> Stoker, 28

<sup>93</sup> Harker hears the peasants talking about the following monsters, "'Ordog-' Satan, "pokol"-hell, "stregoica"-witch, "vrolok" and "vlkoslak"- both of which mean the same thing, one being Slovak and the other Serbian for something that is either werewolf or vampire" (Stoker 32).

among the books and maps in the library regarding Transylvania; it had struck me that some foreknowledge of the country could hardly fail to have some importance.” In contrast, Harker finds that in Romania “there are no maps of this country as yet to compare with our own Ordnance Survey maps.”<sup>94</sup> In this simple discussion of maps, we see the perceived gulf between Harker’s West and wild, superstitious Eastern Europe. In his London, knowledge is ordered and orderly, both in maps and in museums, which are essentially monuments to all that humankind has discovered. In contrast, Harker cannot even find a halfway reliable map in Romania. Later, Harker also bemoans the fact that the trains in Romania cannot be trusted to run on time. If Dracula and Romania embody the untamed phantasmagoria of the (very near) East, then Harker and his London represent the logic and scientific thought of England and, by extension, the West.

These diametrically opposite schools of thought collide in the backwoods of Eastern Europe. There, Jonathan Harker witnesses first hand events that cannot be explained through the laws of science. Famously, Harker witnesses Dracula defying gravity as he crawls headfirst out a window. In addition, Harker notices that the Count casts no shadow, another violation of scientific law. Having experienced such things, Harker is forced to admit, “Unless my senses deceive me, the old centuries had, and have, powers of their own which mere ‘modernity’ cannot kill.”<sup>95</sup> The essential term in this phrase, “modernity,” can easily be replaced with “science” without altering the meaning of the sentence. Science was central to modernity, rapidly becoming the lens through which people viewed and explained the world. Science was also exerting a physical impact on modernity through an explosion of new technologies. However, things that Harker’s Western, scientific background told him should not happen were occurring right before his eyes, weakening his trust in both modernity and science.

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<sup>94</sup> Stoker, 27

<sup>95</sup> Stoker, 60

We see two polar opposites in manner of thinking, Harker's scientific, Western mode of thought and the world of Eastern Europe, awash in superstition. Though these views are seemingly irreconcilable, Stoker offers a third choice, one that embraces the scientific and the supernatural, as Madam Blavatsky did with Theosophy. For Bram Stoker, Dr. Abraham Van Helsing embodies this middle ground; therefore, he is the character most relevant to a discussion of Theosophy. Before discussing Van Helsing, it is important to draw attention to his city of origin, Amsterdam. While this location may seem an insignificant detail, I do not believe that Stoker chose this location randomly. Geographically, the city is more or less located halfway between Jonathan Harker's England and Dracula's Romania. In making Van Helsing from Amsterdam, Stoker further illustrates the doctor's position of being "in between"; he not only represents the philosophical comingling of scientific and supernatural knowledge, just as Theosophy does, but he is also from a place that is the physical representation of the meeting of the two worlds. The character who bridges the divide between science and superstition hails from the city that connects the West to the East.

*Dr. Abraham Van Helsing and the Embodiment of Theosophy*

In describing Van Helsing to his friend Arthur Holmwood, Dr. Seward writes, "No matter on what ground he comes, we must accept his wishes. He is seemingly an arbitrary man, but this is because he knows what he is talking about better than anyone else. He is a philosopher and a metaphysician, and one of the most advanced scientists of his day; and he has, I believe, an absolutely open mind."<sup>96</sup> This brief introduction speaks volumes about Van Helsing. First, it establishes his *scientific* credibility. Van Helsing's introduction comes not from Jonathan Harker, a lawyer, but from Dr. Seward, a man of science. Van Helsing is also a

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<sup>96</sup> Stoker, 129

physician, a career that demands proficiency in the sciences. Furthermore, he is seemingly at the cutting edge of science. He is “one of the most advanced scientists” and “knows as much about obscure diseases as anyone in the world.”<sup>97</sup> Van Helsing is far from a quack, as his scientific credentials reveal, and he is well versed in the mainstream science of his day.

These few introductory lines also prepare the reader, and Arthur Holmwood, for another aspect of Dr. Abraham Van Helsing. Just as Theosophy sought to reconcile the scientific and the spiritual, so does Van Helsing. Even before he is described as a scientist, Van Helsing is referred to as a “metaphysician and a philosopher.”<sup>98</sup> The calculating rationality of science seemingly does not accord with the airy musings of philosophy, or the spirits of the metaphysical, but here one man embodies these contrary impulses. With respect to plot, these early hints of the otherworldly prepare the reader for Van Helsing’s methods of dealing with Dracula, while at the same time making him seem like the right person for the job. Looking at Van Helsing through the lens of Theosophy, however, one can see that he reconciles the scientific and the supernatural, which is precisely what Madame Blavatsky’s Theosophy attempted.

Van Helsing is at his most Theosophical during a debate with Doctor Seward, who serves as an analog for Western belief in the supremacy of science, a point which I will return to later.

During this conversation in Chapter XX, Van Helsing states,

“You are a clever man, friend John; you reason well, and your wit is bold; but you are too prejudiced. You do not let your eyes see nor your ears hear, and that which is your daily life is not of account to you. Do you not think that there are things which you cannot understand, and yet which are; that some people see things that others cannot? But there are things old and new which must not be contemplated by men’s eyes, because they know—or think they know—some things which other men have told them. Ah, it is the fault of our science that it wants to explain all; and if it explain not, then it says there is nothing to explain.

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<sup>97</sup> Stoker, 129

<sup>98</sup> Stoker, 129

But yet we see around us every day the growth of new beliefs, which think themselves new; and which are yet but the old, which pretend to be young- like the fine ladies at the opera. I suppose now you do not believe in corporeal transference. No? Nor in materialization. No? Nor in astral bodies. No? Nor in the reading of thought. No? Nor in hypnotism.”<sup>99</sup>

This passage starts with Van Helsing chiding Seward for his intellectual biases, which are in favor of Western science. Van Helsing’s claim that science seeks to “explain all” echoes Blavatsky’s assertion that “the impregnable position of science may be stated in a few words: we claim and we shall wrest from theology, the entire domain of cosmological theory.”<sup>100</sup> The scientific impulse to dismiss that which it cannot explain also receives attention in Blavatsky’s writing. In fact, she devotes the entire second chapter of *Isis Unveiled* to criticizing science for this tendency:

It has so narrowed their views of the possibilities of natural law that very simple forms of occult phenomena have necessitated their denial that they can occur unless miracles were possible; and this being a scientific absurdity the result has been that physical science has lately been losing prestige. If scientists had studied the so-called miracles instead of denying them, many secret laws of nature comprehended by the ancients would have again been discovered.<sup>101</sup>

This passage from *Isis Unveiled* dovetails nicely with Van Helsing’s words. Both condemn science for its attempt to be all-encompassing and dismissal of that which it cannot explain. Citing both scientists and spiritual mediums of the day in *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky attempts to show just how eager organized science is to dismiss that which it cannot fathom. Some of her specific examples of feats these mediums were capable of are the same as those cited by Van Helsing as proof of science’s limitations.

Van Helsing’s speech ends with a list of phenomena that he accuses Seward of disbelieving. A close reading of this list reveals that most of the terms are indebted to

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<sup>99</sup> Stoker, 200

<sup>100</sup> *Isis Unveiled: Volume 1*, vii

<sup>101</sup> *Isis Unveiled: Volume 1*, vii

Theosophy, if not taken from the belief system outright. The first phenomenon Van Helsing inquires about is corporeal transference, which means the movement of bodies by mental effort alone. This is an ability attributed to many an adept in *Isis Unveiled*, where it at times takes on a far darker timbre. Blavatsky claims “many persons firmly believe that certain individuals possess the power of the evil eye...there are persons who can kill toads merely by looking at them, and can even slay individuals.”<sup>102</sup> *Isis Unveiled* describes this as “projecting the force of the will,” but both are variations on the same theme. Blavatsky maintains that such things are possible via the manipulation of “astral fluid,” which leads directly to the next phrase Stoker employs that is indebted to Theosophy, “astral bodies.” As the Oxford English Dictionary indicates, the Theosophical Society coined the very term “astral bodies.” Here, Van Helsing states his belief in the possibility of their existence, or at least berates Seward’s disbelief. Regardless, “astral bodies” were intimately associated with Theosophy and its teachings, as was materialization, which Van Helsing also advocates in this passage.

The footnote to the Bedford-St. Martin’s edition of *Dracula* indicates that the term “astral bodies” refers to “the appearance of a spirit in bodily form,” a phenomenon distinct from ectoplasm. However, Theosophy’s definition of the term is more complicated. According to Blavatsky, the “astral body” is distinct from the “Buddhi,” or astral *soul*. It is called the “Lings Sharira” and is not part of the essential man, but rather one of the four lower elements that constitute man’s physical body.<sup>103</sup> More specifically, it is like a shade, or phantom double of the physical body.<sup>104</sup> A skilled adept could project this astral body across great distances, thus

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<sup>102</sup> *Isis Unveiled, Volume 1*, 380. Interestingly, the Romanian peasants warn Jonathan to be wary of the “evil eye”.

<sup>103</sup> *The Key to Theosophy*, 90.

<sup>104</sup> The complete definition is as follows: “A word employed by spiritualists to indicate the phenomenon of ‘a spirit clothing himself with a material form.∴. The far less objectionable term, ‘form-manifestation,’ has been recently suggested by Mr. Stainton-Moses of London. When the real nature of these apparitions is better comprehended, a

materializing in spectral form. Blavatsky notes that materializations are “many and various in the sacred records.”<sup>105</sup> Not only was it such a materialization that compelled Blavatsky to go to India, but she also claimed to have been visited by Masters most of her life. Proving this claim became problematic when other people wanted to see these Masters. Partly because of this, Blavatsky’s definition of materialization expanded to include the spontaneous appearance not only of people but also of things. For example, in order to convince the wife of occultist A. P. Stinnett of the existence of ascended masters, a note from Master Koot Hoomi spontaneously “appeared” in the branch of a tree, along with a lost brooch. In fact, “mail from nowhere” was prevalent in the Theosophical Society, as it became the next best thing to seeing an ascended master.<sup>106</sup> Astral bodies and spontaneous materialization were prime tenets of Theosophy, and Van Helsing mentions both as phenomena in which he seems to believe.

A few paragraphs after Van Helsing concludes his list of paranormal terms, he includes one more worth noting. Continuing to interrogate an incredulous Dr. Seward, Van Helsing asks,

“Can you tell me how the Indian fakir can make himself to die and have been buried, and his grave sealed and corn sowed on it, and the corn reaped and be cut and sown and reaped and cut again, and then men come and take away the unbroken seal, and there lie the fakir, not dead, but that rise up and walk amongst them as before?”<sup>107</sup>”

This is the last piece of evidence Van Helsing marshals before Seward cuts him off, and it is worth examining through the lens of Theosophy. Fakirs are mentioned quite often in *Isis*

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still more appropriate name will doubtless be adopted. To call them materialized spirits is inadmissible, for they are not spirits but animated portrait-statues.”

<sup>105</sup> *Isis Unveiled, Volume 1*, 493

<sup>106</sup> Of course, the materialization of these letters was completely fraudulent. In 1884, two disgruntled employees revealed the existence of secret mail slots in the Theosophical Society’s headquarters that were designed to make it appear letters were spontaneously appearing. A subsequent investigation by The Society for Psychical Research led by Dr. Richard Hodgson confirmed these claims of fraud, but it appears he may have gone too far. A 1986 comparative handwriting analysis of some materialized letters and letters written by potential “authors” revealed no matches. Obviously, they did not come from nowhere, but they were not penned by Blavatsky or her inner circle.

<sup>107</sup> Stoker, 200

*Unveiled*, which is not surprising since much of Theosophy is culled from Indian beliefs. Fakirs are included in Blavatsky's essential Theosophical terms, but are paid the most attention in a section entitled "The Burial and Resuscitation of Fakirs." Whereas Stoker does not get into the details of the rituals of resuscitation, Blavatsky does. She provides a list of "modern witnesses" who allegedly saw firsthand a resuscitation rite, and describes the specifics of its execution. Blavatsky narrates Sir Claude Wade's experience with a particular fakir at the court of Rundjit Singh. Briefly, she explains that the fakir was buried alive for six weeks in a box buried three feet below the earth that was perpetually under guard, analogous to the sealed grave mentioned by Van Helsing. What Blavatsky includes is that the resuscitation process involved bathing with hot water, friction, the removal of wax and cotton pledgets from the nostrils and ears, the rubbing of the eyelids with ghee, and the application of hot wheaten cake to the head. After all this, the body violently convulsed but soon thereafter began functioning normally.<sup>108</sup>

At one point in the novel, when Van Helsing and company believe they are about to encounter Dracula, Dr. Seward describes, "We each held ready to use our various armaments—the spiritual in the left hand, the mortal in the right."<sup>109</sup> One of Van Helsing's weapons is a Kukri knife, a weapon of Indian origin, and the other is a gun. This is the perfect image of Theosophy. The knife is from India, an Eastern land of spirituality, and the gun is a product of scientific advancement. Van Helsing, the person wielding the two, treats both modern knowledge and ancient spiritual wisdom as equally valid weapons against Dracula. Likewise for Madame Blavatsky, science and spirituality were both necessary to understand the mysteries of the world.

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<sup>108</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 477-478

<sup>109</sup> Stoker, 302

Science, Superstition, and the Defeat of Dracula

Theosophy did not try to be a religion, but rather a science that blended rationality and spirituality, which is precisely what Dr. Abraham Van Helsing does. When attempting to “rally the troops” before going vampire hunting, Van Helsing delivers a motivational speech of sorts:

Well, you know what we have to contend against; but we, too, are not without strength. We have on our side a power of combination- a power denied to the vampire kind; we have resources of science; we are free to act and think; and the hours of the day and night are ours equally. In fact, so far as our powers extend, they are unfettered and we are free to use them.<sup>110</sup>

With respect to Theosophy, the most interesting part of this passage is the reference to the “resources of science” available to *Dracula’s* Western heroes but not accessible to the Eastern villain. This proves prophetic because it is equal parts science and ancient wisdom that lead to the defeat of Dracula.

When most people conceive of ways to dispatch a vampire, what likely comes to mind are objects such as cloves of garlic, crucifixes, and wooden stakes. This makes sense, as what most people know about vampires comes from Hollywood. However, such methods are only half of the equation in Stoker’s novel. Bram Stoker mined the folklore of Eastern Europe not only for the name Dracula but for ways to dispose of him as well. Much of what Van Helsing prescribes comes from this Eastern European tradition.<sup>111</sup> Perhaps the best example of this is the clove of garlic, which is anathema to vampires. This is folkloric herbalism, and one of the most ancient ways of dealing with vampires.<sup>112</sup> Although Van Helsing employs this and other folkloric techniques, what often gets overlooked is how much science is actually used to defeat

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<sup>110</sup> Stoker, 243

<sup>111</sup> *Vampires and Vampirism* by Montague Summers is perhaps the most encompassing work on the subject, but many more focused studies have been published devoted to the specific traditions from which Stoker culled.

<sup>112</sup> Other herbs were considered toxic to vampires, ranging from hemp to millet seeds, depending on the tradition.

Dracula. Examples range from simple deductive reasoning to the outright use of science and technology.

The first example lies in the very construction of the text of *Dracula* itself, placed in chronological order by Mina Harker. This neat ordering of journal entries, newspaper clippings, and even a ship's log prevents the novel from being a truly modern, experimental piece of writing. However, creating this chronology of events does more than that. As Mina writes, "In this matter dates are everything, and I think that if we get all our material ready, and have every item put in chronological order we shall have done much."<sup>113</sup> This neat, orderly assembling of information echoes Jonathan Harker's praise of maps and the British Museum earlier in the novel. It also allows for the realization that Renfeld "has been sort of an index to the coming and going of the Count."<sup>114</sup> Drawing such a conclusion is an exercise in deductive reasoning, part and parcel of the scientific method, facilitated by an organized and coherent assembly of information.<sup>115</sup> At other times, the use of science is far more overt. When discussing what course of action Dracula was likely to take after the various coffins he hid around London had been sanctified, Mina states, "The Count is a criminal and of criminal type. Nordau and Lombroso would so classify him, and *qua* criminal he is of imperfectly formed mind."<sup>116</sup> In essence, Mina is giving a rudimentary criminal profile of Dracula. The conclusion she reaches, that Dracula is a criminal and as such, he will try to escape, is not the most profound insight, but

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<sup>113</sup> Stoker, 230

<sup>114</sup> Stoker, 231

<sup>115</sup> Thank you to Professor Marshik for pointing this out to me.

<sup>116</sup> Stoker, 336

how she reaches this conclusion is important. She is calling on critical psychology, an emerging science of the day.<sup>117</sup>

Finally, in the climactic showdown with Dracula, technology plays just as important a role as folklore and superstition. Essentially, *Dracula* has two endings, one scientific and one supernatural. A communion wafer consecrates Dracula's resting place at Castle Dracula, but does not actually kill its inhabitant. What most Hollywood versions of *Dracula* leave out is the final defeat of Dracula, which in the novel takes place outside the walls of his castle and is preceded by what amounts to an Old West style shootout. Yes, Dracula is staked through the heart, an example of folkloric knowledge at work, but first he is wrestled away from a band of Gypsies. To do so, our heroes open fire on the Gypsies with Winchester repeating rifles, examples of technology, or applied science. As Van Helsing says earlier in the novel, our heroes have a "power of combination" on their side, which means that only through the use of ancient wisdom *and* science are they able to defeat Dracula.

The quintessential example of this combination comes when Van Helsing employs hypnosis to determine Dracula's location. Hypnosis in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century was not solely the domain of bad magicians and Las Vegas sideshows as it is today. It was far from mainstream science, but it had some scientific credibility. Technically speaking, though, what Mina Harker undergoes is not even hypnosis, although that is the term used in *Dracula*. She appears to be experiencing, at a distance, the sights Dracula sees and the sounds he hears, which is different from hypnosis. If hypnotism belonged on the margins of science, then remote viewing of this kind would have been absurd to a late- nineteenth century audience. It is

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<sup>117</sup> Max Nordau argued that civilized man was degenerating intellectually as well as physically, while Cesar Lombroso proposed that criminal tendencies were inherited and criminals were throwbacks to earlier evolutionary stages. The influence of Darwin on both is quite apparent.

done under the control of a man of science, however, which makes it a viable option. Although it is Mina's idea to undergo hypnosis, it is the scientist-spiritualist Van Helsing who conducts the hypnotism. Stoker describes the process as follows: "The professor made a few more passes then stopped, and I could see that his forehead was covered with great beads of perspiration. Mina opened her eyes but she did not seem the same woman. There was a far away look in her eyes, and her voice had a sad dreaminess."<sup>118</sup> Blavatsky and Theosophy have little to say about hypnosis, but it is unlikely that hypnosis is actually what is happening in this scene from *Dracula*. Rather, it is akin to a projection of Mina's astral body. Those who can do this are said by Blavatsky to "have the power to transport themselves from one place to another, *however distant*, with speed and facility. This faculty relates but to the *projection* of the *astral entity*, in a more or less corporealized form, and certainly not to bodily transportation. This phenomenon is no more a miracle than one's reflection in a looking glass."<sup>119</sup> The reader believes that Mina is seeing through Dracula's eyes and hearing via his ears, but really there is little textual evidence for this supposition. That Mina is projecting her astral being is just as likely an explanation. The catalyst for this projection is Dr. Van Helsing, who is sweating profusely while putting Mina under. Beyond that, Van Helsing notes that when he "hypnotizes" Mina, she goes by his volition as opposed to that of Dracula. These two points imply that Van Helsing has some sort of agency over this process. The ability to understand and control forces of nature is the very definition of science.

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<sup>118</sup> Stoker, 308

<sup>119</sup>, Blavatsky, Helena Petrovna. Isis Unveiled: Volume 2 (Pasadena: Theosophical UP: 1998) 619

### *Dracula as Theosophical Allegory*

If Theosophy does in fact play such a prominent role in *Dracula*, how does that alter our reading of the text and its characters? In brief, it allows *Dracula* to be read in an almost allegorical way, in which Count Dracula and Dr. Seward act as two extremes, the former representing unchecked ancient wisdom and the latter standing in for unchecked modern wisdom, meaning science. Van Helsing, integrating the two so completely, acts as a synthesis of Dracula's ancient wisdom and Seward's science. In a 1986 article, John L. Greenway expertly depicts Dr. Seward as almost an icon of the "normal" science of late-nineteenth century England. Greenway points out that. "Stoker has Seward portray himself as radically modern. He keeps notes on a phonograph, an innovation physicians first adopted in 1890. As a physician, he treats madness as a medical problem, seeing Renfeld as a 'patient.' Treating madness by physicians had only begun mid-century."<sup>120</sup> However, as the title of Greenway's article suggests, Seward's devotion to science amounts to folly, as it does little to bring about the defeat of Dracula. As a physician, he should have been the one psychoanalyzing Dracula, as well as deducing the relationship between Renfeld and the Count. He does neither.

Greenway devotes much time to the passage cited above in which Van Helsing berates Seward for his skepticism towards certain phenomena. I discuss the significance of materialization and astral projection; Greenway does not. He does, however, make a fascinating point about hypnotism, the mention of which prompts Seward to cut Van Helsing off. Greenway calls attention to the fact that Seward responds to Van Helsing's belief in hypnotism by saying "Charcot has proved that pretty well." Jean-Martin Charcot's work and research elevated

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<sup>120</sup> Greenway, John L. "Seward's Folly: *Dracula* as a Critique of 'Normal Science'" Stanford Literature Review 3 (Fall 1986) 214

hypnotism, previously known as Mesmerism, from chicanery to a valid science. Along with a newfound credibility, Mesmerism gained a new name. Greenway's claim is that "the reference to Jean-Martin Charcot in this passage gives an important link between the science of Seward and that of Van Helsing."<sup>121</sup> It is only once a previously marginalized phenomenon receives scientific credibility that Seward is able to believe in it. In a passage not long after his mention of astral projections and hypnotism, Van Helsing argues that there are "things that are done today in electrical science which would be deemed unholy by the very men who discovered electricity."<sup>122</sup> Greenway maintains that here "Stoker suggests the distinction between science and pseudoscience often becomes obvious only in retrospect."<sup>123</sup> While this is extremely insightful, when looking at *Dracula* through the lens of Theosophy, another reading is possible. In terms of Theosophy, phenomena such as hypnotism, telepathy, alchemy, and astral projections are not proto-sciences (as Greenway argues), heralds of scientific discoveries to come. Rather, they are forms of ancient knowledge, waiting to be rediscovered, or at the very least acknowledged, by open-minded scientists (such as Van Helsing) as real phenomena despite the fact that current science cannot explain them. The spiritualism of Theosophy, as embodied by Van Helsing takes just that approach, while the strict scientific dogma of Seward does not.

The novel repeatedly illustrates this myopic mindset of Dr. Seward. When Lucy is fed upon by Dracula, a blood transfusion is the first remedy attempted. In fact, this cutting edge procedure is attempted multiple times, each one as ineffectual as the last. Despite these repeated failures, Seward remains steadfast in his scientific skepticism until he sees the reanimated Lucy. The scenes leading up to the beheading of the undead Lucy are further evidence of Seward's

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<sup>121</sup> Greenway, 218

<sup>122</sup> Stoker, 201

<sup>123</sup> Greenway, 218

strict scientific mindset. In order to finally put Lucy to rest, Van Helsing suggests cutting off the head of her corpse. Seward ardently objects to this by saying, “But why do it at all? The girl is dead. Why mutilate her poor body without need? And if there is no necessity for a post-mortem and nothing to gain by it- no good to her, to us, to science, to human knowledge- why do it?”<sup>124</sup> Desecration of a corpse is perhaps one of the oldest taboos, but Seward would do so as long as it is for the good of science. Once its necessity falls outside the parameters of established, “normal” science, Seward voices an objection. He eventually acquiesces, but it takes a great amount of persuading by Van Helsing. Seward’s attitude towards what is acceptable when done for scientific good is also on display in his attitude toward vivisection. When writing about Renfeld in his journal, Seward muses “Men sneered at vivisection and yet look at the results today! Why not advance science in its most difficult and vital aspect- the knowledge of the brain? Had I even the secret of one such mind- did I hold the key to the fancy of even one such lunatic- I might advance my own branch of science.”<sup>125</sup> Seward is eager to cut open Renfeld while he is still alive for the sole purpose of advancing science, yet later he reacts with horror to the mere notion of decapitating a dead woman even though his mentor believes it is the right course of action. Seward’s advocacy of vivisection places him at odds with most spiritual movements of the day, as most, including Theosophy, were anti-vivisection.<sup>126</sup> Dr. Seward was once Van Helsing’s student, but that is where the similarities between the two end. As we have seen, Van Helsing maintained an open mind towards phenomena that science and its great disciple Dr. Seward rejected.

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<sup>124</sup> Stoker, 177

<sup>125</sup> Stoker, 92

<sup>126</sup> Owen, Alex. The Place of Enchantment (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 41

Greenway succinctly discusses Seward's reaction when faced with the reality of the supernatural and otherworldly:

“Rather than admit the reality of vampirism, Seward first suspects Van Helsing, then questions his own sanity (all the men do this) and finally drops out of the novel. When he is forced to admit the truth of Van Helsing's explanation, he becomes increasingly passive, and subsequently becomes virtually useless outside of London. He is the only one silent at the group's oath to extirpate Dracula; he makes no comment upon Mina's suggestion to use hypnosis/telepathy to pursue the count, nor upon her insight that Dracula has the criminal physiology characteristic of the atavistic racial degenerate described by Lombroso and Nordau; nor is he in on the killing of Dracula.”<sup>127</sup>

Once it becomes obvious that pure science is not the answer, Seward's role in the novel changes. He becomes little more than a background character, no longer playing a major role in the action. Seward represents pure, unadulterated science, of the kind that Madame Blavatsky believed was trying to create a monopoly on all knowledge considered valid in the modern world. However, in Theosophy as well as in the novel *Dracula*, science was only half of the equation. Just as both science and ancient wisdom were needed to defeat Dracula, both were needed in terms of the dogma of Theosophy to have a fully realized understanding of the world.

If Dr. Seward represents the perils of unchecked science, then Count Dracula represents unfettered superstition or ancient wisdom. Dracula is old, very old. When discussing the history of his country, he speaks of historical events as if he had actually been present at them; this makes him a vehicle for ancient wisdom since he has been literally alive since at least the 1400's,<sup>128</sup> if not longer. Van Helsing describes the Count as a “Soldier, statesman and alchemist—which latter was the highest development of the science—knowledge of his time. He had a mighty brain, a learning beyond compare, and a heart that knew no fear or remorse. He dared even to attend the Scholomance, and there was no branch of knowledge of his time that he

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<sup>127</sup> Greenway, 221

<sup>128</sup> The time of Vlad Tepish, the historical Dracula

did not essay.”<sup>129</sup> Dracula is privy to all manner of ancient wisdom. He has knowledge of alchemy, and at Scholomance was taught the secret language of nature and animals by the Devil himself. Theosophy held alchemy and alchemists in high regard,<sup>130</sup> and the secrets of nature were the very things that it sought to lay bare, but there is a huge difference between Dracula and Theosophy. In the above passage, the phrase “of his time” is significantly repeated twice. All Dracula has knowledge of is *ancient* wisdom; it is untempered by modern science, and thereby not the marriage of ancient and new wisdom that Theosophy and Van Helsing represent.

Dracula’s knowledge is stuck in the past, therefore, unchecked and dangerous. When examining Dracula’s library early in the novel, Harker notes that “there were books of the most varied kind—history, geography, politics, political economy, botany, geology, law—all relating to England and English life and customs and manners. There were even such books of reference as the London Directory, the ‘Red’ and ‘Blue’ books, Whitaker’s Almanack, the Army and Navy Lists and—it somehow gladdened my heart to see it—the Law List.”<sup>131</sup> We are provided with a fairly exhaustive list of Dracula’s reading material, yet not one of his books relates to the “hard” sciences of chemistry, biology, or physics, all of which were making tremendous strides during the time in which *Dracula* is set. It would seem that Dracula is ignorant of them and as such, represents antediluvian belief and knowledge run amuck in “modern” England, which leads to disastrous results.

The one time that Dracula makes a gesture towards science is when he attempts to ship fifty coffins filled with earth from his native Transylvania (necessary to sustain him away from

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<sup>129</sup> Stoker, 300

<sup>130</sup> *Isis Unveiled: Volume 1*, xxv. In her definition of alchemists, Blavatsky notes that many people have accused alchemists of charlatantry and false pretending. Surely such men as Roger Bacon, Agrippa, Henry Kunrath and the Arabian Geger (the first to introduce into Europe some of the secrets of chemistry), can hardly be treated as impostors, least of all fools.

<sup>131</sup> Stoker, 44

home) to London. The invoice notes that the earth is to be used for “experimental purposes.”<sup>132</sup> The term “experimental,” especially in this context, has a scientific connotation, but the science is a sham. It is just a cover to facilitate the importation of Dracula and his unfettered ancient knowledge into England. The message seems quite clear. Just as science without openness to other modes of knowledge is ineffectual, if not disastrous, then ancient wisdom without the check of real science can be cataclysmic. This reflects the increasing need for knowledge to be validated by science in order to be considered legitimate in the modern world.

*Harker, Van Helsing, and the Validation of Knowledge*

Looking at *Dracula* through the lens of Theosophy reveals an important detail about the way knowledge was legitimized in the world of the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. Increasingly, for an idea to be taken seriously it needed to have the approval of the scientific community. This was not just true for scientists, but for ordinary citizens with a modicum of education. For example, as a solicitor, Harker is educated and learned in the science of his day, though not to the point of Dr. Seward. He is proud of his status as one born and raised in the rational atmosphere of late nineteenth century Britain. Not only does Harker take pride in the diligence of British mapmakers and scoff at the inadequacies of Romanian maps and trains, but Stoker also takes every opportunity early in the novel to remind us of Harker’s rationality. Rather than attribute his sleepless nights in Romania to anything paranormal, he quite rationally blames them on an overly spicy dinner.<sup>133</sup> Beyond that, part of the reason he maintains such meticulous journal entries is to keep a hold on his sanity, which he would rather believe is slipping away than admit to the reality of things that cannot be killed by “mere modernity” and

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<sup>132</sup> Stoker, 232

<sup>133</sup> Stoker, 28

science. Only in the face of overwhelming evidence does he admit to even the remote possibility of the existence of the supernatural; yet even then, he continues desperately to seek rational explanations for what he has experienced. After his “escape” from Dracula, he is still willing to attribute his experiences to fever and delirium. As such, Harker seems to be an “everyman” version of Seward. He is not strictly a man of science like Dr. Seward, but is educated enough to not only privilege scientific knowledge above superstition, but to hold it as almost unshakeable even in the face of overwhelming evidence to the contrary.

Perhaps the grand irony of *Dracula* is that all the bloodshed, bloodsucking, and carnage could have been avoided had rational minded Harker listened to everything the Romanian peasants were literally and figuratively screaming at him from practically the first page of the novel. These peasants, living in Eastern Romania, a place untouched by science, cling to their ancient beliefs with the same fervor with which Seward and Harker adhere to modern science. Peasant upon peasant begs Harker not to go to Dracula’s castle; when he insists on going, they implore him to take some sort of protection, such as a cross. He dismisses their advice because, in his mind, these are the superstitions of ignorant peasants. However, these very same superstitions are part of what ultimately vanquishes Dracula. This leads to the inevitable question of why Harker flippantly dismisses the protective powers of crosses and garlic early in the novel, only to embrace them at the novel’s close. The answer lies in where the knowledge comes from at the end as opposed to the beginning of *Dracula*.

Whereas peasants are the purveyors of knowledge at the beginning, the same ancient wisdom comes from Dr. Van Helsing at the novel’s end. The first letter from Van Helsing to appear in Stoker’s narrative conglomerate introduces “Abraham Van Helsing, M.D, D.Ph, D. Lit,

etc, etc.”<sup>134</sup> Van Helsing has every known academic accreditation, and then some. Seward, a veritable paragon of science, introduces him to the reader. Van Helsing’s scientific and academic credentials seemingly make it acceptable for the rational non-scientists in the novel (Quincy, Jonathan and Mina Harker, and Arthur) to believe in what was previously downright unbelievable. This speaks volumes about what it takes for a belief to be seen as credible in the modern era. Increasingly, what was needed for an idea to be valid and believable was the approval of science.<sup>135</sup>

### Conclusion

Today we are experiencing a vampire renaissance in popular culture. The success of franchises such as *Twilight*, *True Blood*, and *The Vampire Diaries*, as well as the novels of Anne Rice, are testaments to the vampire’s renewed popularity. Although legends about vampires are timeless, Stoker’s novel thrust the vampire into popular consciousness. The same intellectual and cultural climate that produced *Dracula* also produced *Isis Unveiled*, and I argue Theosophy might have influenced Stoker’s masterpiece. As such, it is not a stretch to say that Madame Blavatsky is the great grandmother of modern vampires, such as Edward Cullen and Bill Compton.<sup>136</sup>

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<sup>134</sup> Stoker, 130

<sup>135</sup> We still see this today, oddly enough in television commercials. Fake doctors sell us aspirin and impostor dentists sell us toothpaste, but the public tends to believe them because they are wearing lab coats.

<sup>136</sup> Interestingly, Blavatsky discusses vampirism in *Isis Unveiled*. She devotes several pages to the question of whether vampirism is real or not, listing many examples of alleged cases of vampirism from both occult and medical traditions alike. Not surprisingly, Blavatsky believes in their existence (*Isis Unveiled* 455-460).

### CHAPTER 3

#### FEMMES FATALES AND REINCARNATED LOVERS: THEOSOPHY IN HAGGARD'S

#### AYESHA NOVELS

It is a quirk of pop culture history that two of the most successful movie franchises of the late- twentieth century owe a debt of gratitude to perhaps the most successful author of the early- twentieth century. The swaggering, swashbuckling hero Indiana Jones and the labyrinths of ruined cities he explores can trace their lineage back to the pages of H. Rider Haggard's fictions, such as *She* and *King Solomon's Mines*. Less obvious is the connection between Haggard and the James Bond series of books and films. Quite simply, every single Bond girl is a descendent of the original femme fatale, Haggard's Ayesha. Easily Haggard's most popular literary creation, Ayesha has origins almost as enigmatic as her character. Some critics have said she is the embodiment of the goddess Isis, while others view her as an analogue for the Queen of England, a white woman single handedly subduing entire African tribes.<sup>137</sup> Yet others have taken a more psychological approach, seeing Ayesha's terrible powers as a manifestation of Haggard's fear and hatred of women. For his part, Haggard once wrote that a particularly macabre doll his mother used to frighten him with as a child served as the inspiration for Ayesha. But there must be more to it than that.

In this chapter, I look at Ayesha, and the novels she appears in, through the lens of Theosophy, and outline a new way of viewing both. First, it must be understood that Haggard does not use Theosophy in any one coherent manner in his Ayesha novels. It is not a "middle way" between science and the spiritual, as in *Dracula*. Rather, Haggard picks and chooses those elements of Theosophical doctrine that work best in terms of the plots of his novels. The most prevalent of these is reincarnation, but there are others. There were many spiritualist belief

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<sup>137</sup> Katz, Wendy, Rider Haggard and the Fiction of Empire. (Great Britain: Cambridge UP, 1987) 125

systems that Haggard could have borrowed from, but he chose Theosophy. The reasons behind this choice are the first topic I explore. Next, I examine Ayesha as she appears across all the Ayesha novels and advance one more interpretation of this enigmatic character. Specifically, I will argue that she is a *fallen* Theosophical adept, stripped of her immortality but not her powers, and doomed to undergo the cycle of death and rebirth as punishment for a murder committed in a jealous rage. Finally, I discuss two of the four Ayesha novels, *She* and *She and Allan*, examining them from a Theosophical angle. I choose *She* because it is the most canonical of Haggard's Ayesha novels, and *She and Allan* because it best reflects Haggard's own attitudes towards spiritualism.

#### *Haggard's Ayesha Novels: A Summary*

Ayesha's first appearance is in 1887's *She*, as the despotic white ruler of a savage African tribe, the Amahagger. As the reader finds out, she is awaiting the return of the lover that she killed in a jealous rage over 2,000 years earlier. This lover, Kallikrates, returns in the person of Leo Vincey, but once again Ayesha fails to win him. Instead, she ends up burning in the Fire of Life that is supposed to renew her immortal youth and beauty. As Ayesha became an incredibly popular character and Haggard was very much interested in turning a profit, it was almost inevitable that he would revisit his most successful creation. However, none of his prequels or sequels approached the acclaim and popularity of the original. *Ayesha: The Return of She* was written a full eighteen years after *She* and is the novel's only true sequel. It finds a reincarnated Ayesha not ruling over a tribe in Africa, but instead lording it over a cult of worshippers high in the mountains of Tibet. Ayesha, through astral projection, communicates her new dwelling place to Leo Vincey and his foster father Horace Holly, who make the long journey to Tibet to see Ayesha again. There, they encounter not only Ayesha, but also the reincarnated Amenartas (in

the person of the Khania) for whom Leo/Kallikrates spurned Ayesha 2,000 years before. After the death of the Khania, Leo and Ayesha are at last reunited in a fiery death that is likely anything but permanent. H. Rider Haggard once again returns to Ayesha as a character in 1921's *She and Allan*. This was clearly an effort on his part to capitalize on two of his most popular characters, Ayesha and Allan Quartermain, the pragmatic adventurer and hero of *King Solomon's Mines*. Technically, this novel is a prequel to *She*, as it takes place before the arrival of Leo Vincey to Ayesha's ruined African city of Kor. Ayesha plays a relatively minor but important role in the novel. As in *Ayesha: The Return of She*, the temptress is radically different from what she had been in *She*. Whereas in the first novel readers were "encouraged to shudder at the prospect of Ayesha's remorseless, despotic rule being extended to the British Isles,"<sup>138</sup> in her two later appearances she is cast more or less as a good ruler. In *She and Allan*, the usually stoic Allan Quartermain pines over the various women death has taken from him. Needing to know whether or not he will encounter them again in an afterlife, he embarks on a quest, along with the Zulu Umslopogaas (another popular and recurring Haggard character), to find a "white witch" who holds the secrets to such things. After a great number of battles and adventures, including one in which he slays a giant on her behalf, Ayesha grants Allan and Umslopogaas a drug that allows them to foray briefly into the spirit world of the dead.

The final appearance of Ayesha in Haggard's works takes place in *Wisdom's Daughter*, published in 1923. The novel is told entirely from Ayesha's point of view and takes the reader from her earliest days up to her arrival in the ruined city of Kor. It is the weakest of the Ayesha novels, as it is full of strange inconsistencies. This makes the text exceedingly difficult to work with, as Ayesha warns that she might be lying to the reader, and if not lying deliberately, at least

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<sup>138</sup> Etherington, Norman. Rider Haggard. (Boston: Twayne Publishers, 1984) 64

obfuscating, or talking in parables.<sup>139</sup> Perhaps this is Haggard's effort to cover sloppy writing, but he "probably did not care. He had reached the endpoint with the fictional form that had provided his living for forty years."<sup>140</sup>

Critical Background and "Romance, Reincarnation and Rider Haggard"

Most criticism on Haggard focuses on two works, 1885's *King Solomon's Mines* and 1887's *She*. Haggard, however, was a prolific author, and over the course of his literary career produced well over twenty novels, which met with varying degrees of both critical and commercial success. These other works remain largely ignored by critics. When they engage them, they do so mostly through the lens of empire, as expressions of imperialism and colonialism. In her book *Rider Haggard and the Fiction of Empire*, Wendy R. Katz quite succinctly states that "Rider Haggard was an imperial propagandist, a man who made use of every opportunity to advance matters relating to the Empire."<sup>141</sup> She notes that the writer, five years prior to his death, wrote a letter to *The Times* essentially extolling himself as a devotee of country and champion of the imperial cause. Certainly Haggard's most famous work, *King Solomon's Mines*, lends itself to an imperialist reading. Within it there are elements of classical imperialism: "big game and diamonds conjure visions of boundless African wealth; the attribution of the ruins to vanished whites discounts African ability; the tyranny of the bad king is a caricature of savagery; and the death of the maiden conveniently removes the threat of miscegenation."<sup>142</sup> *She* is cut from the same imperial cloth. There is big game hunting and

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<sup>139</sup> This idea is first developed in *She and Allan*, in which Ayesha outright states "Have I not said that my words are like snowflakes, meant to melt and leave no trace, hiding my thoughts as this veil hides my beauty?" (174).

<sup>140</sup> Burdett, Carolyn. "Romance, Reincarnation and Rider Haggard," *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004)230

<sup>141</sup> Katz, 153

<sup>142</sup> Etherington 41

grossly stereotyped natives, the most noble of which is a cannibal and self-confessed necrophiliac, who admits to sleeping with the remains of the long dead.

These are the themes that dominate most scholarly writing on Haggard, and justifiably so since they pervade Haggard's fiction. If critics stray from these imperial themes and engage other aspects of Haggard's work, they tend to zero in on Ayesha. However, most if not all of these interpretations focus solely on *She*, and certainly none view the character of Ayesha through the lens of Theosophy, except for Carolyn Burdett's "Romance, Reincarnation and Rider Haggard," published in 2004.<sup>143</sup> It is an excellent article, the first that engages the Ayesha novels from the point of view of Theosophy. Burdett discusses Haggard's own tenuous relationship with spirituality and briefly explores his familiarity with Theosophy. She argues that part of his ambivalence toward spirituality was that he viewed it as vulgar and plebeian. Theosophy, as he saw it, was a spirituality that had a clear hierarchy and an element of elitism that rescued it from the commonness that tainted other spiritualisms of the day.<sup>144</sup> Much of Burdett's discussion of the Ayesha novels focuses on reincarnation, though she does mention other elements of Theosophy as they appear in the texts. In her discussion of *She*, she notes that Ayesha describes herself as a scientist rather than a mystic, a Theosophical distinction. Burdett also notes the Theosophical significance of the Tibetan locale of *Ayesha: The Return of She* and points out that Ayesha's dabbling in alchemy emphasizes her role as an adept or Master, one trained in the ways of Theosophy. However, much of Burdett's discussion of Ayesha outlines the ways in which it presents a "Christianity revitalized and reanimated by reincarnation."<sup>145</sup> She only briefly touches on Haggard's two other Ayesha novels, *She and Allan* and *Wisdom's*

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<sup>143</sup> Burdett, Carolyn. "Romance, Reincarnation and Rider Haggard," *The Victorian Supernatural* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2004)

<sup>144</sup> This strikes me as odd, because, as we have seen, Theosophy appealed to both the elite and the masses.

<sup>145</sup> Burdett, 229

*Daughter*. I agree, and commend Burdett for being the first to see the connection between Haggard and Theosophy. I wish to expand on some of her points by focusing more on Theosophy than she does. Although I will deal with some of the same episodes as Burdett, my discussion of them will focus specifically on Theosophy whereas she is only marginally interested in the subject. Because of this, *She and Allan* will figure more prominently in my argument than it does in Burdett's.

### Why Theosophy?

While H. Rider Haggard was by no means a Theosophist, he was certainly well acquainted with Spiritualism. In fact, he had a rather curious relationship with it. Carolyn Burdett points out that as a young man Haggard attended séances in London and followed with great interest the activities of the Society for Psychical Research. She adds that Haggard's autobiography, *The Days of My Life*, is littered with references to occult phenomena. Haggard tells the story of a dream he once had about the family dog being in danger, only to find out that the dog actually died around the same time that he had the dream. Additionally, he writes of events that he created in his fictions that later came to pass in his real life, and describes visions that he speculates might come from a previous life. As Burdett acknowledges, however, "these narratives of strange happenings are always hedged about with disclaimers."<sup>146</sup> Haggard dismisses these events as curiosities in which he has little faith. Burdett shows Haggard's admittedly ambiguous relationship with Spiritualism and occult phenomena, even in his own life. To this I add two examples, one from Haggard's personal journals and one from *She and Allan*, that hint at a more intimate familiarity with Theosophy proper.

In *She and Allan*, Haggard writes that one of the authors Allan Quartermain read in his fruitless efforts to commune with the dead was Emanuel Swedenborg. Haggard explains that

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<sup>146</sup> Burdett, 222

Allan “consulted Swedenborg, or rather samples of him, for he is very copious, but without satisfactory results.”<sup>147</sup> Peter Washington acknowledges that Swedenborg, who had died in 1772, was in many ways a forefather of Theosophy in his quest for “a serious theory of spiritual science” and his attempts to “locate the human soul and prove its immortality.”<sup>148</sup> It seems very likely that if Haggard was familiar with this earlier form of spiritualism he would also be acquainted with its more modern incarnation, especially since Theosophy was reaching its heyday as Haggard wrote *She*. More convincing perhaps is the following excerpt from Haggard’s journal, dated January 13<sup>th</sup>, 1919:

Yesterday we attended a lecture in Hastings given by Sir A. Conan Doyle in furtherance of his spiritualistic propaganda, and afterwards Doyle and his wife came to supper here. What he told us, both at the lecture and privately, was interesting; but I cannot say that it carried conviction to my mind. It may all be true, but the ‘spirits’ seem to be singularly reticent upon many important points. However, he believes in them most earnestly and preaches a most comfortable doctrine, so earnestly indeed that he travels all over England giving these lectures in order to make converts to this creed.<sup>149</sup>

As the above suggests, Doyle was an ardent spiritualist, which is ironic considering he was responsible for the creation of one of the most logical and rational minds in literature, Sherlock Holmes. Doyle was also a known associate of Edward L. Gardner, a prominent London Theosophist.<sup>150</sup> This selection from Haggard’s journal betrays the ambiguity that Burdett notes in “Romance, Reincarnation and Rider Haggard.” On one hand, Haggard acknowledges that Doyle’s beliefs are interesting and that there is an audience for them as evidenced by Doyle’s frequent lecturing. In fact, Haggard admits attending these lectures himself. Still, he cannot bring himself to believe fully in Doyle’s teachings, although it seems there is a part of him that

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<sup>147</sup> Haggard, H. Rider *She and Allan*. (New York: Quiet Vision Press, 2004) 2

<sup>148</sup> Peter Washington, *Madame Blavatsky’s Baboon*. (New York: Schocken Books, 1995) 13-14

<sup>149</sup> Haggard, H. Rider *The Private Diaries of Sir H. Rider Haggard*. ed. D.S Higgins (New York: Stein and Day, 1980) 160

<sup>150</sup> Clark, Jerome. *The Unexplained!* (Detroit: Visible Ink, 1999) 541

would like to believe. As Burdett points out, Haggard freely admits that reincarnation is the first article of belief for a full quarter of the world's population.<sup>151</sup> He is well aware of the prevalence of belief in reincarnation, and Theosophy was one of the guises in which reincarnation was being promulgated in Britain.

There may have also been a personal element to Haggard's ambivalent attitude toward spiritualism. Haggard's only son had died in 1891, and he was, of course, inconsolable. Haggard longed for a way to connect with the departed, an opportunity that his Anglicanism did not afford but that the séances of various spiritualisms claimed to provide. As we will see, this desire is apparent in *She and Allan*. Nevertheless, Haggard was concerned with the perceived vulgarity of mass spiritualism, though in his mind Theosophy was exempted from this charge. Despite his admitted experiences of the supernatural, Haggard was "horrified by the prospect of being associated with vulgar, decadent or primitive interests—all charges leveled at Spiritualism—let alone be thought irrational and superstitious."<sup>152</sup> The "new spiritualism," of which Theosophy is the pre-eminent example, "placed explicit emphasis on a secret spiritual tradition that could be accessed only by initiated elite. In both respects this marked a distinct break with spiritualism, which prided itself on straightforward message and non-elitist practice."<sup>153</sup> A spirituality that had elitist tendencies and also marketed itself as a science would no doubt be the one that Haggard would turn to in his writings, given his concerns about "vulgar" spiritualism and its irrational connotations.

However, there is much about Theosophy that enhanced Haggard's literary agenda as well. First, it was an organized belief system that allowed for the supernatural. Much, if not all, of what passes for the supernatural in Haggard can be found in the annals of Theosophy. By

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<sup>151</sup> Burdett, 224

<sup>152</sup> Burdett, 222

<sup>153</sup> Owen, Alex. *The Place of Enchantment*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 22

grounding his fantasy in a wildly popular doctrine, Haggard made the events in his fictions a bit more plausible. Beyond that, Theosophy “combined socialist and feminist ideals with [its] sophisticated esoteric philosophy”<sup>154</sup> and as such was a movement in which women could obtain substantial power. The founder of Theosophy was Madame Blavatsky, but the list of powerful Theosophical women extends well beyond her, including Annie Besant. Furthermore, Theosophy was a movement in which both “ordinary men and women were offered the chance to join the enlightened.”<sup>155</sup> There was no gender restriction as to who could seek enlightenment, and the Ascended Masters dispensed their wisdom to both men and women alike; Blavatsky herself claimed to have spent time studying with one in Tibet.<sup>156</sup> Theosophy allowed for powerful women, and Ayesha is nothing if not a powerful woman.

Although many spiritualist movements were prevalent in Britain when Haggard was writing his Ayesha novels, Theosophy is the one most likely to have exerted an influence on his work. It was a movement he was familiar with, and Theosophy’s elitist tendencies made it the most comfortable spiritualist movement for him. Additionally, Theosophy provided a readymade network of spiritualist beliefs and paranormal phenomena he could call upon in his fiction, and the movement’s popularity made it likely that they would be familiar to Haggard’s reading public. Finally, Theosophy allowed for powerful women, and its public face was an authoritative woman, Madame Blavatsky. It makes sense that Haggard would look to Theosophy when writing his own tale of a dominating woman, Ayesha.

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<sup>154</sup> Owen, Alex. *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989) 136

<sup>155</sup> *The Place of Enchantment*, 22

<sup>156</sup> Campbell, 55

*Ayesha, The Fallen Adept*

Ayesha dominates Haggard's four Ayesha novels, and I examine her as she appears across the four texts before I turn to each individually. There has been no shortage of interpretations of Ayesha or explanations of her nature. Norman Etherington suggests that she might be based on rumors Haggard could have heard while in Africa of a light-skinned African queen or perhaps the character was based on a ragdoll that terrified Haggard as a child. As to what Ayesha might represent, Etherington suggests possibly the "Eternal Feminine" or an unattainable dream of femininity.<sup>157</sup> Others have suggested that Ayesha is the embodiment of the Egyptian goddess Isis, or perhaps the Devil herself. To these I add that Ayesha is a fallen Theosophical adept, divested of her immortality but not her powers and condemned to undergo the cycle of death and rebirth that adepts and Masters have transcended. I freely admit that Blavatsky nowhere makes mention of a female Theosophical Adept, but this does not preclude the possibility of Ayesha being one. Theosophy certainly allows women to train with and learn the powers of an Adept, so a woman could master these powers. Beyond that, Theosophy was a belief system in which women could ascend to heights of great power, and it is difficult to believe that a woman would be barred from the heights of Adeptship. Haggard did not adopt Theosophy and its dogmas wholesale and weave his Ayesha tales around them. Ayesha does not stand in for Theosophy, but much about her is Theosophical. This was not only the spirituality that her author seemed the most comfortable with, but also the one best suited the needs of his supernatural adventure stories. Since his relationship to Theosophy was not that of a true believer, there was no reason for him not to take liberties with its tenets. If Theosophy did not explicitly mention a female Adept, or a fallen one, that need not have precluded Haggard from

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<sup>157</sup> Etherington, 87-88

projecting his harrowing vision of female power through the concept of a fallen Adept. In fact, there is much evidence for this in the Ayesha novels.

Quite clearly, Ayesha is a ridiculously powerful woman who is also incredibly ruthless. Such terribly powerful women inhabit Haggard's works beyond the Ayesha novels, though Ayesha is the supreme example. As Katz points out, "the numerous and conspicuously female rulers in Haggard's fiction deserve a discussion of their own, but we can say at least that these women appear to function as 'outsider' figures who are more susceptible to indulgent and even lavish fantasies of power."<sup>158</sup> A fallen Theosophical Adept fits into this mold of women overstepping or misusing their power and being punished for it. Much has been made of Haggard's disdain for women, and a woman incapable of handling the responsibilities of Theosophical Adeptship, and who is ultimately undone by two fits of jealousy, would dovetail with his treatment of women throughout his works. The concept of Ayesha as a fallen adept also makes sense in terms of the genre of literature into which *She* and its prequels and sequels fit. *She* has been categorized as a "Gothic adventure story," playing to a "Victorian fondness for archaic origins, secret societies and the Gothic,"<sup>159</sup> and one of the staples of the Gothic genre is a corrupted aristocrat.<sup>160</sup> Certainly an Ascended Master can be seen as the Theosophical equivalent of an aristocrat, as that is the highest and most pure incarnation to which a devotee of Theosophy can aspire. In *She*, Ayesha is a tyrannical monarch and anything but pure, the antithesis of what a proper Ascended Master should be. Blavatsky herself seems to allow for at least the possibility of a fallen adept or master, noting that arcane knowledge put to ill use is

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<sup>158</sup> Katz, 125

<sup>159</sup> *The Place of Enchantment*, 28

<sup>160</sup> Daniel Karlin refers to the novel as a Gothic romance in his introduction to the Oxford World's Classic edition of *She*.

“black magic” or “sorcery.” Such a claim can no doubt be leveled against Ayesha and the use to which she puts her powers.

From the first time a reader encounters her in *She*, Ayesha sounds like someone with knowledge of Theosophy. One of the first things she “teaches” Holly is that there is no such thing as death, rather there is only change. As Burdett points out, “Holly’s first lesson is thus of reincarnation,”<sup>161</sup> perhaps the central tenet of Theosophical belief. Furthermore, when explaining her perceived clairvoyance, Ayesha describes it as “no magic; that is a fiction of ignorance: There is no such thing as magic; though there is such a thing as a knowledge of the secrets of nature... In Arabia and in Egypt the sorcerers knew it centuries ago.”<sup>162</sup> Ayesha’s explanation strongly echoes Blavatsky’s Theosophical credo that “We believe in no Magic which transcends the scope and capacity of the human mind, nor miracle whether divine or diabolical, if such imply a transgression of the laws of nature.”<sup>163</sup> Ayesha sounds very much like a Theosophical Adept explaining to a would-be disciple that her powers are not magical, but the result of an ancient wisdom now lost.<sup>164</sup> These powers, and more importantly Ayesha’s long life span, both fit into the doctrines of Theosophy.

Of course, Ayesha speaks often of reincarnation because it is essential to the plot of all four novels in which she appears. It not only sets the plot of *She* in motion, but Ayesha herself is reincarnated at the beginning of *Ayesha: The Return of She*; there, in addition to Ayesha and Leo we meet yet another reincarnated character, the Khania. However, reincarnation does not explain the 2,000-year-old Ayesha that inhabits the Caves of Kor in *She*.<sup>165</sup> Holly points out as much

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<sup>161</sup> Burdett, 226

<sup>162</sup> *She* 140

<sup>163</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, v

<sup>164</sup> *She*, 187. Ayesha also tells Holly: “I tell thee I deal not in magic- There is no such thing. ‘Tis only a force that thou dost not understand.” This is also a very Theosophical explanation of magic.

<sup>165</sup> Over the course of the four Ayesha novels, Haggard leaves unclear what is the cause of Ayesha’s long life. In *Wisdom’s Daughter*, as in *She*, Ayesha attributes it to the Fire of Life. Complicating this is the fact that Ayesha

when he says to her, “even if we must be born again and again, that is not so with thee.”<sup>166</sup>

Theosophy, however, does provide a mechanism for the immortality and power of Ayesha, which Haggard could tweak to serve his purposes. Along with reincarnation, Theosophy allowed for belief in Masters or Adepts who have reached the supreme height of Theosophical evolution of the spirit. In fact, “the modern Theosophical movement is based on teachings that Helena Petrovna Blavatsky received from living men she called adepts, Masters, or Mahatmas.” According to Blavatsky and other Theosophists, Masters were said to dwell in the mountains of Tibet, live to a great age and be men “who were perfected in former periods of evolution and thus serve as models of human development. They have gone through the training necessary to develop many unseen and hidden powers.”<sup>167</sup> They are “beings whose rigorous esoteric training and absolute purity have invested them with supernatural powers.... the Masters can inhabit material or semi-material bodies at will (this point is not quite clear) and possess powers which enable them to move about the universe exercising their thaumaturgic and clairvoyant skills.”<sup>168</sup> When questioned by Holly about the nature of her powers, Ayesha replies, “we are all spirits, and I, perhaps, more than others.”<sup>169</sup> What this means in terms of Theosophy is that she is more “highly evolved” than Leo, Holly or anyone else for that matter. In Theosophy, the spirit as well as the body could evolve, and those with the most highly evolved spirits became Adepts or Masters. Being a fallen ascended master would account for the clairvoyance and long life we see in *She*. In fact, there is evidence for this in *She*'s prequel, *Wisdom's Daughter*.

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prefaces *Wisdom's Daughter* with statements like “all these stories do not agree together, since often I speak them as parables, or in order to tell to each that which he would wish to hear or to hide my mind for my own purposes.”

<sup>166</sup> *She*, 139

<sup>167</sup> Campbell, 54

<sup>168</sup> Washington, 34

<sup>169</sup> Haggard, H. Rider. *Ayesha: The Return of She*. (Utah: Waking Lion Press, 2006) 235

In *Wisdom's Daughter*, Ayesha states that “the channel through which wisdom flowed into her heart was a certain Noot.”<sup>170</sup> Noot was “always aged and white haired, ugly to look on with a curious wrinkled face the color of parchment”<sup>171</sup> and promised to teach her “the knowledge of the secrets of the gods; spells that will sway the hearts of kings, magic that will show things afar and call ghosts from the grave, power that will set him who wields it upon the pinnacle of worship.”<sup>172</sup> He spoke nothing of his race or country, and it is said that he was “born beyond this earth.” On a superficial level, one of the most prominent Theosophical masters was Koot Hoomi, and Noot sounds very similar to Koot. In addition, adepts or masters were said to have transcended the boundaries of race and country. However, a more important point is present here. This is precisely how Theosophical knowledge flowed, from ascended master to student. Upon completing normal human development, meaning shedding their corporeal body and completing full spiritual evolution, adepts could “permit some individuals who fulfill certain conditions to become their disciples.”<sup>173</sup> In theory, a disciple should have a caring, loving and selfless nature.<sup>174</sup> This qualification seems a far cry from the Ayesha we encounter in *She*, but it reinforces my reading of Ayesha as a fallen adept and helps to make sense of the novel’s climactic scene.

Critics have long debated the significance of what happens to Ayesha at the end of *She*. She bathes in the Fire of Life with the intent of renewing her longevity, but instead she shrinks and ages, becoming withered and inhuman, with talons instead of hands. In rapid succession she is described as “turning into a monkey,” “no larger than a baboon” and “no larger than a big

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<sup>170</sup> Haggard, H. Rider. *Wisdom's Daughter* (New York: Dodo Press, 2005) 23

<sup>171</sup> *Wisdom's Daughter*, 15

<sup>172</sup> *Wisdom's Daughter*, 19

<sup>173</sup> Bruce F. Campbell, *Ancient Wisdom Revived*. (Los Angeles: Berkeley UP, 1980)

<sup>174</sup> Perhaps Ayesha once had such a benevolent nature, but being spurned by her beloved, killing him in a jealous rage and spending thousands of years in isolation seems to have warped her.

monkey.”<sup>175</sup> To see this as a punishment one can view what happens to Ayesha both through the lens of Theosophy and in terms of the plot of Haggard’s novel. It is possible that two thousand years before the events of *She*, the female ascended master Ayesha fell in love with Kallikrates. Masters could “voluntarily incarnate in human bodies to form the connecting link between human and superhuman beings,”<sup>176</sup> so perhaps she did this. She then killed him in a jealous rage, which fits in with Haggard’s depiction of women in his work. Her behavior also violates what it means to be an ascended master, as these beings were meant to be “perfectly chaste, perfectly abstemious, and indifferent to physical luxury.”<sup>177</sup> As punishment, Ayesha is stripped of her immortality, the true hallmark of an adept, but not her powers, and takes up residence in the Caves of Kor.<sup>178</sup> According to Blavatsky, one does not have to be an Ascended Master to employ supernatural powers. Those who were aware of and understood the ancient wisdom that Theosophy preached could employ such powers to varying degrees. Certainly a fallen Adept would remain aware of these gifts, explaining Ayesha’s continued ability to employ them in *She* and its most direct sequel, *Ayesha: The Return of She*. The real indignity is the fact that Ayesha must still endure the cycle of death and rebirth. However, Ayesha has yet to die. She only suffers death after attempting to bathe in the Fire of Life, *something she survived before*.

Then why does she undergo such a violent devolution? This change makes the most sense if she is being punished for abusing her powers and committing murder in a jealous rage for a second time. Recall that Ayesha struck down Leo’s Armhaggar bride Ustane because she dared love Leo. Clearly, Ayesha did not learn her lesson the first time and now she must endure

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<sup>175</sup> *She*, 257

<sup>176</sup> Campbell, 55

<sup>177</sup> Campbell, 55

<sup>178</sup> It is not clear whether this exile is voluntary or not, but judging from the pining curiosity with which she interrogates Holley about the outside world it seems not to be. Plus, if Ayesha is in fact a fallen adept newly vulnerable to death, a remote cave surrounded by people she can intimidate seems a smart place to hide

death rather than the mere threat of death.<sup>179</sup> The type of death Ayesha undergoes is telling. The evolutionary implication is manifest: Ayesha is regressing through the stages of evolution. However, Theosophy acknowledged Darwinian evolution as only one phase of a multi-step evolutionary process. With this in mind, it seems as if Ayesha has been knocked down several rungs on the evolutionary ladder from her ascended perch, an ignoble fate for one who has reached the highest level of Theosophical evolution. Worse still, she must begin the long climb back up the ladder via evolution, which she does in *Ayesha: The Return of She*.

Ayesha's Theosophical powers are more apparent in *Ayesha: The Return of She* than in *She*. In fact, Carolyn Burdett acknowledges that "in *Ayesha: The Return of She*, Ayesha's role as an adept is continually emphasized."<sup>180</sup> As evidence of this claim, she points to Ayesha's dabbling in alchemy, "the most celebrated of occult practices,"<sup>181</sup> belief in which can most certainly be ascribed to Theosophy. Here, I wish offer a close reading of the alchemy episode in *Ayesha: The Return of She* as well as examine two other powers Ayesha employs that Blavatsky quite clearly attributes to Theosophical adepts.

Simply put, alchemy was the pseudoscience of transmuting metals other than gold into gold. Blavatsky attributes to alchemy a very long history, claiming that it is as old as tradition itself:

The first authentic record on the subject," says William Godwin "is an edict of Diocletian, about 300 years after Christ, ordering a diligent search to be made in Egypt for all the ancient books which treated of the art of making gold and silver, that they might be consigned to the flames. This edict necessarily presumes a certain antiquity to the pursuit; and fabulous history has recorded Solomon, Hermes, and Pythagoras among its distinguished votaries."<sup>182</sup>

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<sup>179</sup> This also might help to explain why the normally trigger happy Ayesha chooses to exile Ustane before executing her. Perhaps she was trying to avoid such a fate?

<sup>180</sup> Burdett, 227

<sup>181</sup> Burdett, 227

<sup>182</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 503

There is an entire chapter in *Ayesha: The Return of She* entitled “Ayesha’s Alchemy,” in which Holly and Leo witness firsthand Ayesha’s ability to transmute metals into gold. Upon seeing such a transformation, Holly’s reaction is to assume that the transmutation is the result of magic. Noticing this response, Ayesha remarks, “Holly here, after his common fashion, believes that this is magic, but I tell thee again that there is no magic, only that which I have chanced to win.”<sup>183</sup> Ayesha is suggesting that what *appears* to be magical is really the result of some ancient wisdom that she discovered during her two thousand years on Earth. Presumably, the secrets of alchemy were once common but are now lost to history, or so Madame Blavatsky and Ayesha would have us believe. Ayesha disavows magic in a Theosophical manner, echoing the credo, contained in the preface to *Isis Unveiled*, that “we believe in no Magic which transcends the scope and capacity of the human mind, nor in ‘miracle’, whether divine or diabolical, if such imply a transgression of the laws of nature instituted for all eternity.”<sup>184</sup> Both Blavatsky and Ayesha are saying that there are no miracles and that the world has to obey the laws of nature.<sup>185</sup>

In *Ayesha: The Return of She*, Ayesha employs two other abilities beyond alchemy that are attributed to Theosophical adepts.<sup>186</sup> As a reincarnated master, she no doubt has a great understanding of Theosophy and its powers and can still employ them, as Theosophy teaches a select few can do. What sets the plot of the novel in motion is a dream Leo Vincey has in which

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<sup>183</sup> *Ayesha: The Return of She*, 259

<sup>184</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, v

<sup>185</sup> Interestingly, H. Rider Haggard provides his reader with a footnote (as he does from time to time) in his alchemy chapter to explain how Ayesha’s alchemy might have come to pass. He has his fictional editor suggest that perhaps the transmutation “owed its origin to the emanations from radium, or some kindred substances. Although in the year 1885, Mr. Holly would have known nothing of these marvelous rays or emanations, doubtless Ayesha was familiar with them and their enormous possibilities, of which our chemists and scientific men have, at present, but explored the fringe.” This attempt to recast something magical and mystical as misunderstood science is very much in line with what Theosophy was all about. What might seem miraculous really was not, as all processes were governed by nature.

<sup>186</sup> Well before any of these episodes, Holly is engaged in conversation with an old shaman, who is also a physician. When the shaman introduces himself as such, Holly deliberately mishears him and asks “Did you say physician or magician?” The shaman’s response leads Holly to conclude that “here physician and magician mean the same thing,” which introduces a central idea of Theosophy long before Ayesha actually appears in the novel. This blurring of the line between science and spiritualism is what Theosophy is really all about.

Ayesha seemingly beckons him to Tibet to find her. Carolyn Burdett reads Vincey's dream as simply that, a dream.<sup>187</sup> However, I would argue it is much more akin to astral projection, a phenomenon intimately associated with Theosophy. It involves sending out one's "astral body"<sup>188</sup> or "spiritual self" over great distances, which is precisely what happens in *Ayesha: The Return of She*. Reincarnated in Tibet, Ayesha yearns to find her reincarnated Kallikrates, Leo Vincey, once again. In order to do so Ayesha sends Leo, who is in Britain, a vision of herself and the mountain in which she now dwells. Not only that, but as Leo Vincey tells Holly, "Then she glided away, and Horace, my spirit seemed to loose itself from the body and be given the power to follow. We passed swiftly eastward, over lands and seas."<sup>189</sup> Clearly, not only can Ayesha project herself, but also she can control and manipulate the astral self of one who is not an adept.<sup>190</sup> As Blavatsky writes, "there is no reason why the adepts, the alchemists, the savants of secret art should not have already found out that which scientists deny to-day, but may discover true tomorrow, *i.e.*, how to project electrically their astral bodies, in an instant, through thousands of miles of space, leaving their material shells."<sup>191</sup> Blavatsky's words provide an exact description of what Ayesha does. Since it is an ability that Blavatsky attributes to adepts, it stands to reason that Ayesha is an adept, or at least a former one who retained some of her knowledge.

The final episode I wish to discuss involves Ayesha's control over nature. Even in *She*, Ayesha is intimately associated with nature. Bilali compares her will to a force of nature, and her dwelling place in Kor is described as a sort of natural castle. According to Theosophy,

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<sup>187</sup> Burdett, 227

<sup>188</sup> The "astral body" is distinct from the "Buddhi" or "astral soul". The "astral body" is one of the four constituent parts of a person's physical self and is essentially a ghostlike double of the corporeal body.

<sup>189</sup> *Ayesha: The Return of She*, 8

<sup>190</sup> Astral projections appear repeatedly in *Wisdom's Daughter* and are just as essential to the plot, if not more, than they are in *Ayesha: The Return of She*.

<sup>191</sup> *Isis Unveiled II*, 620

an adept, aside from being able to “control the sensations and alter the conditions of the physical and astral bodies of other persons not adepts...can also govern and employ, as he chooses, the spirits of the elements.” Adepts could also “stimulate the natural movements of plants and animals in a preternatural degree.”<sup>192</sup> To achieve her victory over the Khania, Ayesha unleashes the full fury of nature on her enemies in the form of a violent hurricane. Before this cataclysm is unleashed, Holly observes that “it was as though all Nature around us were a living creature which was very much afraid.”<sup>193</sup> While Theosophy nowhere teaches that an Adept can influence the winds and rain, it would not be a stretch to argue that they can. *Isis Unveiled* explicitly states that an Adept could influence plants and animals, and they are certainly part of nature. In the preceding passage from *Ayesha: The Return of She*, all of Nature is likened to a scared animal, which Ayesha would no doubt be able to influence. A further indication that Ayesha could affect nature can be found in Madame Blavatsky’s description of natural elementals in *Isis Unveiled*:

The third class are the ‘elementals’ proper, which never evolve into human beings, but occupy as it were, a specific step of the ladder of being, and by comparison with the others, may properly be called nature-spirits, or cosmic agents of nature, each being confined to its own element and never transgressing the bounds of others.<sup>194</sup>

Blavatsky goes on to say that these elementals are essentially astral forms devoid of a body or immortal spirit. Ayesha can affect an astral body, as she did when guiding Leo to Tibet, so it stands to reason that she could also influence the elemental astral bodies of nature. As we have seen, Haggard is not concerned with a strict application of Theosophical doctrine, according to which the abilities of its adepts may be set in stone. Rather, Theosophy seems to provide a loose framework from which Haggard is picking and choosing, consciously or not. Theosophy was the

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<sup>192</sup> *Isis Unveiled, Volume II*, 590

<sup>193</sup> *Ayesha: The Return of She*, 283

<sup>194</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 311

spiritualism with which he felt most at ease. Due in part to its perceived elitism and in part to its ostensible foundations in science, Theosophy was the spiritualism that Haggard found most acceptable. The fantastic elements of his fictions were still zesty, but at the same time somewhat less fantastic and “safer” when grounded in Theosophy. With it as his loose guideline, it is quite plausible that Haggard mixed some elements of Theosophy with his own anxieties about women and spiritualism and came up with Ayesha, the fallen adept.

His ambivalence towards all manners of spiritualism is alluded to by Burdett, who quotes the following entry in his journal: “Mysticism in moderation adds a certain zest to life and helps to lift it above the commonplace. But it is at best a dangerous sea to travel for the time.”<sup>195</sup>

Haggard’s point on mysticism can just as easily serve as a theory on fiction. Haggard’s adventure stories are supernatural, but the fantastic elements are not terribly farfetched. Ayesha repeatedly states that her abilities are the result of an advanced knowledge of science and nature. Theosophy filled in the details of how this was possible and was the ideal belief system to do so. Theosophy’s mission statement was to explain the spiritual in terms of science, and it was popular. Although Haggard never tells them to do so, Haggard’s readership could explain to themselves Ayesha’s powers in terms of Theosophy, thus making the mystical content of his novels a bit less mystical.

#### *Theosophy as a “Key” to She*

Incorporating Theosophy into a reading of the Ayesha novels allows one to view this curious figure in a new guise, that of a fallen Theosophical adept, but what does it do for readings of the novels as a whole? It would be simplistic to say that Ayesha represents Theosophy and characters such as Holley, Leo, and Allan Quartermain stand for various points on the spectrum between skeptic and believer. Haggard’s use of Theosophy is not as dogmatic as

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<sup>195</sup>Burdett, 222

that. Although Ayesha is informed by and indebted to Theosophy, she is never Theosophy incarnate in the same way that Van Helsing is in *Dracula*. Nevertheless, viewing the Ayesha novels through the lens of Theosophy sheds new light on certain episodes and characters. I will discuss *She*, the most popular Ayesha novel, and *She and Allan*, in which Ayesha comes closest to being a stand-in for Theosophy itself.

Haggard's novel *She* relies heavily on Egypt in terms of plot. The story is set in motion by Horace Holly's receipt of a shard of Egyptian pottery, along with a note from Leo Vincey's father assuring him that one of Leo's ancestors was "an Egyptian priest of Isis, though he was himself of Greek extraction, and was called Kallikrates."<sup>196</sup> In its early days, Theosophy borrowed heavily from the religion and images of Ancient Egypt, though later it would rely more heavily on the religions of India and the Far East for its dogmas.<sup>197</sup> This shift from the Egyptian to the more remote orient also occurs between Haggard's *She* and *Ayesha: The Return of She*, which shifts its focus from Egypt to Tibet. As Burdett points out, "the importance of Tibet as a center for occult philosophy had been widely popularized, both through the notoriety of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and by Alfred Stinnet's influential books."<sup>198</sup> This assessment is certainly correct, but Burdett makes no mention of *She*'s Egyptian overtones in terms of Theosophy. What caused Kallikrates's ultimate demise was that he broke his vows as a priest of Isis in order to marry the Egyptian princess Amenartas. This is not the only reference to Isis in the novel, as Ayesha is repeatedly associated with snakes and described in serpentine terms in *She*. The obvious connotation is Biblical, but the snake was also the animal most sacred to Isis in Egyptian religion. Of course, the very name Isis has great import in Theosophy, as the seminal

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<sup>196</sup> *She*, 18

<sup>197</sup> As Peter Washington mentions, the first official meeting of the Theosophical Society was actually a meeting on Egyptian mysticism, and a general "Egyptian air" pervaded the society up to and including the publication of *Isis Unveiled*.

<sup>198</sup> Burdett, 220

Theosophical text is *Isis Unveiled*. Perhaps these allusions to Isis and Egypt are Haggard's "veiled" references to *Isis Unveiled*, or at the very least, an acknowledgment of the "Egyptomania" that was sweeping the nation at the time.

There are two particular passages in the novel that an understanding of Theosophy allows us to read in a new way. Early in the novel, Holly and Leo have to open a mysterious chest willed to Leo by his late father. Haggard describes the keys used to open this box as follows:

There were three of them: the largest, a comparatively modern key, the second an exceedingly ancient one, and the third entirely unlike anything of the sort that we had ever seen before, being fashioned apparently from a strip of solid silver, with bar placed across to serve as a handle, and some nicks cut in the edge of the bar. It was more like a model of some antediluvian railway key than anything else.<sup>199</sup>

Burdett reads this scene with a focus on the chest, saying "The chests within chests that contain the sherd, and the wrapped sherd itself, contribute to a motif of unveiling; of the sherd, of Ayesha, of history and of truth."<sup>200</sup> I would also call attention to the keys and their descriptions, which are a perfect allegory for Blavatsky's view of Theosophy. The first key that must be used is described as distinctly modern, and I believe this stands in for modern knowledge and scientific understanding. Blavatsky acknowledges the importance of modern scientific knowledge, giving credence to Darwin and other scientists of the day, but this is not the only key that must be used to gain access to the contents of the box, or true understanding in our allegory. After using the modern key to unlock or "get past" a modern conception of the world, Holly must then use the key described as ancient. Blavatsky's respect for the knowledge of the ancients is manifest in *Isis Unveiled*. She cites Greeks such as Pythagoras and the Hindus as preservers of an ancient wisdom mostly lost to the modern world. Only by using and understanding the knowledge of the ancients, represented by the second key, can one gain access

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<sup>199</sup> *She*, 31

<sup>200</sup> Burdett, 225

to ancient wisdom. The key that unlocks the innermost box is described as looking like an ancient silver railway key, unlike anything they had ever seen before. This is because what it unlocks is unlike modern scientific understanding or ancient knowledge, but somehow nestled at the core of both. Such a reading of the passage is both appropriate and distinctly Theosophical.

The second passage I would call attention to involves Leo's education. Leo's father leaves Holly specific instructions that Leo be instructed in "Greek, the higher mathematics and Arabic."<sup>201</sup> These three "languages" take on a specific significance in terms of Theosophy. Arabic is the language of the Middle East, where Theosophy initially looked for its doctrines and beliefs before turning further east. Blavatsky holds the Ancient Greeks, particularly Pythagoras, in high regard as conveyors of her ancient wisdom, albeit in veiled forms. So, it would seem that Leo is to learn two languages that will allow him to become intimately familiar with Theosophy, or at least the ancient texts important to it. Of course, math is the universal language, and its importance to Theosophy is made evident by Blavatsky in the following passage:

The harmony and mathematical equiformity of the double evolution- spiritual and Physical- are elucidated only in the universal numerals of Pythagoras, who built his system entirely upon the so-called metrical speech of Hindu *Vedas*...In both the esoteric significance is derived from the number: in the former, from the mystic relation of every number to everything intelligible to the human mind; in the latter, from the number of syllables of which each verse in the mantra consists.<sup>202</sup>

For Blavatsky, proof of both the indestructibility of matter and the immortality of the spirit lies in the universal language of mathematics, and she uses the connection between Greek and Hindu (Eastern) esoteric traditions to argue this point. Leo Vincey would be in an excellent position to understand this and other Theosophical truths once armed with an understanding of Greek,

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<sup>201</sup> *She*, 25-26

<sup>202</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 9

Arabic, and mathematics. The reality, however, is that Leo Vincey is not terribly bright and he is never fully able to grasp the mysteries of Ayesha.<sup>203</sup>

What, then, of the two men who follow Ayesha across the span of two continents and two novels, Ludwig Horace Holly and his foster ward, Leo Vincey? Both ultimately end up believing in her and her powers to varying degrees, but they each relate to her in a different way. These are perhaps the most interesting points of comparison. Whereas it is too specific a claim to say that Ayesha represents Theosophy, it is certainly clear that she stands in for some aspect of the supernatural. When confronted with the Egyptian evidence that delineates his ancestry and first posits the existence of Ayesha, Leo is ready to set out for Africa right then and there. Similarly, Leo takes the first piece of evidence that seems to corroborate his father's story (the Ethiopian's head) as proof positive that the tale is true. Holly also ends up believing in Ayesha and her powers, so much so that he is willing to embark on a second quest to find her in *Ayesha: The Return of She*. However, Haggard makes it very clear that Holly is far more pragmatic and intelligent than Leo. Holly's belief is born of soul searching and confrontation with that which cannot be but somehow is, much like Harker in *Dracula*. Conversely, Leo's belief is born of blind (or dumb) faith. Of course, they are two standard models of believing, but to understand them fully in terms of the novel one must examine the nature of both Leo's and Holly's relationship with Ayesha. Leo is Ayesha's reincarnated beloved Kallikrates. Obviously she loves him passionately, but it is a relationship over which Leo has very little control. He is destined to be with Ayesha and is just along for the ride. He loves Ustane but this matters not to Ayesha, so Leo's wife is first ostracized and then executed. Leo's relationship to Ayesha is very

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<sup>203</sup> In fact, one of the main complaints against *She* upon its publication was that Vincey seemed too stupid for someone of Ayesha's ageless wisdom to be attracted to him. This prompted Haggard to put a qualifying statement in the preface to the novel, proffering that perhaps Ayesha was so all powerful that she saw potential in Leo when no one else saw any.

much that of a subordinate, despite her rhetoric. At times it is almost parental, as she nurses Leo back to health. Rarely, if at all, do the couple engage in any sort of meaningful dialogue. This is not the case with Ayesha and Holley, whose intellect and pragmatism Haggard has taken great pains to establish.<sup>204</sup> It is Holly who engages her in philosophical and religious discussions, not Leo. As such, it seems that Holly has the more substantial and reciprocal relationship with Ayesha, as opposed to the passion-fueled, but essentially empty, one-sided relationship she has with Leo. Might Haggard be saying something about the nature of belief in a post-Darwin era? Leo believes blindly and immediately, while it takes Holley longer to do so. They both arrive at more or less the same place, but Holly's route leads him to question and challenge Ayesha. Eventually he comes to believe that she and her powers are otherworldly, but he does not come to this conclusion easily.<sup>205</sup> As we have seen, Haggard had a tenuous relationship with the supernatural, and perhaps this is his way of cautioning others to view the emerging spiritualist movements of the day (including Theosophy) with skepticism. Haggard does not condemn them outright, as the skeptical inquirer Holley ends up a believer, but before doing so he engages Ayesha on an intellectual level. By taking a cerebral, as opposed to an emotional, approach to Ayesha (the supernatural) as Leo does, Holley ends up with a more substantial relationship to her. This may very well have been influenced by Haggard's own feelings towards the supernatural, which are much more on display in *She and Allan*.

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<sup>204</sup> In *Ayesha: The Return of She* Ayesha reveals that Holley might be the reincarnation of her wisest tutor from her days in Arabia.

<sup>205</sup> An early hint that Holley will ultimately believe Ayesha is supernatural may be found in the nickname given him by Bilali. Holley is called "baboon" by the Armhaggard people. Most read this as further emphasis on Holley's physical ugliness, which Haggard admittedly emphasizes. However, in Egyptian mythology the baboon was believed to be an incarnation of Toth, the god of writing and magical spells.

*She and Alan.....and Haggard*

If Ayesha is the most enduring of Haggard's characters, a good argument can be made that Allan Quartermain is the most popular. This was certainly true when Haggard was writing, as Allan Quartermain appears in fifteen of his novels, as opposed to the four in which Ayesha has a role. In many ways, Quartermain is the character most similar to Haggard. Unlike the Cambridge-taught Holly, Quartermain is not very educated and certainly does not engage in philosophical discussions. Out of his seven brothers, only Rider Haggard was denied a proper schooling and never really distinguished himself academically. Quartermain's similarity to Haggard is also evident in the way both deal with the world of the spiritual. Holly ends up an awe-inspired believer in Ayesha's otherworldliness, although he takes some convincing. Quartermain requires substantially more persuasion. As Wendy Katz puts it in her chapter on Haggard and spiritualism in *Rider Haggard and the Fiction of Empire*, "Quartermain is continually represented as a pragmatic man whose serious misgivings about strange phenomena disappear following bizarre but thoroughly convincing experiences."<sup>206</sup> It seems as if this is what Haggard would have loved to have happen to him. He was no doubt skeptical about spiritualism but unquestionably found it alluring. He attended lectures and séances, especially early in his life. According to a Haggard biographer,

Haggard clearly implies that these séances disturbed him considerably, and after one of the more ghostly meetings had had quite enough and chucked the whole business. 'Since those days were nearly forty years ago,' he later wrote, 'I wonder whether the whole thing was illusion, or, if not, what it can have been.....I do not believe that it was a case of trickery; rather I am inclined to think that certain forces.....were set loose....which, perhaps had their real origin in our minds, but nevertheless were true phenomena.'<sup>207</sup>

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<sup>206</sup> Katz, 119

<sup>207</sup> Cohen, Martin. *Rider Haggard: His Life and Works*. (New York: Walker and Co.) 27

Clearly, Haggard was unsure what to think of what he saw, and this ambivalence seems to have dogged him his whole life. As the above passage reveals, he was wary of the legitimacy of what he witnessed, but he was also somewhat in awe of the possibility that it might be real. It seems as if, like his fictional character Allan Quartermain, Haggard needed to be blown away by thoroughly convincing evidence. Haggard wants to believe, and most of the time he lets Quartermain end up doing the believing for him. However, I would argue that the one exception is *She and Allan*, as Allan Quartermain remains thoroughly unconvinced at the end of the novel. This might be because the subject matter of the novel, communing with dead loved ones, hit close to home for Haggard.

Other critics have noted that the Allan Quartermain who appears in *She and Allan* is very different from the figure in Haggard's other Quartermain novels. Etherington notes that "schoolboy readers of *King Solomon's Mines* must have been amazed to find their thick-skinned hero mooning about in search of a drug that will put him in touch with dead lovers."<sup>208</sup> As the novel begins, Quartermain is pining away for the several women death has taken from him. He consults a Zulu witch doctor to find out whether he will meet them again in the hereafter, and the witch doctor ultimately tells him to seek out Ayesha. Because this episode is such a radical departure from Quartermain's usual stoicism, it is worth examining. Haggard wrote *She and Allan* in 1921, four years before his death. Quartermain's desire for knowledge suggests an aging Haggard wondered if he would see his own dead son in the afterlife. His son's death haunted Haggard, and for a man like him, both uncertain and fascinated by spiritualism, it seems very likely that, like Quartermain, he might have used some form of it to try and contact his son. Up until the end of his life, Haggard remained unconvinced, as Quartermain is in *She and Allan*.

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<sup>208</sup> Etherington, 64

As I have argued, one of the spiritualisms that Haggard was familiar with was Theosophy. Although it does not play one clearly defined role in the novels, it provides a structural account of fantastic phenomena that, in Haggard's mind, was more "respectable" than most others were. Haggard once again calls on Theosophy in *She and Allan*, this time to explain the radical change in Allan Quartermain's demeanor that we are greeted with at the beginning of the novel. Chapter One begins with Allan Quartermain telling the reader:

I believe it was the old Egyptians, a very wise people, probably indeed much wiser than we know, for in the leisure of their ample centuries they had time to think out things, who declared that each individual personality is made up of six or seven different elements, although the Bible only allows us three, namely body, soul and spirit. The body that the man or woman wore, if I understand their theory aright, which perhaps I, an ignorant person, do not, was a kind of a sack or fleshy covering containing these different principles.<sup>209</sup>

Much about this introductory statement sounds Theosophical, or at least like the jumbled and misguided view of Theosophy that Allan Quartermain, who has no time for the whisps and phantoms of spiritualism, might develop. Wendy R. Katz notes that "Quartermain is the most scientific of Haggard's characters,"<sup>210</sup> and a spirituality that also claimed to be a science would appeal to a man like him, in much the same way that it appealed to Haggard. In the above passage, all the elements of Theosophy are present. The belief is attributed to the Egyptians, who it is inferred may very well have had a culture far wiser and more learned than has been realized. As we have seen, Theosophy looked back to Egypt as a storehouse of ancient wisdom, especially during the Theosophical Society's early days. Furthermore, Quartermain's understanding that "each individual personality is made up of six or seven different elements" could be directly culled from Theosophy. Theosophical doctrine teaches that man is in fact made up of several different parts. According to Blavatsky, four lower parts constitute the physical

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<sup>209</sup> *Allan and She*, 1

<sup>210</sup> Katz, 119

body while three make up the upper, spiritual, or essential person.<sup>211</sup> Theosophy also teaches that man was once a purely spiritual being, but has since been encased in a physical body described by Blavatsky as “fleshy bodies.”<sup>212</sup> Quartermain’s description seems to be a jumble of these two ideas, reflecting an understanding of Theosophy that someone only barely acquainted with it would have.

Ayesha has a far less prominent role than Quartermain in *She and Allan*. However, she is no less mystical and magical than she was in *She and Ayesha: The Return of She*. She performs many of the same feats that she did in the presence of Leo and Holly. The difference here is that she has an incredulous and skeptical observer. Whereas Holly, like Jonathan Harker in *Dracula*, is convinced after witnessing various supernatural acts, Quartermain falls back on science to explain what he sees. This response is much more akin to the role Dr. Seward plays in *Dracula*, though Quartermain is nowhere near as educated as Seward. Quartermain’s science is not the cutting edge biology and psychology of Seward, but rather a pragmatic, eminently rational and reasonable view of the world. It is the science of the hard-working, respectable British citizen, as that is very much what Quartermain (and Haggard) was. Here, Haggard is acknowledging the fact that most people who were confronted with spiritualism and its claims did not interrogate it armed with an intimate knowledge of science. Their questions and knowledge base were far less cerebral, more practical. Quartermain is able to explain away Ayesha’s abilities not through science but through common sense.

Once again, in *She and Allan*, Ayesha’s supernatural powers seem to be taken directly from the annals of Theosophy. By these means Ayesha is able to learn much about Allan

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<sup>211</sup> Madame Blavatsky discusses the septenary nature of man multiple times in her writing, most often in *The Secret Doctrine*. However, a succinct description of the doctrine, complete with chart, can be found in *The Key to Theosophy*. Blavatsky, H.P. *The Key to Theosophy*. (London: The Theosophical Publishing Society, 1890) 90-93

<sup>212</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 293

Quartermain and what befell him on his way to Kor. Since Quartermain is not a believer in astral projection, he develops alternative theories as to how Ayesha knew so much about him and his companions. He first attributes it to “what is known as telepathy [between two practitioners of magic]...though perhaps this end was effected by commoner means.”<sup>213</sup> It is worth noting that in the early part of the twentieth century telepathy was not quite so thoroughly debunked as it is now. However, even this (at the time) quasi-scientific explanation is a bit too outlandish for the level-headed Quartermain, which is why he concludes Ayesha must have used “commoner means.” Quartermain later speculates that these “commoner means” are a system of spies and messengers that Ayesha might have dispatched.

Astral projection is not the only mystical phenomenon Quartermain is able to explain to himself. Some do not strictly have to do with Theosophy, so I will spend less time on them, but they are worth a mention as they are illustrative of Quartermain’s mindset. During a great battle, Ayesha appears out of nowhere in radiant, resplendent glory, practically glowing and visible from all over the battlefield. To Allan, she must have “put luminous paint or something else on her robes, for they gleamed with a sort of faint, phosphorescent fire.”<sup>214</sup> Our heroes do battle with a giant named Rezu, who was supposedly invulnerable except for one spot on his back, where he could be smote with a particular ax. Quartermain unloads several hollow-point bullets into Rezu’s chest, but the giant is unscathed. Rather than attribute anything supernatural to Rezu, Quartermain assumes that he is “one of the representatives of the families of ‘strong men’, of whom examples are still to be seen doing marvelous feats all over the earth.”<sup>215</sup> And what of Rezu’s seeming invulnerability to bullets? Quartermain attributes this to Rezu having some sort of early modern equivalent of a bulletproof vest under his sprawling beard, though he has no

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<sup>213</sup> *She and Allan*, 131

<sup>214</sup> *She and Allan*, 155

<sup>215</sup> *She and Allan*, 168

direct evidence of this assumption, not having examined the giant's corpse.<sup>216</sup> Lastly, Ayesha kills some of her enemies by means of what appears to be a lightning storm, which would seem to be in line with Ayesha's ability to control nature. However, as Quartermain notes, he has "never seen anyone killed by lightening on whose clothing there was not some trace of its passage," as was the case with the corpses of those struck down by Ayesha. Nevertheless, Allan is positive that "no doubt it admitted some sort of simple explanation."<sup>217</sup> Even something that cannot be rationalized still somehow can be, at least in Allan's mind.

Ayesha senses, or rather reads, Quartermain's incredulity after she cleanses the mind of a young girl traumatized from being abducted by savages. Quartermain merely *thinks to himself* that this was done by hypnotic suggestion. In response to this thought, Ayesha verbally responds that she is a 'witch,' meaning, "one who has knowledge of medicine and other things and who holds a key to some of the mysteries that lie hid in Nature."<sup>218</sup> Again we see the idea, so prevalent in Theosophy, that what appears to be magical and mystical is in reality some hidden truth of Nature or secret knowledge that man has yet to unravel through science, or long ago unraveled but has since forgotten. Ayesha clarifies this in perhaps her most important statement in *She and Allan*:

"The soul of man, being at liberty and not cooped within his narrow breast, is in touch with that soul Universe, which men know as God Whom they call by many names. Therefore, it has all knowledge and perhaps all power, and at times the body within it, if it be a wise body, can draw from this well of knowledge and abounding power. So at least can I. And now you will understand why I am so good a doctress and how I came to appear in the battle, as you said, at the right time, and leave it when my work is done."<sup>219</sup>

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<sup>216</sup> Interestingly, Blavatsky recounts the following story: "A few years ago, there lived in an African village, an Abyssinian who passed for a sorcerer. Upon one occasion a party of Europeans, going to Soudan, amused themselves for an hour or two in firing at him with their own pistols and muskets for a trifling fee" He did this because he was seemingly impervious to bullets, as the Europeans soon found out (*Isis Unveiled* 379).

<sup>217</sup> *She and Allan*, 183

<sup>218</sup> *She and Allan*, 172

<sup>219</sup> *She and Allan*, 123

According to Ayesha, her seemingly magical abilities come from her soul, which communes with a Universal soul, be it called God, Isis, or Nature itself. The careful reader will realize that Ayesha states that the body resides within the soul, as opposed to the more commonly held belief that the soul resides in the body. However, as we have seen in our exploration of Theosophy, the “soul” is the eternal and essential part of man, whereas the body is a mere carapace that he will eventually outgrow. As such, the soul is the truer and most important part of the person, and it can evolve along with the body, its ultimate goal being a pure and spiritual state unfettered by the trappings of the flesh. Once the soul reaches this ultimate end, it is able to perform feats that most would view as supernatural. However, this endpoint of Theosophical evolution is, for both Blavatsky and Ayesha, no more mystical or magical than Darwinian evolution. Allan Quartermain cannot accept this. While the pseudo-science of Ayesha’s doctrine might have appealed to some, as Theosophy’s scientific trappings did, it would hold no interest for Allan Quartermain, whose rational mindset is more rooted in common sense than scientific theories and abstractions. If Ayesha is in fact a fallen Theosophical adept, *She and Allan* becomes a confrontation between one disinclined to believe in the paranormal, Allan Quartermain, and the very embodiment of the paranormal and spiritualism (not just Theosophy), Ayesha. Although what sends Allan on his quest is a heartfelt need for solace via the paranormal, when confronted with what appears to be supernatural Quartermain reverts to his staunch skepticism and simply cannot believe, just as Haggard was never able to in his own life.<sup>220</sup>

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<sup>220</sup> I know there are those who might argue that Quartermain is in fact swayed by the end of the novel, as Ayesha does grant him the drug that he was searching for. However, I would point out that even before Chapter One begins, a note from the late Mr. Allan Quartermain declares, “This strange woman (Ayesha) whom I had met in the ruins of a place called Kor, without any doubt had thrown a glamour over my senses, and at the time almost caused me to believe much that is quite unbelievable.”

### Conclusion

In discussing the genesis of H. Rider Haggard's *She*, and the unforgettable Ayesha,

Morton N. Cohen tells us:

We do not get much help in tracing the origin of *She* from Haggard's own observations. His statements are at first hesitant, later weighty, around a vague notion about an immortal woman, but how he came by the notion, let alone the material he poured into the tale, we never really learn. Later on, after the book sky-rocketed to success, he tries to explain in a long, verbose, ex post facto statement the allegorical meaning of the tale, and finally he writes three sequels, each an attempt to work out the meaning of Ayesha for himself and his reader. All this is inconclusive for a real understanding of the tale.... We must look, not in Haggard's statements about *She* for an explanation of the story, but in Haggard himself and in the forces working upon him.<sup>221</sup>

While many forces may have influenced Haggard, it is clear that one of these forces was Theosophy. Haggard was by no means a Theosophist, as he had serious misgivings about spiritualism in general, so he does not employ Theosophy in a set or purposeful way in any of the Ayesha novels. As Cohen points out, Haggard himself likely did not know what Ayesha meant to him or was going to be, so it would be impossible for him to have kept a coherent agenda throughout the four novels. Despite his lifelong skepticism, Haggard was clearly fascinated on some level by the supernatural, and this fascination was likely amplified by his son's death. He seems to have wanted to believe, but never quite could. Skepticism was not the only obstacle that kept him from fully embracing spiritualism, as he perceived spiritualist movements as rather common and vulgar. Given his skepticism and elitist tendencies, there was much about the hierarchy and scientific approach of Theosophy that would have appealed to Haggard. Even if his engagement with Theosophy had been marginal, he surely would have been exposed to the "miracles" of Theosophy, such as astral projection and ascended masters. Haggard then could incorporate them into his fiction, altering them to fit his own needs and anxieties. Theosophy

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<sup>221</sup> Cohen, 103

might well have been one of the many forces working on Haggard when he was writing in the “white heat” frenzy that gave rise to Ayesha.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Marie Corelli: Reconciling Christianity and Spiritualism for the Masses*

In his popular novels *Angels and Demons*, *The DaVinci Code* and *The Symbol*, Dan Brown merges elements of twenty-first century spiritualism and the occult with Christian mythology and in a way reconciles the two via a healthy dose of conspiracy theory. The result each time was a worldwide literary sensation, though the critical response to each book was unenthusiastic. However, this was not the first time such a formula was used to succeed in the literary market. In several of her most popular novels, Marie Corelli unites spiritualist beliefs of her day with the teachings and mythology of Christianity. She accomplishes this merger not via conspiracies as Brown does, but through science, which was as much in the popular consciousness at the turn of the last century as conspiracies are today. By reconciling spiritualist beliefs such as reincarnation with Christian teachings, Corelli offered a solution to a readership seeking a way to do just that. She achieves this by using science in much the same way that Madame Blavatsky did to explain the seemingly supernatural in Theosophy, her science-religion. Theosophy was a convenient template for Corelli to use in crafting her own hybrid religion. It provided a model for the way science could be used to explain the supernatural and came with a storehouse of supernatural phenomena with which people were already familiar. With a perpetual eye towards her readership, however, she was careful not to borrow wholesale from Theosophy. Blavatsky's attitude toward Christianity, hostile and combative, made it impossible for Corelli to adapt all of Theosophy to her purposes. She ended up picking and choosing elements of a belief system intended to displace Christianity in order to support it instead in a scientific age.

### Why Write About Marie Corelli?

As any cultural critic will tell you, the best way to gauge what people were talking and thinking about during a given time is to examine what was popular, and the fiction of Marie Corelli fits that description. Everybody read her novels, from Queen Victoria to London's poorest shop girls. As of today, though, only a small amount of scholarship on Corelli has been produced. In a 2003 piece on Corelli, "The Story of One Forgotten," Brenda Ayres points out that "to date nine books have been written on Corelli, the latest being in 1999 and 2000."<sup>222</sup> Since then a few articles on Corelli's writings have appeared, but far less than one would expect for a writer of her popularity. Perhaps this is because although Corelli's novels were commercially successful, they often met with scathing critical reviews, and this critical aversion still exists. As the most commercially successful body of work covered in this project, however, Marie Corelli's fiction is perhaps the best indicator of what was in the hearts and minds of the public during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century.

The following passage from Brenda Ayres's chapter in *Silent Voices* nicely sums up how popular Marie Corelli was during her heyday:

For two decades she was the most popular woman novelist in the world (Bullock xv), the 'best-selling novelist of her generation' (Bigland 11). One of her biographers claims what while Queen Victoria was alive, Marie Corelli was the 'second most famous Englishwoman in the world' (Masters 6). Her best-seller *The Sorrows of Satan* (1895), went through sixty editions with immediate sales that exceeded any British novel to date. According to another biographer, this novel made her name as familiar as Charles Dickens to most English readers (Bullock 117), and it became known as the first actual best-seller in England (Fredrico 7; Ransom 80). Half of all her novels were world best-sellers, selling more than 100,000 copies each year (Casey 163). One of her most ardent fans was the queen herself. The novelist's fame having gained a friendship with the prince of Wales, Corelli was the only writer invited to his coronation.<sup>223</sup>

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<sup>222</sup> Ayres, Brenda. "The Story of One Forgotten." *Silent Voices*. (Westport: Praeger, 2003) 203

<sup>223</sup> Ayres, 203

Already having dabbled in poetry and shorter pieces, Marie Corelli published her first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, in 1886. As would become routine with her works, *A Romance of Two Worlds* met with a warm public reception but hostile critical reaction. The *World* published a review that said “‘Taken as a pure romance- a romance of electricity we may call it- the book is a tolerable thing enough. If the writer intends us to take it seriously- as her preface seems half to suggest- it is pure bosh.’”<sup>224</sup> Despite such reactions, Corelli received praise from Oscar Wilde and “by 1896, ten years after it was first published, *A Romance of Two Worlds* was into its fourteenth edition and had been translated into many languages.”<sup>225</sup> *Ardath* (1889) reached its second edition in sixteen days, also received plaudits from Wilde.<sup>226</sup> Even more commercially successful was 1893’s *Barabbas*. However, as was typical for her novels, *Barabbas* was the victim of scathing reviews. According to Brian Masters, the *Pall Mall* actually refused to review the novel on the grounds that it crossed the line into outright blasphemy, and several other organizations recommended that Corelli’s novels be banned. Nevertheless, *Barabbas* outsold all other Corelli novels up until that point, and went into its seventh edition in seven months.<sup>227</sup> Although Marie Corelli was successful, she was on the verge of becoming a phenomenon because of a change in the publishing industry.

The world’s first best-selling novel, *The Sorrows of Satan*, was published in 1895. Up until its publication, all of Corelli’s novels had been published in the traditional three-volume format. However, *The Sorrows of Satan* was one of the world’s first single-volume novels,

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<sup>224</sup> Masters, Brian. *Now Barrabas Was a Rotter: The Extradordinary Life of Marie Corelli* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1978) 59

<sup>225</sup>Ransom, Teresa. *The Mysterious Marie Corelli: Queen of Victorian Bestsellers.* (London: Sutton, 1999) 37

<sup>226</sup> Masters, 89

<sup>227</sup> Masters 129-130

which helped to account for its astronomical sales.<sup>228</sup> Simply put, “*Sorrows* was a runaway success, of the order any writer would dream of. It had an initial sale greater than any previous novel in the language, making it the first best-seller in English history. There may have been many in England who did not read it, but there could be no one, in 1895, who had not heard of it.”<sup>229</sup> According to Julia Kuehn,

With this book, Corelli- whose fame had steadily increased between 1886 and 1895- reached a readership hitherto unprecedented. Although no exact figures are available for overall sale, according to two advertisements in the *Pall Mall Gazette* of 18 and 23 October 1895, the first two editions of *The Sorrows of Satan*- the first with 15,000 and the second with 5,000 copies- were exhausted *before* publication, so that a third edition of another 5,000 copies was already in the press when the novel was released. In a review of the novel W.T Stead spoke of ‘some seventy thousand copies’ sold by the end of the year.<sup>230</sup>

Corelli bucked tradition with the publication of *The Sorrows of Satan* and refused to send complimentary copies to critics. Although the novel was far from a critical darling, its reviews were not quite as negative as those received by the author’s previous novels.<sup>231</sup> A slew of novels followed but Corelli’s popularity began to decline around the time of 1902’s *Temporal Power*. Her novels did not change very much over her literary career, but by that time society certainly had. During World War I, she gave political speeches and wrote political articles, but “the value of this work was undermined by an unfortunate conviction in a petty court case for ‘food hoarding.’”<sup>232</sup> She died in 1925, and one last work, *Open Confessions From A Man To a Woman*, was published posthumously in 1927.

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<sup>228</sup> In her preface to the Valancourt classics edition of *The Sorrows of Satan* Julia Kuehn discusses the reasons behind the publishing industry’s shift from three volume to one volume publications, and details its impact on the publishing world in general and on *The Sorrows of Satan* specifically.

<sup>229</sup> Masters, 143

<sup>230</sup> Kuehn, Julia. introduction, *The Sorrows of Satan* by Marie Corelli (Kansas City: Valancourt, 2008) viii

<sup>231</sup> Ironically, one of the main characters in the novel is Mavis Clare, an author who is very obviously an analogue for Marie Corelli herself. This character disdains literary critics and even withholds copies of her novels for review!

<sup>232</sup> Kuehn, x

Despite this tremendously successful career, Corelli's name remains largely absent from college courses and anthologies covering the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century. There is a dearth of critical work on her, and she remains an unknown to most people despite having the distinction of being the world's first best-selling novelist. It is because of this wild and wide-ranging popularity that I believe the novels of Marie Corelli are worthy of critical re-examination. Certainly, a writer whose words were able to reach such a broad readership can reveal something about the period that produced them. Jill Gavin agrees; in "Christians, Infidels and Women's Channeling in the Writings of Marie Corelli," one of the few scholarly pieces extant on this author, she writes,

Corelli's omission from many accounts of turn of the century literature is cause for some surprise, considering the magnitude of her popularity a hundred years ago. Of her thirty books, a good half were bestsellers; first editions often out as soon as they hit the shelves, to the tune of as many as 50,000 copies in one day. In her heyday, Corelli boasted a fan in Italy's queen, was granted a visit by William Gladstone, and received heartwarming words from Poet Laureate Alfred Tennyson. Queen Victoria requested copies of the entire Corelli oeuvre, and King Edward VII invited the novelist, alone of all authors, to his coronation. Corelli's *Sorrows of Satan* (1895) made the reading list of James Joyce and even earned a mention in *Ulysses* (1922) whose Stephen Dedalus, Marvin Malanger points out, bears a noteworthy resemblance to *Sorrows'* bedeviled protagonist.<sup>233</sup>

Aside from her popularity, there is another reason Marie Corelli's writings are worthy of critical re-examination. In her prologue to 1911's *The Life Everlasting*, Corelli points out that six novels, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, *Ardath: The Story of A Dead Self*, *The Soul of Lilith*, *Barabbas*, *The Sorrows of Satan* and *The Master-Christian* are "the result of a deliberately conceived plan and intention and are all linked together by one theory."<sup>234</sup> Along with *The Life Everlasting* these seven novels advocate one (more or less) coherent philosophy that attempts to reconcile spiritualism with the author's own orthodox Christianity. Corelli harmonizes the two

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<sup>233</sup>Gavin, Jill. "Christians, Infidels, and Women's Channeling in the Writings of Marie Corelli," Victorian Literature and Culture (2003) 85

<sup>234</sup>Corelli, Marie. The Life Everlasting. (NY: Borden, 1966 ) 29

through science; by bringing all spiritual phenomena under the same scientific umbrella she could make them all co-exist. Because science is used to make this possible Corelli's writings are of interest to this investigation. I will focus on the first and last of the series of novels Corelli identified, *A Romance of Two Worlds* and *The Life Everlasting*.

*A Romance of Two Worlds*, published in 1886, was Corelli's first novel. It is written in the first person and is purportedly a first-hand account of something that actually happened to the narrator, despite the fact that some of the claims it makes, like the protagonist's travelling to Venus, are patently outlandish. She eventually backed off these claims somewhat, stating "her first book had been written by the bedside of her dying father [it wasn't- he died six years later] and was true in substance because it grew out of the stress of a personal spiritual experience."<sup>235</sup> Briefly, *A Romance of Two Worlds* tells how, when the protagonist was a sickly and struggling musician, she met the famous Italian artist Cellini, who seemed to have the secret of the old Masters because his colors were so vibrant. Cellini introduces Corelli to Heliobas, a spiritual scientist who treats her physical and spiritual malaise. Heliobas is able to do all manner of apparently mystical things through his intimate mastery of the secrets of electricity. By these means, Heliobas allows her to have a vision in which she meets her spiritual guardian Azul, travels to Venus, and witnesses a miniature version of Creation. Heliobas also begins to school Corelli in his arts and the mastery of electricity, and teaches her the "Electric Creed of Christianity," which essentially explains Christian mythology in terms of electricity. A subplot involves Heliobas's sister, a mystic in her own right, who has a lover, her soul's true love, in the spiritual realm.

*The Life Everlasting* was published in 1911 during the declining years of Corelli's popularity. While the novel does not claim to be a firsthand account of Corelli's own

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<sup>235</sup> Masters, 302

experience, it does claim to recount events that happened to an acquaintance of the author's, told in the first person for convenience's sake. The plot is rather simple. While on a boat trip, the narrator, who has spiritual inclinations but Catholic beliefs, meets a man named Santoris, Oxford educated and of Egyptian descent. He studies the occult, seems many years younger than his actual age and appears to have assorted mystical powers. Slowly, and through a series of dreams and visions, the narrator realizes that she and Santoris are literally soul-mates. They have known each other through several lifetimes, and have narrowly missed being together due to each other's folly. Although drawn to Santoris, the narrator feels compelled to know for herself the secrets of nature and the soul, which Santoris has already mastered. To do so, she travels to France to study under the man who trained Santoris, a mystic named Aselzion. There she undergoes a series of grueling mental challenges, all of which she passes, and she ends up spending her life with Santoris.

### THE HYBRID RELIGIONS OF BLAVATSKY AND CORELLI

#### Attitudes Toward Contemporary Science

It is natural to talk about Marie Corelli and Madame Blavatsky side by side because both essentially invented their own hybrid religion. Blavatsky marketed Theosophy as a hybrid religion-science, and that is precisely what Marie Corelli did with her own Christianity, which incorporates elements of spiritualism reconciled with Christianity by quasi-scientific means. The explanation of the supernatural by pseudo-science is textbook Theosophy, but rather than seeking to rationalize only the non-denominational supernatural, Corelli uses science to explain Christianity as well, allowing both to co-exist. Rita Felski writes that in Corelli's work "the

familiar vocabulary and symbolism of orthodox Christianity is fused with the rhetoric of late-nineteenth-century science to create a distinctively modern cosmological vision.”<sup>236</sup> Despite their ambivalence toward the science, both Blavatsky and Corelli incorporate science into their belief systems.

Corelli, like Blavatsky, was no great lover of modern science. In the prologue to *A Romance of Two Worlds*, she expresses her disdain for science:

We live in an age of universal inquiry, ergo of universal skepticism. The prophecies of the poet, the dreams of the philosopher and scientist are being daily realized- things formerly considered mere fairy-tales have become facts- yet, in spite of the marvels of learning and science that are hourly accomplished among us, the attitude of mankind is one of disbelief. ‘There is no God!’ cries one theorist; ‘or if there be one I can obtain no proof of his existence!’ ‘There is no Creator!’ exclaims another. ‘The Universe is simply a rushing together of atoms.’ ‘There can be no immortality,’ asserts a third.<sup>237</sup>

Science was causing people to doubt or abandon faith in God and immortality, which for Corelli were a Christian God and Christian immortality. For her, science did not have to displace religion completely, as “Corelli was far from denouncing the role of science in religion altogether. As she saw it, science, though not necessary to faith, is yet valuable to it in that it illuminates phenomena that invigorate the loyal Christian’s appreciation of the creation.”<sup>238</sup>

Blavatsky sees similar potential and frustration in science. Theosophy’s *Ascended Masters* showed that at its best science could complement religion and “that by combining science with religion, the existence of God and immortality of man’s spirit may be demonstrated like a problem of Euclid.”<sup>239</sup> To Blavatsky, the current state of science was far from good. She writes in *Isis Unveiled*,

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<sup>236</sup> Felski, Rita. *The Gender of Modernity*. (London: Harvard UP, 1995) 132

<sup>237</sup> Corelli, Marie, *A Romance of Two Worlds*. (New York: Dodo Press, 1998) i

<sup>238</sup> Gavin, 87

<sup>239</sup> Blavatsky, H.P. *Isis Unveiled: Volume I*. (Pasadena, Theosophical UP: 1998) vi

On the brink of the dark chasm separating the spiritual from the physical world stands modern science, with eyes closed and head averted, pronouncing the gulf impassable and bottomless, though she holds in her hand a torch which she need only lower into the depths to show her mistake.<sup>240</sup>

Blavatsky's problem with science is its myopia. It lacked the open mind to allow for the possibility that it did not have all the answers to life's mysteries. Although both Corelli and Blavatsky take issue with contemporary science, each treats it a little differently in her writings. For Blavatsky, science as it existed at the time could not explain the seemingly paranormal. Conversely, Corelli was able to locate her explanations for the otherworldly in the fashionable science of the day.

Theosophy encourages its acolytes to look to ancient wisdom long lost but still available to a select few to explain paranormal phenomena that defy modern science. People tend to look for something ancient and deep-rooted in their religion, and that is exactly what Theosophy was providing by finding its answers and explanations in an almost forgotten ancient wisdom. That it was still available to a select group of initiates gave the pseudo-religion a cabalistic appeal. Beyond that, it also allowed for mysteries yet to be discovered rather than providing all the answers, as religions rarely explain all things to all believers. In contrast, the spirituality in Corelli's novel very rarely looks further than present-day science. The science of the day was in the air, popular and more than fantastic enough to captivate a reader as well as provide a seemingly plausible mechanism for Corelli to explain the miraculous, Christian and otherwise.<sup>241</sup>

Teresa Ransom writes that the "mysterious world of space and time travel was ripe for the novelist's picking. It is interesting to note that Rider Haggard's *She* was published in 1887 and

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<sup>240</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, xxii

<sup>241</sup> What tended to happen is a phenomenon I like to call "Jurassic Park Syndrome." Real scientists understood the limitations of the scientific breakthroughs of the day, but the average citizen did not. For example, when the novel *Jurassic Park* was published, actual scientists knew it was impossible to grow dinosaurs, but when a vaguely plausible scenario was presented to the general public, people thought it was imminent.

H.G Wells' *The Time Machine* a little later in 1895."<sup>242</sup> The science of the day was selling books just as much as the spiritualism of the day was, and Corelli capitalized on that.

*A Romance of Two Worlds* was written in 1886 and explains every seemingly supernatural event using electricity. In the late nineteenth century, electricity moved from being a scientific novelty to a staple of modern life. *The Life Everlasting* was published in 1911, a mere twelve years after Marie Curie discovered radium, which Corelli mentions in the novel. Not surprisingly, radiation is used to explain the seemingly miraculous. It is a drastic change, so much so that she addresses it in her "Prologue":

My first book, "A Romance of Two Worlds" was an eager, though crude, attempt to explain and express something of what I myself had studied on some of these subjects, though, as I have already said, my mind was uninformed and immature, and, therefore, I was not permitted to disclose more than a glimmering of the light I was beginning to perceive. My own probation- destined to be a severe one- had only just been entered upon; and hard and fast limits were imposed on me for a certain time. I was forbidden, for example, to write of *radium*, that wonderful discovery of the immediate hour, though it was then, and had been for a long period, perfectly well known to my instructors who possessed all the means of extracting it from substances as yet undreamed of by latter day scientists. I was only permitted to hint at it under the guise of the word 'Electricity.'<sup>243</sup>

Of course, Corelli had no prior and privileged knowledge of radium back in 1886. By 1911, radium and radiation had replaced electricity as the cutting edge science that had captured public interest, so that becomes the basis for her new novel. Since these novels are part of the same theoretical progression she had to justify the change somehow.<sup>244</sup> Corelli, a bestselling writer, had a finger on both what the public was talking about and what they wanted in terms of popular science and spirituality. As Brenda Ayres writes:

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<sup>242</sup> Ransom, 29

<sup>243</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 18

<sup>244</sup> Corelli cannot completely denounce her "Electric Theory," or at least resist the urge to trumpet it one last time. On page 19 of *The Life Ever Lasting* she cites a 1905 paper about electricity published in the *Hibbert Journal* which she claims was "precisely my teaching in the first book I ever wrote."

Their offering of an alternate belief that united science and spirit is one reason Corelli's novels were so successful. Hers were a strident backlash to the decreasing influence of religion close to the end of the century. In every novel she deals with this subject to the degree that 'nothing could have exceeded the passion with which she attacked moral lapses, whilst championing the purity and going to the rescue of the weak. She had the zeal of a missionary, the declamatory methods of an evangelist, and she captured the loyalty of her readers at one sitting' (Bullock 45). Many of her works appealed to three kinds of people: "the sentimental Christian who was attentive to the moral tonics of fiction, the enthusiastic student of science or psychic forces who attempt to expand the boundaries of the mind, and the sober members of the working class who would benefit from a steady fare of exotically forbidden stories promising material rewards for virtue" (Kowalczyk 851).<sup>245</sup>

Ayres's list includes Christian readers who were looking for morally acceptable fiction, students of the occult and science, and working-class readers looking for rewarding escapist literature.

What it does not include is people looking for a new faith or creed. For all her fervor, Corelli was a bestselling author who was not looking for converts and believers. In fact, in the preface to her very first novel, *A Romance of Two Worlds*, she states, "I wish it to be plainly understood that in this book I personally advocate no new theory of either religion or philosophy."<sup>246</sup> Corelli was not interested in preaching new truths and mysteries waiting to be rediscovered, as was Theosophy. Plus, nameless truths are not very popular, whereas the latest scientific discovery most certainly was.

#### *Different Attitudes Toward Christianity*

The second key difference between the hybridized religions that Blavatsky and Corelli develop is their attitudes toward Christianity. Simply put, Blavatsky was extremely antagonistic toward Christianity. Amongst other things, she accused Christianity of purloining much of its doctrines and iconography from other traditions, as well as an assortment of other transgressions throughout history. Because of this hostility towards Christianity, Blavatsky saw no need to

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<sup>245</sup> Ayres, 210

<sup>246</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, iii

reconcile Christianity with the doctrines of Theosophy. Rather, she seems more interested in disproving and maligning Christianity. The closest she comes to trying to reconcile Theosophical doctrine with Christian belief is her claim that Jesus Christ was one of many Ascended Masters.<sup>247</sup> On the other hand Corelli was a devout, albeit unorthodox, Christian. This accounts for the majority of the differences between the two belief systems. Whereas “Blavatsky and others...constructed a spiritualism with an intent to replace traditional Christianity, Corelli fashioned a spiritualism in the guise of a modern- one might say ‘New Age’ Christianity, one somehow both more scientific and less materialistic.”<sup>248</sup> According to biographer Brian Masters, Corelli’s “own brand of Christianity was a fairly orthodox fusion of deism and evangelism, often expressed in distinctly unorthodox ways.”<sup>249</sup> Despite these forays into the domain of spiritualism, she wrote with the “unshakeable conviction that she had been chosen by the Almighty to carry His message.”<sup>250</sup> The “unorthodox ways” of expression referred to are Corelli’s dalliances with reincarnation and astral projection in her spiritualist novels.

Corelli’s inclusion of spiritual phenomena such as reincarnation and astral projection can be accounted for by her uncanny business savy and awareness of what her readership wanted. In his article “The Counter-Invasion of Britain by Buddhism in Marie Corelli’s *A Romance of Two Worlds* and H. Rider Haggard’s *Ayesha: The Return of She*,” J. Jeffrey Franklin writes “Corelli was a genius of marketing and self-promotion who understood the multifaceted nature of her

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<sup>247</sup> According to Bruce F. Campbell, Theosophy maintains that “Many of the great religious teachers such as Abraham and Moses, are identified as Masters. Also, the ‘mighty triad’ of Buddha, Confucius and Jesus are thought to be Adepts, as are Solomon, Laotze, Boehme, Cagliostro, Mesmer, and many others” (54).

<sup>248</sup>J. Jeffrey Franklin. “The Counter-Invasion of Britain by Buddhism in Marie Corelli’s *A Romance of Two Worlds* and H. Rider Haggard’s *Ayesha: The Return of She*”, *Victorian Literature and Culture* (2003) 29. As the title suggests, Franklin’s article focuses on how *Ayesha: The Return of She* and *A Romance of Two Worlds* reflect Buddhist beliefs. He does discuss Theosophy, but only inasmuch as Theosophy was one way in which Eastern beliefs were made more palatable to Britain. By draping an Eastern belief in the trappings of science it becomes more Western and less foreign. Whereas Theosophy is ancillary to Franklin’s article it is the focus of my argument.

<sup>249</sup> Masters, 130

<sup>250</sup> Masters 132

product and the conflicted needs of her consumers.”<sup>251</sup> Her product was multifaceted in that it contained elements of Corelli’s own Christianity along with bits and pieces of popular spiritualist beliefs. Her readership was conflicted in that many were not as steadfast in their devotion to Christianity as Corelli was. Darwin and science had done much to call into question the validity of Christianity, though at the same time it is always difficult to abandon a religion, especially one as engrained in people’s hearts and minds as Christianity. Nevertheless, large portions of the public were flocking to spiritualist belief systems such as Theosophy. As Franklin argues, Corelli recognized this fact and gave her readership a way to have both.

There is evidence that Corelli was aware of her public’s spiritual needs. Felski notes that “numerous letters that poured in from grateful readers testified to Corelli’s success in fashioning a contemporary synthesis of scientific knowledge and religious mysticism that had mass appeal.”<sup>252</sup> In subsequent editions of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, Corelli included copies of these letters, which contain lines such as the following:

I have always been interested in the so-called Supernatural, feeling very conscious of depths in my own self and in others that are usually ignored....I have been reading as many books as I could obtain on Theosophy, but though thankful for the high thoughts I found in them, I still feel a great want- that combining of this occult knowledge with my own firm belief in the Christian religion. Your book seemed to give me just what I wanted- IT HAS DEEPENED AND STRENGTHENED MY LOVE OF GOD AND HAS MADE THE NEW TESTAMENT A NEW BOOK TO ME.<sup>253</sup> (emphasis original)

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<sup>251</sup> Franklin, 29

<sup>252</sup> Felski, 132

<sup>253</sup> *Romance of Two Worlds*, 250. Marie Corelli makes liberal use of capitals in her prose. Occasionally she uses capitals for dramatic effect, capitalizing words like “LOVE”. However, Corelli most often employs capitals when a character is explaining something, such as the “Electric Creed of Christianity.” As we have seen, Corelli’s explanations typically have a Christian element to them as well as a scientific element. Corelli uses capital letters to emphasize both of these elements equally as opposed to capitalizing one aspect of her explanation and leveling the other in lowercase. By doing so, she is not privileging one of the other but instead treating them equally.

Other letters contain phrases such as, “what really struck me in your book was...no sweeping away of the Crucified One”<sup>254</sup> and “the Electric Creed respecting Religion seems to explain so much in Scripture which has always seemed to me impossible to accept blindly without explanation of any kind.”<sup>255</sup> What is present in all these letters is not only an acceptance of the supernatural but also an acceptance of Christ, which was the more important element for Corelli. She gave the public what it wanted with new age spiritualist trappings, but the heart of her message was always distinctly Christian. If the letters Corelli includes at the end of *A Romance of Two Worlds* are real, then Corelli did in fact recognize something the public was looking for: a way to integrate Christianity and spiritualism. If the letters are fabricated, then that speaks to her belief that there was or should have been such a desire.

Although “some of Marie’s popularity must be attributed to her cult with the ‘spiritualists’ which survived even her death,”<sup>256</sup> she always took great pains to specify what she meant by the term spiritualism. In her preface to *The Life Everlasting*, Corelli points out that she took a break from writing books with a spiritual theme for a while “lest I be set down as a ‘spiritualist’ or ‘Theosophist,’ both of which terms have been brought into contempt by tricksters.”<sup>257</sup> She has no problem with certain forms of spiritualism, but she tries to distance herself from the more gross or cartoonish ones. Corelli clarified her feelings on spiritualism in a preface to the second edition of *A Romance of Two Worlds*. There she writes that she

had no time for table-turners. The present ‘craze’ she said is mere charlatanism. ‘The so called signs and wonders of modern self styled spiritualists are always contemptibly trivial in character, and vulgar, when not absolutely ridiculous, in display....disembodied spirits never become so undignified as to upset furniture or rap on tables. Neither do they write letters in ink and put them under doors.’<sup>258</sup>

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<sup>254</sup> *Romance of Two Worlds*, 253

<sup>255</sup> *Romance of Two Worlds*, 255

<sup>256</sup> Masters, 39

<sup>257</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 29

<sup>258</sup> Masters, 302

Besides taking great pains to distance herself from popular spiritualism, Corelli made it clear that her beliefs were firmly rooted in Christianity. As Franklin states, “Corelli repeatedly insisted that her ‘creed has its foundations in Christ alone’ which assuaged the concerns of her Christian readers about her eccentric view of their faith.”<sup>259</sup> In order to keep selling books, Corelli sought not to alienate her fanbase. Her great ability was to find a way to indulge the public’s fascination with new age spirituality while at the same time staying firmly rooted in traditional Christianity. Ironically, science gave Corelli the means to dovetail Christianity and popular spiritualism.

Corelli’s scientific Christianity is just as much a hybrid of science and religion as Theosophy. Both use science to explain the supernatural, but Corelli’s religion seeks to use it to explain *Christian* mysteries as well. If science can be applied to supernatural phenomena not typically associated with Christianity, then all the better; if the science that explains Christian mysteries also explains astral projection, then the two belief systems are not mutually exclusive anymore. Corelli is never elaborate, detailed or very philosophical in her writing, but she need not be. Her readership was not looking for a treatise on religion or the nature of the soul, merely a good read that indulged popular trends of spirituality in a way that was not blasphemous. Corelli is vague at times, playing as much with popular conceptions of scientific theories, such as electricity and radiation, as with popular spiritualism. Her explanations need only sound vaguely plausible to someone with a layman’s understanding of science. “She offered her public the best of both worlds, religion and science, neatly packaged to her own specifications, and guaranteed to give comfort and pleasure. No need to despair, to turn agnostic, to commit suicide, to reject the angels and the life eternal, Spiritualism is part of evolution too!”<sup>260</sup> Conversely, Blavatsky’s Theosophy was an ocean of doctrines and convoluted theories. Whereas Corelli was trying to

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<sup>259</sup> Franklin, 29

<sup>260</sup> Masters, 301-302

augment or update a belief system, Blavatsky was trying to start her own. She was more concerned with cosmic questions than with the doubts and insecurities of an individual believer. This variance in scope and ambition is the central difference between Corelli's hybrid religion and Blavatsky's. Corelli was not out to start her own religion, so she did not need to explain every little detail. People's faith was not in her but Christianity; she was just there to sell books. Blavatsky was recruiting believers, and believers want doctrines before bestsellers. It did not matter much who these believers were, as Theosophists were culled from both upper and lower classes. You did not need money to believe, but you did to buy books, so Corelli was appealing to a more specific target audience than Blavatsky. Despite the difference, Theosophy was useful to Corelli in that it provided not only a template for using science to explain the supernatural, but also a storehouse of spiritualist phenomena that could be explained in such terms.

#### SCIENCE IN THE NOVELS OF MARIE CORELLI

*A Romance of Two Worlds* introduces the concept of electricity along with Casimir Heliobas, the Chaldean spiritual scientist described as a "physical electrician."<sup>261</sup> When he is first mentioned, Heliobas's abilities are described to Corelli, as are the potential wonders of electricity:

Electricity, mademoiselle, is, as you are aware, the wonder of our age. No end can be foreseen to the marvels it is capable of accomplishing. But one of the most important branches of this great science is ignorantly derided by the larger portion of society- I mean the use of human electricity; that force which is in Heliobas. He has cultivated the electricity in his own system to such an extent that his mere touch, his lightest glance, have healing in them, or the reverse, as he chooses to exert his power.<sup>262</sup>

Present in this passage are several important elements. First, notice the acknowledgement of electricity as the "wonder of our age," or, in other words, the science of the moment. Heliobas's

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<sup>261</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 53

<sup>262</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 53

powers are not born of a science unknown to the rest of the world. The explanations offered by Corelli are immediate and vaguely plausible. After this introduction, electricity and its myriad applications come to dominate the novel. Radiation and atomic theory, the science of the moment for *The Life Everlasting* play less of a role in that novel. These concepts come into play whenever a supernatural phenomenon needs to be explained, but that happens less frequently than in *A Romance of Two Worlds*.

That each concept, electricity and radiation, can produce such seemingly miraculous results is met with skepticism in both novels. In *A Romance of Two Worlds*, the skepticism comes primarily from two sources. The narrator, Corelli, is skeptical of what Heliobas can accomplish with electricity, but only slightly. She is actually remarkably credulous, saying “I knew that there were many cases of serious illnesses being treated with electricity- that electric baths and electric appliances of all descriptions were in ordinary use;<sup>263</sup> and I saw no reason to be surprised at the fact of a man being in existence who had cultivated it within himself to such an extent that he was able to use it as a healing power. There seemed to be nothing really extraordinary in it.”<sup>264</sup> She does express some skepticism about the claim that Heliobas can facilitate out of body experiences, or “soul transmigrations,” but that is about her only reservation. The bulk of the skepticism about Heliobas comes not from the narrator but from minor characters, and it is a skepticism tinged with fear and mistrust. Corelli is asked, “Have you not dread of that terrible man? Is it not he that is reported to be a cruel mesmerist who sacrifices everybody- yes, even his own sister, to his medical experiments?”<sup>265</sup> Prince Ivan, a

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<sup>263</sup> Cambridge, N.A. “Electrical Devices Used in Medicine Before 1900.” *The Proceedings of the Royal Society of Medicine*. 1977 September 70 (9): 635-641. The interplay of electricity and medicine had evolved from the days of Frankenstein. Besides the widely known electroshock therapy used to treat mental illness, electricity was also used to treat nerve damage and paralysis, arthritis, and even constipation. A common medical device was an electric chair, not used to execute but to heal. It was a chair designed to give a controlled dose of electricity to the patient.

<sup>264</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 54

<sup>265</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 91.

minor character in love with Heliobas's sister, delivers a fuller diatribe later in the novel. He states, "I am no dreamer; no speculator in aerial nothings; no clever charlatan like Casimir, who because he is able to magnetize a dog, pretends to the same authority over human beings, and dares to risk the health and perhaps the very sanity, of his own sister and that of the unfortunate young musician whom he has inveigled here, all for the sake of proving his dangerous, almost diabolical experiments."<sup>266</sup> Both passages manifest a definite fear of Heliobas and the science that he wields.<sup>267</sup>

In *The Life Everlasting*, the skepticism about science as an explanation for supernatural events comes from two characters encountered early on, Dr. Brayle and Mr. Harland. Plot-wise these characters serve to put the narrator in contact with the mystic Santoris, though they are also representative of two types of people who would be resistant to religion and spiritualism. Recall that Corelli's issue with science was that, although it did not necessarily have to, it tended to weaken people's faith in religion and thereby foster immorality. Brayle and Harland are two products of such an intellectual and spiritual environment. Dr. Brayle is described as "a physician of note...a man who has taken his degree in medicine and knows what he is talking about."<sup>268</sup> He embodies the godless and materialistic aspects of science that Corelli loathed. For Brayle, the debate between science and religion is no debate at all- it is a landslide victory in favor of science. He states,

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<sup>266</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 117

<sup>267</sup> This highlights an interesting aspect of the role of the scientist in the modern world. Specifically, the scientist has stepped into the role of the wizard or sorcerer as the wielder of some obscure and privileged knowledge. Just as wizards and magicians had to attend specialized schools and undergo training, so now do scientists and doctors. In pre-scientific times, the average person did not understand why or how a spell or charm worked; they simply took it on faith that it did. At the end of the day, laymen do not truly know why or how a medicine will make them better, yet they trust in their physician that it will. Anytime privileged or esoteric power, magical or otherwise, is wielded by a select few, there always seems to be a sense of fear and mistrust on the part of those not wielding the power. It seems that Theosophy still looks to keep an element of this privileged and elitist aspect of knowledge, ostensibly for its religious allure.

<sup>268</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 269

You speak of eternal realities. To me there are none, save the constant scattering and re-uniting of atoms. These, so far as we know, of the extraordinary (and to me quite unintelligent) plan of the Universe, are for ever shifting and changing into various forms and clusters of forms, such as solar systems, planets, comets, star-dust and the like. Our present view of them is chiefly based on the researches of Larmor and Thomson of Cambridge. From them and other scientists we learn that electricity exists in small particles which we can in a manner see in the 'cathode' rays, and these particles are called 'electrons'. These compose 'atoms of matter'. Well!- there are trillion of atoms in each granule of dust,- while electrons are so much smaller, that a hundred thousand of them can lie in the diameter of an atom. I know all this,- but I do not know why the atoms or electrons should exist at all, nor what cause there should be for their constant and often violent state of movement. They apparently always have been, and always will be- therefore they are all that can be called 'eternal realities.' Sir Norman Lockyer tells us that the matter of the Universe is undergoing a continuous process of evolution- but even if it is so, what is that to me individually? It neither helps nor consoles me for being one infinitesimal spark in the general conflagration.<sup>269</sup>

Here Brayle extolls the virtues and achievements of science as it stands now. For him, science has already explained man's place in the universe, and that place is wholly insignificant. The science of the moment has reduced the world and everything in it to a mere conglomerate of atoms, without any sort of grand eternal purpose, design, or planner behind it. With science providing the answers so completely, for Dr. Brayle a reality beyond current scientific explanation simply does not exist, and this is as true for God as it is for astral projection.

Mr. Harland, on the other hand, represents a different kind of non-believer. Harland is not a professional man of science like Brayle. Nevertheless, he is very wealthy and "in a certain sense notorious for having written and published a bitter, cold and pitiless attack on religion, which was the favorite reading of many scholars and literary men....who, having grown utterly tired of themselves, presumed that it was clever to be equally tired of God."<sup>270</sup> Rather than the all-consuming scientific arrogance present in Brayle, Harland's disbelief stems from materialism and spiritual ennui, both forms of thinking decried by Corelli. Harland advises the narrator that

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<sup>269</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 109

<sup>270</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 41

“there is nothing beyond our actual sight and immediate living consciousness;-we know we are born and that we die- but why, we cannot tell and never shall be able to tell.”<sup>271</sup> Harland does not turn to science for answers; instead he turns to nothing at all. For him, faith and spirituality are replaced by a big, gaping hole, which is actually rather modern.

Where Dr. Brayle and Mr. Harland stand in for two modes of modern skepticism, the role of the ardent believer is played by Rafael Santoris. The Egyptian-born Santoris studied with distinction at Oxford but was not satisfied with the knowledge learned there, so he returned to Egypt to continue his own course of study. When Harland characterizes these studies as occult, Santoris replies that he does not like that term; he prefers to say “spiritual science.”<sup>272</sup> He later describes spiritual science as “the knowledge, not of the outward effect so much as the inward cause which makes the effect manifest. It is a knowledge that can be applied to the individual daily uses of life,- the more it is studied the more reward it bestows.”<sup>273</sup> The very name “spiritual science” combines science and spirituality on equal footing in precisely the same way that Theosophy did.<sup>274</sup> Santoris explains away the miraculous in terms of science, but not in terms of long lost knowledge waiting to be rediscovered as Theosophy does. Instead, he uses nothing more than the science of the day. Santoris states,

Nature has given us all the materials for every kind of work and progress, physical and mental- but because we at once do not comprehend them we deny their uses. Nothing in the air, earth or water exists which we may not press into our service,- and it is in the study of natural forces that we find our conquest. What hundreds of years it took us to discover the wonders of steam!- how the discoverer was mocked and laughed at!- yet it was not really ‘wonderful’- it was always there, waiting to be employed, and wasted by mere lack of human effort. One can say the same of electricity, sometimes called ‘miraculous’- it is no

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<sup>271</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 287

<sup>272</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 133

<sup>273</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 134

<sup>274</sup> Parsing the very word “Theosophy” reveals this. “Theo” is Greek for “god” and “soph” is the Greek term for knowledge and wisdom. God and religion are typically the domain of the spiritual, but the two competing impulses exist side by side in the term “Theosophy.” The word implies knowledge of god, odd when it is faith, not knowledge, that is typically associated with the divine.

miracle, but perfectly common and natural, only we have, until now, failed to apply it to our needs,- and even when wider disclosures of science are being made to us every day, we still bar knowledge out of obstinacy, and remain in ignorance rather than learn. A few grains in weight of hydrogen have power enough to raise a million tons to a height of more than three hundred feet.<sup>275</sup>

This passage is important for multiple reasons. First, Santoris claims that there is no such thing as magic, only phenomena that must obey natural law.<sup>276</sup> The same concept is conveyed in the following selection from *Isis Unveiled*, but with one key difference:

The so-called miracles, to begin with Moses and end with Cagliostro, when genuine, were as de Gasparin very justly insinuates in his work on the phenomena, ‘perfectly in accordance with natural law’: hence- no miracles. Electricity and magnetism were unquestionably used in the production of some of the prodigies; but now, the same as then, they are put in requisition by every sensitive, who is made to use unconsciously these powers by the peculiar nature of his or her organization, which serves as a conductor for some of these imponderable fluids, as yet so imperfectly known to science. This force is the prolific parent of numberless attributes and properties, many, or rather, most of which are as yet unknown to modern physic.<sup>277</sup>

Just as in the passage from *The Life Everlasting*, here is the belief that the seemingly fantastic and miraculous does not exist beyond the boundaries and laws of nature and natural science.

Where Blavatsky and Corelli differ is in the focus of that science. The relatively short quotation from *Isis Unveiled* twice mentions things “imperfectly known” or “yet unknown” to modern science, though presumably once known to the ancients. Blavatsky directs her devotees to this ancient wisdom for answers to the unexplainable. In contrast, Santoris’s discussion from *The Life Everlasting* is entirely grounded in modern atomic theory. There are allusions to the benefits this science has yet to yield, but they are by no means held up as the answers to life mysteries.

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<sup>275</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 151-152

<sup>276</sup> This claim is also similar to a refrain repeated by Ayesha in Haggard’s novels, that her powers were not magic but nature.

<sup>277</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 128

Science, Spiritualism, and Theosophy

Not only is Corelli's methodology for reconciling science and the supernatural culled from Theosophy, so too are many of the spiritualist beliefs that she talks about. This makes sense in that Theosophy was the most popular spiritualism of its day and the particular beliefs it espoused made their way into the public consciousness. Such concepts as astral projection were born of a science-religion; and as such they were prime candidates for Corelli to incorporate into her own hybrid Christianity. The first example of this reconciliation is a feature of her most spiritual characters, Heliobas from *A Romance of Two Worlds*, as well as Santoris and Alsezion of *The Life Everlasting*. Essentially, each is a Theosophical adept in his own right. Alsezion is a Chaldean, a tribe Blavatsky describes as being "the magians of Babylonia, astrologers and diviners"<sup>278</sup> and purveyors, if not originators, of the ancient wisdom she preached. Alsezion is a more developed and imposing version of an Ascended Master. Whereas Heliobas has a bit of the eccentric scientist in him, Alsezion is all gravitas and doctrine. Alsezion is the seemingly ageless teacher of both Heliobas and Santoris. There is speculation that he is "a kind of descendant of some ancient Egyptian conjurer who had the trick of playing with fire. There is nothing in the line of so-called miracle he cannot do."<sup>279</sup> Both Heliobas and Alsezion have their supposed origins in the Eastern esoteric tradition that Theosophy revered. Similarly, Alsezion mastered "so called" miracles while the equally mystical Heliobas was described as a "physical electrician." Present in each characterization is the Theosophical precept that "we believe in no Magic which transcends the scope and capacity of the human mind, nor in 'miracle', whether divine or diabolical, if such imply a transgression of the laws of nature."<sup>280</sup> Neither Heliobas

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<sup>278</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, xxviii

<sup>279</sup> *Life Everlasting*, 362

<sup>280</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, vi This notion is repeated ad nauseam in Haggard's Ayesha novels, with her refrain that "There is no magic, only nature"

nor Alsezion are practicing magic; instead they merely wield an advanced knowledge of the natural, scientific laws of nature, just like a Theosophical adept.

*Influence Over Self: Maintaining Youth and Warding Off Disease*

Several times during *The Life Everlasting*, the ability to maintain one's youth and health is discussed. Although Harland knew Santoris from his days in Oxford some twenty years ago, the Egyptian seems not to have aged a day and to be in perfect health. This has not been accomplished by mystical or magical means but by an application of *the science of the day* with an eye towards its spiritual implications. To stave off disease one must first realize that "we human beings are composed of good and evil particles. If the good are encouraged they drive out the evil,- if the evil they drive out the good. It's the same with the body as the soul, if we encourage the healthy working 'microbes' as you call them, they will drive out disease from the human organism altogether."<sup>281</sup> Santoris explains that death itself can be warded off in a similar fashion:

And here you have the key to what you consider my mystery- the mystery of keeping young instead of growing old- the secret of living instead of dying. It is simply the conscious practical realization that there is no Death, but only Change. This is the first part of the process. Change, or transmutation and transformation of the atoms and elements of which we are composed, is going on for ever without a second's cessation,- it began when we were born and before we were born- and the art of living young consists simply in using one's souls and will-power to guide this process of change to the end we desire.<sup>282</sup>

Both passages attempt to use science to explain something wholly implausible, namely maintaining eternal youth and willing away disease.<sup>283</sup> However paranormal, there is nothing inherently anti-Christian about prolonged youth and health. Perhaps attaining eternal youth and longevity by magic would violate Christian dogma, but it is science and not magic by which they

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<sup>281</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 91

<sup>282</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 251

<sup>283</sup> In *The Life Everlasting* Corelli does acknowledge the possibility of inherited disease, but according to her that can be "prevented in a great measure by making the marriage of diseased persons a criminal offense" (136).

are achieved. It is the science of the here and now, atoms and microbes that Corelli employs.

Conversely, Madame Blavatsky, in *Isis Unveiled*, looks back to Paracelsus for her model of how mankind gets ill. She writes,

The next point for physiologists to verify is his proposition that the nourishment of the body comes not merely through the stomach but, ‘also imperceptibly through the magnetic force which resides in all nature and by which every individual member draws its specific nourishment to itself.’ Man, he further says, draws not only health from the elements when in equilibrium, but also disease when they are disturbed. Living bodies are subject to the laws of attraction and chemical affinity, as science admits; the most remarkable physical property of organic tissues, according to physiologists, is the property of imbibitions. What more natural, then, than this theory of Paracelsus, that this absorbent, attractive and chemical body of ours gathers into itself the astral or sidereal bodies....what objection can science offer?<sup>284</sup>

For Blavatsky, the secret to youth and disease-free living lies not in electricity and atoms but in the ancient science of Paracelsus not yet fully understood by our scientists, and thus discredited. Blavatsky outlines Paracelsus’s belief that people are influenced and affected by the world around them, specifically by “astral or sidereal influences.” Their impact can either be for good or ill. Blavatsky makes a gesture towards basing this in legitimate science by mentioning that “living bodies are subject to the laws of attraction and affinity, as science admits” and alluding to magnetism and chemistry, but nothing of real substance beyond that. The passage revolves around “astral or sidereal influences,” but what these are is left completely vague. Blavatsky is saying that since magnetism is scientifically valid, then so should the theories of Paracelsus be, and modern science is shortsighted in not acknowledging their validity. Corelli does not use magnetism but atomic theory to explain Santoris’s youthful appearance. However, the logic she uses is similar to that of Blavatsky. If modern day atomic theory was scientifically valid, then perhaps prolonged youth could be achieved, as she explains in *The Life Everlasting*.

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<sup>284</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 169

*Influencing Others: Healing and Astral Projection*

A natural extension of being able to promote health and longevity in oneself is the ability to do so in others. In fact, much of the plot of *A Romance of Two Worlds* centers around Heliobas's efforts to cure the narrator of her physical and spiritual maladies. Conversely, much time in *The Life Everlasting* is focused on Dr. Brayle's inability to cure Harland and his daughter. In *A Romance of Two Worlds*, Heliobas can heal the narrator because his scientific knowledge is tempered by a spiritual awareness. He represents a marriage of science and spirituality the same way Van Helsing does in *Dracula*. Although Heliobas is not a physician, he plays the role of one, and his openness to phenomena and possibilities beyond the confines of conventional science allows him to treat the narrator successfully. In *The Life Everlasting* Santoris states outright that he could heal Harland, something Dr. Brayle is ultimately not able to do. Dr. Brayle represents scientific myopia in much the same way Seward does in *Dracula*. In this role, he is skeptical about man's ability to influence his fellow man in any esoteric way, saying "I believe in a certain extent in magnetism- in fact, I have myself tested its power in purely nervous patients,- but I have never accepted the idea that persons can silently and almost without conscious effort, influence others for either malign or beneficial purposes."<sup>285</sup> Despite his skepticism, Dr. Brayle acknowledges the possible medical potential of magnetism, though here he is talking about its psychological applications, which do not exist.<sup>286</sup> Nevertheless, for Brayle, modern science has its limits and one of those is that people cannot silently and clandestinely influence each other through the force of their will. Heliobas himself acknowledges this in a conversation with the narrator, "being cured by electricity, there is

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<sup>285</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 294

<sup>286</sup> As Brenda Ayres pointed out, many people believed in the medical potential of magnetism, and not only scientists. Even Mark Twain came to believe in magnetic healing. When he visited Corelli in 1907 Ayres claims they must have exchanged notes on the subject.

nothing surprising in such a statement nowadays. But say nothing of the HUMAN electric force employed upon you- no one would believe you.”<sup>287</sup> However, Blavatsky and Corelli both operate beyond those confines.

In *A Romance of Two Worlds*, Heliobas alleviates the narrator’s physical and spiritual afflictions using what seems to be electrified liquid. She speculates that “if it had contained electricity, as I supposed, my body had absorbed it.”<sup>288</sup> Interestingly, the novel also contains an incident in which Heliobas uses his powers for destructive purposes. Towards the end of the novel during a fight with Prince Ivan he falls upon him, “exciting the whole battery of his inner electric force, and that thus employed for the purposes of vengeance, must cause death.”<sup>289</sup> Heliobas can therefore obviously affect another person directly, but this ability has its limits. According to him, “those who are on my own circle of power I can, naturally, draw to or repel from me; but those who are not have to be treated by different means.”<sup>290</sup> Heliobas further explains that “the Universe is a circle. Everything is circular, from the motion of planets down to the human eye, or the cup of a flower, or a drop of dew. My ‘circle theory’, as you call it, applied to human electric force, is very simple but I have proved it to be mathematically correct. Every human being is provided both INTERNALLY and EXTERNALLY, with a certain amount of electricity, which is as necessary to existence as the lifeblood to the heart or the fresh air to the lungs.”<sup>291</sup> The science is, of course, completely unfounded, but it is loosely based on electrical theory and gestures towards legitimacy with Heliobas’s claim of mathematical proof. It seems Heliobas has the greatest efficacy on people who are in the same circle as he, or are similarly charged.

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<sup>287</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 165

<sup>288</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 68

<sup>289</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 218

<sup>290</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 83

<sup>291</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 84

To explain how a human being might have an innate electrical charge, Heliobas's sister explains that people have within them organs that are charged with electricity and "they have forgotten the use of the electrical organs they all indubitably possess in large or minute degree. As the muscles of the arm are developed by practice, so can the wonderful internal electrical apparatus of man be strengthened and enlarged by use. The world in its youth knew this; the world in its age forgets."<sup>292</sup> As is customary with Corelli, this explanation is rooted in scientific fact, although the end result is fantastic. Just prior to this passage, the narrator mentions "a book on electric organs as they are discovered in fish."<sup>293</sup> Indeed there are fish that can both generate and detect electric fields, the most familiar being the electric eel. Corelli then makes the leap to asserting mankind once had similar electrogenic organs that have atrophied away from lack of use.<sup>294</sup> Corelli also maintains that these organs generate electricity to varying degrees in different people, and that this power can be harnessed and used. That the efficacy of the electricity varies and must be cultivated explains why everybody does not have access to this power, and also why some who would like to cultivate it cannot; they simply do not have the electrical capacity to do so. What is particularly interesting about this passage is the notion that "the world in its youth knew this; the world in its age forgets." This gesture towards an ancient, lost wisdom is rather out of character for Corelli, and is more in line with Blavatsky's Theosophy. I believe Corelli had to make this claim out of necessity. If people have electrified organs that are now dormant, then it is a logical necessity that these organs were once active and functional. Otherwise, they would have no reason for existing.

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<sup>292</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 126

<sup>293</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 125

<sup>294</sup> Mankind has vestigial organs such as the appendix and vestigial bone structures such as the coccyx. I suppose it is vaguely possible that man did once possess such organs, but it is not likely.

One last way in which some of Corelli's characters can affect other people is their ability to induce in them lucid, dreamlike visions that can only be termed astral projections. Astral projection is a phrase intimately associated with Theosophy and refers to the practice of sending one's "astral body" out across space and time while the corporeal body remains stationary and unconscious. Although this belief is not directly opposed to Christianity, it is the one the narrator of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, Marie Corelli, has the toughest time accepting, saying, of a story she heard "the only part I didn't credit was the soul-transmigration."<sup>295</sup> Here Corelli uses the term "transmigration" in a different way from Blavatsky,<sup>296</sup> although it is clear she is referring to astral projection. In the story to which she is alluding the artist Cellini, under the influence of Heliobas, undergoes an experience of which he later says "when I say [I was] senseless, mademoiselle, I allude of course to my body. But I, myself, that is, my soul, was conscious; I lived I moved I heard, I saw. Of that experience I am forbidden to speak."<sup>297</sup> Cellini's experience with Heliobas is the first example of a character influenced into an astral-projection-like experience. The best example occurs in *A Romance of Two Worlds*, where the narrator is influenced to have a vision that lasts one day and a half in which she, among other things, travels to the planet Venus<sup>298</sup> and gets to try her hand at a miniature version of creation. During the experience the narrator wonders "'Did I dwell in that body?' I mused to myself, as I felt the perfection of my then state of being. 'How came I shut in such a prison? How poor a form- how destitute of faculties- how full of infirmities- how limited in capabilities- how narrow

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<sup>295</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds* 54

<sup>296</sup> For Blavatsky the term "transmigration" is essentially synonymous with reincarnation, Corelli's version of which I discuss later.

<sup>297</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 51

<sup>298</sup> Alex Owen opens her book *The Place of Enchantment* with an account of two upper middle class Victorians who met with the express purpose of travelling to other planets via astral projection. As Owen points out, such a thing was common. Alex Owen. *The Place of Enchantment*. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004) 1-2.

in all intelligence- how ignorant.”<sup>299</sup> Present here is the notion that the true, essential and spiritual self has been liberated from an inferior, corporeal trap, which is precisely what Theosophy teaches.

In each of the above episodes, the body lies inert but the spirit or “actual self” goes out on a journey, and that is what makes the experience distinctly one of astral projection as defined by Theosophy. Blavatsky describes astral projection as “the voluntary and conscious withdrawal of the inner man (astral form) from the outer body (physical form).....to the movements of the wandering astral form neither time nor space offer obstacles.”<sup>300</sup> She also gives an example of “the flight of a lama’s astral body to a distant monastery while his physical frame remained behind.”<sup>301</sup> When Blavatsky discusses astral travel and astral projection it is usually in terms of the adept or master projecting their astral bodies out but adepts can also “control the conditions of the physical and astral bodies of other persons not adepts.”<sup>302</sup> Influencing the astral bodies of others to traverse the boundaries of space and time is exactly what characters like Heliobas, Santoria, and Aselzion do in Corelli’s novels.

At first glance it would seem that these beliefs would be at loggerheads with orthodox Christianity. However, that is not necessarily the case. There is nothing unchristian about any of the aforementioned phenomena. The Old Testament is littered with people who live incredibly long lives, and there is nothing inherently unchristian about astral projection, especially given that Christianity preaches a belief in an immortal soul. These beliefs are not inherently anathema to Christianity. Therefore, Corelli could weave them into her hybrid Christianity without too much concern about alienating an orthodox readership. They were inoffensive novelties thrown

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<sup>299</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds* 135

<sup>300</sup> H.P Blavatsky. *Isis Unveiled: Volume II*. (Pasadena: Theosophical UP, 1998) 588

<sup>301</sup> *Isis Unveiled II*, 605

<sup>302</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 590

in to give the readership a taste of new spiritualism and invite imaginative play with the possibilities they presented. Speculative popular science allowed phenomena like astral projection to co-exist with Christianity. In fact, with Theosophy as her template, Corelli could make popular science explain some of the most fundamental beliefs of Christianity and even the mysteries of Christ himself.

### CORELLI'S ELECTRIC CREED OF CHRISTIANITY

#### CONCEPTIONS OF THE SOUL

“The Electric Principle of Christianity” appears in chapter 14 of *A Romance of Two Worlds*. Corelli’s credo starts with the notion that God “is a shape of pure electrical radiance. Those who may be inclined to doubt this may search the Scriptures on which they pin their faith, and they will find that all the visions and appearances of the Deity there chronicled were electric in character.”<sup>303</sup> “The Electric Principle of Christianity” goes on to describe creation as God causing “the Earth to be inhabited and DOMINATED by beings composed of Earth’s component parts, animal, vegetable, and mineral, giving them their superiority by placing within them His ‘LIKENESS’ in the form of an ELECTRIC FLAME or GERM of spiritual existence.”<sup>304</sup> This statement very strongly echoes Theosophical teaching that “humans are described as Sparks of the Divine Fire, emanated from the Solar Deity.”<sup>305</sup> The non-denominational Solar Deity of Theosophy has been replaced by the Christian God and the Spark of the Divine Fire has become an electric flame, which is a scientific stand-in for the Christian soul. This indebtedness to Theosophical teaching increases as Corelli’s “Electric Principal of Christianity” further describes this electric spark/soul:

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<sup>303</sup> *Two Worlds*, 175

<sup>304</sup> *Two Worlds*, 176

<sup>305</sup> Bruce F. Campbell *Ancient Wisdom Revived: A History of the Theosophical Movement* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1980) 64

Like all flames, this electric spark can either be fanned into a fire or it can be allowed to escape in air- IT CAN NEVER BE DESTROYED. It can be fostered and educated till it becomes a living Spiritual Form of absolute beauty- an immortal creature of thought, memory, emotion and working intelligence. If, on the contrary, he is neglected or forgotten, and its companion Will is drawn by the weight of Earth to work for earthly aims alone, then it escapes and seeks other chances of development in OTHER FORMS on OTHER PLANETS, while the body it leaves, SUPPORTED ONLY BY PHYSICAL SUSTENANCE DRAWN FROM THE EARTH ON WHICH IT DWELLS, becomes a mere lump of clay ANIMATED BY MERE ANIMAL LIFE SOLELY, full of inward ignorance and corruption and outward incapacity. Of such material are the majority of men composed BY THEIR OWN FREE-WILL AND CHOICE, because they habitually deaden the voice of conscience and refuse to believe in the existence of a spiritual element within and around them.<sup>306</sup> (emphasis original)

This vision of spiritual evolution comes extremely close to Theosophy's version of metempsychosis, which Blavatsky defines as "the progress of the soul from one stage of existence to another."<sup>307</sup> She goes on to chastise the evolutionary science of her day as short sighted, acknowledging physical evolution but denying the possibility that the spirit evolves:

Modern, or so-called exact science, holds but to a one-sided physical evolution, prudently avoiding and ignoring the higher or spiritual evolution, which would force our contemporaries to confess the superiority of the ancient philosophers and psychologists over themselves. The ancient sages, ascending to the unknowable, made their starting-point from the first manifestation of the unseen, the unavoidable, and from a strict logical reasoning, the absolutely necessary creative Being the Demiurgos of the universe. Evolution began with them from pure spirit, which descending lower and lower down, assumed at last a visible and comprehensible form, and became matter.<sup>308</sup>

In both Corelli's Christianity and Blavatsky's Theosophy the soul can evolve. Also present in both passages is the idea that the soul can and has devolved into a corporeal state. In fact, reaching an idealized and pure spiritual form is the goal of both belief systems.<sup>309</sup> According to

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<sup>306</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 176

<sup>307</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, xxxvi

<sup>308</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, xxx

<sup>309</sup> However, such spiritual perfection is no easy task, either in Corelli's Christianity or in Blavatsky's Theosophy. Corelli mentions that one might need to further develop the soul in "other forms and on other planets." This apparent belief in extraterrestrial spiritual evolution is culled directly from the doctrines of Theosophy, as

Theosophy, adepts or masters are those who have finally reached such an evolved state, and this notion is echoed in Corelli's "Electric Creed."

### ELECTRIC JESUS

For Theosophy Jesus Christ was an adept, meaning his soul had reached the endpoint of Theosophical evolution.<sup>310</sup> In *Isis Unveiled* Blavatsky writes that "all the civilized portion of the Pagans who knew of Jesus honored him as a philosopher, an *adept* whom they placed on the same level with Pythagoras and Apollonius."<sup>311</sup> As an adept, Jesus would have been one of many masters "who were perfected in former periods of evolution and thus serve as models of human development. They have gone through the training necessary to develop many unseen and hidden powers, traits that Theosophists believe make them appear godlike to normal humans."<sup>312</sup> Corelli describes Jesus Christ in precisely the same terms as Theosophical teachings. In her "Electric Creed of Christianity" she maintains that Jesus was "an emanation of [God's] own radiance- no germ or small flame such as given to us in our bodies to cultivate and foster but a complete immortal Spirit."<sup>313</sup> In this sense, Jesus is a completely refined spirit who had voluntarily taken human form, which Theosophical masters could also do. From time to time, they "voluntarily incarnate in human bodies to form the connecting link between human and superhuman beings."<sup>314</sup> Corelli even picks up on this concept of an incarnated master providing a connective link between humans and super humans. The "Electric Creed" maintains "It was necessary, in order to establish what has been called an electric communication between God's Sphere and this Earth, that an actual, immortal, untainted spirit in the person of Christ should

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Theosophical teachings dictate that "evolution is a process carried out not only on this planet but also on other visible celestial bodies and on invisible ones as well" (Campbell 64).

<sup>310</sup> Following Corelli's model of Christianity, any believer whose soul reached such an exalted, refined state would be closer to Jesus (in terms of spiritual evolution), which is the goal of any good Christian

<sup>311</sup> *Isis Unveiled II*, 150

<sup>312</sup> Campbell, 54

<sup>313</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 178

<sup>314</sup> Campbell, 55

walk this world.”<sup>315</sup> Corelli has co-opted Theosophy’s doctrines for her own purposes. Rather than having adepts facilitate communication between humans and the Great White Lodge (where adepts were said to live), she substitutes God’s Sphere, allowing the Theosophical concept to dovetail with her Christian beliefs.<sup>316</sup>

After establishing that Jesus Christ was akin to a master or adept, she proceeds to explain many of his miracles in terms of electrical science. Corelli states that “it can be proven from the statements of the New Testament that in Christ was an Embodied Electric Spirit. From first to last His career was attended by ELECTRIC PHENOMENON.”<sup>317</sup> She then elaborates on a list of Biblical examples, many of which have analogs in Theosophy. One claim that Corelli makes is that “the sympathetic influence of Christ was so powerful that when He selected his disciples, He had but to speak to them, and at the sound of His voice, though they were engaged in other business, ‘THEY LEFT ALL AND FOLLOWED HIM.’”<sup>318</sup> In order to understand how this relates to Christ’s innate electrical capacity one must understand Corelli’s “sympathetic influence.” Since God imbued every person with an innate electrical spark (which is how Corelli renders the soul in terms of science), it is possible for highly evolved persons to influence those around them, even to effect miraculous cures. Corelli goes on to say “Christ’s body was charged with electricity. Thus he was easily able to heal sick and diseased persons by a touch or look.”<sup>319</sup> This is precisely how Heliobas is able to effect cures, and by the end of *A Romance of Two Worlds*, the narrator has the same skill. As Heliobas and the narrator part, he tells her “you have

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<sup>315</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 178

<sup>316</sup> Earlier in *A Romance of Two Worlds* Corelli employs the analogy of something like an “Atlantic Cable” facilitating communication between Earth and God’s Sphere, even more firmly rooting her spirituality in the science of her day.

<sup>317</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 179

<sup>318</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 180

<sup>319</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 180

progressed greatly in electric force: the mere touch of your hand will soothe her,”<sup>320</sup> in reference to her sick friend. Here, Corelli seems to be taking a cue directly from Theosophy, even at the expense of her own orthodox Christianity. Volume I of *Isis Unveiled* contains a chapter on healing mediums in which Madame Blavatsky lists healers who can “like Jesus, and some apostles...cure by the word of command.”<sup>321</sup> Earlier in *Isis Unveiled*, Blavatsky explains Jesus’s healing powers as a function of magnetism:

the representatives of ‘exact science’ are unable to either explain or even offer us anything like a reasonable hypothesis for the undeniable mysterious potency contained in a simple magnet. We begin to have daily proofs that these potencies underlie the theurgic mysteries, and therefore might perhaps explain the occult faculties possessed by ancient and modern thaumaturgists as well as a good many of their most astounding achievements. Such were the gifts transmitted by Jesus to some of his disciples. At the moment of his miraculous cures, the Nazarene felt a *power* issuing from him.<sup>322</sup>

Corelli’s explanation of Christ’s healing abilities parallels Blavatsky’s. First and foremost, both are byproducts of electricity. True, Blavatsky’s version hinges upon magnetism, but according to science, magnetism is a function of electricity. Electric currents, or moving electrical charges, create magnetic fields.<sup>323</sup> Furthermore, both Blavatsky and Corelli claim that Christ felt the electrical power leaving him at the moment of healing. When discussing Luke 8:16, in which a sick woman merely touches Jesus and is cured, Corelli writes,<sup>324</sup> “the woman who caught his garment in the crowd was cured of her long standing ailment; and we see that Christ was aware of his own electric force by the words he used on that occasion: ‘WHO TOUCHED ME? FOR I FEEL THAT SOME VIRTUE IS GONE OUT OF ME’ - which is the exact feeling that a

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<sup>320</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 235

<sup>321</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 217

<sup>322</sup> *Isis Unveiled*, 130-131

<sup>323</sup> This theory was refined in 1861 by physicist James Maxwell

<sup>324</sup> Interestingly, Madame Blavatsky cites the very same example from Luke on page 216 of *Isis Unveiled*

physical electrician experiences at this day after employing his powers on a subject.”<sup>325</sup> Granted, Corelli is making quite a leap equating “virtue” with “electricity,” but it is nonetheless clear that Corelli’s version of Christ’s miraculous restorative abilities is similar to Blavatsky’s in two important ways. Christ’s healing ability is related to magnetism and he could feel the electricity leaving him. Beyond that, Corelli is echoing Blavatsky in a third, and somewhat unexpected way. Both seem to be saying that the ability to cure via electromagnetism is present in all people, not just Jesus Christ. Such a claim is not unexpected for Blavatsky, but it does seem a bit odd coming from Corelli. As mentioned earlier, Heliobas can cure people and so can the narrator after comparatively little training.

This is not the only time Corelli claims that anybody can perform miracles like those of Christ. In fact, she makes the same claim about one of Christ’s most iconic miracles, in that “the walking on the sea was a purely electric effort, AND CAN BE ACCOMPLISHED NOW BY ANYONE who has cultivated sufficient inner force. The sea being full of electric particles will support anybody sufficiently and similarly charged- the two currents combining to procure the necessary equilibrium.”<sup>326</sup> This tendency to make Christ’s miracles a bit less miraculous might well border on the blasphemous, and we must wonder why Corelli does so. It seems that such statements are a necessary outcrop of her efforts to recast Christianity in a (pseudo)scientific light. If we explain the divine, that which was once inherently unknowable, in terms of manmade science, the spiritual has to become less elusive. Corelli has transformed both God and the soul into functions of electricity. At best, man could only wonder and speculate about the nature of the soul when it was an airy mystery, but now she has made it an electric spark. When Corelli was writing *A Romance of Two Worlds*, man had already begun to unravel the

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<sup>325</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 180

<sup>326</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 180

mysteries of electricity. Previously, the soul was inscrutable, speculated upon but never fully understood by philosophers and theologians. How could one harness the power of the unknown and uncertain, even if a soul exists in everybody? Now, for Corelli, the soul was an electrical spark and science was continuing to delve into the nature and properties of electricity. If people could begin to understand electricity, what it was and what it could do, then all of a sudden the potential would be there for everybody to harness its powers provided they took the time to learn and develop them.

Up until this point I have discussed ways in which Marie Corelli co-opted Theosophical teachings to suit her own purposes. I would like, however, to explore a way in which she directly refutes one of Theosophy's doctrines. In her "Electric Creed of Christianity," Marie Corelli makes the following claim about Christianity and how it relates to other religions of the world, particularly Buddhism:

All religions, as known to us, are mere types of Christianity. It is a notable fact that some of the oldest and most learned races in the world, such as the Armenians and the Chaldeans, were the first to be convinced of the truth of Christ's visitation. Buddhism, of which there are so many million followers, is itself a type of Christ's teaching; only it lacks the supernatural element. Buddha died a hermit at the age of eighty, as any wise and ascetic man might do today. The death and resurrection of Christ were widely different. Anyone can be a Buddha again; anyone can NOT be a Christ. That there are stated to be more followers of Buddhism than of Christianity is no proof of any other efficacy in the former or lack of power in the latter. Buddhists help to swell that very large class of persons who prefer a flattering picture to a plain original.<sup>327</sup>

This argument directly contradicts one of Blavatsky's main arguments against Christianity, specifically that it is merely a derivative of Buddhism. Blavatsky repeatedly makes this claim throughout *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine*, arguing that "the true spirit of Christianity can alone be found in Buddhism."<sup>328</sup> Further, Blavatsky maintains that "the doctrines, ethical code

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<sup>327</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 178

<sup>328</sup> *Isis Unveiled II*, 240

and observances of the Christian religion were all appropriated from Brahmanism and Buddhism”<sup>329</sup> and finally that “the first *Gospels*, once as canonical as any of the present four, contain pages taken almost entire from Buddhistical narratives.”<sup>330</sup> The idea that Christianity was descended from Buddhism was an increasingly popular belief in late-nineteenth century Britain. J. Jeffrey Franklin claims that, after Darwinism, Buddhism was perceived as the next biggest threat to Christianity. While Christianity, Judaism and Islam, the three major world religions predicated on the Creation myth, were called into serious question by evolution, Eastern religions such as Buddhism were in no such danger. In fact, he points out that “Buddhism had a perceived compatibility with...science,”<sup>331</sup> making it an attractive alternative for those seeking a new religion that complemented the science of the day. Franklin continues:

This shift was compounded by a spreading recognition that Buddhism had preceded Christianity by over five hundred years, and this brought with it a fear that Jesus may have studied at the feet of ‘wise men from the East.’ By the 1880s-90s, the thought that ‘Buddhists had been in the Holy Land during Christ’s life-time was an idea very much in vogue’ (Whitlark, ‘Nirvana Talk’ 27). It was only a short step from there to speculating about the influence of Buddhist parables on the Bible, which twentieth-century scholars have partially affirmed.<sup>332</sup>

Christianity was not only under siege from science but also from an influx of Eastern religions, and Buddhism was by far the most appealing. According to an article Franklin cites, there were approximately 30,000 Buddhists in Paris by 1890. Given the appeal and rapid growth of Buddhism in Europe, it is easy to see why Corelli would take great pains to oppose the emergent belief that Christianity was indebted to Buddhism. Corelli was perfectly willing to borrow methodology and spiritualist beliefs from Theosophy as long as they did not directly offend Christianity. The priority of Christianity was always at the forefront of Corelli’s hybridized

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<sup>329</sup> *Isis Unveiled II*, 211

<sup>330</sup> *Isis Unveiled II*, 504

<sup>331</sup> Franklin, 22

<sup>332</sup> Franklin, 24

faith, and Buddhism was a very real threat. It was one thing to write about such popular trappings of spiritualism as astral projection and ascended masters. These beliefs were non-denominational, attached to a multitude of spiritualisms that did not threaten organized Christianity. Buddhism, however, was a far bigger and established threat, hence Corelli's strong condemnation of it and defense of Christianity. This attitude towards Buddhism also influences Corelli's treatment of reincarnation.

### **MARIE CORELLI AND REINCARNATION**

Reincarnation was a hallmark of spiritualist beliefs in the late-nineteenth century, particularly those influenced by Buddhism and the East. The doctrine held a particular appeal for those recently divested of a Christian heaven by Darwin and evolution. A promise of life after death completely independent of Christianity was appealing. A multitude of spiritualisms preached a belief in reincarnation and Theosophy was no exception. Reincarnation is a far more nuanced and complex doctrine than abodes of eternal bliss and damnation. It introduces issues such as past lives, reincarnation into animal life, as well as the possibility of future incarnations. Madame Blavatsky and Marie Corelli discuss reincarnation but in very different ways. Reincarnation is one of those beliefs that contradict Christian conceptions about life after death and the nature of the soul, so Corelli had to handle it differently. Theosophy was not a viable model on this point because assailing entrenched Christian beliefs was precisely its goal. Marie Corelli did not want to alienate her readership or validate Buddhism, so she makes several careful choices when conceptualizing her Christian version of reincarnation. The differences between the two say much about the different goals Corelli and Blavatsky were trying to reach with their hybrid religions.

Theosophy's version of reincarnation was always a source of controversy. One of the key criticisms of *Isis Unveiled* was its garbled and contradictory discussion of this subject. This prompted Blavatsky to write an apology that clarified Theosophy's concept of reincarnation, but even after that this doctrine was constantly being developed and refined. It's not so much that Theosophy lacked a unified vision of reincarnation but that it was not the reincarnation that most people understood or cared about. The average person cared about reincarnation as a new way of avoiding the possibility of eternal nothingness after death. The reward for living a good life was not eternal bliss but rather another go at life, perhaps in a slightly better station.

Theosophists were not interested in reincarnation for the same obvious reasons that average persons were. The science-religion Theosophy took a grandiose and philosophical approach to reincarnation. True to scientific form, reincarnation was more about the evolution of the soul, but only as a function of the larger evolution of the human race. Volume two of *The Secret Doctrine* gives the history of man

as the story of a succession of seven 'root races,' each of which inhabits a specific continent. The history of man reflects the process of involution and evolution. Man once was more spiritual than physical and was able to create through inner powers of his mind. Again, in the distant future, he will create by spiritual will.<sup>333</sup>

According to Theosophy, mankind is currently in the fourth phase of a seven-phase evolution. Theosophic doctrine gets so wrapped up in the larger picture of evolution that the little steps along the way get lost in the shuffle. Theosophy places its emphasis on what will happen to humankind and largely ignores what will happen to individuals during this phase of human evolution. It is more concerned with grandiose inquiries like the fate of mankind because it is seeking to rival both modern science and religion, therefore its writing is more doctrinal with an eye towards nuanced answers to large questions.

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<sup>333</sup> Campbell, 44

Marie Corelli's version of reincarnation is precisely the opposite of Theosophy's impersonal vision. One of the ways in which reincarnation manifests itself in *The Life Everlasting* is through past life memories, a possibility Theosophy does not allow for, but which is common to most spiritualisms. By including past life experiences in the lives of her characters Corelli implicitly invites her readers to wonder about the exciting enchanted lives they might have lived. Reincarnation, for Corelli, is an individual experience and for Blavatsky it is a collective one. Blavatsky's vision of reincarnation focuses on a theoretical future for the entire human race, where as Corelli's vision of reincarnation is more personal, asking readers to wonder about past and future lives. Corelli's vision is also easier to relate to. As the story of a character's past life unfolds, a reader cannot help but wonder about the details of their own past lives. Imagining a life as a courtesan or warrior helps a person to forget about the drudgery and fear of modern life.

#### CONCEPTIONS OF THE SOUL IN BLAVATSKY AND CORELLI

Theosophy's conception of the soul violated a fundamental Christian truth, so Corelli could not adopt it. Christianity maintains the belief in a single, unified soul. However, the soul in Theosophy is tripartite. These three parts are the Manas (which is essentially consciousness), Buddhi (the Spiritual Self) and Atma (the spark of the Absolute). Of these three, it is the Buddhi, the spiritual self, that gets reincarnated and evolves over time. Of course, Blavatsky's conceptualization of the soul is not entirely her own. She owes much to Plato, Pythagoras, and Sanskrit texts. Blavatsky connects Pythagoras and Hindu vedic visions of the soul, and to her this was proof that both were in touch with an ancient wisdom and truth about the soul.<sup>334</sup>

Blavatsky points out that numbers connect the Greek and the Hindu teachings. Mathematics is

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<sup>334</sup> *The Key to Theosophy* contains a chart and comparison between Theosophy's construction of man's essence alongside a Greek conception and one from Sanskrit. H.P Blavatsky *The Key to Theosophy* (London: Kessinger, 1890) 91

the language of science, and she is basing her claim on this language. Her conception of the soul derives from an ancient esoteric knowledge older than both Christianity and modern science, one that is validated by mathematics, if one knows where to look. Traditionally the soul is spiritual but Blavatsky has rooted her soul in the scientific. It also evolves, which science says the physical body does, and Blavatsky extends the claim to the ethereal side of man. Blavatsky's conception of the soul, although rooted in ancient tradition, is a radical departure from a Christian concept of the soul. Of course, this is what Blavatsky wanted. Not only did she depart from Christian conceptions; she relished doing it.

Marie Corelli was working within the constraints of the Christian understanding of the soul when incorporating reincarnation into her hybridized version of Christianity. However reincarnation was extremely popular and the possibility of recollecting past lives holds a certain allure, especially to those seeking escape. Corelli keeps the soul whole and immortal but demonstrates that immortality using atomic theory and the 1911 discovery of radium and radiation. In *A Romance of Two Worlds* Corelli explained the seemingly supernatural in terms of electricity, but by her 1927 novel she had a new, popular science at her disposal. She writes,

I was told there was no 'spiritual' force in electricity. I differ from this view; but 'radio-activity is perhaps the better, because the truer term to employ in seeking to describe the Germ or Embryo of the Soul, for- as scientists have proved- 'Radium is capable of absorbing from surrounding bodies some unknown form of energy which it can render evident as heat and light.' Heat and light are the composition of Life;- and the Life which the radio-activity of Soul generates in itself and of itself can never die.<sup>335</sup>

Corelli's soul maintains the essential characteristics of Christianity's conception of the soul, which is still one coherent entity as opposed to the unorthodox multipart version that Theosophy offered. Re-imagining the very nature of the soul was not Corelli's interest. Rather than re-invent the Christian soul Corelli simply re-explained it. Christianity holds that the soul is the

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<sup>335</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 19

breath of God, a bit of the divine present in everyone. Corelli makes the same claim for her soul, stating “there is nothing in the whole Universe so *real* as the Vital Germ of the actual Form and Being of the living, radiant, active Creature within each one of us.”<sup>336</sup> Furthermore, the soul is “generated from a divinely eternal psychic substance,- a ‘radia or emanation of God’s own being.”<sup>337</sup> The bit of the divine in every person had a name, and that name was radiation. Therefore, all the mysteries of the soul now had the potential to be explained not by religious theory but by science. Corelli writes,

It was also found that radium kept on producing heat *de novo* so as to keep itself a fraction of a degree *above the surrounding temperature*; also that it spontaneously produced electricity. Does this teach no lesson on the resurrection of the dead? Of the ‘blown away part’ which decays in a few days or weeks?- of the ‘Radia’ or Radiane” of the soul?<sup>338</sup>

Beliefs such as the immortality of the soul were now explained in terms of radiation.

Radioactive materials such as radium could independently produce heat, and a substance that was perpetually warm could be seen as forever alive in some sense. Beyond that, the very nature of radiation, a sort of disembodied energy, can also be made to seem spiritual. Radioactivity is the process by which unstable atoms lose energy in the form of radiation. In a very real sense, solid atoms changing are becoming non-corporeal energy. Corelli picks up on this very concept in her prologue to *The Life Everlasting*:

of the ‘new form of matter’ and the radio-activity as a concomitant of the *change of form*’ ? Does not Science here almost unwittingly verify the words of St. Paul:- ‘It is sown a natural body; it is raised a spiritual body. There is a natural body, and there is a spiritual body’”? There is nothing impossible or miraculous in such a consummation, even according to modern material science, - it is merely the natural action of *pure* radioactivity or that ethereal composition for which we have no name, but which we have vaguely called the soul for countless ages.<sup>339</sup>

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<sup>336</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 21

<sup>337</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 25

<sup>338</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 20

<sup>339</sup> *The Life Everlasting* 20-21

In the above passage Corelli explicitly brings together the writings of Saint Paul and hardcore modern science. She discusses radiation as a change of form between matter and energy and connects that dichotomy with the divide between flesh and the spirit. Man has his physical, natural body, which consists of atoms. Religions also posit a spiritual side, and Corelli presents the possibility of this spiritual side in a scientific way. The spirit is disembodied and ethereal, as is energy, and it is easy to think of the two in similar terms. In fact, a shapeless and vibrant force is a very workable imagining of a soul or spirit.

Having maintained the fundamental elements of the Christian soul, Corelli merely offers a different version of what happens to the soul after death. Her description of God is as a “Divine Mind or Governing Intelligence.”<sup>340</sup> God in scientific terms becomes a kind of cosmic brain or thinker, but is still a single, all powerful deity. The ultimate goal for the soul in Corelli is union with this Divine mind. Corelli describes an acolyte praying in *The Lifer Everlasting*, “O Divine Light...We are a part of Thee, and into Thee we desire to become absorbed.”<sup>341</sup> Furthermore, Heaven is described as “a state of perfect happiness. What is Happiness? The immortal union of two Souls in one....God is the Supreme Lover and there is nothing higher than Love.”<sup>342</sup> Union with the Divine, being in the presence of God, can just as easily be a description of a Christian heaven. In Corelli’s Christianity there was no death, as death is merely “a shifting and re-investiture of imperishable atoms.”<sup>343</sup> This idea of matter re-shaping and re-constituting itself echoes the physical principle that matter cannot be created or destroyed.<sup>344</sup> However, matter is able to be transformed into energy. As such, death would merely be a process easily conceivable by science by which matter becomes energy or spirit. Corelli’s big

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<sup>340</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 332

<sup>341</sup> *The Life Everlasting* 340

<sup>342</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 379

<sup>343</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 316

<sup>344</sup> This is the Law of Conservation of Mass

break with orthodox Christianity concerns what next happens to the spirit. Before reaching unity with the Divine Mind, or Heaven, the spirit is reincarnated through multiple lifetimes.<sup>345</sup>

### PAST LIVES

The mechanics of Corelli's reincarnation are never really fleshed out, but they need not be. Her readership was not looking for exact answers but rather for a way in which fashionable, popular spiritualist beliefs could co-exist with Christianity. Oddly, science provided a way to do this as long as one did not ask too many questions. It is clear that Corelli conceptualizes the soul as some sort of radiation, but she does not establish much beyond this. How does a radioactive soul progress from existence to existence? Fortunately, Corelli's readership was looking for entertainment not dense theory and doctrine. Rather than give elaborate explanations of how reincarnation happens, Corelli spends her time on a different kind of proof: past life memories. A belief in past lives invites people to wonder about what lives they might have lived, and practically every form of spiritualism delved into the topic. To the believer, exploring one's past life is akin to exploring one's self. This fulfills a personal, introspective function of spirituality. It is a private moment even within the largest spiritual community. To Corelli, however, past lives present a unique opportunity to provide her reader with proof of reincarnation.

An entire chapter of *The Life Everlasting* is devoted to the narrator's previous incarnations. The narrator is prompted to recollect them and they all come rushing back in vivid detail, as if she were watching them acted. True to form, such memories are grounded in Corelli's vague science. The narrator explains that "the brain pictures, or rather soul pictures, presented to me were only a few selected out of thousands which equally concerned us."<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>345</sup> Corelli is not the first Christian to write about the possibility that reincarnation co-exists with Christian doctrine. The Christian scholar Origen who lived from 185-284 AD is widely believed to have speculated on the possibility, though his writings on the subject are sadly lost.

<sup>346</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 207

Corelli is relocating memory from the brain, part of the transitory and corporeal body, to the eternal soul that is reincarnated. The soul was radiation for Corelli, and the secrets of radiation were still being unlocked by scientists, although they were already “known” to her. Certainly it was not out of the realm of possibility that radiation could transmit some sort of information. The possibility is grounded in science, but for Corelli the more interesting proof was past life memories themselves. Lives are narratives and can be turned into stories and Corelli was, after all, a storyteller

Chapter 8 of *The Life Everlasting* presents six visions of the narrator’s past lives with her soul-mate Santoris. They include a vision during Roman times, an Egyptian vision, a bizarre savage incarnation, and one in sixteenth century Florence. Simply put, past lives are a wonderful opportunity to fantasize, tell stories and escape, for storyteller and reader alike. A dreary present existence can be momentarily forgotten with wishful recollections of a passionate or important life once lived. Reincarnation not only allows for the hope of what will be, but also for the possibility of what was. Instead of elaborate theories justifying faith and belief, Corelli gave her audience evidence of reincarnation via testimonials, regressions to past lives that were exciting and vibrant. *The Life Everlasting* was supposed to be a firsthand account by Corelli, and these past life versions were allegedly real. If this were possible for the heroine, a seemingly ordinary woman, then it was possible for anyone. Readers are invited to speculate on their own souls’ history while being told the story of *The Life Everlasting*. Corelli is aware that too often the masses “will not listen to any spiritual truth unless it is conveyed to them, as though they were children, in the form of a ‘story.’”<sup>347</sup> In the process of listening to this story, the reader is sold on reincarnation in a wholly Christian context with a completely Christian message. She did not need to construct an elaborate new theology, merely make some tweaks to an existing one.

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<sup>347</sup> *The Life Everlasting*, 33

Corelli did not write theories but instead told stories, and at its core the possibility of having lived multiple lives is an invitation to tell lifetimes of stories.<sup>348</sup> To Corelli and her readers, they provided convincing evidence of reincarnation.

Theosophy, on the other hand, worked to challenge both conventional science and religion. As such, Madame Blavatsky was in the business of constructing elaborate doctrines on the very nature of the soul. Interestingly, past life memories, the lynchpin of Corelli's reincarnation, are explicitly denied by Theosophy. For Blavatsky, "memory along with its brain, the vanished memory of a vanished personality, can neither remember nor record anything in subsequent incarnations. Reincarnation means that this [astral soul] will be furnished with a new body, a new brain, and a new memory."<sup>349</sup> In Blavatsky's conception of reincarnation memory and consciousness reside in the Manas, which does *not* get reincarnated. Of the three essential parts of man, only the Buddhi, or astral souls get reborn. This difference speaks volumes about what Blavatsky was aiming to accomplish as opposed to Corelli.

Practically every spiritualism made a claim about remembering past lives, but Theosophy did not. On some level Theosophy sought to distinguish itself from gross spiritualism and this is an example of a way in which it did so. Simply put Blavatsky aimed to give her audience a science-religion of elaborately constructed, intelligent-sounding theories based on science and ancient writings. Blavatsky's proof was based on more than half forgotten memories and feelings of déjà vu. Theosophy did not deny past lives, just that they could be recollected. Blavatsky was more concerned with evolution of the human race as a whole. Eventually, people will once again be purely spiritual beings. Evolution of the soul through reincarnation is the

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<sup>348</sup> As Professor Marshik pointed out to me, past lives are a chance for Corelli to briefly veer of her primary narrative and tell stories within her main story. Corelli does this briefly in *The Life Everlasting*, but more extensively in other novels.

<sup>349</sup> *The Key to Theosophy*, 128

method by which this will be achieved according to Theosophy. However, Blavatsky does not seem to care much about the steps along the way, the lives of individual souls. In short, Blavatsky's reincarnation, without its memories of past lives, is much less personal than Corelli's version.

*DIVINE PUNISHMENT: REINCARNATION, HEAVEN. AND HELL*

Although it has a more vital presence in *The Life Everlasting*, the groundwork for Marie Corelli's Christianized version of reincarnation is already established within *A Romance of Two Worlds* and the "Electric Creed of Christianity." There, Corelli links reincarnation with Christianity's version of divine reward and punishment, Heaven and Hell, belief in which is essential to maintaining a Christian message. Corelli describes the desired goal of the electrically infused souls present in all people:

Very few souls will succeed in becoming pure enough to enter the Central Sphere without hindrance. Many, on leaving Earth, will be detained in the Purgatory of Air, where thousands of spirits work for ages, watching over others, helping and warning others, and in this unselfish labour succeed in raising themselves little by little, higher and even higher, till they at last reach the longed-for goal. <sup>350</sup>

Here Corelli does not deviate very far from conventional Christian beliefs. The Central Sphere is an electrically charged version of Heaven, a less refined version of the Divine Intelligence from *The Life Everlasting*. Purgatory is also present, another essential facet of the Christian afterlife. Corelli starts to deviate from standard Christian thinking when describing her conception of Hell, which is not what one might expect from her:

It had been asked whether the Electric Theory of Christianity includes the doctrine of Hell, or a place of perpetual punishment. Eternal punishment is merely a form of speech for what is really Eternal Retrogression. For as there is a Forward, so there must be a Backward. The electric germ of the Soul-delicate, fiery and imperishable as it is- can be forced by its companion Will to take refuge in a lower form of material existence, dependent on the body it first inhabits. For

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<sup>350</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 183

instance, a man who is obstinate in pursuing ACTIVE EVIL can so retrograde the progress of any spiritual life within him, that it shall lack the power to escape, as it might do, from merely lymphatic and listless temperaments, to seek some other chance of development, but shall sink into the form of quadrupeds, birds and other creatures dominated by purely physical needs. But there is one thing it can never escape from- MEMORY. And in that faculty is constituted Hell. So that if a man, by choice, forces his soul DOWNWARD to inhabit hereafter the bodies of dogs, horses and other like animals, he should know that he does so at the cost of everything except Remembrance. Eternal Retrogression means that the hopelessly tainted electric germ recoils further and further from the Pure Centre whence it sprang, ALWAYS BEARING WITHIN ITSELF the knowledge of WHAT IT WAS ONCE and WHAT IT MIGHT HAVE BEEN.<sup>351</sup>

Hell, according to “The Electric Creed of Christianity,” has more in common with reincarnation than it does with traditional Christian conceptions. Gone are the fire and brimstone, devils and demons, and eternal physical torments that are normally associated with eternal damnation. Corelli has replaced them with “Eternal Regression,” which is really just reincarnation as a life form further down the evolutionary ladder from humans. As Franklin points out “this is a translation of Christian heaven/hell into the Buddhist law of karma and reincarnation, with the added, non-Buddhist torture of continuous memory.”<sup>352</sup> Corelli wanted to maintain the notion of hell as a place of torment. Reincarnation as a sloth or ant eater is a step down from life as a human, but it loses a bit of its sting when one cannot look back on a life once lived with regret and repentance. By adding memory of past lives, Corelli increases the torment level of her version of Hell to appropriately Christian levels.

For all her dalliances into spiritualism and science, Corelli was first a Christian, both for herself and for her readership. Certain elements of her hybrid Christianity stay firmly rooted in Christian doctrine. For her, Hell must be a place of torture in the way mere retrograde reincarnation simply cannot be without the added agony of memory. Her Christian morality of reward and punishment is omnipresent. Blavatsky, on the other hand, is not trying to reconcile

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<sup>351</sup> *A Romance of Two Worlds*, 183

<sup>352</sup> Franklin, 30

her hybrid religion with Christian concepts of morality, reward and punishment. Rather, she was doing quite the opposite, seeking to invalidate Christianity wholesale, so reincarnation need not be a punishment. This is the fundamental difference in reincarnation as conceptualized by Blavatsky and Corelli. For Blavatsky, “esoteric philosophy teaches that nature never proceed[s] backward in her evolutionary progress, once that man has evolved from every kind of lower forms- the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms- into human form he can never become an animal except morally, hence *metaphorically*”<sup>353</sup>. Reincarnation was not punitive for Blavatsky; it was simply the natural progression of the soul, which always moved forward and never backward. To be sure, one could remain static as a human, but Theosophical evolution would never knock someone several steps down the ladder. Whether one progressed had a lot to do with the amount of “retributive Karma which the individual generated in a previous life.”<sup>354</sup> Blavatsky once again distances herself from Christian morality. For Christians, the way one lived one’s life dictated reward or punishment in the afterlife. Blavatsky moves away from this accepted belief by introducing the notion that the accumulated rights and wrongs of previous lives influences what happens in the next. It is no longer the result of one’s actions in this life, but also the result of countless other versions of one that came before. However, the stakes are not as high anymore because punishment can be no worse than another turn as a human with a clean slate of memory. Theosophy offers a new conception of reward and punishment in the afterlife written by someone seeking not to preserve but undercut Christian doctrine.

### **CONCLUSION**

I came to this chapter fully expecting to find that Marie Corelli used Theosophy as a step-by-step guide in formulating her own hybrid religion of science, spiritualism, and Christianity.

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<sup>353</sup> Blavatsky, H. P. “Theories About Reincarnation” *The Path*. November 1886

<sup>354</sup> *The Key to Theosophy*, 201

However, that is not what I found. To be sure, Theosophy was an important influence on Corelli, and its fingerprints can be found in all of her writings. Nevertheless, there are fundamental differences that prevent her from importing Theosophy wholesale. Theosophy provided her with a library of already popular spiritualist beliefs as well as a loose model for explaining the supernatural in terms of science. In this way, her use of Theosophy is similar to Haggard's in his Ayesha novels. For both writers, Theosophical theories presented a storehouse of popular spiritualist beliefs. Theosophy also presented guidelines on how to rationalize these beliefs with science, which was important to both writers. Even the skepticism with which Theosophy was met is echoed in Corelli's writing. However, there are important differences between what Corelli and Blavatsky wanted and believed. Although both were critical of contemporary science, Corelli had more use for it than Blavatsky. Ever the professional author, Corelli was able to capitalize on popular trends in science as much as on trends in spiritualism. Her science was vague enough to make sense to the layman, so essentially any science could be made to fit the bill. Corelli was not seeking to provide answers but to explain Christianity in the new light of this prestigious knowledge.<sup>355</sup> Blavatsky, on the other hand, was seeking to provide her own answers to big questions, wanting to supplant both science and religion. Theosophy found its answers in a long-lost wisdom advanced well beyond our modern science. Arcane roots and a cabbalistic appeal are much more in line with what Blavatsky was doing, preaching a new religion. One of Blavatsky's goals for Theosophy was to challenge Christianity for religious authority, and this manifested itself in repeated scathing attacks on Christianity.

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<sup>355</sup> Here, an interesting comparison can be drawn between Stoker and Corelli. Although Stoker does not use science to explain Christianity certainly the two are not mutually exclusive in his works. Science plays a role in the demise of Dracula, but so does ancient wisdom and superstition. In the post-Darwin world, religion became somewhat akin to ancient wisdom and superstition. However, much of what is used to defeat Dracula is taken from Christianity, including communion wafers and crucifixes. Stoker appears to be saying that science and Christianity can co-exist, as does Corelli.

This attitude highlights a second key difference between Corelli and Blavatsky. Above all else, Corelli was a devout (albeit unorthodox) Christian and she took great pains not to alienate her Christian fanbase. Spiritualism always took a back seat to Christianity for Corelli. None of the spiritual doctrines she uses really violate Christian teachings, and she even manages to recast reincarnation as Christian. Because of these philosophical differences, and the simple fact that she wanted to sell books and not start a new religion, Corelli ended up picking and choosing both broad ideas and specific details from Theosophy as it suited her. The elements Corelli incorporates are those most compatible with Christianity, and gone are the strands of Theosophy that challenge fundamental Christian beliefs.

One of the most fascinating insights I take away from this chapter is how spiritualism could be used not to attack but reinforce Christianity. Whereas Stoker and Haggard were free of an overt religious agenda, Marie Corelli was writing with a very obvious pro-Christian slant. That makes her use of Theosophy, a decidedly anti-Christian spiritualist movement, even more curious. Was it, then, this allegiance to Christianity that accounted for sales that dwarfed those of Haggard and Stoker combined? Haggard's use of reincarnation, adepts and astral projection is quite similar to that of Corelli. She made greater use of popular science than Stoker or Haggard, so maybe that is the secret to her success. Of course, H. G. Wells made much wider and more imaginative use of science in his work, but Corelli outsold him. Perhaps her combination of science and the supernatural was responsible for her staggering sales figures? If that is the case then Corelli has Madame Blavatsky and Theosophy to thank at least in part. Still, Corelli's combination of science and spirituality outsold even Blavatsky's most successful works. The difference is Corelli's devotion to Christianity. Spiritualism and modern science were new wonders, and new ideas are always popular. Corelli found a way to base these new ideas in

Christianity, something old and familiar in changing modern times. It provided a way to participate in the excitement of new ideas and beliefs without abandoning the comfort of long cherished ones.

## CHAPTER 5

### CONCLUSIONS

#### *Reflections on Theosophy and Literature*

This project started with a simple idea stumbled upon over behind the Stony Brook University Humanities Building some seven years ago. While discussing potential topics for my dissertation with a few colleagues, my penchant for the unexplained and the paranormal led me to the subject of Theosophy, the most popular spiritualist movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. It seemed logical that such a prevalent and influential quasi-religious movement would have had an impact on the literature of the day. Initially, what I knew about the topic was limited to my own meandering readings in the world of paranormal phenomena, and my encounters with the subject during my studies of Modern literature, specifically high Modernism. As I continued to research the topic, it became clear that almost all of the scholarly criticism focusing on Theosophy and literature was limited to its influence on high Modernist writers such as James Joyce and T. S. Eliot. To help fill this critical gap, I decided to focus my inquiry on Theosophy's impact on middlebrow literature, the more popular writing of the day. Eventually I realized this was far too broad a topic, so I limited the scope of my project to a specific type of middlebrow literature, the supernatural adventure story. Over the course of my investigation I have come to several realizations about Theosophy's impact on the supernatural adventure story in general. Also, my research has given me the opportunity to reflect on the different *ways* Theosophy was used by middlebrow and highbrow modern authors.

For the most part, Theosophy and spiritualism were not treated kindly by modern highbrow authors. In my introduction I discussed how Theosophy was derided and scorned by writers such as James Joyce, T.S. Eliot and W.B. Yeats. Over the course of my research, it

became clear to me that middlebrow authors treated spiritualisms such as Theosophy very differently from their highbrow contemporaries: with far more respect and far less judgment. Of course, there typically are characters in supernatural adventure stories that take cynical attitudes toward the seemingly paranormal, but they do so for very specific reasons. With respect to the works covered in this project, Harker, who mocks the paranormal and superstition early in *Dracula*, serves as the archetypal “everyman.” His skepticism reflects the knowledge and understanding of the world that a typical late-nineteenth century Englishman would have had, a worldview in which science was triumphant over superstition and spirituality. However, his skepticism is ultimately proven wrong by what Harker witnesses. Something similar could be said for Holly in Haggard’s *She*. His initial skepticism is intended to mirror that of an educated person of the day, and it too is pushed to the limit if not fully destroyed. There are also characters far more rigid in their incredulity, such as Dr. Seward from *Dracula* and Dr. Brayle from *The Life Everlasting*. However, Dr. Seward essentially disappears from the novel after the full supernatural import of events is realized, basically becoming irrelevant, whereas Dr. Brayle is treated with contempt and criticism by the narrator of *The Life Everlasting*, essentially is the author, Marie Corelli. In the supernatural adventure stories that I have worked with, there is never an absolute condemnation of spiritualism as there is in the works of highbrow modernism. I will readily admit that part of this has to do with the *types* of middlebrow novels with which I chose to work. When writing a supernatural tale it would make little sense for an author to lambast and ridicule all things spiritual and fantastic, but I believe the reasons for spiritualism’s more benevolent treatment in the middlebrow extends beyond the genre of the supernatural adventure story.

I believe the difference in the treatment of Theosophy by middlebrow and highbrow authors in Modernism gets to the very heart of the differences between the middlebrow and highbrow literature of the day. The validity of Western religion was already being put to the test by Darwin and evolution. At the same time, highbrow Modernism had a penchant for challenging norms and the status quo, in areas ranging all the way from sexuality to punctuation, and including religion. It really would not have been terribly groundbreaking to replace one organized religion, such as Christianity, with another, especially one with a reputation for charlatanry such as Theosophy. A turn to spiritualism just went against everything for which high modernism stood. The time for looking “without,” to external sources, for answers and insight had passed, and instead it was time for individuals to find enlightenment on their own. Beyond that, most high modernist authors were far less concerned with selling books than their middlebrow brethren, and as such could afford to denigrate spiritualist movements. They could offend spiritualism and its devotees all they wanted without fear of its impact on sales or profits because this audience did not matter to highbrow writers. On the other hand, a middlebrow author looking to sell books could ill afford to malign a popular movement embraced by a large portion of the populace. However, there is even more at play here than economics. I believe an important reason writers of middlebrow literature, particularly of supernatural adventure stories, were more amicable towards Theosophy is that in many ways Blavatsky’s writing operated in much the same way as a middlebrow detective or adventure story.

Madame Blavatsky’s writing had an appeal similar to that of a detective story or tale of suspense and mystery. In order to understand this, it is necessary to understand Blavatsky’s readership. Her primary works were *Isis Unveiled* and its sequel, *The Secret Doctrine*. These works, published in 1877 and 1888 respectively, took advantage of a rapidly expanding reading

audience. A series of education reform acts in Britain in the 1870's and 1880's resulted in a literate but not necessarily educated public. As Peter Washington explains,

a large, semi-educated readership with the appetite, the aspirations and the lack of intellectual sophistication necessary to consume such texts [as Blavatsky's *Isis Unveiled*]. It was the milieu portrayed so vividly in England by Bernard Shaw, H. G. Wells, George Gissing and Hale White: the world of autodidacts, penny newspapers, weekly encyclopedias, evening classes, public lectures, workers' educational institutes, debating unions, libraries of popular classics, socialist societies and art clubs- that bustling, earnest world where readers of Ruskin and Edward Carpenter could improve themselves, where middle-class idealists could help them to do so, where nudism and dietary reform linked arms with universal brotherhood and occult wisdom.<sup>356</sup>

Such a readership would definitely be educated enough to be acquainted with evolution and Classical civilizations to engage and attempt to understand what Blavatsky was saying in her writings. In fact, a reader would probably feel somewhat accomplished for doing so. In many ways this mirrors what Haggard accomplished by including large tracts of ancient, arcane languages in *She*. Of course, Haggard includes the rough translations of these foreign languages, but readers of Haggard could still feel that they in some way cracked the code of an ancient mystery. There was much in Blavatsky's writing, such as references to Sanskrit and esoteric Western beliefs that would be completely foreign to her readership. This allowed her to essentially run roughshod over her audience, making up quotations and claims to serve her own purposes, and Blavatsky definitely did. Max Muller, a Professor of Sanskrit at Oxford University, accused Blavatsky of scholarly incompetence, while another identified over two thousand unacknowledged or fabricated quotations.<sup>357</sup> What she did with this information, fraudulent and otherwise, is akin to what middlebrow writers did in their novels.

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<sup>356</sup> Washington, 53

<sup>357</sup> Washington, 52

Blavatsky's readership was the same readership that was used to piecing together the popular mysteries of *Sherlock Holmes* and reveled in the perceived intellectual adroitness it took to unravel a plot twist or anticipate the surprise ending of a popular novel. Using *Dracula* as an example, when the reader realizes that Renfield's sanity and insanity corresponds to when Dracula is awake or asleep long before it is pointed out by Dr. Seward, this gives a reader a certain sense of accomplishment. Essentially, *Isis Unveiled* appeals to the same impulse, or at least a variation on a theme. Blavatsky explains her method of presenting her argument:

In undertaking to inquire into the assumed infallibility of Modern Science and theology, the author has been forced, even at the risk of being thought discursive, to make constant comparison of the ideas, achievements, and pretensions of their representatives, with those of the ancient philosophers and religious teachers. Things the most widely separated as to time, have thus been brought into immediate juxtaposition, for only thus could the priority and parentage of discoveries and dogmas be determined.<sup>358</sup>

Blavatsky is up front with her reader about what she is going to be doing, as well as what she wants the reader to take away from it, specifically "priority of parentage," or which idea or belief came first. *Isis Unveiled* and *The Secret Doctrine* are both set up the same way. Blavatsky puts forth her argument about an ancient wisdom predating all organized religions. She then presents an extensive list, ideas, phenomena and theories culled from different time periods all over the world. She places like beliefs side by side, such as similar myths from different cultures. The similarities are meant to prove a common origin. By making the connections among Blavatsky's disparate examples, readers are doing similar intellectual work as they would be doing reading a Holmes novel. Readers are connecting the smaller pieces of a larger picture. In the case of *Isis Unveiled*, it is Blavatsky who painted the picture. That she was able to do this had everything to

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<sup>358</sup> H.P Blavatsky. *Isis Unveiled: Volume I*. (Pasadena, Theosophical UP: 1998)

do with her audience, which was the same that would be reading the middlebrow works of H. Rider Haggard, Bram Stoker or Marie Corelli.

### *Other Venues of Exploration*

The spiritual and otherworldly would have a natural home in the works of writers of supernatural fiction. However, I also would like to investigate whether Theosophy left any footprints on any other genres of middlebrow literature. It would make sense that it did. Theosophy had a wide ranging appeal, “The permanent residence at Adyar [the Theosophical Society’s headquarters in India] during the 1880’s and 1890’s were typical... a quarrelsome collection of minor English aristocrats, rich American widows, German professors, Indian mystics and hangers on of every distinction.”<sup>359</sup> Certainly not everyone in such a disparate group was an aficionado of the supernatural adventure story, but such a collection would include fans of the detective story, romance and drawing room novel. In this section, I briefly introduce some other authors whose work would be worthwhile to search for Theosophy’s influence. Some of them wrote supernatural fictions, while other toiled in other genres.

### *Robert Hugh Benson*

Robert Hugh Benson, born in 1871, was ordained a priest in the Church of England in 1895. During a trip to the Middle East, the source of much of the spiritualism coming into England, he began to question the claims of the Anglican church. He explored the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church, and eventually converted in 1904. Aside from his career in the clergy, Benson was a prolific and bestselling author. He wrote science fiction, historical fiction, plays and devotional works. Benson was very clearly familiar with Theosophy. In his 1908 book *Non-Catholic Denominations*, Benson includes a subsection devoted to Theosophy in his section that discusses mysticism in England. Benson writes,

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<sup>359</sup> Washington, 70

‘The Theosophists,’ the ‘Christian Scientists,’ and the ‘Mindhealers’. Neither can such communities be dismissed as Non-Christian because it is possible for a certain portion of their members to adhere, at least for a while to historical Christianity, although, in the long run, they seldom do so. In each of these three denominations or groups it is customary to assure proselytes that there is nothing to hinder the continued practice of Christianity, that the new teachings merely afford a fresh light on old dogmas, and that they supply again those elements that, once in the Christian Church, have disappeared in the lapse of ages.<sup>360</sup>

Not only does Benson have an in-depth knowledge of Theosophy, as demonstrated by his section on it, but he shows a great deal of support for other forms of spiritualism. Besides acknowledging their validity, he states that one can be a spiritualist (at least one of the three specific kinds that he mentions) and a Christian at the same time. This is certainly not the position one would expect a clergyman to take. In fact, Benson goes on to say that “it is possible for the ‘Christian Theosophist’ to retain orthodox language.”<sup>361</sup> He was even known to speak at Theosophical society gatherings from time to time. Due to his openness towards spiritualism in general, and Theosophy in particular, I believe it would be fruitful to look for Theosophy’s influence on Benson’s fictional works. When Benson discusses spiritualism in his fiction he takes a cautionary attitude towards it. While Benson approves of some spiritualisms, he warns his readership that there are fraudulent and dangerous ones as well, that could lead to evil and ruin.

The primary work of Benson’s that I would examine for elements of Theosophy is 1909’s *The Necromancers*. First published in 1909 *The Necromancers* is a cautionary tale against the kinds of spiritualisms that Benson deemed dangerous. Set in contemporary Britain, it is the tale of Laurie Baxter, a British barrister who falls madly in love with Amy Nugent. Tragically, she dies before they can be wed. Baxter is a recent convert to Christianity, but his heart is not truly in it. Distraught after Amy’s death, Baxter will do anything to reconnect with her again, and hopes for the possibility to once again touch her. He turns to a circle of spiritualists with the

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<sup>360</sup> Benson, Robert Hugh. *Non-Christian Denomination*. (London: Longmans, Green and Co. 1910) 187

<sup>361</sup> Benson, 191

hope that a medium will help him bring back his beloved. During a séance, a vision appears, apparently of Amy back from the dead. Baxter rushes to embrace it, but as he does it changes. The apparition is not Amy but an evil spirit that has possessed Baxter. A climactic battle for Baxter's soul ensues as the good and pure Margaret, educated in a convent and armed with faith and prayer, expells the evil spirit from him.

Similarly, 1908's *Lord of the World* also cautions against what Benson perceived to be dangerous spiritualisms. The novel is essentially a dystopia, depicting a socialist and humanist world in which religion has been almost completely destroyed. The Roman Catholic church has been reduced to small, isolated pockets scattered throughout the world. For example, Westminster is the only Catholic church in London. The rest have become Masonic Temples.<sup>362</sup> *Necromancers* and *Lord of the World* are the Benson novels that I believe have the best potential for showing a Theosophical influence. Both were written during Theosophy's heyday. Since each deals in depth with spiritualism, I would be interested to see if he used Theosophy as a template for his account of such sects, much like Marie Corelli did. Since Benson was clearly familiar with Theosophy, and Theosophy was rather popular, perhaps Benson called on Theosophy as a sort of universal storehouse of spiritualist phenomena. Also, these novels of Benson contain definite warnings against spiritualism, but, as we have seen, he was open to certain varieties, such as Theosophy. Perhaps in these novels that caution against some spiritualist beliefs Benson uses Theosophy as an example of an acceptable spiritualism that can co-exist with Christianity.

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<sup>362</sup> The Freemasons, with their rituals shrouded in mystery and their reputation for having secret and esoteric knowledge, are essentially a spiritualist movement minus the spirituality. It is like a secular sort of spiritualism, and perhaps that is why they have survived, and some might say prospered, until today

Baron Corvo or Fredrick Rolfe

Fredrick Rolfe was an influential figure in proto-Modernism, the various literary movements that came before and coalesced to become Modernism. Rolfe was born in London in 1860 and, showing an early penchant for things spiritual, converted to Roman Catholicism in 1886. This conversion to Catholicism was surprising because he had expressed an array of unorthodox beliefs over the years that did not seem to fit with Catholic doctrine.<sup>363</sup> The strength of his conversion was so strong that he considered the priesthood but was refused Holy Orders.<sup>364</sup> Instead, he pursued a life devoted to the arts, dabbling in photography, painting and writing, using a slew of pseudonyms.<sup>365</sup> He is best known for his works of fiction, although he did not meet with much commercial success during his life. Most of Rolfe's novels have vaguely disguised versions of him as their protagonists, and it is these novels that are of interest to literary critics. As recently as 2004, a chapter on Rolfe, or Baron Corvo, appeared in *The Victorian Supernatural*. In his chapter "Baron Corvo and the key to the underworld," Colin Cruise identifies two works, 1901's *In His Own Image* (a collection of 32 stories) and 1904's *Hadrian the Seventh*, as containing elements of spiritualism. Of the most interest to me is *Hadrian the Seventh*.

*Hadrian the Seventh* is one of the novels in which a thinly veiled version of Rolfe is the main character. In this work, written while Theosophy was at its peak popularity, he adopts the persona of Englishman George Arthur Rose, who is rejected from the priesthood. In an absolutely absurd plot twist, Rose is then elected pope. He assumes the name Hadrian the

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<sup>363</sup>Cruise, Colin "Baron Corvo and the key to the underworld" *The Victorian Supernatural* ed. Nicola Brown, Carolyn Burdett and Pamela Thurschwell. (London: Cambridge UP: 2005) 131

<sup>364</sup> Cruise, 134

<sup>365</sup> Baron Corvo was the pseudonym he was best known for, but he used others. These others include "Frank English," "Fredrick Austin," and the delightfully odd "A. Crab Maid." Technically, though, Fredrick Rolfe was Baron Corvo. Rolfe was adopted as a grandson by an actual Duchess, who granted him use of the title.

Seventh and proceeds to make sweeping reforms to the Church, in terms of organization, practice and theology. Colin Cruise writes that “*Hadrian the Seventh* combined pretences to the highbrow and the learned (even didactic), with elements of the arcane, comparable to the exotic Spiritualist works of the popular writers like Marie Corelli.”<sup>366</sup> Cruise’s article is ripe with reasons that *Hadrian the Seventh* might have been influenced by Theosophy. The pretence of learning and elements of the arcane are both reminiscent of Theosophy in general, and *Isis Unveiled* in particular. Cruise compares Rolfe’s work to the works of Marie Corelli. I argue in this dissertation that Corelli’s hybrid Christianity was influenced by Theosophy, and on the basis of Cruise’s comparison I believe Rolfe’s *Hadrian the Seventh* might show a similar influence, given his esoteric beliefs and the novel’s Christian subject matter. Furthermore, Cruise points out that “the novel received praise from many Catholics, among them the influential convert and priest Robert Hugh Benson, himself interested in magic and the supernatural; the two planned collaborative and religious works.”<sup>367</sup> Recall that Benson had very specific views on which forms of spiritualisms were acceptable and able to dovetail with Catholicism. More than that, he approved of Rolfe’s use of the arcane and spiritualism enough to plan to write with him. Benson identified three “mysticisms” or spiritualisms that were able to co-exist with Catholicism, and Theosophy was one of them. There is a good chance that Rolfe’s s spiritualism, which was able to exist alongside Christianity, was influenced by Theosophy.

### H.G. Wells

Of course, most of H.G. Wells’s reputation stems from his works of science fiction. Along with Jules Verne, Wells is considered the father of modern science fiction.<sup>368</sup> However,

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<sup>366</sup> Cruise, 134

<sup>367</sup> Cruise, 134

<sup>368</sup> I am of the opinion that Wells is the true father of modern science fiction. There is not all that much fiction in the science fiction of Verne. There is nothing terribly sci-fi about travelling around the world in a hot air balloon. More

Wells was much more than just a science fiction writer. In terms of literary output, he did write a staggering number of books that have become staples of science fiction.<sup>369</sup> However, many of Wells's novels are straightforward Victorian novels with plots more akin to Dickens than George Lucas.<sup>370</sup> Wells was also a prolific writer in the realm of non-fiction as well. He was somewhat of a scientist, having passed his exams in physics and biology (but failing in geology).<sup>371</sup> He ultimately earned a degree in zoology from the University of London External Study Program.<sup>372</sup> Drawing on this knowledge Wells wrote, along with Julian Huxley, 1930's *The Science of Life*. It is basically a biology textbook, but with an interesting twist. Along with his discussion of traditional biology subjects, Wells includes a chapter on "Borderland Sciences" in which he talks about, in all seriousness, subjects such as ghosts,<sup>373</sup> séances, mediumship, and ectoplasm.<sup>374</sup> Wells had real, formal scientific training but was still willing to treat such phenomena, typically the domain of spiritualisms, as scientific possibilities. Of all the spiritualisms that existed during the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth century, Theosophy was not only the most popular but also the most scientific. Recall that Theosophy marketed itself as a hybrid –science religion, and Blavatsky prided herself on being able to produce proof, however fraudulently, of her spiritualist claims.

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to the point, the Nautilus of *20,000 Leagues Under the Sea* is really just a glorified submarine, a technology that has existed in some form or another since ancient times. The inventions in the works of Verne could be easily imagined as they were technologies that already existed. Wells's time machine goes well beyond any technologies that existed at the time or would exist in the immediate future.

<sup>369</sup> Besides *The Time Machine*, *The Island of Dr. Moreau*, *The Invisible Man*, *War of the Worlds* and *The First Men in the Moon* are considered canonical science fiction.

<sup>370</sup> Wells was of the opinion that literature should above all else entertain, and famously had a running debate with Henry James on the subject.

<sup>371</sup> Costa, Richard Hauer [H.G.Wells](#)In *Twayne's English Authors Series Online* (New York: G. K. Hall and Co. 1999)

Previously published in print in 1985 by Twayne Publishers.

<sup>372</sup> Essentially the University of London External Study Program is a much more rigorous version of a correspondence course or in today's terms an online course.

<sup>373</sup> In *The Time Machine*, Wells has his Time Traveler speculate on the possibility of the ghost population reaching critical mass, stating "if each generation die and leave ghosts, he argued, the world at last will get overcrowded with them". Wells, H. G *The Time Machine*.(New York: Ace Books 2001) 69

<sup>374</sup> Wells, H. G, Huxley, Julian and Wells, G. P. *The Science Of Life*. (London: Garden City Publishing 1939)

As an ardent fan of science fiction, I have been reading the canonical works of Wells since my youth and, reflecting back on them through the lens of Theosophy, I cannot find much evidence of its influence on them. They are too firmly rooted in the world of science to allow for much spiritualism.<sup>375</sup> However, Theosophy most definitely did influence part of Wells's large corpus of work, particularly his short stories. Wells wrote several short stories that have been collected as "Fantasies," which contain elements often associated with spiritualism. One even specifically references Theosophy and Blavatsky by name, and expresses some ambivalence towards spiritualism in general and Theosophy specifically. Wells's short story "The Man Who Could Work Miracles" was written in 1898, during the time Theosophy was most popular. It is about George McWhirter Fotheringay, a mild mannered clerk who is granted the power to work miracles. In his fervor to do good, Fotheringay literally brings the world to a screeching halt attempting to prolong the day so he could improve more people's lives while they slept. This disastrous ending is more likely a commentary on people's zeal to impose changes on others than it is a cautionary tale against spiritualism, but Wells does take the opportunity to comment on the subject. He mentions both Theosophy and Blavatsky by name, but his final position on them and spiritualism in general is rather ambivalent.

In "The Man Who Could Work Miracles," Fotheringay's miraculous powers start out small but eventually evolve to the point where he can stop the world from spinning. Fotheringay's early miracles are "timid little miracles- little things with the cups and parlour fitments, as feeble as the miracles of Theosophists."<sup>376</sup> These words sound rather ambivalent towards Theosophy. Wells is clearly unimpressed by the "miracles" and supposed evidence

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<sup>375</sup> There are a few tantalizing hints of Theosophy's influence in *The Time Machine*. The very first image the Time Traveler sees when arriving in his futuristic dystopia is a white sphinx. The sphinx is an icon of Egypt and its mysticism, and Theosophy was intimately associated with Egypt especially during its early days.

<sup>376</sup> Wells, H. G. "The Man Who Could Work Miracles" *Selected Stories of H.G Wells* ed. Ursula K. LeGuin (New York: Modern Library 2004) 253

Theosophy produces as evidence of the supernatural. Much of Theosophy's so-called evidence involved things like teacups mysteriously moving or letters and knickknacks appearing out of nowhere. Such manifestations were clearly fraudulent, and many people saw them as such. However, in Wells' short story, *Fotheringay's* miracles are in fact real. It seems, then, that Wells is allowing for the possibility that such events could happen and are in fact stepping stones on the way to performing even greater miracles. This more positive attitude toward Theosophy is picked up later in the short story. *Fotheringay* reveals his powers to his pastor, Mr. Maydig. Maydig, though a pastor "took a certain interest in occult matters [and] preached about 'things that are not unlawful.'"<sup>377</sup> He reacts to *Fotheringay's* miraculous powers by saying, "I have always wondered at the miracles of Mahomet, and at Yogi's miracles, and the miracles of Madame Blavatsky. But, of course! Yes, it is simply a gift! It carries out so beautifully the arguments of that great thinker...his Grace the Duke of Argyll. Here we plumb some profounder law- deeper than ordinary laws of nature".<sup>378</sup> This quote seems to be an endorsement of Blavatsky and Theosophy. It acknowledges the validity of Blavatsky's miracles, slight as they may be. Furthermore, an understanding of some deeper, profounder laws of nature is what allows one to work these miracles. This is precisely how Theosophy would describe the seemingly miraculous, not as magic but as simply a true understanding of the laws of nature.

"The Man Who Could Work Miracles" is not a supernatural adventure and therefore did not fit into the parameters of this dissertation, but I intend to explore further Theosophy's role in this story, and what it reveals about Wells's attitude toward the subject. There are other Wells short stories that I would include in such an investigation, such as 1896's "The Story of the Late Mr. Elvesham." In this tale Mr. Elvesham, a mysterious old man, transfers his conscience and

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<sup>377</sup> Wells, 249

<sup>378</sup> Wells, 251

soul into the younger Mr. Eden. Parts of the story are excellent descriptions of Elvisham's memories overtaking Eden. I believe this story shows a Theosophical influence for a few reasons. First, the idea of forcibly injecting a soul into another person seems a hybrid of reincarnation and astral projection, both of which are central beliefs of Theosophy. How this transfer of soul is achieved also might be influenced by Theosophy. Elvisham achieves it via a combination of powder and drink, reminiscent of the balms prescribed to the narrator in *A Romance of Two Worlds* that allow flights of the soul. In both cases, the process seems to be more chemical than mystical, facilitated by an understanding of chemistry, nature, and the physical world. Finally, Wells has Elvisham and Eden meet at a restaurant called Blavitski's.<sup>379</sup> Although this may just be a coincidence, Blavitski is awfully close to Blavatsky and its inclusion in a story so heavy in spiritualist subject matter seems deliberate.

I believe the works of H. G. Wells are a fruitful arena in which to search for traces of Theosophical influence, and I have identified some already. Because of its specific mention of Theosophy and Blavatsky, "The Man Who Could Work Miracles" would be the centerpiece of any future investigation on the subject, but there is enough material in other of Wells's work to make such a project both substantial and worthwhile.

W. Somerset Maugham

Out of all the middlebrow writers I believe might show the influence of Theosophy on their works, perhaps W. Somerset Maugham has the best critical reputation. This being so, there has been a substantial amount of criticism devoted to him, and some of this criticism has explored the influence of spiritualism. Most has focused on his most famous and critically acclaimed work, *The Razor's Edge*. With its story of finding spiritual enlightenment in India and a title taken from the Upanishads, the novel certainly displays an Eastern influence, but I do not think it

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<sup>379</sup> Wells, 227-228

is a Theosophical one. *The Razor's Edge* was written in 1944, long after the heyday of Blavatsky and her unified brand of Theosophy. It had long since shattered into various splinter groups, some led by powerful women akin to Blavatsky and others helmed by Indian gurus and swamis.<sup>380</sup> Each of these had their own versions and variations of Blavatsky's original belief system, and thus are beyond the scope of this project. However, I believe that evidence of Theosophy's influence can be found in one of Maugham's earlier and most scandalous works, 1908's *The Magician*.

Maugham was not terribly proud of *The Magician*, and for very good reason. When he turned it in to his agent, he called it "dull" and "stupid"; later in life he called the novel lifeless."<sup>381</sup> Maugham wrote it in part for profit, and in part to take a shot at Satanist Aleister Crowley.<sup>382</sup> The antagonist of the novel, Oliver Haddo, is very obviously a caricature of Crowley. The hero is Arthur Borden, a rational-minded doctor who is about to marry his ward, Margaret Dauncey. Into their lives comes Oliver Haddo, a disgusting, corpulent, uncouth individual who is a sorcerer or magician. After getting into a physical altercation with Arthur, Haddo resolves to destroy him by taking away the one thing he cares about, Margaret. Through a combination of alcohol, drugs, hypnosis and mind control he does just that, getting Margaret to leave her fiancé. She accompanies Haddo on a debauched world tour, filled with drugs, sex and gambling. After seeing Margaret again at a dinner party, Arthur resolves to save her. He does this with the help of friends, most importantly Dr. Porhoet. Porhoet plays the role of Van Helsing, the doctor with the mind open for extreme possibilities. He spent time in Egypt and has

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<sup>380</sup> According to Peter Washington, the playwright Christopher Isherwood is often identified as the model for the protagonist of *The Razor's Edge*, Larry Darrell. Isherwood most definitely spent time studying with Jiddu Krishnamurti, a swami who got his start in but ultimately disavowed Theosophy.

<sup>381</sup> Calder, Robert. Introduction. *The Magician*. By W. Somerset Maugham. New York: Penguin, 2007. vii

<sup>382</sup> For his part, Crowley took in stride being portrayed so harshly. He would occasionally sign documents as "O. Haddo" and when meeting Maugham he delivered the wonderful line, "I almost wish you were an important writer" (Calder xvi).

a vast library of occult and paranormal texts. Arthur is temporarily able to break Haddo's spell over Margaret but he cannot do so permanently. Haddo ultimately sacrifices her in a hybrid ritual-scientific experiment in an attempt to create a homunculus, in an attempt to create life. The twist to Maugham's novel is that the initially skeptical doctor, Arthur, spent his childhood in Egypt and actually has a mystical side to him that he uncovers. Although this mysticism emerges too late to save Margaret it does allow him to talk to her spirit and find out what happened to her. Arthur ultimately kills Haddo and burns down his laboratory.

There are a world of problems with *The Magician*. Aside from being written for profit and to settle a grudge, the plot is derivative of *Dracula*. More than that, large portions of the novel are plagiarized. In a minor literary scandal, Alister Crowley "exposed the variety and extensiveness of Maugham's plagiarisms in an article entitled 'How To Write a Novel! After W. S. Maugham' published in the December 30, 1908 issue of *Vanity Fair*."<sup>383</sup> Publishing text from *The Magician* side by side with its source material, Crowley proved that Maugham both paraphrased and stole wholesale from popular occult books, as well as fictional works such as H. G. Wells's *The Island of Dr. Moreau*. Ironically, the reasons that make *The Magician* a work often overlooked by Maugham scholars also make it a perfect candidate to examine for the influence of Theosophy.

Since *The Magician* was plagiarized from several occult texts, there is a distinct possibility that Theosophy played a role in its genesis. In fact, I would not be surprised if parts of it were lifted wholesale from *Isis Unveiled*. Certainly the books that Maugham plagiarized from are of the ilk of Theosophy. Maugham either paraphrased or copied directly passages from Macgregor Mather's *Kabbalah Unveiled* and Franz Hartmann's *The Life of Paracelsus and the*

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<sup>383</sup> Calder, xiv

*Substance of His Thoughts*, amongst others.<sup>384</sup> Theosophy had the Kabbalah at its roots. At its inception “the Parent Society and the other Theosophical bodies had no literature of their own. The Kabbala, translations of Plato, Oriental philosophies and religions, the Spiritualist publications, the numerous writings of Christian mystics, and the existent Western works on magic, hypnotism, mesmerism and related subjects supplied the only material for study.”<sup>385</sup> Theosophy’s beliefs became more codified in *Isis Unveiled*, and Paracelsus played an important role in that text. There were probably books on Paracelsus in the Theosophical library described above. Blavatsky esteems Paracelsus as the “‘most wondrous intellect of his age’, a ‘noble genius,’”<sup>386</sup> and refers to him time and time again in *Isis Unveiled*. Because Maugham was borrowing from spiritualist writings that contained ideas similar to those of Theosophy, it seems very likely that he either borrowed from or at least read through a Theosophical text.

Beyond its genesis, the content of the novel reveals a strong possibility of Theosophical influence. *The Magician* is derivative of *Dracula* in part because it sets up a dichotomy between East and West. In *Dracula*, Transylvania stands in for the exotic, mystical and superstitious East whereas London represents the rational, scientific West. In *The Magician*, Transylvania gets swapped out for Egypt, which comes to represent mysticism and arcane knowledge. Dr. Porhoet argues, “The young man who settles in the East sneers at the ideas of magic which surround him, but I know not what there is in the atmosphere that saps his unbelief.”<sup>387</sup> This line performs the same function as Harker stating that he was leaving the West and entering the East as he crossed into Transylvania. Both announce that there is something mystical and otherworldly about the

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<sup>384</sup> Calder xiv

<sup>385</sup> The Theosophical Society. *The Theosophical Movement*. (New York: E.P Dutton: 1925) 21

<sup>386</sup> Blavatsky, H.P. *Isis Unveiled Volume I* (Pasadena: Theosophical UP: 1998) 53

<sup>387</sup> Maugham, W. Somerset. *The Magician*. (New York: Penguin Classics: 2007) 35

Orient. On some level this is an effort to exoticize the East, but taken in conjunction with other aspects of the novel, the Egyptian setting also reflects a Theosophical influence.

Both *Dracula* and *The Magician* have scientists that are open to the idea of the fantastic and supernatural. In their own way, each scientist lends validity to beliefs that would otherwise seem outlandish to the scientific mind. Interestingly, both are foreigners. *Dracula's* Dr. Van Helsing is from Amsterdam whereas Dr. Porhoet, in *The Magician*, is French. However, on the very first page of the novel, Maugham announces that Dr. Porhoet spent substantial time in Egypt. Both are proper doctors, but each expresses a willingness to believe in things beyond the confines of accepted science. Van Helsing routinely demonstrates an encyclopedic knowledge of paranormal beliefs and phenomena in *Dracula*. In *The Magician*, we are given a glimpse of Dr. Porhoet's library, which is a veritable treasure trove of occult texts.<sup>388</sup> Both Porhoet and Van Helsing make use of this occult knowledge to affect the outcome of their respective projects. Van Helsing hypnotizes Mina, whereas Dr. Porhoet is able to guide Arthur through the process of conjuring Margaret's ghost. In my section on *Dracula* I argue that Van Helsing represents the Theosophical midpoint between the rampant spiritualism of *Dracula* and the strict science of Dr. Seward. I am curious to see whether a similar claim can be made about Dr. Porhoet in *The Magician*. I believe that the way in which Dr. Porhoet allows science and the supernatural to co-exist is exactly the same way that Van Helsing and Theosophy do.

Dr. Abraham Van Helsing, Madame Blavatsky and Dr. Porhoet all believe that science does not have all the answers, and that things perceived as paranormal are simply phenomena that science does not understand yet. Dr. Porhoet reminds us that "doubt [is] a proof of modesty, which has rarely interfered with the progress of science. But one cannot say the same of incredulity, and he that uses the word impossible outside of pure mathematics is lacking in

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<sup>388</sup> Maugham, 48-49

prudence.”<sup>389</sup> Porhoet is echoing a sentiment expressed by both Van Helsing and Blavatsky, that science should not be too sure of itself and dismiss that which it cannot explain. That man could one day harness these powers given the proper training is an essential belief of Theosophy, and that attitude comes across much more clearly in Dr. Porhoet. He states, “I have seen many things in the East which are inexplicable by the known processes of science. Mr. Haddo has given you one definition of magic, and I will give you another. It may be described merely as the intelligent utilization of forces which are unknown, contemned, or misunderstood of the vulgar.”<sup>390</sup> Present in this definition is the familiar idea that magic is not supernatural at all, just a deeper understanding of the natural world than current science has.<sup>391</sup> Ayesha echoed this sentiment in the novels of Haggard, and it also was articulated in the works of Marie Corelli. Interestingly, it was not a major concept in Stoker. Van Helsing certainly speaks to the validity of ancient wisdom but does not speculate as to its nature as much as Porhoet does.

In his introduction to the Penguin Classics edition of *The Magician*, Robert Calder argues that the novel is “empty at the core, lacking the allegorical or thematic substance of the best of occult or science fiction literature.”<sup>392</sup> Maugham would likely agree with this assessment. Nevertheless, I argue that viewing the novel through the lens of Theosophy can reveal some thematic substance; at its core is the same fundamental conflict that drives *Dracula*, the conflict between science and the supernatural. I believe Maugham asks the same questions about reconciling the two in the Modern world that Stoker does, just in a far less interesting or well crafted way.

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<sup>389</sup>Maugham, 35

<sup>390</sup> Maugham, 35

<sup>391</sup> Although Haddo is referred to as a “wizard,” his lair is described as a laboratory. “On broad tables were test tubes, basins and baths of white porcelain, measuring glasses and utensils of all sorts.” Maugham 188

<sup>392</sup> Calder, xx

### Theosophy and Its Legacy Today

This dissertation focused on Theosophy in its initial, truest form, as conceived of by Madame Blavatsky. After her death in 1891 Theosophy splintered into a menagerie of rival sects, each with its own leadership and variant set of beliefs, some of which met with marginal success. There is still an official Theosophical Society and a February 2009 article in the *New York Times* talks about a Theosophical group that meets weekly in New York City.<sup>393</sup> Of course, Theosophy is nowhere near as popular or influential as it was during its heyday. However, Theosophy, or at least some of the ideas it introduces, still appears in contemporary works of literature and entertainment.

The first way and most obvious way in which Theosophy still could appear in literature written today is in works set in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Spiritualism was prevalent at the time, and as the most popular spiritualist movement, it would likely be mentioned. In terms of serious literature, I would be interested to explore the works of A. S. Byatt for evidence of Theosophy and its beliefs. I would focus my investigation on 1990's *Possession: A Romance* and 1992's *Angels and Insects*. These two works seem the most promising because they are set in the appropriate time period and "the subplot of spiritualism in *Possession* is moved to the forefront of *The Conjugal Angel*."<sup>394</sup> That spiritualism was an occupation from which women could obtain both money and power plays a role in the novella, and Blavatsky was perhaps the most powerful female spiritualist of all.<sup>395</sup> I would be curious to see if Byatt researched Madame Blavatsky or Annie Besant as influential, successful spiritualist

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<sup>393</sup> Koppel, Lily. "A New Age Approach With Very Old Origins." *The New York Times*. 15 February 2009

<sup>394</sup> Kelly, Kathleen Anne A.S. Byatt In *Twayne's English Authors Series Online*. New York: G.K. Hall & Co., 1999. Previously published in print in 1996 by Twayne Publishers.

<sup>395</sup> Byatt reviewed Alex Owen's *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* after writing *Possession: A Romance*. This book played both a role in the writing of *The Conjugal Angel* and this dissertation.

leaders. If so, perhaps some of Theosophy's doctrines influenced Byatt when writing these works.

Theosophy also can, and does, still exert an influence on culture today through popular entertainment. Clive Barker is a popular writer, filmmaker, and artist. He begins his graphic novel "Jihad" with the following quotation from Madame Blavatsky, "Daemon est Deus inversus, the devil is the shadow of God, states the universal kabalistic axiom. Could light exist but for primeval darkness."<sup>396</sup> Aside from being appropriately demonic, present in this quote are two pairs of opposites, demons and God, light and dark, and attempts to reconcile them. The entire graphic novel is about a war between monsters representing chaos and demons representing strict, uncompromising order. In fact, much of Barker's work is about attempts to harmonize opposites. Having studied literature and philosophy as well as the occult, I am sure Barker was aware that fundamentally Theosophy was about reconciling two seeming opposites, science and the supernatural.

A more compelling example of Theosophy's influence on popular culture is the successful science fiction franchise *Stargate*. The show's mythology takes as its premise that the gods of ancient Egypt were extraterrestrials. As such, they could do incredible things such as build the pyramids, achieve spaceflight, and construct wormholes not through magic but through science. As *Stargate* is set in the present day it uses scientific discoveries we are just now making. The premise of the series seems very Theosophical, right down to the Egyptian influence.<sup>397</sup> However, there are further similarities to Theosophy. According to *Stargate*, some people, after reaching a certain level of spiritual insight or self awareness can evolve into enlightened, immortal beings of pure energy who can occasionally take human form. This is

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<sup>396</sup> Barker, Clive. *Jihad: Part II* Illus. D.G Chichester and Paul Johnson. New York: Epic Comics, 1991

<sup>397</sup> It seems to me that this is Theosophy married to Erich Von Daniken's *Chariots of the Gods*

Theosophical evolution in a nutshell, with its endpoint being reincarnation as an Ascended Master. Interestingly, the aforementioned process from *Stargate* is called “ascending.” *Stargate* seems to be Theosophy for a more scientific age. The spiritual aspect is downplayed and the science is emphasized even more than it was in Blavatsky. Extraterrestrials, a scientific possibility, replace spiritual Ascended Masters as wielders of advanced powers, in the form of technology, that are the fruit not of magic but a deep understanding of science.

### FINAL THOUGHTS

One of the reasons Theosophy was so popular was that it spoke to a very specific moment. Theosophy was at its heyday during a time when spirituality was being called into serious question by science, specifically Darwin and evolution. However, many certainties were under attack by science, even the very nature of space and time itself. During a time when science was increasingly pervasive and sure of itself, spirituality and religion were increasingly marginalized. Belief in science or faith in religion was becoming an either/or proposition. Theosophy offered a third way by having at its core a reconciliation of science and spirituality, and I believe this accounted for its popularity. In reality, though, science and religion had been in conflict for some time, and they still are today, and people are finding new ways to harmonize them. Theosophy is an example of a way that was, for a time, successful.

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