

Magical Materialism: The Role of Costume in the Rituals of The Hermetic Order of The Golden Dawn and E. Nesbit's *The Enchanted Castle*

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Abstract

The dominance of scientific rationalism and the authority of organised religion in the Victorian era set the preconditions for dissent as the nineteenth century drew to its close. Matters of the fantastic and supernatural were discussed in both literature and in occult groups that imagined realities beyond the physical and known. For writers of fiction and worshippers of the occult, material objects such as costumes could be used as a device to remove restrictions on acceptable belief and experience. *The Enchanted Castle*, a novel written by E. Nesbit, children's author and initiate of The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, proposes that the physical world hides another, magical dimension in which costume allows the open-minded to explore. Likewise, the Golden Dawn used costume in its rituals to conjure and control esoteric forces, as analysis of a portrait of one of its founders attests to.

Sometimes an element of imaginary play, sometimes a conscious sartorial statement, costumes allow their wearers to rearrange the appearance of time and place, or to defy established perceptions of reality. Children's fiction abounds with instances of the young donning costumes and thereby challenging their ordinary frames of reference. For instance, E. Nesbit's novel *The Enchanted Castle* features a group of children whose adoption of costume has extraordinary magical consequences. The costumes become a conduit for the supernatural, and importantly, their magical properties are perceived as real in much the same way as air or water might be. The act of dressing up in costume is not, of course, limited to the spheres of childhood or fiction, as E. Nesbit well knew; the author was initiated into an occult society which often used costume to assist its members in exploring alternative visions of reality. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn sought to discover, translate and practise the magical and religious traditions of the ancient world, and adepts like Nesbit followed complex rules of dress which were thought to add efficacy to certain magical rituals. The society emerged at the end of the nineteenth century when widespread reaction against austere scientific orthodoxy and narrow religious dogma led many to seek more satisfying explanations to their spiritual and intellectual questions.¹ At the end of the century, terms associated with occult practice such as 'psychical', 'Hermeticism', 'Theosophy' and 'mesmerism', to name a few, entered 'common parlance in the vocabulary',² and not just among artists and the literati. For Golden Dawn adepts during the *fin de siècle*, and for Nesbit's young characters in *The Enchanted Castle*, the immaterial world beyond the senses was and is real, but it can only be accessed through secret methods. By examining pertinent passages from *The Enchanted Castle* and a portrait of one of the Golden Dawn's founding members, it will be shown that costume could become an important bridge between the material and immaterial world.

If any distinctive mode of fashion may be considered a costume, Edith Bland – better known today under the pen name of E. Nesbit – had personal experience of the

¹ Karl Beckson, *London in the 1890s* (New York, 1992), pp. 318-319.

² Robert F. Geary, 'The Corpse in the Dung Cart: *The Nightside of Nature* and the Victorian Supernatural Tale', in Joe Sanders (ed.), *Functions of the Fantastic: Selected Essays from the Thirteenth International Conference on the Fantastic in the Arts* (Westport, CT, 1995), p. 51.

transformative powers of dressing in costume. Writing to a close friend in 1884, Nesbit announced that she had made the choice to wear comfortable but unfashionable all-wool dresses, explaining that they are 'deliciously pleasant to wear'.³ Spurning the late-Victorian trend for women to bind themselves in constrictive undergarments, she embraced her prerogative to wear what pleased her, not what pleased society. Her sartorial decision begins to hint at the powers of costume to make experience beyond society's orthodoxies and expectations possible. Nesbit's main characters in *The Enchanted Castle* are middle-class siblings who are sent to be educated at a boarding school. At every opportunity, however, they abandon the school in favour of off-site adventures. The adults they encounter on these adventures possess such narrow imaginations that one sibling also begins to question his belief in the existence of magic and the supernatural. This prompts his brother to ask: "Do you think there's nothing in the world but what you've seen?"⁴ The question could almost be read as an appeal to the audience to consider whether or not there is something more to this world than what we can see or what we are taught. Their sister Kathleen adds: "Perhaps there's given up being magic because people didn't believe in it anymore."⁵ Kathleen's contribution lacks sophistication in its logic, but it is still powerful because it condenses and simplifies a feeling of alienation, of distance from modes of experience that are meaningful but often rejected for their inability to be understood. Shortly after this exchange, the siblings come across a maze in the grounds of a castle. At its centre is a sleeping princess who, readers are later told, is actually a relative of one of the estate workers. The little girl is merely wearing a costume, wishing to deceive the other children. The act of dressing up, however, unleashes a series of magical consequences that for the children, determines that magic can and does exist in the real world.

Gerald, Jimmy, Kathleen and the Princess explore the realms of their imaginations: the Princess entertains the others by making a game of turning bread into beef, and of conjuring treasures into empty rooms. Just as the children begin to suspect that the Princess' magic is too good to be true, the Princess commands: "...let's all dress up and you be princes and princesses too."⁶ Costumes, she presumes, will add an air of authenticity to the magical proceedings, so Gerald dons a gold crown and a collar of SS, whilst Kathleen amuses herself by trying on extravagant ornaments. The Princess narrates the costuming process and explains each object's magical properties: the bracelet forces its wearer to tell the truth, the chain augments its wearer's strength, and the ring makes one invisible. The children are so enveloped in their imaginative play - in their alternate versions of themselves - that real supernatural powers do seem to be let loose. The ring worn by the Princess (whose real name is Mabel) no longer supports the imaginative pretence of invisibility, it really does make her invisible. Moreover, towards the middle of the novel, the omniscient narrator relates Gerald's feeling that the magic he is experiencing does not operate in a separate dimension from his own, outside of the natural world, but is merely a hidden force that the open minded can discover.

And he had that extraordinary feeling so difficult to describe, and yet so real and so unforgettable the feeling that he was in another world, that had covered up and hidden the old world as a carpet covers a floor. The carpet was there all right, underneath, but what he walked on was the carpet that covered it and that carpet was drenched in magic...⁷

Imagination opened up the possibility of a magical realm, but costume was the key that allowed Gerald to reveal this hidden layer of reality.

³ Edith Nesbit, 'Letter addressed to Ada (6 April 1884)', in Julia Briggs (ed.) *A Woman of Passion: The Life of E. Nesbit 1858-1924* (London, 1987), p. 67.

⁴ Edith Nesbit, *The Enchanted Castle* (London, 1994), p. 5.

⁵ *The Enchanted Castle*, p. 5.

⁶ *The Enchanted Castle*, p. 10.

⁷ *The Enchanted Castle*, p. 43.

Peter Keating's study of the late Victorian novel argues that authors of children's fiction were rejecting the moralism of their forebears in favour of adventure driven stories in which protagonists 'play at being cowboys and Indians, pirates, African explorers and jungle animals'.⁸ He offers several possible reasons for this change, such as new interest in the education of children through play and recognition that childhood is a discrete and transitory stage of development. Nesbit's approach to this trend was different, contends Maggie Ann Bowers, because her characters and their environments are represented realistically despite the magical occurrences that transpire.⁹ JM Barrie created a Neverland for his characters, Lewis Carroll fashioned Wonderland, and Rudyard Kipling's characters had exotic jungles and cities at their disposal. Conversely, Nesbit's young characters exist in a world similar to the one enjoyed by Nesbit's largely middle-class audience. The collision of the real with the magical in Nesbit's fiction is a deliberate statement. It echoes the ideas emerging from certain occultist groups such as the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn that there is more to our world than is commonly acknowledged. For many occultists at the turn of the nineteenth century, the tenor of the age was systematic, narrow, and dogmatic and the occult offered an escape from the unsatisfactory, closed off pathways of rational analysis, materialism or religious orthodoxy. Crucially, however, occult inquiry at the *fin de siècle* was concerned with discovering secret magical and spiritual forces in the everyday. In *The Enchanted Castle*, the immaterial world exists alongside the material world. They cannot be disassociated from one another as, the novel suggests, reality and magic are merely two sides to the same coin.¹⁰

Use of costume figured highly in the practices of several *fin de siècle* occult movements such as spiritualism, Theosophy, Hermeticism, and mesmerism. It could be employed to enhance the dramatic impact of a performance, or it could be used to add resonance and magical efficacy to rituals. The famous spiritualist Helena Blavatsky, for instance, cultivated a distinctive mode of dress which added to the magnetism of her séances.¹¹ The Hermetic strand of occultism did not perform its rituals in public, which meant that costumes occupied a different role, one that sought to amplify the significance of the group's rituals rather than to captivate an audience. Before examining visual evidence of the Golden Dawn's costuming conventions, a brief summary of its founding principles will aim to support analysis. The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn had over three hundred members by 1896, and although the majority were drawn from the middle classes, it also attracted prominent academics and writers.¹² Its name suggests regeneration. Indeed, its founding principles were based on new interpretations of ancient texts, particularly those of the ancient Greek mystic and philosopher Hermes Trismegistus.¹³ The group's ideologies did not pose a challenge to Christianity or to science, but contended that there is but one universal truth, a truth which can only be accessed by unlocking ancient secrets. As mentioned previously, E. Nesbit was a member of the Golden Dawn alongside poet W.B. Yeats and author Bram Stoker. All of these individuals would have worn costume during their initiation rites, and thereafter the costume he or she adopted was dictated by his or her rank within the group's complex hierarchy. Very little information remains about Nesbit's specific activity within the structure of the Golden Dawn, especially compared to information surrounding Yeats' involvement as he was pivotal in interpreting ancient writings and generating a network of esoteric symbols

⁸ Peter Keating, *The Haunted Study: A Social History of the English Novel 1875-1914*, (London, 1989), p. 224.

⁹ Maggie Ann Bowers, *Magic(al) Realism* (New York, 2004), p. 101.

¹⁰ Matthew Beaumont, 'Socialism and Occultism at the "Fin de Siecle": Elective Affinities', *Victorian Review*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Spring 2010), p. 217.

¹¹ Beaumont, p. 222.

¹² Beckson, p. 325.

¹³ Alex Owen, 'The Sorcerer and His Apprentice: Aleister Crowley and the Magical Exploration of Edwardian Subjectivity', *Journal of British Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Jan, 1997), p. 102.

to be used in rituals.¹⁴ One initiate whom Yeats had long standing romantic interest in, Maud Gonne, resigned from the group after just four rites. She dismissed the costumes worn by her fellow-mystics because in her opinion, they were not able to cover the members' inherent dullness. She writes in her memoir: 'They looked so incongruous in their cloaks and badges at initiation ceremonies'.¹⁵ For Gonne, the wearing of costume did not augment the efficacy of the Golden Dawn's rites, but struck her as a hollow, even self-indulgent practice.

Not all would have agreed with Gonne's assessment that the Golden Dawn's costumes were a fanciful escape from dreary middle class experience. Most initiates would have been educated in how the costumes' specific use of symbol, colour, texture and shape was intended to evoke a more transcendental past, one which accessed experience beyond contemporaneous concepts of reality. Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers, one of the Golden Dawn's founders, dictated rules surrounding ceremonial costume. His translation of the rare and ancient text *The Key of Solomon the King*¹⁶ may not hold up to modern standards of translation, but it offers a glimpse of the material he used to inspire Golden Dawn costume. In Chapter VI of this famous *grimoire*, suggestions are made as to which garments and shoes should be worn by practitioners of magic, ranging from what type of cloth or material the costume should be constructed in, to colours of fabric and decorative elements. The following extract provides a sense of the specificity of the instructions:

The exterior habiliments which the Master of the Art should wear ought to be of linen, as well as those which he weareth beneath them; and if he hath the means they should be of Silk. If they be of linen the thread of which they are made should have been spun by a young maiden.¹⁷

Visual evidence of Golden Dawn members wearing ceremonial costume is challenging to find, perhaps because the exclusivity of the organisation precluded photographic possibilities, or because such artefacts were destroyed by, or kept within, families. There is, however, a striking portrait of Mathers in full costume. It was painted by his wife in 1896 and can be found on display in the National Library of Ireland. It is helpful in demonstrating how costume could, through codes and symbols, attempt to bridge the immaterial with the material world.

The viewer is initially struck by the ancient Egyptian leitmotif; it could be speculated that the headpiece as well as the cross speak to the mythos surrounding the death and resurrection of Osiris (an Egyptian myth then arrogated by Christianity). As mentioned previously, the Golden Dawn did not dispute Christian principles, but wanted to extend notions of spirituality beyond the Church of England's teachings. This costume was potentially subversive in its mingling of Christian and pagan codes. Looking more closely at Mathers' headpiece, the viewer observes a five-pointed star which is instantly recognisable as a general symbol of occult belief. Today, the pentacle is popularly associated with witchcraft, but it appears and reappears throughout history in different contexts. To seek the meaning of this costume's employment of the pentacle, it is useful to turn to Mathers' translation of *The Key of Solomon the King*. This text clearly suggests that pentacles should be used during prayer and conjuration rites: 'Let the Master uncover the consecrated Pentacles which he should have made to constrain and

¹⁴ Beckson, p. 322.

¹⁵ Beckson, p. 326.

¹⁶ *The Key of Solomon the King*, ed. Mathers, Samuel Liddell MacGregor (1888), p. 93, <http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupname?key=Mathers%2C%20S.%20L.%20MacGregor%20%28Samuel%20Liddell%20MacGregor%29%2C%201854-1918> [accessed on 30/12/2014]

¹⁷ *The Key of Solomon the King*, p. 93.

command the spirits.¹⁸ Here, Mathers' costume and its pentacle become, if the translation is to be read literally, a link from the material world to the spiritual half of our dimension. The wearer becomes so powerful that he is literally able to bend this spiritual world to his desire, bringing it firmly within his reality.

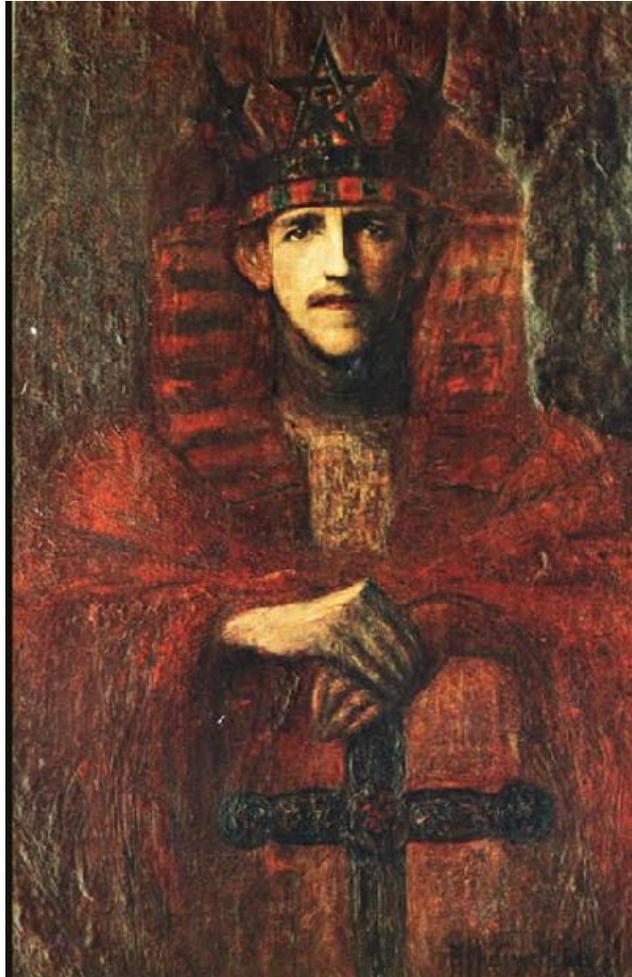


Figure 1. Moina Mathers, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers in magical regalia (c. 1895), copy of a portrait.¹⁹

One fantastical scene in *The Enchanted Castle* sees the young protagonists put on a dramatic performance. They dress up chairs using old clothes and household objects to approximate the appearance of a large theatrical audience. The innocent impulse to transform everyday objects into human facsimiles goes awry, however, as the garments become invested with magic; one of the children happens to be wearing an enchanted ring which grants wishes, and the ring interprets their wish for more audience members in a way that grotesquely interlocks the natural and the supernatural world. The costumed chairs come to life, and because they speak and act like real humans whilst retaining their resemblance to their original component parts, they strike horror in all those who observe them.²⁰ When the magic dissipates, the creatures' departure is met

¹⁸ *The Key of Solomon the King*, p. 29.

<http://onlinebooks.library.upenn.edu/webbin/book/lookupname?key=Mathers%2C%20S.%20L.%20MacGregor%20%28Samuel%20Liddell%20MacGregor%29%2C%201854-1918> [accessed on 30/12/2014]

¹⁹ Moina Mathers, Samuel Liddell MacGregor Mathers in magical regalia (c. 1895), copy of a portrait. <http://www.nli.ie/yeats/main.html> [accessed on 20/12/2014]

²⁰ Nesbit, *The Enchanted Castle*, pp. 293-300.

with relief. Ever careful to inculcate ethical themes in her novels²¹, Nesbit may have constructed this passage to carry an implicit warning about how one must tread carefully when stepping outside familiar realms of experience, for the Ugly-Wuglies (as they are called) are not depicted as a comical lark, but are perceived by the characters as a monstrous burden. In *The Enchanted Castle*, therefore, alternative realities and their attendant forces can be accessed by all, even though it suggests that such matters should not be meddled with carelessly. It leads one to consider whether the Golden Dawn's founders held any such reservations about individuals accessing the esoteric mysteries of the world. The fact that all of the Golden Dawn's beliefs and practices were so closely guarded (even within the cult itself) can lead one to assume that its leaders considered it their duty to be judicious in revealing its mysteries. For those adepts initiated into the 'Inner' Order the art of practical magic was finally revealed, but whether or not these select few found success or failure in bending supernatural forces to their will is not known. Herein lies the difference between Nesbit and the Golden Dawn's evaluation of magic and costume. Nesbit's novel shows that open-mindedness is all one needs to channel the immaterial from material objects, whereas the Golden Dawn barred those from outside its membership from accessing knowledge on how costume could open up new areas of experience.

There is a curtain, thin as gossamer, clear as glass, strong as iron, that hangs fore ever between the world of magic and the world that seems to us to be real. And when once people have found one of the little weak spots in that curtain which are marked by magic rings, and amulets, and the like, almost anything may happen.²²

The narrator of *The Enchanted Castle* here argues that the partitions put up between the physical and spiritual worlds are artificial and can be removed. A number of *fin de siècle* occult groups like the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn joined this chorus. Occultism at the end of the Victorian era, an age dominated by the intellectual currents of scientific rationalism and strict Anglican orthodoxy, was a popular mode of dissent. Certain individuals wished to bring the material world into greater intimacy with its hidden, immaterial forces. Costumes, by their fundamental ability to reconstitute reality and shift perception, became a way to defy intractable and narrow systems defining experience.

²¹ Geary, p. 226.

²² Nesbit, *The Enchanted Castle*, p. 301.

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