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‘Fräulein Sprengel’ and the Origins of the Golden Dawn: A Surprising Discovery

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Abstract

Dieser Beitrag berichtet über eine neuerliche Überprüfung von Briefen, die angeblich in den späten 1880er Jahren an den englischen Esoteriker Dr. William Wynn Westcott gesandt wurden. Absender soll ein gewisses ‘Fräulein Sprengel’ gewesen sein, eine angebliche deutsche Rosenkreuzermeisterin mit dem magischen Pseudonym *Sapiens Dominabitur Astris*. Diese Briefe enthielten den Auftrag zur Gründung des Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. In der Erforschung der Ursprünge des Golden Dawn werden diese Briefe generell als Fälschungen betrachtet. Man geht davon aus, dass der Text von Westcott mit dem Ziel einer Autoritätsanmaßung selbst entworfen wurde und anschließend ins Deutsche übertragen wurde. Der Autor des vorliegenden Artikels hat die im Freimaurermuseum in London aufbewahrten Originalbriefe überprüft und darin Anhaltspunkte gefunden, die die Identität von *Sapiens Dominabitur Astris* in neuem und überraschendem Licht erscheinen lassen.

Keywords

Golden Dawn; Wynn Westcott; Fräulein Sprengel; *Sapiens Dominabitur Astris*

Of all the mysteries connected with the origins of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn, none is more teasing than the riddle of the so-called ‘Fräulein Sprengel letters’. For readers less familiar with the Golden Dawn’s inceptions it may be helpful to recapitulate the basic facts as we know them. The story goes that in 1887 Dr. William Wynn Westcott (1848–1925), a London corner and Freemason with strong esoteric leanings, came into possession of a manuscript, written in a cipher based on the *Polygraphiae libri sex* (1518) of the Benedictine Abbot Johannes Trithemius (1462–1516). When deciphered, the manuscript was found to contain skeleton descriptions of rituals, written in English, apparently stemming from an order with a grade structure similar to the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia and the German 18th-century Gold- and

Rosenkreuzer (Golden and Rosy Cross) order. The manuscript also contained elements of esoteric lore including references from the Kabbalah, astrology, alchemy and the Tarot. Much has been written about this cipher manuscript, and there are still many unanswered questions surrounding it, but I shall not dwell on the manuscript, except to add that between its pages was a slip of paper, with a short message, also in cipher but in a different hand from the main manuscript. As Ellic Howe reports, this message, when translated, read: ‘Sapiens dom ast is a chief among the members of the goldene dammerung [i.e., Golden Dawn] she is a famous soror her name is fräulein sprengel letters reach her at herr j enger hotel marquardt stuttgart she is 7 = 4 [figures in Hebrew characters] or a chief adept’.¹ The abbreviated motto is *Sapiens Dominabitur Astris*, meaning ‘the wise person will rule the stars’. In later references she is referred to as ‘A. Sprengel’ or ‘Anna Sprengel’.²

Howe then goes on to say: ‘Soror SDA provided an ideal solution to Westcott’s problem. By locating her in Germany he made her inaccessible, and by investing her with an exalted rank in a suitably mysterious German occult order he made her a credible source of authority.’³ The Hotel Marquardt existed, as is proved by a lunch bill on headed paper, dated 1 December 1887, which is preserved among the ‘Sprengel letters’ in the Library and Museum of Freemasonry in London.⁴ The letters were, according to the first one, written for *Sapiens Dominabitur Astris* by her secretary, who called himself Frater ‘In Utroque Fidelis’ (faithful in both). Westcott, as he claimed, wrote to S.D.A. at this accommodation address, and there ensued an exchange of letters, using the translation services of a certain Albert Essinger, evidently a German living in London. Howe’s account, however, is rather different:

¹ Howe, *Magicians of the Golden Dawn*, 12.

² With regard to the name Sprengel, see Henrik Bogdan, ‘Women and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn: Nineteenth Century Occultist Initiation from a Gender Perspective’, 248. Here it is explained that in the German masonic context the term ‘Sprengel-Recht’, refers to ‘the area where a Grand Lodge is allowed to found lodges’. See also Marcel Roggemans, *Geschiedenis van de occulte en mystieke broederschappen*, 332: ‘Een andere hypothese zegt dat Fräulein Sprengel een “codeword” zou kunnen zijn van het Duitse woord “sprengelrecht”. Dit betekent “territoriale jurisdictie”.’

³ Howe, *Magicians of the Golden Dawn*, 12.

⁴ The Collection, kept in the Library and Museum of Freemasonry, 60 Great Queen Street, London WC2E 5AZ, is labelled “The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn and Related Bodies”. The material referred to here is in Sub fonds 1, Series 1/3, “Sprengel Letters: originals, translations and related material”.

In order to play the Soror S.D.A. “game” properly it was necessary for Westcott to appear to write to her and for a potential witness to know about the correspondence. However, Westcott’s letters, duly translated by Mr Essinger, would never have been posted ...

Westcott next drafted Soror S.D.A.’s replies in English. An unidentified person—graphological evidence suggests it was not Mr Essinger—then made painfully literal translations into what he supposed was German. As and when Soror S.D.A.’s letters “arrived”, Westcott gave them to Mr Essinger for translation back into English.⁵

Howe adds that the letters from S.D.A. are so full of linguistic errors and anglicisms that they could not have been written by a German.

For over a century these letters have been the object of debate. Were they genuine or a forgery? Did Fräulein Sprengel exist or was she invented by Westcott? While Howe and the equally well-known historian of the Golden Dawn, R.A. Gilbert,⁶ have little doubt that the correspondence was forged by Westcott, apologists for the Golden Dawn are inclined to give Westcott the benefit of the doubt.

I might have been content to let sleeping dogs lie, had I not had occasion to revisit Ellic Howe’s book *The Magicians of the Golden Dawn*, which contains a photograph of the first ‘Sprengel’ letter as well as the English translation that Howe claims was probably in fact Westcott’s original draft for the bogus German letter.

The letter reproduced by Howe is, like all the others, written in German Gothic handwriting, which was the normal script used in Germany up to about the Second World War. This is a difficult script for a foreigner to read let alone write. And this handwriting is fluent and confident, suggesting that the writer—or at least the amanuensis—was either (a) a native German speaker or (b) a non-German who had lived in Germany for some years. It is true that the letter contains some striking grammatical mistakes, which would tend to argue for (b)—I shall return to this question later.

The German text begins:

Lieber Bruder Sapere Aude

Ich habe schon längere Zeit die Wohnung verlassen, wohin Sie meinen Brief sandten aber ich erhielt endlich nach längerer Zeit Ihren Brief. Ich war sehr erfreut die Mittheilung zu erhalten, daß die geheimen Papiere welche Sie beschreiben sind wieder

⁵) Howe, *Magicians of the Golden Dawn*, 13.

⁶) See Gilbert, *The Golden Dawn*, 28.

einmal zum Vorschein gekommen. Dieselben wurden durch den lieben Abbé Constant vor Jahren verloren & kamen dann in den Händen von zwei Engländer, welche um die Erlaubniß einkamen dieselben zu benutzen.⁷

And the English translation made for Westcott reads:

Dear Brother,

I have long left the address to which you sent a letter but it has safely reached me at last. I am very glad to hear that the private papers which you describe have been found once more, they were lost by poor Abbé Constant years ago and then came into the hands of two Englishmen who applied for leave to use them.⁸

Comparing the German letter with the English translation, I was struck by the fact that the latter contained a number of mistakes, indicating that the text had been translated—rather badly—from German into English and not vice versa. There are certain words in it that give the game away. One is the word *geheim*, which normally means ‘secret’ although in some contexts it can mean ‘private’. In the context of an occult order it would almost certainly be intended to mean ‘secret’, but here it has been translated as ‘private’. Then again, Abbé Constant (alias Eliphas Lévi) is referred to in the German as *den lieben Abbé Constant* (the dear Abbé Constant), whereas the translator has written “poor Abbé Constant”. These mistakes could have been due to an imperfect knowledge of German or lack of familiarity with the script. At any rate, it is clear that Howe was wrong to suppose that Westcott had written the English text and had it translated into German to masquerade as a letter from S.D.A. It is true that Westcott could have made an earlier draft or perhaps dictated the letter, but then he would have ended up with a translation different from his draft.

These findings led me to wonder whether Howe had been mistaken on other points as well, so I decided to go to the Library and Museum of Freemasonry in London and consult the original letters in the Golden Dawn Collection. Instinct told me that I would find something important there, but I was unprepared for what would prove to be a staggering discovery.

In order to make clear what I found out, it will be necessary to explain something about German for those readers unfamiliar with the language. Whereas in English a letter can easily be written giving no indication of the sex of the writer other than his or her first name, in German the sex immediately

⁷) Howe, *Magicians of the Golden Dawn*, Plate III.

⁸) *Ibid.*, 14.

becomes apparent when the correspondent uses an adjective to refer to himself or herself. This is because the ending of an adjective has to agree with the gender of the noun it qualifies.

Now when I came to the second letter from S.D.A.,⁹ I was astonished to see that the writer signed off as *'Ihr ganz ergebener'* (your devoted), the point being that both the possessive pronoun *'Ihr'* and the adjective *'ergebener'* were masculine. At first I thought this might, by a long stretch of the imagination, be a slip on the part of the amanuensis, but when I read on through the letters I found that whenever an adjective or possessive pronoun was used to refer to the writer the ending was always masculine. Then came the final letter, written in August 1890 by a different correspondent with the motto *'Ex Uno Disce Omnes'* (From One Learn All), in which the death of S.D.A. was reported (again in incorrect German) as follows: *'Es ist mir sehr leid, daß ich Euch anzeigen mus den Sterbefall unseres gelehrten Freundes S.D.A.'* (I am sorry to inform you of the death of our learned friend S.D.A.). Here again the genitive ending of *unseres* (of our learned) is masculine, as is the noun *Freundes*. So now there was no shadow of doubt: S.D.A.—whether real or invented—was a *man*! Fräulein Sprengel either never existed or was someone else entirely.

As soon as I had made this astonishing discovery, other questions began crowding into my mind. First of all, why had this escaped notice up to now? Admittedly the papers had for many decades been held in a private collection before being deposited at Freemasons' Hall, but Ellic Howe for one had been able to gain access to them. Why had he, with his knowledge of German, not spotted what I had spotted? Perhaps he was not as familiar with the script as he was with German typography, in which he was known as an expert, or perhaps he simply did not read the letters carefully enough. But what of Oskar Schlag, the Zürich graphologist to whom Ellic Howe showed the letters? Schlag immediately spotted the many linguistic errors in the letters but not the obvious matter of the writer's gender, perhaps because it was simply not what he was looking for. Since then it appears that no one with a knowledge of German, and able to read the script, had looked at the letters before me. Or, if they had, they had not noticed what I had.

More important, however, are the questions of substance which the discovery raises. If S.D.A. was a man, why did Westcott think or pretend that he was corresponding with a woman? How did the confusion come about? Was

⁹ Golden Dawn Collection, Series 1/3. All letters quoted are from the same series.

S.D.A. a real person or not? If he existed, who might he have been? And what are the implications for the question of fraud or not fraud?

I would like to attempt two scenarios—one assuming that the letters were a forgery, the other assuming that S.D.A. really existed.

In the first scenario we have to account for the fact that Westcott presented S.D.A. as a woman, while the letters clearly showed the correspondent as a man. This scenario presupposes that Westcott used two translators—Essinger and one other—otherwise there would only have been one English version of each S.D.A. letter, namely Westcott's draft (and, as I have shown, the final translation must have differed from the draft). Ellic Howe also suspected two translators on the basis of graphological evidence. This would make sense if Westcott was using Essinger for appearance's sake, to show that the letters had indeed been translated from the German. So the scenario is this: Westcott writes a pretend letter to S.D.A. and drafts a pretend reply, which he gives to someone he knows in England who has some (but imperfect) knowledge of German and can write Gothic script. Let us call this person 'Translator X'. Westcott omits to tell Translator X that the correspondent is supposed to be woman, and X assumes that S.D.A. is male and writes the letters accordingly. The German text of each letter is then given to Essinger, who simply translates them into English, not commenting on the gender—perhaps he also does not know that Westcott's correspondent is supposed to be female. As the English translation does not indicate the gender, Westcott never finds out about the discrepancy. And so the misunderstanding continues right through the final letter announcing S.D.A.'s death.

The second scenario is as follows: Starting with the slip of paper found with the cipher manuscript, giving information about S.D.A., let us suppose that the writer of this note has mistakenly conflated two different people: S.D.A. and Fräulein Sprengel. Westcott then duly writes care of Herr Enger at the Hotel Marquardt in Stuttgart, enclosing a letter to S.D.A. and using the motto rather than the name Fräulein Sprengel. In due course he receives the first reply. He has it translated by Essinger and reports with delight to his friends MacGregor Mathers, W.R. Woodman and possibly others involved in the founding of the Golden Dawn, that he has been contacted by the great German Rosicrucian adept Fräulein Sprengel. Westcott then writes again to S.D.A. and receives a second reply. At this point, or conceivably a little later in the correspondence, Essinger spots the gender of the writer and tells Westcott. Now Westcott is in a dilemma. He cannot reveal the discovery without making a fool of himself. On the other hand, he cannot abandon the correspondence because S.D.A. is now vital to his plans for the Golden Dawn. So he continues the correspondence,

swearing Essinger to secrecy and pretending to the others that he is dealing with *Soror* S.D.A., alias Fräulein Sprengel, and not *Frater* S.D.A. This would explain why he remained silent and refused to produce contrary evidence when Mathers later accused him of forging the correspondence.

Which of these two scenarios is the most probable? What speaks in favour of the letters being fraudulent is that they so closely fit the stereotype of the fictitious lineage that esoteric groups so often construct in order to give themselves legitimacy. Another thing that makes them suspect is the way in which they conveniently arrived at the moment when the Golden Dawn was being planned, and equally conveniently nominated Westcott, Mathers and Woodman as the three chiefs. And there is S.D.A.'s timely death in 1890 when she/he was no longer needed. Furthermore, it is suspicious that the letters were supposedly not entrusted to the post, as indicated in the first letter from S.D.A. This looks like a device to account for the absence of postmarked envelopes from Germany. There is also the faulty German in which they are written, although if S.D.A. was not Fräulein Sprengel, as I have shown, then there is nothing to say that he was a native German, only someone who appeared to be living in Germany.

Against the forgery theory one could argue that a forger would surely have gone to the trouble of procuring an impeccably correct German text. A forger would also surely have made the letters look as impressive as possible, with an imposing letter head, copperplate writing and possibly a wax seal. Instead the letters are on small sheets of paper and rather untidily written in an often spidery hand.

What sort of person might the writer of the German letters have been (whether Translator X or S.D.A.?) Although he uses some idiomatic German expressions, he makes many spelling and grammatical mistakes and he scatters his letters with anglicisms ('Secretary' instead the *Sekretär*, 'Lodge' instead of *Loge*, etc.) and the occasional French term (*Couvert* for 'sealed letter' and in one place *Secrétaire* for secretary). Such a person could have been an Englishman who had spent time in Germany or a person of Anglo-German background whose German was imperfect. Alternatively, he might have been someone from one of the territories of the Austro-Hungarian Empire, such as Hungary or Bohemia, where German was common currency in addition to the national language. One possible candidate, who has been suggested to me by Dr. R.A. Gilbert, is Julius Kohn, apparently a Jewish immigrant and author on alchemical subjects, who was in contact with some of the Golden Dawn figures. In the collection of letters of the Golden Dawn member W.A. Ayton, edited by Ellic Howe, there are a number of references to Kohn. For example, on

3 April 1894 Ayton wrote to his fellow Golden Dawn member F.L. Gardner: ‘I have told you I have a Jewish learned friend who was very advanced tho’ he never would belong to any order or society.’¹⁰ Ellic Howe comments as follows:

It has not been possible to discover anything about Kohn’s life, but in the Introduction to his translation of *The Prophecies of Paracelsus: Magic Figures and Prognostications* (195), he mentioned that his ‘studies in the Occult ... have now extended over forty years’, which suggests that he was born c. 1850 ... In his ‘Hermetic’ catalogue No. 23 (Summer 1981) Mr Gilbert [i.e., R.A. Gilbert] described Kohn as an Austrian emigré.¹¹

Of course Kohn is only one possible candidate, and pending further evidence the identity of Translator X must remain a mystery.

As I see it, there are now four main explanations for the correspondence:

- (a) S.D.A. was a fiction created by Westcott, and the gender discrepancy came about in the manner I have outlined in the first scenario.
- (b) He was a fiction created by someone other than Westcott.
- (c) He was an impostor posing as a Rosicrucian adept.
- (d) He was what he claimed to be: a member of a German esoteric lodge, willing to confer authority on Westcott, Mathers and Woodman to found an English offshoot.

While I would argue that the weight of the evidence points to (a)—i.e. the old forgery theory with a new twist—one cannot be sure. However, one thing we can say with certainty is that S.D.A. was not Fräulein Sprengel. So we can bid farewell to *Soror* S.D.A. Vale Soror! Ave Frater!

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¹⁰ Howe (ed.), *The Alchemist of the Golden Dawn*, 76.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

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