



William Hughes, *That Devil's Trick: Hypnotism and the Victorian Popular Imagination*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2015 (2018), 256 pp. Hb £70, ISBN: 978-0719074837; Pb £15.99 ISBN: 978-1-5261-2714-3

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That Devil's Trick: Hypnotism and the Victorian Popular Imagination by William Hughes made the welcome leap to paperback last year. Hughes acts as a knowledgeable, enthusiastic and detailed guide through the complex topic of the perception of magnetism and mesmerism, taking the time to explain each figure or practice as they become significant. In this volume, magnetism “is regarded as being unavoidably integral” to hypnotism (Hughes 2018: 13), whereas the two are often regarded as distinct techniques. The successive accounts of magnetists and hypnotists distancing themselves from their forebears, extolling the virtues of their own techniques, before being discredited or falling out of fashion begins to feel like an epic saga.

I would draw particular attention to the subtitle as the “Victorian Popular Imagination” forms as great a part of this study as hypnotism itself. It is a great example of an interdisciplinary book that deals with science, medical practice, as well as popular fiction's depictions of it. Hughes lays out the approach he has adopted in *That Devil's Trick* in the book's introduction, emphasising his use of “popular accounts” as opposed to relying just on “those derived from clinical publications” (14). Incorporating a breadth research, using not only examples from newspapers and journals, but also advertisements, the bibliography alone is worth the price of admission for anyone interested in the response to hypnotism. The introduction further states that the book hopes to provide “a methodological pointer as to how the other pseudosciences of the Victorian period could best be revealed in all their richness and variety” (17). This is certainly achieved, with Hughes providing a blueprint on how historical and literary studies can possess a

better encompassing view of their subject through wider engagement with such resources.

To give an overview of the book's contents, the preamble begins with a staging of Elizabeth Inchbald's play *Animal Magnetism* in 1848 – which transpired at Bulwer-Lytton's house and featured Charles Dickens himself. This serves not only as an introduction to the subject, but shows the proximity of the literary world to this subject on all fronts. Dr John Elliotson who becomes a central figure in later chapters maintained a friendship with Dickens, both at the peak of his magnetic fame and after his loss of reputation. The discussion of Inchbald's play similarly foregrounds the knowledge that magnetism was popular later in Britain than on the continent, and its reputation was a shifting balance between the gullibility of both the practitioner and the victim. Hughes outlines the value of his innovative approach, and clearly states "the central conceit of *That Devil's Trick* is one of co-existence and retention rather than evolution and succession" (13).

The structure of the book is simple and easily navigated. The first chapter, "The epoch of Mesmer," is a detailed analysis of British attitudes displayed towards Mesmer himself. What follows is a fascinating account of "Mesmer himself as the nineteenth century both envisaged and interpreted him" (24). In the popular presses the behaviour of practitioners was often of more interest than the efficacy of the treatment itself. Later practices seemingly made light of Mesmer in order to create a distinction between *their* practices and his. Hughes moves seamlessly into how later practitioners contributed to this conception of mesmerism in the popular imagination, encompassing Galvanism, Perkinism, John Bonnoit de Mainaduc and the Marquis de Puységur. This first chapter closes as "therapeutic magnetism in the United Kingdom becomes predominantly the preserve of a class of conventionally educated physicians who deploy magnetic therapy not in the salon but upon the hospital ward" (28).

The second chapter is entitled "Medical magnetism" and bridges the gap of how mesmerism starts to move into more overt medical practice. The chapter explores a short period when hypnotism was tolerated in Britain. The accounts begin with Baron Dupotet, one of the first practitioners to employ magnetism in a hospital setting before being removed from it by a medical committee. Hughes devotes particular attention to Richard Chenevix – a figure Hughes notes is often overlooked by histories of hypnotism, with no substantial work published on him. Dr John Elliotson becomes a key figure for the rest of *That Devil's Trick*. Drawing on points earlier in the chapter about the erotic nature of magnetism, by Victorian standards, the topic becomes central to Elliotson's treatment of the O'Key sisters. Not only does the press coverage of the O'Key sisters call into account their morals, soon an investigation into them discredits Elliotson's treatments and deals medical magnetism a significant blow.

The third chapter, "Surgical hypnotism," explores popular accounts of surgery under mesmerism. Beginning with how hypnotism "gained a specific functional purpose" after changing under the influence of James Braid: acting as an anaesthetic during surgery (155). Of particular interest is the account of James

Esdaile's experimental surgery under hypnosis in India. Not only because it is perhaps the most widely practiced example of surgery under hypnosis, but also because it taps into more general colonial anxieties with Esdaile's "deliberate choice" that "native mesmerists should not anaesthetise or influence their European employers" (174). The chapter then moves on to the founding of the Mesmeric Infirmary in London; from the initial success under Henry George Francis Reynolds-Moreton, the Second Earl of Ducie, through to its failing finances and ultimate closure. The chapter closes noting that chloroform, despite its risks, still proved a better prospect for anaesthesia and that "With interest in clairvoyance and mesmeric diagnosis likewise in decline, there was seemingly no longer a viable place for mesmerism in the national consciousness" (198).

The conclusion deals with the seeming death of British fascination in mesmerism. Returning to a closer relationship with literature, examples from the close of the nineteenth century demonstrate the impact that the content of the first three chapters still had. Despite mesmerism being in abeyance, works of fiction continued to use the subject. Doyle's *The Parasite* (1894) and Marsh's *The Beetle* (1897) are late suggestions that anyone might be brought under the control of an unscrupulous mesmerist. Perhaps the most famous mesmeric novel, Du Maurier's *Trilby* (1895), is used as a prominent example of how "mesmeric clichés" remained "present and potent" (210).

That Devil's Trick provides an in-depth background to the popular reception the subjects of magnetism, mesmerism and hypnotism received across the Victorian press. Critics of Victorian and Gothic literature will be familiar with mesmerism from a range of works, but Hughes provides such a thorough and many-faceted exploration of the subject they may not be able to look upon literary mesmerists quite the same way again. *That Devil's Trick* would be of interest to any study of Victorian medicine, pseudo-science, and the influence and attitude of the popular press.

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