Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain (review)

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Journal of Interdisciplinary History, Volume 31, Number 1, Summer 2000, pp. 95-96 (Review)

Published by The MIT Press

such terms no longer applied during the 1860s to any particular woman or to any legitimate political authority. She then charts the development of Victoria's own iconic image of feminine grief through her published memoirs, in the statuary of numerous public monuments that she erected in Albert's honor, and in photographs by Julia Margaret Cameron of mourning women that accompanied a version of Alfred Lord Tennyson's elegy, "Idylls of the King," which he dedicated to the queen in Albert's memory.

The logical consistency of Homans' argument will convince many readers of the inherent plausibility of her intertextual reading of Victoria's meaning for the British. Her assumption that to survive democritization, modern monarchs had to adapt their representations to the gendered expectations of their subjects will also meet with wide assent. By contrast, her assertion that for the British monarchy to complete its transformation "into a wholly symbolic function," the monarch had to be a woman and ideally a widow, begs for a comparison with other European monarchies in the modern era, as well as a better appreciation of the political astuteness with which Prince Albert staged a masculine royal role.

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Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain. By Alison Winter (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1998) 464 pp. $30.00

From the 1830s to the 1860s, "animal magnetism"—or "mesmerism," as it was pejoratively known—flourished in Victorian Britain. Drawing on social history, history of science and medicine, history of the body, gender history, and even the history of music, Winter takes us on a fascinating journey that traverses Victorian society—from London to colonial India and the provinces, from public lecture halls to private sick rooms—to explore the attitudes, concerns, and ambiguities of early- and mid-Victorian culture.

Mesmerism, "a wide range of different techniques, each claiming to give one person the power to affect another's mind or body," functioned as a social laboratory in which Victorians grappled with many of the central issues of their society (2). Winter studies mesmeric encounters in order to explore Victorian attitudes toward the body and mind, authority and social structure, and gender and science. She shows how a "fringe" science became instrumental for the late Victorian consolidation of the malleable scientific, medical, and intellectual cultures of the early Victorian period; how a loose structure of practices was appropriated by and marshaled in support of oppositional social ideologies; and how mesmeric terms became part of a more general language for describing influence and communication in Victorian society, irrespective of whether one subscribed to mesmerism itself.

Winter's imaginative historiographical approach is evident in many places throughout the book. Her discussion of the "discovery" of anesthesia, for example, reinterprets the introduction of ether during the 1840s in light of institutional history, history of the body, and the history of clinical knowledge. Her study of mesmeric experiences, to take another example, draws on Bakhtin's notion of the carnivalesque, the history of religion, and the history of theater to uncover the hidden meanings that mesmerism could have had for mesmeric subjects.[1]

Winter's study of mesmerism not only transforms our understanding of mesmerism, but also challenges intellectual histories of Victorian psychology by demonstrating that Victorians' conceptions of the human psyche are best explored through a social-history approach. It contributes to the history of music by suggesting an original interpretation of why Britons were slow to accept the baton conductor, and it takes to task our stereotyped images of Victorian bodies as self-contained.

Winter's exceptional study, however, leaves a number of issues relatively unexplored. For example, one of the most characteristic aspects of mesmerism, as Winter frequently reminds her readers, was its "flexibility," its open-endedness—the multiplicity of alternative meanings that different participants could impose on any mesmeric encounter. This flexibility is important to Winter's argument because it explains why mesmerism was appropriated by so many—often conflicting—ideologies, and because it illustrates the contested (and public) nature of authority during the early- and mid-Victorian period. The emphasis on flexibility, however, forces Winter to shift her focus away from those cultural and intellectual factors that constrained the interpretive flexibility of Victorians during a period of contested authority (and prior to the establishment of an authoritarian community of scientific "experts"). Nonetheless, minor lacunae like this one do not detract from Winter's fascinating and imaginative study, which serves as a model for how an interdisciplinary approach can enrich the history of science.

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Friends of the Family: The English Home and Its Guardians, 1850–1940. By George K. Behlmer (Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1998) 455 pp. $55.00

Historians such as Donzelot and Lasch on the left and Himmelfarb on the right have characterized state and voluntary intervention in the family as an attack on parental authority and familial self-sufficiency.[1]

1 Mikhail Mikhailovitch Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (Cambridge, Mass., 1968).

1 Jacques Donzelot (trans. Robert Hurley), *The Policing of Families* (New York, 1979); Gertrude Himmelfarb, *The De-Moralization of Society: From Victorian Virtues to Modern Values* (New York, 1995); Christopher Lasch, *Haven in a Heartless World: The Family Besieged* (New York, 1979).