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Spiritualism and 'The Woman Question'

The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England. Alex Owen. University of Chicago Press, 2004. 344pp.

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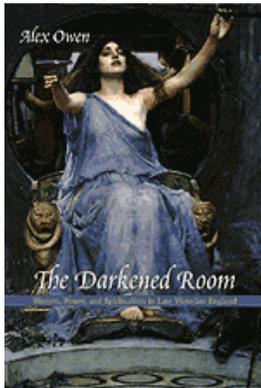
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<1>In this fascinating book, Alex Owen invites the reader to suspend any skepticism about the paranormal, and instead consider the phenomenon of spiritualism in Victorian England in terms of its social implications, particularly concerning gender and class. First published over fifteen years ago and only recently available in paperback, *The Darkened Room* tackles a difficult subject using previously unexamined material. As Owen mentions in the introduction, her interest was initially in constructions of femininity in light of the influence of Victorian medicine. A groundbreaking feminist and historicist study, Owen's work continues to shed light on Victorian medicine.

<2>Owen's is a difficult subject to write about, since so much of the work of the mediums depended on a relationship, or the appearance of a relationship, with spirits. At the beginning of the study, she develops the theory that the effects produced by mediums must lie with one of three causes: intentional deception, "unconscious production" in which "the mediums were capable of self-induced or self-regulated forms of psychological dissociation" (Intro., ix), or inexplicable factors. This said, the book's core focus is social issues. Although women played a central role in spiritualism—as mediums and healers, as well as believers—the relative absence of written materials by women might have made their great involvement invisible to scholars. Owen's concern to set the record straight by stressing women's participation is still worth considering and it has enabled subsequent investigations such as Alison Winter's book, *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*.⁽¹⁾

<3>Owen provides detailed background on the origins of the spiritualist movement, the connections to Swedenborgian philosophy, and increasing popularity between roughly 1860 and 1890. Her primary concern, however, is how the development of spiritualism intersected with the "Woman Question." Women were considered particularly suited to work as mediums, since the feminine ideal of passivity of mind and "renunciation of self" (9) was thought to facilitate spirits' control of female mediums. Despite this stereotype, mediumship afforded women some status as authority figures, and frequently also an independent income, destabilizing the expected power balance in relations between men and women. Thus, according to Owen, "spiritualist mediumship was capable of sabotaging the mechanics of power inherent in the Victorian codification of gender difference" (11).

<4>Discussion of the religious background to spiritualism, including the beliefs of secular and Christian spiritualists and the organizations which sprang up around the movement, forms much of the early part of the book. Owen is especially effective in explaining not only why women were permitted to develop their mediumistic skills and careers to such an extent, but also why the movement attracted so many believers. She suggests that "Women, as the embodiment of the spiritual and moral, were regarded as invaluable in the promulgation of spiritual truths and for the furtherance of meaningful social reform" (28). Furthermore, many believers came to the movement through their involvement with women's rights, anti-slavery and other social-reform groups, attracted to the public opportunities that spiritualism afforded. The growing middle-class interest in women's rights was among the various reforms with which spiritualism intersected. Thus, the British National Association of Spiritualists, for example, asserted that 'To cause the Rights of Woman to be recognized in full' and 'To cause the Wrongs of Woman to be redressed in full' were essential aspects of its platform" (27). The medium Emma Hardinge Britten used her "spirit inspired" (28) lectures to persuade her audience that women should be permitted to enter

the professions, particularly those related to teaching, healing, or spiritual authority (though it seems she toned down her agenda when speaking in Britain, saving her more radical words for lectures in the US).

<5>Mediumship gave women the opportunity for considerable earning power, though still left them vulnerable to the exhaustion of their gifts or exposure of fraud. As a public field in which women could acquire fame as well as authority, spiritualism was relatively unique. Owen illustrates her point using particular case studies, examining the development of young girls into successful and renowned mediums, and considering the divide between the public and private sphere of mediumship, and the shift from domestic to professional work. She also explores the significance of spiritualism in the domestic sphere in a chapter devoted to a particular respectable, middle-class family, the Theobalds, for whom spiritualism was essentially moral and religious, allowing them to contact their dead children, using their living children as mediums, and exemplifying many issues such as the breakdown of class divides which spiritualism permitted.

<6>Particularly enlightening are the chapters devoted to women healers and medicine. As a study of advertisements in the spiritual press indicates, from the 1860s on, a large and growing number of women worked as mesmeric or spiritual healers. “The ability to heal complemented a spiritualist concern with a pure and healthy body” (107), as Owen points out, and also permitted women to offer curative treatments that often involved promoting holistic care of the body including vegetarianism, rational dress and exercise. Many spirit healers drew on antecedents such as homeopathy and hydropathy. Many women healers were able to develop highly successful careers, with some, such as Chandos Leigh Hunt, unable to treat the large number of patients who came to her

<7>Conflicts with the medical profession were, however, considerable. The work of healers required a “degree of intimacy” (110) which traditional medicine did not; the practice was therefore described by critics as “disgraceful and repellent” (110). Furthermore, the offering of pain relief and even cure through non-conventional methods cast doubt on the medical profession’s claim to “exclusive, esoteric knowledge” (110). The suspicion was mutual, however; many spiritualists felt that allopathic medical practitioners failed to appreciate their belief in a holistic, spiritual approach to physical well-being, and much spiritualist literature is devoted to vitriolic attacks on the medical profession, describing the Royal College of Physicians and Surgeons as “human parasitic fungoid excrescences”(112), for example.

<8>In her sixth chapter, Owen details the medical profession’s view that belief in or practice of spiritualism was the product of a “diseased mind” (139) and the charge that apparent manifestations of spirits could well be due to hallucination. This was not simply a matter of male doctors turning misogynistically on the female healers; rather, the struggle “between physicians and spiritualists circulated implicitly around the key issue of the construction of normalcy and, by extension, normative womanhood” (139). As links between spiritualism and lunacy or hysteria were asserted, several women, including Louisa Lowe, were incarcerated in asylums due to their spiritualist beliefs. As Owen suggests, an “active, campaigning and autonomous woman” (167) fell foul of the prevailing belief that “conformity to the social norms was taken to be the criterion of a healthy mind” (144).

<9>The final chapter offers a concluding examination of the séance room itself, where, according to Owen, the gendered norms of everyday life were frequently subverted as women led the proceedings and frequently produced spirits that did not adhere to contemporary behavioral codes with, for example, male spirits becoming violent towards sitters, and female spirits allowing male sitters to check if they were wearing corsets (since corsetry was considered a sure sign of a fake). Here Owen relies on psychoanalytic theory for “exploration of the mediumistic experience” (204), even as she concedes that psychoanalysis can be problematic for historians. Particularly of note here is Owen’s Lacanian reading of the issue of spirits as a projected ego, in which spiritualism is seen to provide “a rationale for the multi-faceted ‘I’” (225). *The Darkened Room* concludes by exploring the construction of the self in terms of the work of the medium, with the undercurrent of sexuality inherent in many séances..

<10> Though Owen is primarily a historian, *The Darkened Room* provides material for research into many aspects of literature, not only shedding light on the cultural norms transgressed by spiritualism, but also adding a dimension to novels that portray aspects of spiritualism, such as Wilkie Collins’s *Jezebel’s Daughter* (1880). The cultural transgression situated in women’s ability to transform perceived social restrictions into a source of power and authority indicates the wide

application of Owen's research to the field of literary and cultural criticism. Referring frequently to sources including the spiritualist press, contemporary books, case studies and tracts, this is an invaluable guide not only to the Victorian world of spiritualism but also to the codified gender relations inherent within it. Effectively yet unobtrusively Owen follows her feminist agenda throughout, concluding that "Femininity is a battleground across which contemporary concerns are fought" and that "We must not permit ourselves to become trapped in darkened rooms of our own making" (242).

Endnotes

(1) Winter, Alison. *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998. (1)

