Review of Martin Willis and Catherine Wynne, eds., Victorian Literary Mesmerism and Martin Willis, Mesmerists, Monsters, and Machines: Science Fiction and the Cultures of Science in the Nineteenth Century

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Blair examines an impressively broad spectrum of Victorian culture and discusses a wide range of poets, but her more particular focus comes in three chapters on major poets: one on Elizabeth Barrett Browning’s concern “with ways of rewriting the cliché of the woman’s heart,” particularly in *Aurora Leigh* (p. 20); one on the “heart sickness” of Matthew Arnold’s poems, their morbidity particularly in relation to his religious doubts and his oscillation between what he perceived as a diseased spasmodic poetry and a more healthy poetry of Tractarian reserve; and finally a chapter on Tennyson’s *In Memorian* as an exploration of heartsickness and the return to a healthy heart, and *Maud* as a spasmodic poem representing the morbidly diseased heart and head. These chapters may not revolutionize our views of the particular poets, but they do provide fresh insights and a new perspective. Finally, Blair’s conclusion returns to the idea expressed in the introduction that the 1850s saw an efflorescence of writing about the heart because the “poetic heart” was being replaced by the pathological heart, and argues that the next generation of poets, represented by Walt Whitman, Swinburne, Christina Rossetti, and Gerard Manley Hopkins, took representation of the heart, blood, pulse, and circulation to “the extreme edges of the tradition of heart-centred poetry” (p. 240) as a kind of culmination and coda of that tradition.

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Mesmerism is hardly a new topic in nineteenth-century studies. Since at least the mid-1980s with publications such as Elaine Showalter’s *The Female Malady: Women, Madness, and English Culture, 1830–1980* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1987), mesmerism and similar pseudosciences such as phrenology have been staples of the field, and Alison Winter’s definitive *Mesmerized: Powers of Mind in Victorian Britain* (Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 1998) established that mesmerism was central rather than marginal to Victorian struggles over scientific legitimacy and theories of the mind. These findings are
picked up and confirmed both in *Victorian Literary Mesmerism* and in *Mesmerists, Monsters, and Machines*. One would expect, then, that in this relatively defined field these recent titles featuring nineteenth-century mesmerism would be much alike, particularly since Martin Willis authored one and coedited the other with Catherine Wynne. These two books, however, are surprisingly different in focus. The collection *Victorian Literary Mesmerism* is in fact a broad and rather thin treatment of not just literary mesmerism but also phrenology, clairvoyance, and hypnotism, mostly in the works of major British writers but also in the United States and Australia. By contrast, the subject of *Mesmerists, Monsters, and Machines* is indicated in its (oddly hidden) subtitle, *Science Fiction and the Cultures of Science in the Nineteenth Century*. This book’s more narrow and thesis-driven scope make it the greater contribution to scholarship in literature and science of the nineteenth century.

The collection edited by Willis and Wynne seeks to demonstrate how “mesmerism’s power lies in its ability to invigorate and often dominate debates on the scientific and social order and the fraught relationship between the two” (*Victorian Literary Mesmerism*, p. 5). The editors claim that “to investigate literary mesmerism is to unveil the reactions and responses, the interventions and influences of one of the key forms of knowledge that the Victorians used to define their sense of self and society” (p. 7). For instance, the editors identify three principal areas where mesmerism can tell us something about Victorian society: class, gender, and the criminal. “Mesmerism was always associated with radical class politics” beginning with “its comfortable coexistence with revolutionary France” (p. 7). Franz Anton Mesmer’s “quasi-sexual ritualism detracted from the science’s attempt to establish itself as a scientific principle but was responsible for fuelling its literary possibilities” (p. 8). And “the legal symbolism of mesmerism had always suggested a phenomenon on trial, always already criminalized” (p. 9).

*Victorian Literary Mesmerism* contains eleven essays, arranged roughly chronologically, in order to show the interplay of mesmerism and fiction throughout the Victorian period. All of the essays are at least competently done and will be useful both to scholars interested in Victorian pseudosciences and to specialists of the particular authors that are covered here. Many of the conclusions, particularly among the single-author essays, will strike the reader familiar with Victorian scholarship as unsurprising, but several of the essays make novel and genuinely interesting arguments about nineteenth-century literary mesmerism. The introduction could perhaps have done more to flesh out the theoretical implications of the connections between
mesmerism and literature that the volume explores. Just what is it about mesmerism—as opposed to, for instance, other heterodox or even orthodox sciences—that makes its integration into literary writings meaningful and interesting to the Victorians and to us?

The volume’s first essay, by Ilana Kurshan on early Victorian phrenology and mesmerism, establishes that the relationship between mesmerism and literature in the early Victorian period was both interdependent and explicit. Kurshan argues that the pseudosciences of phrenology and mesmerism were “presented as literary activities” to Victorians since practitioners “read” skulls and minds (p. 37). Phrenologists and mesmerists also validated their practices by the heavy use of allusion and the “rhetorical strategies of great writers,” strategies that paradoxically also undermined the legitimacy of those sciences (p. 37).

Following Kurshan’s piece are a series of essays that elaborate upon this interdependence of mesmerism and the work of mainstream mid-Victorian writers. Gavin Budge is interested in how Edward Bulwer-Lytton integrates Victorian medical theories about mesmerism and vitality in his occult novels, *Zanoni* (1842) and *A Strange Story* (1862). In particular, Budge sees mesmerism as the means by which the conservative reactionary, Bulwer-Lytton, can explore issues of sexuality and gender and particularly the vitality of masculinity, which dominates the weaker feminine forces within both novels (p. 59). In “Dazed and Abused: Gender and Mesmerism in Wilkie Collins,” Sharrona Pearl also argues that mesmerism, as a science that supports patriarchal power, ultimately represses female characters who are potentially transgressive in their gender. Louise Henson reads Elizabeth Gaskell as skeptical of mesmerism’s validity. For the Unitarian Gaskell, susceptibility to mesmerism was a sign of mental weakness, something that might lead to “epidemic delusion” in a community such as that of Cranford (p. 88). Gaskell advocated “corrective strategies” for susceptible minds since, she believed, mesmerism “disabled the judgement and undermined responsibility for moral conduct” (pp. 96, 103). Similarly, Angelic Rodgers reads Nathaniel Hawthorne as a skeptic of mesmerism, a threat to the patient’s psychological autonomy, both in his personal letters and in *The House of the Seven Gables* (1851).

Martin Willis’s “George Eliot’s *The Lifted Veil* and the Cultural Politics of Clairvoyance” is the most satisfying essay of this section, which is not surprising considering Willis’s full-length monograph on Victorian mesmerism. Willis demonstrates how the language of mesmerism
and clairvoyance can illuminate mid-Victorian economic anxieties. When Latimer begins to use his clairvoyant powers to advance himself socially and financially, he abuses his power and so allies himself with reckless economic speculators of the period.

Breaking from the pattern of single authors in mesmeric context are essays by Anthony Enns and Tiffany Donnelly. In “Mesmerism and the Electric Age: From Poe to Edison,” Enns takes an innovative look at mesmerism as a communication technology, and he not only makes a connection between Edgar Allan Poe and Thomas Edison via the telegraph and telephone, but also ties it to contemporary theories of information technologies, brain science, and the “crisis of embodiment” (p. 61). Donnelly provides one of the few examples in the volume of mesmerism serving a feminist cause. She tells the fascinating story of Caroline Harper Dexter, trained as an herbalist and medical mesmerist in London, who in the late 1850s transplanted her practice to Australia. There, the explicitly feminist Harper Dexter established the Mesmeric Institute, which sought to reconstitute “female disorder” as “women’s business” (p. 116); she further supported her practice by extensive publishing of pamphlets and in journals.

The volume ends with three strong pieces on mesmerism at the fin de siècle. In “Marie Corelli’s Magnetic Revitalizing Power,” Alisha Siebers examines Corelli’s spiritualist take on the revitalizing power of hypnotism, which could function as a cure for neurasthenics. Corelli found hypnotism particularly useful to artists, for, as Siebers explains, “if one renounces one’s imperfect body for the truths of the ideal realm found in trances, one is rewarded with rich, authoritative writing” (p. 184). Mary Elizabeth Leighton addresses head-on the question of the hypnotist as criminal in her investigation of literary mesmerism in the 1880s and 1890s. The press coverage of sensationalistic court cases and literary treatments of scheming hypnotists meant that despite the best efforts of medical men to support hypnotism as a legitimate practice, in the public mind the hypnotist was rendered either a “criminal or dupe” (p. 211). Catherine Wynne presents yet another example of literary mesmerism that works in the service of patriarchal power. In the case of Arthur Conan Doyle’s The Parasite (1894), however, the mesmerist is a West Indian femme fatale who gains control over a male scientist and threatens to destroy his happy domestic life via seduction. Others of Doyle’s writings show a similar anxiety over an aggressive female sexuality that must be redomesticated.

Martin Willis’s Mesmerists, Monsters, and Machines begins by noting a gap in literary scholarship—that “extended readings of the use of
science in science fiction texts are extremely rare,” and even more rare when limited to science fiction of the nineteenth century (p. 1). This omission seems particularly odd considering the wealth of studies on Victorian literature and science, and in related genres such as Gothic fiction (p. 1). In his monograph, Willis demonstrates how science fiction writings of the nineteenth century “benefit from extended exposure to the specific scientific histories that were so important in their making” (p. 2).

Willis hopes to gain more attention and respect for science fiction among scholars of the nineteenth century and to remind critics of science fiction that “the genre is science fiction as well as science fiction” (pp. 2–3). He wants a truly interdisciplinary approach to science fiction that gives equal attention to the analyses of science and literature without reducing the former to “mere facts” (p. 25). In his chapters on E.T.A. Hoffmann, Mary Shelley, Poe, Jules Verne, Villiers de L’Isle-Adam, and H. G. Wells, Willis performs the sort of interdisciplinary work that he would like to see from other scholars. By tracing the three themes of his title through the works of these disparate writers, he “guards against a simplification of the interaction between science and literature” (p. 26).

Willis demonstrates how his three themes function together in Hoffmann’s “Automata” and “The Sandman,” stories that allow Hoffmann to examine “the creation of forms of knowledge . . . calling themselves science” during the “embittered shift” in the early nineteenth century “from occultist natural philosophy to materialist science” (pp. 34–35). In his chapter on Frankenstein, Willis argues that Shelley merges Gothic convention with scientific investigation at least partly “from an understanding that science . . . appeared as a very gothic form of knowledge” in the early nineteenth century (p. 67). Electricity embodied this sort of Gothic science; its centrality to Shelley’s novel makes Frankenstein “a significant intervention in the cultural understanding” of electrical power during a time when Romantic and materialist science stand in opposition over its “possibilities and properties” (p. 63). In the next chapter, Willis ties Poe’s interests in mesmerism and the mechanization of the human back to Hoffmann. But whereas Hoffmann was interested in “automata (the human machine), mesmerism, and magico-occult practices, Poe is more keenly interested by the cyborg (the mechanized human), medical mesmerism, and the role of science as fraudulent activity” (p. 105). This difference, argues Willis, shows the shifting relationship of science and culture between 1810 and 1840 (p. 105). Comparing Poe’s treatment of science with Shelley’s, Willis notes that by 1829, scientific power “has
moved so significantly to the materialist camp that Romanticism . . . is no longer properly recognized” (p. 108).

Without severing the threads of mesmerism and the human-machine interactions of earlier chapters, Willis, in his chapter on Jules Verne, turns to the mid-century’s obsession with natural history. He argues that oceanography, in particular, “reflects and informs the scientific and societal dynamics” from 1840 to 1870 in that it “operates on the principles of commodity capitalism,” reveals “tensions between professional and amateur science,” and emphasizes “the powerfully masculine rhetoric of vision and penetration” of nineteenth-century science (p. 137). In “Villiers de L’Isle-Adam’s Invention of Psychical Research,” Willis outlines the French science fiction writer’s debt to his sci-fi predecessors, Hoffmann, Shelley, Poe, and Verne. In Tomorrow’s Eve (1886), Villiers de L’Isle-Adam uses the cyborg to bring “into dialogue” the “orthodox science of electricity” with “heterodox spiritualism” and, thus, to “investigate the popular and scientific attitudes toward psychical research” (p. 170). Finally, Willis reads Wells’s The Island of Dr. Moreau in relation to the rise of laboratory science in the 1890s, when science decisively “distanced itself from a popular audience” and “steadily gained its own . . . institutional power” (p. 201). As Willis notes himself, this is the most theoretically sophisticated and scientifically informed of the chapters, in that he pairs the reading of Wells’s novel with a discussion of the creation of the British Institute of Preventive Medicine and the vivisection debate within which the Institute was embroiled (pp. 202, 213).

Mesmerists, Monsters, and Machines is an ambitious and original piece of scholarship that largely lives up to its promises. Willis argues persuasively and eloquently for the importance of science fiction of the nineteenth century and of reading that fiction within a scientific context. Science fiction critics and scholars of nineteenth-century literature will find new and useful readings of these landmark works. Scholars of literature and science and the history of science and medicine should also be pleased by Willis’s informed and careful analyses of the scientific trends and debates that relate to the fiction he examines.

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