


Please cite the Published Version

Brennan, Z, Liggins, E  and Wisker, G (2022) Introduction: Spiritualism and the Supernatural, 1870–1925. *Women's Writing*, 29 (2). pp. 153-160. ISSN 0969-9082

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1080/09699082.2022.2050504>

Publisher: Taylor & Francis (Routledge)

Version: Accepted Version

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INTRODUCTION

INTRODUCTION: SPIRITUALISM AND THE SUPERNATURAL, 1870–1925

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Spiritualism and the supernatural have long been sources of fascination for the woman writer. In the nineteenth century and beyond, ghost stories by women were published alongside autobiographical reflections on the after-life, first-hand accounts of séances and philosophical and psychoanalytical musings on theosophy, mysticism and the subconscious. An excellent recent collection *The Female Fantastic: Gendering the Supernatural in the 1890s and 1920s* (2019) calls attention to the positioning of women writers at the forefront of radical enquiry into the border between life and death, identifying them as important producers of experimental fantastic fiction and involved in the exchange of ideas about esoteric religions and occult practices. As Lizzie Harris McCormick, Jennifer Mitchell and Rebecca Soares point out, however, much of the scholarship on the supernatural and the fantastic lacks a specific focus on female-authored narratives.¹ In an earlier special issue of *Women's Writing* (2008) on “Victorian women and the Occult”, focussing on writers such as Florence Marryat and E. Nesbit, Tatiana Kontou argued that, “both women and the occult challenge the extent of what is natural and/or supernatural and defy containment in Victorian literature and culture”.² And yet this defiance of boundaries has still not been fully mapped fourteen years later. There is more to be said about “gendering the supernatural”, about the diversity and depth of women writers’ responses to their rapidly changing environments, to increasingly popular ways of communicating with the dead and to shifting transnational understandings of the otherworldly.

Entrenched Victorian mourning practices and high mortality rates contributed to the desire for communication with the dead or curiosity about the afterlife, with women trying to contact their lost children becoming a common stereotype of séance activity. Mediums, ghost-like in their out of body experiences, challenging male authority with their strange and

unsettling powers, captured the popular imagination. Kontou attests that “the female sensitive became in late Victorian culture a locus of occult as well as emotive appropriations”,³ a symbolic figure of the age whose inhabitation of the commercial nexus also inevitably aligned her with prostitutes, actresses and exploitative male managers.⁴ In the eyes of feminist critics, the séance became a transgressive realm of gender ambiguity. Pamela Thurschwell identifies the séance room as “a place for transgressive cross-class/cross-gender contact, as well as a site for communication with a desired other world”.⁵ Although other worlds might have seemed increasingly available for empirical investigation in a sceptical age of scientific progress and new technologies, they necessarily eluded explanation. According to Christine Ferguson, the opposition between science and esotericism should not be over-stated as during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “the boundary between scientific and occult investigation was a distinctly porous one”: belief in a supernatural world infused the work of some scientists whilst occultists “regularly claimed for their beliefs scientific precedence and authority”.⁶ The desire to know more about the unknown, which straddled the ancient and the modern, united spiritualists, scientists, priests and ghost-seers caught up in the contradictions of the occult.

Historians of spiritualism now recognise that, whilst the rise of the celebrity medium and scandals over fraudulent or “staged” séances may have been most prominent in Britain between the 1850s and the 1880s, spiritualism continued as a “counter-cultural movement” from the late Victorian era well into the twentieth century.⁷ The 1880s “witnessed a re-grouping of the forces of spiritualist respectability in the face of attack and ridicule,” according to Alex Owen, as believers and mediums increasingly aligned themselves with the feminist movement, socialism and the social purity campaign.⁸ The large-scale losses of the First World War then reactivated the desire for communication with loved ones, popularised in greater media and fictional coverage of spiritualist encounters. Heather Ingman has identified a number of female modernists who drew on the occult and magical thinking in their supernatural fiction from the 1910s to the 1930s, including May Sinclair, Mary Butts, Sylvia Townsend Warner and Elizabeth Bowen,⁹ and there are certainly more figures to add to this list.

This special issue follows on from the previous issue’s exploration of the range and versatility of women’s ghost stories in the long nineteenth century. By focussing on spiritualism and the supernatural, rather than so specifically on genre, we hope to offer a more expansive account of the ways in which women writers processed and negotiated their imaginings and experiences of the world beyond death and spectral communications. Whilst the majority of articles concentrate on material from ghost story collections, others address other discourses such as life-writing, séance diaries, photography and communications media, as well as drawing on sociological and

periodical debates about theosophy, science and spiritualism. The contributors address questions about the medium's control over the séance, black magic, hypnotism, the afterlife, clairvoyance and dreams which predict the future, communications technologies such as telephones and telegrams and different cultural and regional responses to the "craze" for spiritualism. They advance debates about the ways in which "writers of the fantastic render the everyday extraordinary through haunted and otherworldly objects and spaces".¹⁰ By examining narratives written between 1870 and 1925, by British, American, Australian and New Zealand writers, they map onto different contexts and locations, from the foggy streets of London to the small towns of New England, from remote Scottish castles to Australian plains and waterholes. They consider the connections between spiritualism, and the decline of religious belief, mourning rituals, the women's rights movement, the fascination with the occult and wartime imperatives to stay connected.

A number of articles address the potential impact of cultural discussions of spiritualism and the unsettling power of the female medium on the development of women's ghost stories from the nineteenth into the twentieth century. In her discussion of gendered space in the 1870s stories of Rhoda Broughton and Mary E. Braddon, Lindsey Carmen Williams argues that real-life female mediums such as Florence Cook who transgressed the boundaries of femininity, inspired ghost story writers to create women who challenged authority in the domestic sphere. Adopting a Foucauldian approach, she shows how female spinsters and servants in ghost stories were presented with clairvoyant and ghost-seeing powers in order to protest against the horrors of patriarchal confinement, refusing their roles as "docile bodies". Focussing on the 1890s, Emma Liggins explores the forgotten ghost stories of Lettice Galbraith in relation to debates about hypnotism and the occult, contending that the woman writer subverts power relations in order to show the spectral "mesmeric" gaze of the female revenant as a form of vengeance against her male oppressors. Galbraith's lesser-known story "In the Séance Room", also discussed by Carmen Williams, is one of the first ghost stories to represent the female medium and the female spirit she calls up; spectrality is used to call out male violence. Liggins also considers women's transgressive uses of "sorcery" to summon demons in a new twist on the haunted house narrative influenced by a *fin-de-siècle* fascination with psychical research, occult practices and nocturnal rituals.

Ruth Heholt and Rebecca Lloyd turn to the 1890s ghost stories of writer Louisa Baldwin who they frame as marginalised within her own family. Married to industrialist Alfred Baldwin, mother of Prime Minister Stanley Baldwin and aunt to Rudyard Kipling, she was overshadowed by her more famous familial connections. Heholt and Lloyd refer to her, unusually, by

her first name as an act of tearing her away from the network that defined her both in life and the various biographical accounts of it. They read her only collection of ghost stories *The Shadow on the Blind* (1895) through this lens, focussing on the “weight of ancestry”; a theme they argue weaves throughout various tales. Louisa depicts the past as having an often-monstrous hold on the present. However much her protagonists try to escape it, they cannot evade the ties and responsibilities of blood which turns the domestic space into a site of trauma. Heholt and Lloyd suggest that Louisa experienced her homelife in a similar way, consistently judged as “lacking” in comparison to her extended household.

A sense of liminality is also key to Minna Vuohelainen’s discussion of the supernatural stories that Margaret Oliphant wrote for *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine* (*Maga*) over a period of forty years, 1857-1897. Vuohelainen maintains that the author’s longstanding interest in the liminal, particularly the continuum between life and death, are central to the stories. She turns to biography to suggest that the many losses that the author faced throughout her lifetime drove this preoccupation. Not only is this represented by the revenants she creates, but also reflected in tales in which she imagines the afterlife and the spatial imagery she employs. Vuohelainen explains that threshold images permeate Oliphant’s work for *Maga*, with doors through which characters cannot pass and windows through which they can only look, paradoxically connected, and separated from what lies beyond. Alongside this exploration of the tales, Vuohelainen offers an interesting insight into a prolific female writer’s relationship with a patriarchal and conservative journal. She argues that in this context, Oliphant is a marginal but subversive figure who used the platform to subtly challenge gender norms, for example, championing women’s right to study.

Picking up on the theme of the spinster figure as a challenger of authority, Carys Crossen’s article shifts the discussion to turn of the century New England and the impact of wider knowledge of spiritualism in the United States. Examining Mary E. Wilkins Freeman’s neglected collection of supernatural fiction *The Wind in the Rose-Bush* (1903), she suggests that Freeman’s stories share many concerns with the Spiritualist movement that was allowing women the opportunity to participate in those debates of the day mentioned earlier. Crossen emphasises the fact that female participants of the seances were not “quite” outside the bounds of propriety and so were allowed a voice and power that challenged these very boundaries. Freeman’s stories, set in similarly haunted domestic spaces, are also critical of the stereotypes and restraints placed on women at the time. Her female characters, whilst they conform to stereotypically feminine attributes such as passivity and self-sacrifice, are shown to suffer because of their adherence to social norms. Crossen further argues that simply by spotlighting socially

marginalised characters, such as the widow and spinster, Freeman allows them a platform which was denied them by the wider society.

Conversations about spiritualism in the 1890s and early twentieth century have often been dominated by a focus on high-profile male spiritualists such as Arthur Conan Doyle and Oliver Lodge. In her article, “A Lady’s Guide to Spectral Etiquette: Domestic Science in Georgiana Houghton’s Séance Diaries,” Lin Young looks at the work of female medium Georgiana Houghton whose intimate form of the séance diary connects with the nineteenth-century spiritualist movement’s desire to prove the material existence of spirits. While male spiritualists tackled questions of spectral materiality, through their “objective” reports and research papers, Young argues that Houghton develops a “gender-appropriate” genre linked to life writing with her séance diaries. In the war years, a renewed interest in spiritualism and communication infiltrated media and fictional debates. Melissa Dinsman and Heather Robinson focus their discussion of the connections between war, spiritualism and communications media on “Love’s Last Leave”, a story from Violet Hunt’s *More Tales of the Uneasy* (1925) which uses new technologies such as telegraphs, telephones and wirelesses to articulate the deadliness of the First World War. Hunt’s modernist story, with its gaps and fragmentation, was written at a time of her increased camaraderie with other women writers like Sinclair who had shared interests in spiritualism. Dinsman and Robinson reveal its spiritualist tropes and women’s difficulties in receiving spirit messages, arguing that “Hunt forces readers to experience their own connection failures, thereby amplifying her message that the Great War brought about a new kind of fractured experience, one that could not be mended by technological, spiritual, or even literary mediums”.

An international perspective on spiritualism is provided in the final essay by Gina Wisker, which considers two cosmopolitan writers who travelled and resided in Australia, New Zealand, the Far East, Europe and the UK. Women writers of the supernatural and Gothic from Australia and New Zealand including Rosa Praed and Dulcie Deamer were influenced both by local cultural beliefs and understandings, for Praed particularly the Aboriginal spiritual understanding of history and existence, the Dreaming, and by the occult, spiritualism and Eastern originated beliefs informing Theosophy. Madame Blavatsky even appears as a character in Praed’s play *Affinities*, while Deamer’s close friend, fellow New Zealander, Rosaleen Norton, the infamous “Witch of Kings Cross”, in Sydney’s Bohemian Kings Cross area, represented herself as a witch. In Deamer’s own “The Devil’s Ball” removed from her novel *The Devil’s Saint* (1924), Sidonia the lead is a witch’s daughter. Deamer also wrote of homosexual characters and Praed settled with Nancy Harward, thought to be a returned Roman slave-girl. There are many links still to be explored with other New Zealand and

Australian women writers who mix beliefs, cultural influences and locations from their origins with Far Eastern and European interests in spiritualism and the occult.

We hope that the following essays offer new ways of thinking about spiritualist cultures and the gendering of the supernatural, as well as highlighting the importance of these frameworks for canonical writers and pointing towards some lesser-known figures to explore. Mackenzie Bartlett has reminded us of the importance of “the emotional resonance of the séance” and “the significance of the affective experience associated with spiritualism”.¹¹ These articles suggest that discussions of women writers’ contributions to debates about spiritualism and the supernatural not only need to take account of emotion and science, of religion and the occult, and of female transgressions, liminality, and the challenging of male authority, but also notions of “gender-appropriate” genres for entering these debates. More work certainly needs to be done on women writers’ development of stories using ghosts, the supernatural and the weird from the 1920s onwards, including work by Australian Christina Stead, and Katherine Mansfield’s relative, Australian/German Elizabeth von Arnim. There are some rich similarities of interest in witches, the devil, alternative cultures and companies of women in the contemporary work of, for example, Sylvia Townsend Warner. Transnational conversations about spiritualism which draw in other cosmopolitan European, Asian and American authors are also in need of further investigation.

We would like to thank the following reviewers for their insightful comments on earlier versions of these articles: Jen Baker, Gillian Ballinger, Katerina Garcia Walsh, Janine Hatter, Ruth Heholt and Elizabeth Nolan.

Notes

1. Lizzie Harris McCormick, Jennifer Mitchell and Rebecca Soares (eds.), *The Female Fantastic: Gendering the Supernatural in the 1890s and 1920s* (London: Routledge, 2019), xx-xxi.
2. Tatiana Kontou, “Introduction: Women and the Victorian Occult”, *Women’s Writing* 15:3 (2008), 275–81 (276).
3. Kontou, “Introduction”, 276. She goes on to argue that “psychical researchers preferred the term ‘sensitive’ to ‘medium’ when talking about spirit communication, further consolidating the links between feminine attributes and spectral manifestations through a neurological template” (277).
4. Pamela Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking, 1880–1920* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 10.
5. Thurschwell, *Literature, Technology and Magical Thinking*, 8.
6. Christine Ferguson, “Introduction,” *The Occult Imagination in Britain, 1875–1947* (Oxon and New York: Routledge, 2018), 4.

7. Heather Ingman, "Religion and the occult in women's modernism," in *The Cambridge Companion to Modernist Women's Writing*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 187–202 (187).
8. Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989), 38, 39.
9. Ingman, "Religion and the occult," 199.
10. McCormick, Mitchell and Soares, *Female Fantastic*, xxvi.
11. Mackenzie Bartlett, "Mirth as Medium: Spectacles of Laughter in the Victorian Séance room," in Tatiana Kontou and Sarah Willburn (eds.), *The Ashgate Research Companion to Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism and the Occult* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2012), 268, 284.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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Emma Liggins is a Reader in English Literature in the Department of English at Manchester Metropolitan University. Her publications include *George Gissing, the Working Woman and Urban Culture* (Ashgate, 2006), *The British Short Story* (with Andrew Maunder & Ruth Robbins) (Palgrave, 2011), *Odd Women? Spinsters, Lesbians and Widows in British Women's Fiction, 1850–1939* (Manchester University Press, 2014) and *The Haunted House in Women's Ghost Stories, 1850–1945: Gender, Space and Modernity* (Palgrave, 2020). Her research interests include ghost stories, haunted heritage and Victorian cemeteries. She is currently working on the American ghost stories of Shirley Jackson and the graveyard as a Gothic space in the fiction of Susan Hill and Tracy Chevalier.

Zoe Brennan is a senior lecturer in English literature at the University of the West of England. She is interested in writers who explore the intersection between old age, gender, and sexuality. She is the author of *The Older Woman in Recent Fiction* (2005) and *Brontë's Jane Eyre* (2010). Recently, she has published papers and chapters on subjects such as the Edwardian ghost story, Angela Carter's Gothicising of space in the Bristol trilogy and her depiction of unruly septuagenarians in *Wise Children*. She is currently working on Kazuo Ishiguro's portraits of aging masculinity in *The Buried Giant*.

Gina Wisker is an Associate Professor at the University of Bath, supervising doctoral students and Professor 11, University of the Arctic, Tromsø. She is also a Professor Emeritus at the University of Brighton, where she was Professor of Higher Education & Contemporary Literature and Head of the Centre for Learning & Teaching, and had a similar role previously Anglia Ruskin University, Cambridge. She has published 26 books (some edited) 140 + articles: *Key Concepts in Postcolonial Literature* (2007); *Horror Fiction: An Introduction* (2005); *Margaret Atwood, an Introduction to Critical Views of Her Fiction* (2012); *Contemporary Women's Gothic Fiction* (2016); *The Postgraduate Research Handbook* (2001; 2nd ed. 2007); *The Good Supervisor* (2005, 2012); *Getting Published* (2015); *The Undergraduate Research Handbook* (2nd ed, 2018). She is a National Teaching Fellow, Principal fellow of the HEA, SFEDA, FRSA, FEA. She was chair of the Contemporary women's writing association

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