

# Entranced by Eyes of Evil

Tales of Mesmerism & Mystery

Edited by

**TIM PRASIL**

BROM NES BOOKS

*Entranced by Eyes of Evil: Tales of Mesmerism and Mystery* is the first volume of the Phantom Traditions Library series, published by Brom Bones Books. These anthologies feature “forgotten” genres or sub-genres of popular fiction—from supernatural and fantasy tales to detective mysteries and science fiction—written during the 1800s and early 1900s. Edited by Tim Prasil, each volume will include a well-researched introduction, helpful and interesting footnotes, and an appendix that spotlights a work or two of relevant non-fiction from the same period. Learn more about the Phantom Traditions Library at [BromBonesBooks.com](http://BromBonesBooks.com).

The front cover illustration is from Fernand Bottey’s *Le “Magnétisme Animal”: Étude Critique et Expérimentale sur L’hypnotisme ou Sommeil Nerveux Provoqué chez les Sujets Sains Léthargie, Catalepsie, Somnambulisme, Suggestions, Etc.* (Plon, 1884), where it is captioned “Attitude Cataleptique: Extase”

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# INTRODUCTION

Tim Prasil

Using one's power to manipulate another person typically ends badly in literature. In William Shakespeare's tragedy *Othello* (1603), Iago coaxes the title character to murder his wife. Lady Russell convinces Anne Elliot to break her engagement in Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1818), leading to all kinds of anguish. Olive Chancellor and Basil Ransom compete to exert the greater influence over Verena Tarrant in Henry James' *The Bostonians* (1886), and though Verena chooses Basil in the end, readers are told that her life will be one of tears. To establish his theme, James makes Verena the daughter of a man who claims to cure patients with mesmerism. Mesmerism, of course, is a very clear method of wielding one's will over another, and it is the shared subject of the tales you are about to read.

The term "mesmerism" was born when Franz Anton Mesmer (1734-1815) became an international celebrity by offering a medical cure based upon what was being called animal magnetism. Mesmer believed that this animal magnetism permeated the universe and that it could be channeled by a gifted practitioner to benefit those suffering from a wide variety of ailments. He attempted to treat his patients by putting them into a trance via deep, direct eye contact along with a series of touches and hand movements. Wild speculations about what might result from these trances spread. Could unethical doctors misuse their patients' suggestibility, perhaps even commanding them to commit crimes? Could inducing these trances regularly form a clairvoyant bond between the subject and the mesmerist that persists long after the therapy session? Could these entranced subjects reach a mental state so profound that they could even communicate with spirits of the dead? The possibilities were both fascinating and frightening.

In 1779, Mesmer moved from Vienna to Paris, where he attracted a following among the well-to-do. But he also attracted a

growing number of authorities who scoffed at his claims. By 1784, Mesmer's theory was investigated by representatives of France's Royal Academy of Science, a team that included American Ambassador Benjamin Franklin. The investigators judged the animal magnetism theory to be baseless and attributed any positive results derived from applying it solely to the power of the patient's imagination. In other words, they deemed mesmerism to be, at best, a placebo. Mesmer withdrew from Paris the following year.

However, the practice that Mesmer had popularized and that now bore his name continued, and its influence wandered in strange directions. For example, by the late 1840s, the notion of an entranced and, in a sense, self-mesmerized medium connecting the physical realm to the world beyond exploded with the Spiritualist movement, which claimed millions of believers within decades. In fact, the word "séance" was used to indicate both a Spiritualist and a mesmerist demonstration. Following a very different path, in 1890, Gabrielle Bompard was charged with murder, but she made headlines by pleading that she had been the victim of hypnosis, the new term for mesmerism. An international debate was sparked on whether or not someone could be found guilty for committing a crime when under a hypnotic spell. (See this book's Appendix for a summary of the Bompard case and for two opposing editorials that it inspired.) All along, fiction writers were seeing a subject here for drama, one that typically involved the *abuse* of mesmeric powers.

Not surprisingly, then, literature has a gallery of mesmerists, and almost all of them are sinister or downright evil. At the least, they succumb to the diabolic lure mesmerism offers much as Pandora did to that box. In addition, these characters are frequently painted as foreigners. "Fictions of mesmerism often played up the connection between alien origins and depravity," says Daniel Pick in his study of the history surrounding George du Maurier's Svengali, the poster boy for fictional mesmerists.<sup>1</sup> Certainly, a fear of outsiders goes a far way to explain this. However, there's also the compelling attraction to the exotic at play here, and sinister mesmerists become interesting because of that strange mix of repulsion and fascination. It's the traffic accident that we don't want to observe, but from which we are unable to turn.

Even more frequently than being marked as foreign, these characters are given beguiling eyes. Though there are earlier novels,<sup>2</sup> we can begin with authors who are still widely recognized today. Miles Coverdale, the narrator of Nathaniel Hawthorne's *The Blithedale Romance* (1852), meets a Professor Westervelt and twice

describes his black eyes as sparkling, “whether with fun or malice I knew not, but certainly as if the Devil were peeping out of them.” That narrator later learns that this is the very man who presided over an exhibition of mesmerism at the very start of the novel. Edward Bulwer-Lytton’s *A Strange Story* (1862) introduces a man named Margrave who has “unspeakably lustrous” eyes and who hopes to discover a formula for immortality by mesmerizing Lilian Ashleigh, a clairvoyant. For added tension, Ashleigh is engaged to wed Allen Fenwick, a doctor who starts the novel as an outspoken skeptic regarding mesmerism. Next, there’s John Jasper, who mentally enslaves Rosa Bud in Charles Dickens’ *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (1870). At one point, Rosa explains that Jasper psychically controls her singing and piano playing while silently communicating his yearning for her. “I avoid his eyes,” she pleads, “but he forces me to see them without looking at them.” Arthur Conan Doyle’s *The Parasite* (1894) presents one of the uncommon female hypnotists, but one who still uses her powers and her “feline” eyes for selfish and cruel ends. When Svengali appeared in George du Maurier’s 1894 novel *Trilby*, he provided a nickname for all hypnotic villains. Like Jasper, Svengali is a music teacher who uses his “bold, brilliant black eyes” to manipulate the title character in her public and her private life. Bram Stoker’s vampire in *Dracula* (1897) has both a fiery gaze and the power to entrance, but hypnotism also becomes a useful means to *vanquish* evil in this novel. Stoker’s *The Lair of the White Worm* (1911) deals even more directly with mesmerism by giving the protagonist, Edgar Caswall, family ties to Mesmer himself. The eyes of Caswall are described in this way: “Black, piercing, almost unendurable, they seem to contain in themselves a remarkable will power which there is no gainsaying.”<sup>3</sup>

*Trilby* and similar novels became labeled “Hypnotic Fiction” in an 1895 piece of literary criticism by Arthur Quiller-Couch. He was not a fan of this body of literature largely because of the response it stirs in readers. Instead of the “ordinary human terror” one feels from a work such as *Macbeth*—which, by negative example, reinforces the idea that virtue leads to happiness—“the terror of these hypnotic stories resembles that of a child in a dark room.” The typical plot involves a villain hypnotizing a victim, most often “a good and beautiful woman,” thereby making her “commit any excesses that his beastliness may suggest.” Quiller-Couch complains that this leaves readers asking, “What avail native innocence, truthfulness, chastity, when all these can be changed

into guile and uncleanness at the mere suggestion of a dirty mesmerist?"<sup>4</sup> In other words, Quiller-Couch prefers a character's bad behavior and consequent downfall to result from that character's own bad motives. It is an interesting point, but as interesting is the fact that a critic recognized that a nameable genre of fiction had emerged, and this genre included novels as well as shorter works such as those anthologized in this book.

Whether the genre should be categorized under *supernatural* or *science* fiction is difficult to decide. In a sense, the history of mesmerism/hypnotism has been a struggle to yank the phenomenon out of the supernatural realm and confine it to the natural. Under "Animal Magnetism," an 1883 edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica* explains that widespread and centuries-old reports of disease being cured "by the touch of the hand of certain persons," inducing "deep sleeps . . . during which the sleeper sometimes had prophetic dreams," and producing other "effects like those now referred to animal magnetism" were attributed to supernatural agencies. Moving to Mesmer, the entry explains that his theory was directly shaped by his experience with Johann Joseph Gassner (1727-1779), a priest who performed exorcisms and miracle cures, leading Mesmer "to suppose that some kind of occult force resided in himself by which he could influence others."<sup>5</sup> Certainly, Mesmer's claims of channeling animal magnetism—a force he said pervades the universe—implied a power that was mystical and transcendent, if not outright supernatural.

In contrast, medical men interested in the therapeutic potential of hypnotism worked to explain the phenomenon scientifically. Around 1843, Scottish physician James Braid (1795-1860) suggested renaming the practice "neuro-hypnotism" while stripping away its associations with stronger wills controlling weaker ones and with animal magnetism or any other external force. In the wake of Braid, Ambroise-Auguste Liébeault (1824-1904) and Hippolyte Bernheim (1840-1919) investigated hypnotism as representatives of the Nancy School, named for the French town in which they worked. Their conclusions conflicted with those of Jean-Martin Charcot (1825-1893) and the Paris School (also called the Salpêtrière School), but despite the rivalry, these physicians were making hypnosis a matter of science, not the supernatural.

Meanwhile, some fiction writers were perpetuating the phenomenon's supernatural roots to thrill readers. Shortly after the nineteenth century became the twentieth, an M.D. named Charles

Gilbert Chaddock condemned the popularization of hypnosis, be it through stage acts performed “for the amusement and mystification of the public” or through the “writer of modern novels, who employs the mysteries of hypnotism to heighten interest in his impossible.” Again, *Trilby* is cited as a prime example of works of fiction that “only serve to foster in the minds of the masses a belief in the supernatural, with all the errors and mental aberrations which spring from ignorance.”<sup>6</sup> Perhaps instead of placing the tales in this anthology into either supernatural or science fiction, then, we should see them as creating tension by straddling science and the supernatural while challenging literary categories based on those oppositions.

Dr. Chaddock’s claim that readers in the 1800s and early 1900s were ignorantly led to a belief in the supernatural by fictional treatments of mesmerism seems to be an exaggeration. Victorian readers were generally very savvy about the distinctions between fact and fiction, after all. At the same time, our own presumably better understanding of the limits of hypnotism over a century later might help us recognize and enjoy the fabrication in the short stories in this anthology. That creative license to stretch the truth—and to stretch it far—is what makes these works fun, especially when it was done by respected writers such as Edgar Allan Poe, Louisa May Alcott, Arthur Conan Doyle, and Ambrose Bierce. Along with these authors are many who, though they might have lost some of their luster over time, were literary celebrities in their day. E.T.A. Hoffmann, Fitz-James O’Brien, Percy Greg, Rhoda Broughton, Mary Elizabeth Braddon, and L.T. Meade were all important writers historically.

I arranged their stories in chronological order so that readers might chart the evolution of the genre. To be sure, some stories are weaker than others, but all of them become interesting when viewed as a map of where the tradition has roamed. In addition, knowing that one readers’ nostalgic delights are another’s archaic distractions, I’ve attempted to preserve the original charm of the 19th-century texts while also modernizing spelling, punctuation, and paragraphing for 21st-century readers.

Regardless of my success at this balancing act, *Entranced by Eyes of Evil: Tales of Mesmerism and Mystery* is designed to introduce all readers to that “forgotten” genre that Quiller-Couch dubbed “Hypnotic Fiction.” I hope that it proves to be exactly that for you.

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<sup>1</sup> *Svengali's Web: The Alien Enchanter in Modern Culture* (Yale University Press, 2000) p. 101. Other book-length analyses of literature and mesmerism are Maria M. Tartar's *Spellbound: Studies on Mesmerism and Literature* (Princeton University Press, 1978); Anne DeLong's *Mesmerism, Medusa, and the Muse: The Romantic Discourse of Spontaneous Creativity* (Lexington, 2012); and an anthology of critical essays, edited by Catherine Wynne and Martin Willis, titled *Victorian Literary Mesmerism* (Rodopi, 2006). Donald Harman offers a bibliography of literary works dealing with the topic in "Hypnotic and Mesmeric Themes and Motifs in Selected English-Language Novels, Short Stories, Plays and Poems, 1820-1983," *Bulletin of Bibliography*, 44.3 (Sep. 1987), 156-66.

<sup>2</sup> Earlier novels dealing with mesmerism include Marianna Pisani's *Vandeleur; or Animal Magnetism* (1836), Isabella F. Romer's *Strumer; A Tale of Mesmerism* (1841), and Timothy Shay Arthur's *Agnes; Or, The Possessed: A Revelation of Mesmerism* (1848). Indeed, Bulwer-Lytton's novel *Zanoni* (1842) fits nicely among this first wave of novels dealing with the topic.

<sup>3</sup> Nathaniel Hawthorne, *The Blithedale Romance* (Ticknor, Reed, and Fields, 1852) p. 113; Edward Bulwer-Lytton, *A Strange Story* (S. Low, 1862) p. 159; Charles Dickens, *The Mystery of Edwin Drood* (Chapman and Hall, 1870) p. 46; Arthur Conan Doyle, *The Parasite* (Harper, 1895), p. 13; George du Maurier, *Trilby* (Harper, 1894), p. 12; Bram Stoker, *Dracula* (Archibald Constable, 1897); Bram Stoker, *The Lair of the White Worm* (William Rider, 1911) p. 18.

<sup>4</sup> "A Literary Causerie: Hypnotic Fiction," *The Speaker* 12 (Sep. 14, 1895) pp. 289-90. Along with those by Hawthorne, Bulwer-Lytton, Dickens, and du Maurier, Quiller-Couch might have had some of these novels in mind: Herbert E. Chase's *A Double Life, Or, Starr Cross: An Hypnotic Romance* (1884); Esmé Stuart's *In His Grasp* (1887); Julian Sturgis's *Thralldom* (1887); Walter Besant's *Herr Paulus: His Rise, His Greatness, and His Fall* (1888); Joseph Hocking's *The Weapons of Mystery* (1890); and E.H.C. Oliphant's *The Mesmerist* (1890).

<sup>5</sup> "Magnetism, Animal," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Volume 15 (Scribner's, 1883) p. 277.

<sup>6</sup> "Hypnotism," *International Dental Journal*, 25 (Sep. 1904) pp. 694-95. This article is a transcript of a lecture Chaddock had given at the Marion-Sims Dental College.