

Emily Ogden. *Credulity: A Cultural History of US Mesmerism*. Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 2018. xiv + 267. ISBN: 9780226532165. \$82.50.

The history of mesmerism in the United States has been a topic of historical research before. However, it has always been either in an attempt to write a bigger history¹—in which mesmerism is but a stage—or within the framework of a small case study, such as of a specific mesmerist actor.² This led to the situation in which we still lacked a monograph dealing exclusively with American mesmerism. With *Credulity*, Emily Ogden finally fills this peculiar gap. In it, following the subtitle, Ogden traces the history of U.S. mesmerism from Paris in 1784 all the way to the American 1850s, where it almost completely merged with other traditions such as Spiritualism and New Thought. Moving beyond the descriptive, Ogden also builds a thesis centered around her title concept of “credulity”: namely that many American mesmerizers saw themselves as disenchanted, rational men using enchantment to manipulate the credulity of others into (often economically) useful ends.³ By doing this, she aims not only to further our understanding of American mesmerism as a cultural phenomenon of its own, but also to contribute to current models of secularism.

Ogden starts her historical narrative with an extensive look at the French 1784 Faculty of Medicine commission report (34–40), and with good reason. The scientific commission, of which Benjamin Franklin was a part, denied the

1. For example, the history of psychology: e.g. Adam Crabtree, *From Mesmer to Freud: Magnetic Sleep and the Roots of Psychological Healing* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1993); or American religion: e.g. Robert Fuller, *Mesmerism and the American Cure of Souls* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1982).

2. E.g. Eric Carlson, “Charles Poyen Brings Mesmerism to America,” *Journal of the History of Medicine and Allied Sciences* 15, no. 2 (1960): 121–32; Sheila Quinn, “Credibility, Respectability, Suggestibility, and Spirit Travel,” *History of Psychology* 15, no. 3 (2012): 273–82.

3. The emic definition of credulity as an insult is given in the introduction of the book: “credulity . . . is deception and thrall to false magic”, or simply “excessive belief” (9). As will be elaborated on later, Ogden also uses the term credulity as an analytic concept, but she does not discuss this usage theoretically.

existence of an animal magnetic fluid, instead ascribing the curative effects to the imagination. Ogden argues that this led to two interconnected developments, which would ultimately shape the history of mesmerism in the United States. Firstly, she shows in the latter part of Chapter One (46–54, 61–67) how this dismissal of mesmerism reached the United States in 1784, half a century before the actual practice would successfully follow suit in 1836. Being the first to extensively describe these 52 years, aptly under the title “Animal Magnetism Before It Was True” (25), Ogden convincingly shows that Americans readily cultivated the link between mesmerism and quackery. For them, it was an easy (i.e. absent) “other” to denounce as irrational in order to prove their own rationality.

Secondly, following Jessica Riskin,⁴ Ogden shows that by transferring mesmerism’s alleged power to the imagination, the commission inadvertently turned the latter into a powerful force, one that was, as of yet, little understood and in need of management (40). Here the main thesis of the book comes to the fore: Ogden argues that American mesmerists saw their practice as a continuation of superstitions of old, but sought to rationally repurpose it into the power of controlling credulity for enlightened ends (usually in very economic and pragmatic ways: raising efficiency of workers, highspeed information transfer, etc.). In other words, *mesmerism* would perform the task of managing the imagination (70). In this regard, Ogden asserts that the commission report turned out to work in mesmerism’s favor in the case of the United States (e.g. 47, 67). The utilization of mesmerism was first proposed by its importer into the country, Charles Poyen (Ch. 2). Ogden sees in his introduction of mesmerism to factory owners a tool to increase the punctuality and efficiency of their workers (90–100). She views this as consistent with his ties to and dependencies on slavery, for which she provides newly found archival evidence from Guadeloupe. In doing this, Ogden casts a new light on Poyen, who is often described as an abolitionist in earlier works.⁵

4. *Science in the Age of Sensibility: The Sentimental Empiricists of French Enlightenment* (Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press, 2002), 209–25.

5. E.g. Carlson, *Charles Poyen*, 123, 126; Sheila Quinn, “How Southern New England Became

However, this vision of a utilized mesmerism soon had to make room, as Ogden describes in her third chapter, for a new sort of mesmerism: one in which spectacle, with only the promise of utility, took center stage. Soon after its arrival in New England, a new form of clairvoyance was tied to mesmerism: travelling somnambulism, or spirit travel. It weighted the power-dynamic of mesmerizer-somnambulist more in the balance than Poyen's vision of mesmerism. Ogden describes this new form of mesmerism as "mutual storytelling" (105), as, for example, captured in the interaction between skeptical William Stone and blind somnambulist Lurena (or Lorraina) Brackett as they 'flew in imagination' to New York in 1837. Just who the credulous one was became more difficult to assess. Ogden uses new archival material, including letters to and from Brackett, to give a nuanced version of the role Brackett played. Often skipped over as little more than Stone's somnambulist, Ogden paints, in line with some earlier research,⁶ a nuanced picture of a struggling woman with disabilities who at every turn in her life had to choose between different dependencies. In the case of mesmerism, the dependency left Brackett with some control of her own, and any embellishment of her talents and disabilities should be read in light of necessity rather than malice or naivety (136–55). Consistent with this, Ogden argues that it is helpful to focus not only on the empowering aspects of mesmerism and similar phenomena, but also on the consequences of its disempowering qualities (229–31).

With the advent of phrenomesmerism (the combination of phrenology and mesmerism) during the 1840s, the power balance between mesmerizer and somnambulist looked restored. Ogden argues in Chapter Four that the credulous somnambulist was once again utilized to serve a modern purpose: to increase knowledge of the brains of specific persons, as well as in general

Magnetic North: The Acceptance of Animal Magnetism," *History of Psychology* 10, no. 3 (2007): 234.

6. The only other discussion on Brackett's role is by Quinn, who emphasizes the possibility that mesmerism may have had a positive therapeutic effect on the woman: "Credibility, Respectability," 279–81. The two theories definitely do not exclude each other, and Quinn, too, leaves room for occasional "fraudulent" behavior on Brackett's part.

(e.g. 159–60, 169). Of special interest to the mesmerizers and customers was the confirmation somnambulists could give, through such a brain-reading, that the person being read was rational (160)—just like mesmerism was debunked before 1836 in order to make the debunker seem rational. She then shows, however, that this balance was once again upset with the advent of the reading of letters or autographs rather than persons. As the subject was no longer present to deny the somnambulist’s interpretations, theatrical performances based solely on the agency of the latter became possible (192–97).

Around the 1850s, after the advent of Spiritualism, the last mainstream version of animal magnetism, electrobiology, arose. This version, Ogden shows in Chapter Five, once again resumed control of the somnambulist, who now could be anyone rather than only those deemed extraordinarily credulous (e.g. women and enslaved people). The idea of utility, however, had to—again—make place for “mere” entertainment, as electrobiologists used stage shows (reminiscent of the later hypnosis shows) to display that almost anyone could be convinced that they were actually certain animals or in specific situations. Eventually though, partly due to in-fighting, mesmerism had to make way for the more popular phenomenon of Spiritualism, itself heavily influenced by mesmerism. Ogden argues that just like mesmerists claimed to update old superstitions, Spiritualism now claimed that mesmerism was the more “primitive” practice, and that Spiritualists were the actual modern users of its techniques—techniques which were once again utilized, this time in order to contact spirits (224–26).

The history of U.S. mesmerism as described in this book is highly valuable. Ogden not only uses new material that provides informative ways to look at key characters such as Charles Poyen and Lurena Brackett—she also shows that the United States, in the period between 1784 and 1836, contained a mesmeric presence even though it was not yet practiced. Moreover, Ogden readily makes use of her disciplinary background (in literary studies) to draw parallels between fiction and mesmerism and to give new analyses of popular novels by authors such

as Hannah Webster Foster, Edgar Allan Poe, Nathaniel Hawthorne, and Herman Melville, even though these often seem to stray from the main argument. Her decision to look extensively at key figures, rather than trying to deal with all mesmerist actors, clearly paid off. All in all, this book builds on previous histories of U.S. mesmerism, but ultimately surpasses them by synthesizing existing and new knowledge into a whole that provides a more up-to-date view.

However, the credulity-centered analytical framework, while often thought-provoking, seems to miss a solid theoretical and evidential underpinning. The exception is the argument that the 1784 commission cemented a link between mesmerism and quackery, and that this link was gleefully cultivated in America before 1836, which is completely convincing. On the other hand, the claims that 1) this same commission was ultimately helpful for mesmerism's reception in the United States, and that 2) the mesmerists saw themselves as repurposing old superstitions in order to enchant and manage somnambulists through their credulity, are, while interesting, problematic. Regarding the first point, the direct link that Ogden draws between the commission's empowerment of the imagination and Poyen's repurposing of magnetism as its manager seems to forget the more obvious explanation for mesmerism's transformation into a popular practice, the development of somnambulism under Armand Marie Jacques de Chastenet, Marquis de Puységur (1751–1825) and its subsequent development by mesmerists such as Joseph Philippe François Deleuze (1753–1835) (although this development is discussed in itself: 68, 77–79). In this alternative—but not mutually exclusive—reading, the commission's report is seen as solely detrimental due to its influence on American perception of mesmerism during the fifty years prior to Poyen's arrival, instead of it being awkwardly positioned as both a curse (pre-1836) and then a blessing (post-1836). This does not necessarily rule out Ogden's argument, but without a more conscious reflection on the influences of both the commission *and* the Puységurian tradition, it is enough to cast reasonable doubt on her interpretation.

With regards to the second point, a confusion of several terms seems to take place, which together appear to lead to the argument that mesmerists used credulity to manipulate somnambulists for their own gain. Firstly, Ogden argues repeatedly that mesmerists saw themselves as appropriating old superstitions made by false priests, but one shouldn't forget that mesmerism was first and foremost seen as a science, and was only subsequently used to rewrite the "miracles and superstitions" of history in a rational way. Secondly, "credulity" is used uniformly throughout the book, both as an insider term and as a theoretical category, but with little elaboration. Because of this, the reader cannot adequately judge the analytical value of the term. Thirdly, a similar confusion seems to be at play in Ogden's two different usages of the term "enchantment": it presents a worldview when talking about disenchanted mesmerists, but a distinct state of mind when dealing with enchanted somnambulists. Finally, the book makes little mention of the multiple statements by mesmerists that it was especially the healing aspect that attracted them to mesmerism—an aspect that itself is barely covered in the book. Together, these issues make it hard to accept the credulity thesis as it currently stands, but perhaps a more theoretically advanced view could have dispelled the same clouds of reasonable doubt that fog the previous point. Lastly, a more extensive look at the role of skeptics and their role within the history of mesmerism, as was promisingly started by Ogden in her discussion of William Stone (117–21), would have had the potential of putting the phenomenon in an even broader cultural perspective.

These points notwithstanding, Ogden has written a highly eloquent book providing new material and raising intriguing questions. The quality of the historical part alone would have been enough to merit the reading of the book, but the novel way of rethinking the aims of both mesmerists and somnambulists is definitely worthy of being considered carefully and discussed further.

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