Journal of Literature and Science
Volume 17, No. 1 (2024)
ISSN 1754-646X
Emily Alder, "Alder on Bates": 54-55

Gordon Bates, "Arthur Conan Doyle in Mesmeric Edinburgh and Hypnotic London." *Victoriographies* 11. 3 (2021) 314–330.

Gordon Bates's article argues that Arthur Conan Doyle's 'John Barrington Cowles' (1884) and *The Parasite* (1894) rely directly upon specific sets of medical contexts with which Conan Doyle had direct experience, having studied medicine as a young man and later becoming deeply interested in spiritualism and its intersections with medical practice through, for example, mesmerism and hypnotism. As the article title suggests, Conan Doyle's professional move from Edinburgh to London tracked the progression of psychic medicine from its original context of mesmerism to the new discourse of hypnotism by the end of the nineteenth century.

Bates establishes the importance of spiritualism to Conan Doyle, pointing out that the author hoped to be remembered for his contributions to this movement more than for those to literature. Mesmerism and hypnotism, arising in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, represented beliefs and treatments often allied with spiritualism, and interact with a number of Conan Doyle's stories in the 1880s and 1890s. The article puts Conan Doyle's early mesmerism fictions in dialogue with specific Edinburgh medical contexts; with some of the key players in mesmeric medicine, such as James Braid, having studied in Edinburgh, mesmerism lingered there as an area of serious concern. However, as Bates explains, during the nineteenth century what had begun as medical also became performance – a "hybrid educational entertainment2 (318).

The backdrop of mesmerism as entertainment forms an analytical context for "John Barrington Cowles". Bates reads the story as a narrative engaging with questions over the legitimacy of hypnotism and mesmerism as medical science – a topical debate in their mid- to late-Victorian popularity as "a fashionable social craze" (318). In "John Barrington Cowles", the apparent deadly mesmeric power of Kate Northcott over the title character is set against the prowess of an entertainer, Dr Messinger; significantly, it is the entertainer who loses the battle of psychic will, while the perceived risk of mesmeric powers being used for immoral or criminal influence is also highlighted as a contemporary concern.

The article moves on to Conan Doyle's later novella, *The Parasite*. By this time, as Bates traces, widespread interest in hypnotism had developed including through the work of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), which engaged Conan Doyle's participation in the early 1890s. Like "John Barrington Cowles", *The Parasite*, Bates suggests, is a story synthesising genre conventions and medical context, blending Gothic tropes with contemporary thinking and debates over the practices and efficacy of hypnotism. Again, in *The Parasite*, a young man (a sceptical doctor), falls under the influence of a hypnotist, Miss Penelosa, and only narrowly is catastrophe avoided. Bates examines the similarities and differences between the two stories, both of which invert gender roles and critique orthodox medicine. However, the decade between the two stories saw changes in psychic display taking place as private rather than public performance and in the scientific status of hypnotism following the serious work of the SPR. Conan Doyle, Bates concludes, ultimately remained at odds with much of the work of the SPR, despite his long involvement with it, maintaining his spiritualist position and beliefs, including his belief in the value of mesmerism.

"Arthur Conan Doyle in Mesmeric Edinburgh and Hypnotic London" deftly and accessibly traces the interweaving nature of an author's personal life, fictional output, professional interests, and the scientific and social contexts from which they emerge. Relatively little has been written about most of Conan Doyle's early fiction, and Bates

contributes a thoughtful, well-reasoned account of how these stories are embedded in the conditions of a specific set of nineteenth-century medical ideas, each interestingly linked to the two cities. These two stories, Bates shows, use Gothic conventions to engage with scientific debates around both the legitimacy and the practices of mesmerism and hypnotism, while revealing something of the author's own ambivalence or questioning of orthodox medicine particularly in light of spiritualism. While these are relatively familiar conclusions for scholars of nineteenth century Gothic and science, the article is a welcome contribution to the body of scholarship around what we might think of as Conan Doyle's 'non-Sherlock-Holmes' stories, as well as to the understanding of psychic medical history in Edinburgh and London.

Emily Alder
Edinburgh Napier University