

THE TRIAL OF WOMAN

The Trial of Woman

**Feminism and
the Occult Sciences
in Victorian
Literature and Society**

DIANA BASHAM



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Preface

This book has been written in the attempt to provide a missing dimension in the history of the Victorian Women's Movement – that of the psychic constituents and fantasy enactments which surrounded discussion of the Victorian 'Woman Question' at every stage of its complex evolution. In looking both to nineteenth century fiction and to the Victorian occult revival to provide this dimension, my intention has been to explore a series of cultural associations which repeatedly linked 'the Woman Question', not only to the various phases of the occult revival, but also to developments in Victorian science, especially those occurring in the technology of communications.

In referring to the 'Occult Revival' and to the 'Occult Sciences', I wish to imply in particular those 'semi-legitimated' areas of occult experimentation into the nature of trance phenomena. The varying fortunes of Mesmerism, Spiritualism and Blavatsky's Theosophy had, as I hope to show, considerable implications for Victorian women, if for no other reason than because trance itself was widely regarded as providing access to the 'female' side of the human psyche. These semi-legitimated areas of occult experiment are also important in that they provided a dialectical model for the increasingly unstable relationship between Victorian women or concepts of Womanhood on the one hand, and, on the other, the various codifications of Victorian 'Law'. This applies whether the 'Law' in question was legal, theological or scientific.

As Victorian culture struggled for a sense of interpretive coherence, the notion of the 'Occult Woman' was repeatedly presented as the figure that best embodied what was perceived as incoherent or problematic, while at the same time holding a possible key to new synthesis and integration. That 'key' appears, for the Victorians, to have concerned the female menstrual cycle, itself a site for anxious discussion about the legendary occult powers of 'Woman'. In the vast debate surrounding the Victorian 'Woman Question', this issue appears as both crucial and occult, simultaneously central and unmentionable. Menstruation was a topic that was seldom addressed directly in the course of this debate, and yet it was a key concept because of all that it implied concerning women's biological and psychic 'difference'.

Partly, menstruation was occluded because it was a taboo subject in public discourse and could be spoken of only either in confidential discussions between women themselves or in the equally confidential forum of the medical consultation. Harriet Martineau, for instance, was devastated when her brother-in-law authorised publication of the medical history of her disturbed periods, as controversy raged over her claim that she had been cured by mesmerism of a fatal illness.

The other reason for its exclusion was the ignorance and mistrust surrounding the subject. Theologically, 'the Curse of Eve' had developed little in the way of theoretical sophistication over the centuries beyond its elision with the medical diagnosis of 'hysteria'. Woman had been found guilty under scriptural law and hence excluded from the law's full recognition, just as women were denied equal legal rights and civic status with men.

In the nineteenth century, many factors conspired to create a context in which the special nature of woman's difference could be reconsidered. The undermining of Biblical Law both by German scholarship and by new scientific knowledge, in addition to the recognition won by individual women for their work either as authors or as pioneering philanthropists, all contributed their share to the possibility of such a re-evaluation of women's nature, role and status.

If, as I believe, the intense anxiety surrounding much discussion of the 'Woman Question' indicated the continued existence of old fears concerning Woman's satanic alliances, the new myths of scientific knowledge were themselves not free of similar association with the occult mysteries of the female body. The more that scientific discoveries seemed to promise liberation from the limitations of the human body, the more they were attended by occult configurations of an emergent female principle. Edward Bulwer-Lytton's prophetic science fiction novel, *The Coming Race* (1871), is one example of a text which explores the connection between the scientific domination of Nature and the emergence of female power. It is for this reason that his narrator, a mining engineer, finally rejects both the utopian community he has accidentally discovered and the individual woman who presides over his experience of it.

Throughout the nineteenth century, many Western medical practitioners, influenced by Anton Mesmer's theories of a Universal Fluid which connected all living organisms, worked with hypnosis to construct new theories of hysteria, and new 'cures' for

what they had constructed. Meanwhile, the Occult Revival itself, resisting such pathologies, offered an alternative forum in which the mysterious nature of the female could be examined and explored. It was within this context of Victorian occultism that some of the wildest claims and some of the most intense debate on 'the Woman Question' took place.

Before women's access to educational opportunities, legal rights and political status could hope to be achieved, some testing out of their 'different' powers, and perhaps more important, the limits of those powers was required. This, Victorian culture in general, and Spiritualism in particular, provided: a chance to demonstrate, through the fantasy control of the seance, that the hidden powers of the 'female medium' did not offer any ultimate or immediate challenge to the security of the social order or to the reality paradigms which governed it. As such, the Women's Rights Movement was the obvious beneficiary of the collapse of the status of Spiritualism during the crucial decade of the 1880s.

Because menstruation was in itself both a fact and a metaphor for woman's legendary occult potential, and the guilt attendant upon it, Victorian writers symbolised its presence in texts concerned with gender issues in a number of different but remarkably persistent ways. Interruptions of a realist mode, female initiation rites, trance states, clairvoyant inspirations, rebellious outbursts and displaced images of bleeding occur in narrative after narrative, almost invariably associated with the figure of the lost mother, or her over-dominant surrogate.

In undertaking to piece together the psychic history that accompanied women's political struggle in the nineteenth century, I have tried to match literary texts with specific aspects of the occult revival and to set real pioneering women against their fictional counter-parts. As Victorian women attempted to sort out their relations with past traditions, with contemporary society, and with each other, the figure of the Mother, whether as real person, literary construct, social role or occult signifier of the menstrual legacy, will be seen to preside over much the material presented here. It is for this reason that I have chosen to begin the book with a brief study of the relationship between an actual mother, Lady Anabella Byron, and her daughter, the mathematician, Ada Lovelace.

As the estranged wife and daughter of the notorious Lord Byron, the lives of these culturally prominent women served as a model, an inspiration and as a warning to many of their contemporaries, and

both women regarded their public visibility as an essential feature of the tasks which they chose to undertake. In this respect, their relationship also provided an arena for many of the issues addressed by this book, as the younger generation of women, to which Ada Lovelace belonged, attempted to transform the legacy of the past into the creation of a New Woman, an invention of the period to stand alongside any of the inventions of Victorian science. The writers of the Victorian era, whatever their individual prejudices or beliefs, contributed enormously to this project and helped to shape and determine its outcome. Whether she appears as inspired prophetess, mesmerised somnambule, spiritualist medium, revamped witch or emancipated Theosophist, the 'New Woman' of the Victorian period owes much to the curious alliance between literature and occultism which helped to script her existence.

My thanks are due to the University Libraries of Birmingham, Warwick and Hull, and to the Institute of Psychical Research, Oxford, for the facilities made available to me. Thanks are also due to Val Ellis, Faculty Librarian at Buckingham Polytechnic for helping me to find information about Amelia B. Edwards, and to Valerie Saunders at the University of Buckingham for allowing me access to her forthcoming edition of Harriet Martineau's *Letters*. I would also like to express a debt of gratitude to my friends, and especially to my family, who have supported me throughout the trial of writing this book, and who have endured with fortitude the many bizarre and uncanny occurrences associated with its production. Special thanks are due to Dr Helen Dennis, Department of English, the University of Warwick, and to Dr Caroline Series, reader in Mathematics, University of Warwick, for, among other things, introducing me to the works of Henri Poincaré.

Finally, I would like to acknowledge the help I received from my mother in providing child-care while I wrote this book, and to thank my daughter, Hester, for her enthusiastic acceptance of my work.

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