

BETWEEN SPIRITUALISM AND HYSTERIA: SCIENCE  
AND VICTORIAN MEDIUMSHIP IN MICHÈLE  
ROBERTS' *IN THE RED KITCHEN*\*

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this article is to propose a reading of Michèle Roberts' neo-Victorian novel, *In the Red Kitchen* (1990), in the light of recent work on the relationship between mainstream science—for example, the study of nerve illnesses—and the occult sciences in the second half of the Victorian period. This novel examines the connections between hysteria and spiritualism, as well as challenges and demystifies the scientific discourse of early psychology, thus proposing a “hysterical” narrative. Lastly, it will be argued that Roberts' novel is part of a recent trend that can be found in neo-Victorian fiction in which nineteenth-century science and the occult interrelate.

KEY WORDS: Contemporary historical fiction, science and literature, Victorian spiritualism, Michèle Roberts, hysteria.

RESUMEN

El propósito de este trabajo consiste en analizar la novela neovictoriana de Michèle Roberts, *In the Red Kitchen* (1990), según investigaciones recientes sobre las relaciones existentes entre el discurso de la ciencia—por ejemplo, el estudio de la histeria—y las ciencias ocultas en la segunda mitad del siglo XIX. La novela examina las conexiones entre la histeria y el espiritismo, pero también subvierte y esclarece el discurso científico de la incipiente psicología, proponiendo una narrativa “histórica”. Por último, se argumentará que la novela de Roberts participa en la tendencia actual de combinar los discursos científicos y pseudo-científicos del siglo XIX dentro de la narrativa neovictoriana.

PALABRAS CLAVE: narrativa histórica contemporánea, ciencia y literatura, espiritismo victoriano, Michèle Roberts, histeria.

In the closing decades of the twentieth and early twenty-first century contemporary historical fiction such as Michèle Roberts' *In the Red Kitchen* (1990), Victoria Glendinning's *Electricity* (1995), and, more recently, Sarah Waters' *Affinity* (1999) show an impulse towards the representation of the crucial role played by the supernatural, namely spiritualism, mesmerism and psychical research in the Victo-

rian age, and the attempts to reconcile it with science. Additionally, all these novels explore questions of (pseudo)science and gender in Victorian times from a twentieth-century perspective. The aim of this article is to propose a reading of Michèle Roberts' neo-Victorian novel, *In the Red Kitchen* (1990), in the light of recent work on the connections between mainstream science—for instance, the study of nerve illnesses and hysteria—and the occult sciences in late-Victorian England.

It has become commonplace to suggest that Victorian fiction writers were overtly preoccupied with the discourses of medicine and scientific explanations of human experience as they gained more importance at the expense of religious ones, especially as regards the contesting notions of Victorian femininity. Typically, nineteenth-century culture rejected the division between mind and body, considering both in multiple ways, and which was at once attracted to and disturbed by those uncharted areas that were submerged, hidden or beyond conscious control. The multifarious representations of body and mind underpinned a public controversy between doctors and spiritualists in late-Victorian England, which has recently become a focus of interest among socio-cultural historians. The doctors who especially rejected spiritualism were mostly specialists in neurophysiology and psychiatry. These men believed their own materialist scientific culture was under attack by spiritualists, particularly when eminent representatives of the medical field joined the spiritualist cause. This fact fuelled the controversy and scientists dismissed the spiritualist trance “as a form of hysteria” (Walkowitz 173). Given the rise of interest in the intrinsic relations between the Victorian discourses of medical science, particularly psychology and neurophysiology, and the supernatural—studies of drawing room table-rapping séances, healing therapies and mesmerism or animal magnetism (later known as hypnosis), it seems appropriate that neo-Victorian fiction writers in turn wanted to explore those relations in their plots.

*In the Red Kitchen* traces the evolution of the treatment of hysterical symptoms in women being assimilated by the discourse of spiritualism in the 1870s and 1880s, and associated with female sexual disorder, to being later included in the psychological explanations of nerve illnesses by the emergent field of mental science. Moreover, not only does Roberts' novel examine the connections between hysteria and spiritualism, but also challenges and demystifies the authority of science by appropriating the scientific discourse of early psychology and thus proposing a hysterical narrative. Lastly, it will be argued that Roberts' novel is part of a recent trend that can be found in neo-Victorian fiction in which nineteenth-century “serious” science and the occult sciences interrelate. Therefore, this article will further investigate the reasons that lie behind the proliferation of contemporary novels that incorporate the Victorian supernatural, namely spiritualism and mesmerism.

*In the Red Kitchen* unfolds the story of three women who live in three different historical periods: King Hat, the daughter of the Pharaoh and later Pharaoh

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herself in Ancient Egypt; Flora Milk, a Victorian working-class medium based on the historical figure of Florence Cook, a renowned medium in the London of the 1870s; and Hattie, orphan and writer of recipe books in contemporary Britain. Each of them becomes first-person narrator, together with Rosina Milk (who assists her sister in the séances) and Minny Preston, the other two Victorian narrators. Despite the variety of historical time-settings and the wide range of female voices, the text underlines the connection between women, whose stories become entangled. The main characters of the novel —King Hat, Flora Milk, and Hattie— are linked by spiritualism as Flora supposedly materialises a spirit called Hattie King who can be either Hattie, the contemporary narrator, who is undergoing a process of mourning due to a recent miscarriage, or King Hat who says: “I am a spirit condemned to roam for ever through the dark, never to find a resting place, never to be venerated again as a god on earth.”<sup>1</sup> Moreover, Hattie dwells in a derelict house, where Flora used to live, and while doing refurbishing work Hattie sees a child spirit, who could easily be Flora, the Victorian medium. Finally, the other two Victorian narrators, Rosina and Minny, play a very important role in the narrative as they offer alternative versions of the story told by Flora.

*In the Red Kitchen* is a Victorian-centred novel even though part of the narrative takes place in present time. Its main concerns are related to Victorian issues: on the one hand, the scientific discourse of hysteria and nerve illnesses and, on the other, the occult sciences in connection with the role of women. Roberts acknowledges in the author’s note that she has made use of two sources for her research: Elaine Showalter’s *The Female Malady* (1985) and Alex Owen’s work on nineteenth-century spiritualism and mediumship as a profession available to women. These intertexts operate and interact with the narrative itself as they are subsumed in Roberts’ reconstruction, bringing the past alive for us, twenty-first century readers. Therefore, they illustrate what Hutcheon poses in relation to this practice: “[p]ostmodern intertextuality is a formal manifestation of both a desire to close the gap between past and present of the reader and a desire to rewrite the past in a new context” (118). Roberts’ novel offers revealing insights into how the Victorian past can be rewritten in a new context, according to Susan Rowland. This critic has carried out an in-depth analysis of *In the Red Kitchen* in terms of “the theoretical discourses of hysteria, Freud’s female Oedipus complex, and Jung’s notions of the unconscious” (Rowland 202). My own reading of *In the Red Kitchen* takes a different line to Rowland, but to some extent can be seen to be playing around with similar ideas, i.e. the debates about science vs. spiritualism that were current in late-Victorian England, which revolved around gender issues, among other things. Likewise, similar projects can be found in other postmodern narratives, like A.S. Byatt’s *Possession* (1990), which attests to the fact that the division that appears “between

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<sup>1</sup> Michèle ROBERTS, *In the Red Kitchen* (London: Vintage, 1999) 133. Subsequent quotations are from this edition.



science and spiritualism follows clear gendered terms along male/science vs. female/spiritualism lines, [...] science as male endeavour [...] and the domestic and spiritualism as belonging to the female realm” (Candel Bormann 253).

Some account of spiritualism is necessary in order to fully understand the importance of this movement in England, and its portrayal in Roberts’ novel. Nineteenth-century spiritualism is conventionally said to date from 1848, when Katherine and Margaret Fox of Hydesville, New York, announced that they were capable of communicating with the dead through an alphabet of cryptic knockings and rappings. Spiritualism crossed the Atlantic and in four years many English people embraced the newly spiritualist doctrine. As to the reasons for the spiritualist craze, it has been suggested that spiritualism fulfilled a social and spiritual craving both in nineteenth-century England and the States for “its doctrines provided an important antidote to rising tides of scepticism” (Shortt 340). Spiritualism, then, “seemed what a religion should be” in assuring life beyond death through the communication with the dead (Dickerson, “A Spirit” 252). The Victorian crisis of faith, caused by a series of erudite challenges to the Biblical truths and the rapid technological changes that were taking place in late-Victorian England, was not always a liberating experience for all; it was sometimes rife with fear, so for many people the spiritualist practice was a powerful antidote to the pessimism of the scientific materialism of the time. In similar vein, in 1859, a well-known nineteenth-century woman writer, Catherine Crowe, who supported the spiritualist cause, defended the necessity of spiritual knowledge against “[t]he rapid advance of physical science without any corresponding progress in spiritual knowledge” (48). Besides, spiritualists attempted to demonstrate the afterlife through empirical observation and “argued that spiritualism provided scientific evidence for the spirit’s survival after death” (Owen, *Darkened* xvi). Hence, the spiritualist credo came to play a fundamental role in the late-Victorian set of beliefs, and more precisely in the 1870s and 1880s, the heyday of spiritualism in England, as the story of the celebrated medium Florence Cook will shortly show.

Until the 1870s the most common phenomena in dark rooms were the production of spirit voice or writing through the intervention of the medium. The medium would, then, convey messages from the dead to grief-stricken people who were eager to hear from their deceased relatives. In this respect, *In the Red Kitchen* shows the relief that séances provided to those who mourned the loss of a loved person. The reasons behind Minny’s wish to attend a spiritualist session led by the medium Flora Milk point to her bereavement for the death of her daughter, Rosalie, as she herself notes in a letter to her mother: “I confess I am quite wild to attend one of [Flora’s] séances. Oh Mamma, just suppose she were able to transmit some reassuring message from my darling little Rosalie!” (Roberts 22).<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Being in her eighth pregnancy, Minnie faithfully gives voice to the pain and bereavement of Victorian women who suffered the consequences of excessive child-bearing. Here, then, resides “a large part of the emotional appeal of séance communication” (Basham 112).

Why did so many women become mediums in the second half of the nineteenth century? It seems evident that women (of whatever social class) and ghosts had many things in common in the Victorian age: both shared the status of invisibility, as Vanessa Dickerson has lucidly discussed through the examination of the supernatural in fiction (Dickerson, *Victorian* 15). Could this be the only reason for the active participation of women in this spiritualist craze that swept through Victorian England? Historians have tackled these questions from different viewpoints, although they agree on raising the subject of the contesting notions of femininity in relation to the spiritualist practice. It is noteworthy that, with the notable exception of Daniel D. Home, the majority of mediums were female. Following Dickerson's analysis, Victorian women's participation as mediums could be considered the result of "their own spirituality and their ambiguous status as the 'other' living in a state of in-betweenness" (Dickerson, *Victorian* 8). In fact, the separation of the spheres and the idealisation of domesticity greatly contributed to the emergence of female mediums, who, within the safety of the house, could begin their careers celebrating séances in private drawing-rooms in the company of relatives and friends as sitters. In addition, women were good mediums because, according to Victorian concepts of womanhood, they were prone to passivity, weakness and mental instability (Owen, "Women" 134), and thus they were more biologically prepared to make themselves receptive to communications with the other world. One example is provided by the culturally charged notion of illness. Women were defined as permanently ill and invalid by the medical establishment—following the theories of the evolutionary biology proposed by Charles Darwin and other theorists: "The assumption that women suffered from constitutional nervous instability and that their reproductive functions trapped them in an endless round of sickness could only have encouraged doctors to promote female invalidism, no matter what they said to the contrary" (Oppenheim 230).<sup>3</sup>

It seems, then, evident that illness had negative connotations for the ideological construction of femininity in the nineteenth century. But, if women were defined as permanently ill and invalid by medical doctors, "in Spiritualism illness [...] was interpreted as a cleansing of the temple in preparation for psychic gifts, and was thus accepted and acceptable route to powerful mediumship" (Owen, "Women" 137). In their trance-like states mediums could accede to positions of power since séances provided them with some freedom of speech and action, as well as with possibilities of transgression. In a trance, loosely defined as a state of mind in which the spiritualist medium usually had no conscious control over her thoughts and actions, the medium, inert and inactive, relinquished control of her own self,

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<sup>3</sup> During the Victorian and Edwardian period sickness was simultaneously related to the nerve system and the reproductive organs, as far as women were concerned, since there was not a clear distinction between mind and body. Illnesses such as neurasthenia and hysteria, which, together with anorexia nervosa, marked the study of the female malady in the second half of the nineteenth-century were thought to have a physiological basis (Showalter 121).



because she claimed to be under the control of a spirit; in other words, she could behave unconventionally in a permissive environment, thus liberating her unconscious desires and wishes. Nevertheless, the situation was not that optimistic, since these empowering qualities could also entrap women in the snare of conventional femininity (Owen, “Women” 137). All in all, spiritualist mediumship seemed not only to collude with patriarchal notions of femininity, but also offer some resistance to them, particularly as regards materialisation mediums.<sup>4</sup>

At the beginning of the 1870s mediums were improving their skills and managed not only to communicate with the dead through the voice, but also to produce full-form materialised spirits. In her groundbreaking study of the connections between power, gender and femininity in nineteenth-century spiritualism, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (1985), Alex Owen has devoted a whole chapter to the “two princesses of the spiritualist world” (as she herself calls them) of late-Victorian spiritualism: Florence Cook and Mary Rosina Showers. The key to the understanding of the relevance of these two mediums lies in their powers to materialise spirits. In this sense, a landmark in the history of nineteenth-century spiritualism is the case of Katie King, the most celebrated English spirit, materialised by her medium Florence Cook, whose life has provided the inspiration for the fictional Flora Milk in Roberts’ novel. Florence Cook was a cause célèbre in late-Victorian London, so much so that her story is widely reproduced in many cultural studies on the history of spiritualism. Although Roberts simplifies Alex Owen’s full account of Florence Cook’s life, the main events of her life and her beginnings as a medium can be clearly recognised, albeit slightly changed.<sup>5</sup> About 1870 Florence Cook, a working-class girl, began to have several bouts of trance-like states that left her depleted and exhausted. Similarly, the fictional Flora Milk first falls into trance in her adolescence, precisely when she is attending her father’s funeral. In fact, this sad event seemingly triggers such a re-

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<sup>4</sup> The spiritualist circles opened up a new world for women with obvious similarities with the Victorian Women’s Movement. Much has been written on the convergence of these two movements, the occult and the “Woman’s Question.” One has only to turn to Henry James’ *The Bostonians* (1886), where Verena Tarrant’s inspirational powers as a speaker are inextricably linked to her connections with the occult. For more information about the associations between spiritualism and the Women’s Movement, see Basham’s *The Trial of Woman*.

<sup>5</sup> Many resemblances can be found between the depiction of Flora’s process of becoming a renowned spiritualist medium and the historical events that surrounded the life of Florence Cook from the 1870s onwards. Besides, *In the Red Kitchen* alludes to Flora’s use of her mediumistic powers during World War 1, and how after 1918 she could no longer converse with the spirits because she had not transmitted their messages truthfully (Roberts 141). Although this is not an actual fact in Florence’s mediumistic career, this piece of information contributes to the appearance of verisimilitude of the character of Flora, since many women mediums celebrated séances not only during World War 1, but also in the interwar period. This subject matter has recently received critical attention by cultural historians who desire to dig out the hidden story of twentieth-century spiritualism.

sponse. Flora, at the age of thirteen, has a vision of Queen Hat, the Egyptian princess who repudiates her female sex to become Pharaoh, and whose only wish is to be remembered. To this end, she projects herself forward in the future. Later in the novel, when Flora falls into trance, a spirit (be it that of Queen Hat, or of Hattie, the contemporary narrator) occupies Flora's body.<sup>6</sup>

Up and well into the second half of the nineteenth century the entranced medium would only convey messages through the use of her vocal organs or automatic writing. At the beginning of the 1870s the materialisation of spirits who were not only audible, but also "visible" signified a landmark in nineteenth-century spiritualism. However successful these materialisation séances were, they became a contentious issue. Accusations of fraud —like the ones made by Rosina in her correspondence with Flora's benefactor, Mr Redburn— were often thrown to materialisation mediums who used a cabinet to produce a full-form spirit, and who had to be always prepared for the control and scrutiny of experienced sitters and investigators. In a séance the cabinet "shielded the medium from public gaze and maintained the dark conditions thought necessary for the production of spirit forms" (Owen, *Darkened* 46); in it the medium would be tied up in order to show the dissimilarities between the medium and her materialised form. In 1873 the historical Florence materialised a full-form spirit form, called "Katie King." This gained her widespread reputation and the patronage of Charles Blackburn (Mr Redburn in the novel), so her career as a medium seemed well established.

The fictional Flora Milk, in turn, materialises a full-form spirit, called 'Hattie King,' whose name strikes close resemblance to "Katie King,"<sup>7</sup> who can be either the Egyptian Queen Hat, or the contemporary Hattie, as mentioned before. Both full-form spirits, Katie King and Hattie King, maintain several similarities in that both are beautiful, playful, wayward, saucy and, at times, what they say or do seems to reveal what lies submerged and hidden.<sup>8</sup> The historical Florence's materialised

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<sup>6</sup> At this stage Flora has the permanent company of and help from Rosina, her sister and confidante. This fictional character is a conflation of two different women: on the one hand, the other *princess* of the spiritualist movement, Mary Rosina Showers, and, on the other, Kate Selina Cook, who became entranced in 1872 for the first time. Significantly, the novel opens and ends with Rosina's letters to her benefactor, Mr Redburn, where she accuses Flora of fraud and deceit, out of revenge. Rosina blames her sister for thwarting her ambitions of becoming a medium and, more importantly, she cannot forgive her sister for marrying George, Rosina's former boyfriend. As a consequence, she denounces Flora, claiming the truth and alluding to her own connivance at Flora's tricks: "She fools all those poor people [...] Collapsible rods to make spirit arms, trick slates with messages already written on them, [...] all these things are easy enough to do once you've learned how from some other unscrupulous medium" (Roberts 1).

<sup>7</sup> In an ironic twist, the fictional Rosina claims to produce a materialised spirit, "Katie King," at the end of the novel, in what seems to be Roberts' homage to Florence's celebrated materialised spirit.

<sup>8</sup> For example, the fictional Flora celebrates a private séance with Minny and her materialised spirit, Hattie King, or Flora's unconscious, reveals an alternative version of the death of little



spirit, Katie King, captivated many people at the time, particularly William Crookes, who replaced Charles Blackburn in the management of the historical Florence's séances. Sir William Crookes, discoverer of the element thallium (Basham 182), eminent scientist and future president of the Royal Society, became fascinated with the spiritualist practice and devoted several years of scientific investigations to the séances. William Crookes (William Preston in Roberts' novel) undertook test séances with Florence, as Dr Preston seeks to do with Flora, according to Minny (Roberts 35). At this point it has to be noted that "[t]hrough her involvement with William Crookes, Florence Cook's "Katie King" provided the closest thing to a liaison ever achieved between the contending fictions of Victorian Spiritualism and Victorian empirical science" (Basham 183). There existed a controversy over the issue of mediumship in late-Victorian England, since "[s]piritualism firmly rejected medicine's attempts to equate mediumship with female deviancy and sickness" (Owen, *Darkened* 202). What follows, then, is a succinct account of this polemical debate between late-Victorian spiritualism and science, and the ways in which it is portrayed in Roberts' novel.

As regards the polemical debate between spiritualism and science, the watershed was the 1870s. Until this date, "[i]n contrast to the often sympathetic and usually clamorous interest shown by the public in the claims of spiritualism [...] most scientists remained at best sceptical and more frequently dismissive" (Shortt 341). Significantly, the situation changed overnight in the heyday of spiritualism, the 1870s and 1880s. The medical professionals considered the spiritualist craze as threatening to their own practice, and to the epistemological basis of scientific research and materialism. They claimed that human progress had to leave religion and metaphysics behind, and spiritualist circles precisely challenged and undermined the rigorous positivist epistemology (Shortt 349-51). As a consequence, they set to dismantle the widespread reputation of mediums by dismissing them as deranged people. In turn, "[s]piritualists responded by elaborating an iconography of male medical evil, imagining the doctor as a trader in lunacy" (Walkowitz 172). The situation became more alarming when prestigious members of the medical establishment, Sir William Crookes and Alfred Russel Wallace, showed their sympathy to the spiritualists to such an extent that Crookes, the eminent physical chemist, "published a series of articles between 1870 and 1874 describing his favourable investigations of noted mediums" (Shortt 342), such as Florence Cook. This precipitated the controversy over spiritualism because to the many egregious Victorian doctors it was "a system of belief purporting to describe new powers of the human mind [...] dignified by the scientific eminence of men such as Crookes or Wallace" (Shortt 354).

Hence, those who joined the anti-spiritualism campaign launched an attack on the spiritualist mediums, led by prestigious members of the medical profes-

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Rosalie: Minnie could have smothered Rosalie, thus becoming a child murderer: "*Mother. Smother. Mother, you smothered me. Mother, you smothered me*" (Roberts 94; emphasis original).

sion: the alienist Henry Maudsley and others like the physiologist William Carpenter, the biologist E. Ray Lankester and L. Forbes Winslow, the operator of two private asylums.<sup>9</sup> These medical men gave a scientific explanation of spiritualist madness and supported the idea that this craze could only be explained in terms of a physiological condition of the nervous system.<sup>10</sup> Maudsley is a case in point since he attempted to treat insanity by focusing on the physiological, where he hoped to find a somatic explanation for madness.<sup>11</sup>

With similar zest, alienists, physicians and nerve specialists associated spiritualism with nerve illnesses and neuroses, like hysteria. One particularly controversial aspect was the trance state, which featured in most private séances. Medical practitioners had their own clinical interpretation of the trance state: “Medical psychologists equated ecstatic and abandoned possession with morbid and degenerative pathology, a perverse moral sense, and delinquent sexuality” (Owen, “Women” 149). In the medical profession mediumistic trance was equated with hysterical symptoms, thus having a pathological source. This interpretation was not shared by spiritualist believers and sympathisers, who contended that a medium voluntarily relinquished control over her body and fell into trance for the communication with the dead to take place. As mentioned before, trance conditions legitimised a wide range of unconventional behaviour in séances. While the feminine qualities—passivity, fragility and inertia, for example—were weaknesses for the medical profession, for the spiritualists these ones turned into strengths, since they facilitated the communication with the spirits. It is true, though, that “[t]hese special powers also rendered female mediums vulnerable to special forms of female punishment, in particular, to medical labelling as hysterics and to lunacy confinement,” always in connection with women (Walkowitz 177).

Hysteria, the name of which derives from the Greek *hysteron*, or womb, although affecting both men and women, has been always linked with the feminine in a number of ways. The Victorian nerve specialists John Conolly and Robert Brudenell Carter devoted some time to the causes of hysteria and concluded that this illness was due to “some more or less discoverable irritation existing in some part of the uterine system, exercising [...] its wide influence on [...] the] nervous system” (Conolly 185). In addition, the conventional hysterical symptoms “fits,

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<sup>9</sup> The term alienist is used to designate to a Victorian “medical practitioner who specialised in treating the insane” (Oppenheim 27).

<sup>10</sup> One cannot forget that during the nineteenth century the terminology of nervousness was generally applied to physical and mental states, as there was not a clear distinction between mind and body.

<sup>11</sup> The following extract from Maudsley’s *The Physiology and Pathology of Mind* (1867) illustrates his approaches to deranged states from the perspective of heredity: “[T]he acquired ill of the parent becomes the inborn infirmity of the offspring... [the child] does often inherit a constitution in which there is a certain inherent aptitude to some kind of morbid degeneration, or a constitution destitute of that reserve power necessary to meet the trying occasions of life” (299).



fainting, vomiting, choking, sobbing, laughing, paralysis —and the rapid passage from one to another suggested the liability and capriciousness traditionally associated with the feminine nature” (Showalter 130). *In the Red Kitchen* provides several instances of mediumistic trances in the portrayal of the medium Flora, which will be interpreted as hysterical fits by the medical professionals.<sup>12</sup>

If the aforementioned nerve specialists took pains to show that these mediumistic trances were the product of a degenerative brain, associated with uterine disorders, others like the historical William Crookes, saw that more attention should be given to the psychological processes of the mind in spiritualist practice. “This marriage of true minds between Science and Spiritualism” was further enhanced by the foundation of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), another attempt to reconcile the occult with science (Basham 183). In 1882 a group of Cambridge scholars accepted the challenge of medical professionals to subject spiritualism to empirical observation. These researchers were trying to establish “an investigative framework for a new branch of science [...] to formulate an experimental protocol which would be equal in rigour to that employed by practitioners in the more established branches of scientific knowledge” (Mantel 6). In the SPR eminent men like Frederic Myers resisted physiological explanations of mental illnesses.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, Charcot, Sigmund Freud and C.G. Jung had connections with this Society as well; significantly, Freud became a corresponding member and read the publications of the SPR. Consequently, as Diana Basham lucidly postulates, “the contact with Spiritualist phenomena was to lead eventually to a transformation of science itself” (183), and to the emergence of the concept of “dynamic unconscious” (Shortt 355).

Once examined the relevance of the debate between spiritualism and scientific knowledge, it is most evident that not only does *In the Red Kitchen* approach this controversy, but also it encompasses the attempts to reconcile the occult with science in late-Victorian England, through the relationship between the historical Florence Cook (Flora Milk) and Sir William Crookes (William Preston) in the Victorian section of the novel. Additionally, it traces the evolution of the treatment of mental illnesses in the second half of the nineteenth century, regarding the female malady *par excellence*, hysteria, and its intrinsic connections with mediumistic activity and Victorian gender norms.<sup>14</sup> As far as the contending issue over spiritual-

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<sup>12</sup> These fits lead to the depletion of Flora’s strength, as, Elaine Showalter notes, “[t]he [hysterical] fits were followed by exhaustion, and usually by rapid recovery, although occasionally the effects lasted for days” (Showalter 130).

<sup>13</sup> Myers’ theories of “subliminal self,” “developed during the 1880s and 1890s, formed a direct link between psychical research and medical interest in the submerged and uncharted areas of the mind” (Owen, *Darkened* 237).

<sup>14</sup> That scientific knowledge is highlighted in the novel remains clear by the presence of three different medical professionals: one is Dr Felton, Minny’s physician, another one is William Preston, the medical investigator, and lastly, Charcot, who makes his appearance in the novel. These



ism is concerned, several masculine figures in the novel represent the two sides of the existing conflict: on the one hand, Mr Frederick Andrews (although he is not a doctor, he is a much-informed journalist of spiritualist activities), who struggles to expose Flora (and others) for trickery to public shame; on the other, Dr William Preston, Minny's husband and a psychical scientist and investigator. Dr Preston works hard to prove that Flora's mediumistic powers are true. Therefore, Dr Preston can be grouped with those prestigious scientists who strived to give public recognition to the spiritualist activities, against the accusations of trickery and fraud made by the medical profession.

It is precisely Mr Andrews' attitude during the course of a séance which urges Flora to ask for Dr Preston's patronage and protection under his roof.<sup>15</sup> Once in the Preston household she is happy to assist Minny in her sick-room, celebrating private séances; but, more importantly, she readily submits to the scrutiny of the doctor.<sup>16</sup> That a medium under suspicion submits to medical supervision, turning into a "test medium under the patronage of some wealthy gentleman" (Walkowitz 181), was not that uncommon in the Victorian period. This test séance was a familiar practice for those spiritualists who needed to clean their names, and thus turned their eyes to the medical profession to achieve their aims (Owen, *Darkened* 68).<sup>17</sup>

Dr Preston's research into Flora's mediumistic powers secures him success and prestige in the medical establishment, and concludes that, unlike the common belief of physiological damage, most psychical phenomena, particularly the powers of the medium, are the result of mental illnesses or disorders, as Charcot himself underlines. Dr Preston and Charcot (who appears in a section of the novel) as

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three male doctors, to a lesser or greater degree, employ exploitative techniques to exercise control over female illnesses.

<sup>15</sup> This episode is also based on a historical fact. There was an attempted exposure of Florence in December 1873 when the spirit Katie King had been seized by a sitter and, since then she was under the scrutiny of both the medical profession and experienced sitters (Owen, *Darkened* 66-69).

<sup>16</sup> Flora makes a statement in front of William Preston, concerning her disposition of becoming subject to scientific experimentation: "—I am ready, sir, I declare: to submit myself to the severest scrutiny science can provide! I am ready to make myself available to the penetrating gaze of one such as yourself ... I am ready to be examined under any conditions stipulated by my examiner! ...I will do anything to prove to you and to the public that I am not involved in any trickery, and that my mediumship is real!" (Roberts 62). Note the vocabulary related to scientific investigation such as "scrutiny," "gaze" and "examined," that reveals the binary opposition between male/science vs. female/nature and how the former aspires to dominate the latter.

<sup>17</sup> As Dr Preston is a psychical scientist and investigator, he makes use of a scientific mode of procedure to account for Flora's capability as a medium: for example, direct observation, and scrutiny of the subject and publication of findings in prestigious journals. In addition, that Dr Preston is an apt representative of scientific knowledge is proved by the fact that he is reputedly given the Nobel Prize (Roberts 18). It seems that the publication of his research into the figure of the medium helped him gain more reputation; in fact, Minny takes pains to tell this news to her mother at the end of the novel: "[...] he has only recently published his optimistic findings, in *The Spiritualist Magazine*" (Roberts 145).



early psychologists arrive at the same conclusions about hysteria. Flora Milk is diagnosed hysteria, after being scrutinised by Dr Preston during her stay in the Preston household, and hypnotised by Charcot at the Salpêtrière in Paris.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, hysteria and spiritualism are related in that its symptoms were to be associated with the behaviour that spiritualist mediums and table-rappers had at the time, as Roberts' novel finely shows. The symptoms of the medium and the hysteric attest to the relationship between mind and body, between the mental organisation and physiology, which provides the ultimate reason for the mediumistic behaviour in trance-like states. Minny highlights this in a letter to her mother: "[William] has been forced to conclude that all too many young female mediums partake of the moral degeneracy always found amongst hysterics" (Roberts 143). Women who manifested a subversive or more active behaviour in Victorian society were thought to be a hysteric. In fact, it is true that "[h]ysteria [...] rose to a new prominence in the nineteenth century as a condition whose clinical criteria could be modified in order to diagnose all the behaviours which did not fit the prescribed model of Victorian womanhood" (Wood 12). This is precisely what happens to the female medium, who sidestepped the conventional views of womanhood, according to the Victorian gender ideology. Then, mediumship, in other words, the manifestation of female power, of the occult, the inexplicable, is understood as hysterical disorder. The fear of the unknown, the powerful female medium in this particular case, is contained within the rational discourse of medical sciences. The hysterical/mediumistic symptoms could be, then, taken as the medium's impulses, urges and desires for which the Victorian culture did not have many outlets.<sup>19</sup>

It has been already suggested how William Preston uses scientific methods to account for Flora's mediumistic gifts, and how his research into the figure of the medium helped him gain more reputation in the scientific establishment. Dr Preston shares with Charcot the respected status of the doctor, like that of the priest, since "the nineteenth century witnessed the rise of medicine as a socially authorita-

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<sup>18</sup> Minny explains Dr Preston's scientific endeavour in a letter to her mother: "[William's] plan is now to compare the physiology of persons endowed with mediumistic gifts with that of those afflicted with hysterical illnesses, having some intuition that the two conditions may, at certain points, overlap, and thus enable him to pursue further, as his next project, certain of his conclusions about a medium's unconscious mind" (Roberts 112). As regards Charcot, especially important is his use of hypnosis both to produce and treat hysterical symptoms in women. For more information about the relevance of hypnosis and its connections with Mesmerism, see Basham 84-88.

<sup>19</sup> The episode in France ends with Dr Preston's attempt to incarcerate Flora in Charcot's hospital without success. Not surprisingly, Flora runs away from the hospital. The incarceration of female spiritualists and vulnerable wives, accused of being insane, was a common practice by the second half of the nineteenth century. One has only to remember the immensely popular Wilkie Collins' *The Woman in White* (1860), in which this subject matter, embodied in Laura Fairlie, sets the plot in motion. For more information, see Walkowitz who argues that "the insane asylum simply amplified the danger of the domestic asylum" (181).

tive profession, and the specific emergence of psychiatry as a medical discipline” (Shuttleworth 198). Moreover, Dr Preston and Charcot are also related insofar as they aspire to exercise male rational control over female nature, bodily disorders and nervousness. Charcot (and also William) makes use of the camera as the means to apprehend, appropriate and dominate nature and the female. Charcot’s well-known photographs are mentioned and described by Flora in the course of her visit to the Parisian hospital for women, where hysterical patients in white nightdresses are represented in several gestures, interpreted as sexual by Charcot. Elaine Showalter explains that “[t]his interpretation of hysterical gestures as sexual was reinforced by Charcot’s efforts to pinpoint areas of the body that might induce convulsions where pressed. The ovarian region, he concluded, was a particularly sensitive hysterogenic zone” (Showalter 150). William has, in fact, put this into practice since not only does he in turn take advantage of his authoritative position as a doctor, but also sexually exploits Flora, who falls prey to the manipulation that William subjects her to, and eventually returns pregnant from her visit to the Salpêtrière: “William has taken many photographs of me during our séances together [...] William puts his fingers inside Hattie, while Flora lies unconscious [...] William says hush [...] Remember I’ve promised to help you. William is a doctor, so it’s all right. It’s science, it’s an experiment” (Roberts 122).

Taking photographs was a common practice among spiritualist believers, in need of proofs. In fact, William Crookes, the real-life counterpart of William Preston, did take photographs of “Katie King,” Florence Cook’s materialised spirit at séances, in order to prove the dissimilarities between the medium and her spirit, as Alex Owen points out (*Darkened* 257). But, in Roberts’ novel, although Dr Preston is supposed to work alongside well-meant spiritualists, and newly supporters of the spiritualist cause, he makes use of photographs to claim the power and authority of medical science and thus control over and dominate the female. Therefore, despite the supposedly disinterested help that Dr Preston gives to Flora’s career as a medium, his use of the camera is somewhat similar to that of Charcot, who interpreted the hysterical body movements and gestures as sexual. Then, the scientific investigator’s use of the camera ultimately attests to the importance of the male gaze over the female subject. All in all, it remains, then, clear that scientific authority over the illnesses of the feminine other is invoked in Roberts’ novel by the male characters. More essentially, it has been proved that *In the Red Kitchen* revolves around the connections between hysteria, female sexuality and spiritualist mediumship in the second half of the nineteenth century, when medicine interpreted this activity as pathological womanhood.

The controversy over spiritualism waned at the end of the nineteenth century as many celebrated mediums were exposed for deceit and trickery to public shame, and, eventually, early psychology — SPR investigators and Charcot, among others — assimilated and domesticated the threat that spiritualism had produced in earlier decades. Seen in this light, mediumship activity is, thus, understood as the way to bring to light repressed and hidden areas of the mind by means of the unconscious, finally formulated by Sigmund Freud who created psychoanalysis on the basis of his clinical experience with hysterical patients.





Charcot's findings on hysteria as having psychological origins led to Freud's psychoanalytic work on female hysterics that was published with Breuer as *Studies on Hysteria* (1895). Breuer and Freud maintained that patients that do not react to a psychological trauma, because this is intentionally repressed, inhibited and suppressed, form a specific group: "distressing things of this kind that, under hypnosis, we find [as] the basis of hysterical phenomena" (61). The most well-known case history in Breuer and Freud's volume was that of Bertha Pappenheim, or Anna O., who was treated for hysteria from 1880 to 1882. Taking this work as the basis for his psychoanalytic system, Freud continued his studies on other cases such as that of Dora. Nevertheless, her story is one of resistance and opposition against Freud's interpretation of her symptoms as merely sexual, notwithstanding the relevance of cultural conditions. She rebelled against the rational control of the doctor through her hysteria, and in doing so, showed how to challenge the patriarchal system that curtailed her freedom and intellectual capabilities. Her case, since then, has become a source of inspiration for many feminists.

In general terms, psychoanalysis "saw hysterical symptoms as the product of unconscious conflicts beyond the person's control" (Showalter 161). Even though Freud manifested some reticence to abandoning the physiological component in his study on hysteria, he finally left the concept of degeneracy out of his studies on hysteria, and defined the illness as an extreme version of forgetting the past: "*Hysterics suffer mainly from reminiscences*" (Breuer & Freud 58; emphasis original). Freud went through various stages before completing his studies on hysteria; he first thought that his female patients showed hysterical symptoms as the repressed trauma of adult sexual molestation. These adults could be "older family members, fathers and uncles" (Bernheimer 12). The traumatic event is repressed and only reactivated in adulthood in relation with sexuality. This is, basically, what happens to the contemporary narrator in Roberts's novel: Hattie. She was sexually molested when she was living with her uncle and aunt. The memory of this traumatic experience has been repressed but suddenly erupts when she has to face a tragic event (a miscarriage), as well as an emotional involvement with a man. In this light, Hattie is also a hysteric, since she has repressed her past selectively (Roberts 136-37).

Freud rejected the seduction theory and concluded that "seduction scenes are infantile wish fulfilments, fantasies rather than memories" (Bernheimer 14). What this statement implies is that Freud was about to formulate the Oedipus complex.<sup>20</sup> As regards Roberts' novel, the three main female narrators —Queen Hat, Flora Milk and Hattie— manifest, to varying degrees, hysterical symptoms inasmuch as, on the one hand, they have a special relationship with their paternal

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<sup>20</sup> In general terms, Freud's Oedipus complex can be defined, according to Claire Kahane, as "a set of relations in which the child desires the parent of the opposite sex and feels hostility for the same-sexed parent"; this involves a belief in "an innate bisexual disposition," but Freud "assumed a natural heterosexual attraction and saw his task as the liberation into consciousness of that natural desire, which, when repressed, resulted in hysterical symptoms" (Introduction 22).

figures, and, on the other, become obsessed with and haunted by the past (with the exception of Hat King who projects herself forward in the future).<sup>21</sup> In this sense, special attention should be given to Flora and Hattie who embody, firstly, how hysterical symptoms erupt when a traumatic event has been previously repressed, and, secondly, the obsession with a traumatised past that menaces to haunt them. In her childhood Hattie experienced a traumatic episode of sexual molestation that caused her a psychological wound, which would in turn affect her relationships with men in the future. As far as Flora is concerned, it is significant that her first fit coincides with the loss of her father. This could be the origin of her “hysterical” symptoms, that is to say, a traumatic event that has not been assimilated. In Flora’s particular case, it would be the death of her father, whose importance is also suggested throughout the narrative (Roberts 30).

What turns the novel into a feminist project is the appropriation Roberts makes of the figure of the hysteric. Feminism re-interpreted the Freudian analysis of hysteria and, above all, the Dora case, in which feminists believed that “Freud’s interpretive strategies were critically determined by his inability to deal with the feminine and its relation to the mother” (Kahane, Introduction 27). Accordingly, what precipitates the hysterical symptoms is not the hostility for the mother, a girl’s primary love object, but precisely the repression of the girl’s pre-oedipal desire for the mother and the maternal body (Kahane, Introduction 28).<sup>22</sup> Moreover, French-oriented psychoanalytic critics like Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous have privileged the figure of the hysteric as rebelling against the rationality of the patriarchal order. To both Catherine Clément and Cixous the hysteric is an exemplary female figure: “[t]his feminine role, the role of sorceress, of hysteric, is ambiguous, antiestablishment [...]” (5). Taking this idea as the founding premise, other feminist critics, like Claire Kahane, have set themselves to examine how hysteria and hysterical symptoms can be somehow expressed through textual/speaking voice, what Kahane calls a “formal reconversion of hysteria into textuality” (*Passions* xv). In her view, both male- and female-authored texts can exhibit features of such a discourse. It is, then, my contention that *In the Red Kitchen* is a female-authored text that exhibits hysterical features and, thus, can be properly termed as a “hystery.” This term has been coined by Emma Parker in her study of hysteria in Toni Morrison’s *Beloved* (1987), where she uses not only Freudian, but also French feminist psycho-

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<sup>21</sup> The Egyptian Hat King is involved in the incestuous relationship when she marries her father, but loses him altogether when he dies. She is not obsessed with the past, but with the future. She might represent the repressed desires and passions of Hattie (Roberts 135).

<sup>22</sup> At the end of the novel Flora makes this patent by saying: “I did love Hattie, but she was a spirit [...] I did love my mother, but I was always jealous, she loved my father so much, far more than she loved me. That’s exactly what Lily thinks I’ve done too” (Roberts 142). In mothering Lily, Flora seems to be reproducing exactly the same relationship that her own mother had with her. Therefore, Flora’s trance states could be interpreted “as providing access to the ‘female’ side of [her] psyche” (Basham vii) and as the hidden desires and wishes for the mother and for the re-enactment of that pre-oedipal relationship, repressed by her conscious self.



analytic tenets. To Parker, there are basically two prerequisites to consider a narrative text as a “hystery”: firstly, the power of storytelling. She deems important the fact of telling one’s story since “[n]arrative enables the hysteric to tell her story in a different way (with words rather than her body), but her hysteria also enables her to tell a story that is different” (15). Roberts’ *In the Red Kitchen* allows its female narrators —Queen Hat, Flora Milk, Hattie, Minny and Rosina— to have a voice of their own and express what is inexpressible, what has been repressed or silenced by the patriarchal discourse. All of them, to a greater or lesser degree, take up the pen and tell their own stories without the interference of the male rational discourse. Particularly significant is the character of Flora, a spiritualist medium whose activities have been marginalised from traditional accounts of cultural history. In this narrative, though, she is given a voice, and because of this fact, Flora takes control of her narration telling her own (hysterical) story.

According to Parker, the second requirement for a narrative text to become a “hystery” is to employ “the body as text to speak the unspeakable” (16). What happens in Roberts’ novel is precisely the opposite: the text is employed as body to manifest hysterical symptoms, reject the conventional discourse of narrative, and bring to light what remains submerged and hidden. The novel, then, becomes a female excessive narrative by offering a fragmented narrative form, and a fluidity of subject position, “a multiplicity of voices [...] not bound together or overwritten by the device of a single protagonist-author” (White 147). Moreover, *In the Red Kitchen* is a disjunctive narrative since it travels across time and space (Ancient Egypt, the late-Victorian period and contemporary England), portrays a variety of social classes and backgrounds (nobility, working, and middle-class), and resists closure.<sup>23</sup>

In short, Roberts’ *In the Red Kitchen* aligns itself with feminist reappraisals of the figure of the female hysteric, who brings up her unconscious wishes and desires into bodily symptoms.<sup>24</sup> Feminist critics like Hélène Cixous have re-interpreted this figure in a more positive light. The hysteric, also equated with the female spiritualist medium in late-Victorian England, has been always connected with the female sexual disorder. According to nineteenth-century nerve specialists, hysteria had a physiological foundation and posed a threat to femininity. Likewise, the mediumistic trance state permitted unconventional behaviour, and by this means the private séance became a site for potential subversion. The Victorian medical profession turned their eyes to the spiritualist practice with anxiety as it challenged the scientific materialism of the time, whilst simultaneously offering empirical evidence of the existence of the other world. The debate between science and spiritualism, which was predicated along gendered terms male vs. female, became more

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<sup>23</sup> Similarly, Susan Rowland has affirmed that “the novel encourages hysterical reading, the failure to find a secure subject position as a way to incorporate an acknowledged fiction like *In the Red Kitchen* into our reading of traditional history” (208).

<sup>24</sup> On several occasions, Roberts has affirmed that her writing activity is often informed by her passion for French-oriented psychoanalysis.

and more visible to the extent that the medical doctors contended that the trance was a form of hysteria. *In the Red Kitchen*, then, examines how the scientific discourse of early psychology and spiritualism interrelated and, at times, overlapped, and how the latter was eventually subsumed and domesticated by the former. As a result, early psychology began to dismiss the biological explanation of hysteria to offer interpretations based on the workings of the mind and the unconscious. However, Roberts' novel reverses the situation in that rational control and the scientific discourses of medicine and early psychology are eventually challenged and undermined. The novel subverts the whole concept of hysteria and nerve disorders by two means: firstly, by assimilating the figure of the hysteric and appropriating it to invert and pervert the masculine version of this figure, thus challenging patriarchal binary oppositions (in accordance with feminist re-evaluations of the hysteric); secondly, by turning the narrative itself into a "hystery", that is to say, a narrative where subjects are traumatised by their pasts, a narrative where female subjects have a voice of their own, thus turning into speaking subjects and, lastly, a female excessive narrative that illustrates the symptoms of hysteria.

Michèle Roberts' *In the Red Kitchen* can be grouped with other neo-Victorian narratives that incorporate Victorian scientific concerns and/or the occult. I hope to have shown how Victorian science and spiritualism were not in fact contradictory discourses. However different they may seem at first sight, both tried to give response to people's preoccupations about nature, world and death. It has become commonplace to support the view that scientific materialism permeated late-Victorian England due to an unprecedented technological and cultural revolution. The technological advances "created a vertiginous sense of social and economic acceleration to which Victorian discourse bore frequent witness" (Kahane, *Passions* 1). However, as Hilary Mantel poses: "[...] the rise of spiritualism coincided with the high point of scientific materialism, and the assumptions of one creed fed the other" (5). In fact, spiritualism gained widespread reputation and attempted to demonstrate the existence of the afterlife by establishing communication with the dead and by materialising full-form spirits. In other words, spiritualist practitioners affirmed that they provided empirical evidence of the afterlife and, by doing so, gave spiritual relief to those who had been disillusioned with the evolutionary theories of Charles Darwin.

In my opinion, it is not too far-fetched to draw similarities between the late-Victorian period and our own fin de siècle, as Claire Kahane has perceptively observed: "[t]he sense of cultural transformation that dominated both event and discourse in the Victorian era has been repeatedly chronicled [...] a *technological revolution perhaps unparalleled until our own fin-de-siècle computer age* [...]" (*Passions* 1; emphasis added). Interestingly, our contemporary age is also characterised by technological breakthroughs and rapid scientific advances that have in some ways entailed a sterile materialist culture, whereby spiritual concerns no longer feature. Therefore, it is my contention that the need of epistemological answers to current issues can account for the supernatural in neo-Victorian fiction, and that by looking back to how the Victorians dealt with their own crisis of faith, these novels can enlighten our perception of contemporary reality. It seems that, in A.S. Byatt's



words, “writing Victorian words in Victorian contexts, in a Victorian order, and in Victorian relations of one word to the next [is] the only way [one] could think of to show one could hear the Victorian dead” (47). It is true that this can be taken as a nostalgic revival of the desired past, and yet, by revitalising the Victorian past, the neo-Victorian novel, with an emphasis on the associations between science and the supernatural, allows for communication with the Victorian dead, and in doing so, it speaks to the contemporary heir of the Victorian doubtful mind.



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