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Sofie Lachapelle, *Investigating the Supernatural: From Spiritism and Occultism to Psychical Research and Metapsychics in France, 1853-1931*. Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2011. 198 pp. Figures, notes, bibliographic essay, and index. \$50.00 U.S. (cl). ISBN 978-1-4214-0013-6.

Review by David Allen Harvey, New College of Florida.

Sofie Lachapelle's *Investigating the Supernatural* is the latest addition to a growing corpus of scholarly studies of the occult revival of the fin de siècle and beyond (for a useful overview of the field, see John Warne Monroe's review essay, "The Way We Believe Now: Modernity and the Occult").<sup>[1]</sup> Rather than focusing on spiritism or related esoteric movements themselves, however, Lachapelle's topic is the scientific study of paranormal phenomena in France during the years of the Second Empire and Third Republic. Her study begins with the well-known eruption of American spiritualism into France (and elsewhere in Europe) during the 1850s, and comes to a close after the first third of the twentieth century, a moment when, as she demonstrates, serious scientists lost interest in the supernatural, and spiritists stopped seeking scientific verification and legitimization of their movement. Over the course of the eight decades in between, however, Lachapelle demonstrates that science and spiritism interacted with one another in a variety of ways, with each being transformed in the process.

Lachapelle divides her book into five chapters, each of which surveys a different group of individuals and a different explanatory discourse regarding paranormal phenomena. The first such group, naturally, were the spiritists themselves. While American spiritualism did not have a coherent or unified doctrine at the outset (this was the contribution of the French theorist of spiritism, Allan Kardec, né Hippolyte-Léon-Denizard Rivail), the "turning tables," mysterious knocks or raps, and other physical phenomena produced in séances were from the beginning taken as empirical proof of the continuing existence of the soul after death. Indeed, as Lynn Sharp and others have shown, this promise of concrete proof of the immortality of the soul was the primary reason for spiritism's immediate and enduring popularity.<sup>[2]</sup>

The second group Lachapelle studies were the Theosophists and occultists of the 1880s and 1890s, who offered a somewhat different explanation for the phenomena of the séance. Rather than evidence of life after death, the occultists tended to interpret these phenomena as signs of invisible natural forces or entities, such as elemental beings, astral projections, or universal magnetic fluids. Lachapelle suggests, quite plausibly, that the occultist theories of the fin de siècle marked a transition away from spiritism proper toward the more scientific or pseudoscientific interpretations she examines in the remainder of her monograph. The third chapter surveys the reactions of the medical community, which often pathologized spirit mediums and their clientele, interpreting spiritist phenomena as signs of mental breakdown or disaggregation, though Lachapelle observes that many provincial doctors were less dogmatically materialist than their Parisian counterparts, and were willing to entertain alternate explanations. For example, she discusses the revival of Marian apparitions in nineteenth-century France, and notes that, at the most famous shrine to emerge from this milieu, the grotto of Lourdes, a medical bureau was established in 1883 to provide scientific

verification of the miracle cures operated through the intervention of the Virgin Mary. Lachapelle's fourth and fifth chapters are devoted to the fields of "psychical research" and "*métapsychique*," respectively. These were short-lived, but broadly influential, efforts by prominent scientists, physicians, philosophers, and psychologists to develop a science of the supernatural, which would provide empirically verifiable and scientifically valid interpretations of the phenomena first uncovered in the darkened rooms of the séance. The book closes with the failure of these efforts.

Lachapelle notes the paradoxes inherent in the enterprises of the psychic researchers and of their heirs in the new field of *métapsychique*, illuminating interesting questions regarding both the social and epistemological foundations of modern science. From its origins in the 1880s, psychical research was a serious business, carried out by serious men, such as the Cambridge philosopher Henry Sidgwick, the French physiologist Charles Richet (who would go on to win a Nobel Prize for his work on anaphylaxis), the German psychologist Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, and the Italian epidemiologist Rocco Santoliquido. Many of these psychical researchers first attended spiritist séances as skeptics, but after becoming convinced of the validity of the phenomena they witnessed there, sought to dispel the haze of mysticism and charlatanry that often surrounded them and to develop scientifically credible explanations for hidden forces and apparently supernatural faculties.

Typical of this approach was the astronomer and onetime spiritist Camille Flammarion, who declared that "the supernatural does not exist" (p. 28), and who spent much of his life seeking to explain paranormal phenomena according to the laws of science. Flammarion and like-minded men of science organized a variety of professional organizations, (ranging from the original Society for Psychical Research, founded in 1882, to the Institut Métapsychique International, established in 1919), held a series of international congresses, and published a range of learned journals. Nevertheless, the line between science and humbug was never as clear-cut as men like Richet and Flammarion would have wished. Early conferences devoted to psychical research, like the Quatrième congrès international de psychologie, held in conjunction with the 1900 International Exposition in Paris, were crashed by figures like the Martinist leader Papus (Gérard Encausse) and the spiritists Léon Denis and Gabriel Delanne, whose grand metaphysical theorizing was condemned as unscientific by many other participants. Subsequent congresses would for this reason exclude spiritists and occultists but, as Lachapelle demonstrates, the psychical researchers thereby undercut the popular appeal of their work and contributed to their own marginalization. At the same time, the new science's failure to uncover verifiable natural laws or solid empirical evidence led to its rejection by the mainstream scientific community. The post-WWI rechristening of psychical research (a name now seen as tarnished by association with charlatanry) as *métapsychique* is one notable sign of this failure.

Lachapelle also offers interesting insights into the class and gender dynamics of psychical research. Publication and scholarly presentation in the field was dominated by well-educated, relatively well-to-do men, often medical doctors or other members of the professional class, whose curiosity was piqued by their brushes with paranormal phenomena, but who, as noted above, hoped to move away from spiritism toward serious science. In order to pursue their research, however, they were obligated to collaborate with spiritist mediums and clairvoyants. Many, though not all, of these mediums were women, usually of an uneducated peasant or working-class background, although some of them, such as Eusapia Palladino and Marthe Béraud (a.k.a. Eva Carrière), achieved both fame and fortune through their alleged supernatural powers.

Palladino and Béraud were what we would today call professional illusionists, making use of sleight of hand, misdirection, and hidden collaborators to produce physical effects, such as

moving objects, producing sounds, and secreting “ectoplasm,” which their credulous audiences took as evidence of the paranormal. Psychical researchers sought to replicate the phenomena of the séance under laboratory conditions, but the conditions that Palladino and Béraud placed on their participation (darkened lighting, background conversation or music, and control over the proceedings) tended instead to bring the séance into the laboratory, and to facilitate the use of deception. Remarkably, many researchers continued to believe in Palladino’s powers even after she had been caught in deliberate acts of fraud. She must, one imagines, have been a truly remarkable and charismatic figure.

Lachapelle ends her narrative with the failure of the Institut Métapsychique International to achieve its dual goals of unifying international psychical research under its leadership and constructing a science of supernatural phenomena that would convince the academic community of the validity of such pursuits. She traces part of this failure to purely personal factors, such as the ongoing tensions between the scientifically-minded researchers of the IMI and their wealthy patron, Jean Meyer, who wanted above all to discover empirical proof of the survival of the soul after death, and to the deaths of many of the leading figures of the fin-de-siècle movement during the interwar period. On a broader level, however, these personal factors merely exemplify the irreconcilable goals of the psychical researchers, which made a parting of the ways inevitable. In subsequent years, as Lachapelle notes in her conclusion, the two camps have gone their separate ways. The scientific community has largely abandoned its earlier interest in parapsychology, and today’s spiritists and other esoteric devotees have retreated into a world of inner subjectivity, no longer seeking scientific validation for their belief systems.

A revised version of the author’s doctoral dissertation at the University of Notre Dame, *Investigating the Supernatural* is the product of a great many years of study and makes a solid contribution to a growing field. It will be of interest to scholars in a variety of areas, ranging from French social and religious history to the history of science.

#### END NOTES

[1] John Warne Monroe, “The Way We Believe Now: Modernity and the Occult,” *Magic, Ritual, and Witchcraft* 2/1(2007): 68-78.

[2] Lynn Sharp, *Secular Spirituality: Reincarnation and Spiritism in Nineteenth-Century France* (Lanham, Md.: Lexington Books, 2006).

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