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## Making the Dead Speak: Spiritualism and Detective Fiction

*Chris Willis*

The idea of any link between spiritualism and detective fiction seems totally contradictory. Classic detective fiction is a literature of logic in which everything has a scientific explanation. It is concerned with hard facts and encourages scepticism. The reader must learn to doubt everything he or she is told about events and characters and must automatically disbelieve such things as alibis. Spiritualism, on the other hand, involves suspension of logical faculties to believe in events and phenomena which cannot be explained in scientific or logical terms. However, it is interesting to note that the rise of the fictional detective coincided with the rise of spiritualism. Both began in the mid-nineteenth century and were widely popular in Britain from the turn of the century until the 1930s. Both attempt to explain mysteries. The medium's rôle can be seen as being similar to that of a detective in a murder case. Both are trying to make the dead speak in order to reveal a truth.

A murder mystery could be solved beyond doubt if the victim could return from the grave to name the murderer. There was a medieval belief that a corpse's blood would flow if the murderer touched it, a superstition which is used to good effect to frighten a suspect into confessing in Ellis Peters' first Brother Cadfael story, *A Morbid Taste for Bones* (1977). It is widely believed that detectives investigating the Jack the Ripper murders opened the eyelids of at least one victim in the belief that the victim's eyes might somehow have retained the image of the last thing she saw. The ability to make the dead communicate in a more reliable way would no doubt be a great advantage for a detective. In Peter Lovesey's historical detective novel *A Case of Spirits* (1975), an ardent female Spiritualist tries to convince the detective that he has mediumistic qualities. She tells him, 'It doesn't prevent you from being

a detective as well, you know. I should think it would be a positive advantage.<sup>1</sup> At the end of the book, the detective needs no supernatural powers whatsoever to reconstruct the seance at which the murder took place and to reproduce and explain the tricks used by the fraudulent medium.

The best-known link between spiritualism and detective fiction is of course Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. As a young man, Conan Doyle had described spiritualism as 'the greatest nonsense upon earth',<sup>2</sup> but in later years he became one of its staunchest advocates. His conversion began in the mid-1880s, when he began to attend seances with friends. Some sessions produced bizarre results: in one a spirit named Dorothy Postlethwaite told him that there was life on Mars.<sup>3</sup> Conan Doyle was initially 'very critical as to the whole proceedings' but, feeling that spiritualism presented 'a problem to be solved',<sup>4</sup> he began to investigate further.

Tragedy struck Conan Doyle's family in 1893 when his wife Louise developed incurable tuberculosis (she died in 1906). In October 1893, Conan Doyle's father died. Biographers point out that this personal loss was echoed in Conan Doyle's work: Sherlock Holmes 'died' at the Reichenbach Falls two months after the death of Conan Doyle's father.<sup>5</sup> Three weeks after his father's death, Conan Doyle joined the Society for Psychical Research.<sup>6</sup> Throughout the 1890s and 1900s, he continued to study what he later described as 'the wonderful literature of psychic science and experience'.<sup>7</sup> His interest in the supernatural found expression in his fiction of the 1890s and 1900s. Perhaps the best-known example is his 1899 ghost story 'The Brown Hand', narrated by a doctor who is also a member of the Society for Psychical Research. A surgeon is haunted by the ghost of a man whose hand he amputated many years earlier: the patient believed in bodily resurrection, and his ghost keeps returning to look for the missing part of his body. The psychic investigator gets rid of the ghost by providing him with a 'new' hand amputated from another patient.<sup>8</sup> In another short story, 'Playing with Fire', Conan Doyle gives a humorous account of a fictional seance at which a unicorn materialises and rampages through the building, much to the consternation of everyone present.<sup>9</sup>

Conan Doyle's full conversion to spiritualism came during World War I. In 1907 he had married Jean Leckie and during the war the couple shared their house with Jean's friend Lily Loder-Symonds, a keen spiritualist. In 1916 Loder-Symonds claimed to have received spirit messages from her brothers who had died early in the war, and from Jean's brother Malcolm, who had been killed at the battle of Mons.

After this, Conan Doyle gradually became convinced of the truth of spiritualism. His conversion was closely linked with personal tragedy. His son, brother and brother-in-law all had been killed in the war. Like many others bereaved in World War I, he found that the spiritualist revival of the 1920s seemed to offer a means of maintaining contact with loved ones after their death.

Conan Doyle lectured widely on spiritualism and in 1922 undertook a tour of America. Despite his unwavering belief in mediumship, he exposed two fraudulent mediums, twins Eva and William Thompson, at a seance in New York. Conan Doyle may have had his suspicions aroused by a strange coincidence: one of the participants at the seance had the surname Moriarty.<sup>10</sup> During this tour, Conan Doyle arranged a private seance for his friend Houdini, at which Jean, acting as medium, produced a 'fifteen page letter from [Houdini's dead] mother.'<sup>11</sup> Houdini was sceptical about the letter, as it was in English and, as he put it, 'although my sainted mother had been in America for almost fifty years, she could not speak, read, nor write English.' Conan Doyle explained this by telling him that she had learnt English in Heaven.<sup>12</sup> Houdini was not convinced.

For the rest of his life, Conan Doyle was a passionate advocate of spiritualism. He wrote several books on the subject, lectured worldwide, and set up a psychic bookshop and library, both of which ran at a loss. In 1901 he had 'resurrected' Holmes; in 1917, he had tried to rid himself of Holmes again – the short story 'His Last Bow' was intended to be the detective's final appearance – but in 1921 Holmes re-appeared in the first of a series of short stories that continued until 1927. There is no doubt that the super-logical, unsuperstitious Holmes brought in the income to subsidise Conan Doyle's spiritualist activities. Summing up his writing career in his autobiography, Conan Doyle hoped that his 'psychic work' would 'remain when all the rest has been forgotten',<sup>13</sup> but the public preferred Holmes. In the mid-1920s, at the height of his spiritualist activities, Conan Doyle had written a short story called 'The Sussex Vampire' in which Holmes provides a natural explanation for an apparently supernatural mystery. Unlike his creator, Holmes disowns any belief in the supernatural, boasting that: 'this Agency stands flat-footed upon the ground, and there it must remain. No ghosts need apply.'<sup>14</sup>

Conan Doyle kept spiritualism out of the Holmes stories, but in several twentieth-century detective stories spiritualist activities, and particularly seances, are used to further the plot. There is an uneasy relationship between detective fiction and the figure of the medium.

After all, the detective would be virtually redundant if the medium could summon a murder victim back from the dead to name the murderer. In traditional fiction, the detective is usually portrayed as a knowledgeable, respected figure, often with a middle-class or upper-class background and a good education. Mediums, on the other hand, are usually portrayed as rather ridiculous figures, almost invariably being ill-educated, badly-dressed, middle-aged and vulgar. In 'Golden Age' fiction, the medium is usually a working-class woman who provides a deliberately incongruous note in stories set among the middle and upper classes. The other characters look down on the medium, but it is not unusual for her to be proved right where they are wrong.

Fraudulent mediums, however, provide easy targets for the detective's abilities. The exposure of a fake medium provides the basic plot for several detective stories, one of the earliest examples probably being Tom Gallon's 1903 short story 'The Spirit of Sarah Keech'<sup>15</sup> in which spirit messages from a dead woman 'miraculously' appear on a typewriter whose keys move even though no one is touching them. In fact the typewriter is connected to another machine in the next room, so that messages typed on one machine appear on the other. Unfortunately for the medium, the typist employed to do this is an undercover detective.

The boom in spiritualism after World War I made the medium a well-known figure in fact and fiction. In 1928 Lilian Wyles, the CID's first woman officer, became involved in a *cause célèbre* when she investigated complaints against a well-known medium. Wyles arranged a private seance, where she was somewhat surprised to hear predictions which referred to her husband and her sister. In fact, Wyles was unmarried and had no sisters. The medium also predicted the imminent death of Wyles' mother – who lived for another 12 years. Not surprisingly, Wyles said that this 'did nothing to impress me as to her powers of clairvoyance'<sup>16</sup> and a summons was issued against the medium, who was fined after a much publicised trial. At that time it was illegal to predict the future and the medium's authenticity was not an issue in the trial. However, Wyles' evidence established that the medium was a fraud. The case caught the public imagination, and the fraudulent or misguided medium was to be a recurring figure in fiction during the years that followed.

Generally speaking, the medium is portrayed as either a person with supernatural powers which no-one quite understands or a fraud who is exposed by the detective. In 'Golden Age' fiction a third situation sometimes arises, when the detective or a confederate pretends to have mediumistic powers to trick someone into a confession or revelation.

Dorothy L. Sayers' *Strong Poison* was published in 1930 at the height of the post-World War I boom in spiritualism. In this novel Lord Peter Wimsey's sidekick, the redoubtable Miss Climpson, masquerades as a medium in order to search a house for a missing will.<sup>17</sup> She holds a series of private seances, during which she produces an impressive array of 'spirit rappings' by means of a small metal soap box attached rather painfully to her leg with a strip of elastic. She also manages an impressive performance of table-turning, making a small bamboo table levitate by supposedly supernatural means. This is done by means of wires attached to her wrists while her hands remain firmly in view on top of the table. Having found out a little about her client's background, she is able to produce convincing 'spirit messages' from a variety of people including her client's dead fiancé. The reader is told that Miss Climpson learned these tricks from:

a quaint little man from the Psychical Research Society [who] ... was skilled in the investigating of haunted houses and the detection of poltergeists ... she had passed several interesting evenings hearing about the tricks of mediums ... she had learned to turn tables and produce explosive cracking noises; she knew how to examine a pair of sealed slates for the marks of the wedges which let the chalk go in on a long black wire to write spirit messages.

She had seen the ingenious rubber gloves which leave the impression of spirit hands in a bucket of paraffin-wax, and which, when deflated, can be drawn delicately from the hardened wax through a hole narrower than a child's wrist. She even knew theoretically, though she had never tried it, how to hold her hands to be tied behind her back so as to force that first deceptive knot which makes all subsequent knots useless, and how to flit about the room banging tambourines in the twilight in spite of having been tied up in a black cabinet with both fists filled with flour.

Miss Climpson had wondered greatly at the folly and wickedness of mankind.<sup>18</sup>

The man from the Psychical Research Society is probably based on Frederick Bligh Bond, whom Sayers had met in 1917. Bligh Bond was an archaeologist who excavated the ruins of Glastonbury Abbey after the spirit of a dead monk had supposedly told him where to dig. However, his firm belief in spiritualism had not prevented him from exposing several fraudulent mediums. In a letter to her parents, Sayers says he told 'hair-raising tales of how he and the head of the Psychical

Research Society are sent for to haunted houses, to Sherlock Holmes about for the haunters!<sup>19</sup> Bligh Bond's account of his spirit guidance in excavating the Glastonbury ruins was published by Sayers' employers, Blackwell's, in the following year. Following this, the unfortunate Bligh Bond was promptly dismissed from his job and barred from the Glastonbury site by the Church of England, which did not want to be seen to be associated with spiritualism.<sup>20</sup>

Sayers uses Miss Climpson's situation to set up a moral dilemma: Miss Climpson is a devout Christian, and feels thoroughly guilty about producing fraudulent spiritualist phenomena, both because of the deception involved and because of the connection with the occult. She soothes her conscience by telling herself that it is for a worthy end: her efforts will save Harriet Vane from being wrongfully convicted of murder. Her deception presents an interesting situation – in theory a fake medium is someone who would be likely to be unmasked by a detective, rather than being a detective herself. After the will is found, Miss Climpson reverts to a more conventional rôle. She feels it is her duty to put her client on her guard against another fake medium, whom she describes to Lord Peter as being, 'as great a charlatan as I AM!!! and without my *altruistic* motives!!!'<sup>21</sup>

Agatha Christie uses a similar device in *Peril at End House* (1932), where Poirot arranges for all the murder suspects to attend a seance. Poirot's friend Hastings acts as a remarkably unconvincing medium. Poirot arranges for the supposed murder victim (who is in fact still very much alive) to appear at the seance in suitably ghostly fashion. This leads to some very interesting confessions and the revelation of the murderer's identity, as well as the arrest of a forger and the unmasking of a drug dealer.

Christie's *The Sittaford Mystery* (1931) begins at a seance where the spirit of a Captain Trevelyan informs the sitters that he has just been murdered. It turns out that Captain Trevelyan has indeed been murdered at or near the very time the spirit message came through. Throughout the book two mysteries run in parallel: who committed the murder and what is the explanation of the spirit message? Various explanations are suggested, ranging from clairvoyance and auto-suggestion to telepathy. One character even suggests asking Sir Arthur Conan Doyle's opinion. In fact the murderer created the spirit message by purely natural means in order to establish an alibi, and a perfectly logical solution to the 'supernatural' mystery has been obscured by a shoal of red herrings. Like the novel's characters, the reader is cleverly led to believe the information given at the seance, which is just what the murderer wants.

In both of these novels Christie's use of spiritualism is perfectly straightforward. The seances are definite fakes. She used the seance situation more ambiguously in some of her short stories. *The Hound of Death*, which was also written in the 1930s, is a collection of short stories about the supernatural. The stories are an odd mixture – some treat the supernatural as a fact, but one shows how easily people who believe in it can be exploited by fraudulent mediums. 'The Blue Jar' features a gullible young man who is tricked by a fraudulent medium. This story gains most of its impact from its context. The supernatural aspects appear convincing to the reader because the story is in a collection of supernatural tales: in a collection of detective stories the deception would be obvious. This authorial sleight-of-hand reflects the techniques used by fake mediums themselves. As Richard Wiseman's recreations of seances at the University of Hertfordshire have shown, even the most cynical of people have their scepticism dulled by the darkness and atmosphere of expectation which precedes any 'supernatural manifestations' in a seance.

In Christie's 'The Last Seance' a genuine medium is destroyed by her own powers. She makes the spirit of a dead child materialise and when the sitter touches the spirit, the medium dies. This story reflects many mediums' insistence that no-one should touch the 'spirits' without their consent, as this would supposedly result in death or serious injury to the medium. In practice, people who broke this rule often found themselves clutching remarkably solid 'spirits' who bore a distinct resemblance to the medium. In December 1873, for example, a Mr Volckman disrupted a seance by grabbing hold of a 'spirit' calling herself Katie King, who turned out to be none other than the medium Florence Cook, supposedly bound in a locked cabinet.<sup>22</sup> At another seance a sitter grabbed hold of a very substantial 'spirit' who proved to be the medium Miss Woods on her knees partly undressed and draped in muslin.<sup>23</sup> In 'The Last Seance', one of the characters explains the solid nature of such 'spirits' by arguing that,

a spirit, to manifest itself, has to use the actual physical substance of the medium. You have seen the vapour or fluid issuing from the lips of the medium. This finally condenses and is built up into the physical semblance of the spirit's dead body.<sup>24</sup>

This is an admirably lucid and concise explanation of a well-known spiritualist belief. It is possible that Christie had in mind the American medium Mina Crandon, known professionally as 'Margery' whose exploits received a great deal of publicity in the mid-1920s, when a

team of investigators including Houdini and Conan Doyle tried to establish whether or not she was genuine. Ruth Brandon's book on spiritualism includes some truly repulsive photos of Margery in action. In one of them, an extra hand, supposedly made out of ectoplasm, appears to be emerging from her stomach.<sup>25</sup>

In another Christie short story, 'The Red Signal' a medium warns three clients 'Don't go home tonight'. The warning comes true for all three. The first man returns home and is murdered, the second returns home to find he has been framed for the murder and the third (who actually committed the murder) returns home and is arrested. One of the characters also has a premonition of danger immediately before the seance. The seance itself is described in distinctly sceptical terms. During the first part of the seance, 'messages were given from vaguely described relatives, the description being so loosely worded as to fit almost any contingency'<sup>26</sup> – a well known technique of fake mediums, and one used by Miss Climpson in *Strong Poison*. The medium herself is described in unpleasantly snobbish terms which reflect the views of the distinctly upper-class sitters: she is 'a plump middle-aged woman, atrociously dressed in magenta velvet, with a loud rather common voice', who believes that her own predictions are 'nonsense'.<sup>27</sup>

Christie also created a supernatural detective, Mr Harley Quin [*sic*], who appeared in a collection of short stories in 1930. Mr Quin is a supernatural being – supposedly an incarnation of Harlequin – who acts via a human intermediary, Mr Satterthwaite. Seances feature in two of the stories. In 'The Bird with the Broken Wing' a group of young people take part in a table-turning session as a joke, but a very real spirit message comes through for Mr Satterthwaite. In 'The Voice in the Dark' a dead woman's voice is heard at a seance. There is a natural explanation for this: the woman is actually still alive but going under a different name, and she is one of the sitters at the seance. As this explanation involves the woman in question having a split personality and a 50-year spell of amnesia, the 'natural' explanation is not much more convincing than the supernatural one.

F. Tennyson Jesse's 1931 detective Solange Fontaine also has dealings with fraudulent mediums. She attends a seance, where

no less a person than St Elizabeth of Hungary appeared to us and wrote us messages in English on a little tear-off pad. Unfortunately, when grappled with by two men, friends of my own, who were present, St Elizabeth turned out to be a man – the medium in fact, dressed in white muslin.<sup>28</sup>



This may have been based on fact. Ruth Brandon reproduces a 1907 recipe to make a 'spirit veil' as used by a fraudulent male medium when impersonating female spirits. This involved several yards of fine silk soaked in benzine, lavender oil and luminous paint. The man who gave the recipe claimed to have used it when impersonating 'Cleopatra and other queens'.<sup>29</sup> Fontaine is later aided in her investigations by a self-confessed fraudulent medium who, to her own amazement, solves a murder case when she channels a perfectly genuine message from the supposed victim.

Mediums also appear in more recent detective fiction. In Paul Gallico's *The Hand of Mary Constable* (1964),<sup>30</sup> the detective (who, appropriately, is called Alexander Hero) is described as the 'chief investigator of the British Society for Psychical Research [and] an independent private detective of the occult... an occupation which called for a thorough grounding in normal and abnormal psychology, physics, chemistry, biology, photography, magic, sleight-of-hand [and] laboratory procedure.'<sup>31</sup> Even Sherlock Holmes could not boast such a catalogue of accomplishments! Hero exposes a fraudulent medium who has produced the impression of the supposed 'spirit hand' of a dead child in wax, complete with correct fingerprints. Less sophisticated versions of this trick had been a favourite with earlier mediums. After Conan Doyle died in 1930, one medium, Valiantine, had produced Conan Doyle's 'spirit thumbprint' for his widow. When checked, the print turned out to be not Conan Doyle's thumb but Valiantine's own big toe.<sup>32</sup> The methods used by Gallico's medium are similar to those described by Dorothy L. Sayers, in *Strong Poison*, but with all the advantages of modern technology. For example, she uses infra-red light to move around freely in the darkness of the seance room.<sup>33</sup>

Gallico's book emphasizes that it is men of scientific training and intelligence who are fooled by the medium, because her simple sleight-of-hand tricks are outside their experience. A similar point was made by J.N. Maskelyne, a Victorian magician and investigator of psychic phenomena, who commented that, 'no class of men can be so readily deceived by simple trickery as scientists. Try as they may, they cannot bring their minds down to the level of the subject.'<sup>34</sup> As modern investigators such as James Randi have pointed out, their obsession with looking for a scientific explanation for paranormal phenomena can blind scientists to the use of simple conjuring tricks to produce supposedly supernatural effects.<sup>35</sup>

Although Gallico's medium is exposed as a fraud, the book's attitude towards spiritualism is distinctly ambivalent. Hero is described as being

'as eager for genuine proof of life in the hereafter as he was active in destroying the charlatans of spiritualism who preyed upon the bereaved and ignorant.'<sup>36</sup> He is keen to emphasize that his exposure of one fraudulent medium does not disprove spiritualism in general.<sup>37</sup> By the 1960s, spiritualism was not such a topical or controversial issue as it had been in the 1930s, so it is easier for the detective to be tolerant. This atmosphere of tolerance becomes even more marked in more recent fiction dealing with spiritualism. The growth of New Age beliefs has led to an interest in the occult, and spiritualism has become a 'respectable' subject for mainstream fiction such as Victoria Glendinning's novel *Electricity* (1995)<sup>38</sup> and A.S. Byatt's novella 'The Conjugal Angel' in *Angels and Insects*.<sup>39</sup> This is reflected by a more sympathetic portrait of mediums in some British detective fiction.

In *A Killing Kindness* (1980), Reginald Hill reverses the usual convention of not revealing the murderer's identity until the last chapter. The book's very first sentence names the murderer, but this is done in such a way that the reader does not realise it. This sentence is spoken by a medium in a trance. Although she is convinced that it is the voice of the murder victim speaking through her, even the medium herself does not realise the significance of what she is saying, nor do her audience. Transcripts of the seance are given to various characters in the novel, but no-one apart from the murderer realises the true significance of the medium's words.<sup>40</sup>

Hill's medium is a cultured Romany woman with a great knowledge of supernatural lore, unlike the badly-educated, vulgar charlatans of 1930s fiction. Although this medium is portrayed as perfectly genuine, the way Hill sets up the situation could be seen as the authorial equivalent of the sleight-of-hand tricks used by fake mediums. In the best tradition of detective stories, the author uses his professional skills to play tricks on the reader. Hill sets up a tension between character and narrative technique. His medium is portrayed as being open and honest, but the techniques he uses to portray her are deliberately misleading and full of trickery in order to prevent the reader from realising that she has in fact named the murderer.

In a sense, the author functions as the medium's agent or manager, working behind the scenes to stage her tricks. In *Revelations of a Spirit Medium*, published in 1891, the author, who claims to be a former fraudulent medium, warns,

Do not forget the 'manager' in your search. He or she is never searched, or never has been, up to date, which has been the cause of

many a failure to find the 'properties' of the 'medium' when the 'seance' was given in a room and 'cabinet' furnished by a stranger and skeptic.<sup>41</sup>

In writing about mediums, a skilled author can manipulate the reader in the same way that the manager would manipulate the medium's audience, playing on their preconceptions and expectations.

One of John Mortimer's Rumpole short stories, 'Rumpole and the Soothsayer',<sup>42</sup> deals with the exposure of a fake medium. The 'spirit voices' produced at his seances are in fact all produced by a confederate speaking through an intercom from another room. However, there is a twist at the end, when the medium discovers that the intercom was broken, so that at least some of the messages he was sure were fake are in fact genuine. This reverses the convention of detectives exposing mediums as frauds: in this story a medium who he thinks is fraudulent is proved to be genuine. Ironically, he foretells his own death but does not believe his own prediction – a modern twist on the Cassandra story?

In Carol O'Connell's *Mallory's Oracle* (1994), a group of elderly women who attend a weekly seance are murdered one-by-one. The medium, Redwing, is an impressive but unsympathetic figure who has been arrested three times for extortion and fraud, and is suspected of a range of crimes from child abuse to insider dealing. Her criminal career culminates in a murderous attack on the detective, Kathy Mallory. Unlike the mildly comical mediums of much 1930s fiction, Redwing is a sinister and imposing figure who exerts an almost hypnotic power over her victims. However, her table-turning performance bears a marked similarity to that of Miss Climpson. At a seance, Mallory notices that,

When [Redwing] put her hands on the table, I saw the rings digging into her fingers. Then I saw the two ripples in the tablecloth where her rings had unhooked the pins under the material. All she had to do was lift.<sup>43</sup>

Mallory's cynicism is temporarily shaken during the seance when Redwing is supposedly possessed by the spirit of Mallory's recently murdered adoptive father, but Mallory later convinces herself it was trickery. However, a lingering unease about Redwing and other supposed psychics is felt throughout the book: they are seen as dangerous figures who inspire fear rather than ridicule.

A more benevolent mediumistic figure features in the sequel to *Mallory's Oracle*, *The Man Who Lied to Women* (1995). Mallory and her associate Charles Butler are heavily influenced by their memories of Malakhai, a magician who took up 'debunking paranormal frauds'<sup>44</sup> after he retired from the stage. Before retirement, Malakhai perfected an illusion which would be the envy of any fake medium: the spirit of his dead wife supposedly aids him with his stage act: 'after the audience got comfortable with the idea that she was not only invisible but dead, things began to float through the air as she handed him one thing and another.'<sup>45</sup> However, for all his scepticism, Malakhai himself believes in the very illusion he has created, and 'only created the flying-object illusion in the act so the audience could see her too.'<sup>46</sup> Charles comes to believe in a similar manifestation: he attempts to recreate the spirit of the murder victim in the hope that she will help him solve the case. He feels he has been successful, and the reader is left in some doubt as to how far this is an illusion. In combining the roles of detective and medium, has Charles literally made the dead speak?

The relationship between spiritualism and detective fiction has been a changing and uneasy one. The medium varies from being a figure of fun to a figure of supernatural power, and from being an undoubted fraud to being a genuine psychic whose power to make the dead speak is greater than that of the detective. In most of the examples I have given, the detectives are male and the mediums female, so the medium can also be seen as a threat to male power. In the Comtean tradition, women's mental powers were linked with instinct, spirituality and the supernatural, whereas men's mental powers were linked with science and logic. Spiritualism had been founded by women and was one of the first Western religions to place women in a central public rôle. Spiritualists believed that women were more sensitive to spirit influences than men. As Ann Braude points out, 'Spiritualism made the delicate constitution and nervous excitability commonly attributed to femininity a virtue and lauded it as a qualification for religious leadership.'<sup>47</sup> This unease with the female medium's rôle in a supposedly logical and scientific male-dominated society is summed up in *The Hand of Mary Constable*, whose author comments,

The world in recent years had grown a good deal more sceptical about life in the hereafter, both in the religious as well as the occult sense. Yet underlying every man's complacency was still to be found that residue of terror that one day proof might establish survival of

some heretofore hidden forces more powerful than the overweening ego of man.<sup>48</sup>

In closing, I would like to comment that mixing spiritualism and detective fiction is not necessarily successful. Dickens' unfinished novel *Edwin Drood* – arguably one of the earliest detective stories – was completed after his death by an American medium who claimed that his spirit had dictated it to her. Dickens' son commented, 'I never saw this preposterous book, but I was told that it was a sad proof of how rapidly the faculties ... deteriorate after death!'<sup>49</sup>

## Notes

- 1 Peter Lovesey, *A Case of Spirits* (repr. Harmondsworth: Penguin 1977), p. 30.
- 2 Arthur Conan Doyle, *The New Revelation* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1918), p. 19.
- 3 *Ibid.*, p. 31.
- 4 Conan Doyle, *Memories and Adventures* (London: John Murray, 1930), p. 102.
- 5 Charles Higham, *The Adventures of Conan Doyle: The Life of the Creator of Sherlock Holmes* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1976), pp. 116–17.
- 6 See Higham, *The Adventures of Conan Doyle*, pp. 117–18 and Kelvin I. Jones, *Conan Doyle and the Spirits: The Spiritualist Career of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (Wellingborough: Aquarian, 1989), p. 80.
- 7 Conan Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, p. 138.
- 8 Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Story of the Brown Hand', *Strand Magazine* (May 1899), repr. in *The Supernatural Tales of Sir Arthur Conan Doyle* (London: W. Foulsham & Co., 1987).
- 9 Arthur Conan Doyle, 'Playing With Fire', *Strand Magazine* (March 1900), repr. in *ibid.*.
- 10 Jones, *Conan Doyle and the Spirits*, p. 179.
- 11 Arthur Conan Doyle, *Our American Adventure* (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1923), pp. 179–81.
- 12 Harry Houdini, *Houdini: A Magician Among the Spirits* (1924, repr. New York: Arno Press, 1972), pp. 150–8.
- 13 Conan Doyle, *Memories and Adventures*, p. 448.
- 14 Arthur Conan Doyle, 'The Sussex Vampire' in *The Case-Book of Sherlock Holmes*, repr. in *Sherlock Holmes: The Complete Short Stories* (London: John Murray, 1959), p. 1179.
- 15 Tom Gallon, 'The Spirit of Sarah Keech', in *The Girl Behind the Keys* (London: Hutchinson, 1903).
- 16 Lilian Wyles, *A Woman at Scotland Yard: Reflections on the Struggle and Achievements of Thirty Years in the Metropolitan Police* (London: Faber & Faber, 1952), p. 171.
- 17 Dorothy L. Sayers, *Strong Poison* (repr. Sevenoaks: Coronet, 1989), chapters 17–18, pp. 166–87.
- 18 Sayers, *Strong Poison*, p. 162.

- 19 Letter to her parents, 2 August 1917, repr. in *The Letters of Dorothy L Sayers*, Vol. I, 1899–1936: *The Making of a Detective Novelist*, ed. Barbara Reynolds (London: Hodder & Stoughton, 1995), p. 134 (see also p. 133).
- 20 The Visitor Centre at Glastonbury Abbey has reproductions of some of Bligh Bond's 'spirit drawings' on display. For other biographical information, I am indebted to Kathryn Denning's lecture on spiritualism and archaeology at the 'Victorian Supernatural' conference held at the University of North London in November 1995.
- 21 Sayers, *Strong Poison*, pp. 191–2.
- 22 Ruth Brandon, *The Spiritualists: The Passion for the Occult in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 1983), pp. 109–13.
- 23 *Spiritualist*, 28 September 1877, cited by Ronald Pearsall, *The Table Rappers* (London: Michael Joseph, 1972), p. 98.
- 24 Agatha Christie, *The Hound of Death* (repr. London: Fontana, 1986), p. 169.
- 25 Brandon, *The Spiritualists*, illustrations between pp. 212 and 213. The investigation of 'Margery' is described in chapter 6, 'Magicians Among the Spirits', pp. 175–89.
- 26 Christie, *The Hound of Death*, p. 30.
- 27 *Ibid.*, pp. 29 and 31.
- 28 F. Tennyson Jesse, *The Solange Stories* (London: Heinemann, 1931), p. 10.
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