POPULAR LITERATURE, AUTHORSHIP AND THE OCCULT IN LATE VICTORIAN BRITAIN

With the increasing commercialization of publishing at the end of the nineteenth century, the polarization of serious literature and popular fiction became a commonplace of literary criticism. Andrew McCann cautions against this opposition by arguing that popular fiction's engagement with heterodox conceptions of authorship and creativity complicates its status as mere distraction or entertainment. Popular writers such as George Du Maurier, Marie Corelli, Rosa Praed and Arthur Machen drew upon a contemporary fascination with occult practices to construct texts that had an intensely ambiguous relationship to the proprietary notions of authorship that were so central to commercial publishing. Through trance-induced or automatic writing, dream states, dual personality and the retrieval of past lives channeled through mediums, they imagined forms of authorship that reinvested popular texts with claims to aesthetic and political value that cut against the homogenizing pressures of an emerging culture industry.

ANDREW MCCANN is currently an associate professor in the Department of English at Dartmouth College. He is the author of *Cultural Politics in the 1790s: Literature, Radicalism and the Public Sphere* (1999) and *Marcus Clarke's Bohemia: Literature and Modernity in Colonial Melbourne* (2004).

CAMBRIDGE STUDIES IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY LITERATURE AND CULTURE

Nineteenth-century British literature and culture have been rich fields for interdisciplinary studies. Since the turn of the twentieth century, scholars and critics have tracked the intersections and tensions between Victorian literature and the visual arts, politics, social organization, economic life, technical innovations, scientific thought – in short, culture in its broadest sense. In recent years, theoretical challenges and historiographical shifts have unsettled the assumptions of previous scholarly synthesis and called into question the terms of older debates. Whereas the tendency in much past literary critical interpretation was to use the metaphor of culture as "background," feminist, Foucauldian and other analyses have employed more dynamic models that raise questions of power and of circulation. Such developments have reanimated the field. This series aims to accommodate and promote the most interesting work being undertaken on the frontiers of the field of nineteenth-century literary studies: work which intersects fruitfully with other fields of study such as history, or literary theory, or the history of science. Comparative as well as interdisciplinary approaches are welcomed.

A complete list of titles published will be found at the end of the book.

POPULAR LITERATURE, AUTHORSHIP AND THE OCCULT IN LATE VICTORIAN BRITAIN

ANDREW McCANN

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

CAMBRIDGE
UNIVERSITY PRESS

University Printing House, Cambridge CB2 8BS, United Kingdom

Cambridge University Press is part of the University of Cambridge.

It furthers the University's mission by disseminating knowledge in the pursuit of education, learning and research at the highest international levels of excellence.

www.cambridge.org
Information on this title: www.cambridge.org/9781107064423

First published 2014

Printed in the United Kingdom by Clays, St Ives plc

A catalogue record for this publication is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloguing in Publication data
McCann, Andrew (Andrew Lachlan)
Popular literature, authorship and the occult in late Victorian Britain / Andrew McCann.
pages cm – (Cambridge studies in nineteenth-century literature and culture ; 94)
Includes bibliographical references. and index.
ISBN 978-1-107-06442-3 (hardback)
1. Paranormal fiction, English – History and criticism. 2. English fiction – 19th century – History and criticism. 3. Popular literature – Great Britain – History and criticism. 4. Popular literature – History and criticism – Theory, etc. I. Title.
PR830.O33M33 2014
823′.809–dc23
2014003928

ISBN 978-1-107-06442-3 Hardback

Contents

Acknowledgements

The impetus to write this book in the form it finally took owes a lot to some fairly vehement debates about the popular and popularity in the field of Australian literary studies. Those debates often displayed impatience with a putatively dominant sense of the literary (great or canonical literature), and offered popular forms of writing as a counterpoint. The broader disciplinary history behind this is, by now, well known. The shift from literary studies to cultural studies presupposed a democratic expansion of what counts as culture; the tension between literature and popular fiction could play out a version of that shift while preserving a focus on print and textuality. I worked in the Australian university system (first at the University of Queensland and then the University of Melbourne) for almost a decade, and found myself energized by these debates and the insistence with which they framed aesthetic questions as political questions. But I was also perplexed by the ways in which evocations of the popular almost always had to be qualified or underlined in order to preserve their politically progressive character. Hence a phrase like "the *genuinely* popular" would define itself against some other sort of popularity that seemed compromised or spurious. The concept of the popular, in other words, had to be divided against itself in order to preserve its democratizing force. From this perspective attempts to shore up a politics by opposing popular literary forms to "high" culture seemed to displace a more fundamental problem inherent in the category of the popular. My interest in late nineteenth-century fiction has a lot to do with the curious ways in which it actualizes this problem: what I was repeatedly coming across as I read writers like Marie Corelli and Rosa Praed were popular, commercial novels that deployed the occult as a way of orienting to something for which commercial conceptions of authorship simply couldn't account. A senior faculty fellowship from Dartmouth College, as well as an incredibly forgiving teaching schedule, gave me the time to consolidate some of these ideas with research in libraries as far flung as Brisbane and New Haven. I'm also very grateful to my editors at

Cambridge University Press, especially Anna Bond and Joanna Breeze, as well as my copy-editor Rose Bell, for the care they have taken with the minutiae of my work. Part of Chapter Four has previously appeared in "Rosa Praed and the Vampire-Aesthete," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 35.1 (March 2007). It is reprinted here with the permission of Cambridge University Press. As always though, it was the love and forbearance of Rachel, Rosa and Lachlan – two of whom are avid consumers of popular fiction, one of whom is a reluctant convert – that made the writing of this book possible. It is, of course, dedicated to them.