

ESSAY REVIEW

Eusapia Palladino Anthologized

Eusapia Paladino: Materialisations and Intellergetic Phenomena in Physical Mediumship compiled by Scott Dickerson. Runabout, 2016. 286 pp. ISBN 978-1530915859.

In the last decade we have seen the publication of various books about physical mediums. The authors of these studies have done much to rescue from oblivion the careers of individuals such as Indridi Indridasson from Iceland (Haraldsson & Gisurarsson 2015), William Mumler from the United States (Kaplan 2008), and Franek Kluski from Poland (Weaver 2015). One medium who needs discussion, so as to be reintroduced to new generations, is the Italian Eusapia Palladino, the topic of the present book.

Unlike the above-mentioned studies and overviews of the careers of mediums, the present work, compiled by Scott Dickerson, is more limited in scope. It is an anthology of various English-language articles and sections of books about Palladino. *Eusapia Paladino: Materialisations and Intellergetic Phenomena in Physical Mediumship* is part of a series entitled “Lost Foundations of Parapsychology and Psychical Research.” Unfortunately, the book has no information about this series, but its Amazon page states that the series “endeavors to provide the interested public with authoritative investigative accounts from the period of research prior to the rise of the statistical approach to parapsychology championed by J. B. Rhine, coming to prominence in the later 1930s.”

Why Palladino?

The mediumship of Eusapia Palladino has continued to be relevant among those who take physical mediumship seriously. Unfortunately, Dickerson does not introduce the book (nor any of the articles reprinted) in any way, limiting himself to presenting the articles with no additional information. Such a course of action does not help those readers who are not familiar with the medium to understand her importance in psychical research, nor to realize from the beginning of the book the variety of phenomena shown by her (Alvarado 2016).

Palladino is important for various reasons. First, her case has long been considered evidential by many. For example, Charles Richet (1922:38–39)

stated in his celebrated *Traité de Métapsychique*, that even assuming that Palladino was the only medium in the world, her séances would suffice to scientifically establish both telekinesis and materializations. A more recent example is Stephen E. Braude, who has written:

The crucial issue is not whether there are instances in which the medium cheated, but whether there are instances in which the evidence is strong that no cheating occurred. And in that respect, Eusapia's case is exceptionally good. (Braude 2007:47)

The medium's cheating, which was repeatedly reported (e.g., Carrington 1909:182, Courtier 1908:521–540), has created much skepticism among modern parapsychologists, some of whom tend to ignore the case (Irwin & Watt 2007), or present highly imaginative fraudulent explanations for particular séances (Wiseman 1992). Such skepticism is not unique about Palladino, since other past physical mediums also are neglected. Many people appear to have a general distrust about accepting old séance reports as documentation for the reality of physical phenomena.

Second, and as I have argued before (Alvarado 1993), Palladino's case was historically important for reasons other than evidential concerns. In addition to projecting influential negative images of mediumship with some of her fraudulent, flamboyant, and apparently hysterical behaviors, her performances contributed to the development of theoretical concepts, and of research standards involving controls and the use of instruments to record physical phenomena.¹

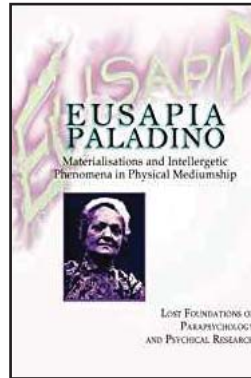
Palladino's importance is evident in the coverage of her mediumship in overviews of the history of parapsychology, such as Gutierrez and Maillard's *Les Adventuriers de L'Esprit* (2004:82–100, 117–138) and Inglis' *Natural and Supernatural* (1992:Chapters 35–38). There is much information about her in Biondi's history of spiritism and psychical research in Italy (1988:96–100, 121–129, 134–159). Furthermore, there are other examples of scholarship about her such as the work of Gauld (1968:Chapter 10), Giuditta (2010), and Sommer (2012). Palladino has been a particular interest of mine, as seen in various articles I have written about topics such as her influence on psychical research (Alvarado 1993), Julian Ochorowicz's ideas about her fraud and dissociation (Alvarado 2010), her biography (Alvarado 2011), and Lombroso's writings about her (Alvarado & Biondi, in press).



Eusapia Palladino

But to learn about this medium in detail, it is necessary to go to the

original séance reports. Many examples could be presented. In addition to very early mentions of the medium (Damiani 1872), there are various nineteenth-century reports. These include those about the famous sittings Cesare Lombroso had with the medium (Ciolfi 1891), as well as those conducted at Milan (Aksakof et al. 1893), and elsewhere (e.g., Lodge 1894). The subsequent literature is vast, including the reports of Bottazzi (1909/2011), Carrington (1954), Courtier (1908), Feilding, Baggally, and Carrington (1909), and Morselli (1908).



The Anthology

The anthology opens with Cesare de Vesme’s article “The Spiritistic and Spiritualistic Explanation of Mediumistic Phenomena” (de Vesme 1907:1–39, these and other page ranges refer to the anthology reviewed here). I wonder why this article was chosen to open the volume since it barely mentions Palladino. It consists mainly of ideas about the study of psychic phenomena in general. Some examples are sections about “a priorism in scientific language,” the use of explaining phenomena with one hypothesis, and cases that “appear to be spiritistic.” While in principle such issues are related to many phenomena and specific cases in psychical research, including Palladino’s, the medium is little discussed in the article.

This is followed by a much-neglected article by physician and student of mediumship Giuseppe (called Joseph in the report) Venzano, “A Contribution to the Study of Materialisations” (pp. 41–138), taken from the *Annals of Psychical Science* (Venzano 1907).² This is a good selection because it includes more dramatic materializations than those usually reported with this medium. The following is an example reported in a séance that took place on December 29, 1900, which included various individuals, among them Venzano and astronomer Francesco Porro:

Suddenly Dr. Venzano, who held the medium with his left hand, she resting her head, visibly to all, on the shoulder of Professor Porro, saw forming to his left, at about a hand’s breadth from his face, as it were a globular, vaporous, whitish mass, which condensed into a more decided form, that of an oval, which gradually assumed the aspect of a human head, of which the nose, the eyes, the moustache, and the pointed beard could be distinctly recognised. This form came and touched his face, and he felt a warm and living forehead press against his own and remain there for a second or two. Then he felt the contact of the whole profile of the face against his own,

with a pressure as of a caress, then the imprint of a kiss, after which the mass seemed to vanish into vapour near the curtains. The other sitters, meanwhile, were only aware of a vague luminosity in the direction of Dr. Venzano; but they distinctly perceived the sound of the kiss. (p. 91)

Other observations were even more dramatic, involving the appearance of apparently whole body figures. All of these observations were made in Italy, at the Circolo Scientifico Minerva in Genoa. Several reports of phenomena seen in this group appear in books published in Italian by Ernesto Bozzano (1903), Enrico Morselli (1908), and Luigi Arnaldo Vassallo (1902).

The third chapter, “Eusapia Paladino” (pp. 139–144), is taken from William F. Barrett’s *On the Threshold of the Unseen* (1917). He mentions at the beginning the negative conclusions of the investigation of the medium at Cambridge University by members of the Society for Psychical Research (see Sidgwick 1895). Unfortunately, the account does not even begin to acknowledge the magnitude of the controversies created, as seen in Gauld’s (1968:Chapter 10) discussion of the subject.

But Barrett discussed other issues as well. He stated:

Like other psychics . . . , she is most sensitive to “suggestion,” even when unexpressed; and in the trance, when her consciousness and self-control are largely inhibited, she is the easy prey of external influences. In the absence of the steadying, though subconscious, influence of a high moral nature, she unblushingly cheats whenever the conditions are unfavourable for the production of supernormal phenomena. We have no right to assume that she is wholly conscious of so doing If they are due, as some have thought, to an externalization of the nerve force of the psychic, it is not improbable that the degree of this externalization will vary with the favorable or unfavorable mental state of those present. We may even conceive that when this psychic force is restricted or not externalized, it may create movements of the limbs of the psychic which will cause her to perform by normal actions (in perhaps a semi-conscious state) what under good psychical conditions would be done supernormally. This would produce the impression of intentional fraud. (pp. 143–144)

However, these interesting ideas were not original with Barrett. Julian Ochorowicz (1896) discussed this years before, but the lack of contextual information in this anthology does not help the reader realize this.

Some of the work of Enrico Morselli is covered in “Experiments Made with Eusapia Paladino at Genoa by Professor Morselli” (pp. 145–169), taken from a chapter from *Psychical and Supernormal Phenomena* by Paul Joire (1909/circa 1916:Chapter 37), who mainly cites Morselli. From

the so-called Feilding report (Feilding, Baggally, & Carrington 1909), the compiler presents the conclusions of each of the authors (pp. 170–191): Hereward Carrington, W. W. Baggally, and Everard Feilding. Carrington wrote:

As a result of the ten sittings held by us at Naples, November 21st–December 15th, 1908—being the ten séances attended by me—I beg to record my absolute conviction of the reality of at least some of the phenomena; and the conviction, amounting in my own mind to complete certainty, that the results witnessed by [us] were not due to fraud or trickery on the part of Eusapia. (p. 170)

Carrington’s statement is interesting because it shows his conversion to the reality of the medium’s manifestations. It is important to remember, and this is something that the compiler does not mention, that Carrington was not only skeptical of Palladino, but of most physical mediums. This is clear in his book *The Physical Phenomena of Spiritualism* (Carrington 1907). But the 1908 Naples sittings made him change his mind about the Italian medium. He stated in the book’s second edition: “Since this book was first issued, I have seen Eusapia Palladino, and witnessed what I believe to be many genuine and remarkable physical manifestations” (Carrington 1920:vi).

There were important consequences. As I have documented before (Alvarado 1993:273–274), Carrington became a defender of Palladino, providing much publicity for the medium. Furthermore, Carrington brought the medium to the United States in 1909, something that generated many controversies (Carrington 1954).

The book being reviewed here also has excerpts presenting negative and positive views from Frank Podmore and Cesare Lombroso. The excerpt by Podmore (pp. 193–201) comes from his well-known book *Modern Spiritualism* (Podmore 1902:Vol. 2:198–203), a study showing much skepticism to physical phenomena. In addition to some general background, Podmore stated:

Finally, if we decide to reject the evidence in favour of Eusapia’s supernormal powers, that decision is in the last analysis justified The justification is that the results attained . . . are not sufficiently free from ambiguity to weigh against the presumption derived . . . from an examination of all previous evidence upon the subject. (p. 200)

Cesare Lombroso’s discussion (pp. 203–239), including personal experiences with the medium, was taken from his book *After Death—*

What? (1909). There is no discussion in the anthology of the importance of Lombroso's acceptance of her phenomena, which included publicizing her with his fame in psychiatry and criminology, and bringing her to the attention of others who then conducted many séances with her. For example, the first major investigation of her mediumship, conducted in Milan, stated:



Taking into consideration the testimony of Professor Cesare Lombroso about the topic of mediumistic phenomena that occur through Mme. Eusapia Paladino, the undersigned gathered here in Milan to do with her a series of studies in order to verify these phenomena by submitting them to experiments and observations as rigorous as possible. (Aksakof et al. 1893:39)

Cesare Lombroso

But Lombroso was also important in another way. His writings about Palladino spread a “mixed” perspective of mediumship, also held by a few others (e.g., Morselli 1908). This view consisted of the idea that Palladino suffered from hysteria but also showed genuine physical phenomena such as movement of objects and materializations (Lombroso 1892, 1909), a topic I discuss with a colleague elsewhere (Alvarado & Biondi in press).

In the excerpt presented in the anthology, Lombroso describes many examples of phenomena. Here is one of them:

At Naples, in 1895 . . . , I again tried these experiments in a room in our inn chosen expressly for the purpose. And here, in full light, we saw a great curtain which separated our room from an alcove adjoining (and which was more than three feet distant from the medium) suddenly move out toward me, envelop me, and wrap me close. Nor was I able to free myself from it except with great difficulty. A dish of flour had been put in the little alcove room, at a distance of more than four and a half feet from the medium, who, in her trance, had thought, or at any rate spoken, of sprinkling some of the flour in our faces. When light was made, it was found that the dish was bottom side up with the flour under it. This was dry, to be sure, but coagulated like gelatine When the lights had been turned on, and we were all ready to go, a great wardrobe that stood in the alcove room, about six and a half feet away from us, was seen advancing slowly toward us. It seemed like a huge pachyderm that was proceeding in leisurely fashion to attack us, and looked as if pushed forward by someone. (pp. 217–218)

Perhaps the most dramatic one was the séance in which Lombroso's deceased mother was said to appear. He wrote, after being told she would come:

I saw detach itself from the curtain a rather short figure like that of my mother, veiled, which made the complete circuit of the table until it came to me, and whispered to me words heard by many, but not by me, who am somewhat hard of hearing . . . I was almost beside myself with emotion and begged her to repeat her words. She did so, saying, "*Cesar, fio mio!*" (I admit at once that this was not her habitual expression, which was, when she met me, "*mio fio!*"; but the mistakes in expression made by the apparitions of the deceased are well-known, and how they borrow from the language of the psychic and of the experimenters), and, removing the veil from her face for a moment, she gave me a kiss.

After that day the shade of my mother (alas! only too truly a shadow) reappeared at least twenty times during Eusapia's seances while the medium was in trance; but her form was enveloped in the curtain of the psychic's cabinet, her head barely appearing while she would say, "My son, my treasure," kissing my head and my lips with her lips, which seemed to me dry and ligneous like her tongue. (pp. 224–225).

Furthermore, the book also includes a summary (pp. 241–253) of a biographical article written by Paola Lombroso (1907b) originally published in Italian (P. Lombroso 1907a). This is a good selection for the anthology because it includes much personal and anecdotal information about the medium's personality.

Finally, the anthology includes some articles published about Palladino's performances during her visit to New York, published in issues of the newspapers *The New York World*, *The New York Times*, and *The New York Herald* (pp. 255–284). All this illustrates the complexity of this case, particularly in the New York séances. In fact, I would argue that this is an episode of the medium's career that deserves further study, particularly using the New York newspapers. I once copied from microfilm (before the advent of modern PDF databases) everything I could find about Palladino's New York séances from 1909–1910 issues of *The New York Times* and can attest to the complexity of the discussions. But one must remember, as seen in the current anthology, that there were several other newspapers at the time in New York covering the séances as well.

Evaluation

I have argued throughout this Essay Review that the anthology is problematic in many ways. To start, the book clearly needs more contextual information to introduce the reader to Palladino, since not all potential readers can be expected to know much about her. This information could have been provided with an initial essay presenting an overview of the medium's career, including biography, phenomena typical of the séances,

controversies (evidence for fraud), and other aspects of this important mediumship case.

It would have also helped to have short introductions to each chapter with information about its authors. After all, not everyone today knows who Barrett, Carrington, de Vesme, Feilding, Lombroso, Podmore, and Venzano were, to name a few. Similarly, the book would have been improved if a bibliography of published primary and secondary literature about Palladino had been included.

It would also have been helpful to readers if essays appearing latter in the volume, such as those of Barrett and Podmore, would have been placed at the beginning, since they present more general perspectives. The same may be said about the summary of the Paola Lombroso essay, consisting of biographical notes about the medium.

While the anthology could have been better-crafted, particularly for those with little background on the topic, it still has much to offer. Several of its chapters present useful information about Palladino that will inform readers about her phenomena and other aspects of her career. This includes the work of Lombroso, Venzano, and Morselli, among others. Similarly, readers will learn about the opinions of Carrington, Baggally, and Feilding, aspects of the New York séances, and about doubts and controversies such as those discussed by Podmore. All in all, within the above-mentioned limitations, this anthology can assist readers to obtain information about the legendary Eusapia Palladino.

Notes

- ¹ The main theoretical concept I am referring to is the idea of biophysical forces coming out of the body of mediums to produce physical phenomena (Alvarado 2006). Both Morselli (1908) and Carrington (1909) are examples of theoreticians of this sort of material. There is much about instruments and controls in Courtier (1908) and Feilding, Baggally, and Carrington (1909).
- ² The article (Venzano 1907) is not only in the August issue of the journal, as indicated in the anthology (p. 41), but also in the September issue. It is a two-part article.

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