

‘Trick’, ‘Manipulation’ and ‘Farce’: Albert Moll’s Critique of Occultism

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Abstract: In July 1925, the psychiatrist Albert Moll appeared before the district court in Berlin-Schöneberg charged with having defamed the medium Maria Vollhardt (alias Rudloff) in his 1924 book *Der Spiritismus* [*Spiritism*]. Supported by some of Berlin’s most prominent occultists, the plaintiff – the medium’s husband – argued that Moll’s use of terms such as ‘trick’, ‘manipulation’ and ‘farce’ in reference to Vollhardt’s phenomena had been libellous. In the three-part trial that followed, however, Moll’s putative affront to the medium – of which he was eventually acquitted – was overshadowed, on the one hand, by a debate over the scientific status of parapsychology, and on the other, by the question of who – parapsychologists, occultists, psychiatrists or jurists – was entitled to claim epistemic authority over the occult. This paper will use the Rudloff–Moll trial as a means of examining Moll’s critique of occultism, not only as it stood in the mid-1920s, but also as it had developed since the 1880s. It will also provide insight into the views of Germany’s occultists and parapsychologists, who argued that their legitimate bid for scientific credibility was hindered by *Dunkelmänner* [*obscurantists*] such as Albert Moll.

Keywords: Boundary Work, Albert Moll, Occultism, Parapsychology, Rudloff–Moll Trial, Maria Vollhardt

Introduction

In July 1925, the psychiatrist Albert Moll appeared before the district court in Berlin-Schöneberg charged with having defamed the *apport* medium Maria Vollhardt – pseudonym of Maria Rudloff.¹ The plaintiff, Hermann Rudloff – the medium’s husband – claimed that the defendant’s use of terms such as ‘trick’, ‘manipulation’ and ‘farce’ in his 1924 book, *Der Spiritismus* [*Spiritism*] – a brief section of which, entitled ‘*Das Apportmedium*’ [*The Apport Medium*], described a sitting with Frau Vollhardt – had

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¹ The term ‘apport’ refers to the paranormal transference of objects from one place to another or the appearance of articles from unknown sources in the presence of a medium. Maria Vollhardt specialised in apports, including hoops, branches and flowers.

been libellous.² While Moll had not explicitly used the words ‘deception’ or ‘fraud’ in his depiction of the medium’s phenomena, Rudloff maintained that these accusations had nonetheless been clear, causing profound damage to his wife’s reputation.³ He was supported in this contention by some of Berlin’s most prominent parapsychologists, several of whom had been present at the experiment Moll’s book described. These parapsychologists claimed that the defendant, mistaking personal attack for scientific critique, was responsible for the coarse tone of debate which now plagued their field.⁴ Presented with this argument, the presiding judge, one Herr Bornemann, was required to decide whether Moll’s portrayal of Frau Vollhardt met the criteria for defamation as set out under Sections 186 and 187 of the Republic’s penal code.⁵ As Judge Bornemann soon discovered, however, the Rudloff–Moll case was rather more complex than it first appeared. In a context in which the reality of the central phenomena, that is, *apports*, materialisation and stigmata, were debated and in which the issues of epistemic authority and expertise over these phenomena were highly contested, ascertaining whether the outspoken defendant was guilty of defaming the medium or of overstepping the acceptable bounds of critique within the nascent field of parapsychology would not be straightforward.⁶

Moll’s annotated reproduction in *Der Spiritismus* of a protocol derived from Friedrich Schwab’s book *Teleplasma und Telekinese* [*Teleplasm and Telekinesis*] (1923) had provided a thoroughgoing critique of an experiment conducted by Berlin’s leading occultists – including the doctors Carl Bruck and Paul Süner, members of the *Ärztliche Gesellschaft für parapsychische Forschung* [*Medical Society for Parapsychological Research*] – on 11 April 1923.⁷ In part, this critique sought to demonstrate the manner in which Vollhardt’s phenomena, in particular the appearance of wooden hoops on the arms of those acting as her controls, could be achieved manually, that is, through skilful ‘trick’ and ‘manipulation’. With reference to both the art of conjuring and the psychology of observation, Moll argued that in this instance the medium had most probably slipped the hoops onto her arms before control of her hands had been established, but after the room had been darkened.⁸ He maintained, furthermore, that the transfer of the hoops onto the arms of Vollhardt’s controls had undoubtedly occurred as she underwent the

² ‘Prozeß-Urteil Moll–Rudloff’, *Psychische Studien*, 52 (1925), 550–8; Albert Moll, *Der Spiritismus*, 2nd edn (Stuttgart: Franckh’sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1924), 36–48.

³ ‘Prozeß-Urteil Moll–Rudloff’, *op. cit.* (note 2), 552.

⁴ Albert Moll, *Ein Leben als Arzt der Seele: Erinnerungen* (Dresden: Carl Reissner, 1936), 106. On Moll’s confusion of personal attack with scientific critique, see Walther Kröner, ‘Epilog zur Moll-Polemik’, *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie*, 3 (1926), 160–9.

⁵ ‘Prozeß-Urteil Moll–Rudloff’, *op. cit.* (note 2), 552. The *Strafgesetzbuch* states the following: ‘Section 186: Defamation: Whosoever asserts or disseminates a fact related to another person which may defame him or negatively affect public opinion about him, shall, unless this fact can be proven to be true, be liable to imprisonment of not more than one year or a fine and, if the offence was committed publicly or through the dissemination of written materials (Section 11 (3)), to imprisonment of not more than two years or a fine. Section 187: Intentional defamation: Whosoever intentionally and knowingly asserts or disseminates an untrue fact related to another person, which may defame him or negatively affect public opinion about him or endanger his creditworthiness shall be liable to imprisonment of not more than two years or a fine, and, if the act was committed publicly, in a meeting or through dissemination of written materials (Section 11 (3)) to imprisonment of not more than five years or a fine’.

⁶ ‘Prozeß-Urteil Moll–Rudloff’, *op. cit.* (note 2), 552, 554–5. Note that, like Moll, I will use the terms ‘occultist’ and ‘parapsychologist’ as well as ‘occultism’ and ‘parapsychology’ interchangeably in this paper.

⁷ Friederich Schwab, *Teleplasma und Telekinese: Ergebnisse meiner zweijährigen Experimentalsitzungen mit dem Berliner Medium Maria Vollhart* (Berlin: Pyramidenverlag, 1923); Moll, *op. cit.* (note 2), 37–40.

⁸ Moll, *ibid.*, 38, 40–1.

convulsions that routinely accompanied the production of her mediumistic phenomena.⁹ To demonstrate the ease with which Vollhardt could have escaped her controls Moll also provided several illustrations, derived from contemporary works in the field of parapsychology, in which the mediums pictured successfully freed their hands from those who were holding them.¹⁰

The other, and perhaps more significant, purpose of Moll's critique, however, was to highlight the profound, even 'farcical', lack of scientific rigour exhibited by Berlin's foremost parapsychologists. From the opening pages of *Der Spiritismus*, Moll's desire to undermine the scientific pretensions of this community had been clear.¹¹ In the introductory section, he noted that the term 'occultism' had, in recent times, been used to refer to the practice of spiritualism: a belief system based on the idea that spirits are able to communicate with human beings.¹² Moll wrote that it appeared to him that some people chose to use the terms 'occultism' and 'parapsychology' because they did not want to admit to being spiritualists.¹³ Thus, at the beginning of his second chapter, Moll declared his intention of providing descriptions of some of the experiments held by these putative occultists; such depictions, he stated, would make the true – that is spiritualist – nature of these sittings clear.¹⁴ The heavily annotated protocol at the centre of the Rudloff–Moll trial, which appeared in the seventh chapter of Moll's book, clearly served this purpose. Full of righteous indignation, Moll wrote: 'the experiments were made under such incredibly thoughtless conditions that one can only speak of a farce. The medium was not searched beforehand. . . . That is what the Berlin occultists call science!'¹⁵ While Schwab had published this same protocol believing that its verification by the doctors and psychiatrists who had been in attendance made it significant, Moll commented snidely that its true importance lay in its documentation of the mental state of Berlin's leading occultists. He stated, 'I have only used the experiment and my remarks about it therefore because they quickly cast light on the mental state of the leaders of Berlin occultism. The trick is so crude that the whole case only deserves consideration because of the frame of mind of the occultists.'¹⁶

Following three days (4, 8 and 11 July 1925) of arguments and expert testimony, which included close analysis of *Der Spiritismus*, and long discussions about the scientific validity of the 11 April 1923 sitting, Judge Bornemann found Moll not guilty of defaming Maria Vollhardt, ordering the litigant to pay the cost of the proceedings. In his lengthy justification of this ruling, Bornemann stressed several of the key issues in deciding the defendant's lack of culpability. The first was that Moll's sharp critique had essentially not been directed at Frau Vollhardt but at those who had participated in the sitting, in

⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 43, 45, 46.

¹¹ This point was made by Carl Bruck in his introduction to what he claimed was a more accurate protocol of the 11 April 1923 sitting with Frau Vollhardt. See, Carl Bruck, 'Ein Protokoll', *Psychische Studien*, 51 (1924), 481–7.

¹² Moll, *op. cit.* (note 2), 4, 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 9.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 20.

¹⁵ 'Die Versuche sind unter so unerhört leichtfertigen Bedingungen angestellt, daß man nur von einer Farce sprechen kann. Das Medium ist vorher nicht untersucht worden . . . Das nennen die Berliner Okkultisten Wissenschaft!' *Ibid.*, 42. Translations of quotations are the author's unless stated otherwise.

¹⁶ 'Ich habe den Versuch und meine Bemerkungen dazu nur deshalb gebracht, weil sie blitzartig den Geisteszustand von Führern des Berliner Okkultismus beleuchten. Der Trick ist so plump, daß der ganze Fall nur wegen der Geistesverfassung der Okkultisten Beachtung verdient'. *Ibid.*, 42.

particular Carl Bruck and Paul Süner, who had acted as the medium's controls.¹⁷ In Moll's opinion, these men had not exercised the scientific rigour or objectivity necessary to exclude either sensory deception or fraud from this experiment; a problem that, he maintained, was typical in occult circles.¹⁸ Furthermore, the use of the word 'farce', as Bornemann indicated, did not refer to the medium but to the conditions under which the experiment had been conducted. It was therefore far more an attack on the credibility of Berlin's occultists than it was on the reputation of the medium.¹⁹

The second issue highlighted by Bornemann was the applicability of Sections 186 and 187 of the penal code to this case. While the pertinence of Section 187 was dependent on the defendant disseminating 'untrue facts' about another person, under Section 186 it was sufficient that the 'facts' disseminated were not proven to be true.²⁰ In the Rudloff–Moll case, this meant that it was necessary for the judge to decide whether the 'trick' and 'manipulation' claimed by the defendant, which he had stated as fact rather than hypothesis, could be established given the evidence in hand.²¹ For this reason, he was required carefully to assess the sitting of 11 April using evidence provided, not only by those who had participated in it, but also by expert witnesses in areas such as occultism, conjuring and psychology. This task was complicated, however, by Moll's assertion that the phenomena that Vollhardt claimed to produce, in particular *apport* and materialisation, were scientifically impossible. As Bornemann noted, Moll's use of expert witnesses to provide evidence for this claim necessitated entry into the broader scientific dispute over whether occult events and phenomena were possible, impossible or already proven.²² According to the judge, the exposition of this debate served to demonstrate that, in contrast to many other scientific fields, a fundamental opposition existed within the field of parapsychology between those who were sceptical of all occult experiments and theories and those who wholeheartedly believed in them without compelling scientific evidence. After having reviewed all this material, however, Bornemann found himself concluding that the accusation of deception in the sitting of 11 April 1923 could be neither proven nor disproven. This meant that Moll's statements did not qualify as 'untrue facts' and he could not be charged with defamation under Section 187.²³ The conditions for defamation under Section 186, in contrast, had been fulfilled because the medium's deception could not be definitively proven. As the judge made clear, however, Moll was protected from prosecution under Section 186 by Section 193, which dealt with fair comment.²⁴ The parts of the defendant's book that were in question, he stated, were within the realm of acceptable scientific critique.²⁵

¹⁷ 'Prozeß-Urteil Moll–Rudloff', *op. cit.* (note 2), 552.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 552.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 552.

²⁰ *Ibid.*, 552–3.

²¹ The plaintiff argued that Moll had stated as fact that the medium had pushed the wooden hoops onto the arms of her controls. This, he said, amounted to accusing her of deception. Bornemann was thus concerned with establishing whether such deception could be proven. See, 'Prozeß-Urteil Moll–Rudloff', *op. cit.* (note 2), 552.

²² *Ibid.*, 554.

²³ *Ibid.*, 557.

²⁴ §193 reads: 'Fair comment; defence: Critical opinions about scientific, artistic or commercial achievements, utterances made in order to exercise or protect rights or to safeguard legitimate interests, as well as remonstrations and reprimands by superiors to their subordinates, official reports or judgements by a civil servant, and similar cases shall only entail liability to the extent that the existence of an insult results from the form of the utterance or the circumstances under which it was made'.

²⁵ 'Prozeß-Urteil Moll–Rudloff', *op. cit.* (note 2), 557–8.

Following this clarification, Bornemann considered two further questions; these related first to Moll's decision to ignore information that contradicted his claims, and second to his ostensible insult of the medium (Section 185).²⁶ On the basis of Schwab's protocol, Moll had given a talk at the *Berliner forensisch-medizinische Vereinigung* [Berlin Medical–Forensic Club] in October 1923 in which he claimed to replicate, via a series of conjuring tricks, some of Frau Vollhardt's phenomena. Approximately two weeks after this performance, he received a telephone call from Dr Bruck, who had been one of the controls at the disputed sitting. Bruck told Moll that Schwab's protocol contained errors, including, most significantly, the contention that the control of the medium's hands had been established only after the lights were extinguished.²⁷ Despite this information, Moll reiterated his claims of 'trick' and 'manipulation' and re-printed Schwab's protocol in *Der Spiritismus*. He claimed that Bruck's failure to put his objections in writing gave him the right to ignore this information. While Bornemann felt that this probably did constitute 'insult in the circumstances', the expert witnesses' division on whether Moll could be said to have acted properly or professionally did not allow him to rule with any certainty on this issue.²⁸

The last question on which Bornemann had to make a decision was whether Moll's use of the terms 'trick' and 'manipulation' constituted an insult to the medium, given that they could be read as intimating fraud (Section 185). Under other circumstances, the judge claimed, these words would certainly meet the criteria. In this context, however, where the defendant was talking about manual manipulation, the word 'manipulation' appeared to be synonymous with 'movement' and the word 'trick' with 'artificial'.²⁹ Furthermore, as the judge pointed out, occult and spiritualist literature also frequently used this same nomenclature; even occultists, it appeared, held that mediums might, on some occasions, create their phenomena artificially. In this instance, therefore, it was the judge's opinion that neither of these terms could be considered defamatory.³⁰

In spite of Bornemann's thoroughgoing explanation of his decision, the outcome of the Rudloff–Moll trial proved disappointing for all those involved: Rudloff continued to believe that his wife had been unjustly maligned by Moll; the occultists Bruck and Süner, at whom Moll's critique appeared primarily to be aimed, complained not just that the defendant had gone beyond the bounds of acceptable critique, but that their nascent science had also not been given adequate opportunity to defend itself against Moll's unwarranted attacks;³¹ while Moll, for his part, disputed the grounds of his acquittal under Section 193, contending that it was not possible to commit libel, as he had been found guilty of doing under Section 186, in a context in which the reality of the phenomena in question remained open.³² Given this widespread dissatisfaction with the verdict, it is perhaps unsurprising that the Rudloff–Moll case appeared twice more before the courts, in December 1925 and in September 1926. Each new appeal added to the bitterness of the fiery polemics

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 558. §185 states: 'Insult: An insult shall be punished with imprisonment of not more than one year or a fine and, if the insult is committed by means of an assault, with imprisonment of not more than two years or a fine'.

²⁷ Albert Moll, *Psychologie und Charakterologie der Okkultisten* (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1929), 67.

²⁸ 'Prozeß-Urteil Moll–Rudloff', *op. cit.* (note 2), 558.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 558.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 558.

³¹ E. Dreher, 'Nachklänge zum 'Okkultisten-Prozeß'', *Psychische Studien*, 52 (1925), 545–50: 545, 548.

³² Eberhard Buchner, 'Der Mollprozeß in zweiter Auflage', *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie*, 3 (1926), 154–9: 155.

between those who sided with the prosecution, that is, Germany's parapsychologists, and those who supported the defence, that is, Moll and others critical of so-called scientific occultism. In both instances, however, and much to the chagrin of his opponents within the parapsychological community, Moll was acquitted of all charges.

Clearly, in all three iterations of this trial, the defendant's putative affront to the medium was not the central issue; that question was continually overshadowed, on the one hand, by debate over the scientific status of parapsychology, and on the other, by the question of who – parapsychologists, occultists, psychiatrists, or jurists – was entitled to claim epistemic authority over the occult. Thus, it seems that the Rudloff–Moll trial provides insight, not just into a petty personal dispute, but also into the largely intractable problems surrounding parapsychology's bid for scientific status in the early twentieth century, as well as the efforts of other disciplines, including psychology, psychiatry and law, to claim the field as their own. It also offers insight into the intellectual world and the intellectual development of its central protagonist, Albert Moll. His life-long interest in occultism saw him become one of the most important, albeit most critical, figures within the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century German debate over spiritualism, occultism, psychical research and parapsychology.

It is my intention in this paper to use the Rudloff–Moll trial as a means of examining Moll's critique of occultism, not only as it stood in the mid-1920s, but also as it had developed since the 1880s.³³ The opinions that Moll expressed in the course of this trial, as he himself told the court, were the culmination of four decades of observation and experimentation in the field of occultism.³⁴ Indeed, I will argue that his use of the terms at the centre of this case, that is, 'trick', 'manipulation' and 'farce', reflected his slow evolution from a psychological to a pathological model of occultism; that is, from an understanding of occultism that sought to explain it in terms of inattention and observational error to one that attempted to explain it in terms of both the flawed scientific objectivity and mental pathology of its proponents. This trial, then, in which Moll questioned the mental state of Berlin's leading parapsychologists, can be read as marking the transition between, or fusion of, these approaches; a process that was perhaps only fully realised in his 1929 book *Psychologie und Charakterologie der Okkultisten* [*Psychology and Characterology of the Occultists*].

This article will also demonstrate the manner in which the subjects of Moll's critique, who published furiously in periodicals such as *Psychische Studien* [*Psychical Studies*] and *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie* [*Journal for Parapsychology*] during the Rudloff–Moll affair, mounted a defence against his psychological and psychopathological attacks;

³³ Occult trials have proven to be useful sources for historians working on both the history of occultism and on criminal justice in the German context. Of particular note is the work of Corinna Treitel and Benjamin Carter Hett on the early twentieth-century trial of the medium Anna Rothe. Treitel has discussed this case as part of her exploration of the relationship between occultism and modernity in Germany, while Hett has considered the Rothe trial in his cultural–historical analysis of criminal trials in Imperial Berlin. Both scholars considered this trial as a manifestation of liberal despair over public credulity and the popularisation of science. See Corinna Treitel, 'The culture of knowledge in the metropolis of science: spiritualism and liberalism in Fin-de-Siècle Berlin', in Constantin Goschler (ed.), *Wissenschaft und Öffentlichkeit in Berlin* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner, 2000), 127–54; Benjamin Carter-Hett, *Death in the Tiergarten: Murder and Criminal Justice in the Kaiser's Berlin* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2004), 153–5. I have tended to approach occult trials in another way, using them to tease out the epistemic and methodological issues surrounding parapsychology's bid for scientific status. See, Heather Wolfram, *The Stepchildren of Science: Psychical Research and Parapsychology in Germany, c. 1870–1939* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2009), especially Chapter Five. In this paper, however, I take a slightly different approach and use the trial to gain deeper insight into one man's critique.

³⁴ Buchner, *op. cit.* (note 32), 155; Kröner, *op. cit.* (note 4), 161.

turning Moll's own past as a champion of hypnosis and his 'grubby' psychopathological tactics against him. Moll, they contended, as a participant in the *Hypnose-Kampf* [*Hypnosis Battle*] of the late nineteenth century, should have some appreciation of the difficulties of establishing disputed scientific phenomena.³⁵ Materialisation and telekinesis, they maintained, stood in the same relationship to the science of the early twentieth century as hypnosis had stood to the science of the *fin de siècle*.³⁶ Furthermore, in response to Moll's psychopathological attacks on their credibility, they argued that *Dunkelmänner* such as Albert Moll felt it necessary to hinder parapsychology's legitimate bid for scientific status as a result of compulsions that could only be understood by considering their deep-seated neuroses and inferiority complexes.³⁷

Thus, in this article, the Rudloff–Moll trial and the literature it produced will act as lenses through which to assess Moll's critique of occultism and its evolution over several decades, as well as the responses of his opponents to his brand of aggressive scientific discourse. In adopting this approach I hope to build on the work of Barbara Wolf-Braun, who has described Moll's mobilisation of naturalistic explanations for paranormal phenomena during the 1890s as an act of sanitisation, that is, as an attempt to maintain a critical distance between the emergent fields in which he had a professional stake, such as psychology and experimental and therapeutic hypnosis, and the taint of occultism.³⁸ Like Wolf-Braun, I will maintain that Moll's critique of occultism was motivated by the epistemic and professional contest that occurred between the emerging disciplines of psychology and parapsychology during the Kaiserreich. Using the Rudloff–Moll trial, however, I will extend Wolf-Braun's analysis to show how this contest developed during the Weimar years, demonstrating the manner in which its proponents, responding to developments within their fields and ongoing debate with their enemies, became increasingly dedicated to a form of boundary work that sought to undermine the authority and credibility of opponents, both through their re-subjectification as critical scientific observers and through their psycho-pathologisation.³⁹

The article will begin by focusing on Moll's accusations of 'trick' and 'manipulation' in the 11 April 1923 sitting he described in his book, and his demonstrations of occult phenomena in the courtroom, as a means of reflecting on the development of his early psychological analyses of the occult. In the second section, I will consider the contention of 'farce' during the trial as a way of examining Moll's increasing reliance on pathological models of occultism during the early twentieth century. Finally, I will turn briefly to the defence mounted by Berlin's occult community, who sought to undermine the credibility of Moll's critiques of their aspiring science by using his own tactics against him. In adopting this approach I hope to achieve some balance between Moll's own view of

³⁵ Christoph Schröder, 'Pseudo-Entlarvung: Ein kritischer Beitrag zur "Medien"-Entlarvungs-Tatik (Teil C)', *Psychische Studien*, 51 (1924), 664–6.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, 666.

³⁷ Kröner, *op. cit.* (note 4), 167. For a more detailed analysis of how such pathologisation strategies were used against deviant epistemologies like parapsychology, see Andreas Sommer's article in this special issue.

³⁸ Barbara Wolf-Braun, 'Parapsychologische und psychiatrische Konstruktionen des Mediumismus um 1900', in Marcus Hahn and Erhard Schüttpelz (eds), *Trancemedien und Neue Medien um 1900* (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2009), 150; see also Barbara Wolf-Braun (ed.), *Medizin, Okkultismus und Parapsychologie im 19. und frühen 20. Jahrhundert* (Wetzlar: GWAB Verlag, 2009).

³⁹ The term 'boundary work' and related ones such as 'epistemic contest' and 'sanitisation' are derived from recent works in the sociology of knowledge and science, which seek to describe the manner in which borders between fields of knowledge are created, demarcated, contested, and secured. See Thomas F. Gieryn, *Cultural Boundaries of Science: Credibility on the Line* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999).

himself as a kind of scientific St George, and that of Germany's parapsychologists who tended to demonise Moll and those, including Max Dessoir and Albert Hellwig, who chose to support him during the Rudloff–Moll trial.

'Trick' and 'Manipulation': Psychological Responses to Occultism

During the first iteration of the Rudloff–Moll trial in July 1925, the psychiatrist and aspiring parapsychologist Paul Sünner took the stand in support of the plaintiff, Hermann Rudloff. Sünner, who had acted as one of Frau Vollhardt's controls during the 11 April 1923 sitting, testified under oath and in contradiction of Schwab's version of events, which Moll had used to mount his attack on Berlin's occultists, that he had taken hold of the medium's hand while the room was still light and that he had maintained his grip on this appendage throughout the darkened sitting; the hand with which he gripped Frau Vollhardt was also that on which the 'materialised' hoop later appeared.⁴⁰ If, as one of the occultists commentating on this trial argued, one did not believe that Sünner had perjured himself, how did one explain the appearance of the hoop on his arm, other than through materialisation? In response to this problem, Moll, who had claimed that the medium's phenomena were a result of 'trick' and 'manipulation', did not attempt to cast doubt on Sünner's truthfulness but sought instead to invalidate his testimony and that of the other control, Carl Bruck, through a piece of courtroom theatre.⁴¹

Blindfolding the judge, Herr Bornemann, Moll took hold of one of his subject's hands with both of his, pressing all three appendages onto a table.⁴² Maintaining the same pressure on the judge's hand, he used one of his hands to pick up a beech tree branch that had been hidden on the floor and laid it on the table; following this he replaced his hand upon that of Herr Bornemann, where it remained until after the blindfold was removed.⁴³ The judge, as he subsequently told the court, had not perceived the removal of Moll's hand from his own during the experiment and was thus astounded to see the branch upon the table.⁴⁴ Moll also made clear in his testimony that he had demonstrated this and similar tricks at a small number of clubs and societies throughout Berlin.⁴⁵ This was significant, he maintained, because one of these events had been attended by Dr Vieregge, a participant in the 11 April 1923 sitting. According to Moll, Dr Vieregge had not been able to figure out how the trick was carried out even though he examined the hoops Moll had used for close to an hour; in the end Moll had had to explain it to him.⁴⁶ While those occultists who supported Rudloff were less than impressed by the defendant's theatrical coup or his denigration of Dr Vieregge's intellect, this did not stop Moll from using these same experiments in subsequent proceedings,⁴⁷ in order to show how easily a medium's controls, in this case Sünner and Bruck, could be made to fall victim to a deception of the senses.⁴⁸

⁴⁰ Dreher, *op. cit.* (note 31), 549.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 549.

⁴² 'Prozeß-Urteil Moll–Rudloff', *op. cit.* (note 2), 554.

⁴³ Dreher, *op. cit.* (note 31), 549.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 549.

⁴⁵ Moll had sought to debunk Vollhardt's phenomena at talks held at the Berlin Forensic-Medicine Club (26 October 1923) and the Berlin Urania (6 November 1923); see, Moll, *op. cit.* (note 27), 67.

⁴⁶ 'Prozeß-Urteil Moll–Rudloff', *op. cit.* (note 2), 554; Moll, *op. cit.* (note 2), 42.

⁴⁷ On Moll's experiment with District Court Judge Pusch in the second edition of the Rudloff–Moll trial; see Kröner, *op. cit.* (note 4), 161.

⁴⁸ Dreher, *op. cit.* (note 31), 549.

Sensory deception, along with distraction and expectation, were the central explanatory tools in Moll's initial attempts to come to terms with the occult in the closing decades of the nineteenth century. It was during the late 1880s and early 1890s that Moll first became interested in spiritualism, mesmerism and other forms of occult phenomena, including clairvoyance. According to Moll, his curiosity had been inspired, not only by spiritualist sittings in the resort town of Spindelmühle in 1888, but also during his time as a young doctor in Paris, where he had visited a wide range of occult practitioners.⁴⁹ While Moll admitted that he was often strongly influenced by these strange experiences and could not initially explain them, he maintained that further deliberation on the problem always revealed the cause of the phenomena he had witnessed.⁵⁰ In the Spindelmühle case, for example, where he had been involved in table rapping and turning, Moll's close examination of the table convinced him that its ostensibly purposeful movements had been achieved through manual means.⁵¹ In another instance in which a table communicated his name and other information about him that was unknown to others in the room, Moll discovered that he himself had provided this information through the unconscious pressure he had exerted on the table with his hands.⁵² Once Moll returned to Berlin, he continued his study of this field by attending the spiritualist club *Psyche* and visiting many of the city's most famous mediums and conjurers. In so doing, the young physician became ever more scientifically preoccupied with the phenomena of occultism and its habitual bedfellow, hypnosis; a preoccupation that from the late 1880s Moll was able to indulge in the *Berliner Gesellschaft für Experimental-Psychologie* [*Berlin Society for Experimental Psychology*].⁵³ It was as part of this society that Moll and his friend, the psychologist and philosopher Max Dessoir, both of whom were involved in efforts to promote the psychological and medical use of hypnosis during the 1880s and 1890s, published some of their first efforts at a psychology of occult belief. Unlike experimental psychologists, such as Wilhelm Wundt, who maintained that all occult phenomena resulted from fraud and were therefore unworthy of scientific analysis, Moll and Dessoir felt compelled to explore the psychological reasons that so many seemingly rational people were convinced of the reality of such phenomena.⁵⁴ Building on the work of the physiologist Wilhelm Preyer and the psychologist Hugo Münsterberg, who had attempted to explain thought transference as the result of unconscious physical cues, the two men looked to the art of conjuring and the psychology of observation for answers.⁵⁵

In the first incarnation of the Rudloff–Moll trial, many of those who acted as witnesses for the defence did so in their capacity as experts on conjuring, arguing that the hoop

⁴⁹ Moll, *op. cit.* (note 4), 92–4.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 94.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 92–3.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 92–4.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 94. See also Adolf Kurzweg, 'Die Geschichte der Berliner "Gesellschaft für Experimental-Psychologie" mit besonderer Berücksichtigung ihrer Ausgangssituation und des Wirkens von Max Dessoir' (unpublished MD thesis: FU Berlin, 1976).

⁵⁴ Barbara Wolf-Braun, 'Zur Rezeptionsgeschichte der Parapsychologie im Rahmen der akademischen Psychologie: Die Stellungnahmen von Wilhelm Wundt (1832–1920) und Hugo Münsterberg (1863–1916)', in Jürgen Jahnke *et al.* (eds), *Psychologiegeschichte—Beziehungen zu Philosophie und Grenzgebieten* (Munich: Profil Verlag, 1998), 410; Heather Wolfram, 'Parapsychology on the Couch: The Psychology of Occult Belief in Germany, c. 1870–1939', *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 42 (2006), 237–60; 241–2.

⁵⁵ Wilhelm Preyer, 'Telepathie und Geistesherlei in England', *Deutsche Rundschau*, 26 (1886), 30–51; Wolf-Braun, *op. cit.* (note 54), 408–9. The approach adopted by Moll and Dessoir had much in common with that of Joseph Jastrow in the United States; see Deborah Coon, 'Testing the Limits of Sense and Science: American Experimental Psychologists Combat Spiritualism, 1880–1920', *American Psychologist*, 47 (1992), 143–51.

phenomenon, as Moll had maintained in *Der Spiritismus*, was a trick well known by stage magicians.⁵⁶ Moll's expertise in this area had begun to grow during the late 1880s and early 1890s, when the spiritualist Dr Egbert Müller introduced him, not only to a number of Berlin's best mediums, but also to escape artists and conjurers, whom the young physician was able to study closely.⁵⁷ The tricks he learnt from these performers allowed Moll, so he claimed, to feign many of the most common spiritualist phenomena. Perhaps the simplest and most effective of these tricks was the freeing of the hands from one's controls. In 1892, Moll explained this mediumistic manipulation in detail, responding to a publication by Cesare Lombroso in which the criminologist claimed to have witnessed some significant physical phenomena in the presence of the medium Eusapia Paladino. As Moll explained, while the medium may have linked her fingers with those of her controls in full light, once the room was darkened it was a fairly simple matter for her to free one of her hands without alerting the control; this person's fingers would be brought in contact with those of the control on the medium's other side.⁵⁸ This was more than just dexterity, Moll claimed, it was an understanding that in the dark, one's sense of touch and perceptive abilities are not as acute as they are in full light; a fact that was confirmed for Moll as he watched some of the best observers he knew fall victim to this trick.⁵⁹

While testimony about the manner in which this sleight of hand was achieved was no doubt central to Moll's defence in his July 1925 trial, both he and Dessoir had become aware as early as the 1890s that the art of conjuring and the psychology of observation were by no means mutually exclusive; indeed this was evident in Moll's description of the freeing of Paladino's hands, with its reference to the effect of darkness on the senses. This recognition had been made even more explicit, however, in 1890 when Dessoir, who appeared as an expert witness for the defence in the Rudloff–Moll trial, published an article in the political monthly *Nord und Süd* [*North and South*], in which he used an exploration of conjuring in order to cast light on spiritualist belief. Dessoir maintained that the conjurer and, by association, the spiritualist medium, were less reliant on their manual dexterity than they were on their understanding of the psychology of association and imitation, which allowed them to distract and deceive their audiences.⁶⁰ Dessoir wrote, 'In the majority of cases, the observer is deceived neither through actual sleight of hand nor through deception of the senses; rather, in a more refined manner he causes himself to be deceived through lapses of attention and errors of interpretation.'⁶¹ Moll, for his part, concentrated on the difficulties of making accurate observations in conditions in which there was inadequate light and in which distraction and expectation played an important role. In considering these problems as well as the psychological impact of the séance room, Moll was reliant on his knowledge, not only of conjuring and the limits of observation, but also of hypnosis and suggestion.

⁵⁶ Dreher, *op. cit.* (note 31), 550.

⁵⁷ Moll, *op. cit.* (note 4), 94–5.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 95–7.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 96.

⁶⁰ Max Dessoir, 'Zur Psychologie der Taschenspielerkunst', *Nord und Süd*, 52 (1890), 207–8, 212. For further discussion of Moll's analysis of conjuring; see Sofie Lachapelle, 'From the Stage to the Laboratory: Magicians, Psychologists, and the Science of Illusion', *Journal of the History of the Behavioral Sciences*, 44 (2008), 319–34.

⁶¹ 'In der Mehrzahl der Fälle wird der Beobachter weder durch eigentliche Taschenspielerkunst noch durch Trugwahrnehmungen getäuscht, sondern er wird in feinerer Weise veranlaßt, sich selbst durch Lücken der Aufmerksamkeit und Irrtümer der Deutung zu täuschen'. Max Dessoir, *Vom Jenseits der Seele: Die Geheimwissenschaften in kritischer Betrachtung*, 3rd edn (Stuttgart: Ferdinand Enke, 1919), 189–90.

Moll was deeply involved in efforts during the late nineteenth century to have hypnosis accepted as a legitimate medical therapy, that is, as a system of psychotherapeutics and as a tool of psychological investigation. This project was hindered, however, by the medical and public perception that a close relationship existed between medical hypnosis and various forms of lay practice, including *Heilmagnetismus* [*Magnetic Healing*] and occultism. This perception was based, not only on the apparent similarity between the techniques applied by both medical and lay practitioners, but also on the fact that itinerant lay hypnotists, such as the Dane Carl Hansen, had been responsible for introducing German doctors to hypnosis during the late 1870s.⁶² As both Barbara Wolf-Braun and Jens-Uwe Teichler have argued, the desire to sanitise hypnosis, that is, divorce it from both lay practice and occultism, and prove its therapeutic and psychological utility, led researchers, such as Moll and Dessoir, to wield hypnosis as a weapon of enlightenment.⁶³ Moll, for instance, argued that suggestion explained the putative cures of Christian Science, as well as the apparently supernormal rapport between magnetisers and their somnambulists.⁶⁴ Both men also used hypnotic suggestion as a means of exploring the psychology of occult belief.⁶⁵ Dessoir, whose work with hypnosis had led him to postulate the existence of a *Doppel-Ich* [*Double Ego*], used this idea to explain the ostensibly discrete personalities exhibited by mediums while in trance. While spiritualists interpreted these personalities as the spirits of the departed, Dessoir maintained that they were evidence of double consciousness.⁶⁶ Moll's experiments in hypnosis around the same time (the 1890s) allowed him to show that post-hypnotic suggestion could be used to give the impression of veridical thought transference.⁶⁷ He also used hypnosis to explain how intelligent, educated people could be led to believe they had witnessed mediumistic phenomena. He argued that the hypnotic atmosphere of the darkened séance room and the suggestive effect of the experimenters' social and scientific prestige could be used to explain why seemingly rational people vouchsafed occult phenomena.⁶⁸ This use of hypnosis, as a light against the superstitious darkness spread by occultism, had two advantages. On the one hand, it enabled Moll and Dessoir to further legitimise hypnosis as a tool of psychological introspection, as part of the so-called 'hypnosis battle', and on the other, it enabled them to claim the problems posed by occult phenomena and occult belief as ones best dealt with by the psychologist.⁶⁹

⁶² Jens-Uwe Teichler, 'Der Charlatan strebt nicht nach Wahrheit, er verlangt nur nach Geld', *Zur Auseinandersetzung zwischen naturwissenschaftlicher Medizin und Laienmedizin im deutschen Kaiserreich am Beispiel von Hypnotismus und Heilmagnetismus* (Stuttgart: Steiner Verlag, 2002), 31.

⁶³ Barbara Wolf-Braun, "'Was jeder Schäferknecht macht, ist eines Arztes unwürdig': Zur Geschichte der Hypnose im wilhelminischen Kaiserreich und in der Weimarer Republik (1888–1932)', *Hypnose und Kognition*, 17 (2000), 134–52: 144. Teichler, *op. cit.* (note 62), 170–84.

⁶⁴ Albert Moll, *Gesundbeten: Medizin und Okkultismus* (Berlin: Hermann Walther, 1902); Albert Moll, *Der Rapport in der Hypnose: Untersuchungen über den tierischen Magnetismus* (Leipzig: Ambrosius Abel, 1892).

⁶⁵ For a closer analysis of the development of the psychology of occult belief in the German context, see Wolfram, *op. cit.* (note 54).

⁶⁶ Albert Moll, *Hypnotism*, 4th edn (London: Walter Scott, 1897), 416.

⁶⁷ Moll, *op. cit.* (note 2), 32; Moll, *op. cit.* (note 66), 277.

⁶⁸ Moll, *op. cit.* (note 27), 87, 96.

⁶⁹ Moll and Dessoir were engaged here in a kind of double boundary work, seeking, not only to sanitise hypnosis, which in the German context was associated with lay performers and *Heilmagnetismus*, but also to expand psychology's jurisdiction and authority into territory claimed by the occultists. For more on boundary work in this area, see Wolfram, *op. cit.* (note 33); David J. Hess, *Science in the New Age: The Paranormal, Its Defenders and Debunkers, and American Culture* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1993).

By the time he came to write *Der Spiritismus* in 1924, Moll had used this kind of psychological explanation for occultism – with its emphasis on hypnotic suggestion as well as the limits of attention, the problems of expectation and the dangers of distraction – innumerable times. Indeed, his attempts to bring light to realms made murky by occult obfuscation had appeared in a wide range of newspapers, popular periodicals and scholarly journals by the mid-1920s. Moll could, therefore, have been forgiven for experiencing some frustration when he read Schwab's protocol from 11 April 1923, which made apparent just how little impact such work had had on Berlin's occultists. The Vollhardt case highlighted, not only the methodological failings of these occultists, which included a failure to search the medium before the sitting, but also pointed, according to Moll, to their complete neglect of the psychology of observation.⁷⁰ As Moll argued, many occult protocols, including Schwab's, reported the appearance of phenomena that had been produced only after a long duration spent in a room illuminated only by a dim red light. He complained that none of those researchers who claimed the reality of the occult had attempted to test the limits of accurate observation under these conditions. Research by R.W. Schulte, he explained, had shown that séance participants often broke the séance circle without being aware of it and that, in the red light normally used to illuminate such experiments, distance appeared much greater than it really was.⁷¹ Moll stated that the failure to take such facts into consideration left leading occultists such as Bruck and Süner as credulous as new-born children when attending experiments with mediums like Frau Vollhardt.⁷²

In these circumstances it is perhaps unsurprising that Moll's comments in *Der Spiritismus* went beyond phenomenological and psychological analysis of the events of the 11 April 1923 sitting to suggest some kind of inadequacy in the scientific objectivity or mental acuity of those who vouchsafed the medium's phenomena. The problem, as Moll described it in his book, was not that these occultists fell victim to sensory deception or the tricks of seasoned conjurers – indeed given what Moll and Dessoir had discovered about the psychology of observation such mistakes could be expected under the sub-optimal conditions in which experiments with mediums were conducted – but that they were completely without logic. Moll complained that the most frequent error of reason made by occultists was the following: when someone thoroughly explained a particular occult phenomenon in terms of manual manipulation, occultists were almost never capable of conceding that this explanation could be used to elucidate another similar phenomenon.⁷³ Moll's demonstration of the beech-tree phenomenon with Judge Bornemann was a good example of this. The occultists who were in attendance complained that the trick, as performed in the courtroom, did not exactly replicate the circumstances in which Frau Vollhardt had produced her beech-tree branch, and was thus an insufficient explanation for the phenomenon.⁷⁴ Frustrated by similar instances of what he considered to be irrationality and pig-headedness, Moll had intimated in *Der Spiritismus*, and began to state more explicitly in other works from the mid-1920s, not just a lack of logic and a skewed understanding of the scientific method on the part of Germany's occultists, but also some

⁷⁰ Moll, *op. cit.* (note 27), 36.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 36; R.W. Schulte, 'Experimentalpsychologische Untersuchungen zur Prüfung der Kontrollbedingungen bei okkultistischen Dunkelsitzungen', *Zeitschrift für kritischen Okkultismus*, 1 (1926), 248.

⁷² Moll, *op. cit.* (note 27), 36.

⁷³ Moll, *op. cit.* (note 2), 43.

⁷⁴ Dreher, *op. cit.* (note 31), 549; Kröner, *op. cit.* (note 4), 161–2.

form of mental weakness or pathology. This was the line of argument he was to develop with his accusation that the 11 April 1923 sitting had been 'farcical'.

'Farce': The Evolution of a Pathology of Occult Belief

It was clear by the time of the Rudloff–Moll trial in the mid-1920s that the form of boundary work that Moll and other researchers had employed during the 1890s to distance emerging disciplines such as psychology and medical hypnosis from occultism had been insufficient to achieve their secondary aim, which was to claim occult questions for themselves. Although the techniques of the late nineteenth century, that is, the naturalisation and psychologisation of occult phenomena, were still useful during the inter-war period, developments in the mental sciences, especially the idea of complexes, enabled the mobilisation of another form of boundary work. This technique, which had been used in a somewhat different fashion during the nineteenth century to undermine the credibility of magnetic and spiritualist mediums, not only had the advantage of maintaining the crucial distance between psychology, hypnosis and the occult, but also of denying parapsychologists' authority over the paranormal and transforming them into the subjects of psychological or psychiatric analysis. This technique was pathologisation.

While Moll's claim that the sitting with Frau Vollhardt had been a 'farce' was, on its surface, a comment about the lack of methodological rigour practised by Berlin's leading occultists, the deeper implications of this statement were pathological; pointing to his evolving interest in both undermining his opponents' scientific objectivity and ascertaining the mental peculiarities and problems to which this group of men were subject. In *Der Spiritismus* he had written, for example, that the experiment with Vollhardt and the 'farcical conditions' under which it was conducted were of interest only in so far as they cast light on the occultists' mental state.⁷⁵ While in this publication he allowed the reader to draw their own conclusions about the mental acuity, even sanity, of Bruck, Sünnner and their friends, it was clear that Moll had, by this time, begun to consider the parapsychologists, rather than the phenomena they studied, as the objects within the field of parapsychology that most required analysis. However, before Moll could embark properly upon the study of this occult pathology – that he and others were later to call the 'occult complex' – he needed to provide evidence, not just of isolated errors of judgement and oversights in methodology, but also of systemic and consistent refusal to think rationally about occult phenomena, even in the face of overwhelming evidence of sensory deception and fraud. Moll began, therefore, to highlight the persistent methodological and logical errors committed by occult researchers and their lack of expert knowledge of their own field. His aim was to undermine parapsychologists' scientific objectivity by re-subjectifying them, that is, making explicit the manner in which their vested interest in proving the reality of the phenomena of mediumship actively shaped the process of knowledge production.⁷⁶ This was the approach he took in all three parts of the Rudloff–Moll trial, where his epistemic and methodological critique of parapsychology was to lay the groundwork for his personal insult of particular parapsychologists.

Moll had several misgivings about the scientific methodology practised by occult researchers. While these men maintained the conviction that the phenomena they witnessed in the presence of mediums were neither artificial nor fraudulent, they

⁷⁵ Moll, *op. cit.* (note 2), 42, 43.

⁷⁶ Thank you to the anonymous reviewers of this paper who suggested that I highlight this other form of pathologisation.

steadfastly refused, so Moll contended, to instigate the checks and controls that would definitively prove this. In the case of the 11 April 1923 sitting, for example, the rooms on either side of the séance room were searched, while the séance room along with the medium and her daughter were not.⁷⁷ Furthermore, according to Schwab, although this of course was contested by Bruck and Süner, control of the medium's hands had not been established until after the lights had been extinguished. In his running commentary on Schwab's protocol, Moll also noted the lack of crucial detail in this record of events. While the protocol stated, for example, that the silhouettes of Dr Süner and Dr Vieregge were visible in the moonlight that came in through the curtains, no mention was made of whether the medium or her daughter were visible.⁷⁸ Similarly, although the protocol maintained that the medium's hands had been held tightly throughout the experiment, it did not mention whether they had been pressed to the table-top throughout, and for Moll, at least, this was the most significant point.⁷⁹

While the protocol lacked detail on crucial issues such as the control of the medium's hands, it did, as Moll pointed out, put undue emphasis on events and procedures that were ultimately insignificant.⁸⁰ Schwab's protocol, for instance, gave details of the medium's pulse during and after the experiment held on 11 April 1923, while many other occult protocols provided measurements of blood pressure or sensitivity to pain.⁸¹ Moll argued that whether Frau Vollhardt's pulse was sixty or seventy beats per minute after the sitting was completely irrelevant; it served only to act suggestively on the reader and distract from more important epistemic and methodological issues.⁸² Ultimately, Moll believed that such details were part of an effort on the part of parapsychologists to lend their protocols the aura of science.⁸³ Given what Moll saw as the occultists' superficial precautions and lackadaisical note-taking, which did nothing to exclude the possibility of fraud or sensory deception, these irrelevant minutiae were incapable of convincing him of occultism's scientific legitimacy. What these irrelevancies did convince him of, however, was the occultists' lack of expertise or epistemic authority in their own field.

During the Rudloff–Moll trial, Moll sought not only to demonstrate his opponents' lack of scientific understanding, highlighting their careless methodology and faulty logic, but also to contest their expert knowledge of the occult. He attempted, for example, to undermine the litigant's expert witnesses by pointing to what he contended were crucial gaps in their knowledge of the parapsychological canon. Of Walther Kröner, who had been produced by the prosecution to testify on the defendant's introduction of a coarse tone of

⁷⁷ Moll, *op. cit.* (note 2), 40.

⁷⁸ *Ibid.*, 37.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 38.

⁸⁰ In their defence against Moll's attacks, which was mounted in a series of articles in the journals *Psychische Studien* and *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie*, parapsychologists claimed that the lack of precautions they took in their experiments, including the decision not to search the medium or her helpers, were an unavoidable consequence of the unpredictable and ill-understood nature of occult phenomena and their conduits, the mediums. In the case of the 11 April 1923 sitting, Bruck stressed that this experiment had never been intended to be definitive and that the participants had been quite aware that the conditions under which it was conducted were such that sceptics would not find the protocol convincing. The aim had simply been to introduce Bruck and Süner, who had never acted as controls before, to Vollhardt's phenomena in conditions that mimicked those in which she had performed successfully before. Moll, of course, was little persuaded by this argument, using such protests to highlight the profound differences he saw between the science of the occultists and mainstream science, commenting snidely about their astounding lack of scientificity; Bruck, *op. cit.* (note 11), 484.

⁸¹ Moll, *op. cit.* (note 27), 44.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 44.

⁸³ *Ibid.*, 44.

debate to the field, Moll demanded, 'Do you know the book by X?', 'Have you read the article in Y?' *ad nauseam* until the witness was quite flustered.⁸⁴ As the parapsychologist Eberhard Buchner later noted, Moll had continued this barrage of questions until the judge intervened, pointing out that Kröner was half Moll's age and was thus naturally less well-read than him.⁸⁵ With this attack deflected, Moll now sought to discredit Kröner and belittle his expertise by highlighting his practice as a magnetiser. In particular, Moll claimed that Kröner had offered both magnetic diagnosis and healing at a distance; a practice that was considered a dangerous form of charlatanry by medical authorities and was therefore illegal under German law;⁸⁶ not only was Kröner an ignorant ('Nichtwisser') but, according to Moll, he was also a dangerous charlatan. Moll's aim here with Kröner and other witnesses was to highlight that what Germany's parapsychologists called science, and what they presented as scientific expertise and authority, in fact bore no resemblance to the real thing; of which he, of course, was a true representative.

While the occultists involved in the Rudloff–Moll trial no doubt had reason to feel aggrieved by Moll's claims about the scientific legitimacy of their field and their expert knowledge of it, his attacks in the courtroom were relatively mild compared with those he was to launch in his 1929 book *Psychologie und Charakterologie der Okkultisten*, in which he wrote, among other things, 'Different from the Others [Anders als die Andern] is the name of a homosexual film. Different from the others [anders als die Andern] are the scientific practices of occultists.'⁸⁷ Clearly this book took the denigration of the occultists' scientific pretensions to another level, but its real significance lay in its development of the psychological analysis of parapsychology's proponents that Moll had hinted was necessary in *Der Spiritismus* and during the Rudloff–Moll trial. The jurist Albert Hellwig, who acted as an expert witness in this trial, led the attack on this front, postulating the problem of occult research as one ultimately concerned with the researchers' personalities, but Moll's *Psychologie und Charakterologie der Okkultisten* developed the psychological analysis more fully.⁸⁸ He wrote here, for instance, of his perplexity about the mental state of a man like Süner, who had signed Schwab's protocol, vouchsafed the revised protocol of Bruck, and yet swore in court that neither account was true. What, Moll asked, was one supposed to think about a man who is ostensibly a leading scientific figure in his field but who rejects under oath protocols he himself signed or published?⁸⁹ While the reader was left in this instance to draw their own conclusions, the final section of the book, entitled 'Zur Psychopathologie der Okkultisten' ['On the Psychopathology of Occultists'], left little doubt that Moll believed that Süner and his colleagues were mentally unstable.

According to Moll, occultists suffered a range of inter-related mental problems. Occultists were, he claimed, highly susceptible, not only to the suggestive atmosphere of the séance room, but also to a kind of paranoia, which made them both extraordinarily credulous and overly defensive of their beliefs. Furthermore, many of them were convinced, not just of the reality of a phenomenon they had experienced, say telepathy,

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 63.

⁸⁵ Buchner, *op. cit.* (note 32), 159.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 159; Moll, *op. cit.* (note 27), 64.

⁸⁷ "Anders als die Andern" heißt ein homosexueller Film. "Anders als die Andern" sind die Sitten der Okkultisten in der Wissenschaft"; Moll, *op. cit.* (note 27), 69.

⁸⁸ Albert Hellwig, 'Psychologische Glossen zu dem Berliner Okkultistenprozeß', *Zeitschrift für kritischen Okkultismus*, 1 (1926), 54–61: 56. Hellwig's participation in the Rudloff–Moll trial led to his becoming the defendant in two further defamation trials. For further detail, see Wolfram, *op. cit.* (note 33), 250–2.

⁸⁹ Moll, *op. cit.* (note 27), 68.

but also of others they had no experience of, for example clairvoyance. As a concomitance of this tendency, they also regularly situated themselves in opposition to whole areas of accepted science, believing, without question, anything that official science had rejected.⁹⁰ The expert witness Kröner, for example, Moll accused of being a biochemist, a homeopath and a believer in clairvoyance, as well as a psychoanalyst and someone convinced of a whole range of other occult phenomena, who attacked both the eating of meat and vivisection.⁹¹ For Moll, this combination of credulity and combativeness pointed to an ‘occult complex’, a group of unacknowledged feelings and ideas that manifested in a desire to prove the reality of the occult under all circumstances, a phenomenon that bore a close resemblance to paranoid ideas.⁹² Moll went even further to identify compulsive ideas, nervous disorder and psychopathy among various occultists, which in some cases lent them such self-belief that they had a strong suggestive influence on those with whom they came into contact, thereby spreading the occult contagion.⁹³

The psychopathology that emerged in *Psychologie und Charakterologie der Okkultisten* allowed Moll to dismiss his opponents and their epistemic claims on the basis that they were mentally unstable. Indeed, Moll had become increasingly frustrated over the decades at the lack of impact that his psychology of occult belief, which had been based on research into sense perception, suggestion and distraction, had had on the understanding of the occult. He found that his new psychopathology enabled him, not only to undermine the legitimacy of the entire field, but also to transform its erstwhile proponents into objects of study. These objects of Moll’s psychopathological gaze, did not, however, take this attempt to destroy them lying down. Instead, they turned Moll’s tools of analysis against him, seeking an ultimate cause for his irrational rejection of parapsychology.

‘The Obscurantist’: Parapsychologists’ Responses to Moll’s Critique

The anger of Germany’s parapsychologists about *Der Spiritismus* and their dissatisfaction with the outcome of the July 1925 trial were, in large part, a result of the belief that Moll had not only attempted, but had also been allowed to get away with, the sabotage of their nascent science.⁹⁴ For this reason, much of this trial and the subsequent proceedings were taken up with arguments about the ‘coarse tone’ that Moll had used in *Der Spiritismus*, and expert witnesses were asked to consider whether his comments constituted acceptable scientific critique in the field of parapsychology.⁹⁵ While Judge Bornemann and the judge presiding over the third set of proceedings tended to side with the parapsychologists, asking that, in future, critics of occultism moderate their tone, they were not able to punish Moll for his alleged lack of professionalism.⁹⁶ It was left to the parapsychologists, therefore, to highlight the error of Moll’s ways. In his discussion of *Der Spiritismus* and the Rudloff–Moll trial, for example, the Berlin-based occultist and doctor Christoph

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 109.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 109–10.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 112–13.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 114–15.

⁹⁴ Dreher, *op. cit.* (note 31), 548.

⁹⁵ In his autobiography, Moll stated that he had shown in the course of the Rudloff trial that the parapsychologists, in particular Kröner, were just as guilty of an unseemly tone in their polemics as he was; see, Moll, *op. cit.* (note 4), 106. In *Psychologie und Charakterologie der Okkultisten* he made a similar point, alluding to occultists’ use of the threat of legal proceedings to prevent legitimate critique; see Moll, *op. cit.* (note 27), 58.

⁹⁶ Anonymous, ‘Das Urteil des Kammergerichts in der Privatklagesache Rudloff gegen Moll’, *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie*, 12 (1926), 760–2.

Schröder pointed to Moll's careless application of logic and his apparently unreflective malice against the field of occultism. Many of the arguments that Moll used against the reality of occult phenomena, he argued, were the same arguments used by physicians and psychologists during the late nineteenth century to object to the use of hypnosis.⁹⁷ Moll, as one of the participants in this *Hypnose-Kampf*, should have some appreciation, Schröder contended, of the difficulty of validating phenomena that, given the current state of scientific knowledge, were little understood and hard to prove. Furthermore, using Moll's writing and expert testimony on the relationship between suggestion and memory, Schröder was able to argue that Moll was so biased against the reality of occult phenomena that his desire not to confirm their reality had led to the falsification or deception of his memory.⁹⁸ When such argument and analogy fell on deaf ears, however, parapsychologists sought a new approach to the 'obscurantist' Albert Moll.⁹⁹

Walther Kröner, who in his capacity as an expert witness in the Rudloff–Moll trial had come under sustained attack from Moll, was one of the leading figures in the parapsychologists' counter-offensive.¹⁰⁰ In his '*Epilog zur Moll-Polemik*' [*Epilogue to the Moll Polemic*], for example, Kröner argued that Moll had used the trial to portray himself as science's champion. He wrote that Moll, in the guise of St George, appeared not only to fight for Germany's scientific reputation, but also to bring light to areas darkened by superstition, and rescue the freedom of scientific critique that the representatives of this murky realm ostensibly threatened.¹⁰¹ Moll had demanded sittings under his control in which the medium would be undressed and searched, in which the séance circle would be built under strict conditions, and in which the medium would not be seated in a medium cabinet. According to Kröner, however, this was all bluff and bluster; a blatant attempt to take advantage of both the judge's and the public's ignorance about the conditions under which the phenomena of mediumship were possible.¹⁰² Moll claimed to have forty years of experience and expertise in the field of occultism, but if he were truly not aware after all this time of the psychic instability and spontaneity of mediumship, Kröner argued, he should return all the money he had received as an expert witness in this field.¹⁰³

Kröner's argument intimated, without much subtlety, that Moll was well aware that he was being dishonest, that he was purposefully misleading both the court and the public, and that his purpose was self-aggrandisement; certainly, Kröner's allusion to Moll as St George aligns quite well with the presentation of self that is apparent in Moll's autobiography.¹⁰⁴ What remained was to ask why Moll confused personal attack with scientific critique; why he required the fame he so obviously sought and how he acquired followers. The answer was to be found, according to Kröner, in Moll's own peculiar psychology, which manifested as a pathological aversion to the occult. Tarring Moll and men such as Dessoir and Hellwig with the same brush, Kröner stated:

It is this, the position of the Moll school, with their confusion of heterogeneous concepts – like the equation of personal questions, specialist questions and questions of principle – that gives the best typical example

⁹⁷ Schröder, *op. cit.* (note 35), 664–6.

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 498.

⁹⁹ Walther Kröner, 'Parapsychologie und Psychoanalyse', *Zeitschrift für Parapsychologie*, 2 (1926), 99–114.

¹⁰⁰ On Moll's attack on the parapsychologists, see Andreas Sommer's paper in this issue.

¹⁰¹ Kröner, *op. cit.* (note 4), 160.

¹⁰² *Ibid.*, 161.

¹⁰³ *Ibid.*, 161–2.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 160.

of an emotional clouding of the judgement and through this doggedly held system of errors provides the proof for their own neurotic-dogmatic views.¹⁰⁵

Furthermore, Kröner wrote that Moll's anti-occult complex was based around profound feelings of inferiority. He was a man who, because of his mental and psychic inferiority, continually met with refusal and resistance; this had led him to develop both a hate complex and acute narcissism.¹⁰⁶ Unfortunately, this narcissism lent Moll a suggestive power that allowed him to convince others of his ideas, thus spreading what Kröner chose to call the 'Moll bacillus'.¹⁰⁷ He ended his polemic by stating that he understood why the Rudloff–Moll trial and the arguments it had fostered had caused some of his colleagues to develop what might best be described as an 'anti-Moll complex' in their writing, but this was an indulgence he urged them to give up. After all, Kröner said, what psychologist would try to convince a neurotic woman of the error of her ways through reasoned argument? Attempts to reason with Moll were equally futile, therefore occultists should, he maintained, simply let the facts speak for themselves.¹⁰⁸

Conclusions

The Rudloff–Moll case with its focus on Moll's claims in *Der Spiritismus* of 'trick', 'manipulation' and 'farce' offers a way of considering, in microcosm, not only the substance and the development of his critique of occultism but also the evolution of the broader epistemic contest between psychology and parapsychology during the Kaiserreich and Weimar Republic. The case reveals, I believe, several aspects of this contest. The psychology of occult belief that Moll and his supporters utilised during the trial, for instance, was in large part motivated by the desire of psychologists and medical hypnotists during the 1880s and 1890s to distance their nascent disciplines and professional interests from those of occultists. Certainly, this was Moll's intention when he examined Christian Science and the putative rapport between magnetisers and somnambulists at the turn of the century. As in the Rudloff–Moll trial, however, where Moll felt compelled to go beyond explanations of Vollhardt's phenomena based on the study of conjuring and the psychology of observation, this form of boundary work ultimately proved insufficient to wrench paranormal phenomena from the grasp of the occultists. For this task, as Moll's attacks in *Der Spiritismus*, the trial and *Psychologie und Charakterologie der Okkultisten* proved, a more powerful weapon was required: pathologisation. Aided by new psychological concepts such as 'the complex', Moll and his colleagues could, by the 1920s, both question the scientific objectivity, and impugn the mental health, of seemingly rational people, transforming them from disciplinary rivals into objects of study. As the Rudloff–Moll case demonstrates, however, this did not bring the epistemic contest between psychology and parapsychology to an end because parapsychologists responded to this attack by pathologising their critics.

The Rudloff–Moll case, therefore, provides a record, not just of one of the many confrontations Moll had with Germany's parapsychologists, but also an overview of the

¹⁰⁵ 'Es ist dies der Standpunkt der Schule Molls, die mit ihrer Vermischung heterogener Begriffe (wie der Gleichsetzung von Personal-, Sach-, und Prinzipienfragen) das typische Beispiel einer affektiven Urteilsstrübung zum besten gibt und durch dieses zäh festgehaltene Fehlleistungssystem den Beweis für ihre neurotisch-dogmatische Einstellung liefert'; Kröner, *op. cit.* (note 99), 103.

¹⁰⁶ Kröner, *op. cit.* (note 4), 167.

¹⁰⁷ *Ibid.*, 167.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 168.

evolution of his thought about the occult, and an insight into the problems surrounding both psychology's and parapsychology's claims to scientific status and authority during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. While the case reveals many of the flaws in the occultists' methodology and logic, it also casts light on Moll's sense of self and his preferred style of scientific debate, neither of which reflect well on him. Undoubtedly, Moll did see himself as a kind of 'scientific St George', and he was not concerned about insulting, offending, defaming or ignoring those he felt were his ideological enemies and intellectual inferiors. What this makes clear is that, despite Moll's claim to be a man of reason and a representative of science, he ultimately did not feel that he could, as Kröner had counselled, let the facts speak for themselves; he felt compelled to resort to an attack that would annihilate both the credibility of his opponents and their putative science.