

Angelique Cottin

Angelique Cottin was a French girl who in 1846, aged fourteen, was the centre of psychokinetic disturbances that caused an international sensation, earning her the soubriquet 'electric girl of Bouvigny'.

Background

Angélique Cottin was born in 1832 in the village of Bouvigny in the rural district of La Perrière in northwestern France. As a doctor's examination would confirm, her health was good. Her education was likely rudimentary and her life occupied by chores.¹

At 8 pm on 15 January 1846, 14-year-old Angelique, in the company of other girls, was weaving silk gloves on an oak frame. The frame began to jerk as if it were alive and was impossible to keep steady. A turning cylinder suddenly broke free from the apparatus and was flung 'a considerable distance without any visible cause'. This was repeated several times. The girls fled, but their account was disbelieved and they were told to return to work. They now noticed that the frame remained still until Angelique approached, at which point it began jerking again.

Concerned that their daughter had been bewitched or possessed, Angelique's parents took her to the local church to be exorcised. However, the priest observed the phenomena himself and advised her parents to take her to a physician, Dr Tanchou. They did so, but in the meantime the force intensified.

[N]ot only articles made of oak, but all sorts of things, were acted upon by it, and reacted upon her; while persons who were near her, even without contact, frequently felt electric shocks. The effects, which were diminished when she was on a carpet or a waxed cloth, were most remarkable when she was on the bare earth. They sometimes entirely ceased for three days, and then recommenced. Metals were not affected. Anything touched by her apron or dress would fly off, although a person held it; and Monsieur Herbert, while seated on a heavy tub or trough, was raised up with it ...

A needle, suspended horizontally, oscillated rapidly with the motion of her arm, without contact, or remained fixed, while deviating from the magnetic direction ... She was often hurt by the violent involuntary movements she was thrown into ...²

It was found that Angelique could get respite by sitting on a stone covered with cork. Isolation also helped, and the effects diminished when she was fatigued.

Investigations

François Arago

Her parents and Tanchou now brought her to Paris to the preeminent astronomer, scientist and politician François Arago, who along with two other investigators tested her in his observatory. They reported the following findings to the Paris Academy of Sciences:

A mostly repulsive but sometimes attractive force emanated from the left side of Angelique's body. 'A sheet of paper, a pen, or any other light body, being placed upon a table, if the young girl approaches her left hand, even before she touches it, the object is driven to a distance, as by a gust of wind. The table itself is thrown the moment it is touched by her hand, or even by a thread which she may hold in it.'³

This would instantly cause a 'strong commotion' in her side, drawing her toward the table, but the repulsive force seemed concentrated on her pelvic region. Any time Angelique attempted to sit, the seat was thrown far away from her, so forcefully that it would carry another person sitting on it. The force was strong enough to move a chest with three men sitting on it, and also to break a chair which two strong men were holding still.

The phenomena were intermittent in intensity and most intense daily from 7 to 9 p.m. During that time, Angelique was forced to stand the entire two hours 'in great agitation'. Angelique could touch no object without breaking it or throwing it on the ground.

Every piece of furniture touched by her clothes was moved or overturned. At the point of this happening, people touching her felt a 'true electric shock'.

While the phenomena were happening, the left side of Angelique's body was warmer than the right. Her left side was afflicted by jerks, unusual movements and 'a kind of trembling, which seems to communicate itself to the hand which touches it'. When approaching a magnet, Angelique felt a violent shock from the north pole, but nothing from the south pole (as appeared when an experimenter secretly changed the poles).

The involuntary paroxysms she suffered each evening resembled symptoms of some 'nervous maladies'⁴

Arago commented that the force

seems to have no identity with electricity; and yet when one touched her in the paroxysms there was a shock like that given by the discharge of a Leyden jar. It seems to have no identity with magnetism proper, for it has no reaction upon the [compass] needle; and yet the north pole of a magnet has a most powerful reaction upon her, producing shocks and trembling ... At all events, whatever it be, time and research will determine, with sufficient cases ; at present we are left to conjecture.⁵

In February, as newspaper coverage of the 'electric girl' went international, the Academy of Sciences began its investigation. The scientist who wrote a preliminary report stated:

A large and heavy sofa upon which I was seated was pushed with great force against the wall the moment the girl came to seat herself by me. A chair was held fast upon the floor by strong men, and I was seated on it in such a way as to occupy only half the seat; it was forcibly wrenched from me as soon as the young girl sat down on the other half. [6](#)

When a second scientist made similar observations, the Academy set up a formal committee of inquiry. However, testing over five days was reportedly unproductive, and it withdrew its earlier reports.

Critics blamed the committee for failing to account for the observations of Arago and other scientists, and pointed out that the non-appearance of the phenomena at a given moment did not disprove it. [7](#) Albert de Rochas d'Aiglun, a physical researcher argued that the committee members were too narrowly concerned with using equipment to ascertain the presence of electricity, and that the effects may in any case have been declining by this stage. [8](#)

Angelique and her parents returned home and the phenomena ceased, some ten weeks after they had begun.

A later commentator speculated that the origin of the force was related to the onset of puberty. [9](#) However, there is no record of the timing of the commencement of Angelique's menses in relation to the period of the phenomena.

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Literature

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Endnotes

Footnotes

- [1.](#) The main sources for this article are a chapter in *Philosophy of Mysterious Agents, Human and Mundane* (1856) by E.C. Rogers, a summary by Catherine Crowe in *Night-side of Nature* (1848), an article in the *Courrier des Etats Unis* (cited by Rogers), and a report presented to the French Academy of Sciences by François Arago (cited by Rogers).
- [2.](#) Crowe (1848/1986), 382-83.
- [3.](#) Rogers (1856), 55.
- [4.](#) Rogers (1856), 55-6.
- [5.](#) Cited in Rogers (1856), 58.
- [6.](#) Eisenbud (1979), 144.
- [7.](#) *Gazette des Hôpitaux* in its 17 March issue; *Gazette Médicale*; Lang (1901–1903), 324.
- [8.](#) Rochas (1906), 563. Trans. by Google Translate and K.M. Wehrstein.
- [9.](#) Rogers (1856), 59.