October 2013

Talking Nonsense: Spiritual Mediums and Female Subjectivity in Victorian and Edwardian Canada

Claudie Massicotte
The University of Western Ontario

Supervisor
Dr. Sharon Sliwinski
The University of Western Ontario

Graduate Program in Theory and Criticism

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree in Doctor of Philosophy

© Claudie Massicotte 2013

Follow this and additional works at: https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd

Part of the Comparative Literature Commons, Cultural History Commons, Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons, Literature in English, North America Commons, and the Women's History Commons

Recommended Citation
https://ir.lib.uwo.ca/etd/1656

This Dissertation/Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by Scholarship@Western. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Thesis and Dissertation Repository by an authorized administrator of Scholarship@Western. For more information, please contact tadam@uwo.ca.
ABSTRACT

This study traces the development of mediumship in Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Especially popular among women, this practice offered them an important space of expression. Concealing their own identities under spiritual possession, mediums ubiquitously invoked well-known historical figures in séances to transmit their opinions on current issues. As such, they were able to promote new ideas to interested audiences without claiming responsibility for their potentially controversial words.

While many studies have been conducted in the United States, Britain, and France regarding the significant role of mediumship in the emergence of women on the political scene, very few have approached this history in Canada. My research defends the importance of studying mediums’ discourses as they provide rare access to Canadian women’s perspectives at a time when public speaking was restricted for them. More particularly, I argue that séances provided women a disguised means to explore, discuss, and reconfigure the notion of female agency within a variety of public and private platforms. I read séances through the works of major figures in feminism and psychoanalysis in order to demonstrate how the complexity of subjectivity performed by mediums questioned traditional understandings of discourse and agency. Examining the trance communications of mediums from pioneering author Susanna Moodie to suffragist Flora MacDonald Denison, among others, my objective is to shed new light on the relations between women and politics, while defending a more inclusive understanding of the historical past that addresses yet unexplored forms of women’s participation in sexual, cultural, and political debates.

Keywords: Spiritualism, Mediums, Feminism, Psychoanalysis, Nineteenth Century.
RÉSUMÉ

Cette étude interroge le développement du médiumnisme au Canada de la seconde moitié du 19e siècle au début du 20e siècle. Particulièrement populaire auprès des femmes, la pratique médiumnique leur offrait un important espace d’expression. En effet, en camouflant leur propre identité sous la dite possession spirituelle, les médiums invoquaient couramment l’esprit de figures historiques reconnues afin de transmettre leurs opinions sur des sujets courants. De cette manière, ces femmes parvenaient à promouvoir de nouvelles idées auprès d’un large public, sans avoir à endosser la responsabilité de possibles controverses résultant de leurs discours.

Alors que plusieurs études ont été réalisées aux États-Unis, en Angleterre et en France concernant le rôle insoupçonné des médiums dans l’émergence des femmes sur la scène politique, très peu ont abordé cette histoire au Canada. Ma recherche soutient que l’étude des discours médiumniques offre un rare accès aux perspectives des femmes canadiennes à un moment où la parole publique leur était refusée. J’aborde les pratiques spirituelles d’après les œuvres de figures majeures du féminisme et de la psychanalyse afin de démontrer comment la subjectivité complexe engendrée dans les séances met en question la compréhension traditionnelle du discours et de l’intentionnalité. Examinant entre autres les discours médiumniques de l’auteure pionnière Susanna Moodie et de la suffragiste Flora MacDonald Denison, je souhaite jeter un regard nouveau sur les relations entre les femmes et la politique, tout en promouvant une compréhension plus inclusive du passé historique adressant les formes encore inexplorées de la participation des femmes dans les débats sexuels, culturels et politiques.

Mots Clés: Spiritualisme, Mediums, Féminisme, Psychanalyse, Dix-neuvième siècle.
DEDICATION

Before the age of ten, I used to gather with my neighbourhood friends to play with the Ouija board. Together, we often contacted the spirit of Gemma, my young playmate’s mother who had recently died in tragic circumstances. Violently taking possession of her daughter, Gemma sometimes voiced evil threats of murder, sometimes wrote angry letters recounting her omniscient knowledge of our mischiefs, sometimes amicably answered our insatiable questions on the topics of love, sexuality, and death, and sometimes protected us against the realization of our deepest fears. In our spiritual encounters, Gemma began to embody the diverse figures and personalities that we attributed to parental authority. As such, her discourses intervened in the development of our personalities; gradually gaining control over her fiery spirit, we also became able to control the fears and anxieties shaping our relation with the external world. I would like to dedicate the following pages to that feared and cherished ghost of ours, and to the living who, like us, developed their own voices through those of the dead.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Like the productions of the séance, this research was only possible through the collaboration of the members of what I would like to call my “circle of believers” who have inspired and contributed to its development. Among the people who helped the completion of my project, I would particularly like to express all my gratitude to Professor Sharon Sliwinski for her generosity and for the confidence that she granted me throughout the years. Through her careful readings, she has provided insights and nuances which deeply enriched the lines of my argument. I have also benefitted from the support of members of the Centre for the Study of Theory and Criticism at the University of Western Ontario. I wish to thank Professors Joel Faflak and Matthew Rowlinson for the enthusiasm they have manifested for my project. I was extremely privileged to receive their guidance on the questionings that arose throughout the writing process. The other members of my evaluating committee, Professors Nancy Christie and Marlene Tromp also deserve my gratitude for their invaluable advice on various sections of the text. I was fortunate to benefit from the financial support of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, the Schmeelk Canada Foundation, the Fonds Québécois de la Recherche sur la Société et la Culture, and the University of Western Ontario’s Graduate Fellowship of Academic Distinction and Centre Excellence Award. My gratitude goes to these institutions for their support to research. Lastly, I owe all my gratitude to my parents and husband: my parents, for believing in, and encouraging, the pursuit of my interests in academia; my husband, Chris Richardson, for his extraordinary ability to read my chapters over and over again and for his undying encouragements.
**TABLE OF CONTENTS**

ABSTRACT ............................................................................................................................... ii
RÉSUMÉ ............................................................................................................................... iii
DEDICATION ........................................................................................................................... iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS ....................................................................................................... v
TABLE OF CONTENTS ......................................................................................................... vi
LIST OF FIGURES ................................................................................................................ viii

INTRODUCTION Spiritualism, Female Mediums, and Feminism in Victorian and Edwardian Canada ................................................................................................................................. 1

- Spiritual séances in the Canadian context ................................................................. 7
- Channeling spirits: mediumship and the female body ........................................... 20
- Female mediumship in Canada: a feminist approach ............................................ 29
- Interpreting mediums’ discourses ............................................................................. 31

CHAPTER 1 Theorizing Mediumship: Spiritualist Diseases and Unconscious Communications ................................................................................................................................. 41

- Nineteenth-century medicine, insanity, and hysterical mediumship .................. 45
- Hysteria, mediumship, and the theorization of the unconscious ............................ 56
- Developing a framework: feminist appropriations of hysteria and unconscious communications ................................................................................................................................. 71
- Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 77

CHAPTER 2 Healers from the Other World: Spiritualism and the Gendering of Care in Nineteenth-Century Canada ................................................................................................................................. 82

- Mediums and medicine ............................................................................................. 85
- Orthodox medicine, alternative care, and the formulation of medical regulations in the nineteenth century ................................................................................................................................. 91
- Channeling physicians: Susan Kilborn’s spiritualist cures and medical manuscripts 100
- Whose “right to be heard?” Discursive subjectivity in mediumship and hysteria..... 111
- Conclusion ..................................................................................................................... 117
CHAPTER 3 In Search of a Voice of One’s Own: Séances and Women’s Literary Creativity

Ghostly lineages: Woolf, mediumship, and writing ................................................................. 126
Spiritoscope, mesmerism, and uncontrollable hands in Susanna Moodie’s séances .. 135
“The direct dictation of an ‘Invisible Intelligence:’” Annie Florence Smith’s mediumship .......................................................................................................................... 144
Mediums and creativity ............................................................................................................. 151
Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 157

CHAPTER 4 Antigone’s Heirs: Public Séances and the Subversion of Femininity ..... 160
Antigones, now and then .......................................................................................................... 164
Public séances and feminism: the mediumship of Emma Hardinge Britten and Flora MacDonald Denison .................................................................................................................. 177
Antigone’s mediumship and the problem of female subjectivity ............................................ 195
Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 200

CHAPTER 5 “Who is running this show anyway?” Psychical Research, Ectoplasm, and the Scientific Imagination of the Female Body ................................................................. 203
Enter the ghost ......................................................................................................................... 207
The Hamilton and Crandon experiments .................................................................................. 211
Ectoplasm and the female body ............................................................................................... 221
Regulating the female body: dermographism, secretions, and the language of otherness ................................................................................................................................. 229
The paradox of scientific evidence: performance and control .............................................. 233
“Who is running this show anyway?” Ectoplasm and spirits’ artistry .................................... 242
Conclusion ................................................................................................................................. 252

CONCLUSION The Legacies of Spiritual Communications .................................................... 256
Talking nonsense: psychoanalysis and female mediumship .................................................... 256
Writing with ghosts: séances and the understanding of female subjectivity ....................... 260

BIBLIOGRAPHY ......................................................................................................................... 266
CURRICULUM VITAE .................................................................................................................. 288
LIST OF FIGURES

Figure 1. Margaret Fox, Kate Fox, and Mrs. Leah Fish, c. 1852................................. 2
Figure 2. The “dancing tables,” 1875 ........................................................................... 3
Figure 3. “Ouija Board” Eaton’s Fall and Winter Catalogue, 1915-1916 ..................... 19
Figure 4. The séance as a spiritual battery, 1853 ......................................................... 22
Figure 5. Annual Report of the Malden Lunatic Asylum, 1866 ................................. 48
Figure 6. Annual Report of the Malden Lunatic Asylum, 1866 ................................. 49
Figure 7. Helen Smith’s Martian alphabet, 1900 .......................................................... 64
Figure 8. S.W.’s hermetic system, 1900 ....................................................................... 80
Figure 9. Portrait of Dr. Barry, c. 1813-1816 ............................................................... 94
Figure 10. Dr. Emily Stowe, n.d. ............................................................................... 97
Figure 11. Advertisement by Susan Kilborn, c. 1860s ................................................ 102
Figure 12. Susanna Moodie, c. 1860 .......................................................................... 136
Figure 13. The Moodies’ Spiritualism Album ................................................................ 142
Figure 14. Portrait of Emma Hardinge Britten, c. 1860s ............................................ 178
Figure 15. Portrait of Flora MacDonald Denison, n.d. ............................................... 188
Figure 16. Dedication to Walt Whitman at Bon Echo, 1919 ....................................... 191
Figure 17. Une Leçon clinique à la Salpêtrière, 1887 .................................................... 205
Figure 18. “Dermographisme: Démence précoce catatonique,” 1904 ......................... 207
Figure 19. Battery of cameras in the Hamiltons’ séance room, n.d. ............................ 213
Figure 20. Floor plan of the Hamiltons’ séance room, n.d. .......................................... 214
Figure 21. The Winnipeg Circle, 1928 ...................................................................... 218
Figure 22. Mary Marshall with teleplasmic spots, 1931 ............................................. 219
Figure 23. Mary Marshall with hand simulacrum, 1932 ............................................. 219
Figure 24. Physical intimacy in the Winnipeg séances, 1930 ..................................... 223
Figure 25. Margery Crandon with hand-shaped ectoplasm, 1925 ............................. 226
Figure 26. Dermographic sign of the devil, 1897 ......................................................... 231
Figure 27. Head, hand, and foot controls used in Margery Crandon’s séances, n.d. .... 239
Figure 28. The Lucy materialization on Mary Marshall’s left-hand side, 1930 ............ 247
Figure 29. Teleplasms appearing on the face and neck of Mary Marshall, 1929 .......... 250
Figure 30. Mary Marshall with W.E. Gladstone Teleplasmic Face, 1929 ................... 251
INTRODUCTION

Spiritualism, Female Mediums, and Feminism in Victorian and Edwardian Canada

“And they began to speak with other tongues as the Spirit gave them utterance”¹
(Catharine Parr Traill, Unpublished Manuscript)

Historians generally date the origins of spiritualism to March 31, 1848, when a peculiar incident in Hydesville, New York initiated a viral interest in the manifestation of the dead.² On that date, two young sisters, Kate and Margaret Fox, claimed to have established a line of communication with the spirit world as they began talking with the ghost of a murdered man, “Proudfoot,” through a rudimentary code of rapping. Using a different amount of knocks to signify ‘yes’ and ‘no,’ the ghost declared in answer to the Fox family’s questions that he had been murdered in their house many years ago and was unable to find peace until the truth about his death was revealed. Friends and neighbours who had gathered that day rapidly shared the strange incident they had witnessed and, shortly afterwards, crowds of people assembled in Hydesville hoping to hear for themselves the spiritual manifestations. The sisters soon acquired such fame that they

began touring across America under the management of an older sister, Mrs. Leah Fish, followed in every place they went by the mysterious rapping sounds (see figure 1).

![Figure 1](image)

**Figure 1.** From left to right: Margaret Fox, Kate Fox, and Mrs. Leah Fish, c. 1852.

The rapping sounds now professed to originate from the souls of departed parents hoping to share final thoughts with their living family members through the mediumistic abilities of the Fox sisters. On occasions, the spirits were able to express themselves in long monologues, forming sentences by knocking every time a desired letter of the alphabet was recited by observers; on other occasions, they manifested themselves by moving different pieces of furniture such as the table around which sitters were conveyed (see figure 2).
When the Fox sisters introduced spiritual rapping in Hydesville, the general public was still marveling at the possibilities opened by the telegraph, invented by Samuel Morse in 1844. In these years, the enthusiasm for this new—and largely invisible—mode of transmission fed into the belief that the living and the dead could communicate similarly. Soon, the expressions “dancing-tables” and “spirit-rapping” entered the popular press to describe the mysterious phenomena emanating from the Fox sisters’ séances. Now famous across America, the Foxes founded the Spiritualist Church in 1852. The new religious movement grew rapidly on an international scale, reaching England and Germany in 1852 and France in 1853. As a French commentator wrote in
the latter year, participation in spiritual séances spread virally, exploding among all parts of society as new mediums discovered their powers: “The whole of Europe, and I say, Europe? At this moment the world has its head turned by an experience that consists of making a table turn. We hear from all sides that tables can turn: Galileo himself made less noise on the day he effectively demonstrated that it was in fact the Earth which turned around the Sun.”

The French commentator’s dramatic comparison between spiritualism and a revolutionary scientific discovery is perhaps less hyperbolic than many contemporary readers may assume. Reflecting on such contemporary perspective, Molly McGarry reverses the comparison: she remarks that in the context of the year 1848—a year which saw revolutions sweep across the world and the publication of Marx and Engels’ influential Communist Manifesto—one might today be inclined to believe that the spiritualist movement, born in the same year, would “deserve approximately the same amount of attention as the retail marketing of chewing gum, a development which also occurred in 1848.” Yet, McGarry adds, the history of spiritualism “is much more than a cultural footnote, even as it may be considered the ghost story of the long nineteenth century.” Akin to the haunting spirits it engages, spiritualism participated in important cultural transformations in late nineteenth-century culture, as it disturbed familiar ideas held in dominant religious, political, and social institutions. As “the ghost story” of the period, the movement confronted modern society with ideas it hoped to repress.


In particular, mediumship—a practice generally performed by women—perturbed dominant conceptions of gendered subjectivity. In spiritual séances, the dead frequently expressed through their female mediums controversial views regarding the religious, social, cultural, and political landscape of the sitters. Female mediums embraced discursive positions otherwise rarely accessible to women. Both channeled through and culturally determined by women’s bodies, such discursive positions paradoxically opened the possibility of a certain repudiation of the fixity of gendered and sexual identifications. In other words, the spiritualist practices demonstrated the fluidity of gendered identity by disturbing the foundations of dominant social and cultural understandings of “womanhood.” In this research, I retrace how these practices therefore operated as a kind of “Galilean revolution,” as our French commentator remarked, since they profoundly challenged modern ideas about the formation and definition of women’s agencies.

The social and cultural impacts of mediums’ ingenious discourses have recently garnered the interest of many historians and published work on spiritualism has burgeoned. Studying the development of spiritualism in America, England, and France,

for instance, authors have demonstrated the impacts of séances on a variety of matters, ranging from the development of feminism,\(^6\) to the relation between new technologies of communications and the female body,\(^7\) and to the development of literary inventions by female authors of the Victorian and Edwardian eras.\(^8\) By contrast, only one full-length scholarly study of spiritual séances has been conducted in Canada. Stanley McMullin’s 2004 *Anatomy of a Séance: A History of Spirit Communication in Central Canada* offers a vivid portrait of the role of séances in the lives of many Canadians—most notably Benjamin F. Austin, Albert Durrant Watson, Jenny O’Hara Pincock and William Lyon Mackenzie King. While McMullin’s text and a handful of articles and chapters have explored particular figures of Canadian history who developed an interest in spiritualism, no study has yet addressed how séances and mediumship influenced the development of women’s voices in the Canadian public sphere.\(^9\)

---


\(^9\) Among these few studies, the following should be introduced for their take on specific aspects of Canadian spiritualism: Robert Sylvain’s 1963 article provides a fascinating narrative of the unknown relations of influence between America, Quebec, and France in the nineteenth century, by tracing the origins of modern spiritualism in Quebec. Sylvain presents various responses to spiritualism, from the
The present research illuminates the fascinating, yet rarely discussed, history of Canadian spiritual communications through accounts of séance participations and spiritualist writings. I focus principally on the lives and works of female mediums to demonstrate how their communicative practices helped them understand and challenge their positions in religious, political, legal, professional, and artistic institutions. Through this work, I hope to contribute to the historical study of spiritual séances in the country by offering a new narrative on the role of female mediumship for the development of the women’s movement in Victorian and Edwardian Canada. I propose that séances participated in the growth of feminist perspectives at the turn of the century by providing many women a disguised means through which they could covertly explore and discuss notions of female subjectivity.

**Spiritual séances in the Canadian context**

Canadian author Catharine Parr Traill once commented that the country was devoid of a history that permitted the presence of ghosts. In her 1836 work *The Backwoods of Canada*, she wrote: “As to ghosts or spirits they appear totally banished from Canada.

infatuation of Victor Hugo (who was introduced to the movement by French Canadian friends) to Henry Lacroix (one of Quebec’s most well-known spiritualist author). (Sylvain, “Quand les tables dansaient.”) Ramsay Cook’s *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* offers an enlightening chapter on spiritualism which presents important figures of the movement in English Canada, most notably B. F. Austin and Flora MacDonald Denison. It suggests that the latter’s belief in spiritualism reflected “a significant drift in religious and social thought in Victorian English Canada,” a drift marked by the attempt to integrate modern scientific, historical, and ethical discoveries into a new understanding of the world. As such, the chapter illustrates Cook’s broader reflection on the process of secularization that accompanied social reforms in nineteenth-century post-Darwinian Canada. (Ramsay Cook, *The Regenerators: Social Criticism in Late Victorian English Canada* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1985) 84; also in: Cook, “Spiritualism, Science of the Earthly Paradise.”) Meyer Zu Erpen and Lowe’s article “The Canadian Spiritualist Movement and Sources for its Study” acknowledges the lack of historical research on spiritualism in the country and attempts to respond to this lack by providing a list of archival documents and their locations. As such, the text traces an invaluable map for the researcher to find and analyse unacknowledged documentation. (Walter J. Meyer Zu Erpen and Joy Lowe, “The Canadian Spiritualist Movement and Sources for its Study.” *Archivaria* 30 (1990): 71-84.)
This is too matter-of-fact a country for such supernaturals to visit. Here there are no historical associations, no legendary tales of those that came before us. Fancy would starve for lack of marvelous food to keep her alive in the backwoods. We have neither fay nor fairy, ghosts nor bogle, satyr nor wood-nymph; our very forests disdain to shelter dryad or hamadryad. No naiad haunts the rushy margin of our lakes or hallows with her presence our forest-rills.”

Almost twenty years later, her sister Susanna Moodie rendered a similar picture of the country in her work *Roughing it in the Bush*, where her characters dismissed the presence of supernatural beings in the Canadian landscape: “‘Ghost! There are no ghosts in Canada!’ Said Mr. D____. ‘The country is too new for ghosts. No Canadian is afeard of ghosts. It is only in old countries, like your’n, that are full of sin and wickedness, that people believe in such nonsense.’”

While negating the long history of Native Americans in the “new” country, such claims also failed to anticipate the forthcoming popularity of spiritual séances that would be introduced in Canada by the early 1850s. By then, ghosts became so well entrenched in the white middle- and upper-classes of the Canadian landscape that even Parr Traill and her sister Moodie gave in to the influence of the dancing-tables.

Through the mid-nineteenth century, the spiritualist movement rapidly developed its influence in Canada, thanks to the travels of many reputed mediums wishing to spread their belief in spiritual communications. Kate and Margaret Fox were themselves born in the country and had lived in Belleville, Ontario before they moved to Hydesville in 1848. They returned to their homeland on several occasions during the 1850s to visit their eldest sister, Elizabeth, who had married and stayed in the country with her husband.

---

During their stay, the sisters held séances in homes in the surrounding areas, drawing attention to occult communications. Among others, Kate Fox visited Susanna Moodie, who became captivated with spiritualism. Entranced by Fox’s appearance, Moodie described the “spirit rapper” as possessing “the most beautiful eyes I ever saw in a human head. Not black, but a sort of dark purple. She is certainly a witch, for you cannot help looking into the dreamy depths of those sweet violet eyes till you feel magnetized by them.”

During their encounter, Moodie witnessed raps answering her questions with perfect precision and heard with astonishment the sound of her piano playing by itself as she conversed with the medium. By the end of the séance, she admitted being greatly troubled by the medium’s abilities and became infatuated with spirit communications.

With her husband Dunbar and her sister Catharine, Moodie began to participate in séances and spiritual communications became fully entrenched in her daily activities. In their jointly written *Spiritualism Album*, a work describing the unfolding of their spiritual séances by the end of the nineteenth century, the Moodies had indeed noted how quotidian, even mundane, spiritual communications had become. They explained, for instance, how the teachings of a spirit had been interrupted by the tea ritual, before continuing again shortly thereafter. The séance notes begin by transcribing the teachings:

“‘Spirits cannot reveal to man the secret of Eternity. Even Jesus was silent upon this great subject. He taught the immortality of the soul: but he left untold the nature of that immortality. A servant is not greater than his master. We can only confirm the great fact he died to inculcate.’” Then, the notes explain the séance’s interruption before continuing the spirit’s exposé: “(Continued two or three hours afterwards the foregoing being

---

interrupted by tea.) “Were spirits permitted to explain to man the mystery of death, instead of conferring a benefit, such knowledge would be productive of much evil.””

Catharine Parr Traill also witnessed the spirits becoming entrenched in her new life in Canada. Already in 1851, she wrote to Susanna: “I must tell you of a family ghost that appeared successively…to Jane and Sarah while sitting up nursing Agnes in a quinsey – about one o’ clock the door of the room opened and a little woman in grey came in she groped the floor and holding up her hand made a strange hissing sound and vanished…. I guessed it to be a grey grimilkin but Maria will have it it was a ghost.”

Parr Traill also participated in many séances with the Moodies and Susanna remarked that “My sister Mrs Traill, is a very powerful Medium for these communications, and gets them in foreign languages.”

Emma Hardinge Britten, a widely known and respected medium, historian of the spiritualist movement, and editor of the British publication *Spiritual Telegraph*, also visited Canada during the 1850s. She notably held public séances in the cities of Toronto, London, Ottawa, St. Catharines, Montreal, and La Prairie to broadcast spiritual wisdom through trance speaking. Although her public séances were often controversial, she nonetheless gathered much attention, thus enticing interest in séances. Of a visit she later made to Prince Edward’s Island, Hardinge Britten noted that as she drove along the streets of Bloomfield with a companion, she “was amused at the violent ringing of a huge bell, whilst in the intervals of the clatter, a man, with stentorian lungs, was shouting

---

14 Catharine Parr Traill, “Moodie, Susanna, Transcript of a Letter from C.P.T. File,” 1851. Traill Family Collection, Library and Archives Canada, 37. Throughout this research, I have kept the spelling and punctuation of archival materials, letters, diaries, and séance notes.
out—‘the most beautifullest, the most wonderfulllest, the most astonishingest great prodigy as never was’—more furious ringing, and then commenced a fresh tirade as above.” She then “asked in amazement, what that creature was bawling about, when…the answer came in a voice of thunder, ‘Missis Emmy Ardin!—Come and hear, come and hear!—the most beautifullest, the—‘etc., etc., etc.’” Although she recalls that her séance in the Bloomfield community came close to being cancelled due to the protestations of opponents to the spiritualist movement, she nonetheless declares having performed her trance lecture among a crowded audience and “amidst cries of ‘What is she like?’ ‘Let’s get a look at her.’ ‘Has she come with a broomstick?’ Does she wear wings?’ &c., &c.”

As travelling mediums such as Kate Fox and Emma Hardinge Britten continued to diffuse the spiritualist doctrine in the localities which would soon integrate the Dominion of Canada, the broad public interest in spiritual séances rapidly translated itself into several pamphlets and newspaper articles discussing the possible explanations of mediumship and spiritual communications. In 1853, *The Anglo-American Magazine*, a Toronto journal, published a short story reflecting on such possible explanations as its characters wondered whether the mystery of the dancing-tables should be “identified with spiritual manifestations” or attributed to “the involuntary muscular action of the hands on the table as a cause of motion.” In 1863, an article by the *British Columnist*, then leading newspaper in the colonies of British Columbia, adopted the former spiritualist explanation as it testified to a series of occult apparitions that succeeded the death of the author’s nineteen-year-old son. These apparitions, witnessed by various individuals, led

---

19 “The Editor’s Shanty,” 207.
the article to claim “the verity of spirit manifestations.”

For its part, the Montreal journal Medical Chronicle opted for the materialist explanation of séances in an 1854 article arguing that the table’s movements during such events were “produced by human efforts, due to muscular contractions, involuntary or unconsciously exerted in the persons of those exhibiting.”

From whatever sources the bizarre manifestations were thought to emanate, early articles on spiritual mediumship in Canada tended to warn against the dangerous effects of spirit rapping. In 1854 for instance, the Evangelical Nova Scotia journal The Church Times reviewed works from Washington and London that cautioned against the effects of participation in séances. Agreeing with the works’ cautionary claims, one article concluded that whether or not mediums could truly communicate with the dead, “in either case it was entirely prohibited by God. It was considered by him a presumptuous and rebellious sin.” A second article determined that “instead of ‘Spirit Rapping’ being a collateral and acceptable hobby, which can be contained in perfect consistency with at least nominal Christianity, it is entirely in the hands of men who are now professed and proselytizing infidels.”

In effect, participation in séances became a contentious topic in Canada as dominant religious discourses and institutions from both Francophone and Anglophone communities argued against spiritualist practices. Anglican Dean Edward Cridge, for instance, published a sermon in Victoria in 1870 that stated views similar to those held in The Church Times. Cridge suggested that “we need not enter the question whether the

21 “Spiritualism.” The Medical Chronicle 1, no. 8 (January 1854): 238
professed intercourse with departed spirits is real, or pretended; or whether modern ‘spiritualism’ is only a system devised by man to obtain notoriety, procure gain, or to prejudice godliness.”Regardless of its truth claims, he concluded, spirit communication was “denounced in the Holy Scripture under the severest penalties. Those who followed it were not to be suffered to live. It is ever mentioned with every sign of the divine abhorrence, as foolish, ungrateful, and the mark of an unenlightened mind.”

The Methodist Church similarly rejected the spiritualist doctrine. In the late nineteenth century, B. F. Austin, a Canadian who contributed greatly to the diffusion of the spiritualist movement through publications such as *Glimpses of the Unseen* (1898) and *What Converted Me to Spiritualism: A Hundred Testimonies* (1901), was banned from the Church for his unorthodox belief in spirit communications. Previously a respected clergyman of the Church, Austin had held the position of principal at the Methodist Alma College between 1881 and 1897 and was honoured by the institution with the title of Doctor of Divinity in 1896. After the loss of a daughter, however, he resigned from his position in 1897 and began exploring the possibility of spirit communications, acting as a psychic researcher in séances in Canada and the United States. In 1899, he preached a sermon at the Parkdale Methodist Church in Toronto in which he suggested that: “the scientific truth of telepathy, clairvoyance, soul-flight, psychometry and prophecy are well established by incontrovertible evidence, yet to mention them in certain church circles is to ostracize yourself.”

Church’s highest court expelled him for heresy. His belief in spiritualism was judged “an offense against the Law of God and the Rules and Discipline of the Methodist Church.”

While Anglican and Methodist authorities suspended judgment on the occult origins of séances (even as they denounced the practice), the Catholic Church, for its part, generally accepted the truth of these manifestations. Against spiritualist claims, however, the Church attributed these manifestations to evil spirits rather than to departed loved ones and angels. In 1853, Ignace Bourget, Bishop of Montreal, published a *Lettre Pastorale* in which he argued that séances were established on “superstition, and therefore diabolic cult.” As such, he considered consultation with spirits by means of the dancing-tables a grave attack on the Church and its doctrines, and recommended “to abstain completely from the games and operations of which they are the occasion.”

Indeed, even if communications with the dead could occasionally produce positive impressions on the sitters, he cautioned: “the devil often disguises himself as an angel of light to better deceive man.” Shortly thereafter, the Archbishop of Quebec city Pierre Flavien Turgeon published a *Mandement* in which he similarly suggested that only evil spirits would communicate with attendants of séances. Interestingly, his work became influential in Europe where it was notably reproduced in the paper *L’Ami de la religion*.

---


28 My translation from “superstition, et par conséquent culte diabolique.” (Ignace Bourget, *Lettre pastorale de Monseigneur l’Évêque de Montréal à l’occasion de la nouvelle année. Les tables tournantes* (Diocèse de Montréal, 1853) 10.)

29 My translation from “Nous vous recommandons...de vous abstenir tout à fait des jeux et opérations dont elles sont l’occasion.” (Bourget, *Lettre pastorale*, 10.)

30 My translation from “le Démon se transforme souvent en ange de lumière pour mieux se jouer de l’homme.” (Bourget, *Lettre pastorale*, 7.)
(1854) and in Father Gury’s widely distributed Manuel de théologie (1875). According to Yvonne Castellan, such condemnations of spiritualist practices “created a great stir in the Catholic world.” In Canada and abroad, publications such as those of Bourget and Turgeon established the foundations for Catholic interpretations of séances as dangerous spaces of satanic interventions that should be avoided at all cost by pious believers. To mention a few examples of such interpretations in the French Canadian press: Le Propagateur defined the dancing-tables as “direct manifestations of the evils backstage;” L’Écho de la France considered spiritualist believers as “friends of evil;” and the Revue Canadienne published a series of articles warning the curious against the evil of spiritualism, for: “if we examine the nature and character of spirit manifestations, and if we judge their causes by their effects, we see that the spirit is bad, despicable and evil. Indeed, moving and perturbing the furniture, making objects dance on the furniture without one knowing why or how; hearing the sound of voices, seeing radiances, flashes of light, and small flames; apparitions of hands, sometimes impudent...abject pranks unworthy of a gentleman, all this could not be the result of a truly noble and good spirit.”

33 My translation from “Les tables tournantes sont...des manifestations des démons dans les arrière-loges.” (“Le Diable au XIXe siècle ou les mystères du spiritisme.” Le Propagateur 4, no. 9 (July 1 1893): 276.)
34 My translation from “amis des démons” (“Les Choses de l’autre monde et le spiritisme.” L’Écho de la France 9, no. 82 (October 1869): 341.)
35 My translation from “Si nous examinons la nature et le caractère des manifestations spirites, et si nous jugeons de la cause par les effets, nous voyons que cet esprit est également mauvais, méprisable et malfaisant. En effet, agiter et bouleverser le mobilier, faire danser les objets sur les meubles, sans qu’on sache pourquoi ni comment ; entendre des bruits de voix, voir des lueurs, des éclats de lumière et de petites flammes ; des apparitions de mains parfois impudentes...des gamineries abjectes et indignes d’un homme bien élevé, tout cela ne peut être le fait d’un esprit vraiment noble et bon.” (“Le Spiritisme.” Revue Canadienne 31, no. 6, (July 1895): 403.)
That the popularity of spiritualist practices be perceived negatively by religious institutions is not surprising considering the movement’s threat against intermediaries in one’s personal relation to the transcendent. In her study of Joan of Arc and her trial by the ecclesiastic court, Françoise Meltzer remarks that: “Beginning in the mid-twelfth century, visions had to be authentified by the ecclesiastical hierarchy.” The suspicion of visions among Catholic authorities offers an insightful example of the demarcation of the Church’s power as sole receiver, interpreter, and transmitter of God’s word. Thus, for Meltzer, Joan of Arc was highly “dangerous for the Church, for in its eyes she is professing to know better the desire and the very Logos of God than they do. In this sense, her discourse and that of the Church show identical, if clashing, positions with respect to knowledge: both claim legitimacy in their relation to the truth.” More than four centuries after Joan’s trial and her condemnation to death by fire, female mediums continued to defy the power of religious authorities by claiming to possess and diffuse the words of spirits and angels. As I demonstrate throughout this research, spiritualist visions threatened such registers of power by giving rise to a different form of agency and discourse that legitimized women’s claims to truth.

Whatever were the reasons for dominant religions’ rejection of spiritualism, their reiterated warnings certainly had an impact on the reception of spiritual séances in the country. A glance at the data collected in the decennial census of Canada indicates that the development of spiritualism as a religion remained significantly marginal. While no nineteenth-century census offers mention of spiritualism, rendering it difficult to determine exactly the number of believers, the data collected between 1901 and 1941

---

36 Françoise Meltzer, For Fear of the Fire: Joan of Arc and the Limits of Subjectivity (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2001) 141.
37 Meltzer, For Fear of the Fire, 154.
chronicle between 616 and 2,263 spiritualists. Asking participants to checkmark their religious affiliation from a pre-established list, the census revealed that spiritualism’s popularity reached its peak in 1931, before the number of believers declined to 1,214 in 1941.\^38

However participation in séances did not necessarily entail adherence to the spiritualist religion and official census data may obscure the larger influence of such practices in the country. Canadians from diverse religions attended séances for a variety of reasons. Even the religious authorities who strongly condemned spiritualist beliefs ubiquitously admitted their own participation in séances. Their excursions into such territories were generally considered a necessary evil allowing them to unmask the true dangers of spirit communications for their congregations. Others also came to séances as scientific observers attempting to detect mediums’ modes of fraudulence or to confirm or refute proof of the after-life. For instance, the Society for Psychical Research, established in London in 1882 and later developed through different branches in America and Europe, gathered renowned scientists, philosophers and poets who shared a fascination for the new phenomenon of spiritual mediumship. The purpose of the organization, as stated in the first proceedings of the London Society, was to “investigate that large group of debatable phenomena designated by such terms as mesmeric, psychical, and

---

\^38 Census of Canada, 1891, (Ottawa, 1893), 1: table 4; Census of Canada, fourth, 1901, (Ottawa, 1901), 1: table 8; Census of Canada, fifth, 1911, (Ottawa, 1913), 2: table 1; Census of Canada, sixth, 1921, (Ottawa 1924), 1: table 34; Census of Canada, seventh, 1931, (Ottawa, 1933), 2: table 38. According to these statistics, Ontario gathered most spiritualist believers, followed by British Columbia, Alberta, Manitoba, and Quebec, respectively. Further, most spiritualists across the country were women. Similar numbers appear in Statistic Canada’s 2001 report, which established, based upon a 20 percent sample data, that there were 3,295 spiritualists in the country. Of that number, 32 percent were male and 68 percent were female. In 2001, Ontario and British Columbia also continued to gather most believers (numbering 1,410 and 1,040 spiritualists, respectively). Census of Canada, Fourteenth, 2001, (Ottawa, 2001), Topic-based Tabulations: Religions in Canada.
spiritualistic.” In Canada, Stanley McMullin writes: “psychic experimentation under controlled conditions seems to have been much more appealing to medical doctors than to scientists.” These Canadian observers gathered to perform secular research groups on séances and, in 1908, they incorporated the Canadian Society for Psychical Research “to investigate all supernormal subjects and record the results, publishing proceedings, reports, and discussions.”

Lastly, some individuals considered séances a game. They came as curious observers seeking to momentarily replace the monotony of their mundane reality with the fearful amusement of possible spirit encounters. For instance, a 1900 column in Le Samedi, a Montreal paper, suggested that “the dancing-tables offer a distraction as good as any. It is always pretty much the same: the table turns, moves, frolics, rises slowly, violently, with grace, with heaviness, stomps, etc. It is all the same; and when the weather is gray and it is raining, we find these manifestations interesting.” The ambiguity of séances as both a game and a religious practice further appeared in 1920 through a famous court case in the United States, when the Baltimore Talking Board Company, distributor of the Ouija board, claimed that its communicative device constituted a “medium of communication between this world and the next”—that is, a sacred object that should be exempted of game taxes. However, the court ruled against the company, declaring that the Ouija board could be “seriously used by some persons,” but it remained “sold with the expectation that it is to be used merely as a means of social

40 McMullin, Anatomy of a Seance, 85.
41 McMullin, Anatomy of a Seance, 87.
42 My translation from “Les tables tournantes offrent une distraction comme une autre. C’est toujours un peu la même chose : la table tourne, s’agite, gambade, se lève doucement, violemment, avec grâce, avec lourdeur, frappe du pied, etc. C’est égal : quand le temps est gris et qu’il pleut, on trouve ces manifestations intéressantes.” (“Les Tables Tournantes.” Le Samedi 11, no. 4, (1900): 9).
amusement or play.”\textsuperscript{43} The Canadian company Eaton also advertised the Ouija board (“one of the most remarkable and mysterious productions of the century”) in the toy section of its catalogue, amidst other advertisements of checkers, dominoes, and “donkey party” (see figure 3).\textsuperscript{44}

![Ouija Board](image)

Figure 3. “Ouija Board.” Eaton’s Fall and Winter Catalogue, 1915-1916.\textsuperscript{45}

Through its implementation of the more popular practice of séances, the spiritualist movement was therefore significant in the country’s history, not solely as a religious practice, but also as a space for scientific explorations and as a recreational activity. As such, séances and mediums became highly debated topics of Canadian culture and their impact on Canadian citizens was constantly emphasized by religious


\textsuperscript{45} The Ouija Board—this “great Egyptian fortune telling game”—appeared in its commercial form in 1892 and later became a registered trademark of Parker Brothers. Similar devices, however, were said to have existed in Ancient China, Egypt, and Greece. These alleged exotic origins seem to have supported the commercialization of the board, as illustrated by the Eaton Catalogue advertisement. For more information on the device’s history, see: Hunt, \textit{Ouija}, 3-7.
authorities and the press. As the Moniteur Canadien, emphatically stated: “Today, the table-turning mania is not only a game, it is a passion, a fury, a delirium!”

**Channeling spirits: mediumship and the female body**

As the spiritualist movement spread across the Western world, the forms of communication with the dead evolved and participants soon replaced the strenuous rappings of the Fox sisters with more efficient communicative devices. These included the planchette, the Ouija board, and mediums’ own bodies and voices. As vehicles for the dead, mediums could allegedly channel spirit communications either through automatic writing or trance speaking. They were also often said to possess other powers such as divination, clairvoyance, levitation, and telepathy. The variety of communications in séances reflected the wide range of mediumistic activities. As Janet Oppenheim writes: “Some [mediums] took payments for their services, other refused. Some could produce phenomena in front of hundreds of strangers, others exclusively in the intimacy of their own homes…. Some specialized in particular effects, whereas others offered a broad repertoire of manifestations…. Reports of séances also told of furniture cavorting around the room, objects floating in the air, mediums levitating, musical instruments playing tunes by themselves, bells ringing, tambourines jangling, strange breezes blowing, weird lights glowing, alluring fragrances and ethereal music wafting through the air.”

Through their ability to communicate the dead’s messages, mediums’ bodies transcended their material condition to become bearers of multiple voices, each bringing its own personality and abilities to the séance. As such, some mediums only channeled family

---

46 My translation from “Aujourd’hui, la tablo-tournomanie n’est plus un jeu, c’est une passion, c’est une fureur, c’est un délire!” (Quoted in Sylvain, “Quand les tables dansaient,” 223)

47 Oppenheim, The Other World, 7-8.
members, conveying farewell messages to their love-ones, while others also channeled medical experts bringing unconventional knowledge to advise ill or incapacitated sitters. Some mediums further witnessed the appearance of extraordinary personalities from earlier kings and queens to renowned scientists and saints guiding the sitters in their professional and moral endeavours. Other mediums even channeled inhabitants of other planets wishing to share their wisdom on Earth through yet unknown languages.

While not all mediums were women, contemporary research on spiritualism in the Western world has shown that many factors contributed to define mediumship as a female profession.\(^{48}\) The first of these factors rested in the Victorian conflation of the female body with technologies of communications. Indeed, spiritualist believers frequently explained spiritual intercourse through the popular imagination of modernity’s new technologies such as radio and telegraph which similarly allowed for invisible transmissions across vast distances. The movement’s proponents used the scientific terminology of waves, radiations, electromagnetic fields, electricity, and telegraph lines in order to defend the validity of séances. For instance, when the Fox sisters and their followers began touring in America to demonstrate their mediumistic powers, the comparison of séance communications to the working of “celestial telegraphs” was common. Further, the adaptation of the term “medium” itself referenced such new technology of transmission. This understanding of mediumship through the semantic field of new technological devices made the female body more apt to transmit spiritual communications. Indeed, Victorian interpretations of the gendered body stipulated that the male and female nervous systems possessed opposite electrical poles, or positive and

negative charges: the male nervous system was generally active and positively charged, while the female nervous system was more prone to electrical imbalance and was passive and negatively charged.\textsuperscript{49} Offering an example of the perceived importance of gendered energies for spiritual communications, William Jackson Davis, one of the founders of the spiritualist doctrine in the United States, defined the mode of operation of spiritual séances as a “spirit battery.” In his arrangement, best results were obtained through the balance of male and female electrical properties and their transmission through a “magnetic rope” (see figure 4).

Figure 4. The séance as a spiritual battery as illustrated by Andrew Jackson Davis in 1853.\textsuperscript{50}

Davis interpreted the mechanisms of communications with the dead through the conjunction of new scientific discoveries and nervous (male and female) principles. He wrote:

\textsuperscript{49} For a more detailed study of spiritualism in relation to scientific conceptions of electrical energies and telegraphic communication technologies, see Sconce, \textit{Haunted Media}, 21-58.

\textsuperscript{50} This image also appears in Sconce, \textit{Haunted Media}, 29.
The males and females (the positive and negative principles) are placed alternately; as so many zinc and copper plates in the construction of magnetic batteries. The medium or media have places assigned them on either side of the junction whereat the rope is crossed…. The copper wire should terminate in, or be clapped to, a zinc plate; the steel wire should, in the same manner, be attached to a copper plate. These plates should be dodecahedral, or cut with twelve angles or sides, because, by means of the points, the volume of terrestrial electricity is greatly augmented.\(^5\)

This distinction between the positive and negative principles of each genders’ nervous systems supported the spiritualist interpretation of mediumistic practices as telegraphic transmissions of the dead’s messages. In effect, the idea of the female body as a “negative” and “imbalanced” charge made it particularly apt to perform mediumistic activities. As Jeffrey Sconce suggests, spiritual contact depended upon the “enigmatic technology of the ‘medium,’ a complex receiver who channeled the mysteries of spiritual electricity through the circuitry of another unfathomable entity in nineteenth-century science—the female body. Like the telegraph, women’s bodies presented many Victorians with ‘a machine they could not understand.’”\(^6\) Female mediums also embraced such definitions of their bodies when explaining their practices. Emma Hardinge Britten stated, for instance, that “women, by their peculiar organism, by the fineness of their nerves, the susceptibility of their sensations...have always been

---


\(^6\) Sconce, *Haunted Media*, 44.
peculiarly susceptible of impressions through the imaginative and sensational parts of their natures.”

Secondly, not only did the presumed negativity and nervousness of the female body make it seem like a good technological instrument for the reception of occult waves, but other characteristics often attributed to women in the Victorian era were considered advantageous for the production of trance states. Molly McGarry notes: “the very qualities that modern scientific culture found least valuable—unreason, passivity, susceptibility, femininity—became ideal qualifications for mediumship.” For instance, the alleged weakness and passivity of a woman’s will was thought to predispose her to possession by more “active” spirits. In this sense, Edward Walter Wallis, author of the 1885 *A Guide to Mediumship and Psychical Unfoldment*, defined mediumship as “a passive or negative state of mind and body which renders a person subject to the positive will-power of spirits who influence him or her.” In other words, the medium’s subjectivity had to be more fragile—or more easily erased—for its speaking position to be taken over. And because the female will was judged weaker, it was thought to be more easily contained under the stronger influence and control of spirits. Additionally, women’s alleged innocence and lack of formal education augmented the sincerity awarded to spirit discourses, as the latter were given more credibility when highly divergent from the medium’s perceived intelligence and abilities. Since many women lacked instruction in literary, philosophical, or political disciplines, their eloquence on such topics could more easily be attributed to highly cultured spirits among believers.

---

54 McGarry, *Ghosts of Futures Past*, 132.
Cathy Gutierrez notes: “The farther from the waking self and its perceived abilities, the more likely trance speech was to be regarded as authentic. One of the hallmarks of true mediumship was the ability to pass certain tests wherein the testers did not believe that the medium could discuss such topics due to a lack of education or intelligence. This was seen particularly in the case of women who were generally thought to be incapable of waxing eloquent about philosophy or politics.”

One example of how such prejudice increased the credibility of female mediums is offered in Carl Gustav Jung’s doctoral dissertation, which presented a close study of a young medium from 1899 to 1900. Describing the young woman as a banal teenager of “limited education” and “mediocre intelligence, with no special gifts,” Jung noted that during her state of trance she was able to “make exclusive use of literary German, which she spoke with perfect ease and assurance, in complete contrast to her usual uncertain and embarrassed manner in the waking state.” As such, he added: “To anyone who did not know her secret she was just a girl of 15½, no different from thousands of other girls. So much the greater was people’s astonishment when they came to know her other side.”

A third reason why mediumship may have been more popular among women was that, while the female condition was considered beneficial to the practice of mediumship, this practice itself helped improve women’s social status. Whether séances occurred in small circles where only family members and acquaintances were gathered, or in large assemblies sometimes composed of hundreds of men and women from different social

strata, the phenomenon of trance speaking gave female mediums access to a platform to voice ideas and concerns to audiences otherwise reluctant to hear them. While many might have ignored an uneducated woman’s opinions about the unequal rights of men and women, audiences listened more carefully to the opinions of a well-educated and recognized dead man. By attributing their words to the dead—and often to the spirits of distinguished men of science—mediums gained a certain authority which allowed them to be taken more seriously by believers. Further, the alleged spiritual control over mediums’ subjectivities allowed them to approach divisive social topics and to voice radical ideas more freely than others could because they did not have to embrace the authorship of their discourse. These factors had important implications for the development of feminism in the Western world during the nineteenth century as they allowed mediums to question the social conditions of women. As Alex Owen explains in her historical research on spiritualism in England: “the years which saw the development of spiritualist societies…also witnessed the developing controversy over sexual inequality and agitation for women’s rights. Spiritualism emerged contemporaneously with the consideration of women’s proper role and sphere.”

Studying the spiritualist movement in the United States, Ann Braude goes even further, suggesting that: “mediums formed the first large group of American women to speak in public or to exercise religious leadership.” Documenting the existence of about two hundred trance speakers of the nineteenth century, she demonstrates that the practice of mediumship “became a major—if not the major—vehicle for the spread of woman’s rights ideas.”

Lastly, Sconce suggests that in public séances in America “the spirits of a higher and

---

60 Owen, *The Darkened Room*, 1.
61 Braude, *Radical Spirits*, x.
more refined plane of existence repeatedly argued that women needed to be liberated from the limited education that restricted the development of their intellects, from unjust laws that denied them access to their property and custody of children, from unequal marriages that subjugated them to men, and from economic restrictions that forced them into dependence.  

63

While providing a space in which gendered subjectivity could temporarily be disguised or perhaps even erased under the phenomenon of possession, séances therefore paradoxically allowed female mediums to play an important part in the feminist movement and to defend the rights of women to gain more control over their own bodies. It was precisely because female mediums sacrificed their claim to authorship that they were empowered to publicly voice ideas and beliefs on contentious topics. Through mediums’ possession, Victorian metaphors of femininity as passive communicative technology produced a strategic position in which reflections and ideas for the collective advancement of women could be voiced and heard. Under the authority and protection of the spirits, mediums could verbalize new ideas relating to feminist concerns.

As I demonstrate throughout this research, spiritual mediumship also offered an important platform in Canada for the emergence of women’s voices on social and political issues. It may here be best exemplified by the work of Flora MacDonald Denison who combined her radical feminist views with her performances as a medium and trance speaker. Involved in the feminist movement, Denison promoted drastic reformation of women’s rights while working as a Secretary for the Dominion Women’s Enfranchisement Association, as a Canadian delegate for the 1906 Third World Conference of the International Suffrage Alliance, and as a speaker for the Canadian

63 Sconce, Haunted Media, 48-49.
Labour Party. Her feminist endeavours, while rejected by many in her waking life, found support in her trance communications which, according to her own testimony, gave her both strength to pursue her effort and a platform to diffuse her ideas.

Other Canadian mediums used spiritualism to reflect on their role in the women’s movement. Matilda Ridout, later known as Lady Edgar, was also an important figure in the history of the Canadian feminist movement who used her mediumship to support her work towards the advancement of women’s rights. After the death of her husband in 1899, Edgar withdrew from the National Council of Women of Canada. In her spiritual séances, however, she found validation of her work from the channeling of spirits. In automatic writing, she received her husband’s encouragements: “go bravely on with your work…and for my sake bear up and be to [the children] all that a mother can be.”64 These communications allowed Edgar to resume her activity in 1900 even more emphatically than before. According to Erin Breault: “After this year of spiritualist explorations Lady Edgar became more involved in advocating the rights of women to higher education, to earn an independent living, to vote, and, in the case of married women, to control their own property. Her commitment took the form of leadership in the National Council of Women: she became a life member in 1906 and was elected president that year and again in 1909.”65

The séances of Flora MacDonald Denison, Lady Edgar, and many others can demonstrate in the Canadian context the ties between mediumship and feminism. While Denison’s and Ridout’s feminist perspectives differed on many accounts, their transactions with spirits similarly helped them confirm their feminist endeavours.

65 Breault, “Matilda Ridout.”
Further, as I will argue, female mediumship not only provided a public platform to broadcast feminist concerns, but additionally constituted, through trance, an inner space in which these concerns could be questioned and evaluated. In other words, whether séances were conducted in small circles or in public assemblies, the disguise offered by spirit possession not only allowed mediums to publicly voice ideas on the equality of both genders, but also provided a space in which the very experience of oneself as a woman could be examined.

**Female mediumship in Canada: a feminist approach**

The transformations of women’s role in Canadian society between the middle of the nineteenth century and the end of World War I have fascinated historians of women.66 As these scholars have noted, the press was then infatuated with the “woman question.” Religious, medical, and political discourses repeatedly attempted to define women and their proper behaviours and sphere of activities. As Ramsay Cook and Wendy Mitchinson note: “Why [the woman question] was asked is debatable for those who insisted upon discussing the question agreed with monotonous regularity that woman’s role was to be a wife, a mother, and a homemaker.”67 In stressing the importance of the family and the central role of women at its foundation, dominant discourses thus confined the latter’s sphere of activity within domestic boundaries. However, women were certainly not silent on the matter of such fantasies of gender expectations and many advocated for increased participation in the public sphere. To quote Gail Cuthbert Brandt et al.: “In the second

---


half of the nineteenth century, a growing number of women, mostly drawn from the middle class, began to propose solutions to what was increasingly identified as the ‘woman question’ or the ‘woman problem.’”68 Eventually, they began to form a number of associations that campaigned for higher access to education, professionalization, financial autonomy, and the right to vote. By 1893, these women’s associations led to the foundation of the national umbrella-organization: The National Council of Women of Canada. But the attempt to expand women’s realm was often ridiculed or rebuked as unnatural and immoral by authorities. The press described social participation as contrary to a true woman’s spiritual and physical essence. Consequently, for Veronica Strong-Boag: “To ensure that women, at least those of the middle-class, did not too often venture beyond their allotted sphere, laws and institutions barred the way to women’s easy progress in the realm that men had set aside for themselves. The breaching of such barriers required considerable courage and determination.”69

Through extensive research on Canadian women of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, historians have studied the variety of ways through which women responded to the ideology of separate spheres, noting how their responses fundamentally transformed gendered roles in Canadian society.

Within this important historiographical enterprise, the paucity of research on spiritual mediumship in Canada is striking. Female mediums certainly offered an original counter-narrative to the ideology of true womanhood. Through trance-speaking, mediums were able to publicly voice ideas and arguments for the advancement of women’s rights while apparently preserving their identities as true women since, at least amongst

68 Brandt et al., Canadian Women, 179.
believers, they were not considered the authors of the very discourses they pronounced. As I demonstrate in this research, many mediums in fact continued to behave as traditional mothers and wives in their daily lives, but became medical professionals, religious leaders, prolific authors, social activists, and scientific researchers in the state of trance.

Drawing on the extensive literature on mediumship abroad and on the findings of Canadian studies, the following chapters thus pursue a dual objective. On the one hand, they retrace the lives of female spiritualists across Canada in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries in order to discuss a crucial, if under-examined, aspect of national history. The volume of writings on spiritualism during the period demonstrates that the religious and cultural practice formed an important and highly debated aspect of Canadian culture that should not be neglected in contemporary scholarship. Additionally, and perhaps more importantly, the following chapters focus on female mediums in order to enrich current understandings of women’s responses to their socio-political contexts. As séances allowed female participants to find interested audiences to hear their views, fears, and ideas through the voices of the dead, a better understanding of the role of spiritualism can provide a deeper awareness of the subtle and complex ways in which women challenged the ideology of separate spheres and participated in public debates.

**Interpreting mediums’ discourses**

My research defends an interdisciplinary approach to history as I choose to interpret archival material such as séance notes and spiritualists’ diaries through the twin frameworks of feminism and psychoanalysis. Particularly, I draw on theories that permit
me to reveal how spirit discourses constituted a disguised means for communicating women’s experiences and desires while challenging modern understandings of subjectivity that supported patriarchal infrastructures of oppression. I argue that psychoanalytic theories of the unconscious and their appropriation in feminist criticism can shed light on the subtle ways female mediums challenged the ideology of the separate spheres by paying attention to the complex nature of discourse.

It should here be noted, however, that the points of juncture between psychoanalysis and feminism are not unproblematic and demand much negotiation. As Juliet Mitchell notes in the opening sentences of her now canonical work *Psychoanalysis and Feminism*: “the greater part of the feminist movement has identified Freud as the enemy. It is held that psychoanalysis claims women are inferior and they can achieve true femininity only as wives and mothers.”70 For many feminists of the twentieth century, psychoanalytic approaches indeed seemed to constitute an attempt to regulate women’s sexuality under phallocentric logic. In 2001, Rosemary Balsam noted that in “the original Freudian schema, which by now hardly needs repeating…the girl is really a little boy in her own mind until the fateful encounter with the actual sexed boy, causing her horror, disbelief, and conviction that she has come into the world with a boy’s damaged genitals….What she has not (in male body terms) is therefore viewed as the primary locus of a girl’s intrapsychic conflict and what she has (in female body terms) is perceived analytically as a derivative and secondary issue.”71 In particular, Freudian consideration of the clitoris as a “little penis” has seemed to take the male organ as the

---

norm according to which female genitalia could only be secondarily understood in terms of lack. Freud’s early association of vaginal pleasure with normal sexuality and his interpretation of the clitoris as solely instrumental have further appeared to submit women’s sexuality to the definition of male—rather than female—pleasure. Therefore, as Muriel Dimen argues, an important part of feminist literature, particularly in the 1970s, “saw in the psychoanalytic construction of the female body the pernicious machinery of patriarchal power.” In fact, Freud’s work on the construction of sexual difference has given rise to a flourishing set of debates, not only among feminists, but also among psychoanalysts who rejected what they considered Freud’s phallocentric approach to sexual identity.

Despite such debates, I believe—as many other feminists do—that Freud’s theorization of the unconscious can remain useful for the analysis of women’s discourses. Even Elaine Showalter, not generally inclined to adapt psychoanalysis as a framework for feminist and historical studies, suggested in 1987 that Freud notably contributed to the amelioration of Victorian and Edwardian methods of treatment of institutionalized women as he demonstrated a willingness to listen to the latter’s stories. Showalter’s reluctance to psychoanalysis appears clearly in the following passage of her famous essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness:” “Although psychoanalytically based models of feminist criticism can now offer us remarkable and persuasive readings of individual texts and can highlight extraordinary similarities between women writing in a variety of cultural circumstances, they cannot explain historical change, ethnic difference, or the shaping force of generic and economic factors. To consider these issues, we must go beyond psychoanalysis to a more flexible and comprehensive model of women’s writing which places it in the maximum context of culture.”

---

73 For a summary of these debates, see Dimen, “Strange Hearts;” and Balsam, “Integrating Male and Female.”
74 Showalter’s reluctance to psychoanalysis appears clearly in the following passage of her famous essay “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness:” “Although psychoanalytically based models of feminist criticism can now offer us remarkable and persuasive readings of individual texts and can highlight extraordinary similarities between women writing in a variety of cultural circumstances, they cannot explain historical change, ethnic difference, or the shaping force of generic and economic factors. To consider these issues, we must go beyond psychoanalysis to a more flexible and comprehensive model of women’s writing which places it in the maximum context of culture.” (Elaine Showalter, “Feminist Criticism in the Wilderness.” *Critical Inquiry* 8, no. 2 (Winter, 1981): 195.) As I argue in this research, the analysis of spiritualist practices gains much insight from the psychoanalytic interpretation of the unconscious and its reflection on the speaking subject—a reflection which can also be illuminating for the analysis of women’s position in what Showalter calls “the maximum context of culture.”
noted: “The feminist critique of Freud should not obscure the fact that the early years of psychoanalysis offered a considerable advance over the biological determinism and moralism of Darwinian psychiatry.... In principle, although not always in practice, psychoanalysis...saw the hysterical symptoms as the product of unconscious conflicts beyond the person’s control. Finally, psychoanalysis was attentive to the process of therapy.”

Although it is true that Freud generally attempted to normalize the deviant behaviours of his female patients rather than encourage social upheaval, he nonetheless undertook the project of interpreting his patients’ symptoms as the disguised communications of talented women who were being silenced in patriarchal society. For Freud, the unconscious manifested itself in a variety of ways, perhaps most notably through its masquerades in physical symptoms, dreams, slips of the tongue, and the compulsion to repeat certain acts. As Mitchell writes, for psychoanalysis, unconscious manifestations “are always there, speaking to us, in their way.”

The psychoanalytic cure aimed to provide a space of expression in which patients could more freely explore and discuss their fears, desires, and ideas. As such, the psychoanalytic approach claims that part of the subject’s mental life communicates meaning through complex, and often disguised means of expression that call for a reinterpretation of the very notions of discourse, authorship, and meaning.

Through its attempt at listening and at giving voice to the experiences of those who are traditionally silenced in dominant institutions, psychoanalysis can correspond to an important part of the feminist project. To quote Dimen, both “psychoanalysis and feminism are causes…with much in common, like their ‘questionings of the moral status

---

My research draws on the reflections of many feminist theorists who have pursued the psychoanalytic reflection on subjectivity through an inquiry into the parameters of language. Theorists such as Luce Irigaray, Judith Butler, and Françoise Meltzer, for instance, have attempted to question how gendered identity is formed through the individual’s access to language. These authors certainly offer different visions of the feminist project and of the role psychoanalysis should play in its development. Yet, they all share a preoccupation with the formation of gender identifications in discourse that can enrich the interpretation of female mediumship. For them, the psychoanalytic insight that we are opaque to ourselves, rather than transparent masters of discourse, constitutes an important point of departure for contemporary discussions of women’s stories. In the following chapters, I therefore argue that the notion of unconscious communications is fruitful for the analysis of mediums’ trance discourses for it can shed light on the oblique modes of communication of those who are traditionally silenced.

Chapter 1 elaborates this theoretical framework as it details the understanding of mediumship in the works of pioneering authors of depth psychology and theorists of the unconscious at the turn of the century. I argue that the transformations of medical interpretations of mediumship through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries permitted new discoveries regarding unconscious communications as disguised expressions of censored desires. Indeed, theorists of the unconscious from Pierre Janet to Sigmund Freud erected new theories of the mind through their studies of spiritual possession, which they conceived as a form of hysteria. I then introduce the reflections of contemporary feminist scholars who have questioned how the modern definition of

---

77 Dimen, “Strange Hearts,” 211.
femininity interacted with the symptoms of hysteria. Through a dialogue with Freudian psychoanalysis, contemporary feminists such as Dianne Hunter have noted that hysteria constituted a radical but silent rejection of the symbolic order—a rejection which, for a lack of supporting infrastructures, could only express itself through the subject’s body. These works will orient my reflection on trance discourses as particular forms of communication which, like hysteria, require their own grammar and grids of interpretation to reveal their disguised meanings. While arguing for a critical awareness of the limits of the explanation of mediumship through the notion of hysteria, I demonstrate how the psychoanalytic conception of unconscious communications can offer a rich line of investigation of mediums’ discourses as it lays the foundation for an understanding of camouflaged speech in restrictive contexts.

Chapter 2 returns to the charge of hysteria advanced by nineteenth-century practitioners against female mediums. Certainly, many mediums suffered from this diagnosis. Yet, I suggest that it would be misleading to portray spiritualists as the passive victims of all-powerful doctors. Indeed, mediums and believers formulated their own interpretations of the mind and body that directly confronted medical views. As such, female mediums reframed the medical pathologization of the female body as a powerful tool to defend the validity of spiritual communications. Through female mediums’ opposition to nineteenth-century medical authorities, spiritualism became an important vehicle for women’s participation in the medical profession. This chapter revisits the story of Susan Kilborn, a spiritualist who has recently drawn the attention of Canadian historians as one of the first female practitioners this country has produced. Through my reading of Kilborn’s life story and of the influence of spiritualism in her practice, I
conceive mediumship as an attempt to imagine new systems of expression, while eluding traditional hierarchies of speaking positions. In other words, I recuperate the psychoanalytic framework of analysis, not to interpret mediumship as pathology, but to explore how the disguised strategies of communication in spiritual séances permitted to confront women’s oppression in male-dominated social institutions. Such a framework leads me to suggest that mediumship emerged partly as a means for women to re-appropriate the body amidst new scientific developments that put healing in the hands of male authorities.

In Chapter 3, I examine how spiritualism contributed to a redefinition of women’s role, not only in medicine, but also in artistic innovations. I argue that mediums’ communications reframed women’s positioning in the symbolic order through the creative potential of spiritual discourses. Mediumship indeed offered an original narrative strategy that defied the unequal access of men and women to language. The plurality of voices intervening in spiritual séances challenged the patriarchal understanding of the literary author as the sole, transparent master of textual productions. My argument is here developed through the study of the creative writings of Canadian mediums Susana Moodie and Annie Florence Smith who developed complex modes of expression through their participation in séances. I propose that such female mediums’ narrative inventions prefigured the poetic endeavour of feminist writers of the twentieth century as it opened new possibilities for the exploration of women’s creativity. Specifically, I argue that the narrative strategies related to trance appeared in Virginia Woolf’s writings as ways to imagine a space for women to express themselves in patriarchal traditions. I suggest that the figure of the medium profoundly influenced her oeuvre, where it appeared to reveal
that the access to language was never perfectly simple or clear, but reflected the internalization of oppressive ideologies. Woolf therefore used the vocabulary of séances in her writings to address women’s difficult access to authorship.

Chapter 4 examines the function of public séances in Canada in order to discuss how spiritualism participated in women’s entrance in political debates. I compare the figure of the medium with that of Sophocles’ tragic heroine Antigone—a heroine particularly popular among Victorian Canadians who interpreted her as a model of true womanhood—in order to demonstrate how spiritual discourses helped Canadian women gain access to the public sphere. Like Victorian Antigone, I argue, mediums developed creative narrative strategies that could confront the state in the public sphere while continuing to define themselves as “pure” women under the ideology of the separate spheres. More particularly, I demonstrate how Flora MacDonald Denison and Emma Hardinge Britten used this particular form of collective authorship with the dead to promote work for the advancement of women in various ways. I demonstrate how the internalization of spirits’ voices allowed these mediums—as it allowed Antigone—to participate in the political sphere by opposing unjust laws from a space that momentarily escaped the limitations of gendered expectations. From this space, mediums were both compliant and resistant towards dominant understandings of womanhood. Their complex performance of both models of masculine and feminine identities in and out of trance opened difficult questions concerning our understandings of identity, subjectivity, and gender.

Lastly, Chapter 5 explores the documentation of ectoplasmic productions in séances of the early twentieth century. Particularly, I address the experiments of
psychical researchers Thomas Glendenning Hamilton in Winnipeg and L. R. G. Crandon in Boston. These experiments’ mediums—Mary Marshall and Margery Crandon respectively—claimed to channel a spirit named Walter who possessed a particular gift for the reproduction of materialized flesh from the spirit world. Analyzing the séances’ archives, this chapter suggests that the ectoplasmic photographs of Mary Marshall and Margery Crandon’s séances present an important moment in the history of the representation of the female body in scientific discourse. I argue that the ectoplasmic medium’s body appeared as malleable and transformative, thereby urging scientific observers to regulate it rigorously. I here frame my discussion of ectoplasmic productions through a reflection on the phenomenon of dermographism, an affectation of the (largely female) skin that fascinated the medical authorities of the Salpêtrière in the late nineteenth century. By comparing the protruding skins of mediums and hysterics—and their respective evaluations in scientific discourse—this chapter continues to explore how the strategies of spiritual séances allowed women to renegotiate their place in the social order as it reveals that mediums’ spirit personalities eluded the scientific attempt to control the female body by re-appropriating the language and imagination of femininity.

Chapters 2 to 5 therefore aim to revisit different episodes in the history of mediumship in order to retrace a broader cultural history of negotiations of conceptions of femininity in Canada. My view of mediumship is here predicated upon the hypothesis that mediums’ discourses were neither primarily deliberate frauds of morally ill women, nor the products of female madness, but paradoxical loci for the exploration of women’s experiences. Each of the following episodes demonstrates how mediums have used spiritual channeling in various ways, adapting trance communications to their own
desires, anxieties, and socio-political context. Their trance discourses revealed complex practices which both confirmed and disrupted Victorian definitions of womanhood. Their stories are at times tragic, at times empowering, and the following chapters pursue the inherent ambiguities and tensions of séance productions.

Although my research traces the development of mediumship in Canada and highlights its relation to the definition of femininity throughout the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, its objectives are not only historical. Ultimately, my focus on the conceptions of gendered subjectivity through the practice of mediumship allows me to probe the meaning of the voice, in a larger sense, as a system of expression of the self.
CHAPTER 1

Theorizing Mediumship: Spiritualist Diseases and Unconscious Communications

No sooner has she walked through the door that we set her in catalepsy with a gong resonating beside her. From this moment, she belongs to us.

(Gilles de la Tourette, *L’Hypnotisme et les états analogues*)

More than thirty years ago, feminist historian Gerda Lerner wrote in *The Majority Finds its Past: Placing Women in History*: “Women have been left out of history not because of the evil conspiracies of men in general or male historians in particular, but because we have considered history only in male-centered terms. We have missed women and their activities, because we have asked questions of history which are inappropriate to women.”

Her approach to the past favoured a female-centered focus that revealed the important role women played in shaping their societies while acknowledging that this role might have been invisible under traditional hierarchies of historical interpretation. With Lerner, many historians have demonstrated since the 1970s the need to transform the parameters of historiography in order to revisit women’s past. By considering what history would be like “if it were seen through the eyes of women and ordered by values they define,” their investigations examined women’s experiences as important historical

---

78 My translation from “À peine a-t-elle franchi la porte que nous la fixons en catalepsie au moyen d’un coup de gong frappé auprès d’elle. Dès lors elle nous appartient.” (Gilles de la Tourette, *L’Hypnotisme et les états analogues au point de vue médico-légal* (Paris : Librairie Plon, 1889) 131-132.)


objects in their own rights. Since then, a plethora of historical studies have emerged to illuminate previously unexplored aspects of the past. To quote Gordon S. Wood: “Instead of writing about statesmen, generals, diplomats, and elite instructions, historians began concentrating on ordinary folk and marginal people: the poor, the oppressed, and the silent. By the 1970s, this new social history of hitherto forgotten people had come to dominate academic history writing.”

In this research, I pursue this now well-established practice as I choose to focus specifically on Canadian women’s participation in séances in order to reveal new meanings in women’s history. Through this focus, I suggest that female mediums’ inventive appropriation of a different form of discourse obliquely challenged patriarchy by destabilizing their epoch’s presumptions regarding who is allowed to speak, how one can speak, what can be heard, and what can be said.

But in contrast with other figures of women’s history, there appears to be an important difficulty in approaching female mediums. This difficulty lies in the ambiguity of mediums’ contributions to their very own performances and discursive productions. Indeed, how can one consider séance communications as exposing particular ideas, desires, and anxieties of Victorian and Edwardian women when the very women who pronounced them refused their authorship? What can female mediums reveal about Canadian women when the voices carried in séances claimed to escape mediums’ realm of experience?

In this chapter, I approach such problem as I introduce the psychoanalytic framework of my research through an examination of late nineteenth- and early twentieth-centuries’ medical literature on mediumship in Canada and abroad. As I

---

demonstrate, the ambiguity of séances’ authorship was already at stake in the cultural reception of Victorian and Edwardian séances. The authorial voice of spiritual communications fascinated medical observers of the period, who put forth new theories of subjectivity through their attempt to explain the ethereal voices’ mysterious identities. The medical literature indeed repeatedly defined spiritualism as a form of insanity, thus attributing spiritual wisdom to “the creation of a heated brain.”

In fact, a predominant understanding of séance productions in the Western world considered mediums’ state of trance as a symptom of hysteria. This correlation between madness and mediumship certainly undermined mediums’ narrative inventions and frequently served as an alibi to regulate séances’ perceived disruption of the social order. However, I suggest that the changes hysteria underwent in medical theory by the turn of the century also illuminated some of mediums’ most important contributions to cultural understandings of gendered identity. With the birth of psychoanalysis, the interpretation of spirit discourses transformed understandings of the speaking subject, which was now perceived as much more complex than the transparent, unified figure depicted by the Cartesian cogito. In studies of the unconscious, mediums’ “madness”—expressed notably through their loss of consciousness, narrative disruptions, and multiple or fragmentary viewpoints—came to reveal the fallacies of unified subjectivity and, by the same token, rigid conceptions of male and female identities.

Through such a framework, determining the subject of the historical study of spiritual séances stops being a problem or a difficulty. Rather, the questioning of the particular modalities of the authorial voice becomes an integral part of this history. It is indeed largely through the very ambiguity of spiritual communications that female

82 “Spiritualism.” The Medical Chronicle 1, no. 8 (January 1854): 239.
mediums participated in the transformations of their socio-political and intellectual landscape. Approaching séances through their profound interrogation of the limits of subjectivity can therefore shed light both on Canadian female mediums’ stories and on Victorian and Edwardian women’s relation to discourse.

After surveying nineteenth-century medical literature on spiritualism, this chapter introduces theories of mediumship developed by pioneers of depth psychology from Pierre Janet to Sigmund Freud. As historian of psychology Sonu Shamdasani explains: “What took place in the seances enthralled the leading minds of the time, and had a crucial bearing on many of the most significant aspects of twentieth-century psychology.”83 I argue that the theoretical framework born from such studies of spiritual communications can be appropriated to reveal important implications of mediums’ discursive productions. By challenging the very notion of authorship as a mastering, transparent intentionality, theorizations of the unconscious can shed light on significant meanings of séances both for their surrounding cultural context and for their female participants. Within this framework, my research does not attempt to answer the question: What particular individuality mastered the discourses pronounced by female mediums? Rather, I seek to decipher: What were the modalities of mediums’ speech? How did Victorian and Edwardian questionings of séances’ authorship developed into new medical and scientific conceptions of subjectivity? Through what modes did mediums’ speech affect the cultural perceptions of gendered identity?

Nineteenth-century medicine, insanity, and hysterical mediumship

As I suggested in the preceding chapter, for spiritualists of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, departed souls were considered the true authors of séances and this explanation gave legitimacy and freedom to mediums’ discourses while facilitating the articulation of feminist ideas in public and private séances. Among believers, the spiritual authorship provided mediums with the higher status and social recognition ascribed to possessing spirits in their earlier lives. As such, female mediums were able to voice political ideas in the public sphere while denying responsibility for their utterances.

However, the spiritualist view of trance discourses was not accepted by everyone. Particularly, nineteenth-century physicians from Europe and North America often opposed themselves to immaterialist approaches to subjectivity. As such, the puzzling meaning of mediums’ discourses became a point of contention between spiritualist believers and medical authorities. As the nineteenth century unfolded, the unconventionality of mediumistic practices became closely associated with the definition of insanity, and medical authors published books and articles linking the generally female practice of mediumship to their understanding of madness. As Alex Owen writes in *The Darkened Room: Women, Power, and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England*: “When spiritualism appeared on the scene, with its plethora of female mediums and quite different standards of acceptable behaviour, medicine took upon itself the task of interpreting the phenomena and its adherents…. Once again, it was women who were the most vulnerable in this respect.”84

At the time, and along with heredity, intemperance, lactation, and masturbation (to name a few), physicians in Canada and abroad often considered religious excitement a cause of insanity and believed that a significant number of people were suffering from it. In 1934, Simon Stone provided a study of new admissions to the New Hampshire State Hospital for three months between 1842 and 1843. He concluded that 24 of the 100 State Hospital’s institutionalizations during the period were attributed to religious excitement from attending meetings of the Millerite Second Adventist movement, then particularly en vogue. Dr. Alexander P. Reid, who had been in charge of the asylum for the insane in Nova Scotia for many years, was quoted in the Sessional Papers of the Dominion of Canada in 1895 similarly asserting the importance of religious excitement as a trigger of madness: “As an exciting cause of insanity,” he declared, “I think religion is a long way ahead of any other.” During the same decade, the Canada Health Journal published more modest statistics on religious excitement, affirming that in asylums: “The so-called emotional causes of insanity, as business perplexities, disappointed affections, domestic trouble, grief and anxiety, homesickness, popular errors and delusions and religious excitement, together comprise a total of but twelve per cent of admissions.”

Despite these statistical discrepancies, it should remain clear, as Benjamin Beit-Hallahmni and Michael Argyle note, that “intense religious experiences—such as mystical experience, conversion, and glossolalia (‘speaking in tongues’)—have often been explained as symptoms of results of mental disorders.” Such medical perceptions

of unconventional religious experiences had unfortunate consequences for many participants in séances. While spiritualism certainly created a stir in North America and Europe, the religion remained marginal, and medical authorities generally frowned upon the unconventional behaviours of mediums. In Canada, the medical literature continuously ascertained the correlation between insanity and mediumship to caution readers against such activities. An 1854 article in the Montreal Medical Chronicle, for instance, counted “in a short space of time, 27 suicides, 8 murders, and 209 cases of insanity…directly traceable to [spiritualism] as the cause.” The Canadian Journal of Medical Science, for its part, referred to London scholar W. B. Carpenter’s work on spiritualism to argue that séances “were calculated to produce insanity, because insanity was nothing more than the possession of a fixed idea which tinctured everything with which we have to deal.” Lastly, in his 1866 Annual Report of the Medical Superintendent of the Malden Lunatic Asylum, an asylum located in Amherstburg, Ontario, Superintendent Andrew Fisher confirmed that the belief in spirit communications could lead to institutionalization, reporting the admission of believers on the grounds of their religious practices (see figures 5 and 6).

89 “Spiritualism.” The Medical Chronicle 1, no. 8, (January 1854): 239. The correlation between spiritualism and insanity was also repeatedly presented in the non-medical press. Alphonse Gagnon wrote in La Revue Canadienne: “The disorder of the mind, the flickering of reason, insanity, in a word, temporary or permanent insanity, is the real danger that concerns even the apostles of spiritualism.” (My translation from “Le trouble de l’esprit, le vacillement de la raison, la folie, en un mot, folie passagère ou permanente, est le véritable danger qui préoccupe les apôtres mêmes du spiritisme.” Alphonse Gagnon. “Le Spiritisme.” La Revue Canadienne 31, no. 6, (July 1895): 404.) Similarly, an article from L’Écho du cabinet paroissial de Montréal suggested: “lunatic asylums are peopled with spiritualists, who lost their spirits to the spirits.” (My translation from “Les maisons d’aliénés se peuplent de spirites, auxquels les esprits ont fait perdre l’esprit.” “Le diable existe-t-il et que fait-il ?” L’Écho du cabinet paroissial de Montréal 11, no. 2, (February 1869): 92.) 90 “Spiritualism and Insanity.” Canadian Journal of Medical Science 2, no. 5 (May 1877): 167.
Figure 5. Annual Report of the Malden Lunatic Asylum with mentions of institutionalized spiritualists and of religion as a cause of insanity, from the *Sessional Papers of Canada*, 1866.
Figure 6. Annual Report of the Malden Lunatic Asylum with mentions of religious excitement and spiritualism as causes of insanity, from the Sessional Papers of Canada, 1866.
The correlation between spiritualist practices and insanity in nineteenth-century medical literature often employed the terminology of hysteria to explain the prevalence of such practices among women. Throughout modernity, hysteria defined a typically female malady that manifested itself through a variety of symptoms, including: unexplained physical paralysis, convulsions, somnambulism, loss of consciousness, and troubled thoughts or discourses. The term has ancient Greek origins, when hysteria was said to result from displacements or affectations of the uterus. The disease’s transforming and incomprehensible symptoms, however, puzzled physicians who, over the next centuries, began to develop new theories that gradually transformed the medical understanding of the illness. In the seventeenth century, for instance, English physician Thomas Willis located hysteria in the brain and dismissed the idea that its symptoms arose from the uterus.\footnote{Jeffrey M. N. Boss, “The Seventeenth-Century Transformation of the Hysteric Affection, and Sydenham’s Baconian Medicine.” \textit{Psychological Medicine} 9 (1979): 221-234.} In 1859, Pierre Briquet published his \textit{Traité clinique et thérapeutique de l’hystérie} which presented 430 cases of hysterical patients at the Hôpital de la Charité in Paris. Briquet here considered hysteria as a “neurosis of the brain”\footnote{Pierre Briquet, \textit{Traité clinique et thérapeutique de l’hystérie} (Paris: J. B. Baillière, 1859).} and, like Willis, rejected the uterogenic theory of the disease. He further presented 20 cases of male hysteria, thus noting that women were not the only ones who could suffer from the illness. French neurologist Jean-Martin Charcot—then famous for his demonstrations of hypnotized hysterical patients at La Salpêtrière in Paris—also categorized hysteria among the neuroses and adopted Briquet’s claim that the illness occurred in nervously predisposed male and female individuals. But while their conception of the disease’s origins shifted, nineteenth-century doctors generally continued to associate hysteria with women, who constituted the vast majority of patients treated for hysterical symptoms.
“For Charcot,” Elaine Showalter writes, “hysteria remained symbolically, if not medically, a female malady. By far the majority of his hysterical patients were women, and several, such as Blanche Wittmann, known as the ‘Queen of Hysteric,’ became celebrities…featured in his books, the main attractions at the Salpêtrière’s Bal des Folles, and hypnotized and exhibited at his popular public lectures.”

Like hysteria, mediumship could appear in men and women. However, it remained a symbolically female affliction as the characteristics associated with the power of channeling (passivity, weakness of the will, lack of education, etc.) were considered feminine. Furthermore, mediums often experienced symptoms such as the loss of consciousness, paralysis, and affectation of motor control during the state of trance. Add to this list of similarities the fact that most skeptics considered trance discourses and mediums’ glossolalia as erroneous, incoherent, and disturbed verbiage, and the diagnosis of hysteria became an easy answer to the complex problem of séances’ authorship. Along with hysteria, the perceived causes of spiritualist practices thus changed throughout the nineteenth century. Whether doctors considered mediums’ discourses to result from defects in the reproductive organs, the brain, or the nervous system, medical interpretations continued to support the correlation between the illness and femininity. Professor of psychological medicine and medical jurisprudence in New York, R. Frederic Marvin, for instance, viewed mediumship as one of “these forms of insanity which are

---

associated with derangements of [the reproductive] system.”

In *The Philosophy of Spiritualism and the Pathology and Treatment of Mediomania*, published in 1874, Marvin coined the term “mediomania, or the insanity of mediums” in order to describe what he saw as one of the most common female disorders. Noting that the disease mostly assailed women, he concluded that “the word mediomania, though not actually synonymous with the word utromania, is very closely allied with it in meaning.”

Likewise, American neurologist William Alexander Hammond defined mediums as hysterics. In his 1876 work *Spiritualism and Allied Causes of Nervous Derangement*, he claimed that: “At most of the Spiritualist meetings which I have attended…there have been hysterical phenomena manifested.” He suggested for his part that spirit communications were “symptoms of nervous derangement…precursors of organic disturbance of the spinal cord, leading to a paralysis, epilepsy or mental derangement.”

The mediums Hammond mentioned throughout his study were almost exclusively women. Such hysterical interpretations of mediumship were also predominant in Europe. During the 1880s in France, Charcot presented a lecture at the Salpêtrière entitled “Spiritualism and Hysteria,” in which he suggested that women and children were “persons nervously predisposed” to believe in spiritualism. Charcot had already associated the state of trance (medically or self-induced hypnosis) to hysteria. He consequently understood the mediumistic trance, like the state of hypnosis, as more

---

95 Marvin, *The Philosophy of Spiritualism*, 35.
easily induced in “passive” subjects and attributed the prevalence of spiritualism and hysteria among women to the imbalance of the female nervous system. Gilles de La Tourette, one of Charcot’s protégés, pursued the latter’s ideas on the loss of consciousness during trance in his 1887 *L’Hypnotisme et les états analogues au point de vue médico-légal*. Along with his mentor, de la Tourette considered the state of trance—whether induced by hypnosis, somnambulism, mesmerism, or spiritualism—as an indicator of hysteria. His book soon travelled to Canada and, in 1888, Evariste E. Duquet, assistant doctor at the St-Jean-de-Dieu asylum in Longue-Pointe, Quebec, published a review for *La Gazette médicale de Montréal*. The latter defended that this work could not be too highly “recommended to doctors and students anxious to keep abreast.”\(^9\) In his article, Duquet agreed with de la Tourette’s claim that the dangerous state of trance was “the most important factor in revealing hysteria”\(^10\) and consequently followed the latter’s views on spiritualism. Duquet wrote: “Spiritualism was born out of magnetism and resembles it although their disciples fight each other. The theatrical performances of magnetism produced disastrous effects everywhere and a large number of people have inherited from these experiences spontaneous somnambulism or hysterical fits. This vulgar propagation of hypnotism is dangerous and can lead to physical and mental disorders.”\(^11\)

\(^9\) My translation from “recommander aux médecins et aux étudiants anxieux de se tenir au courant” (“L’hypnose et les états analogues.” *La Gazette Médicale de Montréal* 2, no. 6 (1888): 283-284.)

\(^10\) My translation from “le meilleur agent révélateur de l’hystérie” (Evariste. E. Duquet. “L’hypnose et les états analogues au point de vue médico-légal.” *La Gazette médicale de Montréal* 3, no. 3 (1889): 109.)

\(^11\) My translation from “Le spiritisme est né du magnétisme et le vaut quoique les disciples des deux se combattent…. Les représentations théâtrales de magnétisme ont produit partout des effets désastreux et un grand nombre de personnes ont hérité après ces expériences d’un somnambulisme spontané ou d’attaques d’hystérie. Cette propagation vulgaire de l’hypnotisme est dangereuse et peut amener des désordres physiques et moraux.” (“L’hypnose et les états analogues,” 111.)
In recent years, cultural historians have examined the effects of such medical interpretations of spiritualist practices as symptoms of insanity. These studies have shown that the nineteenth-century medical rejection of the spiritual authority communicated by mediums facilitated the rejection of the latter’s feminist claims. Indeed, the diagnosis of insanity reinforced traditional differentiations between both genders’ definitions, characteristics, roles, and privileges in nineteenth-century societies as it defined as non-sense the demands expressed by female mediums during trance. In other words, by attributing spiritual discourses to the mediums who pronounced them—and particularly to the underlying disturbances of their brains and bodies—medical authorities could more easily reject the revelations of trance speaking. An example of how such medical understanding could support the traditional codification of gendered subjectivity, Marvin’s text suggested that the mediomaniac “becomes possessed by the idea that she has some startling mission in the world. She forsakes her home, her children, and her duty, to mount the rostrum and proclaim the peculiar virtues of free-love, elective affinity, or the reincarnation of souls. Allow the disorder to advance and it becomes a chronic malady, and, alas! the once intelligent, cultivated, and pure woman sinks through a series of strange isms.”

In Canada, the Medical Chronicle suggested in 1854 that mediums’ mad behaviours and discourses produced devastating consequences and should thus be restrained. An article noted: “Spiritualism does not stop there; its devotees are further

---


103 Marvin, 47.
distinguished by their enlightened opinions upon nature, man, &c., and their reckless discussion of the holiest themes…. The spirits intend, they say, to unfold the wisdom of the spirit world, to deliver mankind from error…the end of these things is awful. From terror, excitement, and such like influences, the mind grows weaker and weaker, until, alas, wisdom has been often seen to desert her throne, or distraction to sit down with her.”

Such medical interpretation pathologized mediums as a response to the latter’s threat to the traditional organization of society. It provided scientific grounds for the invalidation of ideas introduced in séances that confronted the patriarchal organization of gendered roles. As an example of such threatening ideas, the *True Witness and Catholic Chronicle* mentioned that: “Some women have abandoned their husbands for other ‘affinities.’ One who has figured in the recent Free Love Conventions is set down as having abandoned two husbands, both of whom are living—and one woman traded husbands with a sister spiritualist. The mediums are represented as of the same sort.”

Therefore, the materialist approach of many nineteenth-century medical men silenced mediums’ creative productions by diagnosing them as mad. As Elaine Showalter has noted, such medical will to regulate women’s challenges to the ideology of the separate spheres was not limited to spiritual séances, but extended itself to a larger dismissal of growing feminist claims in the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the

---

104 “Spiritualism.” *The Medical Chronicle*, 239.

105 “Fruits of Protestant Spiritualism.” *The True witness and Catholic Chronicle* 9, no. 10 (October 15 1858): 7. Similarly, English biblical scholar Joseph B. Rotherham had emphasized in his work *Familiar Spirits* how the movement’s reorganization of gendered roles constituted an important threat to the institution of marriage: “Hundreds of families have been broken up…. Many once devoted wives have been seduced and have left their husbands and tender helpless children, to follow some ‘higher attraction.’ Many well-disposed, but simple-minded, girls have been deluded by ‘affinity’ notions and led off by ‘affinity hunters’ to be deserted in a few months.” (Joseph B. Rotherham, *Familiar Spirits, Past and Present. A Warning Against Spiritualism* (London: Morgan and Chase, 1868[?]) 14-15). For an in-depth discussion of Rotherham’s views on the movement’s cultural impacts and Victorian ideas on the organization of society and sexual relations, see: Marlene Tromp, *Altered States: Sex, Nation, Drugs, and Self-Transformation in Victorian Spiritualism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2006) 28-31.
twentieth centuries: “During an era when patriarchal culture felt itself to be under attack by its rebellious daughters,” she writes, “one obvious defence was to label women campaigning for access to the universities, the professions, and the vote as mentally disturbed, and of all of the nervous disorders of the fin-de-siècle, hysteria was the most strongly identified with the feminist movement.”¹⁰⁶ And, one might add, with spiritualism.

Are there other ways to interpret mediums’ creative productions without banishing the genuine, transcendental meaning many wished to communicate? How can one understand, today, the modes of production and the cultural impacts of spiritual communications? As I will argue, the vocabulary of the unconscious—a scientific discovery that emerged largely through the study of “hysterical” mediums—is useful, albeit with some reserve, for interpreting the structure and stakes of mediums’ discourses.

**Hysteria, mediumship, and the theorization of the unconscious**

By the end of the nineteenth century, new theories began to associate hysteria with psychic conflicts and repressed memories rather than with uterine or nervous disorders. Jean-Martin Charcot had paved the way for such interpretations when he began studying the state of trance. The adoption of trance states—which Charcot believed was an important indicator of hysteria—emanated largely from the pseudo-science of mesmerism, which had been popularized in France through the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Franz Anton Mesmer, its inventor, had suggested that a magnetic force called animal magnetism could be manipulated for the treatment of illnesses. Mesmer believed that such force permeated the world and that diseases resulted from its disharmony. The

¹⁰⁶ Showalter, *The Female Malady*, 145.
magnetizer, who was said to control such force, could redistribute it properly in the ill body using “passes of hands” to entrance the patient. Originally from Germany, Mesmer moved to Paris in his later life where his technique became highly fashionable. For Patricia Jensen: “When Franz Anton Mesmer introduced to pre-revolutionary Europe his vision of an invisible, universal, superfine, magnetic fluid that surrounded and penetrated all bodies, he did so in an atmosphere already imbued with a host of ideas about vitalistic forces, agents and fluids.” During the enactment of trance, the mesmeric cure rapidly became marked by a series of repeated behaviours. These included patients’ convulsions, amnesia, and mystical experiences. In 1784, a Royal Commission was set up to evaluate the method of Mesmer whose evaluators included Benjamin Franklin, Antoine Lavoisier, and Joseph-Ignace Guillotin. These experts agreed that the method did entrance its subjects and that the latter often claimed feeling better afterwards. However, they rejected the influence of magnetism and attributed the trance and its effects to individuals’ imagination. Many years later, Charcot noted the similarity between Mesmer’s patients and his own, and introduced hypnosis at the Salpêtrière in order to open new experiments on the state of trance. While leaving aside the occult elements of magnetism, he used trance in his work with hysterics to demonstrate and relieve the symptoms of the disease.

Later on, two colleagues of Charcot, Pierre Janet and Sigmund Freud, pursued his ideas on the curative powers of trance as they frequently turned to hypnosis in their medical practices. However, in their works, trance began to reveal the role of unconscious ideas in the formation of subjectivity. Janet noted through his use of hypnosis, for instance, that some hysterical symptoms were attributable to dissociation, a

term which emphasized the possibility of a fragmentation of the psyche into conscious and unconscious forms of thought. He wrote: “things happen as if an idea, a partial system of thoughts, emancipated itself, became independent and developed itself on its own account.” The particularity of such emancipated system of thoughts, for Janet, was that it could operate on the body without the subject’s conscious acknowledgement. In his early studies of hysteria, Freud likewise believed that ideas could be prevented from expressing themselves through speech while concurrently possessing the body as their means of transmission. When patients were entranced, they could express these unconscious ideas and their physical symptoms often disappeared. Although Freud later rejected the value of hypnosis for the psychoanalytic treatment, the use of this practice in the early phase of his career allowed him to understand hysteria as the physical enactment of desires prohibited from reaching consciousness. As Juliet Mitchell explains, in the Freudian understanding of hysteria: “what is being expressed in another language is the repressed sexual idea which some crisis has re-evoked; a symptom is an alternative representation of a forbidden wish which has broken through from the unconscious, whence it was banished, into consciousness—but in an ‘unrecognizable’ form.” In the early years of psychoanalysis, hypnosis was thought to give access to the unconscious and to permit patients to retrieve and express repressed ideas in symbolic discourse.

Once again, the shift in medical understandings of hysteria from disturbances of the uterus and the nervous system to psychic conflicts coincided with a reinterpretation of mediumship. In fact, as some authors have noted, it was partly through the very reflection on mediums’ state of trance that psychologists began to reconsider hysterical productions

as hidden layers of mental life.\textsuperscript{110} Henri Ellenberger observed: “The advent of spiritism was an event of major importance in the history of dynamic psychiatry because it indirectly provided psychologists and psychopathologists with new approaches to the mind...a new subject, the medium, became available for experimental psychological investigations, out of which evolved a model of the human mind.”\textsuperscript{111} Hence, important pioneers of depth psychology—Pierre Janet, Théodore Flournoy, Carl Gustav Jung, and Sigmund Freud, to name a few—shared a common interest in the mediumistic state of trance through which they formulated new interpretations of subjectivity.

In this section, I demonstrate how these authors became preoccupied with the question of authorship in spiritual communications, a preoccupation which shaped their understandings of the unconscious through the scientific appropriation of mediumistic trance. This history can illuminate some of mediums’ most important contributions to cultural understandings of the speaking subject: under the scrutiny of their observers,


\textsuperscript{111} Ellenberger, \textit{The Discovery of the Unconscious}, 85.
female mediums’ “madness” came to express the fallacies of unified subjectivity and, by the same token, of rigid conceptions of male and female identities.

Pierre Janet’s psychological studies began with experiments on a woman who certainly presented many similarities with the abilities of spiritual mediums. In search of a subject for his doctoral dissertation, Janet had encountered Léonie, a French peasant who had previously been a patient of a Le Havre doctor and who could apparently carry certain hypnotic commands without the means of direct communications. Janet described his experiments with Léonie in a paper he presented before the Société de Psychologie Physiologique in 1885. He confirmed hypnotizing Léonie from a distance and mentally giving her post-hypnotic instructions while she remained under the observation of invited witnesses. At a distance of several kilometers, for instance, Janet would hypnotize his patient and command her to turn on a light at a specific moment of the day. Out of 22 such trials, Janet stated that 16 had been successful in a way that could not be attributed to coincidence.¹¹²

Relatively quickly, Janet discontinued his experiments and distanced himself from the field of parapsychology, which he felt gave rise to too many misrepresentations in the popular press. However, his interest in the abilities displayed by spiritual mediums did not completely vanish. In the late 1880s and early 1890s, he began to explore automatic writing. Janet remarked that this practice—a valued mode of communication among mediums during trance—was also observable in his hysterical patients. He wrote: “Lucy, Margaret, and many others present in a complete way the automatic writing and

would make the fortune of spiritualist circles.”¹¹³ For Janet, the scientific appropriation of mediumship could demonstrate that some memories expressed themselves through the body and acted on its behalf, while remaining unacknowledged by the conscious self. In this sense, he stated: “It is useless to go back to the description of [automatic] writing discovered by the spiritualists; if it has to-day no longer the religious character...it may in many circumstances subserve a medical purpose.”¹¹⁴

In one of his experiments with automatic writing, Janet put a pen in his hysterical patient Margaret’s anesthetic right hand, then moved it in order to write the name ‘John’ while asking her to look away: “Margaret tells us that she has felt nothing at all. We know what that means: she has not had any personal perception of anything.” The remarkable characteristic of this experience, he added, was that after a short lapse of time, the presumably anesthetic hand would itself repeat the movement instigated by the doctor: “we put a pencil in her right hand…and make her look away. We see her fingers take hold of the pencil and the hand write. How could this delicate movement take place, when but a moment ago the subject could not move without looking? ... The hand wrote the name John, which was the same word with the same form of letters we wrote ourselves.”¹¹⁵

In another experiment with trance and automatic writing, Janet reported a conversation with his patient Lucy, which highlighted the fragmentation of consciousness and the easiness with which unconscious personalities could be built among hysterics:

¹¹⁴ Janet, The Mental State, 16.
Do you hear me, I ask her? – (she responds in writing) No.

But to answer one must hear. – Yes, absolutely.

So how do you do it? – I do not know.

There must be someone who hears me? – Yes.

Who? – Other than Lucy.

Farewell! Another person. Shall we name this person? – No.

Yes, it will be more convenient. – Well then Adrienne.\(^{116}\)

As these quotations illustrate, the modes of communication of séances allowed Janet to consider how memories could locate themselves outside of consciousness and operate on the body. Trance also revealed to him how easily one’s subjective identity could fragment itself into a plurality of voices. The scientific appropriation of mediumistic practices therefore allowed the psychologist to highlight a relation between unconscious ideas and physical motor reactions that would remain influential up to Freud’s theorization of hysteria.\(^{117}\)


117 That Freud was influenced by Janet’s interpretation of hysteria is evidenced in his works. To mention only few of his references to Janet: in 1897, Freud wrote: “I can only associate myself fully with the views advanced by M. Janet in recent numbers of the Archives de Neurologie; they are confirmed as much by hysterical paralyses as by anaesthesia and psychical symptoms.” (Sigmund Freud, “Some Points for a Comparative Study of Organic and Hysterical Paralyses.” The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud vol. 1 ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage Classics, 2001) 169.) Freud further related his own interpretation of hysteria through the medieval view of possession to that of Charcot and Janet. In the 1893 text “Charcot,” he states: “[Charcot] succeeded in proving, by an unbroken chain of argument, that these paralyses were the result of ideas which had dominated the patient’s brain at moments of a special disposition…. This incomparably fine piece of clinical material has been taken up by his own pupil, Pierre Janet, as well as by Breuer and others, who developed from it a theory of neurosis which coincided with the medieval view—when once they had replaced the ‘demon’ of clerical phantasy by a psychological formula.” (Sigmund Freud, “Charcot.” The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud vol. 3 ed. and trans. James Strachey (London: Vintage Classics, 2001) 22.) Janet himself accused Freud of reusing his concepts with
Théodore Flournoy’s *From India to the Planet Mars*, among the earliest studies of a medium from a psychological perspective, pursued Janet’s exploration of the unconscious but reversed his methodology. Instead of studying hysterical individuals who presented signs of mediumship, Flournoy observed a medium who presented characteristics of hysteria. The text resulted from five years of observation of Hélène Smith, “a beautiful woman about thirty years of age, tall, vigorous, of a fresh, healthy complexion,”¹¹⁸ who would impress her listeners by falling spontaneously into trance and by narrating the story of her former lives. Smith believed herself to have been previously reincarnated as a Hindu Princess, Queen Marie Antoinette, and an inhabitant of Mars. During trance, she spoke in different tongues, which were to be her original languages in these previous lives. She further developed a Martian alphabet which often slipped through her communications in automatic writing and deeply intrigued some of the most prominent linguists of her time, including Ferdinand de Saussure and Victor Henry (see figure 7).¹¹⁹


¹¹⁸ Flournoy, *From India to the Planet Mars*, 9.

Flournoy interpreted the medium’s trance discourses as “romances of the subliminal imagination” and demonstrated that many of her claims originated from a book she had read in childhood. While the reading had long been forgotten by her conscious self, it had remained imprinted in other layers of her psyche and had been revived during her trance sessions. Thus, Flournoy interpreted her trance discourses as cryptomnesia—the expression of long forgotten memories that occurred without the subject’s conscious recognition. He originated Smith’s mediumship from “the influence, so often verified, of emotional shocks and often certain traumatisms upon mental dissociation. By means of these the birth of hypnoid states may become the germ either of secondary personalities
more or less strongly marked...or of somnambulistic romances.... And finally we must note the phenomena of cryptomnesia, the awakening and setting to work of forgotten memories.”120 Like Charcot, Janet, and others, Flournoy equated spiritualism with hysteria. At his fourth sitting with the medium, he remarked that he could no longer “resist a strong desire to ascertain the physiological condition of the charming seeress,” and thus “vigorously” proceeded to examine her hands “which lay temptingly spread out opposite me.” While revealing the seductive character of séances—an aspect which will be taken up in later parts of this research—Flournoy’s examination demonstrated that Smith experienced in trance “a large and varied assortment of sensory and motor disturbances which...are thoroughly identical with those that may be observed in cases of hysteria (where they are more permanent).”121

Carl Gustav Jung, whose work was deeply influenced by Flournoy, wrote a similar psychological study of a medium in his 1901 doctoral dissertation.122 The medium under observation, his younger cousin S.W., had impersonated a plethora of spirits during séances at the end of the nineteenth century. She channeled: the late personality of her pastoral and highly reputed grandfather; the ghost of an unknown character named Ulrich von Gerbenstein, who appeared to be “a gossip, a wag, and...a great admirer of the

120 Flournoy, From India to the Planet Mars, 266.
121 Flournoy, From India to the Planet Mars, 12. The language here used by Flournoy to express his perception of the medium as both passive and seductive illustrates well the eroticism shaping relations between female spiritualists and their observers. In Chapter 5, I come back to such seductive relations to interrogate more fully the erotic representations of female mediums in cultural and scientific discourses.
ladies;”\textsuperscript{123} and the alter-ego Ivenes, “a serious, mature person, devout and right-minded, full of womanly tenderness and very modest.”\textsuperscript{124} Jung interpreted these spiritual incarnations as unconscious creations of S.W. through which she was shaping different aspects of her own personality. His favourite persona was the womanly Ivenes. After a year of séances, Jung noted that his cousin’s “character has much improved: she has become on whole quieter, steadier, and more agreeable.”\textsuperscript{125} He concluded that the integration of such spirit personalities as that of Ivenes shaped the young medium’s psychological development.

Jung proposed that the mediumistic trance could provide valuable insights into the medium’s unconscious conflicts. He phrased this understanding in a preface to Stuart Edward White’s book \textit{Unobstructed Universe}: “The communications of ‘spirits’ are \textit{statements about the unconscious psyche},” he wrote, “they have this in common with dreams; for dreams, too, are statements about the unconscious, which is why the psychotherapist uses them as a first-class source of information.”\textsuperscript{126} Jung here referred to the generalized idea that psychoanalysis, as a science of the unconscious, had been invented through, and remained centered on, the analysis of dreams. Freud himself, as is well known, often spoke of dreams as “the royal road to the unconscious.” In the 1910 “The Origin and Development of Psychoanalysis,” for instance, Freud had mentioned that the interpretation of dreams, along with \textit{parapraxis} and free associations, was one of the only modes available to psychoanalysis for exploring the unconscious aspects of personality: “Working over the ideas that occur to patients when they submit to the main

\textsuperscript{125} Jung, “On the Psychology,” 46.
\textsuperscript{126} Carl Gustav Jung, “Psychology and Spiritualism,” \textit{Psychology and the Occult}, 139.
rule of psychoanalysis is not our only technical method of discovering the unconscious. The same purpose is served by two other procedures: the interpretation of patients’ dreams and the exploitation of their faulty and haphazard actions.\textsuperscript{127} As Jung’s quotation demonstrates, however, the mediumistic state of trance also contributed to the development of psychoanalysis as “a first-class source of information” about the unconscious.

Jung approached mediumship differently than most of his contemporaries. He believed the practice to be more than a symptom of madness since it could play an important and valuable function in the formation of subjectivity. However, like the medical tradition that preceded him, he left open the correlation between the phenomenon of trance speaking and hysteria. Indeed, despite his initial claim that “otherwise there were no abnormalities to be noticed about S.W., and especially no serious hysterical symptoms,” he later integrated the notion of hysteria with his understanding of the medium’s practice as he observed that: “in the middle of a lively conversation, she would become all confused and go on talking senselessly in a peculiar monotonous way, looking in front of her dreamily with half closed eyes.”\textsuperscript{128} Jung also attributed different values to the spiritual personalities of his cousin and displayed a marked preference for the modest and timid Ivenes, which testified to his uneasiness towards the female performance of masculine discourses.

Finally, Freud’s studies of hysteria were also informed by the phenomenon of spiritual communication. Two years after the publication of \textit{Studies in Hysteria} in 1895, and at the time of his own self-analysis, Freud wrote to his friend Wilhelm Fliess:

What would you say, by the way, if I told you that all of my brand-new prehistory of hysteria is already known and was published a hundred of times over, though several centuries ago? Do you remember that I always said that the medieval theory of possession held by the ecclesiastical courts was identical with our theory of a foreign body in consciousness? But why did the devil who took possession of the poor things invariably abuse them sexually and in a loathsome manner? Why are their confessions under torture so like the communications made by my patients in psychic treatments? Sometime soon I must delve into the literature on this subject.¹²⁹

Freud indeed began this research “sometime soon.” In his next letter to Fliess, he reports: “I have ordered the *Malleus maleficarum*, and now that I have put the final touch on infantile paralyses I shall study it diligently…. Can you *without* trouble recommend some good reading from your excellent memory?”¹³⁰ In these letters, while he did not directly discuss mediumship as practiced by the spiritualist groups of his century, Freud (akin to Charcot) referred to the comparable state of evil possession as tantamount to hysteria. The study of possession throughout medieval history thus provided him with a tool to demonstrate the ramifications of unconscious manifestations. Like hysteria, the phenomenon of spiritual possession revealed, for Freud, the existence of some “foreign body” in the self and the sexual character of this repressed otherness.

Interestingly, the following letters to his friend, in which Freud revealed the developments of his own hysteria, indirectly pointed to the practice of automatic writing as previously studied by Janet and developed by spiritual mediums. In July 1897, Freud

---


referred to what he termed his “writing paralysis,” noting: “I still do not know what has been happening to me. Something from the deepest depth of my neurosis set itself against any advance in the understanding of the neuroses, and you have somehow been involved in it. For my writing paralysis seems to me designed to inhibit our communication.”

This paralysis, as it would later appear, was not only figurative, but affected the movement of his hand in concrete ways: “My handwriting is…more human again,” he later wrote to his friend, “your handwriting, as I see with pleasure, never varies.” As this quotation indicates, Freud’s hand was thus affected, like Janet’s hysteric, by a force independent of his conscious agency. “It” transformed his typography, as if he were inhabited by a non-human entity. The psychoanalyst was only able to regain control over his motor reactions—to make his writing “more human again”—by exploring repressed, unconscious memories. Freud understood the lack of control over linguistic communications akin to the mediums’ automatic writing as a symptom of psychic disturbance.

As I discussed elsewhere, Freud’s interest in mediumistic abilities continued in his later works, as he became more and more intrigued by the possibility of telepathy. Like many of his disciples, Freud visited mediums to inquire about such possibility. Although he was generally reluctant to believe in the latter’s occult abilities, he became convinced of the reality of telepathy after an experiment with his daughter Anna and his

---

student Sandor Ferenczi, experiments in which he declared to have himself “played the medium.”

Through these explorations, the psychoanalyst thus continued to interpret the practice of mediumship as revelator of yet unacknowledged modes of communications between individuals.

Therefore, while psychologists of the turn of the century refused to endorse the spiritual origins of mediumistic communications, they were deeply intrigued and preoccupied by the manifestations of séances. Through such questioning, the state of trance helped them formulate new theories of the unconscious. To quote William James, philosopher and member of the Society for Psychical Research, spiritual séances provided “instruments in research, reagents like litmus paper or the galvanometer, for revealing what would otherwise be hidden.” For depth psychologists from Janet to Freud, mediums revealed the secrets of the mind. They made way for new discoveries and provided new interpretations of subjectivity that transformed the definition and treatment of madness. Depth-psychologists’ discoveries of the unconscious were born largely out of the difficulty for materialist scientists to determine the “true” authorship of spiritual communications. As Marina Yaguelo writes, in the medium’s discourse: “The relationship of person is missing, there is no I standing as the source of the utterance at the centre of the discourse, no I taking responsibility for the act of utterance and involved

135 Freud’s relationship to the occult beliefs of his era remains a mysteriously unacknowledged aspect of his psychoanalytic theory. For further information, I will here only briefly refer to: Ernst Jones, “Occultism.” Life and Work of Sigmund Freud (London: Hogarth Press, 1961); Nandor Fodor, Freud, Jung, and the Occult (New Hyde Park, New York: University Books, 1971); and George Devereux, Psychoanalysis and the Occult (London: International University Press, 1953). These authors demonstrate the ambivalence of the psychoanalyst towards mediumship: while he easily rejected most of the claims put forward by spiritualism, Freud was never able to refute completely the possibility of telepathy, of which he seemed to become more and more convinced. During the 1920s, he wrote to Hereward Carrington, who had invited him to act as co-editor of different periodicals on the study of occultism: “If I had my life to live over again I should devote myself to psychical research rather than to psychoanalysis.” (Quoted in Jones, Life and Work, 392).

by virtue of this in a spatio-temporal continuity.”¹³⁷ By inquiring into séances’ modes of communication, these authors thus contributed to an important reinterpretation of the relationship between subjects and discourses. They demonstrated the precariousness of the sense of self, the “I,” always threatened with disruption by unconscious ideas and desires.

Developing a framework: feminist appropriations of hysteria and unconscious communications

Since the 1970s, feminist scholars have renewed the interest in the definition of hysteria, which, they claim, crystallizes fundamental aspects of women’s experiences in male-dominated institutions. As Elisabeth Bronfen explains in The Knotted Subject: Hysteria and its Discontents: “Feminist scholars such as Helene Cixous, Catherine Clément, and Christina Von Braun...have invoked a return to the question of hysteria as a means to discuss the exclusion of the feminine subjectivity inherent in patriarchal culture.”¹³⁸

Other authors, from Luce Irigaray to Elaine Showalter, and from Juliet Mitchell to Janet Beizer, have also undertaken research on the advent of hysteria in the late nineteenth century to discuss particular aspects of women’s relation to their social and cultural contexts.¹³⁹ While their takes on hysteria vary, these feminist scholars have noted that the unfolding of medical understandings of the illness calls attention to cultural

---

¹³⁸ Bronfen, The Knotted Subject, xi.
interpretations of the gendered body. They further suggest that the reflection on hysteria can be recuperated as a valuable tool for the feminist project.

Similarly, I would argue that depth psychologists’ approach to hysteria remains useful through its effort to understand communications that could only manifest themselves in disguised or indirect ways. Within the psychoanalytic framework, hysterical symptoms express painful and conflicted ideas that could not be spoken. To quote Bronfen: “to produce hysterical symptoms—the loss of consciousness, control over body functions, or control over the vagaries of the mind—is for those afflicted the only possible way to articulate a psychic disturbance, but the improper recourse to the language of the body signals that the patient cannot effectively use symbolic language.”

In psychoanalysis, the interpretation of hysterical symptoms demanded redefining discourse to encompass, not only what was spoken, but also what remained silenced.

The first medical case of Freud’s and Breuer’s Studies in Hysteria presents a paradigmatic illustration of the psychoanalytic definition and cure of hysteria and reveals how the psychoanalytic approach to the unconscious may be relevant for the study of mediums’ discourses. The case relays the story of Anna O., a pseudonym for Bertha Pappenheim, who fell victim to hysterical symptoms while she was responsible for the prolonged nursing of her dying father in the 1880s. During this period, Pappenheim experienced physical paralysis, mood swings, and total aphasia. As Sharon Heller remarks: “Other disturbing symptoms emerged. In conversation, she occasionally omitted necessary words until her speech became nonsensical. For two weeks she became mute;
she struggled to speak, but no words came out.” Under hypnosis, however, she was able to express the ramifications of her life story in English, French, and Italian. The possibilities offered by the state of trance thus permitted the patient to voice ideas which would have otherwise remained silent, expressing themselves only through her symptomatic body. Unable to help her through other methods of treatment, Breuer began to listen to her during her hypnotic trance and for the first time recognized the mechanism of her disorder: “She had felt very much offended over something and had determined not to speak about it.” When he suggested this hypothesis to his patient, her linguistic disability disappeared, although she could only express herself in English. The analysis further revealed that Pappenheim’s intellectual abilities had been inhibited by the restrictive expectations upon her sex: while she had been required to remain in the domestic sphere to nurse her father, her less ambitious brother had been allowed to pursue a university degree. By the termination of the treatment, Pappenheim had retrieved her ability to communicate in her primary language and became an important figure of the German social and feminist movement. In her later life, despite occasional relapses of hysteria, she ran an orphanage for approximately twelve years, travelled to the Balkans and Russia to investigate prostitution, and co-founded the League of Jewish Women. In 1954, she was posthumously honoured for her philanthropic work by the Republic of West Germany as a “Helper of Humanity.”

As shown in this exemplary case, the psychoanalytic framework thus conceived hysteria as a dysfunctional form of communication between ideas and the body that resulted from the silencing of deeply important yet conflicted desires. Psychoanalytic techniques aimed to acknowledge and verbalize unconscious ideas through symbolic language in order to eradicate their invalidating expression through the body. It is only because they were receptive to different modes of expression that Freud and Breuer could interpret the origins of their patients’ distress.

In contemporary feminist criticism, the case of Anna O. has been recuperated to demonstrate that hysteria could also express a radical but silent rejection of the symbolic. Alex Bronfen explains: “what the hysterical broadcasts is a message about vulnerability—the vulnerability of the symbolic (the fallibility of the paternal law and social bonds).”  

However, this rejection of the symbolic could only manifest itself through the subject’s body due to a lack of supporting infrastructures. As such, Dianne Hunter connects Pappenheim’s hysterical symptoms with her rejection of the familial order as articulated through the organization of language. “In patriarchal socialization,” she writes, “the power to formulate sentences coincides developmentally with a recognition of the power of the father.”  

For Hunter, Pappenheim’s inability to speak German revealed an impossible desire to escape the confinement of the home. Refusing her father’s language, Pappenheim was also unconsciously attempting to escape the social and familial orders in which she felt trapped. But because she could not consciously admit this inner rage to herself or others, she became its own victim through her inability to function in the society she wished to reject. It was only after she

144 Bronfen, *The Knotted Subject*, xiii.
recognized her impossible desire, thanks to Breuer’s attentive listening during her hypnotic trance, that she could consciously confront patriarchy through her feminist and philanthropic work. In this reading of Pappenheim’s case and others, hysteria thus represented “the desperate communication of the powerless.”

146 Showalter explains:

In its historical context in the late nineteenth century, hysteria was at best a private, ineffectual response to the frustration of women’s lives. Its immediate gratifications—the sympathy of the family, the attention of the physician—were slight in relation to its costs in powerlessness and silence…. But hysteria and feminism do exist on a kind of continuum as the career of Bertha Pappenheim illustrates. The availability of a women’s movement in which the protofeminism of hysterical protest could be articulated and put to work, offered a potent alternative to the self-destructive and self-enclosed strategies of hysteria, and a genuine form of resistance to the patriarchal order. If we see the hysterical woman as one end of the spectrum of a female avant-garde struggling to redefine woman’s place in the social order, than we can also see feminism as the other end of the spectrum, the alternative to hysterical silence, and the determination to speak for women in the public world.

147 Feminist re-interpretations of hysteria have therefore opened a view of the many women who, in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, did not receive the social support necessary for the conscious acknowledgement of their desires and who therefore expressed this conflict through the medium of their own bodies.

146 Showalter, The Female Malady, 5.
147 Showalter, The Female Malady, 161.
The psychoanalytic understanding of hysteria might again provide a relevant concept for today’s analysis of mediums’ practices, in so far as it offers a theoretical framework that both accounts for the role of trance speaking and sheds light on how speech can be camouflaged in restricting contexts. As his study of hysteria demonstrates, Freud implied that communication operated in many ways. In this account, spiritual mediumship can be conceived as another form of “communication of the powerless,” but one which, through the state of possession, found a strategic way to voice its rejection of the symbolic order. In such framework, the mediumistic trance can be seen as a relatively secure space of expression in which individuals could at last give voice to their inner revolt against their marginalization in the social order, yet only through the apparent fragmentation of their sense of self. The claims of spiritual channeling, fragmenting the enunciating “I” into a multiplicity of identities, transformed the medium into an instrument acted upon by invisible forces. Albeit in the names of others, the claims of spiritual possession offered female mediums an opportunity to speak, to voice what might have otherwise remained silenced.

148 The correlation between hysteria and possession remains present in certain contemporary psychoanalytic interpretations. Mitchell, for instance, defends the position that hysteria has not disappeared from lived experiences, despite its current unpopularity in medical terminology. She gives cross-cultural examples of possession cults and interprets them as “using one expression of hysteria” (Mad Men and Medusas, 236). Referring to anthropologists who studied possession in primitive societies established on the firm subjugation of women, she notes: “Lewis observed four clearly defined contexts for spirits possession. In all, it is easy to see the evidence of what we would call hysteria, and, indeed, despite himself, it is how Lewis describes the behaviour” (236). In her study of spiritualism in England, Alex Owen also presents an understanding of mediumship as a form of hysteria in her concluding chapter. Here, she enumerates the known symptoms of many mediums who, before or after their practice as trance speakers, experienced many of the incapacitating symptoms then associated with hysteria. Quoted as examples are the famous mediums Eva Carrière, Emma Hardinge Britten, and Florence Cook who suffered from poor health, lethargy, and depression at different stages of their lives (The Darkened Room, 207-209). Owen, however, feels uneasy towards this approach, noting: “Any suggestion that unconscious processes might be responsible for certain spiritualist phenomena is, of course, unacceptable to spiritualists, and as such has played no part in the preceding analysis.” In this research, I compare the events of séances and hysteria in Victorian and Edwardian cultures, not to offer a symptomatology of mediums, but to further explore the stakes and meanings of mediumship.
Under such a framework, the fact that the rituals of séances recurrently emphasized the difficulty of speech may illustrate female mediums’ experiences of disempowerment. Mediums’ communications, always disguised or hidden under a plethora of authors, frequently appeared to be uttered under the most strenuous efforts. When words or discourses were pronounced, they generally appeared after long minutes, sometimes hours, of silence leading to the medium’s entrancement. Spirit raps demanded the same amount of patience: the method by which sitters would repeat again and again the alphabet until a rap would be heard meant that the formulation of a sentence could take hours. By analyzing the modes of conveyance of such a speech, the present research suggests that both hysteria and mediumship originated from the same internal rejection of patriarchal structures of oppression. However, mediumship painfully gave this rejection a voice through the productions of trance state which hid a profound attack on the Victorian ideology of the separate spheres.

**Conclusion**

This chapter introduced the psychoanalytic framework that will shape my assumptions about, and interpretations of, séance communications in Victorian and Edwardian Canada. This framework will permit me to address some contradictions in the historiography of female mediums. For instance: what happens when women take on an agency that is politically motivated, but refuse to claim it as their own? Whose voices do we hear through the analysis of their discourses? I have chosen, however, to introduce this framework through a discussion between psychoanalytic conceptions of subjectivity and the nineteenth-century medical understandings of hysteria from which such
conceptions partly originated. Through this historical exploration, I hope to highlight both the validity and problems of adopting a psychoanalytic framework for the interpretation of mediumship.

Among the problems of adopting such framework, I have demonstrated that the understanding of mediumship by depth psychologists loosely followed nineteenth-century physicians’ definition of spiritualist beliefs as a form of insanity. Explaining the practice of mediumship through the terminology of unconscious communications rather than dysfunctions of the uterus, depth psychologists’ understandings of séances continued to presume the correlation between mediumistic productions and madness. Like medical men of the nineteenth century, depth psychologists refused to principally locate the symbolic importance of séances in the alleged spirit discourses. In this way, both medical and psychological interpretations pathologized female mediums, a treatment that I do not endorse. Indeed, my aim is not to produce a new symptomatology of mediumship, but to explore what their discourses and practices revealed about gendered subjectivity.

In my view, the taxonomy of hysteria as a debilitating illness cannot do justice to the constructive political and epistemological aspects of mediumship. Indeed, in contrast to Pappenheim, who rejected her German language and, by the same token, her ability to function in male-controlled social structures, Helen Smith, the medium Flourney observed in *From India to the Planet Mars*, invented a new Martian language through which she reconstructed her relation to language altogether. Through her imaginative creations, Smith established for herself a strategic position from which she could reveal scientific and religious wisdom to male and female sitters. She fascinated some of the most renowned scholars of her time, including Théodore Flourney, Ferdinand de
Saussure, and Victor Henry. While Janet’s patient Margaret was condemned to repeat in automatic writing the name her doctor had inscribed by manipulating her hand as that of a marionette, and while Freud lost his ability to write while struggling to overcome his own hysteria, Jung’s cousin S.W. used automatic writing to compose a complex mystical system of life forces that greatly impressed her observer for its brilliance (see figure 8). Through this system, S.W. integrated Kantian theories to which she was newly acquainted with original ideas on the after-life. Jung explains: “I can remember clearly that in the winter of 1899/1900 we spoke several times in S. W.’s presence of attractive and repulsive forces in connection with Kant’s *Natural History and Theory of the Heavens*, also of the law of the conservation of energy, and of whether the force of gravity is also a form of motion. From the contents of these talks S. W. had evidently derived the foundations of her mystic system.”

---

If the hysterical loss of language can be interpreted as a rejection of external dominance that can only express itself through the internal splitting of the subject, I would therefore suggest that mediums’ glossolalia, automatic writing, and spiritual possession can be considered as attempts to reconstruct, from this rejection, a new structure to legitimate the manifestation of women’s voices. In short, reading mediumship as simply an iteration of hysteria would fail to recognize the creativity at play in séances. The practice of mediumship, I believe, formed an original response to the ideology of true womanhood in the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries that should not be rejected simply as a manifestation of insanity.
That said, the psychoanalytic framework can remain a valuable tool of interpretation because it can reveal some of the important contributions that mediums brought to cultural understandings of gendered subjectivity. Relinquishing their authorial agency through the state of trance, female mediums profoundly challenged the notion of the speaking subject as a masterful whole. When mediums performed their own disappearance in order to channel the voice of the dead, they demonstrated that identity is constructed in the fragile tension between fragmentary and deeply conflicted ideas, desires, and discourses. By providing a framework to interpret different forms of communications, psychoanalysis can therefore create an enlightening perspective on mediumship because its stems from a similar questioning of authorship and language.

In the following chapters, I set out to demonstrate how mediums’ peculiar modes of expression eluded the notion of authorship as something whole, transparent, or completely intentional. When female mediums embraced male intellectual voices and produced highly praised discourses on difficult topics, when they created and projected ectoplasmic bodies from their orifices, and indeed, even when they were caught performing trickery and deceiving their audiences, they demonstrated to skeptics and believers alike the possibility for women to overcome the restrictions and expectations imposed upon their sex. They revealed to their audiences that a woman’s sphere, her desire, and even her erotic anatomy, were contingent constructions. Through their trance discourses and performances, they were able to demonstrate the fragility of gendered categorizations and, as such, challenged the ideology of the separate spheres still predominant in Victorian and Edwardian Canada.
Dr. Arling then said, ‘Doctors, I have known Miss Melville for some years. I tried to make a study of her. Before meeting her, I was a materialist, and studied from a materialistic standpoint. I treated the bodies of people with drugs and... often... the drugs had no effects.... Gentlemen, I have ever been successful in diagnosing disease, but it is only lately that I have done it intelligently.... The mind is what operates on brain cells. Take it away and... the body disintegrates.

(Flora MacDonald Denison, *Mary Melville, The Psychic*)

In the preceding chapter, I explored how nineteenth-century medical orthodoxies in Canada and abroad interpreted mediumship as a manifestation of hysteria and brought about the institutionalization of many spiritualists. As historian Alex Owen has noted, the century’s “experts in the field of lunacy were troubled by what they perceived as an association between the mediumistic trance and an entire range of pathological conditions.” It was such an association that an 1854 article in the *Medical Chronicle* noted when it claimed that “27 suicides, 8 murders, and 209 cases of insanity” had been directly caused by spiritualism.

---

152 “Spiritualism.” *The Medical Chronicle* 1, no. 8 (January 1854): 239.
While many female mediums did suffer from the medical association of their practice with hysteria, it would be a crude oversimplification to portray spiritualists as the passive victims of all-powerful doctors. As this chapter demonstrates, medical men of the nineteenth century were still struggling to establish the authority of their science. Simultaneously, mediums and believers formulated their own interpretations of diseases, producing a vocabulary that directly confronted medical orthodoxies. In Ann Braude’s terms, just as spiritualists “found a warrant for women’s religious leadership in accepted stereotypes about women’s natural piety, they found a justification for the medical training of women in the common view that women had inherent nurturing qualities.”153 Female mediums reframed stereotypes of femininity as a state of passivity and, as a result, they responded to patriarchal ideas about the limitations of the female body. Specifically, mediums’ discourses contested the symptomatic interpretation of trance states by reframing spiritual communications as sites of healing. Through these means, spiritual séances permitted female mediums to borrow more authoritative voices to enter the then largely male-dominated field of medicine. Spiritualism thereby became an important source for women’s participation in the medical profession.

In this chapter, I revisit an episode in the history of women in Canadian medicine as I explore the role of spiritual healing in Susan Kilborn (1815-1868). Although she remains more obscure than most of her nineteenth-century colleagues, Kilborn has recently drawn the attention of historians as one of the first female practitioners this country has produced. She studied medicine in Stanstead, Québec through a four-year apprenticeship with Dr. Moses Colby (1795-1863), then travelled to Boston where she

worked and advertised herself as an M.D. Through the analysis of the influence of
spiritualism in her practice, I aim to demonstrate that mediumship emerged partly as a
means for women to re-appropriate the female body amidst new scientific developments
that strove to put healing in the hands of male authorities.

This chapter begins by re-interrogating the opposition between medical men and
mediums in order to highlight spiritualism’s counter-narrative to the association of trance
states with hysteria. Although medical regulations made it increasingly difficult for
women—and for female mediums more particularly—to participate in the profession,
spiritualism offered an array of responses that aimed to re-establish women’s control over
the body and its cure. Indeed, the performance of possession by which mediums lost
control over their bodies paradoxically permitted them to voice ideas reclaiming
women’s authority in the healing process. Susan Kilborn’s story illustrates such approach
as her spiritual communications allowed her to borrow the voice and authority of her late
mentor, Dr. Moses Colby. With a medium named Elma Comstock, Kilborn indeed re-
interpreted her apprenticeship in a way that allowed her to find her place in the field.
Borrowing Colby’s authorial voice, she gained the confidence and support that permitted
her to validate her practice. In the last section of this chapter, I analyse the discursive
position Kilborn adopted through her internalization of Colby’s spirit. I suggest that her
use of mediumship can illuminate important aspects of women’s relation to discourse.
Through a reading of Luce Irigaray’s analysis of women’s language, I argue that the
practice of mediumship formed a paradoxical response to women’s oppression in the
processes of symbolization in which sexual difference is established. Kilborn’s story
therefore not only permits me to explore female mediums’ responses to cultural
perceptions of their bodies—a theme which will reappear frequently throughout this research—but also to introduce reflections on women’s enunciation of agency. Through Kilborn’s use of spiritualism, I begin questioning how mediums challenged cultural ideas about womanhood, from body to mind.

**Mediums and medicine**

In recent years, cultural historians have examined the opposition between medical men and spiritual mediums. Such studies demonstrate that the medical diagnosis of spiritualists as hysterics may not have solely emerged from a concern for the unconventional behaviours and discourses of mediums, but also from the need to legitimate the validity of materialistic interpretations of the body against the popularity of alternative medicine. As the nineteenth century unfolded, regular practitioners found themselves struggling to establish their authority as experts of the body amidst the growth of competing medical sects. Orthodox doctors had to compete for patients, not only with healing mediums, but also with practices established on homeopathy, herbal healing, magnetism, and Christian Science, among others. Such medical sects tended to focus on the mind’s healing powers and thus generally offered much less pervasive approaches to cure that appealed to many patients.

The relative unpopularity of nineteenth-century medicine rested partly on the fact that orthodox doctors often reverted to what historians have called heroic measures. In other words, these doctors’ remedies for a vast array of diseases consisted of cupping, bleeding, extracting teeth, and prescribing large quantities of laxatives, arsenic, and

---

opium-based medications. In his book *Reminiscences of Student Life and Practice*, Dr. E. D. Worthington commented on the preponderance of such cures in Canada around the 1850s: “When I was a student, my occupation seemed to consist entirely of bleeding. It was considered the correct thing to be bled at least every spring…. In our official sanctum it was a concession that bleeding and tooth drawing were prerequisites…. I need hardly add that no one left…surgery…, no matter what his ailment, without being bled or having a tooth-extracted…. What if a wrong tooth was extracted now and then? There were plenty more where it came from!”

Offering another illustration of such heroic treatments provided by regular doctors, historian Geoffrey Bilson described the cure received by Patrick Mullany, soldier of the 32nd Regiment at Quebec, who had been diagnosed with cholera:

[On 17 July at 9 am] he was bled thirty ounces, given fifteen grains of calomel and two of opium, given a turpentine enema, rubbed by turpentine for his cramps, then given ginger teal and allowed to rest. At 2 pm he was given three grains of calomel and put on a course of one-eight grain of opium every half-hour with calomel every third hour…. On 20 July he was given a variety of drinks and had a blister applied to his stomach. The next day, he was dosed with rhubarb, had twelve leeches applied to his stomach, followed by a second blister, and was allowed beef tea and arrowroot. On 22 July he was fit enough to eat porridge for breakfast, but the mercury had begun to blister his mouth and he was given bicarbonate of soda in addition to his beef tea and arrowroot. On 23 July the

---

155 E. D. Worthington, *Reminiscences of Student Life and Practice* (Sherbrooke: The Sherbrooke Protestant Hospital, 1897) 72.
medicines were withdrawn and he began to improve slowly until on 11 August he was declared fit for duty.\textsuperscript{156}

By contrast, alternative healers used milder treatments to combat diseases. They prescribed herbal remedies and minute doses of medicine, advocated the benefits of fresh air and the avoidance of over-stimulation, recommended healthy diets and prayers, or turned to passes of hands. Such alternative approaches rested on the assumption that the treatment of illness must expend from the strictly materialistic views of most orthodox practitioners and turn to the patient’s mind. These gentle treatments seemed particularly suitable for children, and mothers therefore frequently chose alternative over orthodox cures.\textsuperscript{157}

Similarly, spiritualists generally advised patients to follow alternative forms of treatment. Approaches varied widely from one medium to another: some charged for their services, while others freely dispensed spiritual advice; some did not possess medical training, while others combined spiritual inspiration with their own knowledge of medicine; some directly channeled the voice of spirits, while others worked through intuition. However, spiritualists generally shared a common predilection for mild treatments and remedies. Further, most spiritualists encouraged the performance of trance states to help restore patients’ health. For instance, the Canadian medium Flora

\textsuperscript{156} Quoted in Wendy Mitchinson, \textit{The Nature of Their Bodies: Women and their Doctors in Victorian Canada} (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1991) 21-22.

MacDonald Denison, who will be discussed in Chapter 4, used spiritual communications with a trance entity named “Sunset” as a method of healing. The medium wrote of her spirit personality that: “He is a healer and has often assisted me in stopping pain through both mental and magnetic healing.” A 1900 book entitled What Converted me to Spiritualism, published in Toronto by Benjamin Fish Austin, conveyed some one hundred testimonies by Canadian and American spiritualists, many of whom similarly felt themselves cured by the spirits and therefore began to believe in the powers of trance as a site of healing. The book included the testimony of Mrs. Marian Carpenter from Detroit, who: “at the age of twelve…was stricken with diphtheria and after a long illness finally recovered,” finding that she had lost her voice for singing, “which had been a gift from two years of age.” Carpenter then married into a spiritualist family and attended séances. “At the third or fourth sitting,” she noted:

I was peculiarly influenced by some invisible power which seemed like electric shocks passing through my body, nearly throwing me from my chair. From that hour I became clairaudient and heard a voice say, “What would you rather be?” I did not understand what was meant, but replied, “if it is true that spirits can return, bring me my voice and I will ask for nothing more.” About six weeks after this I was impressed to sit down to the organ (being alone) and again felt the same strange influence. In a moment I began to sing and play a song that I had never heard…. I came to myself finding that my voice had been instantly restored and was stronger and clearer than ever before.

159 B. F. Austin, What Converted Me to Spiritualism (Toronto: Austin Publishing, 1900) 69.
Mattie E. Hull from Buffalo also wrote in *What Converted me to Spiritualism* that when the power of mediumship came to her: “I was treated for illness, and as my father was at the time engaged in a drug-store, his acquaintance among the country physicians was quite extended and he spared no means, as far as medical treatment was concerned, to relieve me of the ‘spells’ that caused me to act so strangely.” Although she was “bled and blistered,” no orthodox treatment seemed to alleviate her suffering until she met “a young physician and a clairvoyant” who urged her “to go to his house and sit ‘with his wife and another member of his family around the table.’ Full consent was given, and the second evening of this experience, I was entranced—made wholly unconscious, and talked for some time.” From then on, she began her recovery and “devoted much of my time to writing and speaking under that strange influence.”\(^{160}\) Among many others, such testimonies demonstrate how spiritual healing aimed to help believers by providing non-pervasive treatments that emphasized the powers of the mind over the body. For most mediums, passes of hands and the transfer of spiritual energies were sufficient for the restoration of health. Further, the adoption of trance states was considered to have highly beneficial properties. As Patricia Jasen argues, a large number of individuals were therefore open to consult mediums for treatment: “Late Victorian Canadians were…confused and curious about the nature of the mind, spirit, body and brain in light of new psychological theories, challenges to religious orthodoxy and resurgence of faith-cures and spiritualism.”\(^{161}\)

However, the unorthodox practice of spiritualist cures met with the condemnation of many physicians, who defined their approach as quackery and thereby demanded

---

\(^{160}\) Austin, *What Converted Me*, 75.  
stronger control over medical regulations. In 1888, Evariste E. Duquet, assistant doctor at the St-Jean-de-Dieu asylum in Québec, published a review of Gilles de la Tourette’s latest book in *La Gazette médicale de Montréal*, a book which warned against the grave dangers of trance states if unsupervised by competent and well-educated medical authorities. Agreeing with de la Tourette’s warning, Duquet included some of his personal ideas about spiritualist and magnetic cures. He was outraged that “at the end of the nineteenth century, in a city enlightened such as Montréal, a certain Dr. Citron could, by means of pompous advertisements of pretended cures obtained by impositions of hands and magnetic trickery, get money from a large number of victims.”

Similarly, in 1877, an article in *The Public Health Magazine* denounced “the doings and vaunted ‘cures’ of the clairvoyant and spiritualist doctors” who “ingenuously” carried the identity of deceased medical men to suggest treatments to friends and acquaintances. The author noted: “There are two features in common between the spiritualist and clairvoyant ‘doctors;’ both are as a rule females; in the case of both it is by no means necessary for the patient to be present in person at the séance.” The author’s reference to the sex of these clairvoyant doctors and to their avoidance of physical examination rendered clearly his assumption that medicine should be regulated by male authorities and that illness should be conceived in purely materialistic terms. Such critics thus adopted gendered categorizations to defend the value of medical science as masculine, quantifiable, and rational, against the superstition, impressionability and illogicality of female spiritualist

---

162 My translation from “à la fin du dix-neuvième siècle, dans une ville éclairée telle que Montréal, un certain Dr. Citron aurait pu, au moyen d’annonces pompeuses de prétendues guérisons obtenues par l’imposition des mains au moyen de passes magnétiques, soutirer l’argent d’un grand nombre de victimes.” (Evariste E. Duquet, “L’hypnose et les états analogues au point de vue médico-légal.” *La Gazette médicale de Montréal* 3, no. 3 (1889): 103.)


beliefs. The authors thus participated in a broader campaign to monopolize interpretations of the body, a campaign which certainly benefited from the correlation between insanity and trance productions.

Orthodox medicine, alternative care, and the formulation of medical regulations in the nineteenth century

As the century unfolded, medical associations in Canada mobilized their efforts to regulate healing. Orthodox doctors implemented professional regulations over the appellation of practitioners and the educational curriculum, thereby limiting legal access of alternative healers and spiritual mediums to the profession. The creation of regulating bodies defining medical practice, however, impacted not only the perception of alternative care, but also the social understanding of the role of women in the healing process. The latter, unsurprisingly, had constituted the majority of patients and providers of alternative care.165

While care had traditionally been the domain of women and mothers, whose nurturing qualities were praised in Victorian literature, the orthodox view emphasized that the scientific treatment of the ill was the purview of men. To quote Wendy Mitchinson: “Women had always been healers within the family but becoming a physician was a different matter…. Physicians were public figures, a role that many in society did not view as appropriate to women.”166 For many orthodox practitioners,

165 For further studies of the role of female practitioners in nineteenth-century medicine in North America, see: Leavitt and Judith Walzer (eds.), Women and Health in America: Historical Readings (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1984); Susan Wells, Out of the Dead House: Nineteenth-Century Women Physicians and the Writing of Medicine (Madison: The University of Wisconsin Press, 2001); and Cheryl Krasnick Warsh, Prescribed Norms: Women and Health in Canada and the United States since 1800 (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010).
166 Mitchinson, The Nature of Their Bodies, 27.
women were physically and emotionally unsuited to practise medicine. Indeed, in the early nineteenth century, heroic measures required strength as the work of “operation assistants” often consisted of holding patients down during surgeries.\textsuperscript{167} Further, medicine required an exhaustive knowledge of the body that was incompatible with Victorian ideals of true womanhood. As such, the Harvard Medical School declared in 1851 that since “no woman of true delicacy would be willing in the presence of men to listen to discussions of the subjects that necessarily come under the consideration of the student of medicine...we object to have the company of any female forced upon us, who is disposed to unsex herself, and to sacrifice her modesty, by appearing with men in the medical lecture room.... [Her] presence is calculated to destroy our respect for the modesty and delicacy of her sex.”\textsuperscript{168} Presenting a similar point of view, an article in \textit{The Canada Lancet} articulated its own rationale for barring women from medical practice: “As wives, mothers, sisters and dainty little housekeepers we have the utmost love and

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{167} Sydell Waxman, “Emily Stowe: Feminist and Healer.” \textit{Beaver} 72, no. 2 (1992): 26.
\item \textsuperscript{168} Quoted in Harriot K. Hunt, \textit{Glances and Glimpses: Or Fifty Years of Social, Including Twenty Years of Professional Life}. (Boston: John P. Jewett and Company, 1856) 207. The resolution was passed in 1851, when Harriot Hunt, one of the first female practitioners in the United States, had applied to join the Harvard Medical School. Like many female doctors of the period, Hunt’s career reveals a profound interest for the spiritualist movement which she describes in \textit{Glances and Glimpses}. After a visit she made in an asylum in Columbus where she encountered female spiritualists treated from mental illness, she claimed to have “had an opportunity of witnessing some peculiar phenomena in spiritual manifestations through the pencil-drawings of faces, by mediums in a clairvoyant state.” Asked about a woman who had “become indifferent to every thing—her will is gone, she waits for spirits to tell her what to do,” Hunt revealed her own thoughts on the relations between spiritualism, diseases, and healing: “I believe in spiritual manifestations, in those holy unseen influences which arrest us from the within, and the effect is seen on the outer.... But I know not yet what to say of those manifestations which close the outer sense.... If the message be delightful, why do not the features become illuminated?... This is the dark side of spiritualism. I think it is true that the minds (most commonly) who become mediums are passive; they do not live a life---they dream one. I except from this class, those who are so highly organized, that through sickness, sorrow, and prayer, they have been brought into the clairvoyant state. To such, this communion with the spirits has been a blessing—by restoring them to the world, to usefulness, and enjoyment” (356-357). Hunt thus perceived the spiritual trance as both a site of healing and illness, depending on the strength and devotion of the medium’s mind.
\end{itemize}
\end{footnotesize}
respect for them; but we do not think the profession of medicine, as a rule, a fit place for them.”

Medical regulations therefore prevented women from entering the field. Both the College of Physicians and Surgeons in Canada East, created in 1847, and the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario, which came into being in 1869, made registration as a practitioner contingent upon participation in a course in a Canadian or provincial university. However, since women were not welcomed in the established medical schools in Canada until 1883, when Augusta Stowe-Gullen became the first woman to graduate in medicine in the country, women’s legal access to the profession was rather challenging. Such impediments can largely account for the small number of female practitioners throughout the nineteenth century—the Canadian census of 1891 recording only 76 women among 4448 doctors listed.

In such context, one may not be surprised to discover that the first woman to practise medicine in the country had to literally be “disposed to unsex herself”—to borrow the expression of the Harvard Medical School—which is to say she posed as a man during her 46-year medical career (see figure 9). It was only after her death in London in 1865, when her body was being prepared for burial, that her sex was finally revealed.

---

171 Mitchinson, The Nature of Their Bodies, 29.
James Miranda Stuart Barry (1797-1865) had entered as a male student the medical school in Edinburgh, Scotland, and graduated in 1812. She later joined the British army as a medical officer and, towards the end of a successful career, she arrived in the country in 1857 to work as Inspector General of military hospitals in both Lower and Upper Canada. While her manners were often a point of curiosity, very few suspected that such competent and highly-ranked practitioner could have been a woman.\textsuperscript{172} Thus, in her earlier work in Cape Town as Colonial Medical Inspector and Physician to the Governor’s Household, she had enticed the curiosity of Lord Albemarle who wrote: “There was at this time in the Cape a person whose eccentricities attracted universal attention—Dr. James Barry…. I had heard so much of this capricious, yet privileged gentleman, that I had a great curiosity to see him…. I beheld a beardless lad, apparently of my own age, with an unmistakably Scotch type of countenance—reddish

\footnote{172} Carlotta Hacker, \textit{Indomitable Lady Doctors} (Toronto: Clarke Irwin, 1974) 3.
hair, high cheek bones. There was a certain effeminacy in his manner, which he seemed to be always striving to overcome.”

In 1859, two years following her arrival in Canada, Barry contracted influenza and was sent back to England where she died in 1865. What had escaped Lord Albemarle was then discovered when a charwoman laid out the body and revealed that Barry was a “perfect female” and even showed signs of an earlier pregnancy. Such revelation, however, did not suffice to convince medical authorities and authors in the press who refused to identify Dr. Barry as a woman. Most declared that Barry must have been a hermaphrodite, an apparently unfounded statement that can only be explained by the rigidity of Victorian ideas about the restrictive nature of the female body. As Carlotta Hacker remarks: “Dr Barry couldn’t have been a woman, for women and medicine were contradictory terms.”

James Barry’s success, obtained only through her performance of masculinity, demonstrates the difficulty for nineteenth-century women to enter the profession of medicine. Such difficulty may explain the attraction of female doctors to the spiritualist movement: although female pioneers did not directly follow Barry’s example, some—as this chapter demonstrates—found comfort in borrowing masculine voices through spiritual channeling in order to establish the value and authority of their work.

---

176 One of the leading practitioners of nineteenth-century medicine, Barry quickly became a highly recognized figure in the field. She performed one of the world’s first caesarian sections and was a leading proponent of health care for women and the poor. Barry’s sex remains, however, the most discussed aspect of her medical practice. For further reference to James Barry’s life and work, see: Lauren Beukes, “The Curious Case of the Cross-Dressing Doctor—Dr. James Barry.” *Maverick: Extraordinary Women from South Africa’s Past* (Capetown: Oshun Books, 2004) 47-57; and Rachel Holmes, *Scanty Particulars: The Scandalous Life and Astonishing Secret of James Barry, Queen Victoria’s Most Eminent Military Doctor* (New York: Random House, 2003).
The practice of Dr. Emily Howard Stowe (1831-1903) offers another example of the difficulty for Canadian women to find their place in the medical profession and testifies to the potential appeal of spiritualism. Appearing on stamps, historical encyclopedias, and museum exhibitions, Stowe is well-recognized today amongst the first women since James Barry to practise medicine in the country (see figure 10). As Sydell Waxman remarks, her path was still a challenging one: “It was suggested to Emily Stowe that she follow Dr. Barry’s example and pose as a man, but she finally turned to the United States where Dr. Clemence Sophia Lozier had opened the Women’s New York Medical School in 1863.” Research into Stowe’s archives demonstrates that she might indeed have entertained the idea of following Barry’s course, as she had collected an article on a young woman traveling to New York to gain employment under masculine attire. The article revealed the risk of such attempt, however, as it explained that the young woman “was found on pier 26 North River on Thursday evening…and…taken into custody” where she faced many forms of sexual harassment. A married mother of three, Stowe probably did not wish to, and could not have, hidden her sex. Yet, she found ways to adapt her practice to her restrictive context.

---

177 For further reference to Emily Stowe, see: Mary Beacock Fryer, Emily Stowe: Doctor and Suffragist (Toronto: Hannah Institute & Dundrum Press, 1990).
179 Emily Howard Stowe, “Scrapbooks with news clippings on matters concerning medicine, women’s rights, spiritualism and political personages.” [1873?-1885]. Emily Howard Stowe Collection, Queen’s University Archives, 32.
Born from Quaker parents in Norwich Township, Upper Canada in 1831, she married John Stowe in 1856 and the couple gave birth to their children between 1857 and 1863. It was then, after her husband became increasingly ill, that Stowe resolved to embark upon a career as a physician. Although she had followed an apprenticeship with Joseph J. Lancaster, a physician who practiced in Norwich until 1848, her applications to Colleges of Medicine in Canada were rejected and she thus turned to the United States, where she studied at the Women’s New York Medical School. After graduating in

180 Until Emily Stowe’s own daughter, Augusta Stowe-Gullen, became the first woman to graduate from a medical university in Canada, women often found more opportunities to work and graduate in medicine in the United States. Some studied in schools available to women in the north of the United States such as The New England Female Medical College in Boston, which opened its doors in 1848, and The New York College for Women, founded in 1863. Not surprisingly, given the strong opposition to female practitioners by regular doctors, such medical schools tended to promote alternative approaches to healing. However, as Gina Feldberg remarks: “The inhospitable climate for women’s education in Canada was probably only one
1867, she returned to Ontario to her family and husband. She practiced medicine in Toronto upon her return, but was not registered to legally do so under the College of Physicians and Surgeons of Ontario until 1880.\(^{181}\) From her apprenticeship with Lancaster, who had been amongst the first to introduce homeopathy in the country, to her studies at the Women’s New York Medical School, which focused primarily on homeopathic cures, Stowe was trained in alternative medicine. In addition to her belief in alternative care, she further entertained a fascination with spiritualism. At the end of her career, she wrote that she had “out grown all religious creeds” and became “a Mental Scientist looking upon Jesus Christ as our great exemplar & at the same time regarding him as a pre-eminently socialist.”\(^{182}\) This “Mental Scientist” coveted interest in various branches of Christianity and her archives held at Queen’s University demonstrate that she completed scrapbooks filled with reports of spiritualist occurrences. The scrapbooks indeed include—mixed with works of prose and poetry as well as articles on the suffrage movement, on women’s rights, on medicine, and on mental diseases—many stories of strange happenings in spiritual communications that she had collected over the years.\(^{183}\)

\(^{181}\) At the time, many practitioners treated patients without licenses and, due to their important numbers, rarely faced prosecutions, but occasionally accepted to pay a fine. In *The Nature of Their Bodies*, Mitchinson remarks that despite its intention, the early legislation was not particularly successful in restricting unorthodox healers from accessing the profession. Indeed: “Regulating physicians made sense if they were numerous enough to administer to the needs of British North Americans, but in the early years of the century they were not.” Thus, “the medical licensing laws, whatever their interpretation, were virtually ignored.” (Mitchinson, *The Nature of their Bodies*, 17).

\(^{182}\) Feldberg, “Jennings, Emily Howard (Stowe).”

\(^{183}\) Such reports did not please her mother, however, who wrote in the margins of a newspaper article reporting a séance in which a marriage between two spirits was celebrated by their living relatives: “Satan’s strong delusion. Swallow the bait if you can. I cannot, thank you. Some people like young birds swallow...
Stowe’s daughter, Augusta Stowe-Gullen, who had worked in her mother’s practice for years before graduating in medicine, was also fascinated by spiritual communications. Carlotta Hacker writes that, as her mother, “she had foresworn all religions by the end of her life and was far more interested in Spiritualism than in The Holy Spirit—she used to have a great time table-turning at the Stowe property in Muskoka. It was one of her few relaxations.”

That nineteenth-century female practitioners such as the Stowes were drawn to spiritualism among a variety of other alternative treatments reveals the movement’s attempt to make space for women in the medical profession. To quote Ann Braude, spiritualists’ “hostility toward regular physicians and support for female practitioners made them supportive of any women who entered the medical field, whether orthodox or sectarian.” As such, Emily Stowe and her daughter could have found comfort in spiritualism and support from its devotees. It should thus not be surprising that they shared a close friendship with medium and feminist Flora MacDonald Denison and collaborated with spiritualist author and editor Benjamin Fish Austin who helped publish some of their work.

Despite medical men’s conflation of spiritualism with hysteria, many female practitioners like Emily Stowe and her daughter therefore found themselves attracted to

---

what ever is put in their mouths. I am not of that class and do not wish to be so easily duped. Hannah L. H. Jennings.” (Stowe, “Scrapbooks,” 66.)

184 Hacker, Indomitable Lady Doctors, 34.
185 Braude, Radical Spirits, 149.
186 See: Janice Anne Fiamengo, The Woman’s Page: Journalism and Rhetoric in Early Canada (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008) 153. Fiamengo writes: “A close friend of suffragist Emily Howards Stowe and her daughter, Augusta Stowe-Gullen, Denison also had ties to the international women’s movement, which included the American leader Anna Howard Shaw and the British suffragette Emmeline Pankhurst.” B. F. Austin notably helped publishing Augusta Stowe-Gullen’s essay on women in medicine in Canada and abroad, as he edited a volume compiling the works of many proponents of the women’s movements. See: Augusta Stowe-Gullen, “Woman as Physician.” Woman: Maiden, Wife and Mother, ed. B. F. Austin. (Toronto: The Linscott Publishing Company, 1898.)
the movement. Alex Owen remarks that: “of all aspects of spiritualist phenomena, mediumistic healing was perhaps the most revered by believers and sympathetically attested to by non-spiritualists.” Spiritualism’s promotion of non-pervasive cures and its opposition to the monopoly of orthodox doctors over interpretations of the body made it a powerful source of support for female practitioners. Perhaps more importantly, while medical authorities ubiquitously used gendered categorizations to defend the value of medical science as strictly masculine, spiritualism offered the possibility for female mediums to borrow the voices of male scientists without the risk of “unsexing” themselves by identifying with such voices. Amidst a Victorian ideology alleging the restrictive nature of the female body, such approaches would have certainly appealed to many female doctors. As the next section demonstrates, Susan Kilborn relied, for her part, on her late (male) mentor’s spiritual communications in order to progress with more confidence and authority in her work.

Channeling physicians: Susan Kilborn’s spiritualist cures and medical manuscripts

Susan Kilborn grew up in Stanstead, Canada East, where she later followed a four-year apprenticeship with Dr. Moses Colby between 1857 and 1861. Colby had graduated from Dartmouth College in Hanover and from the School of Practical Anatomy at Harvard College. A highly reputed medical authority, he contributed regularly to medical periodicals such as the Boston Medical and Surgical Journal and published a pamphlet, 

188 There are currently two studies of Susan Kilborn: Aileen Desbarats, “Introducing Susan Kilborn M.D. from Stanstead, Canada East.” Stanstead Historical Journal 20 (2003): 41-48; and Van Die, “Practising Medicine.” The following section is indebted to the authors’ research.
“New Views of the Functions of the Digestive Tube,” in 1860.189 In feeble health by the end of the 1850s, he had taken Kilborn as his apprentice to help him transcribe and publish his medical research. In 1861, Kilborn left Stanstead and moved to Boston with a note of introduction from her mentor. Dated April 15th of the same year, the letter stated: “Miss Susan Kilborn has been under my instruction for four years past. She has displayed great aptitude for medical study and has attained proficiency and skill in the practice of many branches of the profession. Every aid and encouragement should be given to one who is so distinguished for talent, zeal and humanity.”190 As the requirements to practise medicine were not yet as strictly implemented in the United States, Kilborn may have chosen to leave the country to increase her chances of professional advancement. In Boston, she advertised herself under the appellation “M.D.” in periodicals, promoting her expertise on “melancholy and other degrees of mental derangement,” “neuralgia and loss of memory,” and “diseases peculiar to the females” (see figure 11).191

---

190 Van Die, “Practising Medicine,” 448.
Kilborn further participated in the New York Medical College for Women, where she “had the honour of speaking on behalf of the faculty at its fourth annual commencement on March 1 1867” – the same year that Emily Stowe had graduated from the institution.192

Before her move to the United States, Kilborn’s apprenticeship under Colby had involved transcribing the dictation of the latter’s manuscript formulating the connections between insanity, nervous diseases, and disorders of the digestive tract. Historian Marguerite Van Die explains: “Kilborn’s medical education under Colby was

192 Van Die, “Practising Medicine,” 459.
characterized by oft-repeated principles and by his growing obsession to place his findings as quickly as possible before the public."^{193} Although Colby had attempted to distribute the manuscript for publication, it had found little interest during his lifetime and was thus not yet published when he died in May 1863. When Kilborn had completed her apprenticeship, Colby had asked her to work on updating and publishing his manuscript from the United States. Although Kilborn worked on this manuscript for the rest of her life, she produced something highly divergent from his original. Archivist Aileen Desbarats, who initiated the current scholarly interest for Kilborn, noted after finding it in Kilborn’s papers: “Would the manuscript prove to be the one she was working on at the time of her death? Unfortunately, this was not to be the case…. [Susan] apparently fell under the influence of the rather eccentric Dentons, who, among other things, were believers in spiritualism and reincarnation.”^{194} The text found in her papers, far from Colby’s original manuscript, described her encounter with the deceased mentor, who revised his research from the other world through the help of a medium named Elma Comstock. Whether or not Kilborn’s spiritual encounters should be considered “unfortunate,” they proved important in the development of her confidence in her medical practice through her identification with, and devotion to, the masculine voice of her late mentor.

In Boston, as Desbarats noted, Kilborn developed ties with many devoted spiritualists. Among these counted Elizabeth Foote Denton and William Denton, both of whom published a work entitled *The Soul of Things, or, Psychometric Researches and

---

^{193} Van Die, “Practising Medicine,” 457.

^{194} Desbarats adds: “I was not far in the work when I realized that it was not what I had anticipated. Instead of a scholarly treatise on medical practice, as she and Dr. Colby viewed it, I found an account of her chance and fateful encounter with a Mrs. Comstock, who proved to have extraordinary powers as a medium.” (Desbarats, “Introducing Susan Kilborn,” 46.)
Discoveries in 1861. The book postulated that objects conserved memories of their surroundings and that sensitive individuals or mediums could retrieve these memories through the super-natural powers of trance states. Well-versed in the spiritualist doctrine, Elizabeth Denton was also a healer and a feminist, notably promoting the dress reform for women on many platforms. Ann Braude remarks on the eccentricity of the Dentons: “Displaying one’s radicalism so visibly required courage. William Denton recalled that, when he met his future wife, Elizabeth Foote, in the mid-1850s, he ‘had considerable trouble…shielding her from insult’ because she wore the bloomer.” Among Kilborn’s circle also counted Alfred and Annie Cridge who were also devoted spiritualists. The former, himself a medium from Canada, had hoped to propagate faith in spiritualism while notably retracing the unfolding of the movement in the Maritimes in his 1854 work Epitome of Spirit-Intercourse: A Condensed View of Spiritualism. In his opening remarks, Cridge declared that: “Having become deeply interested in spiritualism, after twelve years’ investigation of reform ideas,” he “gradually developed as a writing medium (principally in St. John, N.B., and in Halifax, N.S.), under such circumstances as could lead no doubt in my own mind as to the nature of the agency employed.” Kilborn’s connections to the spiritualist world also included Elma Comstock, whom she had first met around 1862 when the latter sought for medical help. Already utilizing mediumship in her practice, Kilborn suggested consulting a nearby medium, Mrs. Lydia Maria Child, when she was unsure of the best treatment to provide. The latter then told

196 Braude, Radical Spirits, 15.
197 Alfred Cridge, Epitome of Spirit-Intercourse: A Condensed View of Spiritualism, in its Scriptural, Historical, Actual and Scientific Aspects; its Relations to Christianity, Insanity, Psychometry and Social Reform; Manifestations in Nova Scotia; Important Communications from the Spirits of Sir John Franklin and Rev. Wm. Wishart, St. John, N.B., with Evidences of Identity and Directions for Developing Mediums (Boston: Bela Marsh, 1854) 3.
Comstock that her cure would come if she “ceased resistance and ‘yield to the Spirits’ several hours a day.” In trance, Child promised Comstock eventual healing from the spirits and she foresaw a “future, yet undefined mission of great consequence.”

Following the encounter, Comstock began to develop her mediumistic abilities and to receive advice from the spirit world on various treatments. Like many other mediums, she found trance speaking beneficial for the restoration of her health. When Kilborn heard of her patient’s spiritual communications, she was deeply impressed by the medical knowledge they revealed. Kilborn came to believe that the spirit communicating through Comstock must have been her late mentor, Moses Colby, and that Comstock’s “mission of great consequence” was to help publish Colby’s manuscript. Kilborn and Comstock thus began living together and, through the latter’s mediumship, the master’s voice returned to revise his work and to help Kilborn with new patients by suggesting procedures and treatments.

Through Comstock, Colby’s spirit indeed provided guidance and counsel, thus helping Kilborn develop confidence in her medical practice. Notably, when she was confronted with difficult medical cases, she found reassurance in the belief that Colby was present to take charge of the treatment if need be. As in his lifetime, he often recommended diet cures, including lime water, beef, oatmeal, and dry bread for different ailments. On occasions, he further helped Kilborn successfully perform orthodox cures otherwise infrequent in her—as in many female doctors’—medical work. As Marguerite Van Die writes: “Under the instructions of the medium, Kilborn found herself with great success executing procedures quite unusual to her former practice: applying a blister to Mrs. Comstock and cupping her (but only once), as well as receiving detailed instructions

198 Van Die, “Practising Medicine,” 465.
on the treatment of the other four women patients under her care, including [a] difficult case that had been causing her such anxiety.”

Establishing her treatment on her late mentor’s scientific advice, Kilborn found spiritual communications helpful to fill a perceived gap in her medical abilities and to perform orthodox treatments generally reserved to male practitioners.

Further, communications with Colby’s spirit provided Kilborn with a sense of authority and assurance that was beneficiary for the conduct of her work on his manuscript. As Van Die writes: “a routine was put in place whereby Mrs. Comstock would read the manuscript, begin copying it, and whenever she experienced a sense of uncertainty would pause and wait for an impression or an ‘illumination’ for changes, which would then be written on a note for Kilborn. It was Kilborn’s task each evening to examine the notes, compare the copied work with the original manuscript, and ensure that no errors had crept in.”

Such communications with the spirit world helped Kilborn define her place in the medical profession: with a probable sense of familiarity, she continued to transcribe her mentor’s knowledge without apparent interference. As in his lifetime, Colby continued to ask Kilborn to transcribe his research with great precaution. On January 16th, 1868, after Kilborn had apparently been careless with his manuscript, he advised, for instance: “Susan—you acted in this matter regardless of your usual judgment and consideration—not the slightest liberty must be taken with any of these papers without first consulting me. My injunctions regarding secrecy have not been sufficiently regarded. It is my wish and desire that No More People be made acquainted with any of this phenomena until I remove the prohibition……If it will be any satisfaction to you,

199 Van Die, “Practising Medicine,” 466.
200 Van Die, “Practising Medicine,” 468-469.
you may show them this paper as giving authority for what you may withhold. Collect at first opportunity all papers and let them here remain.”201

Colby’s authoritative voice further benefited Comstock and Kilborn’s endeavours in concrete, material ways. When they experienced financial difficulties, the spirit indeed wrote them a note allowing them to finance their labour. He suggested that, “given the importance of the enterprise to the cause of science and of spiritualism, ‘perhaps it would be better to try the faith of the spiritualists by trying their pockets.’”202 Colby further gave permission to show a select number of people the narrative describing their writing collaboration in order to help them receive donations. One can easily imagine how such a note from a male authority—even a dead one—might have seemed helpful for the two women to pursue their work.

Through Comstock’s mediumship, Colby’s manuscript became a highly creative and, as Desbarats noted, original work. Colby’s spirit indeed suggested that the women write a second work, in parallel with the completion of his volume on mental diseases, which was to help propagate faith in spiritualism by describing their writing process. As will be discussed in Chapter 3, such creative intervention was not uncommon among nineteenth-century mediums, who often produced innovative works under trance. Through the internalization of Colby’s social position and knowledge, more particularly, Kilborn and Comstock forged a collaborative writing process permitting the momentary conjuration of restrictive conceptions of femininity in order to form new modes of authorship.

201 Desbarats, “Introducing Susan Kilborn,” 46.
202 Van Die, “Practising Medicine,” 469.
By reinterpreting Victorian definitions of the female body as a quasi-agentless machinery, their collaboration became the locus of a new creativity offering an alternative to restrictive conceptions of womanhood. Indeed, the spiritualist defence of mediumship relied heavily on Victorian stereotypes of femininity as it conceived the female constitution as a passive machinery inclined to lose her own will. Spiritualists could compare the female body to telegraphic networks because they understood women as vehicles prone to be overtaxed by various flows of energy. Yet, believers used such stereotypes about the female body in order to define female mediums as inherently gifted to channel the will and voices of powerful spirits. The 1915 Canadian Society for Psychical Research’s first proceedings, for instance, defined the medium as “an intermediary. A mediator. A person through whom or through whose agency another acts. An instrument for the manifestation of another personality.” Similarly, Arthur Conan Doyle stated in his *History of Spiritualism*: “It has been the habit to say that great


204 See: Jill N. Galvan, *The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channelling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies, 1859-1919* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010). Galvan suggests the very interesting hypothesis that “the development of female mediumship parallels women’s increasing involvement over the course of the period in technological modes of communication mediation. Western Union, which would soon become a monopoly in the United States, hired its first female telegraphers in 1846. Though the number of nineteenth-century female telegraphers was never large in absolute terms, its continued increase is itself notable: by 1900, women had garnered 13 percent of U.S telegraphy positions. The size of female telegraphic workforce rose more rapidly in Britain, reaching over a quarter of all spots by 1880” (4-5). In the Unites States, she adds, women represented 64 percent of stenographer-typists in 1890 and they made even speedier inroads as telephone operators. Many other recent studies have explored the involvement of women in the communication sectors, from telegraph to telephone operators and type-writers. (See for instance: Graham S. Lowe, “Women, Work and the Office: the Feminization of Clerical Occupations in Canada, 1900-1931.” *Rethinking Canada: The Promise of Women’s History*, eds. Mona Gleason, Adele Perry, Tamara Myers (USA: Oxford University Press, 1998) 109-114). However, Galvan adds to such studies by suggesting a correlation between the employment of women as typewriters, phone-girls, operators, telegraphers, and the popular practice of mediumship in the nineteenth century. The emergence of telecommunication as a gendered field is for her a reflection of the views of femininity as a passive vehicle for others’ communications. For Galvan, indeed, “the concept of feminine automatism helped to shape the optimistic views of how information relays could work, in settings both mystical and mundane.”

intellect stands in the way of personal psychic experience. The clean slate is certainly most apt for the writing of a message.”\textsuperscript{206} In such interpretations, the reconfiguration of Victorian understandings of the female body as technology became an oblique means to attain higher social positions through the communications of great authorities from earlier times. The practice of mediumship could therefore allow Comstock and Kilborn to reinterpret the alleged passivity of the female body as an empowering tool to define their place in the medical profession.

As such, just as Kilborn had done during Colby’s lifetime, she could continue to define herself as a vehicle of transmission for her master’s voice after his death. Unlike in his lifetime, however, she transformed her role through her spiritualist beliefs and her collaboration with the medium Elma Comstock. While the two women defined themselves simply as transmitters of Colby’s voice, they nonetheless created a new and original work and gained a higher sense of confidence in their medical endeavours through their appropriation of Colby’s knowledge. Via this new collaboration, Kilborn played a more active role in her practice than she had as a transcriber during her apprenticeship under Colby.

Certainly Kilborn’s collaboration with Comstock also bore its difficulties. Kilborn wrote: “Who will believe our report…. Here was a fact too stupendous to be taken in, we two women temporarily isolated from this world, holding full and free converse with the inhabitants of the other world, one of them dictating revision of a scientific work from which he had been called before he had time to do it here.”\textsuperscript{207} Yet, such “full and free converse” with her mentor would have certainly appeared

\textsuperscript{207} Van Die, “Practising Medicine,” 470.
advantageous to Kilborn. Further, the spiritualist community among which she established her practice supported and applauded her endeavour. Despite regular doctors’ association of spiritualism and madness, female doctors like Kilborn may therefore have encountered in the movement’s definition of the female subject a possibility to take on an active and authoritative voice in their medical practices.

In 1868, Kilborn became increasingly ill despite Comstock’s various suggestions for treatment. The two women’s collaboration came to an end in March of the same year. Kilborn died the following November and her death left the manuscript once again unfinished. By December, her brother C. A. Kilborn wrote: “Mrs. Denton informs me that she had some communication with Susan some time ago about her papers; that Susan requested her in the event of her not living to do it herself, to try to put them into shape to be published. I have not yet decided about the matter.”208 The manuscript never found publication. Around the same time, Elizabeth Foote Denton wrote Susan’s obituary for the Boston Commonwealth and the Stanstead Journal, stating:

Blest with rare mental capabilities, she has for years past, with unflagging perseverance and an industry and energy scarcely equaled, directed her inquiries to the relations of mind and matter as manifested by the functions and dependencies of the brain and general nervous system of the human organism, both in condition of health and disease…. Simultaneously [sic] if not in connection with this work she had designed publishing the theory of a medical practice based upon these relations and dependencies; the discovery of which, together with the perfecting of the theory she invariably and unhesitatingly

ascribed to the patient, diligent researches of her late honored and lamented instructor, M.F. Colby, A.M., M.D., from whom she had received it, and whose deep devotion to his profession gave him the right to be heard.209

Whose “right to be heard?” Discursive subjectivity in mediumship and hysteria

As I suggested in the previous chapter, the study of spiritual communications must address the difficult determination of séances’ authorship. In this particular case, who gained the “right to be heard” through Comstock’s mediumship? What are we to think of the fact that Comstock and Kilborn acquired more authoritative discursive positions, yet only through their own fragmentation as subjects of enunciation? And how is such a particular form of authorship responsible for nineteenth-century doctors’ diagnosis of mediumship as hysteria? In recent years, Luce Irigaray has suggested that both the female hysteric and the female mystic shared a conflicted approach to discourse that resulted from the larger subjugation of women in patriarchal institutions. Drawing on Lacan’s theory of subjectivity, she connected this subjugation to women’s particular difficulty to express their sense of agency in language. In this section, I explore how her work can illuminate the functions of spiritual discourses for female mediums as it addresses the problems of women’s authorship.

As Juliet Mitchell writes, Lacan’s “subject is not an entity with an identity, but a being created in the fissure of a radical split. The identity that seems to be that of the subject is in fact a mirage arising when the subject forms an image itself.”210 In his famous tripartite division of the real, the imaginary, and the symbolic realms, Lacan has

indeed argued that when infants enter the world, they exist in a chaotic state without the ordering of language, with little sense of the distinction between subjects and objects, and with no sense of the “I” and its others. In time, children enter the imaginary, the realm of the image, in which they begin to distinguish their forms and contours. Breaking out of the symbiotic relationship with their mothers, children come to recognize their own bodies through their images in reflective surfaces. Lacan writes: “The jubilant assumption of his specular image by the kind of being—still trapped in his motor impotence and nursling dependence—the little man is at the infans stage thus seems to me to manifest in an exemplary situation the symbolic matrix in which the I is precipitated in a primordial form, prior to being objectified in the dialectic of identification with the other, and before language restores to it, in the universal, its function as subject.”

The entrance in the symbolic realm follows when children learn language and, at about the same time, recognize the authority of the father in the triadic relation with the mother. With this recognition, children understand that they are not the only object of desire of the mother and that, like her, they must assume a particular place in the social world. It is also at this stage that children begin to form the fallacy of themselves as a unitary “I” by assuming a position in discourse. Lacan suggests that the symbolic order, or the realm of representation through language, is also the realm where sexual difference is established and maintained. Here, subjects cement their fragile sense of self through social institutions and language (by differentiating the “I” from other subjects and objects, or masculine from feminine pronouns, for instance). Such modes of representation permit them to forget the constant threat of the forces of the unconscious menacing to bring

---

them back to their primordial splitting. Mitchell explains: “the unconscious, where the subject is not itself, where the ‘I’ of a dream can be someone else and the object and subject shift and change places, bears perpetual witness to this primordial splitting.”

212

A student of Jacques Lacan, Luce Irigaray has refashioned this theory of subjectivity to address women’s positioning in discourse. She ascribes to Lacan’s idea of the construction of male and female subjectivities as an effect of language. However, Irigaray focuses on the fact that the symbolic order, the realm of the law of the father, is fundamentally masculine. She writes: “There is lacking in Lacan a theory of enunciation which would be sufficiently complex, and which would allow him to account for the effect of sexual difference in the production of language.”

213 Created by men and passed on from fathers to sons, language and social institutions, for Irigaray, have been conceived in masculine terms. As such, a woman’s sense of self, established through discourse, can only mirror the masculine. To quote her again: “We can assume that any theory of the subject has always been appropriated by the ‘masculine.’ When she submits to (such a) theory, woman fails to realize that she is renouncing the specificity of her own relationship to the imaginary.”

214 Her work thus questions the effects of women’s confinement to a masculine system of representation. As Nelly Furman argues: “It is through the medium of language that we define and categorize areas of difference and similarity, which in turn allow us to comprehend the world around us…this is why

attention is increasingly directed to the inherently oppressive aspects for women of a male-constructed language system.”

Through such explorations of women’s positioning in language, Irigaray has connected the discourses of the hysterical and those of the medium. Already in her doctoral dissertation, she demonstrated that—in not so different a way than medium’s trance discourses—the hysterical’s utterance was marked by the disappearance of the enunciating “I.” She noted that the hysterical is “spoken more than speaking, enunciated more than enunciating… the demented person is therefore no longer really an active subject of the enunciation…. He is only a possible mouthpiece for previously pronounced enunciations.”

Ventriloquizing the words of others, the hysterical here appeared unable to linguistically formulate a mastering relationship to the world by performing in discourse an active subject-position. Later on, in To Speak is Never Neutral, Irigaray illustrated this particularity of the hysterical’s language through a linguistic analysis comparing fragments of discourses pronounced by two individuals identified as a hysterical and an obsessive. She remarked that: “the subjects of the utterance—I and you—play almost equal roles in the hysterical’s discourse, with you being somewhat more numerous however (40% > 34.5%). If I is the subject, the responsibility for the utterance can still be left to (you), either due to the interrogative form, or to the fact that the subject of a completive subordinate clause is you and the real utterance is expressed there.”

By contrast, for the obsessive, the “I” becomes subject of the utterance almost twice as

much, in a proportion of 66%. Through such analysis Irigaray argued that the hysteric manifests a form of disempowerment through her incapacity to assume the responsibility of her enunciation. Revealingly, she added that this incapacity to enunciate the “I” as a mastering agent was also a characteristic of women’s discourses more broadly. She remarked in Sexes et genres à travers les langues: “Analyzing the discourses of men and women, it appears that men and women do not designate themselves as subjects or listeners of the message in the same way. Women designate themselves much less than men as subjects. This means that the subject of women’s discourses will be a you (masculine) or a he rather than an I (feminine).”

Such research reveals that women have experienced greater difficulty in expressing their sense of agency and autonomy in language. Mystical discourses such as spiritual communications may have therefore offered a privileged position for women as they presented an apparent compromise to confront their sense of disempowerment under sexual hierarchies. In mediums’ trance communications, by comparison to hysteric’s discourses, the “I” could frequently appear as an authoritative subject of enunciation. Comstock’s trance communications, for instance, generally emerged from a confident authority, apparently mastering its relation to discourse. However, this “I”—the personification of a respected male spirit—remained a “you” distinct from the enunciating subject who simultaneously refused to assume full authorial responsibility for the utterance. As such, in an essay entitled “La Mystérique,” Irigaray linked the

---

218 Irigaray, To Speak, 49.
219 My translation from “En analysant les discours des hommes et des femmes, il apparaît que hommes et femmes ne se désignent pas eux-mêmes comme sujets ou allocutaires du message de la même façon. Les femmes se désignent beaucoup moins comme sujets que les hommes. Cela veut dire que le sujet du discours des femmes sera plutôt un tu (masculin) ou un il qu’un je, féminin.” (Luce Irigaray, Sexes et genres à travers les langues: Éléments de communication sexuée, français, anglais, italien (Paris : Grasset, 1990) 17.)
discourses of the female mystic and the female hysteric by remarking that the narrative of trance is “the place where consciousness is no longer master, where, to its extreme confusion, it sinks into a dark night that is also fire and flames.”\textsuperscript{220} The medium is able to assume the authorial function of a masterful “I,” yet this linguistic positioning is obtained only through the fragmentation of her own discursive subjectivity. Irigaray’s work on women’s access to discourse and their oppression in symbolic language can thereby reveal how mediumship could constitute a concession for nineteenth-century women, as the practice permitted them to speak and act publicly and authoritatively, despite their subjugation in male-dominated institutions.

Within such a framework, Comstock and Kilborn’s use of mediumship may recall the story of Breuer’s patient, Bertha Pappenheim, described in Chapter 1. Indeed, the spiritualists’ writing process on Colby’s medical manuscript could only establish itself through the apparent silencing of their own voices, just as Pappenheim had remained silent when she refused to use the symbolic language which she associated with patriarchal authority. Kilborn apparently served her late mentor obediently, as Pappenheim had done for her dying father. Yet, like Pappenheim, Kilborn and Comstock seemed trapped in a society that refused to consider the validity of their ambitions. Akin to the hysteric, the mediums therefore spoke of the fragility of the self as they sank into the “dark night” of trance states. Here too, the splitting of the enunciating “I” signaled a certain incapacity to linguistically express one’s sense of agency. However, although the figures of hysteria and mediumship shared a sense of disempowerment that manifested itself in their refusal to accept the direct subject position in their own discourse, an

important difference rested in the modalities of their enunciation. The state of possession granted Kilborn and Comstock something more than Pappenheim’s mutism; they were able to create an alternative form of expression which allowed them to re-establish their roles in the professions. With Comstock, Kilborn transformed her mentor’s life-work into a completely different and original manuscript. Their story can therefore illustrate how mediums’ narrative inventions marked an important attempt to verbalize meanings despite women’s disempowerment in the symbolic realm. Through their trance discourses, these mediums disturbed the symbolic function of the “I” by demonstrating that they could grasp any given discursive position, whether young or old, educated or not, living or dead, male or female.

Conclusion

In re-interpreting the nineteenth-century medical interpretation of mediumship as a manifestation of hysteria, this chapter aimed to demonstrate how spiritualism responded to orthodox practitioners through the formulation of new discourses on the body and its cure. As many mediums believed that they could channel reputed scientists and doctors from earlier times, they frequently offered medical remedies to inquiring sitters that differed from orthodox medical practices. As such, this chapter suggested that spiritualists were not the passive victims of all-powerful doctors, but produced a register of discourse that directly confronted medical orthodoxies by re-appropriating controls over the female body from the hands of those who had defined the profession as rigorously masculine. As such, the voices of possessing spirits provided a means for women to increase their participation in the medical profession.
The history of women in medicine in nineteenth-century Canada—from James Barry to Emily Stowe and to Susan Kilborn—reveals the difficulty for women to find their place in the profession. Emily Stowe and Susan Kilborn responded to such difficulty in part by associating with spiritualist networks which tended to support the work of female practitioners. Kilborn’s use of mediumship through her collaboration with Elma Comstock further permitted her to momentarily escape patriarchal ideas about the female body. Kilborn and Comstock’s collaboration indeed replaced the opposition of male scientists with internal dialogues with greater authorities. “Holding full and free converse” with spirit personalities, as Kilborn noted, provided them with an important opportunity to develop their own place in the field of medicine.

No doubt, Kilborn struggled to establish her purpose in the medical profession amidst the rigidity of Victorian ideas about the nature of her body. Such ideas must have affected her self-definition as both author and practitioner. Through Comstock’s mediumship, however, she could continue to define herself through dominant ideas of femininity while accessing a traditionally masculine place in her practice and discourse. In other words, mediums and spiritualist healers could use the inner trance to cure patients while not risking to “unsex” themselves under Victorian sex-roles, for they adopted the discursive position of the male scientist, but refused the responsibility of the enunciation. As such, Kilborn did not actively contest Victorian ideas about gender identity, but nonetheless demonstrated possible ways for women to overcome the restrictions attached to such ideas.

A question arises: Did female mediums simply mimic masculine voices or did they operate a more profound questioning of the ways agency is constituted through
language? In the following chapters, feminist and psychoanalytic frameworks of analysis will permit me to elaborate my argument that the performance of spiritual possession led to a certain challenge of the foundations of the symbolic order: trance speaking revealed the ruses of all discourse. I will suggest that mediums’ borrowing of male voices cannot be read solely as a parroting, but must be considered a potent demonstration of the fact that the authoritative “I”—with all its presumed mastery—is nothing more than what Lacan and Irigaray would consider a fiction performed through discourse. Despite mediums’ submission to Victorian understandings of the sexes outside the séance, the practice of channeling opened a profound questioning of the symbolic modes of representation in which sexual difference is established. In the next chapter, I revisit these problems of discursive subjectivity in trance mediumship in order to further explore the functions of spiritualism amidst incapacitating Victorian ideals of true womanhood using the trance writings of Susanna Moodie and Annie Florence Smith.
CHAPTER 3

In Search of a Voice of One’s Own: Séances and Women’s Literary Creativity

Nothing is to be known about women before the eighteenth century. I have no model in my mind to turn about this way and that. Here I am asking why women did not write poetry in the Elizabethan age and I am not sure how they were educated; whether they were taught to write; whether they had sitting-rooms to themselves; how many women had children before they were twenty-one… It would have been extremely odd… had one of them written the plays of Shakespeare, I concluded, and I thought of that old gentleman, who is dead now, but was a bishop, I think, who declared that it was impossible for any woman, past, present, or to come, to have the genius of Shakespeare. (Virginia Woolf, A Room of One’s Own) 221

The above quotation presents the narrator of Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own as she questions the terms of the relationship between women and literary creativity. Seeking to understand the lack of writing by female authors of the past centuries, she ponders the material, social, or biological factors that might have contributed to women’s silence. She is then reminded of the theories of “that old gentleman” who “declared that it was impossible for any woman, past, present, or to come, to have the genius of Shakespeare.” 222

222 Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 45. My emphasis.
Such views of women’s lack of creativity would certainly have been familiar to Woolf’s early twentieth-century readers, as they continued to reflect common Victorian definitions of the “separate spheres” stressing the inescapability of women’s subordinate conditions. Most often, these Victorian definitions relied on biological determinism, a set of theories which considered distinctions between male and female sexual organs as justifications for social norms. Tenets of biological determinism claimed that a woman’s anatomy naturally led her to function as a devoted mother and wife, thus confining her eternally to the domestic realm where she could best flourish. Rejecting the importance of social, cultural, and ideological factors in the production of inequalities, biological determinism thus claimed that women were inapt to create imaginative works because of the inescapable nature of their biology. As an example, W. K. Brooks’ 1883 text *The Law of Heredity* stipulated that the female ovum transmitted hereditary characteristics and had historically evolved through “conservation,” while sperm cells transmitted acquired characteristics and had evolved through “progression and creation.” Identifying the social consequences of such biological distinctions, Brooks suggested that “creative” sperm cells allowed men to make scientific discoveries and attain the highest artistic insights, while the “conservatory” ovum predisposed women to fulfill the demands of quotidian, mechanical tasks. Brooks thus noted “how infinitesimally small is the number of women who have shown in any form the very highest order of genius” as he concluded that “it

---

is as impossible to find a female Raphael or a female Handel as a female Shakespeare.'”

Akin to the old gentleman of *A Room of One’s Own*, Brooks restricted authorship to the realm of men by deriving from the lack of renowned matrilineages the absence of future possibilities for women authors. For these Victorian critics, the non-existence of well-recognized female artists supported the belief that essential limitations made it impossible for any woman to create valuable works of imagination.

Such a prevalent view would have certainly made it difficult for women to define themselves as authors. The much quoted theories of Brooks, for instance, would have efficiently silenced women by denying the very possibility that valuable works could originate, should any of them ever assume the position of authorship in spite of the alleged incapacity of her nature to create. The importance of Woolf’s text—and, as I will here argue, mediumship—rested in their demonstration that social, political, and material factors (rather than biology) shape the understanding and embodiment of authorship. Indeed, as *A Room of One’s Own* demonstrates, writing depends on material conditions as well as cultural constructions of meaning that help or restrict individuals’ expression. Biological determinism and its institution of the “separate spheres” prohibited women’s access to language, not only by limiting their experiences, material resources, and education, but also by undermining the importance of these limitations as factors of creativity. In this sense, Woolf acknowledged the effects of patriarchal ideologies on women’s creativity: “Outwardly, what is simpler than to write books? Outwardly, what obstacles are there for a woman rather than a man? Inwardly, I think, the case is very different; she has still many ghosts to fight, many prejudices to overcome. Indeed, it will

---

are science and philosophy. Whole classes of activities are now endowed to a sex…every habit, gesture, and activity is sexualized and categorized as male or female, masculine or feminine.” (12)

be a long time still, I think, before a woman can sit down and write a book without finding a phantom to be slain, a rock to be dashed against.”

In this chapter, I explore spiritual mediumship as one of women’s strategies under nineteenth-century social, material, and ideological structures of oppression to exorcise such phantoms. I suggest that trance communications created new filiations that counter-balanced the paucity of renowned matrilineages. Mediums’ trance productions indeed momentarily teleported them to an imaginary stage upon which they could create spectral figures of authorship to serve their creative endeavours. On this stage, they could carry the voices of well-known authors, from lost acquaintances to Shakespeare himself. Séances thus offered a variety of ways through which female mediums could reinvent their relation to creativity, from the embodiment of male subjectivities to the conjuration of restrictive figures of femininity. By both borrowing male voices and reimagining the past, mediums also undermined the validity of biological determinism which the alleged lack of matrilineages of creative geniuses had been said to demonstrate.

Many Canadian mediums have accessed such complex forms of authorship through their participation in séances. This chapter presents the trance writings of two mediums, Susanna Moodie and Annie Florence Smith. These two women may not appear to bear much resemblance if one excludes their mutual interest in communications with the dead. On the one hand, Susanna Strickland Moodie is well-known in Canadian studies as a pioneering author of colonial literature. The Strickland family burgeoned with remarkable literary personalities, from Moodie’s brother Samuel who wrote an important autobiographical work at the end of his life, to her sisters Agnes and Elizabeth

who wrote multiple biographies of noble personalities. Her other sister, Catharine Parr Strickland Traill, who emigrated from England to Ontario twenty-three months apart from Moodie, also became a celebrated author of the colonial period and her works *The Backwoods of Canada* (1836) and *Canadian Crusoes* (1852), among others, are still taught as pillars of Canadian literature.\(^{226}\) Susanna Moodie is today known particularly for her autobiographical journal *Roughing it in the Bush* (1852), a work she co-wrote with her husband and that her editor, Richard Bentley, heavily re-worked.\(^ {227}\) *Life in the Clearings versus the Bush* (1853) and *Flora Lyndsay, or Passages in an Eventful Life* (1854) completed her Canadian trilogy detailing her experiences as a settler. Under the editorship of Bentley, her prolific publications during the 1850s also included *Mark Hurdlestone* (1853), *Matrimonial Speculations* (1854), and *The Moncktons* (1856).

Moodie gained increased attention from scholarly research following the 1972 publication of Margaret Atwood’s *The Journals of Susanna Moodie* as the latter defined her work as paradigmatic of the Canadian psyche. However, the vast array of responses to Moodie’s work and Atwood’s interpretation of it has very rarely explored Moodie’s detailed accounts and transcriptions of the multiple “voices” she heard during her relatively brief infatuation with the spiritualist movement between 1857 and 1863.\(^ {228}\)

Along with her sister Catharine, her husband Dunbar, and her daughter Agnes, Susanna

---


Moodie developed mediumistic abilities through a series of séances occurring shortly after a visit from Kate Fox in her house in Belleville, Ontario.  

Annie Florence Smith, on the other hand, was a Montreal medium who remains virtually absent from Canadian scholarship. Her trance communications, however, were the origins of her two novels, Brighter Spheres (1890) and A Murderer’s Fate in the Spirit World (1899). According to Ernest John Craigie, author of the introduction to Brighter Spheres, she received her education in the Anglophone school system in Montreal until the age of 14 when she left to pursue her domestic duties. By the end of the nineteenth century, her evenings were filled with paranormal activities, as reputed men and women gathered in her spiritualist circle to hear her trance communications. 

While divergent in many regards, the testimonies of Smith and Moodie allow me to detail the complexity of spiritual séances as communicative devices. Through presentation and interpretation of their spirit writings, I suggest that the mediums’ modes of creation (table-rapping and automatic writing in particular) forged an important

---

229 I do not wish to claim here that only women were victims of oppressive ideologies and therefore were the only ones who found in spiritual séances a strategic way to respond to their feelings of disempowerment. While the majority of mediums were women in the Anglo-Saxon world, such claim would ignore the realities of the many male mediums who also used séances as a space of expression. Susanna Moodie’s husband Dunbar, for instance, pursued a profound interest in spirit communications. As he experienced difficulties in his career, he received comfort and validation from the departed: in 1854, he was advised not be “discouraged by the machinations of bad men, but trust in God…. He will not forsake you in your hour of need, nor let your enemies triumph.” (“Moodie Family Spiritualism Album.” Patrick Hamilton Ewing Collection, Box 5. Public Archives of Canada. 49-50) As such, John Thurston argues that “J.W.D. Moodie, in his own words poor, needed his wife’s money to keep afloat the family economy. He was oppressed by his enemies and found the performance of his duties physically draining. She was the success, he the failure. Socially, he was a womanly man…. In his beleaguered position, [J.D.W.] Moodie was susceptible to finding in spiritualism the power which belongs to the powerless.” (Thurston, “The Casket of Truth,” 14). Although this chapter focuses on the séances of Susanna Moodie and Annie Florence Smith, it should not be forgotten that various individuals appropriated in different ways the narrative strategies offered by séances. On masculinity and mediumship, see: Diana Barsham, Arthur Conan Doyle and the Meaning of Masculinity (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2000); and Brett E. Carroll, “ ‘A Higher Power to Feel’: Spiritualism, Grief, and Victorian Manhood.” Men and Masculinities 3, no.1 (2000): 2–29.

230 The only mention of Annie Florence Smith I was able to trace in recent historical research appears in a footnote in Walter J. Meyer Zu Erpen and Joy Lowe, “The Canadian Spiritualist Movement and Sources for its Study.” Archivaria 30 (1990): 84. The note reveals the existence of the typescript of A Murderer’s Fate in the Spirit World at the Toronto Reference Library.
possibility for nineteenth-century women to “take the pen” by dissociating the (sexed) self from the communicating hand.

While many studies of spiritualism and women’s authorship have already been realized, I wish to address a rarely explored aspect of séances by locating the functions of ghostly lineages affecting women’s works, an aspect which can be illuminated through the analysis of Woolf’s writings on creativity. I therefore frame my discussion of Canadian spiritual séances through a reading of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*, a work which admirably detailed the terms of the relation between women and writing. As one of Woolf’s “first concerted attempts to create a counter-history to Victorian sex-roles,” this text explores the important obstacles nineteenth-century women writers faced. The text also formulates a variety of strategies allowing women to access the freedom of mind required to create imaginary works, strategies which share important structural features with those of séance communications. Indeed, *A Room of One’s Own* appeals to a spectral genealogy in order to conceive the possibility of female authorship in opposition to Victorian theories of biological determinism. Through this lineage, the text demonstrates that mediums, as transmitters of spirit discourses, could become oblique figures of creativity whose paradoxical access to speech revealed innovative modes of communications for those who were traditionally silenced.

**Ghostly lineages: Woolf, mediumship, and writing**

Woolf encountered the spiritualist movement in her early youth through the influence of her father, Leslie Stephen, who had been a member of the Society for Psychical Research

---

for several years.\textsuperscript{232} It would be misleading, however, to suggest that she believed in the occult origins of séances, or even that she cultivated the slightest interest in the possibility of spiritual manifestations in her adult life. In a 1934 letter to Stephen Spender, she admitted, for instance, that she “liked talking to Yeats,” a strong believer of spirit communications and member among the famous medium Madame Blavatsky’s spiritualist circle. But she quickly added that she found tedious his constant allusions to the other world. In his presence, she wrote, “the occult appeared—an illuminated coat hanger, a child’s hand, and a message about an unborn baby in Greek—at which I gasped, like a dying alligator.”\textsuperscript{233} The vocabulary of boredom shaping the narrative of her interactions with Yeats echoed her description of a spiritualist character in her short story “Kew Gardens” whose allusions to the topic similarly tested the patience of his company. For this believer in spiritual communications, the occult emanated in a flower: after looking at it for a moment “in some confusion” and answering “a voice speaking from it,” Woolf writes, “the old man…began talking about the forests of Uruguay which he had visited hundreds of years ago in company with the most beautiful young woman in Europe. He could be heard murmuring about forests of Uruguay…as he suffered himself to be moved on by William, upon whose face the look of stoical patience grew slowly deeper and deeper.”\textsuperscript{234}

Despite these expressions of boredom and distaste for the movement’s beliefs, Woolf also borrowed the vocabulary of séances as a tool to reflect on the act of writing.

Particularly, Woolf appeared to recognize that the operative mode of séances offered a radical transformation of narrative conventions. Mediums’ trance discourses thus provided her with a powerful imagery to conceive the innovative forms of writing and authorship she was developing. In “Modern Fiction,” for instance, she noted that the literary current of modernism worked in opposition to the writings of “materialists,” for the latter were “concerned not with the spirit but with the body.” In comparison, she defined the modernist novelist, such as herself, as a “spiritualist,” one for whom “the point of interest, lies very likely in the dark places of psychology.” Relocating the meaning of occult apparitions in the uncovering of the psyche, her reference to spiritualism thus served to illustrate a form of writing emphasizing the complex nature of subjectivity. For Woolf, as for depth psychologists of the turn of the century introduced in Chapter 1, the vocabulary of séances enlightened the hidden life of the mind. In “Haunted House: Ghostly Presences in Woolf’s Essays and Early Fiction,” George M. Johnson reiterates Woolf’s image of the modernist author, noting that “a significant number of late-Victorian and Edwardian writers were much more concerned with portraying the spiritual element of character than the material. Not only did they probe the dark places of psychology, but they explored extensions of the powers of the human mind in such phenomena as telepathy, hypnosis, extrasensory perception, prevision and psychic possession.” Like mediums’ trance possession, modernist poetics revealed the alien, fragmented voices inside oneself. Often in accordance with psychoanalytic theories

of the unconscious, such poetics emphasized, as Eugene Lunn states in *Marxism and Modernism*, “the demise of the integrated subjective self.”238 As such, Woolf could pursue the comparison between her form of writing and the process of spirit communications in her diary through a short reference to the figure of the medium. She wrote: “I think writing, my writing, is a species of mediumship. I become the person.”239 The spiritualist trope therefore offered her a tool to conceive the potentialities of a form of writing in which the author’s consciousness could dissolve through the creation of multiple and distinct personalities. Woolf’s use of the vocabulary of séances demonstrated that her writings aimed to emphasize the fragility of the speaking subject and that the frontiers of identity were never perfectly stable or clear.240

Such forms of writing appear explicitly in *A Room of One’s Own*, where the enunciating “I” becomes a blurry, divided entity constantly confounding itself with the objects it discusses. The text begins with a narrative of the fragmentation of the author-position as Woolf introduces her fictional narrator and the spaces she will cross: “I need not say that what I am about to describe has no existence. Oxbridge is an invention; so is

239 Virginia Woolf, *Diary of Virginia Woolf*, vol 5, ed. Anne Olivier Bell and Andrew McNeillie (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1984) 101. It is not insignificant to note that Virginia Woolf was herself possessed by different voices. As Katherine Dalsimer explains, shortly after the death of her mother she indeed “heard for the first time what she would later call ‘those horrible voices.’ She heard them for the last time in the weeks before her death: ‘it is just as it was the first time…. I have fought against it, but I cant any longer, she wrote before putting stones in her pockets and walking into the River Ouse in 1941 at the age of 59.” (Katharine Dalsimer, “Virignia Woolf: Thinking Back Through our Mothers.” *Psychoanalytic Inquiry* 24, no. 5 (2004): 717.)
240 To this list of parallels between Woolf’s writings and séances’ narrative structures, I should add that the notion of “stream of consciousness” itself, frequently used to describe the complex representation of consciousness deployed through Woolf’s literary style, is borrowed from William James’ *Principles of Psychology*. An important founder of the Society for Psychical Research in England, James had formulated the term to introduce the idea that human consciousness was not “chopped up in bits. Such words as ‘chain’ or ‘train’ do not describe it fitly.” Rather, he claimed, consciousness was floating and “a ‘river’ or a ‘stream’ are the metaphors by which it is most naturally described.” (William James, *Principles of Psychology* 2 vols. (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1890) 239.) James’ research on consciousness, it goes without saying, was profoundly influenced by his research on séances.
Fernham; ‘I’ is only a convenient term for somebody who has no real being. Lies will flow from my lips, but there may perhaps be some truth mixed up with them…. Here then was I (call me Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael or by any name you please—it is of no importance) sitting on the banks of a river a week or two ago in fine October weather, lost in thought.”

Lost in her thoughts, this fragmented and duplicitous “I” “with no real being” thus serves to formulate a complex perspective on the relationship between women and fiction through the creation of an oblique narrative. Its configuration depends on the obliteration of yet another “I,” reading “from my lips” a text on the relation between women and fiction to audiences in Newnham and Girton in October 1928. Woolf pushes this narrative strategy to its radical development in the last section of her novel To the Lighthouse, a section which aims to present a narrative devoid of the parameters and constraints of a mastering authorial voice. In her Diary, she wrote of the difficulty of this mode of creation: “I cannot make it out—here is the most difficult abstract piece of writing—I have to give an empty house, no people’s characters, the passage of time, all eyeless and featureless with nothing to cling to...is it nonsense? Is it brilliance?”

This nonsensical language, “all eyeless and featureless,” through which Woolf hoped to convey a narrative without schematization through the fallacy of an omnipotent, masterful author shares important structural characteristics with the narratives of spiritual séances. Helen Swords remarks in Ghostwriting Modernism that the links between mediumship and literature are always present: “writers of literary fiction have always functioned as spirit mediums of a sort: giving voice and substance to literary characters

---

241 Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 6.
we cannot see but nonetheless believe to be real; ventriloquizing for the dead…. Conversely…at least since the time of the Fox sisters, spirit mediums have typically regarded themselves as privileged recipients and interpreters of the written word.”243 Yet, Woolf’s modernist writings, in particular, echo the practice of spiritual séances in a more fundamental way. Woolf is right to compare her writing to “a form of mediumship,” for she similarly disintegrates traditional conventions of authorship as she elaborates a complex, blurry, and duplicitous “I.” Woolf’s and mediums’ literary creations have indeed shared a subject-position that disrupted traditional understandings of the modalities of discourse. As I have earlier demonstrated, mediums could only become bearers of discourses through the mad process of fragmenting their own authorial positions in séances, since the legitimation of their discourses relied on spiritualist definitions of their bodies as agentless apparatuses of transmission for the words of others. As such, prefiguring Woolf’s modernist writings, mediums’ form of authorship was fragmented, duplicitous, and born from the very dissolution of the enunciating “I” into a circuitry of identities. Spiritual séances, in other words, opened for mediums a possibility to respond to the Victorian imagination of the female body as incapable of participating in traditionally masculine realms of endeavour, by manipulating the enunciated “I.” As such, séances’ narrative conventions challenged the conceptual position of this “I” by veering away from the representation of the subject as transparent master of its discursive productions.244

Another parallel appears between the narrative strategies developed by mediums and Woolf’s feminist response to Victorian ideologies of biological determinism through *A Room of One’s Own*’s use of the terminology of specters and hauntings to retrieve an imaginary genealogy of female literary creativity. Noting the absence of a female equivalent to the genius personality of Shakespeare, “the old gentleman” of *A Room of One’s Own* reminds Woolf’s unnamed (or multi-named) narrator of an important problem for women writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. Since “a woman writing thinks back through her mothers,”245 as she notes, one is indeed forced to recognize that the scarcity of female ancestors legitimizing current women’s writing enterprises may prevent many from identifying as authors.246 *A Room of One’s Own* thus formulates a strategy to replace this absent lineage with imaginary figures of the past. To answer the question of why there had been no female equivalent to Shakespeare, the narrator creates the character of Judith—the imaginary sister of the poet— and presents the possible destiny of this talented woman in early modern English society. In her story, Judith Shakespeare remained muted despite her intellectual potential, not because of her

Unselfish Love:’ Spiritualism and the Collaborative Writing of Rosa Praed and Nancy Harward.” *Southerly: A Review of Australian Literature* 702 (2010): 110–123; and Daniel B. Shea, *The Patience of Pearl: Spiritualism and Authorship in the Writings of Pearl Curran* (Columbia: University of Missouri Press, 2012). These works suggest that mediums’ particular narrative strategies profoundly challenged traditional authorial conventions. These texts form the theoretical background for my interpretations of Moodie’s and Smith’s séances. However, important questions remain to be explored: why were the ghosts so essential to women’s creativity in the first place? Why did women privilege such forms of authorship? By framing my analysis of Canadian mediums through Woolf’s writing on the functions and modalities of creativity, I wish to address such questions more particularly.

245 Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 93.

246 I am aware that recent studies have demonstrated the existence of writings by women in the Elizabethan age. The book by Paula Backscheider, *Eighteen-Century Women Poets and their Poetry: Inventing Agency, Inventing Genre* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2005), is an important example of the discoveries of this important historiographical endeavour, which now permits us to recognize many lineages of women’s literary creativity. What interests me in this chapter, however, is the perceived lack of such lineages in an era where historiography was not largely concerned with women’s past and their textual productions.
biology, but because of her socio-political conditions and the inhibiting force of those conditions on her creativity. Woolf writes:

Let me imagine, since facts are so hard to come by, what would have happened had Shakespeare had a wonderfully gifted sister, called Judith, let us say. Shakespeare himself went, very probably,—his mother was a heiress—to the grammar school, where he may have learnt Latin—Ovid, Virgil and Horace—and the elements of grammar and logic…. He had, it seemed, a taste for theatre; he began by holding horses at the stage door. Very soon he got work in the theatre, became a successful actor, and lived at the hub of the universe, meeting everybody, knowing everybody…. Meanwhile his extraordinarily gifted sister, let us suppose, remained at home. She was as adventurous, as imaginative, as agog to see the world as he was. But she was not sent to school. She had no chance of learning grammar and logic, let alone reading Horace and Virgil.247

While this imaginary ancestor possessed remarkable intelligence, a gift akin to her brother’s for theatre and, like him, stood at the stage door in the hope of developing her talent through new encounters, social considerations for her sex prevented her from receiving the recognition attributed to her brother. Her story ended tragically, when “At last…. Nick Greene the actor-manager took pity of her; she found herself pregnant with child by that gentleman and…killed herself one winter’s night and lies buried at some cross-roads.”248

Judith’s fiction allows Woolf to combat biological determinist views of the sexes by highlighting the importance of social constructions and material conditions as

247 Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 46.
248 Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 47.
important factors inhibiting the development of creativity. Taking into account the
writer’s life and social milieu, her description of Judith demonstrates that sexual
inequalities are not natural realities, but constructions perpetuated through patriarchal
ideology. In refuting such ideology, Judith can also serve as a spectral presence which
guides future women writers by building an imaginary lineage. She becomes an inspiring
figure whose tragic story can counter the Victorian ideology of the “separate spheres.” As
such, *A Room of One’s Own*, concludes with an appeal to Judith’s ghost, which serves as
an invocation to women authors:

I told you in the course of this paper that Shakespeare had a sister…she died
young, alas, she never wrote a word. She lies buried where the omnibuses now
stop, opposite to Elephant and Castle. Now my belief is that this poet who never
wrote a word and was buried at the cross-road still lives. She lives in you, in me,
and in many other women who are not here to-night, for they are washing up the
dishes and putting the children to bed. But she lives; for great poets do not die;
they are continuing presences; they need only the opportunity to walk among us
in the flesh.\(^{249}\)

The parallels between the potential symbolized by the imaginary Judith and the
ghostly ancestry of spiritual mediums are clear. Like the ghosts of the séance, the fiction
of Judith serves to render a real possibility for women’s future creative projects. Her
tragic story emphasizes the social conditions that both shape production of discourses and
determine who is allowed to speak. Further, the fiction of Judith highlights the potential
of ghostly communications as stratagems of legitimation of women’s discourses. In a
context where the paucity of artistic matrilineages was used to argue for the impossibility

\(^{249}\) Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 107-108.
of women’s creativity, Judith (as the ghosts of séances) allowed women authors to form a different legacy and thus to confront ideas of biological determinism.

In the following sections, I explore the literary works originating from the séances of Susanna Moodie and Annie Florence Smith. I suggest that their séance communications—part of a much broader movement—prefigured in important ways Woolf’s emphasis on particular strategies of women’s access to a different form of writing. More explicitly, I demonstrate that Moodie’s and Smith’s participation in séances permitted them to explore their creativity through their reconfiguration of the enunciating “I” and their appeal to noble genealogies legitimizing their discourses.

**Spiritoscope, mesmerism, and uncontrollable hands in Susanna Moodie’s séances**

Susanna Moodie (see figure 12) documented her infatuation with the spiritualist movement during the 1850s and 1860s through a series of correspondences and a *Spiritualism Album* that depict the diversity of her interactions with the departed. Throughout these years, she remained ambivalent towards the possibility of spirit communications, but became an active participant in séances, acting herself as a writing medium in many instances.
Moodie’s interest in spiritualism was sparked during a visit from Kate Fox to her home in Belleville in 1855, when the latter revealed deeply personal information that only Moodie and the spirits could have known. The medium had indeed asked her to write down the names of departed friends and to state her inquiries while keeping her scribbling hidden. Moodie described the following manifestations in a letter to her friend and editor Richard Bentley:

I then wrote under the name of poor Anna Laura Harral…who had been one of the friends of my girlhood, “Why did you not keep your promise.” This promise having been a solemn compact made between us in the days of youth and romance, that the one who died first should appear if possible to the other. The answer to my unseen written question was immediately rapped out, “I have often
tried to make my presence known to you.” I was startled, but wrote again, “if so rap out your name.” It was instantly done. Perhaps no one but myself on the whole American continent knew that such a person had ever existed.\textsuperscript{250}

Such communications were certainly not exceptional, as they reflected common narratives of spiritualist conversions. Indeed, in order to refute the possibility of fraud, believers generally attempted to relocate authorship away from the medium’s subjectivity. A popular way to determine the validity of the medium’s powers was thus to verify whether she could reveal secret information to prove that she was not at the origins of her enunciation. As Jill Nicole Galvan notes in \textit{The Sympathetic Medium: Feminine Channeling, the Occult, and Communication Technologies}, because the medium’s automatism “implied her ignorance of the often personal and confidential facts she communicated from the departed, it also implied the authenticity of the communications themselves, thereby verifying spiritualism.”\textsuperscript{251} While Moodie remained doubtful, noting that the medium may have been a “clairvoyant and able to read unwritten thoughts,” she found herself fascinated by Fox’s talents. She defined herself as “still as great a skeptic as to the spiritual nature of the thing,” but admitted that “the intelligence conveyed is unaccountable.”\textsuperscript{252} Kate Fox’s abilities to transmit information on which she should have been ignorant enticed Moodie’s interest towards spiritual manifestations and sparked a curiosity that would grow stronger over the following years.

As Moodie continued exploring the movement through her own mediumship, she experienced for herself the feelings of dissociation and loss of subjective agency put

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{252} Moodie, \textit{Letters of a Lifetime}, 158.
\end{flushright}
forward by many mediums to describe their states of trance. In 1858, for instance, she pondered the spiritual or psychological origins of her communications. She wrote to Bentley: “You will perhaps think, as I too have often thought, that the whole thing is an operation of my own mind.” Yet, she immediately refused this psychological explanation, because of her complete ignorance of the words she pronounced and of their sublime revelations: “my mind must be far cleverer than I, its owner, have any idea of if it can spell letter by letter, whole pages of connected and often abstruse matter without my knowing one word about it, for, it is not until Mr. Moodie reads it over to me, after the communication is suspended that I know what it is about.”

In addition to her loss of conscious awareness during trance, Moodie experienced a lack of control over her body that revealed feelings of dissociation. Such feelings appear highly similar to those of Pierre Janet’s hysterical patients when performing automatic writing, or of Freud’s loss of control over his hand during the treatment of his hysteria, described in Chapter 1. Indeed, having one day invoked the spirits and dared them to prove their existence, she wrote to Bentley: “I suddenly laid my right hand upon the table and…. I said tauntingly, enough, ‘If there be any truth in this doctrine, let the so called spirits move my hand against my will off from this table, and lay it down in my lap!’ You may therefore guess my surprise, not to say terror, when my hand became paralyzed, and the fingers were slowly wrenched up from the table, and the whole hand lifted and laid down in my lap…as if held in a strong grasp and placed there.” She continued such experiments in the following days, until her hand became so completely paralyzed that she had to call on her husband to operate “the reverse passes in

---

253 Moodie, Letters of a Lifetime, 182.
254 Moodie, Letters of a Lifetime, 182.
mesmerism” that restored her control. Through these various experiences, Moodie thus associated the practice of mediumship with the loss of her subjective agency and the experience of her body as a passive vehicle for others to take over.

Detaching herself from her communicating hand, however, importantly benefitted Moodie’s creative enterprise by situating her among a spectral genealogy of reputable figures of authorship. In her correspondence to Bentley, Moodie continued to describe her experiences of spiritual communications through the help of a particular device—the spiritoscope. A creation of her husband, this instrument constituted an ingenious apparatus of communication which, similarly to the Ouija board, rendered spirit communications more efficient by using a graphic representation of the alphabet. In one of her séances, the spiritoscope allowed Moodie to communicate with the renowned spirit of Thomas Harral, the first literary man for whom she wrote and who had first encouraged her poetic endeavour. Moodie appeared in his British magazine La Belle Assemblée as early as 1825 and continued to publish in it poems and other literary works through the 1820s. According to John Thompson, however, psychological conflicts led her to distance herself from the magazine as she began to experience “difficulties with Harral, her literary fame in his magazine and her own spiritual and moral state.” After all these years, now renewing contact with the ghost of her lost mentor, Moodie asked him the question: “Why do you wish to communicate with me?” Harral’s response—“Because I felt an interest in you when upon earth”—validated her writing through its

---

256 Moodie, Letters of a Lifetime, 180.
257 See McMullin for a description of the spiritoscope: “This machine is simply an upright stand, with a spiral brass spring in the center, and with a transverse handle sliding over it, and placed horizontally, for the hands of the medium to rest upon. On the top of the stand is placed a dial, with letters of the alphabet. A string is tied to the upper end of the spiral spring, and then passes over a pulley which carries a hand to point to the letters, and the other end is tied to the cross handle.” (McMullin, Anatomy of a Séance, 17).
spiritual approbation. Moodie’s experiences of dissociation were therefore the beginning of a communication that placed her in a greater tradition of writing among departed figures of literary creativity who brought encouraging words of support.

Significantly, when Moodie became interested in spiritualism, she had begun experiencing some difficulty with writing. In fact, such difficulty had emerged much earlier in her career, as she seemed struggling to reconcile her activities with nineteenth-century ideologies of true womanhood. As Woolf writes in “Women Novelists,” while it was certainly possible for nineteenth-century women to write imaginative works and remain respectable under Victorian ideals of womanhood, “the burden of the proof still rested anew upon each authoress. Even so late as the mid-Victorian days Georges Eliot was accused of ‘coarseness and immorality’ in her attempt ‘to familiarise the minds of the young women in the middle and higher ranks with matters on which their fathers and brothers would never venture to speak in their presence.’” Moodie seems to have experienced such struggle between her literary ambitions and her internalization of dominant ideas of womanhood as, already in 1829, she had described as a “criminal passion” her “desire for fame.” She regretted having “employed my abilities with which heaven had endowed me, doubtless for a wise and useful purpose, entirely for my

259 For further study of Moodie’s work in relation to Victorian ideologies of the “separate spheres,” see: Gillian Whitlock, The Intimate Empire: Reading Women’s Autobiography (London: Cassell, 2000). Whitlock remarks that throughout Moodie’s oeuvre “the tensions between authorship and appropriately feminine domestic conduct are apparent…. Advised by neighbours to ‘lay the pen, and betake [her] self to some more useful employment,’ Mrs Moodie protests ‘…I tried to avoid all literary subjects [and became] more diligent in cultivating every branch of domestic usefulness.’” (70) Despite such difficulty, Moodie has been known for operating a reversal of the gendered roles in her writing, thus demonstrating that she was not simply prisoner of Victorian expectations, but was able to challenge such expectations through her literary works.


261 Susanna Moodie, Letters of a Lifetime, 39.

140
own amusements,” and she thus decided that she would now devote her talents to the service of God. During this period, she burnt her literary works, persuaded that it was “unworthy of a Christian to write for the stage.” While Moodie came back to writing in the following years—and experienced a more productive period during the early 1850s—her creativity seemed lost by the second half of the decade. Indeed, the critics of Moodie’s work generally agree that she wrote little after *Life in the Clearings* (1853). In a letter to Bentley from 1856, she herself confirmed this assertion, noting that her writing “belongs like me to the past” and that “I have not written one line for publication since I last wrote.” Although she needed the revenues provided by her profession, she noted: “my pen had failed to add its mite…and I felt in no spirits for the task.” As such, Carl Ballstadt, Elizabeth Hopkins, and Michael Peterman note: “It is not surprising that in May 1856, when things were beginning to go badly, Susanna succumbed to the persistent persuasiveness of the occult and found comfort in the advice of those early ‘father figures’ [such as] Thomas Harral.” The reappearance of these father figures may indeed have benefitted her creativity though their validation.

As such, considerations for her *Spiritualism Album* reveal not the abandonment of her writing activities, but the continuation of her burgeoning creativity. The *Album* comprises more than 200 pages of poems, stories, moral tales, and revelations received by the Moodies between 1857 and 1863. Many of these were composed by an entity they

---

264 Thurston, “Moodie, Susanna,” 754.
named the “Anglo-Saxon spirit,” who had declared himself to be Susanna Moodie’s unnamed guardian angel from Old England (see figure 13).

The latter communicated through Susanna’s hand many spiritual revelations and poems which the Moodies considered of a high moral nature. Among these, for instance, was included the following poem:

You evermore shall God adore / Your heart and soul / Shall react to the goal / Your spirit longs to win / Redeemed and purified from sin / Come, sister spirit, come / To thy eternal home / The earth mists melt away / Behold the dawn of day / The living sun that shows / Where the healing water flows / To cleanse each Earthly stain / Then drink – nor thirst again / For to thy soul is given / The baptism of heaven / Then, sister, come away, / To the realms of endless day / Let my words be thee prophesy.  

As Dunbar exclaimed: “It appears as if the Mediumship of Mrs. M were reserved for the especial service or teachings of this Spirit, who obviously belongs to a very high order of

---

269 “Moodie Family Spiritualism Album,” 94
Intelligence.” Thus, through her communications with the dead, as Thurston puts it, Moodie “did not, after all, stop writing. She just stopped writing about the living and for the living. In the ‘Spiritualism Album’ as in Roughing It, she accepted the aid of collaborators and ventriloquized the voices of others in a dangerous dialogue with her own. In the ‘Spiritualism Album,’ however, her collaborators and conversationalists are dead. Moodie turned from words to the Word.” In adopting the dangerous state of trance, in which she often experienced the loss of control over her body and mind, Moodie was indeed able to create new works by transmitting the words of what she perceived as more honourable (male) authors.

While the Album never found its way to publication, indications suggest that Moodie considered the possibility of conveying her communications to a broader public. In 1858, her husband sent abstracts of the communications to a prominent spiritualist newspaper in America, the Spiritual Telegraph. The same year, her Anglo-Saxon spirit recommended that she deliver his revelations to humanity in a published volume. “This volume,” he told her, “shall be called ‘the Casket of Truth’ and the name of the aged pioneer shall be gazed upon in days to come, as a name worthy of angel account.” She reported to Bentley some of the revelations provided by her guardian angel and inquired on her editor’s interest to receive further writings: “I have received some noble communications from this spirit, and if you wish to know more of him, I will give more, 

---

270 “Moodie Family Spiritualism Album,” 80.
273 “Moodie Family Spiritualism Album,” 100.
in my next letter. He is so unlike all the other communicants, that I know him from the first sentence he spells upon the board.”

The *Spiritualism Album*’s last entries date from 1863 and Moodie does not seem to have pursued her spiritual communications after this date. While brief, her infatuation with spiritualism allowed her to collaborate with old attachments from her early career and with newly encountered figures of creativity to produce a new form of literature. Because she had been a prolific writer before her mediumistic activities—publishing literary works under her own name for more than thirty years—her need for spiritual disguise may first seem doubtful. However, her interactions with the departed provided her with an ingenious solution to the profound conflict she had experienced in the division between her literary ambitions and her notion of pure womanhood. Her momentary inclination for spiritualism allowed her to reconcile herself with her creativity by interpreting it as her pious duty as a subordinate to God and his communicating spirits.

“The direct dictation of an ‘Invisible Intelligence:’” Annie Florence Smith’s mediumship

Annie Florence Smith was a Montreal medium whose communications with the spirit world resulted in two manuscripts: *Brighter Spheres*, published in 1890, and *A Murderer’s Fate in the Spirit World*, completed in 1899. Unlike Susanna Moodie, Smith had never gained recognition as an author prior to her participation in spiritual séances. Like Moodie, however, she found a strategic way to explore her creativity through her intercourse with the departed. In both *Brighter Spheres* and *A Murderer’s Fate*, her self-definition as an instrument of transmission for the spirits’ male voices provided an

---

important alibi for the development and reception of her imaginative works. As such, both texts were filled with extra-diegetic interventions that validated the words she transmitted.

In *Brighter Spheres*, this complex apparatus of legitimation begins with an “Author’s declaration,” signed by the spirit, which states that “I, Spiritus, known throughout this work as Arthur Rogers, do solemnly assert that I dictated it; and that all contained herein is the true account of my life, with its sins, its sorrows, its struggles and final ending.” To this prefatory remark follows an introduction by Ernest John Craigie, sitter among the medium’s circle, which further legitimates her communications by demonstrating the impossibility that she could have authored it: “READER—believe me or not as you may,” Craigie wrote, “this work, which I trust will prove instructive as well as interesting, was produced in the marvelous manner described further on.” Among Craigie’s arguments demonstrating such impossibility was the objective analysis and verification of reputed male observers who could not have been deceived by the medium’s treachery. Indeed, “many well-known persons, including professional and business men, who were invited on various occasions to witness the progress of the work” testified to the validity of Smith’s spiritual messages. The medium’s lack of education further evidenced the spiritual authorship, for “without the benefits of a liberal education,” Craigie noted, “there can be no possibility of imposture on the part of the Medium.” Similarly, Craigie’s introduction to the manuscript of *A Murderer’s Fate* stated that “those who know Miss Smith are satisfied that she is quite incapable of

---

275 *Spiritus, Brighter Spheres: Dictated Through the Mediumship of Annie Florence Smith* (Montreal: J. Lovell, 1890) 1.
276 *Spiritus, Brighter Spheres*, 3.
277 *Spiritus, Brighter Spheres*, 3.
278 *Spiritus, Brighter Spheres*, 3.
attempting fraud upon the public and that her imagination had no part whatever in the production of these ‘histories.’” The Victorian expectations regarding the medium’s sex—women’s lack of creative imagination, education, and ingenuousness—thus benefitted the reception of Smith’s communications as the genuine correspondence of a more reputable (male) author.

Notwithstanding one’s beliefs in the occult origins of séances, however, Craigie was certainly right to admire the “marvelous manner” from which Smith’s work originated. Produced through “the direct dictation of an ‘invisible intelligence,’” both texts indeed demanded quite strenuous processes of communication that deserve considerations in their own rights. As both Craigie and Spiritus explain in Brighter Spheres, these communications emanated in every séance from knockings heard on a tilting box on which the medium had placed her hands. As sitters would recite the alphabet out loud, a knock on the box would indicate that a desired letter had been produced. The corresponding letter would then be taken down by a copyist from whose hands the manuscript would slowly emanate. In each case, the spirit insistently demanded to be heard. Spiritus stated on its very first apparition: “I want you to write all I tell you…. It will be beneficial to mankind. You will publish it.” So too, in A Murderer’s Fate, the spirit’s main desire in the afterlife was to tell his story. To the medium’s question “what do you want?” the “author” of the manuscript calling himself Nemesis answered: “To let you know how I was punished for my crime,” thus beginning his narrative. Through this particularly demanding mode of transmission, Brighter Spheres comprised 221 pages of Spiritus’ life and sins. The shorter unpublished manuscript A

279 “A Murderer’s Fate in the Spirit World by Nemesis, through the mediumship of Annie Florence Smith, Medium of Brighter Spheres.” John Craigie Papers, Metropolitan Toronto Library, Baldwin Room.
280 Spiritus, Brighter Spheres, 4.
*Murderer’s Fate* consisted of 52 pages describing the afterlife of Nemesis following his murder of a love rival.

As such, Annie Florence Smith’s mediumship demonstrates the possibilities opened by spiritual communications for the exploration of women’s literary creativity. Through various processes of legitimation, the medium could become bearer of meaningful enunciations despite the ideology of the sexes which constrained her access to authorship. Nemesis’ and Spiritus’ narratives provided her with an important strategy to produce a work of imagination that her audience—as well as she—might have otherwise rejected as inappropriate to her sphere of endeavour. In becoming an empty vessel for others to “take over,” Smith could retain the image of pure womanhood, while producing creative works on the sins of men and spiritual revelations on their fates in the afterlife.

Interestingly, a further analysis of *Brighter Spheres* demonstrates that this extra-diegetic apparatus of legitimation staging the erasure of the female medium also occurs at the diegetic level through the disappearance (or death) of most of the female characters introduced. The very beginning of Spiritus’ narrative, for instance, describes a scene of matricide: the young Arthur Rogers is fighting with another boy, when a woman—for whom “the least shock or excitement would prove fatal”\(^{281}\)—anxiously runs towards them and attempts to separate them. A minute later, Arthur notes, “she was dead, and nothing remained but the pale, silent body to mock my anguish, for I, Arthur Rogers, was that boy, and the woman, lying dead and cold beside me, was my mother.”\(^{282}\) While his father takes this opportunity to pursue a new marriage with his mistress, Arthur is struck

by remorse over his responsibility in the death of his mother—whom he remembers as “a model housekeeper.””\textsuperscript{283} Yet, he nonetheless remains drawn to hurt the many women who share his life. Shortly after marrying Maud, a devoted woman and wealthy heiress who had fallen in love with him, he leaves her for one of his mistresses, bringing along her inheritance. The consequences are dire for, he admits, Maud subsequently became ill and died “of a broken heart.”\textsuperscript{284} Maud’s death further echoes the lot of another of Arthur’s lovers who declared: “Once I was pure as yonder flowers that bloom unblemished…until he crossed my path and flattered me with his promises of love; and, innocent of the world and the wickedness of man, I listened and fell. For his sake, I left my happy home, my aged father, and the loving friends of childhood…. But he soon tired of his pretty plaything—tired, as he will one day tire of you, lady, for his guilty nature cannot love.”\textsuperscript{285} Following the recurrent motif of the fallen woman in nineteenth-century literature, the mistress then vanishes into a life of abasement. Her last words curse the protagonist to a death as desolate as her own: “‘May your life be as miserable as you have made mine! May you die, as I shall die, comfortless, cheerless and alone!’” She then disappears as “Her voice died away faintly, and she was gone.”\textsuperscript{286}

On the one hand, these female characters’ successive disappearances appear to chastise male characters for their profanity and licentiousness and thus to warn women of the depravity they may encounter in men. Although Spiritus constantly emphasizes that his narrative aims to combat atheism—attributing his sins to his lack of faith—the description of his life-story also resonates as a challenge to male dominance. The story of

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{283} Spiritus, \textit{Brighter Spheres}, 20.
  \item \textsuperscript{284} Spiritus, \textit{Brighter Spheres}, 80.
  \item \textsuperscript{285} Spiritus, \textit{Brighter Spheres}, 59.
  \item \textsuperscript{286} Spiritus, \textit{Brighter Spheres}, 61.
\end{itemize}
his sins indeed implies a call for prudence for “virtuous” women who may suffer from “the wickedness of men.” For instance, Spiritus laments that “Poor Maud, in her loving trust and confidence in me, had given me the management of her wealth” and he states that “this was the worst thing she could have done…. I soon began squandering my wife’s wealth. Some of it went to gambling debts; some of it was spent on pretty women.” Among others, the narratives of Arthur’s mother, wife, and mistress thus exemplify the tragic lot of disempowered women under patriarchal institutions that confine them to dependence.

On the other hand, the disappearance of *Brighter Spheres*’ female characters may equally be read as a metaphor for the process of literary creation itself. This process, indeed, also requires the conjuration of certain figures of virtuous femininity in order to operate. As Virginia Woolf claims in “Professions for Women,” women writers must confront “a phantom to be slain,” this phantom being the figure of the ideal woman as portrayed under Victorian ideologies of the sexes. This “Angel of House,” for Woolf, is an “intensely sympathetic” and “immensely charming” woman who “never had a mind or a wish of her own…she was pure.” And her ghost, she adds, was most pervasive in the late nineteenth century: “In those days—the last of Queen Victoria—every house had its Angel. And when I came to write I encountered her with the very first words:… ‘Above all, be pure.’ And she made as if to guide my pen.” Unlike the figure of Judith Shakespeare which must be invoked, the ghost of the Angel of the House must be exorcised as a prerequisite to the act of creation, for her internalization would abolish the

---

289 Woolf, “Professions for Women,” 59.
290 Woolf, “Professions for Women,” 59.
very possibility of writing. Woolf notes: “I did my best to kill her…for, as I found…you cannot review even a novel without having a mind of your own, without expressing what you think to be truth about human relations, morality, sex…. She died hard. Her fictitious nature was of great assistance to her. It is harder to kill a phantom than a reality.”

This phantom, which always threatens to “guide the pen” of women writers, represents the difficulty for Victorian women to define themselves as authors amidst the predominance of ideas of pure womanhood. Emphasizing that women should above all be self-less and sympathetic—to the risk of losing their sense of agency and autonomy altogether—the Angel of the House demonstrates the dangers of the internalization of patriarchal ideas of biological determinism. Such ideas must thereby be exorcised for the expression of a woman’s “mind of [her] own,” that is, for the expression of a voice that would not be silenced by social understandings of womanhood.

Paradoxically, nineteenth-century female mediums have appeared to perform such exorcism when they erased their own identity under the voices of possessing spirits. By seemingly annihilating their own authorial agency, mediums could embrace a voice exempt of the constraints of the ideology of true womanhood. The female medium’s creativity, in other words, originated from an internalization of the symbolic murder of the Angel of the House, as the conflict between the discourses of pure womanhood and her desire to become bearer of public discourses led her to stage her own splitting into the myriad identities of communicating spirits. The deaths of Brighter Spheres’ virtuous

---

291 Woolf, “Professions for Women,” 60.
292 Contemporary critics have noted an apparent contradiction in A Room of One’s Own, a text which reads as a plea for women to write and to think through their mothers, but which also suggests that “It is fatal for any one who writes to think of their sex.” (See for instance: Kathleen Wall, “Frame Narratives and Unresolved Contradictions in Virginia Woolf’s A Room of One’s Own.” Journal of Narrative Theory 29, no. 2 (April 1999): 184-207.) The comparison between the figures of Judith Shakespeare and the Angel of the House may reveal that Woolf is not contradicting herself, but presenting the complexity and multiplicity of figures of womanhood which women must either invoke or exorcise in order to create.
female characters may thus illustrate this creative process. The complex feelings of freedom, guilt, and anxiety, described by Arthur following his responsibility in the murder of pious women, may accordingly testify to the difficult experience associated with the exorcism of models of femininity embedded in the female medium’s access to creativity.

**Mediums and creativity**

Both Moodie’s and Smith’s creativity in trance originated from the fragmentation of their enunciating “I,” which led to the formation of a variety of new identities that legitimated their communications through their divergent, more powerful, authorial positions. In becoming empty vessels for spirits to “take over,” Moodie and Smith could retain the image of pure womanhood in their daily lives while formulating in trance creative works that might have otherwise appeared inaccessible to them. Adopting the voices of spirits, they found a strategic way to develop a different form of creativity. As such, nineteenth-century séances also revealed broader implications for women writers through their subversion of traditional conventions of authorship. Mediums’ narrative strategies demonstrated the fallacies of interpretations of the author as the absolute “I,” mastering its text as the object of its rationality.

In *A Room of One’s Own*, Woolf’s narrator reveals how such interpretations of authorship supported the exclusion of women from the realm of creativity as she takes down “a new novel by Mr. A., who is in the prime of life and very well off.”293 After reading many books by female authors, she notes that male writers such as Mr. A. have accessed a very different form of discourse. She remarks how “delightful,” it first seems

293 Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 95.
to find herself in the presence of this “well-nourished, well-educated, free-mind, which had never been thwarted or opposed.” Mr. A’s novel indeed presents a “direct” and “straightforward” narrative which she finds more welcoming than the fragmented, circulatory stories of female authors she just read. Yet, she adds, such male narrative rapidly becomes tiring, for “after reading a chapter or two, a shadow seemed to lie across the page. It was a straight dark bar, a shadow shaped something like the letter ‘I’… One began to be tired of ‘I’…this ‘I’ was a most respectable ‘I’: honest and logical; as hard as a nut.… But…the worst of it is that in the shadow of the letter ‘I’ all is shapeless as mist.”

Mr. A thus embodies the god-like figure of authorship standing at the absolute origin of meaning and sense. In its mist, otherness is undistinguishable, unimportant. Woolf’s iteration of unequivocal phallic imagery (“direct,” “straight dark bar,” “hard as a nut”) thus serves to criticize this form of authorship as complacent to the silencing of women. Indeed, because women have been subjugated in symbolic institutions where they were repetitively opposed and oppressed, rather than “well-nourished,” “well-educated,” and “free,” their authorship, far from “hard as a nut,” formed more fragile and fragmented modes of narration. “If one is a woman,” Woolf notes, “one is often surprised by a splitting of consciousness, say in walking down Whitehall, when from being the natural inheritor of civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical.” In this view, Woolf exposes the literary technique of Mr. A as the result of material and social privileges that have been denied to women.

* A Room of One’s Own * diverges from such technique through the recurrent meanderings, tangents, and circulatory reflections of its narrator as well as through

---

294 Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 95.
295 Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 95.
296 Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own*, 93.
Woolf’s refusal to identify with the “I” of the text (“Mary Beton, Mary Seton, Mary Carmichael…it is of no importance”\textsuperscript{297}). These narrative strategies have given rise to controversies in more recent feminist criticism as scholars disagreed on their innovative potential. In the late 1970s, Elaine Showalter criticized Woolf’s elusive style, noting that her “strenuous charm” could not inspire women to write because it prevented her from unfolding her argument straightforwardly and therefore led her to fail to provide a forceful opposition to patriarchal discourses. Showalter writes: “despite its illusion of spontaneity and intimacy, \textit{A Room of One’s Own} is an extremely impersonal and defensive book.”\textsuperscript{298} In her view, Woolf should thus have expressed her anger directly instead of protecting herself under the disguise of a fictional narrator. Yet, Woolf’s narrative devices provided a far more complex and powerful critique of the unified, integrated self-identity that Mr. A.’s novel represented. What feminists such as Showalter have failed to grasp, as Toril Moi explains, “is that the traditional humanism they represent is in effect part of patriarchal ideology. At its centre is the seamlessly unified self…commonly called ‘Man…’ In this humanist ideology the self is the sole author of history and of the literary text: the humanist creator is potent, phallic and male—God in relation to his world, the author in relation to his text.”\textsuperscript{299} Woolf’s refusal to obey the narrative conventions of linear argumentation thus indicated the need to free the text from such phallic representation of authorship, for the latter obliterated the complex nature of discourse. In her 1995 monograph on \textit{A Room of One’s Own}, Ellen Bayuk Rosenman similarly disagreed with Showalter’s criticism, noting that Woolf’s duplicitous thought

\textsuperscript{297} Woolf, \textit{A Room of One’s Own}, 6.
process demonstrated that language was not a given, but rather the result of material, social, and ideological considerations that inevitably affected women’s processes of creation. As such, she argued that Woolf’s essay “follows a powerful if subtle strategy that reflects her ideas about male and female writing…. Woolf does not wish to make a conventional argument because, first, she wishes to avoid the coercive, definitive voice of patriarchy.” Woolf’s destabilization of authorial conventions thus supported the various modes of communications of the disempowered as it aimed to illuminate the oppressive character of phallic understandings of subjectivity.

Woolf’s essay can make explicit mediums’ paradoxical strategies of communication: just as Showalter criticized Woolf for her refusal of a direct discourse that would erect itself as “straight as a bar,” contemporary readings of séances might view mediums’ discourses as little more than a tragic expression of women’s oppression. Under such interpretation, spiritual discourses may only appear as an unfortunate episode of women’s history, in which women’s psyches became fragmented under the contradictions between their sense of self and the social interpretations of womanhood. Female mediums may here be seen as prisoners of notions of womanhood to the extent of concealing their own authorial voices as the only means to produce highly defensive discourses. Although I partly agree with such view, I believe that it would neglect a more subtle, yet fundamental, aspect of séances: while mediums’ particular form of creativity highlighted the difficulty of speech in restrictive contexts, it also operated a more

profound subversion of Victorian ideologies by veering away from traditional notions of authorship which relied on the fallacy of a unitary, all-masterful “I.”

Certainly, that the fragmentation of their own sense of self became the site for female mediums’ discursive and social empowerment should not, by itself, be celebrated as an advance for feminism. Yet, mediums’ spiritual narratives obliquely participated in a broader transformation of the terms of the relationship between women and creativity that was beneficial to women’s endeavours. The Moodies’ *Spiritualism Album*, for instance, emanated from the collaborations of many mediums and spirits who produced a series of distinguished works. The *Album* reads as a collage of family conversations, whereby Catharine, Dunbar, Susanna, and Agnes, along with their respective groups of communicating spirits, exchanged correspondences on a vast array of mundane and celestial matters. Similarly, *Brighter Spheres* stemmed from a palimpsest of authors and literary personas who gathered to create a communal narrative. Arthur Rogers himself, while claiming to be the sole author of the text, resorted to his *nom de plume*, Spiritus, to disguise his identity. Further, against his claim that he alone composed the text, the transmission of his life-story relied on the collaboration of many individuals: the sitters, who recited the alphabet; the copyist, who took down every desired letter; Craigie, who provided ulterior revisions and an introduction to the text; and the medium, whose hands permitted the spirit to rap out his communications. This intricate machinery of enunciation unsurprisingly led to a certain confusion in the determination of *Brighter Spheres*’ authorship. The Canadian National Catalogue attributes the text to Spiritus, thus leaving unquestioned the authenticity of spiritual communications.\(^\text{301}\) In contradistinction,

\(^{301}\) See: *Amicus: Canadian National Catalogue* where a search for *Brighter Spheres* indicates the catalogue’s attribution of authorship to Spiritus.  [http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/amicus/index-e.html](http://www.collectionscanada.gc.ca/amicus/index-e.html)
in their article “The Canadian Spiritualist Movement and Sources for its Study,” Meyer Zu Erpen and Lowe ascribe its authorship to Ernest John Craigie who, they add, “is almost certainly also the author of this typescript [of *A Murderer’s Fate in the Spirit World*].” Because the spirits spoke something alien, because their discourses were duplicitous and unlocaliseable, séances’ modes of writing thus importantly disrupted the notion of the author as the centre of all meaning.

As I have argued in Chapter 1, theories of the unconscious from Janet to Freud highlighted through their studies of mediumship that subjectivity is more complex than depicted by the traditional humanist notion of the self as unified and mastering intentionality. Freud’s psychic topography indeed posited the fallacy of a transparent, homogeneous self. As such, Lacan could later write, psychoanalysis is “at odds with any philosophy directly stemming from the cogito.” By emphasizing the role of repressed sexual desires in subjectivity, psychoanalysis’ theorization of the unconscious thereby exposed the part of otherness irremediably shaping one’s thoughts and discourses. As

---

(163) Helen Sword retraces the interesting debates that spiritualism has introduced in the cataloguing system in the United States. (“Ghosts in the Library.” *Ghostwriting Modernism*, 24-31.) She notes: “The most practical challenges posed by spirit authorship, in fact, affect the daily work not of lawyers and judges but of librarians and bibliographers, who have often been stymied when asked to catalog novels and other literary works ostensibly written by the dead. The bibliographic information for such books varies considerably from one cataloger or cataloguing system to the next.” (27) Due to the disorganized classification, she adds that the American Library Association elaborated specific instructions for cataloguing “mediumistic writings” in 1941. The instructions suggested that these writings be “entered under the medium rather than the supposed spirit.” (27) These instructions changed many times in the following years, as did interpretations of what constituted an author.

---

302 Meyer Zu Erpen and Lowe, “The Canadian Spiritualist Movement,” 84. Although Craigie registered *Brighter Spheres* with Parliament and wrote its introduction, nothing indicates—and his introduction contradicts—the idea that he would have authored the story. Nothing indicates that he was more than the sitter responsible for editing and publishing the work. (I wish here to express my gratitude to Tania Henley, Manuscript Librarian in the Baldwin Room at the Toronto Reference Library, who confirmed to me that Craigie was not considered to be more involved in the creation of the typescript.) Then again, it would be very difficult, if not impossible, to determine with certainty that the spirit, medium, or any other sitter, was in fact the true and sole author of *Brighter Spheres* and *A Murderer’s Fate*, which is part of the radical contributions of spiritual séances to cultural understandings of authorship.

Juliet Mitchell writes, what we encounter in psychoanalysis “is a doubling self-division in which the person’s empty inside is taken over or occupied.”\textsuperscript{304} Recent authors have further explored how such undermining of the notion of a mastering, homogeneous subjectivity is fundamental for feminism. Toril Moi explains: “As Luce Irigaray and Helene Cixous would argue, this integrated self is in fact a phallic self, constructed on the model of the self-contained, powerful phallus. Gloriously autonomous, it banishes from itself all conflict, contradiction, and ambiguity.”\textsuperscript{305} Therefore, to quote Irigaray: “Freudian theory certainly gives us something that can shake the whole philosophical order of discourse.”\textsuperscript{306} Interpreted through this framework, collaborative, non-linear, and a-centric modes of narrative construction in séance communications—made of multiple personalities, fragmentary viewpoints, incomprehensible chatter, pauses and contradictory claims—similarly appear to disrupt the notion of a self-transparent speaking subject as they reveal the ruses of discourse.

**Conclusion**

Many scholars have explored the problem of women’s creativity in the Victorian era since the publication of Woolf’s essay. Perhaps most famously, Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar have reflected on the effects of the unequivocal association between authorship and masculinity on nineteenth-century women’s literary works. In their pioneering *The Madwoman in the Attic*, they suggested that this association bound women to become objects—and not subjects—of discursive productions. They wrote: “Since both patriarchy

\textsuperscript{305} Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics*, 8.
and its texts subordinate and imprison women, before women can even attempt that pen which is so rigorously kept from them, they must escape just those male texts which, defining them as ‘Cyphers’, deny them the autonomy to formulate alternatives to the authority that has imprisoned them and kept them from attempting the pen.”

Since most Victorian discourses defined creativity as masculine, women writers tended to adopt a variety of textual strategies. Hence, some authors chose to masquerade as men, either through the use of male *noms de plume*, or through the mimicry of male voices. It is in the latter sense that, for Jane Miller, “all women who read and write…have learned to do those things as if they were men.”

For Victorians, the perceived lack of renowned matrilineages supported theories of biological determinism which claimed that women were naturally unfit to become authors of literary discourses. However, spiritual séances offered a strategy to counter-balance this apparent lack of lineages for women authors by both exorcising the phantasms of pure womanhood and placing the discourses of the trance medium in a different tradition through the borrowing of imagined voices. I therefore suggested that séances produced another important narrative strategy for nineteenth-century women to develop creative works, because they not only allowed mediums to adopt different *noms de plume*, but also permitted the momentary conjuration of various figures of true womanhood. In séances, female mediums could orchestrate a dialog with imagined figures that served or impeded their artistic projects. They could appeal to the ghosts of

---


past genealogies who, like Woolf’s Judith Shakespeare, served to inspire and validate their communications. And they were also able to conjure ideas of pure womanhood which, like Woolf’s “Angel of the House,” prevented them from defining themselves as authors. By successfully borrowing masculine voices, female mediums further demonstrated the fallacy of biological determinism and emphasized, instead, the social and political factors behind the production of creative works. As narrators, mediums could therefore form a powerful image of literary expression as they became bearers of a plurality of voices, producing inventive poems and sublime revelations. In doing so, they created a different form of authorship that disrupted the phallic fantasy of mastery in one’s relation to discourse. Through their particular solution to women’s oppression, female mediums could both keep their identifications as “true” women outside séances, yet eliminate the restrictions encumbered by such identifications during their literary endeavours in séances.
CHAPTER 4

Antigone’s Heirs: Public Séances and the Subversion of Femininity

That I, a woman, and moreover ‘a lady by birth’ and English, above all, that I would go out, like ‘strong-minded women,’ and hector the world, on public platforms? Oh, shocking! I vowed rebellion—to give up the spirits, spiritualism, and America; to return to England and live a ‘feminine existence’ once again.

(Emma Hardinge Britten, *Six Lectures*)³⁰⁹

ISMENE: Then don’t, at least, blurt this to anyone. Keep it a secret. I’ll join you in that, I promise.
ANTIGONE: Dear god, shout it from the rooftops. I’ll hate you all the more for silence—tell the world!

(Sophocles, *Antigone*)³¹⁰

Sophocles’ tragic heroine Antigone has fascinated philosophers and literary critics for centuries. Keri Walsh remarks that “Antigone Studies is a field with a distinguished history, and one that is flourishing again thanks to the emergence of a new community of voices.”³¹¹ Philosophers and poets from Hegel to George Eliot and to Matthew Arnold considered *Antigone* amongst the finest of tragedies and offered various interpretations of

the ethical dilemmas presented by its protagonists.\textsuperscript{312} More recently, the play has elicited the interest of literary scholars, psychoanalysts, and feminists, most notably through Jacques Lacan’s \textit{The Ethics of Psychoanalysis},\textsuperscript{313} Luce Irigaray’s “The eternal irony of the community,”\textsuperscript{314} and Judith Butler’s \textit{Antigone’s Claim: Kinship between Life and Death}.\textsuperscript{315} While Freudian psychoanalysis had principally turned its gaze towards the story of Oedipus as a figuration of psychological motifs conditioning the subject’s development, this new scholarship has made Oedipus’s daughter Antigone the new paradigmatic figure, paying particular attention to the heroine’s complex representation of femininity. As a central figure in the discussions between psychoanalysis and feminism, Sophocles’ heroine has sparked important reflections on the meaning of female agency in oppressive states and these reflections may prove valuable for the interpretation of mediumship.

This chapter pursues the discussion of \textit{Antigone} in order to grapple with the problem of gendered subjectivity in Victorian and Edwardian séances. I suggest that Antigone’s particular discourse of sovereignty—motivated by her relationship with her late brother whose agency she carries against the authority of Creon’s state—shares important characteristics with female mediums’ trance speaking in public séances. Ready to sacrifice her life for her brother’s corpse, Antigone indeed exists—like mediums—in the passage between the living and the dead. Towards the end of Sophocles’ tragedy, the


prophet Tiresias reminds Creon: “You have thrust to the world below a child sprung for
the world above, ruthlessly lodged a living soul within the grave—then you’ve robbed the
gods below the earth, keeping a dead body here in the bright air, unburied, unsung,
unhallowed by the rites.”

Alive precisely in the place (and in the name) of corpses, Antigone establishes her discourse through her identification with the dead, an
identification which permits her to voice her opposition to the rules of the state. Like
Antigone, mediums have partaken in political debates using the agency of the dead to
defy what they considered unjust rules and norms in the public sphere. As such,
investigating the cultural interpretations of the heroine across time can shed light on
female mediums’ participation in politics, a participation which relied on a similar
rhetorical claim of legitimation.

This chapter begins with an exploration of the transformations the figure of
Antigone underwent in scholarship from the Victorian era to the present. This genealogy
is complicated by the fact that the heroine ambivalently served to represent both
conservative models of femininity and the condition of possibility to challenge such
models. Among most Victorian commentators, she represented a figure of true
womanhood, a model of submissive femininity whose participation in the political life
was conditional upon her commitment to family duties. Many contemporary authors,
however, have noted that her political resistance should not be so easily dismissed, for
her defiance of Creon’s law demonstrates the “possibility for social transformation” by
those figures who blur the boundaries of normative identities. By exploring the critical
interpretations of Sophocles’ tragedy from the nineteenth century to the present, I am not

---

316 Sophocles, Antigone, 115.
317 Butler, Antigone’s Claim, 24.
seeking a final meaning of the play. Rather, I believe that the very heterogeneity of these interpretations enlightens the ambivalent, even contradictory, potential of Antigone’s discursive strategies of resistance. Antigone’s endurance over the centuries testifies to the complexity of her representation of female agency.

In dialogue with *Antigone*, I here introduce the Canadian séances of Emma Hardinge Britten (1823-1899) and Flora MacDonald Denison (1867–1921), two mediums who delivered assertive discourses on the public stage. While their political views varied, both mediums carried spiritual agencies to engage in social debates. Like Antigone, they found strength and encouragement to voice positions on current issues through their devotion to the spirit world. By locating their discursive position—the “I”—in the realm of the dead, they created a different register of discourses through which they could more easily confront the socio-political oppression of women. I suggest that the spiritual communications of Flora MacDonald Denison and Emma Hardinge Britten—allowing them to adopt different voices in the séance room—opened a possibility of disrupting cultural understandings of sexual norms. Like Antigone, female mediums offered an important, yet paradoxical, potential for feminist politics through their reliance on a different realm of action and ethics, which could counter the prevalent discourses within their social contexts. Instigating a dialogue between the practice of spiritual mediumship and the feminist and psychoanalytic interpretations of *Antigone*, I demonstrate that mediums oscillated between the performance of conservative models of femininity and the adoption of discursive positions destabilizing prevalent understandings of sexual identity of their time.
Antigones, now and then

Sophocles’ tragedy takes place after a civil war has killed the two sons of Oedipus, Polyneices and Eteocles, and after Creon—new King of Thebes—has forbidden the burial of Polyneices, whom he regards as a traitor. In the introductory lines of the play, Antigone decides to defy her uncle’s authority by following her commitment to the divine laws obliging kin to bury their relatives after death.\textsuperscript{318} Despite her sister Ismene’s supplication not to defy the laws erected by men, Antigone maintains her resolve, even inviting Ismene to shout her action “from the rooftops” and adding: “I’ll hate you all the more for silence—tell the world!” Antigone then twice visits her brother’s corpse to perform proper funeral rites and, the second time, Creon’s guards witness and denounce her action. When Creon learns of Antigone’s treason, he performs his sovereign power by entombing her alive despite the plea of his own son Haemon, to whom Antigone had been promised.

In the interpretative tradition of the play, the moral opposition between Antigone’s allegiance to traditional household duties and Creon’s sovereign establishment of the law has become the marker of a historical transition in Western civilization. Commentators have variously read the tragedy as a representation of the passage from unwritten laws to governments, or to an ethical order based on principles of universality. As Robert J. Littman and Ruth Fainlight write, the study of the tragedy’s historical context reveals that: “At the end of the sixth century and during the fifth

\textsuperscript{318} See: Robert J. Littman and Ruth Fainlight, “Introduction.” \textit{The Theban Plays: Oedipus the King Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone} (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 2009) 1. The authors write: “In the Greek religion the female spiritually guarded blood ties. It was the Furies, the spirits of vengeance, chthonic female goddesses, who pursued those who had spilled kindred blood. Antigone acts as a reminder of those Furies.”

\textsuperscript{319} Sophocles, \textit{Antigone}, 64.
century BC, Athens was moving from being a tribal collection of kinship groups, to being a city governed by the rule of law.”320 Such interpretations have further implied a gendering of social and ethical positions, as they defined the feminine character of Antigone through her commitment to the private realm of the family. It is as such that Hegel could read Antigone, according to Stefani Engelstein, “into an ethical narrative that is bound up with the political, but…in such a way as to exclude her as a woman and to exclude women as such from the public sphere envisioned as universal.”321 In this critical tradition, Antigone conditions the possibility of civil politics, but remains confined to the domestic realm.

In the field of psychoanalysis, Jacques Lacan also read Sophocles’ tragedy as delineating the passage between two registers of ethics. He told his students: “You will see in retrospect that even if you are not aware of it, the latent, fundamental image of Antigone forms part of your morality, whether you like it or not. That’s why it is important to analyze its meaning.”322 Lacan, however, reframed his interpretation of the tragedy through the division between his notions of the imaginary and the symbolic. As earlier discussed, the imaginary realm accounts for the mental processes that stem from the child’s encounter with the images of its reflection as a foundational moment in the configuration of the sense of self, while the symbolic realm holds the language and rules of society in which the subject must position itself. For Lacan, the story of Antigone marked the rupture announcing the subject’s entry into language or the symbolic, an entry which also corresponds to a submission to paternal law, or to what Lisa Walsh calls “a

---

320 Littman and Fainlight, “Introduction.” I.
shift from a maternal to a paternal frame of reference.”

For Lacan, this shift indeed comes following the realization that the symbiotic relation with the mother is prevented by higher obligations. The child understands that the mother must leave to fulfill other duties, which the father symbolizes. The father comes to represent social institutions, laws, and obligations to which both the mother and the child must ultimately submit. Lacan therefore isolated, like Hegel, “two distinct laws, or ‘dimensions’ at play in the battle between Creon and Antigone for moral justification: the laws of the earth and the commandments of the gods.”

As such, Lacan also continued to interpret the tragedy through the separation between two realms of action symbolized as masculine (symbolic) and feminine (imaginary). To put it in the words of Françoise Meltzer: “After arguing that Antigone blurs registers, because she blurs the distinction between life and death, he then tells us that she is in the Imaginary register…. Sophocles’ Antigone is not, for Lacan, a limit concept at all finally.”

**Feminist Antigone**

Contemporary feminist readings of Antigone have mainly instituted themselves as responses to such canons of philosophical and psychoanalytic writings as they have interpreted Sophocles’ heroine as a representation, not of kinship and archaic laws, but of the politics of female agency. Responding to Lacan’s analysis, for instance, Luce Irigaray has re-interpreted the tragedy through an analysis of the othering of woman as the driving force necessary for the functioning of the community. Her reading revises Freud’s

---

323 Lisa Walsh, “Her Mother Her Self: The Ethics of the Antigone Family Romance.” *Hypatia* 14, no. 3 (Summer, 1999): 100.
324 Walsh, “Her Mother Her Self,” 103.
325 Françoise Meltzer, “Theories of Desire,” 182.
narrative in *Totem and Taboo* according to which all society is established on a primary patricide.\(^\text{326}\) For Irigaray, the myth of Antigone—and its illustration of the passage from the imaginary to the symbolic—reveals, on the contrary, the establishment of society on the erasure of women as subjects. The passage to the symbolic marks the abandonment of the realm of the mother in order to transit to the more universal laws and institutions created by and for men. The entombment of Antigone, which had become the marker of the transition from traditional household laws to sovereign power, here illustrates how the negation of female desire is necessary for the establishment of patriarchy as the mode of functioning of the social (or symbolic) order. Irigaray demonstrates how, through the interpretations of both Hegel and Lacan, women are confined to a state of “quasi-subjectivity…that cannot be possessed as consciousness of the self” through their positioning in the symbolic. As such, she writes:

…woman does not take an active part in the development of history because she is never anything but the still undifferentiated opaqueness of sensible matter…. In her case “I” never equals “I,” and she is only that individual will that the master takes possession of…. Being as she is, she does not achieve the enunciatory process of the discourse of History, but remains its servant, deprived of self (as same), alienated in this system of discourse, as in her master, and finding some hint of her own self, her own ego, only in another, a You—or a He—who speaks.\(^\text{327}\)

This analysis may first seem counter-intuitive given that Antigone acquires a quite pronounced speaking role in Sophocles’ tragedy. Yet, for Irigaray, Antigone only talks


\(^{327}\) Irigaray, “The Eternal Irony,” 225.
through and for her brother, imprisoned as she is in a society that only values masculine discourses. Antigone certainly speaks, but she does so for another—the “He” who speaks through her and to whom she has sacrificed her own life. Further, for Irigaray, the critical tradition of analysis of Antigone from Lacan to Hegel has pushed Antigone outside the realm of history, as this tradition has confined her to an opposition to the state from which she appears only as an outsider. The tradition of criticism on Antigone has thus participated in the elimination of women from the realm of subjectivity. Women are here “quasi-subjects” excluded from the public sphere as the locus of universal history. It is this alienation that structures the difficulty for women to assume the subject position in their enunciation, thereby leaving to a “you” or a “he” the responsibility of their utterance.

While most readings (Irigaray’s included) have focused on Antigone’s exclusion from the political sphere, Judith Butler’s *Antigone’s Claim: Kinship between Life and Death* highlights, for its part, the political potential already present in Antigone’s liminal positioning. In contradistinction with the critical tradition opposing kinship and the state through the figures of Antigone and Creon, Butler demonstrates that these figures cannot be so safely defined as representations of separate and opposed realms of laws. On the one hand, Creon blurs this separation as he is related to Polyneices and Antigone. As Antigone’s uncle and father-in-law, his decisions can therefore not be interpreted as purely outside the realm of the family which he is said to transcend. On the other hand, Antigone herself blurs the limits between state and family. The heroine not only participates in the transformations of the state through her opposition to Creon, but she also puts into question the notion of kinship established on heterosexual desire and the
incest taboo. Antigone disturbs traditional representations of the family through her incestuous dynasty and through her decision to die for her brother rather than to assume wifehood and maternity.

For Butler, Antigone consequently represents an impure figure whose liminal positioning becomes dangerous for the rule of the state—itself established precariously. Reinterpreting the critical tradition, Butler argues that Antigone’s defiance of Creon’s law does not stem from a realm purely outside the social sphere. Rather, her political resistance defies such delineations as private/public. Butler writes: “Antigone acts, but what is her act? She buries her brother, indeed, she buries him twice, and the second time the guards report that they have seen her. When she appears before Creon, she acts again, this time verbally, refusing to deny that it was she who did the deed. In effect, what she refuses is the linguistic possibility of severing herself from the deed, but she does not assert it in any unambiguously unassertive way: she does simply say, ‘I did the deed.’”

By verbally reclaiming her act and defending its rightness in the public sphere, Antigone, for Butler, does more than obey family duties: she threatens Creon within his sphere of endeavour, declaring: “I did it. I don’t deny a thing.” Thus, Antigone “attempts to speak in the political sphere in the language of sovereignty that is the instrument of political power.” Like Creon, who “makes his proclamation and makes sure that everyone knows his words,” Antigone makes her act public as she repeatedly emphasizes her wish for her rebellion to be acknowledged by others: Antigone “wants

---

328 Butler, Antigone’s Claim, 7. Proper funeral rites would appear to have been completed after Antigone’s first visit to her brother’s corpse. The second burial thus appears superfluous and has as such puzzled many commentators of the play. For Butler, Antigone’s second visit to her brother’s corpse expresses her desire to make her action known by the community.
329 Sophocles, Antigone, 81.
330 Butler, Antigone’s Claim, 27.
331 Butler, Antigone’s Claim, 27.
her speech act to be radically and comprehensively public, as public as the edict itself.”332 Her act is therefore not outside of the state, but employs a discursive register of sovereignty that threatens its very establishment.

For Butler, Antigone’s discursive agency, or her reliance on this language of sovereignty, threatens the social order because it blurs not only the boundaries between private and public life, but also the definition of fixed masculine and feminine identity on which such boundaries are established. The heroine’s defiance of norms of femininity appears perhaps most notably in her response to the warning of her sister Ismene at the beginning of the tragedy: “Remember we are women,” Ismene pleads, “we’re not born to contend with men…we’re underlings, ruled by much stronger hands, so we must submit in this, and things still worse.”333 In her refusal to submit to her uncle’s rule, Antigone thus disrupts fixed gendered identities and becomes the bearer of a dangerous masculinity. Creon is indeed afraid of being emasculated by Antigone if he accepts her act of treason. He exclaims: “I am not the man, not now. She is the man.”334 In fact, in the historical context of the play, Antigone’s action to bury her brother could itself be considered manly as “in Athenian law it would be highly unusual for the obligation of burial to fall to a female. Athens from the sixth century aimed increasingly to control women’s participation in death rituals and in public display of emotion. To the Athenian audience, it would have been almost unthinkable for a woman to step forward to perform a burial.”335 Through her opposition to the political decree of her uncle, Antigone thereby

appears, for Butler, “to assume the form of a certain masculine sovereignty, a manhood that cannot be shared.”

After Butler, several authors have continued to explore the relevance of the tragic figure to formulate feminist politics that challenge traditional gender and sexual norms. For instance, Cecilia Sjöholm’s *The Antigone Complex: Ethics and the Invention of Feminine Desire* proposes that the notion of an “Antigone complex” confronts the complexity of female desire, which is always tied to “ethics, politics, and the law, to the social sphere, the family sphere, and the public sphere.” In *Feminist Readings of Antigone*, Fanny Söderbäck argues for her part that revisiting Antigone’s story permits us to better understand “the struggles and crises of our own time,” and therefore plays an important role “in contemporary political debates (and more specifically feminist debates).” Through such works, the heroine is resurrected, after Butler, as a model of resistance to unjust laws and her discourse against the state has revealed both the risk and urgency of women’s participation in politics.

Can Antigone’s act of resistance against Creon’s sovereignty truly form an inspiring model for today’s feminist theory? Or does her act, rather, manifest a compulsion to blindly sacrifice herself to the benefit of her filiation? As I demonstrate in the next section, the comparison between Victorian and contemporary interpretations of Antigone leads to question this “I” that admits to have done the deed, but that seems already determined by a variety of attachments haunting its enunciation of agency. Indeed, who this “I” that “did it” and “[doesn’t] deny a thing”? 

Victorian Antigone

The importance of *Antigone* in contemporary feminist scholarship culminates from a long-standing fascination with the heroine that may be traced back to the nineteenth century. In her article “Victorian Antigone: Classicism and Women’s education in America, 1840-1900,” Caroline Winterer demonstrates that the tragedy was highly regarded among Victorians, appearing in “scholarship and college courses, general interest and women’s periodicals, novels, short stories, and poetry,” even becoming the most frequently performed classical play in American campuses as it reached a height of 33 per cent of all college performances between 1893 and 1903. Articles in the Canadian press appear to confirm Winterer’s assessment of the popularity of the tragedy through their own references to *Antigone*. An 1896 article from *The University of Toronto Quarterly*, for instance, concluded through the comparison between Antigone and Electra that “Antigone…has always been a favourite of modern thought. While the drama of Antigone has been presented many times within the last hundred years, that of Electra has been but rarely before the public.”

Like contemporary feminist authors, Victorian commentators used the tragedy to explore the relation between women and politics. However, their Antigone reflected a very distinct model of femininity. Certainly, Victorians could not avoid noticing that Antigone *did* act in the public sphere and that the strength and decisiveness of her action would not exactly conform to prevalent understandings of domestic, modest, submissive

---

femininity. As such, reviewers of the play occasionally expressed their uneasiness towards a certain masculinity displayed by the heroine. A commentator noted in the Toronto *Trinity University Review*, for instance, that “a modern dramatist would assuredly not have handled this subject in the way in which Sophocles has done. Had Shakespeare been writing on this subject he would have made Antigone far more tender and woman-like than the Greek tragedian has represented her to be.”\(^{342}\) Another author from *The Canada Educational Monthly and School Chronicle* regretted the fact that the heroine was played by a man on the university stage, a performance which further removed her from the “young lady” she ought to be: “Not that Antigone did not declaim her speeches with perfectly clear articulation, but it is not derogatory to Professor Hutton to say that he did not look quite the type of young lady who should embody the ideal of a stately Greek princess, ‘a daughter of the gods, divinely tall, and divinely fair…”\(^{343}\) For such authors, the heroic character of Antigone was shadowed by her embodiment of a certain masculinity that they would have preferred to suppress.

Commentators nevertheless dismissed the “masculine” character of Antigone by reinterpreting her sustained revolt against her uncle’s edict as motivated solely by her “womanly” devotion to the family. Through her sacrificial love for her brother, she became one of the “ideal women of antiquity, differing in many respects from the ideals of modern literature, but differing, for the most part, in those characteristic which are incidental and native to the Greek character as a whole.”\(^{344}\) Reviewers of the play conceived Antigone’s public defiance of the law as the result of an intolerable sacrifice.

\(^{342}\) Rev. Professor Lloyd. “Convocation and the Undergraduates in Arts and Medicine of Trinity University.” *Trinity University Review* 4, nos. 8, 9, 10 (1891): 130-131.


\(^{344}\) Robinson, “Antigone and Electra,” 257.
undertaken only for the sake of her brother. Her political resistance was thus redeemed for her motivations were considered entirely domestic and submissive. As an 1894 article in the *Queens’ University Journal* put it: “The men of Toronto and the men of Athens are of one kindred, and…many an Antigone and many an Ismene moves in the everyday world around us.”\(^{345}\) For the *Rose-Belford’s Canadian Monthly and National Review*, Antigone could even become an inspiring model for Victorian women as she offered an example of “unwavering constancy in obeying the dictates of religion and in acknowledging the superior obligation of the laws of a Higher Power in matters pertaining to conscience…. At a time when but little honour was accorded to women…Sophocles exhibited the female character in its most glorious perfection.”\(^{346}\) The majority of commentators of the second half of the nineteenth century thus portrayed Antigone as a modest figure of true womanhood through her sacrificial devotion towards her brother.

Such interpretation of the tragedy made Antigone confirm the prevalent ideology of the separate spheres. This ideology, as I noted in Chapter 3, relied on notions of biologically rooted sex differences to exclude women from the realms of public discourse and political action. According to this set of beliefs, as Gail Cuthbert Brandt explains: “men naturally possessed traits—such as strength, competitiveness, and rationality—needed to succeed in the public sphere of economics and politics, while women—represented as delicate, virtuous, and nurturing—should restrict their energies to the domestic realm of the home and family.”\(^{347}\) Women who deviated from their maternal

\(^{345}\) “Alma Mater Society of Queen’s University.” *Queen’s University Journal* 21, no. 9 (March 1894): 130.


role in attempting to participate in public debates were often ridiculed for their allegedly unfeminine characteristics. A blatant example of such perspective, The Christian Guardian observed in 1872, that “very intellectual women are seldom beautiful, their features, and particularly their foreheads, are more or less masculine.”

In this context, Antigone’s opposition to Creon offered Victorian commentators a platform to express their understanding of female codes of conduct. As Winterer writes, “When asked to make a choice about state and family, Antigone put religion and family first. According to many nineteenth-century writers, she had no choice: she literally could not—by instinct, by nature—act in any other way.” Far from Butler’s interpretation, Victorian commentators thus saw Antigone as an indication that “women were fundamentally different from men” and were bound by nature to family obligations. In such interpretations, exhibiting “the female character in its most glorious perfection,” Antigone was thus chained to familial duty by her female nature. Despite her forceful opposition to her uncle’s laws, she appeared to exist only to support the desires of her male relatives. The heroine here continued to serve the exclusion of women from the political life by naturalizing their confinement to the domestic realm—even when they stepped outside of it.

**Antigone and the subversion of femininity**

In the hands of Victorian commentators, Antigone was accorded the special privilege of partaking in politics without “unsexing” herself as long as she did so in the

---

348 Quoted in Ramsey Cook and Wendy Mitchinson, The Proper Sphere: Woman’s Place in Canadian Society (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1976) 5.
name of familial duties. Through her allegiance to her deceased brother, she became a model of femininity, conforming to the ideology of the separate spheres, while adopting a vocabulary of entitlement otherwise forbidden to members of her sex. In the Victorian context, Antigone’s relationship with the dead thus carried the potential to subtly overturn ideals of true womanhood, while escaping some of the fierce criticism reserved to women who engaged in public debates under their own names.

In the context of the play’s significant popularity, mediums have, like Antigone, gained access to assertive discourses through their devotion to loved ones from the spirit world. Spiritual séances created a privileged space in which they could voice political ideas while apparently complying with Victorian models of feminine modesty and submissiveness. Due to the widespread interest for the spiritualist movement, these ideas could further reach hundreds of listeners during public séances. As contemporary feminists have been able to draw on Antigone to reflect on feminist politics, the practice of mediumship may thus similarly permit us to reevaluate women’s complex position in discourse and their oblique modalities of resistance.

As I now demonstrate through the presentation of the séances of Emma Hardinge Britten and Flora MacDonald Denison, the story of Antigone reveals how mediums could subvert notions of gendered identity while apparently complying with the ideology of the separate spheres. By contrasting the radical positions of Flora MacDonald Denison to the more conservative discourses of Emma Harding Britten on the status of women, I explore some of the ways in which the structure of spirit channeling responded to women’s oppression in the Victorian and Edwardian eras. I suggest that although the two mediums embraced very different positions regarding the advancement of women’s rights, they
both shared a liminal positioning in discourse through the borrowing of spiritual agency that permitted them to legitimize their ideas. Like Antigone’s actions and discourses for her lost brother, mediums’ trance speaking could therefore both confirm conservative models of femininity and provide a means to challenge the foundations of gendered categories.

Public séances and feminism: the mediumship of Emma Hardinge Britten and Flora MacDonald Denison

Emma Hardinge Britten

A historian of spiritualism and editor of the *Spiritual Telegraph*, British medium Emma Hardinge Britten began touring the globe in 1856 to promote the teachings of spiritualism and rapidly became one of the most famous trance speakers of the movement (see figure 14). Born in 1823 in London, she first appeared on the stage as an actress before beginning to channel spirits’ discourses in her public séances. Like many other spiritualists of the nineteenth century, her mediumship embraced feminine codes of conducts prevalent under the ideology of the separate spheres. Outside trance, she repeatedly defined herself through conventional representations of womanhood. Even in séances, her spirit discourses often complied with views naturalizing women’s domestic role. Although she held many séances on topics addressing social and political concerns of her time, her discourses were sometimes acquiescent with traditional restrictions upon women. Yet, Britten also embodied a particular form of femininity with agency through

---

her spirit personalities that disrupted traditional conventions of gendered identities and thereby carried a certain threat to social institutions supporting women’s oppression.

![Figure 14. Portrait of Emma Hardinge Britten, c. 1860s.](image)

Through her travels, Britten wrote many works, which included presentations of Spiritualism in Russia, Germany, France, and Australia. Her book *Modern American Spiritualism*, published in 1870, remains one of the most important historical accounts of the unfolding of the movement in the United States and Canada. Describing a visit she made to the cities of Toronto, London, Ottawa, St. Catharines, Montreal, and La Prairie to broadcast spiritual wisdom in 1858, the book further depicts the reception of her trance lectures in the country. Describing her lecture in Montreal, she reported:

> The audience on the first occasion was not large…. The questions, at least some of them…were put with the obvious purpose of confounding the speaker; but…each successive attempt was promptly frustrated…. At the close of the session, the

---

victory remained triumphantly with the speaker…. On the second evening, the hall was crowded…. No one, according to the journals referred to, seemed willing to enter the list and oppose himself to the ready wit and knowledge of the speaker.

Two more evenings of crowded audiences, at an admission fee of twenty-five cents, succeeded with like results.354

Britten further offered a more detailed account of her 1858 visit to Canada in her autobiography. Here, she stated that she hesitated accepting her invitation to speak in Montreal, for, “as I knew nothing whatever of Canada…I submitted this offer to several friends, all of whom pleaded with me not to accept it. The Canadian winter, they urged, would be unendurable; the conditions implied danger.” However, her spiritual beliefs encouraged her to pursue her work: “These and many other objections were so forcibly urged, that I was on the point of declining the offer in question, when the Spirit voices pleaded with me sternly to do my duty, and go, whatever might be the result.”355 Of her first address in the city, she recalled:

It was on Tuesday, November 16th, 1858, that I appeared for the first time at ‘Buona Venture Hall,’ Montreal. The place was full, and, to do them justice, the people listened to the lecture quietly. But when, according to my usual custom, I invited questions, the long pent-up feeling of hostility had full sway. At least a dozen impatient and unmistakably determined opponents shouted out questions and remarks all at once. One person demanded, fiercely, to know if his

354 Emma Hardinge Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism* (Whitefish: Kessinger Publishing, 1870) 461-462. *The True Witness and Catholic Chronicle* admitted that “Miss Hardinge showed…considerable tact in avoiding, or rather giving evasive replies to, any questions which her audiences, according to her invitation, proposed to her.” But the author would not go so far as to proclaim “the victory” of the speaker. Rather, the article concluded that interest in spiritual manifestations was “unworthy of the countenance of the Catholic.” (“Spiritualism.” *The True Witness and Catholic Chronicle*, February 19, 1858, 4.)
grandmother’s spirit was there; whilst another screamed ‘Tell me my mother’s middle name, or I won’t believe’…I can well recall the words I—or some blessed power through me—uttered. They were—and that amid profound silence—‘God forgive them, they know not what they do.’ I then quietly and calmly, to my own subsequent astonishment, said I should lecture in that place again the next night. On that occasion the audience were to select a committee of five gentlemen from amongst themselves to choose the subject of the lecture, after which I would answer such questions as belonged to that subject, and none others, and the very moment two voices spoke at once, or raised any unseemly clamour, I should quit the platform. At this point I left amidst vociferous cheers and equally vociferous hisses and cries of ‘Down with the witch!’

Britten came back to the country to give public lectures on several occasions. Her autobiographical account adds, for instance, that since her lecture in Montreal, she “visited London and Toronto, Canada, but, on both these occasions I found that Spiritualism was no longer either a strange or tabooed subject. I was as well received in both places as I should have been in any American city where my belief was well established.” She also later gave a month’s course of Sunday lectures in Oswego, “a beautiful town on the borders of Lake Ontario,” and visited Prince Edward’s Island where, following her address, a crowded audience “began to pass out quietly, only pausing to glance kindly at me, some murmuring ‘God bless you,’ some holding up a child for me to kiss, and not a few stretching out hands to grasp mine.”

---

After Britten’s visits to the country, the press would often confirm that her public séances, although opposed by many, found large and enthusiastic audiences. An 1858 article in The True Witness and Catholic Chronicle, published after her Montreal address, regretted that “the interest which her lectures on modern ‘Spiritualism,’ delivered by the lady whilst ‘in trance’—and not as the profane insinuate ‘in a state of beer’—have excited, is a melancholy proof of the readiness of a large portion of our fellow-creatures to believe anything and everything, except the truth of the Christian religion as revealed through the catholic church.”  

The Canadian Craftsman and Masonic Record similarly lamented, almost forty years later, that “the Spiritualists have faith in the utterances of such of their enthusiasts as this Mrs. Britten, and are foolish enough to believe that the messages are inspired in the manner claimed.” Her multiple appearances in the country and her work for the growth of the spiritualist movement are still celebrated today by members of the Britten Memorial Church of Canada, who “honour [its] founder, Emma Hardinge Britten, by continuing to offer spiritual guidance, inspiration, support, and friendship to individuals of all faiths.”

Through her lectures in Canada and abroad, Britten did not only address the teachings of spiritualism; she also touched on political and social issues on which few other women could have enjoyed the ability to publicly express themselves. During a tour in the United States in 1864, for instance, she became involved in the political campaign for Abraham Lincoln’s re-election and travelled through various states to give, according to her testimony, “thirty-two Lectures; each Address usually occupying two hours and a

360 “The Britten Memorial Church of Canada.” http://www.brittenmemorialchurch.ca/ (accessed June 1, 2013)
half in its delivery.” An observer of one such lectures held in San Francisco, noted that: “nearly an hour before the appointed time of commencement...two thousand persons were seated, and...nearly as many more were standing within and without the Hall, and were anxiously awaiting her appearance.” That few women could have spoken on such political topics to crowded audiences was not lost on Britten who noted that, after her orations, she was approached “many and many a time” by women who “loved ‘Father Abraham’ and thanked God that one of their own sex, at last, could echo the fervent prayers and blessings, they had silently put up for him to Heaven.”

On April 1865, thirty-six hours following the president’s assassination, she delivered another speech, *The Great Funeral Oration on Abraham Lincoln*, in New York City, which she claimed also gathered “an assembly of upward of three thousand persons.” Her many speeches on political and social issues also included: “The Place and Mission of Woman,” delivered in Boston in 1859; “America and her Destiny,” delivered in New York in 1861; and “The Chinese Labor Question: Or the Problems of Capital Versus Labor,” delivered in Sydney in 1878.

Yet, Britten’s participation in political discussions across the world did not lead her to oppose herself explicitly to the cult of pure womanhood, and she considered her own defiance of gendered norms as conditional only to her devotion to the spirit world.

---

361 Emma Hardinge, *Miss Emma Hardinge’s Political Campaign, in Favour of the Union Party of America, on the Occasion of the Last Presidential Election of 1864* (London: Thomas Scott, 1865) 9. It is worth noting here that Abraham Lincoln’s wife, Mary Todd Lincoln, believed in spiritual communications and attended séances at the White House as well as in the homes of prominent Washingtonians. She attempted to contact her husband after his death and the later appeared by her side in a photograph by William M. Mumler, a celebrated spirit photographer, in 1872. Mumler also photographed Emma Hardinge Britten in 1871 with the spirit of Beethoven. For more information on Mary Lincoln’s spiritualism, see: Louis Kaplan, *The Strange Case of William Mumler, Spirit Photographer* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008).
As Miriam Wallraven notes, “Britten repeatedly stresses that she is being guided, even forced, to work as a medium and a public speaker for the cause of spiritualism.” Like Antigone, Britten’s discourses were motivated by her allegiance to the dead. It was only by speaking for the beloved “Father Abraham,” for instance, that she could, as a woman, dare to climb the public stage and take part in social and political discussions. Refusing to embrace the authorship of her trance discourses, the medium explained that she felt on stage to be two individuals, one who uttered “a succession of sentences, sometimes familiar to me, oftener new and strange” and the other being “an onlooker and occasional listener.” Detached from her utterance, she could thus adhere to conventions of the separate spheres and present herself as a model of true womanhood while developing a career in public speaking.

Britten’s writings therefore frequently relied on a rhetoric of modesty that reinscribed her assertive participation in the public sphere within the registers of the Victorian ideology of true womanhood. Describing her participation in Lincoln’s re-election campaign, she exclaimed, for instance, that it was only on insistence of the spirit world that she could become his “Female Campaign Orator,” for “to invade the sphere of politics, was a step too daring to contemplate under any authority, but that of my daring self.” In *Six Lectures on Theology and Nature*, she further displayed her womanly disdain for public speaking and remarked that it was only her devotion towards the spirit world that led her to access the stage. She wrote: “That I, a woman, and moreover ‘a lady

---

365 Miriam Wallraven, “‘A Mere Instrument’ or ‘Proud As Lucifer’? Selfpresentations in the Occult Autobiographies by Emma Hardinge Britten (1900) and Annie Besant (1893).” *Women’s Writing* 15, no. 3 (December 2008): 395.
by birth’ and English, above all, that I would go out, like ‘strong-minded women,’ and hector the world, on public platforms? Oh, shocking! I vowed rebellion—to give up the spirits, spiritualism, and America; to return to England and live a ‘feminine existence’ once again.”

Like Victorian Antigone, Britten’s violation of gendered roles, or her escape from “a feminine existence,” was thus permitted by her devotion to other agencies. She noted that, ultimately: “I should have felt that I was guilty of disobedience to my Heavenly Father’s will had I resisted the wonderful power that had been poured out upon me, and failed to become an instrument for the blessed Spirits in teaching and providing the conditions of life hereafter.” The similarities between Victorian interpretations of Antigone and Britten’s autobiographical description of her public role are remarkable. Having to choose between traditional womanhood and her duty towards greater powers, Britten elected “the higher of the two” and became—through great sacrifice and resistance—an ardent speaker on the public stage. Just as Britten, Victorian Antigone’s opposition to Creon had been considered the result of a great sacrifice, which she undertook only because her womanly nature dictated that she devote herself first to her familial and religious duties when she was “asked to make a choice about state and family.”

Although Britten’s strategy of legitimation allowed her to speak in the sphere of politics, such participation was therefore, like Antigone’s feminist politics, highly ambivalent. In fact, not only did Britten herself attempt to conform to Victorian notions

of domestic femininity, she also exhorted other women to do as such. In *The Place and Mission of Woman*, for instance, she defended Victorian stereotypes of femininity in response to a woman’s demand “to be permitted to raise her voice in the Legislature.”

She here suggested that women should follow the talents that “Nature” had intended for them, for only when “Nature robs your cheek of its bloom. And your hair of its soft, silky wave; when she makes you coarse and strong, when she takes from your possession the poetry of life, when she converts your moon-like love and your star-like beauty into the strong, coarse, garish light of day, then shall you weigh, and measure, and perform feats of physical force and strength, and then maybe you be fitted to have a voice in Legislatures, as they at present exist.”

Britten therefore encouraged the female members of her audience, rather, to restrict their efforts to the improvement of the family:

“O woman! We call upon thee to help thyself. Thou canst not obtain what thou wouldst have from legislation...you must obtain it by the assertion of that soul within, of that spirit within, which will make itself felt, which will make its mark upon the world in such beautiful and gentle characters that man shall be proud, and not unwilling, to recognize thy rights.”

Such addresses thus appear to embrace the ideology of the separate spheres by confining woman to “the true interests of the soul, of little children, of wives, mothers, and friends.”

However, Britten’s public séances demonstrated a possible state of exception, in which a woman could gain access to a different position within discourse. Through her public invocation of the spirits, Britten revealed—despite the very discourses she

---

carried—the possibility for a woman to discuss politics and legislation without converting her “moon-like love and [her] star-like beauty into the strong, coarse, garish light of day.” Like Victorian Antigone, she could retain her identification with the characteristics of womanhood while adopting assertive discourses. As such, the heterogeneity of the views expressed during séances should not obscure the fact that the practice of mediumship provided itself a structure of speech in which women could become bearers of a discourse of sovereignty. Among the registers of meaning of spiritualism, mediums could participate in political debates for their utterance of subjectivity on stage was detached—quite literally—from the prison of Victorian notions of the female body.

**Flora MacDonald Denison**

Flora MacDonald Denison (see figure 15) was involved in the reformation of women’s rights during the beginning of the twentieth century as a Secretary for the Dominion Women’s Enfranchisement Association, as a Canadian delegate for the International Suffrage Alliance (for which she spoke at conferences in Budapest in 1903 and Copenhagen in 1906), and as a speaker for the Canadian Labour Party. She further propagated her feminist views in written works, which included a spiritual biography based on the life of her elder sister, Mary Merrill, entitled *Mary Melville: The Psychic* (1900); a column in *Saturday Night* magazine; and publications in the *Toronto Sunday World* for which she worked as an editor.375 Her participation in the women’s movement was, however, complicated by her positions, often more radical than those of her—even

feminist—contemporaries. For instance, she rejected the Catholic Church and its doctrine of depravity, a rejection which created tensions with many of her more orthodox feminist colleagues who did not wish to abandon such religious teachings. Further, in 1914, her support of the English militant suffragettes led to her forced resignation as president of the Canadian Suffrage Association, whose members generally disapproved of the assertive methods employed by their English sisters. For historian Deborah Gorham:

“Her views on religion, marriage, temperance, birth control, and social class, expressed through her column in the *Toronto Sunday World*, were more radical than those of most Canadian suffragists.”

Her public career and personal history thus “demonstrate that there was a more radical side to women’s activism in Canada.”

Linda Kealey confirms that “Denison’s contempt for temperance and organized religion, her social background, her spiritualism and interest in socialism distinguishes her from her contemporaries.”

Unlike Emma Hardinge Britten, Denison thus approached trance speaking to voice explicitly her opposition to the Victorian ideology of the separate spheres.

---


377 Gorham, “Denison, Flora MacDonald.”

378 Linda Kealey, “Introduction.” *A not Unreasonable Claim: Women and Reform in Canada, 1880s-1920s* (Toronto: Women’s Press, 1979) 11. Historians have distinguished between two ideological currents of feminism in the United States and Canada during the Victorian and Edwardian eras. On the one hand, social or maternal feminism defended the participation of women in the public sphere through the latter’s biological characteristics associated with motherhood. According to such view, women’s special role as mothers provided an argument to gain rights. As such, many women “in the women’s movement proclaimed that a perfect womanhood would participate in the public sphere of politics and employment as well as in the private sphere of the home and family.” (Veronica Strong-Boag, “Introduction.” *Elizabeth Smith. A Woman with a Purpose: The Diaries of Elizabeth Smith 1872-1884* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1980) vii-ix). On the other hand, another current of feminism—much less prevalent in Canada—established itself on arguments of equal rights which directly confronted the ideology of the separate spheres. “This viewpoint…stressed how much women resembled men, and how unjust it was that they should have fewer rights.” (Gail Cuthbert Brandt et al., *Canadian Women: A History* (Toronto: Nelson Education, 2011) 217). For Deborah Gorham, MacDonald Denison’s views drew closer to this second stream of feminism, while most of her feminist contemporaries tended to defend variants of maternal feminism. (Gorham, “Flora MacDonald Denison: Canadian feminist.” *A Not Unreasonable Claim*, 47-70.)
Among Denison’s ideas in her *Sunday World* column was a report from a visit she made to England to witness the efforts of the suffragettes. The article recounted addresses given by Annie Kenny and Sylvia Pankhurst, two leading figures of the British Suffragettes movement and the Women’s Social and Political Union who faced imprisonment and fierce opposition due to their feminist militancy. Denison noted that a “dramatic scene took place, when Miss Annie Kenney, which had been re-arrested, appeared on the platform. Had a corpse arisen from its coffin the electrified crowd could not have been more startled. This frail tiny girl, dressed in a simple white frock, with a bright red rose in the corsage, was half carried to a chair. She looked absolutely ghastly and too ill to be out of bed, but she spoke, and under the excitement, she became strong enough to stand.” Later on, she added: “Sylvia Pankhurst was half dragged, half carried, to the platform, disguised in very grand clothes…. She was ghastly pale and unable to stand. Two nurses
in attendance kept giving her sips of brandy and water…. From my seat on the platform I
looked out on the street and saw that extra contingents of police were arriving.” Her
comparison of female speakers with corpses and her allusion to death enlighten
Denison’s perception of women’s public speaking as a dangerous activity. She concluded
her article by noting that “the spirit, the endurance, the pertinacity of these women is
without a parallel in our history, but such frail women as Mrs. Pankhurst…and Annie
Kenny are, cannot hold out much longer against the terrible torture they are inflicting on
themselves for conscience sake.” 379

In this context, Denison’s own discourses for the advancement of women’s rights
often relied on spiritual communications to find reassurance and encouragement in the
face of public criticism. Her feminist endeavours, while rejected by many in her waking
life, found support in her trance communications with the spirit world, which, according
to her testimony, gave her strength to pursue her effort. For instance, following the death
of her eldest sister, Mary Edwards Merrill, she experienced episodes of spiritual
communications which helped restore her confidence in her life and future. In the
collected work What Converted Me to Spiritualism, she explained that she experienced
her first spiritual vision of her sister Mary following a particularly difficult time. She
notes: “I saw ahead of me work and endeavour—but success. I felt strong and well as I
looked, and the world instead of being the hated habitation of a crushed life, became a

379 Flora MacDonald Denison, “Stray leaves from a Suffragette: Mrs. Flora MacDonald Denison witnesses
from her platform position forcible methods used in the removal of Mrs. Pankhurst from a Meeting.” The
vast field wherein to endeavour and accomplish—to learn—and finally to know. I had now perfect confidence in the future, and that life, after all, proved worth living.”

Spirit communications further permitted Denison to create a platform to diffuse her political ideas. She conducted many séances at her house in Bon Echo, Provincial Park in Ontario, which historians now identify as “a mecca for radical thinkers of the period.”

Her property, which she bought in 1910, indeed became a summer-time community devoted to the democratic ideals of American poet and spiritualist Walt Whitman. Writers, reformers and feminists who met in Bon Echo often shared Whitman’s and Denison’s interest in spiritual communications. These included, for instance, Maurice Richard Bucke, author of Cosmic Consciousness and Superintendent of the provincial asylum for the insane in Hamilton, Albert Durant Watson, president of the Canadian Society for Psychical Research and author of The Twentieth Plane: A Psychic Revelation, and Horace Traubel, author of a nine-volume biography of Whitman’s final four years (see figure 16).

---

380 Flora MacDonald Denison, “The Vision of Mary.” What Converted me to Spiritualism, ed. B. F. Austin (Toronto: Austin Publishing, 1900) 95-96. For more on the life and death of Mary Melville and her communications with her sister, see: Flora MacDonald Denison, Mary Melville: The Psychic (Toronto: Austin Publishing, 1900).


382 Whitman, an ardent spiritualist himself, had encouraged in his poetry the participation of mediums in the public sphere. For a study of Whitman’s spiritualist beliefs, see: Steven B. Herrmann, Walt Whitman: Shamanism, Spiritual Democracy, and the World Soul (New York: Eloquent Books, 2010).

Denison kept the record of her activities in her small press, *The Sunset of Bon Echo*, which she printed between 1916 and 1920. In the magazine’s first issue, she described how her practice of mediumship helped her formulate and defend her ideals of sexual and class equality in public forums:

I have been aided so far in my work by friends in the Spirit World and I want to tell you about some of them without explanation or apology. Mary Merrill was a sister in earth life…. She is a great comrade of mine, and has helped me over many stony places. A Hindu prince is often in communion with me, and his chief concern is the terrible wrongs brought about by unjust caste systems. Sunset (for

---

whom this little magazine is named) was an Indian Chief…. He is a healer and has often assisted me in stopping pain through both mental and magnetic healing. ‘Crusts-and-Crums’ has often been my teacher and much has come to me through the spirit of those two columns. An Arab is a spirit to whom I owe much. His swiftness of decision has helped when problems most perplexed me. Walt Whitman makes the mystic seven complete. These will constitute the personnel of the Sunset. Walt Whitman is the master guide. He has taken me to unbelievable heights and I have neither fear nor anxiety about the future.… My psychic experiences are often too personal and intimate to be of general interest, but I will blend them into everyday life stories because they are part of my everyday life.385

The “swiftness of decision,” “unbelievable height,” and passion for the “unjust caste systems,” of this personnel of the Sunset thus intervened in Denison’s daily life to provide strength, encouragement, and motivations, as well as to support her more radical ideas when rejected by many. Such description of her Hindu, Arab, and Natives guides may display naïve beliefs and a certain orientalism. Michele Lacombe observes in this sense that “her discourse touching on ‘Indians’ in contrast to her denunciation of ‘caste privilege’ reveals an admixture of complicity and resistance.”386 However, her internalization of marginalized others forged an attempt to create new dialogues exploring models of emancipation. Imagining, and identifying with, oppressed voices

helped her oppose the infringements of women’s rights. Her radical positions on social issues could thus find justification in the stories of ostracized communities, leaders, and poets of democracy from the spirit world to which she devoted her work. As such, Denison’s mediumship provided not only a platform to share stories with communities of believers, but also various voices supporting her views.

The *Sunset* further describes a séance at the home of psychical researcher Albert Durant Watson during which Denison communicated through the Ouija board with the spirit of Walt Whitman, a communication which furthered her confidence in her political endeavour. She writes: “Walt Whitman held the board for an hour and a half, and the conversation with me was of such an intimate and significant nature, that all agreed we had entered into the Holy of Holies of our beings, and the information was for me alone. The only way I can show my gratitude for being honored as I was, is to be true to my life work of propagating the Democratic Ideals of Walt Whitman.” During this conversation, Whitman had revealed his support and interest for her work as he exclaimed that “whatever you do at Bon Echo will be welcome by me.”

Through her work, Bon Echo later came to stand as “a spiritual and educational centre, a source of income and meaningful work, a political alternative—in short, a ‘free’ space for women and woman-friendly progressives.” By positioning her feminist work under her devotion to the late Walt Whitman as her “master guide,” Denison thus found the strength and certainty necessary to carry on her life work.

Through her spiritual communications, the medium found internal support and validation that helped her confront public criticism. Unlike Annie Kenny and Sylvia

---

388 Lacombe, “Songs of the open road,” 159.
Pankhurst, Denison relocated some of her discourses within a community of ostracized figures from the other world, a discursive strategy which permitted her to share the responsibility of some of her most controversial ideas. Instead of becoming a “ghastly pale” corpse like her English sisters, she fought her isolation and vulnerability through the registers of legitimation permitted by the spiritualist movement. Like Antigone, Flora MacDonald Denison’s communication with the dead thus formed a different register of discourse through which she was able to take on the public stage. Denison’s feminism—reframed notably as a dedication to the work of Walt Whitman—helped her validate her opposition to male-dominated institutions. Like Sophocles’ tragic heroine, she thus adopted a complex, ambiguous discursive positioning that allowed her to speak by internalizing masculine voices to whom she claimed her devotion.

Denison can serve as an emblematic figure of the close ties between feminism and spiritual communications by the turn-of-the-century as she illustrates the radical possibilities permitted by spiritual séances. Yet, her practice also differed from the practices of other female mediums who, like Emma Hardinge Britten, often appeared to do much less to confront the ideology of the separate spheres. On occasions, some mediums even refused to campaign for the advancement of women’s rights. The feminist potential of female mediumship is thus complex, heterogeneous, and, at times, contradictory, as is Antigone’s own political power. Yet, as I demonstrate in the next section of this chapter, both mediums can also offer something valuable to feminist politics through their questioning of fixed gendered identities.
Antigone’s mediumship and the problem of female subjectivity

Most historians of spiritualism have noted the importance of female mediumship in the development of the women’s movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, Ann Braude remarks, for instance, that the “movement as a whole was sympathetic to women’s rights and to other reforms that horrified most pious Americans.”

Braude adds that “spiritualism’s greatest contribution to the crusade of women’s rights probably lay in the new role of spirit mediums.”

Casted as religious leaders, many female mediums were indeed able to offer an authoritative perspective on social issues of their time and many advocated ideas to improve the status of women. The explanation of spirit channeling—attributing the responsibility of mediums’ discourses to the dead—allowed many to adopt more radical positions on social issues than their contemporaries. Such studies have therefore often approached the movement through its more radical and progressive voices to demonstrate the subversive character of the movement. As Jeffrey Sconce has suggested: “the spirits of a higher and more refined plane of existence repeatedly argued that women needed to be liberated from the limited education that restricted the development of their intellects, from unjust laws that denied them access to their property and custody of children, from unequal marriages that subjugated them to men, and from economic restrictions that forced them into dependence.”

The mediumship of Flora MacDonald Denison provides a perfect illustration of such radical potentialities offered by spiritual communications as her
séances served to support her opposition to what she considered reactionary laws imposed upon women.

However, such studies of the movement have recently been challenged by scholars who emphasize the fact that mediums ubiquitously did not decide to rebel against female codes of conduct and were thus not dedicated to a profound redefinition of femininity. As I have highlighted in the introductory chapter of this research, the spiritualist explanation of channeling held fast to conventional views and attitudes towards the female body as a passive receptacle. Furthermore, most believers—such as Emma Hardinge Britten—remained compliant to ideals of the domesticity and submissiveness defining true womanhood. In this regard, female mediums’ role in women’s history through their participation in public séances may appear much less evident than focus on the radical voices of the movement would have it. In her 2011 article “Recent Studies in Nineteenth-Century Spiritualism,” Christine Ferguson favours such a perspective, arguing that the current emphasis on the emancipatory aspects of séances has created an “overly-homogeneous presentation of the chaotic morass of spiritualist political identifications, ones which ranged dramatically from the progressive to the highly reactionary.”392 Quoting Robert Cox, she adds: “the tendency to look for explicit social argumentation, focusing nearly exclusively upon the ‘radical’ voices, has provided a one-dimensional view of a complex terrain.”393 By highlighting the distinction between the discourses of Emma Hardinge Britten and Flora MacDonald Denison, I hope

to offer a more nuanced approach to mediums’ participation in feminist politics that accounts for the vast arrays of views expressed in séances.

Indeed, as Ferguson argues, archival readings reveal that female mediums appealed to a variety of personalities during séances and that some of these did very little to contest the prevalent norms and attitudes policing women’s lives. Contrary to Flora MacDonald Denison, who repeatedly appealed to marginal figures which permitted her to defend ideas of sexual and class equality, many female mediums channeled the voices of spirits who defended conventional views and attitudes regarding Victorian sex-roles. An 1887 article from *Arcturus*, for instance, reported that a séance in Toronto was attended by “several active politicians,” mainly from the Liberal party, during which an unnamed medium carried a spirit’s anger at the growth of radical movements in upper Canada. After the medium “closed her eyes, and…went off into a trance state,” appeared the spirit George Brown, a late Reform politician, editor of the *Toronto Globe*, and one of the founders of the Anti-Slavery Society of Canada, who here disapproved of the new turn of politics:

The Reform party—the party I spent my life to build up—has become a degenerate faction…. I was a Reformer, but never would I have favoured movements which strike at the very root of constitutional British government…. These men have no clear convictions of their own, and their idea of statesmanship is simply to endorse the notions of every little clique of consequential self-conceited nobodies who fancy they can renovate society and at the same time bring themselves into notoriety. Home Rulers, Rielites, Prohibitionists, Labour demagogues, Socialists of the Henry George school, Agnostics, *Woman*
Suffragists and all sorts of people of that stamp are patted on the back…and find a welcome for their crazy theories in the Globe office.

Once the medium had regained consciousness, a member of the Liberal Party suggested that: “If that was really George Brown, it just proves what I have always said—that he was a Tory at heart, and a Reformer merely by accident.” Such séance thus demonstrates that female mediums frequently voiced opinions opposed to the advancement of feminist politics. Yet, the séance also reveals the possibility for Victorian women to engage in the field of politics, even to debate policies with “active politicians,” through their identification with late personalities.394

Ferguson’s critique of current interpretations of the movement rightly points to the more conservative views expressed in trance, but she neglects the complexity of the modalities of trance speaking. I would suggest that female mediums such as Flora MacDonald Denison and Emma Hardinge Britten—despite their very different positions on the women’s movement—both played an important role in the development of feminist activities. Indeed, despite the apparent conformity of certain mediums to Victorian notions supporting the oppression of women, the discourse of sovereignty performed in séances formed the possibility to challenge the rigidity of sexual difference. Alex Owen writes in this sense that the séance room “was a distinct realm governed by different rules of conduct…. It was spiritualist practice, and in particular all that was implied by the spiritualist séance, which effected a truly radical challenge to cultural orthodoxy and the stunning subversion of the nineteenth-century feminine ideal. In

394 “Ghosts of Eminent Canadians: The Ghost of George Brown.” Arcturus 1, no. 7 (February 26, 1887): 103-104. My emphasis.
marked contrast to normative female conduct, mediums were notoriously unconventional when under the influence of a controlling spirit.\textsuperscript{395}

Like Victorian Antigone, the medium’s sacrificial devotion redeemed her, but her public discourse could nonetheless serve as a subtle means to contest the limits of the ideals of pure womanhood. At a time when women were often denied the agency required to access assertive discursive positions, the strategy of trance speaking permitted mediums to overturn gender conventions as they accessed the public stage by pushing patriarchal stereotypes of female passivity to their very limit. Like Antigone, mediums became “women strong with the gods”\textsuperscript{396} as they developed a subjective positioning momentarily escaping the prison of Victorian notions of the female body. As such, like the figure of Antigone, mediums can indeed be read variously as subjugated figures and feminist heroines. They simultaneously present the tragic silencing of their own voices and the inspiring abilities to destabilize male and female positions in discourse.

The introduction of Antigone’s criticism therefore offers a critical opportunity to explore alternative gendered subjectivities introduced through medium’s public performances. As Françoise Meltzer writes in “Theories of Desire: Antigone Again,” the heroine challenges “the notion of conceptual boundaries”\textsuperscript{397} as she dislocates cultural delineations between the realms of life and death. Her disruption of such boundaries becomes a threat to cultural understandings of sexual identity through her enactment of agency. It is as such that her story can testify to the innovation of mediumship and demonstrate how, even through their more conservative factions, female mediums could

\textsuperscript{395} Owen, \textit{The Darkened Room}, 202.
\textsuperscript{396} Sophocles, \textit{Antigone}, 108.
\textsuperscript{397} Meltzer, “Theories of Desire,” 171.
play an important part in transforming ideas about sexual and gendered norms due to their adoption of liminal positions in discourse.

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have suggested that understandings of Antigone from the Victorian era to the present were bound up with broader conceptual representations of female agency. Indeed, the heroine’s conflicting interpretations since the nineteenth century reflect the complexity of her discursive position, which renders her malleable to multiple perspectives. When Antigone publicly declares her opposition to Creon—stating: “I did it. I don’t deny a thing”\(^{398}\)—her utterance reveals both her attempt at discursive sovereignty and her identification with her brother’s desire. Her subject of enunciation, in other words, oscillates between a self-possessing agency and the expression of a submission towards her brother. Similarly, Victorian and Edwardian mediums’ embodiment of the dead transformed the speaking “I” into a multitude of attachments that legitimized their assertive discourses on the public stage. In Victorian discourses, female mediums’ allegiance to a greater authority could redeem them from their “unfeminine” positions as public speakers and spiritual leaders. Yet, their identification with the dead also transformed them into communicative vessels for agents of political sovereignty. Like Sophocles’ heroine, mediums have thus generated a plethora of interpretations, taking on new cultural meanings with changing social circumstances.

If, as Irigaray suggests, woman is “alienated in this system of language…and finding some hint of her own self…only in another,”\(^{399}\) then her performance of agency

---

\(^{398}\) Sophocles, *Antigone*, 81.

\(^{399}\) Irigaray, “The eternal irony,” 225.
in oppressive contexts must defy conventions of subjective positioning in discourse. Meltzer calls Antigone’s defiance of such conventions “the feminine subject with agency,” that is, “a third term that reveals the place of danger because it fits into neither its native category nor the one that is its opposite.” Through her identification with the dead, Antigone becomes the bearer of an utterance of agency, a figure in excess who breaks with the rules of the symbolic order. Akin to the female medium’s discourse, she is unlocalisable: “In the Antigone of Sophocles, what emerges are two responses to desire, that of Creon, which we can recognize as the Symbolic in Lacan’s sense, and that of Antigone, which we precisely do not recognize, since it has no obvious place inside the registers of either kinship or the state, nor in the place of the living or dead.... Antigone falls outside all registers, realms, nomenclature. She is herself in excess, a figural catachresis, the emblem of which is her entombment while she is still living.” As such, she embodies the possibility of breaking with structures of oppression by defying the very delineations on which they rest.

Antigone shares important characteristics with Victorian and Edwardian mediums for the latter’s discourses in séances similarly conveyed the spirit world as a new structure of ethics whose rules differed from those of their social contexts. Through this other realm, mediums could reinvent their positioning in discourse, not only by adopting the identities of the dead, but also by challenging delineations of passivity and activity, private and public roles, and feminine and masculine identities. The discourse of the spirit confronted such categories of oppression which sustain the symbolic order. Trance speaking’s abrupt shift from the medium’s own voice, its constant transition from the

400 Meltzer, “Theories of Desire,” 175
401 Meltzer, “Theories of Desire,” 176.
individual proof to the revelation of universal truths, and its very impossibility mark a challenge to traditional modes of valuation of discourses. It is within this impossibility that the mediumships of Flora MacDonald Denison and Emma Hardinge Britten, despite their important differences, reveal oblique modalities of resistance defying norms of identity. Like Antigone’s, their enactment of an agency in excess, unlocalisable, presents both the tragic dissolution of the voices of those who had been silenced in patriarchal institutions and the important forms of resistance permitted through the disruption of fixed masculine and feminine identities.
“Who is running this show anyway?” Psychical Research, Ectoplasm, and the Scientific Imagination of the Female Body

Now listen!... As soon as the man is strapped down, the Bed is set in motion. It quivers in minute, very rapid vibrations, both from side to side and up and down. You will have seen similar apparatus in hospitals; but in our Bed the movements are all precisely calculated; you see they have to correspond very exactly to the movement of the Harrow. And the Harrow is the instrument for the actual execution of the sentence.... Our sentence does not sound severe. Whatever commandment the prisoner has disobeyed is written upon his body by the Harrow. This prisoner, for instance...will have written on his body: HONOR THY SUPERIORS!

(Franz Kafka, “In the Penal Colony”)

In 1877, when she was eighteen years old, Marie Wittmann was admitted at the Salpêtrière hospital for women in Paris. Like many of the Salpêtrière’s patients coming from the lower classes of French society, she may have found herself with no other place to go. Recent studies of her medical records indicate that she was the oldest child of an impoverished Parisian couple. Her father, described as a violent and unstable man, had eventually gone mad and spent the rest of his days at the Sainte-Anne insane asylum. Her mother, a laundress, had died when Wittmann was still in her teens, as did five of her eight younger siblings.

---

403 For the details of Blanche’s life at the Salpêtrière, see Asti Hustvedt, Medical Muses: Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century Paris (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2011) 33-142.
When Wittmann first met Jean-Martin Charcot, her symptoms included highly unpredictable convulsions and momentary paralysis. Soon after her entrance at the institution, however, her body began a transformation that made her increasingly interesting in the eyes of her doctors. She would quickly become “Blanche Wittmann,” Charcot’s most famous patient, chosen to perform again and again the symptomatology of hysteria during the master’s “Tuesday lectures” and to be the subject of countless photographs reproduced in the annual volumes of the Iconographie photographique de la Salpêtrière and the Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtriere (see figure 17). In her work Medical Muses: Hysteria in Nineteenth-Century Paris, Asti Hustvedt notes: “Over the next decade, Blanche Wittmann would develop from an ordinary hysteric into an exemplary one. She became a ‘queen’ whose talent and beauty were widely recognized. Her symptoms, which had at first been unpredictable, became prototypical, medically perfect.”

404 Hustvedt, Medical Muses, 48.
Wittmann’s body presented, in particular, one of the most bizarre conditions associated with hysteria, a form of urticaria called dermographism that fascinated the Salpêtrière doctors. According to Charles Féré and Henri Lamy, who discussed the condition in the *Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière*, the disease defined “a singular phenomenon caused by a particular excitability of the skin, which consists in the appearance of edematous protrusions surrounded by redness, similar to urticarial plaques, which can
form various figures at will, under the influence of excitations of the integument.”405 This is to say, through the slightest stimulation, doctors could inscribe words and images on the skin of their patients. Uncannily like the prisoner of Kafka’s short story “In the Penal Colony,” whose sentence was inscribed upon his body, the hysterics’ skin could be repeatedly inscribed with her medical condition (see figure 18).406 In one particular experiment in August 1878, Blanche herself saw her body stamped with her new medical identity. The doctors explained: “We used the point of a stylus to trace the name of the patient on her chest, and on her abdomen, we traced the word ‘Salpêtrière.’ This produced a red stripe that was several centimeters high, and on this band the letters appeared in relief, about two millimeters wide. Little by little, the redness disappeared, but the letters persisted.”407 The letters remained on her skin for the following days and they reappeared when a second experiment was set to repeat the first trial: the doctors imprinted once again upon her skin her name and that of the institution in which she would spend the rest of her days.

405 My translation from “Un phénomène singulier dû à une excitabilité spéciale de la peau qui consiste dans l’apparition de saillies cédématœuses, entourées de rougeurs, semblables aux plaques ortiées, pouvant former des figures variées à volonté, sous l’influence des excitations du tégument.” (Charles Féré and Henri Lamy, “La Dermographie.” Nouvelle Iconographie de la Salpêtrière, vol 2 (Paris: Lecrosnier et Babé, 1889) 283.)

406 This was the case of Cécilia, one of Charcot’s hysterics whose case presents disturbing similarities with Kafka’s prisoner. As Georges Didi-Huberman remarks, she was “herself as a ‘hater of images,’” refusing to let her body stamped by dermographic inscriptions. However, her doctors retaliated violently: “‘With a pin, letters are written on the upper part of her chest.’ Her body is compared to a wax manikin and treated like a kind of magic writing tablet, despite her furious attempts not to cooperate, not to ‘represent.’…She is cauterized on the cervix four times with a hot iron. During the operation, her face becomes covered with ‘red erythemic blotches,’ a variant of the demographic phenomenon. Her body is assaulted by subcutaneous injections, inhalations, showers, metalloscopies, leeches, ovarian compressions. She dies in 1879, without the cause of her death noted in her dossier.” (Georges Didi-Huberman, “The Figurative Incarnation of the Sentence.” Cabinet 13, 2004. http://www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/13/didi-huberman.php (accessed June 1, 2013))

407 See Hustvedt, Medical Muses, 56.
Enter the ghost

Blanche’s skin, with its particular propensity to create and archive meanings and images determined by her doctors, finds a parallel in the mediumistic production of ectoplasm and its documentation and classification by psychical researchers—a practice which grew in popularity through the beginning of the twentieth century. While Wittmann’s body was transformed by her doctors into a white canvas upon which new layers of meaning could perpetually be inscribed, female mediums of the twentieth century pulled out of their skin
and orifices the glutinous substance of ectoplasm which was then photographed and archived by scientific researchers.

This chapter explores the imaginary of the female body in ectoplasmic séances by comparing and contrasting its visual archive to the iconography of the Salpêtrière in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In the 1920s and 1930s, Canadian doctor and psychical researcher Thomas Glendenning Hamilton conducted experiments with a medium named Mary Marshall and her control spirit Walter in Winnipeg, Manitoba. The Hamilton experiments were greatly influenced by the séances of gynaecologist and surgeon Le Roi Godard Crandon with his wife, the world-renowned medium Margery Crandon (born Mina Stinson). Although she had moved to Boston where her mediumship developed, Margery was originally from Canada. This chapter interrogates the Hamilton and Crandon séances in Winnipeg and Boston respectively as it retraces psychical researchers’ archival records of ectoplasm and its modes of transmission through the female medium. As I demonstrate, both the hysterics’ dermographic skin and the medium’s ectoplasmic séances present a transformation of the body’s surface into a speaking organ. Indeed, while the narrative imprinted upon Charcot’s female hysterics was strictly controlled by her doctors, such narrative presented avant la lettre what Freud would later conceive as the language of physical symptoms. Voiceless, this language expressed itself through images, thus relying on the camera as both its condition of proof and possibility.

My critical approach to the ectoplasmic séances stems from the observation that ectoplasmic photographs differed greatly from earlier spiritual imagery. Spirit photography of the nineteenth century relied upon a mystical qualification of the
photographic medium. By contrast, ectoplasmic photographs presented a different phase in the exploration of the spirit world; the technology was here seen as an objective, scientific instrument. To quote John Harvey, in ectoplasmic photography: “Neither is the camera complicit in the conjuring or reception of ‘extras’ nor the glass plate or film an arena for the psychokinetic reconfiguration of the emulsion by spirits. Rather, photography participates in the proceedings solely as a means of recording the phenomena.” The camera thus constituted a different kind of witness, a difference which rested partly in the belief shared by most psychical researchers that the matter of ectoplasm was not invisible or mystical, but material, quantifiable, and biological. Or, to put it in the words of the control-spirit of Boston medium Margery Crandon: “this stuff I am using tonight is like macaroni. It is not transparent.” In this chapter, my analysis of ectoplasmic archives alongside Charcot’s photographs of the Salpêtrière hysterics stems from the observation that both archives represented the aberrances of the female body

---

using a scientific and forensic method of documentation, and thus re-interpreted mysterious inscriptions upon women’s skin in the vocabulary of materialistic proof.411

The comparison with the visual imagery of the Salpêtrière and its interpretation in contemporary cultural studies offers a particularly enlightening framework to interrogate the scientific fantasies of the female body in ectoplasmic productions. Such a framework will lead me to ask: how did scientists approach the female body and what imagery did they use to define it? What were the modalities of the collaboration between mediums and scientists? How did both mediums and hysterics respond to the imagination of their bodies? While earlier chapters of this research were primarily concerned with an attempt to grasp the cultural and political meanings of mediums’ trance discourses, this chapter also explores the performance and imagery of spiritual séances. Through an analysis of this imagery, I argue that both the hysteric and the medium presented malleable bodies that threatened the boundaries of self-identity.

I begin with a presentation of the Winnipeg and Boston circles and their scientific methodology, emphasizing the members’ fascination with the visual documentation of spiritual communications. In analyzing the scientific vocabulary used to describe the

411 As I noted in earlier chapters, the theorization of mediumship and trance communications as symptoms of hysteria was common in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In fact, Hamilton himself noticed the reciprocity between mediumship and hysteria when, after studying the trance state of a medium named Elizabeth Poole, he stated: “it will be apparent, especially to the physician and psychologist, that the onset and release from trance as exhibited by this woman disclosed a mental zone in which certain features appeared resembling those observed with medical hysteria and other psychopathic conditions.” (T. Glen Hamilton, *Intention and Survival: Psychical Research Studies and the Bearing of Intentional Actions by Trance Personalities on the Problem of Human Survival* ed. J.D. Hamilton. (Toronto: The MacMillan Company of Canada, 1942) 245.) However, he soon added a difference: “With Elizabeth…it would seem that it was possible for her to pass quickly and safely through the various stages, dip down into deep slumber where she took on these alleged spiritistic perceptions that differentiated the mediumistic trance from medical hysteria and hypnosis, and then return to everyday consciousness without any harm being done to her normal personality.” (Hamilton, *Intention and Survival*, 245-246.) Hamilton, like others before him, thus believed that mediums possessed a greater control than hysterics over the trance’s temporary fragmentation of the self. However, he connected the two conditions through the dangers of trance states as spaces of both creation and annihilation.
circles’ photographic archives, I then argue that their ectoplasmic imagery transformed women’s bodies as reproductive technologies of limitless fluids, skins, and excrements. The medium here became a dangerous reminder of the precariousness of the self as she exposed in a mixture of seduction and repulsion a body unlimited by the contours of the skin. Always malleable and transformative, her body was to be regulated rigorously by scientific observers. Indeed, the latter attempted to control their evasive—almost liquefying—mediums by implementing rigid methodologies to fix and objectify their bodies. The last section of this chapter reveals, however, that through the strategies of trance states, mediums’ spirit personalities eluded the scientific attempt to control the female body by re-appropriating the language and imagination of femininity in scientific discourse.

The Hamilton and Crandon experiments

Thomas Glendenning Hamilton was born in Ontario in November 1873 and later studied at the Manitoba Medical College from which he graduated in 1903. He then established a practice of medicine in Elmwood, a suburb of Winnipeg, where he became a well-respected authority. He worked notably as Lecturer in Clinical Surgery in the Medical Faculty of the University of Manitoba and as President of the Manitoba Medical Association in 1921-1922.412 According to Hamilton’s daughter, Margaret Lillian Hamilton, his fascination with spiritual communication was set off when, with two friends, he and his wife “casually tried table-tipping one night in our home in late 1920.

To their utter astonishment, by way of table-tilts they received this message: ‘Plato Book Ten… Allegory very true… Read Lodge… Trust his religious sense… Myers and Stead here… Stead answers Drs. questions.’**413** With their medium, a friend and neighbour of the family named Elizabeth Poole, the Hamiltions began to conduct séances on a regular basis. They were further captivated by Poole’s telekinetic abilities, as they witnessed the séance table move in all directions without apparent physical contact.

In January 1923, Hamilton was so astounded by the communications that he reportedly told his wife “I must give in. There is more here than meets eye or ear. Find me a group of people who will take this matter seriously and I will see what I can do about finding time to experiment further. What is ahead I do not know, but I must admit, to myself at least, that there is a region of fact which must be investigated along scientific lines.”**414** With a group of inquisitive sitters, he began a search for other mediums. In 1928, he invited Mary Marshall to join the circle on a regular basis and she soon began to produce a “mysterious substance, variously called materialization, ectoplasm or teleplasm.”**415** Marshall’s gift was incontestable, according to Hamilton, who rapidly collected hundreds of photographs of her materializations.

While the first few séances had taken place in the family living room, Hamilton now reserved a special room for the sole purpose of housing the séances. Because ectoplasms were known to disappear in the light, investigators of spiritual manifestations relied upon other means of visualization and documentation. Based on earlier works in psychical research, Hamilton believed that the flash of the camera could record ectoplasmic materials in short exposure-time at the instant before the light would cause

---

them to disappear. He had thus installed in his séance room a battery of cameras placed at varying heights and equipped with different lenses (see figure 19). Hamilton controlled the scientific rigor of his experiments by himself loading, developing, printing, and enlarging his photographs.

Figure 19. Battery of cameras of varying heights and lenses used to photograph materializations in the Hamilons’ séance room, n.d.

Hamilton also furnished the séance room with a three-sided, wooden cabinet in which the medium was asked to take her seat, facing a large table which allowed for the presence of scientific observers who were occasionally invited to testify to the validity of the phenomena (see figure 20).
Whether or not Hamilton succeeded in proving the veracity of communications between the living and the dead, his research resulted in the constitution of one of the richest sources of information on spiritualism in Canada. His posthumous work *Intention and Survival*, published in 1942, provides a series of photographs and descriptions of each ectoplasmic apparition. The T. G. Hamilton collection held at the University of
Manitoba additionally presents researchers with hundreds of pictures and thousands of documents including séance notes, letters, and articles on spiritual matters.\footnote{The collection is established from documents donated by the Hamilton family in several instalments between 1979 and 1986. It primarily reports Dr. T.G. and Lillian Hamilton’s investigations of psychic phenomena from 1918 to 1945. The photographs of the collection have now been digitalized and can be found online at: \url{http://imgserver.lib.umanitoba.ca/BrowserInsight/BrowserInsight?cmd=select-collection&hold=true&cid=33}. The site includes digital reproductions of photographs, stereo photographs, slides, negatives and glass slide negatives, as well as some accompanying textual records. Unless I indicated otherwise, the figures presented in this chapter are reproduced from this digital collection. See also: “Hamilton Family Fonds.” University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections. URL address: \url{http://www.umanitoba.ca/libraries/archives/hamilton.shtml}.\textsuperscript{417} Hamilton, \textit{Intention and Survival}, 31.}

The collection further provides many details on the mediums who participated in the Hamilton séances. Although these appear only in the background of most ectoplasmic photographs, they at times participated in the creation, observation, or interpretation of the materials emanating from Mary Marshall’s body and as such deserve presentation. Among these was Mrs. Samuel Marshall, Mary’s sister-in-law, who had been invited to join the group in 1929 under the latter’s recommendation. Mrs. Samuel Marshall also claimed to be controlled by Walter on many occasions, as well as by a spirit named Lucy, who would later appear in one of Hamilton’s most spectacular photographs (see figure 29).

Another important medium among the circle was Harry A. V. Green, who joined the group in 1928, after having completed his education in Law in Edinburgh and having immigrated to Canada in 1913. During the sittings, he found himself frequently falling into trance state, but, according to \textit{Intention and Survival}, “he very consciously and actively maintained a hyper-critical attitude towards his own and other trance products.”\footnote{Hamilton, \textit{Intention and Survival}, 31.} A theatre aficionado, Green won the Canadian Drama Award for his plays and stories and, perhaps in correlation to this passion, his trance communications are quite entertaining.
Lastly, as earlier mentioned, it was years after Elizabeth Poole had begun table-tipping with the Hamil­tons that Mary Marshall entered their circle. Poole’s mediumship nonetheless continued to occupy an important part of the séances from the 1920s to 1933, usually taking place before Marshall’s attempts at materializations. The Hamilton records indicate that Poole participated in 388 séances with the circle and produced “977 separate trance products of a purely mental type.” These were attributed to Robert Louis Stevenson, David Livingston, the psychical researcher W. T. Stead and the French astronomer Camille Flammarion who all claimed to speak through the trance medium. Although Poole’s mediumship will not be discussed at length in this chapter, it should be noted that her trance productions reiterated many of the motifs discussed in earlier parts of this research. A woman of little education, during séances she created beautifully imaginative productions that sitters had no difficulty attributing to the renowned authors. Poole’s mediumship had further impressed Arthur Conan Doyle who had visited Winnipeg in his American tour in 1923 and had attended on his very first day in the city a séance at the Hamiltons’ home. On this date, Conan Doyle was captivated by the medium’s poetic abilities as she successfully transmitted communications from Robert Louis Stevenson even though “the little Scotch woman knows nothing normally of R.L.S., because she is not of a literary turn.”

Poole’s mediumship, however, could not prove the validity of the spiritualist hypothesis through the high standards of scientific methodology according to the Hamilton circle. In 1929, Harry A. V. Green wrote in the spiritualist journal Light that the pressure for images and visual documentation had already shaped the reception of

---

418 Hamilton, Intention and Survival, 236.
Poole’s mediumship, as Hamilton had often tried to photograph Stead, Livingston, and Stevenson, but without success.\textsuperscript{420} It was thus left to Mary Marshall to realize the scientific dream of the Hamilton séances: she produced through the control of Walter a series of materializations which, in the researcher’s view, were a more convincing evidence of spiritual life.

Although Marshall had first joined the group in 1925, she only attended 10 to 12 séances over the next three years. In January 1928, she became a regular medium among the group and, as her abilities became increasingly manifest, her mediumship took precedence in the séances. Marshall, who had earlier immigrated to Canada from Scotland, thus rapidly gained the trust and interest of the circle. While the sittings were collaborative and often required the presence and communications of many mediums, she was undoubtedly the main “star” of the show, appearing in the vast majority of the circle’s ectoplasmic photographs (see figure 21).

\textsuperscript{420} H. A. V. Green, “Mary M. Séances.” \textit{Light}, 27 April 1929.
The work *Intention and Survival* thus consists mainly in the presentation of Marshall’s ectoplasms. These are divided into categories defining the degrees of completion or intentionality Hamilton attributed to the materializations. For instance, some ectoplasms presented simple masses in which no resemblance to real-life objects could be found (see figure 22), while others formed recognizable human faces or shapes (see figure 23).
Figure 22. Mary Marshall, with teleplasmic spots attached to her face on June 12, 1931.

Figure 23. Hand simulacrum portraying the medium, Mary Marshall, with a mass emerging from her mouth that resembles a hand at the séance of April 27, 1932.
In the early years of the twentieth century, ectoplasms were a common topic of interest among psychical researchers. Hamilton’s séances were shaped in accordance with the register of images of earlier investigations on the mysterious substance. In particular, Dr. L. R. G. Crandon’s studies of his wife, Margery Crandon, constituted an important point of reference in Mary Marshall’s materializations. Indeed, when Hamilton began his experiments, Margery Crandon was already famous among psychical researchers for her spectacular manifestations. She had been studied by some of the most renowned scientists of her time, including William McDougall, then head of the Department of Psychology at Harvard, and Henry Clay McCommas, a prominent psychologist from Princeton. Like Hamilton, she was also from Canada. She was born in 1888 and grew up on a farm in rural Ontario, but moved to Boston as a young woman. After an unsuccessful marriage, she met with Dr. Crandon while she was at the Dorshester hospital for an operation. Dr. Crandon was a former professor of surgery at the Harvard Medical School and a renowned gynaecologist. His scientific reputation played a major role in the popularity and credibility of his wife. After their ectoplasmic experiments began in 1923, she rapidly gained recognition across North America.

That Marshall’s materializations echoed the experiments of the Crandons is revealed by their sharing of the control-spirit, Walter. Indeed, this control spirit who frequently appeared in the Hamilton séances claimed that he was in fact Walter Stinson, the late brother of Margery Crandon who had famously participated in the Boston séances to produce well-known telekinetic and ectoplasmic phenomena. Crandon’s brother had first appeared on June 9th, 1923, when “a hoarse, masculine, disembodied
voice was heard, which Margery recognized to be that of her elder brother Walter.”

Walter had died in 1911 in a railway accident and Crandon claimed that the two had been greatly attached during his lifetime. Due to their shared relationship with the trance personality, Hamilton eventually exchanged correspondence with the Crandons and the scientists visited each other to participate in an experiment in cross-correspondence, a practice of spiritual connection in which a control-spirit would simultaneously provide messages in distant séances. In the following sections, I analyse the symbolism of the ectoplasmic productions of both Mary Marshall and Margery Crandon in order to retrace the terms of the relationship between female mediums and male scientists in séances.

Ectoplasm and the female body

Psychical researchers defined ectoplasm as “a substance of some kind which may give rise to various simulacra and has its biological source in the medium’s body.” As such, these scientists generally framed their photographs with a consideration for the mysteries of the female body as they attempted to demonstrate the substance’s biological points of origin. Despite their claim at objective, scientific observation, their photographs often crystallized the cultural imagination of womanhood. Revealingly, the pictures taken in the Hamilton and the Crandon séances share a common representation of the female medium as simultaneously highly erotic and repugnant. Through this disturbing imagery,

422 During the 1910s, Hamilton further went to Harvard Medical School where he undertook post-graduate studies in surgery. He had then become acquainted with Dr. L. R. G. Crandon. For more information on Margery Crandon, see: Walter Franklin Prince, “A Review of the Margery Case.” The American Journal of Psychology (July 1926): 433-441; and “Science: Margery Plays Cards.” Time, 21 February 1938.
423 Hamilton, Intention and Survival, 5.
the medium often relegates the ectoplasm to the background and becomes the main focus of her viewers.

On the one hand, researchers’ recognition that ectoplasms stemmed from orifices in the medium’s body shaped the séance into a highly erotic mise-en-scène. While the experiments of the Hamilton group were not as explicitly pornographic as those of some researchers abroad, Mary Marshall’s productions presented a highly sexual imagery that can frequently be observed in photographs or read in séance notes. Physical examinations of the medium’s body were recurrent aspects of the Winnipeg ectoplasmic séances. Further, Hamilton remarked that “a number of our mediums often exhibited rhythmic movements of their hands or feet, stumping, rubbing the hands, rubbing the wood of the cabinet, rubbing their arms and sometimes the arms of adjacent sitters or another medium, and so on. This is a most curious demonstration but the results obtained have led us to believe that those rhythmic movements were, as the controls claimed, definitely purposive, bringing about the release of certain ‘forces’ not otherwise available for the work in hand.”424 Such soothing caresses illustrate the physical intimacy permitted in ectoplasmic séances, thus momentarily freeing sitters from conforming to conventions of appropriate behaviours (see figure 24).

424 Hamilton, Intention and Survival, 45.
However, séances were also disquieting as ectoplasmic productions seemed to cause great strain to the mediums. Hamilton wrote: “At times when a sitting was in progress, Mary [Marshall] could be heard making peculiar gagging, gasping, coughing or choking sounds, these sounds suggesting that her digestive and respiratory organs were being seriously disturbed, the disturbing factor in each instance being an apparently abnormal one. Occasionally, when a sitting was over, she complained of being nauseated and sometimes vomited forth white mucus.”

Coming from women’s orifices,

\[425\] Hamilton, *Intention and Survival*, 42. Vomiting was in fact used as a mode of fraudulence by some ectoplasmic mediums. Ruth Brandon remarks that: “The advantage of regurgitation is of course that, search as they may, investigators will never find anything concealed on the body. It also has its disadvantages…. It may not be a silent process; but, as we have seen, a great positive point was made of the groans, grunts
teleplasms not only simulated erotic performances, but also recalled the production of vomit and excrement, an imagery which was uncannily juxtaposed to the otherwise seductive nature of séances.

Additionally, the vocabulary of pregnancy frequently appeared in scientific descriptions of ectoplasmic productions. Such descriptive language of materializations permitted scientists to conceptualize the ectoplasm as a biological entity connected to the medium’s body as infants during pregnancy. The female body was thereby conceived as a site of reproduction, not only for living entities, but for departed spirits who may come back to the world for a fleeting moment. Dr. Gustav Geley, a famous psychical researcher of the beginning of the twentieth century, wrote in this sense that: “The phenomena appear…after a variable interval, sometimes very short, sometimes very long, an hour or more. They always begin by painful sensations in the medium. She sighs, groans intermittently, like a woman in travail.”

Spiritual pregnancy had already been a common phenomenon among spiritualists and remained a trope shared between hysterics and mediums. One of the very creators of the movement, Margaret Fox, for instance, had been shocked during her travel to England when she noticed the proliferation of spirits allegedly giving birth through mediums: “They even go so far,” she wrote of English mediums, “as to have what they call ‘spiritual children’! They pretend something like the immaculate conception!” (Quoted in Cathy Gutierrez, “From Electricity to Ectoplasm: Hysteria and American Spiritualism.” Aries 3, no. 1 (2003): 70.) In psychoanalysis, such episodes could be interpreted as examples of hysterical pregnancy. The case of Anna O., or Bertha Pappenheim, can here again be brought for comparison as she was herself victim of a hysterical pregnancy. This pregnancy, further, has been said to lay at the very foundation of Freud’s theorization of the psychological importance of sexual desires in the etiology of neuroses. As the story goes, Breuer had already claimed that his patient had been cured when he was called in emergency to visit Anna O.’s home. There, to his horror, he discovered that she was in the midst of hysterical labour, and exclaiming “Now Dr. B.’s baby is coming.” (see Ann H. Jackowitz, “Anna O/Bertha Pappenheim and Me,” in Between Women: Biographers, Novelists, Critics, ed. C. Ascher, L. DeSalvo, and S. Ruddick (New York: Beacon Press, 1984) 257.) This imagined pregnancy, the result of the seduction between Breuer and Pappenheim throughout the treatment, signified for Freud the conflicted sexual desires at the origins of Pappenheim’s illness—desires that Breuer had failed to address. The lexicon of pregnancy in female ectoplasmic mediums’ séances may similarly reflect the unspoken and forbidden relation of seduction that existed between the scientific researchers and their subjects—a relation that had also shaped Anna O.’s treatment under Breuer.

Such a simultaneously erotic and ghastly symbolism appears clearly in the following image, presenting Margery Crandon’s materialization of Walter’s hand on January 1925 (see figure 25). Employing once again the vocabulary of pregnancy to describe the marvelous matter produced, psychical researcher E. J. Dingwall, who had been called upon to verify the authenticity of the ectoplasm, noted in the Scientific American Journal: “It is the most beautiful case of teleplasm and telekinesis with which I am acquainted…. The materialized hands are connected by an umbilical cord to the medium; they seize upon objects and displace them.”428 As this image reveals, however, this was hardly the story. Taken by Dingwall, the photograph presents at its centre the nude genitals of Margery, covered by a small piece of tissue and touched by the hands of Dingwall and Walter. According to Margery’s testimony, the voyeuristic quality of the

428 Quoted in Gutierrez, “From Electricity to Ectoplasm,” 72. An even more blatant example of this symbolism also appears in the work Phenomena of Materialization by Albert von Schrenck-Notzing. In his séances with Eva Carrière, ectoplasms regularly took the shape of umbilical cords attached to the medium’s navel. But the language of séances was also frequently informed by metaphors of birthing. In a report from a séance held on March 6th, 1913, for instance, the expression and performance of the medium, as well as the interpretations of the researcher, appealed very directly to this imagery through a mixture of seduction and repulsion:

9 P.M. More violent efforts. Condition of ‘mediumistic labour’
9.3 P.M. ‘Cela me prend, Juliette.’ (It takes me, Juliette)
9.5 P.M. Hands still visible, lying on her knees, and holding the curtain. As soon as she opens her knees, I see between them, in a fold of the dress, a strip of about 8 or 4 inches long and about the thickness of a pencil, of a pink colour…
9.8 P.M. On touching the luminous portions, they feel moist and sticky…
9.16 P.M. ‘Je le sens Juliette…’ (I feel it Juliette)
9.22 P.M Plaintive whimpering. Mme. Bisson holds her hands to encourage her, and then releases them again…
9.35 P.M. ‘Cela vient, je le sens.’ (It is coming, I feel it)

As the séance progressed, this thick pencil of a pink colour revealed between her legs reappeared on the medium’s naked breast and disappeared in her navel to the bemusement of its observer. (See Albert von Schrenck-Notzing, Phenomena of Materialization: A Contribution to the Investigation of Mediumistic Teleplastics, trans. E. E. Fournier d’Albe (New York: E. P. Dutton & Co. 1920) 225-226. French passages are followed by my translations.)
photograph should not be surprising: when Dingwall had arrived to her séances, “the first thing he told me was to take off my clothes.”

Margery, like a “woman in travail,” to borrow Geley’s expression, therefore performed with her genitals exposed, allowing her observers to witness the biological points of origins of her productions. While the process of ectoplasmic materialization had taken place in total darkness, the result was entirely open to scrutiny. In Margery’s photograph, the viewer must assume the position of the gynaecologist (other pictures of

---

the séance offer the same point of view, but with Margery’s legs spread, providing an even clearer look at her genitals) seemingly transforming the scientific gaze into voyeuristic pornography. Apart from this highly erotic quality of the performance, the materialized substance itself appeared quite disturbing. Pierre Apraxine remarks: “Margery’s materializations were made of a strange, rubbery, organic substance. A crude hand purported to be Walter’s would appear…. It could be touched and examined: it felt like skin, it contained bones, its temperature was around forty degrees.”⁴³⁰ And E. J. Dingwall, who had first been greatly impressed by the phenomenon, later came to believe that it was made fraudulently from an animal lung while the wrist was in fact a trachea.⁴³¹

From such examples, one can easily notice how, to quote Marina Warner, “the processes that bring ectoplasm into the world are often reproductive, modeled by extended analogy to…the metaphor of giving birth.”⁴³² Like Warner, many scholars have noted the importance of the language of “the woman in labour” in ectoplasmic productions, a fact which may be related to the high infant mortality rate in the early years of the twentieth century, when many parents lost their children either to the war or diseases. In “Ectoplasms, Evanescence, and Photography,” Karl Schoonover notes that: “Ectoplasms were invented in the twentieth century’s first decade and reached their widest mainstream popularity just after World War I.”⁴³³ The Hamiltons themselves had lost a child to pneumonia in 1918, before the beginning of their materializations, and it may well be imagined that the terrible loss was a strong enticement for the production and reproduction of materialized flesh. The fleetingness and fragility of this flesh,

⁴³² Warner, Phantasmagoria, 301.
however, demanded constant reproduction and the vastness of the archives on Marshall’s séances demonstrates the tragic repetition of loss staged and photographed compulsively over two decades. Yet, if the mourning for lost children can certainly account for the compulsive production and documentation of ectoplasmic séances, how can one understand this representation of the female body as simultaneously dissected by the scientific gaze and hidden through the séance’s mise-en-scène? Why such bizarre fantasies about women’s orifices as sites of magical productions? And how can one account for researchers’ representation of the female body through this highly erotic, yet ghastly, symbolism of reproduction?

Perhaps this confused vocabulary of repulsion and seduction reveals an after-effect of ectoplasmic mediums’ disruption of all boundaries (between life and death, between male and female voices, and between the “I” and its others). Pregnant with such disturbing flesh, mediums entered a process of abjection in demonstrating the subject at the point of its collapse into otherness. Through the metaphors of excretions and birthing, the mediums indeed recall the notion of abjection as theorized by Julia Kristeva defining the process in which the subject is exposed to the fascinating—repulsing yet seductive—precariousness of the divide it has erected between itself and others. As I have argued in the previous chapter, mediumship inherently implied a questionings of the limits of life and death, public and private, and masculine and feminine identity. However, while trance mediums had changed their voices to carry masculine discourses, they had generally done so through their unquestionably female bodies. Ectoplasmic mediums, by contrast, often transformed their bodies into new shapes, sometimes appearing

seductively, humorously or repulsively other. Here, the body itself became a speaking organ, expressing through its images something disturbing about the limits of subjectivity.

**Regulating the female body: dermographism, secretions, and the language of otherness**

The iconography of dermographism may offer an instructive parallel to analyse the process of abjection in Mary Marshall’s and Margery Crandon’s ectoplasmic productions. As I noted earlier, this condition of the skin transformed the hysterical body into a canvas upon which mastering scientists could inscribe new meanings. Through this transformation, the hysteric’s skin became bearer of a disturbing otherness that provides rich insight into the ectoplasmic séance’s process of camouflage and revelation.

Like mediumship, dermographism defined a mysterious reproductive quality of the body that quickly became associated with the peculiarity of womanhood. For instance, medical authorities Charles Féré and Henri Lamy discovered a predominance of the dermographic condition “in two categories of patients: on the one hand, hysterical women; on the other hand, individuals already suffering from true urticaria.”\(^4\)\(^3\)\(^5\) Thus, while hives could be a cause of dermographism in all individuals, the female hysterical body was inherently susceptible to the production of words and images. In 1893, Toussaint Barthélémy wrote a study on the condition in which he further found that

\(^{435}\) My translation from “nous trouvons une prédominance chez deux catégories de malades. D’une part, les femmes hystériques; d’autre part, les individus déjà atteints d’urticaire vraie.” (Féré and Lamy, “La Dermographie,” 284.)
menstrual periods were often a pre-requisite to dermographism. Such conceptions defined, once again, the female body as a reproductive technology for mysterious representations.

In medical writings of the nineteenth century, dermographic apparitions on the female skin called for a reference to occult forces, or to a threatening otherness invading the self. For instance, Barthélémy linked the phenomenon to “diabolical dermatology” in which, according to medieval beliefs in satanic possession, the demon imprinted his image upon the body of possessed girls. Barthélémy himself used the word “Satan” as a signifier in his experiments, inscribing it upon many of his female patients. In an 1897 article entitled “Skin Writing” for the London Strand Magazine, Jeremy Broome similarly remarked that the work of “Charcot and others in Paris” had “brought about a remarkable change in our knowledge of the sorcery marks of the fifteenth and sixteenth century,” when it was “supposed that our hated enemy, the devil, was able to mark his own.” The devil’s mark of choice “was usually hand” which therefore became one of the “hated symbols of demonic possession.” However, Broome remarked, such mark could now easily be explained by the phenomenon of dermographism. Therefore, he wrote: “today it is easy for any hypnotist to make the devil’s stigma on the skin” (see figure 26).437

The appearance of mysterious hands upon the medium’s and the hysteric’s skin bears witness to both figures’ perception in scientific discourses as ambiguous forms of subjectivity, reaching outside of their own boundaries. Akin to the medium’s materializations, the dermographic skin thus provides the occasion of a profound questioning of the limits between self and other through the hysteric’s disruption of the body’s contours.

In fact, women’s apparent lack of boundaries had for long been a marker of hysteria. In an 1818 entry on the disease in the *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales*, for instance, J. B. Louyer-Villermay noted that the onset of hysterical attacks was signaled by the production of uncontrolled secretions, including “abundant urine, utero-vaginal excretions, sometimes accompanied by voluptuous sensations…the return of the
menstrual flow…a considerable effusion of tears…sweat, diarrhea, salivation.”

The hysterical attack’s conclusion was later announced by “frequent needs to urinate, abundant emission of clear and limpid urine, mucus or spermatic discharges by the vagina or the uterus.”

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, dermographic hysterics and ectoplasmic mediums renewed the concern and fascination for women’s uncontrollable dripping and flowing (a concern which led doctors to explore all secreting parts of the female body), but they now transformed their secretions into language, pouring words, images, and figures out of their skin. The fascination for these women’s uncanny powers of excretion continued to signal an anxiety in medical discourses over the fragility of the distinction between self and other, an anxiety which was then contained through the broad restriction of such powers to the female body.

The photographic representation of dermographic hysteria at the Salpêtrière consequently reveals a tradition of scientific concern over the malleability of a peculiar, disturbing female body. By performing a body that has no contours, that secretes words and images out of its surfaces, the dermographic hysteric indeed disrupts the fallacy of unified subjectivity, thereby calling to be rigorously controlled. Analyzing the medical fascination for this fluid female body, many contemporary authors (including Georges Didi-Huberman, Anne Golomb Hoffman, Janet Beizer, and Asti Hustvedt) have demonstrated that the Salpêtrière iconography presents a male fantasy about womanhood as doctors attempted to control the hysterical body using the instruments of science.

---

438 My translation from “Une urine abondante, les excrétions utéro-vaginales, accompagnée parfois d’une sensation voluptueuse…les retours du flux menstruel…une effusion de larmes considérables…les sueurs, les diarrhées, la salivation.” (Jean-Baptiste Louyer-Villermay, “Hystérie.” *Dictionnaire des sciences médicales* vol. 23 (Paris: Panckoucke, 1818) 249.)

439 My translation from “envies fréquentes d’uriner, émission abondante d’une urine claire et limpide, écoulements muqueux ou spermatiques fournis par le vagin ou l’utérus.” (Louyer-Villermay, “Hystérie,” 258.)
her study of dermographism in nineteenth-century medical discourses, Janet Beizer, for instance, remarked that doctors were constantly attempting to gain power over the female skin’s language: “clinicians...struggle to steal God’s word, labor to inscribe on the hysterical body a new gospel, which would say: ‘And the flesh will made word, will become the word of men.”

As I argue in the following section, both the dermographic hysteric and the ectoplasmic medium present a challenge to their scientific observers through this queer fluidity. Both mediums and hysterics have therefore entered into a complex relationship with science and its instruments—here photography—as they responded to a male fantasy that attempted to control and delimit their bodies in order to re-inscribe upon them their own vocabularies.

**The paradox of scientific evidence: performance and control**

The visual archives of Hamilton and Crandon share a common portrayal of the relationship between scientists and mediums that offers a rich line of investigation for the analysis of the female body in the scientific and medical imagination. Their investigations relied on their professional reputations as medical authorities and their use of a scientific vocabulary. For Harry A. V. Green—one of the mediums amongst the Winnipeg circle—if Hamilton’s research was so remarkable, indeed: “It was not only because of the scrupulous care which he took to avoid the possibility of conscious or unconscious fraud. It was not only because his technique and approach were scientifically

---

correct. It was also because he was a man whom to know was to accept his word."\textsuperscript{441}

Like Hamilton, Crandon controlled the scientific rigor of his experiments by attempting to dispel all fraudulent conditions through his use of a scientific and forensic approach. However, the extremes to which this compulsion for control led the unfolding of séances bear important questions regarding the researchers’ concern over the malleability of their mediums’ bodies.

Certainly, the need for rigorous controls responded to the high possibility of fraud during ectoplasmic productions. The century had brought revelations of many fraudulent mediums and séance cabinets had frequently been found to be nothing more than magician boxes from which hidden materials and actors would emerge, adopting the shape of spirits and ectoplasms. In particular, many deceitful mediums had been exposed by skeptical sitters who grabbed and imprisoned their alleged spiritual manifestations only to discover—once the light was restored—that they were nothing more than living individuals. Escape artist Harry Houdini himself, after being deceived by staged materializations, famously instigated a crusade against fraudulent mediums. He attended séances around the world in order to reveal their trickery. Houdini notably visited Margery Crandon on more than one occasion and published an explanation of the modes of fraudulence he accused her of employing.\textsuperscript{442} However, trance personalities continuously argued that ectoplasms required particular conditions to successfully materialize and that exposing them to light and physical handling could carry dangerous consequences. Hamilton noted:

\textsuperscript{441} Hamilton, \textit{Intention and Survival}, xiii.

\textsuperscript{442} For more information on Houdini’s crusade and his investigation of Margery’s mediumship, see: \textit{Harry Houdini, A Magician Among the Spirits} (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011); Massimo Polidoro, \textit{Final Séance: The Strange Friendship Between Houdini and Conan Doyle} (Amhurst: Prometheus Books, 2001); and Brandon, “Magicians Among the Spirits” in \textit{The Spiritualists}, 164-189.
The grave possibility that the medium who is the organic source of this mysterious substance may suffer from nervous shock if the substance is handled too roughly or without regard to the substance’s condition, as disclosed by the trance personalities who claim to produce it, creates an ethical responsibility which the sincere investigator must accept…. The investigator must also accept the fact that, thus far, most teleplasmic phenomena have been most easily produced in total darkness. There are many who feel that this alone marks teleplasmic phenomena as fraudulent. As a rule, darkness is one of the necessary factors in production of the plasm, for the presence of light causes the material to disintegrate and disappear.\footnote{443}

Such experimental conditions disturbed the orthodox methodology of “the true spirit and outlook of science\footnote{444} and demanded additional precautions. However, perhaps the most important obstacle for the scientific approach to ectoplasm was that the material could only be produced through the (usually) female body of the medium, a body that perpetually concealed and disguised. To come back to the séance of Margery Crandon presented in figure 25, one may easily note how the vantage point of the photograph permits the viewer to explore her orifices, a vantage point that testifies to the suspicion that her vagina could have been used as a hiding place. Margery would in fact be accused of producing the phenomena fraudulently through such a method, a hypothesis that seemed confirmed when, very shortly after her January 19\textsuperscript{th} séance, she suffered from a uterine hemorrhage.\footnote{445} Witnessing her materializations, scientific explorers were
therefore led to ask suspicious questions regarding her body and its modes of concealment. In this regard, a bizarre—to say the least—hypothesis suggested at the time that the eminent surgeon and gynaecologist L. R. G. Crandon had altered his wife’s cavities so that she could store a larger amount of materials inside herself.\textsuperscript{446} Therefore, as Karl Schoonover remarks: “That mediums were submitted to not only the ever-watchful gaze of the male scientist and his camera, but also routine, extensive body searches suggest that ectoplasm investigation enacts a clinical suspicion of the female body.”\textsuperscript{447}

Like psychical researchers, Charcot became well aware of the problem of scientific observation of the female body when he discovered that hysteria—a primarily female disease—was by nature a suspicious illness that defied medical expertise. He linked the suspiciousness of hysteria to the natural tendency of his female patients to lie and manipulate, as he witnessed “the ruse, the sagacity, and the unyielding tenacity that especially the women display in order to deceive…especially when the victim of the deceit happens to be a physician.”\textsuperscript{448} His disciple Gilles de la Tourette similarly remarked: “The female hysteric represents an extraordinarily complicated type, of a completely particular and excessively versatile nature, remarkable for her spirit of duplicity, lying and simulation. With an essentially perverse nature, the hysteric seeks to fool those around her…”\textsuperscript{449} Even Blanche Wittmann, the “queen of hysterics,” had appeared to be of a particularly cunning nature, when, on one occasion, she and another hysteric had imprisoned a group of Salpêtrière’s visitors in the garden and ran off. One of

\begin{flushright}
\textsuperscript{446} Anne L. Delgado, “Bawdy Technologies and the Birth of Ectoplasm.” \textit{Genders Online Journal} 54 (Summer 2011): 35. \url{www.genders.org/g54/g54_delgado.html} (accessed June 1, 2013).
\textsuperscript{447} Schoonover, “Ectoplasms, Evanescence, and Photography,” 33.
\textsuperscript{448} Quoted in Hustvedt, \textit{Medical Muses}, 36.
\textsuperscript{449} Quoted in Hustvedt, \textit{Medical Muses}, 36.
\end{flushright}
these duped visitors had had to climb the fence in order to liberate the others. However, when on her deathbed she had been asked if her performances in the “Tuesday Lectures” had been nothing more than simulation, she allegedly replied “Simulation! Do you think that it would have been easy to fool Monsieur Charcot? Oh yes, there were certainly some jokers who tried! He would look them straight in the eye and say ‘Be still.’”<sup>450</sup>

Charcot’s work on hysteria thus relied on his ability to control and master his inherently conniving female subjects.

For the psychical researcher—as for the investigator of hysteria—the reliance upon a constantly secreting, transformative, and “excessively versatile” female body presented an extraordinary leap from controlled, secure scientific methodologies. Consequently, many psychical researchers proceeded as Jean-Martin Charcot had done before them and adopted two main strategies to secure the validity of their scientific studies of ectoplasm: extensive controls and regulations over their mediums’ bodies; and reliance upon the camera as an objective instrument of observation. The predicate of such methodology was that science and technology could perfectly control the female body, rendering doctors and scientists immune to the treachery and duplicity of their subjects.

First, the need for control over the female body led psychical researchers to resort to seemingly extreme measures. Many undressed their mediums in order to closely examine their body and orifices before—and during—the séances. Some also used the holding of hands to insure that mediums had little opportunity for fraud during the experiments, while others proceeded by tying them to their chairs.<sup>451</sup> As such, Margery

---


<sup>451</sup> Marlene Tromp explains: “to ensure that the spirit was not the medium in disguise, measures—sometimes dramatic or extreme—were taken…. She might be bound to the chair within [the cabinet] by chains or ropes; have her hair nailed to the cabinet; have a string run through the hole in her pierced ear to a
Crandon was frequently asked to undress and she often had her hands, feet, and head tied during materializations (see figure 27). Although Mary Marshall’s séances never resorted to such an extreme, the medium was observed naked before each séance by a female participant and her hands were held during séances by sitters on each of her sides. Hamilton explained: “In a room apart from the séance room she was disrobed by Miss Turner. Following this the upper parts of her body—head, neck, shoulders, breasts and under-arms—were sponged with warm water…. The medium was then dressed in one undergarment, a low-necked sleeveless gown and slippers. These were provided for her. This procedure, which came fully into practice in 1929, was enforced throughout the entire investigation.”

---


452 Hamilton, *Intention and Survival*, 34.

238
Second, investigators countered the suspiciousness of the female body by utilizing and defining the photographic apparatus as a true, objective observer of psychic phenomena. Indeed, since light and physical handling were to cause distress to mediums according to their control-spirits, only photography’s new developments could provide a means for recording ectoplasms’ fleeting apparitions. Hamilton remarked that although ectoplasms shied away from most methods of observation: “Fortunately for the investigator, teleplasm can withstand the damaging effects of a photographic flash without too great discomfort to the medium, providing the exposure is exceedingly brief. At present, photography of the substance is the most valuable means at our disposal of showing its objective reality and of studying its morphology and processes.”453 The

photographic apparatus was particularly welcomed since new developments made the exposure time shorter, while the increasing manufacture of cameras permitted amateurs to procure themselves with the latest tools. But, for psychical researchers, the advantage of photography principally rested in its apparent objectivity. The appearances of ectoplasms on the photographic plates were indeed conceived as a powerful counter-argument to those who stated that sitters had been naively deceived by mediums taking advantage of their imagination and wish to believe.

Charcot had first encountered the scientific value of the photographic process in documenting hysteria. He had installed a medical photographic studio in the Salpêtrière in 1875 and, by the late 1880s, he appointed Albert Londe as a resident photographer at the institution, a position which entrenched the symptomatology of hysteria in its visual productions. In his foundational work Invention of Hysteria, first published in French in 1982, Georges Didi-Huberman demonstrated that Charcot provided tableaux of the disease that became a point of reference in the medical literature. The Salpêtrière thus became, under Charcot, an “image factory” embracing a “triple project of science, therapy and pedagogy.” Through photography, Charcot’s patients became reified images of the disease, travelling through Europe and America as objective definitions of the physical manifestations of hysteria. As Didi-Huberman writes, photography “seemed to fulfill the very ideal of ‘Observation,’ reuniting the case and the tableau. This is why, in the nineteenth century, photography became...in the words of Albert Londe, director

---

454 Karl Schoonover notes that, by the first decades of the twentieth century: “Once the nearly exclusive domain of professionals and a few wealthy hobbyists, photography was now fully accessible to the amateur, and the camera had quickly become a household item in many middle-class families.” (Schoonover, “Ectoplasms, Evanescence, and Photography,” 36.)

of the photographic department of the Salpêtrière in the 1880s...‘the scientist’s true retina.’” While hysterics could be fluid, malleable, even conniving, photography did not lie.

Thus, the precarious subjectivity presented in female mediumship and forms of hysteria such as dermographism disturbed scientific and medical observers who attempted to redefine the female body by controlling its productions. Conceived as a double of the photographic plate, this body became a site of reproduction of various inscriptions that could be controlled like any other instruments of science in order to reach objective truths.

Unsurprisingly, however, Didi-Huberman demonstrates through his analysis of the Salpêtrière archive that photography did deceive. Despite their claims to objectivity, the images of the Salpêtrière were always at least partially staged, whether through the addition of backgrounds and make-up or through the performances of specific poses. As such, they revealed a set of cultural ideas that shaped their creation. For Didi-Huberman, the visual iconography of the Salpêtrière indeed reframed the hysterical body into a sign, a vehicle of meanings that could be controlled by medical authorities. Janet Beizer, defining dermographic hysterics as “ventriloquized bodies” similarly notes: “In fact, the body does not speak; it is spoken, ventriloquized by the master text that makes it signify.” Yet, she asks: “what would happen if the hysterical body no longer allowed itself to be signed, labeled, diagnosed, but if, insubordinate, itself become a creator, a producer of meaning...?”

456 Didi-Huberman, Invention of Hysteria, 32.
457 Beizer, Ventriloquized Bodies, 24.
458 Beizer, Ventriloquized Bodies, 26.
Akin to the iconography of dermographism, the archives of the Mary Marshall and Margery Crandon materializations present, under the camera’s façade of objectivity, the highly staged performances of ectoplasmic productions. However, unlike the Salpêtrière medical authorities, psychical researchers had very little control over the trance personalities’ manoeuvres. Indeed, against Margaret Lillian Hamilton’s claim that because her father, Dr. Hamilton, “did all his own developing, enlarging and printing,” therefore, the photographs “were under his complete oversight,”\(^{459}\) the next section demonstrates that ectoplasmic apparitions contained a vast amount of excess that eluded the controls and methods of science, thus granting trance personalities much power over the séances. As such, whereas the voices heard or pronounced by hysterical patients seemed of little consequence for the production of the Salpêtrière photographic record, mediums’ trance personalities intervened strongly in the unfolding and visual documentation of séances. Insubordinate, these personalities appropriated the female body through a different language and imagery. Unlike dermographic hysterics, who were condemned to embody the sentences their doctors had inscribed upon them, mediums produced from their pores and orifices their own imaginative creations and as such constantly perplexed the scientific gaze that sought to control their liquefying bodies.

“Who is running this show anyway?” Ectoplasm and spirits’ artistry

Occasionally, ectoplasmic séances were unproductive: hours would pass and nothing would happen. Such was the case of a séance in Winnipeg on September 17\(^{th}\), 1928. Referring to the mysterious process by which the control spirit Walter had been believed

to activate a bell in the séance room through telekinetic means, one of the sitters asked him: “come on, Walter. Give us a ring to waken us up.” The séance notes then describe the trance personality’s particular response to the demand. He asked through Mary Marshall’s voice: “Who is running this show anyway?” before himself voicing his own demands. First, he asked the sitters to stop what he referred to as “canned music;” “‘Oh take it off! Take it off!... It’s too distracting.’” Then, he ordered them: “‘Sing up! Sing up!’(Standing up. Stamps feet in time to music…) ‘Sing up! Sing Golden Slippers…’” Mixed with his entertaining performance of anger, the trance personality here introduced a rather fascinating question: who, indeed, was primarily responsible for the parameters and methodologies of ectoplasmic experiments?

The apparent objectification of the medium under the rigid controls of psychical researchers’ conception of science described previously should not obscure the fact that her trance personalities were highly active in the processes of ectoplasmic materializations. Indeed, these personalities very often determined the experiments’ results. In her article “Bawdy Technologies and the Birth of Ectoplasm,” L. Anne Delgado thus suggests that “these women were unquestionably more in control of the narrative than either their observers or contemporary critics acknowledge or recognize and as such claimed a measure of agency uncommon to most women of the period.” In my view, Delgado’s article leaves aside the complexity of such agency and brushes over the more tragic circumstances of séances (she does not mention the paradoxical fact, for instance, that in order to “invert the gendered hierarchies that existed in the scientific and para-scientific production of knowledge,” female mediums also submitted themselves to

460 “Walter’s Preparations Completed: Séance notes of September 17, 1928, taken by Margaret Hamilton.” Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections.

the strenuous physical processes and rigid constraints of séances). However, she is certainly right to note that mediums were far from passive and silent vehicles of ectoplasmic transmissions and were, in fact, often more in control than their scientific observers.

Hamilton himself revealed how he had no choice but to obey Mary Marshall’s trance personalities if he wished to witness their materializations: “the question will arise—how did we know where to focus the cameras, and in the second place, when to release the flashlight? Astonishing as it may seem, days, weeks, and sometimes months in advance we were informed by the leading trance entity at what point the coming phenomena would in all likelihood appear.... The trance directors as well arranged for and gave the signals for exploding the flashlight.” Hamilton’s use of the expression “trance directors” is, of course, not fortuitous as control-spirits frequently orchestrated the unfolding of séances and they did so with a sense for the dramatic and the spectacular. As Margery Crandon’s trance personality exclaimed at a séance in February 26th, 1925: “This head I am making will be a real head, bones and all features. You people will get the shock of your lives!”

As such, in a paradoxical move, spirit personalities were often the ones requesting the rigorous controls implemented by their scientific observers. Although Margery Crandon often complained of physical distress, for instance, her control-spirit Walter continued to ask for her participation in the processes of materializations. He once

462 Delgado, “Bawdy Technologies,” 6. In arguing that contemporary critics have failed to acknowledge the agency of female ectoplasmic mediums, Delgado herself also fails to account for the study of Ruth Brandon, which offers a compelling argument revealing the conscious, and intentional, modes of fraudulence employed by these mediums to obtain higher social positions. (See Brandon, “Why Ectoplasm?” and “Magicians among the Spirits.” The Spiritualists, 127-190).
463 Hamilton, Intention and Survival, 23.
464 Quoted in Warner, Phantasmagoria, 302.
commented through the medium’s own voice, after her nose had began to bleed: “Pay no attention to her. Let her groan. She hasn’t any pain. Blow your nose, Kid…. She must sit very tight. Don’t ask her how she feels.” Similarly, Hamilton noted that Mary Marshall had frequently expressed her wishes to discontinue her participation in the séances. He wrote: “at times throughout the years she expressed a desire to withdraw from the work.” Yet, he added, “Walter’s attitude in these cases is interesting in that it showed a complete opposition to the medium’s normal self.” Walter insisted upon the necessity for Mary Marshall’s participation in the Winnipeg circle for, he claimed, her mediumistic powers were essentials to the production of ectoplasm.

Researchers were often impressed by such attitude and thus valued the trance personalities’ contributions more highly. For instance, Hamilton was more inclined to participate in research with the Walter personality after he had heard the latter voice important parameters to prevent fraud in the séance room. Indeed, when Walter demanded that the bell he had promised to ring through telekinetic means be placed further away from the medium: “This statement, revealing as it did the new trance entity’s recognition of the necessity for contrafraudulent conditions, caught Dr. Hamilton’s interest and for the first time he felt inclined to give Walter his full cooperation.” Akin to speaking mediums, who had gained access to powerful discursive positions by adhering to limiting conceptions of women as passive technologies, ectoplasmic mediums gained access to a powerful control over the séances’ mise-en-scène by submitting themselves to suspicious and objectifying methods of observation.

---

465 Quoted in Warner, Phantasmagoria, 304.  
467 Hamilton, Intention and Survival, 28.
The following image (see figure 28) provides a rich illustration of the séances’ orchestration by trance personalities. It presents the alleged teleplasm of a spirit entity named Lucy, who had often been the control-spirit of the medium Mrs. Samuel Marshall—Mary Marshall’s sister in law—in the Hamilton séances. Walter had earlier announced that this materialization would be one of his most ambitious projects. He had claimed that no other photographic experiment would be held until its completion, which “would take about twenty séances.”\(^{468}\) He then organized the séances differently for this production, remarking: “Anybody coming into the cabinet must come in by the right…. ‘This side,’ and bangs the wall of the cabinet to the medium’s right…. I am building on the medium’s left and I don’t want anyone to interfere.”\(^{469}\) He also requested that, during the “building period,” Mary Marshall be allowed not to change her clothes before séances if she did not wish to. In a commanding tone, he added: “no one is to enter this room after you leave it to-night and don’t think I won’t know if anyone does enter.”\(^{470}\) Finally, he stated that, on the decided date of the apparition, when the building phase would come to its end, “the medium must be sponged off completely and have an entire change of garments. Nothing she brings from her home must she have on. Nothing! I wish every part of her body to be examined…. I would like some person who doesn’t sit in the circle to be doing this.”\(^{471}\) Hamilton then proceeded with great caution to take the photograph on Walter’s signal and developed the results in front of an observer specially called upon to verify the authenticity of the phenomenon on this particular occasion.

\(^{468}\) Hamilton, *Intention and Survival*, 166.


\(^{471}\) Hamilton, *Intention and Survival*, 175.
In controlling the experiments, mediums’ trance personalities thus enjoyed particularly powerful positions. Occasionally, this even led them to order their prominent sitters to acquiesce to their every demand. As noted earlier, Walter often used this power to bully sitters in the Winnipeg circle into singing various songs of his choice. His favourite was “Jingle Bells,” which he claimed helped restore spiritual energies necessary for ectoplasmic productions. For the researcher, such demands were an embarrassing, yet necessary reality of séances. Hamilton noted: “Apart from the imagined loss of dignity in scientific investigation this technique is perfectly admissible. Indeed, it is a distinct aid in setting up well-defined séance routines aimed at minimizing the medium’s natural inhibitions to the trance state.”

Despite Hamilton’s claim, however, Stanley McMullin remarks quite justly that: “The visual image of the illustrious citizens of Winnipeg

---

singing ‘Jingle Bells’ at the top of their voices in the middle of a hot summer day to keep the forces of good strong against the evil spirits striving to disrupt the séance does have a strong element of the grotesque about it.”⁴⁷³ When appearing in the Margery Crandon séances, Walter also requested songs on many occasions. However, with the Boston family, he displayed—certainly not insignificantly—a preference for the “Wedding March.” The Crandon séances thus functioned not only as staged repetitions of loss and recuperation of the flesh, but as constant reminders of wedding vows and lovers’ promises. This “theme song” is particularly revealing when one considers the words of one commentator of Margery Crandon’s séances who suggested that her husband, the gynaecologist and psychical researcher, Dr. L. R. G. Crandon “was well connected in Boston through his medical practice, and a widower twice over when Margery married him; she was also twenty-five years younger than him, and less securely placed in Boston society…. One of the scientists called in to examine her activities suggested that ‘her husband was tired of her and it was with the hope of regaining his confidence and affection that she had invented the mediumship.’”⁴⁷⁴ In orchestrating the séances, Margery Crandon’s trance personalities thus used their power to remind her husband of his marital duties.

Therefore, despite psychical researchers’ attempts to control the conditions of materializations, trance personalities regularly intervened in the scientific study of ectoplasm. These personalities frequently transformed the scientific character of séances into highly imaginative performances that eluded the researchers’ scientific approach in re-appropriating the female body through spectacular and artistic means. Marina Warner

⁴⁷⁴ Quoted in Warner, Phantasmagoria, 303.
writes: “The lurid, commingling of the female physical display, scientific language, and forensic, evidentiary process brings to a prurient culmination the labours of psychical investigators since the foundation of the Society for Psychical Research. But the séances…could also be included among the remarkable studio practices of the period, while the mediums could be numbered among extraordinary performance artists of the period.”

In many photographs presented by the Hamilton circle, ectoplasms took the shape of adornments, in a form of artistry that disrupted the researcher’s scientific approach. In a séance in September 8th, 1929, for instance, the circle witnessed tear-shaped ectoplasms appear in both Mary Marshall’s eyes while another ectoplasmic shape ornamented her neck (see figure 29).

---

475 Warner, Phantasmagoria, 295.
Two weeks later, on September 22nd, Walter had claimed to materialize the face of the English statesman and Prime Minister William E. Gladstone, through Mary Marshall’s mouth (see figure 30). Encircling Gladstone, ectoplasms developed as striking ornaments on the medium’s face and neck, transforming her into a beautifully outlandish figure. To Hamilton’s question on this fantastic arrangement—“Why this undoubtedly bizarre effect?”—the medium’s trance personality responded: “Since the medium was wearing a ‘party’ dress she must have all the trimmings including the ‘ear ring’ and the ‘bow,’ and the ‘cap,’ and also the beads.”476 Yet, such answer could not satisfy the scientist, who could not interpret the role of the apparently superfluous ectoplasm in the

medium’s nostril among this otherwise poetic configuration. While Walter had seemed playful in his ornamentation of the medium, Hamilton could not see this excretion as part of the intelligent design. As such, he concluded: “The small mass emerging from the nostrils has apparently no place in the humorous arrangement of the components of the manifestation but it may well indicate one of the exit points of the teleplasm.”

Figure 30. W.E. Gladstone Teleplasmic Face. Photograph from the séance of September 22, 1929.

The spectacles of ectoplasmic productions offered an artistic quality that eluded the forensic language of psychical investigators as it reminded researchers of the transformations and elusiveness of the female body through its recurrent embellishments. Walter playfully thwarted the rigor of the experiments, repeatedly outwitting the authority of scientists. Thus, to contemporary observers, Marshall’s materializations (as those of Margery Crandon) ubiquitously seem more concerned with shocking sitters and playing with their curious beliefs about the female body, than with presenting an irrefutable proof of the afterlife. These mediums thereby demonstrated a greater control over their physical performances than the dermatographic hysterics of the Salpêtrière. Such a power relied on dominant fantasies of the female body, which trance personalities manipulated by exuding their observers’ fears of sexuality, death, and femininity. Through such approaches, trance personalities demonstrated the inherent excess of the female body, always escaping the parameters of the scientific fantasy of objective analysis.

**Conclusion**

Following the prophetical writing imprinted upon her skin, Blanche Wittmann spent the rest of her life at the hospital whose named had been so aptly stamped upon her. Although her attacks of hysteria vanished after the death of Charcot—and after the subsequent decline of the medical fascination for the Salpêtrière hysterics—she remained in the institution which had made her an international celebrity. While she had spent the first part of her time at the Salpêtrière as the object of its “image factory,” she later moved in different representations of the symptomatology of hysteria, she later moved to the other

side of the camera. First, she worked as an assistant in Albert Londe’s photography laboratory. Then, she joined the new radiology services of the institution as a technician. However, at a time when the effects of radiation were not well understood, technicians were often at risk. In a particularly cruel turn of fate, after spending her life as the “queen” of the Salpêtrière images, Wittmann died of their effects when she became one of the early victims of radiology-induced cancer in 1912. Wittmann’s story crystallizes perhaps more than other hysterics of the Salpêtrière the complex relationship between bodies and images. As Asti Hustvedt remarks: “Blanche’s moment in the limelight provides an extraordinary opportunity to look at the ways in which cultures and bodies collide to produce new sets of symptoms, which in turn produce new diseases.”

Her story reveals that images transform the bodies they depict according to the gaze which creates and views them.

Wittmann’s photographs can therefore expose the scientific imagination of the female body as well as the complex relationship between male scientists and female patients at the Salpêtrière. In Invention of Hysteria, Didi-Huberman argues that the visual accounts of hysteria at the institution in the last third of the nineteenth century constituted a form of fiction that manipulated the female body to respond to the doctors’ imaginary. Although Didi-Huberman rightly recognizes that hysterics expressed real suffering, he demonstrates that this expression and its reception in the medical community were shaped by preconceptions about the female body and its relation to new technological developments. Charcot’s photographic evidence, for instance, necessitated a fair amount of “narrative construction,” including the configuration of scenery, the adoption of particular poses by patients, and the addition of make-up to highlight certain aspects of

---

479 Hustvedt, Medical Muses, 139.
the disease. Charcot framed a narrative of hysteria in which photographic representations served to construct the ill body as passive evidence of an objective scientific gaze. Or, to quote Ann Golomb Hoffman: “The visual iconography of hysteria in the regime of Charcot makes us aware of the silencing of the female subject. Here, the photograph speaks for the woman.”

The photographs of L. R. G. Crandon and T. G. Hamilton echo the iconography of the Salpêtrière in their form, scientific endeavour, and forensic quality. This chapter’s emphasis on the iconographic tradition of the Salpêtrière consequently reflected on the meaning of the female body in scientific discourses, by contrasting both visual archives through the cultural approach developed after Didi-Huberman. My aim was to unveil the representation of the female body masked under the apparent objectivity of the researcher and the ways both hysterics and mediums responded to this imagination.

Of particular interest in the Hamilton and Crandon séances was how this conception of the female body was shaped through the metaphors of birth, excretion, and vomiting. Here, as in the phenomenon of dermatoglyphism, the subject exposed the precariousness of the divide erected between the “I” and its others. Like the Salpêtrière iconography, the Hamilton archive attempted to reframe the aberrances of the female body through a forensic approach, from which mysterious materializations upon women’s skin were re-interpreted in the materialistic vocabulary of science. The medium’s excessive, duplicitous subjectivity thus became the site of a complex dynamic of performance and control, or hiding and revealing, shaping the relation between female mediums and male scientists. Through their methodologies, scientists revealed a suspicion of the female body of the medium as an entity inclined to deceive, to hide, to

---

manipulate, and they proceeded to explore its every orifice through the gaze of the camera, in an attempt to completely elude its mysteries.

Both the hysteria and ectoplasmic archives certainly demanded the collaboration of female subjects, who, whether consciously or not, transformed their bodies to respond to their observers’ presumptions. However, an important difference rested between the status of the hysteric and that of the ectoplasmic medium. Mediums had indeed much more control over their bodies as their trance personalities often enjoyed free-reign over the unfolding of séances. While appearing complacent to the rigid controls and limitations placed upon the medium, séances’ trance personalities therefore re-appropriated the female body through their artistic performances. The expulsion of dead skin, organs, and human shapes from every orifice of their bodies metaphorically rendered an understanding of femininity as exceeding and escaping the male scientific gaze.
CONCLUSION

The Legacies of Spiritual Communications

They shall train themselves to go in public to become orators and oratresses, Strong and sweet shall their tongues be, poems and materials of poems shall come from their lives, they shall be makers and finders, Of them and of their works shall emerge divine conveyers, to convey gospels. (Walt Whitman, “Mediums”)481

Talking nonsense: psychoanalysis and female mediumship

In a recent interview, feminist author Jacqueline Rose reflected: “I have always thought and still think that there are only two places in culture where you can say outrageous things—like, if you’re a woman, ‘I don’t think I’m a woman,’ or if you’re a man, ‘I don’t think I’m a man’—without being carted off. And one is literature and the other is psychoanalysis. They are the places where you can speak something dissolute and scandalous and impossible and unmanageable, and it’s contained by a form of writing or a form of speech—it’s what you’re meant to be doing in a certain way.”482 Within the frameworks of psychoanalysis and literature, Rose addresses the questions: What is the relationship between language and sexual difference? To what extent is sexual difference inscribed, questioned or denied in certain structures of discourse? In this research, I have understood mediumship as a third location in culture which historically allowed for the

verbalization of the impossible—notwithstanding the very claim that the female body could carry the voice and knowledge of agents identified as male. The organization of discourse in séances allowed mediums to exclaim most scandalously—“I don’t think I am a woman”—at least in the provisional positioning of the “I” as a spokesperson for the dead. As such, I have argued that spiritual channeling provided a relatively secure space of expression in which certain women could challenge their marginalization in the social order by re-exploring the signification of gender identity and its enactment in discourse. This analysis does not negate the tragedy of many mediums’ stories, nor their problematic powerlessness to assume the responsibility of authorship. Yet, it exposes the practice of trance speaking as a rich and provocative strategy of legitimization through which women have historically confronted patriarchal registers of power. As Marlene Tromp suggests: “There is no denying that Spiritualist mediums sometimes saw the new liberties work against them. Still, the freedom they achieved and exploited are worthy of scholarly interest and investigation.”

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, séances were scandalous and dangerous precisely because they appealed to a different register of power, discourse, and meaning that contained the medium’s unmanageable speech. It is therefore not surprising that such speech frequently appeared as a matter of concern in nineteenth-century literature. An 1869 article from L’Écho du cabinet paroissial de Montréal, among others, warned readers against the threats of séances’ occult communications which, according to its author, could only originate from evil spirits. Noting the strangeness of trance discourses, the article claimed that the “spirits’ attitude lacks the dignity that belongs to

---

good angels…. Their language is even more pitiful than their actions. Unnecessary words, murky and emphatic verbiage: quite often INDECENT, sudden reversals in which, after edifying advice, follow others which are not. No; good spirits do not talk like that.” Indeed, the author added, the language of angels “may be simple and popular, but it is always dignified.”

Elaborating on Rose’s quotation, I have here argued that psychoanalysis’ attempt at listening to the experiences of those who are traditionally silenced in dominant institutions could illuminate séances’ manifestations as complex, disguised productions of the speaking subject. The psychoanalytic framework has permitted me to interpret mediums’ outrageous “unnecessary words” and “murky and emphatic verbiage,” not as communications of evil spirits, but as oblique contestations of sexual hierarchies and the disguised expression of internal conflicts in marginalized subjects.

Such a framework has led me to compare the upsurges of séances and hysteria in the late nineteenth century to explore how both events reveal different responses to women’s oppression under the rigidity of Victorian sex-roles. I have suggested that while hysteria was presented as a radical rejection of the symbolic order that could only manifest itself by incapacitating the subject, mediumship momentarily recreated from the same rejection a relation to the social order that was both empowering and complicit. Instead of losing their abilities to function in social institutions, mediums imagined in trance new genealogies through which they could redefine their discursive positions. In

---

484 My translation from “L’attitude des esprits révélateurs manque de la dignité qui convient aux bons anges…. Leur langage est plus pitoyable encore que leurs actes. Paroles inutiles, verbiage nuageux et emphatique : assez souvent INDECENT, revirements subits qui, à des conseils édifiants, en font succéder d’autres qui ne le sont plus. Non : les bons esprits ne parlent pas ainsi.” And “peut être simple et populaire, mais il est toujours digne.” (“Le Diable existe-t-il et que fait-il ?” L’Écho du cabinet paroissial de Montréal 11, no. 2 (February1869): 91).
other words, while both hysterics and mediums appeared to have shared a sense of disempowerment—which notably expressed itself through their ventriloquism—the sometimes priestly, sometimes angry, sometimes playful, and sometimes “indecent” verbiage of trance personalities formed a different image of authorship that validated mediums’ endeavours. Elma Comstock and her colleague Susan Kilborn adopted the voice of the highly reputed Dr. Moses Colby to reconfigure their place in the largely male-dominated field of medicine. Kilborn and Comstock were able to develop more confidence and authority in their medical endeavours and to find inspiration to create new knowledge of the body by internalizing Colby’s voice and authority. Through their creations of spectral authorships, Susanna Moodie, Annie Florence Smith, Flora MacDonald Denison, Emma Hardinge Britten, and Mary Marshall also established strategic positions as producers of knowledge that disrupted traditional sexual hierarchies. Mediums were perhaps speaking something mad, but they created a framework that contained and justified their scandalous discourses.

Reading the stories of female mediums through a framework attentive to oblique and disguised forms of communications, I wished to explore the ways discourses are shaped, silenced, and camouflaged in response to socio-political contexts. In *Ventriloquized Bodies*, Janet Beizer writes that “discourse in the larger sense is not only what is spoken, but what is silenced, and what is then imposed in its place.”485 Within the analytic scene, the speech act must be considered in this “larger sense,” as its meaning lies in tonality, affect, grammatical organization, and omissions. Discourse is contained not only by what is enunciated, but also by the performance of enunciation. Through such

---

an understanding of discourse, I argued séances participated in the growth of feminist perspectives at the turn of the century by providing many women a space in which they could explore notions of female subjectivity. In addressing not only the “emphatic verbiage” of spirits, but their modes of elocution, their tonality, their bodily inscriptions, and the silences on which they were established, one can see how the practice of trance speaking destabilized cultural presumptions regarding who is allowed to speak, how marginalized subjects can be heard, and—as Rose’s quotation underscores—what can be said. Such a perspective can thus indicate how mediums were able to bring forth new reflections on what it means to define oneself, and to be defined, as a woman.

**Writing with ghosts: séances and the understanding of female subjectivity**

Introducing her study of spiritualism in the United States, Molly McGarry writes: “it is worth asking why, in certain historical moments, people need to speak with the past. Why, in the middle of the late nineteenth century, did Americans want to converse with their dead ancestors, to look backwards as they strove forward?” One might add: Why, throughout the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the early twentieth centuries, did women, in particular, decide to search for these ancestors? The stories of the female mediums introduced in this research illuminate how the knowledge or imagination of renowned past lineages could counter Victorian and Edwardian women’s sense of oppression in largely male-dominated social institutions. In *A Room of One’s Own*, Virginia Woolf suggested that: “A woman writing thinks back

---

through her mothers.” Yet, in the early twentieth century, she added, “all these infinitely obscure lives…remain to be recorded.” Woolf related this apparent lack of women’s historical legacies to their concurrent subjugation: “If one is a woman,” she wrote, “one is often surprised by a splitting of consciousness…when from being the natural inheritor of civilization, she becomes, on the contrary, outside of it, alien and critical.” Placed outside of the renowned lineages of civilization, women’s access to discourse would undoubtedly have been challenging. As part of her feminist project, Woolf therefore hoped to become a “deliverer advancing with lights across the waste of years to the rescue of some stranded ghost…waiting, appealing, forgotten, in the growing gloom.” Whether real or imaginary, past ghosts and ancestors condition for Woolf the possibility of writing in the present, a possibility which would have been largely denied to late-nineteenth-century women who knew very little of past women authors and authorities.

Akin to Woolf, Victorian and Edwardian mediums created versions of the past that opened a space for the imagination of different forms of discourses in the present. Through the support and encouragements of well-recognized spirits, mediums positioned their allocution in spiritual genealogies that allowed them to write original literary works (Chapter 3), express political ideas in public platforms (Chapter 4), and propose new scientific conceptions of the body (Chapter 2 and Chapter 5). Reinventing their relation to the past by “rescuing some stranded ghost,” mediums could create artistic, political, religious and scientific knowledge otherwise unspeakable for women. Creating myriad

489 Woolf, A Room of One’s Own, 93.
490 Woolf, The Essays, 119.
personalities through the very “splitting of [their] consciousness,” women could find in the séance a momentary space to speak and write as inheritors of past knowledge and artistic lineages.

As I revisited the history of spiritual séances in the country, I found myself confirming Woolf’s comment on the importance of spectral legacies as I was constantly reminded of the “mothers” and “ghosts” who have now been rescued as important figures in feminist criticism. From Bertha Pappenheim to Blanche Wittmann, and from Antigone to Judith Shakespeare, these powerful figures have been recuperated, transformed, and fictionalized in many writings by and about women. Both real and imaginary, they have inspired and challenged the ways feminists think of women’s discourses and the relations between women and language. As I attempted to think through the problems of female mediumship, their ghostly presences came to illuminate how the dilemmas and conflicts mediums faced have remained important points of tensions in feminist theory.

Bertha Pappenheim and Blanche Wittmann, for instance, have appeared in a plethora of feminist writings as canvas for their cultures’ representations of womanhood. Although they are both historical figures, contemporary writers have shown that they were also constructions responding to their epoch’s beliefs about the female body. Victorian and Edwardian séances similarly illustrate how personal experiences and

---

cultural constructions so often intersect. Like Blanche Wittmann, who defended the true character of her hysterical symptoms, mediums often claimed the reality of their spiritual encounters. Yet, the many ways in which these encounters have expressed themselves seemed to have been to a certain extent culturally determined. Like Pappenheim and Wittmann’s hysterical symptoms, the ghosts invoked in séances have indeed evolved in parallel with changes in culture, politics, and science. From the invention of the telegraph to new developments in photography, and from discoveries in neurology to the advancement of gynaecology, the mise-en-scène and characters of séances reflected changing belief-systems and world-views that corresponded to their transforming cultures. Through a dialogue with such figures of hysteria and their interpretations in contemporary studies, I have therefore argued that the history of spiritual manifestations could offer a critical opportunity to explore the effects of culture on the performances of bodies. Like the dermographic skin, the medium often became the surface upon which came to be reflected a web of ideas on womanhood, pathology and death, amongst others.

Concurrently, the imaginary figures of Judith Shakespeare and Antigone have become powerful tools to re-articulate women’s positions as producers and interlocutors of discourse. Their tragic deaths in both Woolf’s and Sophocles’ stories have constituted important sites for feminist authors to articulate women’s relation to writing and public speaking. Both recuperated as symbols of women’s oppression and inspiring figures of resistance, these heroines have demonstrated in contemporary reflections the problems and complexities of feminist politics. For instance, in 2008, Toril Moi positioned herself against what she defined as a dominant current in “cutting-edge feminist theory” through
her reading of Judith Shakespeare’s story.\textsuperscript{492} Through this reading, Moi suggested that such a current had mistakenly claimed that women should “‘eliminate’ their gendered…subjectivity, or in other words to masquerade as some kind of generic universal human being, in ways that devaluate their actual experiences as embodied human beings in the world.”\textsuperscript{493} Woolf’s imaginary ancestor led Moi to argue, instead, that “if a woman’s vision of the world is strongly marked by her gender, that is potentially as interesting as the absence of a gendered view. The whole point, after all, is to avoid laying down requirements for what a woman’s writing must be like.”\textsuperscript{494} Like Moi’s interpretation of Judith Shakespeare, the female mediums I have introduced were constantly juggling their incapacity to completely escape their internalization of gendered expectations and their wish to speak, to act, and to know “like” men. The result was a mind at war with itself, oscillating between two impossible positions, a result which does not appear so different than the dilemmas Moi describes facing today’s women authors who may feel obliged to deny their internalization of any gendered norms.

Now part of the feminist language, such figures can illustrate how fantasies about gendered bodies work, as well as their historical persistence, transformations, and questionings. In dialoguing with Judith Shakespeare, Victorian Antigone, Anna O. and Blanche Wittmann, I hope to have conveyed the significance of mediumship for continuing questionings of women’s agencies. My aim was not to answer the impossible question “what is a woman?” but to illuminate how this question was asked in a variety of ways through the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. My objective was to

\textsuperscript{493} Moi, “I Am Not a Woman,” 265.
\textsuperscript{494} Moi, “I Am Not a Woman,” 268.
address, in other words, some of the different ways in which the notion of female subjectivity has been conceived and challenged in historically and culturally specific contexts. Through this reflection, I wished explore how these tensions can today highlight the fallacy of the fixed polarities between male and female discourses, identities, and bodies by revealing how such polarities are highly contingent upon cultural constructions. Female mediums’ stories can indeed expose how modernity has shaped understandings of femininity, agency, and sexuality and the ways in which such understandings have been internalized, enacted, or contested by subjects. This history, I believe, can remain important for a feminism concerned with the demystification of a “female nature,” but also attentive to the profound effects of the internalization of sexual and gendered identifications.
BIBLIOGRAPHY

Archives Consulted

Hamilton Family fonds, University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections.

Denton Family Papers, Wellesley Historical Society.

Flora MacDonald Denison papers. Merrill Denison Fonds. University of Toronto Library.

Patrick Hamilton Ewing Collection, Library and Archives Canada.

Traill Family Collection, Public Archives of Canada.

John Craigie Papers, Metropolitan Toronto Library, Baldwin Room.

Emily Howard Stowe Collection, Queen’s University Archives.

Additional Sources

“Alma Mater Society of Queen’s University.” Queen’s University Journal 21, no. 9 (March 1894): 130.


Austin, Benjamin F. Sketch of the Rev. Dr. Austin’s Life: the Story of the Heresy Trial, the Charges Preferred, Synopsis of the Heresy sermon, Address of Rev. Dr. Austin at the London Annual Conference, Windsor, June 1st 1899, on the Occasion of his Trial for Heresy. B. F. Austin Publisher, 1899.

Austin, Benjamin F. What Converted me to Spiritualism. Toronto: Austin Publishing, 1900.


Broome, Jeremy. “Skin Writing.” *Strand Magazine* 14 (1897): 453-456. [http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015056049466;view=1up;seq=1](http://babel.hathitrust.org/cgi/pt?id=mdp.39015056049466;view=1up;seq=1)


*Census of Canada, fourth, 1901*, vol. 1. Ottawa, 1901.

*Census of Canada, fifth, 1911*, vol. 2. Ottawa, 1913.

*Census of Canada, sixth, 1921*, vol.1. Ottawa, 1924.

*Census of Canada, seventh, 1931*, vol. 2. Ottawa, 1933.


Flournoy, Théodore. “Nouvelles observations sur un cas de somnambulisme avec glossolalie.” Archives de Psychologie, 1 (1902).


“Fruits of Protestant Spiritualism.” *The True witness and Catholic Chronicle* 9, no. 10 (October 15, 1858), 7.


“Ghosts of Eminent Canadians: The Ghost of George Brown.” *Arcturus* 1, no. 7 (February 26, 1887): 103-104.


“Le diable existe-t-il et que fait-il ?” *L’Écho du cabinet paroissial de Montréal* 11, no 2, (February 1869): 87-92.


Lloyd, Professor Rev. “Convocation of the Undergraduates in Arts and Medicine of Trinity University.” *Trinity University Review* 4, nos. 8, 9, 10 (1891): 130-132.


“Modern Necromancy.” The Church Times, June 24 1854.


Robinson, Percy J. “Antigone and Electra.” *The University of Toronto Quarterly* 2, no. 4, (June 1896): 244-257.


“Science: Margery Plays Cards.” *Time* (February 21 1938).


“Spiritualism and Insanity.” *Canadian Journal of Medical Science* 2, no.5, May 1877.

“Spiritualism.” *The Church Times*, January 21 1854.

“Spiritualism.” *The Medical Chronicle* 1, no. 8, January 1854.


Wallraven, Miriam. “‘A Mere Instrument’ or ‘Proud As Lucifer’? Selfpresentations in the Occult Autobiographies by Emma Hardinge Britten (1900) and Annie Besant (1893).” *Women’s Writing* 15, no. 3 (December 2008): 390-411.


**CURRICULUM VITAE**

**Name**
Claudie Massicotte

**Post-secondary Education and Degrees:**
Western University
London, Ontario, Canada
2009-2013, Ph.D.

Université de Montréal
Montréal, Québec, Canada
2007-2009, M.A.

Université de Montréal
Montréal, Québec, Canada
2004-2007, B.A.

**Honours and Awards:**
Social Science and Humanities Research Council
Doctoral Fellowship, 2012-2013

Richard J. Schmeelk Canadian Fellowship
Doctoral Fellowship, 2011-2013

Fonds Québécois de Recherche sur la Société et la Culture
Doctoral Fellowship, 2009-2012

Centre Excellence Award
Doctoral Award, Western University, 2009-2013

Graduate Fellowship of Academic Distinction
Doctoral Award, Western University, 2009-2010

**Related Work Experience:**
Instructor
Western University, 2012-2013

Teaching Assistant
Western University, 2009-2012

Teaching / Research Assistant
Université de Montréal, 2007-2009

**Publications:**