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**A SÉANCE ROOM OF ONE'S OWN:
SPIRITUALISM, OCCULTISM, AND THE NEW WOMAN
IN MID- TO LATE-NINETEENTH CENTURY SUPERNATURAL
FICTION**

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ABSTRACT

This thesis will examine the nineteenth-century supernatural stories written by women connected to Spiritualism. These include 'standard' ghost stories, esoteric novels and works infused with Spiritualist and occult themes and tropes.

The middle- and upper-class Victorian woman was already considered something of a spirit guide within her own home; following the emergence of Modern Spiritualism in the 1850s, women were afforded the opportunity to become paid spirit guides (that is, mediums and lecturers) in the public sphere. Spiritualism was an empowering force for female mediums like Elizabeth d'Espérance and Emma Hardinge Britten, and Spiritualist philosopher Catherine Crowe. In this thesis I will examine how these new power dynamics—to use Britten's phrasing, the 'place and mission of woman'—are reflected in society and literature. This thesis sees Spiritualism as the impetus for several occult movements which emerged near to the end of century, including Marie Corelli's *Electrical Christianity*, Madame Blavatsky's Theosophy, and Florence Farr's Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. Each of these women founded, or had significant input in the founding of, their respective creeds.

There is an area of critical neglect around the fiction written by these women. Corelli's works are often analysed in the New Woman framework, but rarely in the spiritual or occult; scholarly interest in Blavatsky focuses on the incredible power she consolidated, but her Theosophical fiction tends to be dismissed in favour of her treatises; d'Espérance's fiction has not been properly examined thus far.

With this thesis I hope to offer a re-reading or re-framing of this supernatural literature by placing it, and its authors, in its socio-political context at the tumultuous end of the nineteenth century.

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INTRODUCTION

John Wilkes Booth is reported to have manifested to a certain American [séance] circle. The remorse that besets him can be sufficiently judged of [*sic*] from his communication. 'I and Lincoln,' he remarked, 'often have a cosy chat up here. We agree that it was just as well I shot him'.
(Daniel Dunglas Home, 1877: 362-363)

I do not make use of the supernatural as a get-out; it is inseparable (whether or not it comes to the surface) from my sense of life.
(Elizabeth Bowen, 1965: 9)

When Modern Spiritualism emerged in the mid-nineteenth century, few were prepared for the effect it would have on the cultural understanding of ghosts and spirits. Suddenly ghosts had their own agency; spirits were free to move about in their world—The Other World—as well as pop into this one, if they so chose. Spiritualist teachings instructed the faithful that heaven and hell were no more; all people, good and evil, rich and poor, went to the same place. This explains why Messrs Booth and Lincoln were able to have their 'cosy chats'. What is less well-documented, however, are the writings of women associated with the spirits through Spiritualism, Theosophy and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

These were courageous women who attempted to negotiate a place for themselves, in-between this and the other world; between the feminine domestic sphere and the masculine public sphere. Spiritualism has been a topic of scholarly interest in the last dozen years or so, and yet

there has been relatively little critical attention paid to the fiction, the supernatural stories, written by women associated with Spiritualism and the occult. I hope this thesis will begin to unearth these women's voices, and thus, the fears, anxieties, triumphs and negotiations experienced by these women. Mediumship, I contend, with its open access to the 'truths' of the other plane became an impetus for new women's writing at this time.

Female Spiritualists and occultists in the nineteenth century were liminal beings; not wholly belonging to This World, not quite belonging to The Other World. They transgressed patriarchal constraints, but, very often, did not intentionally do so. As writers, then, they were doubly subversive, violating the patriarchally-sanctioned rules which silenced (or sought to silence) the female voice in the public sphere. Directly or indirectly; consciously or unconsciously, they questioned woman's role in society, posed the Woman Question, and used their supernatural or esoteric stories to explain or explore their beliefs concerning gender roles and authority. 'Their activities were in implicit dialogue with the gender issues of the day, and whilst there was conformity to the dominant norms, there was also resistance.'¹ The Spiritualist and

¹ Owen, 2004: 39

Theosophist movements, by necessitating not just female involvement but female leadership, created a new woman—which helped contribute to the birth of the New Woman.

This thesis will examine supernatural and esoteric stories written by Elizabeth d'Espérance, Catherine Crowe, Emma Hardinge Britten, Marie Corelli, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Florence Farr. d'Espérance and Hardinge Britten represent different perspectives on mediumship by mediums. d'Espérance largely understands that her phenomena were natural—she claims to have had these gifts from birth—but questions the origins of the phenomena: God, the Devil or her own mind. Hardinge Britten puts forth her religious messages of purity and morality which she felt were integral to Spiritualism. Crowe did not practise Spiritualism herself, but elected to write about spirit phenomena from a scientific point of view. Corelli ardently denied she was a Spiritualist, and decried the 'tricksters' who held séances: yet I would argue her close associations with the spirit world and her belief in what she termed 'electrical Christianity' place in her the category of self-loathing Spiritualist. Madame Blavatsky developed Theosophy after studying Spiritualism, and deciding that she needed a system which

offered her greater power and authority over the worlds. Blavatsky, as founder of Theosophy, uses her short stories to clarify the messages and teachings of her new philosophy. Florence Farr joined the Order of the Golden Dawn in 1890, having left the Theosophical Society in search of something more. Her esoteric novels and plays reflect her notions of magic and empowered womanhood. Despite their differences in ideology, I will argue that each writer—again, consciously and unconsciously; directly and indirectly—used her fiction to further her messages on spirituality, spectrality, and society, and to question patriarchal authority.

Annette Federico (2000) writes, 'I am impelled less by an evangelical urge to rescue a once-popular writer from oblivion than by a curiosity about a woman whose fame at the end of the nineteenth century was unsurpassed and yet who by the end of the twentieth century had become only a name, vaguely, and pejoratively, connected with Victorian popular fiction.'² Though she writes here of Marie Corelli, this sentiment may be applied to each of the woman writers in this thesis. Have the fictions of these women been largely neglected because the stories are not as 'good' as those written by Elizabeth Gaskell or

² Federico, 2000: 2

Charles Dickens? Have they been neglected because their output is smaller compared to that of Mary Braddon or JS LeFanu? Or have they been intentionally left behind as remnants of our superstitious past (that is, something of which we, culturally, ought to be ashamed)? It is possible, too, that because these writers are religious or quasi-religious, their rejection comes from being too 'niche'. Alex Owen (2007) writes that the occult receives little attention from her fellow historians because it goes against popular notions of 'modern culture and the modern mind-set.'³ Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2000) have argued that Spiritualism's critical neglect has to do with its nineteenth-century patriarchal criticisms—thus almost echoing the silencing techniques of the Victorian gentlemen themselves. Nineteenth-century male critics, like Henry James, sought to 'discredit the political feminist movement by linking it with "irrational" psychic phenomenon.'⁴

I hope to use this thesis as the starting point for a greater investigation into this fascinating, tumultuous period in history, and how these women appropriated Spiritualism to negotiate authority. 'Far from being "minor"

³ Owen, 2007: 6

⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, 2000: 473— it is worth noting that things have changed since the original publication of *Madwoman* in 1979, or even its reprint in 2000; Spiritualism and occultism have gradually become acceptable areas of study across academia

or peripheral to the main traditions of either the literary or Female Gothic, then, these uncanny stories offer especially fertile and sophisticated explorations of women's dreams and desires, fears and terrors.'⁵ If we seek an understanding of the Victorian supernatural fiction—or the Victorian woman's supernatural—then it is necessary to move away from the canonical greats, and examine a multiplicity of authors.

I employ the term 'supernatural' throughout this thesis. This refers to beings and entities not of this earth (such as divine or demonic spirits) or the spirits of the dead. Clive Bloom (1998) explains that 'creatures and forces of the supernatural have specific abilities to transcend both time and space, cross the divide between life and death, move between the invisible and the visible and travel freely within both the spiritual and the material. Supernatural forces and beings are therefore understood to be of immense power and able to manifest themselves to human beings either at their own will or through invocation.'⁶ This is certainly true of the ghosts, spirits, Mahatmas and elementals in Spiritualism and occult conceptions. 'Spiritualism' and 'occultism' are the broad terms in

⁵ Wallace, 2004: 66

⁶ Bloom, 1998:17

which the specific practices developed or used by the women examined in this thesis are contained. 'Ghost' refers to the soul or spirit of a deceased person who has returned to earth—or been bidden to return.

Hauntings

Spiritualism empowered ghosts and spirits, first by lending them a voice. Spirits and ghosts were now able to communicate freely with living humans, through a medium, and by a number of means: speaking, writing, and knocking or rapping on tables. Spirits were also empowered by Spiritualism's assertion that the Spirit World was a place largely free from anxiety, danger or fear—most unlike contemporary British society. The Spirit World was, for the Spiritualists, a place of serenity, learning, and most importantly, equality. There were no restrictions on who could reside in this new plane: race, gender, culture and even character were not inhibiting factors. Though mediums and psychics were used to facilitate spirit travel and spirit communication, the prevalent teaching was that the spirits had the power to travel and communicate on their own. That is, the medium did not have the power to bring forth a spirit; the spirit(s) would elect to speak to the medium

who reached through the veil. Both sides of the veil were understood to be similar, if not equal.

Even the term 'veil' is important: it is gauzy, hazy; what is beyond it is just perceptible if one tries hard enough. It refers to a piece of female apparel, at once signifying that mediumship is a feminine undertaking. Concepts like door, fence or gate are almost never used in relation to the borders between this and the other side. They are too tangible, too masculine. I argue that female authors were better at capturing this new ghost than their male counterparts, as the subaltern (woman) is better able to understand the plight of the subaltern (ghost). In addition to 'veil' throughout this thesis I will use 'spirit realm', 'other realm', 'other side' or 'afterlife' interchangeably. For each sect of Spiritualism or occultism, they had distinct, specific meanings, but for the sake of ease, I have employed them all to mean 'the place where spirits go.'

Diana Basham (1992) contends that 'both ghosts and women were subject to the same kind of criticism and liable to be met with the same dismissive hostility in their attempts to gain recognition.'⁷ Though the idea of women operating as mediums was widely accepted, female

⁷ Basham, 1992: 152

mediums nonetheless existed in a contested, contentious place in between patriarchal expectation and subversion or transgression. As Basham notes, the trance state was 'semi-legitimated' by society; on the one hand it called for women to have more authority than they normally would have, but on the other, it was largely a domestic activity, and one that utilised feminine attributes like passivity. Yet, and this was the issue for Victorian men, it posed the question: 'how far did this power stretch and what could it accomplish?'⁸ What, exactly, were women capable of?

In this thesis I will not attempt to prove or disprove the veracity of Spiritualist, Theosophist or occult phenomena. It is not only impossible, but irrelevant. As Julian Wolfreys explains in *Hauntings* (2002), 'the veracity of the ghost... is neither here nor there' and a lack of proof does nothing to detract from the effectiveness of the spirit.⁹ In terms of literature, it is about the effectiveness of the ghostly encounter, rather than its 'truth'. In life, in society, it is far more important to discuss the influences Spiritualism et al had on society, rather than if mediums *truly* made contact with the other side. Wolfreys argues, '[t]he act of haunting

⁸ *ibid*: 4

⁹ Wolfreys, 2002: 4

is effective because it displaces us in those places where we feel most secure, most notably in our homes, in the domestic scene.¹⁰ This notion may also be carried from literature into life: for one, spirit contact was often practised in private homes. The spirits of the dead were readily invited into sitting-rooms and drawing-rooms across the country. By acting as a tool of empowerment for women, by offering them paid employment, Spiritualism also caused 'maximum disruption' in the public sphere, by disrupting Victorian ideals of religion, femininity and authority.

History and (New) Historicism

This thesis will follow a New Historicist framework. 'New Historicism,' explains H. Aram Veenser in *The New Historicism* (1989), permits scholars 'to cross the boundaries separating history, anthropology, art, politics, literature, and economics. It has struck down the doctrine of non-interference that forbade humanists to intrude on questions of politics, power, indeed on all matters that deeply affect people's private lives.'¹¹ The 'portmanteau quality'¹² of New Historicism permits us to see

¹⁰ *ibid*: 5

¹¹ Veenser, 1989: ix

¹² *ibid*: xi

literature produced at this time as a part and function of culture, as opposed to something discrete. The stories and novels to be explored and discussed in this thesis, ‘do not embellish the past as such—they take what was hidden (or invisible) in that past and, with the benefit of hindsight... bring it into our field of vision, out of the spirit cabinet and into the light.’¹³ Tatiana Kontou (2009) uses this metaphor of the Victorian novel as a spirit photograph that might have been taken during a séance, noting the way the spectral presence is invisible at the time the photograph is taken, but visible after time and development.¹⁴ Though some Spiritualists and Theosophists had (radical) political agendas, with the benefit of time and space their intended, as well as the unintended consequences of their writing, like the spirit photograph, may be revealed. JJ Franklin (2012) contends that a ‘full understanding of the movement [Spiritualism] requires reading it in relationship to the histories of conditions for women, women’s sexuality, and women’s spiritual practices.’¹⁵

¹³ Kontou, 2009: 15

¹⁴ *ibid*: 15

¹⁵ Franklin, 2011 in Kontou and Willburn, eds, 2011: 129

Claire Colebrook (1997) explains that literature often functions both for and against the dominant culture. 'A work may reflect *and* contest *and* effect *and* disrupt *and* reinforce.'¹⁶ If it is accepted that literature reflects, unconsciously, the dominant values of society, then the ghost stories explored in this thesis must certainly have been consciously reflecting the nondominant values as well. Corelli, Crowe, d'Espérance, Hardinge Britten, Farr and Blavatsky in their attempts to exert their authority, had to navigate the constantly shifting cultural and political realities that determined, essentially, who they could be, and who their characters could be. Deidre David (1987) notes the difficulty in finding 'a satisfactory theoretical place for intellectual women writing in the Victorian period.'¹⁷ Even when these authors were enforcing patriarchal diktat in their works—Hardinge Britten, for example, believed in the 'natural' divide between rational man and emotional woman—the fact that they were writing or speaking publicly was disruptive to the Victorian restraints placed on middle- and upper-class women. 'All intellectual activity is part of a complex climate of beliefs and practices,' David writes, and these authors 'actively contribut[e] to the formation of the culture which gives them authority and against whose patriarchal

¹⁶ Colebrook, 1997: 143 [emphasis in original]

¹⁷ David, 1987: 3

attitudes they sometimes position themselves.¹⁸ It is impossible, then, to separate these authors from the culture in which they wrote, or to examine these works in a vacuum. Spiritualism had an effect on society and society had an effect on Spiritualism. The way Corelli, Crowe, d'Espérance, Hardinge Britten, Farr and Blavatsky negotiated their authorial authority is played out, directly and indirectly, in their supernatural, ghostly and esoteric fiction.

Ghostwriting

Spirits have existed in nearly every literature produced by nearly every culture. Dorothy Scarborough in *The Supernatural in Modern English Fiction* (1917) claims:

The ghost is the most enduring figure in supernatural fiction. He is absolutely indestructible. He glides from the freshly cut pages of magazines and books bearing the date of the year of our Lord nineteen hundred and seventeen as from the parchment rolls of ancient manuscripts. He appears as unapologetically at home in twentieth century fiction as in classical mythology, Christian hagiology, medieval legend or Gothic romance. He changes with the styles in fiction but never goes out of fashion. He is really the permanent citizen of this earth, for mortals, at best, are but transients¹⁹

In other words, to be effective, the figure of the spectre must change from generation to generation, from culture to culture. He [*sic*] must react and respond to the society in which he was created. Works

¹⁸ *ibid*: 226

¹⁹ Scarborough, 1917: 81

necessary in understanding the ghost story include Julia Briggs's *Night Visitors: The Rise and Fall of the English Ghost Story* (1977) and her 'The Ghost Story' (2004). Briggs, in *Night Visitors*, traces the evolution of the ghost story from its ancient origins in Lucian, to *Hamlet* and *Macbeth* and onto the Victorians. She takes care to note the particular environment of the Victorian ghost story, it having appeared at a time of great social flux. The changing role of religion in society, the rise of Spiritualism, the culture of empiricism and a middle-class with more leisure (i.e. reading) time saw not only a change in the ghost story itself, but a greater demand for their publication. 'Ghosts,' writes Marlene Tromp (2006), 'cross the sacred barriers between life and death, between cultures, between people; they transcend time, space, and history... The appeal of ghosts may lie in their power to dispel what seem to be very rigid boundaries.'²⁰ For Spiritualist and occultist women writers of these supernatural stories, this was the appeal: to cross lines of gender and class to use their voice in the public sphere.

Vanessa D. Dickerson's *Victorian Ghosts in the Noontide: Women Writers and the Supernatural* (1996), Diana Wallace's 'Uncanny Stories: The Ghost Story as Female Gothic' (2004) and Tatiana Kontou's

²⁰ Tromp, 2006: 2

Spiritualism and Women's Writing (2009) focus on various aspects concerning the spectral figure present at the nineteenth century. They each provide an invaluable understanding of the multifaceted notion of what a Victorian literary spirit was, or could be. Most importantly, for this thesis, they devote their efforts to examining women writers of the supernatural. The supernatural and esoteric stories written by the occult women are surveyed in Annette Federico's *Idol of Suburbia: Marie Corelli and Late-Victorian Literary Culture* (2000) and Teresa Ransom's *The Mysterious Miss Corelli: Queen of Victorian Bestsellers* (2013), Alex Owen's (2007) *The Place of Enchantment* and Mary K. Greer's *Women of the Golden Dawn* (1995). The latter two offer particular emphasis on the life and work of Florence Farr.

Women's supernatural stories are different to men's supernatural stories. Male writers had the privilege of going largely unquestioned in their patriarchal society; that is, if a man wanted to explore the proper place of woman, he would be free to do so in the form of non-fiction articles or essays. For many women seeking to involve themselves in public, political life, it was simpler to hide their anger and anxieties in ghost stories. Some women, of course, were eager to enter public

discourse and wrote about any and all subjects they chose. For the ones who hid their meanings behind the spectral, it was likely as a means of ensuring they would not be labelled as radical or subversive writers. Basham, Dickerson and Briggs largely agree that the ghost story was a popular form for female authors because of the popularity of the form: ghost stories promised greater circulation and sales at the *fin de siècle*. They also allowed women a subversive space in which they could ponder, discuss or even attack patriarchal ideals.

Wallace writes, that in patriarchal societies, men have the ‘power to “ghost” women both physically and spiritually.’²¹ Woman, like the spirit, is seen and not heard; invisible and ever-present. The Victorian patriarchy saw to it that ‘women were increasingly engulfed by the private realm, bounded by physical, social and psychic partitions.’²² As suggested by Elizabeth Bowen’s words at the start of the introduction (an epigraph of sorts) the linking of woman and spectral did not cease with the dawning of the twentieth century, despite the best efforts of Spiritualists and suffragettes. For Dickerson (1996), Victorian woman ‘paled’ in the real world, having been ‘robbed of place, space and

²¹ Wallace, 2004: 66

²² Davidoff and Hall, 1987: 319

substance in society.²³ Practising Spiritualism as a medium permitted women power in their society; writing about the same spirits lent her even greater voice. 'In the séance room, at the mesmeric session, but particularly in the ghost story, woman could more freely and safely examine the possibilities and limitations of her mythical role as the angel in the house, and she could, if she chose, release those not-so-angelic impulses, feelings, and desires that the age publicly denied her.'²⁴ Dickerson acknowledges, importantly, that Victorian women did not all write the same ghost story.²⁵ This is a necessary consideration when we examine the diversity of the supernatural stories written by Corelli, Crowe, d'Espérance, Hardinge Britten, Farr and Blavatsky, and the way each was influenced by her own relationship to Spiritualism and the occult.

Spiritualism, Theosophy, and the Occult

Spiritualism, though often thought of as a singular entity, encompassed a number of ideas, both religious and secular: what all Spiritualists had in common, however, was the belief in an afterlife and that spirits

²³ Dickerson, 1996: 4

²⁴ *ibid*: 8

²⁵ *ibid*: 9

residing in that Other World or astral plane could communicate with living humans on this side of the veil. Janet Oppenheim's *The Other World: Spiritualism and Psychical Research in England 1850-1914* (1985), Geoffrey K. Nelson's *Spiritualism and Society* (1969) and Logie Barrow's *Independent Spirits: Spiritualism and English Plebeians, 1850-1910* (1986) are valuable resources for uncovering the origins of Modern Spiritualism, as well as providing a broad survey of nineteenth-century Spiritualist and occult activities and beliefs. Works such as JM Peebles's *Seers of the Ages: Or, Spiritualism Past and Present* (1869) and WT Stead's *Real Ghost Stories* (1897/1921) provide an understanding into the minds of the Spiritualists at that time.

As will be discussed in the first chapter, Spiritualism was not a new phenomenon. Humans seeking spirit contact (including divine and demonic sources) have existed across cultures and centuries. 'No doubt every age in human history has felt the lure of the occult. Ever since science began establishing its claim to epistemological supremacy, there have been people drawn to phenomena that apparently defied rational, scientific explanation.'²⁶ What makes nineteenth-century Spiritualism unique are its lasting effects, and its

²⁶ Oppenheim, 1985: 3

interaction with the women's issues of the day. Here, works like Alex Owen's *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late-Victorian England* (2004), Diana Basham's *The Trial of Woman: Feminism and the Occult Sciences in Victorian Literature and Society* (1992) and Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America* (2001) provide useful insight into the ways in which women navigated the Spiritualist movement(s). Spiritualism operated outside the boundaries of Victorian (Christian) patriarchy, yet permitted women authority as mediums and writers. This is not to suggest that Spiritualism or Theosophy were perfect organisations. Alex Owen does not 'suppos[e] for a moment that Spiritualism was an unproblematic enterprise for women, or that there were no casualties of male/female power struggles. Far from it. But Spiritualism undoubtedly did mark a particular power strategy based upon the celebration and exercise of female spiritual authority.'²⁷

Though Braude (2001) concentrates her writing on the rise of Spiritualism in nineteenth-century America, much of her work is applicable to nineteenth-century Britain as well. She explains that

²⁷ Owen, 2004: xiii-xiv

Spiritualism had many meanings to many people.²⁸ 'For some it provided solace in the face of bereavement, for some entertainment, for some a livelihood earned from the credulous. For many it provided evidence of the immortality of the soul that formed the basis of a sincere religious faith. For iconoclasts and nonconformists it provided an alternative to the established religious order.'²⁹ The livelihood of which she speaks was largely the domain of women. Though there were many male mediums, mediumship was understood to be woman's work, because entering a trance state required ultimate passivity. Spiritualist men understood this and were accepting, even encouraging, of women taking leadership roles within their communities. 'At a time when no churches ordained women and many forbade them to speak aloud in church, Spiritualist women had equal authority, equal opportunities, and equal numbers in religious leadership.'³⁰ This is certainly seen in the British context, with Crowe, d'Espérance and Hardinge Britten in Spiritualism, Blavatsky in Theosophy, and Corelli and Farr in their own occult circles.

²⁸ The biggest difference between British and American Spiritualism was the emphasis on the latter of liberal/progressive socio-political issues: vegetarianism, free love, abolition and suffrage were, for most Americans, a natural and inseparable part of the Spiritualist beliefs.

²⁹ Braude, 2001: 2

³⁰ *ibid*: 3

According to Owen,

English Spiritualism was not untouched by 'the woman question' or the passions it engendered. On the contrary, progressive Spiritualists were very much concerned with the issues involved. And it is no accident that Spiritualism, a movement which privileged women and took them seriously, attracted so many female believers during a period of gender disjunction and disparity between aspiration and reality³¹

This is an interesting consideration. The women surveyed in this thesis do not represent all that might fall under the large umbrella of Spiritualism (including Theosophy and occult practice), but they do represent a cross-section of belief. Each of these women had opinions on the treatment of women—on the roles and responsibilities of women in both Spiritualism and secular society. Yet none but Blavatsky and Farr would have defined themselves as 'progressive'. Hardinge Britten was even a keen advocate of the separate spheres of man and woman (though she did not accept the idea that domesticity should be the entirety of a woman's life). Both Owen and Dickerson contend that women, because of their 'ghosting' in society, began to identify and empathise with spirits. Basham writes of the affinity between spirits and Spiritualists: 'both ghosts and women were subject to the same kind of criticism and liable to be met with the same dismissive hostility in their

³¹ Owen, 2004: 4

attempts to gain recognition.³² As nineteenth-century spirits grew in voice and power, women, I would argue, started following their example. If the dead could ‘return’ via séance and offer worldly wisdom, why shouldn’t living women be able to do the same? As women became the focal points of séances both public and private, many started to write of their experiences as they pulled back the veil. ‘We can see the medium herself, the figure that caused such outrage, wonderment and confusion across the nineteenth century, as a kind of author—a typist dictated to from beyond the grave.’³³ Kontou raises the question of authorship, of authority, here. If the medium is indeed just a typist for the spirits, does she hold any *real* authority? I argue that once the female leaves the séance room and attempts to forge public life, she does demand authority equal to men—and in most spiritual, occult or esoteric communities, she received it.

For occult and esoteric women, there was little question of their power and authority. Unlike Spiritualism, the occult offered women the chance to exercise their own will. ‘Willpower was closely associated with what Victorians referred to as the “masculine temperament” and the will was

³² Basham, 1992: 152

³³ Kontou, 2009: 2

considered by many physicians to act as the guarantor of manly health and efficacy.³⁴ In both Theosophy and the Golden Dawn, it was stressed that ‘adeptship’, as opposed to passive mediumship, was the most effective method of contacting the other side. The prevailing notion at the time was that anyone could be a medium, as long as their heart was pure and their mind was clear; to become an Adept—the term used by Theosophists and Golden Dawn members—however, required training, dedication, and education. ‘The occult... permitted women the exercise of a “masculine temperament” and provided an intellectual and spiritual outreach that were difficult to find elsewhere. Occultism appealed to an aspiring, questing nature.’³⁵ Occult women like Blavatsky and Farr actively sought to disrupt society by challenging, not only the separate spheres doctrine, but the very ideas of masculinity and femininity.

Chapter One will discuss, briefly, the origins of Spiritualism, beginning in the ancient world. In doing this, we can trace notions of female (spiritual) power through the centuries—something a number of Spiritualist and Theosophist women did during the nineteenth century

³⁴ Owen, 2007: 88

³⁵ *ibid*: 90

as a means of legitimising their spiritual authority. Marina Warner (2006) claims, '[t]he séance reproduces some of the characteristic features of oracles in antiquity: the sitters forming the ring are vital to the event, and to the success of the event; they gather as a solemn, ritual congregation, bonded together to follow prescribed steps in making contact with spiritual powers.'³⁶ Women were used as oracles in the Greco-Roman tradition, as noted by Homer and Ovid, and Buddha used female proselytizers. The Bible, arguably the religious text with which nineteenth-century British mediums would have been most familiar, has countless women receiving messages from the divine and the demonic, including Sarah, Miriam, Jezebel (for better or for worse) and Mary, mother of Jesus. The recidivistic nature of Spiritualism (that is, allowing women to return to a state of past glory), I will argue, was one of the societal elements that lent itself to the rise of the woman question. The second section of this chapter looks at Modern Spiritualism, and its development in the late 1840s and 1850s. This focuses primarily on an exploration of séance phenomena and new ideas concerning spectral power—that is, what ghosts were now capable of doing. The third section examines WT Stead's *Real Ghosts* in relation to the idea held by him, and others, that the spirit is innately female or feminine. The

³⁶ Warner, 2006: 267

fourth section picks up Stead's ideas in relation to the blurred gender boundaries of mediumship. The fifth section briefly explores the notion—the possibility, even—of female authorship.

The chapters are divided into two parts; the first three chapters (which constitute the first part) look at the Spiritualist writers d'Espérance, Crowe and Hardinge Britten. Chapter Two studies the work of medium Elizabeth d'Espérance, with particular attention paid to her hyper-femininity. This is significant, I argue, because her accounts of spirit interaction have a 'hysterical' underpinning to them—she finds the unknowability of the spirit world distressing and, in actual fact, harmful to her mental health. This chapter will explore, alongside d'Espérance's writings, the notion of hysteria and mental wellness in relation to female mediumship. The third chapter centres on Catherine Crowe: her Spiritualist writings, her ghost stories, and the notion of 'naturalising' the spectral. Since Crowe was not a practitioner of Spiritualism, she will be examined in the context of (public) intellectualism and scientific inquiry. The fourth chapter is a study of Emma Hardinge Britten, who spent her career trying to reconcile Spiritualism and religion. In many ways she was a conservative writer and thinker, advocating as she did for women

to be pure, moral and feminine. Yet in other ways, she is the most explicitly feminist. Though her works fit, largely, within the prescribed 'woman's sphere' she is adamant in her belief that it is the duty of woman to seek employment and fulfilment outside of their husbands and children.

The second part contains the three occult writers, Corelli, Blavatsky and Farr. Chapter Five looks at Marie Corelli and her, often antagonistic, relationship to Spiritualism and the New Woman. Both movements, I argue, influence her greatly, and despite her reticence to be associated with either, she was an important voice at her time, in both these arenas. Chapter Six looks at the writings and teachings of Madame Blavatsky and Theosophy, and the ways in which she developed and negotiated her authority in both worlds. Chapter Seven investigates Florence Farr and her fiction, informed as it was by her prominent and influential position within the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

CHAPTER ONE:

New Spirits; New Women

1. Introduction: 'Women were favoured by the spirits'³⁷

This chapter offers a broad survey of Spiritualist and occultist thought in the mid- to late-nineteenth century. The women examined in this thesis were, to a person, fiercely independent and ground-breaking. d'Espérance, Crowe, Hardinge Britten, Corelli, Blavatsky and Farr were not content to simply live within the tenets of Spiritualism (such as they were); each developed her own understanding of this life, the afterlife, and negotiated for herself a place in the public (masculine) sphere. In order to understand how they accomplished this, a bit of historical context is necessary. Martha Nussbaum writes that 'cultures are not monoliths; people are not stamped out like coins by the power machine of social convention. They are constrained by social norms, but norms are plural and people are devious.'³⁸ This chapter offers context for the 'devious' ways in which these spirited women developed their public authority and public voice: mediumship, adeptship and writing being the principal three.

³⁷ Owen, 2004: 18

³⁸ Nussbaum, *Sex and Death* qtd. in Tromp, 2006: 1

This chapter also seeks to contextualise women's identity in Spiritualism and the occult, something each of these women grappled with at one time or another. It was this questioning of role and identity, I argue, which contributed to the Woman Question. The initial questions of writing and publishing the supernatural are also posed in this chapter, to provide better context for those industries, and woman's relationship with them.

1.2 Ancient Spirits

The mysteries of death and the possibility of an afterlife has thrilled humanity from its earliest incarnation. Men and women claiming to be in conversation with gods or spirits; those claiming magical or miraculous powers; those claiming clairvoyance or clairaudience have existed in every century. 'Psychic phenomena have not been restricted to the modern Spiritualist movement but have appeared in all known human societies throughout history and are found in all existing societies.'³⁹ Victorian Spiritualism may well have been Modern, but it most certainly was not new.

³⁹ Nelson, 1969: 41

Vanessa Dickerson writes that Victorian women were, as a rule, not permitted to go forward with the times and assist in the creation of the technologies which marked the nineteenth century as one of great progress. Despite their exclusion, Dickerson explains, they were not required to go backward⁴⁰—but that is, in fact, what many women did. Spiritualism was a recidivistic phenomenon; it recalled ancient traditions of spirit communication that were often performed by women.

Spiritualism's women emerged from the traditions of prophecy and mysticism, both of which granted women enormous freedom and power in the ancient world. Thus the medium's skills in other-worldly communication and transfiguration caused some serious concern in the more conservative elements of society. These women, by virtue of the innate magic within womanhood, and their deeper connection to nature—nature which is consistently personified female—developed power and agency of their own.⁴¹

The earliest instances of what would be known as Spiritualist phenomena may be traced to the Greek and Roman societies. The

⁴⁰ Dickerson, 1996: 10

⁴¹ Auerbach, 1982: 38

Greeks and Romans used prophets, called oracles, who were divinely inspired by the god or goddess of the temple to which they belonged. 'What the *Latins* call'd *Genius*, the *Greeks* call'd *Daemon*; which Word, to pass by other Significations; according to its Etymology, signifies prudent, knowing, skilful in Affairs, and foreseeing things, they giving Answers to those that consulted them.'⁴² These 'daemons' would enter into a receptive person, usually when they were sleeping or in a trance state, where they would implant into the person an idea or a message. There were also stories of what would later be termed full-body apparitions. '*Precopius*, where he writes of the great and wonderful Pestilence, that in the time of *Cosroe* and *Justinian* dispeopl'd the Earth, says, there were then seen publicly, and in private Houses *Daemons* in an Humane shape.'⁴³ Whilst oracle was not exclusively a position held by women, like nineteenth-century mediumship, it was nonetheless considered a feminine pursuit. Emma Hardinge Britten urges her contemporaries to '[r]emember, women, in all the ages of the past, have manifested greater aptitude for what is termed inspiration.'⁴⁴

⁴² Beaumont, 1705: 2

⁴³ *ibid*: 81

⁴⁴ Hardinge, 1859: 4

The writings of Herodotus tell of a priestly woman who inhabited the tower of Belus in Babylon, who 'stayed up each night to obtain information from the presiding deity.'⁴⁵ The priestess Pythia at the Temple of Apollo received messages from the gods, and consulted with poets, orators and generals.⁴⁶ The Sibyl at Delphi is one of the best-known female prophets in history. She was said to be half-god, half-human, and lived for hundreds of years. Though she has passed on (back) to the realm of the immortals, it is said that her voice may occasionally still be heard. The *Odyssey* states that the fall of Troy had been foretold to Ulysses

when he trod
The marble threshold of the Delphic god,
Curious to learn the counsels of the sky⁴⁷

The Dodonan Sibyl and the Cumaean Sibyl were also well-known and well-respected for their prophetic skills. The latter was venerated for her oracles given in temple of Apollo. Like the Sibyl at Delphi, the Cumaean Sibyl exists, still, in the form of her voice and in her prophecies.

Sev'n centuries have I liv'd; three more fulfil
The period of the years finish still.
[...]
This wither'd frame (so fates have will'd it) shall waste

⁴⁵ Peebles, 1869: 29

⁴⁶ *ibid*: 70

⁴⁷ *The Odyssey*, Book VII, p. 126

To nothing, but prophetic words, at last⁴⁸

The Greeks and Romans found spirit communication to be a necessity in daily life. Within the Jewish and Christian traditions, spirit communication is a bit murkier. It was accepted by authors throughout the Bible that one can commune with spirits—be they spirits of the dead, or angels and demons—but there are mixed messages on whether or not this is something humans should do. In the book of Samuel, King Saul, in preparation to do battle against the Philistines, sent his men to find him the ‘woman that hath a familiar spirit, that I may go to her, and inquire of her.’⁴⁹ We may understand ‘familiar spirit’ to mean that she, as many ‘witches’ are wont to do, has the ability to bring forth spirits from beyond. This woman brings forth the spirit of Samuel, who consults with Saul. Though Saul would win the battle, he is ultimately punished for ‘asking counsel of one that had a familiar spirit’⁵⁰ and was smote by God.

As with other forms of spirit communication, Biblical spirit activity was not solely the provenance of women, but there are many accounts of

⁴⁸ Ovid, 1826: 360-361

⁴⁹ 1 Samuel 28:7

⁵⁰ 1 Chronicles 10: 13-14

women receiving divine (or demonic) messages from the other side. And these would have been known in the nineteenth century, particularly to women like Hardinge Britten, who sought to combine Spiritualism with her religious faith. In the book of Genesis, Sarah, wife of Abraham, was in conversation with God several times. Miriam (Exodus 15:20), Deborah (Judges 4:4), Hannah (1 Samuel 1:15), Noadiah (Nehemiah 6:14), Anna (Luke 2:36), and the four unnamed daughters of Philip (Acts 21:7), are all described as prophetesses, and in a neutral or positive way. Huldah was the prophetess-in-residence at the college in Jerusalem when King Josiah commanded his men to commune with her and hear her teachings.⁵¹

Female prophets also possess a skill that male prophets do not—they are able to create life. It is not much of a stretch to view Mary, mother of Jesus, as a prophet. She was in direct communication with an agent (an angel) of God, and though she herself did not preach the message, she was responsible for its distribution by carrying the messenger. Mary was not the first female prophet(ess) to bring forth a child. The Prophet Isaiah's unnamed wife was charged with a similar task some centuries

⁵¹ 2 Kings 22:12-14—Josiah was not punished for visiting the prophetess. Likely this is because her activities were sanctioned by the state, as opposed to the 'witch of Endor' with whom Saul spoke.

earlier: 'And I went unto the prophetess; and she conceived, and bore a son. Then said the Lord to me, Call his name Mahershalalhashbaz.'⁵²

Dickerson explains the links between birth and spirituality:

Yet from woman's difference, from her body, came the miracle of children, heirs to property and the family name. In the Victorian period, as in no other hitherto, the 'elemental power' of woman's body was being both played up to keep her in the home and played down or at least overridden to emphasise a potent but apparently less threatening spiritual facility⁵³

The power of woman to give birth and the power to communicate through the veil were, for many Victorian men, mysterious and frightening prospects, capable of unknown quantities. For Hardinge Britten and others, a woman's ability to give birth (something essentially and uniquely feminine) was part of what made women predisposed to spirit communication. 'Women, by their peculiar organism, by the fineness of their nerves, the susceptibility of their sensations, the absence of that large, coarse, and physical development... women have always been peculiarly susceptible of impressions through the imaginative and sensational parts of their natures.'⁵⁴

⁵² Isaiah 8:3

⁵³ Dickerson, 1996: 29

⁵⁴ Hardinge, 1859: 4

Early Christianity was, according to Catherine Crowe, a welcoming place for prophetic women. In early Britain, women played a significant role in the rites and rituals of the druids, and like their Roman forebears, were also permitted to act as priestesses and prophets.⁵⁵ At the Anglo-Saxon period women like Leoba, a German nun, worked closely with St Boniface; and Hild's two monastic schools 'contributed significantly to the growth of the church by educating priests and bishops.'⁵⁶ In the Middle Ages, Hildegard of Bingen, Mechthild of Magdeburg and Julian of Norwich each experienced ecstatic visions of the divine and of heaven. Once these phenomena were 'verified', they were accordingly given platforms as religious writers, speakers or healers.⁵⁷

How aware nineteenth-century Spiritualist and occult women were of these religious-spiritual traditions is debatable. But from their writings, it is certain both Britten and Crowe had some understanding of this ancient female power, which the former claimed to possess.

1.3.1 New Spirits

⁵⁵ Crowe, 1850: 46-47

⁵⁶ Hollis, 1992: 78

⁵⁷ Beer, 1992: 6

The seventeenth and eighteenth centuries were, Spiritualistically speaking, relatively quiet. Spiritualist JM Peebles (1869) explains:

The New England Witchcraft to this day, casts a lurid light over puritanical history... Spirits, not infallible, evidently endeavoured at this period to establish an open communication between the inhabitants of this and the spirit-world; but ignorance was too deep, clerical influence too potent... The experiment a particular failure, the immortals withdrew their forces, waiting a more auspicious era⁵⁸

So dismayed were the spirits by the reaction they received in Salem, that they decided to cease, for a short time, communicating with the earthly plane.

Nineteenth-century or Modern Spiritualism came about from a blend of the old traditions and new anxieties. 'British Spiritualism, clearly, did not emerge out of nowhere and nothing in the 1850s. In part it drifted over from the United States, but it also drew much strength from indigenous cultural and anthropological traditions, in which religious faith and magic rituals were closely intertwined... Spiritualism in Britain flourished in the specific conditions created by the troubled relations of science and religion.'⁵⁹ Victorian positivism and religious faith had an uneasy relationship, so, for many, Spiritualism with its visible proof of spirits (as demonstrated at séance) was a fine middle ground. Jarlath Killeen

⁵⁸ Peebles, 1869: 165

⁵⁹ Oppenheim, 1985: 27

notes the 'baffling' number of organisations and societies which sprung up out of this nineteenth-century drive toward the 'occult': 'mesmerism, phrenology, Spiritualism, ghost-hunting, Swedenborgianism, alchemy, Theosophy, esoteric Buddhism, [and] Rosicrucianism.'⁶⁰ By the turn of the twentieth century, there was a society for anyone with even the remotest interest in the spiritual.

In addition to its religious precursors, the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century practice of Mesmerism was an impetus for Spiritualism. Emma Hardinge Britten was a 'magnetic subject' as a child, and explained that, 'Mesmerism has been—humanly speaking—the cornerstone upon which the Temple of Spiritualism was upreared.'⁶¹ Indeed, according to Oppenheim, it was these mesmeric qualities of '[s]uggestibility, suspension of will [and] passivity' which made Hardinge Britten the ideal mesmeric subject, and later, spirit medium.⁶²

The Rochester Rappings of 1848 spurred the Modern Spiritualism movement, and made the Fox sisters some of the earliest celebrity

⁶⁰ Killeen, 2009: 127

⁶¹ in Oppenheim, 1985: 219

⁶² *ibid*: 220

mediums. They occurred not in Rochester, specifically, but in the nearby hamlet of Hydesville, New York. The Fox sisters, Margaret and Kate, were visited by a spirit whom they called Mr Splitfoot; possibly a reference to the cloven hooves of the Devil. Every night, Mr Splitfoot would interact with the girls by knocking or rapping on the walls. Eventually they devised a system where he would use the knocks as a means of communication—knocks would signify letters of the alphabet, or serve as responses to yes/no questions. Their unique powers soon attracted the attention of the elite of New York City society. The spirits, for they were now able to interact with many, would knock or rap on surfaces to spell out words; they would also move or pick up objects. Very quickly, the news of their successful interactions with the Spirit World reached Britain and the Continent. They toured Europe, performing their séances for the great and the good of society until the late 1870s.

By the mid-1850s, British mediumship began to flourish. Lamont (2004) writes that séance phenomena were the primary reason for belief for many Spiritualists. The phenomena included the medium flying around

the room⁶³, rapping or tapping on the séance table⁶⁴, musical instruments seemingly playing by themselves⁶⁵ and the movement of objects, seemingly without human intervention.⁶⁶ ‘Reports of séances also told of furniture cavorting around the room, objects floating in the air, mediums levitating, musical instruments playing by themselves, bells ringing, tambourines jangling, strange breezes blowing, weird lights glowing, alluring fragrances and ethereal music wafting through the air’.⁶⁷ Most converts were won over by witnessing these ‘miraculous’ acts in the flesh; even the supposedly rational members of society (Arthur Conan Doyle for one) were entranced by these mediums, who were able to summon the spirits at will. The pinnacle of Spiritualist achievement was the full-body apparition. Mediums that were capable of producing them were highly respected, highly sought-after, and usually highly remunerated.

Spiritualism brought about a newly-empowered subaltern; the new ghost. This new spirit had powers unforeseen in its predecessors.

⁶³ Lamont, 2004: 897

⁶⁴ *ibid*: 899

⁶⁵ *ibid*: 900

⁶⁶ *ibid*: 899

⁶⁷ Oppenheim, 1985: 8

‘Wraiths have a greater vitality to-day than ever before. They are far more numerous than at any time in the past.’⁶⁸ Scarborough goes on to discuss the ‘rambunctious vitality and self-assurance’ of these modern spirits haunting literature and culture.⁶⁹ Until the mid-nineteenth century, literary ghosts and spirits were presented as constrained, controlled figures. Spiritualism taught that these spirits were actually a form of people—complete with the personality, character and memories of the ‘earthly shell’ to which they once belonged. More so, these New Ghosts possessed far greater power and agency than their literary predecessors.

Spiritualism sought to empower ghosts and spirits. There were, and still exist many misunderstandings and confusions about the differences in the terms, soul, spirit and ghost. The former two often are used interchangeably, with the understanding that both refer to the *je ne sais quoi* that lives inside human—it may be called the mind or imagination, but ostensibly it is what makes a human being a human being, and what endows a person with personality and humanity. It is also the part of a person that is, according to religionists and Spiritualists, immortal.

⁶⁸ Scarborough, 1921: vii

⁶⁹ *ibid*: x

Marina Warner writes, 'Thomas Aquinas singled out *animation* as the defining quality of soul, calling the soul "the starting point of all motion in things which live".'⁷⁰ For the Spiritualists, death was the freeing of the soul from earthly bonds—once it was 'freed', then, it could truly be alive or animated. The soul or spirit was no longer constricted by this world, whether by body or circumstance. The soul of a woman, for example, would have been restrained by her lack of access to education. Once in the Spirit World, she was free to learn and grow in knowledge. Her agency would no longer be restricted to what was patriarchally acceptable in Victorian Britain. The same principle applies to anyone disenfranchised or othered by society at that time— race, religion and physical disability were erased in the Spirit World. In the Spiritualism era, ghosts were no longer tied to the place where they were wronged, or the place that they died. Spirits were now free to roam the earth, not that ghosts ever really existed within the confines of logic or laws of nature.

1.3.2 Occult Spirits

Just as Mesmerism, Swedenborgianism and phrenology helped pave the way for Spiritualism in the mid-nineteenth century, Spiritualism

⁷⁰ Warner, 2006: 147

assisted in the development of the occult societies of the late-nineteenth century. 'Although many late-century occultists distanced themselves from Spiritualism, dismissing it as vulgar, naïve, and overly concerned with spirit "phenomena", it nevertheless prepared the ground for subsequent occult developments.'⁷¹ Theosophy and the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn both emerged from Spiritualism in the last decades of the nineteenth century.

The Theosophical Society was founded in 1875 by Blavatsky and Henry Olcott and the London lodge of the Golden Dawn was founded in 1888 by William Westcott and Samuel 'MacGregor' Mathers. Like Spiritualism, the occult societies believed that spirit contact was possible; unlike Spiritualism, the occult societies praised a more active form of mediumship. Adepts in Theosophy and the Golden Dawn would use 'magic' to make contact with the other side. 'Magic ... was based on the belief that an Adept can use a series of revered and ancient techniques in conjunction with a knowledge of correspondences in order to converse with those worlds beyond our own and gain control over the invisible forces of the universe.'⁷² In other words, the receiver

⁷¹ Owen, 2007: 19-20

⁷² *ibid*: 74

of the spirit communication would need to be actively engaged with the other side, and seek out the spirits with whom they would like to converse. Education and learning were important attributes of both organisations: they taught that communication could be achieved if one read and practised their respective ancient rituals.

The 'ancient' credentials of both societies were certainly debatable. The Golden Dawn was inspired by the Societas Rosicruciana in Anglia (of which Mathers and Westcott were members), which in turn was inspired by the seventeenth-century alchemical and esoteric society, the Rosicrucians. In Theosophy, Blavatsky wrote the necessary manuals and guides for her devotees, claiming they were inspired by ancient ritual revealed to her by her spirit guides. As Owen points out, occultists at the *fin de siècle* looked primarily to the Renaissance for inspiration.

The return to Renaissance magic was an attempt to rationalize and control the "mysterious incalculable forces" of old while building a sure and manifest bridge to "union with the divine". This endeavour suggests that if religion no longer operated at the heart of the social fabric in the way that it once had in Britain, belief itself was capable of renegotiating the rationalism and even scientism of the period without sacrificing the ultimate claims to meaning that surely lie at the heart of religious experience⁷³

As with Spiritualism, Occultism sought to rationalise its place in-between the adversaries of science and religion. By returning to the

⁷³ *ibid*: 11

Renaissance—the age of alchemy—they too attempted to combine elements of science with elements of religion in the formation of the system of beliefs.

What is significant about both organisations, was their prizing of women. Blavatsky founded Theosophy, served as its president until her death and was its focal point on all matters; Farr worked with Mathers and WB Yeats to design and establish the initiation rites for the Golden Dawn, and she eventually became Mathers's chosen representative and Chief Adept for the London lodge.⁷⁴ Spiritualism privileged women for their feminine ability to be passive, but for the occult societies, women were encouraged to be more masculine; to seek knowledge for themselves.

1.3.3 Female Spirits

As has been mentioned, and will be explored throughout the following chapters, Victorian women consciously and unconsciously identified with the spectral. 'Before disputing about whether or not there are

⁷⁴ *ibid*: 8; 68

ghosts outside of us, let us face the preliminary question, whether we have not each of us a veritable ghost within our own skin?'⁷⁵

WT Stead posits that yes, indeed, we each have a 'ghost' within us under the guise of soul or spirit. He explains in *Real Ghosts* that this 'ghost' is inherently feminine. '[T]here are inside each of us not one personality but two, and that these correspond to husband and wife.'⁷⁶ Regardless of one's biological sex, the outward of the person—the 'earthly shell' to use the Spiritualist's language, or the 'conscious personality' to use Stead's—must be male, or masculine, because that is what is public. What men and women present to the world, then, is masculine. What is secret, hidden and kept from the light—the 'unconscious personality', therefore, must be female.

The 'husband', writes Stead, is not only public, but an overbearing influence on his 'wife'. 'It is vigorous, alert, active, positive, monopolising all the means of communication and production. So intense is its consciousness that it ignores the very existence of its

⁷⁵ Stead, 1921: 11

⁷⁶ *ibid*: 22

partner, excepting as a mere appendage and convenience to itself.⁷⁷

Stead was a Spiritualist, though not a medium, and it is evident from his writing here that the masculine, contrary to popular Victorian thought, is not the better half in this relationship. The masculine reads as incredibly boorish, and ignorant of his spiritual side. Stead writes of a wife hoarding valuables as a metaphor for spirit or unconscious: '[she] keeps cupboard and storehouse, and the old stocking which treasures up the accumulated wealth of impressions acquired by the Conscious Personality, but who is never able to assert any right to anything, or to the use of sense or limb except when her lord and master is asleep or entranced.'⁷⁸ In trance states and dreams one is beholden to one's unconscious. Stead suggests that trances and mediumship could serve as an empowering tool for women to get out from under their husband's thumbs. 'The Unconscious Personality is emancipated from the marital despotism of her partner' in trance or sleep states.⁷⁹ Women who made use of these spiritual powers, then, could have a double awakening: for one they could better access or understand their own unconscious; for

⁷⁷ *ibid*: 22

⁷⁸ *ibid*: 22-23

⁷⁹ *ibid*: 23

another, it permitted women to awake to their cultural, political and marital inequality.

Stead's ideas are clearly influenced by the doctrine of separate spheres, where men populate the public, and women the private. What occurs in mediumship is the turning-out of the private into the public. In other words, Spiritualism was an intensely private act that, as its popularity grew, moved from domestic settings into the public. Mediumship was considered to be a feminine act because of its passivity: female mediums were spoken of as having spirit controls or their bodies being taken over at séance. Yet Spiritualist women were empowered through their passivity. Feminine sensitivity and receptivity worked to bring women's 'talents' from the private to the public spheres.

Alex Owen explains that during the nineteenth century, it was appropriate and acceptable for women to exercise spiritual influence within their closely subscribed arenas. This spiritual influence was understood as 'moral influence [and] was lauded as a harmonious and uplifting component of domestic life.'⁸⁰ The teaching of morals to children, for example, was the responsibility of women. But as women

⁸⁰ Owen, 2004: 9

started to develop their own spiritual powers, and the ability to communicate through the veil, the dilemma around the proper position of women began. 'For the very quality which supposedly made women such excellent mediums was equally construed as undermining their ability to function in the outside world.'⁸¹ Was Spiritualist practise transgressive? Did it subvert Victorian social norms? The answer to the question, explored in this thesis, lies somewhere between yes and no. As we have seen in the section dealing with ancient religious practices, many Spiritualist women felt they were exercising these long-subdued powers. Occultist women, on the other hand, took it further, and forged ahead with the 'consciousness' seen in masculinity. Their New Woman credentials—whether or not they identified as such—are not in doubt.

As Stead claims, and many Victorians believed, spirituality was a natural and innate element of womanhood. It is my contention that whilst the practise of mediumship, and its emphasis on feminine passivity, is not, of itself, transgressive, the choice of women to take their gifts into the public sphere is transgressive—as transgressive as their occult sisters whose movements demanded not only female participation, but female leadership and activity. Transgressive also was

⁸¹ *ibid*: 10

their decision to monetize their spirit communication via séances or writing.

1.3.4 Victorian Spirits

The Victorian obsession with the supernatural has been well-documented. Bown, Burdett and Thurschwell offer one explanation for this: '[d]isembodied voices over the telephone, the superhuman speed of the railway, near-instantaneous communication through telegraph wires: the collapsing of time and distance achieved by modern technologies that were transforming daily life was often felt to be uncanny.'⁸² The rapid expansion of technology and modernity was shocking for some, frightening for others.

The nineteenth century was a fast-paced époque; seemingly every day brought a new discovery or advancement or social upheaval. New railroads and new factories sprang up; there was a wave of immigration and suddenly there were women demanding the vote. The Victorians were a self-aware people, more so than previous generations. They understood that they lived in an important time, and they believed that what they did would have a lasting impact for centuries. They also

⁸² Bown, Burdett and Thurschwell, 2004: 1

feared the age in which they lived, and for its impact on the future. Degeneration was the spectre that haunted the age—and it took its form in the perceived immorality of the time. Many Victorians were afraid that this age, their age, of science and materialism and growth would ultimately cause a massive breakdown in traditional societal roles.

The notion of a golden age from which the world had steadily declined was rooted in the minds of those who were educated in the Graeco-Roman authors and accepted the Judaeo-Christian story of Eden and the Fall. It encouraged, perhaps not always at the conscious level, a search for a better time which could still yield its lessons to the present⁸³

Anxiety is common feature at the *fin de siècle*, as seen through history. From the American War and the French Revolution at the end of the eighteenth, to the degeneracy and decadence at the end of the nineteenth, to the Y2K fears at the end of the twentieth; people are uncomfortable with the notion of counting to the end. The sense of finality that appears with the end of century asks a big 'what happens next?' of society. 'The crises of the *fin de siècle*, then, are more intensely experienced, more emotionally fraught, more weighted with symbolic and historical meaning, because we invest them with the

⁸³ Chapman, 1986: 8-9

metaphors of death and rebirth that we project onto the final decades and years of a century.’⁸⁴

The British Empire, despite at this time being at the height of its power and influence, felt threatened by forces at home. Trade Unions and the Labour party, urban chaos and acts of terrorism by anarchists and Irish Republicans threatened the system of power at home, prompting fears that it could be lost abroad as well.⁸⁵ ‘England was often compared to decadent Greece and Rome, and there were powerful fears of the rise of captive peoples... of colonial rebellion [and] also of racial mingling, crossbreeding and intermarriage.’⁸⁶ Britain could well be lost to what they understood to be racial and ethnic degeneration.

Yet, at the same time, a belief in the supernatural, in ghosts and spirits, was retained. The supernatural was an ‘important aspect of the Victorians’ intellectual, spiritual, emotional, and imaginative worlds, and took its place in the domestic centre of their daily lives.’⁸⁷ The rise of Spiritualism contributed to this belief as well; the prevalence of spirit

⁸⁴ Showalter, 1991: 2

⁸⁵ *ibid*: 4

⁸⁶ *ibid*: 5

⁸⁷ Bown, Burdett and Thurschwell, 2004: 2

stories in mainstream literature and periodicals was, for many Victorians, too influential not to investigate.

1.4 Writing Spirits

Rosemary Jackson claims that 'supernatural fiction written in English in the last two hundred years has been *predominantly* women's literature.'⁸⁸ Victorian supernatural fiction was written, in part, to explore, discuss and even challenge notions of the self: the masculine self or the feminine self. For female writers, it was a radical act, even when hidden in guise of a spooky story, to ponder the deeply-held notions of Victorian womanhood.

Julia Briggs (1977) explains that '[g]host stories are as old and older than literature.'⁸⁹ If spirits have always existed, then so too has our need to discuss them. She notes the heavy involvement of women in the various nineteenth-century Spiritualist movements, and argues that, in the same vein, writing about the supernatural or other-worldly 'may have further reflected... a concern to reclaim a little lost power and

⁸⁸ in Stephenson, 1993: 15

⁸⁹ Briggs, 1977: 23

freedom that circumstances denied them.⁹⁰ Dickerson writes that men write from a privileged hegemonic position.

Victorian men wrote their tales in assurance: the male writer of ghost stories wrote from the hegemonic position in a society in which the masculine ways of knowing, thinking, and doing were automatically acknowledged as best, more reasonable than those women who, as angelic nurturers and homemakers, did not often get ranked amongst the great thinkers and rationalists of the day⁹¹

Whilst there were dozens of women employed as writers of one kind or another during the nineteenth century, the path to authorship was a bit more complicated. Mike Ashley (2009) explains that women have had a long history as storytellers; that the phrase 'spinning a yarn' refers to female storytellers literally spinning yarn as they spoke.⁹²

According to Edward Said, an author is, 'a person who originates or gives existence to something, a begetter, beginner, father or ancestor.'⁹³

The author, then, is both powerful and male. Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar (2000) claim that in patriarchal Western societies, the author's pen, like his penis, permits him 'not just the ability to generate life but the power to create posterity to which he lays claim.'⁹⁴ If the gender of

⁹⁰ Briggs, 2004: 129

⁹¹ Dickerson, 1996: 7

⁹² Ashley, 2009: 9

⁹³ in Gilbert and Gubar, 2000: 4

⁹⁴ Gilbert and Gubar, 2000: 6

female mediums was debatable, so too was their ability to be authors. Blavatsky, Hardinge Britten, and many others, claimed that their writing was spiritually-inspired; meaning, ostensibly, that visitors from beyond the veil gave them the words or the sentiments. 'If male sexuality is integrally associated with the assertive presence of literary power, female sexuality is associated with the absence of such power.'⁹⁵ If the spirit who inspired the work was male—and replete with literary power — can woman be an author?

The notion of authority was an important consideration for the writers explored in this thesis. Not only their authority as women writers, but the authority (or weight, or gravity) of the texts they produced. Crowe and Hardinge Britten, in particular, seek to blur the boundaries between reality and fiction in their stories. Many of their stories are not framed as fictional narratives, but rather, accounts of true stories. And that these stories were often told to them by members of the upper class and aristocracy, we, the reader, should lend those accounts greater credence. The message is that even a sceptic really ought to give consideration when a Duke or Colonel says he has had a ghostly encounter. By making use of the male voice to verify spirit phenomena,

⁹⁵ *ibid*: 8

women writers sought to capture as much power as they could. Fraser, Johnston and Green (2003) note that, when examining Victorian women writers, context is essential. '[W]e are ever mindful of the very real constraints upon the historical Victorian woman's opportunities and capacity for liberatory self-transformation.'⁹⁶ Despite women's (successful) encroachment into the writing world, their place in society, broadly speaking, confined them to certain roles.

Ashley writes that '[b]y the Victorian era many women, both in Britain and America, found they had a natural gift for telling stories of horror and the supernatural.'⁹⁷ I would argue here that it was not an accident which caused women to 'discover' their gifts of telling ghost stories, but the influence of Spiritualism and occultism, which had already privileged female spirit communication. Automatic writing was a common séance phenomena. Gordon (1992) defines automatic writing (sometimes called 'auto-writing') as 'In trance states some people produce writing not of their own will but via "dictation" from what is often claimed to be discarnate spirits.'⁹⁸ Typically the medium would enter a trance state

⁹⁶ Fraser, Johnston and Green, 2003: 28

⁹⁷ Ashley, 2009: 9

⁹⁸ Gordon, 1992: 34

and merely transcribe the spirits' words, and be unconscious of doing so. Madame Blavatsky claimed this is how she wrote several of her works— *Isis Unveiled* was therefore not her doing, but that of her mahatmas (spirit guides). Spirits as diverse as ancient mahatmas, political leaders and religious icons are all alleged to have written books and messages long after their deaths via this method. Spirits were also able to communicate with mediums through alphabet rappings (one for a; two for b; etc.), by causing messages to simply appear on slates, or making use of the planchette or Ouija boards.⁹⁹ According to Andrew Smith, '[l]iterature's association with Spiritualism is indicated by how various deceased writers became (allegedly) channelled through mediums during the period.'¹⁰⁰

CG Helleberg was a prolific publisher of automatic writing. His medium, Mrs Lizzie Green, received communication from the great and the good of seemingly every century, including Queen Christina of Sweden¹⁰¹, George Washington, Emmanuel Swedenborg, Martin Luther and Confucius. She once received a message from George Washington

⁹⁹ Oppenheim, 1985: 8

¹⁰⁰ Smith, 2010: 97

¹⁰¹ Arguably not as prominent as some of the other names listed, but a Swedish speaker, like Helleberg himself

explaining that, since dying, he had a change of heart concerning colonialism. 'The time will come when the flag of the American republic will float over Canada, all the British Possessions on this continent, the island of Cuba [and] the land of the Montezumas, beyond the Rio Grande.'¹⁰² Even many Spiritualists or Spiritualist sympathisers were known to be dubious about many claims of auto-writing. Sir Arthur Conan Doyle warned '[t]he stained glass will still tint the light which passes through it, and our human organism will never be crystal clear.'¹⁰³ That is to say, despite the best efforts of the medium to remain a blank canvass, sometimes her own thoughts and feelings mingle with that of the spirit. It is possible, then, that it was Mrs Lizzie Green, and not the deceased General Washington, who was in favour of rampant American expansionism.

Because of discrepancies like these, writing mediums were frequently on the receiving end of attacks by sceptics.¹⁰⁴ Unlike séance phenomena, which could be photographed to assure empirical proof,

¹⁰² Helleberg, 1883: 155-156

¹⁰³ Conan Doyle, 1926: 221

¹⁰⁴ Elana Gomel relates the story of medium Hester Travers Smith, who allegedly received communications from Oscar Wilde. Wilde was apparently quite fond of telling Smith about the girls he was chasing in the afterlife—something most early 20th century readers highly doubted he would be doing. This led to Smith's wide-scale discrediting (2007: 192-193).

writings could only be verified by the mediums themselves. For Gomel, the automatic writer is a 'peculiar psychological centaur' consisting of part of the medium and part of the interloping spirit. This composite not only violates our notion of the singularity of the psyche, but in many cases it is also androgynous, adding to the issues of gender in mediumship.¹⁰⁵

When auto-writing, the notion of authorship is imprecise. Smith writes, '[s]pirit messages posed particular problems for their interpreters... The questions of how to account for the "ghost" and the creative "spirit" oddly coincide.'¹⁰⁶ Who 'owns' the automatically-written words? Do they belong to the spirit, or to the medium? If there is an instance where a female medium receives the words of a great male leader, does that female medium become endowed with (some) power? Spiritualist thought teaches us that it is the spirits themselves who decide to make contact, and with whom they would like to speak. It must, therefore, be significant that George Washington and Emmanuel Swedenborg decided to speak to Mrs Lizzie Green instead of Mr Daniel Home.

¹⁰⁵ *ibid*: 194

¹⁰⁶ Smith, 2010: 116

The supernatural—in the guise of traditional ghost story narrative, anecdote or automatic writing—allowed women writers a place for ‘eruptions of female libidinal energy’ and a place to, often discreetly, air out their ‘cramped egos.’¹⁰⁷ Sexuality, religion, politics and the place of woman could all be debated and discussed by women under the guise of the ‘silly’ supernatural story. As Diana Basham explains, ‘Victorian women, even as late as the 1890s, tended not to use the ghost story form for overtly feminist purposes. Instead their attraction to the form seems to have been directed by its potential for covert meanings and excluded presences.’¹⁰⁸ Using elements of the supernatural and fantastic to disguise their motives, women used these stories to combat their invisibility, their own ghostliness.

1.5 Publishing Spirits

The mid-nineteenth century saw an increase in the number of periodicals and journals available in Britain. These included the prestigious *Blackwood’s Edinburgh Magazine*, *The Athenaeum* and the *Quarterly Review*. There were also hundreds of niche titles such as *Science*; and the Spiritualist and Theosophist publications, *Medium and*

¹⁰⁷ Dickerson, 1996: 8

¹⁰⁸ Basham, 1992: 158

Daybreak, *Two Worlds*, and *Lucifer*. Women had their own publications available, like *The Lady's Magazine* and *Girl's Own*. *Girls' Own* was a bi-weekly publication which printed extracts from novels, short fiction, and advice for young women on the 'trade' of womanhood. The week of 7th January, 1882, for example, includes advice on making hand-painted fire screens; the value of sticking to one's New Year resolutions; how to play Beethoven's sonatas on piano; how to make jam; and a short, alleged true story on the dangers of marrying too young and too hastily. It also contains two serialised extracts from novels, Agnes Giberne's *Decima's Promise* and Maggie Symington's *A Daughter Named Damaris*.¹⁰⁹

Of Spiritualist publications, Alex Owen notes the effectiveness of *Spiritualist*, *Human Nature* and *Medium and Daybreak* at reaching both middle-class and plebeian readers.¹¹⁰ The dual popularities of periodicals and Spiritualism met in the 1870s, when mainstream publications, noting the lucrative market, began publishing Spiritualist material; this caused upset in some circles, notably with James Burns, then-editor of *Human Nature* who felt their beliefs would be (or could

¹⁰⁹ *The Girls Own Annual* 1882. London: The 'Leisure Office'. 225-240.

¹¹⁰ Owen, 2004: xiv

be) misrepresented in a secular magazine.¹¹¹ Occult periodicals followed, and its books, magazine and journals appeared in great numbers, published by a 'vibrant' press.¹¹² Occult titles included WT Stead's *Borderland* and Ralph Shirley's *The Occult Review*.¹¹³ In Theosophy, *Lucifer* was Blavatsky's flagship journal, eventually replaced by the *Theosophical Review* after a ten-year run.

Fraser, Johnston and Green (2003) explain locating the reader in the context of the Victorian periodical is an almost impossible task. 'While it seems more likely that women would have read journals that catered to and constructed feminine taste... than these that made no effort to appeal to women readers, we can only speculate about the female readership of mainstream journals.'¹¹⁴ They note Edward G Salmon's article, 'What Girls Read' can only wager a guess at the readership of *Girl's Own*. It had, 'a circulation equalled by no other English illustrated magazine published in this country,' but hastily follows that up with '[w]hether this is so, or not, however, it has been undoubtedly met with a success of which editor and proprietors alike have equal reason to be

¹¹¹ *ibid*: xiv

¹¹² Owen, 2007: 6

¹¹³ *ibid*: 28

¹¹⁴ Fraser, Johnston and Green, 2003: 70

proud.’¹¹⁵ It is entirely possible that women and girls were reading at a greater rate than they had before; possibly even at a greater rate than men.

Whilst readership proves difficult to discern, female editing and writing is well-documented. Glennis Stephenson (1993) writes:

Women exerted a surprising amount of editorial control over the periodical literature of the time: Louisa May Alcott was the editor of *Merry’s Museum*, and Sarah Josepha Hale of *Godey’s Lady’s Book*; Mary Elizabeth Braddon was founder and editor of the *Belgravia*, and Charlotte Perkins Gilman of the *Forerunner*... For those women with no inclination to edit, there was at least a ready market for their work in such publications, and their contributions were actively sought: Margaret Oliphant became closely associated with both *Blackwood’s* and the *Cornhill*, Elizabeth Gaskell with *Household Words*, and Mary Shelley with the *Keepsake*.¹¹⁶

Though all of the writing examined in this thesis was eventually printed and sold in book form, most of the writers (d’Espérance is the exception) had their stories or non-fiction essays published in periodicals. Periodicals were popular with writers because they offered numerous opportunities for publication, and therefore, payment. For unmarried women like Marie Corelli, this was a quick and relatively painless way of earning an income. And though there was competition to be published in a prestigious mainstream journal like *Athenaeum*, the sheer volume of periodicals on the market meant that editors were

¹¹⁵ Edward G Salmon, ‘What Girls Read’ (1886) in Fraser, Johnston, and Green, 2003: 70

¹¹⁶ Stephenson, 1993: 9-10

desperate for material—even from women writers. Rita Kranidis (1995) explains that in addition to meeting needs in terms of volume, women’s writing met moral needs as well. ‘Women’s writing also met a perceived need for moral instruction, similar in nature and function to that provided by and expected of a vast numbers of women educators.’¹¹⁷ For many of the writers surveyed in this thesis, Emma Hardinge Britten in particular, they believed that women represented morality, purity and goodness, in addition to their spiritual gifts, compared to man’s logic and rationality. Therefore injecting society with a dose of good morals was part of the mission of woman, at least for the Christian Spiritualists.

1.6 Spirited Women

The anonymous M.A. Oxon. in his 1883 treatise on Spiritualism writes that ‘some are selected [as mediums] for their loving, gentle nature—their female compassion facilitates an open channel of communication.’¹¹⁸ Barrow concurs, explaining that in order to be successful, ‘the male medium might have, or have needed to develop, certain “female” qualities.’¹¹⁹ Hardinge Britten accepted with these ideas

¹¹⁷ Kranidis, 1995: 66

¹¹⁸ M.A., 1883: 35

¹¹⁹ Barrow, 1986: 269

that women, with their innate faculties of compassion and empathy made far better mediums than men. 'The Victorian doctrine of separate spheres was taken by Spiritualism to an uncanny, if logical, extreme: men belonged in this world, women in the next... [Spiritualism] held unparalleled opportunities for female professionals.'¹²⁰ Despite this commonly-held belief that women made better mediums, the Victorian medium was a controversial figure.

'The Victorian medium is a figure who subverts femininity and instigates questions of class, sexuality, and the position of women in the private and the public sphere both in this world and the next.'¹²¹ The Victorian female medium was a transgressive figure whose presence demanded (explicitly or implicitly) that society consider the Woman Question for one; she also raised questions about identity and gender which were unheard of prior to the mid-nineteenth century. The Victorian adept caused further consternation by refusing to exploit her 'passive nature', preferring, instead, to deliberately seek spirit contact on her own terms.

¹²⁰ Gomel, 2007: 199

¹²¹ Kontou, 2008: 275-276

Judith Butler (1999) explains that the human body is 'mute' and receives its gender identity from the culture it inhabits.¹²² For the Victorians, the gender binary was natural—and female mediumship and adeptship violated this. “Intelligible” genders are those which in some sense institute and maintain relations of coherence and continuity among sex, gender, sexual practice, and desire.¹²³ A female medium or adept, though she may commence séance as a woman, might be imbued with the spirit of man. Mediumship blurred the binary and the boundaries of gender: so does the female medium or adept retain her femininity? Or is she something else? But we must consider the spirits, here. Does a spirit possess a gender? Wolfreys writes that spectres are both ‘at and in excess of the limits of definition’, meaning they cannot be readily defined as one thing or the other; they defy categorisation.¹²⁴

During séance, if a woman became possessed of a spirit, it was believed that she not only had the ability to act as a genuine conduit, but had the power to publicly exercise spiritual authority.¹²⁵ Female mediumship, despite raising uncomfortable questions about femininity

¹²² Butler, 1999: 164

¹²³ *ibid*: 23

¹²⁴ Wolfreys, 2003: x-xi

¹²⁵ Owen, 2004: 6

and female power, occurred within a sphere of accepted female practice, according to Owen. Because Spiritualism relied on feminine qualities like passivity, and usually séances occurred in private homes, it afforded to women a 'species of feminine power' that was both transgressive and acceptable.¹²⁶ Occultist women, then, lost any remaining veneer of respectability. 'The "manly woman"' of Theosophy or the Golden Dawn, 'seemed to critics to be representative of a modern sexual economy marked by the descent into anarchy.'¹²⁷

It would be incorrect to suggest that the Spiritualism movement was the reason for the burgeoning New Woman movement, but I would argue that it was likely a factor in that movement. Many Spiritualist women were wives and mothers *and* paid mediums and speakers. Basham credits the Women's Rights Movement as the 'obvious beneficiary' following the collapse of the status of Spiritualism in the 1880s.¹²⁸

1.7 New Women

¹²⁶ *ibid*: 9

¹²⁷ Owen, 2007: 85

¹²⁸ Basham, 1992: ix

As Ann Heilmann (2004) notes, '[i]n Britain, the 1850s and 1880s marked the singular synchronicity of two movements, which began and had their heyday at roughly the same time.'¹²⁹ She is of course referring to Spiritualism and the New Woman movement.

The idea of the New Woman had been percolating in social consciousness for several decades before Spiritualism— the seeds for the movement were planted with Mary Wollstonecraft's *A Vindication of the Rights of Women* (1792), where the woman question was first posed. But it was Spiritualism, I argue, with its subversion of strict, Victorian social hierarchies and divisions that provided an indelible influence upon the movement. This, again, is not to say that important social change was being forged outside of the Spiritualist movement. After the passing of the Divorce and Matrimonial Causes Act (1857), which lent to women access to divorce, and the Married Woman's Property Act (1870, 1874, 1882 and 1893), which ensured that women could take control of their property even after their husbands had died, women were feeling empowered. The Act also ensured that any property acquired by a woman, 'by her own industry and skill, separately from her husband' is her own; so too was any property she

¹²⁹ Heilmann, 2004: 91

was willed or bequeathed.¹³⁰ Following the 1882 Act, married women could enter into contracts, sue or be sued and were subject to bankruptcy laws, if their business was in their name alone.¹³¹ A woman, married or unmarried, would have, under the 1870 and 1874 Acts, complete control over the finances in her own name, whether they were acquired before or after marriage.¹³²

For middle- and upper-class women, work was largely seen as a shameful pursuit. Knitting scarves for charity or volunteering at inner-city missions was acceptable, as they were understood to be a part of woman's Christian duty—novelist and feminist Sarah Grand's mother once told her 'ladies only work for charity.'¹³³ But seeking paid employment when one's family did not need the extra income was certainly not encouraged. By the 1870s and 1880s, however, the 'white blouse job market' was beginning to flourish—and as Owen points out, it is no coincidence that this era was the same which saw the 'meteoric rise' of the female (paid) Spiritualist medium.¹³⁴ Women working in the

¹³⁰ Blackburn, 1895: 74

¹³¹ *ibid*: 75

¹³² *ibid*: 74

¹³³ in Heilmann, 2004: 29

¹³⁴ Owen, 2004: 2

private sector as secretaries and clerks helped to make more respectable the idea that middle-class women could work; this, in turn, made the notion of paying a Spiritualist medium for her talents more normal. That is to say, Spiritualism and the growing rights of women worked together in the latter decades of the nineteenth century to create more opportunities for British women.

The New Woman did not always work in public, however. Sometimes she stayed home with her children; sometimes she worked in the arts, which, by this time, was considered a semi-acceptable field for women—depending on one's subject matter. The New Woman is at once desirous and repulsive; compelling and dangerous; ubiquitous and impossible to define. Owen writes:

The New Woman was a journalistic and literary invention that nevertheless spoke to the social realities of a changing climate for women at the end of the century...the New Woman was also linked in the journalistic mind with an aberrant sexuality, either an unhealthy renunciation of motherhood or the challenging of conventional sociosexual codes¹³⁵

The New Woman sought to disturb and disrupt social convention, as she insisted on equality of agency— of choice over her life's choices. New Woman fiction subverted social norms, most usually that of the cult of domesticity. The idea of woman as 'angel of the house' did not begin

¹³⁵ Owen, 2007: 86

with Coventry Patmore, as such, but his poem was a coalescing of common sentiment at the time. Transgressive relationships were also a common feature in New Woman fiction, and include a wide range of unacceptable choices from women who married a man of the wrong class/race, to women who left their husbands, to women who opted out of heterosexual marriage altogether.

Nina Auerbach notes that the 'types' of women that existed in Victorian Britain—angel, demon, old maid, fallen¹³⁶— are all defined by patriarchy, and the latter two, by their relationship to men. She goes on to explain that the old maid and the fallen woman are peculiarly Victorian institutions, as they are both 'artificial creations' of patriarchy, and 'evad[e] that tyranny' of that system.¹³⁷ She notes, however, that '[a] woman's fall is imagined as almost the only avenue through which she is allowed to grow.'¹³⁸ The possibility of rebirth or renewal is, here, possible. Though the Victorians would not have liked it very much, Spiritualist and occult women were able to 'destroy and reconstruct [their] world[s]' in their own image.¹³⁹ Their initial intention of 'redeeming'

¹³⁶ Auerbach, 1982: 63

¹³⁷ *ibid*: 61

¹³⁸ *ibid*: 153

¹³⁹ *ibid*: 162

the fallen woman centred on traditional Christianity and its emphasis on reclaiming feminine virtue; modesty, chastity, etc. But through the opportunities afforded by Spiritualism, Theosophy and the occult, Elizabeth d'Espérance was not merely a nervous housewife; she was a powerful conduit for the spirits. Blavatsky and Farr no longer had to be shameful divorcées, but could work, write, and exercise tremendous adeptship.

Angelique Richardson (2003) argues that the Woman Question not only questioned patriarchal ideals, but challenged what was considered to be natural.

Several competing narratives emerged. One was that men and women were fundamentally, innately different, and that social organisation was an expression of this fundamental and fixed biological difference. Within this framework, sex difference was *naturalised* and feminism, the sexual and social emancipation of women, was a violation of the natural order, challenging, as it did, women's central reproductive function¹⁴⁰ [emphasis in original]

The theories of evolution and genetics emerged in the late-Victorian era, and everyone from scientists to Spiritualists were eager to implement its ideas into their ideologies. Those who opposed the advent of the New Woman and suffrage understood female power to be a transgression of the natural order. The New Women believed that

¹⁴⁰ Richardson, 2003: 34-35

evolutionary principles meant that soon women would evolve into the same status as men. Women, as Richardson argues, also understood that their status would affect future generations of men— ‘women began to base their claim to citizenship on their role as bearers and educators of future citizens.’¹⁴¹ In other words, Britain’s future leaders would benefit from having well-educated mothers, since their mothers would be responsible for the majority of childcare in the formative years. ‘Responsible motherhood was a moral obligation and a woman’s first act of citizenship in late Victorian Britain. It conferred nobility, prestige, and power. At a time of concern over national efficiency and empire, motherhood and imperialism were drawn into an alliance in which the function of reproducing was crucial.’¹⁴² These ideas concerning marriage and motherhood are picked up, in particular, with Emma Hardinge Britten (Chapter Four) and Marie Corelli (Chapter Five).

1.8 Conclusion: Restless Spirits

The right to self identify; the ability to claim authorial power; the right to gainful employment—these are the questions posed to Victorian patriarchy by d’Espérance, Crowe, Hardinge Britten, Blavatsky, Corelli

¹⁴¹ *ibid*: 68-69

¹⁴² *ibid*: 75

and Farr. These are also the issues which will be discussed over the following chapters.

Explicitly or implicitly; directly or indirectly, through the medium of periodicals or just through mediums, female Spiritualists, Theosophists and occultists asked many difficult questions of the Victorian patriarchy concerning a woman's authority to speak and to write. Mediumship, as we have seen, was a gendered activity—its passivity meant it *must* be feminine—and yet it granted to mediums exceptional power. Adeptship took the premise of mediumship one step further by insisting feminine passivity was not enough: all those wishing to make spirit contact must exert masculine will to do so. Regardless of affiliation, passivity or activity, the women involved in these movements were, in their own ways, transgressing, and thus questioning, patriarchal standards of proper femininity.

PART ONE:

Spiritualism

The philosophy of Spiritualism is based on seven fundamental principles.

1. The Fatherhood of God.
2. The Brotherhood of Man.
3. The Communion of Spirits and the Ministry of Angels.
4. The Continuous Existence of the human soul.
5. Personal Responsibility.
6. Compensation and Retribution hereafter for all the good or evil deeds done on earth.
7. Eternal Progress open to every human soul.

[The Spiritualists National Union (SNU)]

CHAPTER TWO:

Elizabeth d'Espérance

2.1 Introduction: 'It is better to have the opportunity of defending the truths which I have here attempted to record rather than to leave the work to others'¹⁴³

Elizabeth d'Espérance (1855-1919), née Elizabeth Hope, is the least well-known of the mediums surveyed in this thesis. It is difficult to pinpoint why she, rather well known in her time, has faded from consciousness whilst others have remained. d'Espérance was a working medium in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, and highly thought of in Spiritualist circles for her ability to 'materialise', or produce full-bodied apparitions. She stopped working in Britain in the 1890s after she could no longer dodge accusations of fraud. But she did forge a career in Germany and Scandinavia—the latter place being one of particular significance in d'Espérance's writing.

d'Espérance never specifically classifies mediumship as a feminine undertaking, and in her view, anyone could enter a trance state, or be

¹⁴³ One of d'Espérance's reasons for publishing *Shadow Land* (1897: preface)

induced into one by a medium. In 'Warning Spirit' the spirit of Count K.'s mother causes Hans to 's[i]nk insensible to the floor.'¹⁴⁴ And d'Espérance herself recounts numerous instances where she was so overwhelmed by spirit power that she fainted. According to d'Espérance experiencing extraordinary visions is a part of spirit-seeing—though others would likely attribute them to hallucinations brought on by hysteria. In 'Northern Lights' Herr Massie, while admiring aurora borealis, sees a vision of 'the bridge of the dead':

It is the bridge which the gods build, that the dead may come and go, some are going to their home in Valhalla; some return to earth for a little space. When the bridge is built they crowd upon it, hurrying over. Old warriors with their horses, their swords and shield; one sees how they flash and glitter. Armies march over, with their flags and banners waving¹⁴⁵

In most of the stories collected in *Northern Lights*, it is men who are making contact with the other side. For Basham this use of male narrator and male experience of spirits, especially in texts authored by women, serves as an immediate challenge to patriarchy. '[I]t is male consciousness which is made to encounter, puzzle over, interpret or be haunted by the mysterious "otherness" of the supernatural... [this] indicates that the challenge of supernatural is made directly to notions

¹⁴⁴ *Shadow Land*, 1899: 104

¹⁴⁵ *ibid*: 44

of masculinity itself.¹⁴⁶ Likely it also serves as d'Espérance's claims to legitimacy: if men, learned and rational, could have these experiences, there would be no need to discount or dismiss female spirit involvement.

Nevertheless, d'Espérance was the most 'feminine' and 'sensitive' of any of the mediums surveyed in this thesis—if we accept the definitions offered by others concerning the feminine attributes of mediumship. She writes of her spirit experiences in a way which borders on hysteria: she writes of her fears and anxieties each time she opened up to the other world. d'Espérance is certain that she has had these 'gifts' from childhood; but she writes of her uncertainty about their origins—are they natural? Divine? Demonic? Unlike Crowe or Hardinge Britten who are firmly in the nature and divine camps, d'Espérance hovers somewhere in the middle. 'These things have grown with my growth, and have been familiar to me from the beginning, since I can recall no time when they were not familiar and natural.'¹⁴⁷ d'Espérance writes of her lonely childhood, and the isolation she suffered from other children because of her connection with the spirit world. 'I could see faces and forms where

¹⁴⁶ Basham, 1992: 158

¹⁴⁷ *Northern Lights*, 1897: 1-2

others saw nothing but mist. I could hear music and singing where others only heard the moaning of the wind.’¹⁴⁸ She says she grew up in a large and gloomy house, without siblings, but always found the house quite full. ‘To me the rooms were never dark or empty. Sometime on entering I would look round disappointedly at meeting no familiar form, then I would be startled at finding them suddenly peeped [*sic*] by strangers. Sometimes these shadowy figures were so real, so life-like that I mistook them for ordinary visitors.’¹⁴⁹ d’Espérance claims that her mother discouraged her spiritual gifts, and made her ashamed of them.

Elaine Showalter (1996) writes:

we must ask whether mental pathology was suppressed rebellion. Was the hysterical woman a feminist heroine, fighting back against confinement in the bourgeois home? Was hysteria—“the daughter’s disease”—a mode of protest for women deprived of other social or intellectual outlets or expressive options?¹⁵⁰

d’Espérance’s loneliness, isolation, and the tense relationship with her mother, then, could well have produced her spirit phenomena. Tromp contends that d’Espérance’s mediumship was ‘marked by disquiet’¹⁵¹ as she struggled to come to terms with the ‘slippages’ in her identity.

¹⁴⁸ *ibid*: 10-11

¹⁴⁹ *ibid*: 12

¹⁵⁰ Showalter, 1996: 147

¹⁵¹ Tromp, 2006: 184

In her highly-stylised autobiography, *Shadow Land*, she plays up her feminine sensitivities—she is *extra* sensitive and prone to fainting spells in a way that would not see her out of place in the company of eighteenth-century damsels in distress. When a man touches her at séance in order to prove fraud, she claims it nearly killed her, and she had to spend several weeks recuperating in the south of France. ‘The spiritual trance was a kind of out-of-body experience that at once reflected and inverted the hysterical fit, the most characteristic and dramatic of hysterical symptoms.’¹⁵² This would have appealed to d’Espérance’s high-strung and nervous personality. Though I cannot, with any accuracy, say whether or not d’Espérance was truly experiencing fits of hysteria whilst in the spirit cabinet, it is clear that trance mediumship and hysterical fits did occasionally overlap.

Though *Shadow Land* is intended as autobiography or nonfictional personal narrative, d’Espérance injects it with a great deal of (melo)dramatic flair and writes it in such a hyper-stylised manner, that there are doubts as to its veracity. Gilbert and Gubar note the effectiveness of the ‘mad’ female voice: ‘the female author enacts her

¹⁵² McGarry, 2008: 126

own raging desires to escape male houses and male texts.¹⁵³ By offering her own (even fictionalised) experiences, d'Espérance is able to 'escape' from masculine, patriarchal oppression by emphasising her extraordinary femininity.

Susan Lanser explains that '[t]he use of personal voice also risks reinforcing the convenient ideology of women's writing as "self-expression," the product of "intuition" rather than art.'¹⁵⁴ Whilst this would normally be a valid concern for a woman writer, for many Spiritualists, and certainly for d'Espérance, using personal voice and recounting deeply personal stories lends some authority by discussing experience. Most women did not have access to the necessary education to undertake scientific inquiry into their spirit phenomena, so, in seeking public voice, had to negotiate for themselves some small space in-between the masculine and feminine spheres. Women could be 'perceived as clever and industrious, learned and sensitive, sagacious and brilliant, yet they were never free of a tension inherent in the Victorian subjugation of woman's mind by male cultural authority.'¹⁵⁵

¹⁵³ Gilbert and Gubar, 2000: 85

¹⁵⁴ Lanser, 1992: 20

¹⁵⁵ David, 1987: viii

In the story 'The Warning Spirit' it is Count K.'s materialist, patriarchal ambition which is his downfall. '[H]e became an openly avowed materialists and atheist, laughing to scorn the religious observance of his people, and the admonitions of his priests.'¹⁵⁶ One day K. becomes locked in his safe and almost suffocates whilst waiting to be freed. At the same time, his new valet, Hans, sees an unknown woman in the castle. It is the spirit of K.'s deceased mother, who, as the title suggests, has come to warn her son of the error of his ways. The spirit delivers a message—unknown to the reader—which when delivered to K. immediately sees the end of his 'idle dissipation and wild orgies'¹⁵⁷ and sees him become a man of fasting, repentance and charity. 'Hans Hauptmann's Warning' is quite a similar story about a man being visited by a parental spirit in order that he changes his ways. Hans is a farmer and mill owner obsessed with work. He is not a wealthy man, as K. was, but nonetheless he has a slavish devotion to work and money. A husband and a father-of-four, he often takes his frustrations out on his wife, especially if he's been drinking. One drunken night, he is visited by the spirit of Gretchen's father, his late father-in-law, who issues him a

¹⁵⁶ *Northern Lights*: 99

¹⁵⁷ *ibid*:100

simple warning: 'Take care! Hans Hauptmann! A second time I warn you —take care!'¹⁵⁸ He discovers that it is his father-in-law's spirit that has been destroying his looms and costing him money. Again he beats his wife in frustration, and again he receives a visit in the form of all his cattle dropping dead, his house burning down, and his two youngest children perishing in the fire. These horrible events force him to see the error of his ways, and he repents, living a good life and finally cherishing Gretchen. As Wallace notes, it is this sort of 'ambiguity' which drew women to the ghost story.¹⁵⁹ d'Espérance is able to make her criticisms of the socio-political, masculine realm—too materialist, too atheistic, and too ambitious—from a safe space.

Though she professes a deep and certain belief in God, she does not accept patriarchal Christianity. In 'The Mill Stream', the village miller is a stern Christian, fond of lecturing his only daughter from the Bible. He tells her the story of Moses and the plagues:

In tones solemn and slow the miller read, pausing now and again with uplifted eyes, that glanced through the horn rim of his glasses, to mark the effect of his words on his hearers; and when he had finished the chapter he closed with this observation—'such are the wonderful ways of the Lord, and His mercy endureth forever.'

'Methinks,' said Ruth, the miller's young daughter, 'that mercy in the case was a-wanting; it scarcely was just to punish the nation

¹⁵⁸ *ibid*: 116

¹⁵⁹ Wallace, 2004: 66

because the king had incurred His displeasure; and when He Himself hardened the heart of the king, was it right He should punish the people?¹⁶⁰

The miller is angry to hear what he understands to be a challenge of God's on judgement. Her parents warn her to keep her 'childish and hoydenish' spirit in check, especially as they are about to welcome a guest into their home, a religious scholar called Philip. Predictably, as time passes, Philip grows fond of Ruth, and finds that she has taught him more about love and compassion, than he has taught her about the scriptures.

Upon their brief separation, they make a vow that if one should die, their spirit will visit the other; 'we'll comfort the other with help and advice from above, awaiting with patience and calmness and hope the time that shall see us united.'¹⁶¹ Ruth dies, but as promised, her spirit returns to Philip, instructing him to, 'teach mercy and kindness and goodness of heart... teach them they are the seed in the garden of earth, that must afterward open in heaven.'¹⁶² Here d'Espérance stresses the message of treating others with only kindness and compassion—likely a reaction

¹⁶⁰ *Northern Lights* 142-143

¹⁶¹ *ibid*: 149

¹⁶² *ibid*: 163

to the harsh appraisals she received in the press after her abilities were 'proved' fraudulent. Also, she reinforces the Spiritualist comprehension of the afterlife as a place of learning and growth and repentance. Unlike the Christian conception of heaven and hell, where one's earthly character determined location, Spiritualists believed that all spirits went to the same place, and then were afforded a chance to improve themselves. Finally, Ruth thinks for herself and does not blindly accept the teachings of patriarchy, be it the church or her father. d'Espérance encourages her readers to seek answers to the higher questions for themselves, instead of relying on male intelligence.

d'Espérance contends that the stories in *Northern Lights* have all been told to her by the people of her beloved Northern regions. She explains that she selected these stories in particular because 'the narrators are known to me, as well as to hundreds of other people, as being both trustworthy and veracious.'¹⁶³ In 'Benno, the Vagabond' a young boy, the titular Benno, pilfers a rifle and accidentally kills a man called Wilder. Being just a child, he runs away from the scene of accident, and when it is discovered, Fritz, the owner of the rifle is accused of murder. Benno wakes in a cave and sees Wilder, who tells him he is fine. When

¹⁶³ *ibid*: 22

Benno 'wakes' again, he is the local inn, nursing a broken back and delirious from fever. The landlady of the inn tells him that Wilder is, in fact, still dead. He confesses all about the accident, which frees Fritz, and Benno dies in peace. This is a fairly standard Spiritualist ghost story, except that at its end, d'Espérance states that an article appeared in the October 1890 edition of the *Munchener Neueste Nachrichten*, which gives the facts of the case, including that Benno's 'illusion' of Wilder can be attributed to his injuries.¹⁶⁴ For d'Espérance, however, it is important to note that Wilder is still 'living', and has now been joined by Benno. This type of 'true' story is also employed frequently by Catherine Crowe and Madame Blavatsky, and arguably has a greater impact on the reader than traditional narrative, especially when the storyteller is from the upper classes.¹⁶⁵ But as is often the case in Spiritualism and the occult, ghost-seers emerge from the farthest flung corners of the earth.

2.2 'The darkness of the unknown': d'Espérance and Empire

In the introduction to her collection of ghost stories, *Northern Lights*, d'Espérance offers praise for the 'simple' people she has met on her travels throughout Northern Europe. She notes that the people of

¹⁶⁴ *ibid*: 93

¹⁶⁵ This argument is explored more fully in the chapter on Catherine Crowe's writing

Scandinavia, Bavaria and the Tyrol are 'firm believers in supernatural influences, ghosts, and haunted houses or localities.'¹⁶⁶ She catalogues some of the daily 'miracles' present in their society, including the Water Finder, who makes uses of the dowsing rod or stick, and the Blood Stopper, 'who, by touching the open wound, or by passing his hand over the veins, caused instant cessation of the flow of blood.'¹⁶⁷ She goes on to scoff at the materialist, who she says might explain away these phenomena using natural laws. It is worth noting, now, that this volume was written after the accusations of fraud against d'Espérance grew so loud that she was unable to find work as a medium in Britain. Both *Northern Lights* and *Shadow Land* contain a sort of bitterness against the patriarchal system which doubted her gifts and forced her into exile. Diana Wallace explains that '[t]he ghost story as a form has allowed women writers special kinds of freedom, not merely to include the fantastic and the supernatural, but also to offer critiques of male power and sexuality which are often more radical than those in more realist genres.'¹⁶⁸ Though she never explicitly states her disdain for the British Establishment—apart from jibes at materialists—her anguish at

¹⁶⁶ *Northern Lights* 18

¹⁶⁷ *ibid*: 18

¹⁶⁸ Wallace, 2004: 57

what she considered unfair treatment is evident. d'Espérance does say she willingly accepts her status as martyr for the cause, explaining that in childhood, a gypsy told her: 'You have eyes that see things to which others are blind. God help you! Your life will not be an easy one.'¹⁶⁹

In addition to praising Northern Europeans for their acceptance of Spiritualist practice and thought, d'Espérance, like many Victorian Spiritualists and occultists, was in contact with the racial other. She was one of the many significant mediums controlled by a 'native' spirit.¹⁷⁰ Victorians, not just the Spiritualists, saw non-Europeans and those not of European stock as a lesser or lower race; connected to old ideas of superstition as a result of their lack of education and modernisation. People living on the borders of the Empire were more 'magical' than their WASP-y counterparts.¹⁷¹

Luckhurst points out at least one practical reason for English mediums to bring forth dark-skinned spirits: 'It may have been that racial difference and imperial distance were the clearest representational

¹⁶⁹ *Shadow Land*: 76

¹⁷⁰ Luckhurst, 2004: 202

¹⁷¹ This idea is more fully explored in the chapter on Madame Blavatsky

means of demarcating the medium and her spirit in the domestic space of the séance.¹⁷² In the darkened home or meeting room—the latter being the place where d’Espérance performed most of her materialisations—a simple means of combating fraud was to have a medium and spirit who did not resemble one another in such a dramatic way. Another reason for including marginalised people in the British séance is to do with, in part, guilt over involvement in colonialism and the slave trade. ‘Red Indian and black slave spirits had been transported from the American origins of modern Spiritualism, but the genocidal histories embodied in them spoke to a tradition of English abolitionism and aboriginal protection, dissenting projects overlapping with aspects of Spiritualist belief.’¹⁷³

Not that this guilt or concern made the Victorians treat their marginalised spirits with any particular dignity. d’Espérance writes of making contact with a Spanish girl, Ninia, who ‘wrote bad English’ and was a terrible flirt. d’Espérance has a number of auto-writing sessions with Ninia, and though she is described as Spanish, her style of speech/writing speaks to other racial prejudices. When one of the male séance

¹⁷² Luckhurst, 2004: 203

¹⁷³ *ibid*: 203

sitters scolds Ninia for her lack of discretion, she replies, 'Yo mus not do tings yo's shamed to tel pepels; dats wat Stafford tells Ninia.'¹⁷⁴

In 'Northern Lights' Herr Massie, travelling through the north of Norway and stuck in inclement weather, receives a gracious welcome from a few Lapps, the tribe native to that region. Whilst they are good hosts, they do adhere to nearly every racial stereotype of the native. The patriarch of the tribe tells Massie of his lost love, a woman called Karin, who had been corrupted by encroaching settlers, and took to drink. 'She had not the look of us Lapps, not black-haired, nor had high cheekbones as most of our girls have. No, she was fair and blue-eyed, her cheeks were round and red.'¹⁷⁵ In other words, she looked more Norwegian than Lapp. Massie is also struck by the Lapps' combining of cultures; '[t]hey accepted the "White Christ" but the old gods were not dead.'¹⁷⁶ And it was through these old gods that the Lapps received their spiritual gifts.

¹⁷⁴ *Shadow Land* 141; Stafford refers to Humnur Stafford, a deceased philosopher and another of d'Espérance spirit guides/controls

¹⁷⁵ *Northern Lights* 36

¹⁷⁶ *ibid*: 44

In the East and the 'old' worlds, spiritual gifts, according to d'Espérance was seen as just that: gifts. In the modern, materialist West, however, mediums like d'Espérance faced accusations of mental illness—hysteria most notably—alongside accusations of fraud. Many medical practitioners regarded Spiritualism with 'distaste and suspicion' noting its similarities to sexually and expressively explicit hysteria.¹⁷⁷

2.3.1 'I had a terrible suspicion that there must be something wrong somewhere in me'¹⁷⁸: Hysteria and Spiritualism

Mediumship and madness (hysteria) had been linked since the start of the Modern Spiritualist movement. Kontou (2008) notes that

[s]ensitive nerves—the privilege of women and effeminate men—were not a sign of fragility but psychical tools with which to access the minds of the living and the dead. Psychical researchers preferred the term 'sensitive' to 'medium' when talking about spirit communication, further consolidating the links between feminine attributes and spectral manifestations through a neurological template¹⁷⁹

For a time in the late-nineteenth century, both mediumship and hysteria, this extreme 'nervousness', were performed in public. Hysteria became an unsavoury public spectacle acted out in front of amphitheatres packed with journalists, scientists and celebrities. Jean-Martin Charcot's

¹⁷⁷ Owen, 2004: 139

¹⁷⁸ *Shadow Land* 19

¹⁷⁹ Kontou, 2008: 277

female hysterics would be induced into a trance state, and put on a show, for the assembled masses.

Some of them smelt with delight a bottle of ammonia when told it was rose water, others would eat a piece of charcoal when presented to them as chocolate. Another would crawl on all fours on the floor, barking furiously when told she was a dog, flap her arms as if trying to fly when turned into a pigeon, lift her skirts with a shriek of terror when a glove was thrown at her feet with the suggestion of being a snake. Another would walk with a top hat in her arms rocking it to and fro and kissing it tenderly when she was told it was her baby¹⁸⁰

For Molly McGarry, the medium at séance and the hysteric had a good deal in common, not the least of which were the blurring of boundaries between this world and the next; between health and disease. 'Each phenomenon produced a kind of psychic double play of fractured subjectivities that blurred the boundaries between active, speaking subject and passive object. Both mediums and hysterics performed and produced bodily states that at once confounded and informed men of science. Each performance remained tainted by its supposed link to femininity and female passivity and by a suspicion that it belonged to the realm of the imaginary.'¹⁸¹ Elaine Showalter notes a few more symptoms of hysteria, including, 'fits, fainting, vomiting, choking, sobbing [and] laughing'¹⁸² any of which might happen at séance or

¹⁸⁰ Axel Munthe, 1930 in Showalter, 1996: 148

¹⁸¹ McGarry, 2008: 126

¹⁸² Showalter, 1996: 129

during a mediumistic trance. She explains that those who were alleged to be suffering from hysteria were in many instances simply ‘tainted by class origins and moral issues’¹⁸³ as opposed to any mental health concerns.

McGarry writes that, from a medical perspective, hysteria and mediumship had many commonalities—and it would serve as one plausible explanation for d’Espérance’s physical and emotional fatigue. ‘The various states of mediumistic performance—trance, rigidity, catalepsy, and ecstasy—mirrored the stages of hysteria as it was being diagnosed and codified at the time in asylums and symposiums throughout the USA and Europe.’¹⁸⁴ If she were in a hysterical state, it would her explain her deviations from ‘normal’ behaviour becoming a woman of respectable breeding. ‘Mental science identified contemporary notions of socially acceptable behaviour with the concept of normalcy,’ explains Owen, ‘but represented this norm as a scientific fact.’¹⁸⁵ This idea of normal as natural, instead of socially/culturally determined, is likely one of the reasons for d’Espérance’s lifelong angst

¹⁸³ *ibid*: 18

¹⁸⁴ McGarry, 2008: 126

¹⁸⁵ Owen, 2004: 141

concerning her spirit-seeing. Having felt alienated from childhood, as we have seen, it is little wonder she retreated further in the Spiritualist world.

2.3.2 'A nervous, miserable dread of being misunderstood':

Hysterical Women

For some hysteria led to mediumship; for others it was the other way around. 'The etiology of hysteria, in turn, depended on... understandings of the phenomenon of Spiritualism and the female medium.'¹⁸⁶ Of the mediums and spirit communicators surveyed in this thesis, d'Espérance was certainly the most female; the most sensitive and prone to anxiety over her condition. She recalls an incident at school when she auto-wrote an essay. She submitted it as her own, but when questioned by the teacher, broke down and admitted that in her frustrations at not being able to write it properly, had gone to bed, sobbing, and clutching paper and pencil. When she woke, a religious treatise was beside her. 'All that day I was tormented by self-inflicted arguments for and against claiming the ownership of the writings.'¹⁸⁷

¹⁸⁶ *ibid*: 128

¹⁸⁷ *Shadow Land* 63

d'Espérance frequently writes of being tormented by the unknown spirit quantity within her.

The first spirit d'Espérance was able to materialise on her own was Yolande, 'a young Arab girl of fifteen or sixteen years... a slender olive-skinned maiden whose naïveté and gracefulness made her the wonder and admiration of the circle.'¹⁸⁸ Although d'Espérance states she has not actually seen Yolande herself, being that she is entranced inside the spirit cabinet at the time. Yolande, like Ninia, was also sexualised; d'Espérance notes she would appear 'robed in soft white spirit garments which scarcely concealed her graceful form'; she is described as 'swaying' in her movements and dances gracefully.¹⁸⁹ It is not only the spirits who are eroticised, but the mediums were as well. Cesare Lombroso reports that hysterical women are 'remarkably erotic'¹⁹⁰— they are driven by sensation and passion, and will commit all manner of indecent acts in order to experience a rush of emotion. For Showalter, however, feminists and New Women were persecuted with the threat of incarceration for failing to stay in line. 'During an era when patriarchal

¹⁸⁸ *Northern Lights* 248

¹⁸⁹ *ibid*: 253; 269; 243

¹⁹⁰ Lombroso, 1897: 223

culture felt itself to be under attack by its rebellious daughters, one obvious defence was to label women... as mentally disturbed.¹⁹¹

Ann Heilmann (1998) writes that the New Woman emerges, in part, from discourses on degeneration. '[Max] Nordau's rhetoric of disease was adopted from the medical discourse on hysteria, hence implicitly linked to women.'¹⁹² And it was the 'Janus-like' merging of the feminist and the hysteric, which left us with the socially and sexually deviant New Woman.¹⁹³ Heilmann argues, however, that this perception is skewed, and is a reflection, largely, of anti-New Woman press. 'Many female New Woman writers, though constructed as decadents by the press, saw themselves as a regenerative force in society, and therefore as the opposite of *fin de siècle* decadence, which they regarded as a predominantly male and masculinist movement indifferent or hostile to the woman's cause.'¹⁹⁴

Female mediums were accused of similar sexual impropriety; allowing (male) spirits to assume their bodies was considered by some as an

¹⁹¹ Showalter, 1996: 145

¹⁹² Heilmann, 1998: xii

¹⁹³ *ibid*: xii

¹⁹⁴ *ibid*: xi

erotic, repulsive, act. Lombroso goes on to say that the sexual appetites of female hysterics and female lunatics exceeds that of males—it is ‘more turbulent and indecent in its manifestation than in men.’¹⁹⁵ This is in direct contrast, according to Lombroso, of the qualities of ‘docility and sexual apathy’ which distinguish normal women.¹⁹⁶ Female mediums, when in trance state, were understood to be as improper as women in hysterical states.

Eminent criminologist Cesare Lombroso argues that hysterical women—women with mental illnesses of one sort or another—were more apt to clairvoyance or auditory phenomena. McGarry notes that ‘[b]eginning in the 1870s, a growing number of doctors pathologised mediumship, naming it as a particularly female disease akin to hysteria.’¹⁹⁷ For Showalter, hysteria—madness in women—is linked to language and culture production. ‘[D]ual images of female insanity—madness as one of the wrongs of woman; madness as the essential feminine nature unveiling itself before scientific male rationality—suggests the two ways that the relationship between women and madness has been

¹⁹⁵ Lombroso, 1897: 297

¹⁹⁶ *ibid*: 297

¹⁹⁷ McGarry, 2008: 15

perceived.¹⁹⁸ That is, madness or hysteria is inherent in women because of their status as man's opposite: where man is logical, decisive and rational, woman is emotional, capricious, and unpredictable. Hysteria, or mediumship, was merely an outward expression of these feminine energies and emotions.

Mediumship was not a simple task for d'Espérance. 'The strain of unregulated séances, continual performances, and the consequent drain on stamina led inexorably to a medium's exhaustion and depletion of her powers.'¹⁹⁹ d'Espérance explains that she is not an expert in spirits, but believes Yolande (and others) need a medium to assist with their full-bodied materialisations. 'I seemed to lose, not my individuality, but my strength and power of exertion, and though I did not then know it, a great portion of my material substance.'²⁰⁰ d'Espérance describes her identity confusion at séance:

It must be my own heart I feel beating so distinctly. Yet those arms round me? Surely never did I feel a touch so plainly. I begin to wonder which is I. Am I the white figure or am I the one on the chair? Are they my hands round the old lady's neck, or are these mine that are lying on the knees of me, or on the knees of the figure if it be not I, on the chair?... It is a horrible feeling, thus losing hold of one's identity. I long to put out one of these hands that are lying so helplessly, and touch

¹⁹⁸ Showalter, 1996: 3

¹⁹⁹ Owen, 2004: 61

²⁰⁰ *Shadow Land* 271

someone just to know if I am myself or only a dream—if 'Anna' be I, and I am lost as it were, in her identity²⁰¹

When materialising, d'Espérance is no longer alone in her own mind. She must share her inner-most thoughts with those whom she brings forth. It is understandable why she would have so much nervous tension when she lost her one place of privacy. In the broadest possible sense, as has been discussed, the idea that the medium loses her identity as a Victorian woman, and all that goes with it, is not entirely negative; it was something women could use to question patriarchal gender norms. In many ways, it had a liberating effect. Yet, in the case of d'Espérance and others, sharing consciousness or blurred identity was incredibly difficult, and caused her to feel physically 'weak and powerless.'²⁰²

This links to Owen's claims that mediums, especially ones with the lure of d'Espérance, were frequently overworked. 'Of all forms of mediumship, materialization was thought to take the heaviest toll.'²⁰³ It is unsurprising, then, that mediums like d'Espérance were found to be complaining of physical and mental exhaustion; after arduous auto-

²⁰¹ *ibid*: 346

²⁰² *ibid*: 345

²⁰³ Owen, 2004: 62

drawing sessions, she experience violent migraines.²⁰⁴ She talks about opening her mind to the spirits and, as an unfortunate side effect, being privy to all the world's emotions. 'Never in my life before had I suspected the want, misery, and sickness which existed in the world, nor how little doctors could do to alleviate it... standing face to face with the horrors of disease and want, which I felt so powerless I was to help.'²⁰⁵ It is curious that d'Espérance does not write more about this idea of the vulnerable medium in her short stories; there are a handful of instances of the seer/medium being weakened by the phenomena, but considering her strained relationship with mediumship, it is strange she does not include this theme more often.

'Strange Excursions' does feature the theme that visions and clairvoyance are exhausting; it is not a narrative as much as a collection of spirit journeys from Sweden. In the first part, E.E. is an assistant to Mr F, and she agrees to take a business trip to the home of Herr Lamberg in his stead. In her (dream) vision she makes this journey across Sweden; when she awakes, she notes, 'I felt as physically tired

²⁰⁴ *Shadow Land* 157-158

²⁰⁵ *ibid*: 241

as though I had actually taken a wearisome journey.²⁰⁶ In the second, a Mr Johansson is murdered on a train, while the scene played out in the dream/vision of a Mrs Holm, who lived miles from Mr Johansson, and had no relationship to him. d'Espérance assures her readers that Mr Holm is a 'respectable citizen' and that Mrs Holm is 'connected with the Salvation Army.'²⁰⁷ When her 'nerves gradually quietened' Mrs Holm began to investigate the murder, which had initially been reported as death by natural causes.²⁰⁸ In the third d'Espérance also recounts an instance where she projected her double to the home of some friends—at their request—and the effect of the journey made her feel 'curiously weak and tired.'²⁰⁹

In 'The Light of Pentraginny', the tragic character of Marah appears to be based on d'Espérance herself, and reflects the anxiety and physical toll of spirit communication. Marah's heroic sailor father died saving someone from drowning (d'Espérance's beloved father was a ship's captain) and her mother died in childbirth (d'Espérance deeply resented

²⁰⁶ *Shadow Land* 206

²⁰⁷ *Northern Lights* 215

²⁰⁸ *ibid*: 220

²⁰⁹ *ibid*: 240

her mother) so Marah was raised by her grandparents. Her grandfather, Simeon, would take her on walks to the sea:

...patiently waiting when the child sat in her favourite haunt on a boulder of rock looking seaward, looking out towards the distant horizon with a rapt earnest gaze as though studying some great mystery.

'What do you see, my babe?' old Simeon would sometimes say, in a tremor of a vague, undefined fear, when he would see an unconscious smile play over the child's features, and notice the eagerness of her eyes.

'They are speaking to me from the water. Listen! Can you not hear them?'²¹⁰

Marah tells her grandfather about her mother and father in the afterlife, and the messages they relay through her. For Simeon, this behaviour is 'unnatural' and worrying.²¹¹ For other fishermen in their village, 'her seems ter hev a unnerstannin' o' things 'at's sort o' onnatteral.'²¹² Like d'Espérance, her childhood connection makes Marah a bit of an outcast. After her grandparents pass away, Marah becomes an inmate in the house of Captain Daniels.

One evening, during a terrible gale, the ship *Martha* is struggling in the harbour, as Martha and Captain Daniels watch from the nearby beach. Daniels questions the captain when he finally makes it to shore, and the captain tells him that a mysterious woman in white appeared on board

²¹⁰ *Northern Lights* 251

²¹¹ *ibid*: 253-254

²¹² *ibid*: 260

and guided the ship to safety. Daniels' biological daughter, Gennifer, begins to court Noel Merrick, captain of the *Martha*. When she brings him home for the first time, Noel is shocked:

'There she is again!' exclaimed the sailor, stopping short.
'She? Who?'
'It was she!' pointing to the approaching girl, 'that girl, or angel, or whatever she is that brought in the brig.'
'She! Why, that's Marah.'²¹³

It is explained that after the night *Martha* came in, Marah had been confined to her room, 'recover[ing] from the long, deep fainting fit'²¹⁴ which came about after the safe docking of the *Martha*. Marah's health begins to fade; even the neighbours note the 'pathetic little droop' on her face and that 'her step had lost its lightness.'²¹⁵ Marah eventually succumbs to her mysterious illness; and is forever remembered fondly in the village as an 'angel' to the sailors. It is likely this story speaks, first, to d'Espérance's exhaustion during mediumship; the feeling of her life force draining from her. Second, arguably, it speaks to the way d'Espérance wished to be remembered, as someone who tried to use her gifts for good. Third, as Showalter points out in relation to Mrs Rochester, 'the madwoman [in the attic] is the author's double, the

²¹³ *ibid*: 276

²¹⁴ *ibid*: 276

²¹⁵ *ibid*: 278

incarnation of her own anxiety and rage.²¹⁶ Marah, then, with her divine sweetness, self-sacrifice, and failing health stands in for d'Espérance and her troubled mind. Showalter notes nineteenth-century thought understood women were more 'vulnerable to insanity' than men; and that women would be consistently affected by hysteria/insanity in the conduct of their lives.²¹⁷

McGarry ponders the validity of hysteria always being a medical concern. 'Mediums and hysterics, women ventriloquized by spirits or disease, expressed bodily what could not be vocalized by the rational, speaking, and implicitly male self. Constructed through dominant notions of female frailty and hyperreceptivity, hysteria and mediumship might be seen as distinct yet parallel responses to the limited options for female expression and subjectivity in Western society.'²¹⁸ Perhaps, like mediumship, it represented a choice to communicate outside of patriarchal sanctions. 'Doctors pointed to the minds of mediums and their followers as evidence of both individual and cultural insanity.'²¹⁹

'Cultural' here suggests that hysteria had other origins than one's

²¹⁶ Showalter, 1996: 4

²¹⁷ *ibid*: 7

²¹⁸ McGarry, 2008: 126

²¹⁹ *ibid*: 125

mental health. 'It is certainly possible,' says Showalter, 'to see hysteria within the specific historical framework of the nineteenth century as an unconscious form of protest.' In other words, like unconscious mediumship, women were producing symptoms of hysteria as a means of (unconscious) self-expression. Killeen notes the trepidation of men of science when faced with the question of the 'spirited' woman:

If many writers were convinced that Spiritualists and Theosophists were on to something, in their insistence that there was more to the universe than could be measured by the narrow-gauge scientism of men like John Tyndall and Thomas Huxley, then they were also afraid of what the women who possessed such knowledge could do to them. This was, after all, the period of the New Woman and the incipient woman's rights movement where agitation for increased rights went hand in hand with a more assertive and sexual form of femininity²²⁰

It was fear that drove husbands and fathers to lock up their 'hysterical' or sometimes just uncooperative women. Those women who lived outside the narrow margins of Victorian femininity risked the swift, unpleasant consequences of agitating patriarchy.

d'Espérance would never have deigned to call herself a New Woman, yet she bears many commonalities with them, including nervousness. 'At the same time that new opportunities for self-cultivation and self-fulfilment in education and work were offered to women, doctors warned them that pursuit of such opportunities would lead to sickness, sterility

²²⁰ Killeen, 2009: 146

and race suicide.²²¹ Showalter goes on to note the psychological conflict present in the New Woman, as she attempted to reconcile familial and societal expectations with their own desires.

The nervous women of the *fin de siècle* were ravenous for a fuller life than their society offered them, famished for freedom to act and make real choices. Their nervous disorders expressed the insoluble conflict between their desires to act as individuals and the internalised obligations to submit to the needs of family, and to conform to the model of self-sacrificing “womanly” behaviour²²²

d’Espérance demonstrates her commitment to both emotion and female sacrifice in ‘Together’ when the male half of a young married couple dies. ‘The day’s toil wearied her, for she must toil alone. The night brought little rest, for the hut was lonely and dark, and she was afraid. But she waited... He came not!’²²³ The female dies of a broken heart, stretched prostrate on the grave of her husband.

When the sun rose again, the wondering neighbours found only the worn, toil-wearied body of a woman, who had breathed out her life on the grave of her husband, who had lain down and died a year ago [sic]. With pitiful hands they dug a grave, and laid her also to rest beside him, and then went their way, leaving them alone together.²²⁴

Count K’s mother in ‘Warning Spirit’, prior to being reborn as a powerful agent of divine change, spends her dying moments, ‘broken-hearted and despairing, lay down her weary head, and sobbed her last breath

²²¹ Showalter, 1996: 121

²²² *ibid*: 144

²²³ *Northern Lights* 195

²²⁴ *ibid* 197

away in a prayer for the son who had disappointed her.²²⁵ Even Gretchen, the beleaguered wife in ‘Hans Hauptmann’s Warning’ stands by her husband, despite his violence toward her and their children. ‘You are my husband and my children’s father,’ she tells him, when asked why she did not let him perish in a house fire. Gretchen, and Ruth from ‘The Mill Stream’ are also roundly praised for being the guiding lights of love and compassion for their respective men. Again, d’Espérance never specifically classifies spirit contact as a female pursuit, but certainly the message in her fiction is that woman’s goodness and morality make her more able to produce phenomena, as well as to influence those around her.

In addition to hysteria and the nervous disorders, another factor to add worry to the mind of the medium was the fear of (violent) reprisal. ‘Forcible attempts at exposure were anathema to Spiritualists, but fraud was the problem that haunted their world.’²²⁶ During a séance, when she was materialising Yolande, d’Espérance was grabbed by a man in attendance. He did it ostensibly as a means of exposing her as fraud—that her arm was, unlike ghostly Yolande’s, flesh and bone.

²²⁵ *ibid* 98

²²⁶ Owen, 2004: 67

All I knew was a horrible excruciating sensation of being doubled up and squeezed together... A sense of terror and agonizing pain came over me, as though I were losing hold of life... My senses seemed to have been scattered to the winds, and only little by little could I gather them sufficiently together to understand in a slight degree what had happened. Yolande had been seized and the man who had seized her declared it was I. This was what I was told. The statement was so extraordinary, that if it had not been for my utter prostration I could have laughed, but I was unable to think or even move... The shock was a terrible one, and what was worse to me, than the shock itself, was my utter inability to understand it. It never occurred to me that anyone would dare accuse me of imposition²²⁷

d'Espérance struggles with this 'exposure' of what was believed to be her fraud (or, at least, her complicity in fraud staged by the Newcastle Spiritual Evidence Society). Instead of outward defiance, Tromp notes, d'Espérance attempted to understand what had happened. She pondered her complicity on a conscious or unconscious level—unsure if the spirits she had seen were real, or produced by her 'subliminal consciousness.'²²⁸ This aligns with Lombroso's ideas that 'hysterical fantasy' was akin to what a drunkard might see—rats, serpents and other unpleasantness.²²⁹ Though produced by the mind, the images would have been exceptionally real to the drunk. Just so for the medium: if she *wished* to see spirits and hear voices, then perhaps she did. d'Espérance never finds satisfactory origin of her phenomena; for her they have always been, and will always be, a mystery.

²²⁷ *Shadow Land* 297-299

²²⁸ Tromp, 2006: 185

²²⁹ Lombroso, 1897: 225

This is not say she had any sympathy for the man who caused her such harm: she confirms that at the time of writing, the man who grabbed Yolande had crossed over, and ‘may see that in injuring one’s neighbour one is lessening one’s own chance of happiness.’²³⁰

d’Espérance’s fragile mental state is echoed in her writing, and in a number of instances, she makes reference to the darkest consequences of an overworked or overburdened consciousness.

2.4 ‘A suicide’s grave’: d’Espérance and Suicide

Mental health was a continued preoccupation of d’Espérance, as evidenced by her discussion of suicide, both in *Northern Lights* and *Shadow Land*. In the preface to *Shadow Land* she explains that she initially wished for it to be published posthumously, but later decided against placing the burden of publishing on another. The ‘weightier’ reason she gives for moving up publication of her memoirs, is that ‘suicides are increasing’ and she hopes that any men considering suicide read it, and reconsider the course of their action.²³¹ Though she never states outright that she experienced suicidal thoughts, it is

²³⁰ *Shadow Land*: 300

²³¹ *ibid*: preface

plausible that her anxieties and her loneliness lead her down many gloomy paths.

Suicide frames the narrative in her story 'Pepi' about a young German man who is the life and soul of his village. His 'bright happy life... had gladdened the home and hearts, for nearly twenty-three years!²³² But Pepi was in the forces, and after returning to the village for a wedding, overstayed his leave. Fearful of the consequence, he threw himself off a cliff. His body is found and his face is twisted into an expression of horror unlike anything the (unnamed) narrator had seen. Initially Pepi's parents are told he cannot be buried at the church, but the priest eventually relents, and buries Pepi in consecrated ground. 'I was glad for the dead Pepi that he should rest in peace in God's acre. But the living Pepi, what of him?'²³³ Pepi's spirit appears to the narrator one last time, a few years after his death, and whilst he no longer has the countenance of terror, he is not the fun-loving Pepi he once was. But the narrator takes comfort that he will continue to experience spiritual growth in the other world. Though d'Espérance condemns suicide in

²³² *Northern Lights* 132

²³³ *ibid*: 136

both *Northern Lights* and *Shadow Land*, she emphasises that God will forgive those who take their own lives.

Bennett and Royle write that literary ghosts reflect ‘what’s unfinished, unhealed and even untellable.’²³⁴ Though Spiritualism largely eradicated the idea of the ‘ghost on a mission’, d’Espérance’s lonely suicide victims exist as a stark warning of a wasted life. The suicide stories are recidivist, calling to mind the ghost stories of the eighteenth and early-nineteenth centuries in which ghosts and spirits issued warnings on the need to modify one’s behaviour or character.²³⁵

The story of ‘Harald Arnhult’ begins joyfully, at a ball, where Lieutenant Arnhult and Fraulein Gertrude Naumann have a spirited discussion about ghosts. She, the daughter of an eminent professor, dismisses reports of ghostly activity as rubbish; the lieutenant is a bit more open-minded. They make a bet: whichever of them dies first, will appear to the other. This will prove one of them to be correct. Then, d’Espérance tells us, ‘it was the old story’:

Betting, billiards, wine, women. A few years of wild excess—feverish pursuit of pleasure, and elusive joys, and then the end—a suicide’s grave, a lunatic’s straight jacket, a criminal’s cell, or a wretched,

²³⁴ Bennett and Royle, 1999: 135

²³⁵ Smith, 2010: 3

poverty-stricken, disgraceful old age. Lieutenant Harald Arnhult had chosen the lot of suicide, and now lay on his bed with a bullet in his brain.²³⁶

Arnhult not only appears to Gertrude after his death, he haunts their family home—but not, as d’Espérance is quick to note, in a malicious way. ‘He is no evil spirit,’ Gertrude tells a concerned neighbour, ‘[h]e can, or will, not do us any harm, and if it makes him happier to come to us, why should we drive him away?’²³⁷ Arnhult has become, for Gertrude and her family, a figure of pity; and a stark warning of unhappy afterlife awaiting the victim of suicide. It is also interesting to note that both of the suicides are committed by men in the army—the most potent symbol of Empire, masculinity and muscular Christianity.

2.5 Conclusion: ‘I have found the truth—and the same great prize may be yours too, if you will seek it honestly, earnestly, humbly, diligently’²³⁸

Elizabeth d’Espérance’s life was a trial. From her lonely childhood, to painful adolescence, to the claims of fraud which drove her from the country, she would have been the first to admit that she suffered for her spiritual gifts. Her hyper-sensitive, hyper-feminine nature meant her

²³⁶ *Northern Lights* 174-175

²³⁷ *ibid*: 185

²³⁸ The final, defiant, words in *Shadow Land* (1897: 413)

emotions were always heightened, and she was prone to episodes of what we might now call depression.

In spite of her insistence on feminine virtue and passivity, d'Espérance was able to carve for herself a reasonably successful niche as medium both in Britain and later Northern Europe. Her spectral writing, though over-emotional and bordering on the sentimental, serves as (veiled) criticism of various patriarchal institutions, that she would not have dared do in 'straight' fiction or nonfiction.

Though she does not moralise in the same manner as Emma Hardinge Britten (the subject of Chapter Four) her message on suicide is clear: though God forgives, it means a dreadfully unhappy existence in the next plane. It is significant that she speaks of suicide so openly, and, as has been stated, this most likely links to her own fears over her mental state. Though I can offer no diagnosis, or analysis of her psychological state, it is possible to see connections between mediumship, hysteria and extreme fatigue. d'Espérance most certainly would have rejected the label of 'hysteric' or depressive, but in her writing there is a consistent theme of mental strain: her spiritual gifts are not accepted by

her mother, and mocked by sceptics; the spiritual society overworks her; the question of the divine, demonic or natural origin of her abilities haunts her and her works.

The subject of the next chapter, Catherine Crowe, would have no difficulty in stating that spiritual powers were entirely natural. Far from d'Espérance's emphasis on emotion, Crowe approached Spiritualism through the lens of science, seeking to investigate these phenomena empirically. Although Crowe, unlike d'Espérance, was not a working medium, her proximity to the spirits was (allegedly) the reason for her infamous 1854 nervous breakdown which saw her sectioned. The story goes that she had spent the night in a haunted house, and that was the reason she was spotted running completely naked through the streets of London.²³⁹ Crowe's personal reputation was irreparable, but her books remained popular; *The Night Side of Nature* (1850) was not out of print until the end of the century.²⁴⁰

²³⁹ Killeen, 2009: 139

²⁴⁰ *ibid*: 139

CHAPTER THREE:

Catherine Crowe

3.1 Introduction: 'The great mysteries of the here and hereafter'

Catherine Crowe (1803-1876) might be described as a non-Spiritualist Spiritualist. She made no claims to mediumistic powers herself, and rejected the notion of the 'supernatural', but made her career writing about the movement nonetheless. Clive Bloom (1998) defines the supernatural as 'embrac[ing] all those areas above or beyond the material realm and is the usual designation for the hierarchic planes, fantastical creatures and daemonic forces which exist in cosmic and parallel dimensions and which rule and direct our physical existence.'²⁴¹ Though Crowe disliked the term, arguably this is precisely what she meant by her preferred term, supernormal.

'Crowe believed that the phenomena labelled supernatural were glimpses of a side of nature usually hidden from view. Crowe, who never claimed personally to have experienced the efficacy of mesmerism or to have seen a ghost, had, nevertheless, witnessed strange phenomena.'²⁴² Crowe believed that Spiritual phenomena were

²⁴¹ Bloom, 1998: 16

²⁴² Dickerson, 1996: 38-39

natural, as in, from the earth, and represented a psychic energy or psychic force which, like gravity, was an ever-present and potent force. She makes these claims in *The Night-side of Nature: Or, Ghosts and Ghost-seers* (1850) and *Light and Darkness: Or, The Mysteries of Life* (1850). Unlike many Spiritualists, who urged faith in phenomena in the same manner as religious leaders, Crowe argued that one should not blindly accept the reality of spirit phenomena, but actively investigate it. As Dr W, one of the characters in *Ghosts and Family Legends* notes of spirits, 'one must have wonderfully strong evidence before one could believe such a thing as that.'²⁴³ Gillian Bennett (1987) credits Crowe for publishing *Night Side*, noting it was one of the first publications at its time to include supernatural folk beliefs of the age; she also notes Crowe was the first British writer to use the term poltergeist.²⁴⁴

Her collection of ghost stories, *Ghosts and Family Legends: A Volume for Christmas* (1859) is divided into two sections: the first half purports to be 'true' accounts relayed to her by her friends and acquaintances; the second half are stories which people sought her out to tell her. What is significant about the first section is that the people telling these

²⁴³ Crowe, 1859: 14

²⁴⁴ Bennett, 1987: 78

stories are largely titled—Lord L and Lady A, for example. Finucane (1996) writes that this style of storytelling, ‘reflect[s] broader Victorian assumptions... it was naturally accepted that members of the higher ranks simply could not lie... Proponents of Spiritualism usually cited people of rank who professed similar beliefs.’²⁴⁵ Pioneering member of the Society for Psychical Research (SPR), Frank Podmore, announced at their General Meeting in November 1889, that he “preferred the evidence of educated to that of uneducated persons” and would reject ghost-theories based upon the lore “current amongst peasantry”.²⁴⁶

In the preface to *Ghosts and Family Legends* she writes that the work was inspired by her stay at a country house during Christmas of 1857. The ‘gaiety’ of the party was stifled when one of their friends was the victim of a ‘serious misfortune’, causing all assembled to pass one quiet evening together in the drawing-room. There, around the fire, they told stories to amuse themselves. ‘[A]nd although some of the party professed an utter disbelief in apparitions, they proved to be as fertile as the believers in their contributions,’²⁴⁷ Crowe notes. ‘The telling of

²⁴⁵ Finucane, 1996: 207

²⁴⁶ In Finucane, 1996: 207

²⁴⁷ Crowe, 1859: vi

tales around the fireside makes explicit a particular aspect of the ghost story which depends upon a tension between the cosy familiar world of life (associated with *Heim* and *heimsch*— home and the domestic) and the mysterious and unknowable world of death (*unheimlich* or, uncanny). Victorian ghost stories, in particular, often employed this contrast as their central effect.²⁴⁸ For Crowe, then, setting her book of stories around the fire, instead of adding to the uncanny, should serve to familiarise spirits; the point of this collection is that everyone—from the highest to lowest classes, male and female—has had at least one spiritual encounter in their life. Crowe asks her readers to consider this (admittedly anecdotal) evidence before making their decision as to the veracity of the phenomena. *Night Side* is also a collection of ghost stories, in that it is a collection of anecdotal evidence and legends of spirit activity. It is also blended with Crowe's writings on science, nature and (para)psychology.

Crowe uses titled persons to assist in enforcing her narrative authority. Lanser explains that narrative authority is 'constituted through (historically changing) textual strategies that even socially unauthorised writers can appropriate. Since such appropriations of course backfire,

²⁴⁸ Briggs, 2004: 126

nonhegemonic writers and narrators may need to strike a delicate balance in accommodating and subverting dominant rhetoric.²⁴⁹ It was not acceptable, broadly speaking, for a Victorian woman to write a book on science (Crowe would have considered her work scientific), but her inclusion of patriarchally-sanctioned men and women within the narratives not only offer proof of the phenomena, but, in part, help to legitimise her writing.

Kontou and Willburn remind us that '[b]inaries that often seem intuitively clear in our contemporary moment such as faith vs. reason, Spiritualism vs. science, and tradition vs. progress, did not similarly structure the Victorian age.'²⁵⁰ That Crowe, and others, used scientific enquiry as a means of proving the reality of spirit phenomena would have made sense to the Victorians, even if it seems, to modern eyes, that one would surely be the antithesis to the other. Briggs also emphasises the necessity of remembering the time, place and culture in which these ghost stories were written. "[S]cientific" concepts used to buttress the ghost story, such as mesmerism, appear scarcely scientific at all, for the science of the past commonly becomes the magic or superstition of the

²⁴⁹ Lanser, 1992: 6-7

²⁵⁰ Kontou and Willburn, 2012: 1

present: their chemistry is our alchemy, their astronomy our astrology.’²⁵¹

3.2 ‘But there are no ghosts now!’: Rationality and Truth

‘[I]ntellectuals have been characterised by cultural historians and sociologists in two important ways... intellectuals are perceived either as alienated from dominant beliefs and practices in a particular culture or as legitimating those beliefs and practices.’²⁵² Following this definition, it is difficult to adequately place Crowe on one side of intellectualism or the other. As a public woman, she inhabits a contested space. ‘Victorian women intellectuals are both complicit with and resistant to the powers generating their authority to speak.’²⁵³ Crowe used only her intellectual gifts to further the messages of Spiritualism, as she had no spiritual skills.

She does, however, make distinctions between the male and female spiritual abilities. ‘While female practitioners of these weird phenomena initially seemed to be minding their own ethereal business and leaving

²⁵¹ Briggs, 1977: 55

²⁵² David, 1987: 1

²⁵³ *ibid*: 225

worldly affairs to men, they were nonetheless threatening to subvert the patriarchally designed Christian roles of the quiet obedient, homebound angel or to extend these roles in such a way as to criticise masculine hegemony.²⁵⁴ Crowe highlights the superior ability of women at attracting and spirits, and also claims that 'lesser' people are similarly skilled. The idea that 'simpler' people from 'lower' races were more adept at Spiritualism (or superstition) did not originate with Spiritualism or Theosophy. Within Britain, many believed that those on the Celtic fringe, particularly those far-removed from city life (such as the Highlanders) were better inclined to spirit communication. Italy and France also provided popular settings for writers of supernatural stories, who made frequent use of the stereotype of the innately superstitious Catholic.

The journalist and folklorist Andrew Lang was a vocal critic of Spiritualism, yet was a proponent of psychical research. He advocated sending researchers to the far reaches of the Empire to investigate supernormal phenomena (ghost stories, telepathy), in what was essentially a case study with implications for both supernaturalists and

²⁵⁴ Dickerson, 1996: 33

anthropologists.²⁵⁵ Lang believed that there were too many coincidences from accounts from across the globe for the supernatural to not exist. ‘Savage birraarks in Australia, fakirs in India, saints in Medieval Europe, a gentleman’s butler in Ireland, boys in Somerset and Midlothian, a young warrior in Zululand, Miss Nancy Wesley at Epworth in 1716 and Mr Daniel Home in London 1856-1870’ all shared enough common details to convince Lang that the supernatural should not be so easily dismissed.²⁵⁶ More than half of the stories Crowe relates in *Ghosts and Family Legends* are set abroad—either in Catholic Europe or at the corners of the Empire. Each of the stories, importantly, is verified by a British person of high rank, either in society or the military. Stories from military men in particular would have been the most effective. ‘By discounting the idea of female hysteria or an “excited imagination”... Crowe seeks to validate the significance of “results” that others—lawyers, doctors, and priests—would be disposed to set aside.’²⁵⁷ There would be fewer people understood at that time to be more rational than an army officer, and their spiritual accounts would have received a great deal of weight.

²⁵⁵ In Luckhurst, 2004: 208

²⁵⁶ *ibid*: 208

²⁵⁷ Dickerson, 1996: 39

In *Ghosts and Family Legends*, Captain L. relates a story from his time in the Himalayas. He received a visit from Captain PB, asking him to play billiards. L told PB he needed to finish writing a letter, and would be with him presently. Moments later, L arrived at the billiard room to find no trace of PB. Perplexed, L started back to his quarters. On his way home, L witnessed PB and his wife getting out of a carriage; when he questioned PB, the latter claimed he had been away with his wife. 'I don't know whether you are trying to hoax *me*... but upon my soul I have not been in your quarter to-day; nor have I seen you at all, till I entered this room.'²⁵⁸ Captain PB's story was confirmed by another colleague, Captain D, and Captain L's story by the servant who showed him in. Neither party understood what had occurred that day, and both men were, at the time of L's recitation, alive and well. There must have been some reason for the astral projection, but all parties are ignorant of it. There are several reasons why this story would 'work'. For one, the man recounting it is an army officer—a bastion of Empire and its values. He would be believed as readily as any of the aristocrats present. Second, though it happened to British men, these events occurred in the Himalayas. As we will explore more fully in the following chapter, the

²⁵⁸ Crowe, 1859: 31

imperial margins were understood to be supernatural places: places where this sort of thing might be a common occurrence. It is worth noting, also, the reactions of these men to this encounter. They approach it with perfect rationality; each asking the other for a witness to prove he was where he said he was. For Crowe, this is the ideal reaction to spirit phenomena.

Elsewhere in *Ghosts and Family Legends*, Doctor W. recounts a story from the Isle of Sky—the Celtic fringe—in which a tradesman, Robertson, makes an appointment to meet with a Mr Brown, an acquaintance of the doctor's. Robertson tells Brown that he will be travelling back from Raasa until Thursday, but assures him that, 'I would not miss the meeting on any account.'²⁵⁹ The next evening, Brown goes to Robertson's house, in the hope of finalising their arrangement, but Mrs Robertson explains that her husband has not returned from Raasa. It turns out, predictably, that the boat from Raasa capsized, and all on board were lost—Mr Robertson, true to his word, though, made an appearance at the meeting. The doctor, at the end of his story, accepts that Mr Brown is a trustworthy man, but says he does not believe the story is true. Rather, he insists that it is an invention or an exaggeration

²⁵⁹ Crowe, 1859: 7

from a 'superstitious' Scot. Crowe concedes that the lower class Scotsman, like the lower class Englishman, is inclined to superstition. But she argues that the respectable working-class and the middle-class Scots are as rational as their southern neighbours. '[T]he class to whom Brown and Robertson belong, is the most hardheaded, argumentative, and matter of fact in the kingdom; and their religion, which is eminently unimaginative, so far from inducing a belief in ghosts, would give a precisely opposite tendency.'²⁶⁰ To counter the doctor's claims, she uses the stereotypes of the dour Presbyterian—this would likely resonate with her more sceptical readers as well; particularly those in the English middle-classes who, like the doctor, would have been inclined to primitivise all of Scotland. Lord N. mentions a relation of his, 'a very religious person, and as she belongs to the free church of Scotland, most opposed to the belief in ghosts.'²⁶¹ She was visiting some family friends, and during the night an apparition came to her. Because of her staunch religious beliefs—and her Scottishness— she makes an ideal witness/convert. Crowe writes that it is the ubiquity of Spiritualist-type phenomena which lends it credence (or ought to). In addition to the accounts in the Bible, she notes that 'all people and all

²⁶⁰ Ibid: 16-17

²⁶¹ Ibid: 101

ages have believed, more or less, in prophetic dreams, presentiments, and apparitions; and all historians have furnished examples of these.²⁶²

Miss P. tells a story of astral projection, in which she sees her fiancé, Captain S. in her bedroom, though he is stationed in the West Indies. 'I can't say whether I thought it himself or his ghost. I was passive, and my mind accepted the phenomenon without question of how such a thing could be.'²⁶³ She chatted amiably with her fiancé for thirty minutes, before he took his leave. About a month later, she was visited by Major B., his commanding officer, who delivered the news that the captain had died of a fever the day of his visitation. For Spiritualists, this would have been a comfort; the captain wanted to spend some time with his beloved before he transitioned fully into the spirit plane. This story also serves to enforce the idea that apparitions are not necessarily here to frighten us—certainly Miss P. claims that she was calm during the captain's visit.

Catherine Crowe blames the Enlightenment, largely, for removing man from nature, but she is hopeful for the future in the age of Spiritualism:

²⁶² Crowe, 1850: 26

²⁶³ Crowe, 1859: 3

'in the seventeenth century, credulity outran reason and discretion... The contemptuous scepticism of the last age is yielding to a more humble spirit of inquiry; and there is a large class of persons among the most enlightened of the present, who are beginning to believe that much which they had been taught to reject as fable, has been, in reality, ill-understood truth.'²⁶⁴ And it was this 'humble' spirit which led the development of the mesmeric sciences, which developed alongside Spiritualism.

3.3.1 Altered States of Mind: Mesmerism and Hypnotism

Sceptics pointed to mind control, via mesmerism or hypnotism, as a possible reason for spirit phenomena. The medium would hypnotise the room and make them think they were seeing ghosts, etc. through the power of suggestion. Or the medium would be hypnotised and their strange behaviour chalked up to spirit possession. Some Spiritualists saw mesmerism as a precursor to Spiritualism; for others the philosophies existed together quite peacefully. Within the scientific community, however, mesmerism was largely dismissed. Crowe laments:

²⁶⁴ Crowe, 1850: 8-9

They do not quarrel with a new metal or a new plant, and even a new comet or new island stands a fair chance of being well received; the introduction of a planet appears, from late events, to be more difficult, whilst phrenology and mesmerism testify that any discovery tending to throw light on what most deeply concerns us, namely, our own being, must be prepared to encounter a storm of angry persecution²⁶⁵

Mesmerism was first developed in the late eighteenth century, but returned to public consciousness with the advent of Modern Spiritualism. Originally referred to by its developer, Anton Mesmer, as ‘animal magnetism,’ he wrote that a magnetic fluid pervaded the universe, and was extant in all living things. Free movement of this fluid resulted in health; blockages caused illness. Mesmer concluded that he could cure illnesses by moving the stagnant ‘fluid’ round their bodies by using magnets or, simply, his hands. James Braid, a Scottish surgeon living in Manchester, was the first to attempt scientification of mesmerism—which he called neurohypnotism.²⁶⁶ He rejected the claims of a ‘magnetic fluid,’ being a man of science, but wanted to understand how a person could be put into a somnambulistic or trance state. Eventually his work was carried on by the French neuroscientists Jean-Martin Charcot and Charles Richet. With the attentions of the medical community, it was able to shake off its occult past and gain

²⁶⁵ *ibid*: 6

²⁶⁶ Oppenheim, 1985: 214

standing as a medical implement.²⁶⁷ The use of hypnotism or mesmerism, with its almost exclusive focus on mental healing, was attractive to physicians and the early psychologists who were trying to gain a fuller understanding of the mysterious inner workings of the human consciousness. This, as Crowe points out, is arguably the most important field science can study.

3.3.2 'Oh no; never mind facts, if they don't fit into our theories'²⁶⁸:

Scientific Spiritualism

Science had no singular approach to spirit phenomena; some scientists and scholars believed it to be a physical condition, others a psychological impairment, others blamed new technologies, such as optical illusions. What was most interesting about this era is not necessarily the theoretical differences, but that so many scientists were willing to engage with the perceived supernatural, to find natural causes for the uncanny and the unusual.

²⁶⁷ Oppenheim, 1985: 214

²⁶⁸ Crowe's less-than-sincere remark to the Dutch officer, of 'The Dutch Officer's Story' who had witnessed weeks of spirit phenomena, but insisted, 'one can't believe' in them (Crowe, 1859: 227)

In *Ghosts and Family Legends*, Crowe writes of her unwavering belief that all gathered present had seen a spirit or had some uncanny experience. She spends the next week gathering stories of ghostly happenings. What each story has in common is the lack of a medium: every person encounters the spirit/spirit phenomena without the assistance of a spirit practitioner. This follows Crowe's belief that the spirit world and the natural world are one in the same. Crowe and her ilk wanted to examine spirit activity (or anything resembling spirit activity) with scientific methods as a means of verifying it. 'Victorian occultism did not merely challenge the empiricism of Victorian science, the laws that governed Victorian concepts of reality; it also attempted to enter into a dialogue with them.'²⁶⁹ Evidence of this dialogue is seen in the writings of Crowe and others, as well as in the Society for Psychical Research.

Catherine Crowe was one the first spiritualist 'philosophers' to discuss this notion of naturalising the supernatural. For her, the occurrence of spirits or ghosts was normal, was natural—it simply represented a heretofore unknown force in the world. It is clear to see her influence on the SPR—in her scientific approach to the supernatural

²⁶⁹ Basham, 1996: 7

And it is here the proper place to observe, that, in undertaking to treat of the phenomena in question [apparitions], I do not propose to consider them as supernatural; on the contrary, I am persuaded that the time will come, when they will be reduced strictly within the bounds of science. It was the tendency of the last age to reject and deny everything they did not understand; I hope it is the growing tendency of the present one to examine what we do not understand. Equally disposed with our predecessors of the eighteenth century to reject the supernatural, and to believe the order of nature inviolable, we are disposed to extend the bounds of nature and science, till they comprise within their limits all the phenomena, ordinary and extraordinary²⁷⁰

Crowe argues that spirits and séance phenomena ought not to be dismissed as supernatural, and left at that. Rather, they should be investigated and, if at all possible, natural explanations for the phenomena should be sought. 'Of nature's ordinary laws, we yet know but little; of their aberrations and perturbations, still less. How should we, when the world is a miracle and life a dream, of which we know neither the beginning nor the end... How, then, can we pretend to decide upon what is and what is not?'²⁷¹

Alfred Russel Wallace, co-creator of the theory of evolution, and correspondent of Crowe, believed that without the benefit of scientific inquiry, no one should deny the possibility of spirits. Wallace writes that all new phenomena is likely deemed 'supernatural' or 'miraculous' by those who do not understand it—even snow, he writes, would be

²⁷⁰ Crowe, 1850: 16

²⁷¹ *ibid*: 26

seen as a miracle by inhabitants of the tropics.²⁷² He explains that if the laws of nature are accepted to be true, then by those laws, there is nothing in existence that could possibly violate them. That is to say, if ghosts or spirits exist, there must indeed be allowances made for them within natural law.

One common fallacy appears to me to run through all the arguments against facts deemed miraculous, when it is asserted that they *violate*, or *invade*, or *subvert* the laws of nature. This is really assuming the very point to be decided, for if the disputed fact did happen, it could only be in accordance with the laws of nature, since the only complete definition of the 'laws of nature' is that they are the laws which regulate all phenomena²⁷³ [emphasis in original]

We may not fully comprehend the mysteries of nature, he argues, but to say that anything could exist outside the known laws of the universe, is without merit. This links to the idea offered by Crowe and other Spiritualists who insist that we cannot fully understand the workings of the world, despite advances in science, medicine, etc. 'Knowing the imperfection and limited scope of our knowledge in reference to the occult and hidden powers of nature, and our almost entire ignorance of spiritual or extra-natural laws, we ought to be very modest in the expression of our opinions about possibilities.'²⁷⁴ Most Spiritualists were also accepting of evolution, in spite of any personal religious belief they

²⁷² Wallace, 1875: 37

²⁷³ *ibid*: 36-37

²⁷⁴ Barkas, 1862: 43

may have held. There were also those who viewed the Spiritualist idea of the spirit being capable of perfecting itself, as a form of evolution. Spiritualists were eager to justify their beliefs and their phenomena with scientific and pseudo-scientific theories and Darwin's brand-new theory of evolution was a popular one on to which they latched. Drawing on similar principles, Tuttle writes that 'all spiritual beings had human origin, and that while evolution brought the lower forms of life up to man the wonderful process must not be thought to terminate with this high form.'²⁷⁵ If primordial ooze could turn into man, then, according to Spiritualists, there was no reason man could not turn into what is essentially a quasi-deity.

For Spiritualists, there is a limit on human knowledge and understanding whilst people are still burdened by their earthly bodies.

The spirit or soul, or rather in both conjoined, dwells, also, the power of *spiritual seeing*, or *intuitive knowing*; for, as there is a spiritual body, there is a spiritual eye, and a spiritual ear, and so forth... which does not need the aid of the bodily organs; but, on the contrary, is most efficient when freed from them²⁷⁶ [emphasis in original]

Crowe does accept that not all phenomena has been verified or proved false, and she writes that this level of mystery is acceptable, as long as

²⁷⁵ Tuttle, 1904: 46

²⁷⁶ Crowe, 1850: 20

one does not close their mind to greater possibilities. This idea is reflected in a number of her stories wherein the presence of a spirit seems likely, but cannot be proved either way. Lord N. offers an anecdote of unexplained supernatural phenomena both witnessed by himself. Staying at the Lakes in a 'small, quite modern, and as un-ghostly' house, Lord N. is disturbed late one night by hearing a whip cracking outside.²⁷⁷ Upon investigation, he can find no one. Returning indoors, he hears the whip crack behind him—but finds no one. Retreating to the dining-room, 'I was amazed to see the table rise about a foot perpendicularly into the air.'²⁷⁸ He had no distinct communication, other than the noises and floating furniture.

WT Stead was a proponent of investigating spirit phenomena as natural phenomena. '[I]t is necessary to insist that your ghost should no longer be ignored as a phenomenon of Nature. He has a right, equal to that of any other natural phenomenon, to be examined and observed, studied and defined.'²⁷⁹ He acknowledges that ghosts are 'shadowy' and 'fitful' in their appearance, which makes studying them difficult. But he

²⁷⁷ Crowe, 1859: 102

²⁷⁸ Ibid: 103

²⁷⁹ Stead, 1921: ix

encourages people to undertake this scientific study as a matter of necessity, that they may better, more fully, understand the world in its entirety.

Crowe, Stead and other 'spirito-naturalists' understood that this emergence of spirit phenomena was part of human evolution. Of telepathy, Stead remains sceptical:

[w]ild as this suggestion may seem to-day, it is less fantastic than our grandfathers a hundred years ago would have deemed a statement that at the end of the nineteenth century portraits would be taken by the sun, that audible conversation would be carried on instantaneously across a distance of a thousand miles, that a ray of light could be made the agent for transmitting the human voice across an abyss which no wire had ever spanned, and that by a simple mechanical arrangement, which a man can carry in his hand, it would be possible to reproduce the words, voice, and accent of the dead. The photograph, the telegraph, the telephone and the phonograph were all more or less latent in what seemed to our ancestors the kite-flying folly of Benjamin Franklin²⁸⁰ (xiii)

Many Spiritualists, or those with an interest in Spiritualism, accepted that spirit phenomena could well be natural. The climate of Victorian scientific positivism in which Crowe lived largely necessitated that if something was to be considered true, one needed to demonstrate proof. Verification, like that attempted by the Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was arguably as important a factor in belief as a levitating medium or disembodied voice.

²⁸⁰ *ibid*: xiii

3.3.2 'The Heroic Age'²⁸¹: The Society for Psychical Research

The Society for Psychical Research (SPR) was founded in 1882 with the intention of applying scientific enquiry to (allegedly) supernatural events. The researchers took a rational approach to their investigations, taking statements from first-hand witnesses as well as experts in various scientific fields (i.e., those who could identify fraud based on photographic techniques, etc.). Whilst it no doubt satisfied the curiosity of its members and investigators, the public at large, sceptical and not, were looking for answers about the truth of the phenomena that they were continually hearing about.

The Spectator, Echo, and Daily News cautiously recognised the need for further investigation, as did *The Daily Telegraph*, which pointed out that '[t]he fact that some men, respectable in intellect and conversant with science, have testified their faith in the reality of the phenomena, makes it worth our while to investigate the matter with keener eyes than if the believers were all impulsive and unscientific observers'. Similarly *The Times* stated of the Dialectical Society report that 'if it proves nothing else it proves it is high time competent hands undertook the unravelling of this Gordian knot'²⁸²

The mission of the SPR was to develop a science of the supernatural, and attempt to re-classify the 'supernatural' as the 'supernormal.'²⁸³

Despite their members consisting of people who, like FWH Myers and

²⁸¹ The term was coined by John Beloff, parapsychologist and president of the SPR in the 1970s. He refers to the 'heroic' championing of science and scientific methods by the SPR founders in the 1880s and 1890s: Edmund Gurney, Henry Sidgwick and FWH Myers.

²⁸² Lamont, 2004: 913

²⁸³ Luckhurst, 2004: 197

Henry Sidgwick, professed a belief in a great deal of the séance phenomena, they were eager to maintain the guise of scientific credibility. The SPR researched a number of phenomena, including psychics, ghosts, séance activity and telepathy and claimed, in part, that the ubiquity of these accounts was proof positive of the existence of this supernatural. Finucane states that the SPR is the 'logical culmination' of nineteenth-century thought; 'it was to be scientific and objective, without overt "religious" aims, yet it was to consider those very problems which the scientific community seemed to reject.'²⁸⁴ Roger Luckhurst (2004) explains of the SPR journal that 'class inform[ed] the content, but also constitutes the threshold for inclusion.'²⁸⁵ As alluded to earlier, the class of the person making spiritual claims tended to determine how seriously those claims were taken. The narrator of *Ghosts and Family Legends*, ostensibly Crowe herself, laments that the higher classes are educated out of the axiom 'seeing is believing', especially where spirit phenomena are concerned.²⁸⁶ This sentiment is reflected in her exchanges following Sir A.C.'s story about a spectral encounter his children had.

²⁸⁴ Finucane, 1996: 193

²⁸⁵ Luckhurst, 2004: 198

²⁸⁶ Crowe, 1859: 15-16

'I think the evidence,' said Sir A.C., is quite unexceptionable.'
'I should say so, too, if it referred to any other question,' said Mr E, a barrister, who happened to be present when the story was related; 'but on the subject of ghosts I cannot think any evidence sufficient.'
'A state of mind by no means uncommon,' I said, 'and which it is, of course, in vain to contend with. I can only wonder and admire the confidence that can venture to prejudge so interesting and important a subject of inquiry.'²⁸⁷

'Where an accumulation of stories was read as proof of the ubiquity of such occurrences by the Society [SPR], the same reiterations suggested to sceptics that the credulous public were framing their experiences within the genre rules for ghost stories.'²⁸⁸ This is an interesting consideration, given the structure of Crowe's volume of ghost stories. Though Crowe's collection preceded the SPR by a few decades, it is entirely possible she had the wherewithal to understand sceptics would be less likely to be convinced by a standard volume of ghost stories. By varying her material, it seems she wanted to give all her readers pause for thought concerning the veracity of the phenomenon.

Crowe, in publishing her works is not simply asking readers to consider their position on ghosts, but on women as well. Crowe doubly encroaches in the masculine sphere; first by writing books, second by writing scientific studies. 'Most scientists and physicians throughout the

²⁸⁷ *ibid*: 108-109

²⁸⁸ Luckhurst, 2004: 199

Victorian period define woman's sphere narrowly. This puts science in an awkward position; the prestige of scientific arguments derives partly from their supposed "objectivity," and yet the scientific arguments about women were anything but unbiased.²⁸⁹ Following this logic, Crowe is therefore questioning the entire patriarchal establishment when she tells Mr R, 'I have no doubt there is nobody in this circle who has not either had some [ghostly] experience... or been made a confidant of such experiences by friends.'²⁹⁰ Owen reminds us, however, that not all those associated with the SPR were necessarily looking to disprove spirit phenomena. '[S]ome psychical researchers undoubtedly were seeking proof of the immortality of soul, and possibly all were searching for either consolation or meaning in an otherwise bleakly materialistic world.'²⁹¹ For Crowe, and others, science and the supernatural were not adversarial. Scientific, empirical study could offer proof positive of the phenomena, while rooting out the frauds who sought to capitalise on the Spiritualist and occult crazes at the end of century.

²⁸⁹ EK Helsinger, RL Sheets, W Veeder in Dickerson, 1996: 27

²⁹⁰ Crowe, 1859: 1

²⁹¹ Owen, 2007: 27

3.4.1 'I should think it a very ill compliment if anyone attempted to mystify us with an invented story': The Everyday Spirits

As séances normalised, or sought to normalise, spirit contact, Spiritualists began to argue that seeing a ghost was not necessarily something to fear. As Crowe wrote, she attributed fear of spirits and ghosts to 'bad training' and 'ignorance'.²⁹² Indeed, Lady A professes to have had dozens of these perfectly normal spiritual encounters during her life.

Mrs M. offers a story concerning her maid, Rachel, who received a visit from her sister's spirit, whilst Rachel was travelling in Brussels with her employer. Rachel was awoken by the spirit touching her knee, and it emerged that her sister wanted to warn her that she had died, and her young children back in England would need looking after. Lady A. interjects to say that cases such as that are 'very numerous'; and that 'I know of two which I can give upon perfectly good authority.'²⁹³

Lady A. says a friend of hers was visited by her nephew one day, who was supposed to be away at college. The young man walked through

²⁹² Crowe, 1850: 173

²⁹³ *ibid*: 26

the house, seeming to ignore his aunt—she was offended and puzzled until the post arrived, and the family heard that the young man had drowned. Lady R. offers a story told to her by her sister-in-law, Lady S., '[a] Prussian lady of high rank.'²⁹⁴ An acquaintance of Lady S. was in her bedroom one morning when she saw a young man in the uniform of a Chasseur, 'suspended in the air between the ceiling and the floor, with his legs dangling in the air.'²⁹⁵ The lady is later told that the previous occupant of her house was a Danish diplomat, whose Chasseur had committed suicide in that room.

Though Lady S. was frightened at seeing the half-hanged apparition, for the Spiritualists, the appropriate response should have been pity. Briggs explains that '[f]ear of the supernatural is essentially circular, for what we fear most is the sensation of being afraid, which endows the most familiar objects with frightful possibilities.'²⁹⁶ Whilst the spirit of a hanged servant may not seem the most obvious of 'familiar objects', for people connected with Spiritualism, the mere presence of spirits should

²⁹⁴ *ibid*: 68

²⁹⁵ *ibid*: 68

²⁹⁶ Briggs, 1977: 142

not be frightening. If a ghost or spirit reaches out, it either wishes to help, or needs assistance of some kind.

Dr W recounts another story, this time from Ireland. An acquaintance wanted to convert an old manor home on the outskirts of Dublin into a factory. As the men started their work, they were disturbed by loud bangs, footsteps and the apparition of a woman in white. One young man was even struck ill with brain fever at the sight of her. Dr W notes the haunting stopped when the workmen found the bones of a woman and an infant, and gave them a proper burial. Wolfreys notes that one definition of haunting is, 'the ability of forces that remain unseen to make themselves felt in everyday life.'²⁹⁷ Literally, we may apply this statement to spirits, like the one in Dr W's story, who have made themselves seen in order to get something they need. But we may extend this notion even further when we consider that Victorian women like Crowe were haunting society by writing their stories: they were emerging from their isolation within the domestic to ensure that their needs and desires were met, and their fears, anxieties and grievances aired.

²⁹⁷ Wolfreys, 2002: 110

3.4.2 'Mungo is the ghost of a deceased dog': Animal Spirits

Crowe, in her treatises on Spiritualism, emphasises that it is a natural phenomenon—as in, from nature. She writes that human instinct for spirituality is natural, and is linked to animal instinct. 'When exhibition of the sort of faculty occurs in animals, which is by no means infrequent, it is termed *instinct*; and we look upon it, as what it probably is, only another and more rare development of that intuitive knowledge which enable them to seek food, and perform the other functions necessary for the maintenance of their existence and the continuance of their race.'²⁹⁸ Instinct, she believes, is a vital element of humanity that has, unfortunately, been relegated in favour of rationality and logic.

Crowe offers several stories which feature animals or animal spirits.

This, I argue, is intended to reinforce the message of the natural spirit.

'The Dutch Officer's Story' is an account, by a Dutch army officer, about

Mungo.

We had been three or four days in cantonment, when I heard two of the men, who were digging a little drain at the back of my tent, talking of Jokel Falck, a private in my regiment, who was noted for his extraordinary disposition to somnolence, one of them remarked that he would certainly have gotten into trouble for being asleep on his post the previous night, if it had not been for Mungo. 'I don't know how many times he has saved him,' added he.

To which the other answered, that Mungo was a very valuable friend, and had saved many a man from punishment.²⁹⁹

²⁹⁸ Crowe, 1850: 64

²⁹⁹ Crowe, 1859: 211

The officer is new to the regiment and knows nothing of Mungo, except that he is a large black Newfoundland, with a streak of white down one flank. Making enquiries at dinner, Captain T tells the narrator that Mungo is the spirit of a dog who was frequently in the company of their regiment, and had been for at least fifty years. He was known to appear at just the right time to warn a sleeping (or drunk) man that he was about to be caught. 'If anybody at the table except Captain T had made such an assertion as this, I should have ridiculed them without mercy!'³⁰⁰

After a few weeks had passed, Captain T tells the officer the complete history of how Mungo came to be a part of their regiment. After a battle, some of his men came across the dog lying by a dead soldier. The dog had been cut with a sabre on its flank, so the men took it back to camp and tended its wounds. '[H]e remained with the regiment till his death, and was buried with all the respect they could show him. Since that, he has shown his gratitude in the way I tell you, and of which you have seen some instances.'³⁰¹ Mungo is an exceptional example of Crowe

³⁰⁰ Crowe, 1859: 216

³⁰¹ *ibid*: 220

extending Spiritualist thought into the natural world. Spiritualists believed, as has been previously mentioned, that after death, the spirit is freed, and can move about without restraint. That is true of Mungo who, rather sweetly, spends his afterlife repaying the kindnesses shown to him by this regiment.

Mrs M. tells a story of visiting a friend in Yorkshire, in the small town designated only as C. On her way into town, Mrs M. spots a large white cat, sitting serenely on a country gate. M. claims that she is a lover of animals, and calls her driver over to see it, but by the time he arrived, it had vanished. M. sees the cat three more times in the village, but before she can learn more about it, she is summoned back to London because her eldest child had died. It is possible that the cat appeared to Mrs M. because it knew that she would find some comfort in its form— Mrs M. does confess ‘I have a weakness for cats.’³⁰²

Mrs L., in another story, credits animals ‘with a singular foreknowledge.’³⁰³ She returned to her country home rather late one evening, and found a dog sleeping in front of the fire. Neither she nor

³⁰² Ibid: 22

³⁰³ Ibid: 89

her servants knew to whom he belonged, or how he had managed to get inside, but Mrs L. decided to allow him to stay until he was claimed. The dog had a strange propensity for staring at the son of her friend, a young Mr X. After returning to London, Mrs L. received a letter stating that Mr X. had drowned, and since then, the dog had not been seen. Crowe writes of her own spiritual connectedness to her dogs, and reiterates that the study of the natural world is as important to understanding human nature as is any study of religion or philosophy. For Crowe, the cat is more than a portent of death; it is a vital part of nature. '[T]here is a deep mystery in the beings of these creatures, which proud man never seeks to unravel, or condescends to speculate on. What is their relation to the human race?'³⁰⁴

'The Sheep-Farmer's Story' tells of Sandy Shiels, a simple man living in rural Scotland with his wife, children, servants and dogs. We are told that Shiels is 'a shrewd and simple man... hardhanded and hardfeatured, but not unkindly; a serious churchman, a great reader of his Bible, and a keen observer of Nature.'³⁰⁵ These details are significant because they immediately inform the reader that this is a

³⁰⁴ Ibid: 24

³⁰⁵ Crowe, 1859: 297-298

man who lives by the patriarchal system; he is religious, but not to the point of excluding science (nature); he is the level-headed master of his domain. Crowe takes the time to note that Sandy oversees his farmhands outside each day, whilst his wife and her niece (who resides with them) take charge of the home. If he were not Scottish, he would be the very model of a respectable, English country gentleman.

During a fierce snowstorm his son, Rob, disappears. And so too does his beloved dog, Coullie. Some months later a dog resembling Coullie is seen around the Shiels farm; and Sandy is convinced that it is his beloved hound. Coullie is delighted to see Sandy, but is extremely reluctant to enter the house. The family assumed it was grief over the loss of Rob, and thought little of it. Soon members of the family, Annie in particular, starts seeing a pale man and hearing a whistle like Rob used to give for Coullie. When Coullie hears the whistle, he becomes distressed and runs outside, off to do some errand. Annie follows him one day, and they find Rob's remains in the quarry; it appears he had fallen in during the snowstorm and broken his legs. 'Poor Rob's remains were committed to the earth; Coullie left off his erratic habits and

became an ordinary, but intelligent, sheep dog.³⁰⁶ Annie, however, is unable to shake her suspicion that Rob was murdered.

The family are visited by Rob's grandmother, a woman of the Highlands, who claims the power of second sight. After spending a few days there, she asks to take Coullie home with her, and Sandy grants her this. On the way home, Sandy, Annie, Coullie and granny wait for their coach outside the local pub, when Coullie attacks Donald, a former farmhand of Sandy's. Granny notes that Coullie has the ability to 'give testimony agen [*sic*] the wicked.'³⁰⁷ Donald is soon struck down by cholera, and on his deathbed confesses to murdering Rob, and confesses that Coullie bit him the night of the murder as well.

3.4.3 'The great moral evils that beset us': The Tragedy of Scepticism

Catherine Crowe was not particularly known for this sort of heavy-handed moralising, but the story told by Colonel C. also emphasises that divine justice may be done on earth. Colonel C.'s story takes place in his childhood village, and concerns the murder of a local farmer

³⁰⁶ Crowe, 1859: 319

³⁰⁷ *ibid*: 325

called Gould. There was a 'carrier' called Healy, 'that plied between these two towns... in short, he did our marketings, in a great degree.'³⁰⁸ Healy was well-known and generally well-liked in the villages, even smuggling in a novel for C.'s sisters.³⁰⁹ When farmer Gould is found robbed and murdered, Healy becomes a suspect—though there are no eyewitnesses to place him at the scene. In the assizes, Healy, no doubt fearing for his life, calls out, 'I am innocent, my Lord! I call God to witness, I am innocent! May this right arm wither if I murdered the man!'³¹⁰ Healy was found to be innocent, and returned to his work. Three days after the trial, however, 'Richard Healy's stalwart right arm was withered! The muscles shrunk; the skin dried up; and it looked like the limb of a mummy!'³¹¹ This story also asserts the notion that spirit communication is not a plaything. From séance to prayer, it is dangerous to invoke the spirits when we have such a limited knowledge of the Other World.

The ending of 'The Dutch Officer's Story', too, speaks to the tragedy that can occur when humans meddle with spirits. Major R decides one

³⁰⁸ *ibid*: 44

³⁰⁹ *ibid*: 44

³¹⁰ *Ibid*: 60

³¹¹ *Ibid*: 60

day to shoot Mungo, the dog, to see if he is really a spirit; reasoning that if he is dead, a bullet will not hurt him. Major R fires a shot into Mungo, and the dog disappears. Looking around for a body, or a trace of any kind, Major R and the General notice the guard asleep. Major R realises in horror that the guard is his son, Fritz, who now faces the firing squad for dereliction of duty. In the end, '[h]e was shot; his poor mother died of a broken heart, and the major left the service.'³¹²

Dark omens and portents exist in Spiritualism as well, and they are not to be ignored. Mrs E. says it is unusual how many houses in England, particularly in the North, have stigma attached to them. Some friends of hers acquired a new residence, and found that it came with a woman in white. When she showed herself, one family member would die—the reason they were selling the house. Whilst touring the property, they see the woman: 'the destiny fell on the seer himself this time; he was dead before the year had expired.'³¹³ Crowe writes of the 'radiant boy' who is said to appear to people about to die tragic, usually violent, deaths.

³¹² Crowe, 1859: 227

³¹³ Ibid: 99

The story in *Ghosts and Family Legends* is identical to Crowe's entry into WB Yeats' collected volume, *Fairy and Folk Tales of the Irish Peasantry* (1888). In both, Captain Stewart (later Lord Castlereagh) is graciously received at a large country house in Ireland. The house is full of a shooting party, so the butler places him in the 'Boy's Room' for the night. The captain is awakened suddenly in the night by a vivid light: 'he perceived, gradually disclosing itself, the form of a beautiful naked boy, surrounded by a dazzling radiance. The boy looked at him earnestly, and then the vision faded, and all was dark.'³¹⁴ The captain assumed it was a prank, and the next morning confronted his host. The host 'informed him very gravely' that the person to whom the radiant boy appears will rise 'to the summit of power,' but will ultimately die a violent death.

In life, the real Lord Castlereagh experienced severe mental health problems, committing suicide in 1822. This story was, allegedly, told to Walter Scott by Castlereagh himself, and would have been well-known in Spiritualist circles in the mid-nineteenth century. Scott, in a letter to his son, recounts: 'You have heard of poor Lord Londonderry (Castlereagh's) death by his own hand, in a fit of insanity. This explains

³¹⁴ Crowe, 1859: 95

a story he once told me of having seen a ghost, and which I thought was a very extraordinary narrative from the lips of a man of so much sense and steadiness of nerve.³¹⁵ It is possible, then, that we are to infer that Castlereagh's madness came about as a result of seeing the radiant boy. The butler in Crowe's story is chastised for putting Stewart in 'the Boy's Room' for the night—it is possible that his flouting of his master's order that none enter the room is the reason for Castlereagh's tragic demise. The reason for Catherine Crowe's own nervous breakdown in 1854 was said to be the result of spirit contact. It is difficult, however, to confirm any of this as Crowe never wrote about it, and the cruel rumours which surrounded her after the fact were likely sensationalised.

Similar themes are echoed in the works of Madame Blavatsky (in Chapter 6) where those who dabble with the spirits are made to pay dearly for their flippancy. Despite Spiritualism insisting that all people are capable of inter-plane communication, it is still potentially dangerous for those who do not approach it correctly—certainly black magic was known to Spiritualists, and rather unfortunately, from their point of view, both practices were often equated.

³¹⁵ Scott, 1833: 377-378

3.4 Conclusion: 'What a man has made himself he will be; his state is the result of his past life, and his heaven or hell is in himself'

Dickerson explains that supernaturalism was precisely what 'the [Victorian] age craved but science discredited.'³¹⁶ Catherine Crowe encroached into the masculine sphere in the 1850s to bring her ideas concerning the supernatural and science. As has been explored, she may not have been able to call herself an intellectual, in the strictest sense of its definition, but she truly was an intellectual pioneer into the fields of Spiritualism and Psychical Research. Though she did not think of herself as a Spiritualist, she remains one of the foremost writers on the topic. Her ghost stories explore largely anecdotal evidence from people unlikely to lie about spirit contact, not least because of their prominence with patriarchy and Empire.

The subject of afterlife was pondered by Spiritualists of all stripes. Generally it was accepted that in Spiritualism, all spirits mixed together beyond the veil. Crowe, however, writes that the complexity of people makes this seem unlikely. 'There are too many degrees of moral worth and of moral unworth among mankind, to permit of our supposing that

³¹⁶ Dickerson, 1996: 31

justice could be satisfied by an abrupt division into two opposite classes. On the contrary, there must be infinite shades of desert.’³¹⁷ And this aligns with the Spiritualist notion that the astral life consists of several planes of varying degrees. As with most other religions, or quasi-religions, Spiritualism endeavoured to explain what happened to people once they had died. The term ‘dead’ itself caused some annoyance among Spiritualists, Theosophists and others. They saw an earthly decease merely as the shedding of a layer of the self, but that the most important element of the person (the spirit) remained completely intact.

If one cultivates the soul and devotes oneself to study of the higher truths, then one will have a pleasant afterlife such as the Spiritualists and Theosophists describe—one of labour and sacrifice, but ultimately, one of great reward. This is also an idea reflected in the spirit communications received by Crowe; that similarly-inclined spirits will, in the Other World, find each other. ‘[T]hose who have passed into a similar state with itself—will it not naturally seek its place among those

³¹⁷ Crowe, 1850: 209

spirits which most resemble itself, and with whom, therefore, it must have the most affinity?³¹⁸

It is precisely this understating of the afterlife which sets Crowe apart from the next writer to be studied, Emma Hardinge Britten. While Crowe devoted her life to studying the spirits from a natural perspective, Hardinge Britten applied Spiritualist teachings to her existing religiosity. Regardless of one's individual interpretation of Spiritualism (and its origins), it is evident that Crowe was able to acquire for herself currency as a public intellectual at the time when the prevailing opinion toward middle-class women was that they ought to be kept indoors. Though she never practised the spiritual arts herself, Crowe was able to parlay her fascination with the 'spiritual sciences' into a long and notable writing career.

³¹⁸ Crowe, 1859: 209

CHAPTER FOUR

Emma Hardinge Britten

4.1 Introduction: 'The truth against the world!'³¹⁹

This chapter examines the work of Emma Hardinge Britten (1823-1899), the noted Christian Spiritualist. Hardinge Britten sought to meld together traditional faith and Spiritualist practice (namely séances). Born in London, Hardinge Britten divided her time as an adult between Britain and the United States, where, in 1859, she delivered the seminal speech, 'The Place and Mission of Woman'. Here, she offers a clear outline of a woman's rights and responsibilities, not only as mediums, but as wives and mothers.

Hardinge Britten's ideas concerning Spiritualism itself are found in the non-fiction *Nineteenth Century Miracles* (1884) and her collection of fictional stories, *The Wildfire Club* (1861). In the introduction to *Wildfire*, Britten accepts that Spiritualism will not be accepted by all people—particularly those who fear, not specifically change, but the growth and development of humankind. 'When some lightning soul cuts its way from the clouds of conservatism into the free air of investigation, the

³¹⁹ Hardinge Britten, 1876: 17—these are the defiant words Hardinge Britten uses to sign off the introduction to her work *Ghost Land: Researches into the Mysteries of Occultism* (1876)

world regards the fire-streaked footprints of the pioneer aghast, and closing doors and windows against the Divine Messenger, murmurs from behind the shutters of pride and prejudice, “Beware the Wildfire!”³²⁰ Not all are willing to hear this new divine truth of Spiritualism, but she hopes this collection of stories will be the ‘tiny sparks’³²¹ which spread the great ‘Wildfire’ of Spiritualism. She ends her introduction with a sharp word to her potential critics: ‘men of pen, and ink, and power, a power more vast than ever sword could wield... most mighty press, whilst I should thank you warmly for your very best, I shall not cringe beneath your very worst.’³²² Britten is unafraid of her convictions, and is willing to defend them against what she would deem patriarchal ignorance. In the brief note at the end of *Wildfire*, Hardinge claims, again, that everything she has written has been truthful. She compares her stories to parables, notably that of the Good Samaritan, and claims the effectiveness of using ‘a club of simple stories’ to help deliver the messages which she has received by ‘lifting the tremendous veil’ between the spheres.³²³ Though Spiritualism was one of the most threatening ideologies of the late-nineteenth century—Bennett explains

³²⁰ *Wildfire Club* 1861: 6

³²¹ *Ibid*: 7

³²² *Ibid*: 8

³²³ *ibid*: 367

that it rankled both sceptics and religious people—Hardinge Britten dedicated her life to bringing forth its message.

Hardinge tells her readers the stories in *Wildfire* are not, as such, fiction, but: “‘torn leaves’... Some, indeed, are shadows from *beyond the veil*; some, echoes from the unknown shore.”³²⁴ (8). As we will see with Blavatsky, Hardinge too is fond of saying these stories have been spiritually inspired, as opposed to taking full credit for writing them herself. This is what Kontou refers to as the ‘spillage and seepage’ of authority and voice in the texts.³²⁵ Is Hardinge the owner of the words? Or do they belong to the spirits who inspired her? Or, perhaps, some strange mixture of the two? This unknowability concerning authorship lends an immediate uncanniness to the text. As Kontou points out, Hardinge Britten intentionally fashioned herself as a passive medium and encouraged similarly passivity in her readers.³²⁶ Though she willingly accepted acclaim and remuneration for her services, Britten, at least outwardly, was content to assert her (alleged) inaction.

³²⁴ *ibid*: 8

³²⁵ Kontou, 2009: 5

³²⁶ Kontou, 2008: 279

Though she never would have called herself a feminist, Hardinge Britten's writing was progressive, and she championed the right of women to have public careers. For her, the separate spheres ought not to be public and private, but spiritual ('inspirational') and rational; the former belonging to women and the latter to men. As Alex Owen points out, '[t]he close association of British and American Spiritualism, combined with the current "woman question" debates, ensured that the feminist voice and critique of dominant ideas in relation to women would have a hearing in Britain.'³²⁷ Hardinge Britten, whether or not she intended it—and, arguably, she did not—became a prominent voice in the struggle to establish female authority inside and outside of Spiritualism.

4.2.1 'Welcome back, ye beloved loved ones!': Spiritualism and Religion

On religious objections to SP on the grounds that it is contrary to Christianity, WT Stead writes that '[i]t is fortunate that Mary Magdalene and the early disciples did not hold that theory.'³²⁸

³²⁷ Owen, 2004: 31

³²⁸ Stead, 1921: xi

Victorian Britain was embroiled in a crisis of conscience as traditional religions (Anglicanism, Catholicism, and Methodism) fell from favour. This was partially due to scientific achievements, which ushered in an era of freethought, agnosticism and atheism. This is not to say that all scientists of the time rejected belief in God, but that the discoveries of the origin of man, and the early advancements made into psychology were, for many, better able to provide empirical proof of a wholly natural world. Popular interest in some of the newly founded religions (Revivalism, Spiritualism) also affected the decline in traditional faith.

Spiritualism offered proof to those whose faith in the unseen may have been wavering. 'Convinced members of existing religious bodies did not need to have proof of the supernatural world on which to base their religion, since they accepted the existence of such a world by faith and on the authority of the founder and leaders of their religion.'³²⁹ But for Victorians living in the climate of scientific positivism, many required more than mere faith in order to believe. Séance phenomena and spirit photography provided proof positive of the existence of spirits. Whether or not Spiritualism was a religion, or was an extension of the Christian religion, was hotly debated at the time. But as Nelson writes, its

³²⁹ Nelson, 1969: 140

emphasis on visions in part, served to help define Spiritualism as a religious exercise. 'Visionary experiences are, of course, only one form of religious experience. The more profound type of experience involving trance-like conditions and usually following on meditational practice, seems to present a similar pattern everywhere.'³³⁰

Lamont states that, 'Spiritualists' beliefs tended to be viewed in relation to the general decline in the authority of orthodox Christianity and, more specifically, as a response to the so-called "Victorian crisis of faith" provoked by Biblical criticism and Darwinism.'³³¹ According to Oppenheim many Christians, worried about the oncoming turn of the century, were convinced that Christianity (of any sect) would not be able to provide answers. 'Victorians themselves were fully aware that the place of religion in the cultural fabric of their times was scarcely secure. In an effort to... seek answers where contemporary churches were ambiguous, thousands of British men and women in the Victorian and Edwardian eras turned to Spiritualism and psychical research.'³³² With the subtitle to *Nineteenth Century Miracles*, 'spirits and their work in the

³³⁰ Nelson, 1987: 94

³³¹ Lamont, 2004: 898

³³² Oppenheim, 1985: 1

eve of the earth', Hardinge Britten also speaks to these anxieties that end was nigh. She attempts to reconcile Christian belief and Spiritualism in stories like 'The Improvisatore', where Ernest instructs Gabrielle that her church does not, in fact, deny the possibility of 'living spirits' able to return to earth. 'It teaches you of days when spirits walked the earth, and talked with men like mortals. When the world says it is not possible, it gives the church the lie, and talks mere nonsense.'³³³

In Spiritualism, death was viewed not as the end to a life, but merely the beginning of a new type of life: a life in the spirit world. In this respect it takes a similar view to Christianity, which preaches the existence of life after death as well. Barrow (1986) writes that for many, Spiritualism was meant to be 'a religion but without a creed.'³³⁴ Spiritualists shared no common doctrine and no common dogma, so it was possibly this freedom that appealed to many people who were looking to loose themselves from Christianity, but were uncomfortable giving up religion altogether.

³³³ *Wildfire Club* 165

³³⁴ Barrow, 1986: 14

Braude writes that Spiritualism offered people a way to remain religious—that is, believing in God and an afterlife—without having to live within the strictures of Calvinism or evangelism.³³⁵ This appealed to women, in particular, she explains, because of the high infant mortality rate. Women who had stillbirths, or lost their children before baptism need not worry that they would be accepted into heaven.³³⁶ Traditional religion taught that after death, they would be reunited with their children. In Spiritualism, however, they had the ability to maintain contact with their deceased loved ones whilst still inhabiting this world.

Many religious Spiritualist societies even offered Sunday services. In 1884 the Spiritualist publication edited by Hardinge Britten, *Two Worlds*, advertised more than one hundred services in meeting rooms across the country.³³⁷ Lectures were delivered by trance mediums, prayers uttered by their 'congregations' and even hymns were sung—*Hymns of Faith and Progress* was published by a Manchester society for the benefit of all Spiritualists.³³⁸

³³⁵ Braude, 2001: 4

³³⁶ *ibid*: 37

³³⁷ Oppenheim, 1985: 99

³³⁸ *ibid*: 99

'*Two Worlds* appealed to provincial readers with fewer social and intellectual pretensions... [it] became the leading organ of reform-minded and "progressive," or non-Christian, Spiritualism. Proudly, *Two Worlds* proclaimed itself "A Journal Devoted to Spiritualism, Occult Science, Ethics, Religion and Reform".'³³⁹ Though Oppenheim here writes that *Two Worlds* was not Christian, I would argue that Hardinge Britten, if not the entirety of its subscribers, would be categorised as a Christian Spiritualist. Aligning themselves with several evangelical causes, *Two Worlds* even pressed for the foundation of the Spiritualists' League of Total Abstinence; a teetotal, anti-free love organisation.³⁴⁰ According to Owen, Hardinge Britten had personal, alongside religious, reasons for her stance on free love. She was 'hounded by a variety of men, each of whom was convinced that she was their long-sought-after spiritual "affinity"... She was forced to take legal action to put a stop to harassment from one such man, and became virulent in her opposition to anything that smacked of free love or the doctrine of affinity.'³⁴¹

³³⁹ *ibid*: 46-47

³⁴⁰ *ibid*: 47

³⁴¹ Owen, 2004: 219

Hardinge Britten uses several of her ghost stories to emphasise this necessity of good and moral living. Though Spiritualism (even Christian Spiritualism) taught that there was no heaven/hell divide—all spirits went to the same place—there would be benefits for those who had lived a moral life, and consequences for those who had not.

4.2.2 ‘Sweet faces, angelic in their purity and patience’: Morality, Purity and Spirits

Spiritualism, broadly speaking, denied atonement in the Christian sense. After the shedding of the earthly shell (that is, bodily death) one’s spirit would move to the other side, and there could learn and grow in an egalitarian environment. Atonement therefore was not necessary in Spiritualism because the possibility of being a better person (spirit) still exists.

Death is but a blessing in disguise — a poor and flimsy disguise to those who are prepared for the change, and whose spiritual eyes are opened to realise their future inheritance. Earth is the huge mausoleum of the race; in almost every part it is crowded with the bodies of the departed... We all strive to pierce that dark veil which separates the present from the future, the spirito-natural from the spiritual, time from eternity³⁴²

The use of the word ‘mausoleum’ to describe life is fascinating, and immediately indicates what Spiritualism taught. The other side held in it great treasures (of the non-monetary sort) and some Spiritualists were

³⁴² Barkas, 1862: 83

desperate to find their way there, making do with spirit conversation in the meantime. It also indicates that life on earth is almost worthless. A mausoleum is cold, impersonal, silent and free from useful activity. If this is all that this life presented to the Spiritualist, it is no wonder that they were eager to move into the next. In 'The Last Tenant' and 'The Phantom Mother' the message central to each story is that there is no death; that life on earth is brief and fleeting and what counts is in the spirit world, or afterlife.

Britten, in her story 'Life' enforces the belief that the next plane of existence would be the ideal plane. During a shipwreck, a wealthy, selfish couple are saved, when all others are lost. They are taken to the home of one of the seamen who perished in the wreck. His widow is distraught that her good husband should have died when these seemingly unworthy people were saved. That night she experiences a vision. 'The fabled paradise of Persia, the Elysian fields which ancients loved to dream of, no fabled Eden was ever so fair as this most radiant landscape.'³⁴³ In this magnificent vista she sees all those who perished in the shipwreck, including her husband. He asks, 'Why do you look to ocean and the grave? You will not find your loved ones sleeping there.

³⁴³ *Wildfire Club* 117

Life cannot be crushed out. *We're all in life*; we've but exchanged our garments and our homes.'³⁴⁴ The widow lives the remainder of her life content that 'her spirit-love' will be always near her, and that soon, after earthly demise, her 'life in truth' would begin.³⁴⁵

Despite the lack of judgement upon death, Hardinge Britten and other religious Spiritualists encouraged people to live pure, noble and moral lives just the same. Owen writes that 'British Spiritualism had never constituted a threat to the sanctity of marriage and the family... Hardinge Britten challenged the "spheres" of orthodoxy inherent in domestic ideology, but free love and everything it represented was essentially abhorrent to the majority of the faithful.'³⁴⁶ Whilst Spiritualism is often understood to be a transgressive, subversive movement—and in many ways in certainly was—for Spiritualists, particularly religious ones, leading a pure and moral life was still an obligation. For many religious Spiritualists, arguably the only teaching that transgressed contemporary thought was permitting—necessitating, even—women to have public lives and public careers. At a time when no other major

³⁴⁴ *ibid*: 118

³⁴⁵ *ibid*: 119

³⁴⁶ Owen, 2004: 38

religion ordained women, Hardinge Britten was not only lecturing and practising mediumship, but in July 1886 she performed funeral rites while on a lecturing tour of the North East. *Medium and Daybreak* reported that Hardinge Britten ‘performed the religious exercises at the funeral of the infant daughter of Mr T.A. Kempster’ and that the service was ‘very impressive’ and ‘attended by many Spiritualists.’³⁴⁷

Britten reinforces the necessity of good and virtuous living in ‘The Monomaniac; or, The Spirit Bride’. Old Tom Martin is a man of great compassion and kindness; though exceedingly poor, he is always willing to share his food and drink with those who have greater need than he. This is especially significant considering Tom’s horrifying childhood: sold to work at sea where he was overworked, beaten and starved by a succession of cruel ship’s captains. She compares Tom with the Biblical prophets who enjoyed an intimate relationship with the divine, and dedicated their lives to living the examples of justice and mercy presented to them via spirit communication. The moral of this story is not solely that exceptional living will bring reward in the afterlife, but that one has the possibility of spiritual reward—a ‘spirit bride’—whilst still earth-bound. This would have been appealing to the more

³⁴⁷ *Medium and Daybreak*, 16 July 1886

religious of the Spiritualists, who were searching for a way of combining these philosophies.

4.2.3 ‘There’s no nicer witch than you’: Hardinge Britten and Witchy Women

In ‘Margaret Infelix; or, A Narrative Concerning A Haunted Man’ Hardinge Britten presents her readers with a spiritual revenge; again enforcing that an immoral life, even in the age of Spiritualism, would not go unpunished. The story concerns a young Anglican priest who, popular though he was, never stayed in any appointment longer than a few months. This eccentric habit of declining lucrative, settled, positions made him the subject of gossip—the most intriguing bit of which concerned a woman who seemed to follow him to every parish. ‘Without ever being seen to speak to him, or hold the slightest communion with him’ this ‘tall and graceful woman’ was a conspicuous presence in each of his services.³⁴⁸ Adding to the mystery of this woman was that she was veiled, as a woman in mourning. Though he never seemed interested in making contact with her—often deliberately avoiding looking at her—he was obviously deeply unsettled by her presence. ‘The light of his eyes looked out from “the window of the soul” in

³⁴⁸ *Wildfire Club* 122

troubled, fitful glare, like the eager search of an unquiet spirit “seeking rest and finding none”.³⁴⁹

The veiled woman followed him to every service he performed until he was an old man. She spoke to him only once, to say: ‘*For the last time on earth, remember.*’³⁵⁰ At the conclusion of the service, the priest is approached by a gentleman claiming that Mrs F.I. (the titular Margaret) has died, and willed the priest a large sum of money. Here the priest breaks down and confesses that he had, many years ago, agreed to marry Margaret, but reneged after she had allowed him access to her money. Instead he eloped with another woman and moved across the country. He goes on to say that he night his wife and child were killed in a house fire was the first night Margaret made contact, claiming responsibility for his family’s deaths. ‘I am yet but partially avenged— watching the favourable moment, *I destroyed your wife and child!* Seek not to arrest or convict me; the instruments who served me are beyond your reach.’³⁵¹ Margaret tells the priest that her vengeance will be her constant presence, a renewing of his guilt and shame, until one of them

³⁴⁹ *ibid*: 123

³⁵⁰ *ibid*: 126

³⁵¹ *ibid*: 131

died. A few hours later, the priest also expires. There is no condemnation in the story for Margaret using some form of spiritual art to send her double/spirit around the country to harass this priest. The immorality here present for Hardinge Britten, may be solely found in the disgraceful behaviour of the young priest who succumbed to his greed.

In 'The Witch of Lowenthal' a young Englishman is sent to Germany to marry Clara, a baroness, as his family, though noble, was experiencing some financial difficulty. The young baroness was beautiful and welcoming, but the Englishman was curious about never being able to converse with her in private. 'A young lady, whom the baroness called her foster sister, was her constant companion; and despite all of the hints and innuendos of the bridegroom elect, she never attempted for one moment to quit her post beside the lady,'³⁵² The marriage takes place, and the groom is dismayed to learn that even on their wedding night, Gertrude, the sister, is to sleep in their bedroom. He decides to remove his bride from the castle, and set up a home elsewhere. But he finds that the same spectres still haunt them—he comes to the conclusion that Gertrude is a witch, and she is responsible for the hauntings—so he has her arrested. At trial, Gertrude is found guilty of

³⁵² *ibid*: 252

witchcraft, and sentenced to burn. The night before the execution, the baron tells his son-in-law that Clara is in fact the witch, and Gertrude simply her companion—the orphaned daughter of a priest, no less. The new baron is horrified, but unwilling to stop the proceedings: ‘She is my wife—beloved, adored by me. She must not, shall not die! I cannot lose her! Almighty Father, O, forgive the wrong! The *witch* must live, the *innocent* must die!’³⁵³ Clara, displaying the exceptionally feminine qualities of compassion and sympathy, throws herself on the fire and burns along with Gertrude. The women are greeted in the afterlife as ‘martyred saints... the victims of superstition, error, ignorance, and wrong.’³⁵⁴

Hardinge Britten also uses the motif of the wrongly-accused ‘witch’ in ‘The Haunted Grange. Hannah is raised in the workhouse following her mother’s suicide. From childhood, she exhibited remarkable spiritual gifts, including clairaudience and being able to put her fellow young orphans into trance or hypnotic states. She is brought into the home of Edward Rookwood, to act as servant to his young daughter, following the death of his wife. She has an immaculate second sight, and her

³⁵³ *ibid*: 259

³⁵⁴ *ibid*: 260

predictions always came true. Hannah and Harry, son of Edward, fall in love but before they can announce an engagement, Edward reveals the state of the family's finances: they have nothing. Harry must marry a wealthy woman, and Hannah, though heartbroken, vows to serve the family forever.

I will devote my life to the benefit of *him* and *his*; I will never quit the mansion which has so long sheltered me while life remains; I will never forsake one member of that family to whom I owe so much... I will be as ivy which clings around the crumbling walls... but like that ivy, my life shall henceforth become identified with the old ruin³⁵⁵

Harry would go on to imitate his father's unscrupulousness and unnecessary spending, and Hannah was forced to labour in order to feed her adopted family: making medicines for the villagers, digging food and taking in washing. Britten here notes the ignominy of Hannah being called a witch, when she lived her life as a beacon of goodness and selflessness. '[W]hen we remember that they whom Jesus devoted his life to healing, teaching, and benefiting, condemned their Saviour to an ignominious and shameful death, we cannot wonder that the epithet of witch, and isolation from all human companionship... were [her] only rewards.'³⁵⁶ Following William's murder and Edward's death at sea, Hannah was, indeed, the last tenant of Rookwood Grange. When, in

³⁵⁵ *ibid*: 65

³⁵⁶ *ibid*: 71

her old age, she finally expired, the villagers 'laid her within the shade of the ivied walls with which her humble life had been identified.'³⁵⁷ That spring, a might storm raged and house was toppled 'in a superb mausoleum over the spot which covered the mortal remains of the Last Tenant of Rookwood Grange.'³⁵⁸

Female 'witchy' self-sacrifice is also a major theme in 'The Improvisatore', Ernest Rossi's mother has extremely potent mediumistic powers. She is captured as she flees her village from the invading Austrian army, and because of her second sight, is accused of being a traitor. She has a vision of her own martyrdom, and decides she must die, in order to preserve the life of her son. She is sentenced to be flogged to death—and this does prove to be her horrible end.³⁵⁹

In these 'witch' stories, Hardinge Britten tackles spiritual ignorance alongside the idea of 'divine' retribution for wrong-doers. Clara is not a witch in the sense that she dabbles in the black or demoniac arts. The apparitions and soft music which frighten her husband were common

³⁵⁷ Ibid: 111

³⁵⁸ Ibid: 111

³⁵⁹ Ibid 182-183

séance occurrences. Hannah is merely an extra-sensitive medium who, like Clara, devoted her life to serving others. We are assured, however, that both women will be well-received in the spirit realm. In her autobiography, Hardinge Britten notes 'witch' was one of the slurs thrown at her by her critics—which, naturally, she denies. In her fictional writing, the figure of the witch is threatening to patriarchy, with specific reference to religion (as demonstrated by Margaret Infelix). It is interesting that Hardinge Britten uses the figure of the witch; instead of distancing herself from comparisons to black magic and devilry, it appears that she *invites* readers to be reminded of her close connection with these powerful women. The suggestion here is that, like witches, her powers ought not to be taken lightly, even by sceptics.

4.3.1 'O, woman!': Hardinge Britten and the Role of Woman

For Hardinge Britten, Spiritualism and women are inextricably linked; they each require the other in order to exercise their authority. Her 'Place and Mission of Woman' speech is often cited as a centrepiece of progressive, liberal, Spiritualist thought. Delivered in Boston, Massachusetts in 1859, Hardinge does make some bold statements concerning the present welfare and future state of woman, but she

makes exceedingly clear that changes to patriarchy will only come about when women embrace their feminine virtue. Hardinge urges women not to stray too far from the 'old ways':

O woman! we call upon thee to help thyself. Thou canst not obtain what thou wouldst have from legislation; thou canst not secure it by uprooting any of the institutions of the earth—no good or benefit ever results from the violent disruption of old forms—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 recognise thy rights³⁶⁰

For Hardinge, the expansion of women's rights into the public sphere would only come about at a time when women were willing to emphasise their feminine virtues of grace, kindness and spiritual guidance. Those who chose to refrain from marriage and motherhood, or those who marched on Downing Street demanding a change in the laws of the land were 'extremists', behaving in a manner 'injurious to the cause of truth and to the name, grace and purity of woman.'³⁶¹ She urges women 'not to attempt to grapple with that which Nature has not destined for her,³⁶² but to exert, always, the feminine attributes of grace and dignity. According to Dickerson:

The ideal woman was now to attend to the physical, moral, and spiritual needs of the family as the angel of the house. One of the things expected of Victorian woman, as mother, wife, and daughter,

³⁶⁰ Hardinge, 1859: 10

³⁶¹ *ibid*: 3

³⁶² *ibid*: 5

was that she control herself and suppress desire and passion, as these would be disruptive to her mission as stabiliser of the home. It was mete that woman give up, rein in, be silent, be still³⁶³

Unlike many Spiritualists who saw the afterlife as a place free from judgement, Hardinge Britten does understand that there spirits will undergo some form of judgement when they arrive beyond the veil. Princess A., realising that she is near death, in 'The Princess: A Vision of Royalty in the Spheres' bequeaths her entire estate to her ward, a young orphan called Geraldine. Unlike the princess' 'toadying' relations, Geraldine is 'pure' and 'unconscious of vice.'³⁶⁴ One night, she enters her apartment, and finds that the entire room 'dazzlingly illuminated' by some unseen forces. After a few moments, she feels the presence of another person—it is her deceased benefactor. The princess explains that she is 'neither in heaven nor hell... but in the place called the spheres.'³⁶⁵ Soon the entire room fills with inhabitants of the spheres engaged in dancing. The most remarkable occurrence for Geraldine, is that each dancing couple is comprised of one 'high and noble knight or dame' and one 'from the very lowest, poorest, and most degraded ranks of like,'³⁶⁶ these people are not dancing partners by choice, Geraldine

³⁶³ Dickerson, 1996: 4

³⁶⁴ *Wildfire Club* 14

³⁶⁵ *ibid*: 17; 16

³⁶⁶ *ibid*: 17-18

intuits. Rather they are being punished—'[t]hey had cultivated animal passions in their human nature... a conviction of retributive justice possessed my soul, and I seemed able to read these people's very lives, in the *sphere* which they had made for themselves after death.'³⁶⁷ Britten, interestingly, takes a more conservative view of the spheres than other of her contemporaries. For many Spiritualists, the afterlife was free of judgement, but in Britten's view, the world beyond the worlds was created for each individual based on his/her actions on earth. This dancing sphere is reserved for the 'sensualists'; the pleasure-seekers who, whilst living, chose not to concern themselves with charity, kindness, or seeking spiritual truths.

In the vision before her, Geraldine sees her intended, Lord L., duel (unsuccessfully) with another man. Geraldine decides to marry Lord L. on the condition that they leave for the Continent immediately following the wedding. They marry, but Lord L. claims he cannot leave their home, owing to an engagement. A few hours later, Geraldine finds L. dead, having been killed in a duel. 'That night, *at one o'clock*, I sat by his cold corpse, pondering on the fearful revelation of the preceding night; the fatally fulfilled prediction, and the possible condition of the

³⁶⁷ *ibid*: 18

spirit of the duellist, killed by the husband of a woman whom he had seduced.³⁶⁸ Britten here invokes a common post-Spiritualism trope; that the spirits are able to harm, even kill, the living. Geraldine, though assuredly a woman of virtue, was so terrified by these visions, that she married a clergyman, and from thence on lead a 'solitary and austere life.'³⁶⁹ If one lived well, one would be well-received in the afterlife—this has been demonstrated in 'The Witch of Lowenthal' and is the case in 'The Phantom Mother,' where the elderly narrator exuded a 'calm piety with which she contemplated her rapidly approaching end.'³⁷⁰ Her (the storyteller is never named) calm demeanour is based on the purity of her existence. She tells the writer of the story (presumably Hardinge Britten herself) that she has lived in isolation for sixty years so she would not give into temptation, and thus lose out on a privileged place in the afterlife.

At the Christmas season, the narrator and her sisters have just returned home from a ball. As she prepares for bed, her mother enters her bedroom, looking frightful. 'Her hair was loose and hanging in disorder

³⁶⁸ *ibid*: 23

³⁶⁹ *ibid*: 23

³⁷⁰ *ibid*: 261

around her head... One cheek was coarsely patched with rouge, the other was a deadly pale; a set of false teeth was in her hand, and her face was besmeared with half-arranged pearl powder.³⁷¹ She is shocked to see her ordinarily fastidious mother in such a state. Her mother urges her to find a pen and write down what she is about to say. As readers we are not aware of it at the moment, but the mother had died that evening, and was thus performing this dictation as a 'phantom'—meaning the conversation is now an automatic-writing session.

The phantom mother tells her daughter of her many, many regrets; namely, her 'idleness and coquetry.'³⁷² The mother tells her daughter of a vision she had speaking to divine entities:

I looked up and saw the terrible vision of the crucifixion, while these words rung like thunder in my ears: 'Not everyone who saith unto me, Lord, Lord, but he who *doeth* the will of my Father who is in heaven, he shall be saved.' Then I cried in despair, Is there no salvation? Again the shout was re-echoed. 'Work out your own salvation.' But how? 'By action.' Is there then repentance after death? '*There is no death,*' was thundered in my ears... I asked, in the agony of despair, Where then is hell? No voice replied... *Lo! I am in 'hell', and I myself have made it!*³⁷³

Though she would have objected to the term 'death' Hardinge Britten does press the message, again, that Spiritualism does not mean

³⁷¹ *ibid*: 264

³⁷² *ibid*: 266

³⁷³ *ibid*: 268

hedonism. It is still a woman's duty to be a bastion of feminine purity and dignity.

Hardinge Britten writes that it is woman's obligation to seek wisdom, and not rely on dogmatic teaching. If one is 'proud to bear' the distinction of being a woman, then one must 'striv[e] from the soul of souls the quivering link to find that has its birthplace in the heart of mother and father God.'³⁷⁴ Owen notes Hardinge Britten's use of Shaker theology here, as they believed the One God to be androgynous, containing within it Holy Mother Wisdom and Father God.³⁷⁵ Instead of seeking male or paternal wisdom, it is clear that she wanted to emphasise the female role in the divine.

Hardinge Britten also explains that change must be taken by women. If a new society is needed (and she believed that was the case) then it was up to women to exact those changes. 'We will not speak... in a tone of command or entreaty to man to do thee right. He cannot do it. It is with thyself, thyself alone, that thou must build a name and place in

³⁷⁴ *ibid*, 3

³⁷⁵ Owen, 2004: 13

history.³⁷⁶ Hardinge Britten's central argument is that now—in the Age of Spiritualism—it is to be the age of, if not woman, then at least equality. 'When you consider the necessity of the world's progress,' she explains, 'man... as the recipient of the principle of force, of physical strength, should be the leader'.³⁷⁷ Men ruled in ancient societies because they needed leaders who could lift heavy things, or engage in battle. In these modern times, it is time for men to loosen their grip on government and allow the natural grace of women greater authority.

4.3.2 'Our ancient authority': Women and Spirits

In her writing, Hardinge Britten emphasises that woman's power is natural and God-given, whilst man's is very much of this world. In 'The Improvisatore' she makes reference to the Earl of Ravensworth 'one of the oldest, richest and proudest of England's hereditary (not natural) lords of man's (not God's) creation'.³⁷⁸ Britten speaks of evil ship's captains in 'The Monomaniac' whose 'savage nature' and tyranny develop in these male-only environments—which, notably, also tend to lack religious influence.³⁷⁹ In other words, though Victorian man lays

³⁷⁶ Hardinge, 1859: 3

³⁷⁷ *ibid*: 4

³⁷⁸ *Wildfire Club* 146

³⁷⁹ *ibid*: 42

claim to power on both religious and secular matters, they wield it illegitimately. In the realm of the divine, it is woman who is the natural successor to (spiritual) authority.

At her first public speaking engagement Hardinge Britten claimed to have been reciting words told to her by her deceased father. 'I had a dim perception that I was standing outside of myself, by the side of my dear father—dead- when I was only a little child—but whose noble form I could plainly see close by me, gesticulating to, and addressing somehow, my second self, which was imitating him, and repeating all the thrilling words he was uttering.'³⁸⁰ Owen relates this anecdote, in part, as evidence of Spiritualism's conservatism; that even a pioneering woman like Hardinge Britten declined to take credit for her own teachings, and attributed them to male spirit. Yet, as discussed in the first chapter, voice and authority are not absolutes in Spiritualism. Hardinge Britten's father's spirit may well have been speaking through her, but in the act of relaying these ideas—in a lecture theatre no less she demands, and receives, authority.

³⁸⁰ Margaret Wilkinson, in biography of Emma Hardinge Britten (1900) in Owen, 2004: 212

Hardinge Britten explains that in a trance state, she felt herself “to be two individuals”: one whose lips were “uttering a succession of sentences, sometimes familiar to me, still oftener new and strange”, and the other “an onlooker and occasional listener”.³⁸¹ The notion of spirit influence, even in the case of a male spirit speaking through a female medium, does not remove or negate the authority of the medium. Spiritualists generally accepted the idea that it was the spirits themselves who initiated contact, and could chose with whom they spoke. If the spirits chose Hardinge Britten—or any other woman—then this was the spirit’s way of asking audience to heed this medium.

Mediumship was closely aligned with femininity, although there were a number of male mediums working in the nineteenth century.³⁸² This was, in part, as Kontou notes, because women were understood to possess the innate qualities necessary for mediumship: ‘empathy, sensitivity and passivity.’³⁸³ As Davidoff and Hall point out, however, the argument on women’s greater ability to communicate with the spirits may have been at least partially cultural, as opposed to entirely natural.

³⁸¹ In Wilkinson, 1900 in Owen, 2004: 224

³⁸² Braude, 2001: 23

³⁸³ Kontou, 2008: 277

'[D]omestic seclusion gave a proper basis for a truly religious life and since women were seen as naturally occupying the domestic sphere this was one of the reasons why women were seen as more "naturally" religious.'³⁸⁴

Though Hardinge Britten argues quite strongly that Spiritualism ought to be the provenance of women, she does not exclude men from possessing spiritual gifts. Tom, from 'The Monomaniac' is constantly accompanied by his spirit guide or spirit bride. She comes to him after he has fallen seriously ill whilst at sea, and his only companion, the elderly sailor 'Parson Jack'³⁸⁵, has died. A melodious female voice tells Tom that Jack, 'is dead to earth, and born in heaven.'³⁸⁶ She explains that she is his spirit bride, and will stay with him forever.

Tom was never a cruel person, but after meeting with his spirit bride, becomes the pinnacle of kindness, generosity and selflessness. His feminine qualities, according to Hardinge Britten, have increased

³⁸⁴ Davidoff and Hall, 1987: 90

³⁸⁵ Parson Jack was not a chaplain, just a sailor who acquired that nickname because he was unusually kind and compassionate. He is also often to be found speaking of his 'blessed mother' who gave him the gift of a Bible shortly before he went to sea as a young man.

³⁸⁶ *Wildfire Club* 32

through receiving 'purity and wisdom' from his spirit bride.³⁸⁷ Hardinge Britten rails against 'monstrous' male authority and decries the destructive and deadly powers of male ambition. She laments that an English jury would find Tom to be mad simply because he was able to communicate with the spirit world.³⁸⁸ Masculinity was not, generally speaking, conducive to spiritual progress. Only the increased presence of feminine values and authority in wider society would foster change.

Tom, by hosting his spirit bride, becomes a beacon of feminine values. The softness, gentleness, and submission of self-constituted his claim to feminine influence.³⁸⁹ On one ship a young, starving cabin boy is about to be flogged for stealing bread. Tom, 'with the spirit of his angel bride on his lips'³⁹⁰ steps in and volunteers to be flogged in the boy's place. On board a ship, where there are no women present, Tom becomes the embodiment of the innate female goodness which Hardinge Britten sought to promote. Because of the influence of the female spirit within, Tom is 'purer in morals, kinder in disposition, more refined in habits, more choice in language [and] more pious' than any

³⁸⁷ *ibid*: 43

³⁸⁸ *ibid*: 47

³⁸⁹ Davidoff and Hall, 1987: 395

³⁹⁰ *Wildfire Club* 45

man on-board.³⁹¹ Whilst Hardinge Britten does devote a good deal of her fiction and non-fiction to the necessity of female 'goodness', she also urges men to be a bit more feminine. Ernest Rossi in 'The Improvvisatore' is said to exhibit a 'womanly tenderness' and mercy.³⁹²

Tom's kindness and purity will see him safely into the greatest part of the afterlife, we are assured. In 'The Haunted Grange' Edward Rookwood, master of Rookwood Grange, effectively destroys his own life because of his masculine, material ambitions.

Like all those whose affections are centred in the materialities of the fleeting moment during which we sojourn on this earth, disappointment and a restless craving for something, any thing [*sic*], more, beyond, or above what he actually possessed, forever oppressed his mind. Had he lived in the pure light of Spiritualism, his unquiet aspirations, ever tending, as they did, to the true and beautiful, would have found fruition in the study of a better and nobler purpose³⁹³

Edward eventually learns the error of his ways, but his fecklessness is passed down to his son and eldest grandson.

Hardinge Britten writes of woman's responsibility to be a good mother, and again, if men displayed a bit more maternal instinct, the world, she

³⁹¹ *ibid*: 47

³⁹² *ibid*: 187

³⁹³ *ibid*: 55-56

argues, would be a far better place. William, Edward's grandson, after the death of his father becomes sole breadwinner for those living in the estate. Yet 'his dissolute life and habits retarded his promotion to that rank' which would see his family secure.³⁹⁴ The lack of feminine selflessness here dooms his family.

4.3.3 'O, mother, mother!': Spiritual Motherhood

In terms of motherhood, Hardinge writes that healthy women who are able to bear children must do so in accordance with natural, and divine, principle. In fact, she still places motherhood as the highest possible achievement for women. Care, sympathy and compassion must underpin motherhood, and Hardinge Britten is particularly critical of absent (literally or figuratively) mothers. In 'The Phantom Mother' the elderly narrator talks of worshipping her mother's great external beauty, but never being able to love her, because 'she was neither a domestic wife nor a fond mother.'³⁹⁵ In 'The Haunted Grange' Mrs Rookwood's legalism prevents her from charity: she abhors vice, so shuns its contact and, displaying a lack of maternal instinct, refuses to take in the

³⁹⁴ Ibid: 81

³⁹⁵ Ibid: 263

orphaned Hannah.³⁹⁶ The second Mrs Rookwood, the late Mrs Rookwood's daughter-in-law, lavished her affection on her eldest son, William, and neglected her son Edward. 'The poor child, unused to any share of maternal love, and pining for the stolen caresses of his dead father, would steal away and nestle among the flowers which waved over that father's grave.'³⁹⁷ Edward did find happiness when his mother abandoned him to be raised by Hannah, in an environment of love and spiritual learning.

Mothers were urged to raise girls who would be engaged with the world (both worlds). Hardinge fears that this cycle of creating useful men and useless women is being replicated with each generation. 'O man! you do not know, you cannot conceive the wrong you are doing, not alone to such martyrs as these, but to the children, each one of whom, with its particular characteristics, requires some special training to unfold the flower of its nature.'³⁹⁸ From a Spiritualist perspective, with the age of the spirit imminent, Hardinge fears that women with untrained minds will be unable to take up their rightful places of leadership in the new age.

³⁹⁶ *ibid*: 58

³⁹⁷ *ibid*: 78

³⁹⁸ Hardinge, 1859: 9

She explains that women are presently chained 'down to such a sphere'³⁹⁹ as a result of masculine privilege. Hardinge refuses to accept that the sexes ought to be separated; even understanding it to be in violation of what is natural, and what is Spiritual. As she saw the age in which she lived as the precursor to the Age of Spiritualism, she crafted her understanding of the New Woman, of gender equality, around her Spiritualist principles. 'We would claim, then, that the very first knowledge which should be impressed upon children should be the duty that rests upon all, in the relation of male and female, to sustain, uphold, teach, and support each other.'⁴⁰⁰ Allowing women to have public lives and responsibilities would be beneficial to all of society. She played on the commonly-held belief that women had a more refined moral nature, and that if women were to infiltrate the masculine sphere, their presence would elevate man's morality outside of the home, as her presence (allegedly) did inside the family home. Beyond that, the argument arose that if woman's moral development was so advanced, then surely her intellectual capabilities must be high as well; or certainly higher than once predicted.⁴⁰¹

³⁹⁹ *ibid*: 10

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid*: 7

⁴⁰¹ Owen, 2004: 29

The Victorians—certainly those of the higher classes—fanatically devoted themselves to protecting the virtue of their daughters. A young woman of ‘questionable’ moral fibre would not be able to attract the ‘best’ sort of suitor, and it was believed that reading novels could contribute to the corruption of young women. Too much education, it was believed, could negatively impact a woman’s health, and too much reading could broaden her mind beyond a marriageable point. For the daughters of the upper classes, Hardinge points out that virtually no practical education was granted to them. ‘She may be painter, poet, architect, designer; she may be anything that the world deems of use, *in the germ*, but the education specially [*sic*] calculated to refine and polish the mistress of a family, is all that is given to the daughters of the rich and great.’⁴⁰²

Hardinge accepts that working mothers are likely to be criticised for leaving their children in the care of a nurse or nanny, but argues that this will not, in fact, harm the children. Taking up the example of a female nurse or physician, Hardinge entreats her listeners, ‘Now, look for yourselves at the smile of delight which greets the father on his

⁴⁰² Hardinge, 1859: 7-8

return home... Would children love their mother less because they had been, for some portion of the day, committed to the healthful care of [another]? No.⁴⁰³

The working woman's family's needs must come before her own, and any 'selfish' desires she may have must, in order to preserve a harmonious home, be quashed. Though Hardinge Britten, relatively speaking, does not stray far from the angel of the house mode of womanhood her attitudes toward work are unusual: 'It should be shameful for any woman to be unemployed... no more the dolls of fashionable life, no more the vapid and useless ornaments of saloons and society, but ministering angels, *useful* as well as *good* women.'⁴⁰⁴

This was quite a radical statement at a time when working was not done by women who did not need to work. Owen explains that for most middle-class women, paid employment was shameful; she might do charity work as part of her religious ethos, but work was, generally speaking, not acceptable.⁴⁰⁵

⁴⁰³ *ibid*: 11

⁴⁰⁴ *ibid*: 11-12

⁴⁰⁵ Owen, 2004: 2

Hardinge however urges women to find employment in one of the ‘three specialities which grow out of the very structure of woman.’⁴⁰⁶ She gives these specialities as teacher, physician, and mother—the latter being the highest calling available to women. She placed tremendous importance on women retaining their traditional roles of wife and mother alongside Spiritualist pursuits. It is interesting that she does not mention mediumship amongst these careers; perhaps she felt there was no need to say it considering her own position? Whatever the reason for its exclusion, it is most certainly employment, as Hardinge is quite open about receiving payment. ‘Discussions of the pros and cons of public mediumship had its corollary in the vexed question of payment. Mediums like Emma Hardinge Britten argued that “if my mediumistic gift is the one most in requisition, it is no less worthy of being exchanged for bread than any other”, but some Spiritualists considered it immoral to place a price upon a blessed gift.’⁴⁰⁷ The narrator in ‘Phantom Mother’ spent the bulk of her life ‘preparing myself and my associates for the next [life]’⁴⁰⁸ which may be taken to mean Spiritualistic teaching or mediumship of some form.

⁴⁰⁶ Hardinge, 1859: 6

⁴⁰⁷ *Banner of Light*, 1861 in Owen, 2004: 56

⁴⁰⁸ *Wildfire Club* 271

4.4 Conclusion: ‘O, thrice-blessed lamp of Spiritualism’

Emma Hardinge Britten was, like most female practitioners of Spiritualism, a strange and liminal figure. On the one hand, she argued most passionately that all women should seek employment and lead public lives—much like herself, who, as has been explored in this chapter, was very much a public figure. On the other hand, she remained traditional and Christian in her approaches to Spiritualism and society; she urged women to seek employment, but in fields that were appropriate to female strengths of caring and compassion. Hardinge Britten most certainly would not have defined herself as a New Woman, but I argue her presence in society—at public lectures, séances and whilst performing funeral rites—meant she was transgressing against patriarchal ideals. That her messages tended to the conservative do not, I contend, negate her disruptive presence.

The next section will discuss occult women and how they, like Spiritualist women, negotiated authority for themselves by entering the spirit realm. The sixth chapter will discuss Madame Blavatsky—arguably the most disruptive woman living in the nineteenth century.

Her Theosophy sought to supplant patriarchy, Christianity and most western ideals. Emma Hardinge Britten, needless to say, was not an enthusiast of Blavatsky. '[She] participated in the earliest meetings of the Theosophical Society in New York, but left soon afterward when she found that the doctrine of reincarnation was incompatible with her Spiritualist beliefs, and when she suspected that Blavatsky and Olcott were straying from "simple Spiritualism into the realms of dreamland".'⁴⁰⁹ Another of Hardinge Britten's complaints with the Theosophy Society was that its members were asked for entrance or joining fees. For Hardinge Britten, Spiritualism (and Theosophy by extension) was not about how high one would or could rise through the ranks of an organisation, but about seeking genuine spirit contact. Theosophy's insistence on 'metaphysical' study and its insistence on dividing people into the 'enlightened' and 'trash' was alienating.⁴¹⁰ That some people are 'elect' and will receive specialist Spiritual gifts in both the earthly and spiritual planes rankles Britten; so too does the Theosophical idea which claims that only the great and good will be able to communicate after death. For Hardinge Britten, an important

⁴⁰⁹ Oppenheim, 1985: 182

⁴¹⁰ Britten, 1884: 303

element to her brand of Spiritualism is that communication is available to all—grieving people will be able to contact their lost loved ones. Hearing that ‘fathers and mothers, husbands and children... have already melted out’ is, for Hardinge Britten, a devastating, and incorrect, interpretation of spirit communication.⁴¹¹ Antipathy aside, Hardinge Britten does stand in defence of Blavatsky and the newly-formed Theosophical Society after they are ‘pelt[ed] with ridicule and insult’ by ‘those who [are] in utter ignorance of Occultism, Theosophy, or their aims.’⁴¹² Hardinge Britten does, however, concede the similarities of mediumship and magic— magic, as will be discussed over the following chapters, was extremely important to occult societies and their communication with the spirits.

Cornelius Agrippa and other Mediaeval Mystics have affirmed, that a Magician to attain successful achievement “must be born a Magician.” Reviewing my own youthful experiences, I am perfectly convinced that this remark applies as surely to “Spirit mediums” as to Magicians—indeed to my apprehension the two terms are synonymous.⁴¹³

Though she agreed with little of the aims outlined by the various occult societies, Hardinge Britten, admirably, defends their right to exist in peace. I can only speculate, but I would argue she respected women

⁴¹¹ *ibid*: 304

⁴¹² *Miracles* 440

⁴¹³ Wilkinson, ed., *The Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten* 1900: 2

like Corelli, Blavatsky and Farr who, like her, forged their own spiritual paths in the face of patriarchal constraint and opposition.

PART TWO:

The Occult

'The Golden Dawn is not a commercial enterprise. Initiation is not for sale. There are Temples that hold valid initiatory succession from the original Mother Temple in London which are quietly doing the Great Work. The Order exists. When the student is ready, the teacher will appear.'

[*Gnosis Magazine* Winter 1991]

CHAPTER FIVE:

Marie Corelli

5.1 Introduction: 'Terrible, mystic, and wonderful!'

Marie Corelli (1855-1924) despised Spiritualism.

I find that the majority of persons who profess eagerness to know something of the higher forms of spiritual progress, would rather believe in anything but the too-familiar doctrine of Christianity. They will pin their faith on table-turning, magnetic slate-writing, and other illusive phenomena; but when it is suggested that, instead of these things, they shall try to live such a careful, self-denying life as shall successfully foster the germ of Divinity within them, thus making it capable of the highest clairvoyance and spiritual ability, they are vaguely vexed and bewildered... Hypnotism, which is merely animal magnetism called by a new name... has nothing whatever in common with what I may designate spiritual electrical force⁴¹⁴

And yet, her 'electrical Christianity' draws many parallels to Spiritualist practice, and she acknowledges that spirits can return to earth and communicate with living humans. She may have rejected the label, and spent years of her life decrying the 'tricksters' who popularised Spiritualism and Theosophy, but she is still a female writer with a vested interest in the esoteric, the occult. She explores these ideas in her novels *A Romance of Two Worlds* (1886), *The Soul of Lilith* (1892), and *The Sorrows of Satan* (1896). These novels speak to *fin de siècle* occult and esoteric practice; these movements, as we have seen, had their origin, at least in part, in Spiritualism. For an author who denies she has anything to do with the esoteric, she often describes what might be

⁴¹⁴ in Ransom, 2013: 31

called *séance* phenomena in painstaking detail. According to Owen (2007), '[t]he term *occult*... encompasses such a broad spectrum of beliefs, ideas, and practices that it defies precise definition.'⁴¹⁵ For the purposes of this thesis, I have grouped her with occult writers: her *Electric Creed* does have many hallmarks of Spiritualism, but, as will be demonstrated, she aligns herself—arguably, unintentionally—with esoteric thought.

Corelli was a fascinating figure, and almost as vague (or mendacious) about her past as Madame Blavatsky. 'Marie Corelli, famous author, and household name in 1900 was not the person her adoring public believed her to be. She lived under a false name and gave a false date of birth; she invented her past and declared her parents to be variously Italian, American or Scottish, and she had a single burning ambition. Early in her life she had written, "I have made up my mind to be 'somebody' and I'll be as unlike anybody else as I can."⁴¹⁶ She seems to thrive on contradiction: on the one hand she is religious and professes a sincere belief in patriarchal Christianity; on the other she dabbled in the occult. She rejects the designation of New Woman

⁴¹⁵ Owen, 2007: 19

⁴¹⁶ Ransom, 2013: 1

despite having a successful public career (writing) and eschewing marriage in favour of co-habiting with her *good friend*, Miss Bertha Vyver, for fifty years. Corelli claimed to be descended from pure Venetian stock, with a godmother who was dame d'honneur to Queen Margharita. In reality, she was Minnie Mackay, illegitimate daughter of balladeer Charles Mackay and Mary Elizabeth Mills.⁴¹⁷ The focus of this chapter is not on Corelli's biography, but it is worth noting her penchant for self-fashioning her identity. Siebers writes that Corelli's explanations of hypnotism and electrical Christianity which appear in the preface and afterward of *A Romance*, 'helped her create a unique persona as an inspired conduit of heavenly ideals.'⁴¹⁸ Corelli, then, was in her own words, especially chosen to receive divine truths.

Annette Federico (2000) writes that 'although she called herself an old-fashioned idealist, she experienced moods of profound disillusionment and sought to reconcile scientific theories with her spiritual longings and religious faith.'⁴¹⁹ Privately she concerned herself with religious and scientific inquiry, but publicly, she urged conservatism. It is possible her

⁴¹⁷ Siebers, 2006: 183

⁴¹⁸ *ibid*: 184

⁴¹⁹ Federico, 2000: 2

conservative attitude was a means of semi-legitimising her writing. Corelli's criticism of the New Woman could have been a shield against the accusation of being 'fallen' by her (male) critics. She was already an 'old maid' in the eyes of society, and surely stepping into fallen territory would have damaged her literary aspirations beyond repair. Galligani Casey suggests that Corelli's ideas, often contradictory, reflect the *fin de siècle* uncertainties of which she wrote. 'While Corelli supported the general idea of feminism... she also cherished her role as a Victorian woman who must necessarily recoil from any discussion of a frankly sexual nature and politely avoid the sordid and the radically unconventional.'⁴²⁰

Although she did not participate 'in the vanguard of feminism's first wave, Corelli did not disengage herself from the most imperative social movement of her age.'⁴²¹ As with other of the women discussed in this thesis, the unintended consequences of Corelli's participation in the public sphere allow her to be spoken of as a subversive figure, despite the relative conservatism of her subject matter. Federico (1999) points out that Corelli's issue with New Women centred on sex and sexuality,

⁴²⁰ Galligani Casey, 1992: 165

⁴²¹ Federico, 2000: 94

as opposed to the general ideal behind the movement. 'While she clearly disapproves of assertions about women's intellectual and biological inferiority, she still deplores the sexual entrepreneurship of the New Woman, which is responsible for Christian idealism and the degeneration of true womanly virtues.'⁴²²

Despite not marrying, and devoting much of her writing to developing her *Electrical Creed*, Corelli was still extremely popular with readers in her day: *Sorrows* was released just after Oscar Wilde's jail sentence for indecency, and still managed to be a best-seller despite the homosocial relationship between Geoffrey and Lucio.⁴²³ 'More than half her thirty books were world bestsellers... at the height of her fame in 1906, over 100,000 copies of her books were sold, more than those sold by Rudyard Kipling, Arthur Conan Doyle, and HG Wells combined.'⁴²⁴ One of her contemporaries, critic QD Leavis asserts that her popularity 'illustrate[s] the immense drop from the highly critical and intelligent society [of the early Victorians] to later Victorian taste.'⁴²⁵ In other

⁴²² Federico, 1999: 252

⁴²³ *ibid*: 250

⁴²⁴ Galligani Casey, 1992: 163

⁴²⁵ QD Leavis, 1932: 166 in Galligani Casey, 1992: 163-164

words, she responded directly to the occult and esoteric trends of the day.

Federico blames her 'continued exclusion from most anthologies and book-length studies of New Women or "daughters of decadence"' on her 'apparent antifeminism' which is not palatable to present-day scholars and critics.⁴²⁶ Corelli's popularity exceeded her death by at least a decade: in the 1930s at least two books were (allegedly) automatically written by the spirit of Marie Corelli, *Paulus Antonius, A Tale of Ancient Rome*, subtitled "By Marie Corelli—in Spirit. Through the Hand of M. Elfram"; and *The Voice of Marie Corelli: Fragments from "The Immortal Garden" through the Hand of Dorothy Agnes*.⁴²⁷

Though Corelli's work now perhaps seems fanciful, it is necessary to remember the context in which she was writing. 'Experiments in art and personal style, in mysticism and Spiritualism, were not incompatible with creating a rational social system, reorganising industry, and accommodating the rampant consumerism of a generation that had more money, more education and more leisure than any previous

⁴²⁶ Federico, 2000: 93

⁴²⁷ *ibid*: 159

generation in English social history.⁴²⁸ In other words, the largest number of people in history, up to that point, had leisure time to read. That, twinned with better education (at least from the middle-classes) meant people had the time to ponder the big questions of life concerning the divine, the demonic and everything in-between.

5.2 ‘Now Barabbas was a rotter’⁴²⁹: Corelli and Religion

Marie Corelli had an ‘unshakable confidence in the immortality of the soul’ and used science to understand ‘more metaphors for divinity.’⁴³⁰ Though she declined the labels of Spiritualist or occultist, her blending of religion, science and spirit communication was at once a philosophy and a system of healing—not unlike Theosophy. Her religious beliefs are reflected in her writing, which Teresa Ransom refers to as a ‘unique field of pseudo-Christian fantasy.’⁴³¹

Whether or not she intended to convert any of her readers to her way of thinking is debateable. On the one hand, it seems pointless to write a

⁴²⁸ *ibid*: 93

⁴²⁹ From Corelli’s hugely successful novel *Barabbas: A Dream of the World’s Tragedy* (1893)

⁴³⁰ Federico, 2000: 160

⁴³¹ Ransom, 2013: 1

succession of quasi-religious works *without* the intention of at least asking readers to consider the position proposed. In her prologue to a later novel, *The Life Everlasting*, Corelli, however, states: ‘So whether you, who wander in darkness of your own making, care to come towards the little light which leads me onward, or whether you prefer to turn away from me altogether into your self-created darker depths, is not my concern.’⁴³²

In a teaching quite similar to Catherine Crowe’s, Heliobas, the shadowy spiritual leader at the centre of *A Romance* explains that:

Internally it is the germ of a soul or spirit, and is placed there to be either cultivated or neglected as suits the *will* of man. It is indestructible; yet, if neglected, it remains always a germ; and at the death of the body it inhabits, goes elsewhere to seek another chance of development. If, on the contrary, its growth is fostered by a persevering, resolute WILL, it becomes a spiritual creature, glorious and supremely powerful, for which a new, brilliant, and endless existence commences when its clay chrysalis perishes⁴³³

That is to say, the afterlife is a place of growth and work. It is a place which offers the chance of repentance for earthly deeds. If one accepts the concept of death, that is. Lilith, the titular character in *Soul of Lilith* argues with El-Râmi, the shadowy spiritual investigator:

‘Always you bid me seek for death; I have looked, but I cannot find it.’
[...]
‘How can you say there is no death?’

⁴³² *Life*, 1911: 8

⁴³³ *A Romance* 1886: 213

'I speak truth. There is none.'
'Not even here?'
'Not anywhere.'
'O, daughter of vision, where are the eyes of your spirit?' demand El-Râmi, angrily. 'Search again and see! Why should all Nature arm itself against Death if there be no death?'⁴³⁴

Again, this is a traditionally Spiritualist conception, used by writers like Elizabeth d'Espérance: death is merely transition into one's purer state, and the moment of death is free of heaven/hell style judgement.

The Corelli-developed Electrical Creed also provided healing by refreshing one's energies or spirit—it is in a similar vein to reincarnation, in that energies are recycled through the air, but it does not require death. In *A Romance*, the young heroine is sent to the Riviera to recover her nerves. She laments the needless pills and potions that have been forced into her system:

Poor Dr R—! How many bottles of your tastily prepared and expensive medicines have I not swallowed, in blind confidence and blinder ignorance of the offences I thus committed against all the principles of that Nature within me, which if left to itself, always heroically struggles to recover its own proper balance and effect its own cure; but which, if subjected to the experimental tests of various poisons or drugs, often loses strength in the unnatural contest and sinks exhausted, perhaps never to rise with actual vigour again⁴³⁵

Though Corelli is not an opponent of science, as such, medicine, the intrusion into the body and spirit, is a violation of nature. It is on this recovery venture that the narrator meets a painter called Cellini, a

⁴³⁴ *Lilith* 1892: 27

⁴³⁵ *A Romance* 1886: 11

disciple of Heliobas. She agrees to have her portrait done, and during their afternoon sittings, he tells her about the electrical teachings of Heliobas. Cellini also lectures the narrator on the importance of electricity—not the source of power, but ‘human electricity; that force which is in each one of us.’⁴³⁶

Heliobas eventually outlines for the narrator the principles of the Electric Creed. ‘God is a *Spirit*, and they that worship Him must worship Him *in spirit* and in truth. He is a Shape of Electric Radiance.’⁴³⁷ First, it is clear that divinity is of electric, and, as Corelli points out, as God created all things in his image and likeness, all living things on earth, from vegetables to beasts to man contain within them ‘an *electric flame*.’⁴³⁸

The second element of Heliobas’s statement, is that people must worship God (the spirit) in their spirit form. This is arguably Corelli’s way of telling her readers to forgo masculine church services in favour of open, personal, communication with the divine on a spirit level. Given her apparent conservatism, the most shocking part of the creed are her comparisons of Christ to a medium. Heliobas tells us to think of the

⁴³⁶ *ibid*: 135

⁴³⁷ *ibid*: 222

⁴³⁸ *ibid*: 223

Other Side and this side as Britain and the United States, separated by an ocean. The recently-installed transatlantic telegraph cable means, 'Now the messages of goodwill flash under the waves, heedless of the storms. So also God's Cable is laid between us and His Heaven in the person of Christ.'⁴³⁹ The message-bearer is a holy, privileged figure, according to Corelli.

Lilith, the titular character in *The Soul of Lilith* is dead, and has been for years. Like God, El-Râmi uses electricity—injections of 'Electro-flamma'⁴⁴⁰—to keep her alive, but in a comatose state. This permits her spirit to wander between the worlds, gathering the knowledge El-Râmi requests; he wakes her when he wishes to converse.

Despite being savaged in the reviews she received for *A Romance*, Corelli was undaunted. The wider reading public, she believed, responded to her ideas, whether or not they necessarily agreed with the ideas put forth. Responding to a critic who asked why she wrote about the supernatural, Corelli explains:

I understand that the religion we profess to follow emanates from the supernatural. And I presume that churches exist for the solemn

⁴³⁹ *ibid*: 225

⁴⁴⁰ *Lilith* 188

worship of the supernatural. Wherefore, if the supernatural be thus universally acknowledged as a guide for thought and morals, I fail to see why I, and as many others as chose to do so, should not write on the subject⁴⁴¹

These ideas are still, for Corelli, rooted in mainstream Christianity—the ‘supernatural belief... which is taught by the Founder of our Faith.’⁴⁴² Siebers writes that Corelli’s conception of the electrical universe, ‘assumes that electrically-charged rings emanate from God. Corelli believed that Christ, the Creator, resides on a central planet surrounded by these rings of powerful electric atmospheres.’⁴⁴³ Killeen notes the uncanniness of Christ: a human body housing, or possessed of, the divine.⁴⁴⁴ Occultists would not have missed the significance of the divine messenger, though a man, effectively acting as a medium. The Holy Spirit resided within him, and inspired his teaching, in a way that is hardly different to Emma Hardinge Britten.

And yet Heliobas says she is right to be sceptical of séances; of table-turning and automatic-writing. He claims that spirits cannot touch anything human, nor would they lower themselves to such a ‘vulgar

⁴⁴¹ *A Romance* 214

⁴⁴² *ibid*: 214

⁴⁴³ Siebers. 2006: 185

⁴⁴⁴ Killeen, 2009: 129-130

display' as throwing a chair across the room.⁴⁴⁵ Heliobas (and Corelli) may be willing to deny certain elements of séance phenomena, but it is clear that he makes use of a number of Spiritualist, Theosophical and esoteric principles in his teachings. Equally, he is annoyed by the suggestion that he would be using mesmerism or magnetism to heal—yet the philosophy to which he adheres is identical to that of animal magnetism. The only difference is that for Heliobas and his master, electricity is swapped for mesmeric fluid.

Esoteric and occult themes are explored, implicitly and explicitly, throughout Corelli's writings, as they inform her views on the New Woman, feminism and suffrage.

5.3.1 'Literary women are never social favourites': Corelli and Feminism

'Corelli believed passionately in the intellectual equality of women, supported women's economic independence as an indispensable right, and loudly opposed sexism in the literary establishment,' writes Federico. 'She believed that woman's "mystic power to persuade, enthral and subjugate man" was enormous and that once men freed

⁴⁴⁵ Siebers, 2006: 263-264

them from sexual tyranny, women would morally rejuvenate the world with their influence.⁴⁴⁶ Once more, Corelli calls upon Spiritualist thinking to defend her position as a public woman. The 'mystic power' of which she speaks is the same which flowed through d'Espérance, Hardinge Britten and Blavatsky. Women's moral and spiritual authority simply could not be denied.

Corelli was a proponent of the belief that women, because they bore greater emotional and moral weights, tended to 'suffer' more than men. It is a bit of melodrama that fits into her personal narrative of the courageous woman cut horribly down by nasty men in the press. In *Lilith*, El-Râmi tells Irene Vassilius, '[w]omen are distinctly the greatest sufferers in all suffering creation... [enduring] so much pain and so much misjudgement.'⁴⁴⁷ He compares her treatment by critics to being forced to wear a crown of thorns.⁴⁴⁸ In *A Romance*, the narrator also likens her nervous disorder to Christ's suffering: 'a dull throbbing weight of pain encircle my head like a crown of thorns; nervous terrors shook me from head to foot.'⁴⁴⁹ The painter Cellini, like El-Râmi is perceptive

⁴⁴⁶ Federico, 2000: 95

⁴⁴⁷ *Lilith* 177

⁴⁴⁸ *ibid*: 208

⁴⁴⁹ *A Romance* 20

to these female difficulties, and explains this is why she introduces her to Heliobas—for healing.

Corelli had a complex relationship to the feminist movement, which was beginning to blossom as she began her writing career. For Galligani Casey, Corelli may be seen as an early feminist in a ‘limited sense’ as she grappled with the suffrage movement and the decline of the Victorian feminine ideal.⁴⁵⁰ Like Elizabeth d’Espérance and Emma Hardinge Britten disguising their critiques of society behind ghosts and spirits, Corelli’s initial statements on the state of women were ‘indirect’; appearing only in her fiction.⁴⁵¹ The women in her novels were typically feminine: passive, sweet, self-abnegating. Galligani Casey writes that Lilith is a ‘passive receptor of [El-Râmi’s] intellectual activity’⁴⁵²—yet this is not really the case. It is Lilith who possess the power, because she exists primarily in the spirit world, and has the unlimited access to truth and knowledge that comes with being dead. El-Râmi keeps her body, her shell, alive; but for Spiritualists and occultists alike, the body was not one’s source of power. When El-Râmi is finally afforded a glimpse

⁴⁵⁰ Galligani Casey. 1992: 164

⁴⁵¹ *ibid*: 164

⁴⁵² *ibid*: 166

into Lilith's world, he loses his wits—he is incapable of bearing the same emotional weight as she.

One of Corelli's 'confused' attempts at reconciling her conservatism and feminism is seen in her attitude toward the suffragettes; Galligani Casey notes she was 'bitterly opposed to suffrage for women and expressed this opinion adamantly until her death [in 1924].'⁴⁵³ Corelli's reasons for anti-suffrage have little to do with politics, however; they speak to her understanding of what is feminine and proper. For her, the New Woman was an abomination because she had lost her feminine grace. George Bullock explains her motives were based on fear and ignorance:

She opposed [suffrage] without trying to understand what the enfranchisement of women could mean. She was unable to look beyond the torn and tousled women who kicked policemen, threw bombs and went on hunger-strikes, to the goal for which they were striving. She deplored their unladylike behaviour, and her fear was for the preservation of a tradition. She was willing to sacrifice women's rights to gentility⁴⁵⁴

Elaine Showalter concurs with this view, noting the reluctance of many ladies to abandon their class distinctions and privileges to work alongside 'the vulgar and uncouth.'⁴⁵⁵ 'The emphasis on spirituality, and especially Spiritualism and Theosophy, offered alternative discourses

⁴⁵³ *ibid*: 172

⁴⁵⁴ George Bullock, 1940: 222 in Galligani Casey, 1992: 174

⁴⁵⁵ Showalter, 1977: 238 in Galligani Casey, 1992: 174

which accommodated the needs of a female counter-culture and whose neo-religious language and rhetorical appeal; lent itself to feminist encodings of the socially committed female artist.⁴⁵⁶ For Killeen, her ‘hysterical’ condemnation of female impropriety and transgression has to do with her own negative experiences with (male) critics.⁴⁵⁷ Though she (publicly) rejected much of what New Women—and the Spiritualists—fought for, Corelli was vocal in her support for female, equality, particularly in the arts.

5.3.2 ‘Half of the success of Marie Corelli is due to the no doubt unfounded rumour that she is a woman’⁴⁵⁸: Women’s Art and Women’s Writing

In *Lilith*, Corelli (in the guise of author Madame Irene Vassilius) speaks of her frustration at the different standards for men and women:

Men will enter no protests against women who uncover their bare limbs to the public gazer, and dance lewdly in music-halls and theatres for the masculine delectation; they will defend the street prostitute... but for the woman intellect they have nothing but a shrug of contempt. If she produces a great work of art in literature, it is never thoroughly acknowledged; and the hard blows delivered on Charlotte Bronte, George Eliot, Georges Sand, and others of their calibre, far outweighed their laurels. George Eliot and Georges Sand took men’s names in order to shelter themselves a little from the pitiless storm that assails literary work known to emanate from a woman’s brain; but

⁴⁵⁶ Heilmann, 2004: 6-7

⁴⁵⁷ Killeen, 2009: 143

⁴⁵⁸ Oscar Wilde, 1898 in Federico, 1999: 256

let a man write the veriest trash that ever was printed, he will still be accredited by his own sex⁴⁵⁹

To which El-Râmi, the object of the rant, can only agree. He claims that men are envious of woman's well-rounded nature: 'a great poet, painter or musician may be admirable in his own line, but he generally lacks in something... but a truly brilliant woman has all the charms of mental superiority.'⁴⁶⁰ He offers particular praise to Vassilius, saying she is a 'visionary' and able to 'see things not at all of this world!'⁴⁶¹

Corelli appears to be rather proud of her works, dense and full of complicated religious thought as they are. Though she encourages modesty and humility in her women readers, Galligani Casey points out that Corelli moved to Stratford-upon-Avon 'inviting what she assumed where obvious parallels between herself and Shakespeare.'⁴⁶²

'Why should the extravagance of Corelli's prose, her Satan and her Spiritualism and her crossed subjectivities, be incompatible with a pragmatic populism and class commentary? She wrote for the people

⁴⁵⁹ *Lilith* 205

⁴⁶⁰ *ibid*: 206

⁴⁶¹ *ibid*: 177

⁴⁶² Galligani Casey, 1992: 176

and at the same time worshipped at the altar of art.⁴⁶³ For better or worse, Corelli elected to put out her art; she declined to change her style or her subjects based on what readership might be. Later in *Lilith*, El-Râmi, Madame Vassilius and Féraz, El-Râmi's brother, mock a reviewer: 'Here is a remark worthy of Dogberry's profundity—"*This is a book that must be read to be understood*". Why, naturally! Who can understand a book without reading it!⁴⁶⁴ What is quite pointed here is Corelli's note at the bottom of the page: 'copied verbatim from the current press.'⁴⁶⁵

For Corelli, art was a sacred expression of one's gifts, and to use it wastefully was a sin. The premise of *Sorrows* is a retelling of the Faustian myth. Starving artist Geoffrey Tempest makes his bargain with Prince Lucio Rimanez, and inherits five million pounds. 'I want neither assistance nor patronage—I can buy them all! Titles, honours, possessions—they are all purchasable—love, friendship, position—they are all for sale in this admirably commercial age and go to the highest bidder! By my soul!⁴⁶⁶ Materialism and commercialism, for Corelli, were

⁴⁶³ Federico, 2000: 93

⁴⁶⁴ *Lilith* 236

⁴⁶⁵ *ibid*: 236

⁴⁶⁶ *Sorrows* 18

the downfall of proper art, of expression of the soul. 'I smiled as I thought of those who had scorned and slighted me and labour- how they should cower before me!'⁴⁶⁷ Though she could not begrudge anyone receiving payment for their work—she had newspaper columns for years as a supplement to her income—the notion of buying approval is, effectively, blasphemous. Lucio tells Geoffrey that for centuries, no author has written from 'his own heart or as he truly feels' because if he did, he would be 'immortal' like Homer, Plato and Shakespeare.⁴⁶⁸ The late-nineteenth century is a 'decadent and ephemeral age' filled with 'decadent and ephemeral' things—there is no substance to the age, and Geoffrey is better off being forgotten.⁴⁶⁹ Corelli uses the masculine pronoun here, and I would argue, on purpose. She believed that women most women *did* create their art using their emotion, feeling and intelligence.

Marie Corelli believed that most women working in the arts were pressured to leave by their envious husbands or fiancés.⁴⁷⁰ She does acknowledge the 'chivalric' men like Scott, Thackeray and Swinburne

⁴⁶⁷ *ibid*: 18

⁴⁶⁸ *ibid*: 77-78

⁴⁶⁹ *ibid*: 78

⁴⁷⁰ Corelli, 1905: 157

who variously praised the ‘woman-genius’ of Jane Austen, Charlotte Brontë and Elizabeth Barrett Browning as she chastises men who perceive female encroachment into the arts—‘their hitherto guarded domains’⁴⁷¹— a threat. There is a lack of respect for female artists and writers who have managed to make a career for themselves. George Eliot was accused of being ‘assisted in her novels by Mr [George Henry] Lewes’, and Charlotte Brontë’s ‘thoughtless’ husband possibly ‘teazed [sic] or perplexed her sensitive mind in a critical condition of health, and helped to hasten the fatal end.’⁴⁷² This is likely why so many of Corelli’s heroines were skilled writers or artists. The two major female characters in *Romance* are a pianist and a sculptor; Angela, in *The Master-Christian* (1900), is a painter who is reportedly as skilled as Titian; Mavis Clare in *The Sorrows of Satan* (1896) was an author of some repute. Heliobas in *Romance* tells the narrator that being true to her wants and desires will, along with the Spiritual cures, help her overcome depression and hysteria. He encourages her to be true to herself, and create the music that is pleasing to her senses; just as he encouraged Cellini to paint for himself. He does admit that it is more difficult for female artists—‘A woman who does not go with her time is

⁴⁷¹ *ibid*: 170

⁴⁷² *ibid*: 157-158

voted eccentric; a woman who prefers music to tea and scandal is an undesirable acquaintance; and a woman who prefers Byron to Austin Dobson is— in fact, no measure can gauge her general impossibility!⁴⁷³

Yet, as Swindells points out, careers for Victorian women were still tainted. 'The construction of woman sets up, for the most part, an antithesis with the construction of the professions. Woman is 'lover', 'virgin', 'angel', 'young and beautiful'. If she is virgin, she is 'pure'. If she is wife, she is 'modest'. The professions, in contrast, are 'the foul streets of the city', 'the miscellaneous gaze', 'the fatigues of life', 'the rude strifes of reality'. Nineteenth-century sexual ideology thus inscribes the incompatibility of women and a professional career.'⁴⁷⁴ Dickerson notes the frustrations of the Victorian intellectual woman; 'she lived during an era of the highest material, social, and political achievement, yet found herself all too often unable fully, if at all, to participate.'⁴⁷⁵ In spite of her ferocious criticism of the New Woman, Corelli was at the fore of the issue of women in the arts. In a departure from standard Spiritualist thought, she writes that it is the artist (including the writer) who is the

⁴⁷³ *A Romance* 1886: 167

⁴⁷⁴ Swindells, 1985: 19

⁴⁷⁵ Dickerson, 1996: 11

true 'Chosen Vessels' for the spirits.⁴⁷⁶ In other words, she does not praise passivity in the same way Emma Hardinge Britten might; rather, she argues that women who create are truly making use of their spiritual gifts.

Hugh Stutfield (1897) writes in his essay 'The Psychology of Feminism' that female writers are heavily influenced by changing social mores. Stutfield praises Egerton as one of the finest woman writers of the 'neurotic school'; noting that she 'personifies our modern nervousness' with her autobiographical characters, 'redolent, as they are, of the spirit of discontent and disillusionment.'⁴⁷⁷ He explains that Egerton's writing is driven by 'the *Zeitgeist*'⁴⁷⁸—that she responds directly to the fears, concerns and neuroses of the age in which she lives. Stutfield focuses particular attention on Marie Corelli, writing that her 'revolting' literature grew out of feminine concerns regarding differences in sex, and the burgeoning culture of psychology. He recognises their works as the 'outward and visible sign of our modern *malaise* of the nerves'⁴⁷⁹—that they serve as a clear response to contemporary anxieties. For Pykett,

⁴⁷⁶ Siebers, 2006: 184

⁴⁷⁷ Stutfield, 1897: 109-110 in Heilmann, 1998: 21-22

⁴⁷⁸ Stutfield, 1897: 113 in Heilmann, 1998: 25

⁴⁷⁹ Stutfield, 1897: 115 in Heilmann, 1998: 27

Stutfield's criticisms indicate masculine or patriarchal anxieties of the New Woman— particularly her interiority and self-scrutiny.⁴⁸⁰ Women were no longer content to be defined by men; they sought to self-discover and self-define. Andrew Smith argues that '[t]he presence of the ghostly indicates a liminality which compromises models of a coherent, self-conscious and self-present, conception of identity. The ghost story also explores ideological tensions and contradictions that the spectre introjects.'⁴⁸¹ The nineteenth century woman, like the ghost, seeks now to define her own identity. The presence of spirits in Spiritualist works and Corelli's works throws into chaos the clearly demarcated binaries in society: man/woman, living/dead are no longer valid. Federico writes that 'advanced women... crossed ideological gender lines' and turn into the 'freak of nature' that is the woman writer.⁴⁸²

In *Sorrows*, Geoffrey Tempest takes his new bride, Lady Sibyl, to the country home of Mavis Clare, an author. Clare is most likely the stand-in for Corelli; a 'gracious and happy creature' possessing a 'pretty figure'

⁴⁸⁰ Pykett, 2002: 41

⁴⁸¹ Smith, 2010: 2

⁴⁸² Federico, 1999: 253

and 'gifted as Georges Sand.'⁴⁸³ Federico writes that Clare's label of 'old-fashioned young girl' is one Corelli would have applied to herself.⁴⁸⁴ Tempest explains that he had, for quite a long time, hated Clare, and had rejoiced in savaging her novels anonymously in the newspapers.

Women, I considered, should be kept in their places as men's drudges or toys—as wives, mothers, nurses, cooks, menders of socks and shirts, and housekeepers generally—what right had they to intrude into the realms of art and snatch the laurels from their masters' brows! If I could but get the chance of reviewing this book, I thought to myself savagely!—I would misquote, misrepresent, and cut it to shreds with a joy too great for words! This Mavis Clare, 'unsexed,' as I at once called her in my own mind simply because she had the power I lacked⁴⁸⁵

Tempest is angry and envious, and one can almost understand why. A woman simply had no business seeking to write and publish her work. It was in violation of the doctrine of the spheres. But for Corelli, woman's inherent spiritual strength is tied to her ability to create art. For her, then, it is natural for a woman to have greater proficiency than a man in the arts. But Tempest's feelings quickly turned to admiration upon meeting Clare— and upon his realisation that there was a vast difference between Clare and 'the female scarecrows who so frequently pose as "novelists".'⁴⁸⁶ Clare takes great pride in telling the Tempests of her modesty, gentle grace and dignity; and when Lady Sibyl expresses

⁴⁸³ *Sorrows* 1896: 304; 305; 254

⁴⁸⁴ Federico, 1999: 253

⁴⁸⁵ *ibid*: 171

⁴⁸⁶ *ibid*: 305

her delight that Clare is so unaffected (unlike most female writers). Sibyl goes on to compliment Clare for her uniqueness; praising her for being 'unlike the ordinary run of women and hav[ing] nothing in common with their usual trumpery aims.'⁴⁸⁷ Corelli believes that women in arts must 'cultivat[e] and cherish to the utmost every sweet and sacred sentiment of womanhood; every grace, every refinement, every beauty... as well as modesty'⁴⁸⁸ in order not to completely lose what it means to be a woman, and therefore, a successful artist. In order to throw off any suggestion of 'freakhood' or blurring of gender lines, Clare—like Corelli—is forced to exaggerate her feminine wiles.

Throughout *Sorrows*, Corelli is vituperative in her criticism of modern women—not least for their failures in modesty. Sibyl expresses his disdain for female journalists ('lady paragraphists') who would have the temerity to insult Geoffrey Tempest (then her fiancé). Indeed Lady Maravale, a female journalist who inhabits similar circles to Geoffrey and Sibyl, is known for her scandal-mongering, rather than her journalistic prowess; and at the party she is seen to be 'gorging herself

⁴⁸⁷ *ibid*: 310

⁴⁸⁸ Corelli, 1896 in Mackay, 1897: 99-100

with chicken salad and truffles.⁴⁸⁹ Maravale is representative of the fears of degeneration which surrounded the New Woman; if her manner is not feminine, it is, by extension, masculine. She is degenerate because she subverts the binary genders. Marie Corelli compares the new brand of 'women-warriors' to the Amazons of legend. 'Braced with the golden shield of Courage, helmeted with Patience, and armed with the sword of Faith' they embark on their 'fight for intellectual freedom' by participating in the arts⁴⁹⁰. By taking part in the arts herself, Corelli and other female writers sought to gain the same public authority and legitimacy as their male counterparts. Lanser (1992) argues that when a (female) writer seeks to have their voice heard, they are seeking authority and authorship. '[R]egardless of any woman writer's ambivalence toward authoritative institutions and ideologies, the act of writing a novella and seeking to publish it... is implicitly a quest for discursive authority: a quest to be heard, respected, and believed, a hope of influence.'⁴⁹¹ Despite her protestations of modesty, Corelli did indeed seek authorship: her writing is not merely writing, it is instructional; it seeks to teach about her esoteric philosophies.

⁴⁸⁹ Corelli, 1896: 265

⁴⁹⁰ Corelli, 1905: 170

⁴⁹¹ Lanser, 1992: 7

'Women without men usually have overweening ambition, coupled with a ruthless determination to satisfy it. Deprived of the primitive function which is their right, they spend their lives trying to show the world that they too can achieve something... The phenomenon of Marie Corelli is less a case for the literary critics than for the psychiatrist.'⁴⁹² Federico labels Masters' remarks disturbing, and I must agree—but they are not unusual. 'Her barely suppressed eroticism' and 'disregard for male critics' coupled with a 'high moral tone' make Corelli difficult to define⁴⁹³; she does not fit into New Woman tropes, nor would she be at home with Emma Hardinge Britten's morality crusade. Corelli, like many women writers, is a liminal and slippery as the spirits.

Despite her antipathy toward the New Woman and the suffragettes, Corelli was a successful, independent woman. Mavis Clare says that she has a 'dreadfully obstinate spirit of independence'⁴⁹⁴ which kept her from marriage—much like Corelli herself. Corelli's heroines rarely take the well-trodden path of marriage and motherhood— and yet they

⁴⁹² Brian Masters, 1974 in Federico, 1999: 255

⁴⁹³ Federico, 1999: 255

⁴⁹⁴ Corelli, 1896: 306

retained a certain conservatism. Femininity was a prized asset for Corelli and her heroines, and regardless of their independence (by being unmarried) and financial success (through their work), the 'good' woman, according to Corelli, did not seek to usurp male authority. Rather, she let her talents or her genius speak for itself. Corelli, in *Free Opinions* (1905), demands that female artists are given the same due credit as male artists. To Corelli's thinking, a woman opting out of marriage in order to focus on her artistic career and exercise her genius is to be admired more than women who choose domesticity.

5.4 'I never married because there was no need': Love and Marriage

Corelli explains that the lot of wifedom and motherhood is the feminine ideal, but urges her (male) readers not to judge single women too harshly, for among them are 'some of the cleverest heads of the day, to whom no opprobrious term of contempt dare be applied.'⁴⁹⁵ Corelli no doubt would have included herself amongst these 'clever' women. In *Lilith* El-Râmi praises the single Irene Vassilius for her wonderful morality. 'A chaste woman is an embodied defiance and reproach to man; an intellectual woman is always a source of irritation, because she

⁴⁹⁵ Galligani Casey, 1992: 171

is inevitably his superior.⁴⁹⁶ As both 'old maid' and author Vassilius (and Corelli) represent a double threat to patriarchy.

According to Federico:

Throughout her literary career Corelli was inspired by and preoccupied with women. Her novels, letters, and essays differently attest to her passionate concern with the cluster of attributes and fallibilities that constituted the feminine in her lifetime: purity and evil, social injustice and spiritual equality, the vices of vanity, pride, and idleness that compromise women's potential for genius, perfect love, and moral power⁴⁹⁷

Corelli was a lover of women and the feminine, believing female attributes to be far superior to the attributes of men. The phrase 'perfect love' that Federico uses is telling—though her sexuality may be in dispute with some scholars, it is a fact that Corelli elected to spend her life with another woman. Though there is never any mention of a lesbian affair in her works, this 'perfect love' is often found between two female characters. Passion, romance and love are all symptoms of 'external' electricity. The people with whom the strongest bonds are forged are those who share planes of electricity. In *A Romance* Heliobas says that during courtship, when a man feels that there is something perhaps not quite right in the relationship with his intended, he would do well to end it prior to marriage: it means that their currents

⁴⁹⁶ *Lilith* 205-206

⁴⁹⁷ Federico, 2000: 94

are not combined. Trusting in the senses and instincts, generally thought of as the provenance of women, is absolutely necessary to a fulfilled life, according to Heliobas. Corelli's conception of love aligns itself in some ways with the early Spiritualist notion of affinityship—that alike spirits and souls gravitate toward one another. Neither Corelli nor Heliobas state that the souls must have a 'current' with someone of the opposite sex. Affinity was a controversial topic in British Spiritualism. The idea came over with American Spiritualism, and very quickly came to mean free love.⁴⁹⁸ Certainly free love is not something Corelli would have directly indicated support for, and yet, disguised in a weird story about visiting spirits and electrical currents, she makes a progressive and transgressive argument for love.

Failure to participate in heterosexual marriage and child-bearing was to live outside the bounds of what is 'proper' and 'correct'. Corelli, despite living what we may understand as a 'good' life in most respects—she is religious, polite, well-mannered, of a good family—is effectively ostracised from polite society. Though she never explicitly writes of her homosexuality (nor do her authorised biographers) that she shared her life with Miss Bertha Vyver was rather contentious. She despairs of the

⁴⁹⁸ Owen, 2004: 37

'reproachful faces of one's so-called "friends" show how shocked they are at meeting with anything honest'⁴⁹⁹— such as her relationship with Vyver. Corelli uses her fiction to defend the honesty of her relationship. In *Romance*, the heroine finds love with a woman. Corelli 'raised the emotional temperature to a lurid pitch of unsatisfied and therefore constantly itching desire which is simply that lust she so often condemns.'⁵⁰⁰ Her own homosexuality may be in dispute by critics, but there can be no mistaking that she made the choice to spend her life, and be buried alongside, another woman. Hints at homosexual relationships between women abound in Corelli's novels. Mavis Clare notes in *Sorrows* that receiving a compliment on one's physical appearance from another woman is the highest compliment a woman can receive—it means more coming from another woman than from a man.⁵⁰¹ The relationship between the narrator and Zara in *Romance* is arguably the most obvious homosexual/homosocial relationship in her novels—though Corelli demurs from referring to it as such.

⁴⁹⁹ Corelli, 1898: 11

⁵⁰⁰ Duffy, 1989: 10

⁵⁰¹ Corelli, 1896: 311

To the narrator, Zara is a ‘pure soul’⁵⁰²; ‘lovely’⁵⁰³ and ‘my darling.’⁵⁰⁴ Whilst a close, sisterly female friendship would not have been abnormal for the time, the level of intimacy between the two women suggests a deeper, more knowing, relationship. The narrator enters Zara’s bedroom while she is asleep— comparing Zara to the lamp in the shape of Eros on Zara’s bedside table—she ‘looked long and tenderly on this perfect ideal of a “Sleeping Beauty” and thought to kiss her.’⁵⁰⁵ Eventually, the two share a kiss; and though for the narrator is a mere gesture of goodwill and friendship, it preys on her mind. “I shall always be glad to remember how tenderly Zara kissed me and wished me good repose; and I recall now, with mingled pain, wonder, and gratitude, how perfectly calm and contented I felt as, after my prayers, I sank to sleep.”⁵⁰⁶ Furthering reflecting on their physical intimacy, the narrator recalls the words of the poet Eric Mackay (who was Corelli’s brother); specifically his works entitled ‘A Ballad of Kisses’ and ‘Mirage’.

Hers was sweetest of sweet faces,
Hers the tenderest eyes of all;
In her hair she had the traces
Of a heavenly coronal,
Bringing sunshine to sad places

⁵⁰² *A Romance* 1886: 246

⁵⁰³ *ibid*: 201

⁵⁰⁴ *ibid*: 208

⁵⁰⁵ *ibid*: 88-89

⁵⁰⁶ *ibid*: 155

Where the sunlight could not fall⁵⁰⁷

These are not the words one would normally ascribe to a close friend or sister—these are the words written by, and intended for, one lover to another. Zara dies near the end of the novel, and the narrator promises, ‘as long as love exists—love that shall bring us together again in that far-off Sphere.’⁵⁰⁸ Evidence of Corelli’s continued blending of the ‘spiritual and the sexual.’⁵⁰⁹

In *Sorrows*, Sibyl declares to Geoffrey that she will accept his offer of marriage, but she will not love him. ‘I do not understand the verb “to love”—now and then when I read a book by Mavis Clare, I believe love may exist, but when I close the book, my belief is shut up with it.’⁵¹⁰ It is significant that Sibyl can only experience love when reading a book by an author who is effectively Corelli; that perfect love exists in art, but few other places. When Marie Corelli herself was taken ill, she sits for a portrait, ‘wish[ing] to leave some resemblance of herself to her dearest friend, Miss Vyver.’⁵¹¹ ‘Where Miss Corelli is, there always is her

⁵⁰⁷ Mackay, ‘Mirage’ in *A Romance* 1886: 167

⁵⁰⁸ *A Romance* 1886: 215

⁵⁰⁹ Federico, 2000: 10

⁵¹⁰ *Sorrows* 202

⁵¹¹ Coates and Bell, 1903: 314

devoted friend Mss Vyver. Between these two there is perfect understanding and absolute sympathy.⁵¹² Vyver, in the authorised biography by Thomas Coates and Warren Bell (1903), is described much as a spouse would be. Vyver and Corelli lived together from the time Corelli left school, until her death in 1924. ‘Miss Vyver’ is Corelli’s ‘devoted friend’; constantly by her side, ‘helping her in home difficulties and trials as help can only be given by one with whom there is perfect sympathy’; the two women have helped each other through ‘sorrows and joys that have been borne in company.’⁵¹³ Like Sibyl, Corelli’s idea of expressing perfect love is having her portrait done—being immortalised as a work of art.

Despite her rather romantic notions about love, Marie Corelli was a fierce critic of marriage, and participated in the 1898 volume, *The Modern Marriage Market*. The use of ‘Market’ in the title is apt for Corelli, as she understands the rituals of upper-class marriage to exist in parallel to market traders of livestock, at best, and slave traders at worst. ‘British women shall never, for example, stand stripped in the market-place to be appraised and labelled at a price, and purchased by

⁵¹² *ibid*: 345

⁵¹³ *ibid*: 37

a sensualist and ruffian for so much money down... These things are done in Stamboul [*sic*]. True. Stamboul is barbaric.⁵¹⁴ Yet the marriage market during the London season, she argues, is hardly different, with its 'open and shameless' bartering of bodies and souls.⁵¹⁵ In her *Sorrows of Satan*, Geoffrey Tempest and his fiancée, Lady Sibyl, attend a party to view several *tableaux vivants*. The most shocking, for the newly-engaged couple, is 'His Latest Purchase' where a young (white) woman is bound by thick ropes of pearls and 'appraised' by her new husband, her new owner, effectively. She is shown off to a gaggle of his assembled friends—as one would show off a newly purchased object —“A capital type of most fashionable marriages!” I heard someone say. “Rather!” another voice replied. “The orthodox happy couple to the life!”⁵¹⁶ At the end of the novel, Sibyl commits suicide, saying her training for the 'market' and reading Swinburne chilled her heart—and caused her to declare her love for Lucio, the Satan figure.⁵¹⁷

In addition to finding the 'season' morally repugnant, Corelli writes that it is another hypocrisy of modern marriage—that marriage (within the

⁵¹⁴ Corelli, 1898: 18

⁵¹⁵ *ibid*: 38

⁵¹⁶ Corelli, 1896: 270-271

⁵¹⁷ Federico, 1999: 249

upper echelons of society anyway) no longer consists of the joining of two like-minded souls. Women (and occasionally men) are effectively bought and sold to the highest bidder; are paired off on terms of the status, land, money or titles they can bring to their respective families. The mandates of politeness and civility, societal constraints, are the bane of modern civilisation.

For never in all the passing pageant and phantasmagoria of history did a greater generation of civilised hypocrites cumber the face of the globe than cumber it to-day,—never was the earth so oppressed with the weight of polite lying,—never were there such crowds of civil masqueraders, cultured tricksters, and social humbugs, who, though admirable as tricksters and humbugs, are wholly contemptible as men and women⁵¹⁸

Corelli takes to task the ‘hypocrites’ who populate the modern marriage market. She recognises that the ‘angel of the house’ is a male construct, and considers it foolish, even wrong, that a woman who lacks the graces as described by Coventry Patmore would fake it in order to be more marriageable. It is hypocritical of women to accept the role of ‘angel’ when she lacks the expected ‘feminine graces’ of modesty and delicacy. In this article, which originally appeared in the popular magazine *The Lady’s Realm* in 1897, Corelli directly addresses the ‘women of Society’ who will have bought the publication ‘to minister to pleasure or vanity... not because you want to be told where you fail in

⁵¹⁸ Corelli, 1897: 10

the very mission and intention of Womanhood.⁵¹⁹ These women are hypocrites; they live to flatter men's vanity as opposed to living honestly, and behaving in a way in which they are comfortable. '[W]ill the possession of jewels, gold, and estates, be of any avail as consolation in the hours of pain and loss? Think well about it, fair women, before deciding your destinies; and if you are inclined to shudder at the way in which your human sisters are sold in Stamboul, put a stop to the preparations you are making for selling yourselves.'⁵²⁰ For Corelli, love and marriage rarely went together; the former did not fit the latter because it ought to be devoted to art, pure and beautiful.

5.5 'I *imagine* it must be so, and generally, it *is* so'⁵²¹: Corelli, the East, and the Other

For most occultists, like their Spiritualist counterparts, the East and its ancient societies and religions represented the pinnacle of human thought. As explored in the next chapter Blavatsky, in particular, was highly influenced by Eastern, and in particular Indian, tradition. Corelli's writings, however, represent something of a departure from this

⁵¹⁹ Corelli, 1897: 15; 14

⁵²⁰ Corelli, 1897: 48-49

⁵²¹ Marie Corelli in her authorised biography explains how she is able to accurately depict life in Persia, Naples, etc. without having travelled there (1903: 333)

devotion to the Oriental world, as noted above, in her discussions of the evil 'Stamboul'.

The intentions of Heliobas and El-Râmi may be read in descriptions of their race. Both are demarcated as non-European and non-white, but Heliobas is more 'favourably' depicted than El-Râmi. In Cellini's reminiscences to the narrator of *A Romance*, the first time he met Heliobas, he mistook him for 'a wealthy Englishman or American travelling [in Italy] for pleasure. His features were fine and commanding.'⁵²² Heliobas defines himself as Chaldean—a race that would have been well-known to Corelli's occult and Theosophical readers as the authors of ancient Syrian mystical texts. He claims to be a direct descendant of the wise men who visited Christ, confiding to Cellini that, 'there were more than three, and they were not all kings.'⁵²³

In *Lilith*, El-Râmi is, if not evil, then certainly misguided in his dealings with Lilith. He bears out his wrongdoings in the descriptions of his person. He walks, 'with that firm, swift, yet apparently unhasting pace which so often distinguishes the desert born savage, and so seldom

⁵²² *A Romance* 72

⁵²³ *ibid*: 74

gives grace to his deportment of the cultured citizen.⁵²⁴ His brother Féraz, on the other hand, identifies as Christian. As such, '[h]e resembled El-Râmi in features, but was fairer-skinned, his eyes were softer and more femininely lovely...he was the perfect model of strength united with grace.'⁵²⁵ Grace, physically, and arguably Corelli intended to mean spiritually as well, was not then inherently found in those 'desert born'. Their deaf servant, Zaroba, represents the lowest class of person, it would seem: she is shrill and moody in addition to being 'bronze-skinned, black-eyed, withered [and] uncomely.'⁵²⁶

This description of Zaroba is in contrast to the other Eastern women depicted in *Lilith* and *A Romance*. Lilith is an Arabian girl, Corelli writes, and yet she is incredibly pale—and not just because of her comatose state. She is 'a matchless piece of loveliness' swathed in white garments; she lies prone, her 'small white hands' crossed on her chest, crowned by her flowing hair 'of shimmering gold.'⁵²⁷ Lilith's goodness and purity may be read here in her whiteness. Zara, the object of love in *A Romance* is similarly pale, despite being, like her brother, of Chaldean

⁵²⁴ *Lilith* 11

⁵²⁵ *Lilith* 16

⁵²⁶ *ibid*: 20

⁵²⁷ *ibid*: 23

descent. 'Her complexion was transparently clear—most purely white, most delicately rosy' but unlike Lilith, her hair is black.⁵²⁸

For Corelli, the East represented a place of great spiritual wisdom, in terms of the 'electrical' discoveries that had been known to their ancients. In the Victorian age, however, non-Europeans needed to accept, at the very least, Christianity, in order to be 'good' for Corelli. Even Lilith, reporting back from the spirit world, tells El-Râmi to pray for Christ's blessing. When El-Râmi, shocked, questions why, she tells him Christ is, 'This world's rescue and all worlds' glory!'⁵²⁹ Christianity, it appears, has infiltrated the other side of the veil and is the only correct way to access truths.

The figure of Satan in *Sorrows*, interestingly, does not adhere to these tropes, though he is often to be found travelling in the shadows. Lucio Rimanez is 'singularly pale, this complexion intensifying the almost fiery brilliance of the full dark eyes' and Geoffrey claims never to have seen 'so much beauty and intellectuality' in one's outward appearance.⁵³⁰

⁵²⁸ *A Romance* 102

⁵²⁹ *Lilith* 260

⁵³⁰ *Sorrows* 23

Like Heliobas, Lucio is also of Chaldean stock, but his line comes through 'one of the oldest families in Europe.'⁵³¹ Though it perhaps seems odd, it does make sense for Corelli to not racially-other the devil. The message gathered from *A Romance* and *Lilith* is that acceptance of Christianity and Christian morals means greater outward signs of goodness (i.e., whiteness). Satan, of course, cannot be saved by the power of Christ. By aligning him with whiteness, power and privilege, Corelli depicts the ease with which Satan is able to blend in with polite society.

5.6 Conclusion: 'Of what avail is it to propound questions that no one can answer?'⁵³²

'Of course, she isn't a great novelist, she isn't even a good one. But... if you want to know what the man [or woman!] on the Clapham omnibus thought of life during those years, Marie Corelli's books will help you.'⁵³³

Of each of the authors examined in this thesis, Marie Corelli is both the most subversive and the most conservative. Her identity is the least

⁵³¹ *ibid*: 25

⁵³² Asked in *Sorrows*, 261

⁵³³ John Lucas, 1979: 283 in Galligani Casey, 1992: 176

fixed—she is avowedly not an occultist, but engages with occultist thought; she despises the New Woman movement, but forged a successful career writing about the topics of her choice, including science and religion. Her novels flit and flirt with genres: a bit New Woman, a bit melodrama and a bit romantic.

Like Madame Blavatsky, the topic of the next chapter, Corelli was dissatisfied by Spiritualism, and sought to create her own philosophy, calling it Electrical Christianity. Unlike Blavatsky, she did not endeavour to create her own society; rather she used it in several of her novels, and expounded on its ideals in her non-fiction work. Both Corelli and Blavatsky believed that Eastern philosophers and thinkers were superior to Western ones. Corelli notes that ‘wireless telegraphy’ and ‘light-rays’ have been known to Egyptian priests and the ‘Hermetic Brethren’ for centuries; and now the occidental world must attempt to catch up to them.⁵³⁴ Corelli praises rural Cypriotes for their closeness to nature and the old gods, but chastises ‘Commercial England’ for ‘possessing’ this idyllic land—no doubt fearing for its soul once the western materialists have got their hands on it.⁵³⁵

⁵³⁴ *Life* 1911: 38

⁵³⁵ *Lilith* 333

As has been shown, Corelli fiercely disapproved of the New Woman movement, and would have only reluctantly described herself as feminist. Yet by forging a public career and declining to marry, Corelli was doubly transgressive of patriarchal standards. She negotiated for herself a writing career lasting nearly forty years, where she wrote freely of her ideas concerning science, religion and society. The occult beliefs which sparked her career gave her prominent stature as an important figure in the *fin de siècle* esoteric movement(s).

CHAPTER SIX:

Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky

6.1 Introduction: 'I was sent to prove the phenomena and their reality'⁵³⁶

This chapter examines the work of Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky (1831-1891), the larger-than-life founder of Theosophy and the first president of the Theosophical Society (usually referred to as TS). The mission of the Theosophical Society, developed by Blavatsky and her partner, Colonel Henry Olcott, contained three aims: '1) to form the nucleus of a Universal Brotherhood of Humanity without any distinction of race, creed, or colour; 2) to promote the study of Aryan and other Eastern literature, religions and sciences, and vindicate its importance; and 3) to investigate the hidden mysteries of nature and the psychical powers in man.'⁵³⁷ Theosophy played upon the idea that there existed ancient manuscripts which revealed universal truths about life, death and the universe. 'The suggestion that there is a hidden body of revelatory knowledge, part of a secret tradition that had been preserved

⁵³⁶ Blavatsky writes this in 1875, in reference to her mission from Paris to New York, to teach America her Theosophical truths. (*Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol 1: 73).

⁵³⁷ in Prothero, 1993: 197-198 ['Aryan' in the Theosophical context refers to the Indo-Aryan/Indo-Iranian people native to the East, and not blonde-haired blue-eyed as it came to mean following Arthur de Gobineau's redefinition in 1855 with the theory of the 'Aryan master race'.]

and transmitted over the ages by enlightened illuminati, was central to the most influential elements of the “mystical revival”.⁵³⁸ Blavatsky claimed these truths were slowly being revealed to her by spirit guides—Mahatmas—and her life’s mission was now to distribute to the masses. In so doing, she established an effective cult of personality around herself, which lent her, if nothing else, the air of mystery and intrigue. For her devotees and converts, who read her teachings and wanted to believe, she was a powerful, maternal figure at the heart of their organisation.

Blavatsky was, above all else, a gifted show-woman and promoter: she understood the value of crafting an elaborate ‘creation myth’ around herself. Reports on her childhood and teenage years are wild and varied, even in Blavatsky’s own accounts. Even the dozens of biographies written about her at the time she was alive differ on the truth of her existence. One reason for this is that she was a divisive figure: her critics wrote damning tales of bigamy; and her devotees wrote noble stories of Blavatsky seeking truth and light. Diana Basham describes her as ‘a circus equestrienne, a spirit medium and psychic

⁵³⁸ Owen, 2007: 22

investigator, a prostitute [and] a disciple of Tibetan masters.⁵³⁹ What is known, however, is that she was able to accrue a tremendous amount of power and influence in the last few decades of the nineteenth century.

Oppenheim writes that Theosophy may be seen as 'part of a vast liberation movement designed to topple the materialistic, patriarchal, capitalistic and utterly philistine culture of the Victorian Age.'⁵⁴⁰

Blavatsky, more so than any of the writers explored in this thesis, actively sought societal change, and used her writing (fiction and non-fiction) to press forth her feminist, socialist ideas. Though she would not have accepted the label, Blavatsky was a feminist, like many other occultist women. For her, one of the most important of her 'ancient' teachings was the Aryan treatment of women:

amongst the pure Aryans, woman enjoyed the same privileges as man. Her voice was listened to by statesmen; she was free either to choose a husband, or to remain single. Many a woman's name plays an important part in the chronicles of the ancient Aryan land; many women have come down to posterity as eminent poets, astronomers, philosophers, and even sages and lawyers⁵⁴¹

⁵³⁹ Basham, 1992: 206

⁵⁴⁰ Oppenheim, 1985: 183

⁵⁴¹ from 'The Banns of Marriage' in *The Caves and Jungles of Hindostan* 1892: 221-222

As a result of her radical political leanings, she was singled out for virulent, personal criticism from inside and outside the Spiritualist movement. 'Spiritualist literature was full of references to its women as gentle maidens or loving wives and mothers, women who mutely radiated grace, charm, and beauty, whilst embodying the highest moral and domestic charms.'⁵⁴² Blavatsky's hair was frizzy and unkempt, she was overweight, she drank and smoked; and though they were not evident in her published works, her daily conversation and private correspondences were said to be littered with language unbecoming a lady. In other words, she was the antithesis of Hardinge Britten's sweetly-disposed, maternal medium.

Theosophists saw it as the 'modern surfacing of an ancient hermeneutic tradition that runs through Swedenborgianism and mesmerism, Pythagoreanism and Neoplatanism, Gnosticism and the Eleusian mysteries, the Jewish Cabala and the Hindu Vedas.'⁵⁴³ Their traditions, like Spiritualism, were born from a long line of ancient tradition. Like Spiritualism, Theosophy may be described as a religion. 'When we examine the characteristics of Spiritualism we have no difficulty in

⁵⁴² Owen, 2004: 8

⁵⁴³ Prothero, 1993: 197

defining it as a religion... It has been one of the most successful of the new religions of that century, together with, amongst others, Mormonism and Theosophy.⁵⁴⁴ Nelson goes on to say that more than a religion, Theosophy may be described as a cult. 'But within the broad Spiritualist movement there were from the first some charismatic cults, composed of groups of disciples and followers that gathered around charismatic mediums.'⁵⁴⁵ Hardinge Britten and d'Espérance were certainly charismatic enough to fill lecture theatres, but neither had the skill—or, likely, the desire—to become an influential leader in the manner of Blavatsky.

Stephen Prothero (1993) writes that the Theosophical Society began 'as an attempt to reform Spiritualism from above... to transform the masses of prurient ghostseeking Spiritualists into ethically exemplary theorists of astral planes.'⁵⁴⁶ He argues that Blavatsky, and in particular, Olcott, were eager to move beyond the populism of Spiritualism and into a more meaningful philosophy. Prothero points out that in the United States, Spiritualism was first spread by circus impresario PT

⁵⁴⁴ Nelson, 1987: 20

⁵⁴⁵ *ibid*: 58

⁵⁴⁶ Prothero, 1993: 198

Barnum, who took the Fox sisters on tour.⁵⁴⁷ It is little wonder, then, that more serious-minded people would seek another avenue than Spiritualism to explore psychic and supernatural phenomena.

Hardinge Britten, d'Espérance and others were content to work within the Spiritualist structure, loose as it may have been (as it lacked a central authority). But for Blavatsky, Theosophy represented an opportunity to craft a religion around herself. 'Theosophy constituted an evolutionary leap beyond Spiritualism or mesmerism... they developed written histories and doctrines, organisational structures, fixed meetings and some uniform ritualised practices. Unlike mesmerism or Spiritualism, they appealed to ancient lineages from which they claimed the imprimatur of an original divine authority.'⁵⁴⁸

This 'divine authority' is reflected throughout Blavatsky's esoteric stories in *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan* (1892), *Nightmare Tales* (1892) and *Occult Tales* (1893). Though she uses the short esoteric and supernatural story as a teaching tool, Blavatsky encourages her readers to instead seek truths in her non-fiction works. 'I never meant this to be

⁵⁴⁷ *ibid*: 199

⁵⁴⁸ Franklin, 2012: 131 in Kontou and Willburn, eds. 2012

a scientific work. My letters to the *Russian Messenger*, under the general title: 'From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan,' were written in leisure moments, more for amusement than with any serious design.'⁵⁴⁹

These stories are dramatized accounts of Blavatsky's travels through India, mixed with her thoughts on the present state of Eastern superiority and Western materialism, and fictional narratives and origin stories from Indian (Aryan, to use her term) history.

Annie Besant, her successor as president of the Theosophical Society notes in her introduction to *Nightmare Tales* that though these stories were 'thrown off by [Blavatsky] in her lighter moments' and something which provided the dying Blavatsky 'amusement and relaxation', they are still full of subtle and not-so-subtle Theosophical teachings.⁵⁵⁰ The collected letters Blavatsky received from her Mahatmas (spirit guides) may also be understood to be ghost stories, though of a slightly different nature. As Scarborough points out:

Modern ghosts are less simple and primitive than their ancestors, and are developing complexes of various kinds... [t]he wraith of the present carries with him more vital energy than his predecessors, is more athletic in his struggles with the unlucky wights he visits, and

⁵⁴⁹ *Caves* 1892: iii—The translator's preface notes these stories were originally published in 1878 and 1880 in *Ruski Vvestnik*, a Russian (non-Theosophy) periodical

⁵⁵⁰ in Blavatsky, 1892: np.

can coerce mortals to do his will by the laying on of hands as well as by the look or word.⁵⁵¹

The ghosts and spirits extant in literature after the emergence of Spiritualism are more powerful than their previous incarnates. Largely, both Spiritualist and non-Spiritualist writers accepted that ghosts and spirits held far greater power and influence than ever before. Collected in *The Mahatma Letters to AP Sinnett from the Mahatmas M & KH* (1923/1948), these letters also offer a unique glimpse into how Blavatsky attained, and kept, the power she did as the head of Theosophy.

6.2.2 ‘Oh poor, foolish, credulous, wicked world!’⁵⁵²: Theosophy and Power

Though Theosophy could not have existed without Spiritualism’s influence in society, Blavatsky professed a dislike of Spiritualist teachings and mediums. She had a long-running feud with Daniel Dunglas Home, where she accused Home of fraud; of being a talented magician with no real spiritual power. Home offered his reply in his book, *Lights and Shadows* (under the chapter headed ‘Delusions’),

⁵⁵¹ Scarborough, 1921: xi; xiv

⁵⁵² This also appears in Blavatsky’s ‘Important Note’ of 1875 where she laments those who are unwilling to hear the truth of Theosophy, and those who criticise her for her efforts in spreading the message (*Blavatsky Collected Writings*, vol 1: 73)

confidently asserting that, 'the Theosophical Society need entertain no dread of oblivion. It is destined to occupy a niche in history between the Laputan College of Swift and the philosopher who planned to extract gold from sunbeams.'⁵⁵³

Blavatsky, like d'Espérance and Hardinge Britten, claimed access to spiritual gifts from childhood. Her friend and Theosophical apologist AP Sinnett (1886) offers an anecdote related by Blavatsky's sister:

At about ten versts from the Governor's villa there was a field, an extensive sandy tract of land, evidently once upon a time the bottom of a sea or a great lake, as its soil yielded petrified relics of fishes, shells, and teeth of some (to us) unknown monsters... she used to dream aloud, and tell us of her visions, evidently clear, vivid, and as palpable as life to her! ... How lovely the description she gave us of the submarine life of all those beings, the mingled remains of which were now crumbling to dust around us.⁵⁵⁴

Despite this, Blavatsky was dismissive of mediums—even denying that she herself was one. She refused the label of medium for reasons of power. Mediums were traditionally empty vessels and blank slates; simply a means of conveyance for the spirits. Blavatsky lacked the passivity of those women, and refused to be encased within a spirit cabinet during her time of communication with the spirits. She understood spirit communication as a two-way street, wherein she

⁵⁵³ Home, 1877: 295

⁵⁵⁴ Sinnett, 1886: 37-38

could interact with the spirits, and they with her, on an equal basis. She writes that, 'It is erroneous to speak of a medium having powers developed. A passive medium has no power. He has a certain moral and physical condition which induces emanations, or an aura, in which his controlling intelligences can live, and by which they manifest themselves... Physical mediumship depend[s] upon passivity.'⁵⁵⁵

Blavatsky and Olcott argued that spirit manifestations were caused by adepts, not mediums. Whilst anyone could be a medium, adepts required training and initiation into Theosophy's ancient rites and teachings.⁵⁵⁶ According to Prothero, the passive medium, apart from being ineffectual, 'incorporated broader cultural assumptions regarding the dangerous passivity of women and the wilful activity of men.'⁵⁵⁷ In other words, (female) mediums needed to be wary of the machinations of men eager to get them alone in a darkened room.

Theosophists were taught to be wary of clairvoyants and mediums who claimed congenital spiritual gifts, but had not received training on the

⁵⁵⁵ Blavatsky, 1891: 490

⁵⁵⁶ Prothero, 1993: 203

⁵⁵⁷ *ibid*: 204-205

proper use of these gifts. There seem to be two exceptions to this; the first being cases where the spirits reach out, as opposed to the other way around. In the story 'From the Polar Lands', Dr Erkler ('professor of medicine, half-German through his father, a full-blown Russian on his mother's side')⁵⁵⁸ tells his Christmas guests that a shaman saved him from certain death in Greenland. Whilst exploring the ice floes, their ship was caught, stuck, and unable to move. The men were beginning to starve to death. One night, owing to the illuminations of the Aurora Borealis, the men see large white objects moving toward their ship, across the tundra. Happily, it was a group of Norwegian seal-hunters, led to the ship by their guide Johan—'old Johan *knew all*.'⁵⁵⁹ Johan is reported to be about two hundred years old, and has long been in the service of fishermen and hunters in Greenland. He explains that he was guided to the ship. 'God guided me. How I learned it I do not know; save that I knew—I knew it.'⁵⁶⁰ Whilst caution is an important feature of several of her stories, Blavatsky asks her readers to trust in the spirits and the divine who seek to provide assistance on earth. The second exception, evidenced in the story, is for men and women living away

⁵⁵⁸ *Nightmare Tales* 1892: 95-96

⁵⁵⁹ *Nightmare Tales*: 98

⁵⁶⁰ *ibid*: 99

from the materialistic, scientific west (such as Johan). This exception is especially true for people living in India, Turkey and the Far East.

6.3.1 'The Government recognised that it would be unreasonable to irritate women'⁵⁶¹: Blavatsky's Eastern Influences

Blavatsky claims that she travelled widely through India and Nepal as a young woman, and that studying Hindu and Buddhist teaching helped to move her away from the material West to the more spiritual East. 'No one did more to encourage an artificial glamour surrounding eastern wisdom than Helena Petrovna Blavatsky; nor did any other occult group in this period receive more public attention and press commentary than the Theosophical Society, over whose infant destinies she presided.'⁵⁶²

Nelson credits both Hinduism 'American Indian Shamanism' with having a significant influence on Theosophy, more so even than Spiritualism.⁵⁶³

In 1875, Blavatsky and Olcott, founded the Theosophical Society and headquartered it in Madras, India. Despite her moving there, and bringing other Westerners with her, she was highly critical of colonisers

⁵⁶¹ From *Caves*, in reference to the British government pondering introducing legislation requiring 'native women' to cover their bare breasts; as women very often, are more dangerous than their husbands and brothers' it was decided against

⁵⁶² Oppenheim, 1985: 162

⁵⁶³ Nelson, 1987: 158

—of people travelling to the East intending to impose their ideologies.⁵⁶⁴

The opening story in *Caves*, 'In Bombay' laments the Portuguese sailors who landed there some centuries earlier, and destroyed the 'heathen' temples. 'And, worst of all, they left no inscriptions that might have given a clue to so much. Thanks to the fanaticism of Portuguese soldier, the chronology of the Indian cave temples must remain ever an enigma.'⁵⁶⁵

Blavatsky and Olcott chose India as the home of the TS for several reasons. She claimed to have received instruction in Tibet from the Mahatmas—a sect of Indian gurus and spirit guides capable of astral projection.⁵⁶⁶ Another reason was Blavatsky's belief that the people of the East and of the Orient were more attuned to Spiritualist phenomena; this notion is enforced by several prominent Spiritualists. Daniel Home wrote in 1877 that, 'Every spiritual phenomenon which has in the present day startled the Christians of the West was tens of centuries ago familiar to the Pagans of the East.'⁵⁶⁷ The East and the Orient were

⁵⁶⁴ Blavatsky would have said she was not imposing Theosophy on India as much as resuscitating it from their past

⁵⁶⁵ *Caves* 6

⁵⁶⁶ Oppenheim, 1985: 163

⁵⁶⁷ Home, 1877: 13

important for Spiritualists and Theosophists. It was understood that the denizens of the farthest corners of the Empire had a closer connection to nature than the people of the more materialist Western societies. Luckhurst writes that '[s]pirit controls of a more Eastern cast, meanwhile, promised ancient oriental wisdom. Forgotten "supernatural" powers of a now degenerate Egypt or Indian subcontinent hinted at lost plenitude with a nostalgic allure which was precisely constituted by the erasures effected by Western Imperialism.'⁵⁶⁸ Whether it was true or not, for Westerners like Blavatsky, the 'long-established culture of mesmerism in India' validated the psychic or spiritual phenomena she was said to produce, by permitting a safe environment for spiritual practice, 'away from its marginal and abject status in England.'⁵⁶⁹ Briggs notes that Hindus appearing in nineteenth-century British literature (notably by Kipling) 'believe in the existence of magic and a supernatural order, in a way that the practical and pragmatic British cannot.'⁵⁷⁰ In 'In Bombay', Blavatsky notes that her travelling party 'live in India, unlike the English people, who 'are only surrounded by India at a certain distance.'⁵⁷¹

⁵⁶⁸ Luckhurst, 2004: 203

⁵⁶⁹ *ibid*: 200

⁵⁷⁰ Briggs, 1977: 105

⁵⁷¹ *Caves* 13

In 1890 Blavatsky published a small volume called *Gems from the East*, which was subtitled 'A Birthday Book'—it contains lovely illustrations and useful daily axioms. The preface indicates that the book was compiled by Blavatsky, and contains helpful bits and pieces from Oriental literature that the Theosophical is 'mainly responsible' for publicising in the occident.⁵⁷² The axioms therein are what we might call fortune cookie wisdom: vaguely spiritual statements of a vaguely Oriental origin. 'He who hath too many friends, hath as many candidates for enemies'⁵⁷³; 'When your mind shall have crossed beyond the taint of delusion, then will you become indifferent to all that you have heard or will hear'⁵⁷⁴; 'This world is a venomous tree, bearing two honey-sweet fruits: the divine essence of poetry and the friendship of the noble.'⁵⁷⁵ How much of this Blavatsky wrote herself is unknown, but it speaks the understanding held by her, and others, that people of the East (which it appears spans the entire continent of Asia) were more spiritually-minded than occidental folk. In *Caves* they come across a

⁵⁷² Blavatsky, 1890: np

⁵⁷³ *ibid*: 14 January

⁵⁷⁴ *ibid*: 18 April

⁵⁷⁵ *ibid*: 12 August

'holy man' who has deliberately cut himself, all over his body, so that the insects might feed.

He lay with his eyes shut, and the scorching rays of the sun striking full upon his naked body. He was literally covered with flies, mosquitoes, ants and bugs.

'All these are our brothers,' mildly observed the keeper, pointing to the hundreds of animals and insects. 'How can you Europeans kill and even devour them?'⁵⁷⁶

When pressed by the party—asked if he would kill a snake about to bite him, he replies in the negative. '[If bit] I should be fain to consider it as the finger of Fate, and quietly leave this body for another.'⁵⁷⁷ The belief in reincarnation—one of the many Eastern ideas adopted by Theosophy — engenders a calmness toward death; a knowledge that this life was not the first, and will not be the last.

6.3.2 '...In this age of crass and illogical materialism'⁵⁷⁸: Stories from the Margins

Owen writes that 'Theosophists, like all occultists, abhorred what they saw as the gross materialism of the age.'⁵⁷⁹ For Theosophists (indeed most occultists) materialism referred to being tied to the earth, tied to things. In other words, possessions and money were, of course,

⁵⁷⁶ *Caves* 32

⁵⁷⁷ *ibid*: 32-33

⁵⁷⁸ Blavatsky, *The Secret Doctrine* 1888: xx

⁵⁷⁹ Owen, 2007: 38

material, but scientific enquiry, when it went “too far” was also deemed to be evidence of crass Western materialism.

In her fiction, especially, Blavatsky attempts to unite East and West—the spiritual and the material. In *Caves*, Blavatsky explains that all Europeans are the descendants of Indians.

No doubt Sir William Jones’s soft heart ached, when translating from the Sanskrit such humiliating sentences as the following: “Hanuman is said to be the forefather of the Europeans.” Râma, being a hero and a demi-god, was well entitled to unite all the bachelors of his useful monkey army to the daughters of the Lanka (Ceylon) giants, the Râkshasas, and to present these Dravidian beauties with the dowry of all Western lands... the monkey soldiers made a bridge, with the help of the own tails, and safely landed their spouses in Europe, where they lived very happily and had a numerous progeny. This progeny are we, Europeans⁵⁸⁰

Whilst there are references to Râma and Râkshasa in Hindu and Buddhist folklore, there is no link between them and Europe;⁵⁸¹ this appears to be Blavatsky’s own invention. Her reference to monkeys settling in Europe is apt, considering she mentions *The Origin of Species* in *Caves* and elsewhere in her work. With this little folktale, she combines cutting-edge science with her own (quasi) religious teaching to make a new origin story. It is not only Europe, however, that has been founded or influenced by the ancient Indians: she claims to have recently uncovered a lost manuscript that speaks of the ancient Aryans

⁵⁸⁰ *Caves* 34

⁵⁸¹ see Cedrick Pettigrove, *The Esoteric Codex: Supernatural Legends*

visiting the Americas. 'Nagual is the name by which the sorcerers of Mexico, Indians and aborigines of America are still designated. Like the Assyrian and Chaldean Nargals, chiefs of the Magi, the Mexican Nagual unites in his person the functions of priest and of sorcerer.'⁵⁸²

A recurring theme in Blavatsky's esoteric fiction is this emphasis on the superior spiritual powers of Eastern peoples, or, at least, people living in the west who reject the material and embrace nature. Sceptics or dabblers into spirit communication were often shown, in the most gruesome way possible, the error of their ways. 'A Bewitched Life' tells of a sceptical German man living in Japan, who begins to study Buddhism, 'the only religious system I thought worthy of being called philosophical'; though he does retain his derision of 'Japanese bonzes and ascetics' and 'Christian priests and European Spiritualists'.⁵⁸³ His beloved sister had suddenly stopped writing to him, and fearing the worst, he deigns to visit a mystical man, a Sinto, to see if he can glean some insights. Under a trance, he sees the mangled body of his brother-in-law, caught in some of the machinery at the factory he

⁵⁸² *Caves* 63

⁵⁸³ *Nightmare Tales*: 14-15

supervised. He sees his sister, turned into a gibbering idiot with grief; and his nieces and nephews sent into service or to the orphanage.

Much of that which I had so vehemently denied in those days, owing to sad personal experience I have to admit now. Had I been told by any one at that time, that man could act and think and feel, irrespective of his brain and senses; nay, that by some mysterious, and to this day, for me, incomprehensible power, *he* could be transported *mentally*, thousands of miles away from his body, there to witness not only present but also past events... I would have proclaimed that man a madman... Madmen rave and see that which exists not in the realm they belong to. My visions have proved *invariably correct*⁵⁸⁴

Desperate with remorse, he leaves Japan for Germany. He is warned that he cannot leave before the holy man is able to close his 'inner self,' but his scepticism ultimately prevails, and he boards the next ship home. On the journey, it is apparent that he is infested with evil spirits, the Daij-Dzins, who force him to relive the scenes he saw, as well as further horrors that have put upon his family. He sees his teenage niece raped by an older man, after her employer sold her virginity. He also sees the spirits of the dead, both of his family and of strangers.

One day the old captain was narrating to us the various superstitions to which sailors were addicted; a pompous English missionary remarked that [Henry] Fielding had declared long ago that 'superstition renders a man a fool'—after which he had hesitated for an instant, and abruptly stopped. I had not taken any part in the general conversation; but no sooner had the reverend speaker relieved himself of the quotation, then I saw in that halo of vibrating light, which I now noticed almost constantly over every human head on the steamer, the words of Fielding's next proposition—'and *scepticism makes him mad*'⁵⁸⁵ [emphasis in original]

⁵⁸⁴ *ibid*: 37 [italics in original]

⁵⁸⁵ *ibid*: 50

Through his arrogance and his misplaced rationality, he is doomed to suffer a life of horrific visions, and will not 'purified' of them until his soul is reborn in the next life. Blavatsky claims that this story was relayed to her by the German man—and that he wished for her to pass along the tale of his suffering to spare any other who refused to recognise the immense power of the Spirit World and its denizens.

'The Ensouled Violin' offers a similar moral, that Spiritualist or Theosophical activity must only be performed by trained professionals of good character, and for the right reasons. Franz, born in the Styrian Alps 'nursed by the native gnomes who watched over his cradle' has a long relationship with the supernatural.⁵⁸⁶ This is hardly the East, but it is, for Blavatsky anyway, a part of the west that is removed from most of western materialism and temptation. It is possible that the community in which Franz was raised, then, is closer to its Aryan ancestors than Paris. Blavatsky speaks quite fondly of these rural outposts, not unlike Elizabeth d'Espérance's fondness for the backwater villages of Germany and Scandinavia.

⁵⁸⁶ *ibid*: 99

A gifted violinist, Fritz moves to Paris to perfect his craft, and abandons his study of the occult arts. In his desperateness for fame and fortune, Franz decides that 'he would not scruple to sell himself, body and soul, to the Evil One.'⁵⁸⁷ He began to study black magic and sorcery— in Theosophical terms, these were the opposite of the 'good' occult. Samuel, his beloved instructor and mentor, also under the spell of the dark forces, offers up his own intestines to string the violin— true musical success would only come if he strung the instrument with the guts of someone he loved. But it was to no avail. The sound produced by these strings was not inferior, but ghastly. At his public debut with the new violin, Franz effectively causes a panic.

Sounds seemed to transform themselves into objective shapes, thickly and precipitately gathering as at the evocation of a mighty magician, and to be whirling around him, like a host of fantastic, infernal figures, dancing the witches' 'goat dance'. In the empty depths of the shadowy background of the stage, behind the artist, a nameless phantasmagoria, produced by the concussion of unearthly vibrations, seemed to form pictures of shameless orgies, of the voluptuous hymns of a real witches Sabbat⁵⁸⁸

At the conclusion of the show, after the spectators had fled in terror, the stage manager found Franz dead on the stage, the 'catguts' wound around his neck, and the violin shattered.

⁵⁸⁷ *ibid*: 113

⁵⁸⁸ *ibid*: 129

Both stories clearly warn against spirit communication undertaken by non-professionals. But they take on another significance when we consider power dynamics within Theosophy. If Blavatsky could make people frightened of spirit communication—most certainly the goal of these stories—then she could consolidate power by positioning herself as a safety measure against demons and evil spirits. Though she did not spend all of her adult life in India, that she had a close connection to it, and placed the headquarters of the Theosophical Society there, was designed to allow her access to the ‘savage’ powers present in the natives. ‘The Orient,’ explain James Procter and Angela Smith, is a ‘projection of the *repressed* desires of the European *self*.’⁵⁸⁹ Much in the same way women writers used spirits and the supernatural to mask their hidden/forbidden desires, the far-flung corners of the Empire and its denizens could be used to explore more outré issues of the day. ‘To be savage, black, animal or wild in orientalist terms was not necessarily negative then, but frequently a site of ambivalent (often sexual) desire, eroticism/exoticism, and fantasy.’⁵⁹⁰ The mysteries of the Empire, the strange-ness the other-ness, provided an already uncanny scenery in which these stories could be set. In *Caves* she tells the story of the

⁵⁸⁹ Procter & Smith, 2004: 97 in Bown, Burdett and Thurschwell, eds.

⁵⁹⁰ *ibid*: 97

‘nautcha’ dancing women, whose lives are dedicated to education and music and dancing—the latter two done in a religious, or worship, context. The nautchas, she tells us, never marry, but procreate ‘with the gods.’⁵⁹¹ This is, of course, entirely fictional, as nautch, in Sanskrit, merely translates to dance, and is applied to beautiful dancing seductresses.⁵⁹²

In ‘A Witch’s Den’, in *Caves*, the travelling party visit Kalingalim, a sorceress (*jadu wâlâ*), said to be ‘under the influence of seven sister-goddesses, who took possession of her by turns, and spoke their oracles through her lips.’⁵⁹³ The tour guide takes the party to the village where Kalingalim lives, and warns them not to call her a witch. Kalingalim might be read as an Eastern version of Blavatsky: she is described as ‘lead[ing] a holy life; she is a prophetess, and her blessing could not prove harmful to anyone.’⁵⁹⁴ She is a mysterious figure of indeterminate age who denounces the presence of foreigners—who wear leather boots, no less—on her land. A legend posits Kalingalim was an old hermit who one day, through magic or evolution, became a

⁵⁹¹ *Caves*, 1892: 220

⁵⁹² see Pran Neville, *Nautch Girls of India: Dancers, Singers, Playmates*

⁵⁹³ *ibid*: 258

⁵⁹⁴ *ibid*: 261

hermitess.⁵⁹⁵ In 'The Luminous Shield', from *Nightmare Tales*, a young Englishwoman, part of a party travelling through Greece and Turkey, loses her dog, Ralph, on the streets on 'Stamboul'. Her guide tells her they should visit the dervishes to find his whereabouts. The narrator is sceptical, but desperate to find her dog. They are taken to a small, subterranean passage, where they meet with 'the most extraordinary looking creature that I ever beheld. Its sex was female... She was a hideous-looking dwarf, with an enormous head... She had a grinning countenance like the face of a satyr, and it was ornamented with letters and signs from the Koran painted in bright yellow.'⁵⁹⁶ It is the famous oracle, Tatmos, with whom they are to have their reading. They do not tell Tatmos that they've come looking for the dog— they are told that she will divine their problem. A shield is placed on the floor between them, and as the whirling dervishes call up the spirits to inspire Tatmos, the shield starts to glow (hence the 'luminous' in the title). In the shield, they see a street scene; what they recognise to be near the palace of the Minister of Finance. Behind the house, in a ditch, they see Ralph. They also see the young son of another of the group; his head is bleeding profusely, and he is being tended to by a servant. Hurriedly they depart,

⁵⁹⁵ *ibid*: 264

⁵⁹⁶ *Nightmare Tales*, 1892: 86

and find that both visions were accurate. Because these women are open-minded to the possibility of spirit communication, and engage respectfully with the natives, Blavatsky gives them their happy ending: the boy is fine and the dog is reunited with his owner.

Reincarnation was another Eastern belief which Blavatsky appropriated into Theosophy. In 'The Cave of Echoes' Blavatsky intertwines a story of murder and revenge with her belief in reincarnation— another facet of Eastern religions borrowed by Theosophy. A wealthy man, Izvertoff, is drowned in the cave on his lakefront property. Izvertoff had, the night before his death, beaten his servant Ivan, and Ivan was heard to have sworn revenge. The body was never recovered, but Ivan was still sent to prison. His nephew, Nicholas, and family take over the estate, and soon born to the couple is a boy, '[s]mall, delicate and ever ailing... his resemblance to his uncle was so striking that members of the family often shrank from him in terror.'⁵⁹⁷ A Hungarian mesmerist visits the Russian town, and is granted audience to perform for the family and their friends. The little boy explains that he has seen this man before: the traveller declares that the boy must have seen his 'double': 'which

⁵⁹⁷ *ibid*: 73

roams sometimes far away.⁵⁹⁸ As the mesmerist begins his rites, ‘a sort of nebulous vapour... gathered about the Shaman and the boy.’⁵⁹⁹ The boy then transforms into the deceased Izvertoff—complete with a still-bloody contusion on his forehead.

‘In the name of the great Master, of Him who had all power, answer the truth, and nothing but the truth. Restless spirit, hast thou been lost by accident, or foully murdered?’

The spectre’s lips moved, but it was the echo which answered for them in lugubrious shouts: ‘Murdered! Murdered!! Mur-der-ed!!!’

‘Where? How? By whom?’ asked the conjuror.

The apparition pointed a finger at Nicholas and, without removing its gaze or lowering its arm, retreated backwards slowly towards the lake. At every step it took, the younger Izvertoff, as if compelled by some irresistible fascination, advanced a step towards it⁶⁰⁰

The spirit of his child/uncle compels Nicholas into the lake, where he is drowned for his crimes against his uncle and the unjustly-imprisoned Ivan. Only the reincarnated spirit, with the help of the mesmerist, is able to enact retribution; earthly laws were insufficient. But the warning is powerful: all is known to the inhabitants of the Spirit World, and they are capable of acting out revenge.

In addition to the possibility of revenge, many Theosophists saw reincarnation as a means of gaining gender equality. In 1890 Susan Gay wrote in *Lucifer*, the Theosophical journal, to explain that male

⁵⁹⁸ *ibid*: 76

⁵⁹⁹ *ibid*: 78

⁶⁰⁰ *ibid*: 79

souls may find themselves in female bodies, and vice-versa. It is unacceptable, then, to restrict women's lives when they may, in fact, be in possession of a man's soul. 'The best and noblest qualities' found in people, all people, were their 'spiritual equilibrium of duality.'⁶⁰¹ That is, embracing masculine and feminine qualities.

Blavatsky was born and raised in Russia, before spending the majority of her adult life flitting between the continents. Whilst she placed a great deal of value on Eastern wisdom, her girlhood exposed her to Christianity, and the story 'An Unsolved Mystery.' A Hungarian man, Vic de Lassa and his beautiful wife arrive in Paris in the autumn of 1861. They were well-received into society, not least because of their conspicuous displays of wealth. M de Lassa was an occultist; charging his friends and acquaintances 100 francs per session with his crystal ball. de Lassa came to the attention of police inspector Delessert—not because of reports of wrongdoing on de Lassa's part, but because 'it is the habit of the police to imagine that mystery always hides either the conspirator, the adventurer, or the charlatan.'⁶⁰² de Lassa challenges Delessert to prove he is a charlatan—a task to which the inspector

⁶⁰¹ Gay, 1890: 118

⁶⁰² *Occult Tales* 1893: 83

immediately begins. Delessert finds out that de Lassa is actually German, called Pflock Haslich, and was an apprentice of the celebrated magician Robert Houdin. de Lassa/Haslich had travelled Europe performing séances under a variety of pseudonyms. Delessert, satisfied he had caught a con-man, embarks with another officer to arrest de Lassa. On his way there, Delessert collapses, uttering the cryptic phrase, 'My God... the crystal! the picture!'⁶⁰³ before falling unconscious, and dying a few hours later in hospital. When the police arrived at de Lassa's home, they found he had destroyed everything in it relating to the occult. The authorities attempted to connect him with Delessert's death, but were unable to prove any wrongdoing—his sudden demise was attributed to 'apoplexy, due to fatigue and nervous excitement.'⁶⁰⁴ de Lassa was, after a few weeks, found hanged in his prison cell. In a note at the end of the story, Blavatsky responds to a criticism of the story, which had been originally published in a journal, *Scientist*. The unsigned critic asks if the story is intended to be taken from true events, and if it is, 'specify your authority for it.'⁶⁰⁵ Blavatsky writes that whilst the story is, in fact, just a story, the 'psychic

⁶⁰³ *ibid*: 89

⁶⁰⁴ *ibid*: 89

⁶⁰⁵ *ibid*: 90

phenomena' which comprise the narrative, 'have been, and can be, again produced.'⁶⁰⁶ She has based this account from Scripture, and the story of Ananias, 'who is supposed to have suffered instant death from fear' after a stern rebuke by the apostle Peter [Acts 5:1-6]. It is an unusual reference for Blavatsky considering her antipathy toward Christianity: 'The esoteric pearl of Christ's religion degraded into Christian theology, may indeed be said to have chosen a strange and unfitting *shell* to be born in and evolved from.'⁶⁰⁷

Blavatsky goes on to blame the death of Delessert on the amateurish handling of the spirits by de Lassa—it is important for readers to understand that spirits can sometimes remove themselves from the careful control of their mediums—and that they do possess a threat. 'Ask the powerful mesmerist if there is danger that the subject may pass out of his control? — if he could will the spirit out, never to return? It is capable of demonstration that the mesmerist can act on a subject at a distance of many miles; and it is no less certain that, the majority of mesmerists know little or nothing of the laws that govern their

⁶⁰⁶ *ibid*: 90

⁶⁰⁷ Blavatsky, 1888: 442

powers.⁶⁰⁸ In other words, much of how the spirit world functions is still a mystery, and, like the young man in 'A Bewitched Life', readers would do well to leave spirit communication to the experts.

Blavatsky's fiction, I argue, was radical not only for the subject matter, but because she was unabashed of her writing. Gilbert and Gubar explain that late-Victorian and *fin de siècle* women who chose to write were forced to make the 'degrading' choice between being ostracised, or extreme modesty; that is, claiming female ignorance of 'serious' subjects and writing solely of women's (light, fluffy) topics.⁶⁰⁹ Blavatsky, as with many conventions, defied this. She wrote on the most serious of subjects: divinity, the afterlife and the limits of human knowledge. In the anonymous introduction to *Occult Tales* (1893/1946) it is claimed that the majority of nineteenth century writers failed in their attempts to relay occult fiction: the exceptions were Blavatsky, Stevenson and Bulwer-Lytton.⁶¹⁰ There will be many who will disagree with the sentiment expressed, but it demonstrates that Blavatsky, some fifty-five years after her death, still exuded authority. Gilbert and Gubar claim that

⁶⁰⁸ *ibid*: 91

⁶⁰⁹ Gilbert and Gubar, 2000: 64

⁶¹⁰ in *Occult Tales* 1893/1946: vii

nineteenth-century female writers were conditioned to doubt their own authority, in part because there was no canon of female literature from which they could draw a prevailing aesthetic or form.⁶¹¹ Whilst this theory is applicable to many women writers of the time, it, again, does not apply to Blavatsky. She was resolute in her writing, and concerned only with deploying her Theosophical messages.

6.4.1 ‘Unforeseen, illogical, incomprehensible’⁶¹²: Blavatsky, Socialism, and the New Woman

Davidoff and Hall argue that ‘[t]he feminism of the mid- to late-nineteenth century was built on a sense of grievance and it was women’s sense of their exclusion from the public sphere and its consequences which led to their demand for entry to [public life].’⁶¹³ What Blavatsky consciously, and Hardinge Britten unconsciously did, was to find a ‘female way’ of entering the public sphere. That is, in order to enter the masculine domain and have a public life, they needed a skill which men, largely, did not possess. Spiritualism and Theosophy provided this opportunity for women. But, as has been explored

⁶¹¹ Gilbert and Gubar, 2000: 75

⁶¹² This is how WB Yeats praises Blavatsky in an early draft of his autobiography; he notes that she had ‘more human nature than anybody else’ (in Beaumont, 2012: 169 in Kontou & Willburn, eds., 2012)

⁶¹³ Davidoff and Hall, 1987: xvii

throughout this thesis, not all men were happy to see female encroachment into public life.

According to Matthew Beaumont, Blavatsky is 'a New Woman: contemporaneous portraits were equally obsessed with the fact that, like some monstrous bohemian, she dressed eccentrically, chain-smoked cigarettes and laced her speech with expletives.'⁶¹⁴ Far from simply being a new woman in the spiritual sense, Blavatsky also represented the worst tropes of the secular New Woman. 'Feminists were attracted to... the Theosophical Society because the occult offered a "transcendental View of Social Life" that spoke directly to feminist aspirations for change.'⁶¹⁵ Politically, Blavatsky wrote of her desire for a utopian society, and was sympathetic to a number of socialists. In *The Key to Theosophy* (1889) she praised both Christ and the Buddha for 'preaching most unmistakably Socialism.'⁶¹⁶ Blavatsky herself never identified explicitly as a feminist or a New Woman, but she does make mention, several times, that she supports women leading public lives, and receiving the same education as men. In 1890 she lamented that

⁶¹⁴ Beaumont, 2012: 172 in Kontou & Willburn, eds., 2012

⁶¹⁵ Owen, 2007: 87

⁶¹⁶ Blavatsky, 1889:79 in Beaumont, 2012: 170 in Kontou & Willburn, eds., 2012

the English woman was 'a *thing* and her husband's chattel.'⁶¹⁷ Prothero notes Blavatsky's fondness for wearing the bright red Garibaldian shirt and 'all the revolutionary bravado such garb suggested.'⁶¹⁸

Braude credits Blavatsky as one of the central characters who changed Spiritualism from its early emphasis on trance speaking, to 'sensationalism.'⁶¹⁹ Blavatsky was unwilling to be passive, meek and feminine. She wanted to emphasise that she had unique powers which allowed her to commune with the spirits; and she worked hard to fine-tune these powers into a religion (or cult) at which she was the focal point. However Braude argues that Blavatsky's notoriety was actually harmful to women seeking leadership roles in Spiritualism. She 'confirmed the public's worst fears about the dangers of exposing female sexuality to the amoral public sphere.'⁶²⁰ (191). The use of her body to facilitate spirit communication, coupled with her public persona, meant Victorians saw Blavatsky more as a 'pawn in the spread of licentiousness' than a passive 'vehicle for revelation.'⁶²¹ Though

⁶¹⁷ Blavatsky, 1890: 472

⁶¹⁸ Prothero, 1993: 203

⁶¹⁹ Braude, 2001: 162

⁶²⁰ *ibid*: 191

⁶²¹ *ibid*: 191

Theosophy still exists today—a testament to Blavatsky’s power-- Braude claims that Blavatsky’s selfishness and self-promotion did little to empower women in general. Prothero aligns himself with this idea as well, noting that ‘for Blavatsky, the religious drama was individual rather than social, one laboured to uplift *oneself*, not to uplift *others*.’⁶²²

Braude is correct in some respects; Blavatsky was concerned primarily with herself and her image. But, arguably, that makes Blavatsky an aspirational figure to Spiritualist or Theosophist women. As Basham writes, ‘[t]he many fictions of Victorian Occultism had, in Madame Blavatsky, finally materialised their own Occult Mother.’⁶²³ She was a powerful, central figure on whom both praise and vituperative criticism could be placed. She found a niche, though public, environment for herself to create her own empire.

6.4.2 ‘One of the most repulsive women one can imagine’:

Blavatsky’s Critics

What is significant about the criticism that Blavatsky in particular received was how little of it centred on her teachings: her age, her

⁶²² Prothero, 1993: 208

⁶²³ Basham, 1992: 186

weight and her private life were discussed freely, and cruelly, in the press. 'She was the sphinx of the second half of the nineteenth century; a Pythoness in tinsel robes who strutted across the world's stage "full of sound and fury", and disappeared from view behind the dark veil of Isis, which she, the fin de siècle prophetess, tried to draw aside during her earthly career.'⁶²⁴

The strained relationship between Blavatsky and Daniel Home has already been mentioned, but Home's criticism did not stop with a mere dismissal of Theosophy as folly. Blavatsky claimed to have met Home for the first time in Paris in 1858, where he introduced her, and ultimately converted her, to Spiritualism. This assertion rankled Home, and he attacked her sexual propriety, and suggesting she had given birth to at least one illegitimate child. In a letter, Home explains, 'I took no interest in her, excepting a singular impression I had the first time I saw a young gentleman who has ever since been a brother to me. He did not follow my advice. He was at that time her lover, and it was most repulsive to me.'⁶²⁵ JN Maskelyne, a professional magician, was one of her most vociferous critics. Ostensibly the book she wrote against her

⁶²⁴ HR Evans, 1897 in Beaumont, 2012: 171 in Kontou & Willburn, eds.

⁶²⁵ in JN Maskelyne, 1912: 29

was intended to debunk the 'magic tricks' practised by natives of India, which he believed were responsible for duping the public into Theosophy. He spends the vast majority of the book, however, attacking Blavatsky's appearance and character. Its frontispiece features a sketch of Blavatsky, with frizzy, greying hair and a cigarette in her mouth. Its caption notes it was drawn when she was sixty, and the subtitle helpfully notes that she is 'The greatest impostor in history.' Much of Maskelyne's anger toward Blavatsky centres on her swindling of Olcott and other older, wealthy men. Though she was not a beautiful woman, to his mind, he seems frustrated and confused that she 'drew sums of money from the credulous old gentleman [Olcott] to fund her society.'⁶²⁶ That she is practised in hypnotism is his answer to the question of how people (men, especially) found her so fascinating, despite being 'one of the most repulsive women one can imagine.'⁶²⁷ 'She had the appearance of being a gross, vulgar, sensual adventuress'—she is, again, the antithesis of Hardinge Britten's domestic goddess, or d'Espérance's hyper-feminine mediumess. Maskelyne takes care to mention her overeating, drinking, smoking and her language, 'at times

⁶²⁶ Maskelyne, 1912: 37

⁶²⁷ *ibid*: 61

too bad for publication.⁶²⁸ Maskelyne goes on to suggest that she had three confirmed husbands (though there is no documentation to support this), and possibly a fourth in India. The theme of multiple marriages is picked up by Arthur Lillie, in *Madame Blavatsky and Her 'Theosophy'* (1895); the first few pages note how she fled her first husband. Whether or not Blavatsky ever properly annulled a marriage or divorced her husband is questionable, but for her male detractors, her (alleged) bigamy pointed to a dangerous, duplicitous character. Lillie, to his credit, spends much of his book denouncing or debunking Spiritualism in its entirety, rather than focusing solely on her physical appearance or personal life.

HR Evans (1904) writes that in this age of greater equality for women, 'it is only natural that the greatest charlatan should be a woman.'⁶²⁹ Evans offers reluctant praise for Blavatsky; for her 'extraordinary mental acumen' and 'personal magnetism' which allowed for her success.⁶³⁰ Though he is critical of her ideas and philosophies, much of his offence seems to be in her appearance and manner. '[B]ig, fat, frowsy, and

⁶²⁸ *ibid*: 61

⁶²⁹ Evans, 1904: 392

⁶³⁰ *ibid*: 392

gross-looking, a tremendous smoker of cigarettes; possessed of a horrible temper and a vocabulary of words not to be found in works on etiquette.⁶³¹ He dismisses her as ‘the high Princess of Isis’ and accuses her of pinching Theosophical ideas from various (male) sources, including Home, Olcott and the New York-based Spiritualist lecturer George Felt.⁶³²

In 1884, Theosophy was investigated by the SPR. While Olcott was indignant that the ‘sacred’ testimonies of he and his colleagues were mocked, his greatest umbrage about the inquiry was that the gentlemen who authored the report were not Theosophists. How, then, could they be expected to understand the nuance of this great philosophy?

We scorn the raw opinions of the uneducated tradesman upon astronomy, mathematics, symbology, spirit survival, or any other of the great questions of human knowledge with which he had no familiarity whatsoever. Yet is his case worse than that of those gentleman amateurs in Practical Psychology, who possessed no more qualification to render a just judgement on HPB’s psychical powers than our supposed green-grocer, tailor or blacking-maker?⁶³³

The SPR were quite certain that Theosophy was fraudulent, or at least, fraud was perpetrated by several of its high-ranking members. Olcott was devastated by the SPR’s reports—they stated that they had found

⁶³¹ *ibid*: 392

⁶³² *ibid*: 395; 398

⁶³³ Olcott, 1972: 114

no conclusive evidence to support Theosophy's claims—calling the investigators 'merciless.' In particular he worried about the effect it had on 'that unrewarded servant of the race, HPB.'⁶³⁴ Theosophists felt the methods of the SPR were not only unfair, but placed an unnecessary emphasis on the material: subjects were asked, for example, to materialise objects or perform phenomena upon the examiner's asking.

Ultimately it was the letters sent by Blavatsky to Emma Coulomb, a former Theosophist, which sealed Theosophy's fate. 'It appeared from these letters that a large number of the alleged Theosophical phenomena were ingenious trickeries, carried out by Madame Blavatsky with the assistance chiefly of the Coulombs.'⁶³⁵ Though Blavatsky claimed they were forged by Coulomb, the SPR called in handwriting experts to investigate, who confirmed that they were from Blavatsky's own hand. Olcott, in his published diaries, suggests that Coulomb's testimony should not be taken seriously, as her 'moral worth' is compromised. 'Inquiries at Cairo of the ladies of the Royal Harem, would yield highly interesting facts about her'⁶³⁶— a threatened man

⁶³⁴ *ibid*: 105; 103

⁶³⁵ Report of the General Meeting of the SPR, 1885

⁶³⁶ Olcott, 1972: 109

calling a woman a whore in an attempt to discredit her. It is fascinating—and arguably, a condemnation of her character—that Blavatsky would allow Olcott to speak of Coulomb in this manner, considering her own treatment at the hands of the press and her detractors.

6.4.3 'Smooth-tongued DECEIT and BRUTE FORCE'⁶³⁷: The Feminine and the Mahatmas

Blavatsky, throughout her writings, is confident in the truths she puts forth. Her detractors may use 'brute force' against her, but she responds with relatively little force. In terms of criticism of her appearance, many of her protagonists—Kalingalim, Tatmos—are described as dreadfully ugly, yet extremely powerful. For Blavatsky, it is spiritual strength, not attractiveness, which determines her worth.

Blavatsky is also clear about the swift punishments which follow those who do not take spirit activity seriously. In 'Can the Double Murder?' (1893/1946) Blavatsky's story is told as a letter ('this truthful narrative') to the editor of *The Sun*. The Prince of Serbia, Michael Obrenovitch, his aunt Catherine (Katinka) and her daughter were

⁶³⁷ Blavatsky claims that her detractors—those who will not accept the truth—attack her in this manner (from *Lucifer* 1888).

brutally murdered in the street—Blavatsky, notably, gives rather graphic details of their deaths. A relation of the prince's, 'an old Serbian matriarch'⁶³⁸ swore to gain her revenge on the unknown assailant(s). The old lady, whom Blavatsky only refers to by her title and initial—Gospoja P—possessed a great knowledge of the occult. She was rumoured to have defeated a wandering vampire 'merely by shaking her fist at him and shaming him in his own language.'⁶³⁹ She had a ward, a young gypsy girl called Frosya, who was well-known for her ability for enter trance states and communicate with those beyond the veil. Frosya, in her entranced mutterings, says the first names of two men. She is eventually coaxed from her trance, and the party spends a few days together at the home of the Gospoja. A few days later, the narrator happens upon a newspaper which details the mysterious deaths of two of the Gospoja's manservants.

They screamed, staggered, and ran about the room, holding up their hands as if to ward off the blows of an unseen weapon. They paid no attention to the eager questions of the prince and suite, but presently fell writhing upon the floor, and expired in great agony. Their bodies exhibited no appearance of apoplexy, nor any external marks of wounds, but, wonderful to relate, there were numerous dark spots and long marks upon the skin, as though they were stabs and slashes made without puncturing the cuticle. The autopsy revealed the fact that beneath each of these mysterious discolourations there was a deposit of coagulated blood. The greatest excitement prevails, and the faculty are unable to solve the mystery⁶⁴⁰

⁶³⁸ *Occult Tales*: 73

⁶³⁹ *ibid*: 74

⁶⁴⁰ *ibid*: 81

The two names uttered at séance were clearly the names of these mysteriously murdered men. In this story Blavatsky not only emphasises the power of Theosophy and mesmerism in discerning truth, but that the occult may be used to exact vengeance, or bring justice, as the case may be. In this story, Blavatsky emphasises that Frosya has the ability to bring forth a double of herself; a spirituous counterpart. It is clear not only that the double *can* murder, but that the double can be as dangerous as its progenitor. Which begs the question of Blavatsky's detractors: what is her double capable of doing to them? These stories align with Briggs' contention that '[g]host stories often deal with the most primitive, punitive and sadistic of impulses, revenge being one of the commonest motifs present in the form.'⁶⁴¹

Blavatsky's response to attacks based on her gender largely comes about through the letters were alleged to be written by the spirit guides, or Mahatmas. These were purported to be the true words of the spirits told to Blavatsky, who transcribed them and then sent them on to the 'intended recipients'. Though they were not intended to be fictional narratives, like her stories in *Nightmare Tales*, I would argue they were here way of responding to criticism without doing it herself—that is, she

⁶⁴¹ Briggs, 2004: 128

uses the 'voice' of another to make her own arguments. That, effectively, is fiction. Julia Briggs confirms that supernatural stories have, since antiquity, existed in the form of anecdotes.⁶⁴² There is, I argue, little difference between the short stories and the letters crafted by Blavatsky, as both are intended to further her Theosophical teaching. In one letter to AP Sinnett, she is described as out of touch with the practicalities of Theosophy, having spent too long in the occidental world.

Even if Madame B might 'be induced' to give the AI Society any 'practical instruction' I am afraid she had remained too long a time outside the *adytum* to be of much use for practical *explanations*. However, though it does not depend on me, I will see what I can do in this direction. But I fear she is sadly in need of a few months of recuperative *villagiatura* on the glaciers, with her old master before she can be entrusted with such a difficult task⁶⁴³

Later, in a confidential memo regarding 'the old lady,'—she is variously referred to as 'the old lady' or 'the old woman' throughout the letters—hardly a mark of respect—Blavatsky is criticised for her hysterical, excitable female nature.

I am painfully aware of the fact that the habitual incoherence of her statements — especially when excited — and her strange ways make her in your opinion a very undesirable transmitter of our messages⁶⁴⁴

⁶⁴² Briggs, 1977: 11

⁶⁴³ Letter to AP Sinnett, received late Nov. or early Dec. 1880, in Barker, 1948: 21 [emphasis in original]

⁶⁴⁴ Letter to AP Sinnett, received Autumn 1881, in Barker, 1948: 203

A similar instance is recounted about Blavatsky when she was angry with Society member AO Hume. She repeated confidential information to AP Sinnett, despite having been warned against it—a reflection of her ‘woman-like’ stubbornness and inability to hold her tongue.⁶⁴⁵ Regarding the differences in sex, the Mahatma says that biology is ‘guided by individual Karma, moral aptitudes, characteristics and deeds of a pervious birth.’⁶⁴⁶ We are not told which the Mahatmas views as preferable, but from a Victorian perspective, it would not be difficult to interpret the meaning of the letter as bad karma meant that one would next be born female.

Blavatsky is also on the receiving end of, depending on one’s view, chivalry or condescension. In several instances, blame for incoherent messages is to be put on the Mahatma himself, and not the ‘hapless,’⁶⁴⁷ ‘poor woman.’⁶⁴⁸ When Theosophy on the receiving end of a ‘*filthy*, heavy attack’ by an American newspaper, the Mahatmas expresses his regret that ‘an innocent woman’ should be subject to such abuses.⁶⁴⁹

⁶⁴⁵ Letter to AO Hume, received c. February 1881, in Barker, 1948: 237-238

⁶⁴⁶ Letter to AP Sinnett, received June 1882, in Barker, 1948: 117

⁶⁴⁷ Letter to AP Sinnett, received 26 March 1881, in Barker, 1948: 240

⁶⁴⁸ Letter to AP Sinnett, received c. February 1882, in Barker, 1948: 256

⁶⁴⁹ Letter to AP Sinnett, received c. February 1882, in Barker 1948: 255 [emphasis in original]

Blavatsky did have a great deal of power over those closest to her, particularly Olcott. Her Mahatmas would send messages detailing her needs and wants, and he would be expected to fulfil them. She was not a well woman for much of her adult life, and Olcott was singularly devoted to her care and protection.

Blavatsky herself was charged with transcribing most of the messages that came through from the highest planes, so it begs the question why she would either, depending on one's view, invent anti-woman messages, or transcribe them without modification. Victorians were more comfortable with men in power than women, and it is likely she thought it would somehow assist her by being seen as a 'mere' woman, prone to histrionics and misinterpretation. Yet, in other letters, Theosophical teachings from Kuthumi (sometimes spelt Koot Hoomi), one of the great Mahatma Brothers, instruct that in marriage, men and women are to be equals. It was widely accepted by the anti-Theosophists that Blavatsky was the 'voice' of Kuthumi. It is impossible, of course, to verify this claim, as Blavatsky would not have admitted any fraud. It is plausible that Blavatsky inserted into the Mahatmas letters slight digs at herself as a means of making them seem more authentic.

Though the society promoted equality, it would, perhaps, be taken more seriously if devotees were reminded that Blavatsky was, after all, ‘just’ a woman.

6.5 Conclusion: ‘Authority and Charisma’⁶⁵⁰

Alex Owen (2007) writes that the occult movements of the *fin de siècle* meshed ‘European magical tradition and “Eastern” spirituality [and] operat[ed] in a modern urbanized culture in the grip of change.’⁶⁵¹ This definition is a near-perfect summing-up of Theosophy. Blavatsky (and Theosophy) sought a new way of understanding the world by combining science, religion—Buddhism, Hinduism and Christianity—and Renaissance European magic into a new philosophy.

There were dozens of women who made for themselves a comfortable living from Spiritualism and occultism. None, however, earned the same public attention as Madame Blavatsky. Whether she is seen as pioneering and courageous, or cold and calculating, Blavatsky used the freedom granted by Spiritualism to found Theosophy, and to take charge of the entire organisation. In doing so, she attempted to find

⁶⁵⁰ This phrase, describing Blavatsky, appears in K.P. Johnson’s *Initiates of the Theosophical Masters*, 1995:6

⁶⁵¹ Owen, 2007: 7

legitimacy for their supernatural gifts (such as they were) and to gain notability, or notoriety. Blavatsky spent the latter years of her career mired in accusations of fraud, but she persisted in her work, refusing to acquiesce to (often personal) attacks. She may well have been a fraud, founding a multi-national quasi-religious society in the 1870s was a remarkable accomplishment for a woman. The words of her treatises may have been unscrupulously cobbled together from ancient and Spiritualist sources, but the continued existence of her Theosophical Society indicates her peculiar effectiveness. She insisted on her followers' obedience in all Theosophical matters, chastising those who would not follow her commands—even if they were WB Yeats.⁶⁵²

Blavatsky used her fiction, like the Spiritualists, in part to provide allegories or parables that would make Theosophical 'truth' easier to understand. She also included warnings to believers, like Hardinge Britten and Crowe, that spirit communication ought only be used by trained professionals. She also used her stories to emphasise the potent power of women with spiritual gifts, and the danger of not taking seriously the occult world.

⁶⁵² in Greer, 1995: 96

Blavatsky took the power, privilege and authority by force; as such, she was reluctant to share that power with society in general. She argued that through Theosophical principles, one might learn to advance oneself. Though she was never a vocal advocate for suffrage nor equal rights, Blavatsky still did remarkable work, and forged an impressive path for women and men to follow. 'The old metaphysical order ended with the death of Madame Blavatsky in 1891.'⁶⁵³ Though Theosophy and various other occult societies would go on, the death of Blavatsky ended a golden age of the esoteric; there would be none like her again. Her influence on the Hermetic Society of the Golden Dawn, which will be discussed in the next chapter, is undeniable. Though she was not the only inspiration for their society, she and her teachings were known personally and studied by its earliest members: WB Yeats, Maud Gonne, MacGregor Mathers and Florence Farr. Farr would go on to join the Theosophical Society later in life, after the schism which drove apart the initial inner circle of the Golden Dawn.

⁶⁵³ Greer, 1995: 123

CHAPTER SEVEN:

Florence Farr

7.1 Introduction: 'Dont try to popularise your mysticism or to mystify your popular readers'⁶⁵⁴

Florence Farr (1860-1917) was an actress, writer, and as of July 1880, a member of the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.⁶⁵⁵ She 'had a great aptitude for magic and was deeply committed to both occultism and the Golden Dawn.'⁶⁵⁶ She quickly rose through its ranks to establish herself as one of Britain's finest magical adepts. Like other Spiritualist and occult women, the way in which she made her living was transgressive.

The characters and beliefs of these women ran counter to the norms of their society; they personally embodied the strongest taboos and repressed characteristics of late-Victorian England; they acted *outside* the boundaries of public codes of behaviour. Yet they initiated lasting changes in politics and culture; they heralded a 'new age' and a 'new woman'⁶⁵⁷

Marlene Tromp argues that 'women Spiritualist authors offered a culturally alternative means of determining a man's worth and a

⁶⁵⁴ George Bernard Shaw's literary advice to Farr. 'If you want to write popular books, write them; if you want to write mystic gospels, write them; but in the name of common sense dont [*sic*] try to popularise your mysticism or to mystify your popular readers.' In Owen, 2007: 65

⁶⁵⁵ Owen, 2007: 61

⁶⁵⁶ *ibid*: 63

⁶⁵⁷ Greer, 1995: 4

woman's position relative to him.⁶⁵⁸ It was generally accepted, as we have seen, that women were more spiritually-advanced than men; and that it was, ironically, the patriarchal notions of other-worldly womanhood ('angels') that lent women their power. If Spiritualist women were not content to simply be angels of the house, then occult women were not prepared to simply be passive mediums.

Occultism offered Victorians a different esoteric path than Spiritualism. 'A different kind of spirituality, one shorn of its conventional religious overtones, was widely conceived by those with an interest in the new emancipatory movements to have real relevance for the establishment of a society dedicated to the eradication of materialism and the promotion of individual fulfilment.'⁶⁵⁹ Many Spiritualists did combat materialism, but within occult societies, the material is anathema to spiritual progress. Occultists, unlike Spiritualists, sought a certain degree of power and control in their magical dealings. Not content to merely be messengers and conduits, occultists were active. 'To control the future, or at least have sufficient foreknowledge of it to be able to divert the worst effects of time and chance—these are almost universal

⁶⁵⁸ Tromp, 2006: 62

⁶⁵⁹ Owen, 2007: 24

aspirations, reflected in a multiplicity of divinatory rituals, systems and beliefs from medieval times to the present day.’⁶⁶⁰

The Golden Dawn was by no means the only *fin de siècle* occult order in Britain, but it was without question the most famous. Although researching the Golden Dawn and its members is difficult, as Greer points out, because it was a secret organisation; the majority of private papers and correspondence sent have been destroyed.⁶⁶¹ ‘Madame Blavatsky had taught that the world would enter a new phase with the coming century, passing from a “Dark Age” of materialism into a cycle of great spiritual development; the illuminati of the Golden Dawn were similarly caught up in visions of a new order predicated on spiritual enlightenment.’⁶⁶²

For Jarlath Killeen (2009) the disruptions to traditional religion were an important part in the making of *fin de siècle* occult. ‘The growth, and eventually the separation into different disciplines of geology, biology and physics further suggested that orthodox Christianity had gotten it

⁶⁶⁰ Bennett, 1987: 110

⁶⁶¹ Greer, 1995: 2

⁶⁶² Owen, 2007: 84

factually wrong in a number of crucial areas, primarily in its account of cosmology and cosmogony.⁶⁶³ As material science developed and began questioning church teaching, occultists began to question religion from the immaterial side. If the church managed to get so much wrong concerning creation of the earth and of man, perhaps their teachings on the soul, spirit and afterlife were lacking as well.

Ostensibly, the founders of the Golden Dawn are men; William Westcott and Samuel Mathers. Yet, as has recurred throughout this thesis, a female hand was not only present at the founding, but, arguably, the reason for its founding. Anna Sprengel was a German woman, who, after holding a Rosicrucian 'séance' decided she must appoint Westcott as head of a new occult society called the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn. She was a frequent correspondent of Westcott, and provided him with a cipher that he might better understand the ancient documents which formed Rosicrucian and Golden Dawn thought. She also provided him with lists of quasi-Masonic rituals to be practised by both men and women.⁶⁶⁴ Sprengel was said to have died in July 1890, but her existence was never verified, and the argument over the

⁶⁶³ Killeen, 2009: 125

⁶⁶⁴ Greer, 1995: 47

legitimacy of the Sprengel letters was one of the main reasons for the schism which saw, effectively, the end of the Golden Dawn.⁶⁶⁵

Theosophy and the Golden Dawn did have many commonalities, but arguably the biggest separation was in terms of practical instruction.

Though Blavatsky and Theosophy prized study into their society, they provided no real instruction as to *how* one could advance into adeptship. The exception to this, was the Esoteric Section of the Theosophical Society, which offered the opportunity for intensive occult study.⁶⁶⁶ The Golden Dawn, on the other hand, were almost obsessive about recording and cataloguing their various magical practices which facilitated adeptship. This might be traced to Blavatsky's desire to remain at the centre of Theosophy: whilst Mathers, Westcott, Farr and others certainly wielded a great deal of (spiritual) power, they held no knowledge that could not be distributed to the masses. Blavatsky was less eager to share in the practical aspects of reaching through the veil.

'Occult knowledge gained through learning and direct experience was what the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn offered.'⁶⁶⁷

⁶⁶⁵ Other reasons for the split include the fraud of 'Swami' Laura Horos, who claimed to be, variously, the reincarnation of Sprengel and Blavatsky; and Aleister Crowley's inclusion of 'sex magic' into his occult treatises

⁶⁶⁶ Owen, 2007: 31

⁶⁶⁷ *ibid*: 2

Many of the new initiates into the Golden Dawn were Theosophists who had become dissatisfied with Blavatsky's unwillingness to divulge her methods; the majority of these coming from the Chiswick Lodge.⁶⁶⁸

The majority of GD initiates were drawn, with some exceptions... from the comfortable middle classes. Political affiliations ran the gamut of possibilities, from the aristocratic pretensions and martial leanings of MacGregor Mathers to the social interest of Florence Farr, but political differences could be subsumed (as in the case of Mathers and Farr) in shared occult goals and priorities⁶⁶⁹ (2007:61)

There was evidently an appeal to the scientific community, as Owen notes; there were fourteen doctors in the Order prior to 1900.⁶⁷⁰ I would suggest the reason for this was the revelation of magical method: doctors, as men of science, would likely have appreciated the opportunity to discover for themselves the effectiveness of the magic, as opposed to relying to testimony from others.

Of course it was not only scientists interested in the occult. For Farr, like Marie Corelli, there was art in the occult. Drawing on her acting background, Farr, as she rose through the ranks of the order, 'sought to

⁶⁶⁸ *ibid*: 61

⁶⁶⁹ *ibid*: 61

⁶⁷⁰ *ibid*: 61

raise the level of ceremony and ritual intonation to an art.⁶⁷¹ In her esoteric and semi-autobiographical novel, *The Dancing Faun* (1884), Lady Kirkdale, mother of protagonist Lady Geraldine, claims, ‘I think it is the greatest mistake to make distinctions of rank in matters of art. In art all are equal. There is something so beautiful in that thought.’⁶⁷² Art is not material, though there are occasionally material outputs: art is of the spirit and inspired by the spirit. To seek gain, wealth, from one’s art is to fundamentally misunderstand the point.

One form of art for the occultists and esoterics was what they called magic. Preferring active adeptship to passive mediumship, Golden Dawn members carefully crafted their magical rituals, infusing them with all the drama and pageantry of a stage show.

7.2 ‘All art is magick’⁶⁷³: Adeptship and Magic

According to Owen, the idea of sacred, specific ritual is tied up in the hermetic—hence The Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn.

Arthur Edward Waite, the Victorian occultist and one-time member of the Golden Dawn, noted that the terms “transcendental, hermetic,

⁶⁷¹ *ibid*: 65

⁶⁷² *Dancing Faun* 3

⁶⁷³ Farr said these words when she initiated Aleister Crowley into the Golden Dawn in 1898

Rosicrucian, mystical, and esoteric, or occult” were used “indiscriminately during the nineteenth century, and was careful to use *Hermetic philosophy* to mean “an actual, positive, and realisable knowledge concerning the worlds which we denominate invisible.⁶⁷⁴

The mastery of adeptship and magic necessitated the use of willpower; which, at that time, was understood to be a masculine attribute.

‘Advanced Golden Dawn Initiates were later to be taught that the... adept is capable of conjuring a particular phenomenon with absolute precision through the operation of this all-important [magical] will.’⁶⁷⁵

According to Greer, the principal aim of the Golden Dawn adepts was to ‘unite the Will with the Highest Self.’⁶⁷⁶ In other words, Will was their

idea of the soul or spirit; it represented the divine portion of the person.

It is derived from the same idea as will or willpower; it is one’s drive to accomplish a task or goal.

In one of the ‘Flying Rolls’ of Golden Dawn thought, Farr explains how to channel one’s will:

the method I advise for cultivation of will is to imagine your head as the centre of attraction with thought-like rays radiating out in a vast globe. To want or desire a thing is the first step in the exercise of Will... concentrate all your wandering rays of thought upon this image until you feel it to be one glowing scarlet ball of compacted force.⁶⁷⁷

⁶⁷⁴ in Owen, 2007: 52

⁶⁷⁵ Owen, 2007: 69

⁶⁷⁶ Greer, 1995: 57

⁶⁷⁷ Farr, ‘Flying Roll II’ in Greer, 1995: 117

Farr believed that the combining of human will with 'universal' was the only method for receiving truths. 'If we labour against the world's Will we shall fail, and our work will vanish off the face of the earth.'⁶⁷⁸ She urges the throwing off of that which restricts the consciousness of the individual, noting, rather dramatically, that one's bad habits and customs must be slain like dragons; 'kill them and wash yourself in their blood, like the heroes of old.'⁶⁷⁹

In a short fictional, esoteric work called 'A Dialogue of Vision' a young novice into the occult, Rebecca, converses with The Widow, who represents Rebecca's Higher Self. Rebecca is guided through a series of visions where she is introduced to occult thought—the black (death), red (passion) and white (God, the creator). She also bears witness to the five modes of the soul:

I see the soul arranged in concentric layers round the ethereal starry part which is the innermost soul of joy, which sometimes gives a little beauty to an artist's work. Next to the innermost is the part that does what it thinks right, the sense of duty and sacrifice to an idea. The third part receives ideas, eats them as it were, the second digests them. All the time you are struggling to argue about pros and cons you are functioning in the outermost crust, which always wants to solidify changeable things; it is fundamentally perverse.⁶⁸⁰

⁶⁷⁸ Farr, ed. *Euphrates, or The Waters of the East by Eugenius Philalethes, 1655 with a commentary by SSDD* in Greer, 1995: 155

⁶⁷⁹ *ibid*: in Greer, 1995: 155

⁶⁸⁰ *qtd.* in Greer, 1995: 311-312

Worrying about the material; fretting about earthly matters are the occupation of the outermost soul, and they do nothing but distract from joy, from art. Though the Golden Dawn was not highly influenced by Buddhism, this speaks of the doctrine of detachment; perhaps something inspired by Blavatsky's writings on 'Esoteric Buddhism'. In *Dancing Faun* Grace's malaise is caused by George refusing to allow her back on the stage. She is not serving her own needs, rather she sacrifices her desires to make him more comfortable. If, as Farr posits, the purest joy is in the creation of art, then to deny one's spouse access to that joy is the cruellest punishment possible.

Though adeptship was tied to logic and willpower (and thus more masculine than mediumship) it did not completely rid itself of the womanly attribute of emotion. Farr 'transforms' herself in to the alchemical 'green lion' of bitterness; this is done through exposure to sun and sea-salt, that is, tears.⁶⁸¹ The magic practised by the members of the Golden Dawn was elite and scholarly; they cast a 'long backwards glance to the Renaissance magi [which] provided the momentum for a "new" forward-looking Victorian spirituality.'⁶⁸²

⁶⁸¹ in Greer, 1995: 148

⁶⁸² Owen, 2007: 13

As with other Spiritualist and occult schools of thought, the East and the orient do factor into the Golden Dawn. For Farr, there was a particular emphasis on Egypt in her esoteric and instructional writing. 'Egypt was a nation that believed in the immortality of the soul, and acted upon its belief. Death was the consummation of initiation.'⁶⁸³ The elaborate death rituals of the pharaohs, then, were, for occultists, the necessary steps one needed to take to ensure a comfortable time on the other side.

In 1902, Farr and Olivia Shakespear wrote and starred in two short plays, *The Beloved of Hathor* and *The Shrine of the Golden Hawk*. *Hathor* was set in Egypt, 1500BC, and *Shrine* in Sinai, 4000BC. Greer suggests they may have been inspired by Mathers's foray into ancient Egyptian artefacts, his 'Rites of Isis,' but Farr did have a long association with Egypt. Yeats notes that Farr's lodgings when they first met were near to the British Museum and she would spend her days there, drawing from the Egyptian and Oriental exhibits, and displayed them in her home.⁶⁸⁴ The plays were intended on the one hand to

⁶⁸³ Farr, 1908 in Greer, 1995: 401

⁶⁸⁴ Owen, 2007: 65-66

spread their esoteric, occultist message; on the other, they were an outlet for her art, itself an expression of spirit influence. *Hathor* confronts the idea of material desire versus destiny or fate. Aahmes is the beloved of the priestess Hathor, but shortly before their wedding, sorceress Nouferou seeks to tempt him away from his beloved. He is told by the priestess Ranoutet, 'to-night the battle for your soul must be fought and won!' Nouferou (played by Farr), exclaims, 'I burn for knowledge, for the freedom of a bird upon the wing. I am weary of the speech of the wise, who have not wisdom.' Nouferou uses her feminine wiles and beauty, as well as her magic skill to enact her temptation of Aahmes. Aahmes succumbs to temptation and fails his spiritual test. He is punished with banishment from the temple, but Nouferou is merely scolded for putting personal love ahead of spiritual devotion. The message being that love, or a relationship, without spiritual (or occult) devotion will destroy one's life.

Shrine was written by Farr alone, and offers a parallel to her own spiritual journeying. Nectoris is a wanderer who seeks knowledge—not completely different to her character in *Hathor*. She travels to meet the sorcerer Gebuel, to seek from him the wisdom of the Golden Hawk,

which exists in a stone. When asked how she managed to locate Gebuel's secret lair, she responds: 'In my dreams I went into the forest where the bronze and gold serpents coil like flames amid the leaves, and they made me wise with great sayings, and the spirits of power passed into my spirit; for the forest was the forest of knowledge.' Nectoris gains entrance into Gebuel's inner sanctum by uttering the secret phrase, 'The light shines forth and leaves you desolate'—the same words the stone spoke to Gebuel. He assumes he will perish in the view of the stone, which contains not just wisdom, but the god Heru, trapped inside. Her 'spirit sister' Ka protects her, however, and Nectoris is able to bring the wisdom of the Golden Hawk back to her father in Egypt. Gebuel decides at the end that he will follow Nectoris: 'O wearer of the Golden Hawk! Daughter of Zozer of whom prophecy has spoken!... I follow you, and my priests shall follow you... I follow you, O great among women.'

This short play speaks to a number of occult ideas. First, that spirits exist and can, like Ka, be invoked to protect those on earth. Second, and most importantly, the authority and wisdom of women is not to be denied.

Greer writes that by 1892, Farr was a practising magician, experimenting with and honing her imaginative faculties and her strength of will; and by 1896 she was a member of the Secret Chiefs, the highest section of the Order.⁶⁸⁵ The discovery of Self, an important occult concept, was also something Farr had mastered.

7.3 'Know Thyself': Occult and The Self

Farr refused to permit patriarchal society to identity or label her. Her 'spiritual potency'⁶⁸⁶ as head of the London lodge of the Golden Dawn permitted her the freedom to self-define; something not available to most Victorian and *fin de siècle* women. In *The Dancing Faun*, Lady Geraldine blames society for turning women into 'shams'.

Mr Clausen, can't you understand what it is when a girl grows up and find out bit by bit everything she has been taught and told is a pack of lies... it's the governesses, it's the nurses, it's the silly novels, it's other girls. It makes me shudder when I think what a world of shams I'm living in, and what a sham I am myself.⁶⁸⁷

Farr had found her previous career as an actress to be dissatisfying; 'the stage isn't a fit place for a woman unless she is a first rate actress;

⁶⁸⁵ Greer, 1995: 121; 167

⁶⁸⁶ *ibid*: 19

⁶⁸⁷ *Dancing Faun* 120-121

she must be able to boss the show or quit.⁶⁸⁸ But in the Golden Dawn she found a means of self-identifying and self-fulfilling.

In the nineteenth century female mediums were objectified in two senses. They were objects of investigation for male scientists and objects of wonder for Spiritualism enthusiasts. Very few mediums recorded their experiences of Spiritualism on their own terms and their stories were predominantly told by others.⁶⁸⁹ Ghosts and spirits, according to mediums, used the séance or auto-writing sessions to tell their own stories; to empower themselves. Dorothy Scarborough titles her introduction to the collection *Famous Modern Ghost Stories* (1921) 'The Imperishable Ghost'; meaning the dead, though bodily deceased, persisted in being alive in another plane. By using these 'imperishable' figures, female authors of ghost stories sought not only to depict the newly-empowered, but to further their desires for greater empowerment. Most female mediums at this time were unnamed in reports by newspapers and the SPR, and few were given the opportunity to tell their own stories. The ones who were known to the public, such as Florence Cook, Lizzie Green or the Fox sisters were known via the men

⁶⁸⁸ in Greer, 1995: 25

⁶⁸⁹ Kontou, 2009: 6

who had verified their phenomena. Cook's visitations from her spirit guide Katie King, then, were only valid once the eminent scientist Sir William Crookes assured the public that he too had witnessed the séance phenomena. This was not the case in occult societies, like Theosophy and the Golden Dawn, however. Owen points out the 'close connection between occultism and innovative approaches to the study of the mind.'⁶⁹⁰

Every member of the Golden Dawn had to select a motto (in Latin) that would replace their given names. Farr was initiated as *Sapientia Sapienti Dono Data*, 'wisdom is given to the wise as a gift'. She often used these initials, SSDD, in her occult publications as well as her personal correspondence.⁶⁹¹ According to Greer, these self-selected mottos defined their search for meaning and their relationship to the divine. 'Through these mottos, we can glimpse the inner myths through which these women gave life to their souls.'⁶⁹² As Gilbert and Gubar point out, women will 'starve in silence' unless they are permitted the power to 'name' themselves.⁶⁹³ Farr, then, chose to follow the path of

⁶⁹⁰ Owen, 2007: 6

⁶⁹¹ *ibid*: 69-70

⁶⁹² Greer, 1995: 5

⁶⁹³ Gilbert and Gubar, 2000: 391

the occult in order to 'feed' herself and her spirit. 'By *naming* themselves, [Golden Dawn women] forged pathways to healing and empowerment.'⁶⁹⁴

'Golden Dawn adepts were taught how to formulate their own "Sphere of Astral Light," which would replicate their person, and to a certain degree, initiated consciousness.'⁶⁹⁵ More important than contacting other spirits was locating the Self; becoming familiar with one's own identity. Owen writes that more so than spirit contact, occult societies prized knowledge of and conversation with Higher Self; this, for Owen, sums up the Renaissance admonition of 'know thyself.'⁶⁹⁶ Someone like Elizabeth d'Espérance, who may have possessed spiritual power but spent the majority of her life questioning it, would not have made an effective occultist. Nor would any woman willing to permit herself to be defined by patriarchy. Lady Geraldine decides the only way she could possibly be happy is to 'show how different she was from the rest of her sex [and] cultivate her instincts and let them lead her whither they would.'⁶⁹⁷ Put another way, she is taking the occult step of self-

⁶⁹⁴ Greer, 1995: 379

⁶⁹⁵ Owen, 2007: 128

⁶⁹⁶ *ibid*: 107; 106

⁶⁹⁷ *Dancing Faun* 123

gratification; of deciding what fulfils her before trying to please anyone else.

Killeen notes that Victorians, in order to deal with traumas of their age, took to life writing (biography, diaries, etc.) as a means of re-asserting their individual identity and agency.⁶⁹⁸ This is why Farr uses so much of herself in her works; the first edition to *Dancing Faun* even required a warning at the front, reminding readers that the events she describes were 'purely a work of imagination.'⁶⁹⁹

7.4 'I always thought women were brutes, now I see it's perfectly true'⁷⁰⁰: New Women and Occult Women

In the preface to *Modern Woman*, Farr contends:

This is to be the Woman's Century. In it she is to awake from her long sleep... there is to be a revaluation of all values, old rubbish is to be burnt up, the social world is to be melted down and remoulded... but the old lies are in our blood—we still believe Eve and her shame⁷⁰¹

Unlike Hardinge Britten's softly-softly approach to the rebuilding of society, Farr is ready to dismantle patriarchy and begin again, a new

⁶⁹⁸ Killeen, 2009: 129

⁶⁹⁹ *Dancing Faun* prefatory note

⁷⁰⁰ Spoken by George in *Dancing Faun* when Grace tells him she does not love him, and will be going back to the stage

⁷⁰¹ Farr, 1910: 7

society informed by the occult emphasis on equality. She looks ahead to the 'silent blazes' of change which will usher in a fairer, freer Britain; which will liberate all women from the prison of 'torpid latent life' to which so many were condemned. 'Every day of delay in giving women the votes gives them a power far more deadly... It gives them the hope of standing up for themselves.'⁷⁰²

Lady Geraldine in *Dancing Faun* tells Mr Clausen the reason women are so badly behaved, is because they have been kept under lock and key for so long.

It is because we are kept under lock and key that we don't care what we do. We feel we are unjustly treated, and that we have a perfect right to cheat, and lie, and prevaricate. It is the only means of retaliation we have. Oh, I wonder if the time will ever come when we shall get fair play.⁷⁰³

Clausen responds with a bit of Spiritualist wisdom. He tells her everyone struggles; 'This place is meant for a struggle.'⁷⁰⁴ As the Spiritualists have taught us, it is what makes the next plane that much more rewarding.

⁷⁰² *ibid*: 17

⁷⁰³ *Dancing Faun* 118-119

⁷⁰⁴ *ibid*: 119

The New Woman, as has been mentioned, is a figure who is difficult to define. The New Woman church is broad and diverse, encompassing a number of philosophies and ideas. This description of the New Woman from *The Graphic* (September 1887) indicates that she is inescapable.

The fashionable beauty of the present period, that complex many-sided paragon... goes everywhere, she does everything... [she] can even hold her own at cricket; she drives a pair of horses like a charioteer, pulls a pair of sculls like an Oxonian, competes in the universities with her masculine rivals; mounts the roof of a four-in-hand, or swiftly travels on a tricycle; she practices archery; she is great at private theatrical... Of the modern lady *a la mode*, who wields alike the fiddle-bow, the billiard-cue, and the etching-needle, who climbs mountains, and is a presence in the gymnasium, none but herself can be a prototype.⁷⁰⁵

Not only is the New Woman incapable of being defined by anyone else but herself, she is everywhere. She encroaches in every domain previously thought sacred to the masculine.

In 1894, Farr appeared in a New Woman play called *The Comedy of Sighs* written by John Todhunter, It was a disaster, according to WB

Yeats:

Florence Farr... brought the trouble on herself. Always in revolt against her own poetical gift, which now seemed obsolete, and against her own Demeter-like face in the mirror, she had tried when interviewed by the Press to shock and startle... For two hours and a half, pit and gallery drowned the voices of the players with boos and jeers⁷⁰⁶

⁷⁰⁵ in Greer, 1995: 14

⁷⁰⁶ Yeats, 1894 in Greer 1995: 143-144

Yeats had little sympathy, which is a bit surprising considering his involvement with the occult and with such commanding women as Blavatsky, Gonne and Farr herself. He suggests that if she had declined to 'revolt' against her feminine beauty, she would never have agreed to perform in such a terrible play. It is a regressive remark for one so intimately connected to occult principles.

Occult societies like Theosophy and the Golden Dawn were supportive of women, valuing them as leaders and inspirers in a way that Spiritualism could not quite manage, valiant though its efforts were. 'Following the lead of the originatory cypher manuscript [written by Sprengel], the Golden Dawn welcomed women "sorores" to its ranks. Rumours about the existence "of a very ancient universal Rosicrucian society, composed of students of both sexes" first began to circulate during 1888.'⁷⁰⁷

In occultism, rationality and logic were favoured over emotion and passivity (though this is not to suggest that emotion was absent from occultism). Though these were ostensibly the provenance of men, magic still appealed to women and was still practised by women.

⁷⁰⁷ Owen, 2007: 62

'[W]omen were well-represented throughout the Order. [The London lodge] initiated 32 individuals in its first year, of which 9 were women... during its first eight years of existence the Golden Dawn initiated 315 men and women, with women constituting just over one-third of total membership.'⁷⁰⁸ Farr and fellow actress/occultist Annie Horniman reached the positions of Praemonstratrix and Sub-Praemonstratrix (respectively) in the Golden Dawn, and were its principal instructors in ritual.'⁷⁰⁹

Farr believed in devoting her time and energy to the study of the occult and perfecting her magical skills. Greer claims she 'craved the life of the mind' and found caring for her husband's material needs distracting and dull.'⁷¹⁰ She and her husband, actor Edward Emery, lived separate lives in London until he decided to immigrate to the United States in 1888, and she decided she did not wish to join him. Ostensibly Emery left to further his acting career in New York, but there were persistent rumours that he was involved in some less-than-savoury activities in London, and was run out of town. In *Dancing Faun*, the novel begins with

⁷⁰⁸ *ibid*: 62

⁷⁰⁹ *ibid*: 64

⁷¹⁰ Greer, 1995: 13

George Travers's return to London after having been forced to leave for persistent cheating at cards. Once back in London, George resumes his old ways, but is murdered by Lady Geraldine (his lover) for his troubles. Owen notes that she retained these 'advanced' views on women and marriage all her life.⁷¹¹

Farr's ill-fated marriage (or a parody of it) appears in *The Dancing Faun* in the guise of Grace Lovell and George '[W]e all have our moments of weakness, and in one of these he married this child, who was full of dreams, full of ambition... she married him at a registry office, and disappeared from the stage.'⁷¹² The couple live entirely separate lives; at one point the Traverses happen to meet whilst Mr Travers and Lord Kirkdale strolled down Pall Mall. Travers explained to Kirkdale that 'she lived in the country and he supposed she was up in town shopping for the day.'⁷¹³ George, in addition to standing in for Farr's husband bears many resemblances to her most famous lover, George Bernard Shaw. It is widely believed George Travers is an amalgam of the pair of men.

⁷¹¹ Owen, 2007: 64

⁷¹² *Dancing Faun* 37-38

⁷¹³ *ibid*: 39

Travers, happily, is not physically abusive to Grace but he neglects her and condescends to her. One night after having gone off without telling her, he comes home to find her frantically weeping, worried. He tells her he's been working on a plan to make their fortune, and 'my little wife will have to be very obedient, and do exactly what her husband tells her. Does she promise not to cry anymore, and not to spoil her pretty eyes?'⁷¹⁴ What he does not reveal is that the plan effectively involves prostituting her to Lord Kirkdale. Elsewhere she is 'little baby-wife' or 'little woman.'⁷¹⁵ Though Grace lacks the courage to kill him herself, it is another woman he underestimates, Geraldine, who pulls the trigger. Farr's instruction here is to beware the well-bred woman who has been wronged. It plays into the question first posed by the Spiritualists: if a woman is capable of reaching through the veil, what else is she capable of?

The last conversation they have, is Travers telling Lady Geraldine he was going to America to be his wife's theatrical agent, and that he hoped to swindle a bit of money out of her to make his journey more comfortable. After shooting him, her final words to his corpse are

⁷¹⁴ *ibid*: 24

⁷¹⁵ *ibid*: 31; 40

chilling: 'No, I will not suffer for you.'⁷¹⁶ What Travers offers is not love in the pure, occult sense. He uses her as he uses his wife. After George's death, Geraldine reveals to Mr Clausen:

He would have sneaked and lied and shivered through life, taking men's and women's bodies and souls and tearing them to shreds, dragging them down until they could see nothing in life but a struggle for amusement, nothing beyond but a rest from torment⁷¹⁷ (143).

His death, then, was a great public service. Clausen (wisely) instructs her not to confess, but Geraldine is at peace with her decision. She tells Clausen she has no immortal soul to be troubled. Grace is not particularly distraught at her husband's death either. She tells Geraldine that 'to live with him was to be morally contaminated.'⁷¹⁸ For Farr, the proper care and nurturing of one's soul does not very often mesh with an intimate relationship. There were rare instances when the love between two people was spiritually sanctioned and positive, but for Farr, and many other occult women, love and adeptship were incompatible.⁷¹⁹

⁷¹⁶ *ibid*: 132

⁷¹⁷ *ibid*: 143

⁷¹⁸ *ibid*: 148

⁷¹⁹ In *Women of The Golden Dawn*, Greer follows the lives of four Golden Dawn members; Farr, Maud Gonne, Annie Horniman and Moina Bergson. Of them, only Bergson had a successful marriage, to Samuel Mathers. Farr's marriage lasted a few miserable years and Horniman preferred the company of cats to men. Gonne would marry, but only years after her brief foray into the Golden Dawn.

When Grace tells George she has decided to leave him, he responds with a surprisingly esoteric view, for a drunk and a gambler. 'Our love was of that resistless kind, brought about when the appetite is so strong that every other faculty... are thrust on one side to gratify it.'⁷²⁰ He goes on to explain the reason he was so condescending to her was because he knew she loved him. Now he knows her emotions have given way to reasoning faculties, he can treat her like an adult. Naturally, he does not adhere to this, and treats her rather poorly until his death. For Farr, the purest and greatest love was transcending the limits of incarnation, that the soul would attain perfection. It is spiritual, occult, and immaterial.⁷²¹

7.5 Conclusion: 'I stood naked in a dark and bleak eternity and filled it with my exultation'⁷²²

Florence Farr was a gifted magician, a skilled occultist, and a revolutionary woman for her time. Instead of committing to self-sacrifice and unhappiness, as was the prescribed path for many late-Victorian women, she forged ahead and lived a life which was intended to satisfy

⁷²⁰ *Dancing Faun* 91-92

⁷²¹ Farr, 1910: 80

⁷²² Farr, 'Mystery of Time' in Greer, 1995: 347

her Self. It is tragic that, for many critics today, she is known as George Bernard Shaw's 'muse' or for her relationships with WB Yeats and Ezra Pound. Greer notes, of Shaw, that his renunciation of 'spiritual intercourse' with Farr makes him a minor player in the history of the occult and the women of the Golden Dawn.⁷²³

By 1900, the Golden Dawn was beginning to break. Samuel Mathers grew increasingly power-hungry, and his regime became more autocratic following his own falling-out with Westcott⁷²⁴. The Golden Dawn split into the First and Second Orders, with Farr moving to the Second, and resigning her position as Secret Chief. Farr began a breakaway group, though still within the umbrella of the Golden Dawn, called 'The Sphere', which taught advanced clairvoyant techniques to 'elite' Adepts.⁷²⁵ Soon, however, Farr and Annie Horniman fell out over the legitimacy of the Sphere group. By 1902, Farr had had enough, and resigned totally from the Golden Dawn, and joined the Theosophical Society. Farr travelled to Ceylon and taught at a girls' school there until her death.

⁷²³ Greer, 177

⁷²⁴ This parting of ways was principally to do with Mathers accusing Westcott of forging the Sprengel letters

⁷²⁵ Owen, 2007: 80-81

Farr is an underread writer, but her esoteric and occult works reveal a fascinating glimpse into the mind of a New Woman at the *fin de siècle*. In her writing Farr explores, more deeply than any of the other authors surveyed here, the question of the role of woman and the power of woman. She enforces the (occult) message that all must labour in what satisfies the individual and their soul—she does not suggest sacrifice is without nobility, but if it causes unnecessary suffering to the sacrificer, it is a pointless exercise. Like Marie Corelli, she believed art and the occult were intertwined, and that the purest expression of one's soul or Will was in the creative pursuits. As a New Woman, she eagerly awaited suffrage, and populated her short fiction and plays with intelligent, heroic women who, occasionally, enjoyed the company of men, but did not feel obliged to define themselves by their relation to one. As discussed earlier in the chapter, occultists were highly influenced by the Renaissance and the command of 'know thyself'—Florence Farr most certainly knew herself.

CONCLUSION

All people and all ages have believed, more or less, in prophetic dreams, presentiments, and apparitions; and all historians have furnished examples of these. That the truths may be frequently distorted and mingled with fable, is no argument against those traditions; if it were, all history must be rejected on the same plea. (Catherine Crowe, 1850: 26)

The study of Spiritualism has been an on-going preoccupation of literary critics for the past fifteen years or so. It has been, generally, written about as an example of the strange Victorian obsession with the occult and the supernatural. Broadly speaking, it has been critically dismissed as a fad or hoax; something which captured the imagination of the Victorians, but has rightfully fallen from popular consciousness. 'The Occult Queen herself, Madame Blavatsky, died in London on 8 May 1891; her real-life counterpart, the Empress of India, Queen Victoria, lasted another decade, finally expiring on 22 January 1901. With the end of the Victorian age, a Gothic era begins to draw to a close.'⁷²⁶

Spiritualism's pervading cultural influence certainly ceased during the Great War, as the bleak realities facing the boys over there, and the families back home, made its practices seem frivolous. Spiritualism, however, like its persistent spirits, has not disappeared. There is still a Theosophical Society today, and there are still Spiritualist societies

⁷²⁶ Killeen, 2009: 160

dotted across Britain. Gone, however, is the spectacle of spectrality; the spirit cabinets are no more and tables remain untipped. But the influence of Spiritualism on literature and culture which occurred during the nineteenth century cannot, and should not, be ignored.

Though frequently spoken of in broad strokes, Spiritualism encompassed a multitude of beliefs—as did occultism. Spiritualist mediums principally saw their role as messengers for the spirits; a means of facilitating spirit communication. Occasionally their own thoughts and feelings would blend and mingle with the spirits inside them, but they were largely quiet. Most mediums in Britain also professed a belief in Christianity, though sometimes it was more tangential than fervent. For occultists and Theosophists, it was not enough to make contact with the spirits; they wanted the next step. Developing the idea of adeptship, they combined Spiritualist practice with Renaissance philosophy and science to reach, and even control, the spirit realm.

The main objective of this thesis was to uncover the critically overlooked or undervalued writing of Victorian female Spiritualists,

Theosophists and occultists, and to seek their explicit and implicit statements on power, authority and gender. The New Historicist framework offers the chance to (re)view or (re)read these texts by locating them within a specific culture— what Emma Hardinge Britten called the Age of Spiritualism. Though she may have perhaps wrongly predicted that her time would usher in a golden age where Spiritualism supplanted all other philosophical schools, Hardinge Britten was correct that Spiritualism would have an overarching influence in literature and society at least in her own time.

The empowerment of spirits is noticeable in ghost stories at the time. The presentation of spirits as passive figures became passé in the Spiritualism era: spirits possessed greater knowledge and greater freedom of movement than earthly humans. The understanding of death as an act of finality was effectively dismantled by Spiritualist assertions that death brought enlightenment. In death, one joined the spirit world and was able to access all truths and knowledge of both the human and spirit worlds. Death, then, was all about liberation from the bonds of this worldly existence.

An earthly manifestation of the Spiritualist's search for liberation was in the powerful roles allotted to women. Women acted not only as mediums, but were allowed to publicly lecture and preach on their Spiritualist beliefs. Madame Helena Petrovna Blavatsky was one such woman inspired by Spiritualism. As I have discussed, she did not align herself with Spiritualism, in part, because she believed that mediums were not granted enough power. But Spiritualism did serve as an early influence for her. Almost single-handedly she founded the Theosophical Society, and dedicated her life to writing about its principles and philosophies. She gathered hundreds of thousands of dedicated followers across Europe, America, and India who were eager to hear from her and from her Mahatmas. Blavatsky was not willing to merely content herself with her own organisation, however; she fiercely battled her critics, and instigated wars-of-words with Daniel Home and Edward Benson, the then Archbishop of Canterbury. There is little doubt, in studying the character of Blavatsky, that she would have been an imperious and imposing figure whichever avenue of life in which she elected to work. I contend, however, that she would not have received world-wide celebrity—notoriety?—had Spiritualism not emerged and given her the opportunity.

There were other women, less audacious than Blavatsky, but no less dedicated to their respective causes, who also made careers from Spiritualism or the occult. Elizabeth d'Espérance, Emma Hardinge Britten and Catherine Crowe were well-respected figures in the Spiritualist community. Though Crowe did not possess any spiritual gifts herself, she was a popular and well-read philosopher within Spiritualism. Women like d'Espérance and Hardinge Britten, who worked as mediums, became the gatekeepers between the earthly and spirit realms. This granted Spiritualist women authority and a voice—both of which they were denied by the Victorian patriarchy. Marie Corelli was a critic of most spiritual practice, but, like Spiritualists, sought to reconcile science and faith by developing what she called electrical Christianity. Florence Farr had, after Blavatsky, the most visible public presence of the women examined in this thesis. Her involvement with the Hermetic Order of the Golden Dawn did not begin at its very inception, but she was an influential force in its proceedings, rites and initiations.

Female mediums were allocated a role akin to a translator: they received the words from the Other World, and circulated them into society. The words of the spirits were not merely mournful pleas from one family member to another; mediums received communication from great thinkers, writers and leaders. Whether or not they *truly* received spirit communication is, of course, debatable. But there is no question that the women studied in this thesis were able to translate spirit words into earthly authority for themselves. Each of these women had a different understanding and interpretation of Spiritualism, with Corelli and Blavatsky rejecting it outright. What links them, is that they all understood its importance as a cultural and religious force, whether or not they agreed with it. Their fiction and non-fiction writings reflect how they used or contested Spiritualism as a force. Each of these writers needed Spiritualism as the starting point for her career. Because it was such a 'feminine' (read: passive) pursuit, it allowed women a small window into the masculine sphere. What Crowe, Corelli, Blavatsky, Hardinge Britten, d'Espérance and Farr did, with varying degrees of consciousness and intention, was force their way into the mainstream, and become important public figures.

As writers of supernatural stories, these women sought ways of extending their voice and presence (further) into the public sphere. Though many of the stories examined in this thesis use allegory to raise questions about science, religion and the place of woman, that does not distract from the effectiveness of their ideas. In a patriarchal culture, all woman's writing is subversive, even if her ideas align herself with the governing body.

These authors used Spiritualist or occultist principles to make their voices heard at a time when female participation in the public sphere was only permitted under the strictest of circumstances. By mediating their work—short stories, novels, plays, treatises—through the lens of a 'feminine' act like mediumship, they found a small niche where they, outwardly, would not challenge the patriarchal status quo. But the Spiritualist craze and later the occultist craze thrust these women into the spotlight: their voices were magnified beyond anything they might have imagined. Spiritualism and occultism lent women authority in the private sphere, that d'Espérance, Crowe, Hardinge Britten, Corelli, Blavatsky and Farr were able to translate into authority in public.

As has been discussed, Corelli and Hardinge Britten, in particular, did not desire to see the overthrow of society; they simply sought to ensure that women had their place in public alongside men. Apart from pushing their spiritual/Spiritualist/Theosophist messages, the main function of their ghost stories was to issue a challenge to patriarchal authority. Corelli, Hardinge Britten and Blavatsky challenged the notion of woman's relegation to the private/domestic; Crowe challenged the idea that religious and scientific beliefs ought to be kept apart; d'Espérance challenged her critics and defied accusations of fraud to offer accounts of her personal, spiritual, experiences; Farr's esoteric works sealed her reputation, within occult communities anyway, as one of the leading minds of her generation. As Dickerson writes, Spiritualist women were imbued with the desire to 'reclaim what has been discredited'⁷²⁷—this includes the voices of the spirits, but also the role of woman in society. By challenging and agitating patriarchy as they did, both implicitly and explicitly, these women contributed hugely to the woman question and the New Woman.

Not all of these women identified as New Women or feminists—some would even have utterly balked at the term being applied to their work.

⁷²⁷ Dickerson, 1996:

But, as has been demonstrated, women transgressing into masculine sphere via writing or via public lecture implicitly asked questions. Emma Hardinge Britten's career was as a public medium: from lectures to séances, she was rarely to be found working in darkened rooms. At least some of her audience must have been men; at least some of them must have wondered about the rationale of paying to hear a woman lecture of religious and scientific matters whilst knowing she did not have the right to most employment or to the vote. The New Woman was the spectre of Spiritualism: it lurked, largely unseen in the subconscious of the men and women working in the field, and in the audiences who had their world views challenged. Occult women tended to be less nuanced in their relationship to the New Woman. Blavatsky and Farr wanted equality, and if they could not achieve it in this plane, they would gratify themselves with their knowledge from the next. Corelli had certain moral objections to the New Woman—to her supposed looseness and coarseness—but she was a firm believer in equal opportunity for all, especially in the arts.

The tensions between science and religion; man and woman; progress and superstition found an equilibrium in Spiritualism. It served as an

empowering force for the subaltern (women and the dead) and was one of the first industries where women could flourish. Occultism prized its female leaders, turning Madame Blavatsky into an almost-deity. Though these organisations have faded from popularity and public consciousness, their influence on society in the nineteenth century has left an indelible mark

AREAS FOR FURTHER RESEARCH

In terms of the texts selected to work with in this thesis, there were a few important ones that had to be left out, owing to the scope of this thesis (i.e., mid- to late-Victorian). Two of these are Marie Corelli's *The Life Everlasting* (1911) and Florence Farr's *The Solemnization of Jacklin* (1912). The former centres on a young woman who has Spiritualist-ish experiments performed on her at a shady convent; the latter describes a spiritual journey from frivolity to the 'solemnity' of a life dedicated to the occult. Both are fascinating, underread works that, unfortunately, were written too late.

I believe there is fruitful ground for replicating this study with women writers in other nations, particularly Ireland, which experienced the

Spiritualist and New Woman movements at approximately the same time as Britain and the United States. The Celtic nations were already understood by the English (particularly the ruling classes) as being inherently more inclined toward the occult and the supernatural; and their 'primitive' peoples likelier to believe in superstition. WB Yeats' involvement in Theosophy has been well-documented, as has the English practice of adopting Celtic paraphernalia: McGregor Mathers, one of the co-founders of the Golden Dawn, for example, was born Samuel Mathers, but changed his name because the Scots flavour (he thought) would lend him greater authority on mystical matters.

My research on Elizabeth d'Espérance would not have been possible (or at least, far more complex) but for two spiritual archive websites which host her material, along with a number of others. Both these sites are Swedish. d'Espérance had a great affinity for Scandinavia, escaping there when the accusations of fraud prevented her from working in Britain. It would be fascinating to examine how Spiritualism came to countries like Sweden, and the impact it had there. Spiritualism in Britain, France, the United States, and to a lesser extent Germany, is well-documented. But apart from d'Espérance writing of her fondness of

the 'Northern Lands' there is little documentation (that I have come across) on the rise and fall of specifically Scandinavian Spiritualism.

Spiritual healing is another aspect of mediumship that, like spirit communication, can be traced back to ancient societies. It came back into popular consciousness with nineteenth century movements like Mesmerism, Swedenborgianism and Phrenology. Madame Blavatsky was (allegedly) a gifted healer and made frequent use of these powers. Because of the scope of this thesis, critics like Alex Owen, Janet Oppenheim and Rhodri Hayward have looked into spiritual healing, but this is certainly an area which deserves greater attention, especially linking it with the 'laying on of hands' found throughout the Bible. Hardinge Britten writes that despite women not being permitted to practise medicine (in 1859) their care and compassion made them natural healers—and indeed most mothers at that time would have minded their poorly children. From a feminist or gender perspective it is worth examining the idea that the female healer existed in the margins, compared to male physicians, despite healing being such a feminine pursuit: it necessitates care, compassion, sympathy, etc., all of which were said to be womanly qualities.

There are also grounds to examine the dual (and often complementary) influences of Spiritualism and Mesmerism on literature. In this thesis I have briefly alluded to the somnambulist woman—that is, the entranced medium—but the mesmerised woman, in much the same state, is a common occurrence in supernatural stories. Nina Auerbach's *The Woman and the Demon* (1982) and Marina Warner's *Phantasmagoria* (2006) serve as excellent starting points for examining the seemingly-lifeless woman. 'Somnambulism figures vividly in the stories of Edgar Allen Poe and in the films inspired by them; hypnotic trance became a popular theme at the turn of the century, in George du Maurier's bestseller *Trilby* (1894), and in the Gothic film *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari*, made in 1919.'⁷²⁸

Hypnotised, sleep-walking, charmed, and possessed heroines haunted entertainment. At first they were subjects of medical experiment in theatrical settings: a century after Anton Mesmer's society success as a healer, Jean-Michel Charcot staged demonstrations at La Salpêtrière, Paris, in the 1880s, when he entranced his patients and then placed them on-stage and made them respond to his demands⁷²⁹

In literature the angst over the trance state manifested itself in somnambulistic figures. The notion of doubling, like repeating, is intended to have an uncanny effect—that a person could be in two

⁷²⁸ Warner, 2006: 52

⁷²⁹ *ibid*: 211

places at once plays on similar fears to that of ghosts and spirits. Like the entranced medium, the mesmerised woman stands at the border of life and death; waking and sleep. Their liminal states also ask questions about power and knowledge; agency and ability. The Spiritualist woman, for example, was usually able to enter a trance state on her own. But the mesmerised woman required another's (usually a male's) agency to enter that state.

I have briefly, in the first chapter, touched on the origins of Spiritualism, tracing it from earliest civilisation into the nineteenth century. There have been many studies of Spiritualism, but none have thoroughly explored its historical roots. Many critics have noted that there was female involvement in Spiritualism, and that it was so as a result of (perceived) female passivity. I do not deny this claim, but the question is there to be asked: what if women were in fact using a tremendous power that they had ceased using for centuries? Because of the constraints of this thesis, I was unable to make full use of the research I had done into this area, but I feel that it is a fascinating study, as well as one that is critically valuable. Spiritualist women, as I and others have argued, were pioneers in terms of gaining power and prestige. But their

forbearers, like Hild and Julian of Norwich really have not been connected to Spiritualism; neither have the early Quaker or Millenarianist women who prophesied freely within their communities. The research and critical studies on those women have focused, generally, on their contributions to Christianity, or to their influence in their own time. I contend that mysticism or asceticism is the precursor to Spiritualism; and that it is worth tracing the long history of female involvement in these practices.

Studies of Spiritualism tend to focus on London as the centre of British practice. It is undeniable that London was where a great many celebrity Spiritualists gathered—and certainly it was the first port of call for foreign mediums who visited on their tours. London was not the entirety of the Spiritualist world, however. True it was the home of the fashionable practitioners, and the ‘dinner-party Spiritualists’, but the places where Spiritualism tended to flourish as a quasi-religious practice were far from the capital. The North East of England, in particular, was a hub of Spiritualist activity: from wealthy Novocastrians, to the miners in Easington, to the shipbuilders of Sunderland, Spiritualism was hugely popular and influential. Oppenheim recognises

this, crediting Newcastle as the most active of the 'provincial' Spiritual Associations.⁷³⁰ But this does not really lend to the region the full credit it is due. In Chapter Three I discussed Emma Hardinge Britten performing a funeral in North Shields— a woman, a Spiritualist woman, performing funeral rites is extraordinarily rare, and an example of the openness this region had toward Spiritualist practice.

⁷³⁰ Oppenheim, 1985: 51

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