

BEYOND SANITY

Women in 19th Century Spiritualism Between Pathologization and Liberation

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Introduction

The 19th century was characterized by a great number of social, economical and intellectual upheavals, insecurities and contradictions. The impact of industrialization, urbanization and changes in social structures led to a questioning of various prevailing norms in social, gender-specific and also religious contexts.¹ Concepts of the beyond, the earthly and the intermediate realm were no exceptions to such re-evaluations. It was in this context that Spiritualism evolved — an inhomogeneous movement, a construct which is hard to grasp with very unclear boundaries, especially in the beginning of its development.² Despite the difficulties of clearly defining this loose phenomenon, there are certain general assumptions that can be associated with Spiritualist thought. One key assumption of Spiritualism is the attribution of unexplainable phenomena to spirit activity.³ In the context of Spiritualist thought, those spirits are located in an abstract ghostly realm which extends into the earthly realm inhabited by the living.⁴ It is therefore possible for the living to establish contact with spirits of the deceased “through a sensitive instrument (either a mechanical or electronic device) or a human *medium*.”⁵

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1 Ann-Laurence Maréchal, “Diesseits, Jenseits und Zwischenreich: Vom Glauben an individuelle Unsterblichkeit und Geisterkontakte im 19. Jahrhundert,” in *Diesseits, Jenseits und Dazwischen? Die Transformation und Konstruktion von Sterben, Tod und Postmortalität*, ed. Gregor Ahn, 151–73, Kultur— und Medientheorie (Bielefeld: transcript, 2011), 156.

2 Maréchal, “Diesseits, Jenseits und Zwischenreich,” 158.

3 Ibid, 153.

4 Ibid, 153.

5 John B. Buescher, “Spiritualism,” in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, vol. 13, 2nd ed., 8715–8 (Detroit: Macmillan Reference USA, 2005), 8715.

In most cases, such mediums were women, a phenomenon that I will further attend to at a later point in this paper. However, to summarize, a firm belief in a life after death is a decisive criteria of Spiritualist thought.

John B. Buescher speaks of two events that occasioned Spiritualism's advent. Besides the publication of Andrew Jackson Davis's cosmology *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind*⁶ in 1847, he mentions the events surrounding the Fox Sisters in Hydesville, New York in 1848.⁷ Kate and Margaret Fox claimed to be able to contact a ghost in the basement of their home using a special knocking-system.⁸ The sisters attracted great attention of the public, and especially the press, and triggered a new trend which not only spread throughout the States, but also found its way across the Atlantic. In 1851, the Fox Sister's supposed communications with the beyond were exposed as a fraud.⁹ The sisters themselves finally admitted to having produced the infamous rappings with their toes, knees and ankles in 1888.¹⁰ Despite these exposures, they were very influential, especially for the marketing of modern Spiritualism. Even though the Fox Sisters are often considered to mark the beginning of what we view as classical late 19th century spiritualism, the influences of the movement date back a lot further, also — or especially — concerning its notions of postmortality.

Spiritualism — Influences and Development

A Cultural History of Spiritualist Thought

The influences on Spiritualism's account of the afterlife, which has already been briefly outlined, date back to the period of enlightenment. According to Sabine Doering-Manteuffel, the secularization of worldviews in the late

6 Andrew J. Davis and William Fishbough, *The Principles of Nature, Her Divine Revelations, and a Voice to Mankind* (New York: S. S. Lyon, and Wm. Fishbough, 1847).

7 Buescher, "Spiritualism," 8715.

8 Elena Gomel, "Spirits in the Material World: Spiritualism and Identity in the Fin de Siècle," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 35 (2007), 194; see also: Kenneth D. Pimple, "Ghosts, Spirits, and Scholars: The Origins of Modern Spiritualism," in *Out of the Ordinary: Folklore & the Supernatural*, ed. Barbara Walker, 75–90 (Logan, Utah: Utah State University Press, 1995), 76 ff.

9 William B. Carpenter, *Mesmerism, Spiritualism, &c.: Historically & Scientifically Considered* (New York: D. Appleton and Company, 1877); Being Two Lectures Delivered at the London Institution, 150–153.

10 Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society*, reprint, Routledge Revivals (Abingdon, New York: Routledge, 2013), 6; see also: Reuben B. Davenport, *The Death-Blow to Spiritualism: Being the True Story of the Fox Sisters, as Revealed by Authority of Margaret Fox Kane and Catherine Fox Jencken* (New York: G. W. Dillingham, 1888).

18th century led to a questioning of certain Christian doctrines in terms localizing and defining the afterlife, in particular spatially.¹¹ The afterlife was henceforth increasingly defined as an ‘other world’ which was no longer distinguished into the strictly separated realms of heaven and hell, but rather marked a concealed occult realm.¹² This shift was significantly influenced by new discoveries and developments in various sciences, most notably by advances within the field of astronomy.¹³ The souls of the dying were thought to be able to reside in this abstract realm but also step out of it without endangering the living, as it was usually the case in traditional imaginations.¹⁴ So another crucial characteristic of the notion of a beyond underlying Spiritualist thought is the lucidity and hence the ability to transcend this border between the living and the dead, where the main obstacle was the human body.¹⁵ Transcending this border and communicating with spirits can be understood as the central common aim of all Spiritualist practices, no matter how greatly they varied in their enactment. One might think that this underlying belief in a general ability to contact ghosts and conduct conversations with them could be coined superstition and therefore be radically opposed to the doctrines of enlightenment and even more so the many insights of the natural sciences and new technologies in the course of the 19th century. It may even appear like an attempt to re-enchant a disenchanted world, to put it in Weberian terms.¹⁶ However, with regard to the self-conception of Spiritualism, this was not the case. A romantic ideal of mystically experiencing the supernatural played no role whatsoever in the construction of the Spiritualist identity due to the basic assumption that “supernatural manifestations are entirely natural”¹⁷. Therefore, Spiritualism did not seek to appeal to

the inward illumination of mystic experience, but to the observable and verifiable objects of empirical science. There was little new in the spirit manifestations of the 1850s except this militant stance which proved exactly the right formula to capture the attention of an age which believed that the universe operated as an orderly machine.¹⁸

11 Sabine Doering-Manteuffel, *Okkultismus: Geheimlehren, Geisterglaube, magische Praktiken*, Beck’sche Reihe 2713. C.H. Beck Wissen (München: Beck, 2011), 28.

12 Ibid.

13 Maréchal, “Diesseits, Jenseits und Zwischenreich,” 154.

14 Doering-Manteuffel, *Okkultismus*, 28.

15 Maréchal, “Diesseits, Jenseits und Zwischenreich,” 154.

16 Max Weber, *Wissenschaft als Beruf*, 10. Aufl., unveränd. Nachdr. der 9. Aufl. von 1992 (Berlin: Duncker & Humblot, 1996).

17 Gomel, “Spirits in the Material World,” 195.

18 Laurence Moore, “Spiritualism and Science: Reflections on the First Decade of the Spirit Rappings,” *American Quarterly* 24, no. 4 (1972): 477.

According to Buescher, it can hence be understood “as part of the larger culture’s effort to reconcile science and religion”¹⁹. So in fact, Spiritualism’s compatibility with established and newly emerging (scientific) interpretative patterns in the 19th century was quite strong. This compatibility was facilitated by an increased concentration of the attention of natural sciences and technology on the existence of invisible natural forces and energies.²⁰ Developments such as telegraphy, the discovery of X-rays as well as electromagnetic waves had a profound impact on the ideas within differentiating Spiritualist concepts and practices.²¹ By connecting the scientific and technological with the invisible, Spiritualism drew a connection between the physical world and the supernatural by explicitly denying a gap between the two (respectively denying that the latter should be coined as such at all).²² Hence the use of technology to contact the deceased or to process the information received from the spirit realm became a crucial part of Spiritualist practices. Various devices were developed to measure or capture spirit presence and communication from the beyond, like for instance chemist Robert Hare’s *spiritoscope* — an apparatus based on Isaac T. Pease’s *spiritual telegraph dial* which supposedly automatically transcribed messages from the deceased.²³ Another example at the interface of Spiritualism and technology is spirit photography — a subject that many famous Spiritualists showed great interest in towards the end of the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, most notably Sir Arthur Conan Doyle²⁴.

Despite the many different approaches which were created to access or experience this occult spirit realm, there was a general consent concerning the need for a medium as a negotiator between the two worlds. Even with complex technologies developed especially for spirit communication, such as the afore mentioned *spiritoscope*, a human medium “whose influence served to activate the device and keep it moving”²⁵ was still required. In most cases, such mediums were female. When tracing the development of Spiritualist practices and their influences throughout the entire 19th century

19 Buescher, “Spiritualism,” 8715.

20 Maréchal, “Diesseits, Jenseits und Zwischenreich,” 175.

21 Ibid.

22 Ulrich Linse, *Geisterseher und Wunderwirker: Heilssuche im Industriezeitalter* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fischer, 1996), 16.

23 Anthony Enns, “Spiritualist Writing Machines: Telegraphy, Typtology, Typewriting,” *communication +1 4* (2015): 13, http://scholarworks.umass.edu/cpo/vol4/iss1/11?utm_source=scholarworks.umass.edu%2Fcpo%2Fvol4%2Fiss1%2F11&utm_medium=PDF&utm_campaign=PDFCoverPages (accessed November 30, 2015).

24 Arthur C. Doyle, *The Case for Spirit Photography* (New York: George H. Doran Company, 1923).

25 Enns, “Spiritualist Writing Machines,” 14.

one can observe considerable shifts in the role and characterization of such female mediums. This is especially the case for late 19th century Victorian England and the United States. Before explaining the medium-centered practices of contacting the beyond and their implications for the women involved in the late 19th century though, I will start by introducing an important influence on those female conduits of spirit communication — the somnambulist.

Mesmerism and Somnambulism

The 18th century experienced a boom in the scientific exploration of magnetism and electricity. These developments, theories and discoveries had an immense influence on Spiritualist thought and approaches to the beyond. With regard to the role and characterization of the medium itself, the influence of German physician Franz Anton Mesmer and the further developed methods of artificially induced somnambulist states were especially notable. The key theory underlying experiments with somnambulism towards the end of the 18th century was Mesmer's concept of animal magnetism.

He claimed that a principle of attraction harmonizes heaven and earth, nature and human. The medium of this attraction, he stated, is animal magnetism, a "fluid which is universally widespread and pervasive." He further stated that all diseases result from disequilibrium in magnetic flow.²⁶

Therefore, the key to curing diseases was to restore the harmonic flow of the fluid.²⁷ The magnetizer (the treating physician) was able to achieve this by stroking over the body of the patient and hence directing the fluid into the body which led to a trance state in the subject.^{28,29} In 1784, Armand Marie Jacques de Chastenet de Puységur developed a method based on Mesmer's animal magnetism which allowed to artificially induce a state of somnambulism.³⁰ In this state, the magnetized subject apparently revealed an increase in intelligence as well as certain clairvoyant abilities.³¹ The supposed clairvoyance within such an altered state of consciousness was not yet interpreted as an act of communication with the spirit realm at the end of the 18th and beginning of the 19th century.³²

26 Eric G. Wilson, "Matter and Spirit in the Age of Animal Magnetism," *Philosophy and Literature* 30, no. 2 (2006): 331.

27 Nicholas P. Spanos and Jack Gottlieb, "Demonic Possession, Mesmerism, and Hysteria: A Social Psychological Perspective on Their Historical Interrelations," *Journal of Abnormal Psychology* 88, no. 5 (1979): 528.

28 Ibid, 530.

29 Wilson, "Matter and Spirit in the Age of Animal Magnetism," 331.

30 Spanos and Gottlieb, "Demonic Possession, Mesmerism, and Hysteria," 529.

31 Maréchal, "Diesseits, Jenseits und Zwischenreich," 159.

32 Ibid.

As Spanos and Gottlieb point out, the social roles of the magnetized subject as well as the magnetizer were very clearly demarcated in this process.³³ The magnetized somnambulist's role was largely characterized by passivity,³⁴ meaning "the behaviors of the magnetized subject were construed as automatic concomitants of procedures carried out by the mesmerist."³⁵ So the clairvoyant state of the somnambulist largely resulted out of a total surrender of the self to an outer influence, an ideal that is partly influenced by romanticism.³⁶ This ability to let go of one's senses and give into a mystical state where transcendence could be experienced (also in a very bodily manner) was mostly attributed to women. Therefore the female somnambulist can be read as a reflection of classical patriarchal discourses which render women more accessible for transcendent communication or even possession due to the assumption that they are weaker of will, more amenable to influence, emotionally more sensitive and generally passive. Furthermore, the distribution of social roles between the somnambulist and the magnetizer also speaks for a reproduction of stereotypes that connect femininity with nature while assigning the masculine to culture.³⁷ Mostly, the ability for clairvoyance in the state of somnambulism was attributed to women in poor health who were therefore particularly weak.³⁸ The physical weakness was supposed to make the transcending between the earthly realm and the beyond within the somnambulist state easier for the subject. This pathologization of the enraptured female individual is a trope that we not only find generically in the characterization of the somnambulist, but also to a certain extent in the (external) perception of female mediumship within late 19th century Spiritualism, which I will elaborate on later. However, a good example for the interconnectedness of illness and trance is the perhaps most famous somnambulist, the Seeress of Prevorst, Friederike Hauffe, whose states were documented rigorously by Justinus Kerner. This account also marks the transition from mesmerism to Spiritualism, as Kerner was the first to explicitly connect the somnambulist's state with the spirit realm. The subtitle of his publication on the case of Hauffe, which reads "Eröffnungen über das innere Leben des Menschen und über das Hineinragen einer Geisterwelt in die unsere"³⁹ ("Being revelations concerning the inner-life of man, and the

33 Spanos and Gottlieb, "Demonic Possession, Mesmerism, and Hysteria," 528 ff.

34 Maréchal, "Diesseits, Jenseits und Zwischenreich," 162.

35 Spanos and Gottlieb, "Demonic Possession, Mesmerism, and Hysteria," 529.

36 Buescher, "Spiritualism," 8715.

37 Sherry B. Ortner, "Is Female to Male as Nature Is to Culture?," *Feminist Studies* 1, no. 2 (1972)

38 Maréchal, "Diesseits, Jenseits und Zwischenreich," 162.

39 Justinus Kerner, *Die Seherin von Prevorst: Eröffnungen über das innere Leben des Menschen und über das Hineinragen einer Geisterwelt in die unsere* 1 (Stuttgart, Tübingen: Cotta, 1832)

inter-diffusion of a world of spirits in the one we inhabit"⁴⁰), already unveils this connection. It explicitly speaks for an approach towards the beyond as an abstract spirit realm which extends into the world of the living as it is characteristic for 19th century Spiritualism. According to Kerner, Friedericke Hauffe, a merchant's wife, suffered from states of semi-consciousness where she saw spirits and demonic entities with whom she communicated.⁴¹ Apparently, she was also able to diagnose diseases of others while in the state of somnambulism⁴² — an attribute which was later frequently assigned to Spiritualist mediums towards the end of the 19th century.⁴³

To summarize, one could say that in the course of the 18th and 19th century, the connectedness of invisible physical powers and unexplainable psychological or spiritual phenomena was of central interest to the scientific community. From Mesmer's theory of animal magnetism to later accounts of somnambulism, especially Kerner's observations on Friederike Hauffe, one can observe a focus on this intersection of the visible and the invisible, the explainable and the unexplainable, enlightenment and romanticism. Kerner's *The Seeress of Prevorst* marked a turning point in the interpretation of these phenomena by clearly assigning them to a communication with the beyond, as it was later the case with Spiritualist mediums. The influence of mesmerism and somnambulism on later Victorian Spiritualism is not to be underestimated, also with regard to the characterization of the female medium.

Late 19th Century Spiritualism

By the second half of the 19th century, a modern American form of Spiritualism had emerged. Triggered by events such as the Fox Sister's rappings as well as relevant publications on the matter of spirit communication, Spiritualism received enormous public attention. The second half of the 19th century thus saw the emerge of certain dominant discourses within the movement as well as protagonists that rose to fame, for instance Daniel Dunglas Home, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle, Emma Hardinge Britten, or Florence Cook. At first, the interest in the movement which, as I explained in the introduc-

40 Justinus Kerner, *The Seeress of Prevorst: Being revelations concerning the inner-life of man, and the inter-diffusion of a world of spirits in the one we inhabit* 1 (London: J.C. Moore, 1845)

41 Heinz Schott, "Paternalismus, Autonomie und Sympathie: Kranksein und Heilen zwischen Aufklärung und Romantik," in *Die ausgeblendete Seele der Autonomie: Kritik eines bioethischen Prinzips*, ed. Franz J. Illhardt, 219–30 (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2008) 226.

42 Ibid.

43 Buescher, "Spiritualism," 8717.

tion to this paper, can be characterized as rather loose-knitted, primarily arose within the bourgeoisie.⁴⁴ Especially physicians and lay healers who were mostly strongly influenced by mesmerism, experiments with somnambulism, and hypnosis were intrigued by the practices. On a sociopolitical level, Spiritualism was an anti-authoritarian movement which “was associated with progressive politics and social theory, and was most popular in the northern United States.”⁴⁵ The bourgeois impact of the movement also explains, in part, its affinity towards scientific and technological patterns of explanation of invisible, other-worldly matters. It was already in the 1850s that Spiritualism was no longer only an American phenomenon but had also grown increasingly popular in Europe, particularly in Great Britain.⁴⁶ Buescher observes that there were certain differences between traditions of Spiritualism in different local contexts: “In general, European Spiritualism was more influenced than was American Spiritualism by occult traditions, such as Hermeticism, Rosicrucianism, irregular orders of Freemasonry, and ideas from the eastern lands that Europeans had colonized.”⁴⁷ This also relates to the fact that there was never such a thing as a homogenous institutional movement of Spiritualism. While practices which influenced late 19th century Spiritualism, such as somnambulism, were still very much embedded in Christian traditions, modern Spiritualism had a rather divided relation towards established churches. Whereas some Spiritualist circles understood their practices and beliefs as a religious renewal of sorts which was nevertheless Christian, traditional churches did not approve of the movement. As Buescher explains:

Traditional churches vigorously opposed Spiritualism, attributing it to the devil and equating it with previous forms of necromancy. Traditional churches also opposed Spiritualism because it made revelation deliberately open-ended and subject only to individual judgment. Spiritualism moved religion from churches, which were public places subject to the control of traditional (male) authority, to home parlors, which were private places subject to domestic (female) sentiment, or, as opponents put it, dark places where people were free of restraint.⁴⁸

This quote already tells us a lot about the social dynamics inherent in Spiritualist rites and practices. Séances became established activities in small, private circles where spirits of the deceased were contacted in the hope of receiving answers to certain questions.⁴⁹ The participants tried to contact the beyond by practices such as laying cards, table-turning, or auto-

44 Maréchal, 164.

45 Buescher, “Spiritualism,” 8716.

46 Doering-Manteuffel, *Okkultismus*, 31.

47 Buescher, “Spiritualism,” 8716.

48 Buescher, “Spiritualism,” 8716.

49 Doering-Manteuffel, *Okkultismus*, 31 f.

matic writing.⁵⁰ Messages from spirits were then received and passed on to the participants through the respective medium. So compared to somnambulism, modern American and Victorian Spiritualism was much more group centered.⁵¹ The experience of transcendence was not only individual and direct, but also communal and — not to forget — taken as proof of the reality of a spirit realm.⁵² But despite the communal character of the séance, which naturally caused a shift in social dynamics and hierarchies, there was still a consent concerning the need for a distinct medium for contacting the spirit realm and similar to earlier accounts of pre-Spiritualist practices — those mediums were still predominantly female.

Female Mediumship in the Late 19th Century

When examining the scholarly analyses of female mediumship within late 19th century Spiritualism concerning gender issues, one can observe two dominant opposing discourses: The perception of female mediums as empowered and autonomous women versus the notion of the stereotyped Victorian female that is rendered passive, emotionally sensitive and ultimately physically and psychologically ill (quite similar to the perception of the somnambulist). The former is often seen in connection with Spiritualism's tendency towards progressive politics which also influenced its attitude towards women's rights of. "Some Spiritualists were the first public advocates of women's reproductive rights, and Spiritualists occupied the most radical wing of the early women's rights movement."⁵³ The gender roles inherent in modern Spiritualism were indeed quite ambiguous and one always needs to differentiate between the actual possibilities that arose from it for women (such as relative economical success, advocating women's rights, and somewhat open access to religious truth) and the underlying gendered stereotypes that rendered them suitable for mediumship in the first place.

In the previous section of this paper, I have tried to explain how late 19th century Spiritualism — besides being very communal and group centered — offered an individualistic approach to religious truth so to speak through the direct communication with spirits.⁵⁴ Ann Braude sees a correlation between this individualistic form of religion and the presence of women within it.⁵⁵

50 Ibid.

51 Maréchal, "Diesseits, Jenseits und Zwischenreich," 166.

52 Buescher, "Spiritualism," 8717.

53 Ibid.

54 Ann Braude, *Radical spirits: Spiritualism and Women's Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, 2nd ed. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2001) 6.

55 Ibid, 82.

According to her, mediumship subverted the structural borders which excluded women from positions of religious leadership.⁵⁶ Due to the direct mode of communication, there was no need for qualification, ordination, or organization which would have represented institutional limits for women at the time. This is a valid argument; however, it can be debated whether one can really speak of positions of religious leadership in such cases. First of all, this term itself poses a problem in the context of a non-hierarchical and un-institutional movement such as modern Spiritualism. Secondly, even if certain protagonists that were responsible for more or less dominant theoretical positions at the time could be identified as a religious élite within the movement (which is perhaps the closest we can get to religious leadership within the context of Spiritualism), one needs to acknowledge that there were only very few women among them.⁵⁷ While it was entirely possible and not uncommon for female mediums to gain fame and therefore also economical success and independence to a certain extent, the intellectual and theoretical foundations of the movement remained largely in male hands. This distribution of roles within Spiritualism between men and women points out that it was nevertheless subject to classical patriarchal categories of gender. As Moore indicates, the fact that mediumship was predominantly associated with femininity does not necessarily speak for a feminist approach but is rather indebted to similar stereotypes as the ones surrounding the somnambulist, meaning: "Mediums were weak in the masculine qualities of will and reason and strong in the female qualities of intuition and nervousness. They were impressionable (i.e., responsive to outside influences) and extremely sensitive. Above all they were passive."⁵⁸ So even though female mediums within modern Spiritualism were no longer dependent on a male magnetizer to document and control their altered state of consciousness when contacting the beyond due to the shift in the social dynamics of rituals, the qualities that rendered them suitable for the profession remained largely the same and therefore far from liberating. Elena Gomel observes that this association of femininity with the other-worldly also concerned the perception of male mediumship: "Mediums, regardless of sex, were placed in the feminine position of having to renounce the self in order to become what the word signifies: pure conduits, permeable membranes at the border between two worlds."⁵⁹ Therein she sees the undeniable gender ambiguity of successful female mediums between passivity and power while at the same

56 Ibid, 84.

57 Buescher, "Spiritualism," 8717.

58 Laurence Moore, "The Spiritualist Medium: A Study of Female Professionalism in Victorian America," *American Quarterly* 27, no. 2 (1975): 202

59 Gomel, "Spirits in the Material World," 200 f.

time equal dynamics applied to the male medium — only in the opposite manner, meaning effemination.⁶⁰

The essentialist and biologist explanation pattern of women's suitability for mediumship within Spiritualism also mirrors a stereotypical Victorian pathologization of femininity and female sexuality which is actually not that different from the earlier perception of the somnambulist. In late 19th century medicine, the hysteria discourse was of course dominant in this respect which brings us to the external perception of female mediumship. The supposed connection between female spiritualists and hysteria was a subject of great interest to many psychologists and neurologists in the late 19th century.⁶¹ For instance William A. Hammond, an American neurologist, released a work entitled *Spiritualism and Allied Causes and Conditions of Nervous Derangement*⁶² in 1876 wherein he analyzes all states of mediumship and pathologizes them, connecting them to female hysteria. This pattern of pathologization was of course strongly sexualized and also inherently in connection with women transgressing traditional gender roles.⁶³ "Medical psychologists equated ecstatic and abandoned possession with morbid and degenerative pathology, a perverse moral sense, and delinquent sexuality"⁶⁴. This is where the main difference between the external and the internal perception of (female) mediumship within spiritualism becomes apparent: While the non-sympathizing dominant medical discourse understood the mediumistic state as a symptom of hysteria and therefore nervous female derangement, "[this] interpretation was not shared by spiritualist believers and sympathisers, who contended that a medium voluntarily relinquished control over her body and fell into trance for the communication with the dead to take place."⁶⁵ Despite this significant difference in evaluating the female medium's choice and agency in contacting the spirit realm, the notion of femininity underlying both approaches remains largely the same.

60 Ibid, 201.

61 Ibid.

62 William A. Hammond, *Spiritualism and Allied Causes and Conditions of Nervous Derangement* (New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1876)

63 Braude, *Radical spirits*, 159.

64 Alex Owen, *The Darkened Room: Women, Power and Spiritualism in Late Victorian England* (London: Virago, 1989) 149.

65 Rosario Arias, "Between Spiritualism and Hysteria: Science and Victorian Mediumship in Michèle Roberts' *In the Red Kitchen*," *Revista canaria de estudios ingleses* 50 (2005): 169.

Conclusion

To conclude, one could say that, in the light of the plurality of spiritualist thought and techniques throughout the 19th century, developments in the imaginations of the beyond, an abstract spirit realm, are to be read as reflections of shifting values and ideals of a changing society. To some extent, this can also be said for the shifting perception of female mediumship within this system. However, the situation concerning women in late 19th century spiritualism needs to be regarded as quite ambivalent: They took on more active positions compared to the early 19th century and some of them even made public appearances and gained fame as mediums, yet they remained somehow passive in their characterization because that was what was regarded as necessary for a medium and also still subject to pathologization in their external perception. Therefore it is difficult to support the claim of some authors that Victorian spiritualism was actually a liberating movement for women, at least when thinking beyond the economic liberation of the few very famous and successful female mediums. Overall, it does seem as though the boundaries between activeness and passiveness as well as liberation and pathologization of the women in question were just as lucid as the edge between the assumed spirit realm and the physical world.

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Abstract

BEYOND SANITY

Women in 19th Century Spiritualism Between Pathologization and Liberation

This paper aims to explore the changing role of female mediumship within Spiritualism and its predeceasing movements from the early 19th century up to the late Victorian era. In the course of this exploration, the development of Spiritualist thought, its accounts of the beyond and the various means of establishing contact will be traced from Mesmerism and Somnambulism up to table-turning and bourgeois Séances. In all of those different stages of development, female mediums have played a central role. The assumption that women are more accessible for spirit communication or even possession derived from classical patriarchal discourses that rendered women as weaker of will, more amenable to influence, more emotionally sensitive and generally passive. Continuities and discontinuities of such stereotypical notions of femininity will be traced throughout the different phases of Spiritualist practices. The analysis of the ambivalent position of 19th century female mediumship between pathologization and liberation not only reveals certain dominant patriarchal discourses on femininity as well as their subversion but also interesting insights concerning the shifting perceptions of the beyond and its interconnectedness to the earthly realm within this historical context.

KEY WORDS: animal magnetism; 19th century; beyond; enlightenment; femininity; feminism; gender; ghosts; hysteria; mediumship; mesmerism; pathologization; somnambulism; spirits; Spiritualism; technology