

“STRANGE WOMEN TEACHING STRANGER THINGS”: MEDIUMSHIP AND FEMALE AGENCY IN NINETEENTH-CENTURY AMERICAN SPIRITUALIST POETRY

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the paradoxes posed by American spiritualist poetry in relation to the female voice within nineteenth-century culture. Due to the associations between the passive and sensitive feminine ideal, as well as women's supposedly innate moral and spiritual superiority, the ideology embraced by the spiritualist community granted its female followers a central role in the emerging movement while remaining compliant with the values of the period. As an example, spiritualist authors Lizzie Doten and Achsa Sprague made use of trance poetry to challenge the stereotypes which were meant to prevent women from participating in public life. By tracing the connections between mediumship and the act of writing it is possible to disclose the diverse strategies that such poets borrowed from spiritualist discourse in order to adapt their work to a readership that would rather believe in ghosts than in self-sufficient female authorship.

RESUMEN

Este artículo explora las paradojas planteadas por la poesía espiritista americana en relación con la voz femenina en la cultura decimonónica. Debido a las asociaciones entre el ideal de femineidad pasivo y sensible, además de la superioridad moral y espiritual supuestamente innata de las mujeres, la ideología adoptada por la comunidad espiritista otorgaba a sus seguidoras un papel central en el movimiento emergente mientras, al mismo tiempo, permanecía de acuerdo con los valores de la época. Por ejemplo, las autoras

espiritistas Lizzie Doten y Achsa Sprague utilizaron la poesía escrita en trance para poner en cuestión los estereotipos que impedían a las mujeres participar en la vida pública. Al trazar las conexiones entre la naturaleza de la médium y la escritura es posible revelar las diversas estrategias que aquellas poetisas tomaban prestadas del discurso espiritista para adaptar su trabajo a lectores que preferían creer en los fantasmas antes que en la autoría femenina autosuficiente.

*They shall train themselves to go in public to become orators and
oratrices;
Strong and sweet shall their tongues be—poems and materials of
poems shall come from their lives—they shall be makers and finders.*
Walt Whitman, “Mediums”

INTRODUCTION

The American spiritualist movement was closely intertwined with women’s writing since its early days. As a product of the accelerated changes taking place throughout the nineteenth century, this cultural phenomenon emerged within a historical context during which traditional notions on femininity and women’s sphere were being called into question. Its year of foundation coincided, for instance, with the first women’s rights convention and its *Declaration of Rights and Sentiments* in Seneca Falls, New York, in 1848. Spiritualism soon became an effective vehicle for the manifestation of women’s voices in the political, theological, and literary arena of the period, which contributed to unprecedented social advances such as universal suffrage and female religious leadership. As pointed out by the spiritualist activist Catharine A. F. Stebbins in the *History of Woman Suffrage* (1886), Spiritualism was the first religious association to perceive women as its main driving force at a time when most churches required them to remain silent (514).¹ In addition to performing the subversive art of mediumship, spiritualist women were renowned for relentlessly guiding campaigns in favor of the abolition of slavery, the reform of marriage, children’s rights,

¹ As Ann Braude clarifies in her highly informative study *Radical Spirits: Spiritualism and Women’s Rights in Nineteenth-Century America*, Quaker communities had hitherto been the only religious group to ordain female ministers in the United States. However, Quaker women did not enjoy the same degree of authority as spiritualist women (3).

labor reform, temperance, dress reform, and, most notably, women's suffrage. Such changes were clearly reflected in the copious literary production generated by the spiritualist community.

Besides offering women the chance to occupy a central space in the wave of political activism to which the movement was linked, the nineteenth-century Occult revival constituted a rich source of inspiration for numerous female writers, many of whom had first earned their fame as mediums and trance speakers. Spiritualist literature proved to be an appealing choice for writers, offering them a wide variety of genres to engage with, ranging from a very active press to Occult romances and consolation literature. The intense fascination with death and the afterlife during the Victorian period undoubtedly contributed to the widespread success of this field of writing, which reached the sale of fifty thousand books and pamphlets every year (Braude 26). Spiritualist women's approach to the paranormal plane provided them with the possibility of catering the public taste for sensationalist entertainment while also experimenting with innovative creative techniques such as automatic writing. Ghost-written texts were a highly notorious branch of spiritualist culture that, as the term indicates, consisted in allegedly channeling written messages from beyond the grave. A considerable number of American mediums turned towards this type of literary production, thus achieving a well-established profession, financial security, and independence. As this article aims to prove, the lives and works of spiritualist poets Lizzie Doten and Achsa Sprague provide useful examples of the above stated use of Occult practices to gain recognition in the male-dominated field of published literature.

The aim of this study is to examine the extent to which Spiritualism and the composition of trance poems may be interpreted as empowering tools for women's autonomous expression in nineteenth-century culture. In pursuit of a comprehensive analysis of this matter, special emphasis is placed upon what Hilary Grimes denominates "subversive uses of ghostliness" (90) in texts written by women, thus exploring the potential of spiritualist literature to verbalize social critiques and personal statements that would have otherwise been deemed improper for a nineteenth-century readership. Likewise, this article draws upon Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar's theory of the anxiety of authorship so as to shed light on spiritualist women's use of trance poetry as a strategy in their quest for a phantasmal matrilineal heritage which enabled female

literary creation within a patriarchal context. The following discussion focuses upon a selection of spirit-dictated compositions published in Lizzie Doten's *Poems from the Inner Life* (1863) and Achsa Sprague's *The Poet and Other Poems* (1864), two contrasting collections of trance poetry by spiritualist mediums which reflect diverse employments of ghost-writing in relation to female authorship. Finally, this text brings attention to the theoretical issues and problematic aspects of this choice of creative process in what concerns women's voices in the literary discourse. By combining such considerations with feminist readings of spiritualist culture, such as Alex Owen's illuminative work *The Darkened Room* (1990), it is possible to expose the contradictions which lay behind the situation of women writers within American Spiritualism.

SPIRITUALISM AND WOMEN'S VOICES IN ANTEBELLUM AMERICA

As Ann Braude illustrates in her account of the numerous connections between Spiritualism and first-wave feminism, the spiritualist community played a highly relevant role in the beginning of female participation in the public sphere during the second half of the nineteenth century. This was mainly due to the fact that it was, in certain ways, a women-centered movement from its very beginning. Spiritualism reflected long-established links between women and the realm of the Occult and the esoteric, which, combined with Victorian values concerning femininity, led to an ideology that perceived women as more spiritually receptive than men (Dickerson 31).² Although, in agreement with Alex Owen, "the spiritualist conception of women as uniquely gifted in spiritual matters was at once both liberating and restricting" (*Darkened Room* 8), these complex attitudes around female agency certainly permitted trance poets such as Achsa Sprague and Lizzie Doten to shape a voice of their own.

The controversial dialogues with the dead were initiated by

² According to Barbara Welter, the values of the period asserted that women were pure, pious, and passive by nature (21). In agreement with Ann Braude, these were the stereotypes that, despite their restrictive aspects, allowed women a prominent role in the spiritualist movement: "Spiritualism made the delicate constitution and nervous excitability commonly attributed to femininity a virtue and lauded it as a qualification for religious leadership" (83).

two young sisters, Kate and Margaret Fox, who claimed to have discovered a system of communication with the paranormal plane (Lewis 1850). As the fame of their mediumistic powers spread nationwide, they made their first public appearance in Rochester's Corinthian Hall, followed by similar tours in New York City, Buffalo, Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, Washington D.C., and Ohio.³ It was not long before other American women followed their example and began to entrance séance sitters by demonstrating their psychic abilities. As parlors, lecture theatres, and public halls filled with turning tables and rapping planchettes, it became apparent that adopting mediumship as a career offered remarkable advantages for nineteenth-century women. Beyond the questionable ability to voice the dead and silent lay an ingenious way of asserting women's autonomous presence in the public domain. Whether in private circles or civic events, the assertive role performed by female spiritualists was soon criticized as a form of "erotic self-display" (Leman 19) akin to the indecent exposure which was generally associated with actresses and prostitutes. In addition to this unusual contact with the audience, mediumship provided them with the opportunity of earning a decent income, as well as leading an itinerant lifestyle by travelling across states to establish contact with other communities of believers or engage in ardent activism for progressive reforms (Albanese 237, Braude 85). After all, the spread of Spiritualism across the Atlantic and beyond depended upon mediums and their influential oratory.

Mediumistic power was often demonstrated in trance lectures: public events during which the speaker would reflect upon a matter of social or political importance under the effect of spirit possession. Trance speech was a particularly common practice among women in the spiritualist community, perhaps due to the fact that it granted them access to significant ideological debates led by their male contemporaries. Although the commentaries delivered by trance lecturers covered a wide range of subjects, special emphasis was usually placed on what was then known as the family of reforms, which included temperance, the abolition of slavery, and women's suffrage. Evidence provided by scholars such as Diana Barsham (1992) or Barbara Goldsmith (1999) reveals how the

³ Catherine Fox to John Fox, 26 October 1850. *Amy and Isaac Post Family Papers*, qtd. in Braude 17.

campaign for women's rights became one of the most cherished causes for spiritualists, who, besides demanding universal suffrage, promoted the reform of marriage laws and addressed women's need for economic independence. Moreover, the philosophy embraced by the spiritualist community facilitated such revolutionary efforts, since it emphasized egalitarianism as one of its seven principles. "Women in the spiritualist movement [...] felt empowered by a vision of wholeness and equality that linked the American democratic ethos to a theology of immanence teaching the godliness of all human life," explains Catherine Albanese (238). Some examples of trance speakers who applied Spiritualism to challenge the patriarchal conventions of their time include Cora L. V. Scott, Laura de Force Gordon, and Emma Hardinge Britten, who, though born in England, spent most of her life in the United States and became one of the leading figures of American Spiritualism. Her attitude towards her transition from the private to the public sphere as a spiritualist activist reflects the extent to which the notion of mediumship destabilized traditional conceptions of femininity:

That I, a woman, and moreover, '*a lady at birth*', and *English* above all, that I would go out, like 'strong minded women' and hector the world, on public platforms! Oh, shocking! I vowed rebellion [...] to return to England and live '*a feminine existence*' once again [...] *the next week* saw me on a public platform, fairly before the world as a trance speaker (Britten 10, original emphasis).

Therefore, the spirits who allegedly guided these women seemed to encourage them to challenge their limited role in nineteenth-century culture. In addition to advising them to assume positions of religious leadership, as shown in Britten's case, these disembodied voices urged women to write and publish literature fearlessly.

THE MEDIUM AS THE WOMAN WRITER

As reported by Jessica Amanda Salmonsen, the nineteenth century constituted a rich landmark in supernatural fiction by female authors, accounting for seventy per cent of the ghost stories published in British and American magazines during the Victorian period (10). Why were so many of them focusing their work on ghostly subjects to achieve literary fame? In agreement with Hilary Grimes, it is plausible to explain this tendency by paying attention to

the multiple links which may be identified between authorship, ghostliness and female identity (87). For women writers becoming aware of their invisibility and alienation, the ghost constituted a powerful symbol for "the ways in which they were haunted by the desire to create in a society resistant to female expression" (Grimes 91). Dealing with "subversive uses of ghostliness" (Grimes 90) in the elusive realm of the supernatural facilitated the formation of a politically coded context through which they could examine and question their condition. Likewise, Grimes highlights the creative potential of writing about ghosts by interpreting this literary genre in the light of nineteenth-century parapsychological theories involving altered states of the mind. The philosopher William James and other members of the Society for Psychical Research believed in the possibility of understanding ghosts as manifestations of the subject's subliminal consciousness which could only be accessed through dreams, telepathy, or trance states. Grimes therefore draws a comparison between similar internal processes associated to the paranormal plane and the liberation of women's unconscious by writing supernatural fiction. Such strategies were especially convenient for a considerable number of spiritualist mediums who tried their hand at living by the pen throughout the long nineteenth century.

Spiritualist women writers extended this transgressive dimension beyond the literary text by claiming to transcribe voices from the great beyond while crafting a suitable instrument for female expression. Séance tables and Ouija boards clearly provided a fruitful space for literary production, much of which was believed to be encouraged by the specters themselves. For instance, Elizabeth Stuart Phelps claimed that the elaboration of her three best-selling novels was prompted by spirit communication (Hart 120), while Mary Dana Shindler wrote *A Southerner among the Spirits* (1877) following the ghosts' assurance that it would be a success among the reading public.⁴ In other cases, mediums transcribed directly what was dictated by the spirits in the form of what was then known as ghost-writing, or automatic writing, as it is named it today. This method, which contributed strongly to the fame of literary mediums,

⁴ As claimed in *Banner of Light*, Shindler questioned the spirits during a séance, "Do you wish me to write the work I am thinking of?" to which they replied, "Yes – go on; it will sell well" (18 September 1875: 1).

constituted one of the most popular creative techniques in spiritualist literature and was often used to channel the poetic energies of a deceased author and publish the resulting work (Kerr 16). Furthermore, as suggested by Tatiana Kontou, mediumship in itself involves certain parallels with the act of writing and storytelling (2009). While weaving her web of fiction around the séance sitters, the trance speaker engages in a form of “performative textuality” (Grimes 88) by crafting a narrative involving the forgotten dwellers of bygone times. Mediumship may therefore be interpreted as a form of phantasmal intertextuality through which trance poets emulated the literary tradition into which they would inscribe her work by allowing the spirits of celebrated writers to speak through them.

SPEAKING OR BEING SPOKEN THROUGH: THE AMBIVALENCE OF TRANCE POETRY

However empowering, spiritualist poetry remained a complex field for autonomous female authorship, since it usually implied a mediation of words uttered by other entities. Exploring the complications and possible limitations of trance poetry in relation to female agency entails a consideration of the ambiguous implications of being spoken-through, or, in this case, written-through. As Alex Owen illustrates, female religious leadership in Victorian Spiritualism was paradoxically based on the conservative feminine ideal of the angel in the house, among further cultural constructions of the era concerning woman’s nature and woman’s sphere (*Darkened Room* 7). Understanding the problematic aspects presented by spiritualist discourse may facilitate a richer perception of how spiritualist women made use of the restrictive values of the period to make their voices heard. One of the most evident examples was the assumption that female passivity was a necessary quality for successful mediumship, as it is manifested in the following observation published by the spiritualist periodical *Banner of Light*. The gentleman assured that “if the functions depending on force and muscle are weak [...] the nerves are highly sensitive [...] Hence sickness, rest, passivity, susceptibility, impressionability, mediumship, communication, revelation” (10 November 1866: 2). Women’s supposedly innate nervous excitability, moral sensibility, and delicate constitution were therefore thought to make them more receptive towards the spiritual plane and hence better mediators of communications from the beyond. As Owen clarifies, “in Spiritualism

illness [...] was interpreted as a cleansing of the temple in preparation for psychic gifts and was thus an acceptable route to powerful mediumship" (Owen, "Women" 137). Consequently, a weakened body and "renunciation of the conscious personality" were the "price paid for the authoritative voice [...] The medium's power lay in her ability to absent herself in order to become the vessel for spirit possession" (*Darkened Room* 11). Consequently, spiritualist literature often presents an image of the medium which is closer to that of the passive and receptive mesmerized patient, instead of the empowered speaker which might be expected as a result of the strong connections between Spiritualism and women's rights activism.

In her autobiography *Shadow Land or Light from the Other Side* (1897), the British spiritualist Elizabeth d'Espérance described her experience of mediumship as feeling like "a sort of whispering gallery where the thoughts of other persons resolved themselves into an embodied form" (271-72). In like manner, Anna Henderson's conversion to spiritualism was described as a model of submissive service to the spirits: "She felt drawn by an unseen power to devote her time, her thoughts and her soul, to this new and seemingly strange influence [...] until she became developed as a trance medium" (*Banner of Light*, 5 June 1858: 7). A similar conception of the medium as a mere vessel for external agents instead of as a source of independent thought and speech was conveyed during trance lectures. Whereas spiritualist men addressed audiences in the normal state, expressing their own views with no need of paranormal interventions (Braude 85), women delivered speeches in the "abnormal state" (Albanese 236) and were thus assumed to remain completely unconscious while performing trance lectures. As it may be appreciated in the following extract from the spiritualist press, such performances were interpreted as empirical evidence of the existence of spirits because women were thought to be unable to perform these actions by themselves. The fact that "a young lady [...] should speak for an hour in such an eloquent manner, with such logical and philosophical clearness" would prove "a power not natural to the education or mentality of the speaker" (*Banner of Light*, 3 April 1858: 15); since "lady trance speakers [had] never been able, nor even attempted to give such lectures in the normal state" (*Christian Spiritualist*, 13 January 1855: 9). In order to achieve recognition, spiritualist women had to adapt to an audience that refused to believe they could project their voices onto the public

sphere without “a male spirit speaking through [their] lips” (Willis 303).⁵ Trance poets also molded their expression to their readership, attributing the composition of most of their literary works to spirit guides, rather than their own personality. The remarkable list of ghosts who wished to have their words transcribed included Lord Byron, Plato, Samuel Taylor Coleridge, John Keats, Percy Shelley, and Charles Dickens, to name a few (Kerr 16). In such cases, the medium was often perceived as a mere conveyer of the message dictated by the spirits of eminent male artists, instead of as the original author, a fact that lends itself to interpretation of possible literary influences. In order to examine this notion more closely, it may be useful to take into consideration the concept of the anxiety of authorship proposed by Sandra Gilbert and Susan Gubar in their seminal study *The Madwoman in the Attic* (1979). In their feminist revision of Harold Bloom’s interpretation of the anxiety of influence for the male author in the patriarchal literary tradition, Gilbert and Gubar suggest that, although literature is inevitably inhabited by the ghosts of previous texts, the nineteenth-century woman writer’s relationship with the work of her predecessors differs in the fact that she has very few female predecessors to emulate. This alienation leads to “a radical fear that she cannot create, that because she can never become a ‘precursor’ the act of writing will isolate or destroy her” (49). Such considerations are essential for a thorough understanding of verses recorded by women who were literally haunted by the ghosts of their precursors and wished to invoke the words of the dead in order to disclose their own expression on the page.

If, following Gilbert and Gubar’s analogy, the alienated madwoman in the attic represents the social configuration of the nineteenth-century woman writer, the spiritualist medium shared a similar fate. Spiritualist women’s contact with the irrational side of the mind, along with the unconventional behavior they exhibited during séances led to close ties between mediumship and the “half-deluded and half-designing hysterical patient” (Anon. qtd. in Alvarado and Zingrone 230). As it can be inferred from the views manifested in journals like the *Lancet* and the *British Medical*

⁵ After attending a trance lecture by Cora L. V. Scott, the novelist Nathaniel Parker Willis reflected: “I was prepared to believe her an exception [...] either that a male spirit was speaking through her lips, or that the relative position of the sexes is not the same as in the days of Saint Paul” (303).

Journal, female spiritualists were particularly exposed to the threat of being incarcerated in a lunatic asylum (Owen, *Darkened Room* 139), since medical practitioners from both sides of the Atlantic warned against the menace which Spiritualism presented to women's physical and mental health, basing their claim upon the numerous similarities between trance states and pathological conditions such as hysterical fits and epileptic seizures (Arias 169). For instance, the British alienist Henry Maudsley interpreted the violent bodily convulsions and disconnected utterances delivered by trance speakers as clear symptoms of nervous derangement and underlined female hysterics' dangerous ability to "fall into ecstasies of religious transport" in which "they are deemed to be the special channel of divine flux" (Maudsley 397). American physicians like William Hammond or Frederic Rowland Marvin supported this diagnosis, drawing immediate connections between mediumship, hysteria, and diverse forms of social, sexual, or religious deviancy which were believed to be caused by anomalies in the reproductive system, usually a uterine irritation (Owen, *Darkened Room* 149). Female insanity and sexuality were therefore directly linked, thus contributing to the aforementioned conception of women as victims of a constitutional nervous instability that "trapped them in an endless round of sickness," a notion which "encouraged doctors to promote female invalidism" (Oppenheim 230). Frederic Marvin elaborated upon the fragility of the female mind and body in his lecture *The Philosophy of Spiritualism and the Pathology and Treatment of Mediomania* (1874), in which he introduced the term "mediomania" to designate a form of insanity that "more frequently assails women, and is usually preceded by a genito or venerio-pathological history" (Marvin 38). According to Marvin, the slight difference between a typical hysterical patient or "utromaniac" and a spiritualist medium lay in the fact that the "mediomaniac" would "embrace some strange ultra ism – Mormonism, Mesmerism [...] often Spiritualism" (Marvin 47) as a consequence of her infected or misplaced womb (Owen, *Darkened Room* 147). The hysterical spiritualist would

become possessed by the idea that she has some startling mission in the world. She forsakes her home, her children, and her duty, to mount the rostrum and proclaim the peculiar virtues of free-love, elective affinity, or the reincarnation of souls (Marvin 47).

Marvin's reading of women's quest for independence, public speaking, and desire to have "some startling mission" in life as signs of madness echoes his contemporaries' recurrent understanding of female insanity in terms of what was deemed socially appropriate at the time. As pointed out by Alex Owen, the association of "mediomania" with rampant sexuality and moral depravity sheds light upon the complexity of the line between genuine mental instability and the misperception of spiritualist mediums as madwomen due to the ways in which they differed from normative womanhood. Their subversive behavior put them at risk of being unjustly incarcerated, as in the case of Louisa Lowe, who began her autobiography during her seclusion at the Brislington asylum after becoming "a fully-developed writing medium of unusual power" (Lowe 5). Such conditions lend themselves to Elaine Showalter's feminist interpretation of nineteenth-century hysteria as a form of protest or resistance against a patriarchal society (147). Similarly silenced and marginalized on the grounds of alleged insanity, mediums and women writers had to struggle with "isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness" (Gilbert and Gubar 52) in order to secure their voice and presence in Antebellum America.

LIZZIE DOTEN: VOICING THE INNER LIFE

Poet and trance speaker Lizzie Doten performed a similar role to that of her colleague mediums by fluctuating between advocating for women's participation in society and remaining compliant with the values of the period. Although engaged in ardent political activism in favor of female economic independence and the reform of marriage laws, her trance poems and lectures perpetuated the configuration of the female voice as instrumental: "Woman does not need to cultivate her intellect in order to perceive spiritual truths" – she argued– "Let her live, only, true to her Divine nature and her spiritual perceptions" (*Banner of Light*, 11 February 1860).⁶ Her best-known work, *Poems from the Inner Life* (1863), is a collection of

⁶ She advocated, for instance, in favor of legislation requiring employers to pay equal wages to their female employees. Doten, who had supported herself by teaching and sewing before becoming a medium, was strongly aware of the limited choices women faced for economic independence. As argued in her short story "Marrying for Money," women needed equal opportunities so as not to rely on marriage as their only economic alternative (Braude 120-121).

verses received "under direct spirit influence [...] before public audiences" (Doten 40) to channel various personalities, including William Shakespeare, Robert Burns, and Edgar Allan Poe. Although this fact may be interpreted as an attempt to emulate her male precursors by modestly transcribing a wisdom "higher than [her] own" (Doten 6), the content of her poetry is more intricate than a mere reproduction of the male-dominated literary tradition. Besides the grandiloquent verses of her male predecessors, Doten includes a series of compositions dictated by the spirits of unknown women who reflect upon specifically female concerns and contemporary issues. In this way, the spirits become diverse identities which the author appropriates to invoke a polyphonic narrative of intimate experiences and social critique.

Echoing a long tradition of feminine propriety, *Poems from the Inner Life* begins with a justification of Doten's work as a mode of loyal favor to the spirits by "one of the humble representatives" (7), a recurrent discursive device among mediums with literary ambitions. The poet manifests a strong awareness of social judgment and the implications of a woman's voice in the public sphere while explaining her creative aspirations from a passive stance:

My brain was fashioned, and my nervous system finely strung, so that I should inevitably catch the thrill of the innumerable voices resounding through the universe, and translate their messages into human language, as coherently and clearly as my imperfections would allow" (8).

Nevertheless, her apologetic tone leaves space for an unclear acknowledgement of her poetic contributions: "It is often difficult to decide what is the action of one's own intellect and what is spirit-influence [...] Under such influences I have not necessarily lost my individuality, or become wholly unconscious" (11, 12). This ambivalence is part of a duality that remains consistent throughout Doten's text, which can be appreciated in the way the style and content of the poems differ depending on the speaker's gender. On one hand, poems dictated by male spirits such as Shakespeare or Poe deal with transcendental subjects, such as "Life" (86-91), "Love" (91-97), or the critique of orthodox religion in "The Kingdom" (118-124). Most notably, such poems present clear influences from the great authors that haunt Doten's creative imagination, thus involving the imitation of the male author's tone which Gilbert and Gubar

associate to the woman writer's anxiety of authorship (46).⁷ The following depiction of her feelings while hosting Shakespeare's spirit may serve as an example of the trance poet's preoccupation with her male predecessors:

His influence seemed to overwhelm and crush me. I was afraid, and shrank from it [...] I do not think that the poems in themselves come up to the productions of his mater mind. They are only imitations of what might have been [...] his power was mightier than I could bear" (19).

Despite such insecurities, Doten's texts present an interesting process of reinterpretation of the patriarchal tradition. For instance, the verses of her precursors are adapted to the medium's spiritualist convictions, as in the following Shakespearean depiction of the afterlife: "To be, or not to be' is not 'the question'; / There is no choice of Life [...] For Death is but another name for Change" (86).⁸ Likewise, the same message of communion between the living and the dead is given expression through Edgar Allan Poe's voice in the poem "Resurrexi" (104-109). Poe's spirit was claimed to be a recurrent visitor at Doten's séance table (Kerr 18), and the medium's automatic transcriptions of his verses were regarded by the British scientist Alfred Russel Wallace as "finer and deeper and grander poems than any written by him in the earth-life, though, being given through another brain, they are deficient in the exquisite music and rhythm of his best known work" (9). However imperfect, Poe's music and rhythm are undoubtedly mirrored in Doten's texts. "Resurrexi," for instance, bears a significant resemblance to Poe's "The Raven" (1845) in terms of its repetitive structure, rhythm, and imagery.⁹ The poem, narrated from the perspective of Poe's redeemed spirit, constitutes a hopeful spiritualist reply to the original poem, thus establishing a sharp thematic contrast with the despairing grief which characterizes the famous piece. In this manner, the trance

⁷ "Does the woman writer imitate the male author's voice, his tone, his inflections, his phrasing? Or does she 'talk back' to him using her own vocabulary, expressing her own viewpoint?" (46).

⁸ Further intertextual allusions in Doten's Shakespearean pastiche include references to *A Midsummer Night's Dream* (86), *The Tempest* (86), *Macbeth* (87), *Hamlet* (87), *Love's Labour's Lost* (87), *Othello* (87), *Romeo and Juliet* (87), and *Julius Caesar* (87).

⁹ Poe's iconic bird is present in an allusion to "the harpies and the ravens" (106).

poet rewrites a canonical text by transforming it into a spiritualist tale in which the speaker is reunited with his beloved Lenore in the afterlife:

Like the rainbow's seven-hued glory, blend our souls
forevermore;
Earthly love and lust enslaved me,
But divinest love hath saved me,
And I know now, first and only, how to love and to
Adore (108).

While clearly echoing Poe's rhyme, Doten replaces his ominous "nevermore" by an optimistic "forevermore" alluding to the spiritualist vision of eternal life. By borrowing devices from the male-dominated tradition to express her personal interest in the spiritualist doctrine, the medium is able to reinterpret the literary canon in search of an authoritative voice that may facilitate her readers' acknowledgement of her own ideas.

On the other hand, the fewer poems delivered by female ghosts give voice to more private and earthly concerns, such as family bonds and mourning. In contrast with the celebrated poets channelled in other texts, the ordinary women whispering their personal accounts through Doten's mediumship do not bear well-known names: they are merely identified as "Jennie" (41), "Marian" (66), and "Birdie" (73). Although female agency remains elusive in Doten's poetry, these compositions contribute to the verbalization of aspects which were intrinsically linked to female experience. For instance, "Birdie's Spirit Song," purported to have been articulated by the ghost of a young girl named Anna Cora Wilson (73), offers mourning parents a soothing conception of child loss by promising that they will be reunited "Soon on that shore, / Where all the loved ones meet" (75). The role of spiritualist poetry as consolation literature was a powerful aspect of what James Stevens Curl denominates the "Victorian celebration of death" (2004), as well as of the publicization of female discourse. As Curl illustrates, this historical period witnessed a cultural transformation in the perception of grief, shifting mourning rituals from the confines of the home to the public sphere. Mourning traditions, meanwhile, had long been attached to the feminine realm of emotion (Gleeson 26), and were therefore considered a characteristic part of women's lives (Walter 130). Consequently, in agreement with Melissa Zielke,

Victorian mourning practices functioned as a vehicle for women “to claim a unique voice in the realm of [...] writing and commemoration” and express “their desire to recover, remember and thereby validate the past lives of women and other ‘ordinary’ people” (31). Doten’s work allows a similar exploration of spiritualist mourning literature as an instrument to verbalize the narratives of such unknown women. Her trance poems, often delivered at funeral services, constitute ghostly articulations of intimate experiences of motherly grief. As an example, the poetic speaker named “Jennie” in “The Spirit Child” (41-66) mourns her deceased infant through the medium’s pen:

Oh my sister! [...] I was once a mortal mother [...]
I know
What it is to be a mother
To give being to another
Living soul, for joy or woe (41, 46).

Following a recurrent trend of her period, Doten’s consolation piece presents “scenes of excessive grief” akin to those which Paula Bernat Bennett characterizes as “ubiquitous in nineteenth-century American women’s writing” (185). According to Bennett, the nineteenth-century child elegy permitted female poets to respond to one of the main defining events of the era. As a chiefly feminine genre, child loss poetry “gave women writers a unique literary site wherein to pose questions [...] they might have otherwise lacked the temerity –or the motivation– to ask” (Bennett 186). In the same way, by depicting a sentimental reunion between a mother and her departed offspring in the spiritualist afterlife, “The Spirit Child” grants utterance to a subject which affected deeply women’s private sphere and family circle while also pondering upon significant theological debates concerning mortality and the great beyond.

Lastly, two poems dictated by the ghost of Doten’s fellow spiritualist Achsa Sprague pose a remarkable exception within *Poems from the Inner Life* as the only verses attributed to an acknowledged female author. A poet in life as well as in death, Sprague was regarded as a model for women writers and trance speakers (Braude 112). Doten praises and preserves her legacy by channeling “My Spirit-Home” (76) and “I Still Live” (80), which for the readers of *Banner of Light* were “evidently from the spirit of Miss Sprague” due to the intertextual allusions to her poetic works (qtd. in

Doten 76).¹⁰ Transferred from medium to medium, such compositions offer a valuable example of the use of automatic writing as an instrument to foreground female authorship by recovering it from oblivion. Doten's spirit poems maintained Sprague's vocal character in force beyond the grave, portraying her as a guiding revenant who stresses her duty to "bless [her] sister woman, / And aid [her] brother man" (85), thus echoing the activist efforts of the deceased spiritualist. These verses present, however, a notable contrast with Achsa Sprague's own poetry. Whereas most of Lizzie Doten's ghostly women linger at the border between private and public affairs, leaving their authorship unclear and partly eclipsed by great canonical writers, Sprague's published poetry displays a more assertive and political employment of the female voice.

ACHSA SPRAGUE: GHOSTWRITING FEMALE AGENCY

Identified by Ann Braude as "a case study in empowerment" (99), Achsa White Sprague's poetry and biography provide strong evidence of how mediumship enabled nineteenth-century women to assume a public role and verbalize their opinions. Having suffered from a crippling arthritis that forced her to remain in confinement and sometimes even "prevented her from holding a pen to write" for five years (Braude 100), Sprague's conversion to Spiritualism implied a liberation from "a life of miserable helplessness."¹¹ "Why can't I crush this insatiate urge for a life of action, this thirsting for knowledge?" she lamented during her joint disease.¹² In the winter of 1853, her aspirations began to unfold as her hand was purportedly moved by unseen intelligences while she wrote down communications from the spirits to which she would attribute her recovery. "For Sprague, the return to health represents a turn outward," Braude clarifies, "a shift from writing in her diary to speaking in public" (104). Truly, the spirits proclaimed Sprague "a teacher and a priestess divinely ordained" as she was advised to employ her voice to write for the spiritualist press as well as lecturing

¹⁰ Doten also claimed Sprague's authorship by ghost-writing about "incidents which took place during her illness" before she "passed to the spirit-world" (76).

¹¹ "Sprague's Diary," 132. Published by the historian Leonard Twynham in 1941. Achsa W. Sprague Papers, Vermont Historical Society, Montpelier. Excerpts provided by Ann Braude.

¹² *Ibidem*, 136.

as a trance speaker.¹³ Encouraged by this otherworldly counsel, Sprague enjoyed a rare degree of autonomy for a young woman of her time. In addition to earning her living as a popular itinerant medium, she was a women's rights advocate, thus keeping, in the words of the spiritualist reformer Elmer Louden, "the world of thought agitated by [her] *fearless* independence."¹⁴ Her preoccupation with subjects such as women's role in the public sphere and female authorship is explicitly manifested in her poetry collection *The Poet and Other Poems*, inspired by spirit agency and published posthumously in 1864.

Her semi-autobiographical poetic drama *The Poet* includes the most apparent instances of Sprague's defense of female agency through spiritualist writing.¹⁵ This lengthy piece reflects contemporary controversies around "strange women teaching stranger things" (Sprague 114) by narrating, firstly, how the protagonist is granted the gift of creativity and poetic genius by the spirits, and, secondly, a debate among the members of the Seymour family concerning the scandalous trance poet who is referred to as the "Improvisatrice." Structured around the question of whether women should write or speak in public at all, the dialogue includes Mr. and Mrs. Seymour, their daughter Ida, a writer herself, and friends of the family. The most conservative stance on the matter is embodied by Walter Clifton, who disapproves of the famous medium and believes that "She who best makes her home a place of cheer, / Fills most and best a woman's higher sphere" (67). Likewise, Kate Walters declares: "I don't believe in 'Woman's Rights;' such stuff / I dread; I'm sure that I have rights enough!" (61). Walters is characterized as frivolous and shallow throughout the text as she proceeds: "I think a woman in a public hall, / Lets herself down from woman's lofty sphere, [...] / And I for one, would never go to hear" (83). Mr. Seymour, on the other hand, is more sympathetic, but bases his argument on the period's idealized notion of the angelical

¹³ Undated messages by automatic writing. Folder No. 18 of Achsa W. Sprague Papers.

¹⁴ Elmer B. Loudon to Achsa Sprague, 4 February 1858. Achsa W. Sprague Papers. Original emphasis.

¹⁵ The text focuses on a trance poet whose sickness and miraculous recovery through the aid of spectral agents brings her fame and inspiration. Her mediumistic abilities, refusal of marriage, and familiarity with the struggles of the woman writer constitute several aspects that bear a strong resemblance with Sprague's personal life.

and redemptive woman who uses her voice in her moral mission to elevate man from his sinful nature, thus mirroring the spiritualist notion of the medium as a passive instrument at the mercy of higher powers:

No voice like hers to man was ever given,
To speak of hope, or point the soul to-heaven.
And who can better teach of God above,
Than she who has a higher sense of love
In private or in public, 'tis no shame
For her pure lips to speak God's Holy Name.
With all her power, wherever woman can,
It is her glorious mission to save man! (73-74).

Lastly, Henry Bruce, a radical reformer depicted as "a man of intellect, travel, and liberal views" (76), seems to adopt the most progressive stance by not only admiring and defending the unpopular occupation of the "Improvistrice" by praising "its weird-like tones, its native genius wild" (79), but also by placing her poetry above the established canon: "This was richer than I ever heard[...] Than all the words the world's famed poets sung" (79). Consequently, Ida expresses her wish to meet the admired performer in the hope that her work will "give strength to something in [her] that would speak, / That yearns, aspires, and yet is all too weak" (83). The family therefore attends a delivery of trance poetry by the lady in question at "a large public hall crowded with people of all classes" (109). The contrasting opinions manifested in the audience correspond to diverse viewpoints of the period: some believe the medium ought to "make her woman's voice ring through the land" (113), whereas others mistrust her ways and accuse her of imposing her "deceitful, siren voice" (114). Sprague parallels Doten in her intense awareness of the restrictive societal conceptions regarding women's public expression, yet her reaction suggests a more critical attitude. The limitations encountered by outspoken women are exposed, for instance, through the preacher's disapproval of the trance poet:

Sir, at the best I deem it real sin,
For her to stand such public place within.
You know that Paul says, sir, 'It is a shame
For woman publicly to speak.' I blame
Her very much; and then I have been told,

She teaches such pernicious doctrines, bold,
As if she had no fear of God or man (113).

In a spiritualist justification of female authorship and mediumship, the “Improvisatrice” replies to these accusations by delivering a trance poem to prove the divine origin of her literary inspiration: “In the summer land, / There’s a wealth of thought / By the spirit caught, / When their inspirations flow” (119). Deeply moved by the medium’s words, Ida gathers enough courage to publish the work she had been writing in secret. As a celebration of female autonomous expression, *The Poet* concludes with a final scene of mutual support among women writers in which the trance poet befriends Ida and becomes her mentor and adviser. Sprague’s poetry therefore constitutes a highly illustrative instance of the employment of spiritualist tropes and practices to verbalize and vindicate women’s voices.

CONCLUSIONS

Lizzie Doten and Achsa Sprague’s poetic works reflect diverse applications of the ambivalent authority offered by mediumship within the field of literature. Despite the complex dynamics involved in the channelling of remote voices, their works articulate issues of great relevance for nineteenth-century women. Whereas Doten seems to rely upon borrowed identities to do so, blurring her textual authority with the discourse of literary forefathers and ghostly pseudonyms, Sprague’s poetic persona is unmediated by spirit agency and thus better aligned with Gilbert and Gubar’s solution to overcome the anxiety of authorship: “to heal herself, the woman writer must exorcise the sentences” of the patriarchal influences haunting the literary text (77). As stated in *The Madwoman in the Attic*, this symbolic exorcism is achieved through the search of female precursors in order to create a matrilineal heritage in opposition to the male-dominated tradition (49). “If contemporary women do now attempt the pen,” argue Gilbert and Gubar, “it is because their eighteenth-and-nineteenth-century foremothers struggled with isolation that felt like illness, alienation that felt like madness, obscurity that felt like paralysis” (52). Having dealt with alienation, accusations of insanity, and, in Sprague’s case, literal paralysis, both spiritualist poets engaged in this revisionary process by seeking role models and exchanging words of comfort and

encouragement with other trance speakers through automatic writing. Achsa Sprague continued to inspire other mediums from beyond the grave as her spirit dictated poems to Lizzie Doten (*Banner of Light*, 26 September 1863: 8), Cora L. V. Scott (*Ibidem*, 25 July 1868: 2), and Melvina Townsend: "Sister![...]I love you still! / My strength shall be conferred [...] I come to you at night / In some still hour; / And lend my spirit's might / To give you power" (*Ibidem*, 2 May 1863: 7, original emphasis). In this way, the séance table becomes a collaborative circle in which female authors can ghost-write each other's stories, scribbling away messages that give voice to those spiritualist women who have now, in their turn, "become ghostly in the canon" (Grimes 95). However spectral, Doten and Sprague's spiritualist poetry allowed them to exert their ambiguous position between the separate spheres of nineteenth-century culture to invoke a voice of their own beyond the walls of the séance room.

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