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THE SPIRITUALIST MEDIUM: A STUDY OF FEMALE PROFESSIONALISM IN VICTORIAN AMERICA

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IN HIS JOURNAL EMERSON INCLUDED THE SPIRITUALIST MEDIUM AMONG the new professions that he believed had emerged in America in the 1850s. It was not a happy admission for him. The sudden and rapid proliferation of men and women who (for a fee) claimed to provide scientific evidence of an afterlife was in his mind anything but a sign of a spiritual awakening in the United States.¹ His listing of the medium along with the daguerreotypist, the railroad man and the landscape gardener represented a troubled concession to the realities of a country that already had more than its share of hucksters and humbugs. The leveling ethos of Jacksonian America encouraged all kinds of “unlearned” people to aspire to professional status. None pressed the claim more vociferously than those who presumed to act as channels of communication with the spirit world. Spiritualism grew into a strong cultural force in nineteenth-century America. Once the Fox sisters, with the aid of Horace Greeley and the publicity of the *New York Tribune*, had proved that people would pay to witness spirit manifestations, mediums appeared in almost every city and town in the country.²

¹Emerson, *Journals* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1912), 8:574. John B. Wilson, “Emerson and the ‘Rochester Rappings,’” *New England Quarterly*, 41 (June 1968), 248–58.

²The number of historical studies of nineteenth-century spiritualism has increased in recent years. Among scholarly works, see Geoffrey K. Nelson, *Spiritualism and Society* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1969); Howard Kerr, *Mediums and Spirit Rappers and Roaring Radicals. Spiritualism in American Literature, 1850–1900* (Urbana: Univ. of Illinois Press, 1972); Burton Gates Brown, “Spiritualism in Nineteenth Century America” (Diss. Boston Univ. 1973); Mary Farrell Bednarowski, “Nineteenth Century American Spiritualism: An Attempt at Scientific Religion” (Diss. Univ. of Minnesota 1973). Katherine H. Porter, *Through a Glass Darkly: Spiritualism in the Browning Circle* (Lawrence, Kan.: Univ. of Kansas Press, 1958), remains in many ways the best book on the subject. Anyone interested in the historical origins of spiritualism in America should consult Ernest Isaacs, “A History of American

Not all of them demanded remuneration (most of them would take it), and those who did, even in the age of the common man, encountered a host of difficulties in carving out their claim to professionalism. A medium first of all faced the difficult task of establishing a reputation for honesty. After that, an inevitable ambiguity clouded the issue of whether he or she possessed a trained skill or was tastelessly exploiting a divine gift. If what mediums did required no education and no planned effort, then what right did they have to ask for a professional fee? In fact, was it not a denigration of their spiritual gift to set a price on it?

Believers in the reality of spirit communication advanced various and conflicting answers to these questions.³ A majority of leading spokesmen of the spiritualist movement, however, eventually joined in a defense of the professional nature of mediumship. Whatever the source of inspiration, they said, mediums had expenses, their work was tiring, and they performed a service that not everyone could render. One medium who originally had worked for free changed her mind and said to her critics: "If my mediumistic gift is the one most in requisition, it is no less worthy of being exchanged for bread than any other."⁴ The most successful mediums who in the last half of the nineteenth century advertised in the press, hung out shingles and roamed all over the country meant to earn a living while giving something beneficial to their "clients." Professional jealousy ran high, and they were never very successful in building organizations to protect professional standards and interests. However, the Mediums Mutual Aid Association, which was founded in Boston in 1860, and a few similar short-lived groups, did what they could "to secure favorable conditions for the development and instruction of those who use mediumistic powers professionally as a business or means of support."⁵

Mediumship became a professional role identified primarily with women, even though many of the practitioners of the mediums' art were men. One census of spirit mediums which was conducted in 1859 showed a fairly even

Spiritualism: The Beginnings, 1845–1855" (M.A. thesis Univ. of Wisconsin 1957). Also R. Laurence Moore, "Spiritualism and Science: Reflections on the First Decade of the Spirit Rappings," *American Quarterly*, 24 (Oct. 1972), 474–500; "American Spiritualism and American Religion in the Nineteenth Century," in Edwin Gaustad, ed., *The Rise of Adventism* (New York: Harper, 1974).

³For a summary of the issues and two opposite points of view, see Emma Hardinge, "Compensation of Mediums" *Banner of Light* (hereafter *BL*), Oct. 22, 1859, and the letter from A. C. Robinson, *BL*, May 5, 1866. The *BL*, a weekly spiritualist newspaper that lasted through the nineteenth century, is the richest single printed source on all aspects of the movement. Despite its wide circulation, complete runs are rare (to my knowledge the American Antiquarian Society has the most complete set) and historians have made very little use of it.

⁴Letter from Emma Hardinge to *BL*, July 27, 1861.

⁵Quoted in Isaacs, "A History of Spiritualism," p. 180.

balance between the sexes—121 women as against 110 men.⁶ The men even accounted for some of the most famous of the nineteenth-century spirit communicators. For example, no female medium in Victorian America ever quite captured the attention accorded over many years to Daniel Dunglas Home. Home's admirers in a dozen countries claimed not only that he put his sitters in contact with the dead, but also that he levitated his own body and floated horizontally above their heads. In his most celebrated exhibition he reportedly floated out of a window seventy feet above a London street and came in through another window seven and a half feet away.⁷

Despite Home, however, and despite other men allegedly adept at invoking spirits, the popular impression persisted that mediumship was female. Newspapers hostile to the vogue of spiritualism, and there were many of them, characterized male mediums as "addle-headed feminine men."⁸ For, according to unfriendly accounts, mediumship represented above all else the corruption of femininity. A medium was a person whose generalized female traits had developed in perverse and bizarre ways. Spiritualists themselves, while they rejected the notion that mediumship involved any corruption of womanly qualities, at least agreed with critics that mediumship was an occupation suited especially for women. It was in any case one of the few career opportunities open to women in the nineteenth century. The females who took advantage of it did nothing to discourage the notion that successful mediumship grew from the cultivation of specific traits that in the nineteenth century defined femininity.⁹

A search through nineteenth-century spiritualist literature readily reveals what those traits were considered to be. Phrenological studies, which figured in many essays about mediumistic powers, reported the same thing. 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. After all, it was queried, what spirit could manifest anything through a medium whose own personality was strongly

⁶Uriah Clark, ed., *The Spiritual Register for 1859—Facts, Philosophy, Statistics of Spiritualism*.

⁷Slater Brown, *The Heyday of Spiritualism* (New York: Hawthorn Books, 1970), pp. 243–45.

⁸Mortimer Thomson, *Doesticks What He Says* (New York, 1855), quoted in Kerr, *Mediums and Spirit Rappers and Roaring Radicals*, p. 40.

⁹For an analysis of another professional role identified with women, see Dee Garrison, "The Tender Technicians: The Feminization of Public Librarianship, 1876–1905," *Journal of Social History*, 6 (Winter 1972–73), 131–59. Other professional roles for women included nursing and teaching. Also on the problem of professional women, see Ann Douglas Wood, "The 'Scribbling Women' and Fanny Fern: Why Women Wrote," *American Quarterly*, 23 (Spring 1971), 3–24.

assertive? The success of spirit communication depended on the ability of mediums to give up their own identity to become the instruments of others.¹⁰

Self-sacrifice and passiveness were among the things that, in the nineteenth-century understanding, made for the moral superiority of women over men. Those were the qualities that women used in the home to promote domestic felicity.¹¹ The uses to which female mediums put those same qualities in areas outside the home appeared dangerously inappropriate to many people, even rebellious. But if putting female traits to professional uses was rebellious, the conservative aspects of the rebellion, at least in the case of mediumship, need to be kept in mind. Female mediums did not reject the concept of Victorian womanhood in its entirety. To an amazing degree they accepted sickness, suffering and self-sacrifice as part of the natural lot of women. Those ills in fact served to justify the importance of their profession. Their everlasting willingness to give of themselves for the spiritual benefit of others—even to the point of their own physical impairment—made mediumship in their eyes a dignified calling. The medium could not boast of a college degree to justify professional status. A long illness preceding and accompanying the career of a successful medium served as a common substitute.

The female medium's acceptance of the feminine definition of her profession was not merely a ploy contrived to gain a place in a man's world that she was determined to have anyway. She took her womanhood seriously, and her concept of femininity affected her professional behavior in a variety of ways. For one thing she was extremely reluctant to accept personal responsibility for her vocational choice. She blamed her course of action on the spirits that controlled her. The story is the same in all autobiographies of female mediums. They were, they reported, frightened by their powers and reluctant to develop and demonstrate them. However, the spirit controls insisted and forced their wills into compliance. Emma Hardinge came from England to America as a young person, and, after failing as an

¹⁰For nineteenth-century images of women, see Carroll Smith-Rosenberg and Charles Rosenberg, "The Female Animal: Medical and Biological Views of Woman and Her Role in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of American History*, 60 (Sept. 1973), 332–56; Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "The Hysterical Woman: Sex Roles and Role Conflict in 19th Century America," *Social Research*, 39 (Winter 1972), 652–78; Ann Douglas Wood, "The Fashionable Diseases: Women's Complaints and Their Treatment in Nineteenth-Century America," *Journal of Interdisciplinary History*, 4 (Summer 1973), 25–52.

¹¹The theme of self-sacrifice is a central concern in Kathryn Kish Sklar, *Catherine Beecher: A Study in American Domesticity* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1973). See also Barbara Welter, "The Cult of True Womanhood, 1820–1860," *American Quarterly*, 18 (Summer 1966), 151–74, and Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, "Beauty, the Beast and the Militant Woman: A Case Study in Sex Roles and Social Stress in Jacksonian America," *American Quarterly*, 23 (Oct. 1971), 562–84.

actress, she became one of the most successful public mediums of the late nineteenth century. However, when she first learned of her professional destiny at a spirit circle, she rushed out of the room with horror and tumbled down the stairs.¹² Miss Ellen D. Starkweather, when initially confronted with the news that she was to become a medium, also tried a dash from the room. She luckily was saved a similar crash in the stairwell when a table mysteriously slid across the room to block her exit and seal her fate.¹³

Female mediums almost always went on the stage as “trance” mediums. In this respect they differed significantly from their male counterparts. Male mediums needed their own rationalizations to take up work in so highly controversial a field as mediumship. But at least, once set upon their course, they did not have to overcome additional scruples about the appropriateness of their sex appearing before a public audience. In contrast, the female medium who gave public performances stood in defiance of St. Paul’s admonition against women preaching in public—an admonition that most American churches still heeded in the nineteenth century. Speaking in trance was good theater. It was also a way to blunt the defiance. The words of the female medium, delivered while she was in a deep state of somnambulism, were supposedly not her own but those of her spirit control. In the campaign to make the truths of spiritualism known to the world, female mediums left what was termed “normal speaking” to the men.¹⁴ In many of their activities, and certainly in private sittings, male and female mediums did much the same sorts of things. But the women, in contrast to the men, generally mounted the public stage as passively as possible.

One must ask, of course, in view of the deference that many female mediums paid to social conventions, why they bothered with a professional role at all. The deference was certainly not sufficient to placate critics. In many instances they faced the scorn of friends and family who disapproved generally of women who worked, and especially of women who worked in so public and controversial an enterprise. The use of the trance and the shifting of the blame to spirit controls did not make the work more palatable to those who thought that either trickery or the Devil was behind spiritualist performances.

If the money had been better, the motives of the female medium would

¹² *Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten*, Mrs. Margaret Wilkinson, ed. (London: John Heywood, 1900), 22–26. Because she married late in her professional career, I have retained the maiden name of Hardinge throughout the text.

¹³ “Biography of Miss Ellen D. Starkweather,” *BL*, Nov. 27, 1858.

¹⁴ “Normal speaking” meant that one spoke from one’s own prepared text. In one count most of the men listed as spiritualist orators fell into the category “normal speakers.” However, 100 of the 121 listed women were “trance speakers.” Clark, *The Spiritual Register for 1859*.

pose less of a problem. Wealth overcame as many principles in the nineteenth century as it does in our own and provided compensation for the friends one had lost in the process of acquiring it. Yet mediumship, contrary to the charges frequently made by the enemies of spiritualism, was not usually a way to get rich. Sometimes a wealthy benefactor would act as a patron of mediums. For example, Horace Day used some of the profits from the manufacture of rubber products to house Kate Fox in comfortable circumstances in New York City. In the mid-1850s he paid her a \$1,200 annual salary to give free sittings for all interested investigators. Cornelius Vanderbilt, Charles Partridge, Henry Seybert, Henry J. Newton and David Underhill were others who at one time or another rendered financial aid to various mediums. Luther Marsh, an aging New York attorney, went so far as to turn over his handsome private residence to Madame Diss Debar, one of the most notorious charlatans of the 1880s.¹⁵ A few American mediums also managed to move in European aristocratic circles, for spiritualism became an entertainment demanded by the crowned heads of England and the Continent. D. D. Home, surely the most successful in this respect, levitated tables for Napoleon III, Czar Alexander II and Queen Sophia of Holland. In addition he married a Russian noble lady, whose estate unfortunately did not pass to him after her death, and almost succeeded in getting a 75-year-old English widow worth 140,000 pounds to adopt him as her son and legal heir.¹⁶

Normal earnings, however, for both male and female mediums were modest. The average medium, and the available evidence indicates that the sex of the medium was not important with respect to fees, got \$5 for an evening's work away from home in the last half of the nineteenth century. Private home sittings brought in \$1 per hour.¹⁷ Income was irregular because mediums normally could not depend on a regular clientele—at least for extended periods of time in any one place. When a medium traveled, the financial returns were even more undependable. Warren Chase, who was a well-known spiritualist lecturer for over forty years, reported a typical year's earnings as \$425, a sum derived from 121 lectures. He paid for his own travel arrangements and a good share of the cost of food and lodging.¹⁸ Through their letters to the spiritualist press, female mediums complained

¹⁵ *New York Times*, March 29, 30, 31, April 1, 2, 3, 1888.

¹⁶ D. D. Home, *Incidents in My Life*, Vol. I (New York: Carleton, 1863), Vol. II (New York: Holt and Williams, 1872); Jean Burton, *Heyday of a Wizard: Daniel Home, the Medium* (New York: Knopf, 1944).

¹⁷ Letter of A. B. Child to *BL*, July 31, 1868. A wealth of other material in the *BL* and other spiritualist publications, including advertisements, gives general support to the modest level of fees.

¹⁸ Emma Hardinge Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism: A Twenty Years' Record of the Communion Between Earth and the World of Spirits* (New York: published by the author, 1870), p. 273.

bitterly of low compensation.¹⁹ Of course, such complaints do not suggest that mediums could have done better in any other line of work. Nor is there much evidence to suggest that mediums typically ended their careers as paupers. On the other hand, the monetary returns from the professional practice of mediumship do not by themselves provide an explanation for the willingness of people to endure the very real hardships of the work. While the self-conscious frauds who entered the field cared nothing about social ostracism, there were many others who did believe in the worth and dignity of what they were doing. For them social ostracism was not a pleasant thing. Yet they persisted in their calling, some for amazingly long periods of time.

Personal conviction drove mediums on in their calling. And so did the attention which they received. The women who gravitated toward mediumship had rarely received public attention, first because they were women, and second because they came from a level on the social scale where the men they knew reflected little glory on them. The vicarious sense of fame that came from being wives of respected husbands was by and large unknown to them. Some had lost their fathers early in life and had not been doted on in childhood. Many had had unfortunate experiences with male suitors and husbands. There was no consistent marital pattern among mediums. Many married. Many divorced and remarried. Many remained single. But almost all of them who began their careers as adults felt neglected and useless before undertaking professional life.

The most successful mediums in the nineteenth century derived enormous satisfaction from public acclaim. In their autobiographies they made no effort to conceal that fact.²⁰ Acclaim made up for any public

¹⁹For example, Augusta A. Currier wrote to the *BL*, Dec. 23, 1865, that she had yet to see "the first medium who has been able to earn a decent competency by the exercise of his or her spiritual gifts." The level of fees became a matter of professional jealousy. Lita H. Barney charged that famous mediums set too high a fee, leaving nothing for the rest of them whose spiritual gifts were just as great. *BL*, Sept. 21, 1861.

²⁰Autobiographical and semiautobiographical accounts of nineteenth-century female mediums include Amanda T. Jones, *A Psychic Autobiography* (New York: Graves Pub. Co., 1910); Reuben Briggs Davenport, *The Death Blow to Spiritualism: Being the True Story of the Fox Sisters* (New York: G. W. Dillingham, 1888); Margaret Wilkinson, ed., *Autobiography of Emma Hardinge Britten* (London: John Heywood, 1900); Harrison D. Barrett, *Life Work of Cora L. V. Richmond* (Chicago: Hack and Anderson, 1895); Mrs. Nettie Colburn Maynard, *Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist? or, Curious Revelations from the Life of a Trance Medium* (Philadelphia: Rufus C. Hartranft, 1891); Abram H. Dailey, *Mollie Fancher, The Brooklyn Enigma* (Brooklyn: Press of Eagle Book Printing Dept., 1894); Anne Manning Robbins, *Past and Present with Mrs. Piper* (New York: Henry Holt, 1921). These should be compared to the memoirs of twentieth-century female mediums; for example, Mrs. Cecil M. Cook, *The Voice Triumphant: The Revelations of a Medium* (New York: Knopf, 1931); Eileen J. Garrett, *Many Voices: The Autobiography of a Medium* (New York: Putnams, 1968); Gladys Osborne Leonard, *Brief Darkness* (London: Cassell and Co., 1942); Estelle Roberts, *Fifty Years a Medium* (New York: Avon, 1972). There is also a long list of autobiographical material concerning male mediums.

abuse, which was itself better than no notice at all. Even imagined applause can bring genuine pleasure. Confined to a sickbed in her last years, Cora Maynard recalled her days of glory when as a young girl she had been Mrs. Lincoln's favorite medium. However flawed her memory of specific events, her professional life had most certainly brought her into contact with important Washington officials, including the President. While Lincoln had not issued the Emancipation Proclamation at the command of her spirits, her conviction that he had goes a long way toward accounting for her behavior. In her memory, she, "an unlettered girl," had been led "to become the honored guest of the Ruler of our Great Nation, during the most memorable events in its histories." Those present at her séances, when her spirits had counseled on important affairs of state, "had lost sight of the timid girl in the majesty of the utterance, the strength and force of the language, and the importance of that which was conveyed, and seemed to realize that some masculine spirit force was giving speech to almost divine commands."²¹ Perhaps from a logical point of view, Mrs. Maynard had no reason to take personal pride in what her spirit controls accomplished through her when she was unconscious. A considerable ambiguity attached to the question of just what personal credit mediums could claim for their work. But it did not detract from the immediate satisfaction they felt in knowing that they had impressed an audience.

Mrs. Maynard's seizure by a "masculine spirit force" suggests that part of the satisfaction felt by female mediums derived from their assumption of an otherwise forbidden male social role during the trance state. Time and again female mediums under the influence of their spirit controls turned into swearing sailors, strong Indian braves or oversexed male suitors. The best of them displayed an impressive talent for acting. Many in fact had worked at one time in the theater.²² The cast of spirit characters who performed through them could assume a staggering variety. At one typical "materializing séance" in the 1880s, thirty-one spirits paraded out of the medium's cabinet. Captain Hodges, a "firm erect military man," was followed by Alice, "a tall queenly soprano." Further down the line came Helen, who sang "Sweet Beulahland," Little Wolf, "a perfect Indian brave," and Mrs. McCarthy, an Irish lady whose vocabulary amused without offending genteel taste.²³ Allowing for the deliberate fraud in many of these performances (the incidence of fraud was especially high among materializing mediums), one may still suggest that trance mediums found

²¹ Maynard, *Was Abraham Lincoln a Spiritualist*, pp. 4, 72.

²² Emma Hardinge is the most obvious nineteenth-century example. The theater background is more common in the twentieth century. Note, for example, the lives of Eileen Garrett, Hester Dowden, Gladys Leonard and Jeane Dixon.

²³ Report of a séance conducted by Mrs. James A. Bliss, *BL*, July 26, 1884.

outlets for unexpressed and unexpressible desires in the personalities of the spirits. If a spirit control kept throwing the medium's wedding ring away, the medium could with all sincerity disclaim responsibility.²⁴

The possession trance has served similar functions in cultures very different from nineteenth-century America. For example, Judith Gussler, in a study of the Nguni in South Africa, has argued that trance behavior in that society provided compensation for its hardest pressed members, most notably the women and children.²⁵ Similar to what has been noted in studies of hypnotized subjects, the trance personality showed none of the signs of subservience of the normal personality and was universally acclaimed as evincing more brilliance than the normal personality.²⁶ Moreover, according to Lenora Greenbaum, in an analysis of various cultures of Sub-Saharan Africa, possession trance was more common in rigid societies where simple decision making was fraught with danger from internal and external social controls.²⁷ While nineteenth-century America was by comparison to traditional African societies a flexible rather than a rigid society, women enjoyed the advantage of its egalitarian and democratic features far less than men.²⁸ The trance condition relieved individual women of personal responsibility for decisions by temporarily changing their identity into a spirit. At least one American medium tried (unsuccessfully) to plead irresponsibility as a legal defense against charges of fraud.²⁹ The medium and the petitioner seeking the medium's services could, under the cover of the séance, solve problems in making crucial life decisions without personally challenging the established order of society. Not insignificantly, one of the most serviceable functions of nineteenth-century spirits was the sanction that they so freely issued to American wives to divorce their husbands.

The envy of male and more powerful social roles discernible in the utterances and behavior of female mediums assumed some interesting variations. For one thing, female mediums took obvious joy in conquering male

²⁴Suzy Smith, *The Mediumship of Mrs. Leonard* (Hyde Park: University Books, 1964), p. 48.

²⁵Judith Gussler, "Social Change, Ecology, and Spirit Possession Among the South African Nguni," in *Religion, Altered States of Consciousness and Social Change*, ed. by Erika Bourguignon (Columbus: Ohio State Univ. Press, 1973).

²⁶Henri Ellenberger, *The Discovery of the Unconscious* (New York: Basic Books, 1970), pp. 173-74.

²⁷Lenora Greenbaum, "Possession Trance in Sub-Saharan Africa: A Descriptive Analysis of Fourteen Societies," in *Religion . . . and Social Change*, ed., Bourguignon. Also see Keith Thomas, *Religion and the Decline of Magic* (New York: Scribner's, 1971), p. 48; Vieda Skultans, *Intimacy and Ritual: A Study of Spiritualism, Mediums and Groups* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1974); Gail Parker, "Mary Baker Eddy and Sentimental Womanhood," *New England Quarterly*, 43 (March 1970), 13-24.

²⁸See, for example, David Potter, "American Women and American Character," in *History and American Society* (New York: Oxford, 1973), pp. 278-303.

²⁹Brown, "Spiritualism in Nineteenth Century America," p. 218.

adversaries. Emma Hardinge and her equally famous rival, Cora Richmond, both wrote autobiographies that recorded scores of such triumphs. In one of Hardinge's first public lectures at Rondout, New York, she encountered an entire audience of "rough-looking" men who refused to take their hats off. Coming to scoff, they stayed to cheer. She remembered those hats when later in her career she overwhelmed a similar audience in Glasgow, Scotland. The baring of heads was the signal of her victory, just as it had been earlier.³⁰ Richmond, unlike Hardinge, never subdued a band of armed robbers in Nevada, but she had the satisfaction of reducing Issiah Rynders to tears. Rynders was a Tammany Hall ruffian whom the New York machine had used on one occasion to disrupt a rally of William Lloyd Garrison. The spirit voices of Richmond were more than his match, and at the end of her address, which he had come to heckle, he cried with conviction.³¹

Both Hardinge and Richmond were "trance lecturers" and followed a similar routine in their public performances. They invited the audience to choose a jury from among themselves that would in turn select a topic of discourse for the medium. Announcing the subject to the medium, the audience then gave her a few moments to enter a trance. Once in trance, she proceeded to talk, usually in excess of an hour. The address constituted the test of her powers. Delivered on subjects chosen almost always by male juries and usually concerning "manly" scientific questions, the subject was presumably something that the uneducated medium could not tackle unless spirits came to her aid. As even hostile newspaper accounts admitted, the discourses, whatever their deficiencies in scientific accuracy, usually left the audience, at the very least, with a healthy respect for the extemporaneous logic of the medium. Hardinge may or may not have known more Hebrew than a Canadian rabbi who tried to challenge her explication of a Jewish text, but the majority of those present took her side.³² According to Richmond, Lincoln and the Joint Congressional Committee on Reconstruction sought her advice because she could answer "questions that involved a practical knowledge of finance, history, political economy, jurisprudence, and the science of government."³³ Her memory of events is more important here than the actual facts. Just like Cora Maynard, Richmond recalled her days in Washington as a time when she had met men on their own turf and bested them all. For her, those occasions were the best times in the life of a medium.

³⁰ *Autobiography of Emma Britten*, pp. 77, 217.

³¹ *Life Work of Cora Richmond*, pp. 106ff. Walter M. Merrill, *Against Wind and Tide: A Biography of William Lloyd Garrison* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1963), pp. 257-60.

³² *Autobiography of Emma Britten*, p. 88.

³³ *Life Work of Cora Richmond*, p. 225.

When Hardinge and Richmond and their co-laborers were not out subduing hostile male audiences, they were busy conquering communities where male spiritualist lecturers had previously met with dismal failure. Hardinge journeyed to Indian Valley, Nevada, to help out a local spiritualist preacher who just happened to be a male and a cripple. Whereas he had never drawn much of an audience on the arid western deserts, her own Fourth of July address made believers of everyone. Of the crowd reaction to her speech she wrote: "The cheers grew into shouts; the clapping of hands into perfect leaps and yells of applause; and at the end of about an hour's address . . . I was literally pelted with flowers. The women kissed my dress, and held up their dear little children for me to kiss also, whilst the men almost wrung my arm out, and my hand off, with grips and shaking."³⁴

Not all the adulation that mediums received from males in their audience proved equally welcome. Hardinge was thoroughly indignant over the attention of one young man who wrote love letters to her and followed her (in his "astral body") everywhere she spoke. She finally had the satisfaction of seeing him confined in an insane asylum.³⁵ But an admiring note from afar could be flattering so long as it did not threaten professional independence. Richmond could not resist recording the text of one such letter: "To possess such a lovely, fairy mortal—for her intellectual genius—I would have given a kingdom, or braved a world of dangers."³⁶ She did not in this case even bother to remind her readers that the intellectual genius ascribed to the medium belonged rather to the spirits.

Aside from the acclaim that went with it, the professional life of public mediums gave many women an opportunity for travel and sexual adventure far beyond the lot of the average American woman. The travel is easier to document. Mediums of both sexes were an itinerant bunch. The many advertisements that spiritualist speakers placed in the *Banner of Light* and other spiritualist publications provide abundant testimony to their continuous movement. While some women restricted the engagements they would accept to specific localities, most of them thought little of long absences from home on trips covering many miles. K. Graves traveled through the subzero weather of the Midwest, constantly losing her health and staying in the homes of strangers, in order to carry out her professional duties. Operating along the Pacific coast, Miss Jennie Leys regularly trekked from San Francisco down through San Jose, Stockton, Santa Barbara and Los Angeles to San Bernardino. Many advertised a route in advance and offered to accept engagements along the way. For example, Mrs. Laura Gordon announced that she would start west on April 1 to "receive calls to lecture during the month of April on the route from Boston to

³⁴ *Autobiography of Emma Britten*, p. 198.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 170.

³⁶ *Life Work of Cora Richmond*, p. 183.

Quincy, Ill., via Buffalo, Cleveland and Chicago.” Laura Cuppy and Lizzie Doten turned up everywhere. Perhaps none outdid Mrs. C. M. Stowe, a “devoted wife and mother,” who “traveled unaccompanied, by steamboat, railroad and stage, day and night, and the latter over roads that would appall many a man who has never traveled over these mountains.” In an average trip of five weeks, she covered eight hundred miles, entering towns she had never seen, hiring her own hall, doing her own advertising and entertaining her own audience.³⁷

In any line of work traveling is not always viewed as an advantage by the person forced on the road. Many mediums kept on the move not because they cared for a life of wandering, but because their displays bore only limited repetition in any one locale. Complaining endlessly about the hardships of travel and the lack of hospitality they received en route, some of them longed for the security of a settled parish that ministers in many other churches enjoyed.³⁸ Since spiritualist believers in the nineteenth century who cared to form churches at all generally lacked the funds to provide long-range and regular support to a permanent minister, perpetual motion presented itself to most public mediums in the form of a forced option.

Nonetheless, there are many examples of female lecturers who traveled by choice and rejected offers of permanent settlement when they were made. When she finally married, Emma Hardinge briefly advertised herself as a healing medium with the specific intention of setting up an office in Boston. But she grew restless and resumed her lecture tours. Cora Richmond did accept a permanent position that a spiritualist congregation in Chicago offered to her—but only on the condition that she could take long leaves of absence to continue her routine of travels to England, across America and to Australia. In addition to the gratification of seeing the world, travel provided mediums, just as it did other Americans in the nineteenth century, an opportunity to escape something. Husbands and domestic life often. Unhappy love affairs occasionally. Routine always. In the act of escape mediums proved something to society. They were tough, albeit gentle. They were resourceful, albeit mild. And they had a service to offer that was too important to be confined within narrow geographic boundaries.³⁹

The efforts of some feminist leaders after the American Civil War to liberate women from “the narrow limits of the domestic circle” received strong vocal support at nearly every spiritualist convention held in the latter

³⁷One of the best sources for information about itinerancy are the advertisements placed by mediums in the *BL*. On Mrs. Stowe see *BL*, April 14, 1866.

³⁸For conflicting opinion on the wisdom of settling speakers, see editorial on “Itinerancy,” *BL*, April 28, 1866, and D. W. Hull, “Settled Speakers,” *BL*, March 4, 1871.

³⁹For the impact of mobility on various types of Americans I am indebted to George Wilson Pierson, *The Moving American* (New York: Knopf, 1973).

part of the century.⁴⁰ Mediums of course had a vested interest in battling the opponents of the feminist movement who charged that women, once removed from the constant surveillance of their male spouses, would fall victim to every sensual temptation lying in their paths. But the intent of some of the resolutions adopted by spiritualists was not entirely clear. For example, in saying that “a female whose talents are valuable to the public . . . should not be tongue-tied and pen-tied by the ceremony of marriage,” were spiritualists joining Victoria Woodhull (who was three times the president of a national spiritualist association) in attacking the institution of marriage?⁴¹ Or were they, in milder tones, only suggesting the compatibility of marriage with a career other than household management? Most spiritualist publications supported the latter interpretation and defended “the exclusive conjugal love between one man and one woman.”⁴² But both points of view were represented among spiritualists, and those of them who declared in favor both of marriage and female professionalism had to worry about all the evidence linking mediumship to marital inconstancy.

In his novel *The Bostonians*, Henry James linked feminism to the cause of spiritualism and damned them both. It was a common attitude. Spiritualism, it was charged time and again, inevitably led to free love. By approving of women who operated independently of men, spiritualism was ipso facto a free love movement. The *Los Angeles Times* complained of a woman who, after hearing several spiritualist lectures, divorced her husband to run “around the country playing doctor.” In prompting five or six other ladies in the area to do the same thing, her contagious example, in the opinion of the *Times*, posed a serious threat to sexual morality in Southern California.⁴³

In the early years of the spiritualist movement, Dr. Benjamin Hatch, the first husband of Cora Richmond, published a sensational pamphlet that described mediumistic practices as “shameless goings on that vie with the secret Saturnalia of the Romans.” Divorced by his wife, who then went on

⁴⁰Most spiritualist conventions in the nineteenth century were local and regional rather than national, but they were frequent and well-attended. The declarations in favor of women received strong support from the spirits. See, for example, *Twelve Messages from the Spirit of John Quincy Adams Through Joseph D. Stiles, Medium, to Josiah Brigham* (Boston: Bella Marsh, 1859), pp. 348–49.

⁴¹Letter from Warren Chase, *BL*, May 7, 1862. Chase may have had himself in mind as much as any of the oppressed women. His wife very much disapproved of his travels in behalf of spiritualism, and he responded to her nagging by breaking off sexual relations. Gossip linked Chase to many women, but he denied any illicit sexual activity. See his autobiography, *The Life Line of the Lone One, Or, Autobiography of the World's Child* (Boston: Bella Marsh, 1858).

⁴²The language is drawn from a resolution of a spiritualist convention in Rutland, Vermont, in the summer of 1858, reported in *BL*, July 10, 1858.

⁴³*Los Angeles Times*, Aug. 17, 1888. For literary works other than *The Bostonians* that drew connections between spiritualism, feminism, and/or free love, see Kerr, *Mediums and Spirit Rappers*.

to become Cora Daniels and Cora Tappan before assuming her final matrimonial surname, the aggrieved Hatch charged that of three hundred married mediums he had surveyed in the Northern states, half had dissolved their conjugal relations. A large proportion of the remainder had abandoned the bed of their partners to cohabit “with their ‘affinities’ by the mutual consent of their husband or wife.” Apparently the problem went beyond spiritualism’s tolerance of a public sphere for women because male mediums were as guilty as female mediums in forming these “promiscuous” marriages. Thus, Hatch’s sinners included John Murray Spear, a Universalist clergyman turned spiritualist. He had forsaken his wife to travel with his paramour who “last Fall, bore to him what they call a spiritual baby.” Also S. C. Hewitt, who had left his invalid wife in a water cure to go off lecturing with his “spiritual affinity.” And Warren Chase who harbored a wife “in every Spiritualist port.”⁴⁴ However, male promiscuity was nothing new. What most bothered the critics of feminism and spiritualism was the encouragement they saw both movements giving to women’s desertion of the home and family.

Many spiritualist spokesmen accepted the accuracy of some of the reports of sexual misbehavior. Lamentably, they said, the discordant relations reported among spiritualist mediums had a basis in fact. “We are compelled,” one unusually honest source wrote, “to admit that more than half of our traveling media, speakers and prominent spiritualists, are guilty of immoral and licentious practices, that have justly provoked the abhorrence of all right thinking people.”⁴⁵ Purity was the one assumed trait of Victorian womanhood that did not seem at all necessary to the practice of good mediumship. On the other hand, the *Banner of Light* insisted that actual promiscuity was not to be confused with the advocacy of promiscuity. Moreover, there were social and economic reasons for the moral lapses. Its editorials usually blamed low wages for whatever deficiencies could be charged against the morality of mediums. When mediums were paid better, the *Banner of Light* argued, mediums, especially female mediums, would no longer have to seek favors from people of questionable character.⁴⁶

While it is hard to fault the logic of the editorialists writing for the *Banner of Light*, their arguments remind us that the professional life of a medium was not all bliss. There was a vast difference between feminist leaders, spiri-

⁴⁴ Benjamin F. Hatch, *Spiritualists’ Iniquities Unmasked, and the Hatch Divorce Case* (New York, 1859), pp. 5–6, 13–15 and passim.

⁴⁵ Wm. Bailey Porter, *Spiritualism as It Is: Or the Results of a Scientific Investigation of Spirit Manifestations* (New York, 1865), p. 20. Also Warren Chase, “Spiritualism and Social Discord,” *BL*, May 12, 1860.

⁴⁶ Lizzie Doten, “A Plea for Working Women,” *BL*, May 10, 1862; “Lottie Fowler,” *BL*, April 22, 1899; Letter from Augusta Currier, *BL*, Dec. 23, 1865.

tualist or otherwise, who spoke against marriage as a form of chattel slavery and underpaid female mediums who in their travels spent the night with any man who would buy their whiskey. In part the problem goes back to the underlying assumptions about the nature of a medium's professional skills. It was difficult at best to maintain a professional status on traits universally recognized as qualities of physical and intellectual weakness, even if they did imply moral superiority. Female mediums risked a serious confusion about their identity when they described themselves as passive agents controlled by outside intelligences. In their professional roles, by their own repeated admissions, they were "obedient instruments" or "humble followers." As we have seen, such self-definitions justified the medium's sense of self-importance. At the same time they undermined it. They had the same effect on the way that others viewed the importance of the medium. Séance-goers often treated a private medium as an unimportant (because passive) intermediary, to be praised if things went well, but only for her strange gifts rather than for her trained skill. A good sitting might save the medium a scolding, but not necessarily the humiliating posture of being bound, gagged and searched to insure proper "test conditions."⁴⁷

The public trance lecturer enjoyed higher professional status and escaped some of the pettier trials of the private "test" medium. So long as she confined her activities to speaking, and did not try to lift tables or materialize grandmothers, her audience had no occasion to strip and search her. But the trance speaker, perhaps to a greater degree than other types of mediums, viewed herself as "a negative passive instrument." She worried about falling under the influence of "inharmonious, impure" spirits and the unwholesome thoughts of people in her audience.⁴⁸ Mediums of all types emphasized the danger of their calling in hopes that the hazards would increase its prestige. Thus, they reported without embarrassment an instance when a crew of spirit pirates took over the "organism" of the medium and almost strangled her.⁴⁹ In another case reported in spiritualist literature, two leading trance speakers tore at each other like cats and dogs only to find, after being forcibly parted and restored to consciousness, that their spirit controls were bitter enemies.⁵⁰

Unfortunately, critics of professional mediums saw no heroism in the "particular susceptibility to surrounding influences" which they mani-

⁴⁷*Life Work of Cora Richmond*, p. 725. Kathryn Sklar in her biography of Catherine Beecher has written in a very illuminating way about the efforts by women to shift what were arguably stereotyped weaknesses (submission, self-sacrifice) to their advantage. Those efforts, as Sklar notes, had mixed results.

⁴⁸*BL*, June 23, 1866; "Mediumship and Morality," *BL*, June 22, 1878.

⁴⁹Thomas R. Hazard, "Mediums and Mediumship," *BL*, Dec. 9, 1871.

⁵⁰Biography of Mrs. J. H. Conant, *BL*, May 22, 1875.

fested.⁵¹ On this point opponents of spiritualism made clear why they regarded mediumship as a corruption of womanhood. Whenever women voluntarily relinquished whatever will, reason, and self-assertion they had in the first place, and did so in an unprotected environment, they were asking for trouble. Passiveness was not a professional virtue. It was a good reason for women to stay at home and perfect the arts of domestic science.

In addition to accepting a stereotyped version of themselves as passive creatures, female mediums also believed that they were of necessity frail. By all accounts, vigorous and healthy people did not become mediums. To convey their messages, spirits needed a person of a "nervous temperament." Cold hands and a light complexion, accompanied by a long record of sickness and physical suffering, gave the best possible signs of budding mediumship. Mrs. Marietta Munson, born with a "peculiarly delicate" constitution, developed her mediumistic powers after a severe attack of lung fever. Another talented medium, Mrs. J. S. Adams, suffered from a "general weakness of her whole physical being," and was often confined to bed suffering constant pain "almost beyond endurance." Two other mediums, who were sisters, were "very slight frail persons, suffering under the most pitiable condition of ill-health." Mollie Fancher, the "Brooklyn Enigma," became clairvoyant after landing on her head in a fall from a horse. A series of incredibly painful illnesses ensued. "Confined to her bed, subject to tortures, from the contemplation of which the mind will naturally recoil," she made her living promoting articles for invalids manufactured by the George F. Sargent Company. "We have no faith," the *Banner of Light* wrote, "that the 'nature of things' permits high mediumship unaccompanied by intense suffering."⁵²

Female mediums tried in the only possible ways open to them to reconcile conflicting impulses. In becoming professional, they did not want to cease being feminine. Cora Richmond's emphasis on her own "etherial, virgin beauty" and "her gentle and mild saintliness" justified to herself her entrance into a man's world. But her own early career gave eloquent testimony to the difficulties of combining the qualities of femininity (she described herself as a "frail bark") with professional independence.⁵³ Dr.

⁵¹"Mediumship and Morality," *BL*, June 22, 1878. Reverend William H. Ferris, a harsh critic of spiritualism, listened to a doctor describe the traits of a medium in the following way: "I never knew a vigorous and strong-minded person who was a medium. I do not believe that such a one can ever become one. It requires a person of light complexion, one in a negative passive condition, of a nervous temperament with cold hands, of a mild, impressible, and gentle disposition. Hence girls and females make the best mediums." Such persons, Ferris thought, had no business casting themselves unprotected into new environments. "Review of Modern Spiritualism," *Ladies Repository*, 16 (Feb. 1856), 92.

⁵²*BL*, Sept. 25, 1858; *BL*, May 29, 1858; Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*, p. 201; Dailey, *Mollie Fancher*, p. 2; *BL*, Feb. 12, 1870.

⁵³*Life Work of Cora Richmond*, p. 471.

Hatch, her first husband, had lived off her earnings. His bitter narrative of the marriage, which he published in the same pamphlet containing his exposé of the sexual lives of mediums, was extremely flattering to himself. By his account, when he discovered Cora, she was an indigent teenaged girl. She had an undeniable gift, but no sense of how to use it to elevate herself. Having married her, Hatch began, with “untiring toil,” to take his wife on the lecture circuit. He attended to all the business details, did all the promotion and finally managed to lay some money aside above expenses. Hatch kept, he admitted, firm control over the profits, but he was, he said, extremely generous in the outlays for his wife. “My rule was to anticipate her wants as far as possible, and thus supply them before requested to do so.” Meanwhile, while Hatch performed all this hard work, Cora lay around lazily with not even the need to prepare speeches between her appearances.⁵⁴

Understandably, the wife recalled this epoch in her life differently. Her version of the story, which was supported by an investigation of several prominent spiritualist gentlemen, accused Hatch of seeking an unfair advantage from her immaturity. Lying to her about his social position and financial ability, he completely stopped his own dentistry practice after the wedding. His income thereafter came strictly from what she earned. As sole manager of the finances, he was stingy both with her and her mother. He let her wear her few decent clothes only during performances. Moreover, Hatch boasted to his new wife of his infidelity to his old one and made sexual demands upon her that Cora claimed damaged her “health and delicacy.” He forced on her the company of a woman of “abandoned character,” whose miniature he kept, and gave her the distinct feeling that it was not “safe to cohabit with him.”⁵⁵

Undoubtedly, neither husband nor wife gave an entirely accurate account of the marriage. Only shortly before the divorce, one spiritualist leader had seen nothing wrong in the conduct of Dr. Hatch. In fact, he had viewed the mixture of Hatch’s masculine qualities with Cora’s feminine qualities as perfect complements: “His strong will and determined purpose and powers of mind, acting with her passive and feminine mildness, are doubtlessly well-calculated to bring out and present her medium excellences in a way to affect the greatest amount of good for the people.”⁵⁶ However, given the wide range of possibilities for male abuse of his female partner in the nineteenth century, one’s instinctive sympathy lies with the young Mrs. Hatch. The husband’s outraged reaction to his wife’s charges against him gave a sufficient idea of what she was up against. “No right minded woman,” he

⁵⁴Hatch, *Spiritualists’ Iniquities Unmasked*, pp. 32–41.

⁵⁵Ibid.

⁵⁶A. B. Child, “Cora L. V. Hatch,” *BL*, July 17, 1858.

wrote, "would ever leave her husband on such a basis, were the complaint true."⁵⁷

Cora Richmond left her husband and learned enough from the experience of matrimony to retain the control of her earnings through a succession of husbands. Not every female medium who traveled with a male manager suffered callous exploitation. Emma Hardinge married only after her career had been successfully established, and at that point in her life she was happy enough to turn over the promotional and financial details of her tours to her husband. She remained the star of the show, and her willingness to surrender the management of the practical matters of life served her no better or no worse than it did leisured ladies in any time and place. Men could be useful protectors as well as business partners. In addition to her husband, Hardinge had the comfort of an Indian spirit named Arrowhead who stood over her in times of danger brandishing a war hatchet.⁵⁸

The dangers of exploitation may have been greatest when the medium was young, for many female mediums made their professional debut when their fathers started dragging them around the countryside. Cora Richmond's father, not Benjamin Hatch, first put her on a public platform. The father of Laura Ellis advertised her presentations of spirit wonders when she was thirteen. Bound and gagged by audiences along the East Coast, she somehow managed to get spirits to play musical instruments which had been laid beside her in a darkened room.⁵⁹ Laura and others like her did not feel abused. Children enjoyed the attention they got and were glad in any case when the spirits ordered them to quit school. There were cases of fathers who became obsessed with the spirits and turned the whole family's attention totally away from other things. In these instances, the obsession could destroy the family's fortunes.⁶⁰ More normally, however, the child medium became a modest and welcome source of supplemental family income. The only question was whether the young medium thereafter ever achieved a healthy psychological independence both from the flattering encouragement of her manager or the expectations of her audience.

Potentially the most crippling damage that accompanied the practice of mediumship was not exploitation but serious self-deception. Of course, as has already been suggested, a fantasy which was taken seriously by the medium had its uses and comforts. Mediums who in trance acted out forbidden desires or expressed repressed aspects of their personality were often making the only approach to reality which their society and culture allowed them. Much evidence suggests that mediumship got many women off their

⁵⁷ Hatch, *Spiritualists' Iniquities Unmasked*, p. 36.

⁵⁸ *Autobiography of Emma Britten*, pp. 218–19.

⁵⁹ Reports in *BL*, April 7, April 21, 1866.

⁶⁰ Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*, p. 319.

sickbeds. Whatever the throat and chest afflictions, the lung hemorrhages and the rheumatic aches, mediums traveled long distances with little rest and somehow felt a renewed burst of health when they mounted the speaker's platform. Miss A. W. Sprague lay for two years, utterly prostrate, in a sick room where no sunlight intruded. Medical doctors ministered to her in vain. Then, from spirits speaking through her sister, she learned that she was to become a great medium. She recovered sufficiently to begin a career as a trance speaker, and as the career advanced, her health improved.⁶¹ As we all know, Mary Baker Eddy's miraculous recovery of health was not a unique story in the nineteenth century. What we may not yet realize is the extent to which such recoveries were commonplace.

On the other hand, self-delusion put as many people into sickbeds as it put on their feet. Unless we assume that mediumistic phenomena were genuine (i.e., produced with the aid of spirits) or, alternatively, that they were all the contrivances of conscious fraud, then we must suppose that honest mediums on some psychic level were kidding themselves. And if something damaged the medium's imagined image of herself and forced her to recognize herself as an impostor, the result could be tragic. It was safer to be a fraud from the beginning.

Biographies of spiritualist mediums contain many puzzles that defy explanation. One particular pattern, however, does seem to fit many of their lives. They associated their first awareness of spirit company with the early years of lonely childhoods and dated their actual mediumship from adolescence. In other words a belief in their spiritual powers began with childhood reveries and received reinforcement in a period of life when they desperately wanted to impress adults. They did believe in the specialness of their gift even if later they also came to believe that the gift needed the gilding of trickery to render it truly impressive. Mediumship was a competitive business. Practitioners all too commonly found that a reliance on one dishonest prop forced them to keep seeking for others.⁶² After all, the medium who failed to produce spirits on any given occasion and made excuses about bad conditions lost her reputation and her audience. As professionals, they had a mystique of infallibility to worry about. Similar (they thought) to the lawyer caught with a bad case or a doctor who did not recognize the disease, they proceeded to do their best in unfavorable circumstances. Average séance-goers had no knowledge of professional secrets. Their ignorance in that respect coupled with their predisposition to accept any sign

⁶¹ *BL*, Feb. 9, 1861.

⁶² For a biased but interesting account of the network of fraud that grew up among professional mediums (a network complete with a supporting industry manufacturing props), see David P. Abbott, *Behind the Scenes With the Mediums* (Chicago: Open Court Publishing Co., 1908), pp. 270–73 and *passim*.

that a spirit relative was near made it easy to cheat. And what was a poor medium to do when her over-eager clients claimed to see more spirits than she herself believed to be present in the room? Mediums faced as many moral dilemmas from too much success as from too little.

When conscious deception, by degrees, became the normal practice of the medium rather than the exception, she was forced to wonder whether she had ever been anything other than a willful deceiver. The reckoning could be a hard one. When Margaret Fox tried to reclaim her dignity by publicly confessing in 1888 to her fraudulent methods, she had long before turned to the comfort of drink. Her almost instant retraction of her confession raises a suspicion that she never knew exactly what she was up to. Willed deceit may or may not explain the first raps that Kate and Margaret Fox heard in the cottage of their parents in Hydesville. It may or may not explain their first successes in New York City and their ability to attract attention from the educated and the well-born. But in the long run, it certainly explains their wrecked lives. At the time of their deaths even spiritualists refused to honor them. A general appeal in 1892 asking spiritualists to contribute money for an ailing Margaret Fox netted \$86.80.⁶³

In their pursuit of self-respect, mediums got very little support from the society around them. Increasingly in the nineteenth century they found themselves the objects of legal restrictions. As early as 1865, Charles Colchester, one of the several mediums reputed to have conducted séances for Lincoln, was arrested in Buffalo for failing to purchase a license as a juggler. Although Colchester defended himself by citing his right to pursue whatever religion he chose, a jury found him guilty and fined him \$40 plus \$743 in court costs.⁶⁴ Legislative bodies continued to levy heavy fines on the activities of mediums or banned them altogether. In the 1890s the city of Philadelphia made a wholesale roundup of spiritualist mediums, mostly women, and jailed them for violating a city ordinance against fortune-telling.⁶⁵ The raising of state medical standards put spiritualist healers out of business. Courts threw out wills because the deceased author had been a spiritualist and obviously mentally incompetent. Spiritualists even ran the risk of being committed to asylums by their unsympathetic families.

Confronted with legal restrictions that defined them as deviant, dangerous and insane, the professional mediums took what comfort they could in viewing themselves as martyrs. It was not always very much. Their egos took a beating from psychologists as well as lawyers. To George Beard, an important neurologist who wrote a book about American nervousness,

⁶³*BL*, Jan. 9, 1892.

⁶⁴Brown, "Spiritualism in Nineteenth Century America," p. 147.

⁶⁵*Proceedings of the Third Annual Convention of the National Spiritualists' Association*, p. 16.

mediumship was a disabling malady. Writing in the *North American Review* in 1879, he said: "Trance is a very frequently occurring functional disease of the nervous system, in which cerebral activity is concentrated in some limited region of the brain, the activity of the rest of the brain being for the time suspended."⁶⁶ Particularly in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, with the emergence of a psychology of the unconscious, mediumship became the subject of lively commentary in the journals of abnormal psychology. Psychologists pored over the life history of mediums for information about hysterical behavior. The medium became a key figure in the development of the concept of split and multiple personality.⁶⁷

There is no question that the behavior of mediums sometimes gave occasion for serious alarm. For every one of them who found new strength and happiness in her work, others by their own account threw convulsions and regularly succumbed to hysterical sobbing. Many mediums at the conclusion of a séance showed almost no pulse and remained for hours, or in extreme cases for weeks, rigid and cold.⁶⁸ Even Emma Hardinge, a rock of stability among mediums, did some peculiar things. The "snapping doctor" of St. Louis, a man celebrated for the "unwashed filth" on his hair and body, once kept her rolling on the dirt floor of his office for over two hours, at one moment worshipping the sun, at the next rattling and hissing like a snake.⁶⁹

Still, the historian may wonder whether much of this behavior would have suggested the need for medical treatment if certain elements in the culture had not seen it as socially disruptive. Rachel Baker was a trance speaker who was cured of her disease. According to William Hammond, a nineteenth-century American neurologist who told her tale, she had drawn large crowds to her performances. And though Hammond was intent on linking mediumship to mental derangement, he admitted that her "discourses were highly respectable in point of style and arrangement, and were interspersed with Scripture quotations." Not Rachel, but her parents who were unhappy with such an odd daughter, sought out the doctors who "restored her health." Rachel Baker lost her faculty of trance preaching and never regained it.⁷⁰ A happy ending? Undoubtedly for the parents and for Ham-

⁶⁶George Beard, "The Psychology of Spiritism," *North American Review*, 129 (July 1879), 67. One twentieth-century commentator, who has subjected mediums to Freudian scrutiny, has concluded, among other things, that normal sexual activity is extremely rare among them. See George Lawton, *The Drama of Life After Death: A Study of the Spiritualist Religion* (New York: Henry Holt, 1932), pp. 480ff.

⁶⁷The interest of depth psychologists in the life histories of mediums is a subject requiring extensive treatment elsewhere. Janet, James, Jung, Freud and Hall all studied mediumship.

⁶⁸"Mrs. R. I. Hull," *BL*, June 10, 1882.

⁶⁹Britten, *Modern American Spiritualism*, p. 371.

⁷⁰William Hammond, "The Physics and Physiology of Spiritualism," *North American Review*, 110 (April 1870), 257.

mond. But nothing in the story indicated that the girl was any happier for her cure. As a matter of fact, it never occurred to Hammond to ask.

If a belief that one had spiritualist powers was a malady, a lot of nineteenth-century American women suffered from it. And if a conviction that spirit phenomena were real constituted a dangerous delusion, many of America's most talented women were led astray by it throughout their adult life. Whatever the clinical conclusion, mediumship and a belief in spirit voices had their uses for those who accepted them.⁷¹ They offered relief from boredom, routine and responsibility. They provided consolation in the face of family deaths, marital abuse and loneliness. And of course in many cases they helped to launch successful professional careers. Amanda Jones in fact used her mediumship, which was discovered during several periods of protracted illness, to further other careers as poet and inventor. Believing her actions to be governed by spiritual guardians, she shared credit with her spirits in securing patents for an oil burner and a vacuum process for preserving food. The spirits gave her less useful advice about business practices, for her enterprises usually failed financially. But her autobiography, written with the strong encouragement of William James, gave every indication that she had lived a satisfying life. She died, unmarried and self-supporting, at the age of seventy-nine.⁷²

Mediums bore the double stigma of doing something most women did not do in the service of a cause that many people laughed at. Yet they persisted, many of them for decades. Mediumship was not an occupation pursued by women of social standing and of education. But for other women, further down the social scale, mediumship, whatever the seamy sides of its practice, offered the possibility of transforming a miserable life into one that brought happiness for oneself and not infrequently for others. The frail sensitiveness that characterized nineteenth-century womanhood was put to far worse uses. To be sure a medium's career could also end in unfortunate ways. But if we can cite examples of mediums who in the last half of the nineteenth century led degenerate and unhappy lives, we should understand that the profession was not the most important cause of the degeneracy or the unhappiness.

⁷¹Carroll Smith-Rosenberg in "The Hysterical Woman" provides an excellent discussion of a related historical problem.

⁷²Jones, *A Psychic Autobiography*.